
In 2007, the planting of a titanium flag by a Russian expedition on the North Pole ignited a fierce public debate about Arctic sovereignty. In The politics of Arctic sovereignty Jessica Shadian delivers a critical contribution to inform these discussions from the perspective of some of the Arctic main historical occupants. Building on a thorough study of more than four decades of political agency of the Inuit in Alaska, Canada and Greenland, the author highlights how the colonization process in the Arctic and the imposition of the Westphalian political system provided the incentive for Inuit to organize themselves politically, a process that will ultimately result in the affirmation of an alternative conception of sovereignty.

Shadian structures her expose in three main parts in which each of the ten chapters provide a specific chronological or thematic contribution towards the overall objective of her book. The interest of the book is strengthened by the insertion of long quotes from some of the main actors of these developments, providing direct access to the perspectives of those that contributed most to the establishment of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC).

The book opens with a short review of the key theoretical concepts discussed in the next chapters. In particular, the author introduces the notion of polities, which provides an alternative to the concept of Westphalian sovereignty, enabling to look beyond the artificially strong divide of international actors between the categories of sovereign states and non-governmental organizations.

The first part of the book – ‘Constructing Westphalia’ – describes the historical context in which the Inuit polity emerged. The second chapter discusses the colonization by the Europeans of Canada, Alaska and Greenland. This progressive process is relevant for the rest of the discussion as it explains how the Arctic came to be framed within the Westphalian political system.

Shadian then addresses how, in the context of the new political geography resulting from Arctic colonization, the nation-building processes at play in each of these three territories impacted the emergence of Inuit polities. Despite their differences, the strategies of Washington, Ottawa and Copenhagen led to somewhat comparable results across the Arctic. The import of the Westphalian system by Southerners into the Arctic led to the construction of a new circumpolar Inuit polity that would later progressively question the notion of sovereignty imposed through colonization.

The second part of the book, ‘Expanding the boundaries of Westphalia’, constitutes the most important section of the
Part III builds on the previous detailed historical analysis to offer an analysis of the role of the Inuit polity in the context of contemporary Arctic governance. In the penultimate chapter of the book, the author briefly describes how the debate related to sovereignty in the Arctic has unfolded since 2007 and the planting of the Russian flag. Shadian offers a short account of recent political gains secured by indigenous peoples organizations in international institutions. As a conclusion, the final chapter looks back at the history described throughout the book and reaffirms Shadian’s main thesis that ‘the ICC has been central in helping to reshape the central inside/outside boundaries defining the modern Westphalian political system’. The author identifies, however, two emerging challenges to this development: the progressive shift from sustainable development to discourses focused on climate vulnerability; and the potential affirmation of a sovereign Greenland.

Two elements discussed in The politics of Arctic sovereignty make this book particularly captivating for all those researching or curious about ongoing developments in Arctic governance. Firstly, the book explores the emergence and the role of the ICC in the context not only of regional Arctic governance but also of the definition of norms and discourses through the United Nations. This approach allows the reader to appreciate how both regional and global developments have shaped the formation of an Inuit polity. But references to global governance go both ways as Shadian also highlights how the ICC has contributed to influencing global environmental regimes. As a result, the book avoids the flaws of many studies of Arctic governance that fail to assess the bidirectional nature of the relation between Arctic developments and international governance.

Secondly, the role of oil and gas extraction in the Arctic national and regional governance serves as a connecting thread throughout most of the book. These elements provide a strong basis for Shadian to develop the rather counter-intuitive argument that Inuit political agency emerged as a result of the development of the fossil fuel industry in the Arctic and might suffer from the growing importance of climate change discourse.

One could possibly regret that this otherwise very comprehensive research does not consider the relevance of Russian Inuit in the context of the emergence of a transnational Inuit polity. Shadian justifies this omission by the absence of political agency of the Russian Inuit at the time of the establishment of the ICC. As the author affirms that the ICC constitute a unique expression of sovereignty beyond existing national boundaries, the reader might wonder about the implications of the fact that some of the Inuit are, de facto, excluded from some of the benefits of the constitution of an Inuit polity on the basis of their nationality.

Since Chilingarov’s expedition to the North Pole and Harper’s ‘use it or lose it’ narrative, discussions of national sovereignty in the Arctic have been framed to a large extent by strongly positivist terms. In this context, The politics of Arctic sovereignty provides a much welcomed contribution to this discussion not only describing an alternative understanding of the concept of sovereignty in the Arctic but also offering a fascinating account of how the Inuit came to reaffirm their political agency. (Sébastien Duyck, World Trade Institute, University of Bern, Hallerstrasse 6, 3012 Bern, Switzerland (sebastien.duyck@ulapland.fi)).