

(Mis)Understanding the Arctic

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, APR 3 2014

Debates about Arctic politics are among the most interesting these days. As the Arctic region has grown in prominence in the policies of states and in the global governance regime, so too has the number of scholars examining Arctic issues. Like all areas of political debate, analyses of affairs in the High North are often divided along ideological lines, and this has had a profound impact on how narratives about what is going on in the Arctic have evolved. What is becoming clearer as Arctic political discourse continues to unfold is that the scholarly study of international relations is lagging behind in its application to Arctic politics.

Understanding the Arctic is difficult, primarily because of its complicated nature. When we talk about “the Arctic” we are typically discussing the geographical area north of the Arctic Circle, but the issues involved in Arctic study are far more diverse than politicians and media often present. At play in the Arctic are issues of human development, economic development, natural resources, scientific exploration, shipping and transportation, environment, national security and sovereignty, to name a few. All of these topics are worthy of intense scholarly scrutiny in their own right and recognizing the complexity of the Arctic is important to help comprehend how and why it has emerged as such a vital component of international affairs in recent years.

The problem in the Arctic narrative presented by scholars is that they all seem to be speaking different “languages”. Some are only interested in the specific variables in the issues outlined above. With specific reference to international relations, those scholars who are looking at the international political implications of the Arctic continue to disagree about how the Arctic fits in to the overarching structure of international politics. Some are grounding discussions in what they call “geopolitics” rather than international relations, which means that anything goes. International relations brings with it a historical body of thought attached to explaining how and why states act as they do in given circumstances. We can disagree on levels of analysis and determinants of state action, but at least we have some sort of core assumptions that allow us to speak the same language. Geopolitics does not and this is influencing how unusual Arctic narratives are becoming.

These disagreements have been on display more recently as Arctic scholars theorize about how Russia’s actions in Ukraine may translate into problems in the Arctic.

It is not a stretch to believe Russia will probably not be very pleased with other Arctic states over their stances on Ukraine. In an article published in the Arctic Journal I argue:

It is true that Russia recognises the vital importance of the Arctic for its future interests, but it is unlikely Russia will forgive and forget when it comes to the north. Having looked the US, the EU and NATO squarely in the eyes over Syria, Iran and now Ukraine, why would Arctic diplomacy be any different?

Continuing on this line of thought in a Globe and Mail editorial, University of Calgary Arctic expert Dr. Rob Huebert contends:

Even if the Russians decide that it is in their interests not to hinder the actions of the Arctic Council, there are very significant forces that have been unleashed from the Russian action in the Ukraine that will spill into the Arctic.

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In response to these arguments, critics have accused both Huebert and I of being short-sighted, of fear mongering and seeing the Arctic as a zero sum game. To justify their positions, critics claim that the Arctic, and particularly the Arctic Council, is immune from self-interested and conflictual politics because the region is “different”.

This is where I return to international relations and what it has to say about the Arctic. By arguing that conflict may spill over into the Arctic, I am not at all suggesting we are on the verge of war in the High North, nor do I believe that the situation in Crimea would derail all of the cooperative work done to date in the region. It is quite logical to assume, based on empirical observations of current and historical behaviour that Russia will respond to the sanctions imposed by western states. This is not to say Russia will respond in the Arctic, but rather, that they can. Why wouldn't Russia choose the Arctic as the forum for its response, especially when it currently has the comparative advantage?

The Arctic is not unique in the game of international politics, as states have demonstrated time and again that their self-interest is not limited to specific areas of the world or subject matter. If it is believed that the Arctic Council is somehow immune, this means one of two things – either that the Council is totally unimportant in the grand scheme of international politics; or that states will continue, as they have done previously, to exercise their rights to sovereignty in means that are not under the Council's purview. Institutions are themselves forums for state self-interest and while they can do very good work, they are always hindered by the realization that states will, at their convenience, abandon or subvert those institutions if it serves their interest.

It is true that the Arctic is incredibly complex but so is every other part of the world. Abandoning the perspectives provided to us by international relations would be the worst thing we could do as we seek to heighten our understandings of Arctic affairs moving forward. Arctic political scholarship is still in its infancy and we need to do a better job of building the frameworks we are using to study it. These frameworks will include a diverse array of perspectives which will allow us to appreciate Arctic complexity, but believing that state self-interest is somehow absent in the Arctic is either utopian or naïve.

About the author:

Robert W. Murray is Vice-President of Research at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and Research Fellowships at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and University of Alberta's European Union Centre for Excellence. He is the co-editor of *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* with Aidan Hehir (Palgrave, 2013), *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.