“Nothing more wonderfully beautiful can exist than the Arctic night. It is dreamland painted in the imagination’s most delicate tints; it is colour etherealised” (Nansen 1897, 220).

An idyllic dreamscape of furry creatures, exotic fauna and phenomenal natural occurrences, the Arctic conjures fantasy-like imagery. Its romantic charm derived from its primitivism, remoteness, and beauty. The construction of the Arctic ‘dreamland’ has been built over centuries by explorers – like Nansen – who returned from their expeditions with other-worldly treasures and tales of extraordinary faraway lands. In doing so, an exceptionalist trap was set, into which politicians and scholars fell. This picturesque image of the Arctic has been enhanced to include a political view of the region as a ‘zone of peace’ and ‘territory of dialogue’ in the post-Cold War era (Käpylä and Mikkola 2015, 4). The roots of this ‘Arctic exceptionalism’ stem – in part – from Mikhail Gorbachev’s 1987 Murmansk speech. The address invoked similar dreamlike qualities, with initiatives promoting the Arctic as a cooperative and demilitarised utopia – a concept which seemed like a distant vision for an area considered the military theatre for great power conflicts (Åtland 2008, 305). Since then, the emergence of Arctic institutions and the absence of intra-state hostilities have given the impression that this dream is a reality. Just as stories from early explorers often overlooked the brutality of the region’s climate, it is contested whether the paradigm of ‘Arctic exceptionalism’ is a façade which obscures the harsh realities of Arctic politics. Käpylä and Mikkola (2015) question whether the Arctic is as peaceful and therefore exceptional as conventionally assumed. Despite this, the Alaskan Senator, Lisa Murkowski (2021), has maintained that the Arctic is a unique region of peace which should be preserved. This essay will support the views of Käpylä and Mikkola and argue that the Arctic is not exceptional. It is a region which cannot be isolated from global dynamics, and it is because of this that the Arctic is not free from conflict. To do this, this essay will first pin down the Arctic region and unpack the assumptions of the exceptionalist paradigm. It will then explore the global dynamics at play in the Arctic which prevent its meaningful isolation from other regions. The ‘zone of peace’ label will then be critiqued to reveal conflict, showcasing the similarities between the Arctic and other parts of the world. Lastly, it will examine why the paradigm is an unhelpful lens through which to view the region and offer possible solutions to overcome these shortcomings.

Defining the Arctic

The definition of the southern Arctic borders, and the regulation of who is ‘Arctic’, is a social construct used to regulate the political order of the region (Stephen, Knecht and Bartsch 2018). Hence, any definition draws a line for what is ‘in’ and ‘out’, resulting in assumptions which have political implications. However, for the purposes of this essay, the Arctic will be defined as the area within the Artic Circle – a line of latitude 66.5° north of the Equator (National Geographic 2022). It is the northernmost region on Earth and is almost entirely frozen. This geographical remoteness combined with entrenched romanticism and a lack of native IR scholarship has resulted in the prevailing notion of ‘Arctic exceptionalism’. This normative concept “prescribes the Arctic as a unique region with a set of unwritten rules, beliefs and history that have given it a level of immunity to many of the world’s geopolitical problems” (Murkowski 2021, 42). At the core of the paradigm are the assumptions that the region is both geopolitically isolated and a unique zone of peace (Käpylä and Mikkola 2015). By exploring these ideal characteristics in the following sections, this essay will demonstrate how the region does not warrant exceptional status.

An Isolated Arctic?

‘Exceptional’ is loaded with connotations of otherness. It suggests the Arctic is a distinct entity, cut-off from the international system. This isolationist element of the paradigm manifests itself on two fronts: one posits that the Arctic is a unique form of regionalism, the other presumes the region is secluded from global dynamics. On both counts, the Arctic cannot be charged with exceptionalism. It may have distinctive traits, but this does not render the region exceptional. In fact, the Arctic is remarkably akin to other regions and cannot be bracketed out of the international system.

One feature which is often exaggerated to exceptional status is the presence of overlapping regionalism – the result of states being members of multiple regional organisations simultaneously. The Arctic states – who form the membership of the Arctic Council (AC) – belong to Eurasian, European and North American regionalisms. Yet, the Arctic is not alone in this regard, for example, Egypt, Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia are members of both the African Union and the Arab League. Similar overlaps are found in Asia, the Americas and Europe. In mapping the contours of overlapping regionalism, Panke and Stapel (2018) found more than sixty regional organisations that overlap with one another (635). This not only proves the Arctic is not isolated in its overlapping regionalism, but it also shows that the region is not abnormal in its number of overlaps as exceptionalist advocates assume.

Significantly, the main logics of Arctic regionalism are evidenced elsewhere, further emphasising its lack of uniqueness. It is a region which is open both to outsiders and a larger number of actors. This open regionalism is synonymous with regional cooperation in East Asia and APEC's trade liberalisation, which operates on a non-discriminatory basis towards non-members (Kelegama 2000, 4526). Just as APEC welcomes observers, the AC has granted observer status to non-governmental organisations and non-Arctic states. Moreover, informality is a key pillar of Arctic regionalism with forums, meetings, and summits – such as the Arctic Observing Summit and the Arctic Circle Greenland Forum – playing a pivotal role in cooperation. Informal decision-making and soft institutionalism also drive East Asian regionalism where a dense network of informal gatherings, advisory bodies and working groups permeate the regional space (Söderbaum 2011, 60). It is ultimately flawed to suggest the Arctic boasts exceptional characteristics. Upon closer inspection, the Arctic is made from the same ingredients as other regions, it just might be decorated slightly differently.

The climate alarmism and intense media focus surrounding the Arctic Sea has created the illusion that Arctic regionalism is separate as an environmental entity. Yet, environmentalism is not exclusive to the Arctic, nor is it the sole focus of the region. Conservationist environmentalism is a prominent characteristic of Latin American regionalism. From as early as the Spanish conquest, the region has developed environmental ideas and shaped global discourses (Martinez-Alier, Baud and Sejenovich 2016, 29). Like the Arctic, Latin America has institutionalised environmental governance, developed an admiration for European science, and welcomed the inputs of public intellectuals. In fact, the two intersect in the UNEP Regional Seas Programme of which Latin America is part, and the Arctic region cooperates as an observer. Interestingly, the Regional Seas Programme (RSP) predated and partly inspired the Arctic equivalent – PAME. As early as 1989, scholars like Needham and Jedynack-Copley noted that the Arctic lacked a comprehensive framework and should therefore emulate the RSP. This serves to discolour the image of the Arctic as a lonesome environmental pioneer. With the growing concern for the climate, environmentalism has become a priority for most regions: forming one of the core mandates of NEPAD and driving initiatives such as ASCC 2025. The Arctic is not alone flying the flag of environmentalism, and, rather like its counterparts, it takes a prominent place in its agenda. Despite this, the Arctic is more than just an environmental protector. For instance, it has a platform as a business community – bringing businesspeople together from all Arctic states. Ultimately, the Arctic does not operate in a radically different manner from other regions: it is more than environmentalism, and yet its environmental priorities also do not make it exceptional.

Regionalism is traditionally conceptualised as states connected by geography, shared histories, and common interests. On the surface, the Arctic may appear as an anomaly – it is ultimately ice surrounded by states which belong to different regionalisms. This exceptionalist viewpoint is outdated and saturated with Eurocentrism. The region certainly challenges this 'old regionalism' paradigm of state-led regional integration, but this does not make it special. Instead, the Arctic joins a cohort of relatively 'new' post-Cold War regions – such as Eurasia and Southeast Asia – whose existence signifies the increasing multidimensionality of regionalism. While 'old regionalism' was formed in a bipolar context from top-down processes with an in-ward orientation, 'new regionalism' is taking shape in a multipolar world order with features of cooperation and openness (Hettne 1996, 5). As a result, the Arctic is not an exceptional form of regionalism, but part of a generation of new trends and developments (Söderbaum 2016, 27).

One such development is globalisation. New regionalism is intrinsically linked to the processes of globalisation just as the Arctic is interconnected to the international system. Regions are not formed in a vacuum and so the region itself cannot be the only unit of theory-building (Söderbaum 2016, 10). The exceptionalist paradigm applies a regionalist level of analysis which brackets out the Arctic from the international system. This is inherently flawed as it ignores the domestic-regional-international nexus in which the region is sandwiched between national and global dynamics. The Arctic has never been exceptionally removed from global forces. It is a region – like many others – whose history is one of colonialism. For centuries the region played a role in colonial-trading encounters involving transcontinental whaling, ivory hunting, and fur trading (Dodds 2018, 191). Arctic norms, such as its open regionalism, are features of postcolonial legacies and natural reactions to the dynamics of its history of suppression. Global powers remain present and alive in the Arctic, from member states such as the USA and Russia, to extra-regional interest like China's 'Polar

Silk Road' initiative. Most notably the Arctic was of strategic importance during the Cold War, acting as a military theatre for great power tensions. The legacies of the Cold War have drastically influenced the regional governance of the Arctic, shifting it towards a territory of dialogue. In this regard, the Arctic is similar to regions like East Asia where the global level of analysis plays a strong role in shaping regional agendas. Institutions such as ASEAN can be viewed as a reaction to the Cold War conflict and the need to shield the region from such dynamics. The Arctic is interwoven into the international system through its history of colonialism, trade systems, overlapping regionalism, and its emphasis on environmentalism as a global issue. Most Arctic institutions are open to cooperation from outsiders, for instance, Asian states enjoy AC observer status. Ultimately, the 'Global Arctic' thesis carries far more weight than the exceptionalist paradigm. Rather than an isolated entity, the region is inherently global as part of an interconnected world.

An Especially Peaceful Arctic?

'Exceptional' does not merely imply isolation, but isolation for positive reasoning. For the paradigm of 'Arctic exceptionalism', this relates to the perception of the region as an extraordinary 'zone of peace' marked by geopolitical stability and model regional cooperation. This conception stems from Mikhail Gorbachev's 1987 speech and the Arctic's stark transformation from its Cold War military theatre status.

Central to this conception of an especially peaceful Arctic is the inclusion of indigenous voices. Since the Ottawa Declaration (1996), indigenous peoples organisations are permanent participants in the AC which member states must consult before consensus decision-making. Yet, this is largely just lip service, as the Arctic states are still very much in control with indigenous populations not regarded as equal. This is similar to regions like Asia where regional organisations such as the AIPP promote indigenous interests and pressure states to act on their behalf. While they may have greater input than other indigenous communities, the inclusion of Arctic voices does not justify exceptionalism.

The exceptionalist paradigm also points to US-Russian cooperation in the AC as a sign of Arctic exceptionalism. It assumes the region is a powerful unifier that can uniquely diffuse political tensions. While this viewpoint is formed from the post-Cold War image of the region, the paradigm is inherently flawed because the existence of the conflict and its effect on the Arctic serve as evidence that the region is not inherently peaceful. It is inaccurate to portray the short period of time since Gorbachev's speech as the norm for the region. Moreover, the mistrust between the US and Russia lingers in the post-Cold War Arctic. This was perhaps most evident in 2007 when Russia symbolically staked claim to the oil and gas reserves in the Arctic by planting a Russian flag on the North Pole seabed. The action provoked outrage from other Arctic states, including the US who criticised the mission. Significantly, the event ignited debate surrounding a 'new Cold War' in the region, signalling that perceptions of cooperation are perhaps more unstable than the paradigm gives credit. This is unsurprising given the region's history as a site for great power rivalries from the Great Nordic War through to the World Wars of the twentieth century and beyond. The existence of the paradigm highlights the success of the Arctic at projecting an identity based on community, consensus, and an ability to keep rivalries in check. In this regard, the region shares similarities with the 'ASEAN way' principles of East Asia. The picture of cooperation in both the AC and ASEAN is more complex than projected.

At the heart of the Arctic exceptionalism paradigm lie several assumptions about why the region is a zone of peace and cooperation: 1) that there is not much to fight over, 2) the existing governance structures defuse conflict and promote cooperation, 3) Arctic states have little to gain from letting the region slip into conflict (Käpylä and Mikkola 2015, 8-10). This may have some validity in explaining the avoidance of intra-Arctic conflict, however, it ignores the potential for extra-regional conflict dynamics. Ultimately, the regional focus remains a conceptual flaw of the approach, bracketing out the effects of global dynamics; as part of the international system the region is not free from conflict. The Russian-Ukrainian War has brought external political and conflict dynamics to the region which has had direct and indirect effects on Arctic cooperation (Käpylä and Mikkola 2015, 12). Firstly, the war has affected the established practices of cooperation in the region (Käpylä and Mikkola 2015, 13). All official AC meetings (which Russia has chairmanship of until 2023) have been suspended in response to the conflict. Similar actions were taken after Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 with the Arctic Security Roundtable organised without Russian participation. This highlights the limitations of the AC in facilitating cooperation – it may be a successful institution, but like all other regional organisations it has fractures. As a result, it does not meet the 'gold standard' exceptionalism implies. Additionally, the war has worsened the relations between the West and Russia. Further reinforcing how the region is not a magical sphere where outside hostilities are forgotten. For example, scientific cooperation has stopped with Western scientists unable to access data in Russian controlled territory. The militarisation of the Arctic has emerged as a side effect of the conflict, with re-occupation of Cold War bases, and NATO undertaking military exercises in the region (Melchiorre 2022). This not only acts as evidence of the lingering presence of the Cold War Arctic, but it showcases how the potential for conflict remains. It is not solely the regional focus of the paradigm which is problematic but also its presentism – in branding the Arctic as ‘exceptional’ it wrongly ignores both the region’s history and future.

Ultimately, the paradigm views the region through the same lens as conventional Western theories, placing conflict and cooperation in duality. In positing them as contradictory trends, the Arctic is regarded as wholly cooperative. This lacks nuance and obscures conflict, providing an inaccurate portrayal of the region. In their investigation of East Asian regionalism, Foot and Goh (2019) offer duality, hybridity, and contingency as a research prospectus. In accepting duality and unpredictability, Foot and Goh showcase how the fixation on binaries is unhelpful, and that with a complex lens of analysis, conflict and cooperation can hang up well together. If anything, the paradigm’s overwhelming focus on cooperation reinforces the Arctic as a product of new regionalism like other regions of the late twentieth century.

The Harm of Exceptionalism and Possible Remedies

The paradigm is not just weak, but harmful. In placing the Arctic as exceptional, it forces scholars to look for exceptional concepts to explain the region and its challenges, when existing tools and lenses may be sufficient. The promotion of exceptionalism insinuates that the Arctic is the gold standard which others should emulate. Yet, it has faults like every other region, and should not be replicated in its entirety. This ‘untouchable’ narrative creates the impression that Arctic regionalism is too distant from conventional understandings and is thus wrongfully excluded from the bulk of scholarship. Despite its history of colonialism, the region is largely absent from postcolonial theory and discourses, perhaps due to this exceptional image. The prevailing rhetoric of Global IR scholars has been to ‘bring the South back in’, which in turn isolates the Arctic as the northernmost region. The Arctic largely misses the valued contributions of postcolonial thought because of its exceptional status.

Native theories are required to normalise the Arctic, freeing it from the exceptionality trap. The existence of the paradigm signifies a gap in the literature. Conventional Western theories have proved insufficient, and this lack of understanding has resulted in the 'exceptional' conceptualisation. Scholarship needs to become more acquainted with what is on the ground, and the best way to infuse this into the discipline is through the inclusion of indigenous knowledge. Native scholarship has transformed conceptions of other regions, for example, Foot and Goh (2019) articulate how Asian regionalism is complex rather than unorganised as Western scholars assume. An Arctic equivalent would prove helpful to plug the gaps in the paradigm and repair the exceptionalist damage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Arctic cannot be regarded as exceptional. While the paradigm may have validity in the avoidance of intra-Arctic conflict, the regionalist approach obscures global political dynamics and their impacts on the Arctic region, thus neglecting the potential for extra-Arctic conflict. The Russian-Ukrainian War illustrates the ways in which the region is not only connected to global dynamics, but also potentially less peaceful and cooperative precisely because of them (Käpylä and Mikkola 2015, 17). Ultimately, the Arctic is just like any other region in an interconnected world, its regional development is both enabled and constrained by global forces – it just may contain more ice (Käpylä and Mikkola 2015, 4).

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