

Considering ecological security from the perspective of Arctic ecosystemic politics

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Saami poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää hinted at social and political possibilities enabled by the Arctic ecosystem in his sweeping book of poems and images titled “The Sun, My Father” (Valkeapää 1997). He evoked a vision of the Arctic as a horizontal path of flows and conversation, with treeless expanses giving opportunity to roam and quiet and lengthy polar nights offering opportunity to speak—and listen. Bringing to mind these interconnections also emphasized the ecological and social interconnections of Sápmi, the indigenous homeland of the Sami people that has been transected by the North–South national lines drawn across Nordic and Western Arctic (from today’s Norway to Russia).

Similarly, Matt McDonald, in his recent book (2021), argues for shifting our perspective and tying our practices of governance more closely to the natural world. The argument he forwards is that, in the light of rapid planetary change, the object of security governance needs to expand beyond securing humans collectives and their institutions in fundamental ways. McDonald first explores how security thinking (both in policy and scholarly circles) has indeed been adapted to accommodate and adapt to the specific impacts of climate change and then outlines an agenda for rethinking security that goes beyond this current baseline.

More specifically, the book outlines a normative agenda for addressing the risks posed by climate change with focus on “ecological security,” in which ecosystems and their resilience capacity are the referent objects of security (McDonald 2021, 9). “Ecological security” is presented as a way to move beyond the human-nature binary that many have highlighted as an obstacle to governing for the planet (Simangan 2020; Dalby 2020; Fagan 2017). McDonald also argues persuasively that focusing on securing ecosystems would force practices of governance to account for and respond to inherently complex, dynamic and interconnected systems—an approach more inherently suited to meeting the challenges of the Anthropocene. The governance agenda outlined McDonald’s book is suggested to be achieved through novel, as well as existing, governance institutions and agents of governance.

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In this brief essay, I reflect on progress and prospects for Arctic cooperation and governance in order to consider the promise and limitations of McDonald's ecological security framework. The Arctic is an instructive example for such an exploration. The longstanding post-Cold War cooperation in the Arctic is strongly rooted in an appreciation of the interconnected nature of the Arctic ecosystem, even as the governance mechanisms remain far from what would qualify as an ecological security approach in McDonald's sense. Nonetheless, I suggest that especially two aspects are instructive from the Arctic example. The first relates to how ecological security would potentially interface with an already quite full landscape of governance practices rooted in ecosystems, and associated power political genealogies and effects. The second point is a reflection on unfolding events, seeking to explore how continued inputs from other forms of security governance could impact on emerging or partial attempts to govern with an ecological security perspective. Here, the status of Arctic cooperative governance after Russia's invasion of Ukraine is an illustrative example to consider. Both points can be read as impediments limiting the applicability of the ecological security framework. However, as McDonald argued, impediments are not the same as absolute limits (2021, 192) and potential obstacles are explored here in the spirit of advancing possibilities for ecological security.

Arctic "ecosystemic politics"

The ecological interconnections of the Arctic meta-ecosystem have been a source of imagery and policy narratives by the Arctic states themselves. Arctic states have frequently highlighted the physical nature of the Arctic environment—and threats to it from global climate change as justification for governance choices (Wilson Rowe, 2018). To take one prominent example, following global reactions to both an Arctic sea-ice low and a Russian team planting a flag at the seabed under the North Pole in 2007, Arctic state leaders gathered together in the Greenlandic coastal village of Ilulissat and issued a declaration on the state of governance in the Arctic region. This "Ilulissat Declaration" issued by the 5 Arctic coastal states (Canada, Norway, Kingdom of Denmark, Russia, and USA) makes the following illustrative assertion:

The Arctic Ocean stands at the threshold of significant changes. Climate change and the melting of ice have a potential impact on vulnerable ecosystems, the livelihoods of local inhabitants and indigenous communities, and the potential exploitation of natural resources. By virtue of their sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in large areas of the Arctic Ocean the five coastal states are in a unique position to address these possibilities and challenges...The Arctic Ocean is a unique ecosystem, which the five coastal states have a stewardship role in protecting...(Ilulissat Declaration, 2008, pg. 1–2)

In this quotation, the interlinkage between ecosystem, stewardship, and fragility come together to underscore the unique governance role of Arctic states. The declaration tallies with broader practitioner discourses on the region (see, for broader considerations, Medby 2018). For example, right around the time the Ilulissat Declaration was issued, a Russian diplomat put it to me this way in an interview: "No one can see what the Arctic needs like Arctic states. Sometimes non-Arctic states claim they can take better care of the environment than we can. Non-Arctic states just do not want to miss out on the race. Clear as day this is what they worry about" (Wilson Rowe and Blakkisrud 2014, 80).

The quotation above can be instructively unpacked for those unfamiliar with state politics in the Arctic, as we work our way toward considering the two key perspectives on ecological security outlined above. First, "knowing" the Arctic ecosystem is about both knowledge of political

practice/interlocutors in the region, but also evokes the natural scientific practices and physical presence that have been integral to expanding state power in the North (frequently as colonial projects, at the longstanding expense of Indigenous peoples' autonomy and territorial integrity) (Powell and Dodds 2014; Dodds and Nuttall 2016; Bravo 2019). Understanding, utilizing, and, sometimes, conserving the natural features of the Arctic—from its migratory species to its ocean circulation patterns—have also been drivers for Arctic political cooperation and coordination across national lines (English 2013; Wilson Rowe 2018).

Second, the diplomat refers to shared capacity and agreement on how to govern amongst the Arctic states, establishing a sense of group identity in contrast to “outsiders.” As much scholarship has shown, in the early days of post-Cold War cooperation, it was unclear which actors should be central/included (English 2013) with the gradual strong focus on Arctic states, as well as other Arctic actors like indigenous peoples' organizations and NGOs, to greater exclusion of newly minted “non-Arctic” actors and states (Depledge 2018; Wilson Rowe 2021). Finally, there is a certain defensiveness about the statement—that no one else could govern as well—that reminds us there is an audience for this cooperation and that clubbing up around border-crossing ecosystems can be understood as a power political performance with effects for “outsiders” clamoring for more access or authority

Climate security on rafted ice: intersections of ecosystemic politics and the aims of ecological security

So, what can the case of the Arctic bring to thinking through McDonald's ecological security framework? First, it is worth considering how governing security from ecosystems—with resilience as a core governance goal—intersect with and would need to supersede or build upon what is already a quite populated landscape of governance initiatives. As McDonald rightly acknowledges, there is nothing more “problematically abstract” about ecosystems than states or international society as the referent object of security (2021, 110). Indeed—and importantly—there is nothing new about ecosystems as political objects. In a natural science-based sense, ecosystems can be identified at many levels—from a pond to meta-ecosystems/ecoregions, such as the Amazon, the Arctic, and the Andes, quickly recognizable in our political cartographies of global politics. One study, based in a natural science-based catalog of global meta-ecosystems ecosystems, found that—in fact—very few ecosystems are fully ungoverned and that a surprisingly large proportion already has ecosystem-specific governance efforts anchored in the ecosystem (Maglia and Wilson Rowe, forthcoming). It is striking that organizing governance around ecosystems is already such a prominent if not universal approach to governing. Given that there are certainly other ways of governing (or seeking to govern or seeking to appear to govern) cross-border ecosystems, such as through broader regional multilateralism or through single-issue treaties, the repertoire of governing from or through ecosystems merits analysis not only for its policy aims and effects but also for power political dynamics generated and upheld.

So, what do we know about the web of interests and relations already structured around ecosystems as policy objects? The extensive literature on regional environmental governance certainly captures many relevant dynamics relating to how and why cross-border formal institutions achieve (or fail to) meet their environmental objectives (see Church 2020 for an excellent assessment of the status of ecoregional governance), as well as highlighting power relations produced within such institutions amongst engaged actors. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Wilson Rowe 2021), how (and by whom) ecosystems are governed is already important to how global

power relations and global order are constructed and upheld more broadly, with effects beyond the ecosystems themselves.

Specifically, and based in a grounded theorization of Arctic politics, I suggest a research agenda for investigating and comparing different power political practices and effects implicated in cross-border cooperation around ecosystems, including for actors peripheral to—or eventually excluded from—the cooperation itself. This kind of “ecosystemic politics” can be understood as the broader suite of effects—particularly in changed power relations between ecosystem-adjacent and non/adjacent actors and around global policy objects. For example, the declining centrality of non-Arctic states in Arctic cooperative governance networks as Arctic governance has consolidated is one key indicator (Wilson Rowe, 2021). Likewise, the show of unity amongst the Arctic states in issuing the Ilulissat Declaration discussed above had as much to say about addressing (and quieting) global interest as it did about the Arctic states relations and interests vis-à-vis one another (Byers 2017; Steinberg et al., 2015).

In other words, returning to the core topic of this essay, pursuing ecological security will require coming to grips with the existing consequences of the ecosystemic politics already at play around large ecosystems across the globe. McDonald acknowledges this and of course is not assuming some kind of governance tabula rasa from which ecological security will spring. He observes that “existing international and regional organizations also have a clear role to play in advancing ecological security” (2021, 157). I would encourage further research in developing the ecological security approach to pay particular attention to existing sub-global governance arrangements already anchored in meta-ecosystems themselves. In the case of the Arctic, this includes the Arctic Council and the Barents Regional Cooperation, as well as multiple smaller arrangements, such as in the Bering Sea or in the Arctic waters of the Inuit homeland between Greenland and Canada.

None of these governance efforts anchored in meta-ecosystems, like the Arctic or Amazon cooperation, fulfill the criteria for ecological security as a governance agenda. Yet, they serve broader purposes as geospatial strategy, perhaps especially tied to achieving desirable forms of power relations and authority (see also Gruby 2017 for an interesting discussion of foreign policy visibility and regional environmental governance in Micronesia). In any case, the realization of an ecological security agenda—rooted in the same object of governance already governed by states in many instances—will have no way out but through the layers of governance already established around ecosystems.

Secondly, although the end point of a realized ecological security is meant to shift entirely the dynamics of security entirely, McDonald acknowledges that this is unlikely to be done in a wholesale or universal fashion. This would leave architectures of ecological security vulnerable to interactions with other security dynamics, including war and conflict. The consequences of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on Arctic cooperative governance are illustrative of this challenge. The Arctic states had worked collectively to buffer Arctic Council relations against the consequences of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, even as in other contexts (bilateral and multilateral) Russia’s actions were being thoroughly condemned by other Arctic states and even as Russia continued to protest against the sanctions regime enacted as response to the annexation (including some sanctions that affected Russia’s Arctic economic development) (Byers, 2017; Wilson Rowe, 2020).

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine at the end of February 2022, it was clear that the magnitude of this breach of international law would have greater consequences for Arctic cooperation. Shortly thereafter, cooperation in the Arctic Council was “paused” pending review of “modalities of work” for the “like-minded countries” (the other 7 Arctic states) and cooperation in the Barents cooperation of the Nordic Arctic was first suspended and then continued without Russian participation. At the time of writing, the state of suspension and ways forward are still to be clarified. At the bilateral level most relations between Arctic states and Russia have also been

stopped, including the extensive people-to-people cooperation that had characterized social relations at the Norwegian-Russian border.

At Arctic seminars and conferences, I have been struck by (and experienced myself) a strong sense of sorrow and grief amongst the policy and scientific community used to convening in and around Arctic issues. Much of this is, of course, is related to shock, sympathy, and outrage on behalf of the people and state of Ukraine, ever intensified as the crimes and brutalities of Russia's warfare against Ukrainians continues to be revealed. More specific to the Arctic, however, is that while there seems to be a relatively shared understanding of the importance of a strong response to Russia's breach of international law (with variations in duration and scope and kind of response), there is also sorrow and concern relates to lost opportunities to continue to address Arctic challenges in a truly circumpolar fashion. The result of these 30 years of post-Cold War region building had indeed become a cognitive commitment amongst a broad community of actors that Arctic challenges were of a scale that Arctic-scale solutions were necessary.

Concluding thoughts

The sense of grief over the suspension of activities (even while widely supported as a justified action by most) also indicates that some of the transformation in individuals or building of new forms of community—that McDonald calls for as part of pursuing ecological security—had indeed taken place. At the same time, the major rupture that has been brought about to Arctic cooperation by Russia's aggression against Ukraine sounds a note of caution and a need for thinking through how ecological security can be fostered alongside detrimental or countervailing inputs and interactions from traditional fields of security and conflict. While the program of ecological security is about envisioning a new global order in which traditional security issues are to be subjugated or supplanted by the pursuit of ecological security, any pursuit of ecological security is going to be shaped and impacted by developments in existing security orders and interim steps/modes/thinking would be needed to fill the gap between today and the ecological security future.

In sum, ecosystems are already deeply entangled in practices of national and international governance, even if these governance efforts remain far from realizing aims of ecosystem security or resilience. They are also buffeted and shaped by broader security developments, both within and outside the ecoregion. As most of our studies of how ecosystems are governed come from a rich and thriving scholarship on environmental politics, we have overlooked some of the other ways in which meta-ecosystems and their interconnections are already implicated in governance efforts that are beyond this environmental focus. Realizing an agenda of ecological security will necessitate taking a fresh and comprehensive look at how ecosystems are governed both in formal institutions/treaties and more informal yet potentially impactful practices of political organization across a variety of policy fields. McDonald's book and framework provide a powerful tool for further thinking in both coming to grips with the existing governance architecture around ecosystems—and how it can be transformed.

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