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Understanding Ontologically Insecure Communities in the Arctic

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Newspapers and online media barrage their readers constantly with headlines stating that high temperatures in the Arctic Ocean will lead to an oceanic crisis with global ramifications. It is not uncommon to hear the Arctic and other transboundary environmental spaces such as the Amazon Rainforest or the Himalayas referred to primarily in terms of how their unraveling will lead to the end of the world. However, these transformational spaces can also become the basis of shared identity among states. We might expect states to create collective identity around constructed institutions, such as the European Union, that serve to mitigate anxiety.¹ But how do we make sense of states that form institutions and shared identity around environmentally insecure spaces?

In this primer, we examine the efforts countries go through to counter shared insecurities linked to certain forms of anxiety, such as climate change or geopolitical conditions. We first engage in theory building with insights from ontological security, eco-anxiety, and security communities to introduce the concept of Ontologically Insecure Communities, followed by an illustrative case of the collective effort by Finland and Canada to create the Arctic Council.²

Ontological Security and State Behaviour

We propose that states experiencing anxieties around a transboundary space may seek to form a community with other states to respond to that anxiety. Our argument moves beyond traditional security communities literature that emphasizes social learning and a sense of 'we-ness' and towards the external drivers of an ontologically insecure community.³ The concept of ontological security was first developed in the field of cognitive psychology to describe a person who has a stable sense of self in the world as a continuous real, alive, whole person.⁴ It was then expanded and applied to the field of International Relations (IR) by Anthony Giddens, with ontological security extrapolated to the state level and applied by scholars examining the intersections between security and identity.⁵ Since managing existential anxiety is at the heart of ontological security seeking, we argue that when states experience moments of uncertainty they may form communities tied to both

material conditions such as external tensions and anxieties linked to transboundary environmental spaces they border.

Eco-Anxiety and Security

As an idea that stretches across many fields, eco-anxiety has been studied through paradigms such as the social and political sciences, theories of existential anxiety, psychosocial research, pathology, emotions, and general research on anxiety.⁶ Early studies from 2007 to 2013 focused on the psychological impacts of the ecological crisis.⁷ Since 2017, eco-anxiety has often been studied in connection to the mental health of children and adults.⁸

What we mean by eco-anxiety should be unpacked before analyzing state behaviors associated with the environment. Understanding eco-anxiety as anxiety about changes in the social and geophysical order is linked to the use of emotion as a tool to handle an ecological threat, while existential anxiety can be directly understood through the lens of ontological security.⁹ Taking a psychological perspective on climate anxiety recognizes that the global ecological crisis is hard to accept because it means the possible end of human existence and implies serious change ahead. This can lead to denial and further repressed anxiety.¹⁰

Three conceptual factors make eco-anxiety particularly interesting for scholars of ontological security: 1) uncertainty, 2) unpredictability, and 3) uncontrollability.¹¹ Given the importance of Westphalian sovereignty for the current international system, uncontrollability is a particularly useful frame for considering why eco-anxiety may cause insecurity for states. Similarly, uncertainty and unpredictability both threaten the need of states for a stable self-identity in a changing external world. These factors imply that eco-anxiety shapes how states in certain environmental geographies may experience the world, deal with threats, and handle relationships.

Climate change is one of many factors that characterizes modernity as an age of anxiety alongside threats such as nuclear weapons, pandemics, terrorism, and cyberwarfare.¹² We expand the literature on eco-anxiety and climate change to suggest that 1) eco-anxiety uses a logic of existential anxiety because threats are existential, uncertain, amorphous, future-oriented, and hard for states to grasp, and 2) eco-anxiety in the modern age is not something abstract, but something states are increasingly taking action upon.¹³

That eco-anxiety uses a logic of existential anxiety may be counterintuitive. For example, certain states and people are fearful of climate change, and reports published by the IPCC, the Arctic Council, and others suggest urgency is necessary to solve this crisis. However, states have not generally taken this urgency to heart. Only those states whose survival is directly threatened, such as small island states, tend to recognize and understand climate change as an existential threat. Even climate norm entrepreneurs such as the European Union do not treat climate change as an existential threat that requires new societal norms. In contrast, states like the United States frame climate change through a lens where the threat is not urgent and there is no defined object to combat against.

Eco-anxiety in the modern age is not existential for all states. For some, climate change alters existential anxiety into more immediate material concerns. For states such as those surrounding the Arctic Ocean, as more information emerges about how the region is changing in irreversible ways, so too must these communities of states respond in particular ways. This means that states will create ontological security seeking strategies such as forming multilateral organizations that focus on shared transboundary environmental threats. However, the ways in which communities of states are understood is contested and has drastically changed over the past 50 years.

Ontological security scholars have also written about the nature of security communities. Authors provide an account of inter-state relations using ontological security, emphasizing the routinization of relations via the state's self-definition, perception of that self, recognition, and adaptation.¹⁴ Still others have written on how security communities have two tasks: 1) reinforcing a sense of we-ness in the community, but 2) also recognizing individual members' distinctiveness.¹⁵ In other words, there is always an identity-level conflict whereby states seek recognition from others.

Ontologically Insecure Communities

We propose that states do not only form communities around shared identities, but also around shared anxieties. Here we are specifically interested in the implications of eco-anxiety given that it operates using a logic of existential anxiety, meaning it is uncertain, nebulous, and hard for states to grasp.¹⁶ Transboundary environmental spaces such as the Arctic Ocean play a unique role in why states form communities. When states recognize shared threats to these spaces that are also linked to their core identities, we argue that they form an ontologically insecure community (OIC) around them, particularly given eco-anxiety's characteristics of uncertainty, unpredictability, and uncontrollability.¹⁷ Managing existential anxiety is at the heart of ontological security-seeking, so when states experience anxieties as threatening to their identities, they may form communities to ease those anxieties as a strategy. Shared anxieties may be tied to external material conditions related to the natural environment or other states, or internally to how a state conceptualizes itself in relation to a shared environmental space that is central to how it defines itself.

The Arctic: Canada, Finland, and the Creation of the Arctic Council

Throughout the Cold War, the Arctic was shrouded in geopolitical tension due to the rivalry between the USA and the USSR. Against this backdrop, Canada emerged as a proponent of circumpolar integration and cooperation, a vision that eventually helped establish the Arctic Council.¹⁸ This vision, however, was also rooted in Canada's ontological insecurities, namely Cold War strategic anxiety and eco-anxiety related to concerns about transboundary pollution in the Canadian North. The idea of creating an Arctic Basin Council gained prominence at the end of the 1980s as the Cold War was ending.¹⁹ Funding from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation prompted the Canadian Consortium for Arctic Studies and Development (CCASD) to develop an Arctic arms control program. This laid the groundwork for promoting and institutionalizing what would later be known as the "Arctic Security Cooperation Zone" and the "Arctic Circumpolar Council". These early initiatives

emphasized the importance of lessening tensions between the USA and the USSR, with Canada as a leader in cooperation to mitigate its own strategic anxiety.²⁰ However, eco-anxiety was also present, with initiatives addressing issues such as Arctic haze, persistent organic pollutants (POPs) and other transboundary pollutants that impacted not just the Canadian North but the entire Arctic.²¹

Finland's drive for Arctic institutionalization began in 1988 as a reaction to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's famed Murmansk Speech in 1987.²² Finland's initial proposal for Arctic cooperation directly responded to the central topics in Gorbachev's speech, particularly environmental protection.²³ After some internal debate, the Finnish government invited the other Arctic states to a 1989 conference on "The Protection of the Environment in the Arctic," alongside a working paper that suggested that the Arctic environment was experiencing rapid deterioration. This working paper and conference highlighted threats to the Arctic environment from transboundary pollution as a concern for all Arctic states.²⁴ While most Finnish documents surrounding its push for Arctic cooperation address environmental protection directly, Arctic institutionalization had even higher stakes for Finland. Since the forced signing of the Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union in 1948, Finland had adopted a policy now referred to as Finlandization, namely a foreign policy built around military non-alignment in relation to its powerful neighbours.²⁵ However, the cost of non-alignment was related to restrictions on how Finland could behave on the world stage, particularly when it came to its relationships with Western states. This historical experience has led some to suggest that their Arctic cooperation initiative had more to do with ensuring Finland had a key role in Arctic affairs in a post-Cold War world.²⁶

In June 1991, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) emerged as a result of these negotiations. The AEPS outlined the eight Arctic states' objectives for the protection of the Arctic environment, principles, international mechanisms, specific programs, and further steps for cooperation. The extent to which Canadian and Finnish priorities informed the AEPS is clear. Finland's top issues of climate change, pollution, resource exploitation, environmental monitoring, and the overall goal of protecting the Arctic environment are mentioned throughout the document. Canada's concerns over climate change, the global nature of the Arctic, and Arctic haze are also present. Moreover, the Canadian influence on the AEPS is largely seen through the concept of 'ecosystem' – which was developed by Canadian officials in negotiations with the United States over the Great Lakes in the 1980s – as well as insisting on Indigenous representation within the new initiative.²⁷ Every example of pollution given in the AEPS is also Canadian in nature.²⁸ Interestingly, strategic concerns about the Cold War are not found in the AEPS, even though they played a role in both Canada and Finland's domestic advocacy for the program. In other words, some anxieties were operationalized to use for institutional formation and others were not. Environmental issues are pictured as a threat that can be solved through cooperation, institutions, and monitoring mechanisms, while the end of the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union helped recede strategic anxiety in the early 1990s.

Conclusion

In the Arctic, we find that states drew upon strategic and eco-anxieties to drive community formation when perhaps neither anxiety would have been enough on its own; the combination led to the reduction of anxiety and the taking of action against shared issues. States and non-state actors can draw on these anxieties in other

states to promote cooperation on specific issues. The Arctic case shows that specific environmental issues were used to spur cooperation that led to the formation of a political community in the Arctic.

Endnotes

¹ Jenifer Mitzen. 2006. Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma. *European Journal of International Relations* 12(3): 341-370.

² This brief is part of a larger study, which approaches the generalizability of our theory by also including a second case-study on the Amazon Rainforest.

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¹⁰ Paul Hoggett. 2019. *Climate Psychology: On Indifference to Disaster*. New York: SpringerLink.

¹¹ Pihkala, 2020.

¹² Catarina Kinnvall, Ian Manners, and Jennifer Mitzen. 2018. Introduction to 2018 special issue in *European Security*: “ontological (in)security in the European Union.” *European Security* 27(3): 249-265; Catarina Kinnvall. 2023. Covid-19: crisis, emotional governance, and populist fantasy narratives. *Int Relat (David Davies Mem Inst Int Stud)*, 37(1): 156-163.

¹³ Christopher Browning, 2018. Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in) security. *European Security* 27(3): 336-355.

¹⁴ Mitzen, 2006.

¹⁵ Greve, 2018.

¹⁶ Browning, 2018.

¹⁷ Pihkala, 2020.

¹⁸ P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Ryan Dean. Canada and the Origins of the Arctic Council.

¹⁹ Franklyn Griffiths, F. 1989. Towards an Arctic Basin Council (Discussion paper version I). Walter & Duncan Gordon Foundation.

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