Chapter 1

Shifting Ground: Competing Policy Narratives and the Future of the Arctic

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Policy narratives are interpretive frameworks that both analysts and practitioners develop and use to facilitate thinking in an orderly and coherent fashion about issues arising in policy arenas. Because they are social constructs, the core elements of such narratives are non-falsifiable. Nevertheless, policy narratives exercise great influence not only during processes of agenda formation in which they help to identify emerging issues and to frame them for consideration in policy arenas but also, and more specifically, in efforts to assess the pros and cons of alternative ways to address those issues that move to the top of the agenda. Sometimes, a single appealing narrative comes to dominate an issue domain so that there is broad agreement regarding ways to think about specific issues arising within that domain. At other times, by contrast, alternative narratives compete with one another for the attention of those active in policy arenas. In such cases, debates about the suitability of different narratives often play roles that are more important as determinants of agreement and disagreement among policymakers than differences regarding matters of fact.

Policy narratives are not simply products of unbiased efforts to explain or predict the course of events in the realm of public affairs. They reflect the outlooks of those who create and deploy them: interests on the part of policymakers and representatives of nonstate actors and intellectual commitments on the part of scholars and commentators. This means that efforts to shape prevailing policy narratives and debates about the relative merits of using different narratives to interpret real-world developments are political in nature. Both practitioners and analysts devise and deploy narratives that reflect their own mindsets and cast their preferred interpretations of reality in a favorable light. But this does not detract from the significance of policy narratives. On the contrary, it makes it easy to understand why debates about the suit-

ability of different narratives are often protracted and can spark intense controversy in specific settings.

In this chapter, I apply these observations about policy narratives to the recent history of the Arctic to explain both the remarkable rise of cooperative initiatives in the region in the aftermath of the Cold War and the growth of conflicting perspectives on Arctic issues in recent years, a development that makes it increasingly difficult to arrive at mutually agreeable responses to prominent Arctic issues arising on policy agendas today. Coming into focus initially toward the end of the 1980s, what I will call the *Arctic zone of peace narrative* provided the conceptual foundation for a series of cooperative measures that the Arctic states launched during the 1990s. Foremost among these initiatives were the adoption of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy in 1991 and the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996, along with a series of activities carried out under the auspices of the council in the 2000s (e.g. the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment completed in 2004, the Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment completed in 2009).

As the 2000s gave way to the 2010s, however, consensus regarding the Arctic zone of peace narrative began to fray, a process that has accelerated over the last few years. What is striking in this regard is that no single new narrative has arisen to replace the original Arctic zone of peace narrative as a dominant interpretive framework. While many continue to adhere to the principal tenets of this narrative to guide their actions, three alternative frameworks have emerged and now compete for the attention of policymakers. In this chapter, I will call these competitors the *global climate emergency narrative*, the *energy from the North narrative*, and the *Arctic power politics narrative*. It remains to be seen how the competition among these narratives will play out during the coming years. But there is no doubt in my judgment that the outcome will have profound consequences for the course of Arctic international relations and, more generally, for the place of the Arctic in the overarching global order during the coming years.

I develop this line of thinking in several steps.[1] I start with a brief account of the content of the Arctic zone of peace narrative together with a commentary on its impact on policymaking, before turning to the erosion of consensus regarding this narrative and the emergence of the three competing narratives. I then direct attention to the future,

offering some reflections on the likely course of developments during the 2020s and beyond with regard to the rise and fall of interpretive frameworks dealing with Arctic affairs and what this will mean for those concerned not only with the future of the region itself but also with broader questions regarding the place of the Arctic in the global order.

The Arctic Zone of Peace Narrative

There is broad agreement that a speech Mikhail Gorbachev delivered on October 1, 1987 in Murmansk in which he called for treating the Arctic as a "zone of peace" and proposed cooperative initiatives dealing with a range of concerns including arms control, commercial shipping, environmental protection, and scientific research provided the first high-level public expression of a policy narrative that had been percolating among analysts and practitioners interested in the Arctic starting in the mid-1980s.[2] Propelled by a desire to celebrate the end of the Cold War and subsequently by the erosion of the bipolar order brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union in the closing days of 1991, international cooperation in the Arctic seemed both appealing to the Arctic states themselves and lacking in global consequences that would engage the interests of the rest of international society.[3] Under these circumstances, the vision of the Arctic as a distinctive "zone of peace" took root promptly and led in short order to the creation of the International Arctic Science Committee in 1990 and the adoption of the Rovaniemi Declaration establishing the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy in 1991.

As it crystalized during the period 1987–1991, the *Arctic zone of peace narrative* acquired a set of interlocking tenets.[4] First and foremost is the premise that the circumpolar Arctic is a distinctive region in international society with a policy agenda of its own. The defining features of this agenda are a common commitment to the pursuit of environmental protection and a broader desire to promote sustainable development in the circumpolar North. Second, the Arctic states themselves are the primary players in the Arctic arena; they can and should take the lead in addressing Arctic issues without regard to the preferences of outsiders. Third, the perspectives of the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic who have lived in the far North for centuries and who rightly regard the Arctic as their homeland deserve special consideration. Above all, the

Arctic is not a vacuum with regard to the existence and operation of effective governance systems. Unlike Antarctica in the period prior to the conclusion of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, the terrestrial portions of the Arctic lie securely within the jurisdiction of the Arctic states. The marine portions of the region are subject to the prevailing law of the sea, as articulated in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and a collection of associated arrangements. The Arctic states are willing to work cooperatively within this framework and are prepared to take the lead in establishing any supplemental arrangements needed to facilitate collaboration regarding issues of environmental protection and sustainable development in the region.[5]

The validity of these tenets was not beyond doubt.[6] Even in the late 1980s, many of the Arctic's environmental challenges (e.g. the impacts of radioactive contaminants, persistent organic pollutants, stratospheric ozone depletion) were non-Arctic in origin. The identity of the members of the set of Arctic states was subject to disagreement between those emphasizing the primacy of the five Arctic Ocean coastal states (the A5) and those advocating a broader perspective joining Finland, Iceland, and Sweden to the A5 producing the now familiar configuration of the A8. American policymakers were skeptical about the very idea of treating the Arctic as a distinctive region, especially as the United States emerged as the sole remaining superpower concerned with the need to maintain a global profile.[7] Even the effort to delineate the southern boundaries of the region produced awkward results due to geographical asymmetries between the Eurasian Arctic and the western Arctic.

Nevertheless, the Arctic zone of peace narrative proved appealing to many and quickly gained traction in diplomatic circles.[8] The result was the signing on June 14, 1991 of the Rovaniemi Declaration on the Protection of the Arctic Environment on the part of Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia (then still formally the Soviet Union), Sweden, and the United States.[9] Although not a legally binding instrument, this ministerial declaration solidified the role of the A8, launched the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, and provided mandates for four Working Groups to get started on addressing a set of issues ranging from the impacts of pollutants to the conservation of Arctic flora and fauna and the protection of the Arctic marine environment. Because most others regarded the Arctic as a peripheral region of rela-

tively limited importance to those located elsewhere, they let this process evolve without making any concerted effort to influence the course of events, at least during the early years.

Based largely on the efforts of the Working Groups and drawing on the enthusiastic engagement of government officials located in agencies beyond the foreign ministries of the member states, the machinery of Arctic cooperation made the transition from paper to practice fairly smoothly, building a community of dedicated participants along the way.[10] Taking advantage of the resultant momentum and responding to the leadership of Canada in advocating the addition of sustainable development to the scope of the Arctic policy agenda, the A8 acted to broaden and deepen international cooperation in the Arctic by adopting the September 19, 1996 Ottawa Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council.[11] Though the council, too, is not rooted in a legally binding instrument, this step cemented the dominant role of the A8, expanded the scope of the vision embedded in the Arctic zone of peace narrative, and recognized formally the role of the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic as Permanent Participants in the pursuit of international cooperation in the region. As others have documented in some detail, this set the stage for a flow of significant initiatives during the succeeding years, all underpinned by the influence of a common interpretive framework.[12]

The Rise of Competing Narratives

The fact that it is impossible to falsify the principal tenets of policy narratives does not make them immune to shifts in the political landscape or to competition from alternative narratives that appeal to analysts and practitioners responsive to different sets of concerns. What is the significance of this observation with regard to developments involving the Arctic? Many observers have begun in recent years to speak of a "new" Arctic and to think about the requirements of navigating this new Arctic.[13] But the critical development in the context of this discussion is that several forces, acting together, have made it abundantly clear that the Arctic region is tightly coupled to the outside world and even to the overarching global order, thereby calling into question the premise that the Arctic is a distinctive, region with a policy agenda of its own.[14] As these links with the outside world have tightened over

time, a growing collection of analysts and practitioners have begun to question the persuasiveness of the principal tenets of the Arctic zone of peace narrative.

First, and in some ways foremost, a set of biophysical links, notably involving the Earth's climate system but extending to other major systems (e.g. the global ocean circulation system) as well, connect the Arctic to the Earth system as a whole. Crucially, the impacts of climate change are advancing more rapidly and more dramatically in the Arctic than anywhere else on the planet:[15] surface temperatures are rising more than twice as fast in the Arctic; polar sea ice is receding and thinning at an unprecedented rate; acidification is particularly pronounced in cold water; permafrost is decaying and collapsing; melting on the surface of the Greenland ice sheet is adding freshwater to the North Atlantic.

Needless to say, these developments attributable largely to outside drivers are giving rise to extraordinary challenges to human communities in the Arctic that must cope with the impacts of dramatic changes involving coastal erosion, the melting of permafrost, shifts in the distribution of fish and marine mammals, and more.

What happens in the Arctic as a result of climate change is also generating profound global consequences.[16] This is a function in part of feedback processes in which the loss of sea ice, reductions in snow cover, and the growth of terrestrial melt water ponds lead to increased absorption of solar radiation. It is also a function of system dynamics in which the impacts of climate change in the Arctic are affecting weather patterns in the Northern Hemisphere through shifts in the Polar Jet Stream and the operation of the global ocean circulation system resulting from the flooding of freshwater into the Arctic Ocean and the North Atlantic.[17] As a result, any belief that it is realistic to treat the Arctic as a distinct region in biophysical terms is no longer tenable.

With respect to policy, an increasingly common response to these observations is to fold the Arctic into an emerging *global climate emergency narrative*. This narrative starts from the proposition that we now face not just a climate problem but a full-fledged climate emergency developing on a global scale. In fact, we need to recognize that coming to terms with this emergency is or should be an overriding concern for policymakers at all levels. With regard to the Arctic, this environmen-

tal narrative has consequences both for mitigation and for adaptation. There is, to begin with, a need to minimize or even terminate initiatives aimed at producing the massive reserves of hydrocarbons located in high northern latitudes. There is a pressing need as well to make a concerted effort to address the disruptive impacts of climate change on the well-being of the Arctic's human residents and to take all appropriate steps to minimize the damage to Arctic ecosystems. Overall, the adoption of a global climate emergency narrative suggests that it does not make sense to think of the Arctic as a distinctive region with a policy agenda of its own. Rather, we need to integrate the Arctic into global perspectives, evaluating both developments in the region and the impacts of these developments on global systems from an Earth system perspective.

Paradoxically, though not surprisingly, some analysts and practitioners prefer a lens that focuses on the extent to which these biophysical forces have increased the accessibility of the Arctic, opening up new opportunities for industries interested in extracting the region's natural resources and moving them to southern markets. The leaders of post-Soviet Russia have chosen to ground the economic reconstruction of their country squarely on the extraction of natural resources in the Arctic and, more specifically, on the exploitation of massive reserves of oil and especially natural gas located within the country's jurisdiction. The extraction of natural gas from the Yamal Peninsula and adjacent areas along with the development of the Northern Sea Route as a corridor for shipments of liquid natural gas both westward to Europe and eastward to Asia provides a dramatic example.[18] Responding to opportunities that seem attractive politically as well as economically, China has made substantial investments in the development of Russia's Arctic gas, taken steps to develop its capacity to engage in commercial shipping along the Northern Sea Route, and articulated a vision of the Arctic Silk Road as an element of its overarching Belt and Road Initiative.[19]

Nor are initiatives involving the extraction of Arctic natural resources limited to the Russian North. As a petro-state, Norway is taking steps to expand the production of both oil and gas in the Barents Sea. Alaska, dependent on revenues derived from the production of hydrocarbons to cover the lion's share of the state's budget, is desperate to stimulate its own development of new oil reserves and especially to find ways to move the North Slope's large proven reserves of natural gas

to markets in Asia. Those who favor an early transition to full-fledged independence for Greenland are aware that such a move would make little sense in the absence of the revenues to be derived from the development of hydrocarbons or from mining operations, including the exploitation of major deposits of rare earths.[20]

Embedded in the thinking of those who promote the exploitation of natural resources or who are engaged in carrying out such activities is what I call the *energy from the North narrative*. The central themes of this narrative are that industrialized societies cannot thrive in the absence of plentiful supplies of energy and various raw materials and that modern technology is now adequate to allow for the extraction and shipment of natural resources from the North without serious environmental impacts. Moreover, resource development provides the best option for securing the economic sustainability of northern communities and remote areas. Implicit in this perspective is the proposition that mutually beneficial economic activities can provide a basis for enhancing social welfare and securing peaceful relations as well as a presumption that one way or another we will find effective responses to the climate problem that do not require drastic changes in the character of industrialized societies. A striking feature of current debates regarding matters of Arctic policy is the pronounced tendency of proponents of the global climate emergency narrative and the energy from the North narrative to operate within the confines of their own discourses without engaging in any sustained effort to resolve the disconnect between the two narratives.

Then there is the shift toward a heightened sensitivity regarding great-power politics in the Arctic.[21] A revitalized Russia has taken steps to reclaim its status as a great power, a development featuring the modernization of Russia's Northern Fleet based largely on the Kola Peninsula, the reoccupation of military installations abandoned in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, and the acquisition of an expanded fleet of nuclear-powered icebreakers. China has taken steps to increase its influence in the Arctic largely through economic initiatives including the incorporation of the Arctic into its signature geopolitical vision articulated in the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. Having shown relatively little interest in Arctic politics for a number of decades, the United States has now begun to articulate muscular assertions regarding the rise of high politics in the Arctic, the need to act vigorously

to counter Russian and Chinese efforts to exercise power in the high latitudes, and the importance of embarking on a concerted effort to strengthen American capabilities to operate effectively under Arctic conditions.[22] This has resulted both in a number of concrete measures, such as the reactivation of the U.S. Navy's 2nd Fleet, and in a raft of calls for enhanced capabilities justified by an asserted need to be prepared to engage successfully in high politics in the Arctic.

The resultant *Arctic power politics narrative* is, for the most part, a straightforward application of the tenets of the theories of realism or neo-realism to current developments in the Circumpolar North.[23] Some analysts find it easy to slip into relatively extreme formulations of this narrative. They assert that there is a "new Cold War" in the Arctic;[24] some even argue that the original Cold War never ended with regard to developments in the Arctic.[25] Several commentators have gone so far as to assert that armed conflict among the great powers is now a distinct possibility in the far north, a prospect that could trigger the onset of World War III.[26] No doubt, these are extreme views, articulated in some cases by observers who have little knowledge or even distorted conceptions of the geography of the Arctic and the biophysical, economic, and political realities of the region. But it is surprising how easy it is to revert to a power politics narrative in the effort to craft a coherent story regarding developments occurring in the Arctic today.

It is reasonable to conclude that this tells us more about the mindset that many analysts bring with them as they turn their attention to Arctic affairs than about the realities of what is happening in the Arctic itself. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we can dismiss the influence of the Arctic power politics narrative.[27] As social constructs, narratives can play influential roles in shaping realities over and above their role in lending coherence to accounts of actual developments taking place in a region like the Arctic.

What do all these developments mean for the Arctic zone of peace narrative that guided thinking about Arctic policy during the 1990s and 2000s? Although this narrative no longer dominates the discussion of Arctic issues, it remains influential, especially among those striving to promote cooperative initiatives within forums like the Arctic Council. The council provided the setting for the negotiation of three legally binding instruments among the eight Arctic states during the 2010s:

the 2011 Arctic search and rescue agreement, the 2013 oil spill preparedness and response agreement, and the 2017 agreement on the enhancement of cooperation relating to science. Responding in part to the initiatives of the council, the International Maritime Organization reached agreement in 2014/2015 on the terms of a legally-binding Polar Code applicable to commercial shipping in the Arctic. In 2018, moreover, the five Arctic coastal states and five others (China, Iceland, Japan, Korea, and the European Union) signed a Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement. Meanwhile, the Arctic Council's Working Groups have continued to take steps that have made a difference regarding specific issues like the protection of flora and fauna.[28] At the beginning of 2013, a permanent Arctic Council Secretariat began operations in Tromsø, Norway. And at the close of the Swedish chairmanship in May 2013, the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting issued a statement asserting that the "Council has become the pre-eminent high-level forum of the Arctic region and we have made this region into an area of unique international cooperation."[29]

Looked at from the vantage point of the developments discussed in the preceding paragraphs, this rather self-congratulatory declaration now seems somewhat naive. Still, it is not entirely unjustified. The Arctic zone of peace narrative—suggesting that the region and its governance are unique and somewhat insulated from outside political forces—continues to guide the thinking and actions of many practitioners and analysts engaged in Arctic affairs, producing a track record featuring a number of significant achievements in the realm of international cooperation.

The Future of the Arctic

What can we infer from this analysis about the future of the Arctic? There is no basis for expecting one or another of the four interpretive frameworks considered here to (re)emerge as a consensual narrative to guide the thinking of practitioners and analysts concerned with issues of Arctic policy. Because key elements of these narratives are non-falsifiable, we cannot accumulate and deploy evidence that would demonstrate that one or another of these narratives is superior to the others and ought to be chosen as a guide to thinking about Arctic policy going forward. At this stage, the influence of two or more of the narratives

is very much in evidence even in individual diplomatic events or policy-relevant conferences. It is common, for example, to proceed from one session to another within a single conference in which the first session highlights the critical importance of the Arctic in the dynamics of the Earth's climate system, while the next session drills down on the ins and outs of extracting fossil fuels under Arctic conditions and on ways to address the challenges facing the operations of ships used to transport oil and natural gas from the Arctic to markets located in industrialized societies in Asia, Europe, and North America.[30]

Nevertheless, some observations emerge from this account of policy narratives that are distinctly relevant to thinking about the fate of the Arctic in the coming decades. There is no prospect of returning to the conditions of the 1990s when the Arctic seemed peripheral to the main arenas of international relations and non-Arctic states did not protest vigorously in response to actions on the part of the Arctic states to assert their primacy regarding matters of circumpolar regional policy and to claim for themselves dominant roles in the design and operation of mechanisms like the Arctic Council.[31]

Both the biophysical and the geopolitical links between the Arctic and the overarching Earth system are destined to become tighter and stronger during the foreseeable future. While there are lively debates about such matters as the potential impacts of specific developments (e.g. the release of methane and carbon dioxide from melting permafrost) on the climate system, there is no doubt about the importance of what happens in the Arctic for the future of the Earth's climate system. Similarly, the reemergence of great-power politics in the Arctic, this time including China as a major player, is a reality today rather than a future prospect. It is alarmist to expect this will lead to armed clashes in the Arctic. The exercise of influence in this arena is much more likely to feature economic initiatives or even scientific competition than the use of military force. But the inclusion of the Arctic in global strategies, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative, will make irrelevant any idea of dealing with the Arctic as a self-contained region to be set aside from the impact of global forces.

Several newly emerging developments reinforce these observations. De-globalization, attributable to non-Arctic forces like the sharp rise in the level of Sino-American friction, will affect the course of Arctic

affairs by reducing the attractions of Arctic shipping routes and calling into question visions of largescale infrastructure projects in the Arctic. Even more dramatic are the current and prospective impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which knowledgeable observers are now treating as the most disruptive global event since the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II. Quite apart from the dangers associated with the pandemic in terms of public health in the Arctic, there is growing evidence to suggest that the crisis will lead to profound changes in the global economic system. The Arctic's natural resources, always expensive to produce and deliver, may seem significantly less competitive in the global markets of the future than they have been in recent years.

Still, this does not mean that there are not and will not continue to be a range of policy issues that are Arctic-specific and that can and should be addressed by the Arctic states either individually or in cooperation with one another. The impacts of climate change on Arctic communities in the form of coastal erosion and melting permafrost, for example, are generating urgent needs for adaptation that cannot be relegated to the domain of challenges to be addressed at some future time. The need to respond vigorously to issues of public health affecting the Arctic's human residents, including the extraordinary incidence of substance abuse and suicide in some communities, is undeniable. Rapid increases in the incidence of massive fires and extreme flooding in the far North are posing enormous challenges not only to social systems but also to ecosystems. The consequences of habitat loss or disruption for Arctic species, such as polar bears, walrus and caribou, are worrisome, to put it mildly. In short, there is no shortage of pressing concerns that will require responses first and foremost on the part of the Arctic states and their Arctic communities.

Some of these issues lend themselves to action on the part of individual states or even individual communities. Relocating a community overwhelmed by coastal erosion, for instance, is to a large extent a local affair, despite the thorny problem of finding ways to finance such moves. But other issues will call for concerted responses, and there is considerable room for sharing experience and expertise even in those cases where individual responses are required. To take a prominent example, while the details of concerns relating to public health differ from country to country and sometimes even from community to community within the same country, there is much to be said for pooling

knowledge and sharing evidence regarding the effectiveness of specific response strategies even in such cases. The implications of these observations for the appeal of the Arctic zone of peace narrative and for the continuing need for cooperative mechanisms like the Arctic Council are worthy of consideration.

The Council is not in a position to take actions to control the drivers of climate change, to make authoritative decisions about the trajectory of large-scale natural resource extraction in the Arctic, or to exercise significant influence on the trajectory of great-power politics in the Arctic. Any effort to do so would risk a debilitating demonstration of weakness and a loss of credibility regarding the capacity of the council to operate effectively in other areas. Nevertheless, the Arctic Council, with its Working Groups taking responsibility for major initiatives, may well be the right body to address the sorts of issues identified in the preceding paragraph. This suggests that it is time for a reset regarding Arctic governance, directing the efforts of the Arctic Council toward issues that it is in a position to tackle effectively and turning to other bodies to address issues in which coming to terms with the linkages between the Arctic and the global system constitutes a critical feature of any effort to make progress.[32]

This may seem disappointing to some, especially to believers in the idea that the Arctic can be set aside as a zone of peace and that mechanisms like the Arctic Council may even be able to play a role in fostering cooperative activities designed to defuse conflicts occurring in other regions. But the best advice at this juncture may be to think about disaggregating the Arctic agenda, steering individual issues toward those policy arenas most likely to have the capacity to address them effectively. The alternative is to risk an outcome in which the very real achievements of the last 30 years dissolve into a free-for-all in which there is little hope of arriving at constructive results regarding any Arctic issues. Interestingly, developments along these lines may lead to a situation featuring the deployment of distinctive policy narratives in different settings, with the Arctic zone of peace narrative providing a framework for efforts to address a range of Arctic-specific issues in settings like the Arctic Council and one or more of the other narratives offering ways to organize thinking about links between the Arctic and the overarching global order.

Notes

1. The following account draws on my own experience as a close observer of and, in some cases, an active participant in Arctic affairs starting in the 1970s. During the 1980s, I developed the concept of "the age of the Arctic" and became active in a group promoting the idea of the Arctic as a distinctive region with a policy agenda of its own. As a participant, I have served as co-chair of the Working Group on Arctic International Relations, vice-president of the International Arctic Science Committee, chair of the Board of Governors of the University of the Arctic, co-chair of the Report Steering Committee of the Arctic Human Development Report, and chair of the Steering Committee of the Arctic Governance Project. A more thorough treatment of the topics I cover in this chapter might make use of content analysis of official documents, interviews with participants, a review of the secondary literature, and other related methods.

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