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## Risk Representations and Confrontational Actions in the Arctic

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## **Risk Representations and Confrontational Actions in the Arctic**

### **Abstract**

The Arctic is undergoing rapid changes and gaining geopolitical attention. The effects of climate change in the region lead to both potential and hopes for new resources, new or shorter transit routes, and other opportunities. Most Arctic coastal states have come forward with interest articulations. Some coastal states also see their national security and sovereignty at risk. While the region has seen a significant level of cooperation in some areas in the past, current developments seem to motivate both stronger risk representations and confrontational actions. Among the coastal states, particularly Canada, the United States, and Russia express increasing points of contention and articulate risk representations, and they have engaged in military and hard-security activities that make actual conflict more likely. With existing conflicts of interests, a high uncertainty regarding future developments, and even non-Arctic states like China claiming Arctic interests, conflict potential may be on the rise. The article hones in on current developments regarding hard security in the Arctic. The empirical section discusses risk representation, including the role of spatial constructions and national identity, and the confrontational actions already taken. It concludes with implications regarding conflict potential in the Arctic.

### **Acknowledgements**

N/A

## Introduction

The Arctic is undergoing rapid changes that generate increased geopolitical attention and foster conflict potential. With climate change severely affecting the region, new opportunities to exploit resources and to exert geopolitical influence will result in the coming years. As global warming lets the Arctic ice cover melt, new resources such as offshore oil and gas but also new or shorter transport routes become accessible. Although it is still uncertain when, and if, suspected resources are actually exploitable, as most of them likely are within Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), a number of states have come forward with their interests and claims. Some Arctic coastal states see their national security and sovereignty at risk, and they have taken action to bolster security. The Arctic faces growing conflict potential in the realm of security.

While the region has seen a significant level of cooperation in some areas in the past, current developments seem to motivate both stronger risk representations and confrontational actions. Among the coastal states, particularly Canada, the United States, and Russia are increasingly expressing points of contention and articulating risk representations. At the same time, they are engaging in military and hard-security activities that raise the potential for actual conflict. Activities include an increase in militarization in the region, new surveillance capacities and military bases, aggressive behavior among some coastal states, and increasing articulations regarding the preparedness to defend interests also by force. The UN-Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) gives the Arctic coastal states, which are Canada, Norway, Denmark (via Greenland), Russia, and the U.S., sovereign rights. Yet, also China as non-Arctic state is by now highly active in the region. China defines itself as near-Arctic state, increasingly claims Arctic interests and backs these up with actions. It may aim to circumvent the Arctic legal order. Intensifying risk representations and increasing confrontational actions make conflict potential in the Arctic more likely.

The article delves into risk representations and confrontational actions in the Arctic to assess how these foster conflict potential. To follow the article's proceeding, a brief outline on the research design and on terms is in order: The article refers to the Arctic coastal states of Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States. The terms of Arctic Eight or Arctic states include the coastal states, plus Finland, Iceland and Sweden – these eight have territories above the Arctic Circle and are members of the Arctic Council (AC). The article focuses on Canada, the United States, and Russia, as these coastal states are the most dominant regarding risk representations and confrontational actions. In a separate section, the article deals with China. As non-Arctic state, it has no legal status in the Arctic, which warrants a discussion apart from coastal states. China is of interest though, as it is asserting Arctic interests and taking notable actions. The article focuses on the hard-

security dimension at the state level with a view to regional stability and conflict potential. With a focus on security, it stays away from a thorough discussion of environmental politics. The applied term of conflict potential refers not to outright war, as that is unlikely, but to an increasing contestation and tension that may come to involve military means.

The Arctic is also a maritime space. Due to this, and because of the space-identity nexus, the analysis considers constructions of space and identity in discourse on the Arctic. To assess risk representations, and confrontational actions taken, the analysis has analyzed discourse and action at the state level. As argued by scholars, it is national decision makers who are in a privileged speaker position to create geopolitical images and visions that form the basis for action. Texts such as policy and strategy documents inform on how national decision makers view and represent their state, risks, interests, and policy needs.<sup>1</sup> The article works with small case studies to illustrate the discourse and action at the state level that is of interest here. Scholars see case studies valuable for gaining a detailed understanding of an issue and of complex relations in a qualitative approach. The unit of analysis can also be nations.<sup>2</sup> The analysis focused on texts that center on the Arctic, including security and Arctic strategies and executive statements. Thematically relevant and current assessments by scholars and think tanks complement these. Risk representations are part of discourse, also at the state level, and they become active and material by forming a strong basis of action; as such, they can shape conflict potential.<sup>3</sup> The article argues that strong risk representations foster conflict potential and make actual conflict more likely. Existing conflicts of interests and confrontational actions are also the result of risk representations and in turn strengthen these.

The article proceeds with a conceptual section on the significance of risk representations and constructions of space and identity. The empirical section on the dynamics of conflict in the Arctic begins with recent developments in the Arctic. It discusses risk representations of the three coastal states Canada, the United States, and Russia, then the confrontational actions of these states, and the impact of China. The final section offers implications regarding the rising conflict potential in the region.

## Risk Representations and the Role of Space and Identity

Risk representations form a basis of tension and conflict. References to and constructions of space and identity are a frequent element in risk representations. The term of risk representations refers to how another actor is represented as risk to the self, and how in international relations another state is represented as risk to the own state or to the world. Risk representations are part of human discourse and thus part of discourse by national decision makers vis-à-vis their state and other states in international relations.<sup>4</sup> This article follows the premise that discourse has constitutive effects, meaning that representations in

discourse – of self and other and with various qualitative descriptions and ascriptions – shapes meaning-making processes, interpretation, action potential, and policy formulation. Analyzing discourse enables an understanding of how we socially produce and naturalize contingent meaning, and how speakers offer specific meaning, explain, and justify.<sup>5</sup> Not only humans, but also states define their relations with each other by identifying with and differentiating from multiple others. The differentiation from others can form the basis for tension and conflict, in particular when differentiation occurs in a way where hierarchy and dichotomies come to define relations. Thus, when other states are represented as risk or threat, and the own state as superior, tension is promoted. Exploring risk representations enables insights on factors promoting tension, including how (national) identity is defined vis-à-vis friends and foes, how references to space and spatial ordering are institutionalized into action, and how insecurity and conflict are created.<sup>6</sup> The approach here agrees with scholars who argue that it is not a matter of causal mechanism, but rather of a discursive force or “discursive agency” that influences perception, interpretation, and policy.<sup>7</sup> The key interest here lies on how certain meanings and actions, from among other possibilities, become thinkable, resonant, and dominant in policy formulation.<sup>8</sup> Regarding policy towards other states then, it is a matter of how risk representations create certain policy orientations, and how these can foster conflict potential.

Both space and national identity have a political and security dimension. The reference to space here means how a state relates to its territory and its considered sphere of influence, in discourse, policy, and action. Considering how space is viewed and politically framed can enable a better understanding of how political actors approach regions such as the Arctic. Space is politically produced and applied to represent the self and promote national interests vis-à-vis other states; it thereby becomes meaningful and material, and informs policy formulation and action.<sup>9</sup> An illustrative example of strong spatial constructions is U.S. discourse: it exhibits strong self-other differentiation, a sphere-of-influence approach, and action well beyond U.S. territorial borders that connect with spatial ordering and strong power assertion. U.S. national identity, with American exceptionalism, a global leadership claim, and a sense of invincibility, underlies discourse.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the manner of representation of spatial constructions, such as boundaries and delimitations, informs about the perception and use of spheres of influence. Considering these representations can generate insights on the potential for ‘collisions’ of such spheres. Efforts taken to increase own space serve as a political tool for national interest promotion.<sup>11</sup> Such efforts aim at power assertion and spatial ordering for own benefits. When actors link these to hierarchical and antagonistic representation towards other states, they may facilitate tension and conflict.<sup>12</sup>

Relevant to the Arctic are also identity constructions, as they illustrate how a state defines itself vis-à-vis other states in the Arctic. Spatial constructions and spheres of influence are part of national identity.

When speaking about states here, the article refers to the national decision makers who are socialized in the context of national identity, who represent their state vis-à-vis other states, and whose actions form from the perspective of national identity. Scholars see national identity a key factor for policy formulation towards other states, and thus as influence on interstate relations. Political actors communicate their state's place in the world, along with friends and foes, risks and threats.<sup>13</sup> When decision makers represent another state as risk or threat to the own state, it constitutively affects relations. Since identity forms in differentiation from others, national identity comes with the creation of difference and dichotomies.<sup>14</sup> Difference and dichotomies, and their political use, affect interstate relations and promote tension. In the context of interstate tension, also confrontational actions by states are relevant. Even a security dilemma might develop – a spiral of escalatory steps taken by states based on perceptions and interpretations of other states' intentions and capabilities. In a revised reading of the security dilemma, scholars speak of a two-level strategic dilemma in a context of ever-present uncertainty that also involves the dilemma of arriving at the most fitting response.<sup>15</sup> Some coastal states may indeed find themselves in a security dilemma context, insofar as perceptions and interpretations of developing risks to own interests, security, and sovereignty grow stronger. They then become part of risk representations and shape actions more confrontational. The study of risk representations in a geopolitical context, also attending to space and identity factors, is valuable in uncovering discursive processes of constructing friends and foes, and of creating insecurity and conflict.<sup>16</sup> Insights into such processes and their motivations can be helpful in pointing to ways of alternative, less divisive discourses in order to prevent or reduce conflict.

## Dynamics of Conflict in the Arctic

Before delving into risk representations and confrontational actions in detail, this section presents a background on recent Arctic developments. There is certainly cooperation in a number of policy areas, and the solving of minor territorial disputes.<sup>17</sup> Yet, there are also increasing tension and conflicts of interests. Scholars point to growing geopolitical power games, the expansion of national territorial and energy policies of several coastal states, rising conflicts of interests, and the planned development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) with inherent destabilization potential. They also see more chances for military incidents occurring, and a new level of militarization and aggression.<sup>18</sup> Even external events can affect regional security. The Ukraine crisis, with Russia annexing Crimea, has not only deteriorated relations in the AC with Russia. It has also weakened cooperation in the AC, and resulted in a slowing and/or pausing of plans regarding the Northern Chiefs of Defense Forum and the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the Arctic region's export orientation for oil and gas presents a potential risk, because the involved dependencies, market dynamics, and energy security issues can facilitate geopolitical tension.<sup>20</sup> However, a simple rush for resources

may not take place, as coastal states differ in their Arctic resource interests.<sup>21</sup> Scholars have also considered various visions of and for the Arctic, pointing both to multiple understandings of the region and a more global context. They speak of a history of and continuing potential for cooperation, but also of developments that can spoil cooperation, including tension in US-Russian relations or the uncertain future role of Asian and other states with Arctic interests.<sup>22</sup> Others highlight the complexity facing the region, including the multiple changes from a warming climate, effects on territorial rights, sovereignty and maritime borders, and the future handling of sea routes. The generation of interests, and the actions by non-polar states to benefit from Arctic resources also pose challenges.<sup>23</sup> Some also point to Antarctic cooperation as offering lessons for the Arctic.<sup>24</sup> However, the two regions differ greatly, as the Antarctic Treaty has put aside territorial claims. All these challenges and questions, and others, may offset stability in the region. The article explores some of these developments.

Most states in the Arctic, and some beyond, have recently increased their focus and activities in/towards the region, illustrated by national security strategies, revised Arctic strategies, grown policy commitment to the Arctic, and troop and military equipment deployments. Human activity will generally grow too. With states bolstering security and defense capacities, actual conflict becomes more likely. Climate change effects, states' resource interests, and security concerns may result in incentives for claiming and acquiring territory and resources in attempts to secure both interests and influence.<sup>25</sup> While perceptions of security in the Arctic are no longer only of military nature, the presence of hard security issues continues to shape the region.<sup>26</sup> Despite the achieved level of cooperation, traditional security concerns, as in hard security and geopolitical terms, do remain and may even rise. Some explore the above-mentioned possibility of a security dilemma developing in the Arctic.<sup>27</sup> Even though the region has exhibited a rather low level of tension up until now, state actions seem to have created at least the beginnings of a security dilemma.<sup>28</sup> Such a logic likely strengthens risk representations and motivates further actions perceived by others as confrontational.

A further problem in this picture is that the regional cooperative structures and governance mechanisms regarding security and conflict resolution are underdeveloped. Some argue that the polar governance regimes have proven quite resilient.<sup>29</sup> Others, however, point to clear deficits, especially when it comes to security aspects. For example, UNCLOS has shown weaknesses in dealing with security questions that spill over into Arctic cooperation, such as the Ukraine Crisis; there was no mechanism for it. UNCLOS also does not provide extensive governance. Regarding (new) territorial claims, it can only examine such claims, but not decide them or implement decisions. The AC, as regional intergovernmental forum of exchange and coordination, has no decision-making power, and its mandate excludes security. Yet, military strategies shape the Arctic's geostrategic environment.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, there are attempts of geopolitical ordering in the Arctic, including via threat images of other states.<sup>31</sup> The growing presence of military aspects, security challenges, and geopolitical ordering – in the context of significant transformations – may unsettle Arctic stability. In the last years, the Arctic states have opposed attempts by other states to internationalize the Arctic, promoting instead regionalization where they themselves can foremost shape developments.<sup>32</sup> Such moves show a continued and even rising importance of national approaches and national interests in the region, which can endanger stability and security.

### *Risk Representations*

While there is the legal construction of Arctic space, risk representations can potentially undermine it, and facilitate tension. In light of some Arctic coastal states increasingly acting to safeguard their sphere of influence, risk representations about feared rivals are highly problematic. This section outlines how the coastal states of Canada, the United States, and Russia engage in risk representations. For all three, the Arctic figures as significant space in terms of national interest promotion. They are the coastal states most active in discourse and actions vis-à-vis the Arctic and partly each other. Canada and the United States particularly highlight their concern for security, defense, and territorial sovereignty. Seeing the Arctic as crucial to their security, they claim full freedom of access and of navigation. Both have increased their activities in the region, including patrol and surveillance.<sup>33</sup> In addition, both tie their national identity more closely to the Arctic, as the following parts illustrate. As for Russia, the country has key interests in a Russian sphere of influence and resources. Warnings against other states expanding influence at Russia's expense have grown.

### *Canada*

Risk representations in Canada reflect “a heightened urgency” in the Arctic, because access to new resources and new shipping lanes will likely intensify conflicting interests and result in sovereignty fears and security challenges.<sup>34</sup> Canada is expressing a strong concern over Russia advancing further into the Arctic and attempting to chip away at the Canadian sphere of influence, raising concerns over sovereignty and territory. In the Ukraine crisis, Canada reacted especially strong against Russia, among others by boycotting Russian-chaired AC meetings.<sup>35</sup> Canada sees further risks in Russian plans of sole NSR control. Implementation of this could exacerbate the already existing controversy on the Northwest Passage being international or internal Canadian waters. Canada has defined the Northwest Passage as internal waters and considers any unauthorized passage by other states as violation of sovereignty.<sup>36</sup> Some see no immediate peril to the Canadian position as of now, as there will be no reliable sea route in the Canadian Arctic for the coming years, and as Russia's refuting of the Canadian position would weaken its own position on the NSR.<sup>37</sup>



Nevertheless, the future status of the Northwest Passage remains unclear, motivating uncertainty and fears regarding territory and sovereignty. The example of the passages pinpoints risk representations and the strong concerns over spheres of influence between Canada and Russia in particular, which still await a solution.

Canadian discourse understands and constitutes the Arctic region as a highly significant space for Canada. The Arctic is Canada's northern frontier, and tightly linked to Canadian sovereignty, security, and defense. Aside from the issue of passages, also the claims of Arctic coastal states on the (boundaries of) extended continental shelf lines carry conflict potential, as do the hopes regarding new resources. Some see sufficient vulnerability to "unauthorized and undetected activities" by other states, which would risk Canadian Arctic sovereignty. The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) has the mandate to control also the Arctic space and to warn and respond to military threats there. Canada's indefinite extension of NORAD's command agreement, in cooperation with the United States, illustrates the significance of the Arctic as Canada's northern frontier, the strong spatial element, and the strategic interest. Another indication of the importance of the Arctic space to Canada is that Canada has made it mandatory for foreign ships to register with the Canadian Coast Guard agency that is tracking ships. Canada has even increased its jurisdiction regarding environmental agreements on water pollution in its waters.<sup>38</sup> The latter two measures highlight intensified Canadian concern over incursions into its maritime space and considered sphere of influence, and the goal of strengthening Canadian control over it. Furthermore, Canada initiated a scientific survey to prepare a submission for the continental shelf coverage in the Arctic, in order to get all of its continental shelf recognized, as stated by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicholson.<sup>39</sup> This action illustrates the strong spatial construction of the Arctic as sphere of influence, which Canada must then protect.

The Arctic also figures strong in Canada's national identity. The Arctic identity element has its basis in geography and the country's historic ties to the region, but also in security concerns – as the rough Arctic was always a natural barrier.<sup>40</sup> "The North is central to Canadian national identity" and closely tied to Canada's heritage and destiny, according to the 2009 Northern Strategy.<sup>41</sup> The rugged and cold northern terrain, linked with freedom and opportunity, frames Canada's national identity. Therefore, some argue that regional control and influence are paramount for Canadian identity.<sup>42</sup> Seeing themselves as "northern nation," the Arctic is "an expression of our deepest aspirations: our sense of exploration, the beauty, and the bounty of our land, and our limitless potential."<sup>43</sup> Recently, decision makers restated the commitment to the Arctic as part of national identity.<sup>44</sup> The orientation towards the protection of national interests in Canadian representations of the Arctic has grown.<sup>45</sup> Canadian discourse illustrates the significance of space and identity as part of risk representations in the Arctic.

## *United States*

Risk representations in the U.S. focus on the Arctic as the “new geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape” that will affect American security; there is great uncertainty as to whether there will be cooperation or great-power competition.<sup>46</sup> U.S. decision makers see the Arctic linked with multiple states’ geopolitical calculations, which foster regional competition, dissent, and militarization, and directly affect U.S. national security.<sup>47</sup> A key motivator for this view is climate change. In United States discourse, climate change is transforming the region’s “harsh” environment and polar ice and thereby directly weakening the “physical barrier” to the U.S. homeland and risking security. The growing access to the Arctic and increasing human activity present a further great concern.<sup>48</sup> Discourse expresses fears regarding territory, sovereignty, and security. Growing economic and political activity of other states likely will foster contestation. For example, growing maritime traffic could make the Bering Strait into a “strategic chokepoint” – causing the United States to monitor the region more closely.<sup>49</sup> Further concerns relate to a thawing permafrost that results in softened, boggy ground jeopardizing roads, pipelines, and infrastructures.<sup>50</sup> Risk representations express strong concerns that climate change results in eased access to U.S. territory and sphere of influence, and multiple issues of contestation. There is furthermore the spatial construction of the Arctic as zone of protection of U.S. territory and security – and the growing fears that eased access to the Arctic will endanger national security. In this context, the special relationship and the cooperation with Canada on Arctic leadership are important for U.S. security.<sup>51</sup> U.S. risk representations then express a clear link between climate change and security in a frame of national security and territorial defense.

The Arctic has gained strategic importance for the United States in the last years, expressed in a grown focus on the region in discourse and policy. There is a recognition of the acute changes in the Arctic and their impact on the country. Risk representations have a sense of urgency. They portray the region “at a strategic inflection point” – and seeing both coastal states and non-Arctic states positioning themselves to seize new opportunities, the United States calls for cooperation that benefits U.S. interests and security.<sup>52</sup> New opportunities and interests also relate to resources. Documents express the readiness to protect U.S. national interests and the homeland from risks in the Arctic, in cooperation when possible but unilaterally when necessary – via ensuring an unhindered ability of U.S. manoeuvre in the seas and surrounding airspace.<sup>53</sup> While the United States Coast Guard is currently not well equipped to protect U.S. Arctic interests, discourse highlights its important role. To safeguard U.S. sovereign rights in the Arctic, “the Coast Guard will exercise and assert U.S. sovereignty where necessary, ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight, security of U.S. Arctic waters, and integrity of sovereign borders.”<sup>54</sup> The Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard work to keep “adversaries from

leveraging the world's oceans against us," and maintain unrestricted U.S. access to Arctic waters.<sup>55</sup> These statements illustrate representations of U.S. influence at risk, and a spatial framing of the Arctic as sphere of influence and room for unhindered action for national interests and security. The importance of the Arctic's spatial dimension is also visible in efforts to expand the continental shelf. To access the continental shelf off Alaska, projected to extend for more than 600 nautical miles, the United States plans to ratify UNCLOS.<sup>56</sup> So far, they have only signed it.

Discourse also shows linkages between U.S. national identity and the Arctic, although less strongly than in the case of Canada. Official documents highlight elements of an Arctic identity and the ideas of frontier and pioneer spirit. The United States is "an Arctic Nation,"<sup>57</sup> and the Arctic is framed as frontier, as "one of our planet's last great frontiers" – with the U.S. "pioneering spirit ... naturally drawn" to it.<sup>58</sup> The United States National Security Strategy defines the country as "Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic region" – and emphasis lies on national interests and security.<sup>59</sup> With "the emerging maritime frontier of the Arctic" enlarging the operating area and the United States being a "maritime nation," the Arctic as sphere of influence gains importance.<sup>60</sup> References to the frontier and pioneering spirit strongly resonate with U.S. national identity, and express the space-identity nexus. In agreement with scholars, it becomes visible how such representations facilitate the expansion of reach and influence beyond U.S. borders.<sup>61</sup> The Arctic representation as sphere of influence and the argued need to protect interests fit with U.S. national identity, illustrating the American exceptionalism and assertion of global leadership. Discourse expresses strong risk representations of an urgency regarding the need to protect and defend interests and security, with a space-identity nexus.

### *Russia*

Risk representations of Russia express a new and recently grown focus on the Arctic region. Both the updated maritime strategy of 2015 and the Arctic strategy of 2013 illustrate the increased importance of the region. In line with Russia gearing up to strengthen its influence in the Arctic, there was the planting of a Russian flag on the North Pole in 2007 – a symbolic claim to space and territory, or act of spatial ordering. Behind the expanded focus on the Arctic are economic and resource interests, and more recently heightened strategic and national security concerns. Russian discourse sees the Arctic as key resource base and sphere of influence. In contrast to Canada and the United States, the Arctic seems to be less important for national identity; there are no clear references to this.

In 2008, then-president Medvedev adopted the Russian Federation Policy for the Arctic to 2020.<sup>62</sup> The document raised the Arctic's significance for Russia's economic development, safety and security, and national interests; it proclaimed the Russian goal of being a leading

Arctic power by 2020.<sup>63</sup> In 2013 at the Russian Ministry of Defense, president Putin warned of an existing Arctic militarization, which was endangering Russian security.<sup>64</sup> In 2014, he warned that Russia faces new risks and challenges from changes in the world and new social and economic conditions. He stated that Russia would act to protect its national interests also in the Arctic. He raised the “need to strengthen our military infrastructure,” to strengthen security at Russia’s Arctic borders, and to protect economic interests in “this promising region.” Russia would also protect its territorial rights in the resource-rich Arctic shelf in order to “safeguard each parcel.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, Russian risk representations see Arctic developments becoming acute, creating concerns over resources, but also territory and security. The Maritime Doctrine of 2015 furthermore highlights the links between the Arctic and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and the Arctic’s importance for Russia’s territorial defense via its Northern Fleet. Russia is increasingly seeing the Arctic as strategically important. This fits well with the goal of strengthening the Northern Fleet’s defense capacities, and the protection of Russia’s Arctic interests, called for in the Military Doctrine of Russia in 2014.<sup>66</sup>

When considering the Russian northern coast, the importance of the Arctic to the country and its role in risk representations become quite clear. About 7000 km coastline and several rivers going inland connect the region with the country. Even others recognize the Arctic’s central economic importance.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, Russia is factually mostly controlling the NSR, having its icebreaking fleet present for the winter months. Other states thus fear unforeseeable cost increases, which is among the reasons why they reject Russian plans for sole NSR administration. Russia’s Policy for the Arctic to 2020 states the intention to use the NSR for its international navigation under its own jurisdiction and for the benefit of national interests.<sup>68</sup> Seen from a spatial perspective, factual NSR control would give Russia a means to expand its sphere of influence in the Arctic, potentially at the cost of others. Other coastal states though warn against such steps.<sup>69</sup> The representation of the Arctic as Russia’s resource base also illustrates attempts at spatial ordering and a sphere-of-influence approach, motivated by concerns over resources, territory, and security. Russian risk representations and interests in the Arctic though collide with those of Canada and the United States. The next section pinpoints existing conflicts of interests and the actions that coastal states take to defend their interests and address security concerns.

### *Conflicts of Interests and Confrontational Actions*

#### *Canada*

Underlining its view of the Arctic, Canada has implemented numerous measures to bolster its position in the region, including for increased effectiveness of control and protection against threats.<sup>70</sup> The implementation of Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy of 2013 included the introduction and/or strengthening of additional measures.<sup>71</sup> Canada

has especially bolstered its surveillance, patrol, and interception capacities.<sup>72</sup> Canada is concerned particularly with its sovereignty and security. To safeguard Canadian Arctic sovereignty, the Canadian Arctic seabed was to be comprehensively mapped, aerial surveillance increased, patrol ships added, Arctic Rangers increased and strengthened, and the Canadian military forces modernized. Activities also include the building of a new Arctic research station. Already the Northern Strategy from 2009 called to meet the growing international interest in the Arctic with both strengthened Canadian patrol and presence in Arctic land, sea, and skies, aiming at a stable Arctic that benefits and secures Canada.<sup>73</sup>

The Canadian perspective includes another key challenge, namely how to prevent an Arctic arms race. While the states within the Arctic Circle continually state their goal of cooperation, their articulated objectives to protect their interests and supporting actions show otherwise. With notable increases of some states' military capacities in the region, Canada sees reason for alarm regarding its sovereignty and security. Furthermore, the United States and Russia have not ended their Arctic nuclear operations, only reduced them, and Russia is modernizing its Northern Fleet for stated defense purposes. There is thus a "distinct possibility of accidental launch of nuclear weapons" by both states.<sup>74</sup> Arguably, this U.S.-Russian context also has an inherent escalation dynamic; a deterioration of relations could then trigger escalation. This reminds of a potential security dilemma, as stated above, and illustrates how risk representations and actions interact. As more of the Arctic becomes ice-free, both countries, and others, will likely expand their presence in the region for their benefit – increasing the potential for the collision of interests in resources and influence.

Canada shares some points of contention towards Russia with the United States. Both strongly reject any Russian efforts for the military protection of its Arctic energy and security interests, as well as Russia's troop increases in the Arctic.<sup>75</sup> Neither country has come forward on how to deal with this conflict of interests and the supporting actions up until now, pointing to considerable conflict potential. Canada (and the United States) has also strongly criticized Russia's 2007 flag planting on the North Pole and responded with an increase of military and surveillance capacities.

### *United States*

Recognizing the grown importance of the Arctic to the U.S., activities show an increased focus on the region. Key are the protection of U.S. national interests in the Arctic, the view of the region as sphere of influence, the need to protect national security also via the Arctic, and the gains from new opportunities in the region. While the United States would cooperate with other actors when useful, cooperation must promote national interests. Since Obama's presidency, the United States has increased its Arctic commitment, revised Arctic strategies, and formulated a more active Arctic policy.

Obama's 2015 visit to the region, as the first sitting U.S. president, raised the region's profile. The "staging" of the region included the promotion of U.S. regional leadership and national security.<sup>76</sup> The country has also used the AC chair role (2015-2017) to influence Arctic developments for own benefit.<sup>77</sup> Experts furthermore point to other countries gearing up to profit from new opportunities in the Arctic.<sup>78</sup> U.S. actions point to an increased Arctic link to national defense and security issues.

The United States has therefore strengthened Arctic domain awareness and plans to further do so, including with exercises for maritime readiness and ice-impacted water operations.<sup>79</sup> The country will protect interests and counter any challenges to U.S. global mobility and security, including "excessive maritime claims" of other states.<sup>80</sup> According to former U.S. Defense Secretary Hagel, the country will respond to the "flood of interests in energy exploration" and its effects on other Arctic issues.<sup>81</sup> Fitting U.S. responses are stability measures and security cooperation, but also preemptive means and increased military operations.<sup>82</sup> These measures highlight the concerns over how changes, and other states' reactions to a changing Arctic, may affect U.S. security, and economic and geopolitical interests. Others will likely interpret preemptive and military measures as confrontational action, to which they may respond in kind, again alluding to a potential security dilemma developing.

Specific challengers to U.S. interests and security are Russia and China as the "two near-peer strategic competitors."<sup>83</sup> In the current global context, the United States has focused on Russia and China as the states most threatening national interests.<sup>84</sup> While the United States has also cooperated with Russia in the region, there are increasing points of contention as well as risks from recent Russian actions, including larger naval exercises and new military equipment. There are also stronger responses to the perceived Russian systematic intimidation of forces from NATO and Western European states in the Arctic and nearby. Since the Ukraine crisis, the United States has notably increased the monitoring of the growing Russian threat potential.<sup>85</sup> In addition, at a recent AC meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo lashed out at both Russia and China for their more and more aggressive behavior.<sup>86</sup> Vis-à-vis China, there is an increase in activities too. Seeing China as threat to the U.S. ability for norm setting, the United States now monitors Chinese behavior more closely.<sup>87</sup> Overall, U.S. actions, in part certainly confrontational, echo U.S. risk representations.

### *Russia*

According to the Policy for the Arctic to 2020, Russia will assure sufficient fighting potential to keep its zone of the Arctic a secure space for own benefits.<sup>88</sup> Russia has modernized its military capacities in recent years, fortified its Northern fleet, and conducts regular military exercises. Frequency and size of exercises have grown. Its nuclear

submarines and intercontinental rockets present significant offensive power also to defend its Arctic interests.<sup>89</sup> Some argue that much of the growing military capacities in the Arctic is not necessarily directed at the Arctic.<sup>90</sup> Yet, the country is developing anti-access/area denial capacities for maritime spaces, including the North Atlantic. Russia has notably expanded maritime activities. It has added 6000 soldiers and radar and sensing networks in the Murmansk region, reopened ten new bases in 2015, plans additional bases in the Arctic, and is buying ice-breaking vessels. Putin ordered the Russian government and its agencies to work to implement Russian Arctic objectives with sufficient financial resources.<sup>91</sup> Russia has thus come forward with substantial backing to safeguard its interests of a secure Arctic. Other states, such as Canada and the United States, though consider Russian military- and security-related actions confrontational, as addressed above.

The other key aim of Russia is economic development, using the Arctic as strategic resource base. In light of an intensifying global resource and markets competition, Russia is acting to develop Arctic resources, according to the Russian National Security Strategy from 2015. Russia plans to turn the region into its key resource base, as stated in The Policy for the Arctic to 2020. To foster a climate friendly to its interests, Russia also sees frontier and international cooperation a fitting measure.<sup>92</sup> Russia is leading in Arctic offshore oil production. It has significantly increased energy-related investments directed at Arctic mapping, and exploration that focus on oil, gas and mining.<sup>93</sup> Russia is highly dependent on foreign technology, and recent sanctions have led to difficulties in pursuing its off- and onshore development of Arctic resources.<sup>94</sup> Yet, Russia has, with South Korean help, succeeded in getting the world's first liquid natural gas (LNG) tanker that can operate in the Arctic all of the year; LNG is projected to gain much significance in the future. Russia's economy depends on hydrocarbon exports, making the Arctic reserves essential. Russian oil and gas companies are also greatly increasing their spending and exploration.<sup>95</sup> The growing Russian power projection on land and sea, and close military encounters with Russian forces increase the potential of Russian-Western confrontation in the Arctic.<sup>96</sup> Both economic and security drivers motivate the actions directed at harvesting resources and protecting territory. With risk representations and actions colliding with those of other coastal states, actions point to a greater contestation and possibly conflict.

### *The China Factor – A Destabilizer?*

Recently, at an AC meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo strongly refuted China's Arctic claims as well as China's self-claimed near-Arctic status, and strongly criticized its behavior in the Arctic.<sup>97</sup> China is only an AC observer and has no sovereign rights in the Arctic, which is why the article here discusses China separate from coastal states. The country is, however, a globally rising actor that since a few years claims Arctic interests. While China is at a great distance from the Arctic, decision makers in Beijing are articulating ever more strongly Arctic

interests, and Chinese companies are greatly expanding their Arctic activities. The self-definition of near-Arctic state underlines this. China can affect the Arctic either directly with own actions or indirectly via other states acting in response to Chinese activities in/towards the region. Already more than ten years ago, when the coastal states re-stated their territorial sovereignty over the Arctic in the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration, Beijing rejected any exclusion of non- or near-Arctic governments.<sup>98</sup> This may illustrate Chinese risk representations of being ‘left outside’ when it comes to hoped-for new resources and influence. To support its Arctic ambitions, Beijing has made it a national goal since at least 2013 of becoming a maritime power. China aims to utilize the oceans for global power status and development.<sup>99</sup> This view highlights a construction of the Arctic as space in which China can implement its goals and interests. Both Chinese discourse and actions carry potential for conflict.

In the first policy paper on the Arctic, Beijing outlines its key interests: resources, new and/or shorter transit routes, and security.<sup>100</sup> Resources are to satisfy current needs and guarantee future resource security and economic growth. Details of implementation remain uncertain though. Some thus describe China’s Arctic interests as “undeclared foreign policy” that is only articulated slowly to the outside world.<sup>101</sup> To strengthen its position, Beijing frames the Arctic as constituting a global common, even though the greatest part lies within EEZs. Some even see Beijing aiming for a reordering of the Arctic legal regime by claiming that resources are global commons, to which China can then make its assertions.<sup>102</sup> China may also have chosen to circumvent the legal constraints by building up influence in the region. In fact, China is positioning itself as key partner for multiple states within the Arctic region and nearby, and as Arctic stakeholder. As scholars point out, Chinese firms make large-scale investment in key development projects in the Arctic; construct and renovate ports, airports, and other infrastructure; and make large-scale land purchases. They build strategic bi- and multilateral relationships; implement cross-regional projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that includes an ‘Arctic Silk Road’; and advance in related research and technology, including the construction of icebreakers.<sup>103</sup> The government partly supports and promotes these activities.

China’s Arctic and Antarctic Administration states that China cannot let others split the resources but must expand own influence in the Arctic. This highlights Chinese risk representations, and the linked construction of the Arctic full of resources. Chinese firms are building up technology and skills for competitive Arctic operation, including cargo ships with ice class, and they are among the largest buyers of international oil assets, some directed towards the Arctic.<sup>104</sup> According to a report on Chinese activities of the last years, the greatest part of the over 1.4 trillion US\$ investment in Arctic states plus Finland and Sweden goes into energy and mineral resources.<sup>105</sup> Cooperation projects exist with Canada, the United States, and Russia, and increasingly so with smaller states like Greenland and Iceland, but also



Finland and Norway. Some argue that other regions can better satisfy Chinese resource interests.<sup>106</sup> Yet, China acts to profit from Arctic resources, expanding investment and partnerships for a stronger foothold in the Arctic and its development. Furthermore, there is potential for long-term military conflict.<sup>107</sup> China is building a position to restrain the coastal states' room of action, to which they will likely react. China's military modernization, non-transparent military intentions, aggressive ways of resolving territorial disputes, and the development of anti-access/area-denial, cyber, and space control tools directed against the West can foster destabilization and security risks.<sup>108</sup> China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea is a warning of how China implements its interests.

China is also increasing its cooperation with Russia, including on Arctic matters. That China is thereby gaining additional advantage vis-à-vis the Arctic should be of concern. Intensifying Chinese-Russian strategic aligning is another issue that particularly worries Canadian and U.S. decision makers, along with the growing possibility of China and Russia together effectively challenging the U.S.-Western global order.<sup>109</sup> China and Russia have intensified their relations in many areas, and to depths not expected by observers.<sup>110</sup> Aside from growing economic and resource cooperation, both countries cooperate on advanced military technology, including a nuclear-operated aircraft carrier. For now, both sides benefit. Russia needs China also for financing, especially since Western sanctions have cut revenues. China stepped in to save Russia's Yamal LNG project, but thereby strengthened its own position. Soon, China may outcompete Russia and constrain Russia's Arctic influence, which could destabilize regional relations. While China has been careful to act cooperatively and avoid open tension over Arctic matters, closer cooperation with Russia enables China to exert influence in the Arctic. Some argue that Chinese behavior may depend on how soon there will be ice-free passages, and on the country's evolving international role.<sup>111</sup> The United States, and others, should work to soften the negative effects on U.S. and western interests.<sup>112</sup> China will likely use its growing influence wherever possible, over time also with increased confrontation. Already now, risk representations express Chinese fears of its interests threatened by others. Coastal states are already including China in their risk representations. All sides are responding with more or less confrontational actions, pointing to how risk representations and actions inform each other. It thus becomes essential to find appropriate ways to deal with China in the Arctic, also to reduce risks to Arctic stability.

## Conclusion: Rising Conflict Potential in the Arctic

Risk representations and confrontational actions by Canada, the United States, and Russia point to a rising conflict potential in the region. With non-Arctic China expanding its foothold in the region, future Arctic stability becomes even more uncertain. Risk representations and confrontational actions inform each other. On all sides, there are then approaches towards the Arctic as sphere of influence that primarily

serve national interests. Risk representations include constructions of space and identity vis-à-vis the Arctic. Thus, Canada and the United States see themselves as northern nations that conquer and protect their frontier with their pioneering spirit. In the case of Russia, the identity aspect is not clearly present. All three though show a strong spatial construction of the Arctic for economic exploitation, geopolitical influence, and/or security. Whereas non-Arctic China also shows no clear identity aspect, it shares the construction of the Arctic as space for opportunity and gain, in the Chinese case for resource exploitation, shipping, and geopolitical influence. Risk representations on all sides show concerns and fears for national interests and/or sovereignty and security. They also express an increasingly determined or even aggressive rhetoric regarding the protection of national Arctic interests. Risk representations materialize in confrontational actions, creating a growing potential for actual conflict. Thus, relations between Canada and the United States on the one side and Russia and China on the other side are becoming more fragile. Tension over developments outside the Arctic can exacerbate fragile relations. Hopes and claims over new resources and shipping routes but also security concerns bring further uncertainty, and the increasingly influential China, building its foothold in the Arctic, can unsettle stability, too. In such a context, actions may escalate. Growing conflict potential should not be underestimated, especially since existing means of governance and cooperation are not sufficiently prepared to manage conflict.

Which measures can suitably address rising conflict potential from risk representations and confrontational actions? There is a need to make risk representations and how they interact with actions more transparent. Coastal states and the Arctic Eight need to articulate and share what they perceive as threatening to their interests, and why. It is important to express and explain the underlying motivations and fears, including the spatial and identity aspects. With an understanding of what motivates each other's actions, actors can reflect on how they may contribute to tension. While conflicts of interest are common in interstate relations, it is important to understand how risk representations can harden positions and intensify conflicts of interest. Risk representations can facilitate escalation – the more when there is not sufficient awareness of them. Aside from making risk representations, transparent, future Arctic stability needs tools to address confrontational actions. They should include early warning indicators and the fast evaluation of security-related developments. Also developments below the level of conflict need to be addressed, such as the pausing or stop of agreed cooperation measures, increases in surveillance, and instances of threat-making. As the Arctic moves closer to the opening of new resources and transport routes, functioning means for conflict prevention and management should be in place.

As risk representations and confrontational actions in the Arctic also include non-Arctic China, ways to deal with Chinese interests and actions are needed to manage conflict potential. A sustainable

regulation of security issues will require the maintenance of the respect for sovereign rights of coastal states. At the same time, coastal states cannot ignore the growing Chinese foothold in the Arctic. Arctic states must then develop workable ways of including China at some level of responsibility and gain. Maintaining sovereign rights of coastal states and still integrating China in some manner presents a considerable challenge yet unanswered. A sensible way of doing so will require legal expertise and mechanisms, which other articles must discuss. Furthermore, the case of China touches on questions of how to deal with the global common, with climate change having extra-regional impact, and the interests of other non-Arctic states. These larger questions are of a global nature, and they will move more into the foreground in the coming years. While there are no clear and agreed answers yet, any decisions and measures attending to this should tie the sharing of gains to a sharing of responsibility.

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