

## **Between Classical and Critical Geopolitics in a Changing Arctic**

### **Abstract**

Puzzled by how geographical changes in the Arctic might cause changes in state behavior the authors of this article have been inspired to return to the roots of geopolitical reasoning. By combining insights from the intellectual roots of the geopolitical tradition with empirical data on geographical changes as well as policy changes in the Arctic today, we investigate the degree to which geopolitics, in the sense of geography influencing politics, is still a useful approach in the discipline of International Relations (IR). In limiting our primary focus to the state level, and investigating the period since the turn of the millennium, this article seeks to develop new knowledge concerning if, how, and to what extent geography matters in international politics. Our empirical investigation indicates that geographical changes in the Arctic have indeed had an effect on power relations among several states. Overall, this article shows that geography is an important factor in IR in the sense of enabling or empowering state actors. However, while it appears that physical geography is a possible factor in the cases analyzed to explain changes in identified power potentials, it does not always account for these changes on its own. Economic, political, legal, and historical factors also play a role in the observed power shifts.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Arctic, IR theory

## **INTRODUCTION**

During the last few decades, few innovative studies have been conducted within what could be labeled the ‘classical geopolitical’ tradition, which in its original version proposes that states’ foreign policies are heavily influenced, if not determined, by their physical geography. In contrast, what has come to be called the ‘critical geopolitical’ tradition has flourished, presenting several innovative studies questioning issues such as static conceptions of space, state centrality, the lack of normative considerations in classical approaches, and the role of subjectivity in world affairs (Sheehan, 2005, p. 145; Dodds, Kuus, & Sharp, 2013, pp. 6-7; Guzzini, 2012). At its core, critical geopolitics argues that space is narrated and that geography is not ‘objective’ but a social construction; an understanding providing a very different analytical point of departure for a state’s standing in world affairs, especially concerning the sources and variability of state power. Nevertheless, classical geopolitical reasoning continues to be influential:

Despite the criticism, the geopolitical approach has been extremely influential for half a century[...] All the post 1945 [U.S.] presidents had an overarching vision of the U.S. national security that was explicitly geopolitical and directly traceable to Mackinder’s heartland thesis (Sheehan, 2005).

However, while being popular in the corridors of power, such an observation does certainly not render the classical geopolitical assumptions right. But given its popularity, and in spite of insightful criticism by critical geopolitics, this article asks the question if there are cases in world politics where elements of the classical reasoning might have merit. These could be cases illustrating that ideas from the traditional approach also have explanatory power today, even when taking into account insights and critique from critical geopolitics.

One of the challenges of testing theories about how geography and politics relate to one another is that, aside from sudden natural disasters and direct and indirect human intervention, physical geography tends to change very slowly over time. Yet the accelerating effects of climate change in the Arctic over the last decades have provided an unusual instance in which geographical realities have changed faster than what is usually thought of. The rapidly shrinking Arctic sea ice, the new potential of trans-Arctic shipping routes, and competition over living and non-living Arctic resources create a rare opportunity to address how changes in Arctic geography interact with political institutions in terms of affecting the relative power of states and their ability to achieve their political goals and establish or change norms and institutions.

Triggered by observing how physical changes in the Arctic take place in parallel with political developments in the same region, this article investigate whether the classical roots of geopolitics could help identifying any relationship between these two developments (Jørgensen, 2010, p. 79, 173, 213; Sidaway, Mamadouh, & Power 2013; Sheehan, 2005, p. 145; Chapman, 2011; Brutschin & Schubert, 2016). With changes such as ocean warming, ocean acidification, and rapidly shrinking sea ice, the Arctic Ocean is at present not only becoming navigable during the summer season but also facilitates increased human activity in a broad range of areas stretching from tourism and research to the utilization of living and non-living natural resources such as fisheries and oil and gas resources (Haug et al., 2017; Buixadé Farré et al., 2014; Armstrong, 2015). Climate change is therefore not only reshaping the physical geographies of the North but also its commercial, political, and scientific relevance and importance. The Arctic is hence suitable to our investigation, which seeks to identify a potential interplay between geography and politics, or in other words, a potential geographical component of practical international relations. This is an approach that also finds parallels in recent critique raised by critical theorist, drawing attention to how critical geopolitics might have ‘over-invested [in] the representational, cultural and the interpretive dimensions of geopolitics without paying attention to the important insights that a “more-than-human” approach brings to the fore’ (Squire, 2015, p. 140). This article thus aims to respond to the need to engage materialist approaches in current geopolitical analysis and thus confronts the currently still inadequate inclusion of the ‘materialist turn’ in the recent debate about the reshaping of critical geopolitics. Concretely, we respond to the need to look into the ‘intra-actions’ between physical and social forces in the form of a ‘material discursive’ approach to geopolitics or a geopolitical analysis of power that examines ‘material discursive intra-actions.’ Or very short: We ‘go material’ (Squire, 2015, pp. 139-142).

In limiting our primary focus to the state level and investigating only the period since the turn of the millennium, this article seeks to develop new knowledge concerning if, how, and to what extent geography matters in international politics. We ask whether changes in physical geography can fully or partly explain changes in states’ power potential, understood as the states’ ability to reach political outcomes, influence (non-)decisions - that is upholding the status quo - or mold power structures, norms, and rules in international relations.

In answering this question, the paper presents four cases related to international relations in the Arctic. Based on empirical evidence from these cases, the paper investigates whether some actors are either gaining or losing influence as a consequence of climatic and geographical

changes in the Arctic. From this investigation, we will conclude by discussing whether and how a unique geographic component actually matters or not in international relations.

### **From Classical to Critical Geopolitics**

An original definition of the word ‘geopolitics’ is ‘the study of the influence of geographical factors on state behavior’, or, in other words, how international political behavior may be understood, explained, or predicted by the application of geographic variables, such as location, size, topography, climate, distribution of natural resources and population, or the global distribution of sea and land (Griffiths, O’Callaghan, & Roach, 2008, p. 123; Evans & Newnham, 1998, pp. 197-198).

While dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and having intellectual roots in both social Darwinism and European imperialist thinking of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term ‘geopolitics’ was for a long time particularly tainted by pseudo-scientific attempts by Nazi-Germany’s chief geographer Karl Haushofer to justify the imperialistic and aggressive posture of the Third Reich (Evans & Newnham, 1998, p. 198; Dodds et al., 2013, p. 1; Painter & Jeffrey, 2009, p. 202). The problematic ideological heritage has, in addition to the scientific shortcomings, hampered political theorists in applying insight from the classical tradition (Hochberg & Sloan, 2017, pp. 575-581). This article is an attempt to identify ways how physical, geographical factors could be identified to potentially influence policy processes, while not taking a deterministic view or falling in the ‘trap of object fetishism’ (Squire, 2015, p. 149).

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of the tenets of classical geopolitics and positivism in social sciences were - as mentioned earlier - challenged by critical thinkers. The turn was in many respects a parallel to the ‘post-positivist’ or ‘constructivist turn’ in (particularly European) IR theory (Dalby, 1991; Smith, 2000; Wæver, 2000). According to the critical geopolitical approach, space is essentially narrated and thus highly contextual and dependent on social constructions, discourses, and moldable identities (Dalby, 1991; Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2006). With roots in constructivism, critical theory, poststructuralist traditions, feminism, and postcolonial critique, critical geopolitics today has become ‘an integral part of mainstream human geography’ where it has broadened the understanding of spatiality and subjectivity in world affairs (Dodds et al., 2013, p. 7, 10). Also in the current Arctic context, observations of how geography matters in political discourses should receive greater attention, such as how

changes of ice extent and the mapping of a fluctuating ice edge are interlinked with state politics in countries like Norway and Canada (Steinberg & Kristoffersen, 2017).

The term ‘geopolitics’ is often attributed to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (1864-1922). Kjellén introduced the term in 1899 in an article in *Ymer*, a Swedish geographical journal, and later defined it in a 1905 article in the German *Geographische Zeitschrift* (Kjellén, 1899, p. 283). According to Kjellén, geopolitics is the study of how the location of a state (which was itself understood as a ‘geographical organism’ and spatial phenomenon) vis-à-vis other states, plus how that same state’s territorial form, size, and other geographical factors might determine its behavior. A state’s placement on the world map hence mattered. This idea can be viewed as being almost self-evident, for example in the way a land-locked state ‘naturally’ has different foreign policy priorities compared to those of an insular state (Griffiths et al., 2008, pp.123-124). Yet, the implications of this statement may have a greater reach because of the determinism it potentially implies, as major issues in world politics simply could be explained by looking at the map. Such issues include the repeatedly isolationist tendencies within U.S. foreign policy, which have been explained by its ‘remote’ and sheltered geographical placement between two oceans to the West and East. In a similar way, one could argue that the complicated relationship between Russia and Western Europe makes sense, given the lack of natural geographical borders, such as ocean or mountains, which would give the Russia natural protection against its European neighbors (Griffiths et al., 2008, pp.124-125).

Geopolitical reasoning with assumptions and hypotheses on how geography is connected to issues of state power has been applied to varying degrees during the last century (Sheehan, 2005, pp. 21-25; Agnew, 2006). A common feature of geopolitical research has been to base hypotheses on counterfactual reasoning where evidence is drawn from making comparisons to other more or less similar cases. Applying counterfactual reasoning is an appropriate and relevant method, and it is widely used in the social sciences as well as in related disciplines like history (Tetlock & Belkin, 1996). Yet while ‘geopolitical hypotheses’ might be supported or weakened by counterfactual reasoning and comparisons, the nature of such claims is often hard to test empirically. It is simply difficult to manipulate geography – that is, to move mountain ranges, rivers, or oceans. Referring to the abovementioned example of U.S. isolationism, actually testing out whether the U.S. would behave differently if it were connected to the Eurasian mainland is hard to verify.

Yet the Arctic *is* indeed changing geographically due to climate change, and resulting in the emergence of a new, open ocean more quickly than most observers had imagined (AMAP, 2017). These rapid geographical changes offer a unique ‘test laboratory’ hardly ever available to political scientists. Instead of counterfactual reasoning, the real changes occurring to the Arctic’s physical geography make an investigation of the relationship between state policy, power structures, and geographical changes possible. It is worth specifying that while geography should not be seen as a deterministic factor in the sense of leaving out human reasoning, cultural practice, or the value of political decision making, geographical factors might still perform limiting or enabling functions in certain political processes. In focusing on how the changing geography of the Arctic interacts with institutional features of Arctic politics, and how such changes are connected to shifts in the power potential of the Arctic states, this article sketches some key changes in Arctic geographical conditions and puts forward four cases of Arctic politics worthy of closer scrutiny.

### **Political Consequences of Emerging Arctic Geographies**

During the last two decades, the Arctic has gone through a profound transformation due to the rapidly shrinking sea ice of the Arctic Ocean. The changes have had significant implications for Arctic states, particularly in the way the Arctic Ocean has become increasingly navigable for shipping activities. Inter-ocean traffic between the Pacific and the Atlantic along the Northern Sea Route (NSR) following Russia’s northern coast has increased over the last years, even though a dip in the most recent years has been experienced (see CHNL Information Office, “NSR Transit Statistics”, accessible at [http://www.arctic-lio.com/nsr\\_transits](http://www.arctic-lio.com/nsr_transits)). . This is still in no comparison to the established routes through the Suez and Panama Canals, which experience around 17,000 and 13,000 transits per year, respectively (see Suez Canal Authority. accessible at [www.suezcanal.gov.eg](http://www.suezcanal.gov.eg), and Panama Canal Authority, accessible at [www.pancanal.com](http://www.pancanal.com)). However, destination Arctic shipping – from one specific place in the Arctic to destinations farther south or vice versa – is also on the rise enhancing the importance of ice-free waters. For example, Russia’s first offshore oil field in the Arctic, the Prirazlomnoye field, went into production in December 2013 (Staalesen, 2014), and the first cargo of liquefied natural gas (LNG) left the large onshore Yamal LNG project in December 2017 (Total, 2017), resulting in significantly more shipping activity in the region. Export from these and other fields in the Russian Arctic are assumed to benefit from enhanced NSR sailing conditions. Also, Norway

has large ongoing exploration and production activities in the Barents Sea, including the Goliat oil field and the Snøhvit gas field, and a couple of shipments of LNG from Snøhvit have already sailed along the NSR to Japan. In 2017 a record number (92) of new oil exploration blocks in the Barents Sea were announced by the Norwegian government, a development that was paralleled with an all-time high in the number of planned exploration wells to be drilled in the Barents Sea in one year (Reuters, 2017; Offshore Energy Today, 2017). Attention should also be paid to how changes in water temperatures potentially impact the distribution of living marine resources, such as fish stocks. Such changes are expected to have led species and their prey to migrate northwards due to warmer temperatures (Haug et al., 2017; Bouchard et al., 2017; Christiansen, Mecklenburg, & Karamushko, 2014). For example, in late 2013 mackerel was observed outside Longyearbyen, Svalbard, for the first time (Berge et al., 2015).

In following the purpose of this paper, we ask what are the political consequences of these geographic changes? Are some actors empowered by these geographical changes while others are losing influence? Do these changes impact different actors' ability to set the agenda in Arctic politics? Are there structural changes taking place with respect to who defines the rules and norms, written and unwritten, in the international politics of the Arctic? To answer these questions, four cases have been selected. In delineating our timeframe from the first years after the turn of the millennium until today, we isolate a critical period (15-20 years), during which substantial changes took place in Arctic geography and politics. In the middle of this period, it became clear that the melting of Arctic sea ice accelerated much faster than what was anticipated just a few years before. In particular, it became obvious that the predictions and model runs set by the fourth IPCC report of 2007 did not fit the empirical evidence gathered around the same time it was published. For example, while the most radical IPCC model anticipated a loss in September sea ice of 5.4% per decade (the predicted average was only 2.5%), the actual decline during the modelled time frame (from 1953 to 2006) was 7.8% (NSIDC, 2007).

#### **Four cases in a Changing Arctic**

Due to the climatic and geographical changes occurring in the Arctic region, we have identified four cases and questions worth scrutinizing. In each case, we compare the situation in the early 2000s with the last few years in the 2010s. In this context 'empowering' implies whether changes in the states' *power potential* can be derived from geographical changes that follow

from a warmer climate in the Arctic. Power potential, or political clout, will be understood as having the ability to perform as an active Arctic player and being perceived as such. This includes having the ability to reach preferred political outcomes, to put issues on the agenda and to keep issues off the agenda. It further refers to the ability to influence norm development, either in written (legal) or unwritten form.

Power is understood as a relational, multifaceted concept explored by scholars such as Robert A. Dahl (1957), Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962), and Steve Lukes (1974). The concept hence contains both its objective measurable dimension - A gets B to do something B would otherwise not have done - as well as a deeper, structural understanding which includes issues such as the ability to create unwritten norms. Finally, the analysis will also be attentive to inasmuch identified changes in political clout are unrelated to a changing geography or, in other words, are due to factors not related to physical geography.

*Empowerment of coastal states:* One deciding feature of physical geography that may have an effect on power structures in an opening Arctic region with receding sea ice is if a state has coastlines at the Arctic Ocean and its adjacent seas. We thus ask: Have the “Arctic Five” (A5), the five coastal Arctic states Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Norway, Russia, and the U.S., been empowered due to their direct access to the Arctic Ocean, in contrast to the three Arctic states with no direct Arctic Ocean coast (Finland, Iceland, and Sweden)?

*Differing empowerment due to coastal typology:* The different characteristics of coastlines are a further factor that may influence Arctic states’ power potential, for example if coastlines open up to the large sea areas of the Nordic region such as the Barents, Greenland, and Norwegian Sea or if coasts are rather along more sheltered water areas like the Baltic Sea. Accordingly, we ask: Is there empirical evidence that Denmark/Greenland, Norway, and Iceland, which possess major exposed coasts, have been empowered in contrast to Finland and Sweden, states with more sheltered coasts?

*Role of marine passages and shipping:* Physical geographical features may matter for the influence on shipping activities in the North, for example if shipping routes along a country’s coast are meandering through a widely ramified archipelago (like in Canada) or if there is mostly a wide open ocean beyond the coastline (like in Russia). Thus, is it likely that Russia has been empowered as an Arctic shipping country in contrast to Canada, given their different geography?



*The European Arctic and the European Union:* Location on the map may be decisive for shifts in power relations in entire regions such as Europe and concerning the relationships between single countries and larger blocs of states, such as the European Union. In our final case we thus ask: Is the EU losing influence in the Arctic in comparison with the European Arctic states (Denmark/Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland), as the Arctic region has risen in political importance?

### **Case 1: Empowerment of coastal states**

In this case we ask if the Arctic Five (A5) have been empowered due to their direct access to the Arctic Ocean, unlike the three Arctic states with no Arctic Ocean coast. The case for this inquiry appears especially strong in the sense of economically empowering Arctic coastal states, given that most of the resources newly accessible due to the changing climate are expected to be offshore or marine resources. The economic domain is important to include also in geopolitical writings and is an area that researchers have pointed out has been lacking in many analysis conducted both by classically oriented as well as critical geopolitical scholars (Brutschin & Schubert, 2016, p. 150). According to the 2008 U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the Arctic is expected to hold about 22% of the world's undiscovered conventional oil and natural gas resources, which amounts to about 30% of the world's undiscovered natural gas, 13% of the world's undiscovered oil, and 20% of the world's undiscovered natural gas liquids (NGL). Of these resources, 84% are expected to be offshore and located mostly in shallower waters within the jurisdiction of the Arctic coastal states (Bird et al., 2008; Gautier et al., 2009, pp. 1175-1177).

With less sea ice, these resources are expected to become easier to access, especially on the large, shallow shelf off northern Russia but also potentially in the waters north of Alaska's coasts and in Greenlandic waters (Pumphrey, 2015, p. 266; Bertelsen, Justinussen, & Smith, 2015, p. 22; Byers, 2013, pp. 2-3). As outlined above, shipping activities especially along Russia's northern coast are expected to grow. New inter-ocean trade corridors in combination with enhanced destination shipping activities are expected to be a source of new economic value. Having a coastline bordering the Arctic Ocean thus matters with respect to benefitting the most from these developments.

However, less ice in the Arctic does not automatically make new international trade routes commercially interesting. Goods to be traded with economic benefit between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans need to be available, as well as markets where such goods are in demand. Infrastructure along the Arctic routes—ports, logistical support, and search and rescue facilities—have to be sufficiently developed. Against the backdrop of the prevailing harsh environmental and weather conditions, the viability and seasonality concerns of the shipping industry need to be addressed (Buixadé Farré et al., 2014; Humpert & Raspotnik, 2012; Lasserre & Pelletier, 2011). Nevertheless, the decreasing sea ice could be viewed as the impetus – assuming other necessary conditions as outlined above are in place – for increasing the economic clout of Arctic coastal states.

The most significant increase in shipping activity is within destination and intra-Arctic shipping, which is especially visible in the many applications for the usage of the waters of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). In 2017, 664 permits were issued by The Northern Sea Route Administration, most of which will not be full transits but rather depart from one specific place in the Arctic to destinations further south or vice versa, or intra-Arctic transit between Russian ports (see The Northern Sea Route Administration, *Permissions for navigation on the water area of the Northern sea route*, available at: [http://www.nsr.ru/en/rassmotrenie\\_zayavleniy/perechen\\_zayavlenii.html?year=2017](http://www.nsr.ru/en/rassmotrenie_zayavleniy/perechen_zayavlenii.html?year=2017)).

Further, most of the permits are for Russian-flagged ships, indicating increasing shipping opportunities first and foremost for the Russian economy. On the other hand, even non-coastal states can benefit from increasing Arctic shipping activity. For example, Finland capitalizes on expanded NSR opportunities through its advanced shipbuilding industry, especially because of its expertise in terms of ice-strengthened ships and icebreaker technology.

Fish stocks and their prey could see changes in distribution and abundance. The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) has conducted a study on the effect of climate change on the distribution and abundance of marine species. The study found that changes in the distribution and abundance of fish are happening, most prominently in the OSPAR (name derived from conventions held in Oslo 1972 and Paris 1974) regions I and II, that is the Arctic and greater North Sea areas of the North-East Atlantic. These changes manifest themselves in the form of northward shifts and in the deepening of distribution (Tasker, 2008). While a movement into the central Arctic Ocean, and thus into international waters, would benefit not only coastal states – since on the high seas the principle of the ‘freedom of the seas’ (Art. 78 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea - UNCLOS) applies – few species are in

fact likely to move that far north due to depth and temperature reasons (Hollowed, Planque, & Loeng, 2013; Haug et al. 2017; Wegge, 2015; Wegge, Geoffroy, & Berge, 2017). The deep central Arctic Ocean does not provide the right conditions for groundfish like cod and haddock in terms of water temperatures, bottom topography, and available spawning grounds. Rather, cod and haddock are linked to shallow areas of the continental shelf to find their prey, such as in the Barents and North Sea, which are almost exclusively confined to sea areas within the coastal states' exclusive economic zones (EEZ) (Hoel, 2014; Loeng, 2013; Christiansen, 2017; Bouchard et al., 2017). In these areas, the Arctic coastal states have the exclusive right of managing fishing.

There is also evidence in the political realm that the changing geography of the Arctic has empowered Arctic coastal states. The U.S. in particular has until the last few years been viewed as a fairly inactive Arctic player while under the Obama years it displayed a more active and attentive role towards Arctic issues, even though also George Bush in his last weeks in office 2009 issued the first Arctic strategy (NSPD-66) (The White House, 2009). The U.S. even appears to have made the biggest steps among the Arctic states in terms of having Arctic issues higher up on its agenda and devoting attention and resources towards Arctic issues. For example, at the 2011 Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Nuuk, Greenland, a U.S. Secretary of State attended for the first time. At the subsequent meeting in Kiruna, Sweden, in 2013 the U.S. was again represented by the Secretary of State, as was the case in the 2017 meeting with Rex Tillerson in Fairbanks, Alaska. Additionally, during the Obama years, the number of staff in the U.S. Administration devoted to Arctic issues increased from three to around 20 people. In February 2014, a Special Representative for the Arctic Region was appointed to advance American interests in the Arctic Region (Kerry, 2014).

In May 2013, the White House published its revised 'National Strategy for the Arctic Region' (President of the United States of America, 2013), updating the 2009 National/Homeland Security Directive on 'Arctic Region Policy' (The White House, 2009). Even single departments have developed Arctic documents, even though this could also indicate a lack of coordination. The U.S. Coast Guard (2013) and the U.S. Department of Defense (2013) published their Arctic Strategies, updated with a revised version in February 2017, just days after Trump taking office.

Finally, institutionally the A5 as an ad hoc forum has been able to act, to some degree, as an active Arctic political player. The formation has succeeded in putting some issues on political agendas while keeping others off. In May 2008, the foreign ministers of the A5 met in Ilulissat,

Greenland, which resulted in the adoption of the Ilulissat Declaration (Arctic Five, 2008). This Declaration emphasizes the A5's commitment to the current legal framework in the Arctic, predominantly represented by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Arctic Council. Importantly, the document put the issue of 'a new comprehensive international legal regime to govern the Arctic Ocean', like an overarching Arctic treaty, off the agenda. Despite a follow-up event in Chelsea, Canada in 2010, no more A5 meetings on the foreign minister level have happened since then, probably as a reaction to the criticism of the exclusive character of the events (Ingimundarson, 2010, p. 19). Nevertheless, as Koivurova (2010, p. 151) observes:

The Ilulissat declaration seems to outline an agenda for cooperation between the littoral states of the Arctic Ocean over high level ocean policy issues, potentially challenging the Arctic Council with its eight members, broad focus and soft work on environmental protection and sustainable development.

Criticism of the A5 format by the other Arctic states (Petersen, 2009, p. 51) indicates its importance and relevance, in the sense that it is indeed seen as a potentially powerful institution. Iceland's role is especially interesting. On the one hand, Iceland heavily criticized the exclusive A5 meetings, but on the other hand, the country has shown increasing attempts to be recognized as an Arctic coastal state itself and extend the A5 to an A6 (Alþingi, 2011; Arctic Portal, 2011; Dodds & Ingimundarson, 2012), thereby indicating the political clout and power potential that it associates with this forum.

Although no more high level A5 meetings have taken place since 2010, such meetings have continued on a lower and more issue-specific level. Since 2010, diplomats, officials, and scientific experts from the A5 have been negotiating the possibility of an interim agreement for regulating commercial fishing activities in the central Arctic Ocean. This was an initiative influenced by negative experiences from other high seas areas, such as the Bering Sea where unregulated pollock fisheries in the 1980s and 1990s nearly depleted the entire fish stock (Byers, 2013, pp. 178-179). At a meeting in Nuuk in February 2014, A5 delegates agreed on such interim measures, ending with a non-binding declaration, signed in Oslo in 2015 by the same five countries, to prevent unregulated fishing in the High Seas of the Central Arctic Ocean (Arctic Five, 2014, 2015). As follow-up to the 2015 agreement, in November 2017 a deal has been reached among the A5 as well as Iceland, China, South Korea, Japan, and the European Union to ban commercial fishing in international Arctic waters (Arctic Now, 2017; Hoel, 2017).

This is an agreement with an initial term of 16 years, ‘after which it will automatically be extended every five years unless a country objects or until science-based fisheries quotas and rules are put in place’ (Barents Observer, 2017). This example demonstrates that the A5 are taking the initiative in establishing rules and norms for the regulation of fishing in the central Arctic Ocean before inviting other non-A5 countries into the negotiations towards a binding agreement (Wegge, 2015; Wegge et al., 2017). In this case, the A5 explicitly justified their competency in pushing forward with this initiative through their geographical position as coastal states whose exclusive economic zones border the Arctic high seas areas (Arctic Five, 2014). Or as Hoel (2014) put it, ‘[t]he five coastal states demonstrate to themselves and others that a coastal state responsibility is to act in advance of future challenges to promote the desired outcomes.’

### **Case 2: Differing empowerment due to coastal typology**

The Nordic countries encompass Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kingdom of Denmark, which consists of mainland Denmark and the autonomously-administered entities Greenland and Faroe Islands. The countries have many similarities, even though important differences exist, for example, with respect to topography, demography, language, military alliance policy, and relationships to the EU. Close Nordic cooperation has been a characteristic feature of the region since the end of the Second World War. The Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM), founded in 1971, is the most important formal arena for inter-Nordic governmental cooperation, even though informal and bilateral cooperation initiatives flourish. In this particular case study the developments within the NCM organization is in focus. This case demonstrates how the increased interest in the changing Arctic region over the last decades affected the political dynamics in the Nordic context; a development that is less known outside the Nordic context.

At the turn of the millennium, the NCM was reformed to adapt to the new post-Cold War political environment, emphasizing the importance of external cooperation (Larsen, 1998, pp. 16-18). Nevertheless, in spite of the reform process, the NCM was also viewed as losing importance, particularly as Sweden and Finland in 1995 joined Denmark in becoming EU members, increasing the focus on the European arena at the cost of Nordic cooperation (Heidar, 2004, pp. 21-22; Norden, 2014a; Larsen, 1998, p. 215). The reformed NCM engaged in new areas of external cooperation at the dawn of the new millennium, as the Baltic Sea region,

Belorussia, and the Barents region in particular became new priorities. During this period, 'Arctic issues' also became an area of interest within the 'Adjacent Areas policy'. At the same time, there can be no doubt that the focus directed south- and eastwards were by far the most important (Heidar, 2004; Norden, 2014a; Olesen, 2011; Hagemann, 2014, p. 30).

The period from the late 1990s until 2007 has been interpreted as a period of stagnation in the Nordic Council (Olesen, 2011, pp. 32-33). The NCM's budget declined relative to the Nordic states' growth in GDP. At the same time, the EU gained importance for the Nordic countries, a development that was particularly felt by EU-outsiders Norway and Iceland (Olesen, 2011, p. 33). When scrutinizing the specific Arctic interest during this period, one finds that circumpolar Arctic issues only played a minor role in the NCM before the turn of the millennium (Stokke, 2007; Norden, 2009).

Towards the end of the 2000s, the dynamic in the NCM changed. In Thorsten B. Olesen's report on historical trends in EU, EEA, and Nordic cooperation, he argues that the NCM in fact experienced a 'Nordic renaissance' between 2007 and 2011 (2011, pp. 27-28). On the one hand, financial unrest hit the EU hard in 2008/9, while the Nordic countries, with the temporary exception of Iceland, largely managed to stay out of the worst downturns. At the same time, important 'pan-Nordic' initiatives were also launched, lifting the NCM to become a more politically relevant institution, now discussing matters of core national interest and 'high politics' in the Nordic region. The Stoltenberg report on Nordic cooperation on foreign and security politics presented to the Nordic Foreign Ministers in February 2009 stands out as the most important and high-level document in the NCM context. The report was written at the request of Nordic foreign ministers, and the day of its presentation has been characterized as a 'red-letter day in the history of Nordic co-operation' according to NCM reports (Archer, 2010, pp. 48-49; Norden, 2010). Several proposals from the Stoltenberg report materialized, for example through the five Nordic nations' establishment of NORDEFECO in 2009, a new formal defense cooperation structure, which was unthinkable in the heyday of the strong EU orientation by Nordic states only a few years earlier (NORDEFECO, 2014). The Stoltenberg Report, and subsequently NORDEFECO, with its strong focus on Arctic and maritime issues, has been argued to fit primarily Norwegian security interests and strengthened the Norwegian ability to set the agenda in the NCM (Olesen, 2011, p. 32).

The former marginalization of Norway and Iceland in the NCM was hence changing. The developments in the Arctic had also been acknowledged in the Stoltenberg report, increasing the region's importance, and several new concerns pertaining to northern issues were displayed:

The Nordic countries are responsible for the management of large sea areas. Climate change and melting of the sea ice will open the way for considerable activity in these areas, including new shipping routes through Arctic waters to the Pacific Ocean. This means that Nordic cooperation in the northern seas and the Arctic is highly relevant (Stoltenberg report, p.6).

The report went on to suggest that a Nordic maritime response force, with expertise on Arctic conditions, should be set up, in addition to the establishment of a Nordic amphibious unit capable of operations in the Arctic.

More attention was thus gradually paid to the large sea areas in the Nordic region, thereby putting the concerns of the three western Nordic states higher on the agenda. With the American forces leaving Keflavik airbase in Iceland in 2006, and provoking episodes in which Russian warplanes encircled, and also intruded into, Icelandic airspace in 2008, the relevance of possessing military capabilities in the Nordic maritime region was also demonstrated in practice (Iceland Review, 2008). At the request of the Icelandic prime minister, NATO began armed air-policing missions in the airspace above Iceland, a mission for which Norway and Denmark play a key role, while Sweden and Finland remain unarmed, while occasionally joining the NATO mission (NATO, 2014).

This new focus on the Arctic was also reflected in the Nordic cooperation and beyond, where then foreign minister of Norway, Jonas Gahr Støre, played a key role (Olesen, 2011, p.31). Through skillful diplomacy, Støre made the Arctic dimension more prominent within the Nordic cooperation (Archer, 2010; Dodds & Ingimundarson, 2012, p. 33; Olesen, 2011, pp. 30-31). The new focus on the Arctic materialized through the Nordic Council of Ministers' Arctic Co-operation Program 2015-2017, funding a large range of Arctic initiatives.

The NCM's enhanced attention to the Arctic has redirected its focus westward, thereby giving the organization a new interest in Arctic 'bordering' states such as Canada but also the U.S., the Republic of Ireland, and Scotland/UK. These states are now integrated into several of the NCM's cooperation programs, for example within knowledge exchange on issues of climate change adaptation and mitigation, and work on indigenous issues. Additionally, Nordic

cooperation is now also funding the University of the Arctic, focusing on higher education in a circumpolar context (Norden, 2014b). It should also be recognized how Asian actors have been particularly interested in establishing relationships with the West Nordic states, which is exemplified through the broad Chinese interest in political and commercial cooperation with Greenland, Iceland, and Norway (Nielsson, 2013; Jakobson & Peng, 2012; Jakobson, 2010, p.13; Gang, 2012, pp.362-363, 369). Hence, the ‘peripheral role’ experienced by Norway, Iceland, and Denmark/Greenland from the late 1990s and early 2000s has indeed changed during recent years.

### **Case 3: Role of marine passages and shipping**

Three major routes are usually discussed in the Arctic shipping debate. The *Northeast Passage* (NEP) is a set of routes from northwest Europe around North Cape and along the north coast of Eurasia and Siberia through the Bering Strait to the Pacific. The *Northern Sea Route* (NSR) – which is shorter than but overlaps with the Northeast Passage – is defined in Russian law as a set of marine routes from Kara Gate, south of Novaya Zemlya in the west, to the Bering Strait in the east, with some of the routes running along the coast, and others running north of the islands of the Russian Arctic. The *Northwest Passage* (NWP) is a series of seven major channels between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans running through the islands of Canada’s Arctic archipelago (Arctic Council, 2009, pp. 20, 23, 34).

Less Arctic sea ice could empower Russia more than Canada since the NEP – and as parts thereof the NSR – are expected to be more viable than the NWP through Canada’s archipelago. The geographical position of the Eurasian Arctic indeed offers a number of advantages for shipping along the Russian Arctic coast in comparison to the Canadian archipelago. The more open waters along the Russian coast with chokepoints only at Novaya Zemlya, through Severnaya Zemlya and through the New Siberian Islands provide conditions that are generally more conducive to shipping than the Canadian archipelago, with its multitude of islands, gulfs, and channels.

While sea ice in late summer has decreased significantly in recent years, this has not happened to the same extent all over the Arctic. Rather, decreasing sea ice has been especially large north of the Russian coast and considerably less within Canadian waters. This is because sea ice thickness generally increases from the Siberian side of the Arctic to the Canadian archipelago,



largely in response to the mean pattern of sea ice drift and convergence, and because air temperatures are generally lower on the Canadian side of the Arctic Ocean (Walsh, 2004, p. 190). Consequently, the remnant ice pack will tend to shift towards North America, even in warmer summers. Thus, ‘despite wide-spread retreat of sea ice around the Arctic Basin, it is clear that the unusual geography of the Canadian Arctic archipelago creates exceptionally complex sea ice conditions and a high degree of variability for the decades ahead’ (ACIA, 2004, p. 85).

Giving the proximity of many of the marine routes of the NEP and the NSR to the Russian coast, Russia is able to set norms and rules regulating Arctic shipping in this area. With the extension of the shipping season, these rules play a significant role for actors interested in using northeastern routes. In July 2012, President Putin signed a federal bill ‘On Amendments to Selected Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation on State Regulation of Commercial Navigation in the Arctic Route Area’, which formalizes the NSR as a Russian national transport route, lays down the requirements for sailing along the route, among them standards to protect the Arctic environment and the user fees charged, and envisages a federal NSR administration body (ITAR-TASS, 2012). In March 2013, the new ‘Administration of the Northern Sea Route’ was established to organize navigation in the water area of the NSR. Finally, Russia’s current ‘Integrated Development Plan for the Northern Sea Route 2015-2030’ continues to strengthen Russia’s grip on Arctic maritime transportation (Maritime Executive, 2016).

However, Canada has also built up an extensive regime for shipping in its Arctic waters, starting with the 1970 ‘Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act’, which established a 100 nautical mile (nm) pollution prevention zone (for an overview of Canada’s Arctic shipping regime and the following information see VanderZwaag, 2014). In the 2000s, a mandatory ship reporting system was introduced to Canada’s Arctic waters, the so-called Northern Canada Vessel Traffic Services (NORDREG) Zone. And like Russia, Canada declared the waters of its archipelago internal waters by establishing straight baselines all around it.

Further, Canada shows little political will to support Arctic shipping through its archipelago due to political and legal reasons. If international shipping through the NWP were to increase substantially, Canada’s argument that there is no international strait going through the NWP would be substantially weakened. Canada argues that for a strait to qualify as international, an *actual degree* of international usage is necessary, which thus far has been rather meager along the NWP. In contrast, the US argues that the *potential usage* of a strait is enough to qualify as

international. Canada's limited interest in developing the NWP is also reflected in its minor investments into infrastructure. There are basically no deep-water ports throughout the Canadian archipelago (Arctic Council, 2009, p. 178). Despite the many announcements of the government to invest and improve the infrastructure situation in the North, little has been implemented (Byers, 2011, p. 69). In sum, even if the NWP were to experience similar ice reductions and increasingly extended ice-free periods like the Eurasian Arctic, it is doubtful whether this would increase Canada's clout as a shipping nation.

In addition to political factors, there is also little economic incentive for Canada to develop Canadian Arctic shipping. Canada's biggest ports are located close to the U.S. border and Canada's main international shipping markets are the U.S., Asia/Oceania, and Europe, for which in most instances Arctic routes do not make geographical sense. In contrast, the importance of the NSR for Russian domestic transport and foreign interests in northern transit indicate the high relevance and competitiveness of the NEP and NSR in comparison to other non-Arctic routes.

Historical factors could also explain Russia's stronger standing as an Arctic shipping country. The NSR was used as a national transport route already during the Soviet days. The highest amount of cargo volume transported on the NSR was during the late 1980s, with around seven million tons in 1987, though it declined after the break-up of the Soviet Union to 1.5 million in the late 1990s. Because of this history of usage, more infrastructure is available along the Russian coast, despite in many cases being in dire need of an overhaul (Arctic Council, 2009; Gunnarsson, 2013).

#### **Case 4: The European Arctic and the European Union**

In the initial years of the new millennium, Norway - as a European Arctic country - worked actively to get the EU to pay attention to the Norwegian High North. However, when the EU finally became interested, observers in the EU began complaining that Norway and the other Arctic states 'suddenly did not want the EU to engage in the Arctic any more' (Personal communication, EU Arctic expert, March 6, 2012). While such views might be told in a witty fashion, they highlight an interesting development in the EU's relationship to the Arctic.

In the case of Norway, the initial years of the new millennium were certainly a period when the government tried hard to inform the EU about the importance of the Norwegian High North.

The ‘High North dialogues’ focused on how petroleum from the Norwegian shelf could provide future energy security to the EU (Offerdal, 2010; Pedersen, 2008; Government of Norway, 2005). However, when the EU’s attention towards the Arctic increased, fueled by the Russian flag planting at the North Pole in 2007, it did not only happen on terms that were favorable to the Arctic states (Wegge, 2012). The European Parliament started debating issues such as a potential Arctic treaty, inspired by the Antarctic Treaty, which was an option categorically rejected by the A5 (including the European Arctic coastal states Denmark and Norway). The EU also challenged Canada and Norway’s (and also indirectly Greenland’s) practice of seal hunting, and prominent members of the European Parliament questioned aspects of the Norwegian government’s interpretation of the Svalbard Treaty (Pedersen, 2008; Wallis & Arnold, 2011). As a result, several Arctic states became more reserved toward the potential of increased EU engagement in the Arctic, which was a skepticism that the EU experienced in particular through its difficulties in becoming an accredited observer to the Arctic Council.

In Norway, a key foreign policy debate during the late 1990s and early 2000s centered on the concept of ‘marginalization’ with respect to being left outside the EU (Kux & Sverdrup, 2000, p. 263). While certainly strengthening the EU, the end of the Cold War could also be interpreted as having reduced the political importance of Norway and the Arctic region, from the point of view of Brussels, as the need to bolster its defense against the Soviet Union was diminished, and the most dynamic regions were found in places other than the Arctic (Rieker, 2004, p. 385; Offerdal, 2010, p. 3). However, as the ice melted, new opportunities as well as concerns for development in the Arctic arose in Europe. In this situation, the EU’s High Representative Javier Solana and Commissioner for External Affairs Benita Ferrero-Waldner’s paper to the Council ‘Climate change and international security’ stands out as a particularly interesting document to take note of (The High Representative and European Commission, 2008). By calling upon the EU to increase its focus on the Arctic – because it represented a geo-strategic region with great importance for ‘international stability and European security interests’ (p. 8) – the Arctic became an important issue on the EU’s agenda. With the new focus on the Arctic, non-EU member states such as Iceland, Norway, and the Arctic EU member states Denmark, Sweden and Finland suddenly found themselves with ‘improved cards’ in their hands. As full-fledged members of the Arctic Council, the main political body of and for the Arctic, they were at the heart of the political debate about a region that was now receiving increased attention by powers such as China, Japan, India as well as the EU. In having worked on Arctic issues for decades, and in being familiar with the particularities of the Arctic, the European Arctic states

possessed valuable knowledge they could take advantage of. The Nordic importance in the EU's Arctic priorities has hence been underscored in recent policy documents stemming from Brussels (Stępień & Koivurova, 2017).

However, while the European Arctic states might have gained influence in Brussels over the last decade, one could argue that this case has little or nothing to do with geography. The tendency of the EU to 'lose out' in comparison to European Arctic countries does not necessarily directly result from geographical factors but might rather stem from a number of policy choices the EU made in recent years, for example the Parliament's call for an Arctic treaty, the critique of the Svalbard Treaty, or the seal ban issue. However, the EU's geographic location may have disqualified the Union from taking part in important political processes, such as the initial negotiations among the five Arctic Ocean coastal states about the future management of the living resources in central parts of the Arctic Ocean (Wegge, 2015; Wegge et al., 2017; see above).

## **CONCLUSION**

This article explored whether a unique 'geo'-component exists or makes sense in IR, and if changes in geography can explain changes in states' power potential. Taking into account how the physical aspects of geography might play into politics and society is a dimension that traditionally has been exaggerated in traditionally geopolitical reasoning, leading to determinism. On the other hand, good arguments can be made that this 'more than human' component (Squire, 2015) has been downplayed or ignored by mainstream critical geopolitical thinking. Some critical scholars have recently addressed this critique: 'An appreciation of "the efficacy of matter" is therefore critical, yet conceived as beyond the grasp of established ways of thinking' (Squire, 2015, p. 148). Through investigating four cases that are relevant to the geographic changes caused by climate change, we have sought to identify issue areas where geography in fact seems to have influenced politics. Through our investigation, it seems reasonable to assume that geography indeed influences politics, and that changes in geographic conditions indeed can empower or weaken political actors in certain cases.

Political, economic, and military strength are often put forward as key factors for state empowerment. However, such factors should not be viewed as the only aspects of state power that matter in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The role of the five Arctic Ocean coastal states in establishing

norms for managing the living resources in the high seas of the Arctic Ocean demonstrates a strong case that illustrates the ability of the A5 to establish rules and norms for international Arctic waters. Yet, while it may be the case that Arctic coastal states are empowered generally in times of climate change, one should also pay attention to issues like the fact that Arctic states with large EEZs are also increasingly exposed to new risks such as oil spills and ship accidents, and their resulting environmental hazards. Climate change hence also places a new burden on Arctic maritime powers requiring them to take on more responsibility for safety and protection measures in the Arctic seas and Ocean.

The case of the Nordic Council of Ministers indicates that the coastal states Norway, Iceland, and Denmark/Greenland did indeed benefit from the geographical changes in the Arctic by virtue of their more western and northern location. In contrast, Sweden and Finland did not experience such empowerment due to their different geographies, in combination with their traditionally stronger ties to the south and east. Hence, with climate change taking place, findings in this article suggest that the geographic location on the map actually played a role in itself in this change. The new attractiveness of the smaller northwestern Arctic states is vividly demonstrated by heightened interest from important non-Arctic powers, such as China, Japan, and South Korea.

There are several indications that geographical factors having empowered Russia more than Canada as an actor in Arctic shipping. However, while a milder climate explains important changes as well as differences between the two Arctic states in the time frame investigated, economic, political, and historical factors are also important in impeding Canada from becoming an Arctic shipping power.

Finally, our empirical investigation indicates that geographical changes in the Arctic indeed have had an effect on power relations within Europe. As increased international attention towards the Arctic region also pertains to the EU, empirical evidence suggests that the European Arctic states, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland, and Denmark have achieved a more prominent standing. Overall, this article shows that geography is indeed an important factor in IR, in the sense that it can play a role in how state actors are empowered or not. However, as could also be shown, isolating this effect is very hard, thus pointing to the ‘intra-actions’ between physical/material and social/discursive approaches to geopolitics, the further investigation of which remains an urgent need in geopolitical research.



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