

Geopolitics and International Governance in the Arctic

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Abstract: The Arctic has been the object of heated political discussion in recent years as the region has evolved from a potential conflict zone during the Cold War to an arena for international cooperation immediately afterwards. Since the mid-2000s attention has once again focused on the conflict potential of the Arctic, this time related to its resources. This article looks at how the research literature balances its prospects. The literature on international relations (IR) in the Arctic has been mainly empirical in orientation, although framed in the major IR traditions of realism (traditional geopolitics), institutionalism and (to a lesser extent) constructivism. The English-language literature on Arctic politics, which naturally dominates the field globally, is by and large framed in institutional terms. The discussion is not whether institutions matter in Arctic politics, but how they best can be crafted in order to maintain peace and stability in the region. Speculations about a ‘scramble for the Arctic’ have more or less unanimously been refuted in the literature. The French literature, on the other hand, is largely framed in a geopolitical context. French geopolitics is less concerned with the global power game than with the rivalry between states for strategic resources. The institutions of cooperation are, however, downplayed.

Key words: Geopolitics, institutionalism, Arctic politics, scramble for the Arctic

1. Geopolitics and Institutions in the Arctic¹

1.1 Introduction

The Arctic icecap is melting and scientists are uncertain how this will affect ecosystems. At the same time considerable deposits of oil and gas are believed to exist in the Arctic. Debate has evolved around who shall extract the oil when the ice disappears, and who shall control the new shipping routes that are opening up. Will conflict emerge among states – is a “scramble” for the Arctic underway?

In this article we examine basic research trends in the international relations (IR) literature with regard to recent geopolitical transformations in the Arctic: To what extent does the existing literature reflect major turning points in Arctic international politics over the last decade?

We start with a review of recent transformations in international politics in the Arctic, including brief overviews of territorial conflicts, the new strategic environment, and new patterns of cooperation between Arctic states. Then we examine the English- and French-language literature on international Arctic politics. We review the literature through the lenses of the three major schools of international relations: realism, institutionalism², and constructivism, with an eye to geopolitical elements in the perspectives. Institutionalism is basically concerned with common interests, norms, and spheres of cooperation, and also in contexts where international realism identifies economic rivalry and the potential for zero-sum security games. Classical geopolitics, as a brand of realism, is a more sombre interpretation of the territorial imperatives and border issues connected to state sovereignty. Classical geopolitics connect state power and interstate rivalry to geographical space, location, and transport technology. It is a method trying to explain international behaviour and state policy in terms of geographical variables.³ What has been called *critical geopolitics* – influenced by discourse analysis and social constructivism – is more concerned with the political implications of cartographic representation, linguistic configurations, and rhetorical patterns. Critical geopolitics illuminates how statecraft constructs

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1. The article has been prepared under the GeoPolitics in the High North project, financed by the Research Council of Norway for the period 2008–2012.
 2. We use the term ‘institutionalism’ instead of the closely related concept ‘liberalism’ in this article, as the argument of this tradition in the study of international politics in the Arctic is more that ‘institutions matter’ (Mitchell, Ronald B. (1994), ‘Regime design matters: intentional oil pollution and treaty compliance’, *International Organization*, 48: 425–458) than questions related to complex interdependence among the Arctic states.
 3. See Kearns, Gerry (2009), *Geopolitics and Empire. The Legacy of Halford Mackinder*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

representations of space, location, and distance.⁴ Hence our aim here is to explicate theoretical lines of inquiry in the study of the changing conditions in the North, with a focus on the confrontation between institutionalism and varieties of classical geopolitical perspectives.⁵ It should be noted that in our overview of the existing literature on the politics of the Arctic, only contributions from international relations (IR) are included. There is a lively discussion on Arctic politics in ocean law literature, as well as within areas such as political science, human geography, and anthropology – but this is not our focus here.

2. The Arctic transformed

2.1 The Arctic during the Cold War

The circumpolar Arctic was an area of strategic confrontation during the Cold War; it was a heavily militarised and politically sensitive region. For the Soviet Union, the Kola Peninsula had the only year-round ice-free port in the European part of the Union. From this port the Northern Fleet had access to the Atlantic Ocean, and hidden under the Arctic ice cap, submarines formed the backbone of Soviet second-strike capability. This capability was further fortified with the Soviet build-up of naval power from the early 1960s onwards.

Arctic waters and air space were equally central to the U.S. and her allies. A vital strategic objective was to protect the sea routes between Europe and America. In an agreement with Denmark during the Second World War, the U.S. was granted free travel and military strongholds on Greenland. In a revised treaty of 1951, NATO bases were limited to specific areas. During and after the war, the line from Greenland through Iceland to the Azores served as stepping stones in American Atlantic defence. The Thule base in Greenland and the naval air base at Keflavik in Iceland were kept as geostrategic counterpoints to Soviet aspirations in the High North.⁶ Gradually more sophisticated surveillance systems were developed and deployed on both sides. The NATO base in the Faroe Islands served the navigation system

4. Ó Tuathail, Gearóid (1996), *Critical Geopolitics*, Routledge, London and Dodds, Klaus (2005), *Global Geopolitics: A Critical Introduction*, Pearson Education.

5. For the full range of contributions now labeled as 'geopolitical' see: Ó Tuathail, Dalby and Routledge, eds. (2006), *The Geopolitics Reader*, Second edition, Routledge, London.

6. The major research publication here is Nehring, Niels-Jørgen et al. (1997), *Grønland under den kolde krig, I-II*, DUPI, Copenhagen; cf. also individual reports from this officially commissioned project, like Petersen, Nikolaj (1997a), *The H.C. Hansen Paper and Nuclear Weapons in Greenland*, DUPI Report 1997/2, Copenhagen, and Petersen, Nikolaj (1997b), *Negotiation the 1951 Greenland Defense Agreement*, DUPI Report 1997/3, Copenhagen.

Loran-C and the airborne radar system AWACS. Supersonic aircraft, satellites, surface vessels and submarines patrolled the area. Danish and Norwegian territories played major geostrategic roles towards the north. The power blocs gathered intelligence and asserted themselves across the polar basin.

The most northern parts of the Scandinavian Peninsula and the sea further north were densely militarised. One exception was the Svalbard archipelago, which – according to the 1920 Svalbard Treaty – was not allowed to contain naval bases or fortifications, or be used for warlike purposes. But even here tension and mutual suspicion occasionally ran high. During the Cold War, even scientific exploration, mining, fishing and whaling operated within the coordinates of the geopolitical contest.

2.2 The Arctic after the Cold War

The strategic and military significance of the Arctic faded during the 1990s. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, geostrategic confrontation was replaced by a more civilian agenda of climate change, research cooperation, and economic interests. U.S. forces abandoned the Keflavik base in 2006. Cooperation across national borders was institutionalised in the Arctic Council, the Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic region, the Northern Forum, and other interstate and non-state associations, including indigenous peoples' organisations. Regional collaboration mechanisms were established, notably the Barents Euro-Arctic Region and the EU Northern Dimension. A few sources of tension during the Cold War period left unresolved problems, but they were conceived as less acute in the post-Cold War period.⁷ Some maritime boundary disputes have been resolved during the last couple of decades; others are still on the agenda. The geopolitics of the Arctic have changed from strategic confrontation to exploitation of natural resources, questions of jurisdiction, and prospects for new shipping routes. The reduced tension after the Cold War has coincided with a shrinking ice cap and technological improvements in resource extraction. The Arctic, therefore, has regained a prominent place on the political map under these different circumstances.

The polar regions are in many ways mirror images of each other.⁸ While Antarctica is an uninhabited continent surrounded by the ocean, the Arctic is a semi-enclosed ocean surrounded by sovereign states with various offshore claims and interests. Whereas the Antarctic treaty of 1959 sought to square territorial state

7. Wezeman, Siemon T. (2012), *Military Capabilities in the Arctic*, SIPRI Background Paper, March 2012, Stockholm.

8. Strandsbjerg, Jeppe (2010), *Cartography and Geopolitics in the Arctic Region*, DIIS Working Paper 2010: 20. Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 8ff.

interests with a regime for demilitarised cooperation and scientific research, the international settlement of the Arctic is less stable and comprehensive, even if the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982 provides an important legal framework.

Temperatures in the Arctic have been rising faster than the global average. If the climate trend during the last couple of decades continues, the reduction of ice in the summer season will open up new sea lanes of communication north of mainland Canada and north of Siberia. Transport lines between Asia and Europe will be substantially shorter and potentially cheaper than the present routes through the Panama and Suez canals or around the southern capes of Africa and the Americas.⁹

These commercial prospects add to the potential for energy extraction. There are great reserves of oil, gas and minerals onshore and offshore in the circumpolar area, with new technologies making these reserves gradually more accessible and commercially profitable. The states with an interest in the Arctic are both rivals and partners in their northbound policies. One of the objectives of political research into these policies is to assess the balance points between conflict and cooperation.

3. Power games in a new key

3.1 New strategic environments

Several factors contribute to increased concern about the Arctic – the shrinking ice cap with new shipping routes and easier access to resources; technological advances in the extraction of resources from deep sea and under extreme weather conditions; legal developments that allow for an extension of sovereign rights into the polar basin.¹⁰ These developments have increased the economic and geopolitical stakes in the region. Generally political tension is low in the Arctic, since all parties comply with the UNCLOS. This means that most unprospected resources are under national jurisdiction, with procedural agreement on the handling of claims. The U.S. has not ratified the convention, but has agreed to comply with it.

Military withdrawal may indicate an increased conception of stability or reduced geostrategic relevance. The NATO base on the Faroese Islands has been dismantled and the U.S. has abandoned Keflavik in Iceland. Most U.S. bases on Greenland are also deserted, with the Thule base in the north-west as an exception which is now

9. Ebinger, Charles K. and Evie Zambetakis (2009), 'The Geopolitics of Arctic Melt', *International Affairs*, 85: 1215–32.

10. Byers, Michael (2009), *Who Owns the Arctic?* Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver.

basically a radar station in U.S. advanced rocket defence, on a par with corresponding bases in Alaska and northern Canada.

During the Cold War the principle of collective security also applied to the Arctic territories of NATO members. An attack or provocation against one member should be met by joint forces according to Article 5 in the treaty. NATO defence policy is now more selective, consisting of *coalitions of the willing* responding in case of crises, as a result of the aftermath of the intervention in Iraq. With the extension of NATO to the east, and the new variety of threats, this might even affect Article 5 operations. Security challenges in the Arctic are not mentioned in NATO's strategic concept of 2010. This is due to a transformed power game.¹¹ There is now Western disagreement about questions of jurisdiction. Canada, for instance, regards the North-west passage as Canadian internal waters, while the U.S. claims that the passage is an international strait.¹² The implications of the U.S. dismantling of the Keflavik base in 2006 are also uncertain. Iceland suggested a Nordic nuclear free zone, but met little enthusiasm in the other NATO countries. The scope for multi-lateral defence cooperation among Nordic countries increased, however.

3.2 Maritime and territorial disputes

The climate for stability and cooperation in the Arctic stands in contrast to the tense situation during the Cold War. Still there is a potential for disagreement and rivalry connected to unresolved questions of jurisdiction and crossed interests over transport routes and resources. The rich fishing grounds are fairly well known, while there is more uncertainty about the location of oil, gas and minerals. Exploitation will be costly even though the ice is receding. Furthermore there are debates about security alertness, patrolling, and formal authority in many of the contested areas.¹³

Some territorial questions have been resolved. The border conflict between Norway and Denmark concerning Jan Mayen and East-Greenland was decided in a compromise by the International Court of Justice in 1993. In late April 2010 there was an astounding negotiated settlement of the maritime border dispute between Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea. Norway had claimed that the contested area

11. Perry, Charles M. and Bobby Andersen (2012), *New Strategic Dynamics in the Arctic Region*, The Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Cambridge, MA and Conley, Heather A. et al. (2012), *A New Security Architecture for the Arctic*, CSIS, Washington.

12. Both speak of it as a 'managed' conflict in their respective Arctic strategies, though.

13. Haftendorn, Helga (2012), 'NATO and the Arctic: is the Atlantic alliance a cold war relic in a peaceful region now faced with non-military challenges?' *European Security*, 20:3, pp.337–361 and Rosamond, Annika Bergman (2011), *Perspectives on Security in the Arctic*, DIIS Report 2011: 09, Copenhagen.

should be divided by a line extrapolated from the North-Eastern borderline on land, while Russia had argued that the border at sea should go from the seashore border point and directly towards the North Pole. In the agreement the contested area was divided closely down the middle. The agreement was particularly welcome in Norway since it was doubly significant – it solved a complicated problem, and it symbolised cooperation between equal parties in the Arctic. It is commonly believed that Russia entered into the agreement with Norway in order to show to the outside world that Russia is a ‘civilized’ state that can be counted on to follow the rules of the Law of the Sea in the Arctic.¹⁴

Several jurisdictional questions remain unresolved. Norway obtained sovereignty over the Spitzbergen Archipelago – Svalbard – in the Paris treaty of 1920. All the other signatories, some forty countries, got equal rights to fisheries, commercial enterprise, and the exploitation of resources on land at Svalbard and within 12 nautical miles from the shores. With the establishment of 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zones (EEZ), Norway argues that it can also establish an EEZ around Svalbard. Most other signatories dispute this explicitly, with Britain the most vocal opponent. The main argument is that the non-discriminatory principle of the Svalbard Treaty must be applicable also to the 200-mile zone. Norway adheres to the literal interpretation of the treaty text, while other states argue that the wider ocean areas would have been included in the 1920 treaty if commercial activity outside the territorial waters had been an option at the time. To avoid conflict Norway did not establish an EEZ around Svalbard, but rather a so-called fishery protection zone. Fisheries management has by and large functioned well in the zone,¹⁵ but with eruptions of conflict from time to time. The French newspaper *Le Monde* made this comment 25 January 2013 : “La bataille du Spitzberg relance les rivalités dans le Grand Nord alors que la hache de guerre semblait avoir été (un peu) enterrée”. The ultimate battle might, however, be a legal contest at the International Court of Justice. At present the contested zone is managed by Norwegian supervision since no other country has been prepared to let the situation become critical.

Another potential rivalry concerns the extended continental shelves beyond the EEZs of Denmark/Greenland, Canada and Russia. The treaty of the Law of the Sea has an opening for territorial claims of the continental shelf (but not of the ocean areas) beyond that range. Denmark has argued that the polar underwater ridges extend from the shores of Greenland, while both Canada and Russia dispute the

14. Moe, Arild, Daniel Fjærtøft and Indra Øverland (2011), ‘Space and Timing: Why was the Barents Sea Delimitation Dispute Resolved in 2010?’ *Polar Geography* :145–62.

15. Hønneland, Geir (1998), ‘Compliance in the Fishery Protection Zone around Svalbard’, *Ocean Development and International Law* 29: 339–360.

Danish claim. The Russian view is that major submarine ridges, and in particular the Lomonosov ridge, extends from eastern Siberia. Increased accessibility to potential resources over and under the seabed will intensify the geopolitical rivalry in the polar basin. All Arctic countries, however, agree that the provisions of the Law of the Sea Convention shall be followed. According to these provisions, coastal states must submit scientific data to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) along with their entitlement to a specific stretch of the shelf.

Territorial land disputes are limited to one case. There is disagreement between Canada and Denmark over the small and barren Hans Island in the Nares strait between Greenland and Ellesmere Island. The island is 1.3 square kilometres, an uninhabited stretch of chalk stone, but the national delineation could gain significance in case of profitable oil and gas deposits in the area.

3.3 Greenland in transit

Geopolitical shifts may disturb the present order in the Arctic. One potential shift is *spill-over* into the High North from developments in the northern Atlantic and the northern Pacific. Tension between the U.S., Russia and China may increase in the quest for resources and control of sea routes. Increased military presence may lead to a higher risk for misconceptions and misinterpretations, even if international contacts in the Arctic are institutionally stabilised. Then there is the uncertain future role of Greenland, crucial to the link between the American and European Arctic. Geographically, Greenland is much closer to North America than to Europe. The island is also the key to Denmark's future in the Arctic. As Danish sovereignty erodes, Denmark is on a slope from a great power in the High North towards a more marginal position.

Danish policy is ambiguous. On the one hand, the military position is strengthened with joint command with Greenland and the Faroese islands from 2009. On the other hand, Greenland has been subject to gradual decolonisation. Home rule was established in 1979, and in a referendum 75% of Greenlanders voted for extended self-government from 2009. Extended self-government implies more control of resources, while Denmark continues to command foreign, defense, and financial policy. An overall budget grant of 3.5 billion Danish crowns a year will be reduced in proportion to an increased resource rent. For economic reasons there is internal disagreement about the range of self-government and the tempo towards full independence.

The Greenlandic Self-Government have not supported Danish claims for extended sovereignty along the Lomonosov ridge to the North Pole. Greenland's

position has been that ‘the North pole belongs to nobody’¹⁶, while Denmark perceives an abandonment of the claim as a free gift to Russia. The Self-Government try to rise above the geopolitical rivalry in the Arctic.

Nevertheless, crossed national interests are proceeding to Greenland proportionally with Danish withdrawal. U.S. and European companies are planning for offshore oil and gas explorations. The Chinese-controlled company London Mining is preparing for large-scale iron ore mining in the south-west, and offers infrastructure in return. Uranium deposits have been discovered in the south, and ALCOA has developed a prospect for large aluminium works on the west coast. These prospects are controversial in Greenland since economic gain and ecological costs are uncertain.¹⁷ They are also controversial in Denmark. Chinese mining would initially be based on cheap Chinese labour, and Denmark has kept the authority to regulate immigration to the island.¹⁸

The development towards an independent Greenland is supported by the U.S., based on previous aspirations on the island.¹⁹ Cooperation with American companies is increasing, with prospects for support for new water-power energy, harbours, and airports. Geopolitically, the independence movement is a movement from North-western Europe towards North America. Denmark is squeezed between indigenous demands and international pressure. The long term trend is that Greenland is moving towards the U.S. in security policy, possibly with Chinese interests as a rival force. International rivalry is intensified by better access to natural resources.²⁰ The Thule base is an established bridgehead for the U.S., as a reconfirmed leftover from the vital U.S. presence during the Second World War and then throughout the Cold War.

Greenlanders try to extend the scope to manoeuvre under these new conditions by strengthening the Inuit link to peoples in Canada, Alaska, and Siberia. In geopolitical terms, the indigenous populations are encircled by strong great power interests around the entire polar basin.

16. Personal communication with native participants at a conference in Nuuk, April 2013.

17. Vestergaard, Cindy and France Bourgooin (2012), ‘Should Greenland Mine its Uranium?’, *DIIS Policy Brief*, DIIS, April 2012, Copenhagen.

18. Report in the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*, February 11, 2013.

19. Emmerson, Charles (2010), *The Future History of the Arctic*, The Bodley Head, London, pp. 91–94, 103–104.

20. Cf. “Greenland: Rare Earth in the Arctic”, report from a talk by Damien Degeorges, *IISS news*, April 2012, p. 9, London. See also Taagholt, Jørgen and Jens Claus Hansen (2001), *Greenland: Security Perspectives*, Fairbanks, Alaska: Arctic Research Consortium of the United States.

3.4 Cooperation or conflict?

From another perspective, and beyond the case of Greenland, national interests in the High North have no clear boundaries. Denmark tried to limit national claims within an institutional framework by the *Ilulissat Declaration* in 2008.²¹ The five Arctic coastal states – Denmark, Norway, Russia, U.S. and Canada – declared that questions of jurisdiction and territorial claims should be solved by negotiations within the existing international legal framework. There should be no free ‘race towards the North Pole.’ The declaration was met with some concern from actors outside the five Arctic littoral states, like Iceland, Finland and Sweden, which – if not contrary to the content of the *Ilulissat Declaration* – felt they were sidelined in the important decision on the future of the Arctic. The protracted discussions about observer status in the Arctic Council (from China and the EU, among others) show that the institutional framework of the Arctic took time to find a stable and uncontroversial form.²² The Council took a leap forward by mid-May 2013. Applications for observer status from China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, India and Italy were all successful, while the Council temporarily stopped short of approving the application from the European Union.²³ The major concern of many Asian countries is the implications of an Arctic sea lane from Asia to Europe.

A French expert on the Arctic, Richard Labévière, has outlined three alternative geopolitical scenarios in the area:²⁴

1. An Arctic dominated by the U.S., including Greenland’s independence, but with a stronger American presence on the island. New microstates will, paradoxically, strengthen the conditions for American dominance, not least economically.
2. A new regional cold war between the United States and Russia.
3. An Arctic space with stable partition of national sovereignty, respect for the Law of the Sea and strong cooperative institutions. This scenario is in accordance with the Norwegian slogan ‘High North, low tension.’

The balance between tension and stability will be subject to variation in time and space. China is expected to project power and interests in the eastern parts of the

21. Petersen, Nikolaj (2009), ‘The Arctic as a New Arena for Danish Foreign Policy: The *Ilulissat Initiative* and its Implications’, *Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook*, Copenhagen.

22. Pedersen, Torbjørn (2012), ‘Debates over the Role of the Arctic Council’, *Ocean Development and International Law*, 43: 146–56.

23. IISS Strategic Comments (June 2013), Vol. 19, Comment 16. The Kiruna declaration (2013) states: “The Arctic Council receives the application of the EU for observer status affirmatively, but defers a final decision on implementation until the Council ministers are agreed by consensus that the concerns of Council members...”

24. Labévière, Richard (2009), ‘Le Grand Nord en question’, *Nordiques* 20 : 9–21.

Arctic in particular. American concern will be adapted to this geopolitical shift. An order with a renewal of the American presence is also possible in the western parts of the High North, while the cooperative spirit of the Ilulissat Declaration may be preserved and extended to new parties beyond the coastal Arctic states. To substantiate current tendencies in the Arctic, let us examine the perspectives from the institutional and geopolitical research literature somewhat more closely.

4. Arctic challenges and political research

4.1 From realism to institutionalism

Most political studies of the Arctic during the Cold War were strictly empirical, on a realist background that reflected the superpower tension and strategic importance of the region. The Arctic was a front for surveillance, projection of power, and military rivalry, and political analyses described the policies and mutual suspicions in detail, ranging from assessment of military build-up, air and marine activities, and the location of strongholds and strategic manoeuvring. Historical Cold War studies of the Arctic have concentrated on the extent and importance of militarisation. A prominent example is the two-volume Danish analysis of Greenland during the Cold War, concentrating on covert nuclear deployment.²⁵

The literature on politics in the Arctic after the Cold War has also been mainly empirical in orientation, but the realist leaning is gone, replaced primarily by a more speculative expectation of cooperation and peaceful development. The speculative element is not primarily concerned with the basic reduction of tension, but with the *kind* of cooperation that can be expected in the further opening up of the Arctic.²⁶ Writing in 1988, Archer²⁷ concluded that conditions were now good for 'some form of crossborder Arctic cooperation in the humanitarian area, in scientific research and about environmental matters.' The first half of the 1990s were dominated by descriptions and speculations about the emerging Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), proposed by Finland in 1989 and formally established two years later.²⁸

25. DIIS (1997), *Grønland under den kolde krig*, Vol. I–II, Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies.

26. The following paragraphs are a condensed version of Hønneland, Geir (2013), 'Introduction', in Geir Hønneland (ed.), *Research Collection on the Politics of the Arctic*, Cheltenham and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

27. Archer, Clive (1988), 'General Features of Political Development and Possibilities for Cooperation in the Arctic', *Current Research on Peace and Violence*, 11: 137–45, pp. 140.

28. Stokke, Olav Schram (1990), 'The Northern Environment: Is Cooperation Coming?', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 512: 58–68; Roginko, Alexei and Matthew J.

AEPS mainly involved scientific research and monitoring of the Arctic environment and was subsumed under the Arctic Council after the latter's establishment in 1996.

For the rest of the 1990s and the first part of the initial decade of the 21st century, descriptions and preliminary assessments of the emerging circumpolar collaboration followed,²⁹ along with substantive evaluations of the (more tangible) regional cooperative arrangements in the European Arctic.³⁰ Three years into the Arctic Council's existence,³¹ Scrivener concluded that creating the Council seemed 'to have done nothing to increase the momentum of circumpolar cooperation on pollution and conservation issues and to assist the AEPS's progression beyond monitoring and assessment into the realm of policy action'. Later Young and Stokke did note several effects of Arctic Council programme activities in feeding scientific information into binding international agreements.³² By and large, however, Arctic cooperation – whether circumpolar or regional – was long considered to be 'a thing of the early 1990s': an immediate post-Cold War initiative that failed to spark sustainable high-level political interest. The Arctic Council remained a forum for coordinating Arctic environmental monitoring and science, with strong participation from the region's indigenous peoples,³³ while the regional Barents Euro-Arctic Region collaboration and the EU Northern Dimension were struggling to meet the initial expectations of thriving East–West cooperation on trade and industry.³⁴

LaMourie (1992), 'Emerging Marine Environmental Protection Strategies for the Arctic', *Marine Policy*, 16: 259–76; and Caron, David D. (1993), 'Toward an Arctic Environmental Regime', *Ocean Development and International Law*, 24: 377–392.

29. Scrivener, David (1999), 'Arctic Cooperation in Transition', *Polar Record*, 35: 51–8; Young, Oran R. (2002), 'Can the Arctic Council and the Northern Forum Find Common Ground?', *Polar Record*, 38: 289–96; and Young, Oran R. (2005), 'Governing the Arctic: From Cold War Theater to Mosaic of Cooperation', *Global Governance*, 11: 9–15.
30. Neumann, Iver B. (1994), 'A Region-Building Approach to Northern Europe', *International Studies*, 20: 53–74; Hønneland, Geir (1998), 'Identity Formation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 33: 277–97; and Aalto, Pami, Simon Dalby and Vilho Harle (2003), 'The Critical Geopolitics of Northern Europe: Identity Politics Unlimited', *Geopolitics*, 8: 1–19.
31. Scrivener, David (1999), 'Arctic Cooperation in Transition', *Polar Record*, 35: 51–8, p. 57.
32. Young, Oran R. (2005), 'Governing the Arctic: From Cold War Theater to Mosaic of Cooperation', *Global Governance*, 11: 9–15; and Stokke, Olav Schram (2011), 'Environmental Security in the Arctic: The Case for Multilevel Governance', *International Journal*, 66: 835–48.
33. Scrivener, David (1999), 'Arctic Cooperation in Transition', *Polar Record*, 35: 51–8.
34. Hønneland, Geir (1998b), 'Identity Formation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 33: 277–97; and Browning, Christopher S. (2010), 'The Region-Building Approach Revisited: The Continued Othering of Russia in Discourses of Region-Building in the European North', *Geopolitics*, 8: 45–71.

4.2 A “scramble” for the Arctic?

Much changed with the Russian flag planting in 2007, not only in media discourse (and possibly in actual politics), but also in the literature on Arctic politics. Borgerson famously captured the atmosphere in his seminal article “Arctic Meltdown”: ‘The Arctic Ocean is melting, and it is melting fast. [...] It is no longer a matter of if, but when, the Arctic Ocean will open to regular marine transportation and exploration of its lucrative natural-resource deposits.’³⁵ Further: ‘The situation is especially dangerous because there are currently no overarching political or legal structures that can provide for the orderly development of the region or mediate political disagreements over Arctic resources or sea-lanes’³⁶; and ‘[T]he Arctic countries are likely to unilaterally grab as much territory as possible and exert sovereign control over opening sea-lanes wherever they can. In this legal no man’s land, Arctic states are pursuing their narrowly defined national interests by laying down sonar nets and arming icebreakers to guard their claims’³⁷. Borgerson’s article spurred a wave of new contributions, and the scientific literature on Arctic politics became more of an arena for actual debate.

The topic of debate was whether a “scramble” for the Arctic was underway or not. Most participants concluded that Borgerson’s premises were erroneous.³⁸ Yes, there are prospects for considerable new petroleum findings in the Arctic, but most of these will probably lie in areas where national jurisdiction is undisputed (and those located in what might remain of disputed areas are the least interesting commercially). Yes, jurisdiction of the Arctic continental shelf is not yet finally established, but there is an on-going process under the UN of settling the outer limits of the continental shelf, to which all Arctic nations adhere (and to which potentially strong non-Arctic actors, such as China, have declared that they will also adhere). Above all, there have been hardly any signs of political conflict in the Arctic, and good reason to assume that states see cooperation as their primary choice in the future as well.

Another substantive debate, also following the ‘scramble for the Arctic’ buzz, concerned the possible need for an overarching Arctic treaty to supplement the

35. Borgerson, Scott S. (2008), ‘Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming’, *Foreign Affairs*, 87: 63–77, p. 63.

36. *Id* at p. 71.

37. *Id* at pp. 73–74.

38. Ebinger, Charles K. and Evie Zambetakis (2009), ‘The Geopolitics of Arctic Melt’, *International Affairs*, 85: 1215–32; Dodds, Klaus (2010), ‘Flag Planting and Finger Pointing: The Law of the Sea, the Arctic and the Political Geographies of the Outer Continental Shelf’, *Political Geography*, 29: 63–73; and Brosnan, Ian G., Thomas M. Leschine and Edward L. Miles (2011), ‘Cooperation or Conflict in a Changing Arctic’, *Ocean Development and International Law*, 42: 173–210.

existing Law of the Sea (with the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention at its core, supplemented by a range of other global, regional, and bilateral agreements in specific functional fields). In 2008, the European Parliament issued a resolution advocating such a treaty, but since then all relevant actors (including the European Parliament) have agreed that the existing Law of the Sea is sufficient as a foundation for elaborating more specific requirements to protect the Arctic environment against adverse effects of possible increased human activity in the Arctic, especially related to marine transport and petroleum extraction. In the literature some authors promote the idea of an Arctic treaty, e.g. on the model of the Antarctic Treaty;³⁹ others dismiss it, in line with the political arguments of the Arctic states.⁴⁰

Finally, at the political level there has been some debate about who should be the legitimate actors in international politics in the Arctic: the 'Arctic five' (the states bordering the Arctic Ocean), the 'Arctic eight' (the 'Arctic five' plus Finland, Iceland and Sweden), or a larger group of states. (As we have seen, China and other states repeatedly applied for status as permanent observers in the Arctic Council before they were finally admitted in 2013.) As we have seen, the 'Arctic five' gathered in Ilulissat in Greenland in 2008 to state that the Law of the Sea serves as the foundation for settling jurisdiction in the Arctic Ocean (so there is no need for a new Arctic treaty) – which caused some concern among the rest of the 'Arctic eight', and among indigenous peoples' associations, that the Arctic Council would be supplanted by the 'Arctic five' as the central stage for discussions about circumpolar politics.⁴¹

4.3 IR theory, empirical research

Despite this largely empirical orientation, in the literature on Arctic politics we can catch glimpses of all the three major theory traditions within the study of IR: realism, institutionalism, and constructivism. Few contributions take their explicit point of departure in matters of theory, but many seem implicitly situated in the institutionalist camp by their preoccupation with international regimes.⁴² The focus

39. Rothwell, Donald (2008), 'The Arctic in International Affairs: Time for a New Regime?', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 15: 241–53.

40. Stokke, Olav Schram (2006), 'A Legal Regime for the Arctic? Interplay with the Law of the Sea Convention', *Marine Policy* 31: 402–8; Hoel, Alf Håkon (2009), 'Do We Need a New Legal Regime for the Arctic Ocean?', *The International Journal of Maritime and Coastal Law*, 24: 443–56; and Young, Oran R. (2011), 'If an Arctic Treaty is not the Solution, What is the Alternative?', *Polar Record*, 47: 327–34.

41. Pedersen, Torbjørn (2012), 'Debates over the Role of the Arctic Council', *Ocean Development and International Law*, 43: 146–56.

42. Harders, J. Enno (1987), 'In Quest of an Arctic Legal Regime: Marine Regionalism – A Concept of International Law Evaluated', *Marine Policy*, 11: 285–98; Hoel, Alf Håkon (2009), 'Do We Need a

is on the potential for cooperation and not conflict among the Arctic states. Many of the early contributions (and some of the later ones) discuss the possible links between emerging circumpolar arrangements and existing global and regional regimes, for instance under international environmental agreements. Later contributions focus more on the potential of boosting the political and institutional clout of the Arctic Council,⁴³ and of the role of the Law on the Sea in mitigating potential conflicts among Arctic states.⁴⁴ A realist stance is apparent in Borgerson's 2008 article and, to a lesser extent, in several ensuing contributions on energy and geopolitics in the Arctic.⁴⁵ Many of the books that followed had titles that alluded to Borgerson's article, like Anderson's (2009) *After the Ice: Life, Death and Politics in the New Arctic*,⁴⁶ Howard's (2009) *The Arctic Gold Rush*,⁴⁷ Sale and Potapov's (2010) *The Scramble for the Arctic*⁴⁸ and Zellen's (2009) *Arctic Doom, Arctic Boom*⁴⁹. These books (which referred to Borgerson's claims, but by and large refuted them) are not theoretical contributions, but more directed at the general reader. A constructivist approach is applied in studies of the emergence of the Arctic as a region,⁵⁰ and, more

New Legal Regime for the Arctic Ocean?', *The International Journal of Maritime and Coastal Law*, 24: 443–56; Brosnan, Ian G., Thomas M. Leschine and Edward L. Miles (2011), 'Cooperation or Conflict in a Changing Arctic', *Ocean Development and International Law*, 42: 173–210; Stokke, Olav Schram (2011), 'Environmental Security in the Arctic: The Case for Multilevel Governance', *International Journal*, 66: 835–48; and Young, Oran R. (2011), 'If an Arctic Treaty is not the Solution, What is the Alternative?', *Polar Record*, 47: 327–34.

43. Koivurova, Timo (2010), 'Limits and Possibilities of the Arctic Council in a Rapidly Changing Scene of Arctic Governance', *Polar Record*, 46: 146–56.
44. Stokke, Olav Schram (2006), 'A Legal Regime for the Arctic? Interplay with the Law of the Sea Convention', *Marine Policy* 31: 402–8.
45. Kim, Younkwoo and Stephen Blank (2011), 'The Arctic: A New Issue on Asia's Security Agenda', *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 23: 303–20; Blunden, Margaret (2009), 'The New Problem of Arctic Stability', *Survival*, 51: 121–41; and Blunden, Margaret (2012), 'Geopolitics and the Northern Sea Route', *International Affairs*, 88: 115–29.
46. Anderson, Alun (2009), *After the Ice: Life, Death and Politics in the New Arctic*, London: Virgin Books.
47. Howard, Roger (2009), *The Arctic Goldrush: The New Race for Tomorrow's Natural Resources*, London and New York: Continuum.
48. Sale, Richard and Eugene Potapov (2010), *The Scramble for the Arctic: Ownership, Exploitation and Conflict in the Far North*, London: Frances Lincoln.
49. Zellen, Barry S. (2009), *Arctic Doom, Arctic Boom: The Geopolitics of Climate Change in the Arctic*, Santa Barbara, CA, Denver, CO and Oxford: Praeger.
50. Joenniemi, Pertti (1989), 'Competing Images of the Arctic: A Policy Perspective', *Current Research on Peace and Violence*, 12: 111–22; Keskitalo, Carina (2003), *Negotiating the Arctic: The Construction of an International Region*, London and New York: Routledge; Keskitalo, Carina (2007), 'International Region-Building: Development of the Arctic as an International Region', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 42: 187–205; Heininen, Lassi and Heather N. Nicol (2007), 'The Importance of

specifically, in discussions of identity, region building and geopolitics in the regional collaboration arrangements in the European Arctic.⁵¹

Hence, IR theory has implicitly or explicitly structured the presentation of empirical presentation of Arctic politics, but research on Arctic politics has only to a limited extent spurred theory-building or debate between (implicitly or explicitly defined) camps. Institutional approaches have dominated the field, but seldom sought outside its own confines. Studies either point to the effects of international institutions, or – when they document that such institutions are poorly developed – ask for more of the same thing (i.e. they take for granted the potential good of international institutions).

5. Geopolitics and the French connection

5.1 The re-emergence of geopolitics

Geopolitics relates political power to geographical space. The word was coined by the Swedish political scientist Rudolph Kjellén at the dawn of the 19th century, depicting an organic conception of great power rivalry and expansion. The early Anglo-American geopolitical debate was concerned with the relative importance of land power and sea power, while German discourse centered on interstate rivalry in continental space. The prominent geopolitical analyst Halford Mackinder saw the end of European expansion overseas in the early 20th century.⁵² He termed this era *the Columbian epoch* and heralded a ‘closed’ geopolitical system as expansion came to an end. Great power rivalry would now intensify, with *the Heartland theory* as a major perspective on global politics. The Heartland theory said that core of Eurasia was the key to world dominance. Mackinder’s prescriptive concern was to conceive a grand strategy to preserve the Empire. The Arctic played a marginal role in classical geopolitical analysis. It was a barrier, the *outer area* in geostrategic terms, a field

Northern Dimension Foreign Policies in the Geopolitics of the Circumpolar North’, *Geopolitics*, 12: 133–65; and Wilson, Elana (2007), ‘Arctic Unity, Arctic Difference: Mapping the Reach of Northern Discourses’, *Polar Record*, 43: 125–33.

51. Neumann, Iver B. (1994), ‘A Region-Building Approach to Northern Europe’, *International Studies*, 20: 53–74; Hønneland, Geir (1998), ‘Identity Formation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 33: 277–97; Aalto, Pami, Simon Dalby and Vilho Harle (2003), ‘The Critical Geopolitics of Northern Europe: Identity Politics Unlimited’, *Geopolitics*, 8: 1–19; and Browning, Christopher S. (2010), ‘The Region-Building Approach Revisited: The Continued Othering of Russia in Discourses of Region-Building in the European North’, *Geopolitics*, 8: 45–71.
52. Mackinder, Halford (1904), ‘The Geographical Pivot of History’, *Geographical Journal* 23: 421–37; and Kearns, Gerry (2009), *Geopolitics and Empire. The Legacy of Halford Mackinder*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

for resource extraction, expeditions and rather low-key rivalry, but not a major area of contestation between the great powers.

In retrospect, Mackinder underestimated the long-term capabilities of sea powers like the United States, as he underestimated how technological advances like submarines and intercontinental missiles could bolster the might of marine-based powers. Military technology, certainly, goes into the geopolitical equation, but Mackinder and the heartland theorists had a rather static view of the importance of the steam engine and the railroad which had opened up Eurasia.

The Western strategy of the Cold War was a *rimland* strategy for containment of the USSR by a string of military alliances around the Eurasian Soviet core – ranging from NATO in the European north-west, CENTO in the Middle-East, SEATO in South-east Asia and ANZUS in the Pacific. Cold War strategies were modelled on classical geopolitical thought. The Columbian epoch was gradually brought to an end with the process of decolonisation. A Post-Columbian era slowly emerged, half a century after Mackinder's pioneering analysis.

The voluntary dissolution of the USSR at Christmas Day 1991 seems like a spectacular negation of the Heartland theory. The political tenant to the Eurasian Core Area ended its ambitions for becoming a global hegemon. The Russian successor state was radically disadvantaged in terms of space and power to proceed with this ambition.

A more self-assertive Russia has launched new power projections towards the Arctic, due to oil and gas deposits in more accessible waters as the ice recedes. Eastern Eurasia, accordingly, is emerging as a geopolitical stronghold with the rise of China. The Heartland will remain geopolitically significant, but a unified power is less likely. The center of gravity – in geopolitical terms – is moving towards the North and the East.

Geopolitical analysis has changed during the 20th century, no longer being tied up with *fin-de-siècle* Social Darwinism, and also with perspectives on power and space at different orders of scale, from the global down to the local level.⁵³ The Arctic is of medium-sized order with a typically circumpolar character spanning the *rimlands* of three continents and numerous states. The resources, transport routes and strategic importance of this circumpolar area are the geopolitical foci of analysis. *Globalisation* and *geopolitics* are contrasting images of global developments after the end of the Cold War. While globalisation indicates interdependence, transnational flows, and obliterated state frontiers, geopolitics conjures great power games and power politics. The balance has tilted in favour of geopolitics with the

53. See for instance Kaplan, Robert D. (2012), *The revenge of Geography*, New York: Random House and Brzezinski, Zbigniew (2012), *Strategic Vision*, New York: Basic Books.

rise of China and India, the reassertion of Russia, and the repercussions of 9/11. This balance does not only change over time. It also works out differently in various parts of the world. Again, the Arctic is a field of tension between contradictory forces.

5.2 French geopolitics and the Arctic

Geopolitical modes of analysis present counterpoints to institutionalism in current research. French versions of geopolitics have been explicitly concerned with developments in the Arctic. Generally, French geopolitics is less tied up with the overall global power game compared to the Anglo-American tradition. It emerged in the interwar period in opposition to the German adaptation of the imperialist heritage from Mackinder.⁵⁴ French scholars from Yves Lacoste onwards have applied geopolitical analysis from the grand strategy of superpowers down to the geographical correlates of micro politics at the most local level.⁵⁵

French geopolitical analyses of the Arctic are primarily concerned with state rivalries and the quest for strategic resources in the wake of climate change and increased accessibility. With the prospects of a maritime Northern route from Japan to North Europe, 'a new Russian-American Mediterranean' has emerged, and the global position of Russia – politically and economically – is radically enhanced.⁵⁶ At the dawn of the post-Cold War era, Amiral Besnault published *Géostratégie de l'Arctique*.⁵⁷ After an extensive overview of physical, economic and political features of the Arctic, he concluded – at the swansong of the Cold War – that increased accessibility might intensify the scramble for resources in the region. Given the uncertainties of the future, a combination of economic needs, new opportunities, unresolved sovereignties and a spill-over from conflicts elsewhere, continuously made the Arctic an area for strategic concern. According to Besnault, the prolonged strategic importance of the Arctic was ensured by the variety of natural resources,

54. See Defarges, Philippe Moreau (2005), *Introduction à la géopolitique*, Paris : Éd. Du Seuil, pp. 109 ff. Defarges outlines the varieties of geopolitical traditions in a number of countries in Europe and overseas. On the 'French School of Geopolitics' see also Parker, Geoffrey (2000), 'Ratzel, the French School and the birth of Alternative Geopolitics', *Political Geography*, Vol. 19: 957–969.

55. The French journal of geography and geopolitics, *Hérodote*, was founded by Lacoste in 1976. See the relatively recent volume by Lacoste, Yves (2006), *Géopolitique*, Paris: Larousse. Cf. the comprehensive volume by Chauprade, Aymeric (2007), *Géopolitique*, Paris: Ellipses. Chauprade has an explicitly realist orientation as editor of *Revue française de géopolitique*. See also a concise overview by Defarges, Philippe Moreau (2005), *Introduction à la géopolitique*, Paris : Éd. Du Seuil. French *géopolitique* is both Left and Right, one characteristic feature being the employment of geopolitical analysis on any scale from the global to the local.

56. Chauprade, Aymeric (2007), *Géopolitique*, Paris: Ellipses, p. 751.

57. Besnault, Amiral (1992), *Géostratégie de l'Arctique*, Paris: Economica.

the technological innovations to exploit them, and the problems of sovereignty connected to economic zones and beyond.⁵⁸

In 2008, two geopolitically oriented analysts proclaimed that *La bataille du Grand Nord a commencé ...*⁵⁹ They saw more than a symbolic act in the Russian flag that was planted on the sea bed of the North Pole at a depth of 4200m in August the year before. They saw the episode as a token of the continued game for economic, environmental and strategic positions in the Arctic, intensified by climatic and technological changes. These changes, they claimed, are also likely to draw new countries more strongly towards the North, like China and the U.S. – after a period of receding interest in the aftermath of the Cold War. In this respect, the geostrategic centre of gravity in the Arctic is moving from West to East.

Labévière and Thual envisage three possible scenarios in the Arctic region: a new Cold War triggered by Russian assertiveness that will be countered and contained by other great powers, particularly the U.S.; a ‘dream story’ of a steadily more integrated, multi-state community in the Arctic; or, most likely, a U.S. Arctic ocean based on American reassertion, with Greenland as an extended base, emanating from Thule, filling the position gradually left vacant by long-term Danish retraction.⁶⁰ Labévière specifies his views on the political drift of Greenland in a review conversation in 2009.⁶¹

In a journal symposium on the future of Greenland, Gérard Dussouy expands upon this perspective, showing that in geopolitical terms Greenland is an island extension from the North American continent.⁶² Dussouy is playing down the strategic stakes of the Arctic game, observing that contrasting interests seem to be negotiable and relatively marginal compared to tensions in many other parts of the world.⁶³

A common denominator in French geopolitical analyses of the Arctic is the combination of resource availability, contested sovereignties, and power games. The institutions of cooperation are downplayed in the geopolitical concentration on resources, transport routes, and state rivalry. If the peace still is preserved, this is due to negotiable issues and the limited importance of unresolved questions. Furthermore, predictions are replaced by more open-ended scenarios. In contrast to

58. Id at pp. 398ff.

59. Labévière, Richard and Thual, Francois (2008), *La bataille du Grand Nord a commencé ...* Paris: Perrin.

60. Id at pp. 185–187, 188–207.

61. Labévière, Richard (2009), ‘Le Grand Nord en question’, *Nordiques*, No. 20.

62. Dussouy, Gérard (2008–2009), ‘L’océan Arctique dans le nouveau contexte géopolitique mondial’, *Nordiques* 18: 23–31.

63. Id at p. 31.

the classical Anglo-Saxon and German geopolitics, the French analyses operate on scales from the global to the local.

While geopolitical perspectives in most countries – certainly in the U.S., Britain and Russia – have fluctuated with the international climate – extensive in times of crisis, at a low ebb during more stable times – geopolitics has consistently been a strong analytical tradition in France since the 1960s. There has also been a quite consistent interest in developments in the Arctic, both as an aspect of superpower strategy and as a plurality of geopolitical regions in their own right. A variety of geopolitical modes of analysis of the Arctic have consistently been present in France.

6. Concluding remarks

There is potential for both cooperation and conflict in the Arctic, depending on perspective and focus. Many critical problems have been resolved, either within the framework of international treaties like the UNCLOS of 1982 and bodies like the Arctic Council, or in bilateral negotiations, like the maritime delimitation between Russia and Norway in the Barents Sea. Some issues might lead to increased tension if conditions in some of the major powers develop unfavourably.

The political significance of the Arctic changed radically with the end of the Cold War. During that era the region had been a geopolitical rimland of the first order. The Kola Peninsula had the major ports for the Soviet Northern Fleet and the bases for submarines with nuclear missiles. The circumpolar North was a central access route for strategic weapons from East and West, heavily guarded by advanced surveillance systems. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the Arctic became tightly woven into interstate cooperative institutions. Strategic tension subsided to the benefit of common interests and commercial interchange, even if some disputes remained unresolved. Cooperation was mainly limited to low-politics issue areas such as environmental protection and indigenous peoples' rights, however.

In the new century, the geopolitical importance is again increasing. Climate change, technological advances and the quest for resources are the major drivers of change. The Arctic is an expansion field for national sovereignty in the quest for resources and passage. The geopolitical status of the High North is being transformed from outer to inner crescent – a strategic zone with new modes of cooperation, but also with international disagreement over maritime areas and access routes beyond the circumpolar land area. While the Arctic in classical geopolitics was a remote area which separated Europe from Asia in the north, it is now becoming a contested field with cooperative institutions and joint initiatives intertwined

with national rivalries over more easily available resources – or the potential and prospect of such resources.

Institutionalism has been the dominant approach in the English-language study of Arctic politics since the end of the Cold War – and so far tension runs low and the existing cooperative framework seems robust. Geopolitical analyses, prevalent in the French literature, are more attuned to the potential for rivalries should resources become scarcer, if there is a spill-over from conflicts originating elsewhere, if a crucial country develops more aggressive policies, or if a critical episode gets out of hand. Still, recent geopolitical analyses evade deterministic deductions from the geographical correlates of states.

The nature of the Arctic itself helps to reduce the potential for acute state rivalries. Resource exploitation and transport will remain costly for a long time to come. The North Pole, certainly, is a symbolic prize worth a flag contest, but it is not a profitable goal.