2015

The Pacific Northwest as an Emerging Arctic Region

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Introduction. This border brief, authored by two Arctic scholars, takes a special look at how borders are changing in the Arctic. The fast-changing Arctic is increasingly defined by boundaries drawn at a regional scale, rather than traditional borders that are based on national lines. This has major implications for the national and foreign policies of both Arctic and non-Arctic actors. The Pacific Northwest, which has an Arctic foothold through the northern sub-national units of Alaska, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories (NWT), has been playing an active role in this regionalization process for several years, and seeks to expand its presence, as Alaska in particular takes greater initiative in positioning itself as an Arctic actor separate from Washington, DC.

Re-bordering the Arctic. The Arctic political region is often perceived and discussed through three categories of borders: geography/climate (northern, cold), states (sovereignty) and polities (regional, indigenous and institutional organizations). It has undergone two distinct periods of political regionalization. The first followed the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The political space that opened up at that time allowed stakeholders across the Barents region (covering parts of northern Scandinavia and Northwest Russia) to strengthen economic and social ties and environmental cooperation, resulting in the establishment of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) in 1993. A desire to enhance ties with Russia and address the Arctic environmental legacy left from the Soviet era, as well as growing influence and recognition of Arctic indigenous peoples, further led to the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996. Institutions created in the 1990s further sought to foster a regional circumpolar identity and improve collaboration across borders. The 1990s Arctic thus became a site of such collaboration, based mainly on environmental and scientific issues, and indigenous / non-indigenous relations.

The effects of climate change and the commodities boom of the late 2000s brought renewed attention to the Arctic region, but this time with a more strategic and economic focus. The so-called A5 or Arctic 5 coastal states have met several times since 2008 to address regional oceanic issues, including delimiting the extension of their continental shelves. The Arctic Circle Assembly was inaugurated in 2013 in Reykjavik as a forum to bring together diverse organizations, think tanks, corporations and other stakeholders to increase Arctic dialogue and collaborative decision-making. The Arctic Economic
Council was established in Iqaluit in 2014 to facilitate business-to-business activities and responsible economic development in the region.

The possibility of increased economic activity and extractive industries in the region has also led to a growing number of non-Arctic state actors seeking a seat at the “Arctic table.” In their view, a globalized Arctic implies that non-Arctic state actors deserve to be involved in regional Arctic governance. There is an ongoing debate as to how and what degree this should happen. The 2013 Arctic Council ministerial meeting in Kiruna, Sweden, reflected an evolution in this process: for the first time several Asian states (China, Japan, Singapore, Korea and India) were given observer status in the Arctic Council leading to a total of 12 non-Arctic state Observers. However the debate is not settled, as the Council conservatively deferred all new state applications at the 2015 Ministerial.

**Inuit Homelands**

The creation of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) in the late 1970s – an NGO representing more than 150,000 Inuit across the Arctic region (Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Russia) – illustrates the significant role of indigenous peoples in regionalizing and re-bordering the Arctic. Indigenous peoples in the Arctic have established non-conventional political border constructs in Arctic national and global politics based on local/regional indigenous occupancy, culture and politics. Their political influence far exceeds their numerical strength of approximately 500,000 culturally diverse indigenous inhabitants across the Arctic and sub-Arctic.

On June 10, 2009, the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), which represents the Canadian Inuit regions in Nunatsiavut (Labrador), Nunavik (Québec), Nunavut, and Inuvialuit (NWT), changed its terminology for the Inuit regions in Canada from “Inuit Nunaaq” (Inuit homeland, referring to land) to “Inuit Nunangat” (Inuit homeland referring to land, water and ice). This was provocative in that it deliberately drew Inuit into the politics of Arctic waters governance on issues from environmental protection and maritime activity to resource development and national sovereignty, and portends attempts to influence international law (UNCLOS) on issues relating to Inuit usage of Arctic waters.
Governance collaboration is comparatively less developed in the non-indigenous North American Arctic. While the Pacific NorthWest Economic Region (PNWER) has been around for more than two decades, it established an Arctic Caucus only in 2009, encompassing Alaska, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. The objective of the caucus is to increase the visibility of Arctic issues in PNWER activities and build cross-jurisdictional support for the achievement of mutual goals, in particular economic ones.

In many ways this is a development that is long overdue. The Barents and West Nordic regions have demonstrated the logic of cross-border sub-national planning and collaboration, especially given the unique infrastructural and market challenges that northern regions experience. The North American Western Arctic contains a huge space and significant resources in a world that needs more of both. Yet they have had relatively little influence or prominence in circumpolar affairs, compared to their neighbors in the Barents and Inuit Nunaat regions.

One Arctic, Two Arctics, or Many Arctics? The Arctic Council has traditionally been the preserve of national governments and their foreign policies. Local input has been filtered through the six indigenous organizations, or Permanent Participants (PPs), including the ICC, who play an integral and influential role in the Arctic Council but are non-voting.

In the past several years, however, national delegations have made efforts to include sub-national governments, who represent far more Northerners and have greater democratic legitimacy than the PPs. Canada, for example, formally established an Arctic Council Advisory Committee in 2008 (informal consultation had begun much earlier) that included representatives both from the three PPs which have Canadian indigenous participation and the three territorial governments. In addition, Canada’s Minister for the Arctic Council and Nunavut MP Leona Aglukkaq toured the three territorial capitals in Fall 2012 to solicit feedback ahead of the Canadian Arctic Council Chairmanship. Publicly, the territorial Premiers have been very gracious about this engagement. Sub-national governments in other states have not been as pleased: the Premier of Greenland, Aleqa Hammond, boycotted the 2013 Kiruna Ministerial in Sweden because she was only included as part of the Danish delegation and not in her own right.

A cleavage between the sub-national – Alaska – and the national – Washington, DC – has also opened up under the U.S. Arctic Council Chairmanship, which put a strong emphasis for its agenda on the Arctic Ocean and climate change, quintessential concerns of the lower 48 regarding the Arctic, but of lesser importance to Alaskan politicians. In selecting the leaders of the 2015-17 U.S. Arctic Council Chairmanship, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry chose two non-Alaskans, prioritizing strong oceanic and diplomatic experience rather than northern political knowledge; former Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Robert J. Papp has been appointed the U.S.’ (first) Special Representative to the Arctic while Ambassador John Balton, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Oceans and Fisheries, has been selected Chair of the Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs).

Similarly, the challenge of climate change was the main topic of Secretary Kerry’s remarks at both the Iqaluit Ministerial on April 24, 2015 when the U.S. assumed the Chairmanship, and at the State Department reception he hosted on May 21, 2015 in Washington DC to celebrate the Chairmanship. The Alaska Arctic Policy Commission and U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski had previously lobbied for...
greater emphasis on economic development and improved living conditions. The U.S. Chairmanship has since prioritized these alongside addressing the impacts of climate change and stewardship of the Arctic Ocean, but somewhat belatedly and as yet superficially. It would be an overstatement to suggest that the State Department has not made attempts to engage with and respond to Alaskans’ concerns. But while Alaska may be welcome as part of the Arctic policy team, there is no doubt that the federal government sees itself as leading it.

This makes the official slogan and twitter hashtag of the U.S. Arctic Council Chairmanship – #OneArctic – somewhat ironic. The idea behind the slogan, as articulated by Secretary Kerry at the Iqaluit Ministerial, is that the “entire world shares a responsibility to protect, to respect, to nurture, and to promote the region.” But as Senator Murkowski expressed earlier at the Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik in October 2014, there are increasingly two Arctics – one as understood by southern stakeholders, in which the Arctic is a pristine and vulnerable ecosystem, filled with struggling polar bears and melting sea ice; and one as understood by northerners, in which the Arctic is a homeland, a place to live and work, and a community. At a policy level, these two perspectives are increasingly clashing, as many (southern and northern stakeholders) question whether environmental protection and sustainable development in the region can truly co-exist.

The Pacific Northwest (PNW) in Arctic affairs. Regional collaboration in the PNW (defined by the PNWER map) presents a different opportunity for Alaskan and American Arctic policy, and one which fully complements the state of Alaska’s social and economic goals for its citizens. Notably, it was Washington State Representative Rick Larsen (D-WA) who joined with Alaska’s Don Young (R-AK) to initiate the “Congressional Arctic Working Group” in 2014 to build awareness of the region and manage the opportunities and responsibilities that a warming Arctic brings to actors far south of the 60th parallel. Similarly, cross-border trade and northern infrastructure development will both benefit from closer collaboration between Alaska, Yukon and the NWT, as these regions seek economies of scale in order to compete in world markets.

With sophisticated Arctic policy support from local organizations such as the Institute of the North, Alaska is increasingly positioning itself to initiate and implement circumpolar partnerships quite apart from those being led by the federal government. The PNW, and organizations such as PNWER, are defining a new Arctic region driven by subnational actors who, like their counterparts in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region, have an independent authority to advance intergovernmental and interregional objectives in support of local priorities. Indeed, the PNW is well positioned to play an influential role in Arctic affairs and in shaping future policy-making in the circumpolar world.

Endnotes

1. The authors are respectively Strategist for Outreach and Indigenous Engagement, University of Saskatchewan, and Visiting Scholar at Western Washington University. They are jointly the Managing Editors of the Arctic Yearbook (www.arcticyearbook.com).
2. Speakers were Canadian Consul General (Seattle), James K. Hill; U.S. Consul General (Vancouver), Lynne Platt; Nils Andreassen, Executive Director, Institute of the North; Nadine Fabbi, Associate Director, Canadian Studies Center at the University of Washington; Steve Myers, Program Manager, Arctic Caucus of PNWER; and both authors of this policy brief, Heather Exner-Pirot and Joël Plouffe.
3. The eight Arctic states include Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Russian Federation, and the U.S.
4. Such institutions include the Northern Forum, the University of the Arctic, the Calotte Academy, the West Nordic Council, the Indigenous Peoples Secretariat, the International Arctic Science Committee and the International Arctic Social Sciences Association.
5. PNWER includes Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Alaska, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Yukon, and NWT.