1. The geopolitics of an Arctic meltdown and the question of European Arctic space

During the summer of 2007, Greenland – the world’s largest island – saw a number of relatively unfamiliar visitors: politicians from the European Union and its Member States. The president of the European Commission at that time, José Manuel Barroso, visited Greenland at the end of June. The then Italian prime minister, Romano Prodi, and the German chancellor Angela Merkel experienced global warming and the melting of Greenland’s ice sheet first hand in July and August (Maxeiner 2007; SpiegelOnline 2007). After the issue of climate change rose to the top of the G8 Summit agenda in Bad Doberan/Heiligendamm (Germany) in June 2007, Greenland became the ‘Mecca of climate tourism’ (Harris 2007; Bomsdorf 2007). Later that summer, the broader circumpolar North – the Arctic region – hit global headlines with a blurry picture of a Russian titanium flag, planted more than 4000 m beneath the North Pole at the bottom of the Arctic Ocean. Moreover, images of an ice-free Arctic Ocean ruled the airwaves in September 2007 as the Ocean’s sea ice extent reached a record low – 38 per cent below average (Comiso et al. 2008: 6). The following spring, in March/April 2008, Foreign Affairs published an essay that constituted the then predominant zeitgeist of international debate on the Arctic region. As introduced by the essay’s author: ‘The Arctic Ocean is melting, and it is melting fast . . . Global warming has given birth to a new scramble for territory and resources among the five Arctic powers’ (Borgerson 2008: 63).

The region’s (sea) ice was disappearing; and with the melting of the North Polar ice cap the ‘solid state’ of the Arctic was called into question. The term ‘Arctic geopolitics’ grew in popularity as a fashionable catchphrase that broadly encapsulated the ‘fluid’ state of Arctic affairs, covering a plethora of opposing assumptions on the region’s immediate and long-term future. These postulations included but were not limited to predictions rooted in a series of historical Cold War legacies and questions about national sovereignty, regional hegemony and the economic significance of the region’s resources that eventually all led to ‘Arctic trouble’. On
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the contrary, a shifting, opening Arctic space was perceived as an area of multilateral cooperation that promoted polar region building; a common space of sovereign states, bound together by a shared history and future challenges. The growing internationality of the Arctic as observed in the region’s integration in patterns of globalisation or the emerging regional interests of non-Arctic actors has further contributed to the unclear meaning of Arctic geopolitics (Knecht & Keil 2013: 181–6).

Up to now, these regional intricacies have been explored considerably, with many unknowns still existing. One of these Arctic unknowns and essentially one component of Arctic geopolitics is the politico-economic union of the still 28 Member States, whose prominent representative, visited Greenland back in 2007. Since 2007/08, the EU has shown an interest in the region’s climate, environmental and social challenges, as well as its economic opportunities. On 14 March 2008, the EU’s High Representative and the European Commission issued a joint policy document stating:

The rapid melting of the polar ice caps, in particular, the Arctic, is opening up new waterways and international trade routes. In addition, the increased accessibility of the enormous hydrocarbon resources in the Arctic region is changing the geo-strategic dynamics of the region with potential consequences for international stability and European security interests. (2008: 8)

The Arctic appeared on the Union’s ‘neighbourhood radar’. And it emerged using classic geopolitical reasoning: the availability of resources in the region, induced by global warming, alters interaction between state actors and consequently changes this particular region’s political dynamics, with alleged consequences for European security.

It is this precise point of ‘Arctic’ time that sets the basis for the study at hand. The book deals with the Union’s process of ‘constructing’ European legitimacy and credibility in its northern neighbourhood – the Arctic region. It scrutinises the EU’s endeavour to ‘Europeanise’ an allegedly ‘geopolitically undefined . . . space’ (Dittmer et al. 2011: 206). A region that due to declining Arctic ice ‘opened up’, attracted international interest and animated broad discussions about security threats, governance challenges and economic opportunities (Knecht & Keil 2013: 179–80). A region that during the last decade has emerged as a space of and for geopolitics (Dittmer et al. 2011: 202).

This book provides new understanding on the fragmented debate of Arctic geopolitics by adding a new layer to it: the European layer. Moreover, it uses the Union’s attempted Arctic involvement to question its broader role as an international actor with an evolving geopolitical identity. Over the last decade(s), the EU has steadily developed a tacit
geopolitical discourse, exhibiting certain geopolitical ambitions alongside its own conceptualisation of world order, core values, rule of law and good governance (Kuus 2011: 1151). These European geopolitical leitmotifs have led to the formation of a distinct European ‘space’. A socially constituted space that is understood as Europe’s identity, presence and power operating within an international system of structures, processes and flows (Bachmann 2009, 2015: 685). Broadly speaking, a regulated space of interaction ‘characterised by a commitment to the rule of law, multilateralism, institution-building, democracy and universal values’ (Bachmann 2009).

With the Arctic on the alleged verge of a manifold change of state, this book discusses the Union’s attempt to create a distinct EU Arctic space – a regulated regional space of interaction – between 2008 and 2017. Accordingly, the concept of ‘critical geopolitics’ is used in order to expound the narration of the Arctic as an envisaged space of European interaction and ‘actoriness’ (Bialasiewicz 2011b: 2–3). It establishes a clearer picture on the regional interests of the EU and the related policy development, as well as steps taken by its respective policymakers, in order to get hold of these interests. Moreover, it sheds light on the EU internal processes of both geopolitical ordering and the relations between the various European institutions, as well as on geopolitical knowledge production in the hallways of European power.

The present study provides a first indication on the geopolitical behaviour of an international actor that is typically not referred to as a ‘geopolitical actor’. It tells the comprehensive story of how the EU discovered the Arctic region of the twenty-first century.

1.1 THE ROADMAP: GEOPOLITICS, THE ARCTIC AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Part II (Geopolitics) elaborates on the conceptual context of the study at hand: geopolitics. Accordingly, Chapter 2 (The thought experiment) briefly illustrates the historic development of geopolitics and traces its various forms. Section 2.1 (A short journey) provides an overview and delineates the ‘geopolitical voyage’ from classic to critical geopolitics. It is followed by Section 2.2 (Geopolitics by Europe) and a discussion on the practice of geopolitics from a European perspective.

Part III (The Arctic) and its Chapter 3 (Arctic geopolitics) gives a concise overview of the various factors that determined the Arctic’s international reappearance over the last decade, aiming to illustrate the area’s different transitions that surrounded the EU’s respective policymaking and
legitimisation process. The chapter starts by describing the history and identity of a geopolitical Arctic (Section 3.1) and expounds the governance framework the region is embedded in today (Section 3.2). After highlighting the issue of a melting frontier (Section 3.3), the key problem of ‘hype or no hype’ (Section 3.4) covers a broad variety of potential economic futures that have dominated Arctic coverage and debate over the last ten years.

Part IV (The European Union) scrutinises the EU’s own Arctic story of creating regional legitimacy and credibility. Hence, Chapter 4 (EUropean dimensions) analyses the Union’s multidimensional Arctic presence to underscore the EU’s footprint on the various circumpolar North’s physical conditions. Subsequently, Chapter 5 (An action in the making) delves into a decade of EU Arctic policymaking and traces the policy steps that have so far been taken by the various EU institutions. Eventually, Chapter 6 (Space-making practices) puts on critical geopolitics glasses and identifies the Arctic-related geopolitical reasoning that has been developed in the hallways of Brussels.

Finally, Part V (Conclusion) and its Chapter 7 brings down the curtain on the Union’s Arctic endeavour and concludes on the opening question of creating a EUropean Arctic space.

NOTES

1. Hereinafter ‘EU’ or ‘Union’.
2. The German original of ‘mecca of climate tourism’ reads as follows: ‘Das Mekka der Klima-Touristen’ (Bomsdorf 2007).
3. Hereinafter the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is referred to as ‘HR’ and the European Commission as ‘Commission’.
4. Based on Moisio et al., this study uses the spellings ‘EUropean’ and ‘EUrope’ to ‘signify the complex entanglements of Europe and the EU in contemporary political practices’ by simultaneously highlighting that Europe cannot be reduced to the EU only (2013: 754).
5. According to Bachmann (2009, 2015), ‘identity’ derives from the Union’s integration process and its system as political-economic organisation. ‘Presence’ is the role and function that EUrope exercises within the structures of the international system. ‘Power’, again, describes the ability to influence the geopolitical system.