Security, sovereignty, and resources—these are the most prominent themes that tend to dominate discussions about politics in the Arctic region.

Throughout the last two decades, interest in Arctic international relations has grown significantly, particularly interest in the evolving security dynamics in the circumpolar region. Predominant narratives focus on the role of Russia’s Arctic policy in increasing tensions in the Arctic, the responses of other Arctic states to Russian behaviour, the increased interest from the United States in the region, the interest being shown by non-Arctic states such as China, and the emerging global governance architecture embodied mainly in the Arctic Council. Nevertheless, scholars of international relations and global politics have been slow to engage with the dynamics in the Arctic, so we have comparatively few resources to aid analysis of the political and security issues that have arisen in the North.

It is in this context that noted Arctic politics expert Lassi Heininen provides a brief, yet important, intervention. Heininen’s volume, which is derived from a 2013 conference that focused on Arctic security, assembles a solid roster of contributors to analyze how security is conceptualized in the Arctic and the limitations of prevailing Arctic security narratives. Chapter topics in the book provide insight into a broader Arctic security agenda that includes climate change, economics, subnational actors, diplomacy, development, and science as important, but often overlooked variables with impact on the Arctic security equation. From the outset, Heininen makes it clear that the purpose of the book is to frame Arctic security in the context of human security rather than traditional state security in order to capture what he sees as a more accurate portrayal of Arctic affairs:

...the coexistence of several concepts of security in the Arctic is not a surprise, but a logical outcome of the transformation from traditional, military and state-controlled security to human security with an emphasis on the environment, and a recognition of the Anthropocene, or economic development and security, and that they are closely related to each other making “Arctic security” a special kind of phenomenon to influence the region and its geopolitics. (p. 9)

Heininen et al. are quite correct to note the often myopic view of security in the Arctic, which is not isolated to international political analyses of Arctic affairs, but is also a dominant issue in the field of international relations more broadly. Heininen notes that much of the prevailing narrative about Arctic militarism and interstate security is perpetuated by the media, and that popular discourses on Arctic security need not only to be broadened, but also to be presented more accurately:

When analyzing the state of Arctic security, as well as changes in that, based on the different stages and special features, it is possible to conclude that since the 1980s there has been a clear shift from traditional security to [a] comprehensive one, much influenced by local and regional nonstate actors. (p. 29)

Despite being based on a thesis focused on viewing the Arctic through a human security lens rather than a state security lens, the book also engages with arguments about Arctic militarism and how so-called “traditional” ideas of security relate to Heininen’s claims about a transformation in Arctic security. Michal Luszczuk’s chapter provides a useful commentary on how military cooperation in the Arctic, affected by human security issues, is indispensable for continued Arctic cooperation, though Luszczuk notes that the ongoing tensions in Ukraine and the application of sanctions against Russia by the West may influence Arctic cooperation in the future. The book also deals with other important questions of security, including how subnational actors influence Russian Arctic policy, U.S. Arctic policy, the relationship between sovereignty and development using Canada as a test case, and the Anthropocene.

Taken together, the chapters provide an interesting and novel analysis of core Arctic security questions and engage the actors that contribute to this security in new ways. Providing a brief overview of key issues in accessibly written format, though with certain grammatical awkwardness, the book makes a compelling case for first, being skeptical of the prevailing narratives around Arctic security and militarism; second, noting the need for a human-centric approach to Arctic security; and third, identifying the limitations of traditional approaches to Arctic security.

The book does, however, have two noteworthy limitations of which readers should be aware. The first is the overt effort by Heininen to prove himself correct in his ongoing skepticism of Arctic militarism and conflict theses. He says the discussions on Arctic conflicts sound like a normal academic or political debate, but can be misleading: in fact, he adds, those (like Heininen himself) who would not accept a phenomenon for which they saw no evidence, were right (p. 6). It is unusual to see an author so interested in such self-congratulatory behaviour in a scholarly volume, and it seems that the book was organized specifically to lend itself to Heininen’s own viewpoints about security and Arctic affairs rather than giving voice to a broad collection of experts from across the theoretical spectrum. The second limitation is the book’s commentary on state versus human security. The human security agenda is by no means new in international politics, though the book treats it as such. Given that the UN created the Commission on Human Security in 2001, it would be more appropriate for the book to argue that applying the tenets of human security to the
Arctic may be a recent development. However, there is little reference to the human security literature that exists in the field, which is an unfortunate limitation of the book’s argument.

Despite the fact that the Arctic is not immune from the wider trends in geopolitics and international security, Heininin et al. provide unique insight into the benefits of broadening our understanding of security in a general sense and of applying a human-centric approach to security in the Arctic.

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The author of Baffin Island, Jack D. Ives, arrived in Canada from Britain in 1954 and enrolled as a graduate student in the Geography Department at McGill University. For someone with a burning interest in Arctic and sub-Arctic research, the timing was auspicious, and McGill University was the place to be. In 1956 Jack Ives received his PhD, followed by his appointment in 1957 as the first director of the McGill Subarctic Research Laboratory in Schefferville, Quebec. The 1950s and 1960s, and I would add the 1970s, were indeed the “golden age” of Canadian federal research as well as federally supported research. As stated in the book’s introduction by Peter Adams, one important objective of government and university institutions in this golden age was “to produce graduates trained for polar research” (p. x). In the early 1950s, the Canadian Defense Research Board and the Geological Survey of Canada had launched a major multidisciplinary research project in the High Arctic, and in 1958 the federal government founded the Polar Continental Shelf Project, to this day a crucially important logistic support organization for researchers working in the Canadian Arctic. In 1960, Jack Ives accepted a senior position in the Geographical Branch, Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, Canada. That year Peter Adams was a member of a party heading north to establish the McGill Arctic Research Station on Axel Heiberg Island, while members of the Arctic Institute of North America (AINA), then headquartered at McGill University, established a research station on Devon Island.

As Ives points out in Chapter 1, Baffin Island had been the focus of pioneering investigations going back to the occasional visitations of Western explorers, whalers, and eventually scientists. At the time of Jack Ives’ arrival at McGill, he was undoubtedly exposed to the research projects carried out on Baffin Island, including the multidisciplinary expedition to Pangnirtung Pass in 1953 under the leadership of AINA director Patrick D. Baird. On two earlier expeditions to Baffin Island, Baird had named the Barnes Ice Cap, thought to be a remnant of the Laurentide Ice Sheet. In the mid-1950s, the Canadian government completed air photo coverage of Canada, a remarkably useful way to analyze regions as part of pre–field work planning. In 1956 and 1957, as a member of a small AINA team, Jack Ives was contracted to study the air photos and produce a manuscript for a new edition of Pilot of Arctic Canada. As part of the air photo interpretation, he was asked to study the Baffin Island coastline, among other areas. A sneak peek farther inland brought him over the unknown landscape of the Barnes Ice Cap. Three photos in particular caught his attention, providing the focus for future research plans on Baffin Island.

The completion of the air photo project in 1957 coincided with the establishment of the Distant Early Warning Line (DEW Line), a series of radar and weather stations stretching from Alaska to Iceland, which offered a great opportunity for logistic and communication support for field projects located in their vicinity. The location of the Fox-2 DEW Line station on Baffin Island was to greatly enhance the eventual Barnes Ice Cap work of Jack Ives. A broad research objective of the federal Geographical Branch was the investigation of the “landscape” of Baffin Island. As assistant director of the Geographical Branch, Jack Ives could return to the three air photo images he had noticed earlier and focus his efforts on the glaciological history of the Barnes Ice Cap, a long-term study that would gradually expand in size and scientific coverage.

In Chapter 2, Ives provides an excellent account of the all-important 1961 reconnaissance season, which involved the investigation of the three chosen areas of the Barnes Ice Cap. As with most initial field seasons in remote regions, there was much to learn, particularly about the capriciousness of weather and air transport. The first field camp choice, which Ives named Rimrock Lake, was reached with a chartered single-engine de Havilland Otter on skis, using the DEW Line site (Fox-2) as the nearest contact location and supply centre, courtesy of the station chief, Lou Riccaboni. The first experience with the Single Otter was occasionally tense but successful. The second air support, a Cessna on floats, was less successful. There were close calls and downright drama involving a rescue by a chartered Lamb Airways Norseman.

Following the successful reconnaissance season, the field plans were expanded and new people joined the team. Chapters 3 and 4 cover the 1962 field season, during which one of many challenging objectives was to extract ice cores and transport the frozen cores to Montreal and Stockholm. The reader will enjoy this tale of adversity and success—and the eating of a lot of ice cream as part of the experience.