

## Interview – Zachary Lavengood

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, APR 17 2024

**This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.**

Zachary Lavengood is a fourth-year doctoral candidate at Charles University's Institute of International Studies, Department of North American Studies. His research focuses on Arctic and Eurasian geopolitics with a specific focus on flashpoints and geopolitical evolutions due to climate change. His published works include: *The Evolving Arctic in the World-System*, *China and the 21st Century Arctic: Opportunities and Limitations*, and *Examining the South China Sea Dispute with General Morphological Analysis*

**What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?**

Immanuel Wallerstein has had a significant impact on my academic thought, I might even go as far as to label myself as a fanboy. I first came across his work as I was preparing for my Master's program, in a textbook on international relations I had picked up from a secondhand bookshop. Excerpts of his writing piqued my interest and over the following years I read through his works. His world-systems theory and its ability to analyze global affairs from an Archimedean point, and indeed the frankness with which it spoke of inequalities and exploitation, changed my outlook on the world around me. Its preference for objectivity over idealism has continued to shape my research.

**What geopolitical challenges and opportunities do you see emerging in the Arctic region? How might these impact international relations in the coming years?**

The Arctic is undergoing a fundamental shift in its identity from a geopolitical afterthought to a growing facet of many states' grand strategy. This has come about due to climate change which has caused the region to evolve from a region of frigid predictability to seasonal climatic extremes; with this evolution comes a bounty of new opportunities such as resources revealing themselves from ice-lock, long sought after shipping routes over Eurasia, and a budding tourism industry. However this comes at a cost, the climactic shift taking place in the Arctic, the fastest warming region on the planet, if left unchecked will cause significant environmental reverberations across the world-system as important geophysical processes (such as ocean currents or the polar albedo effect) are put into jeopardy; unfortunately it is likely to continue as the global community drags its feet on addressing climate change.

While this goes on, states will begin to assert their interests in the region which has the potential to raise tensions. This is redoubled due to the Arctic Council, the region's premiere multilateral forum, becoming inert due to fallout from the war in Ukraine. It's important to remember that the region only became internationalized after the Cold War, so it doesn't have a history of precedence to deal with fluctuations in tensions like many others across the world-system. While this is concerning, it should not necessarily be viewed as existential. While relations can once again freeze, as they were pre-1991, the Arctic is an incredibly difficult environment to function in from a security perspective, for this reason much of the military infrastructure in the High North is defensive in nature meaning as a whole the region is less susceptible to open conflict; it's more difficult to rattle a shield than a saber.

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### **What makes the Arctic important for China? How do these interests impact the priorities and decisions China makes in the region?**

China is a rising power on the global stage and is searching for a way to make a name for itself in the world-system, or in more academic terms is seeking prestige. The Arctic is one area where it sees opportunities to spread its influence and garner this prestige, prompting Beijing to insert itself into regional dynamics with the self-adhered status of being a 'near-Arctic state' per their Arctic policy white paper (published in 2018). They successfully became an observer on the Arctic Council in 2013 and have since then inserted themselves into many of the region's track II dialogues, foremost of which are scientific pursuits which China spends significant funding on, both in an effort to further its understanding of the Arctic's environment, but also as a way to foster relations with other states and their scientific communities. The region is also flush with many of the resources (primarily hydrocarbons) that China needs to keep its energy hungry economy running, and importantly presents an opportunity to diversify its energy portfolio; this is a strategic concern given that in the event of a conflict in its home region (such as in the South China Sea), its supplies from the Middle East could be cut off and limit its capacity to sustain its economy/military.

Despite its claim of being a near-Arctic state, China is well aware of its lack of agency in the region and the suspicion the Arctic eight, especially the littoral states, view outsiders with and approaches the Arctic with less of a dragon's roar than in its home region. China's biggest partner in the Arctic is Russia and has used this relationship to gain a foothold in the Arctic, largely through bi-lateral agreements and deals between Beijing and Moscow, which can give China an opportunity to interact in the Arctic without appearing assertive (for example the Yamal LNG project). This however has been muted for the time being due to the war in Ukraine prompting Russia to be excluded from most of the region's multilateral engagements. This means too that China's position has been weakened in the High North, and must be careful with its partnerships with Russia in the region (especially technology exchanges and resource investments/purchases) lest it draw the ire of the sanction-happy West.

### **Can the Northern Sea Route and the Arctic waters compete economically with the South China Sea in the future? Why/how?**

For the time being this is unlikely. While the Northern Sea Route (NSR) is more open now to traffic than ever before, it still poses significant drawbacks compared to traditional shipping routes which often are not worth the time/cost benefits of sailing along the NSR. Foremost is its limited (though widening) shipping season which is only open while there is no, or thin enough sea ice for safe transits; especially at the extreme ends of the shipping season quick changes in the weather can cause ships to be stuck in the ice (as happened in November 2021). Additionally Russia has applied a strict regime of regulations for ships sailing along the NSR, including using Russian pilots, insurance requirements, fees, etc. which can cause many shipping firms to look elsewhere where there are fewer complications. Again however, in times of geopolitical extremes the NSR could come in handy to avoid areas like the South China Sea where ships are more vulnerable to hostile navies. At the moment the NSR is most used for 'destination shipping' (shipping to/from a port located along the route) as opposed to 'transit shipping' (shipping from an Asian port to one in Europe or vice-versa), a trend which is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. However, the NSR is certainly on the radar of shipping firms who will increase their use of the route should it become more cost effective.

### **Why is a World-Systems Perspective useful for analyzing current events in the Arctic?**

The Arctic is a dynamic region which is best viewed from a wide lens that can show the connections that other world regions have to the High North. World-systems analysis allows observers to avoid traditional academic barriers which would limit connecting analysis of one region with another, or focus solely on economics or solely on politics; the flexible scope of analysis is what makes world-systems analysis so useful in providing objective empirical research, and the Arctic is no exception. As the region becomes more internationalized and more active due to climate change, it is important that observers maintain a holistic understanding of the Arctic's geopolitical processes which is possible through world-systems analysis.

### **What are you currently working on?**

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At the moment I'm completing my doctoral dissertation which focuses on creating a deeper understanding of geopolitical flashpoints as social phenomena. In the dissertation I use the Arctic and the South China Sea as case studies for competitive and conflictual flashpoints respectively, focusing on the diplomatic, economic, and security factors which contributed to the flashpoints' inception and perpetuation. In the work, I create a typology of flashpoints which I hope will find use in the fields of conflict studies and conflict mitigation.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?**

I would encourage early career and young scholars to maintain an independent mind in their research; don't take sides or try to support political/national narratives, there is already plenty of that in the world. What helps us move forward is objective research which presents the world as it really is, for better or for worse, so that we as a global community can work to fix the lingering problems of the 20th century and the evolving problems of the 21st century that humanity must face to ensure a better future for all.