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Territorial nationalism and Arctic geopolitics: Iceland as an Arctic coastal state

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This paper explores the cultural and political significance of being acknowledged and recognized as an “Arctic coastal state”. Using Iceland as a case study, we consider how coastal state status had grown in significance as the Arctic Ocean has been re-imagined more as a polar Mediterranean and less as a frozen desert. By drawing on Michael Billig’s work on banal nationalism and popular geopolitics, the manner in which the ideas and practices associated with a “coastal state” are reproduced in elite and everyday contexts. However, we conclude by noting that thus far this appeal to Iceland as “coastal state” has gained greater traction within the Icelandic Foreign Ministry and Parliament, and it remains to be seen whether it will have a more popular resonance with Icelandic citizens. Whatever the future, it is a timely reminder that terms such as “coastal state” are caught up in national and even circumpolar identity projects.

Keywords: coastal state; Iceland; Arctic Ocean; banal nationalism; popular geopolitics

Introduction

Consequently, the geographical situation of Iceland in the effluent of the Arctic Ocean therefore, makes her very vulnerable to any sudden change in the marine ecosystem whether from climate change or pollution. It therefore doesn’t come as a surprise that the present government of Iceland has declared the Arctic as one of the main priorities of our foreign policy.

As a sovereign state, that is the only one lying in its entirety within what the government of our hosts [i.e. Norway] defines as the High North, and with the land and vast areas, as well as huge interests, within the Arctic, it is stating the obvious that we consider ourselves an Arctic Coastal state. Obviously we want to be recognised as such. In this context, the concept is not deployed in a narrow, legal sense confined to territorial claims. I use it as a political and geographical argument to drive home the point, not without reason, that we want to be included, not excluded, from deliberations on the Arctic region.¹

If something either “doesn’t come as a surprise” and/or is “obvious” then why bother to state it in the first place? Unwittingly, perhaps, the aforementioned extract of a speech by the Foreign Minister of Iceland, Össur Skarphéðinsson, provides

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¹Skarphéðinsson, “Icelandic Perspectives on the Arctic.”

something worth a second glance with regard to Iceland being conceptualized and recognized as a “coastal state” – hence the reference to the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. Skarphéðinsson opined that the term “coastal state”, at least to international lawyers, is more often than not related to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).² It is seen as entailing a series of rights, obligations and responsibilities in territorial seas, exclusive economic zones and the extended continental shelves. His arresting reference to the place of Iceland in the “effluent of the Arctic Ocean”, however, also highlights how geographical metaphors and analogies are significant in the ways in which the Arctic region (and those within it) is represented and reworked in a variety of texts including ministerial speeches. Effluent in particular, with its emphasis on the act of “flowing out”, has also been routinely used, at least from the nineteenth century onwards, to refer to industrial waste. It is, on the face of it, a rather disturbing description to posit about Iceland and perhaps works as a warning as much as an opportunity for how the country’s geographical relationship to the Arctic Ocean might be used to build, develop and proclaim itself as an Arctic “coastal state”. In other words, it reflects not only a desire to be counted as a decision-maker (on and about the region), but also concerns about the potential impact of environmental pollution (in and around the Arctic).

We focus here on how “coastal states”, in the context of the Arctic Ocean and adjacent seas, enumerate and act upon their roles before internal and external audiences. Our interest is with the iterative and performance-based aspects of being a coastal state, not only in maritime areas, such as the Arctic Ocean, but also in Arctic geopolitics, and as part of national identity politics.³ In short, we want to draw attention to the relationship between imaginative geographies (including the use of geographical metaphors and analogies) and foreign policies and performances/practices of states – something the Icelandic Foreign Minister acknowledged when he invoked the existence of “a political and geographical argument” and “deliberations on the Arctic region.”⁴ For in making those assertions, the Icelandic Foreign Minister, unwittingly perhaps, reminds us that these claims and deliberations offer up not only an inferential structure with which to consider, but also a pathway for better understanding how political elites in the Arctic region reason about their national and circumpolar interests, and enact them.

Our article is a theoretical intervention, which is concerned with what we might consider to be “Arctic geopolitics” and its relationship with territorial nationalism.⁵ It explores how categories such as “coastal state” are embedded in temporal, spatial, political, affective and everyday contexts.⁶ We contend that these forms of

²Koivurova “Actions of the Arctic States,” 211–12.

³For a longer essay on some of the theoretical implications see J. Dittmer et al., “Have you heard the one about the disappearing ice?”

⁴See Luiza Bialasiewicz et al., “Performing Security,” 408. On the making of an Arctic region, see C. Keskitalo “Region-Building in the Arctic: Inefficient Institutionalization? A Critical Perspective on International Region-Building in the Arctic,” <http://isanet.ccit.arizona.edu/noarchive/keskitalo.html>.

⁵For a recent exposition on the importance of territory, see S. Elden, *Terror and Territory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

⁶This is clearly a larger project than this paper alone, with the purpose of “flagging up” that categories such as “coastal state” perform far more material and affective labour than is currently acknowledged by international lawyers and political scientists as well as Senior Arctic Officials attached to the Arctic Council, for example.

territoriality vary in intensity, depending on wider political events and agendas pertaining in and to the Arctic region. Using Iceland as a case study, we acknowledge that the manner in which claims to being a “coastal state” also vary in terms of engagement and reception. There are times when governments and citizens can be deeply “moved” by the notion of being a “coastal state” with distinct resource and strategic issues including fishing and the possibility of extending sovereign rights over the seabed.⁷ At the very least, there are domestic and international audiences to consider and internal variations therein.

Talking about “a coastal state”

While Tracy Chapman once “talked” about “a revolution”, we confine ourselves (and far less lyrically) to “a coastal state”. The term “coastal state” is not just a legal-judicial category; it is something, as political leaders such as the Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper note, to be promoted, popularized and securitized within existing circuits of territorial nationalism.⁸ It has, in other words, cultural, political and geographical connotations and resonances. In successive Speeches from the Throne in the Canadian Parliament, Harper’s conservative government has reiterated that the country has to “defend Canada’s Arctic sovereignty [...] Canada has a choice when it comes to defending our sovereignty in the Arctic. We either use it or lose it [...] because Canada’s Arctic is central to our identity as a northern nation.”⁹ In the 2010 Speech from the Throne, Harper put it this way:

Our government will continue to vigorously defend Canada’s Arctic sovereignty. It will continue to map our northern resources and waters. It will take action to increase marine safety and reduce pollution from shipping and other maritime traffic. Our government will also work with other northern countries to settle boundary disagreements.¹⁰

So without referring to “coastal state” directly, nonetheless, there is a palatable sense in which Canada’s Arctic sovereignty cannot simply be taken for granted on the basis of geographical proximity and/or international legal conventions. Indeed, whether it be the Icelandic Foreign Minister or the Canadian Prime Minister, political leaders often appear to articulate, and, indeed, perform in ways – whether in southerly capital cities or northerly locations – that give some purchase to media framings of the Arctic region as being caught up in a “scramble for resources and access.” Thus, paradoxically, they urge their own citizens and other internal and external stakeholders who are listening and watching not to believe over-hyped speculation that Arctic territories and resources are going to be exploited by opportunistic others, while at the same time trying in Harper’s words to “excite” citizens about the Canadian North.

⁷Illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing is one area that deserves further attention especially how it is mobilized to pursue national-territorial projects in the name of defending “our fish” or pursuing those who imperil “our fish stocks.”

⁸On general concerns regarding securitizing the Arctic, see Kraska, *Arctic Security in an Age of Climate Change*. And on the geographies of securitization, see Ingram and Dodds, *Spaces of Security and Insecurity*.

⁹Canada, Speech from the Throne, 2007. Available at: http://www.ctv.ca/CTVNews/QPeriod/20071016/thronespeech_SIDEBARS_071016/

¹⁰Canada, Speech from the Throne, 2010. Available at: <http://www.speech.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=1388>

In Michael Billig's terms, the "habits of language" routinely help to flag up (polar) nationalism in a banal and everyday manner. Apart from using words such as "Arctic" and "Canada", Harper's use (to take one example before returning to our Icelandic focus) of the "our", "we" and "the" also play an important role in naturalizing geographical interest in northerly territories, onshore and offshore – in other words asking domestic citizens to accept as a consequence why it is so necessarily to "vigorously defend" something that was never actually disputed in terms of legal ownership. "Habits of language" are, however, only one element in recent Canadian government pronouncements on Arctic sovereignty. References to "action" and "work" also highlight not only discursive labour but also the very real material investment in resource evaluation, continental shelf delimitation, training exercises, surveillance and environmental protection measures. Being a coastal state, as the argument goes when political leaders are urging the need for greater investment and commitment, is expensive and time-consuming. The waters in question, extending 200 nautical miles from the coastal baseline, have to be evaluated, mapped, monitored and patrolled. Throughout Harper's tenure, there have been constant reiterations of the need to invest in new ships, including icebreakers, improve surveillance capability through schemes such as the Northern Watch (operative in the Northwest Passage) and the ongoing collection of geological and oceanographic material necessary for a continental shelf submission to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) before 2014.¹¹

In the case of Iceland, the subject of this article, we have a potentially rich case study of a country eager to remind its Arctic partners and a domestic audience of its geographical connections to the Arctic. Unlike Canada, however, Iceland's status as an Arctic Ocean coastal state is uncertain, in the sense that it is widely assumed that there are only five Arctic Ocean coastal states – Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Norway, Russia and the United States. This was perhaps most evident in the text accompanying the Ilulissat Declaration (May 2008) in which the given Arctic Five (A5) reiterated their belief that

the law of the sea provides for important rights and obligations concerning the delimitation of the outer limits of the continental shelf, the protection of the marine environment, including ice-covered areas, freedom of navigation, marine scientific research, and other uses of the sea. We remain committed to this legal framework and to the orderly settlement of any possibly overlapping claims. This framework provides a solid foundation for responsible management by the five coastal States and other users of this Ocean through national implementation and application of relevant provisions.¹²

As was widely reported at the time, other members of the Arctic Council – namely, Iceland, Finland and Sweden – were unhappy that the Declaration appeared to relegate them to the status of "other users" in the context of the Arctic Ocean.¹³

¹¹For a concise description of the delimitation process and the role of the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) see Koivurova "Actions of the Arctic States," 217–19.

¹²Ilulissat Declaration, 28 May 2008, arctic-council.org/filearchive/Ilulissat-declaration.pdf.

¹³It is worth noting that when Iceland held the chair of the Arctic Council (2002–04) there was no discussion of the "coastal state" because Icelandic officials were not, at that point, concerned that a select number of "coastal states" were later to organize and issue a declaration in May 2008.

This was particularly relevant in the case of Iceland, which protested vigorously against being excluded.¹⁴ It also helps explain why the Icelandic Minister of Foreign Affairs used his annual report to the national parliament in May 2010 to call for a new Arctic policy that would stress Iceland's status as a "coastal state".¹⁵ In a parliamentary resolution on Iceland's Arctic policy, which was passed in May 2011, it was noted that the 12 principles underlying this policy included the following:

Securing Iceland's position as a coastal state within the Arctic region. Promoting understanding of the fact that the Arctic region extends both to the North Pole area proper and the part of the North Atlantic Ocean, which is closely connected to it.¹⁶

The parliamentary resolution and the speech, quoted above, by the Icelandic Foreign Minister can be seen as part of a discursive production of imaginative geographies enacted through performativity. As Mark Salter¹⁷ has argued, the performativity of borders increasingly resemble Judith Butler's idea of stylized repetition of acts within a regulatory frame.¹⁸ If sovereignty, like gender, has no essence, it must be articulated and re-articulated through reiterations and ritualizations. The Icelandic speech act fits well with recent scholarly emphasis in critical geopolitics on looking at borders as moving in two directions simultaneously: to sites inside sovereign territory and offshore,¹⁹ that is, within fixed spaces as well as external and provisional ones, which are "in a state of becoming."²⁰ It is meant to remind domestic and international audiences – through a recasting of an already existing discourse and practice on and of Iceland as a *prima facie* Arctic state – of the country's coastal state credentials. To put it differently, the Icelandic government is doing what Salter terms "performing the border" by resisting and recasting the hegemonic geopolitical narrative of the Arctic Five and their geographical representation of the Arctic Ocean region – Iceland after all wants to be part of an Arctic Six rather than be excluded by an Arctic Five.²¹

The argument is based on the notion that the Arctic region stretches from the central Arctic Ocean to the northern extremes of the Atlantic Ocean. And since Iceland's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extends well into the arctic Greenland Sea as an outlying portion of the Arctic Ocean, its status as a coastal state should be acknowledged and recognized. In addition, Iceland wants to see the Arctic Council, with its eight permanent members and representatives of Arctic "indigenous peoples" (permanent participants), as the primary intergovernmental and decision-making forum for Arctic affairs.²²

¹⁴In part explaining the subsequent importance of Iceland hosting a jointly organized seminar with NATO on Security Prospects in the High North on 29 January 2009, <http://www.mfa.is/publications/aifs/nr/4801>.

¹⁵Report of Icelandic Minister for Foreign Affairs, 10 May 2010, <http://www.mfa.is/media/Skyrslur/Executive-summary.pdf>.

¹⁶See Icelandic Foreign Ministry, "Parliamentary Resolution on Iceland's Arctic Policy."

¹⁷Johnson et al., "Interventions on Rethinking the Border," 62.

¹⁸Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 43–4.

¹⁹See Johnson et al., "Interventions on Rethinking the Border," 65.

²⁰See, for example, Walters, "Secure Borders, Safe Havens, Domopolitics;" Bigo, "When Two Become One."

²¹Johnson et al., "Interventions on Rethinking the Border," 65.

²²See Ingimundarson, "Territorial Discourses and Identity Politics."

The purpose, to be sure, is not to challenge the international governing framework for the Arctic continental shelf. Rather, it provides evidence of how specific governments recognize that the framework is assembled and distributed amongst parties. The Icelandic government fully supports UNCLOS and is a party to it. Thus, it is not a question of contesting the rights of the Arctic Five to submit claims to CLCS based on Articles 76 and 77 of UNCLOS. These articles permit an extended EEZ where continental shelves extend beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines. And unlike the United States, Canada, Russia, Norway and Denmark/Greenland, Iceland makes no territorial claims in the Arctic Ocean proper – in terms of islands and other territories capable of generating territorial seas, exclusive economic zones and the like. According to a 1981 agreement with Norway, it enjoys continental shelf rights in the joint exploitation area between Iceland and Jan Mayen in the Greenland Sea.²³ An agreement in principle was also reached with Denmark on behalf of Greenland on its claim to continental shelf rights beyond 200 nautical miles in the southern part of the Banana Hole near the Faroe Islands in 2006. Finally, Iceland lays claim to the utilization of resources in the waters around Svalbard on the basis of the equality principle of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty.²⁴

But the Icelandic government is primarily thinking of the neorealist and geopolitical consequences of the establishment of an Arctic Five hegemonic regime in the Arctic, especially the re-territorialization of the Arctic Ocean, in the name of national security and resource extraction, on the one hand, and by invoking environmental stewardship on the other. As the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration stated:

By virtue of their sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction in large areas of the Arctic Ocean the five coastal states are in a unique position to address these possibilities and challenges [...] The Arctic Ocean is a unique ecosystem, which the five coastal states have a stewardship role in protecting. Experience has shown how shipping disasters and subsequent pollution of the marine environment may cause irreversible disturbance of the ecological balance and major harm to the livelihoods of local inhabitants and indigenous communities.²⁵

What Iceland wants to “highlight” is the need, on its part at least, to prevent the territorial aspirations of the Arctic Five from being turned into an ownership and management claim to the Arctic Ocean proper as a narrowly defined and self-contained geographic area, with minimal connection to its surroundings or adjacent seas.²⁶ Needless to say, such an exclusivist policy could have deep impact on Iceland, whose dependence on fishing (a highly mobile resource) is crucial for its subsistence, with fish being responsible for 40% of its export revenues. Despite its

²³For a recent analysis, see Y. Tanaka “Reflections on Arctic Maritime Delimitations: A Comparative Analysis between the Case Law and State Practice,” *Nordic Journal of International Law* 80 (2011): 459–84.

²⁴This has been controversial, as Norway has been accused of trying to constrain the rights of foreign registered vessels to fish off Svalbard waters. See D. Anderson, “The Status Under International Law of the Maritime Areas Around Svalbard,” *Ocean Development and International Law* 40 (2009): 373–84.

²⁵Ilulissat Declaration, *supra* note 9.

²⁶See Ingimundarson, “Territorial Discourses and Identity Politics.”

population of only 320,000, Iceland is one of the world's largest "fishing nations", which has been involved in at times tense negotiations with neighbouring states and regional organizations (especially the EU) over fishing quotas in North Atlantic waters.²⁷ When it comes to the management of migratory, trans-boundary and straddling fish stocks in the Arctic region, Iceland is, thus, keen on fighting any attempts to establish an international fishery management organization, which sidelines major stakeholders. So while the term "effluent" might have been an odd word-choice by the Icelandic Foreign Minister, it represented the Arctic as being connected to other oceans including the Atlantic and suggested a more expansive understanding of an "Arctic region" more generally.

Territorial nationalism and everyday polar geopolitics

In recent years, there has been a proverbial explosion of interest in the contemporary Arctic.²⁸ While this region can be mapped and defined in a variety of ways, primary attention has focused on the Arctic Ocean itself, rather than the area north of 60° North. Underlying this concern is the changing geographies of this ice-covered body of water, leading to concern that diminishing sea ice is facilitating a more disturbing future – one based on the spectre of conflict over resources and environmental disaster as ever more interested parties (especially extra-territorial actors) seek to maximize their individual and collective advantage. A combination of ongoing climate change, resource potential, new shipping routes and the security concerns of the Arctic Five are frequently cited as constitutive of a new polar politics, where Arctic waters are both a space of and for geopolitics. Apart from two high-profile meetings in Ilulissat, Greenland, in 2008 and Chelsea, Canada, in 2010, the Arctic Five have formalized their cooperation in many ways through unpublicized meetings on issues ranging from territorial claims and energy to fisheries. What was initially billed as a complementary venue, with the Arctic Council continuing to be seen as the primary Arctic forum, is, in other words, being silently institutionalized – at least, this is what critics of the Arctic Five fear.

Contemporary narratives deploy a series of geographical assumptions and designations that help to conjure up the Arctic Ocean as a geopolitical space. By drawing on the critical geopolitical literature, we examine how geographical claims and assumptions animate political debates and practice.²⁹ Whether acknowledged or not, all analyses of international affairs draw upon a reservoir of common-sense-based geographical assumptions about, for example, the position and role of a state in the world. This concern for the role of geographical common sense usefully highlights that these geographical assumptions may work at a variety of interconnected societal levels, from the formal reasoning of intellectuals of statecraft and think-tank commentators to the practical and popular modes of reasoning deployed by political leaders and media organizations respectively.

Michael Billig's *Banal Nationalism*, since its publication in 1995, has proven fecund as a coterie of geographers, sociologists, historians, political scientists and

²⁷One such case involving a dispute over mackerel quotas is discussed in N. Williams "New Fishing Battle Looms," *Current Biology* 20 (2010): 689–90.

²⁸See the discussion in Anderson, *After the Ice: Life*; M. Byers, *Who Owns the Arctic?*; Emmerson, *Future History of the Arctic*; Fairhall, *Cold Front*; Howard, *Arctic Gold Rush*.

²⁹For an overview see Dodds, Kuus, and Sharp, *Ashgate Companion to Critical Geopolitics*.

others continue to engage with its claims.³⁰ It is a testimony to the book's appeal that it now seems de rigeur to attend to the production, dissemination and negotiation of the national through discourse and practices, including, as Billig noted, the unremarked-upon features of everyday life, such as a flag fluttering from a public building. The notion of the unremarked or, as Billig noted "the double neglect", continues to resonate with scholars.³¹ With reference to the neglectful, Billig contended that existing scholarship (produced in the 1980s and early 1990s) remained beguiled by the more extreme forms of nationalism and, thus, tended to conceive of nationalist discourses and practices as extraordinary and exceptional, especially when writing either about independence movements and/or events such as the break-up of Yugoslavia. Moreover, if there was an interest in the extreme forms of nationalism, attention tended to turn towards particular parts of the world where nationalist aspiration had yet to find some kind of culmination. The net result was to "shut down" conversations about nationalism within the Euro-American world, especially the United Kingdom and the United States, which tended to be portrayed as more settled in that regard unless reference was made to, say, nationalist groups such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland. But the assumption appeared to be that this was either unusual and/or out of kilter with the general post-nationalist trend.

The second aspect of this "neglectful" relationship was a tendency to forget that expressions of national identity need to be understood as a "form of life which is lived daily in a world of nation-states."³² However, Billig argued that if this "form of life" was so entrenched, it was likely that symbols such as "the national flag" would no longer register in a significant manner. The daily practices, which help to reproduce a nation, perhaps then go unnoticed or at least unremarked upon in everyday conversations even among foreign ministers and senior civil servants. The end result is that both the hanging flag and the speech acts become part of the taken for granted. As Jan Penrose reminded us in the early 1990s, "Our acceptance of nations as natural divisions of the global territory and population is essential to the maintenance of the existing geopolitical order."³³ An observation that is no less pertinent when we come to consider the Arctic region and the manner in which political representatives of Arctic coastal states appeal to banal and mundane geographical divisions to reinforce their polar credentials. This is particularly pertinent when it comes to the manner in which the category of the "coastal state" is invoked to naturalize geopolitical and geographical connections to the Arctic region.

The appeal of this thesis to political geographers, contemporary historians and sociologists is not hard to fathom. Billig's attentiveness to the unremarkable chimed well with a growing interest in the popular geopolitics of nationalism, which included an interest in both material culture (e.g. flags and stamps), practices (standing to attention by a flag) and discourses (e.g. American exceptionalism). Without citing Billig's work directly, moreover, the geographer James Sidaway penned a

³⁰M.J. Penrose " 'Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays' full stop: The Concept of Nation as a Challenge to the Nationalist Aspirations of the Part Quebecois," *Political Geography* 13 (1994): 161–81. For example, J. Sidaway, "Banal Geopolitics Resumed," *Antipode* 35 (2003): 645–51; Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.

³¹Benwell and Dodds "Argentine Territorial Nationalism Revisited."

³²Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 68.

³³Penrose, " 'Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays.' "

number of short interventions in the journal *Antipode*, focusing on what he termed “banal geopolitics”, and highlighted the role that speech acts and visual accoutrements, such as maps, play in reproducing routine descriptions of western nation-states and others, especially at times of crisis and conflict, such as the Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq wars.³⁴

Other scholars have considered how Billig’s focus on the banal might be used to think critically about the role of “the little things,” like the use of the “we/them” dichotomy alongside material objects to reproduce certain notions of the national in politics. In that respect, a key aspect of this thread of research has been to move away from the broader theorizing of nationalism and instead focus on the mundane and the miniature. It is within everyday life that banal and hot forms of nationalism blend and blur with one another in ways not controlled exclusively by either the state and state-sanctioned authorities or the media. Instead, we might more profitably ask how nationalism is embedded, resisted, rejected in a messy and unexpected way, which may actually take us (in the sense of both citizens and academics) by surprise.

Our analysis of Iceland of being a “coastal state” is used to explore the elite and popular contexts further, in which Icelandic territorial nationalism is reproduced. We acknowledge in this article that more attention is given to official documents, public speeches and published sources but want to articulate a broader agenda, which will in the future take in more ethnographic research relating to daily practices, including interviews with Icelandic citizens (and others residing in Arctic coastal states). In doing so, our proposed agenda moves beyond the identification of mundane “texts” (such as maps, speeches and adverts) as static exemplars of Icelandic nationalism, to thinking more sensitively about variations (e.g. temporal and spatial ones) in the production and consumption of these representations. Also salient here is Martin Müller’s intervention regarding the ways in which discourses, practices and the everyday co-constitute one another in the formation of geopolitical identities. Thus, we accept the “centrality of representations in the media, in government documents or politicians’ speeches as formative of identity,” but also remain attuned to “the enactment of identities by ordinary people and in micro contexts.” If nothing else we should not assume that Icelandic citizens are “moved” in the same ways by appeals by foreign ministers (to take one example) to recognize the Arctic region in national identity discourses and practices.³⁵ The notion of everyday nationalism as posited by Rhys Jones and Peter Merriman explicitly avoids dividing nationalism into “banal”, and what Billig originally defined as “hot” varieties, instead placing emphasis on the diverse contexts and ways in which such geopolitical symbols are constructed and read.³⁶ Different forms of nationalism are understood to overlap, given the potential for individuals and groups to read and react to geopolitical discourses/practices in a multitude of ways.

The politics of identity and recognition

What underlies Iceland’s current focus on the Arctic and its push for being recognized as a coastal state is not only its stakeholding claim in a region of

³⁴For example, Sidaway, “Banal Geopolitics Resumed.”

³⁵Müller “Reconsidering the Concept,” 335.

³⁶Jones and Merriman “Hot, Banal and Everyday Nationalism.”

ever-increasing geopolitical importance. It has also to be seen within the context of a continuing search for a new foreign policy identity after the Cold War and the termination, in 2006, of a 55-year United States military presence in Iceland.³⁷ Instead of viewing Iceland either as a geostrategic fixture and/or an air/naval bridge, as was the case during the Cold War, Icelandic political elites were suddenly forced to rethink Iceland's geopolitical territoriality and allegiances. It has not been a question of reducing Iceland's commitment to Western institutional structures but more of widening and re-imagining Iceland's geostrategic position. Initially, the most logical and likely outcome of the "politics of transition" was seen by Icelandic political elites as a shift toward the European Union, setting in train an imaginative geographical recasting of the country and its regional environment. No longer part of US forward defence parameters, Iceland was, thus, poised to look more toward Europe for a strategic partnership to complement its strong economic relationship with the European Union (over 70% of Iceland's exports go to EU states). Thus, in 2009, Iceland submitted its EU membership application after experiencing a major economic and political crisis, when its banking system collapsed under the weight of reckless over-expansion abroad, institutional weaknesses and global economic turmoil. The EU application signified a belated and desperate effort to restore economic stability at home and political backing abroad in a time of national crisis. It did not, however, reflect a domestic political consensus.

While Iceland has always identified socially and culturally with Europe, and, for some time, been closely tied institutionally to the European Union through the European Economic Area (EEA) – together with Norway and Lichtenstein – and the Schengen border control scheme, the EU membership bid is highly controversial. Indeed, it is far from certain that an EU accession treaty will be approved in a referendum. Scepticism about the viability of the European project, in general, is not the main reason. Rather, economic nationalism and national identity narratives have reinforced the tendency to frame the Icelandic debate over Europe in sovereignty terms – often with a very strong sense that Iceland should not allow its sovereignty to become either graduated or diminished in its dealings with something frequently imagined as a colossus. The EU's common fishery policy is the main target, for it would infringe on Iceland's full control over its fishing grounds, the backbone of its economy.³⁸ In the 1950s and 1970s, Iceland fought three "Cod Wars" with the British over the issue of fishing limits before gaining the international recognition of its 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone. Evoking the politics of memory, any weakening of Iceland's sovereignty in this area generates stiff domestic political resistance, especially when it is imagined as an active violation of Iceland's maritime borders.

In contrast to the divisions over the European project, there is a cross-political consensus on prioritizing the Arctic in Icelandic foreign policy. It is based on the belief that Iceland will play an increasingly important role in Arctic geopolitics because of its location, proximity to natural resources, potential new sea-lanes and

³⁷See Ingimundarson, *Rebellious Ally*, 155–73. There is also a popular geopolitics to this issue; see the crime novel by the bestselling Icelandic writer Arnaldur Indridason, *Operation Napoleon*, trans. Victoria Cribb (London: Harvill Secker, 2010), which deals with Iceland's uneasy geopolitical relationship with the US.

³⁸One of the strongest sources of opposition to the EU negotiations was the Icelandic Fishing Vessels Owners Union, which was eager to retain influence over a domestic fisheries governance system that grants them control of tradable fishing quotas.

trade routes.³⁹ Hence the emphasis on having a decision-making role on a par with that of the Arctic Five and a re-imagination of the country as an Arctic hub as opposed to an outpost for others. When the geopolitical and media spotlight was turned on the Arctic in response to the Russian North Pole flag-planting spectacle in 2007, Icelandic politicians were already reworking historical and geographical mythologies to create viable political narratives in the present. References to the term “Arctic Mediterranean” – coined a century ago by the explorer Vilhjálmur Stefánsson who was of Icelandic extraction⁴⁰ – were used to evoke future material gains based on the prospective opening of new trans-Arctic trade routes as a result of Arctic ice-melting.⁴¹ Thus, Icelandic officials appropriated, reformulated and repackaged Stefánsson’s early-twentieth-century vision of all-year commercial sea routes around the Arctic, with ports, naval stations and weather stations on strategically placed islands. Iceland was portrayed as an ideal trans-Arctic commercial hub – a centre for reception, distribution and trans-shipment – with the linking of the North Atlantic with the Pacific.⁴² This is represented as complementing, and indeed consolidating, Iceland’s coastal state credentials within the Arctic Ocean region. Others want to receive, distribute and trans-ship precisely because of Iceland’s geographical location and potential connectivity.⁴³ Iceland’s place in the “effluent of the Arctic Ocean” just so happens to coincide with existing and, more importantly, anticipated shipping lanes and networks of economic activity in the future.

Such representations can be traced to domestic political posturing – not in itself to be understood as trivial, but rather to touch upon discursive/practice-based behaviours. They partly reflected a nostalgic Cold War desire to be part of an elite Arctic club, and be associated with a place of renewed strategic relevance and economic potential. Making exaggerated claims about Iceland’s special position in the Arctic and/or the impending opening of new sea-lanes is also double-edged – running a risk of alienating other Arctic “coastal states” and contributing to discourses and practices associated with “Arctic geopolitics”, especially ones that are judged culpable of reproducing understandings of the Arctic region as being characterized as resource rich and prone to military competition. While it has put some emphasis on making Iceland a global trans-shipment hub, it has highlighted the potential of

³⁹See Icelandic Foreign Ministry, “Fyrir stafni haf;” Icelandic Foreign Ministry, “Ísinn brotinn;” Icelandic Foreign Ministry, “Ísland á norðurslóðum.”

⁴⁰Paradoxically, Stefánsson was ambivalent about whether Iceland was part of the Arctic region (for further details, see Pálsson, *Travelling Passions*). Thanks to one of the referees for this observation.

⁴¹It is worth noting that physical scientists and oceanographers use the term “Arctic Mediterranean” in a different context to refer to the subterranean geographies of the Arctic basin. The region being defined as “The Arctic Mediterranean consists of the Arctic Ocean and the Nordic seas (the Norwegian Sea, the Iceland Sea and the Greenland Sea). In this region, cooling and brine rejection increase the density of upper layer waters sufficiently so that they may descend to intermediate (500–1000 m) or deep levels. These ‘ventilated’ waters leave the Arctic Mediterranean as deep ‘overflow’ across the Greenland–Scotland Ridge into the North Atlantic.” See S. Østerhus et al., “Observed Transport Estimates.”

⁴²See “Opening Address” by Valgerður Sverrisdóttir, former Icelandic Foreign Minister, in Icelandic Foreign Ministry, “Fyrir stafni haf;” see also Ingimundarson, “Iceland’s Security Policy,” 84–85.

⁴³There is an interesting argument to pursue about how Icelandic volcanic disruption to European–North American air links in April 2010 highlighted not only Iceland’s “bridging” role, but also its geographical centrality to two of the most important continental spaces of the contemporary world economy.

forthcoming oil exploration in its EEZ zone – in the so-called Dragon Zone – near Jan Mayen.⁴⁴ In addition, it is pushing the economic geographical idea of making Iceland a service centre in connection with Icelandic and Norwegian oil exploration near the island. The same applies to potential natural resource extraction and tourism in Greenland. Not all of its initiatives designed to strengthen Iceland's representation as an Arctic state have met with success. Thus, the Arctic Council favoured Tromsø over Reykjavik when deciding on the location of an Arctic Council Secretariat in 2011. And the proposal for establishing an international Arctic Search and Rescue Center in Iceland has so far not been backed in any tangible way by other Arctic Ocean coastal states. Two examples, perhaps, of how appeals to Iceland's coastal state status do not resonate as forcefully as the Icelandic government might have hoped (rather than expected).

Worries about the potential effects of climate change on the marine environment in the “North” help to assemble and enact Iceland's Arctic policy. So far the practice of territoriality, that is, Icelandic references to “action” and “work” – as part of its self-definition as a coastal state – have highlighted the discursive and international division of labour to respond to Arctic problems rather than specific material contribution. Given its small size and the impact of the banking collapse, Iceland will not be able to invest much in surveillance and resource evaluation, even if it has started the oil exploration licensing process for foreign companies in the Dragon Zone. But there is awareness in Iceland that oil and gas shipments do not only offer future economic opportunities, but also environmental risks, especially the danger of oil spills.⁴⁵ Indeed, given the material stakes here, it is quite possible that Iceland will, in the future, seek ways to securitize its fishing grounds, insisting on far stricter rules of transport routes in international waters. Increased surveillance involvement of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in the Arctic is seen as a step in the right direction. The same applies to the Arctic Council's 2011 agreement on Search and Rescue and its plans for another agreement on oil pollution in the Arctic. If a serious environmental accident occurs in Icelandic waters, one option is to attempt to enforce regulatory changes through unilateral means if multilateral mechanisms – such as the Law of the Sea – are not considered adequate. But, in general, the Icelandic emphasis is primarily on cooperation among the eight Arctic states within the institutional framework of the Arctic Council.

All these factors have pushed the Arctic to the centre stage of Iceland's foreign policy agenda. The aim is to enhance Iceland's position in the “North” by highlighting its dual national identity as a North Atlantic and Arctic state. The policy is under the influence of Norway's “High North” strategy. To the Norwegians, the “High North” encompasses, geographically, the area stretching from the Barents Sea to the Greenland Sea.⁴⁶ From a political perspective, it involves Norwegian relations with neighbouring states, such as Sweden, Finland and Russia; Nordic cooperation; the relationship with the United States and Canada through the Arctic Council, and the ties with the European Union as part of the Northern Dimension, that is, the common policy and political venue of the European Union, Norway,

⁴⁴See Orkustofnun [Icelandic National Energy Authority], “Oil and Gas Exploration.”

⁴⁵Under the Swedish chairmanship, the Arctic Council will be concentrating on developing more robust oil spill procedures for the Arctic region in the aftermath of the legally binding search and rescue agreement signed in 2011.

⁴⁶Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *High North*.

Iceland and the Russian Federation. Norway's High North strategy shows how language (and practices such as the Norwegian Foreign Minister giving frequent speeches pointing to a map to explain to his audience the geographical extent of the "High North") is used to define a geographic area in a political way through a merger of two narratives on the European "High North" and the "Arctic".⁴⁷ What motivates this policy is Norway's attempt to strengthen its presence in the North, for example, on the question of Svalbard, not the least its disputed "Fishery Protection Zone". Another is to maintain political stability in Norway's relations with its much larger neighbour, Russia, and finally to encourage and sustain resource-led development in the northern territories of Norway – onshore and offshore.⁴⁸

Like Norway, Iceland wants to define its place in the "North" in broad political and geographic terms. As an attempt to project claims to national identity, such an approach is not without contradictions. Icelandic nationalism has traditionally centred less on the North than on what has been considered Western identity formation. Historically, there has been a tension between a preponderant commitment to a Western nationalist trajectory, and a Third World anti-colonial narrative. From the 1950s until the 1970s, these two strands of nationalism merged in the "Cod Wars" against the British over the extension of Iceland's fishery limits.⁴⁹

On the one hand, there was a strong influence of the classical Western nationalist model: to strengthen political and economic independence and to protect Iceland's borders – in this case, the fishery grounds around the island – by expanding the fishery zone. In other words, to be considered an efficacious and internationally respected "coastal state". Yet it was anti-traditional in the sense that it was rooted in a modernity discourse, which, was by definition ambivalent in its very origin. As Paul de Man put it, "modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at least a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure."⁵⁰ In the Icelandic case, it represented an attempt to do away with any notions of national backwardness.

On the other hand, political elites used an anti-Western discourse based on Third World nationalism against colonialism and on the reification of historical traditions.⁵¹ This line of argument proved powerful and effective, even if it was problematic because Icelanders did not, as one of the richest nations in the world, identify themselves with the developing world. But what made it discursively viable was that the Icelandic economic system was so dependent on fishing and was fighting a country with an imperialist and colonial record. When it came to the extension of fishery limits in global politics, the most forceful advocates of such territorial nationalism were Third World states. Hence, it also suited Iceland's economic interests to tie its struggle against the British to the wider politics of decolonization.

Such a materialist approach has always taken precedence over any Icelandic propagation of territorial Romanticism. Indeed, the Arctic has never had an exalted place in Iceland's political and cultural imagination. While Iceland has been

⁴⁷Støre, "Iceland and Norway."

⁴⁸See Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, "Regjeringens nordområdestrategi;" see also Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs "Nordområdene: Visjon og virkemidler" (Oslo: Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 18 November 2011).

⁴⁹Ingimundarson, *Rebellious Ally*," 99–134.

⁵⁰De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 244.

⁵¹See, for example, van den Berghe, "Ethnicity and the Sociological Debate;" Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 169–70; Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments*.

committed to a northern identity, it has traditionally paid limited attention to the Arctic, except when clear economic interests have been at stake. It did, for example, not become a party to the Svalbard Treaty until 1994 after a dispute with Norway over Icelandic fishing in the Barents Sea. Iceland has rejected Norway's assumption of the 200-mile "Fishery Protection Zone" around Svalbard, arguing that the non-discriminatory rights to practice peaceful economic activities of the parties of the Svalbard Treaty apply. Thus, in "normal times", national projections of Iceland as developed country have always been dominant. And it is precisely for this reason that Icelanders have not wanted to identify themselves too closely to their "less developed" regional Northern and Arctic neighbours. In this regard, the 2008 banking collapse proved to be a very hard pill to swallow for Icelandic political elites, for it destabilized such national identities and self-perceptions of Iceland as a highly developed and modern state.⁵² Betraying a sense of vulnerability and identity loss – when Iceland was forced to accept an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout – the then Prime Minister Geir Haarde claimed that he had extracted a promise from the IMF that Iceland would not be like, what he termed, a "Third World" state.⁵³

As was the case during the "Cod Wars", this line of argument tends only to be modified in Icelandic political discourse when overshadowed by economic interests. When it comes to whaling, for example, Icelanders have had no problem mixing the historical rights of "indigenous peoples" with their own whale-hunting policy for "scientific purposes".⁵⁴ And given the likelihood of large oil deposits in Greenland's Arctic waters, they have placed much emphasis on the rights of Arctic "indigenous peoples". To be sure, Iceland has traditionally supported their rights and maintained good relations with Greenland. But it is clear that in Iceland's Arctic policy an enhanced importance has been accorded to "indigenous peoples" in the past few years – not least because it has been useful to highlight a geopolitics of potential exclusion. Thus, in its strenuous fight against the establishment of a formalized Arctic Five, Iceland criticized the meetings in Ilulissat and Chelsea not only on the grounds that they excluded the other three Arctic states, but also because they bypassed the Arctic's "indigenous peoples". Given the sensitivity of the issue, even US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton publicly reprimanded the Canadian government for not inviting those stakeholders.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Being recognized as a "coastal state" is primarily geared towards an international audience, especially the Arctic Five. It is seen as a means to strengthen Iceland's

⁵²See Ingimundarson, "Crisis of Affluence."

⁵³Gunnarsson: *Umsátrið*, 71.

⁵⁴The 2011 reaction of the Icelandic government to the possibility of US sanctions on Iceland for hunting whales is a case in point. In a statement, the Foreign Ministry argued that the "US authorities are not consistent when they criticize Iceland for its fin whale hunting," which is "no less sustainable than US bowhead whaling" off the coast of Alaska. What was left unstated was that US whale hunting is conducted by nine different Alaskan "indigenous" communities. See "US May Impose Sanctions on Iceland for Hunting Whales", Bloomberg, 20 July 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-07-20/u-s-may-impose-sanctions-on-iceland-for-hunting-whales-1-.html>.

⁵⁵"Clinton Rebuke Overshadow Canada's Arctic Meeting", Reuters, 29 March 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/articl/idUSTRE62S4ZP20100330>.

position in the Arctic Council, and in its dealings with other Arctic coastal states. Geographical descriptions and metaphors are being put to work to ensure that Iceland is understood as a “coastal state” and, as such, is recognized by others as noteworthy. There has, in fact, been limited debate or discussion – in the domestic arena – about this point, in particular, or Iceland’s Arctic policy, in general. The Arctic does not evoke any sense of nationalistic passions or controversy. In this sense, the Icelandic parliamentary resolution fits well with Billig’s notion of banal nationalism, where the flag remains “unwaved”, and where the assumptions of nationalism are deeply entrenched. The coastal state argument reflects continuous efforts by the Icelandic Foreign Ministry to insert and naturalize ideas within the domestic arena based on perceived national interests in the Arctic region. It is part of what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger saw as a key function of nationalism: to socialize by inculcating beliefs, values systems and conventions of behaviour through an identification with a “community” and its institutions.⁵⁶ The focus is not on immediate gratification – even if politicians are touting the Dragon Zone as a potentially lucrative venture. The Icelandic government and the media have portrayed Iceland’s Arctic interests in materialist terms, with emphasis on potential, if still unfulfilled gains based on Iceland’s geostrategic position.

The meaning and effects of performativity or speech acts depend on how it is displayed and dramatized. Since Iceland is not challenging UNCLOS with its coastal state demand, it has not generated protests among the other Arctic stakeholding countries. Yet, so far, the Arctic Five have not shown any signs that they will recognize Iceland as a coastal state in the sense of inviting its representatives to its meetings as an equal member. They know that any formal Arctic Five meetings will be met by vocal opposition from Iceland and more tempered responses from the other two Arctic states excluded from them, Sweden and Finland, which, unlike Iceland, have no Arctic coastlines. This resistance will surely not stop the Arctic Five project, but it could unsettle it in terms of how a select group of coastal states attempt to “shore up” their sovereign interests and trans-Arctic influence over the Arctic Ocean. And it will remind both international and domestic audiences of the essence of Arctic geopolitics – the inside/outside divide and its potential for friction, not only between the eight Arctic states themselves, but also between them and external actors – and point to the sites, at which the border function of inclusion/exclusion takes places, where it is performed and where it is fought. For us, these developments (and they are ongoing) remind us that there are multiple understandings of the Arctic region and that we have an opportunity to explore in more depth how terms such as “coastal state” are used to build, claim, define and even resist national and circumpolar identity projects.⁵⁷

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⁵⁶Hobsbawm and Ranger, *Invention of Tradition*, 9.

⁵⁷This would also include further research on how Permanent Participants to the Arctic Council engage, employ and perhaps resist the category of “coastal state”.

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