Socioecological State Changes in the Arctic: Implications for Governance

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THE ARCTIC
GOVERNANCE
PROJECT

A sustainable future for the North
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
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
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