

The future Arctic

A MELTING WORLD

Relatively few people have travelled to the circumpolar Arctic, yet the region's basic characteristics of freezing temperatures and isolation often reign supreme in our cultural imagination. In contrast to the "frozen wasteland" imagery, rising global temperatures linked to climate change are accentuated in the Arctic and threaten the region's organic equilibrium, in turn contributing to the planet's broader climatic shift (AMAP, 2021).

This environmental threat appears even more dramatic given the area's frozen composition, which hosts many species that have evolved to live within a tundra ecosystem. The polar bear is arguably the most spectacular animal to embody climate change's threat to the Arctic on an affective level. For example, the image of an emaciated polar bear seemingly wandering in starvation and despair across an "iceless land" captured by National Geographic (Gibbens, 2017) quickly became global in its reproduction. National Geographic clearly evoked the threat of rapid environmental change as an imperilling force by stating that "this is what climate change looks like" (National Geographic, 2017). Here, the underlying values of the Arctic as a "frozen wasteland" image are flipped to signal that which is pristine, untouched, and sacred against the destructive forces of industrial exploitation—a lonely place of dying in a melting world.

IMAGINING THE "NEW ARCTIC"

Such images or *imaginaries* may seem anecdotal (especially when their link to climate change is challenged, as with this polar bear). However, it is essential to consider how our dominant cultural and social representations of the Arctic affect and are interlaced with government policy and discourse. Within the political zeitgeist, the Arctic is routinely framed as a space ripe for capitalist exploitation and interstate conflict over resources and transport routes in the near to distant future. Such discourses have likened

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recent geopolitical interest in the Arctic to the late 19th century's surge of colonial expansion in Africa as European imperialism reached a crescendo. While such comparisons have been challenged, there are certain regional similarities in their coloniality. Specifically, both Africa and the Arctic are represented through overlapping and often competing imaginaries that are historically contoured as *othered* spaces and peoples.

Culturally, how the Arctic is represented is often highly gendered through the reliance on masculinist adventure and rescue narratives. These narratives exaggerate the role of the loner-saviour archetype within the Arctic's elemental milieu—for example, George Clooney's character in the film *The Midnight Sky*

(Clooney, 2020) and Mads Mikkelsen's character in the film *Arctic* (Penna, 2018). Within these situations, conflict is the key thematic driver—man against nature, man against himself. Likewise, climate change represents a critical thematic driver of conflict differently, as man *against* nature. The Arctic and its natural inhabitants are suffering as the result of progress made in the modern age. Rather than our mastery over nature, we have lost control as industrial progress bleeds into the infinite regress of an increasingly complex world.

The multiple and overlapping imaginaries underpinning our current understanding of the Arctic all embody a specific constellation of cultural representations and epistemic interventions premised on what has been termed the "new Arctic." The new Arctic is contoured by rising global temperatures, which are in turn creating a host of cascading effects for the Arctic's environment, flora, and communities. Consequently, these forces are altering the Arctic's entire organic composition and, by extension, the region's social and political makeup.

The permutation of cultural and epistemic representations of the Arctic also shapes debates within international relations (IR). Arctic research within IR is diverse, but many debates are centred on the Arctic's potential for resource development, year-round shipping, exploitation by non-state actors such as criminals and terrorists, and the prospect of interstate conflict over these economic interests. Put succinctly, the Arctic is undergoing a transformation resulting from climate change that enhances its potential for economic exploitation, thereby inserting the Arctic firmly into the networks of globalization.

Conversely, the Arctic is also threatened by these changes from the state's perspective because these forces undermine the taken-for-granted status of sovereignty (sovereignty's *de jure* quality).

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While the assemblage of forces affecting the Arctic may create robust economic opportunities for northern states, these forces also undermine the state's de facto authority. The state's authority is undermined because its ability to project force is challenged by a comparative lack of development and resources, especially relative to southern territories.

Arctic sovereignty and security have thus returned as important considerations on the political scene for policymakers and defence practitioners within the Canadian context. The issue of Canada's sovereignty and defence in the Arctic is not new, and there have been several periods of intense state interest since the turn of the 20th century, but especially during the Cold War. Canada's defence policy in the Cold War Arctic centred on developing surveillance technologies (often in partnership with the United States) to warn of Soviet incursion and attack. These early efforts culminated in the Distant Early Warning (DEW) line, its later upgrade, the North Warning System (NWS), and prototype technologies designed for underwater surveillance.

With the recent growth of interest in the Arctic, Canada has once again

adopted a defence strategy focused on technological innovation following years of disinterest and disinvestment. Notably, while this strategy echoes earlier defence efforts by the Canadian state, current technological developments are premised on a specific concern for the future of the Arctic. The goal of Canada is to illuminate the Arctic through multiple surveillance platforms that will support predictive and pre-emptive forms of intervention by the state through all-domain awareness. All-domain awareness indicates how the future's imaginative quality is shaping the Arctic as a defence theatre. Importantly, this focus may come at the expense of other imaginaries that shape forms of intervention that could promote a more equitable and resilient Arctic in the face of its unprecedented transformation. 🍁

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