

Dissertation External Review

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This dissertation represents an intriguing attempt to analyze geopolitical flashpoints through the theoretical lens of the Copenhagen School and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). It navigates a nuanced intersection of international relations theory and practical geopolitical dynamics, shedding light on complex regional security structures. By focusing on two contested and strategically significant regions—the Arctic and the South China Sea—the study situates itself within pressing global discussions and offers an interesting diagnostic framework for understanding flashpoints.

The dissertation is commendable for its comprehensive coverage of context, theory, and definitions. It lays out the groundwork for its inquiry, presenting a clear and concise review of the Copenhagen School's theoretical underpinnings. In particular, the concept of securitization is well-articulated and directly connected to the study's objectives. The author effectively links securitization theory to RSCT, emphasizing how regional security dynamics are shaped by interactions among states and non-state actors within specific geographical and strategic contexts.

The theoretical section not only clarifies key concepts but also demonstrates engagement with relevant scholarship. The author provides a balanced assessment of the Copenhagen School's strengths and limitations. This critical engagement strengthens the theoretical framework and enhances its applicability to the chosen case studies. Furthermore, the inclusion of precise definitions for geopolitical flashpoints, regional security complexes, and securitization ensures conceptual clarity throughout the dissertation.

The dissertation's exploration of the Arctic and the South China Sea as case studies is a useful aspect of the work. Both regions are examined in depth, with detailed consideration given to their relevant dimensions. In the Arctic, the author explores how climate change and resource competition have amplified geopolitical tensions, analyzing the roles of key actors such as Russia, the United States, and Arctic Council members. The South China Sea case study, on the other hand, delves into sovereignty disputes, militarization, and the strategic interests of regional and extraregional powers, including China, ASEAN nations, and the United States.

A nice distinguishing feature of this dissertation is its innovative diagnostic framework for geopolitical flashpoints. The framework integrates theoretical insights with empirical analysis, offering a structured approach to identifying and assessing security dynamics in contested regions. By emphasizing the interplay between local, regional, and global factors, the framework provides a multidimensional perspective on conflict escalation and resolution. It is a practical

tool that could be applied to other flashpoints beyond the scope of this study, lighting its broader relevance and utility.

Overall, the dissertation is a well-rounded and insightful contribution to the field of international relations. It demonstrates a clear command of theoretical and empirical material, balancing academic rigor with real-world relevance. This work advances our understanding of the Arctic and the South China Sea and sets a foundation for future studies on geopolitical flashpoints using the Copenhagen School and RSCT frameworks. It is a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, and anyone interested in the complexities of regional security.

As for the overall evaluation, (a) the thesis demonstrates that the scholar can work in the field. I will also (b) agree that this thesis meets the standard for the field. However, I grant (b) with some reservations, as there are a number of issues that I think need improvement.

First, the author should more clearly identify the novelty of the work. It seems to be a form of new application of an existing theory set to a set of cases, but of course both the theory and the two geographic case areas have been studied before. So, what's truly new about this work?

Second, the cases are overly descriptive, and would benefit from more robust analytical attention (for instance, there is not much in the way of a systematic application of a method to the analysis of the case data). Also, how does the author exclude other causal factors contributing to his conclusions? Probably the best approach to handling this is more systematic, visible application on the use of the diagnostic identifiers (that gets lost at points).

Lastly, the author should more explicitly/comprehensively discuss how the case analysis informs/updates the theories used. That is, put differently, the author should work more on building his case for the generalizability of his conclusions

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