Interview - Sebastian Knecht

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Sebastian Knecht is a Fellow at the Berlin Gradate School for Transnational Studies (BTS) at Freie Universität Berlin. His research interests are in the field of institutional design and membership systems of international organizations, international relations theory, critical geopolitics, and Arctic governance and politics. He is the co-editor of*Governing Arctic Change: Global Perspectives* (2017 Palgrave Macmillan). His work on Arctic governance and politics has further been published in *Polar Record, The Polar Journal, The Arctic Yearbook* and *Cooperation and Conflict.*

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates occurring in your field?

Generally speaking, it is exciting to see that, after years in the margins, Arctic governance and politics has become an established and well-recognized field in International Relations research again – a status it may have last had in the 1980s when the Arctic was of strategic importance as a buffer zone between the Soviet Union and 'the West'. In the wake of global climate change, High North politics today receives the public and academic attention it certainly deserves, and more and more of it informs and speaks to many 'mainstream' IR debates. Put differently, international politics in the Arctic region has become a 'normalized' research domain without being a 'normal' field. In terms of its geography, climate and environment, Arctic change is very extreme and manifest, and Northern politics partly defies well-established IR concepts and theories when it comes to matters of sovereignty and security, governance, borders and territory, and power and diplomacy, just to name a few.

Two related debates that have emerged against this background are particularly of importance, I think. First, what future do we want for the Arctic and its people in a region where much of the rulebook is yet to be written, and second, how will rules, policies and institutions like the Arctic Council be designed to effectively accommodate the plethora of alternative views and interests in Northern affairs and keep up with developments in the Arctic. The recent change in government in the United States, for instance, has triggered new discussions about the prospective political order in the Arctic, with opinions diverging from gloomy doomsday scenarios for environmental and sustainability governance to cautious optimism for improving US-Russian relations in the region. In any case, the often-proclaimed 'fight over the Arctic' continues to be first and foremost a fight for the dominant vision of how the Arctic political order and its governance regime should look like. This is the issue that my co-editor Kathrin Keil and I have also sought to address in our new book *Governing Arctic Change: Global Perspectives.*

Beyond those more theoretical debates, two other topics receive increasing attention. One important issue that is on the rise is how to substantiate the knowledge base on Arctic change, and how to combine and integrate different knowledge systems and methods and then translate them into meaningful political practice and governance solutions. In terms of actual policies, the issue of Arctic commercial shipping and cruise tourism, as economic and ecological factors, is to stay on the agenda for years to come. This is following an increase in traffic numbers and new mandatory and recommendatory provisions imposed on shipping activity in the Arctic by the International Maritime Organization's Polar Code, which came into effect on 1st January 2017.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The story of how I became interested in Arctic politics is probably very similar to those of many others in my field.

From the day when Russian scientists planted a titanium flag on the seabed of the Arctic Ocean right underneath the geographical North Pole in August 2007, the scope of which was compared to the moon landing of the Apollo 11 mission in 1969, I was intrigued. Not so much by the event and the possible political consequences it might have for circumpolar relations, but what it meant despite it having little to no legal and political weight under international law. All this happened in international waters that no one could claim. I hear the same story by many of my colleagues who agree that August 2007 marked the starting point for their research and a renewed interest in Arctic politics in general.

Much of what has happened since then in the Arctic fortified my early impressions that discursive practices of posturing, symbolic gestures, narratives, framings or power projection are highly influential and widely applied means in international politics. In many cases, these means are used in an intentional and directional manner and entail considerable political consequences.

In your opinion, has rapid global warming over the past decades increased the importance of and interest in the Arctic Council, particularly around 'observer status'?

When it comes to international interest in the Arctic Council, I think there is little doubt about it. The number of new applications and admissions for observer status in the Council certainly correlates with discussions about possible political, environmental, economic and security-related consequences of Arctic change. These discussions revived after a new sea-ice record low was reported in September 2007; forecasts for the Arctic ice-sheet and permafrost have not been very promising thereafter. Fortunately, the awareness and understanding of how important the Polar Regions are for global climate processes have profoundly increased since then.

At the same time, one should not overestimate the role of observer status in Arctic Council governance currently held by twelve non-Arctic states and several non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations. It probably benefits the status-holder more than the institution in terms of political, informational and legitimacy gains, which many observers do not yet compensate for by paying their share to run the Council or contribute to Working Groups. Apparently, observer status is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for committing to the work of the Arctic Council. While the EU is still not an observer and its application for this status became increasingly politicized and has been repeatedly deferred since 2009, EU agencies and experts are regularly and actively involved in many Council projects. The same goes for many scientists from states without observer status who have in the past contributed to, for instance, the Council's Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), including researchers from Israel, Australia, Switzerland, Greece and Austria.

In turn, many admitted observers only exist on paper and are far less active. It is of relevance to pay more attention to the determinants of effective and successful science cooperation between Arctic and non-Arctic actors and across different knowledge systems, including indigenous and local knowledge, so to allow for purposeful and sustainable action in due consideration of the best available information. Observer status here can be one means to make a difference, but certainly is no end in itself.

What role do you think indigenous groups and NGOs such as the WWF play in the Arctic Council's operations and output?

Both indigenous groups and NGOs have important roles to play as agenda-, norm- and standard-setters in the Arctic Council. Indigenous peoples' local knowledge and NGO expertise are also important complementary sources of information always solicited by Arctic states. In these roles, both actors are probably no different from other stake and rights-holders in other regions and similar institutions, but the degree to which particularly indigenous peoples' organizations can leverage their status and position in the Council is significant. Six indigenous peoples' organizations, which currently represents more than 550,000 indigenous people across the eight Arctic states, hold a special status as Permanent Participants, and their right to be consulted at any stage of the negotiations puts them practically at eye-level with state delegations. Indigenous and local communities are strongly embedded in political processes and are often at the heart of Arctic policy-making, even though Arctic states' policies sometimes overlook or go against indigenous interests.

The set of eleven NGOs currently admitted to the Council is quite varied and ranges from science organizations to environmental non-governmental organizations such as the WWF. These groups can impose pressure upon the Arctic states through factual and normative claims, monitoring compliance measures, or conducting performance analyses and ratings as the WWF has just done with its Arctic Council Conservation Scorecard, which intends to compare national implementation of Arctic Council initiatives. These are considered legitimate means to contribute to the work of the Arctic Council, while other forms of protest or campaigning are strongly opposed by Arctic states and local communities. Greenpeace, for instance, is that one prominent example of an NGO that the Arctic Council does not want to be associated with due to the, at times, radical strategies and Guerilla tactics used by Greenpeace to make their voice heard, and their partially opposing interests and disrespect for indigenous traditions and lifestyles.

Your recent work has examined the participation and contribution by member states, permanent participants, and observers in the Arctic Council. What do you consider as the key reasons for the significant variation in how stakeholders make use of their right to participate?

It is a largely uncontested wisdom in stakeholder research that active participation in international environmental governance depends to a great extent on available resources like budget, personnel, and organizational capacity. That's probably a no-brainer. Much research in this field, however, has mostly investigated positive cases where available resources have indeed either hampered or fostered stakeholder participation, and hence at best suggest that resources are a necessary condition for active stakeholder participation. But in order to investigate sufficient conditions of stakeholder commitment, one has to go a step further and also consider cases where actors would have the capacity to be present and participate but do not make use of it.

I have more recently investigated this puzzle for three non-Arctic states with access to the Arctic Council – the Netherlands, Germany and South Korea – all of which perform highly differently in Arctic Council Working Groups. The findings suggest that state observers contribute more to Arctic Council Working Groups when they have set clear priorities for their Arctic policy agenda that are further well-coordinated among ministries and in consultation with relevant domestic actors. This policy coordination process is often directed and promoted by a special office like the German Arctic Office that just started its work on 1st January this year. As likely as the work of the Office will lead to more sustained and coordinated commitment from Germany in the Arctic Council, this step was long overdue. Other observers such as the Netherlands, for instance, had already established such an office many years ago, which put them in a much better position to define priorities and more effectively coordinate their contributions to Arctic Council projects.

Another important factor that kicks in is the number of outside options available to each stakeholder. Actors whose preferences overlap with those of the Arctic Council and which have little other means at their disposal to push their agenda tend to be more active in the body than actors whose policy priorities are less in accord with the work of the Arctic Council or which have outside options available, for instance through the European Union, the International Maritime Organization or through bilateral negotiations with Arctic states.

Your work has also discussed the geopolitical perspectives and spatial narratives of the Arctic by littoral states such as the US, Canada and Russia. Can you elaborate on how these geospatial lenses influence pan-Arctic collaboration?

Spatial narratives constitute political ideas about how the world should be ordered and how geographic areas can and should be governed, and as such 'serve as invisible switchmen', as Goldstein and Keohane so nicely once put it. They make those policy options possible and more likely well align with underlying spatializations, while rendering others impossible or less likely.

A closer look at the world map shows that the Arctic does not easily fit into generic definitions of a political region, and indeed it is not a natural given that states adjacent to an Ocean almost four times the size of the European Union and so diverse in its geography and environment should work together for its common management. For most of the 20th Century, they haven't but the Arctic was as divided as most of the rest of the world, with an 'Icy Curtain' establishing a rather natural prolongation of the 'Iron Curtain' that divided Europe in the post-1945 era. Compared to

Europe, though, it is hard to identify much of a common history and identity for the entire Arctic region that could form the basis for regional cooperation and institution building.

So when Gorbachev in his famous Murmansk speech in October 1987 spoke about making the Arctic a 'genuine zone of peace and fruitful cooperation', this was a political shift that necessitated a change in the perception of space, distance and vicinity first in order to create a sense for common challenges in what was back then a politically fragmented area. It was ultimately about giving up a certain spatial narrative, one of separation, outward demarcation and sector politics, and replacing it with another one that framed the Arctic as an 'open' space for joint governance. This new framing ultimately helped to create the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) in 1991 and five years later the Arctic Council. It has since then provided an impetus also for region-wide, legally binding agreements for the governance of a common space over which Arctic states seek common responsibility and stewardship.

At the moment, we witness a new period of spatial scripting; one that stresses mutual dependencies and inter-linkages between Arctic developments and global market, political, climate and environment processes. The narrative of a 'regional(ized) Arctic' is more and more contested by a counter-narrative of a 'global(ized) Arctic', which empowers a partly new and different set of actors, institutions, mechanisms and policy solutions. This new period is less concerned with overcoming territorial partitioning and intra-regional boundary-making than it is about the appropriate and effective division of political responsibility, competence and authority over Arctic changes across local, national, regional and international levels of governance.

In your 2012 article "US-Russian Arctic Strategies: Spatializing Governance and Governing Space", you state it is more concerning that third actors like China and the EU narrate the Arctic as a global commons so to validate their claims for political and economic involvement. Does this still hold true for 2017?

The proposal to treat the Arctic as a common heritage of mankind is probably of less importance nowadays than it was in 2012. At that time, non-Arctic states and also the EU promoted the idea of the whole world being an Arctic stakeholder for several years. These attempts at undermining or even eroding the dominant political order with the Arctic states being in a central position to address many of the challenges in the region have by and large failed. Both actors today acknowledge and stress the legitimate rights of the Arctic states under international law.

The Obama administration recently invoked a 1953 law that blocks the sale of new offshore drilling rights in most of the US Arctic, just before President Trump took office. Do you think this will alter the already complex governance of the Arctic, and are there potential global ramifications from this?

Obama's decision on 20th December 2016 to use a provision in the 1953 Outer Continental Shelf Land Act, which imposed a moratorium on oil and gas exploration in the US continental shelf of the Chukchi Sea and most of the Beaufort Sea, should probably be regarded as symbolic politics and symbolic politics only. There has been no offshore drilling in these areas so far and it is highly questionable whether it could have become profitable at some point in the next decades. It was more of a finger wag to Obama's successor in office, an outspoken skeptic to the idea of anthropogenic climate change, and meant to freeze the status quo of an untouched continental shelf in US parts of the Arctic. The decision neither makes Arctic governance more complex nor should any serious ramifications for climate and resource politics in the Arctic or beyond be expected. The moratorium does not directly impact the global oil and gas market, but won't help much to curb CO2 emissions from fossil fuels either.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations, particularly those interested in Arctic geopolitics?

I think it is important to remain critical towards established scholarship and continue to challenge claims to common sense and truth. The study of (Arctic) geopolitics is a burgeoning field, though to me it is in need of innovation, new concepts and theories, methodological approaches and empirical assessments. With regard to the Arctic case in particular, much of what has been written about may not be worth reading. But much of what would be worth reading has not yet been written about.

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This interview was conducted by Evangelina Moisi. Evangelina is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.