

Chapter 15

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Three Levels of Arctic Geopolitics

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Moving Past Cooperation *or* Conflict

Few places have been the source of as much speculation, hype, and sweeping statements as the Arctic region at the start of the 21st century. Ever since 2006–07, a continuous narrative has portrayed the High North as the next arena for geopolitical conflict—the place where Russia, the United States, NATO, and eventually China are bound to clash. Propelled to the top of the international agenda by Russian flag-planting stunts and U.S. resource appraisals as much as the growing global concern for climate change, the Arctic keeps luring researchers and journalists northwards. It is here they expect the next “big scramble” to take place.¹

In fact, the idea of “resource wars” in the North has now been conclusively debunked by Arctic scholars.² Oil and gas resources—both onshore and offshore—are located in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) or territories of the Arctic littoral states: approximately 90% of the oil and gas resources of the circumpolar North are under their control.³ Contrary to journalistic hype about potential conflictual relations, there is instead a desire to ensure stable operating environments for extracting costly resources far away from their prospective markets. In other words, the Arctic states have repeatedly highlighted cooperation. As put by the Norwegian and Russian foreign ministers in 2010: “in the Arctic, we work together to solve problems.”⁴

Ideas of the Arctic as an arena for political competition and rivalry are thus often juxtaposed with the view of the Arctic as a region of harmony and shared interests. Such regional approaches have led to Arctic security debates being dominated by ideas of “exceptionalism”⁵—the Arctic being unique, and separate from the (geo)political rivalry else-

where in the world.⁶ In this vein, Phil Steinberg and Klaus Dodds have argued that the Arctic has “an institutional structure that encourages cooperation and consultation among states so as to facilitate commerce,”⁷ while Michael Byers has stressed the collaborative nature of “Russian–Western relations in that region” which “have been insulated, to some degree, from developments elsewhere.”⁸

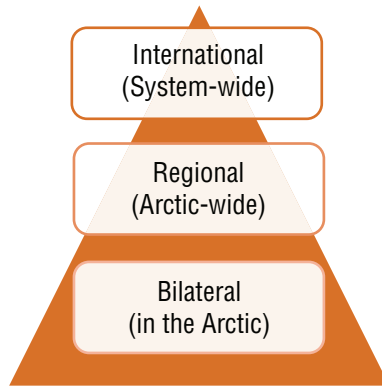
Nevertheless, the notion of a conflictual Arctic amidst great-power politics still make the headlines. On May 6, 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo lambasted both Russia and China in a speech held before the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland; one month later, the U.S. Department of Defense criticized the same states in its updated Arctic Strategy.⁹ That October, France’s Minister of the Armed Forces even compared the Arctic to the Middle East.¹⁰ And yet, both the United States (as a member) and France (as an observer) are strong supporters of Arctic cooperative mechanisms including the Arctic Council, and repeatedly stress their desire to ensure that the circumpolar region remains insulated from troubles elsewhere.

There seems to be a confusing multitude of actors and layers of engagement in Arctic (geo)politics. This chapter asks: What are the geopolitical characteristics of the Arctic region? Why are statements by Arctic states about the region sometimes contradictory? And how might regional relations evolve in the near future?

Performing a (traditional) geopolitical analysis involves examining the connections between geographic space and power politics, being sensitive to expansionist inclinations and interstate rivalry over finite territories and resources.¹¹ This chapter will unpack the notion of Arctic “geopolitics” by teasing out the different, at times contradictory, dynamics at play in the North. To this end I will explore three “levels”¹² of inter-state relations: the international system, the regional (Arctic) level, and the nuances of bilateral relations (Figure 1).

Labelling these three levels as “good,” “bad,” and “ugly”—an unabashed borrowing from Sergio Leone’s epic film—can shed light on the distinctiveness of each but also on how they interact. Such an approach explains why the idea of impending conflict persists, and why this does not necessarily go against the reality of regional cooperation and stability. In sum, my analysis can help explain why rivalry and collaboration co-exist in the Arctic.

Figure 1. Three Levels of Inter-State Relations in the Arctic



A simple three-level division makes it easier to separate the different dynamics of the Arctic, clarifying why the idea of conflict persists even while the Arctic states continue to cooperate.

The Good (Regional Relations)

Let us start with the “good” in the Arctic—the regional relations among Arctic states. As the Cold War’s systemic overlay faded away, regional interaction and cooperation in the North started to flourish. Further, as the melting ice at the turn of the millennium opened possibilities for greater maritime activity (shipping, fisheries, oil and gas exploration/exploitation), the Arctic states began to look northwards in terms of investments as well as presence. In particular, Russia’s ambitions concerning the Northern Sea Route has prompted a buildup of both in terms of military and civilian infrastructure and capacity.¹³ The other Arctic countries have been following suit. And with greater areas of their northern waters remaining ice-free for longer periods, establishing a forward presence through coast guards, patrol aircrafts and exercises has become a priority for all Arctic littoral states.¹⁴

In the circumpolar region the countries recognized the value of creating a political environment favorable to investments and economic development. In response to the outcry and concerns about the “lack of governance” in the Arctic spurred by the growing international awareness of the region, in 2008 top-level political representatives of the five Arctic coastal states met in Ilulissat, Greenland, where they publicly de-

clared the Arctic to be a “region of cooperation.”¹⁵ They also affirmed their intention to work within established international arrangements and agreements, especially the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).¹⁶

Since the Ilulissat meeting, the Arctic states have repeated the mantra of cooperation, articulating the same sentiment in relatively streamlined Arctic policy and strategy documents. The deterioration in relations between Russia and its Arctic neighbors since 2014 as a result of Russian actions in eastern Ukraine and Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula has not changed this.¹⁷ Indeed, the foreign ministries of all Arctic Council members (including Russia) keep pro-actively emphasizing the “peaceful” and “cooperative” nature of regional politics.¹⁸

Moreover, it has been argued that low-level forms of regional interaction help ensure low tension in the North.¹⁹ The emergence of the Arctic Council in the wake of the ending of the Cold War as the primary forum for regional affairs in the Arctic plays into this setting.²⁰ The Council, founded in 1996, serves as a platform from which its member states can portray themselves as working harmoniously towards common goals.²¹ Adding to its legitimacy, an increasing number of actors have since the late 1990s applied and gained observer status on the Council—initially Germany, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the UK, and more recently China, Italy, India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Switzerland.²²

The Arctic Eight (or as Five) have been keen to stress and maintain a stable political environment, not least to hold on to their dominance in the region. To this end they have also underlined the importance of the Law of the Sea and issue-specific agreements signed under the auspices of the Arctic Council. These developments benefit the northern countries in particular, while also ensuring that Arctic issues are generally dealt with by the Arctic states themselves.

Despite open territorial land grabs in other parts of the world, a “race” for Arctic resources or territory is thus highly unlikely to unfold in the foreseeable future. Geographically-based conflicts—geopolitics—where Arctic or non-Arctic states claim a limited number of out-of-bounds offshore resources, many of which are likely to remain unexplored for the next few decades at least, are neither economically nor politically viable and thus not a realistic future scenario.

Map 1. The Arctic Region



The Arctic coastal states have basically divided the region among them, based on the law of the sea. There is little to argue about when it comes to resources and boundaries, although limited disputes exist such as that over tiny, uninhabited Hans Island/Ø and that over the maritime boundary in the Beaufort Sea between Canada and the United States. Map: Malte Humpert, The Arctic Institute.

The Arctic Region

This does not mean, however, that disputes in the Arctic do not exist.²³ Retreating sea ice, changing inter-state power relations, altering the distribution of marine natural resources, plus demand for the same resources, have created an environment ripe for political tension and disputes. Beyond the traditional and strategic concerns in the “East–West axis,” there are domains and issue areas in the North where states and non-state actors disagree. This is linked to marine resources and maritime space, spurred by technological advances and developments

(or lack thereof) in international law, where economic actions taken by states are aimed at achieving larger (geo)political goals.²⁴

Examples of such issues include disputes over the status in international law of the Northwest and Northeast Passages; the processes (via the UNCLOS) for determining the limits of continental shelves on the Arctic seabed beyond 200 nautical miles; the status of the continental shelf and/or maritime zone around Svalbard; the inability of coastal states to agree on how to divide quotas on transboundary fish stocks; and efforts concerning marine protected areas and access to genetic resources/bioprospecting in northern waters. In such instances, actors may hold diverging opinions on international law, resource management and distributional principles.

The dynamics of the Arctic region cannot be reduced to the mutually exclusive options of conflict or no conflict. However, the Arctic states have few, if any, reasons for engaging in outright confrontation (bilateral or regional) over resources or territory. Notions of an impending scramble, as pedaled for over a decade now, are founded on thin ice. Rather, even in the 21st century, relations have proven surprisingly peaceful, guided by the growing primacy of the Arctic Council and the desire of the Arctic states to shield mutual relations from the repercussions of conflict occurring elsewhere in the world.²⁵

The Bad (Global Power Politics)

Of course, there are no guarantees that relations between the Kremlin and some of the other Arctic states will remain on an even keel and that broader tensions or fractures may not be imported into the region. That brings us to the important difference between issues that narrowly concern the Arctic region and overarching strategic considerations and developments on a global plane that feed back into the affairs of the North.

During the Cold War, the Arctic held a prominent place in the political and military standoffs between the two superpowers. It was important not because of interactions *in* the Arctic itself (though the cat and mouse submarine games took place there), but because of its wider strategic role in the systemic competition between the United States and the USSR. Looking at the confrontation between the two military

blocs in the polar region, Norway was the only NATO country that shared a land border with the Soviet Union, while Alaska, in the North West of the North American continent, was separated from Russia's Far East by the Bering Strait. Greenland and Iceland held strategic positions in the North Atlantic, and the Kola Peninsula—home of the Soviet Union's mighty Northern fleet—was central in Soviet Russian military planning, given its unrestricted access to the Atlantic.

With the end of the Cold War, the Arctic was transformed from a region of geo-strategic rivalry to one where (a now diminished Russian state) would cooperate in various novel collaborative arrangements with its former Western adversaries. Several regional organizations (the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Northern Forum) emerged in the 1990s to tackle issues such as environmental degradation, regional and local development, and cultural and economic cross-border cooperation.²⁶ But whereas interaction increased among Arctic states and also Arctic Indigenous peoples (as they gained more political visibility and an official voice) in this period, geopolitically the region seemed to have disappeared from the radar of global power politics.

The Arctic returned to people's consciousness around the world, as international awareness of climate change began to grow, and with it a heightened sense of global existential crisis emanating from natural developments of the melting ice sheet and thawing of permafrost in the circumpolar region, because meteorological and oceanographic impacts could be witnessed much further afield.

It was in this context from the mid-2000s onwards that the Arctic regained strategic importance. Echoing the dynamics of the Cold War, this began to happen primarily because Russia under President Vladimir Putin started to strengthen its military (and nuclear) prowess in order to re-assert Russia's position at the top table of world politics. Given the country's geography and recent history, its obvious focus would be its Arctic lands and seas. In this terrain Russia could pursue its policy of rebuilding its forces and expanding its defense and deterrence capabilities in an unobstructed manner.²⁷

This has happened not only because of changing political circumstances in the Arctic, but also because of Russia's naturally (i.e. geographically) dominant position in the North and its long history of a

Figure 2. Russian Nuclear Submarine Near Murmansk

Russia's nuclear submarines based near Murmansk make the Arctic strategically important for Russia. This also defines the bilateral relationship with Norway, as the nearest neighbor. These submarines are not, however, meant for the Arctic, but for Russia's nuclear deterrence and strategic force posture. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_submarine_Tula_\(K-114\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_submarine_Tula_(K-114).jpg)

strong naval presence, the Northern Fleet, on the Kola Peninsula,²⁸ where Russia's strategic submarines are based, which are essential to the country's status as a major global nuclear power.²⁹ Melting of the sea ice and increased resource extraction on the coast along the NSR are only some elements that have spurred Russia's military emphasis in the country's development efforts of the Arctic: Russia's North matters for the Kremlin's more general strategic plans and ambitions in world politics.

In this evolutionary geo-economic and geo-strategic mix, China has emerged as a new Arctic actor, proclaiming itself as a "near-Arctic state."³⁰ With Beijing's continuous efforts to assert influence globally, the Arctic has emerged as the latest arena where China's presence and interaction are components of an expansion of power in both soft and hard terms—be it through scientific research or investments in Russia's fossil fuel and mineral extraction industries across Arctic countries.³¹ Protecting Chinese interests (that range from those of businesses to opinions on developments related to the Law of the Sea) will be a part of this expansion of its political might in the region and worldwide.³²

Nonetheless, to the Arctic Eight, China remains an outsider. Further, despite the inaccuracies of U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo's warning in 2019 that Beijing's Arctic activity risks creating a "new South China Sea,"³³ such statements show how the Trump administration sees the Arctic as yet another arena where the emerging systemic competition between the two countries is increasing.³⁴ The Arctic, therefore, is becoming relevant in a global power competition between specifically China and the United States.

In sum, the Arctic will not become any less important on the strategic level: the United States and Russia are already in the region, and China is increasingly demonstrating its (strategic) northern interests. Rather, deteriorating relations among these big three actors globally are likely to be accompanied by greater tension in the Arctic as well - with increasingly bellicose statements, military posturing and exercises, and sanctions regimes.

The Ugly (Bilateral Relations)

That brings us to the third level: bilateral interactions between Arctic states. These are naturally informed by the regional and global dynamics which I have already addressed. However, to unpack the issue of security in the circumpolar region, we must drop the international and the regional perspectives, and focus instead on how the Arctic states actually interact on a regular basis with each other. This is where things get ugly: both because some relations are more fraught than others, and because it is difficult to draw generalizing conclusions across the region.

Central here is the role the Arctic plays in considerations of national defense. This varies greatly amid the Arctic Eight, because each country chooses to prioritize and deal with in its northernly areas differently in terms of its national security and defense.³⁵ For Russia, the Arctic is integral to broader national defense considerations of this vast Eurasian empire.³⁶ Even though these considerations are in fact chiefly linked to developments elsewhere, investments in military infrastructure in the Arctic have a direct regional impact, particularly for the much smaller countries in its western neighborhood—Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Indeed, for these three Nordic countries, the Arctic is fundamental to

national defense policy, precisely because this is where Russia—as a great power—invests considerably in its military capacity.³⁷

The Arctic arguably does not play the same seminal role in national security considerations in North America.³⁸ Even if pitted against the Soviet Union across the Arctic Ocean and Bering Sea in the Cold War, Alaska and northern Canada were primarily locations for missile defense capabilities, surveillance infrastructure, and a limited number of strategic forces.³⁹ Many commentators argue that the most immediate concerns facing the Canadian Arctic are not defense capabilities, but the social and health conditions in northern communities, and the poor rates of economic development.⁴⁰ Alaska has a somewhat greater role in U.S. defense policy than the Arctic plays in Canadian policy, bordering the Russian region of Chukotka across the Bering Strait—but this cannot be compared to the role the Russian land border holds for Finnish and Norwegian (plus NATO) security concerns.⁴¹

The geographical dividing line falls between the European Arctic and the North American Arctic, in tandem with variations in climatic conditions. The north Norwegian and the northwest Russian coastlines are ice-free during winter, but ice—even though it is receding—remains a constant factor in the Alaskan, Canadian and Greenlandic Arctic. Due to the sheer size and inaccessibility of the region, the impact of security issues on either side of the dividing line is in turn relatively low. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, Russian investments in Arctic troops and infrastructure have had little impact on the North American security outlook. Approaches by Russian bombers and fighter planes may cause alarm, but the direct threat to the North American states in the Arctic is limited.⁴²

It is therefore futile to generalize about how Arctic countries themselves perceive and respond to their security interests and challenges across the whole northern circumpolar region. Security and—essentially defense—dynamics in the Arctic remain anchored in the sub-regional and bilateral level. Of these, the Barents Sea/European Arctic stand out. Here, bilateral relations between Russia and Norway are especially challenging in terms of security interactions and concerns. Norway is a small state and NATO member bordering a Russia—with its potent Northern Fleet based at Severomorsk on the Kola Peninsula—intent on investing in the Arctic for regional and strategic purposes.

es. Since 2014, defense aspects have made relations increasingly tense, with bellicose rhetoric and a surge in military exercises on both sides.⁴³ In other words: with Russia intent on re-establishing the prominence of its Northern Fleet primarily for strategic purposes (albeit with an eye towards regional development as well), Norway—whose defense posture is defined by the situation in its northern areas—faces a more challenging security environment.⁴⁴

However, bilateral dynamics in the case of Norway–Russia are multifaceted, as the two states also engage in various types of cooperation, ranging from co-management of fish stocks to search-and-rescue operations and a border crossing regime.⁴⁵ Furthermore, in 2010, Norway and Russia were able to resolve a longstanding (almost four-decades-old) maritime boundary dispute in the Barents Sea, partly in order to be initiate joint petroleum ventures in the disputed area.⁴⁶ These cooperative arrangements and agreements have not been revoked after the events of 2014,⁴⁷ a clear indication of the complexity of one of the most fraught bilateral relations in the Arctic.

Dynamics in bilateral relations in the Arctic, even if designated as “ugly,” cannot simply be defined as good or bad. They are influenced by what is taking place at the regional and international levels, but are distinct enough so that they warrant scrutiny and examination.

Mixing Characters and Future Plot Twists

The separation between these three different levels is an analytical tool for unpacking some of the dynamics at work in this specific part of the world. These dynamics are not constant, but constantly evolving. Two aspects are central in assessing how the future of Arctic security might look: the interaction between the “levels,” and the way in which the global relationship of the great powers, in which the non-Arctic state actor China plays a key role, affects the region. The former draws attention to what happens regionally and what from the bilateral or wider international plane influences regional affairs. The latter concerns how great powers (and great power competition) external to a region can impact region-specific developments.

Starting with regional (intra-Arctic) dynamics, the central question is how much developments at this level can be insulated from events

and relations elsewhere. If the goal is to keep the Arctic as a separate “exceptional” region of cooperation, the Arctic states have managed to do a relatively good job, despite setbacks due to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. This political situation is underpinned by the Arctic states’ shared economic interest in maintaining stable regional relations.

Moreover, we cannot discount the role of an Arctic community of experts, ranging from diplomats participating in forums such as the Arctic Council, to academics and businesspersons who constitute the backbone of fora and networks that implicitly or explicitly promote northern cooperation. The annual conferences that have emerged over the past decade, often gathering several thousand Arctic “experts,” are one such channel.⁴⁸ Here we should also note the new agreements and/or institutions set up to deal with specific issues in the Arctic as they arise, such as the 2018 “A5+5” (including China, Iceland, Japan, South Korea and the EU) agreement on preventing unregulated fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean, or the Arctic Coast Guard Forum that was established in 2015.⁴⁹ Such agreements and interactions among “epistemic communities”⁵⁰ have a socializing effect on the Arctic states,⁵¹ as cooperation becomes the *modus operandi* for dealing with Arctic issues.

The most pressing regional challenge, however, is how to deal with and talk about Arctic-specific security concerns, which are often excluded from such cooperative forums and venues. The debate on what mechanisms are best suited for further expanding security cooperation has now been ongoing for a decade.⁵² Some hold that the Arctic Council should acquire a security component,⁵³ whereas others look to the Arctic Coast Guard Forum or other more ad-hoc venues.⁵⁴

The Northern Chiefs of Defense Conference and the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable were initiatives established to this end in 2011/2012,⁵⁵ but they fell apart after 2014. The difficulties encountered in trying to establish an arena for security discussions indicate the high sensitivity to, and influences from, events and evolutions elsewhere. Any Arctic security dialogue is fragile, and risks being overshadowed by the increasingly tense NATO–Russia relationship in Europe at large. Paradoxically, precisely what such an arena for dialogue is intended to achieve (preventing the spillover of tensions from other parts of the world to the Arctic) is the very reason why progress is difficult.

Let us now turn us to the international level and how it impacts Arctic affairs. Primarily, this concerns the growing hostility between what some refer to as “two poles”—the United States and its perceived challenger China.⁵⁶ Some scholars have stressed the anarchic state of the international system, where relative power considerations and struggles determine the path taken by states and thus inexorably lead to conflict.⁵⁷ However, such analyses focused on relative power do not have to become self-fulfilling prophecies. Measures to alleviate concerns and possible rivalry can after all be taken at the international level—by cooperation, by putting in place agreements, or by developing joint institutions, thereby fostering greater trust.⁵⁸

If we transfer these theories to the Arctic situation, we note that China’s increasing global engagement and influence has in fact—thus far—been rather subdued in the North. Beijing, for all its rhetoric about its interests in a “Polar Silk Route” (2018) has used all the correct Arctic buzzwords about cooperation and restraint in tune with the preferences of the Arctic states.⁵⁹

However, there are legitimate fears that this may be just be a mollifying tactic—merely the beginning of a more assertive Chinese presence where geo-economic actions, i.e. financial investments with motivated by geopolitical goals⁶⁰—are part of a more ambitious political strategy aimed at challenging the hegemony of the “West” and also the balance of power in the North.⁶¹ The Arctic speech by U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo in 2019 fed directly into this narrative.⁶² The United States obviously has a considerable security presence in the Arctic that ranges from an air base in Thule, rotating ships and planes at Naval Air Station Keflavik, U.S. military personnel in Canada as part of the NORAD exchange program, rotational deployment of U.S. Marines to Norway, as well as its own Alaskan Arctic component.⁶³

The question is whether Chinese actions in the region are meant to challenge this presence by an engagement that appears to assume predominantly soft-power characteristics. At the same time, shifting power balances and greater regional interest from Beijing need not lead to tension and conflict—to the contrary, they might spur efforts to find ways of including China in regional forums, alleviating the (geo-economic) concerns of Arctic states.⁶⁴

The other Great Power with global (international) status as much as Arctic influence is of course Russia, which in contrast to China is by nature an Arctic state. As the by far largest country of the circumpolar region and the most ambitious in terms of military investments and activity, Russia sets the parameters for much of the Arctic security trajectory. This is not likely to change, although exactly how the future Arctic security environment will look like depends on the West's response to Russian actions predominantly taking place in other regions around the world.

However, Russian military engagement in the Arctic does not have a uniform regional effect: even if old bases are revived and new ones are built along its Northern shoreline and islands, its emphasis is concentrated in the North Atlantic/Barents Sea portions of the wider circumpolar area. This is where the bilateral arena comes into play. Geographic proximity does play a role. Neighbors, after all, are forced to interact regardless of the positive or negative character of their relations. In turn, centuries of interaction compound and form historic patterns that influence relations beyond the immediate effects of other crisis and developments—on the regional or global levels.⁶⁵ It is precisely the complexity of these relations and multiple multi-level entanglements that make it difficult to categorize them in one way or another.

Take Norway and Russia: the two countries collaborate on everything from dealing with environmental concerns to cultural exchange and border crossings, independent of events elsewhere. At the same time, these relations are not immune to outside developments. The regional upsurge in Arctic attention around 2007/2008 (because of flag plantings, resource appraisals and Russia's re-focus northwards), had a positive impact on bilateral relations. In 2010, a new "era" of Russo-Norwegian relations was announced,⁶⁶ after various forms of bilateral cooperation had been established as the Cold War receded.

However, bilateral relations are also behest to power asymmetry, rivalry, and the tendency of states to revert to power balancing (for example, via alliance systems). Moreover, they are influenced by international events. When events in Ukraine brought a deterioration in NATO–Russia relations, Norway–Russia relations were negatively affected.⁶⁷ Indeed since then mistrust and accusations of aggressive behavior have returned, reminiscent of Cold War dynamics.

At the same time, bilateral relationships are impacted by regional relations (say, a new agreement signed under Arctic Council auspices), and can in turn have an impact on the same relations (deterioration in bilateral relations might, for example, make it more difficult to agree on something in the Arctic Council). In other words, bilateral relations, especially if so delicately balanced as Norway's relations with Russia, can easily become funnels for issues and dynamics at different levels in international politics.

Nonetheless, as we have mostly seen in their bilateral relations, the Arctic states try time and again to take measures to deviate from exogenous power-balancing behavior and influences. Through regional webs of agreements and collaborative measures, they seek to reduce tension and prevent conflict (even if disagreements persist over conflictual issues elsewhere). This is the balancing act that Arctic states—like states everywhere—must manage.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have employed a stylized separation involving three different levels—the regional, the international, and the bilateral, or, if we wish, the “good,” the “bad,” and the “ugly.” Crucially, what happens in the Arctic does not remain solely in the Arctic, be it environmentally or politically. Conversely events and processes elsewhere can in turn impact the Arctic—in terms of global warming, security, and desires to exploit economic opportunities. Despite this apparent general insight, there are some paradoxical dynamics—explaining the mix of cooperation and tension if not conflict—that are best understood through the threefold distinction presented here: international competition (why the United States is increasingly focusing on China in an Arctic context), regional interaction (why Arctic states still meet to sign new agreements hailing the cooperative spirit of the North), and bilateral relations (why some Arctic states, and not others, invest heavily in their Northern defense posture).

That the Arctic is important for the Arctic states is not new. Indeed, increasing attention has been paid for some time now to northern security challenges by Arctic actors (including Russia, the United States, and by proxy the EU) and those with a growing interest in the Arctic,

like China. Yet the intensity of interests is novel. Regional collaborative schemes have expanded in response. The growing importance of the region within the international system is also becoming apparent. This is, however, only partly linked to events in the Arctic (ice-melt, economic ventures, etc.). For a large part it has to do with the strategic position of the Arctic between Asia, Europe, and North America. On the bilateral level, we can note some intra-regional competition, as well as investments and cooperation. However, here it is difficult to generalize across the Arctic "region," precisely because of the vastness and inaccessibility of the area itself, and the complex nature of relations.

What these nuances imply is that simplistic one-liner descriptions of "Arctic geopolitics" must be taken with a pinch of salt. This should inspire further studies of security politics in a region that is at least as complex as any other part of the world, but that has again become a focal point as the present world order appears to be at a tipping point.

Notes

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23. I distinguish between *dispute* and *conflict*. The former entails tension and/or incompatibility between actors’ positions on an issue; with conflict, those positions have hardened, have come to a head, and action is undertaken by one or more parties, imposing significant costs on the others (Johan Galtung, “Vi-

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36. Alexander Sergunin, "Four Dangerous Myths about Russia's Plans for the Arctic," *Russia Direct*, November 25, 2014, <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/four-dangerous-myths-about-russias-plans-arctic>.

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