

A Decolonial Approach to Arctic Security and Sovereignty

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Traditional geopolitical theories characterize the Arctic as a zone of potential conflict with the overarching narrative that it is the site of the new Cold War and great power competition between Russia, the United States and China over resources. However, this dominant approach often ignores the extent to which colonial legacies and neocolonial ideas play an instrumental role in influencing these security narratives. There is a need for a more nuanced understanding of Arctic security, particularly as it has to do with how different Arctic states express their sovereignty in practice. A decolonial approach to studying security in the Arctic can better reveal how expressions of sovereignty represent much of the same social and political hierarchies that existed during the colonial era. In this research, I aim to unpack the security narratives and actions of three Arctic states, Canada, the United States, and Russia, by documenting instances of coloniality of knowledge in text as well as neocolonial actions that each state has taken. With this deconstruction of Arctic narratives, I propose a different perception of sovereignty in the Arctic as being heavily influenced by neocolonial narratives in practice and argue that traditional state-centered conceptions of sovereignty should change to acknowledge 1) the shifting geography of the Arctic, 2) the history and role of Indigenous people who live there and 3) adopt an approach that considers shared sovereignty as a more realistic Arctic version of sovereignty.

Introduction

Arctic security is described through several different lenses. While some scholars focus on the importance of oil and gas reserves, others highlight the relevance of interstate conflict between larger powers such as China, the US, and Russia (Sliwa & Aliyev, 2020, Zandee et al., 2020). However, what most security lenses and approaches miss is the importance of colonial legacies and neocolonial ideas. Without an understanding of how these narratives and legacies influence security narratives, Arctic security almost appears ahistorical and ignores how colonialism continues to influence state behavior.

A decolonial approach to Arctic security takes up that challenge, unpacking how the social and political hierarchies from the colonial era continue to be reproduced in the current geo-political environment of today. Instead of overt expressions of force, however, states today use expressions of sovereignty to show their influence and power over regions such as the Arctic by naturalizing

hierarchies of knowledge production and geopolitics that continually place the West in control of the narrative.

In this research, I aim to unpack the security narratives and actions of the United States, Canada, and Russia by documenting instances of coloniality of knowledge in text as well as in neocolonial actions. With this deconstruction of Arctic narratives, I propose that sovereignty in the Arctic as being heavily influenced by neocolonial narratives in practice and argue that traditional state-centered conceptions of sovereignty should change to acknowledge: 1) the shifting geography of the Arctic, 2) the history and role of Indigenous people who live there, and 3) adopt an approach that considers shared sovereignty as more equitable and historically grounded Arctic version of sovereignty.

Literature review

Sovereignty

Traditional geopolitical theories frame the Arctic as a zone of potential conflict with the narrative that it is the site of the new Cold War and competition between Russia, the United States, and China. However, this traditional strand of thought ignores the extent to which colonial legacies and neocolonial ideas play a role in influencing these security narratives. There is a need for a more nuanced understanding of Arctic security, particularly as it has to do with how different Arctic states express their sovereignty in practice. Postcolonial and decolonial approaches to studying security in the Arctic reveals how traditional security narratives have naturalized neocolonial ideas of the civilizing mission, extraction, and ecological imperialism. Furthermore, this approach can better reveal how expressions of sovereignty reproduce social and political hierarches that existed during the colonial era.

Although sovereignty is a base term in international relations, it remains a contested term. For some scholars, the concept is constantly evolving (MacFarlane & Sabanadze, 2013; Glanville, 2013). Others argue that sovereignty represents a hierarchy in international relations that implicitly places the West as the epistemic authority with state development (White, 2019). However, a general understanding of sovereignty is understood as having three elements, and many International Relations (IR) scholars suggest that there is no alternative to these principles. Krasner argues that states have 1) international legal sovereignty, 2) Westphalian/Vattelien sovereignty, and 3) domestic sovereignty. International legal sovereignty refers to a state having recognition including the right to enter treaties and have membership in international organizations, while Westphalian/Vattelien sovereignty concerns the norm of non-intervention. Domestic sovereignty is when states can control activities within their territory (Krasner, 2016). Departing from these conventional notions of sovereignty, Krasner argues, only comes from failed states, states with areas of limited statehood, and members of the EU (Krasner, 2016). More simply put, sovereignty is having the authority over a territory and the population living there internally and externally that other states will not interfere (MacFarlane & Sabanadze, 2013).

Sovereignty in the Arctic

For some scholars, there is already a contestation of sovereignty in the Arctic due to the region's indeterminate geographic characteristics and the real question of distance from non-Arctic capitals to the Arctic itself, making expressing authority over the region complex (Gerhardt et al., 2010). Others argue that climate change, globalization, and a greater acknowledgement of Indigenous

rights also challenge traditional ideas of sovereignty because these transnational problems go beyond the scope that sovereignty offers (Lackenbauer & Greaves, 2016).

Although, as stated above, while there are many ways of explaining sovereignty, only a few are relevant to the study of the Arctic. For example, while ancient conceptions of sovereignty were proven through invasion and power over a land, achieving that in the Arctic where geography and climate make such actions difficult makes achieving traditional sovereignty similarly difficult (Grant, 2011). To handle these problems today, Arctic states have engaged in international agreements to claim sovereignty such as the Ilulissat Declaration where Arctic states used UNCLOS to justify sovereignty over natural resources from the shore to a distance of at least 200 nautical miles.

Traditional realist scholars look at Arctic sovereignty as intrinsically connected to security. For example, protecting sovereignty in the Arctic for some scholars is the ability to control what happens and respond to threats in the Arctic region (Huebert, 2009). Understanding sovereignty in the Arctic, particularly from a Canadian view, however, also is complicated by international maritime challenges such as the American-Canadian dispute over the Beaufort Sea and Canada's dispute over the Northwest Passage. Broadly, sovereignty and security are also threatened by climate change, resource development, and geopolitical transformation (Huebert, 2009). These factors paired with quickening changes resulting from globalization mean that sovereignty is contested and under threat.

In contrast, other scholars suggest that sovereignty in the Arctic is not in serious jeopardy. These scholars instead argue that quiet diplomacy, historic security, and diplomatic practices mean that we should rely on stability to ride out geopolitical and climatic changes in the High North (Griffiths, Huebert & Lackenbauer, 2013). Thus, sovereignty will not ultimately be contested. Instead, it will reckon with a greater demand for resources that will reinforce security and engagement. This importantly means that securitization of the region would be detrimental to the current stability – and instead that scholars and policymakers ought to focus on common interests and double down on multilateral and bilateral mechanisms.

Indigenous Sovereignty

International Law such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People gives rights to Indigenous people to have rights to the lands, territories, and resources that they have traditionally used, owned, or acquired. While this Declaration is not binding on states, the rights contained within it have been upheld by customary law and specifically within Canada, there is constitutional protection in section 35 of the Constitution Act of 1982 as well as a Supreme Court case in 1982 that confirmed the rights of Aboriginal People to hold title to their territories (Campbell, 2015). For some Inuit in Canada, sovereignty does not necessarily mean the same thing as it is interpreted by Western legal accounts. For example, giving land via a land claim agreement does not mean giving up all rights to that title. Instead, it means agreement to share that land in a sustainable manner (Campbell, 2015). This brings up an important distinction to be made between Westphalian sovereignty and Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty.

From an Indigenous perspective of sovereignty, many of the assumptions of Westphalian and Western sovereignty act as a Eurocentric and dispossessive tool that has been used to colonize and subjugate Indigenous People (Kincaid, 2016). Indigenous sovereignty, in contrast, takes a broader

and more relational understanding of social and cultural factors (Bauder & Mueller, 2021). Perhaps the most important aspect of Indigenous sovereignty is the right to self-determination, that is the right to freely pursue economic, social, and cultural development and the right to choose a political status. In other words, sovereignty here is not a source of legal and political authority, but rather a social and cultural way of understanding community. One example of this is that often for Indigenous peoples, sovereignty is linked to an ability to continue to carry out their lives – such as the ability to gather and hunt food (Fakhri, 2018) or the right to engage in good faith (Nicol, 2017). Some scholars such as Vine Deloria Jr. (1996: 111) frame Indigenous sovereignty as “a nation of distinct people, separate from others... so long as the cultural identity of Indians remains intact.” Other scholars argue that Indigenous sovereignty should be removed from Western ideas of power and law and instead be conceived of in terms of ontological belonging (Morteon-Robinson, 2015). Scholars of Indigenous sovereignty also propose that sovereignty does not focus on a state actor, but rather takes a relational lens to look at the relationships and interdependencies in deciding how to make decisions, “the right to be heard and included in deliberations” (Nicol, 2017: 811). Further, an Indigenous sovereignty perspective focuses not on legal power over land, but the responsibility that comes with living on land (Hiller & Carlson, 2018). This notion of caring for land is in complete contrast to a Western perspective of sovereignty that sees land as an exploitable resource. Further in contrast to the universal way that the West defines sovereignty, Indigenous sovereignty is also understood to be contextualized. In other words, how sovereignty is understood changes per community and per individual (Thorner et al., 2018; Mitchell, 2020).

Even with all varying definitions of Indigenous sovereignty, there is debate from Indigenous activists and scholars about whether the term should even be used. By using the term ‘sovereignty,’ some scholars argue, it inherently roots ideas of power and the superiority of the Westphalian state (Bauder & Mueller, 2021; Turner, 2001; Alfred, 1999). Further, it perpetuates a myth of equality between sovereign entities when relations are clearly not equal.

While conceptions of Indigenous sovereignty may be distinct from western Westphalian ones, that is not to say that they do not participate in international organizations that frame sovereignty in Eurocentric terms and use the terminology in their own documents such as, most importantly, *A Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic*. This addresses many of the aspects noted above, such as the importance of self-determination. The declaration begins by declaring key aspects of Inuit sovereignty such as the Inuit being Indigenous citizens of Arctic states but also the Arctic writ large. The declaration also acknowledges the changing nature of sovereignty in the Arctic, and points to the importance of recognition and respect for the right to self-determination, the right to develop creative and innovative jurisdictional arrangements, and the lack of inclusion for Inuit in Arctic sovereignty discussions such as the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration. Looking forward, the declaration also sees the importance of the rule of law, the Inuit as active partners in the future, the need for relationships, and the right for healthy communities in the Arctic. Thus, when thinking about alternative notions of sovereignty that may operate better in the Arctic, it is important to consider the social and cultural aspects of Indigenous sovereignty that recognize and focus on interdependent relationships between actors and the land and highlight the contextual nature of sovereignty.

Decolonial theory

Using a decolonial lens, sovereignty creates a normative hierarchy in international relations, which some scholars characterize as placing the ‘Orient’ as the ‘other’ in opposition to the inherently sovereign and rational West (White, 2019). One example of this is the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect, which assumes that Western states are the only and highest authority of human rights due to their own narrative of naming the West as civilized in opposition to a savage non-West. Another example is the imposition of liberal democratic ideals through international organizations and institutions.

There is an important distinction to be made here before addressing decolonial theory: the similarities and differences between decolonial and postcolonial theory. Postcolonial scholars share many of the same critiques of the current world order, including the elevation of Eurocentric forms of knowledge, developmentalism, and the subordination of the periphery (Grosfoguel, 2011: 17). The capitalist system, they argue, is a cultural system – choosing to focus on agency rather than the overall structure (Morozov & Pavlova 2016; Bhabra, 2014). Decolonial scholars, while agreeing in many of the critiques of the world order, focus more on structural factors to account for the complexities of how different hierarchies have emerged, continued, and play a significant role in the processes of the modern world (Tucker, 2018).

A decolonial approach to IR begins with the acknowledgement that “entrenched and deeply rooted social and political hierarchies based on exclusionary practices shape both geopolitics and the production of knowledge” (Adamson, 2020: 131). These hierarchies often are invisible but play an important role in creating barriers for the legitimacy of knowledge of the colonized and continually perpetuate the same colonizer-driven narratives again and again (Murray, 2019; Mignolo & Walsh 2018; Mignolo, 2011; Grosfoguel, 2011; Blaney & Tickner, 2017). While these hierarchies may not be consciously organized, they exist as “a body of interrelating elements and processes that all marginalize non-Western knowledge” (Fonesca & Jerrems, 2012). This body of elements is what decolonial theory seeks to explain. How are hierarchies reenacted in modern times? How are power relations continued that subjugate the colonized and elevate the colonizers? How is coloniality reproduced? Coloniality at its core relies on power over invisible and disparate social structures, which always relegates knowledge of colonized cultures (Tucker, 2018; Capan, 2017). Thus, for example, a decolonial lens can help answer the question of why some voices and issues are legitimized in security studies and some are not. One key example of this is how, in many cases, the agency of Cuba is written out of narratives surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis. In doing so, many scholars have reproduced the Eurocentric idea that only great powers have agency (Barkawi & Laffey, 2006; Sabaratnam 2011).

Scholars take this decolonial approach to examine instances of these hierarchical systems and understand how neocolonial ideas play a significant role in how states approach the Arctic. Many of these neocolonial ideas include versions of the civilizing mission in the form of platforms to modernize Indigenous ways of life and measuring their capacity based on solely Western ideas of modernity and progress (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). These narratives also often include extraction, such as the growing interest in gas and oil exploration in the Arctic and ecological imperialism. Extraction, in a decolonial lens, furthers colonial actions that are inherent in capitalism, leading into ecological imperialism, which turns people and land into resources to be exploited (Newell, 2020). Importantly, how states express sovereignty in the Arctic is a key part of their neocolonialist

actions, as it often comes directly into contact with the everyday lives of Indigenous communities in both how they speak about land and people but also how they express their sovereignty over land and people through actions. These narratives originate from the singular aim of colonialism, and thus neocolonialism, as they occupy and turn people and nature into resources for the accumulation of capital (Khoo, 2020).

By unpacking these narratives, a decolonial approach to security in the Arctic could reconstitute sovereignty and better explain security in terms that make more sense in exploring the security threats in the Arctic today. For example, decolonial theory addresses a broad, comprehensive, or human security approach because it points out how non-Western knowledge is always marginalized rather than remaining with a traditional state-centered concept of security. Taking this broader approach to security, a decolonial lens can unpack how neocolonial actions by states in the Arctic contribute to insecurity of the individual. Furthermore, in many of the security problems that the Arctic faces now, such as climate change and food, water, and environmental security, Western ways of understanding these problems have proven thus far insufficient for solving collective actions problems. Decolonial theory puts a lens on that problem and defines alternative ways of seeing security and addressing issues like climate change by elevating knowledge from previously colonized/currently neo-colonized cultures. Thus, using this decolonial lens challenges scholars to consider factors that would otherwise not be considered in the realm of security studies.

Methodology

My main research question for this research is: how can a decolonial lens better unpack how Arctic security narratives reproduce social and political hierarchies through expressions of sovereignty? In this paper, I will use a mix of process tracing and discourse analysis to explore three cases of the United States, Canada, and Russia's security actions in the Arctic. I have time bound my case studies from 2014 to 2021 due to the change in Arctic relationships in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea. In these case studies, I will begin by addressing how states have expressed sovereignty, and then document instances of coloniality in text by examining important security policy documents produced by these three governments from 2014 to 2021. I have gone through all official foreign and security policy documents that focused on the Arctic in all cases from 2014 to 2021. For this article, I have examined a selection of those documents and linked them with selected events and actions to make my argument. I will also use process tracing to look at related security neocolonial actions from 2014 to 2021.

After establishing the case study both through discourse analysis as well as process tracing, I will propose a different construction of Arctic sovereignty that departs from a traditional definition of sovereignty. This alternative suggests that a new reading of sovereignty in the Arctic should weaken the norm of international legal sovereignty and domestic sovereignty. I aim to do this by claiming that this new sovereignty should acknowledge the shifting geography of the Arctic, weaken the norm of international legal sovereignty and domestic sovereignty to give more agency to the Indigenous people who live there, and adopt an approach that considers shared sovereignty as a more equitable and historically grounded version of Arctic sovereignty.

The United States

Since 2014, the United States' actions and policies in the Arctic have reflected various expressions of sovereignty. Most call for advancing American security interests in some way to facilitate

commerce, deepen international cooperation, and strengthen environmental stewardship. In documents from 2013-2015, sovereignty was mainly expressed by the United States with a focus on promoting the Western multilateral order through assuring peace, security, and cooperation. This matches with American interests in the Arctic being primarily driven by commercial and security needs, thus more internally focused domestic sovereignty. From 2016-2021, the focus of sovereignty changed to one characterized by reactivity and defense. This arose in response to the resurgence of great power competition. Here, expressions of sovereignty began to take on a more Westphalian flavor to respond to perceived Russian and Chinese incursions on the Western multilateral order.

These expressions in many cases serve to reproduce social and political hierarchies that exclude the colonized and do not appropriately address the security issues at hand. Notably, the United States' chairmanship of the Arctic Council illustrated the nature of leaving out Indigenous voices. This was a multilateral success for Arctic states, but the lack of inclusion of Indigenous people, whose knowledge of maritime travel and non-impact shipping corridors would have been useful, again serves to illustrate the continued power dynamics at play that privilege Western ideas of states, security, and sovereignty. As great power competition rhetoric began to heat up in the Arctic, the United States continued to move its focus more towards state-vs-state competition, ignoring the larger transnational threats emerging from the environment, further using ideas of sovereignty to focus solely on states rather than individuals.

In 2014, the main policy in place was the 2013 *National Strategy for the Arctic Region*. While this policy does mention the needs of Indigenous communities, the focus is primarily on stewardship. In short, many issues that are non-state based are mentioned such as climate change, food security and environmental security. However, the response to these threats is described as one in which the US' role should be as a steward. Stewardship is connected to the Western values of exploitation of natural resources and development within the Arctic. This is reflected in the 2014 *Implementation Plan for National Strategy in the Arctic* and the 2015 *Year in Review: Progress Report on Implementation of National Strategy*. Beyond the role of a steward, both policies address the establishment of ports in the Arctic, partnering with academia and industry, and conservationists. Although the role of Indigenous people and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) are mentioned as potential partners to consult, they are described as having a consultant role rather than a co-management role. American policy in both cases reiterates the role of domestic sovereignty – illustrating how the state controls territory and people rather than giving them an equal voice in the process. During this time frame, there were no direct security policy documents concerning the Arctic, but rather security ideas were integrated within the broader strategies noted above. Because of this, the outright question of security is subsumed within the themes of climate change and does not focus on state-based issues.

Perhaps the most recent significant period of US active engagement with the Arctic was from 2015 to 2017 when it hosted the chairmanship of the Arctic Council. At first glance, the US chairmanship appeared to move towards a more inclusive perspective with its theme of 'One Arctic: Shared Opportunities, Challenges, and Responsibilities', but neocolonial narratives continued to play a role. The United States' three lines of focus within the Arctic Council were 1) strengthening international cooperation, 2) steering the Arctic in the right direction, and 3) promoting security interests by safeguarding peace and considering science and traditional knowledge (Hossain & Barala, 2017). The mention of traditional knowledge is notable. Nonetheless, a decolonial lens

immediately brings attention to the idea of ‘right direction.’ Who decides what is the right direction? Who is involved in that decision? Given that the US interest in the Arctic was and is driven by both security and commercial needs, it suggests that many of the people living in the Arctic, such as Indigenous peoples, do not actually play a significant role in these decisions. Here, we can see domestic sovereignty at play with the United States exerting its control over territory and people by promoting infrastructure and resources development. By excluding the involvement of Indigenous peoples in the development of this Arctic security policy, social and political hierarchies place only Western states at the forefront of decision-making. One of the other hallmarks of the US chairmanship of the Arctic Council was its drive to improve economic and living conditions of Arctic residents by creating a Water Resources Vulnerability Index. While this does aim to help individuals living in the Arctic, it also creates an explicit numeric scale that places those without a Western perceived need in an ‘othering’ position. All of this is not to say that the United States did not have many notable successes in the Arctic Council. The United States worked on and concluded many legally binding agreements on Arctic maritime cooperation, improved cooperation, responded to black carbon pollution, and addressed marine diversity (Hossain & Barala, 2017). Nonetheless, much of its success relied on reproducing hierarchies that consistently marginalized the voices of Indigenous peoples and served only to place Western states’ needs and wants on top.

Policy documents that date after or during 2016 paint a much different picture of Arctic security from a domestic lens. The Department of Defense’s 2016 *Arctic Strategy* only references Indigenous people three times throughout the entire document. It instead focuses on state threats, particularly from Russia, and the continued policy of the US to preserve the freedom of the seas. In this policy, the US is clearly expressing Westphalian sovereignty through non-interference in the sea. This mode of expressing sovereignty reinforces political hierarchies that the US has created as the hegemon to propagate Western values and ideology.

In 2018, more attention began to be paid to the Arctic as Russian militarization and Chinese interest began to worry American policymakers. That year, the US Navy announced that it would reestablish the 2nd fleet, citing Russia as the primary concern for the new force (Larter, 2019). The 2nd fleet, according to the Navy, would respond to high-end naval warfare in the Atlantic. The choice to reestablish the 2nd fleet is a particularly interesting one using a decolonial lens, because it refocuses attention towards how the United States felt that they needed to arrange for a fleet to essentially monitor the Arctic against unwelcome advances that threatened a Western-centric order. The United States does not have traditional sovereignty over most of the Arctic Ocean but felt it had the right to protect the freedom of the seas under the auspices of that order. This aggression from the United States stems from both Westphalian and domestic sovereignty. Interestingly, the United States extended its version of Westphalian sovereignty as a way of claiming that no non-Western state should interfere in the Arctic in ways that Western practices that enforce a multilateral legal order deem problematic.

Later that year, the United States also aggressively pushed for Denmark to fund the construction of airports in Greenland instead of China to counter perceived Chinese influence (Daly & Matzen, 2018; Humpert, 2020). These two issues centered around growing concern in the United States about Chinese and Russian influence growing in the Arctic, while simultaneously, impacts from climate change were beginning to have worrying knock-on effects on the environment and thus livelihoods of those living in the Arctic. By doing this, as well as pushing for Denmark to stave off

Chinese influence, the United States reproduced a social and political hierarchy in which Western ways of life are preferable and therefore more valued than other states, particularly that of China and Russia – both of which are not fully considered Western. The concern for the United States was Chinese infrastructure in Greenland, a key strategic location, which the United States saw as a strategic vulnerability. This type of behavior is reminiscent of an imperial approach, where the United States extended a Western perception of sovereignty to its allies within the Western multilateral order, attempting to thwart what it saw as unwelcome non-Western influence and interference. In doing so, the United States reinforced a hierarchy in which it places Western perceptions of social and political order over others.

The security policies that came out of the Trump Administration from 2019 to 2021 frame security in a similar way (i.e., 2019 *United States Coast Guard Arctic Strategic Outlook*, 2019 *Report to Congress Department of Defense Arctic Strategy*, 2020 *The Department of the Air Force Arctic Strategy*, 2021 *A Blue Arctic*, and 2021 *Strategic Approach for Arctic Homeland Security*). In short, they focus on the perceived aggressive actions of China and Russia in the Arctic with a focus on expressing and defending American sovereignty in the Arctic. This type of sovereignty mentioned in the policies is mainly domestic sovereignty – control over land and people. When Indigenous or colonized people are mentioned, they are described as resources to be used. For example, the 2019 *United States Coast Guard Arctic Strategic Outlook* calls Alaska Natives a “critical layer of security in the Arctic” (United States Coast Guard Arctic Strategic Outlook: 34). In short, Alaska Natives are seen as carriers of information that can assist security strategy by building resilience in local communities. This pattern of making Alaska Natives into resources also occurs in the 2021 *Strategic Approach for Homeland Security*, where Alaska Natives are called first responders – again being transformed into resources for the American security apparatus.

The clearest sign yet that the United States was pivoting towards the Arctic in a manner that cemented a focus on Western security concerns (i.e., traditional state-centered security threats) was then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s speech to the Arctic Council in 2019 (Sengupta, 2019). Rather than address the growing concerns about climate change and the Paris Accords, Pompeo warned the Arctic Council about Russian and Chinese aggressive action in the Arctic, calling the region a zone of global power competition. This continued focus on China and Russia as the main threats to the Arctic and a continued traditional state-centered security lens happens at the expense of other security issues that threaten the individual security of those living in the Arctic. Societal security issues and after-effects originating from climate change, for example, can slip by the wayside with the focus on state-centered threats. Taking a decolonial approach here highlights the neocolonial narratives that are obscured in general discussion about security in the Arctic and brings the focus back to individual insecurities and transnational issues that otherwise are not prioritized. Within American policy documents, this trend is further exacerbated.

Turning back to the research question, Arctic security narratives in the United States reproduce Western social and political hierarchies through expressions of sovereignty. As mentioned above, policy exists to justify and support actions – so it is no surprise that many of the types of sovereignty and security in action are reflected in policy. Thus, in many cases but particularly in policy, domestic sovereignty is the primary mode of sovereignty through which a hierarchical structure is produced in which the government places state-based needs over the needs of people. As with actions, policies from the United States focus overtly on state-based security threats such as Russia and China rather than transnational security threats or individual threats such as those originating from

climate change, food security and environmental security. In short, one of the hierarchies is in which security discourses are legitimized (i.e., state-based threats) versus which are not (i.e., transnational) alongside the question of government needs such as oil and gas extraction versus the needs of individuals and communities living in the Arctic. Although there is not a neat Indigenous/non-Indigenous dichotomy particularly on oil and gas extraction, this hierarchy is best understood through a decolonial frame because this frame brings attention to the entrenched hierarchies that underpin how from a state perspective, questions of threats to state sovereign security are institutionally legitimized. The way in which the United States expresses sovereignty is a way to reify existing hierarchies, suggesting that the way that sovereignty is conceptualized currently in the Arctic is insufficient to fully account for the reality on the ground.

Canada

Canadian expressions of sovereignty in the Arctic have generally reflected a focus on domestic sovereignty over the Canadian Arctic from 2014-2021. Under the Conservative Government until 2015, Canada took a more aggressive stance in the Arctic, implying it would engage in decisive actions to protect its sovereignty. This militaristic approach was paired with promoting tenets of the Western multilateral and neoliberal order such as economic development, environmental heritage, and increased governance. With the arrival of the Liberal Government in 2015, Canada's rhetoric shifted to focus more on consultation and co-development with Indigenous peoples in the Canadian Arctic. Its expressions of sovereignty here turned inward to give more attention to northern governance, modernization, and economic development. Thus, while Canada's approach to Arctic sovereignty has oscillated in terms of rhetoric, ultimately its underlying tenets for how to approach Arctic security have remained the same.

Although Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the Liberal Party have been in power since 2015, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party formed the *2010 Canadian Arctic Strategy* that was in place at the beginning of 2014. This policy explicitly mentioned that the exercise of Canadian sovereignty over the Far North was the goal of Canadian Arctic foreign policy alongside promoting economic and social development, protecting environmental heritage, and improving Northern governance. This former strategy is important in a few respects, the first being that it clearly established sovereignty *over* the Canadian Arctic as a goal, and heavily implied it would engage in military actions to protect that sovereignty. This military protection and a more aggressively enforced version of sovereignty gave more agency and power to the Canadian government at the expense of, rather than opening the door to, co-development and cooperation with local and regional governing structures in the Canadian Arctic (Gronning, 2016). Certainly, other co-development and cooperation activities were occurring – there is no binary per se that sovereignty assertions preclude other forms of governance– but political attention was more focused on questions of hard security. Thus, funding and the benefits that come from being politically valued were relatively lacking as compared to questions of security. Canada also held the chairmanship of the Arctic Council during the leadership of Prime Minister Harper and the Conservative Government. However, many scholars and policymakers found Canadian leadership lacking (Exner-Pirot, 2016). Much of the term of Canada's chairing of the Arctic Council focused on economic development, such as founding the Arctic Economic Council despite concerns about lobbying and the environmental costs of increased resource extraction. By focusing on economic development through increased extraction activities, the Canadian government expressed domestic

sovereignty in order to give preference to the needs of extractive industries. The Canadian government favored those extractive needs coming from the Canadian South over the needs and wants of Indigenous peoples living in the Canadian North.

With the accession of the Liberal Party to power with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in 2015, there was a huge rhetorical shift in how Canada talked about the Arctic. The Canadian government discussed Arctic cooperation with Indigenous Peoples and engaged in more consultation and co-development at the outset. They also announced that the next Canadian Arctic Policy would be developed in tandem with people from the High North. Despite this change in rhetoric, however, much of the neocolonial narratives still exist beneath the surface, such as a focus on increased extraction. Trudeau's Liberal government worked on the development of the 2019 *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* from 2015 to 2019. They created the Inuit-Crown Partnership Committee, a permanent organization with a mandate to advance the interests shared between the Canadian state and the Inuit and focused on the co-development 'with' Northerners rather than 'for' them. This committee was quickly followed by *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy Framework Discussion Guide*. While this policy seemed to give voices to those throughout the North by holding in-person consultation sessions, individuals and groups could only participate by invitation. Furthermore, the constant consultation process was in many cases exhausting for Indigenous communities, particularly when the results of those consultations were not helpful (Everett, 2018). While the word sovereignty was not used in the document, connotations throughout the policy refer to it, thus giving more agency to the Inuit as shared owners of the Canadian territory, but still using them to make sovereignty claims about the region – as they have since the 1980s when Canada formally recognized how Inuit sovereignty underpins Canada's Arctic sovereignty – by the Canadian state. (Everett, 2018). This policy framework discussion guide was followed by the 2017 *Shared Leadership Model*, the 2017 *Pan Territorial Vision for Sustainable Development*, and the 2017-2018 *Towards a New Arctic Policy Framework* documents, all of which mostly echoed the 2017 *Discussion Guide*. In short, they used the right rhetoric to support policies of shared development and consultation, but in many cases, Indigenous issues and needs were sidelined in favor of government needs and wants.

The publication of the *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* (2019) was a widely anticipated policy, given that it had taken four years of development. However, it was almost immediately met with criticism for being light on details and binding commitments (Chater, 2019). Others claimed that, looking at the Harper and Trudeau policies, not much had changed (Brockman, 2019). Perhaps the most damning critique is that the timing of the publication's release immediately before the 2019 federal election in Canada left many experts to analyze the document as part of an election platform for the Liberal Party, rather than a serious Arctic Policy (Tommerbakke, 2019). From a decolonial lens, the *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* (2019) immediately raised concerns. The first issue is the lack of consensus. In the policy, many of the stakeholders from the North such as those from Nunangat, Nunatsiavut, Nunavut, and the Pan-Territorial Governments (governments from Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut) had their contributions placed in appendices rather than within the fully developed policy. This illustrates that there was no compromise or agreement on serious issues of concern such as modernization and extraction – showing that the federal government had trouble finding consensus (Tommerbakke, 2019). Here, there is a clear sidelining of Indigenous needs and wants, one that is reflected through an expression of domestic

sovereignty, where wishes of the federal government were placed above those of the local and regional governing bodies.

The second concern came from the lack of details on how the policy framework was developed. Given that this policy took more than four years to develop, many experts find it reasonable to expect more details (Chater, 2019). This lack of detail illustrates the propensity of states to create policies that have the potential to be imperial and nontransparent in nature. The third and final concern was an issue that was previously noted – the question of participation. While the federal government did host in-person consultation sessions throughout the North, they were invitation-only and thus restricted who could contribute and whose voices mattered. This is not to say the policy was entirely problematic. One of the most notable aspects of the policy was the recognition of the impacts of colonialism in the North, particularly referring to the consequences of disease, cultural assimilation, and coerced relocation. However, by focusing more directly on questions of how and focusing on expressions of sovereignty and power, the federal government continues to sideline Indigenous viewpoints even when the policy claims to represent a co-developed process. In short, it represents the relative insecurity of those living in the Canadian Arctic in terms of representation and participation.

Arctic security narratives in Canada are clearly reproducing social and political hierarchies through expressions of sovereignty. Most of Canada's expressions of sovereignty come from a domestic sovereignty standpoint by focusing on exerting control and influence over territory and policy. This differs from the American case which has both domestic and Westphalian sovereignty, for one reason: Canada controls much more Arctic territory than the United States. Thus, their expressions of sovereignty that exclude or weaken the role of formerly colonized people tend to give more attention to what is happening within its own borders, rather than outside of them. In both policies and actions, Canada often performs the discourse but doesn't follow through with substantial policy. It nominally recognizes the needs and interests of Indigenous People, but the Canadian government continues to prioritize its own needs and agenda. Thus, much of the actual policy continues to produce political hierarchies that puts the needs of the federal government over the actual needs and voices of those in the Canadian Arctic through expressions of domestic sovereignty.

Russia

From 2014-2021, Russian expressions of sovereignty in the Arctic were geared primarily towards other countries rather than inward, thus using a conception of Westphalian sovereignty to express non-interference. With isolation from an economic and political front in the wake of the Crimean annexation, Russia began to focus on the Arctic as an economic opportunity. While there is no expectation of hot conflict, Russian military and economic interest in the Arctic has grown from 2014-2021 in terms of military exercise amount, oil and gas investment, and the investment placed in the Northern Sea Route. In engaging in the Arctic, Russia has expressed Westphalian sovereignty to keep out Western influence while also prioritizing economic interests over the individual security needs of its Indigenous Peoples, thus also expressing domestic sovereignty.

Given Russia's long coastline and history with the Arctic, it is no surprise how important the region is to the Russian government. Particularly in the wake of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent sanctions, Russian economic interests have turned towards the Arctic as a future opportunity. Russia's 2014 *Military Doctrine* began this trend, particularly as a notably recent Russian

military doctrine that explicitly mentions where Russia must protect its national interests in the Arctic. This trend continued with Russia's 2014 *Maritime Doctrine*, which focused on the Atlantic and Arctic and named looming threats specifically in the Arctic as cause for strengthening Russia's Northern Fleet. Russia's 2015 *National Security Strategy* focused on the growing importance of developing Arctic natural resources. It also implied a background of global competition and focused on the expansion of NATO's influence as a threat to Russian sovereignty. However, even with the focus on security, the strategy acknowledged that there was no expectation or conflict or race for resources. Later that year, the *Comprehensive Project for Development of the Northern Sea Route* was published, explicitly introducing measures to improve navigation-hydro-graphic and hydro-meteorological support for navigation. Here, a decolonial lens raises an immediate red flag regarding neocolonial areas of extraction and economic development (Devaytkin, 2018). While the strategy describes the prioritization of Arctic resources, it immediately also raises the question of who is getting those resources, and how the Russian state will handle Indigenous communities who potentially may live in proximity to those areas. The 2015 strategy also highlighted the expansion of NATO's influence as the largest threat to Russia (Klimenko, 2019). Thus, Westphalian sovereignty was also expressed through focusing on a lack of interference from other states. The Russian state also engaged in many military exercises to express this sovereignty, including Vostok in 2014 and 2015, Tsentr in 2019, and Grom in 2019 (Melino & Conley, 2020). A decolonial lens looks at this issue slightly differently than a traditional security lens by refocusing on how an increase in military activity to express Westphalian sovereignty produces social and political hierarchies. Doing so focuses Russia's energy in the Arctic on military and economic matters, ignoring and sidelining individual insecurity issues that may arise from food, environmental, or societal issues. Thus, in expressing its Westphalian sovereignty, Russia places a priority on military and extractive concerns rather than long-lasting security concerns of Russia's Indigenous People.

As the Arctic became a more contested region, Russia created the State Arctic Commission in 2015 to coordinate federal executive authorities, state authorities, and other parts of its government to address the development of the Arctic region and to ensure national security. While this organization may at first seem to address the gaps regarding individual insecurities, it appears to have instead refocused power to Moscow. Leaders in the Russian Arctic now prioritize creating stronger ties to the federal government and Moscow, creating policy that pleases federal authorities rather than focusing on the needs and wants of Indigenous and other marginalized communities in the Russian Arctic (Blakkisrud, 2019). Taking a decolonial lens, in the creation of the Commission, the Russian government was seeking to express its domestic sovereignty over the Russian Arctic. However, in doing so, it created an explicitly top-down structure that continually puts the wishes of Russian political leaders in Moscow above the needs and wants of individuals living in the Russian Arctic.

With the recent publication of *Basic Principles 2035* in 2020, Russia has continued earlier outlines of Russian Arctic policies with one significant change. The new policy introduced the concept of 'ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity' as the top national interest in the Arctic. Past versions of Russian sovereignty expressions in the Arctic have focused on either domestic sovereignty (to illustrate domestic control of territory and population) or Westphalian sovereignty, and it is likely that the document refers to a combination of the two. As with prior Russian Arctic documents, there is also lip service paid to the socioeconomic development of both the Arctic territory as well as the Indigenous Peoples living there (Klimenko, 2020). However, there is little that suggests that

this will result in any real policy changes. Most parts of the Russian Arctic are suffering from population decreases and individual insecurities such as healthcare and housing. This lack of attention to individual insecurities suggests that there are other priorities such as military and economic concerns that trump – in Russia’s view – the needs of their Indigenous population. In short, Arctic security narratives in Russia reproduce social and political hierarchies that favor the needs of the Russian federal government without giving a real voice to minority interests such as those originating from Indigenous Peoples – particularly regarding economic and military concerns. In contrast to Canada, it appears that Russia expresses sovereignty both in a domestic and Westphalian sense. The United States expresses Westphalian sovereignty to keep Russian influence out, while Russia expresses Westphalian sovereignty against as what it sees as undue NATO influence. In its policies and actions, Russia seems to focus heavily on colonial ideas of extraction and economic development to reproduce social and political hierarchies that continually exclude the individual needs of people living in the Arctic.

Discussion and conclusion

Considering how the United States, Canada, and Russia express sovereignty, rather than protecting states from outside threats, each states’ versions of expressing security and sovereignty are merely serving to reinforce hierarchies. Thus, rather than thinking of sovereignty purely as a neutral tool in which Western states express their power over non-Western entities, I argue that sovereignty in the Arctic is heavily influenced by neocolonial narratives and thus the traditional state-centered conception of sovereignty should therefore change to acknowledge three things. First, the shifting geography of the Arctic which makes establishing sovereignty difficult if not impossible (domestic sovereignty). Second, the history and role of Indigenous Peoples who live there (both in enhancing the international legal sovereignty of Indigenous people and giving them more power). Finally, shared sovereignty as a better fit as it will make a more equitable and historically grounded Arctic version of sovereignty.

Adopting a decolonial lens allows scholars to see that sovereignty in general creates a normative hierarchy that places the non-West as ‘othered’ in opposition to the inherently sovereign West (White, 2019). This hierarchy that Western states use suggests that neocolonial narratives continue to influence the way they view security and sovereignty in the Arctic. Non-Western perspectives on conservation, for example, are consulted but not placed on the same valuation as perspectives of Western science, academia, and industry. State-centered threats from China and Russia are given more weight than real individual insecurities arising from food, water, and environmental insecurity. States contribute to individual insecurities by doing so. Thus, non-West perspectives are devalued in reference not only to conservation, but also other questions related to climate change. Traditional security lenses neither acknowledge this neocolonial power structuring nor fully reflect the contestation of sovereignty. Some scholars have already argued that sovereignty is contested in the Arctic due to the region’s constantly changing geography as well as the distance between non-Arctic capitals and the Arctic (Gerhardt et al., 2010).

First, the adverse effects of climate change continue to change Arctic geography as well as geopolitical realities. An updated understanding of Arctic sovereignty should acknowledge that enacting domestic sovereignty may not be fully possible. By trying to maintain the same understanding of land and territory as before that use colonial understandings of ecological imperialism when relating to land, one cannot really approach and think about climate change in a

productive manner. Thus, the same kind of expressions of domestic sovereignty, then, should also be reduced in order to think more critically about climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Second, the history and role of Indigenous peoples should also be more broadly acknowledged in this updated version of Arctic sovereignty. Doing so gives them more legal power and sovereignty over decisions that impact their livelihood. While Inuit sovereignty is key to Canada's broader Arctic claims, it is by no means the norm across Arctic states. Further, acknowledgement is only one part of the equation. With more scholarly attention being paid towards the importance of TEK and other contributions from Indigenous people, so too should sovereignty in the Arctic reflect that role. Going beyond acknowledgement here would serve to give Indigenous peoples more legal sovereignty to take part in decision-making about the Arctic, something that is sorely lacking now. Bringing in those voices may seem like a small step, but it would empower Indigenous Peoples, acknowledging that they too are important players in the Arctic. Acknowledging this new kind of sovereignty is in line with what Indigenous leaders are already saying, particularly in reference to the publication of '*A Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic*' by the Inuit Circumpolar Council in April 2009. Among other claims, the declaration argues that issues of sovereignty must be assessed in the Inuit's context of a long history of exercising self-determination and that the Inuit have been ignored in Arctic sovereignty discussions. When thinking about the role of Indigenous people in Arctic sovereignty, thus, it goes beyond any one state's claim to sovereignty in the Arctic on a territorial level. Scholarly, policy, and activist attention ought to be paid to bringing attention and acknowledgement to the way Indigenous People use sovereignty.

Third, Arctic policymakers and scholars should consider that shared sovereignty may be a more equitable and historically grounded version of Arctic sovereignty. From an Indigenous perspective, sovereignty has a different meaning and can be helpful here when imagining how a shared sovereignty can work in the real world. First, Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty are social and cultural ways of understanding community – and thus sovereignty is often linked to an ability to carry out normal life activities. Therefore, shared sovereignty in the Arctic can reflect that, acknowledging that geopolitical competition and increased oil and gas extraction are threats to that sovereignty. Second, Indigenous approaches to sovereignty also take a relational approach, thinking about how land and people interrelate and the importance of being heard in deliberations between people. In action, this could mean focusing more on the Arctic institutions that exist and giving more power to Indigenous People in those institutions to be heard and speak rather than giving power to states alone. In a future Arctic that will be inevitably changed by the advent of climate change, people and collectives will have to work together to solve these larger collective-action problems. This feeds into a third way that Indigenous sovereignty can inform shared sovereignty. While Westphalian sovereignty treats land as an exploitable resource, Indigenous sovereignty sees land as something to be cared for, the other part of a reciprocal relationship between people and land. What use is having sovereignty over a place if it is not cared for or is not productive? Shared sovereignty in action here would be a reframing of the Arctic as a place for cooperative action to care for the land as the primary objective of sovereignty.

Fourth, sovereignty is contextual. In the Arctic, this implies that any notion of shared sovereignty specifically in the Arctic must include Indigenous people, their traditional and ecological knowledge, and the co-managing of Arctic issues.

Scholars acknowledge that sovereignty is constantly evolving and thus we should not use outdated terminology to describe a region when it is no longer useful (MacFarlane & Sabanadze, 2013; Glanville, 2013). It is not as though sovereignty has not already adapted and been changed with other alterations. The European Union, for example, does not fit within the traditional bounds of sovereignty. It operates as somewhat of a hybrid that follows some older rules but also adapts to the type of sovereignty that the European Union represents. The Arctic similarly should be an opportunity for sovereignty to evolve and address both the changing role of geography and Indigenous peoples alongside a new conception of shared sovereignty as well as deal with the very real threat of climate change.

In this research, I have used a decolonial lens to illustrate how the United States, Canada, and Russia reproduce social and political hierarchies through expressions of sovereignty. I have further demonstrated how traditional security lenses are insufficient to address the current security issues of today and thus, why a new version of sovereignty in the Arctic is necessary to reflect the changing reality on the ground. It is through the deconstruction of neocolonial narratives and ideas that new ways of thinking about sovereignty and security can be revealed and hopefully better fit the current needs and security concerns of people in the Arctic.

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