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PART II. GLOBAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES


AMBIGUITY IN AN AMBIGUOUS REGION

President Obama, wrapping up his August 2015 tour of Alaska with a visit to Kotzebue, located just above the Arctic Circle, declared, “If there’s one thing that threatens opportunity and prosperity for everybody, wherever we live, it’s the threat of a changing climate” (Ryan 2015). According to the White House, Mr. Obama’s visit to Alaska was staged to draw attention to the potential risks climate change poses to coupled environmental and social systems.

Future climate change is predicted to be experienced earlier and more acutely in the polar regions (Holland and Bitz 2003; Kattsov and Kallen 2005). Increased precipitation, alterations in sea ice dynamics, and a change in climatic variability and the occurrence of temperature extremes have already been recorded by both instrumental records and indigenous observations in Alaska and throughout the circumpolar north (“Russian Oil Disaster” 2016; Krupnik and Jolly 2002; Overland, Spillane, and Soreide 2004). First in 2007, followed more disturbingly in September 2012, and most recently during May 2016 satellite photos of the circumpolar north captured images of record-shattering losses of Arctic ice-cover (Beck 2016). These changes, however, which are posing significant risks and hazards to communities throughout the high north, are also introducing commercial possibilities. In 2008 the U.S. Geological Survey completed and published its assessment of the northern Arctic’s unexploited conventional oil and gas resources. According to the assessment, the Arctic may be the location for 13 percent of the earth’s recoverable oil, 30 percent of its natural gas and 20 percent of its liquefied natural gas (Bird, et al., 2008).

Just about one hundred years before the USGS report, Arctic explorer Admiral Robert Peary, accompanied by fellow American Matthew Henson and three Inuit, photographed themselves planting an American flag at a point they claimed was the North Pole. Their flag, however, would have been planted on moving ice floes rather than fixed land. Consequent international deliberations suggested that occupation of the Arctic, and thus establishment of sovereignty, was not possible, given that a floating mass of ice was not territory. However, climate change, the potential for enormous energy resources, and evolving technology are providing more incentives for territorial occupation and concurrently entitlement claims to sovereignty in the Arctic.

State sovereignty, however, does not impede straddling stocks—fishery resources that occur both within national waters and in the high seas beyond—nor the lower level atmospheric air pollution that is increasing in the north as more ships pass across the Arctic’s waters. The Arctic’s ice moves through and across national borders, sometimes flowing into international waters while the earth’s permafrost—frozen soil that covers nearly a quarter of the northern hemisphere and traps vast amounts of carbon—may be melting faster throughout the circumpolar north than previously estimated and releasing more potent greenhouse gasses into the planet’s entire atmosphere than expected (Burke, Hartley, and Jones 2012; Hugelius et al. 2012; Mooney 2015; van Huissteden and Dolman 2012). Melting glaciers and land-based ice sheets contribute to sea-level rise, which consequentially creates beach erosion, places coastal communities at flood risk, and contaminates fresh water supplies. Further, warming in the Arctic has already disrupted atmospheric circulation patterns producing changes in weather that negatively impact global food production. The Arctic’s international waters are at potential risk from over-exploitation of marine resources and rising pollution levels from increased shipping, while an increase in commercial vessels and cruise ship passengers are at higher threat from treacherous storms and accidents. As the areal extent of Arctic sea ice reaches record lows, energy recovery technology advances, and global demand for resources increases many view the Arctic—despite the challenges of distance, remoteness, geopolitics and harsh and changing environmental conditions—as a region open for vast investments in energy production, shipping, and fishing.

Originating far from the Arctic, there are two largely autonomous sets of policies directed at the North from Washington, DC. Mr. Obama’s Alaskan visit, together with his administration’s approval of limited off-shore drilling, highlighted the equivocal policy that sometimes appears, on one hand, to promote oil and gas development, while on the other hand, seems to preserve Alaska’s wild and pristine nature. The United States is not unique in its sometimes ambiguous, occasionally contradictory approach to northern policy-making. This is itself reflective of the region’s liminal nature, where some stakeholders who have attempted to direct attention to the Arctic have stressed that the region is not simply an “empty space” to be protected or exploited, nor can it be exclusively treated as an arena of evolving international relations, nor addressed singularly as a “lived space” of indigenous lifestyles and northern communities. As Arctic landscapes, seascapes, and icescapes change, northern stakeholders and those residing in the southern constituencies of Arctic and non-Arctic states respond, but rarely without contestation.

Thus, the Arctic is a region with transboundary risks that transcend as well as overlap geophysical, political, cultural and historical boundaries and future trajectories. The key conundrum for risk governance in the Arctic is to address the region’s exceptional—and at times seemingly incompatible—social and geophysical characteristics in ways that “normalize” the Arctic’s future geography. This is being attempted in ways that suggest a situated approach to risk governance that does not so much depend on formal risk governance models—such as the IRGC—but rather offers more attention to the socially situated undercurrents of risk governance in practice (cf. Renn 2008 and Renn, this volume). Our discussion underscores the understanding that, as highlighted by Boholm, Corvellec, and Karlsson (2012 pg.1), “risk governance takes place in contexts that are historically, spatially and institutionally situated.” Risk governance is not limited to structuring practices, but is itself embedded within practices that are contingent and agent-driven productions. By examining particular aspects of the Barents Sea Agreement, followed then by a discussion of the evolution of the Arctic Council this chapter explores—through the voices and actions of diverse Arctic stakeholders—systemic risk governance as a negotiation among actors, their multilevel institutional constraints, and their routinization of trust and cooperation. Finally, despite multilateral, flexible and
situated stakeholder cooperation, normalizing the future geography of the Arctic remains the key unresolvable conundrum.

COOPERATING FOR RISK GOVERNANCE

“Save the Arctic… A new Arctic oil rush is starting. Shell, BP, Exxon, Gazprom, Rosneft and others want to risk a devastating Arctic oil spill for only three years’ worth of oil” is Greenpeace’s dramatic call for action, because, as its online campaign emphatically states, “inevitable mistakes would shatter the fragile Arctic environment” (Greenpeace International 2016). Other environmental nongovernmental organizations that have strong ties to the Arctic, such as the WWF, Bellona Foundation, Pew Environment Group, Pacific Environment, the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Alaska Wilderness League, and Earthjustice are as concerned as Greenpeace that the environmental consequences associated with industrial processes will irreversibly damage the Arctic’s fragile terrestrial and marine ecosystems. Unlike the past, when vast expanses of the earth remained free from large-scale human intrusions, the presence of air- and waterborne pollution, chemicals from military and development projects and the consequences of climate change have become noticeable throughout the entire globe. But these changes are particularly poignant for the Arctic, as this region has long been among the most inaccessible on earth, perceived as protected by distance and climate from environmental degradation produced by industrialization taking place far to the region’s south. As multiple stakeholder groups increasingly access the Arctic in diverse ways, environmental NGOs’ influence will be coupled with their ability to negotiate with separate stakeholders over multiple visions for the region. But environmental NGOs, and others who agree that the Arctic’s ecosystems should be protected, may differ as to which kinds of protection are most necessary in which locations, and from which activities.

Recent media headlines proclaiming dramatic changes to the Arctic’s local environments remind those far from the Arctic that the northern latitudes are moving closer toward the center of world attention. Residents of the coastal circumpolar north, however, have been observing for decades how the loss of land and sea-based glacial ice threatens not only the survival of the Arctic’s iconic polar bears and changes the feeding and migration patterns of seals, walruses, and whales, but how these alterations force northern communities to adapt their lifestyles and to react to broader political implications brought on by climate change. This intimate experience with local changes in the Arctic and their non-local causes was expressed during a conversation with the authors in an office located in downtown Moscow, by a leader of RAIPON (Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North), a Permanent Participant of the Arctic Council.

We are concerned with pollution generally, but land pollution is our number one concern, pollution from mining and industrial wastes particularly from the Soviet legacy. Unfortunately, this is not at all. Biological wastes are of major concern to us as well, and the negative impacts of climate change need to be better studied, and we share our information with the Alaskan Aleuts.

Indeed, about 10 time zones away in the northern city of Anchorage, Alaska, a representative of the Aleut to the Arctic Council described to the authors his community’s deep connection to the northern environment.

Our people, my people for example, we have been in the Bering Sea for 10,000 years, 6,000 years before the height of the pyramid culture, and a lot of the information we have is still passed down from generation to generation… we still have an intimate connection to the environment, and very profound knowledge and understanding about what is going on within ecological systems, species dynamics, you name it, weather, climate.

Not only indigenous peoples, but non-indigenous representatives of shipping and resource development enterprises are also conscious of a rapidly changing Arctic, particularly the commercial opportunities revealed by a transforming north. While Royal-Dutch Shell’s Arctic off-shore drilling interests have been well publicized beyond the Arctic region, numerous other multinational companies with global reach have also been among the Arctic’s “First Movers.” Denmark’s Golder Associates, for example, which represents some of the world's major oil and gas, electricity, mining, manufacturing, and urban infrastructure interests operates throughout the circumpolar north, delivering increasingly diverse services to the petroleum, natural gas, and mining industries. Other corporations envision a changing Arctic as opening new opportunities to sell border defense and surveillance systems to northern militaries, to establish new northern cruise routes, and even—potentially—to provide air conditioning, refrigeration services, and products such as ice cream and bottled water in regions previously considered commercial dead ends (Blunden 2012; Backus 2012).

Among the challenges, therefore, are how to manage Arctic natural resource streams in ways that populations in the Arctic find fair, and that account for the political and potential negative environmental consequences of industrialization and climate change throughout the Arctic. But even when stakeholders, such as mining industry representatives and indigenous peoples, are communicating about northern development, their perspectives—not surprisingly—may seem incongruous. Take, for example, the director of a major mining association in Alaska. He is convinced that what is good for the mining industry is consequently perceived similarly as beneficial by and for indigenous peoples.

The native peoples have seen the value of a job, they have seen the value of the mineral industry… Everything that hurts the native corporation hurts the mining industry, and everything that hurts the mining industry hurts the native corporations. They’re very, very supportive.

Just two days after this discussion and two miles away, a conversation with an Inupiaq community organizer suggested a different perspective on the relationship among the mining industry, government, and many Alaska Natives.
I would say by far the vast majority of Inupiak do not trust the [mining] industry, and they gave me lots of explanations and reasons why. They do not trust the government either; they feel by and large that their voice is not heard.

Environmental NGOs, the extracting industries, governments, and indigenous peoples actually possess intersecting goals, including the health and welfare of Arctic stakeholders and the maintenance of the region’s ecosystems. What this means and how this can be achieved, however, apparently differ among stakeholder groups. But conversations among stakeholder groups that involve industry, government, the environment and local communities underscore that environmental and social risks exceed the boundaries of single Arctic territorial states and the interests of particular stakeholder groups to involve concerns common to all of them. Individuals that seem to be speaking past each other are in fact directing attention to the necessity for cooperation in order to address the confluence of systemic risks in the Arctic. Because of the great distances, costs, and harsh weather conditions associated with the extended region, individually no institution or nation is able to monitor and attend to the assemblage of environmental, economic, humanitarian, political, and social risks that converge in the circumpolar north. A major challenge for risk governance in the Arctic, then, is to involve civil, environmental, corporate and multilateral governmental stakeholders in cooperative—rather than competitive—arrangements that can better manage transboundary risks (see also Kaspersion, J.X. and R.E. Kaspersion 2001; Renn 2008).

RISK GOVERNANCE IN AN EXCEPTIONAL REGION

The Arctic, though sometimes marginal to the rhythms of life beyond the circumpolar north, is not terra nullius but is indeed a place of rules, regulations, and international cooperation even while attention-grabbing headlines such as “Race Is On as Ice Melt Reveals Arctic Treasures” (The New York Times 2012), “China’s New Strategic Target: Arctic Minerals” (The Wall Street Journal 2012), “As Arctic Melts Away, Cold War-style Spy Games Heat Up” (CBS News 2014), and “Frozen Conflict: Denmark Claims the North Pole” (The Economist, 2014) may seem to suggest the opposite. The convergence in the Arctic of environmental changes and their implications for lifestyles and habitats, new and potentially profitable shipping lanes, increasingly accessible and valuable natural resources, unresolved maritime boundaries in the Arctic Ocean, and deadlines for nations to submit their claims to the UN for Arctic maritime territory offers commentators from outside the high north a sense of increasing threat, that the Arctic is indeed “heating up.”

Global environmental changes and growing demand for mineral and fossil fuels is connecting the Arctic increasingly to events elsewhere around the globe. Incidents in the Middle East and Ukraine that impact the flow of oil to global markets and contest international normative terrain, and China’s reduction in exports of rare earth elements to multinational electronics manufacturers are positioning the Arctic as a potential supplier of energy and minerals to the rest of the world and a stage on which to play out territorial aspirations.

As climate change, resource potential, and conflicting socio-political values concerning the future of the Arctic converge, Canada, Denmark and Greenland, Norway, Russia, and the US—commonly referred to as the “Arctic Five”— are asserting their sovereignty claims in areas previously of little interest except arguably to scientific researchers, military strategists and northern communities. While Sweden, Finland, and Iceland do not directly border the Arctic Ocean, they too are often included in discussions among the “Arctic Eight.” China, India, Japan, Singapore and South Korea—nations not traditionally associated with the circumpolar north although each have participated in Arctic exploration—are considering buying or building ice breakers and together with Italy gained observer status in 2013 on the Arctic Council (Blank 2016). A range of other nations, which have neither territorial claims nor other types of presence in the High North, hold that the Arctic Ocean should remain open to all nations under the principles maintained by the “common heritage of mankind.”

Numerous small-scale territorial conflicts remain unsettled as climate change progresses and economic and political competition apparently intensifies. But despite the media’s claims of a confrontational rush for the Arctic’s natural resources, neorealistical speculations of increasing geopolitical tensions over territorial expansion, and environmental NGOs’ concern over institutional ineffectiveness in protecting the Arctic’s fragile ecosystems, the Arctic region has also become a site for constructive cooperation among states and non-state organizations. In contrast to conventional governance organized within the hierarchical order of a single sovereign state and geopolitical friction over zero-sum issues, the Arctic is emerging as a region of largely horizontal relations among states, corporations, and civil society.

Unilateral actions by states falling outside agreed upon norms and conventions that govern international relations have become rare in the Arctic. As Peter MacKay, Canada’s former Minister of Defense and former Foreign Minister declared in 2007: “Look, this isn’t the 15th century. You can’t go around the world and just plant flags and say, ‘We’re claiming this territory’” (The Globe and Mail 2007). The former Foreign Minister was directing his heated statements towards what he perceived as a challenge to international law by the placement of a Russian flag on the seafloor at the North Pole. The Russian flag, however, was not placed by or on behalf of a sovereign state. The titanium Russian flag that is resting at the North Pole is representative of the many geopolitical and institutional changes that are taking place throughout the Arctic, including a thaw in the frosty diplomatic relations that had characterized more than 40 years of Norwegian and Russian territorial and environmental dispute in the Barents Sea.

1 The seafloor beneath international waters were designated a “common heritage of mankind” by the Declaration of Principles Governing the Seabed and the Ocean Floor, a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly in 1969. Accordingly, activities conducted on the seafloor of international waters should be in the collective interests of all nations.
BARENTS SEA THAW

The Barents Sea, part of the Arctic Ocean, is among the largest shallow continental shelf areas in the world. Due to warm air and water currents moving in from the south, the Barents Sea region is among the mildest and most humid parts of the Arctic. Together with the Transpolar Current flowing from the Arctic Basin, these ocean and air currents make the Barents Sea a sink for contaminants emitted from outside the region (Hansen 1996). The Barents Sea’s latitudinal warm and relatively stable ecological conditions also provide habitats for varied marine and northern wildlife while also making it vulnerable to environmental hazards, many of which were exacerbated by the decades-long Norwegian-Russian territorial dispute in the Barents.

In the 1970s disagreements flared over differences in approaches to fish conservation, and as geological studies revealed potential oil and gas reserves, the dispute took on more complexity touching on issues of pollution, search and rescue, energy and marine resources, and sovereignty contestations. The emergence of Norwegian-Russian territorial disagreement in the Barents can be traced to the 1958 UN Convention on the Continental Shelf, an agreement created to recognize coastal states’ sovereignty rights over their continental shelves for the exploration and exploitation of natural resources.

In accord with this UN Convention, in 1963 Norway filed sovereign rights claims to the seabed and subsoil of its continental shelf in the Barents Sea. Four years later the Soviet Union filed a similar claim also in the Barents Sea. Bilateral negotiations over where to draw the continental shelf boundary line between the two nations continued unsuccessfully until 1977. The mid-1970s coincided with a change in fisheries regulatory oversight and ongoing territorial claims making. As negotiations were underway toward the Law of the Sea Convention, multilateral negotiations over Barents Sea fisheries transitioned from the Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission to the bilateral Norwegian-Russian Fishery Commission (Elferink and Rothwell 2001). It was also at this time that both nations notched up their competition when Norway extended its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) 200 miles out from its Barents Sea coastlines and the Soviet Union established its own 200 nautical mile exclusive Fishery Zone. This contest over territorial claims made negotiations even more complex as bilateral talks involved not only fossil fuel resources and fish quotas, but also where to draw a single international boundary line that would divide their overlapping territorial claims and settle their outer continental shelf claims.

Representatives of the UN in Moscow straightforwardly explained to the authors that in a competitive relationship among nations international agreements are unlikely—in the Barents Sea specifically and in the Arctic Ocean more generally.

We are talking about competition, which is definitely, in our case, not positive but quite a negative factor for cooperation, within the environmental sphere in particular. The reason I say this is that for several years, it has become more difficult to initiate new international agreements.

Alternative interpretations—or out right neglect—of technical conservation measures regarding fish quotas and offshore fossil fuel drilling are not unique to the Barents Sea. But what was endemic were the challenges of establishing a joint-regulatory management regime across a region with contested sovereignty, the uncertainties of Russia’s fishing industry vis-à-vis the nation’s ongoing economic transition, regulation of non-coastal state fishing within the disputed waters (i.e., international waters), the tensions associated with the proximity of Russia’s largest naval fleet (headquartered at the port of Murmansk) and its unrestricted movements through the 350-mile-wide Svalbard Passage, and the need to arrive at discursive mechanisms to encourage observation of bilateral fishing quotas and territorial integrity (Churchill, R. and Ulstein, G. 1993; Stokke 2001). Particularly during the long-1990s, when Russia was navigating its shift from a command to a market economy, Norway made multiple claims concerning illicit fishing activities by Russian trawlers in the Barents Sea.

Norway and Russia’s four decades of territorial and environmental disputes illustrate the centrality of geopolitics and economic interests, as well as cooperation in these types of interactions. While in multiple ways the power balance between these two nations was and remains asymmetric—in some ways favoring Norway and in other terms Russia—international law requires that asymmetries are immaterial in such interactions. Risks to the well being of natural environments customarily are subject to international agreements, governmental regulation, and state intervention. In these cases regulation tends to be well established with authorities positioned to manage compliance.

But at the same time, risk regulation and enforcement is often distributed across multiple institutions and hierarchically managed at several administrative levels; shaped by the media; influenced by business and other stakeholder interests; and affected by the attitudes and the hierarchal positions of the regulators and the cultures of the participants (Boholm, Corvellec, and Karlsson 2012; Fra.Paleo 2014; Hood, Rothstein, and Baldwin 2001). Indeed, through the 1990s Russia’s agency for fisheries management — now located under the Ministry of Agriculture—was restructured five times, its director replaced even more frequently, and each successive director although well connected to Moscow nonetheless consistently lacked training in fisheries management. But this simply illustrates a truism: regulatory institutions and the cultures in which they are embedded are dynamic, and discursive practices are shaped by actors responding to their particular situations (Boholm, Corvellec, and Karlsson 2012). In the daily activities that constitute risk and its governance, stakeholders may be involved in a variety of activities that blur the responsibilities for—as well as combine—analysis, management, and communication. Risk regulation and enforcement takes place in particular sociocultural and political contexts and may not follow formal risk governance models (Churchill, R. and Ulfstein, G. 1993; Stokke 2001).

RISK CONUNDRUMS
Drawing from Stokke et al. (1999), what helped lead to the creation of an effective compliance regime was the regularity of the meetings convened by the Joint Norwegian-Russian Fisheries Commission. These meetings, carrying on through one year to another and largely including the same individuals, contributed to a context where incremental changes and improvements to the institutional framework was possible. A sense of trust among Norwegian and Russian representatives reduced suspicions that reciprocal fishing would lead to political incidents or would undermine each other’s national authority. The bilateral administration was consequently able to depoliticize allocative issues and allowed territorial sovereignty discussions to continue largely uninterruptedly. In other words, here joint governance evolved not only through coherent governance frameworks—the macro-level apparatus within which individual stakeholders were operating—but more particularly through the micro-scale context where familiarity, mutual respect, embarrassment, pride and anger, and the regularity of interactions among organizational participants was able to take place. Negotiators’ emotions connected to Barents Sea politics were not simply constituted as affect, but rather emerged through the familiarity of repeated interactions (Bueger and Gadinger 2015; Adler-Nissen 2014).

After several decades of competing visions over how to territorially divide the Barents Sea and its consequent natural resources, Norwegian and Russian negotiators reached a compromise in 2010. Both nations agreed to apply existing “international law to achieve an equitable solution,” and further, that “both Norway and the Russian Federation are committed to the extensive legal framework applicable to the Arctic Ocean” (MFA of Russia, 2010). By reaching an agreement, largely based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, Norway and Russia further demonstrated that international stakeholders are working to move the Arctic from a peripheral position somewhere at the “top of the world,” to a region carefully incorporated within an orderly international governance system. This bilateral pact not only demonstrated “good neighborly relations,” but it emerged after private and public institutions and stakeholder groups in both nations collaborated to reduce the systemic risks associated with a decades-long unresolved common border dispute. The international agreement to divide the disputed Barents Sea area equally between the two nations emerged through the one-to-one social interaction of individuals responding, over time, to multiscalar anxieties, expectations, and mutual trust.

Sitting in a St. Petersburg office, decorated with a mix of Scandinavian contemporary furniture a highly ranked Norwegian diplomat to Russia characterized his impressions of the two nations’ evolving relationship in the Barents and in the wider Arctic.

Now there is greater mutual trust, and work in this area continues. There’s much better contact between Russia now compared to the past, and our foreign affairs ministers—due to the activities initiated by Norway—do well promoting cooperation. Problems of course still exist, but at least now we can sit together at the same table and discuss our issues without entering the trenches. (Authors’ communication)

While admitting his bafflement by what he interpreted as the differences in Russian and Norwegian cultural norms, the diplomat was sincerely confident that the increased cooperation he had been witnessing between the two nations during his 20 years of Foreign Service would continue through regular and personal conversations “at the same table.” Russia’s Moscow-based leaders echoed this response. Then president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, considered the Barents Sea agreement instructive for how rival Arctic nations should settle their differences (Harding 2010). According to the The Guardian newspaper, a spokesperson for the Kremlin further underscored the precedent set by the Barents Sea agreement for all the other Arctic nations: “This is a practical illustration of the principle that all disputes in the Arctic must be tackled by the Arctic nations themselves by way of talks.” This statement, while emphasizing direct talks as key to resolving international disagreements, also demonstrates the ongoing appeal to Arctic governance that privileges the physical geographical location of the Arctic nations, leaves unquestioned traditional notions of state sovereignty, and perpetuates the hegemony of national self-interest. As climate change continues to profoundly alter the present and future geography of the circumpolar north, the compounding environmental, geopolitical, social, economic and military consequences remain not only uncertain but unknown. These changes reveal a fundamental issue, namely, whether systemic risks produced by a changing Arctic can be addressed without new institutional governance mechanisms.

The Arctic Council and the Future Geography of a Liminal Region

The Arctic’s international waters are at risk from over-exploitation of marine resources and rising pollution levels from increased shipping, while commercial vessels and cruise ship passengers are at higher threat from treacherous storms and accidents. As reflected by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Arctic’s international high seas require management for the benefit and safety of everyone, in- and outside the Arctic.

This is, in fact, part of the stated mission of the multilateral Arctic Council, founded in 1996. This consensus-building, cooperative institution that consists of state and non-state members traces its formation to a moment when the Cold War was coming to an end and an institutional structure that could facilitate circumpolar research and contribute toward Arctic-specific agreements began to take shape. The eight Arctic nations began to recognize that the issues facing the circumpolar north exceeded the capabilities of any single country and that successful solutions required common action. But in addition to a new vision of northern cooperation, the end of the Cold War also opened the region to new possibilities for territorial re-negotiation, Arctic indigenous peoples’ self-determination, transboundary environmental protection, and resource access and control — which although always present had been overshadowed by nuclear threat and the consequent preclusion of sustained cooperation among Arctic state and non-state stakeholders.

Since the creation of the Arctic Council, rising commodity prices and increased demand for natural gas, oil, and minerals have helped drive multinational, corporate, and civil society activities throughout the Arctic region. The demand for natural resources consequently continues to push demand for shipping services to support the extraction of
these resources and promotes maritime trade among Arctic drilling sites and settlements. Maritime tourism in the Arctic is growing, facilitated by increasing accessibility and improvements to ship design and Arctic maritime safety. As international maritime traffic increases throughout the circumpolar north individuals are also moving in response to diverse economic changes. According to a Moscow-based representative of an intergovernmental organization that deals with migration issues, “There are of course economic problems associated with climate change in the Far North. Just look at changes to the permafrost and construction. And the movement of people into the North, or from the north, is a government issue, everywhere.” While this individual expressed a conventional notion that social change in the Arctic is a matter for national authorities, a Norwegian representative of an international environmental NGO offered a distinction that emphasized Arctic governance, rather than government:

This organization is very aware of the fact that there are a lot of people living in the Arctic… and they need to be heard. The idea of someone from outside coming in and making a treaty without being able to discuss it with people and making rules that don’t fit with the people that live there, is very much against the way we like to think how things should be governed.

Agreeing with a number of northern indigenous organizations, her group is concerned that state-centric agreements would exclude northern residents from direct involvement in shaping the outcomes of multilateral negotiations. The former chair of an international planning organization of North American indigenous people, who served as a representative to the Arctic Council, expressed similar wariness:

All of the indigenous peoples are relegated to advisory posts as NGOs, they don’t have any meaningful voice or any say about anything. And of course the Arctic Council can say, “Oh yes, we have consulted with indigenous people,” but that is meaningless. It basically means we [the Arctic governments] let the indigenous people say what they are going to say and then we do whatever we want to do anyway.

Opinions concerning the Arctic Council vary. A leading official from the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON)—one of the Arctic Council’s six Permanent Participants—holds that the Council provides a unique, cooperative and democratic forum in which indigenous peoples help shape decision-making. As emphasized by a RAIPON leader, their status as Permanent Participants confers a special standing on the Arctic Council.

The Arctic Council, however, is the single individual organization in which natives participate as full participants. This presents us a democratic stage to allow full, equal position and involvement in policy. The main concern, however, is not to set up a situation of native vs. government… We are collaborating with the Arctic Council, and the Forum of Rights of Natives at the UN as well as other organizations here, in Canada, in Scandinavia – we work with WWF, Greenpeace, Pacific Environment, the

A member of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC)—another of the six indigenous Permanent Participants on the Arctic Council—offered a pragmatic perspective regarding indigenous peoples’ participation on the Arctic Council: “It is better to be at the table than not be invited at all.”

In addition to the six indigenous Permanent Participants, the Council currently includes 12 nations, 20 organizations, and the European Union with ad hoc observer status. Four more countries and 12 additional organizations have applied for observer status. While the Council endeavors to be a flexibly inclusive and open forum adapting to the Arctic’s changing circumstances, for its indigenous Permanent Participants, the inclusion of non-Arctic based actors is also seen as potentially diluting their own Council roles while leading toward extra-territorial definitions of the Arctic region.

The question for how best to respond to a changing Arctic environment will remain topical among diverse constituencies and will reflect which stakeholders are included and whose priorities are considered. The Arctic states—with the current exception of Finland—tend to support a Council that is expressive of the collective political will of the Arctic states, where sovereign powers of individual Council members is preserved and the majority of the Council’s policies are binding ethically, not legally. As the discussion of the Arctic Council and the evolution of the Norwegian-Russian agreement in the Barents Sea suggest, management of a changing Arctic is not limited by law but involve ad hoc intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder processes that emerge through social interaction of individuals responding to “naming and shaming,” mutual trust-building, and regime-making conducted within regional and multilateral forums. As expressed by a former member of the United States armed services in the Arctic, a US representative to the Arctic Council, “The Arctic Council is a funny beast. I think it is evolving, I see it as a positive force for good. I mean, the Arctic could be chaotic without it.”

As a “funny beast,” the Arctic Council’s role in the Arctic is evolving. The circumpolar north too is not perceived as static by its residents while its dynamism is increasingly recognized by those located far to its south. As the region’s residents and long-term visitors are forced to adapt to changes brought about by climate change, systemic risk governance in the Arctic must also be flexible, open to adaptation in order to accommodate the interplay of interests from national, regional and local governments, industrial and corporate actors, NGOs, the media, and the general public.

Multilateral governance in the Arctic although evolving, nonetheless remains Arctic state-centric, ad-hoc, and national sovereignty based. No institutional actor or nation is able to manage Arctic risks on their own. Risk governance includes multiple intersecting formal and informal arrangements that include public and private stakeholders who are likely to participate in more than one organization. Risk management by one organization

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in a particular regime may conflict with procedures taken by another organization while involving, at the same time, the dynamic interaction of risks under other administrative and regulatory constraints. What this indicates is that while risk governance involves arrangements of interconnected activities within and among organizations that follow particular patterns of collaborations (treaties, agreements and so forth), governance comes out from both the formal and informal efforts of actual people interacting in particular situations.

The Arctic Council—as the high key level, multilateral Arctic stakeholder forum—strives to enable transparent communication and cooperation among all stakeholder groups in order to frame risks, generate assessments, and consensually facilitate collaborative risk management decision making. Notwithstanding differences among member states and participant groups—some are more open to stakeholder input than others while some member states' political systems are more centrally administered than others—the Council’s responsive institutional structure and relative informality facilitates an open approach to agreement making. Renn indicates that as the world becomes more globalized, “Nationality, cultural background or institutional setting play but a minor role” in the assessment and management of risks (2008, pg. 358). But as long as views on Arctic governance, environmental stewardship, and national policies differ, appear vague, and contradict vis a vis administrative scale and whom to include, common normative understandings and collective management of risks will remain elusive in the Arctic.

While the Council is arguably more flexible than many other international organizations as it adapts its agenda to respond to complex challenges, it also shies away from long-term strategic planning. Although some of the effects of climate change, for example, are more apparent and addressable by the Council’s working groups and expert panels, other environmental and interrelated sociopolitical and economic changes are longer-term, express heterogeneous effects, and produce complex interrelations that the Council’s changing focus from one two-year rotating chairmanship to another is ill equipped to handle. This is especially poignant given the heightened interest in the Arctic by the global community, combined with the associated uncertainties of the future geography of the Arctic.

The normalization of the Arctic’s future geography is, ultimately, the underlying risk conundrum discussed in this chapter. Anticipating the Arctic’s future means situating the ways in which states, indigenous organizations, industries and civil groups are negotiating uncertainties and risks in the present. According to Pouliot (2016), “it is the unfolding of everyday practices that produces the bigger phenomena and social realities of our world,” and it is their compounding interactions that generate possible futures. The fragmented legal framework, the absence of a clearly defined policy-setting process, and gaps in participation and implementation makes grappling with the fundamental risks of a melting Arctic and its future geography not simply challenging, but a central conundrum.

The Arctic Council continues to evolve as the Arctic experiences changing circumstances. But what if the circumpolar north cannot be managed in the manner planned for by the Arctic Council’s members? As the Arctic Council’s members respond to future risks, some areas of the Arctic may be ignored, or damaged, in order to enable other regions to be protected and to thrive. More than a region defined by latitude, the Arctic is an inhabited and liminal place, both connected and responding to—as well as influencing and affecting—political and environmental processes taking place in other parts of the world. The Arctic is an exceptional place, deserving exceptional attention. Without such recognition, it is unlikely that stakeholders beyond national governments will be significantly incorporated into the management of systemic risks nor will alternatives to conventional state sovereignty be considered. The systemic risks posed by climate change in the Arctic require creative approaches, which will be best pursued by a multilateral international institution designed and financed specifically to function in the exceptional space of the circumpolar north. Whether this approach to normalization of an exceptional geography is effective remains, however, the key unresolved conundrum.


CBS News. 2014. “As Arctic Melts Away, Cold War-Style Spy Games Heat up.” Oslo, Norway: CBS.


