

Arctic Regionalism in Theory and Practice: From Cooperation to Integration?

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Conceptualising the Arctic as a political region has been done time and again in polar research, without any clear indication of how to grasp the kind and degree of circumpolar regionalism analytically. Inspired by the New Regionalism paradigm, this article provides a systematised framework for the study of political integration in the Arctic and analyses the region's identity in the respective historical context. Special emphasis is put on the marine area as a source of international governance and the way this impinges on the direction, functionality and virtue of Arctic regionalism. As intergovernmental cooperation in the North has made considerable progress over the past 25 years, the political evolution of circumpolar regionalism will be traced along three critical junctures: 1987 – 1996 – 2007. It was not before the late 1980s that regional cooperation gained momentum in Arctic affairs, because the region's strategic location as a buffer zone between the former Cold War rivals effectively prohibited any comprehensive regional initiative. This changed considerably throughout the 1990s with the establishment of the Arctic Council as a deliberative forum for scientific and political exchange. Further, it is argued that the Arctic Council today is about to become a relevant actor with independent agency in regional governance if it can successfully turn its delegated tasks and information advantage into practice.

Introduction

It is no hot news that the modern world is a world of regions. Their resurgence since the mid-1980s has substantially shaped global governance and inspired intensive debates about the contours of a new world order that came under stress with the end of the static bloc politics of the Cold War era. In almost every corner of the globe, regional projects such as the European Union (EU), MERCOSUR in Latin America, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) introduced additional layers of inter-state governance by providing to its members mutual benefits such as collective security, development

assistance or economic integration. In the world's northernmost periphery, however, an 'icy curtain' persisted after the Iron Curtain had long fallen and made the Arctic little more than a subsidiary arena for regional and IR studies. Having said that, since the late 1980s the Arctic has evolved at impressive speed as a political region, in which various heterogeneous actors, first and foremost the *Arctic Eight* (Denmark/Greenland, Norway, Canada, the USA, Russia, Finland, Sweden and Iceland), but also non-governmental stakeholders collaborate to effectively deal with a region in a state of flux. With the ice sheet collapsing swiftly as an effect of accelerated global warming, Arctic governance becomes ever more important in world politics as long-covered social, environmental, economic and political interdependencies are more and more brought to light. Those challenges evoke collective regional action in order to address, for instance, environmental degradation, sustainable development, pollution control, standardization of maritime traffic, resource extraction and trade regulations as well as aspects of human, national and international security.

While the regional dimension of the Arctic as an environmental security complex has recently been stressed (Exner-Pirot, 2013), it is the purpose of this chapter to argue for Arctic regionalism in a broader theoretical and historical perspective. The argument elaborated here is that the Arctic has moved beyond sheer inter-state cooperation and towards organisational and procedural patterns of regional integration. More specifically, in this analysis the Arctic Council (AC) of the 21st Century is not treated as the Arctic states' devoted servant any more, but is assumed to possess individual agency and rich instruments to shape regional governance and state behaviour. To place the Far North in the regionalism debate, the following section develops a typology and provides a brief description of central propositions and concepts of the *New Regionalism* approach (NRA). Further, the theoretical part dwells on the maritime geography of the Arctic and how this alters the study of circumpolar regionalism. Arctic regionness will then be put to the test and traced historically.

Theorising Regionalism: A Very Brief Research Synthesis

The finding that the Arctic constitutes a distinct political region is not entirely new to the polar studies community (see Griffiths, 1988; Baerenholdt, 1997; Keskitalo, 2004; Exner-Pirot, 2013). Already two and a half decades ago, Franklyn Griffiths formulated a 'template' to codify the degree of *regionality* in the Far North. He was, to the author's knowledge, the first to make the case for Arctic regionalism along three possible classifications, a *minimal region* marked in principle by unilateral action, a *coordinate region* with bilateral and multilateral accords and an *integration region* where states delegate sovereignty to a regional organization (Griffiths, 1988). Because a few multilateral initiatives to target hazardous waste prevention and disposal, indigenous interests and nuclear disarmament were already in place in the Cold War era, Griffiths classified the Arctic as in the state of "transition from minimum to coordinate political regionality" (ibid: 10), but at the same time ruled out that the Arctic is "soon likely to acquire the characteristics of an integration region" (ibid: 4).

Today, Griffiths' analysis requires a profound re-evaluation given both empirical and

theoretical advancements over the past two and a half decades. First, global pressures as well as intra-regional developments have spurred region-building and institutionalisation in the Arctic, whose regional status today exceeds cooperative agreements of the late 1980s in terms of substance, scope and liability (see Heininen and Southcott, 2010). Recent agreements on *Maritime Search and Rescue* (SaR) (Arctic Council 2011) and *Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response* (Arctic Council, 2013a) negotiated under the Arctic Council are points of reference here. Second, scholars associated with the so-called *new* or *second wave* regionalism have over the past quarter of a century brought forward a fine-grained toolbox of complementary, yet distinct concepts to trace, analyse and ultimately compare regionalist movements in contemporary world politics (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2000; Hettne, 2003; Schulz et al., 2001).

It is worth mentioning, however, that the international relations (IR) and comparative politics literature on regions as both an analytical concept and an object of study in world politics are elusive at best and confusing at worst. The only truism in regionalism research is that there still is no commonly accepted conceptualisation of what is or makes a political region. It is hardly feasible here to enlighten this densely “clouded” (Fawn, 2009: 11) debate based on all too new empirical grounds. Neither is it desirable to simply iterate the different strands that persist in debates of what should be ontologically understood as ‘region’, ‘regionalism’ and ‘regionalisation’. Instead, this paragraph will outline and reason a certain understanding of these concepts drawn from *second wave* regionalism research, which is believed to sufficiently serve the purpose of tracing the origins and development of the circumpolar North as a political entity.

The New Wave of Regionalism to Arrive in the Arctic

Within the IR literature, two benchmarks are generally set for a region to be regarded as such: (1) increasing social, economic or political transnational interdependencies between, (2) states in relative geographical proximity (Nye, 1968; for an application to the Arctic case, see Exner-Pirot, 2013). From this perspective, states merge into separate regional blocs for the sake of preferential or free trading agreements (PTA/FTA) (Mansfield and Milner 1999) or because of some kind of socio-historical, economic, political or organizational ‘cohesiveness’ (Hurrell, 1995: 38). However, these indicators are of little analytical value as they say nothing about why and how regions emerge (disparately), change (differently) or even dissolve (occasionally).

Further, even a quick glance reveals that the Arctic is at odds with at least one of these criteria. Not only does the vast Arctic marine territory of approximately 14 million square kilometres make the term ‘geographical proximity’ a dubious one. Also, low population densities and mobility, rudimentary industrialisation and underdeveloped infrastructure on adjacent onshore territories set limits to social interaction and economic interdependencies which would entail region-wide arrangements. Hence, not all ‘roads’ (and ‘waterways’) to regionalism (Börzel et al., 2012) are built on ever-closer trade relations or cultural homogeneity. Why then did the Arctic emerge as a regional entity? What caused its rapid evolution? And what consequences does this development have for circumpolar governance? As will be explained in more detail further below, due to its

'liquid' territory Arctic regionalism is much more reactive and output-oriented towards a restricted set of collective-action problems compared to land-space regions "rooted in historical civilizations" (Hettne, 2003: 41).

Regionalism is hereinafter understood as a political project dedicated to a "policy whereby states and non-state actors cooperate and coordinate strategy within a given region" and towards shared objectives (Fawcett, 2004: 433). While it is likely that actors combine interests, strategies, rules and procedures in common institutions, it is necessary "to avoid the obsession with formal regional organisations" (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2000: 471). This is a remnant of EU integration research long seen as the 'gold standard' in comparative regionalism which any other kind of regional project had to follow. Alternatively, regionalism can be thought of as a broader spectrum from intergovernmental cooperation to supranational integration (Börzel, 2013). The latter differs from the former in that integration brings about new organisational structures above state-level and with independent agency as a result of delegated tasks and capacities by their constituents. From this perspective, regional organisations which member states empower by surrendering parts of their political authority are just one, albeit a very strong indicator among a variety of potential outcomes of denser interstate relations.

Regionalisation, as distinct from regionalism, is defined as a process by which societal actors through their interdependencies, either by default or by design, form and reinforce some kind of regional cohesion, market harmonisation or 'common bond'. If regionalism was to be thought of as ranging from cooperation to integration, the degree of regionalisation is most adequately placed on a continuum "from relative heterogeneity and lack of cooperation towards increased cooperation, integration, convergence, coherence and identity in a variety of fields such as culture, security, economic development and politics" (Schulz et al., 2001: 5). Although methodologically regionalism and regionalisation should not be conflated, it is neither possible nor analytically desirable to keep them apart as their distinction is porous and processes and effects may interrelate. Some even argue that regionalisation "is not enough in itself to create a region" if it is not part of a state-led regional programme (Fawn, 2009: 13). What is more, treating both concepts as two sides of the same coin backs the Arctic case very well. The Arctic Council as the most relevant institution in the circumpolar North is an organisation *sui generis* in that the body is not purely intergovernmental, but also authorises a number of non-state members, particularly indigenous groups. Focusing on either Arctic regionalisation or regionalism processes would thus be discriminatory to participating actors and relevant processes in this cross-level setting.

In order to analyse the degree to which a geographical area qualifies as a political region, Hettne and Söderbaum (2000: 462-468) merged regionalism and regionalisation into one analytical framework and differentiate five levels of *regionness* as relevant landmarks. To them, a pre-condition for any region is a contiguous *regional space*. Increased social interactions and transnational trade on that territory would turn the regional space into a *regional complex*. The level of regionness still remains low here, because actors pursue first and foremost selfish strategies, have little impetus to cooperate with others and adjust

their behaviour to global rather than regional forces (ibid: 464). As interdependence and societal contacts intensify, the region emerges into a *regional society* of solidified trade networks and a strengthened civil society, and further into a *regional community* as the result of “convergence and compatibility of ideas, organisations and processes” (ibid: 466). Intra-regional relations are driven by mutual trust and the sense for a regional collective identity. While national boundaries within the region are transcended, the common external border demarcate the region from other entities and the wider outside world. Finally (and rather theoretically), the region may become a *region-state* as akin to a nation-state. This fifth level of regionness “constitutes a voluntary evolution of a group of formerly sovereign national communities into a new form of political entity where sovereignty is pooled for the best of all” (ibid: 467).

No Land in Sight? Arctic Ocean Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective

Traditionally, regionalism research has focused on land-space regions. While the Arctic shares a number of commonalities with the above-explored paradigm, its physical geography makes the region a somewhat idiosyncratic case in regional studies. Any analysis of northern circumpolar affairs has to account for the fact that the Arctic consists in essence of a semi-enclosed ocean. While this does not per se disqualify the Far North from the study of regionalism, it has a number of substantial implications for why, how, and with what consequences the circumpolar North evolves as a distinct political entity that deviates from classic regionalist approaches. In the following paragraphs, these factors – fuzzy boundaries, a limited political agenda, contested state sovereignty, and, as a consequence thereof, a tendency towards exclusive regionalism as well as the social (re)production of marine regionalism – will be analysed one by one.



Figure 1: Political Map of the Arctic Region

Source: Hugo Ahlenius, UNEP/GRID-Arendal, 2008; Retrieved 3.5.13 from, http://www.grida.no/graphicslib/detail/arctic-map-political_1547..

First, the Arctic's often implicitly assumed and widely accepted political geography in the shape of a 'donut' (Berkman, 2009: 514) – meaning High Seas under no state authority encircled by Arctic states' sovereign sectors (see Figure 1 above) – is a too narrow view on the region. Due to its physical geography as a semi-enclosed sea the Arctic is a globally embedded space and cannot be detached from socio-ecological forces that may originate elsewhere in the world maritime and climate system. How global implications for the Arctic are dealt with in scope (and hence, which level is best suited for effective and sustainable environmental governance), is subject to scientific assessment, monitoring and policy adaptation on a case-by-case basis. Because of the different geographical coverage that various Arctic Council Working Groups and the 2004 *Arctic Human Development Report* (AHDR) put their individual focus on - based either on shorelines or ecological indicators - it would be appropriate to speak of a set of Arctic regions (cf. Keskitalo, 2004: 30-33). As illustrated in Figure 2 below, Arctic regionalism is territorially erratic and potential boundaries are set (and change) along principally functional landmarks and towards problem-oriented governance. Fuzzy external borders, on the other hand, do not necessarily impede further regionalisation as defined above, which is far more dependent on regional and global forces altering the content, level and scope of the relevant policy issue to be dealt with.

New regionalism research indeed acknowledges the geographical indeterminacy of many regionalist projects and that “the regional frontier may very well cut through a particular state's territory, positioning some parts of the state within the emerging region and others outside” (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2000: 462). Also, such a volatile conceptualisation provides sufficient leeway to identify pan-Arctic regionalisation in a space that is primarily a “region of peripheries” of each Arctic state (Young, 2005: 9). Because most of the issues dealt with here have the ocean territory as a source in common and are closely related¹, any analytical differentiation of Arctic regions would be somewhat factitious and of no added value to the study of what holds the circumpolar North together.

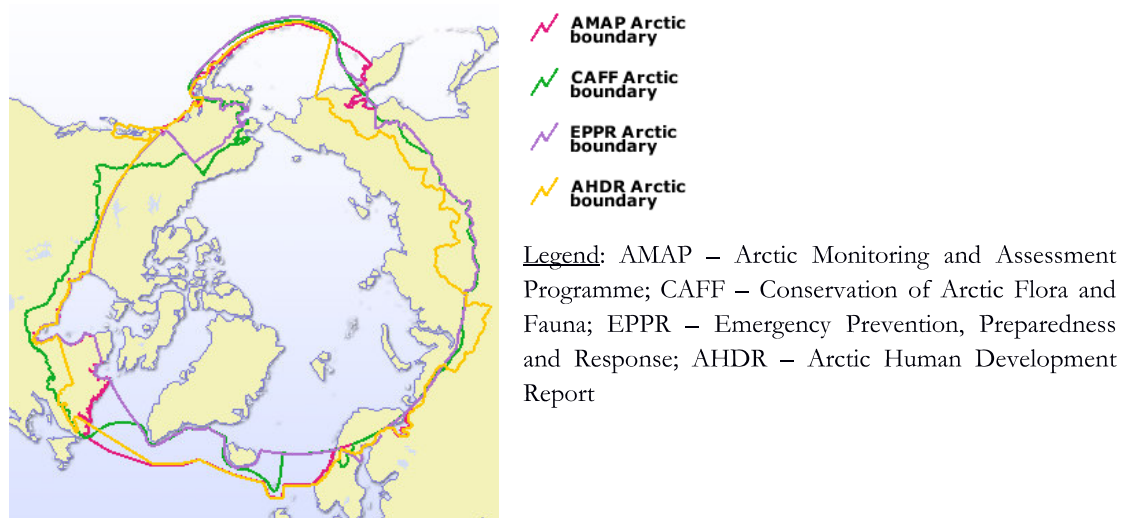


Figure 2: Arctic Boundaries as defined by Arctic Council Working Groups and the AHDR

Source: UArctic. Retrieved 3.5.13 from, <http://www.uarctic.org/AtlasMapLayer.aspx?m=642&amid=5955>.

Second, the transboundary effects occurring within a shared ocean territory cause interdependencies between adjacent states and societies even though social, economic or political linkages may not exist in the first place. The receding Arctic ice sheet more and more uncovers the common legacy of a transformative Arctic Ocean environment so that the *Arctic Eight* are ‘urged to merge’ into regionalism in order to effectively address collective action problems they may not be able to solve in alternative settings. In contrast to temperate regions, where transnational capital flow and socio-economic linkages are assumed to be primary sources for interstate cooperation within a given area, uninhabitable marine regions like the Arctic, “rather than having a ‘natural’ character of their own, are defined only by the existence of common interests in the oceans” (Alexander, 1977: 108-109). No state alone can stem the impact of global climate change on the region or mitigate its environmental, social and political consequences. Nor can any single state be assured of sustainable fisheries management and resource extraction, ecological preservation, social welfare, low-polluting shipping and tourism or comprehensive maritime safety and national security if not all partners contribute to previously agreed objectives.

The regional agenda, however, is restricted predominantly to issues of environmental governance and sustainable development in and of the common maritime space. Analysing the Arctic region as an environmental security complex, Exner-Pirot notices that the “ocean-based nature of the Arctic region has contributed negatively to many of the issue areas that other international regions collaborate on” (2013: 9). It is rather unlikely that Arctic regional politics will either exceed collective action problems arising from the shared ocean territory or incorporate policy issues better addressed unilaterally or at other regulatory levels or institutions, respectively. States will especially repudiate claims for regional initiatives in areas that touch their national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Hence, third, state sovereignty and means to maintain it are key issues in Arctic governance and stressed by all coastal states in their Arctic strategy documents (see Heininen, 2012; see also Knecht and Keil, 2013). The diminishing ice crust incites these states to re-imagine their northern borders vis-à-vis their neighbours and lets them strive for additional sovereign rights over seabed of extended continental shelves. New geopolitical perceptions have so far not led to any major dispute or diplomatic conflict between Arctic states and signs are positive that any claims will be regulated under the primacy of international law, here the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which the states have committed themselves to in the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration. Nevertheless, competing sovereign claims cast a shadow of uncertainty over Arctic affairs and may hinder both negotiation and implementation of common regulatory initiatives. In contrast to many land-space regions, which evolved either to overcome or to reinforce state sovereignty, the Arctic remains a space of contested sovereignty (see Gerhardt et al., 2010).

Yet, the prevalence of sovereignty in circumpolar politics is further questioned from outside the region. Several non-Arctic actors want to make their voice heard in circumpolar governance due to stakes they have in the region or the concern for serious

repercussions from environmental processes therein. These actors constitute an ever larger group of AC observers and those that have applied for observer status, e.g. a number of Southeast Asian states, several EU member countries² and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like *Greenpeace* and the *World Wide Fund for Nature* (WWF). Time and again, these players – in line with several scholars and the wider public – question the coastal states’ reliance on national sovereignty due to expected limitations this would pose on regulatory prospects with regard to sustainable development and ecological preservation and instead ponder “whether it is time to cut the Gordian knot of claims to polar sovereignty for the sake of the common good” to be governed under a global commons regime (Jabour and Weber, 2008: 27). *Greenpeace*, for instance, aggressively campaigns against (plans for) oil drilling by *Royal Dutch Shell* in the Arctic and seeks wide public attention for its ‘Save the Arctic’ web project³, which was launched in mid-2012.

Arguably, to make a fourth point on Arctic regionalism, marine areas do not simply establish a regional territory for the states that surround it, but as a resource basin also have a “powerful centripetal force” (Alexander 1974: 154) with global reach. In reaction to interests that non-Arctic states and entities such as the EU have articulated towards the region, the coastal states set sovereign rights as the ultimate criteria for regional membership and therewith restricted legitimate actorness in Arctic affairs. While in the case of land-space regionalism, states in relative geographical proximity and with similar interests may join or leave regional initiatives and organisations, marine-space regions, by contrast, are determined by accessibility of their members to common waters. According to Lewis Alexander, these states sum up to “a ‘marine-oriented’ region because of their common concern for the sea’s protection and development” (Alexander, 1977: 88). Consistent with this view, the so-called *Arctic Five* (Denmark/Greenland, Norway, Canada, the USA and Russia) in a 2008 separatist move even segregated their sub-Arctic partners Finland, Sweden and Iceland – though founding members of the Arctic Council – from the special ministerial meeting in Ilulissat, while at the same time highlighting their exclusive stewardship role in protecting the Arctic ecosystem (Declaration of Ilulissat, 2008). Also, the Nuuk observer rules agreed upon in the 2011 Arctic Council ministerial meeting for the first time specify the modalities for actors applying for observer status, of which one is to “recognize Arctic States’ sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the Arctic” (SAO 2011).

With that in mind, we could – as shown in Figure 3 – refer to all non-Arctic stakeholders and the group of Arctic Council observers as the sphere of *Arctic marine-oriented globalism*, while *marine-oriented regionalism* includes all states that hold sovereign or jurisdictional rights over parts of the Arctic’s functionally defined territory as stated further above. This latter group is akin to the Arctic Council members (*Arctic Eight*), but also involves the indigenous “Permanent Participants” and their representative organisations.

If, finally, regional boundaries are indeterminate and change along functional indicators, sovereignty is contested and coastal states attempt to define who the legitimate players in Arctic governance are, the region is a product of social meaning and practice and can ergo be changed through discourse and politics (Hurrell, 1995: 38-39). This holds true also for the Arctic. In his book *The Social Construction of the Ocean*, Philip Steinberg

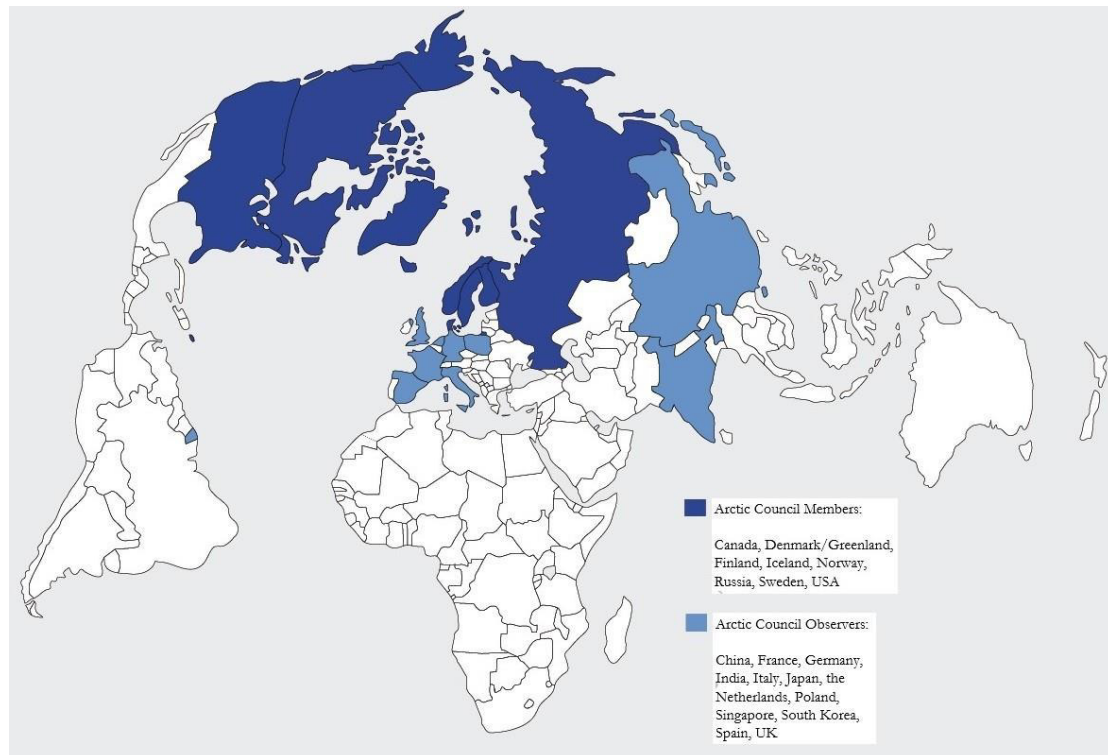


Figure 3: Spheres of Arctic marine-oriented region- and globalism

Source: own illustration; map distorted towards Arctic. Excluded here are Arctic Council non-state members and observers, for a full list see <http://www.arctic-council.org>

investigates the scope conditions for when marine areas are made meaningful space for (economic) governance. Drawing on his work, circumpolar regionalism is primarily a function of how and for which purposes the Arctic is *used* materially, e.g. as a trade corridor and resource base and/or as a military ‘base’, *regulated* politically and *presented* dialectically (Steinberg, 2001: 20-38). These intersecting poles together account for region-building and re-building through mutual reinforcement:

Once implemented in a particular space, each aspect of the social construction (each use, regulation, and representation) impacts the others, effectively creating a new “nature” of that space. This “second nature” is constructed both materially and discursively, and it is maintained through regulatory institutions (ibid: 21).

It is this tripartite social process against which the following paragraphs on the rise of Arctic regionalism will be read.

The Evolution of Arctic Regionalism

The following paragraphs focus on one critical juncture in the political history of the circumpolar North: Gorbachev's Murmansk speech in 1987, which paved the way for the establishment of the AC in 1996, which in turn has been considerably strengthened in recent years. As will be shown further below, preference for unilateral action or, at most, bilateral compromise in Arctic affairs up to the mid-1980s thwarted deepened cooperation. The Russian policy shift towards a comprehensive multilateralist strategy as articulated in Gorbachev's speech in Murmansk in 1987, in turn, set the stage for region-

wide arrangements.

(Post) Cold War Arctic Affairs: From Co-Existence to Cooperation

Until the end of bipolar confrontation of Cold War times, the Arctic was used first and foremost strategically, regulated under a ‘piecemeal approach’ (VanderZwaag et al., 1988: 33) and presented as a potential war zone on both sides of the ocean. Historically, circumpolar cooperation was ill-omened. Not only is the Arctic Ocean the frontier where NATO members and the former Soviet Union come geographically closest, but Cold War rivals also used and abused this vast area for deterrence. The Far North was through the 1980s separated into two self-contained territorial sectors with little to no societal or intergovernmental exchange. The respective sectors were defended from external infringement by the deployment of nuclear-powered submarines and area-wide first- and second-strike capabilities (Roucek, 1983). Because the littoral states saw the Arctic as hardly more than the sum of their national subunits the region remained proverbially the ‘last frontier’ marked by competition and contested stability.

Despite ideological fault lines, collaborative arrangements were not entirely absent in the Cold War Arctic, especially with respect to environmental governance. Many bilateral agreements existed among Western partners, but also between then-Soviet Russia and its direct Arctic neighbours. These included, for instance, the U.S.-USSR Marine Mammal Project (1973), the U.S.-Canadian Joint Marine Pollution Contingency Plan for the Beaufort Sea (1974), the Agreement on the Conservation of the Porcupine Caribou Herd (1987), and the Danish-Canadian Marine Environment Cooperation Agreement (1983). Additionally, the *Arctic Five* had in 1973 adopted the Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears. The Treaty was at that time the only cooperative initiative that all littoral states were signatories to (VanderZwaag et al., 1988: 16).

In NRA terminology, the Arctic of the 1980s/early 1990s is best described as a *regional complex*. While cooperation was not entirely lacking, the states were overall inward-oriented and regarded Arctic affairs primarily as a subject of national foreign policy. Because of their strong focus on national territorial integrity and little regional consciousness due the East-West divide in international politics, the level of regionness remained low. It was not before the often-quoted 1987 speech held by Mikhail Gorbachev, then Secretary-General of the Soviet Communist Party, that induced, in accordance with the processes of *Perestroika*, a substantial change in Arctic relations from “icy co-existence” (ibid: 2) towards deepened mutual trust and more region-wide coordinated action. Gorbachev’s vision of a ‘genuine zone of peace and fruitful cooperation’ (1987) embraced six policy initiatives in the field of scientific, environmental and energy cooperation, consideration of indigenous concerns, the promotion of confidence-building measures as well stringent arms control in a prospectively nuclear-free Arctic region (see Åtland, 2008). It is no exaggeration to refer to this speech as the origin of Arctic regionalism.

The Arctic Council: Institutionalising Regional Governance

Given the sudden window of opportunity that was now open for appeased international relations in the Arctic, Russia more and more committed to multilateral agreements. After the *Arctic Eight* started to meet on a regular basis and to discuss prospective modes of environmental governance from 1989 onwards, they also agreed on the *Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy* (AEPS, 1991) two years later. Its principal objective was to gather and review relevant information on the status of the Arctic environment, give indigenous people a voice and to address transboundary pollution. Yet, the initiative was unclear about the Arctic's territorial boundaries, but, as in the case of oil pollution control, left room for 'extending the geographic scope of these instruments' (ibid: 21). Both geographical coverage and adequate scientific instruments for Arctic environment assessments have been later specified, when the AEPS in 1996 resulted in the establishment of the Arctic Council. The AC is a special forum for intergovernmental deliberation with the primary objective to:

provide a means for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of the Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues, in particular issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic' (Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council, 1996).

With the AC, affairs have been stabilised institutionally, but remained overall complex. The agenda was limited from the very beginning and focused primarily on potential threats to the common Arctic environment. Neither did the Arctic Council have any discretionary power to implement rules, monitor state performance and ultimately sanction noncompliance with regards to the advice it gave the states through its working groups.⁴ Nor did the Council contest states' authority over national territory and jurisdictional rights. The Arctic states have rather substantiated their national sovereignty by restricting membership and excluding at that time still sensitive issues such as military security from the agenda (ibid: note no. 1).

On the other side, the Arctic Council had two innovative strengths. First, the body promoted and formalised a circumpolar perspective through scientific assessments and monitoring reports released by its working groups. This 'knowledge-producing' mandate has so far delivered relevant reports like the *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* (2005), the *Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment* (2009), the *Arctic Human Development Report* (2004) and *Arctic Offshore Oil and Gas Guidelines* (1997, 2002, 2009). These assessments are available to all members and the wider public, gather knowledge on pan-Arctic transformative processes and in this way raise awareness for the 'common North'. Recent studies support this argument and show that Arctic littoral states today indeed narratively configure non-competitive 'articulations' and therewith present and target the Arctic as a common space of and for collaborative governance (Knecht and Keil, 2013). Second, the Arctic Council is unique compared to many other regional organisations. Next to its founding members, the *Arctic Eight*, indigenous peoples' representations have a special status as 'Permanent Participants' and hold full consultation rights at any stage of

deliberation and negotiation processes. Beyond official membership, there are a large number of non-Arctic observers with partial participation rights including states, intergovernmental actors and inter-parliamentary as well as non-governmental organisations.

Having said that, the functionally driven logic of Arctic interdependencies may facilitate state-led regionalism to respond to common challenges, while it may likewise cap, though not lower, the prospects for regionalisation.⁵ Marine regional governance is much less dependent on and seldom bring about relative societal coherence and socio-economic homogenisation than do prominent examples of land-space regions, e.g. the EU. It is beyond the Council's mandate to actively foster deepened social contacts and stakeholder networks. Nevertheless, institutionalised cooperation has facilitated a geopolitically stable setting and this way expedited further cooperation as well as regionalisation among non-state actors, e.g. in the case of pooled scientific resources within the *University of the Arctic* (Keskitalo, 2004: 103-123). Other societal, academic and business institutions have in 2013 formed the *Arctic Circle*. Among the participants are actors as diverse as the *Google Inc.*, the *Brookings Institution*, the *International Council on Mining & Metals*, numerous research institutions, magazines like *Alaska Dispatch* and *Foreign Affairs* and academic platforms such as the *Arctic Yearbook* itself. It is the forum's mission statement to 'facilitate dialogue and build relationships to address rapid changes in the Arctic'.⁶ The *Arctic Circle* in its current shape is nowhere near contesting status and political authority of the AC, but to the contrary "aims to support, complement and extend the reach of the work of the Arctic Council by facilitating a broad exchange of ideas and information". While time will tell which mode and effect diffusion processes between both bodies as well as state and non-state actors will take, the establishment of the *Arctic Circle* is indicative of an active and responsive society.

Also in the case of economic cooperation does regional stability foster ever more interdependence and complementary use of the Arctic Ocean. By way of example, commercial shipping through Arctic waters is on the rise in the years to come and thereby raises investment and risk-taking in this sector. Coastal states plan to build new ports and transshipment hubs as well as transport and urban infrastructure. Furthermore, western oil companies more and more partner with Russian *Gazprom* and *Rosneft* in joint ventures leading to interdependencies in the form of transborder flows in finances, technical equipment and operational expertise (Galkina, 2013). More maritime traffic through the Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route together with growing resource development, in turn, increase the likelihood of oil spills, adverse effects on maritime life and indigenous communities that live thereof as well as accidents at sea and hence require more coordination.

In the latter case, the *Arctic Eight* have negotiated the first legally-binding agreement under the auspices of the Arctic Council, the *Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic* adopted at the ministerial meeting in Nuuk (2011). In the former case, an *Agreement on Cooperation on marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic* followed at the Kiruna ministerial meeting in May 2013, which recognised 'the importance of the Arctic marine ecosystem and of cooperation to

promote and encourage the conservation and sustainable use of the marine and coastal environment and its natural resources'. Both examples resonate well with Steinberg's argument on the social construction of ocean space (2001). The dialectical representation of the Arctic as a common destiny, both in littoral state's Arctic strategies and Arctic Council documents, paved the way for region-wide regulatory agreements, which seemed impossible in the competitive setting that dominated Arctic affairs until the end of the 1980s.

Arctic Regionalism 25 Years Later

With the warming of the Arctic, so did regional relations. Russian foreign minister Sergej Lavrov, while on a visit to Kirkenes in 2008, put it in a nutshell when he proclaimed that "the further North you go, the better East-West relations" (Pettersen, 2010). The pressing issues resulting from climate change more and more pushes the circumpolar North into the state of a *regional society* in the sense that the current collaboration reveals a 'move towards transcendence of national space, making use of a more rule-based pattern of relations' (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2000: 464). The year 2007 was a turning point in this regard: the Arctic ice cover reached a new record low compared to previous years and generated sudden public, political and academic salience of Arctic affairs. Additionally, the well-known assessment of Arctic oil and gas deposits by the *U.S. Geological Survey* (USGS, 2008) opened only one year later the (rhetorical) rush for the Arctic's black gold. That was why the symbolic gesture of a Russian research expedition in August 2007 to plant a titanium flag into the Arctic seabed right beneath the geographical North Pole caused an outcry among Western politicians and the wider public. Yet, instead of discord and diplomatic tussle, the Arctic states have moved closer together and get engaged in region-wide regulatory arrangements and problem-solving initiatives beyond their quest for territorial and domestic sovereignty in times of rising economic stakes.

The Arctic Council, by contrast, is still generally considered a weak institution with 'decision-shaping', but no 'decision-making power' (Young, 2012: 401-402). And without a doubt, the organisation remains first and foremost a forum for mutual consultation between and scientific assessment for otherwise *de jure* sovereign states. This, however, does not implicate that the Council is a *de facto* non-influential body in northern politics. Quite the contrary, the organisation is currently on the cusp of becoming an active and relevant regional player in its own right. Ordinarily, international organisations acquire distinct agency through authoritative rights that member states surrender to them. States, on the other hand, deem it purposive to delegate autonomy to international organisations to manage collective action (problems) and to do so more effectively and cost-efficiently (Bradley and Kelley, 2008). Sovereignty, however, is a sensitive good to the littoral states, which instead strive to substantiate their claims to sovereign jurisdiction and have so far not delegated any decision-making, legislative or regulatory authority to the AC.

The ongoing emphasis on national sovereignty, however, has in some instances prompted a strong civil society opposition. The *Inuit Circumpolar Council* (ICC), by way of example, emphasises that the Inuit are 'united as a single people' and claim their right to

self-determination and a more active role for indigenous organisations as opposed to governments (Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2009). Their common sense of belonging and shared identity was demonstrated, for instance, during the RAIPON incidence in late 2012. The Russian Ministry of Justice had in November 2012 closed down the *Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North* because of non-compliant statutes with Russian legislation. This aroused vigorous opposition and solidarity around the circumpolar North and within the Arctic Council, to which RAIPON is a Permanent Participant. After thorough inspections, the organisation continued regular work in March 2013.

The eight Arctic states hold a dominant, yet contested role in the Arctic Council. A much less acknowledged position beyond its formal character, however, is that the Arctic Council possesses and executes informal power as a highly specialized agent and norm-creator. The Council's mandate as stated further above is overall broad and leaves to the Council room for interpretation. Following a detailed differentiation by Bradley and Kelley (2008), there are at least three types of authority that the AC (potentially) has independent of its members. The most pervasive influence the organisation enforces is through research and advice offered by its six working groups (Bradley and Kelley, 2008: 15-16). These scientific assessments are all too frequent the basis for ministerial and Senior Arctic Officials' (SAO) meetings. In these reports, the working groups do not only monitor and record the state of the art of Arctic change, but often give concrete policy recommendations for Arctic states to adopt in public policies. Taking PAME as a reference, the working group has next to the 2009 *Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment* (AMSA) report released several follow-up progress reports in 2006, 2011 and most recently 2013, which include a number of advices of how to improve marine safety and environmental protection (see Arctic Council, 2013b). The working group has further issued specialised policy guidelines and 'operational steps to follow when planning for Arctic Offshore oil and gas activities' (Arctic Council, 2009). With respect to this, studies on the effectiveness of the Arctic Council as a 'cognitive forerunner' (Nilsson, 2012) and in fulfilling its *raison d'être* expose that the organisation is (at least in the perception of individuals participating in AC working groups) an influential actor as regards, among others, enhancing international cooperation, coordination of Arctic public policies and elevating public awareness about the Arctic ecology (Kankaanpää and Young, 2012: 3-4; see also Stokke, 2007).

The second authority of the Arctic Council, even based on a formal mandate, is agenda-setting power (Bradley and Kelley, 2008: 14-15). To begin with, Arctic states' delegations, the Senior Arctic Officials, serve as a 'focal point' in the body and on behalf of their respective state (Arctic Council, 1998: 5). As the AC Rules of Procedure stipulate, they hold the right to interpret reports from working groups, pre-select and frame issues to be discussed in ministerial meetings as well as ultimately "review and make recommendations to the Arctic Council on proposals by Arctic States and Permanent Participants". Also of growing importance is the newly established AC Secretariat, which officially started work in June 2013. It takes a central role in the Council by 'making it less a forum and more an international organization' (Sellheim, 2012: 70). Its *Terms of Reference* provides the Secretariat with bureaucratic leverage "through the establishment of administrative capacity and by providing continuity, institutional memory, operational

efficiency, enhanced communication and outreach, exchange of information with other relevant international organizations and to support activities of the Arctic Council” (Arctic Council, 2012: 1). International bureaucracies can use this authority to pursue own objectives and to determine how these goals are reached best. Through their informational advantage and bureaucratic capacity to follow own paths, even weakly mandated institutions like the AC Secretariat may create and recreate international norms and progressively promote a regional perspective (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004).

The Secretariat’s position in the Council structure is of strategic relevance as it, beyond purely administrative functions, also assists the rotating Council Chairmanship in writing meeting documents and final reports as well as communication and outreach plans “at the request of SAOs and Permanent Participants” (ibid). Deepened interaction with indigenous organizations, working groups and observers may further put it in a gateway position for these actors to influence the wider agenda and day-to-day practices in Arctic regional governance. This, in turn, enhances the Secretariat’s bargaining power vis-à-vis the *Arctic Eight*. With this in mind, the Arctic can be seen as on the brink of becoming a *regional community*, that is a “process whereby the region increasingly turns into an active subject with a distinct identity, institutionalised or informal actor capability, legitimacy and structure of decision making in relation with a more or less responsive regional civil society” (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2000: 466).

Finally, it remains to be seen whether the legally-binding arrangements already adopted, i.e. the 2011 *Maritime SAR* and 2013 *Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response* agreement, provide the Council with authority for Arctic-wide monitoring and, while less likely, enforcement to ensure compliance (Bradley and Kelley, 2008: 12-14). While this is currently at odds with the littoral states’ claim for unrestricted national sovereignty and the Council’s main role as a venue for deliberation, it may prove to be both more effective and efficient for the eight Arctic states to grant the AC authority in this context. Even soft measures such as direct monitoring of state performances in the respective areas may put AC members under peer pressure and in consequence lead to policy adaptations or a ‘race for best practices’.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to explore the Arctic’s status as a political region in a broader theoretical and historical context. The literature on *New Regionalism* (NRA) offers valuable insights into the kinds, degrees and levels of regionness. Because the Arctic differs from the general consensus within this literature due to its marine geography, causes, processes and effects of Arctic Ocean regionalism were thoroughly accounted for. While it would indeed go too far to call the Arctic an integration region as it was difficult to imagine for Griffiths a quarter of a century ago (1988: 4), the Arctic today can be classified as a *regional society* with attributes of a *regional community*. There is clear indication that the Arctic Council develops discretionary power based on operational capacities and information asymmetry to the benefit of the Secretariat, Senior Arctic Officials and AC working groups.

As always, this article has limitations and there is much room for future research. Any analysis of the AC's formal and informal authority will have to account for the domestic impact the Council wields and the regional agenda it promotes in Arctic affairs and even beyond, e.g. in inter-institutional relations with other organizations and regimes. This is all the more essential in the case of implementation and enforcement of the first two legally-binding agreements. Also, the mechanisms through which regionalising indigenous groups and organized business interests impinge on the work of the Council remain understudied.

This article echoes previous calls for more comparative studies between marine-oriented regionalisms and policy coordination and norm diffusion mechanisms within and beyond them (see e.g. VanderZwaag and Vu, 2012; Exner-Pirot, 2013). Against all scepticism often raised in polar research, this may also include a more coherent comparison between Arctic and Antarctic governance arrangements. What also needs more elaboration is the way the Arctic Council may serve as a (potential) role model for incorporating the needs and demands of indigenous actors worldwide (Koivurova and Heinämäki, 2006), the body's external governance towards interested and affected parties in southern latitudes, as well as studies on design and effect of international secretariats in marine regions (Sellheim, 2012). While this article suggests to grasp Arctic regionalism as an object of study that complements rather than contradicts the complex regime interplay currently at work in the circumpolar North, it is less clear whether and how the Arctic's 'centripetal force' promotes or constrains other international fora.

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Notes

1. By way of example, think of the vicious circle the Arctic ecology is trapped in if global warming makes large oil and gas reserves accessible, whose production may have negative side-effects such as air and water pollution causing further environmental degradation. The burning of fossil fuels, in turn, may intensify climate warming.
2. The European Commission's application for observer status is still pending.
3. 'Save the Arctic' webpage: <http://www.savethearctic.org/> (accessed 12 August 2013).
4. The six working groups are: *Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP)*, *Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP)*, *Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF)*, *Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR)*, *Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME)* and *Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG)*.

Detailed descriptions are available online: <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us/working-groups>.

5. It is beyond debate, however, that sub-state actors had and continue to have their share in discursively and politically constructing the Arctic region. For an excellent argumentation in this regard, see Keskitalo, 2004.
6. Arctic Circle webpage: <http://www.arcticcircle.org/mission> (accessed 12 August 2013).

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