Preface

This book springs out of a simple and – unfortunately – increasingly relevant question: will there be conflict between states in the Arctic? When asked about my work, this is often the question I reference, as it has guided my research over the past fifteen years. Considering that question when I started doing Arctic-specific research, conflict was more or less unimaginable. Today it is not. Essentially, this book expands upon a decade of investigation into Arctic security issues, using this question as a foundational premise.

Having grown up in Bodø, North Norway, just above the Arctic Circle, I had no conception of hailing from 'the Arctic'. Despite the stunning landscapes and the best football team in Norway, I wanted to leave my hometown and the Arctic as quickly as possible, seeking warmer temperatures and bigger cities. As a relatively young master's student in London in 2009, I was told that it would be smart to choose a dissertation topic 'close to home' or one linked to future aspirations. This was the exact time that the Arctic – however you want to define it – started to appear on agendas and conferences around the world, due to climatic change, resource potential, and evolving political relations.

More than a decade and a half later, the Arctic's status has fluctuated between a climate change cautionary tale, a resource-rich frontier, and more recently, a symbol of great power rivalry. Today, the latter narrative predominates, although resource availability and the effects of climate change are more evident than ever.

The fundamental point in this book stems from the work I did after graduating, but before turning to academia, when I represented Northern Norway in Brussels from 2010 to 2013. My role was to inform EU policymakers that the Arctic, which was starting to figure in their strategic considerations, was a complex region. Saying, as some did and still do, that we need to 'Save the Arctic' just doesn't capture that nuance or the interests of the millions of people living in the Arctic.

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That doesn't discount that parts of the Arctic, whether nature, wildlife, or peoples, might need saving at times. But simple one-liners about a space that comprises 4 per cent of the globe just doesn't cut it.

In 2014, at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, I began researching how Norway and the USA, two Arctic states sharing a maritime boundary with Russia, responded to the Russian war in Ukraine starting in March that year. At the same time, the Arctic Coast Guard Forum came into being – something I had been briefly involved in proposing when working at the American think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in the summer of 2011. However, it quickly became evident that discussions on pan-Arctic coast guard cooperation and broader narratives about Arctic geopolitics and security post 2014 often neglected the diverse regions within the Arctic and the varied geographical contexts in which Arctic coast guards operate. This realisation sparked the idea for this book, which seeks to explore the nuances and complexities of Arctic security.

In 2016, as a PhD student in Vancouver, I wrote a paper on regional security theories, which later became an academic article. With support from fellow PhD candidate Greg Sharp and after presenting the paper at a conference in Toronto in 2016, an initial interest in the linkages between security and regions was sparked. The article was only submitted in 2019, and published in 2021, delayed partly due to one reviewer's insistence on a more holistic approach to Arctic security. The article focused on state and military security – the traditional lens for security analysis in international affairs. I argued that, prior to 2022, there was less emphasis on circumpolar or pan-Arctic state security and more on other types of security, such as environmental, human, and Indigenous, with an increasing focus on governance and politics, albeit often excluding military aspects.

I argued that this emphasis, while not incorrect, led to a misconception among scholars, analysts, and the media that the Arctic is also a unified space for security interactions and military operations. Or, at a minimum, there was and is limited understanding about what security issue or issues in the Arctic *is* or *are* in focus, and where, when analysing geopolitical and security dynamics.

Though I would argue that the article accurately captured this fundamental point, it fell short in exploring the complexities of Arctic political dynamics and how national or international factors impact Arctic security. The application of the dominant regional security complex theory

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by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver was also superficial, and the article failed to propose alternative frameworks for understanding Arctic security dynamics. This book attempts to address those shortcomings by building on recent scholarly work and, importantly, includes an analysis of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the increased Arctic-related collaboration between China and Russia, particularly in the North Pacific, and even US President Trump's insistence on 'control' over Greenland.

In turn, this book is not merely a summary of my previous efforts; instead, it draws on the varied topics and writings I have explored since 2014.[1] It encompasses discussions from coast guard and Svalbard issues to broader Arctic geopolitics, reflecting a decade of scholarly engagement with Arctic security. I argue (and hope) that these writings also hold relevance for other parts of the world, when examining geopolitics and conflict potential. 'Geopolitics' has seldom been more in vogue than right now, while we simultaneously seem to increasingly rely on simple one-liners or 'quick takes' that promise to reveal the truth about complex issues in 400 words or less. Alas, the world is complex, as are regional security relations, and empirics matter. This book is, in other words, a call for acknowledging, embracing, and diving into that complexity.

There might be some obvious biases in here too. As I touch on at the end of this book, I've found myself labelled both a 'hawk' and a 'dove'

[1] As such, Chapter 2, in outlining security regions theories leans on 'The Arctic Security Region: Misconceptions and Contradictions' (2021b). Chapter 3 leans on, in the part of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, *Coast Guards and Ocean Politics in the Arctic* (2020a); Arctic regional dynamics, 'Security Dynamics In, Through, and Over the Arctic "Region"' (with Østhagen, Andreas and Whitney Lackenbauer, 2023) and 'Geopolitics and Increased Tension?' (2023, with Svein Vigeland Rottem). Chapter 4 leans on some of the latter works, and, for the NATO and Canada discussion, 'At Opposite Poles' (2018, with Greg Sharp and Paal Sigurd Hilde). Chapter 5 leans on, for the Norway part, *Norway's Arctic Policy: Still High North, Low Tension?* (2021a), 'Ine Eriksen Søreide: Nordområdene, USA og Balansekunst' (2023b), and 'The Myths of Svalbard Geopolitics' (2024). Chapter 6 leans on 'Reluctant No More? The Complexities of US Arctic Security Strategy' (*Handbook of the Politics of the Arctic*, with Pavel Devyatkin, Lillian Hussong, and Andreas Østhagen, pp. 283–300, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2026). Chapter 7 leans on, for Svalbard-discussions, 'The Myths of Svalbard Geopolitics' (2024), and for the China–Russia discussion, 'China, Russia, and the U.S. in the Bering Sea: Military Exercises and Great Power Politics' (*Arctic Yearbook, 1, 2025*, with Erdem Lamazhapov and Andreas Østhagen, pp. 1–21: https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2025/Scholarly_Papers/2SP_AY2025_Lamazhapov_Osthagen.pdf, 2025). Finally, Chapter 9 leans on elements from 'High North, Low Politics' (2016) when discussing low-level cooperation.

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in academic circles, depending on the context. While working on this book, I stumbled upon some older writings from my time in Brussels between 2010 and 2013, where I argued – much as I do here – for the necessity for differentiation and nuance. Maybe I've always been drawn to the subtleties and distinctions when we discuss the Arctic, not only because it's my home but also because I don't quite fit with how the Arctic is typically portrayed.

My experience representing a subnational level in Brussels to a supranational audience might explain my focus on the multilevel structure highlighted in this book. Ultimately, however, this work emphasises the importance of taking state security (i.e., security practices) seriously, while also recognising the various dynamics at play on other 'levels'. This is indeed a Norwegian outlook, although I have lived at various intervals in two Arctic states – Canada and the USA – as well as worked in the 'capital' of the EU. Engaging in Arctic debates in those contexts might be exactly why I am, in this book, emphasising distinction and nuance.

Finally, if you are looking for the 'one ring to rule them all', this book probably won't meet your needs. It doesn't set out to define a comprehensive theory of international relations, nor does it propose an all-encompassing framework. What it does argue is that our common understanding of the 'regional' is often too broad, lacking the explanatory depth and specificity needed to truly grasp the reality (or as close as we can get) of state security practices. With the rise of quick analyses promising to decode the 'geopolitics' of particular regions or even continents, it's worth taking a moment to rethink what geopolitics really entails and how we can enhance the accuracy of our descriptions. That should, in theory, also serve a purpose beyond enlightenment, hopefully influencing the prospects of conflict management in the Arctic and beyond.

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