The Arctic has in recent years received outsized attention in international discourse. A perceived last frontier of uninhabited and ungoverned spaces – of which it is neither – ripe for great power competition – for which there is little appetite.

In this special issue on International Relations Theory, the Arctic is examined through the tenets of IR Theory with a firm grasp of the region's complexities, diversity and fairly clear-cut position in international legal hierarchies.

Not only is the Arctic a home to over 4 million people, it is also a relatively well defined space from the perspective of international governance. All landmass falls under the national jurisdictions of the eight Arctic States or their sub-national jurisdictions. All sea falls under either national jurisdictions or is governed by the tenets of the UN Convention on Law of the Sea, under the auspices of which a number of bilateral and multilateral agreements have been made. The Central Arctic Ocean is the largest area of high seas in the Arctic. Surrounded by the exclusive economic zones of the Arctic States, it is as well subject to international governance through the legally binding *Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean*, signed in Ilulissat, Greenland on October 3, 2018, and entered into force on June 25th, 2021.

The Arctic Council, the leading intergovernmental forum for the region, serves to promote cooperation and coordination among its members, the Arctic States and its Permanent Participants which represent the Arctic Indigenous peoples. It also serves as an interlocutor to the Observers to the Council, including non-Arctic states, governmental and non-governmental entities.

Thus despite the sometimes high strung exclamations to the contrary, so far all is well in the Arctic when it comes to international cooperation and collaboration. The primacy of national sovereignty combined with observance and respect for the rules and norms of international law, all give substance to the policy of maintaining peaceful cooperation and coexistence so steadfastly pursued by the governments of the Arctic.

This does not mean the region is without its challenges, including but not limited to crowded housing, food insecurities, limited health service in remote communities, lack of connectivity, insufficient infrastructure and ever more rapidly warming climate.

Sustainability, economic challenges or opportunities, the impact of climate change, geopolitical rivalries, environmental degradation, all impact a fragile and important region, often disproportionately.

The Covid-19 pandemic has in fact highlighted some of these challenges. Political developments on the national and international level do so as well. To maintain the Arctic as an area of peaceful coexistence and cooperation will become an ever-increasing challenge, not least due to the increasing complexities of the challenges we who call the Arctic home are facing.

For Iceland, managing these challenges, during its two year Chairmanship of the Arctic Council, combined with a global pandemic, was not always easy. It is, however, a task successfully completed. Not least due to the fact that everyone involved kept their focus, recognizing that failure was not really an option. In the end, at the Reykjavik Ministerial at the end of May 2021, an ambitious Strategic Plan for the next ten years of the Council's work was agreed, collectively and by consensus, accompanied by a comprehensive Ministerial Declaration highlighting our shared challenges and achievements. It certainly provides a positive gateway to the next two years of the Russian chairmanship of the Council.

The security dimension remains outside the scope and function of the Arctic Council. Rightfully so, as it would without any doubt impede its other work. That does not preclude us from finding an eventual appropriate home for those deliberations. That will be one of the tasks for the next months and years, and indeed, Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov, at the Reykjavik Ministerial, called for the resumption of meetings among Arctic Chiefs of defense.

In this collection of essays and articles you will find interesting, illuminating and challenging observations and insights for anyone intrigued by the Arctic from any angle, be it environmental, societal, economic or geopolitical – a resource and inspiration for further deliberation.

For any scholar of International Relations Theory, the compilation provides a vibrant insight into our region from a theoretical perspective not often seen – a foundation from which to study and reflect on the dynamics we see.

To Dr. Zellen and his students and colleagues who have accomplished this excellent work and provided their keen insights I offer my congratulations and sincere appreciation for being allowed to bask a bit in the glory of their collective achievements.

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Iceland’s Senior Arctic Official
November 2019 – June 2021