

Transformation, Riskification and Geopolitics in the Arctic

Introduction

The current political landscape in the Arctic is strongly shaped by three major drivers. On the one hand there is the *ecological* aspect. The face of the Arctic is changing drastically and rising temperatures caused by climate change appear to be more grave in the high north than anywhere else in the world (cf. Norwegian Polar Institute 2023), which leads to rapidly melting ice and permafrost—which in turn exacerbates the global climate crises. The dwindling Arctic ice, however, is also arousing tremendous *economic interests* and concerns that drive politics in the region—and globally. Considerations around new trade routes, natural resources in the grounds of the Arctic Ocean and the necessity of renewable energies in the light of a changing climate affect political reasoning. Closely connected to the economic interests is the last driver: *Geopolitics*. A good part of researchers takes a neorealist stance arguing, that the geostrategic importance of the region paired with a (seasonally) ice-free Arctic Ocean will inevitably lead to states trying to substantiate their claims to the riches of the Arctic by military force. Liberalists on the other hand argue that a military conflict in the region is unlikely as states always have the option to choose the rule of law instead of force. With all major regional collaborative forums put on a halt after the unjust war in Ukraine—and Russia’s total disregard for international laws—it remains to be seen how states will react.

While all three drivers—and other issues—have been subject to intensive research, discussions within security studies have been dominated by the geopolitical side, whereby the theoretical debate on the likelihood of armed conflict in the Arctic has overshadowed almost every other approach to the issue. The project “Transformation, Riskification and Geopolitics in the Arctic” seeks to propose a new way to look at contemporary challenges the region faces. It tries to look beyond existing dichotomies and mere theoretical debates.

A Tale of Actors, Risks, Threats and Interwovenness

The Arctic is faced with manifold challenges, of which most go beyond military conflicts and traditional security concerns. Especially in the context of aforementioned drivers, dangers appear to be strongly interwoven and multilayered, creating the risk of polycrises (cf. World Economic Forum 2023: 9). The resulting complexity leads to uncertainty and thus to the absence of adequate responses to urgent questions. The world, for example, is in dire need of renewable and green energy which China appears to be willing to deploy, but the People’s Republic’s close relationship with Russia deters western costumers as fears remain that China will use energy supply as means to exert political pressure. Foreign investments and technologies (such as the investment in a wind park in northern Sweden by China) are thus under scrutiny and often framed as a danger. This is but one example of the interwovenness and complexity of modern dangers.

But who is turning issues into dangers? What even is a danger? And how can we prepare for them? By utilizing securitization (quite recently also framed as threatifi-

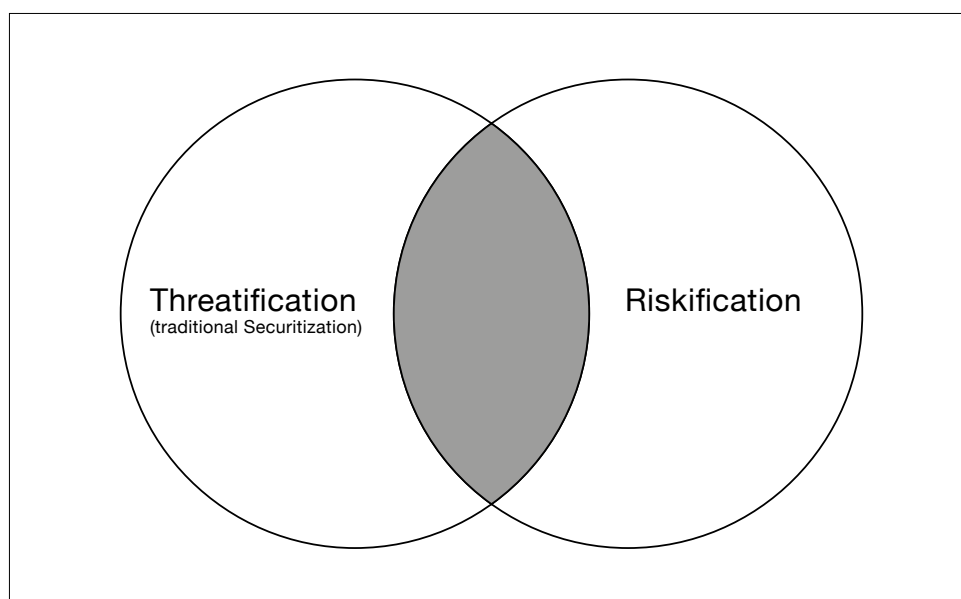


Fig. 1. The Grey Zone within Securitization Continuum.

cation) and riskification theory the project seeks to answer these questions in order to make sense of the multilayered complexity of reinforcing crises. The theories describe how specific actors turn issues into either a threat (that will cause direct harm to a valued referent object) or into a risk (that may cause harm to a governance object) (cf. Corry 2012) in order to legitimize exceptional or precautionary measures to an audience. Some scholars suggest to see both theories as part of a securitization continuum wherein both intersect (cf. Söder 2023: 3). The project seeks to contribute to this growing literature by analyzing the grey area that lies within the intersect of the continuum (see Fig. 1). It will furthermore try to overcome some of the shortcomings that seem inherent to securitization theory. As, even though actors and audiences are at the very heart of it, they remain strongly underexamined even after riskification was introduced—in fact it has gotten more complicated as riskification can be conducted by a broader range of actors such as risk scientists or even insurance companies.

Looking at different actors at different levels (regional, national, and international) and within the multilayered drivers of Arctic change, the project will focus on the question with whom the interpretative sovereignty to determine what a danger is lies now—especially in regard to new technologies and changing audiences due to mass media. It will furthermore look at the performative effects (measures) following a riskification/threatification in the hope to contribute to surmounting and understanding the complex challenges of our time.

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