‘The age of the Arctic’ in modern international relations began in the mid- to late 1980s, when the Cold War was drawing to a close. World leaders such as then-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev spoke of the need to transform the previously militarized Arctic into a zone of peace, with international cooperation on urgent ‘civilian’ matters such as environmental protection. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991, Western governments were keen to draw the young Russian Federation into new forms of transnational institutional arrangements aimed at reducing the potential for future East–West conflict. In the European North, the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR) was established on Norwegian initiative in 1993. The EU Northern Dimension was launched in 1998, on Finnish initiative. These regional collaborative arrangements spanned several functional fields, with infrastructure, business cooperation and environmental protection at the core. At the circumpolar level, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) was created in 1990 by the ‘Arctic eight’ (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Soviet Union and the United States). Canada soon proposed the establishment of an Arctic Council, to embrace policies on indigenous peoples in addition to the environmental focus of AEPS. The 1996 Ottawa Declaration created the Arctic Council, with the AEPS programmes subsumed under the new structure, along with sustainable development and indigenous issues.

Following some initial enthusiasm, Arctic cooperation – whether circumpolar or regional – was long considered to be ‘a thing of the early 1990s’: an immediate post-Cold War initiative that failed to spark sustainable high-level political interest. The Arctic Council remained a forum for coordinating Arctic environmental monitoring and science, with strong participation from the region’s indigenous peoples, while the regional BEAR collaboration and the EU Northern Dimension were struggling to meet the initial expectations of thriving East–West cooperation on trade and industry. Much changed with the planting of a Russian flag on the seabed at the North Pole in August 2007. That action was performed by a Russian scientific expedition involved in collecting data for Russia’s submission to the Continental Shelf Commission – in accordance with the Law of the Sea – but was widely perceived as a Russian demonstration of power in the Arctic. The incident happened at the same time as the summer ice melting in the Arctic Ocean reached ominous proportions, and there was growing interest in the prospects of petroleum development in the Arctic. This spurred a new wave of high-level political interest in the Arctic, and a global media buzz about a ‘scramble for the Arctic’ emerged. In the Arctic Council, high-level participation from the member states gradually increased, and the 2011 biannual ministerial meeting in Nuuk was the first to which all eight countries sent their foreign affairs ministers. It was also the first Arctic Council meeting attended by the US Secretary of State; and here the first binding treaty negotiated under the Arctic Council – on search and rescue in the Arctic – was signed. The interest of non-Arctic states in Arctic affairs was also heightened, especially among Asian nations. In 2013, China, Japan, Singapore
and South Korea, among others, were given status as permanent observers in the Arctic Council.

This volume traces the changes from ‘the age of the Arctic’ to ‘the scramble for the Arctic’, and beyond. It brings together some of the leading expertise on international relations in the Arctic, with contributors from nearly a dozen European countries, as well as North America and Australia. While situated mainly in the international relations tradition, in conjunction with neighbouring disciplines such as geography and anthropology, the book also contains a dedicated legal section. All four ‘obligatory’ elements of any contemporary book on international relations in the Arctic are included: geopolitics, the law of the sea, Arctic institutions and national Arctic strategies (Parts 1–4 of the book, respectively). Needless to say, functional fields such as climate change, energy, indigenous issues, jurisdiction, marine resources, pollution and preparedness and emergency response are covered.

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