



# STATE OF THE ARCTIC

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# **Socioecological State Changes in the Arctic: Implications for Governance**

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# THE ARCTIC GOVERNANCE PROJECT

A sustainable future for the North



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## My Argument

I will seek to persuade you that:

1. The Arctic has experienced two state changes during the last 25 years, one in the late 1980s/early 1990s and another unfolding during the 2000s,
2. Each of these state changes has had/does have major consequences for governance and for Arctic policymaking,
3. We are now at an important turning point regarding the future of the Arctic.

## So what is a state change?

- State changes are sharp shifts or flips in complex and dynamic systems
  - They are generally non-linear, often abrupt, and typically irreversible.
  - They arise following tipping points that are commonly easier to recognize in retrospect than in advance and often give rise to crises.
  - We are now dealing with state changes in coupled systems or socioecological state changes

## So what is a state change?

- Examples of socioecological state changes
  - The collapse of the Soviet Union
  - The collapse of cod stocks in the Northwest Atlantic
  - The 2008 crisis in the international financial system
- State changes are anxiety producing, but they also produce periods of opportunity for innovation in governance

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## Arctic state change #1 – late 80s/early 90s

### Major drivers

The end of the cold war, the collapse of the Soviet Union, reconnection of the two halves of the Arctic

- Iconic moment: Gorbachev's 1987 Arctic zone of peace speech

### Key consequences

- Unleashing of a spirit of pan-Arctic cooperation
- Rise of the idea of the Arctic as a distinct region
- Emergence of new (often non-state) voices

## Implications for Governance

- A delinking or decoupling state change
  - Emergence of a distinct Arctic policy agenda
  - Establishment of numerous Arctic-specific cooperative arrangements

**Examples** IASC, AEPS, AC, NF, BEAR, IPS
- Most initiatives have featured capacity building and the growth of knowledge in contrast to regulatory measures
  - Role of scientific assessments
  - Little emphasis on rule-making and compliance



## Arctic State Change #2 – the 2000s

### Major drivers

Climate change, globalization, opening of the Arctic to outside interests

- Iconic moment: release of the *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* in 2004

### Key consequences

- Rise of new economic interests – energy, shipping, fishing, tourism
- Growing prominence of outside actors
- Emergence of contentious issues (e.g. matters of jurisdiction)

## Implications for Governance

- A linking state change
  - Integration of the Arctic into the global economy
    - Role of outside actors (e.g. the EU, China)
    - Issues of regional sustainability
  - Politicization of the Arctic policy agenda
    - Tendency to question the innovations of the 1990s
    - Geopolitics: the role of the Arctic 5 vs. the 8
  - The need for new regulatory arrangements (e.g. a mandatory Polar Code for Arctic shipping)
    - Limited capacity of the Arctic Council in these terms

## Whither the Arctic?

- The Arctic in the balance

Possible slide toward “high politics”

- Focus on geopolitical considerations, clashes of national interests, and the emergence of a new “great game”

## Whither the Arctic?

- The Arctic in the balance

Alternative prospect emphasizing the Arctic as a complex and dynamic system

- Focus on cross-border collaboration featuring ecosystem-based management (EBM), important roles for non-state actors, and the pursuit of sustainable development or stewardship rather than just environmental protection?

Which way will we go?

- Scope for conscious intervention from the individual level to the state level

A photograph of the Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights) in a snowy landscape. The aurora is a vibrant green and yellow light display in the dark night sky. In the foreground, there is a dark car parked on a snowy road, and a line of evergreen trees silhouetted against the horizon. The sky is filled with stars.

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