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The “Global Arctic” as a New Geopolitical Context and Method

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ABSTRACT

The term “GlobalArctic” was officially launched at the 2014 Arctic Circle Assembly (see: www.globalarctic.org). The idea for this term was not conceived in a vacuum; rather it was the outcome of a critical analysis on the state of Arctic geopolitics and security in the era of globalization with complex and deeply interdependent ecological, economic, environmental, cultural, political, and societal processes. It is important to note that global impacts in the Arctic are nothing new, since the region has historically been a part of the international system. Further, the discourse of regionalism, “the Arctic as a distinctive region”, of the 1990s is no longer sufficient and does not explain the current state of Arctic geopolitics. This article argues that the term “global Arctic” is not a discourse, but a new research and teaching method, an analytical means to study and examine significant changes both in the Arctic region and globally, as well as the current more complex geopolitical context with deeper and more obvious interdependence.

Introduction

The term “GlobalArctic” was coined during a brainstorming meeting of the Thematic Network on Geopolitics and Security in January 2014 in Copenhagen. It was then officially launched at the 2014 Arctic Circle Assembly (see: www.globalarctic.org).

Our idea for this term was not conceived in a vacuum; rather it was the outcome of a critical analysis on the state of Arctic geopolitics and security in the era of globalization with complex and deeply interdependent ecological, economic, environmental, cultural, political, and societal processes. It is important to note, as the book *Globalization and the Circumpolar North* (Heininen and Southcott 2010) points out, that global impacts in the Arctic are nothing new. Whaling, exploration, exploitation, colonialism, industrialism, militarization, long-range pollution—all global phenomena—have all affected the region for centuries. These phenomena were also identified and discussed in the book, which did not have a single definition of globalization. Thus, the book includes a short history of globalization in the Arctic.

Globalization in the Arctic

“Globalization” is a complex and loose phenomenon with several different aspects and angles, with both negative and positive connotations. Furthermore, there are both benefits and costs of globalization in the Arctic, depending upon one’s point of view. The nature and importance of globalization varies among the major (rival) International Relations (IR) theories—Realism, Liberalism, Marxist theory, and Constructivism—depending on how one defines the major categories of international actors.

The globalized Arctic includes both directions: global impacts within, and worldwide implications of the Arctic. Negative impacts, such as colonialism, climate change and the global economy, have been much discussed and emphasized in the Arctic context. There are, however, also benefits, such as recognition of the transcultural nature of Arctic indigenous peoples’ rights, the Arctic globally recognized as a knowledge-based space and knowledge as power in international negotiations on climate.

As a research topic, the global Arctic understood as flows of globalization and global impacts in the region has been discussed since the beginning of the 21st century. The first book on globalization and the Arctic, *Globalization and the Circumpolar North* was published in 2010 (Heininen and Southcott 2010). Prior to this, while it was the trigger for the book project of globalization and the Arctic, the original Arctic Human Development Report (2004) did not include a chapter on globalization and the Arctic, though it was aimed to be included. The Northern Research Forum (NRF) Open Assemblies also began to have a global approach beginning with a 2006 Assembly titled “The Borderless North”, describing the dualism of the post-Cold War Arctic as a “distinctive” region but also a part of the globe, and continued by the 2008 Assembly title “Our Ice Dependent World,” emphasizing that ice and snow also depend on altitudes, not only on latitudes (www.nrf.is). These assemblies created one of the foundations on which the annual Arctic Circle Assembly, the first real global and transdisciplinary platform, and the largest international gathering for open discussion and cooperation on Arctic affairs, was built (the first took place in October 2013 in Reykjavik, Iceland). Correspondingly, the theme was discussed in several workshops of the University of the Arctic’s and NRF’s joint Thematic Network on Geopolitics and Security in 2012–2013.¹ *The Arctic of Regions vs. the Globalized Arctic* was also the title and theme of the 2013 Arctic Yearbook which followed the Kiruna Ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council in May 2013, where the Council finally adopted a global perspective by accepting five Asian states as observers (The Kiruna Declaration 2013).

How the thematic network on Geopolitics interprets the term “Global Arctic” is still a work in progress. For us, the term is, on the one hand a new multi-dimensional and multi-functional geopolitical phenomenon based on the geographical fact that the Arctic region is a part of the globe, and that it is heavily impacted by flows and impacts of globalization. As a part of the global trend that “geoeconomics has taken over geopolitics,” Arctic natural resources have been included in the global economy, as well as claimed to guarantee energy security. This is clearly seen, even manifested, by the shift from environmental protection to economic activities in the national policies of the Arctic states, as well as by the growing interests of many non-Arctic states, among them the biggest economies of the world. Thus, it is possible to say that the future development of the “globalized” Arctic is no longer in the hands of Arctic actors alone, whether we like it or not. This is not a normative statement, as Jessica Shadian also states (this issue), and does not give

permission or a mandate to non-Arctic actors to self-identify as “Arctic stakeholders.” This is simply a research finding and a logical conclusion of the current situation.

Value of a New Research Method

On the other hand, the term is not a discourse, but a new research method, an analytical means to study and examine significant changes both in the Arctic region and globally, as well as the current more complex geopolitical context with deeper and more obvious interdependence. The term “global Arctic” is also a teaching method, though not so new, since a map of the globe was earlier used much in teaching. The discourse of regionalism, “the Arctic as a distinctive region,” of the 1990s is no longer sufficient and does not explain the current state of Arctic geopolitics.

Arctic research also includes the Arctic’s indigenous peoples, such as the Inuit and the Saami. They have “gone global” and they have globalized their home land, the Arctic region—though they do not necessarily use the same terms beginning with their participation in UN forums (such as the UN Commission of Indigenous Peoples) which has been codified in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This could be interpreted to mean “the lurking presence of ‘power-geometry’,” as Klaus Dodds warns (this issue), where indigenous peoples are redefining (state) sovereignty using terms such as “resource sovereignty,” and launching new (sub) discourses of security, such as “food security.” It would be possible to interpret this *de facto* weakening of the legitimacy of state sovereignty of their own countries in the Arctic region, even if unintended, as “globalization” is also interpreted to do.

This can be seen as a clear signal that Arctic indigenous peoples are ready and capable to depend not only on their own organizations, Arctic states, and the Arctic Council, but also using several circles of internationalization at the same time. And, together with self-determination and self-government (such as the current self-governing status of Greenland) this is one of the global trends that is becoming stronger among indigenous peoples, international cooperative regions, and other non-state actors.

In the 2010s, the Arctic has become part and parcel of global political, economic, technological, environmental and societal change. Consequently, the Arctic can be, and is, used as a laboratory or workshop for analyzing impacts of grand challenges and wicked problems. At the same time, we do not know enough about the forces and impacts going in other directions, meaning that the globalized Arctic has significant implications worldwide. These implications have much to do with the environment and climate—for example, that Arctic climate has direct impacts on the Indian monsoon—as well as economics, shipping, governance, geopolitics, security, innovations, and human capital. Furthermore, the Anthropocene, which is a very global phenomenon, is at play in the Arctic, as the “Arctic Paradox” reveals. In sum, the focus of the *GlobalArctic* Project is to draw up a more holistic picture of the world and to bring the Arctic into the studies of world/global politics, where patterns of political relations are defined broadly. Furthermore, the point is to recognize and acknowledge that multi-dimensional global relations and the larger role of non-state actors now characterize the contemporary world, as well as the Arctic region. Thus, the aim is to not only do Arctic research, but also global studies.

All in all, our Thematic Network uses the term “global Arctic” as a method and means to analyze the multi-dimensional and multi-functional state of the Arctic and its resource

geopolitics. Instead of repeating old, traditional definitions, it is sometimes necessary to redefine things, whether they are issues, phenomena, terms, approaches, or perspectives. At the same time, we recognize the danger of loose and trendy terms, and that it is necessary to explain, as precisely as possible, what new terms mean. *Globalization and the Circumpolar North* does this by recognizing economic, political and cultural aspects of globalization, and describing and analyzing them. We also do the same in the *GlobalArctic* Project, but at the same time we wanted to launch the term itself.

Endnote

1. As an anecdote, in October 2013 Lassi Heininen had an opportunity to deliver a presentation titled “Arctic geopolitics gone global” onboard an icebreaker at, as well as carrying the torch which brought the Olympic flame to, the North Pole.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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