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## Sovereign Futures in an Insecure Arctic

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### Purpose

The purpose of this policy brief is to summarize the important policy implications of the research findings presented by Dr. Wilfrid Greaves in his book chapter “Afterword: Sovereign Futures in an Insecure Arctic.”<sup>1</sup> The brief begins by providing an understanding of the situation through a synthesis of background information. Second, it articulates what this means for security in the Arctic, with attention to explaining why these issues are deserving of attention. Finally, the brief concludes with a section on moving forward that encompasses recommendations and comments regarding next steps.

### Background

Greaves uses the concept of pathologies to articulate three overarching topics impacting security and concerning sovereignty in the Arctic region. Building off scientific conceptualizations, he chooses the pathological framing to describe conditions that “deviate from a healthy, efficient, or sustainable condition” (250). He politicizes the term as “practices that harm or undermine the interests of the actor responsible for the practice in question” (250). The three relevant pathologies are therefore the remilitarization of states’ foreign and security policies in the absence of a clear military threat;

hydrocarbon resource extraction in the context of human-caused global climate change; and the constrained inclusion of Indigenous peoples in regional governance (250).

#### *First Pathology: Remilitarization*

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Arctic states were heavily investing in the remilitarization of their Arctic regions and capabilities even in the absence of a distinct military threat. Between 2005 and 2015, Arctic states began reinvesting to support Arctic military operations with an overarching goal of deterring non-Arctic states from claiming access to the region. All of these measures seemed proactive and preventative, underlined by an understanding of peace and rule-governed relationships in the region. Today, however, tensions are rising among Arctic states, largely pitting Russia against the others. This dynamic has been predominantly caused and exacerbated by Russian conflict in Ukraine. Greaves argues that while these tensions do not have anything to do with the Arctic directly, they have contributed to the deterioration of the peaceful and cooperative security mandate among Arctic states (252).

At this time, while it is unknown whether or how the Russian-Ukrainian conflict will impact Arctic governance, Greaves speculates that militarization in the circumpolar region is now less “ambiguous

than it once was” (252). Arctic states have concretely demonstrated their investment in and commitment to increased and enhanced military and security measures in the Arctic through military spending, government discourse, alliance formation, and policy development (252). Military exercises in the Arctic have also increased, and Greaves believes that “[w]ar games on such a scale, particularly between historical antagonists such as Russia and NATO, are a worrisome indicator for the future of security and conflict in the Arctic, even if the catalyst for such a conflict is unlikely to originate from within the region”(252).

### *Second Pathology: Resource Extraction*

The continued search for fossil fuels, specifically in the form of offshore oil and gas drilling, constitutes the second pathology in the Arctic. Greaves cites the 2008 US Geological Survey, which estimates that the circumpolar region may hold approximately 13% of the world’s undiscovered oil reserves and 30% of its undiscovered natural gas (252). The revenue and employment opportunities generated by fossil fuel extraction are an integral part of the economies of several circumpolar states such as Canada, Russia, Norway, and the United States. This importance collides with international efforts to combat climate change, as states attempt to balance their international cooperative commitments with maintaining prosperous economies at home. Greaves argues that in regard to security in the Arctic, resource extraction is of critical importance because it is at odds with the global political consensus on climate change efforts and ignores the reality that private corporate actors are turning away from Arctic fossil fuels, therefore contributing to a waning economic base (254). While environmentally a wise choice, the decline in investment in the Arctic will raise challenges for the political economies of many of its regions. Ultimately, Greaves articulates that “[t]he current

approach of Arctic states – to secure their interests through greater resource extraction – is thus inherently unsustainable and amounts to the prioritization of short-term financial benefit at the cost of long-term ecological and social catastrophe” (254).

### *Third Pathology: Indigenous Governance*

Greaves indicates that the inclusion of Indigenous Arctic communities in the governance of “how ‘Arctic security’ should be defined and pursued” remains an important consideration in Arctic affairs. Indigenous people, while making up a key portion of the Arctic population, struggle to find satisfactory inclusion in the decision making and governance realm. While some efforts have been made to enhance the inclusion of Indigenous peoples, Greaves argues that “they do not alter the fundamental balance of power in the region” (255). Further, Greaves discusses how limited authority and jurisdiction granted to Indigenous communities, combined with the lack of human and fiscal capacity due to the reality of colonially imposed borders, contribute to the continued exclusion of Indigenous peoples from Arctic affairs and security efforts (256).

## What Does This Mean & Why Does it Matter?

Once a region with peaceful potential, exemplifying the strengths and successes of international cooperation efforts, the Arctic has become an increasingly tumultuous region. Greaves details that tensions among the eight Arctic states are growing, particularly in light of the enmity between Russia and the West, and are exacerbated by the pressing threats of climate change (251). Further, Greaves notes that this trend is particularly the case in the relations between Russia and the five Arctic states that are NATO members (Canada, Denmark, Iceland,

Norway, and the United States) (251). He cites that relations between Russia and these five member states are “the worst they have been since the end of the Cold War” (251).

Greaves argues that this dynamic, alongside the three pathologies addressed above, poses questions surrounding sovereignty in the region (256). While the Arctic has been traditionally seen as a region of peaceful international cooperation, these increasing tensions are driving Arctic states to consider their own security, therefore emphasizing notions of sovereignty. The dilemma that emerges is how Arctic states can balance maintaining cooperative solutions to problems such as resource extraction and Indigenous governance in the Arctic, while also exercising enhanced security measures to promote their self-interests. Greaves argues that the reality is that traditional conceptualizations of sovereignty and international law are what will drive decision making in the Arctic.

## Moving Forward

Ultimately, Greaves concludes that preconceived notions of sovereignty and security as topics that “span vast geographies, long periods of time, and widely diverse areas of public policy, state action, and human life” are being “challenged and reimagined by new or resurgent phenomena in global politics, most importantly climate change, renewed geopolitical competition, and the growing indigenization of domestic and regional governance” (257). What is worse is that this dynamic is occurring at a more rapid pace than Arctic institutions and policies are equipped to handle. Greaves articulates that this has “generated a series of profound political, social, economic, and ecological challenges” (257).

Greaves admits that the unclear nature of these circumstances makes predicting which policies and

practices will prevail as adequate security solutions difficult (257). However, he does offer two qualified predictions. The first is that, at least for the foreseeable future, the Arctic will remain defined largely by these mentioned conceptualizations of sovereignty and the power that accompanies those conceptions (257). He goes on to say that this does not mean that conflict is inevitable, or that cross-state actors do not matter, but rather that Arctic states will insist on asserting their sovereign prerogatives and power first and foremost in order to achieve their respective national interests (257). Greaves’ second prediction is that, in light of this inward-sovereignty-driven governance of the Arctic, there is a strong likelihood that the Arctic’s future will be “characterized by acute threats to state and human security across the region” (258). This claim is exacerbated by the greatest risk in the Arctic – climate change. Greaves emphasizes that the negative impacts of climate change in the region are “already visible, certain to worsen, [and] impossible to fully mitigate” (258). Greaves asserts that survival will become the focus of policy action in the region.

Given this information, the question that resonates for those involved in the Arctic is: “whom to become?” (259). The answer to this involves the cooperation of individuals, communities, and states to behave in a way that will result in security for all in a warming world (259). Therefore, Greaves concludes that “[w]e must reimagine the conditions of security in the Arctic, and if the future remains a sovereign one, then we must also reimagine how the use of sovereignty and the application of state power can be applied in order to enhance rather than diminish that security” (259). Achieving this involves a deep understanding of the three pathologies identified in this brief, which continue to loom against the backdrop of Arctic security. These pathologies ultimately produce Arctic *insecurity* and therefore must be overcome in order to avoid consequences as they undermine national

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self-interest and the welfare of states' citizens (259). Greaves maintains that in order for the Arctic's future to be bright in a sovereignty-driven framework, "the survival and well-being of people must be placed at the heart of Arctic security policy-making and practice" (259). This requires a

cooperative effort to alleviate tensions in the region, mitigate the consequences of climate change, and increase the inclusion of local Indigenous communities in governance processes. This is the only path towards a sustainable future for the Arctic.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilfrid Greaves, "Afterword: Sovereign Futures in an Insecure Arctic," in *Breaking Through: Understanding Sovereignty and Security in the Circumpolar Arctic*, eds. Wilfrid Greaves and P. Whitney Lackenbauer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 250-63.