

Contested Sovereignty in a Changing Arctic

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Climate change is challenging the notions of permanency and stability on which the ideal of the sovereign, territorial state historically has rested. Nowhere is this challenge more pressing than in the Arctic. As states expand their sovereignty claims northward in pursuit of potential opportunities (in many cases made possible by climate change), these same states are being confronted with the region's increasing territorial indeterminacy (which also is exacerbated by climate change). To investigate how climate change is challenging the territorial imaginaries around which notions of sovereignty historically have been based, we turn to three debates in the contemporary Arctic: the question of sovereignty in the Northwest Passage, conflicts over territorial control in the Arctic Ocean, and the potential for enhanced multilateral governance. Through our study of these debates we engage the Arctic both as a region that is undergoing climate change's most extreme impacts and as a laboratory for understanding how these and similar impacts might modify the spatial organization of political authority across the world. *Key Words:* Arctic, climate change, ice, North Pole, sovereignty.

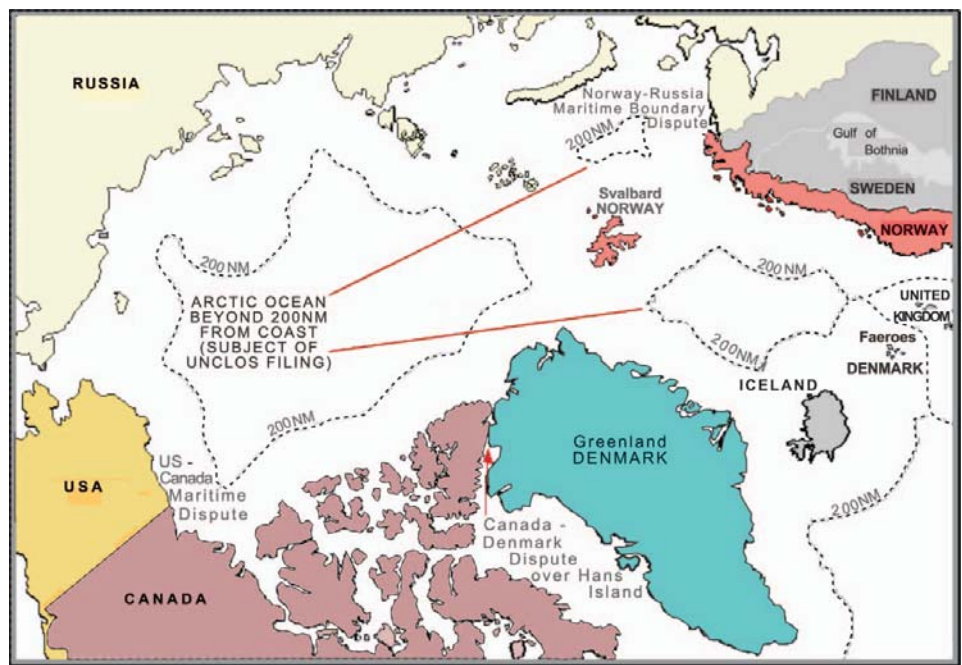
气候变化对主权的永久性和稳定性提出了挑战，这两个特性是领土国家历史性概念的基础。北极所面临的挑战最为迫切。一些国家扩大了其北上主权的要求，藉此谋求潜在的机会（这一可能性在许多情况下是由气候变化造成的），同样是这些国家，正在面临该地区领土不确定性的增加（同样由于气候变化而加剧）。为了探讨气候变化是如何挑战这些历史上主权概念所依赖的领土理念，我们对当代北极所涉及的三次辩论进行了研究：西北通道的主权争议，北冰洋领土控制的冲突，以及增强多边治理的可能性。通过我们对这些辩论的研究，我们认为，北极既是一个正在经历气候变化最极端影响的地区，同时也是一个实验室，藉此我们可以了解这些影响和其它类似的影响将如何改变世界各地政权的空间组织结构。关键词：北极的，气候变化，冰，北极，主权。

El cambio climático está poniendo en tela de juicio las nociones de permanencia y estabilidad sobre las cuales históricamente ha descansado el ideal del estado territorial soberano. En ninguna otra parte este reto es tan apremiante como en el Ártico. A la vez que los estados expanden sus reclamos de soberanía hacia el norte en pos de oportunidades potenciales (que en muchos casos han sido posibles por el cambio climático), estos mismos estados se ven confrontados con la creciente indeterminación territorial de la región (la cual es también exacerbada por el cambio climático). Para investigar el modo como el cambio climático está retando los imaginarios territoriales alrededor de los cuales históricamente se han basado las nociones de soberanía, volvemos sobre tres de los debates relacionados con el Ártico contemporáneo: el asunto de la soberanía en el Paso del Noroeste, los conflictos de control territorial en el Océano Ártico y el potencial de un gobierno multilateral fortalecido. A través de nuestro estudio de estos debates, abocamos el Ártico tanto como una región que está experimentando los impactos más agudos del cambio climático, como una suerte de laboratorio que nos permita comprender cómo estos y otros impactos similares podrían modificar la organización espacial de la autoridad política a través del mundo. *Palabras clave:* Ártico, cambio climático, hielo, Polo Norte, soberanía.

Global climate change is nowhere more pronounced in the Northern Hemisphere than in the Arctic region, where sea ice and glaciers are diminishing at an unprecedented rate. These changes will have profound effects on livelihoods around the world, as melting glaciers lead to sea-level rise and reduced albedo increases the rate of global warming trends (see Figure 1).

Much of the world views these changes with consternation, but northern states have come to realize that climate change in the Arctic presents not only socioecological challenges but economic and geopolitical opportunities. Arctic states—particularly Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Norway, Russia, and the United States, the five states with significant coastal claims in the Arctic Ocean—recognize that a warming climate

Figure 1. The Arctic (map by J. Tasch, based on C. Jayasuriya).



can bring a range of transformations to the region, including the opening of new shipping routes; easier access to reserves of natural gas, oil, and precious minerals; and new options for projecting military presence.

In fact, the economic opportunities presented by a thawing Arctic might be overstated, both with reference to the region's navigational potential (Arctic Council 2009) and its mineral wealth (Powell 2008). Likewise, many of the environmental conditions associated with the Arctic and discussed in this article existed prior to recent changes in the regional climate. Nonetheless, the translation of scientific knowledge into everyday understandings and practices is mediated through institutions and iconography that can proceed in parallel, becoming partially detached from the changes and continuities that are occurring on the ground, particularly when these occur at a difficult-to-grasp scale (e.g., global climate change) or a difficult-to-access region (e.g., the Arctic; Slocum 2004). And, as scholars of critical geopolitics have demonstrated, changes in media representations and everyday understandings of seemingly distant problems are often sufficient to alter the political landscape and influence policy choices (Ó Tuathail 1996).

As Arctic states grapple with changing conceptualizations of their northern frontiers and consider expanding economic activities there, unresolved questions regarding the limits of state sovereignty

in the Arctic Ocean constrain their efforts. It is our contention that ongoing contestation of sovereignty in the Arctic is rooted in the region's indeterminate and unstable geophysical characteristics. Historically, ideals of sovereignty have assumed a basic elemental distinction between land, recognized as amenable to sedentarization and hence territorialization, and water, designated as resistant to these assertions of control (Steinberg 2001, 2009). Even those who argue that a fundamental shift in the relationship between land power and sea power occurred in the late nineteenth century (e.g., Mackinder 1904; Schmitt 2006) expand the ontological distinction between Earth's two essential surface features—boundable land and unboundable water—into an epistemological principle.¹ This pairing of two apparently fixed and totalizing binaries—land versus water and boundable territory versus unboundable nonterritory—resonates with a long-standing tendency to assert difference and belonging by fusing “metageographic” reifications of territorial landmasses with appeals to “commonsense” materiality (Lewis and Wigen 1997). However, commonsense materiality, which is always contestable, is particularly problematic in the Arctic (Lopez 2001; Davidson 2005), especially amidst climate change.

At the most basic level, the binary division of Earth into land and water is confounded in the Arctic by the presence of ice, a liminal substance that combines and

confuses properties of the two. Beneath the cover of ice, it is not always clear where land ends and water begins (Pyne 1998; Laidler 2006), a situation that has long frustrated state constructions of power and knowledge in polar regions, whether gazing from the bow of a research vessel or analyzing an image taken by a satellite (Wråkberg 2004; Yusoff 2005). Furthermore, today's ice could be tomorrow's water. Like the ever-shifting tectonic plates of Massey's (2005, 2006) landscape (cf. J. T. Wilson 1963), Arctic materiality, stable in neither time nor space, complicates the ideal of permanence that underpins modern concepts of sovereignty, just as it complicates the practice of polar science (Frazar 2008).

Given this disparity between the idealized materiality of the system of territorially delimited sovereign states and the actual materiality of the Arctic, it is perhaps not surprising that practices of sovereignty and statehood in the region have diverged from the modern norm. For many northern coastal peoples, for example, materiality is not limited to land and water but incorporates sea ice, seasonal land-fast ice, and the shifting spaces in between, together with localized connections among varying types of wind and water currents, animal behaviors, tidal stages, snow, temperature, and the processes that operate underneath the ice cover (Kerttula 2000; Aporta 2002; Jolly et al. 2002). Such varying conceptions of the Arctic's materiality can lead to political institutions that stray even further from the modern ideal.

Because the Arctic has been governed from non-Arctic capitals, the region has seen a number of variations on the practice of sovereignty. For instance, British sovereignty in the Canadian Arctic historically was mediated by the relatively autonomous territorial control exercised by the Hudson's Bay Company. The Spitzbergen Treaty of 1920 gives Norway sovereignty over Svalbard but with certain provisions that limit Norway's control over economic resources. In several countries in the region, indigenous peoples have some level of autonomy. Further complicating these gradations of sovereignty, northern peoples often assert circumpolar bonds that transcend state structures and cross state borders, as in the case of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region, which brings together nonstate, state, and suprastate (the European Union) actors for regional governance. Even the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS; United Nations 1982), a document that fundamentally reinforces the idealized political-judicial separation of water from land, establishes a special regime for areas with "partic-

ularly severe climatic conditions and the presence of ice covering such areas for most of the year" (Article 234), where coastal states are granted additional jurisdiction with respect to the environment in their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).

In short, the history of sovereignty in the Arctic reflects ongoing attempts to square the multifaceted and unstable nature of Arctic materiality with a constructed ontology (or, to use Schmitt's term, a *nomos*) that assumes a fixed division between land and water.² Yet, as states pursue this goal, the Arctic's climate is becoming more volatile. Past ambiguities and inaccessibility can no longer be relied on by coastal states, and this is leading to a scramble for new material foundations on which to base sovereign claims.

In Canada, one of several Arctic states in which current and past governments have directed resources to the northern frontier, officials have been particularly eager to classify the region's dynamic materiality. In support of these efforts, some have suggested that Canada is less a continental landmass than an archipelago: a nation of land and water (and the liminal ice that mediates this division; Vannini et al. 2009). Indeed, if ice creates ambiguity, it allows water to be construed as solid territory. As Canadian jurist Donat Pharand has written, when arguing for drawing straight baselines around Canada's coasts, "The quasi-permanency of the ice over the enclosed waters bolsters the physical unity of land and sea" (Pharand 2007, 19). A senior official with Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) elaborated on this point:

We're dealing with virtually the world's only archipelago, certainly the world's only large archipelago, which has ice-covered areas throughout its surface. The question is what is the status of that ice vis-à-vis the land around it. . . . At some point we may end up before an international court [and] we will bring evidence that shows the people of the Canadian North, or Canadian citizens, in the winter time have treated the ice exactly the same as the land, and we'll make a very strong argument for that. (Interview, June 2008; see also Byers 2010; Fenge 2007–2008)

The focus on ice has been so intense that Canadian nationalists have not considered the other aspects of Article 234, "severe climatic conditions," which some models forecast will become even more extreme with a hitherto unexperienced Arctic hurricane season (Kolstad and Bracegirdle 2008). This suggests that geopolitical arguments are driven by popular idealizations of a place—territorial imaginaries³—as well as

legal precedents and statutes. Historically, territorial imaginaries have served as foundations for constructions of sovereignty by referring to territory as solid and stable—boundable units of land that can be charted, demarcated, and mapped to signify the “body” of the nation. In the Arctic, states often seek to perpetuate these traditional and assumed ways of defining and delimiting sovereign jurisdiction, notwithstanding the region’s increasing material instability brought about by climate change.

To expound on this proposition we turn to three debates in the contemporary Arctic: the question of sovereignty in the Northwest Passage, conflicts over control in the Arctic Ocean, and the potential for enhanced multilateral governance in the region. Through our study of these debates, we engage the Arctic both as a region that is undergoing climate change’s most extreme impacts and as a space for understanding how these impacts can modify the territorial organization of political authority in the region and beyond.

Navigating Sovereignty in the Northwest Passage

In September 2007, sea ice in the Canadian Arctic archipelago shrank to its lowest levels since satellite measurements began (European Space Agency 2007), and many have predicted that within the next decades commercial-size vessels will be able to make summer transit unassisted (Institute of the North, U.S. Arctic Research Commission, and International Arctic Science Committee 2004). These developments have led to anxious sovereignty assertions by the Canadian government, which maintains that the Passage is a component of the internal waters of Canada (Office of the Prime Minister 2007). Others with an interest in Arctic shipping (most notably the United States) have repeated long-held positions that the Passage is an international strait that, although bisecting Canadian territory, connects two bodies of water (Bureau of International Information Programs 2007). The resolution of the dispute has important implications for transit in the region. If the Passage is classified as Canadian internal waters, Canada has unlimited rights to restrict other nations’ vessels. Contrarily, if these same waters are classified as an international strait, Canada’s rights to regulate transit passage are significantly reduced.

In one sense, this is a narrow dispute of international law, as governments duel over the juridical status of the Northwest Passage. Yet the very designation of this

tangle of waterways in the Arctic archipelago as a singular Northwest Passage belies a more complex attempt to spatialize a liminal environment (Shields 1991). The designation of the region as the Northwest Passage both increases the space’s governability (it is now a distinct and named space) and can decrease its visibility and viability (it is no longer a place or a set of places but simply a mere “passage” to somewhere else that matters). In addition, this attempt at “fixing” the Northwest Passage as a distinct space is accompanied by attempts to fix it with a distinct nature: what it is (ice or water), what it was, and what it will be. Thus, the Canadian DFAIT official quoted earlier, who was referring specifically to the Northwest Passage and why it should be governed as Canadian internal waters, was basing his argument on the assertion that historically the Passage was geographically and socially “just like the land.” Conversely, although it has been navigated only rarely, and mostly not under power but by drifting in pack ice over a winter, U.S. Navy Commander James Kraska has asserted that the Passage is a “strait used for international navigation” and therefore it is fundamentally a part of the ocean and should be governed according to the principles of UNCLOS (Kraska 2007, 257).

Yet, despite such efforts to ascribe permanence to Arctic space, states have also at times acknowledged that the Arctic’s materiality, and hence its social function, is ever shifting. In 1970, Canada passed the Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act (Government of Canada 1985), which, in acknowledgment of the region’s exceptional environment, restricts uses of adjacent northern seas, and which formed the basis for Article 234 of UNCLOS.

As the Arctic Waters Prevention Pollution Act and Article 234 suggest, the binary division of space into land and water and the conceptual mapping of land to territory and water to nonterritory fail to resonate with the region’s actual materiality. It is this materiality, furthermore, that resident and nonresident travelers in the region have long been confronted by and to which they have adapted. In the past, attempts to use the Passage as a shipping corridor were obstructed when it was frozen, even as, conversely, the same winter conditions are incorporated by the Inuit in traditional seasonal movements and routines, whether on dogsled or snowmobile. Notwithstanding the DFAIT official’s assertion that “the people of the Canadian North . . . have treated the ice exactly the same as the land,” northern peoples are keenly aware of the distinctions between ice and land, and among various forms of ice (Oozeva et al. 2004). In this sense, the Canadian tendency to assign

the icy passage to the land side of the land–water binary is no more accurate (in terms of the passage’s material form, its historic uses, or the ways in which it is perceived through everyday spatial practices) than is the American inclination to assign the Passage to the water side. The reification of this space by statespersons for its geophysical properties—with all of the associated assumptions of permanence and transparency—is thus quite arbitrary, and this is especially so in the dynamic and indeterminate environment of the Arctic.

Claiming the North Pole

The dilemma facing statespersons in geophysically “fixing” the Northwest Passage, and the consequences this has for staking claims to territorial sovereignty, finds its parallel in the Arctic Ocean region as a whole. As long as the Arctic Ocean was predominantly frozen but drifting ice pack, international interests in staking territorial claims over the vast Arctic were pushed to the side. This indefinite arrangement, however, was challenged in August 2007 when a team of Russian scientists and legislators, together with an Australian adventure tour operator and a Swedish pharmaceuticals magnate, planted Russia’s flag on the seabed at the North Pole.

Although the Russian flag planting was subsequently seen by much of the world as a media stunt (Canada’s Foreign Minister Peter MacKay rebutted, “This isn’t the 15th century. You can’t go around the world and just plant flags and say, “We’re claiming this territory””; CanWest Media 2007), following their return, Russian government promoters of the expedition heralded it as a symbolic move to affirm and extend Russia’s historic presence in the Arctic (Komsomolskaya Pravda 2007), a history that dates back some 500 years (Brigham 1991). Following Article 76 of UNCLOS, which permits coastal states under certain conditions to claim seabed rights past the 200 nautical mile limit that marks the furthest extent of a state’s EEZ, the flag planting was mobilized by Russia as one component of a broader campaign by which Russia is using seismic and bathymetric data to assert that the land beneath the Arctic Ocean, up to the North Pole, is an extension of its landmass.⁴ Thus, even though Russia’s renewed interest in the region was due to changes in the geophysical environment and its concern over demographic and economic challenges in its Far North, Russia chose not to place its actions within the context of climate change or the dynamic materiality of the Arctic. Instead, Russia appealed to the properties of solid land (the seabed) to identify a natural and timeless contiguity between

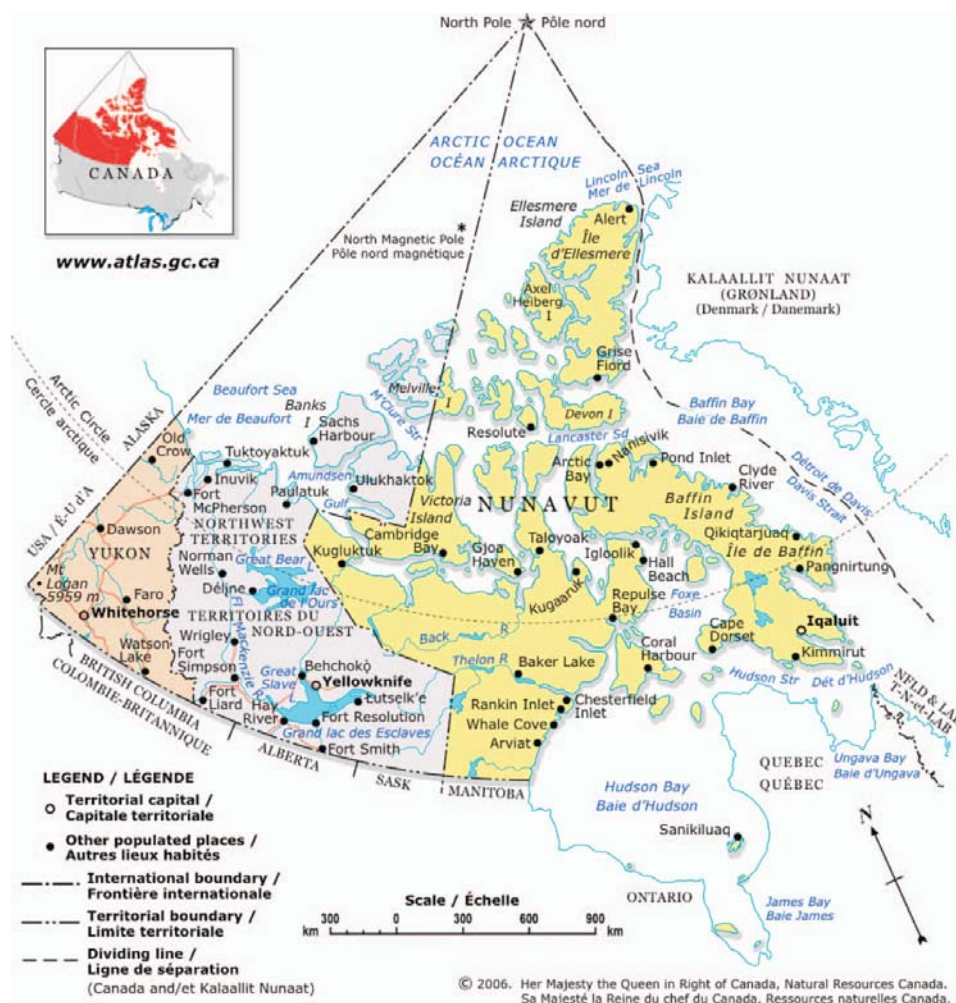
Russian territory and its continental shelf.⁵ In other words, Russia appropriated the symbolism implied by the planting of its flag to issue a public proclamation that upheld the static nature of state sovereignty in a changing world: Even as the Arctic’s increasing climate change–induced liquidity creates new incentives for incorporating it within the territories of sovereign states, state territorialization continues to rest on a “solid” foundation below the changes occurring above.

In constructing the Arctic seabed as a fixed piece of territory that naturally extends Russian soil, and by supporting the replication of a classic means of claiming territory (flag planting), Russia appeared to suggest that the Arctic was, to paraphrase the previously quoted Canadian DFAIT official, “exactly the same as the land.” However, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov subsequently explained that the goal of the mission was not imperial: “The aim of the expedition is not to stake Russia’s claim but to show that our shelf reaches to the North Pole” (CNN 2007). Lavrov thus constructed the Arctic less as a contested space than as a tangible space of opportunity, a construction that implicitly referenced both the legal specifics of the UNCLOS EEZ regime (see note 1) and a long-standing attitude that expansion into contiguous frontier regions is a component of the “natural” extension of the Russian nation (Griffiths 1991). Still other Russian officials strayed further from the conceptualization of the Arctic Ocean as essential Russian territory. Shortly after the mission, Sergei Balyasnikov of Russia’s Arctic and Antarctic Institute announced, “For me this is like planting a flag on the moon” (CNN 2007).

If the Russians seemed divided regarding whether the Arctic Ocean was claimable land, unclaimable water, or a special category of space into which states could extend their authority, the Canadian response was equally ambiguous. Even while dismissing the Russian flag planting as inappropriate, Foreign Minister MacKay announced, “The question of sovereignty of the Arctic is not a question. It’s clear. It’s our country. It’s our property. It’s our water. . . . The Arctic is Canadian” (CanWest Media 2007; see also Steinberg 2010).

In fact, both states have a history of claiming sovereignty over Arctic waters. Beginning in 1907, in the absence of an international regime defining the status of the Arctic Ocean, Canada and then Russia contended that their borders should extend to the North Pole, via their respective northern coastal waters (Horensma 1991; Dufresne 2007). Subsequently, both countries have abandoned this “sectoral” position, restricting their claims to land in their northern

Figure 2. The Territories, from *The Atlas of Canada* (Natural Resources Canada [2006]; Reproduced with the permission of Natural Resources Canada, 2010.)



waters and placing the Arctic Ocean itself within the juridical classification system codified in the Law of the Sea. Nonetheless, the statements by the two foreign ministers suggest that the idea of the Arctic as a special, claimable space, notwithstanding that its central feature is the Arctic Ocean, continues to influence national policies (Dodds 2008, 2010; Morozov 2009). Indeed, in the Canadian government's *Atlas of Canada*, the sectoral principle remains unquestioned on the map of the Territorial North (Figure 2).

Perhaps the most consistent proponent of the opposite view has been the United States, which has long asserted that the juridical status of the Arctic is akin to any other region: Land can be claimed by individual states, but water—including frozen water—is beyond state territory (Horensma 1991). The United States maintained this position in its reaction to the flag-planting episode. As an official with the U.S. Arctic Research Commission said, “[The Arctic] is an ocean

surrounded by continents, not the other way around. So I think from a government perspective, we don't get exercised by the flags being planted [on the seabed]” (Interview, June 2008).

Yet 100 years earlier, Admiral Robert Peary, Matthew Henson, and a team of rarely acknowledged Inuit claim to have planted the first American flag atop the sea ice at the North Pole. If so, the flag would have been placed not on solid, spatially fixed land but on a mathematically determined spot marked on a maze of mobile and shifting ice floes. These floes, in turn, would have swiftly carried away any physical symbol of individual hubris or national territorial claim. The futility of this flag placement from the point of view of sovereignty, and the audaciousness associated with that performed by Russia 100 years later, points to the problems inherent in asserting sovereignty in a space whose physical properties are dynamic in both space and time.

Beyond Sovereignty?

Since the age of exploration, the Arctic imaginaries embraced by metropolitan capitals of northern states have remained relatively stagnant, shaped by cultural memory and an established political ontology of space. Even today, these imaginaries are primarily defined by historical practices rather than the region's changing environment—although it is the latter that marks the emergence of a new era of economic opportunity. Yet, attempts to construct sovereign space in the Arctic have been complicated by the disparity between existing imaginaries and the emergent geophysical and social realities of the region. An alternative to these approaches could be a system of global governance at the margins of sovereign power, which would be based on a fundamental shift in Arctic imaginaries. As Mikhail Gorbachev proclaimed, “[The] Arctic is not only the Arctic Ocean. . . . It is the place where the Eurasian, North American, and Asian Pacific regions meet, where the frontiers come close to one another and the interests of states . . . cross” (cited in Keskitalo 2004, 43). It follows that such a space could be governed not as a bounded, fixed entity (the territorial state model) or its conceptual antithesis (the ostensible ungoverned space of the world ocean), but as a fluid space of crossings. Indeed, Gorbachev's speech inspired the 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, which subsequently led to the formation of the Arctic Council.

This Arctic imaginary drives the vision of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), which, in April 2009, issued a Declaration on Sovereignty (ICC 2009). Citing the complex materiality of this “vast circumpolar region of land, sea, and ice” (Article 1.1) and the many changes that the region faces due to climate change (Article 3.6), the Declaration is pointedly not a declaration of independence. The ICC's constituent members declare their continuing loyalty to predominantly non-Arctic nation-states, but they also assert that their sovereign rights must be respected and the region's multiple, dynamic spaces be collectively governed (Shadian 2006). This sentiment is echoed in the increasingly assertive voice of the European Union, which, notwithstanding its differences with the ICC's vision of the Arctic Council's powers and composition, similarly questions the strictly state-centered focus of the Arctic (e.g., Ilulissat Declaration 2008), drawing instead on the vision of the Arctic Ocean region as a commons that is best governed transnationally (Young 2009).

Although Arctic states have at times resisted this alternative construction of sovereignty, it has been

institutionalized in the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum established in 1996, in which six indigenous peoples' organizations (some of which themselves represent circumpolar constituencies) have near-equal standing with eight Arctic member states. The Arctic Council, however, has no legal authority to bind its members and its mission is limited to environmental protection and sustainable development (Bloom 1999). Indeed, many critics contend that the Arctic Council's “weak institutional structure, soft law status, and ad hoc funding system” limit its efficacy and that alternative proposals should be explored for an Arctic treaty (Koivurova 2008, 14; see also Stokke and Hønneland 2007; Rothwell 2008). Yet, notwithstanding these critics, the Arctic Council has been uniquely successful in two areas, both of which connect directly with the region's status as a space of unstable materiality and indeterminate sovereignty: fostering cooperation in science, particularly in climate change and environmental monitoring (Hoel 2007), and formalizing indigenous representation and access to high-level policymakers at the circumpolar level (E. Wilson and Øverland 2007). In this way, the Arctic Council provides the broadest forum for residents, organizations, authorities, and observers to discuss possibilities for collective governance.

In fact, the Arctic Council's efficacy is dependent on recognizing the Arctic as geophysically and sociopolitically distinct and on recognizing that these two aspects of Arctic exceptionalism are linked: “From the perspective of legitimizing the environmental protection mandate of the Council . . . it can and must present itself as safeguarding this special relationship with the still relatively undisturbed environment of the Arctic indigenous peoples” (Koivurova 2008, 25). A similar point is tacitly acknowledged by the ICC in its decision to begin the Declaration on Sovereignty with a reference to the Arctic's materiality. An Inuit elected official from Canada's northern territory of Nunavut also draws connections between rethinking the nature of Arctic space (and what it means to live in such a space) with changing constructions and assertions of sovereignty in the region: “Because we [residents of the North] use the land, that has to be one of the foremost factors for retaining sovereignty. Prime Minister Harper [says], ‘Use it or lose it.’ Well, that [is] very offensive for us, that flippant little one line. I mean, what are *we* if we're not using it?” (Interview, June 2008).

Although not specifically addressing his comment, one could imagine this elected official responding to the DFAIT official who suggested that Canada assert its sovereignty over the North by pointing to a history of

Northern peoples who “have treated the ice exactly the same as the land.” As the elected official suggests, the challenge facing Canada (and other Arctic states) is not to cast the region’s complex and dynamic environment as “exactly the same as the land” (i.e., a “used” space)—whether the pretext be floating ice or seabed—and then apply that designation to justify its incorporation into the sovereign, territorial state. Nor should the region be externalized as “unused” ocean. Rather, the Arctic region, with its unique and liminal environment, is a dynamic region where new systems of governance can be employed that push the limits of the state form and enable new possibilities for cooperation and inclusion within and across state borders. Thus, by positioning themselves as “an integral part of the very lands and waters” they use and occupy (Kleivan 1992, quoted in Tennberg 2000, 32), the Inuit, instead of directly challenging the role of distant states in the Arctic, question the scalar assumptions of sovereignty itself. With such a stance, the Inuit can be viewed as adopting a flat ontology (Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005), whereby degrees and spaces of jurisdiction are downplayed in favor of the actual interactions between the various parties who maintain specific interests in the region, a phenomenon that also can be seen in other regional cooperative arrangements, such as the proposed Nordic Saami Convention that would allow Saami to travel freely between Norway, Sweden, and Finland and intermittent proposals to allow free travel of indigenous peoples across the Bering Strait.⁶ Whereas the Inuit see themselves as primary stakeholders in such deliberations, their linkages to relevant state, corporate, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) actors are at times held as nonscalar connections to disparate entities with varying levels of power and resources. One such example of a scale-defying politics is demonstrated in the formation of the “Many Strong Voices” program, consisting of a partnership of government and NGO groups that link Arctic interests to those of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the context of rapid climate change.

At its most profound level, this assertion of a flat ontology in the Arctic challenges not just the ideal of the sovereign state with boundaries that are fixed in time and space (see Shadian forthcoming) but also the modern notion of a world that is divided into distinct societies. In this vein, Craciun (2009) suggested that circumpolarity can ground the growing calls within cultural studies for a “planetary” perspective that rethinks global society as a series of connections, a perspective echoed by Lynge (2008) in his

identification of the Arctic (and Greenland in particular) as a space of peaceful global crossings. The notion and the experience of circumpolarity can direct the planetary orientation away from intermediate (or heterotopic) spaces that simultaneously connect and divide (e.g., oceans, borders, ships, etc.) and toward an everyday space that is undergoing continual reterritorialization by those who reside there, those who are attempting to extend their reach, and those who are just passing through. It follows that if one wishes to develop new perspectives for understanding and intervening in a world of connections, where, for instance, increased carbon emissions in one country can trigger a series of climactic changes that could lead to population migrations, new trade and production patterns, and further environmental change at all scales, one could do well to look at ongoing struggles over governance in the circumpolar Arctic.

Conclusion

The Arctic has never fit well within the spatial template of the state system, which is based on a foundational, permanent distinction between enclosable land and free-flowing water. Today, climate change is bringing this divergence, which long had been at the margins of political consciousness, to the core, in Arctic states and beyond. On the one hand, climate change is opening opportunities in the Arctic, giving states new incentive to clearly define the region within the spatial ontology of the state system, whether as developable space that can be enclosed within territories or as transit space that is exempt from state power. On the other hand, these same geophysical changes that are spurring increased interest in the region are making it all the more difficult for Arctic stakeholders to designate specific points in Arctic space as either definitively “inside” or “outside” state territory.

Although this situation appears ripe for conflict, the examples of the Arctic Council and the ICC suggest that it also might present new opportunities for cooperation and for rethinking the sovereign system of mutually exclusive territorial polities. By bringing the sovereignty debate to this materially liminal zone, climate change is forcing the state system to confront its accepted suppositions about the relationship among land, state, territory, and nation. Out of this confrontation could come new experiments with implications that would span far beyond the northernmost latitudes, with meaningful consequences for the evolution of global governance.

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Notes

1. Although the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea recognizes territorial waters in which states are sovereign, these waters, like internal waters, gain this status from their proximity to land (United Nations 1982, Articles 2 and 3), and principles of state territoriality apply there in spite of their material liquidity. Likewise, although the Exclusive Economic Zone extends beyond territorial waters, this is an area in which a coastal state has sovereign rights but not *sovereignty* (United Nations 1982, Article 56).
2. Antarctica presents many of the same challenges and is another example of a space where sovereignty is modified to accommodate the unusual geophysics of a region. Nonetheless, there are a number of factors that make the Arctic different from Antarctica, including the extent to which already existing sovereign authority reaches into the Arctic, the Arctic’s nonterrestrial nature, and the fact that the Arctic is inhabited (Young 1992). Thus, we restrict our study to the Arctic.
3. We use the term *territorial imaginary* instead of the more commonly used term *geographical imaginary* to emphasize the importance of idealizations of a place’s geophysical materiality as well as its idealized cultural attributes.
4. Article 76 of UNCLOS describes the manner by which claims to the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles involve submissions by the coastal state (including a definition of the shelf as well as the data on which this is based) to the twenty-one-member Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. A subcommittee of the Commission then considers the submission to determine whether it has been defined in accordance with Article 76 and forwards its recommendations to the full Commission, the Secretary-General, and a nonvoting representative of the applicant state. If a state disagrees with the subcommittee’s recommendations it can assemble a revised or new proposal for resubmission to the Commission.
5. More than forty-five years ago, geophysicist J. T. Wilson (1963) posited that the Lomonosov Ridge, a narrow rise of continental crust stretching between Greenland and Siberia through the North Pole and on which Russia is basing its Arctic Ocean claims, was likely a displaced sliver of crust that “originally” had been a part of Eurasia, north of Scandinavia and Russia. Whether a piece

of crust, which by happenstance is located adjacent to a country’s shelf, is also attached to that shelf further problematizes the complex and underlying uncertainty of nations’ Arctic Ocean territorial claims.

6. It should be noted that such a flat ontology cannot be attributed to the Inuit as a whole. There are currently numerous and partly contradictory Inuit political projects unfolding. In Greenland, the recent vote for self-rule is seen as an initial step toward full sovereignty. The government of Greenland is thus much more in line with a Westphalian scalar ontology based on state sovereignty (see Nuttall 2008).

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