

Dissertation review

*Zachary Lavengood, Charles University*

“Catalysts of Conflict: Theorizing the Study of Geopolitical Flashpoints”

By Andreas Østhagen, PhD, Senior Researcher, Fridtjof Nansen Institute ([ao@fni.no](mailto:ao@fni.no))

**Overarching comments:**

This thesis conceptualises the notion of flashpoints, leaning on theories from the “Copenhagen school”, and others having outlined “flashpoints”, in order to examine two specific cases (the Arctic and the South China Sea) and prove the utility in evaluating such cases related to a high/low volatility scale for the flashpoints. At large, the thesis is an interesting attempt at defining and refining a commonly used term and giving it theoretical and analytical applicability. The endeavour is worthwhile, and the PhD candidate does a good job in explaining both the rationale for, and the utility of, the concept. The amount of theorisation and operationalisation that the candidate is engaging with is commendable and provides depth and knowledge to the thesis.

Let me also briefly outline a few overarching concerns or issues with the thesis or the approach:

- Concerning the linking with the Copenhagen School and especially RSCT, this needs to be improved. The thesis argues that the flashpoints concept is building off RSCT, but this is not evident. A better explanation of these linkages and foundations is needed, in both chapter 3 and 4, as well as in the examination of the cases. Showing how the RSCT framework applies to / is relevant for unpacking flashpoints would help connect these concepts to each other. Right now, they seem like two separate ideas/notions.
- Concerning operationalising “flashpoints”: it would probably be smart to provide a clear template/framework at the end of chapter 4,
- Critical reflections of both the RSCT and flashpoints are needed. All these concepts and/or theories have flaws and/or constraints, and it is the job of academics and scholars to recognise these critiques and be straightforward about them (in contrast to, say, more popularised and simple analyses). It is needed both in the description of the RSCT (which in turn can also provide a space for this thesis to improve and advance that theory), and it is especially needed for the “flashpoints” concept, since this is a novel development from the thesis.
- Another comment concerns the aspirations of providing a practical / useful tool to deescalate or manage conflicts, i.e. “offer strategic insights for policymakers aimed at mitigating tensions and fostering peace”. This, is, however, lacking from the final chapters. More on this point would be needed to justify its prominence in the abstract/intro, or alternatively that language would have to be toned down.
- In general, the PhD candidate should consider having a final analytical chapter where all the lessons from the cases, the benefits of the flashpoints concept and

its limitations (as well as the linkages with the Copenhagen School), and the practical relevance are discussed.

- It would also be good to try to recognise, or even link with, other similar terms in IR. Although perhaps flashpoints has not been examined, the notion of specific issues having high “salience” for conflict has been, and there might be other words/other frames that somewhat overlap with the foundation for this thesis (i.e. that certain issues that are geographically bounded but socially constructed/securitized) and highlighting these would help lift the theoretical ambition of this thesis (also for potential future use of this work).
- One comment about scales/levels of analysis is needed, given the choice of cases. See more below re. the “Arctic”. The examples given (Kuril islands, Taiwan strait) are all much more specific, focusing on a small territorial domain. The Arctic, however, is a vast region. Also the South China Sea headline should probably be specified further, to South China Sea maritime dispute.
- Finally, the conclusion is remarkably short, especially given the lack of an analytical final chapter.

#### **Specific comments:**

- First, regarding references, they are currently as footnotes, but with the in-text format. I would go for either in-text *or* footnotes. The typical style for IR is in-text citations.
- Concerning the Arctic case:
  - War started in 2022 (p97)
  - Uses high north and Arctic interchangeably, but that is not how it is normally used
  - Not defining the Arctic
  - Arctic was not heavily militarised by NATO, but by NATO member states
  - It was NATO that de-escalated, but primarily the US (along with a few key NATO states that had been engaged like the UK and France) that shifted focus away from territorial defence tasks and out of area operations
  - The Arctic Council is not a multilateral organisation, it is a forum. An important distinction in IR.
  - P103, Russian annexation did not only strain relations between NATO member states and Russia, but all Arctic states and Russia
  - Russia started investing in its Arctic military long before 2014. It occurred already from 2007-2008 onwards, prompting reactions from Norway in particular.
  - If using the concept of the zone of peace, it should be referenced/explained with Gorbachev’s speech in Murmansk in 1987, as an idea but not something the Arctic states were eventually pursuing

- I invite the author to reflect a bit more on the Arctic exceptionalism-narrative, i.e. that it was dead in 2022.
  - P105, it was not the NATO bloc that resumed, especially given that two of the seven were not NATO members at that time
  - This section should also contain something on how the Arctic Council has resumed work, *with* Russia, on working group level
- In general, the description of the Arctic focuses solely on the cooperative forums and how they eventually are challenged. But the reasons for *security* concerns in the Arctic are not really pan-Arctic, nor are they linked to cooperation in the Arctic Council. It is not the lack of cooperation in the Arctic Council that makes conflict escalation in (certain parts of) the Arctic more likely. Instead, I think this piece on the Arctic should focus more on the *security* concerns and where they emanate from. What makes (parts of) the Arctic a potential flashpoint is the Russian re-militarisation and renewal of capacities based on the Kola Peninsula, which predominantly have a global/strategic role (which is *why* the US/other NATO member states have become more concerned with that specific part of the Arctic since 2014ish), but also an immediate conventional role (protect the strategic capacities and project force / ability in the immediate European Arctic domain, which is *why* Norway and other Nordic states have argued for more attention to the European Arctic security environment). These dynamics should be better explained, because this is the true Arctic flashpoint, not necessarily linked to Arctic Council cooperation or exceptionalism debates (although that provides a political context and frame for some of these issues).
- This is in stark contrast to potential security flashpoints in for example Greenland, or in the Bering Sea/Strait. In other words, the Arctic is not one flashpoint, it contains many, the Arctic is just a region. It is the same as saying the Mediterranean is a flashpoint – it doesn't work, which part are we talking about (The Arctic Ocean is in fact 6 times the size of The Med, btw).
- Concerning the South China Sea:
- This case study is much more nuanced and developed than the Arctic one, especially concerning distinguishing what is actually a flashpoint.
  - Language wise, there is not one dispute, but in fact several disputes.
  - The definition of both the name and the geography is much more comprehensive than the Arctic case, which is good for this case but showcases limitations in the Arctic case
  - “Unlike in the Arctic where the United States is conspicuously a non-party to UNCLOS” – the US adheres to the LOS and is very clear about that
  - The summary of the SCS case lacks an explanation of what might make it escalate further. Which of the previously highlighted factors might enable, or hinder, further escalation?

**In conclusion:**

This is a good thesis and it presents a novel and innovative approach to analysing specific disputes around the world. It is original, while it also builds on existing knowledge. It is well structured and the language/framing works very well. There are issues related especially to the Arctic case study, as well as providing more linkages between the concepts, and a final analysis that brings it all together, and I would suggest some revisions before completion. But in any case, this thesis meets the requirements for a dissertation, and it is an interesting and highly relevant contribution to international studies.

With kind regards,  
Andreas Østhagen

Montréal,  
September 21.09.2024