

A Strategic Plan for the Arctic Council:

Recommendations for Moving Forward

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The Arctic Initiative is a joint project of the Environment and Natural Resources Program and the Science, Technology, and Public Policy Program at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. With the goal of providing knowledge and tools that will help reduce risk and increase resilience in the region and elsewhere, the Arctic Initiative is initiating new research; convening stakeholders such as policymakers, scientists, and Arctic residents; and training a new generation of public and private experts to understand and address the many factors that are driving change and risk in the region.

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A view at the Senior Arctic Officials' meeting 13-14 March 2019 in Ruka, Kuusamo Finland.

Courtesy Arctic Council



Introduction

The Arctic Council is the most respected intergovernmental forum for the Arctic. For more than 20 years, it has served as a vital mechanism for collaboration among the eight Arctic States,¹ with the active participation of Arctic Indigenous Peoples and a diverse and growing group of Observers. The Council has promoted peaceful cooperation on a wide range of issues, with a particular focus on sustainable development and environmental protection.

For the first time since its creation in 1996, the Arctic Council failed to reach agreement on a Ministerial Declaration when it met in Rovaniemi earlier this month. Such Declarations signed at each past Ministerial meeting have served to highlight the Council's programs and projects over the prior two years and to chart new work that the Council would undertake during the next biennium.

The Trump Administration bears much of the responsibility for blocking consensus on the 2019 Ministerial Declaration. Having pressured other Arctic Council members to remove references to climate change from the negotiating drafts, and to weaken other elements relating to protecting the Arctic environment, the United States in the end refused to sign the Declaration. As a result, Finnish Foreign Minister Soini had no choice but to convert what should have been a consensus document into a Chairman's Statement reflecting disagreement on key matters.

This unfortunate turn of events raises serious questions about the ability of the Arctic Council to continue to play the constructive role that has been its hallmark in helping to keep the Arctic Region peaceful and cooperative despite growing geopolitical tensions relating to other issues and to other areas of the world. With Finland's chairmanship of the Arctic Council now at an end, Iceland takes up the mantle without the clear alignment of purpose and interests that past Ministerial Declarations have reflected.

¹ The eight Arctic States are Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States of America.

A Missed Opportunity

The Arctic Council’s inability to agree on a Declaration in Rovaniemi largely overshadows another missed opportunity—the inability to complete work on its first Strategic Plan. Two years ago, when the Arctic Council Ministers met in Fairbanks at the conclusion of the U.S. chairmanship, they recognized that “new opportunities and challenges in the Arctic” suggested that the Council should take a serious look at the way it functions. The Fairbanks Declaration called for an effort to establish clear priorities and, potentially, to adjust the structure and operations of the Council to meet current and anticipated conditions. The Ministers accordingly instructed “the Senior Arctic Officials to develop a strategic plan based on the Arctic Council’s foundational documents and subsidiary body strategies and guiding documents” for approval in 2019.

To its credit, the Finnish Chairmanship devoted considerable effort to develop an Arctic Council Strategic Plan over the past two years. As with the Ministerial Declaration, however, negotiations over the final text of the Strategic Plan broke down in the end, suggesting a lack of consensus about either the purpose or the process to be adopted. One may reasonably assume that difficulties over language concerning climate change contributed to the breakdown. Instead of adopting a Strategic Plan, the Rovaniemi Chairman’s Statement welcomed the ongoing strategic work, instructed the Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs)² to continue strategic planning in order to provide guidance and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Arctic Council, and further instructed the SAOs to review the roles of the Ministerial meetings, the Senior Arctic Officials and the Permanent Participants, and to report to Ministers in 2021.

This paper offers a brief background on the circumstances giving rise to the need for the Arctic Council to develop a Strategic Plan and offers suggestions for rekindling this effort following the disheartening outcomes in Rovaniemi.

2 Every Arctic Council nation designates one person as its Senior Arctic Official, almost always from its Foreign Ministry. The “SAO” becomes the principal point of contact and coordination for that government’s efforts and engagement with the Arctic Council. The SAOs typically meet 2-3 times per year among themselves and with representatives of the Arctic Indigenous Peoples (“the Permanent Participants”) and others to oversee the work of the Arctic Council subsidiary bodies, to plan events, to keep open lines of communication, and for other purposes.

Strengths of the Arctic Council

Every institution, even the most successful, can benefit from a periodic and dispassionate assessment of its strengths and weaknesses and a rigorous determination of whether and how to change. Even if the institution ultimately elects to continue operating without significant change, the decision to do so will at least represent an affirmative choice rather than a result of organizational inertia.

The Arctic Council has, from time to time, considered various aspects of its structure and operations and made some notable adjustments. It has never, however, developed and adopted a Strategic Plan of the sort that the Ministers called for in 2017—a comprehensive document that sets priorities for future work and leads to a careful and honest deliberation about whether to make serious changes in order to meet those priorities.

From its modest beginnings in 1996 that others have well documented,³ the Arctic Council has evolved impressively to become the primary international forum in which Arctic States, with the active involvement of Arctic Indigenous Peoples, address a wide range of matters of concern to the people of the Arctic region. The Ottawa Declaration that created the Council gave it a mandate to address “common Arctic issues,” in particular issues of sustainable development and environmental protection. The growing interest in the Arctic, due principally to the profound effects and implications of climate change, has brought unprecedented attention to the Council and has provided the Council opportunities to expand its reach, scope and impact.

Notwithstanding the regrettable outcomes of the Rovaniemi meeting, people who have participated in the Arctic Council over the years, including during the Finnish chairmanship that has now ended, can take considerable pride in how the work of the Arctic Council has evolved. Its notable accomplishments include:

3 Koivurova; Smieszek and Koivurova; Molenaar; Halinen.

- Developing and disseminating knowledge about the Arctic, including through groundbreaking analyses such as the *Impacts of a Warming Arctic* and the *Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment* (among many other products).
- Raising awareness about the environmental and socioeconomic changes that are occurring in the Arctic.
- Involving the Arctic Indigenous Peoples, represented by six Permanent Participant organizations, in essentially all Arctic Council activities in a manner that few if any other international bodies have managed to emulate.
- Serving as the venue for the successful negotiation of three binding agreements among the Arctic States.
- Facilitating the establishment of other entities, including the University of the Arctic, Arctic Economic Council, the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, and the Arctic Offshore Regulators Forum.
- Attracting and engaging a remarkable number of Observers, including 13 non-Arctic nations and some 27 international and non-governmental organizations.⁴

Perhaps most profoundly, the Arctic Council has also contributed appreciably to keeping the Arctic region peaceful and stable, an area of the planet marked by a high degree of international cooperation and relatively low tension, at least until recently.

4 At the 2019 Ministerial meeting, the Arctic Council accepted one new Observer, the International Maritime Organization. Since 2013, when the Council “received the application of the European Union for Observer status affirmatively” but deferred a final decision, the European Union has enjoyed the status of an Observer in practice.

The Need for an Arctic Council Strategic Plan

For all these achievements, the Arctic Council has also faced its share of criticism and challenges over the years. Some of the critiques have appeared in the popular and academic press, and some have emerged from official analyses, including a 2015 Multilateral Audit conducted by five of the Arctic Council governments.⁵ The concerns most frequently voiced include:

- The Arctic Council undertakes too many programs and projects, partly as a result of the rotating chairmanship system, without an effective way to measure the effectiveness of these endeavors. Each incoming chairmanship has typically introduced new and ambitious undertakings to the Council's worklist. Due to the lack of adequate resources and other constraints, however, the Council cannot always complete projects as hoped, such that they often linger on after the chairmanship has ended. Although the Council recently instituted a mechanism to track its many ongoing activities, it still has no real way to determine whether the Arctic States are properly implementing the many recommendations they have accepted in the Ministerial Declarations and other high-level products of the Council. In short, the Council lacks the discipline to set clear priorities for action and lacks accountability and consistent follow-up.
- The Arctic Council's structure may be hampering its effectiveness. The six standing Working Groups of the Council (four of which it in a sense inherited from its predecessor, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, and two that it added later)⁶ may not fully reflect the current issues and needs of the Arctic today. The

5 Koivurova; Smieszek and Koivurova; Rottem; Young; Conley and Melino; Kankaanpää and Young; Brigham et al.; Exner-Pirot et al.; Axworthy; Supreme Audit Institutions of Denmark, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States of America.

6 The six Working Groups of the Arctic Council are the Arctic Contaminants Action Program, the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme, the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna Working Group, the Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response Working Group, the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment Working Group, and the Sustainable Development Working Group. Participants in these Working Groups typically include representatives at the expert level from government ministries, Arctic Indigenous Peoples, scientists, researchers and other invitees.

Working Groups operate partly in accordance with their own distinct rules, and four of them maintain secretariats that are separate from the Arctic Council Secretariat. Separate secretariats and a lack of understanding about Working Group projects and participation can undermine coordination and result in inadequate sharing of relevant information and resources. Moreover, the Council has complicated, and to some extent undermined, its organizational coherence through its penchant for creating additional Task Forces and other subsidiary bodies with time-limited mandates that overlap to a degree with those of the Working Groups.

- The Arctic Council suffers from inadequate and unpredictable programmatic funding. During the 2015-2017 U.S. chairmanship, the Council undertook an analysis of its various funding sources and attempted to quantify both its administrative and programmatic funding levels. The administrative funding proved relatively straightforward to assess, but a calculation of the programmatic funding—much of it provided “in-kind” from government agencies and others who contribute their time and expertise to Council activities—remained elusive.⁷ The signal that emerged from the noise nevertheless demonstrated how poorly resourced the Arctic Council is, and how difficult a job the Council has in predicting future programmatic funding.
- The active involvement of Arctic Indigenous Peoples gives the Arctic Council legitimacy and authenticity that it would otherwise lack. Yet most if not all of the Permanent Participants face very real limitations in financial and human resources necessary to attend and contribute to the many Arctic Council meetings and other events, even those of greatest interest to them. The establishment of the **Álgu** Fund⁸ may help address some of these limitations, but is unlikely to be a full solution to the problem.

7 Arctic Council Funding: An Overview, https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/1721/EDOCS-3199-v4-ACSAOUS202_Fairbanks_2016_5-1_Arctic-Council-funding-an-overview.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y. See also, “How Much Does the Arctic Council Cost?” Exner-Pirot, <http://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2016/09/07/blog-how-much-does-the-arctic-council-cost/>.

8 See <https://www.algufund.org/>.

- The Arctic Council has struggled to identify appropriate roles for its many Observers, and it has a haphazard approach to identifying the relevant people and organizations to participate in projects. The Council's peculiar configuration—8 Arctic States, 6 Permanent Participant organizations, and 40 Observers—makes this an unusual challenge. The Council benefits from the input, expertise and resources provided by the Observers, but also remains wary of giving the Observers too much influence over Council activities. Many of the Observers have called for more transparency, better communication and greater opportunities to engage in the work of the Council. Few seem satisfied with the current situation.

In 2017, these and other concerns led the Arctic Council Ministers to call for a Strategic Plan as a necessary step in considering changes to the Council's operations and structure. The 2019 Ministerial Meeting should have adopted the Strategic Plan to serve as the basis for making such adjustments in the next biennium or two. Instead, the Council needs now to pick up the pieces of the planning process.

Recommendations Moving Forward

Recommendation 1:

Complete and Adopt a Written Strategic Plan Rather than Simply “Continue Strategic Planning”

The Chairman’s Statement issued in Rovaniemi does not actually call for a Strategic Plan, but merely instructs the SAOs to “continue strategic planning ... and to report to Ministers in 2021.” As noted above, this formulation may well have resulted from the inability to agree on language relating to climate change that would have appeared in the Strategic Plan. It may also reflect a lack of consensus on the most pressing and needed changes, and on how to develop the best solutions.

The Council must find a way past this obstacle. An adopted Strategic Plan is the best vehicle for setting priorities and for making the adjustments necessary to meet those priorities. The Strategic Plan does not need to answer every question—indeed, it can set forth specific topics for ongoing planning efforts and a timetable for making further decisions (*e.g.*, during one or two chairmanships to come). Without an initial written plan, however, the vague mandate to “continue strategic planning” is unlikely to focus the Council on the difficult choices that lie ahead.

Recommendation 2:

Respond to the Issues Highlighted in the Rovaniemi Chairman’s Statement Promptly

As outlined above, the Arctic Council faces a number of significant structural and financial challenges. The topics specifically identified in the Rovaniemi Chairman’s Statement for examination over the next two years—reviewing the roles of the Ministerial meetings, the SAOs and the Permanent Participants—do not focus on the most serious of these challenges. While the Council could make changes to the role of each of these,

those changes are unlikely to address the primary concerns identified above. If the Council focuses on these initial issues and makes appropriate adjustments promptly, it can clear the path for pursuing more vital questions that need to be discussed and decided.

The role of the Ministerial meetings does not warrant fundamental change. With the notable exception of the 2019 meeting, the Ministerial meetings have proven successful as political events in demonstrating ongoing cooperation among the Arctic States, in highlighting the engagement of Arctic Indigenous Peoples, in bringing to fruition much of the good work undertaken over the past two years, and in laying out planned activities over the coming two years. The Ministerial meetings also offer a less-appreciated benefit: they require the governments of all eight Arctic States to focus, at a very high level, on the challenges and opportunities of the Arctic region at least once every two years. For these reasons, the Council should consider extending the Ministerial meetings somewhat—they typically are just a half-day session plus a Ministers’ dinner—to allow more time for the Ministers to engage with the SAOs and the Working Groups, and possibly to interact meaningfully with the Observers as well.

Nor should the role of the SAOs change dramatically. Ideally, each SAO would remain in his or her position for at least two chairmanship cycles, so as to improve continuity in, and institutional memory of, the Council. Given the cross-cutting and interdisciplinary work of the Council, each SAO must also ensure robust internal coordination with officials from other government ministries and with key domestic stakeholder groups. While meetings of the SAOs should remain closed to the public to promote candid exchanges of view, the SAOs should take steps to improve the transparency of their work. For example, they should hold joint press events at the close of their meetings and invite a small number of local representatives (perhaps from youth groups) to sit in on their meetings.

As noted above, the role of Permanent Participants gives the Council considerable legitimacy and authenticity. The Council has recently taken steps to ensure the incorporation of “traditional and local knowledge” into its work wherever possible, which has improved the quality of many of its products. The Council has also created the Indigenous Peoples’ Secretariat

to support the engagement of the Permanent Participants.⁹ Still, the Council should do more to address the resource needs of the Permanent Participants, possibly by contributing to the **Álgu Fund** themselves, by cutting down on the creation of new Task Forces, and by scheduling its meetings so as to reduce travel costs. The Council would also do well to resolve differences of view over the term “traditional and local knowledge,” which most if not all of the Permanent Participants find unsatisfactory.

Recommendation 3: **Strengthen the Council in More Meaningful Ways**

Once the Council assesses the roles of the Ministerial meetings, the SAOs, and the Permanent Participants and makes appropriate adjustments in those roles, it should proceed expeditiously to consider the larger questions it is facing. Below are some suggestions for strengthening the Council, some of which others have advocated in the past.

Most importantly, the Council needs to set clear priorities, to bring to conclusion long-running projects of marginal value, and to focus on present and emerging needs of the Arctic region. The “Amarok” tool that the Arctic Council developed to track its numerous ongoing activities yielded a “Maxi-Report” in 2017¹⁰ listing more than 100 projects. In one sense, this is quite impressive. But in a larger sense, it reveals an inability to sunset projects so that the Council can devote its limited resources to activities that matter most.

The Council should institute a practice of having each Arctic State report, perhaps once every two years, on its implementation of major commitments undertaken through Arctic Council Ministerial Declarations. These reports would go a long way toward improving the accountability of the Arctic Council process and expanding the public’s understanding of the Arctic Council’s value. The reports need not be onerous, but they should be of sufficient detail to allow other Members—and the public—to assess how

9 <https://www.arcticpeoples.com/>

10 https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/1908/EDOCS-4258-v1A-ACM-MUS10_FAIRBANKS_2017_Amarok_Tracking_Tool_maxi_report.PDF?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

much follow-up is really taking place. During its 2015-2017 chairmanship, the United States produced such a report in hopes of demonstrating the value of doing so. Such reports should become the common practice of all Arctic States.

If the Arctic Council were created for the first time today, it would certainly not organize its secretariat services in the manner that has evolved since its inception. For an institution so small and poorly funded, the dispersal of secretariat services into so many entities in so many different locations makes little financial or administrative sense. Accordingly, over time, the Council should consolidate the Secretariats that currently serve the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program, the Working Group on the Conservation of Arctic Fauna and Flora, the Working Group on Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment, and the Sustainable Development Working Group into the Arctic Council Secretariat.

The Council should increase and regularize its programmatic funding. This will require a political commitment on the part of all Members to devote more financial resources to Council activities, even when they do not hold the chairmanship. Were such political will to exist—and it may, given the increasing attention to Arctic issues—the Council should consider establishing a broad-based project fund that could receive and disburse money for Arctic Council projects. The Council has some experience with such a fund, the Project Support Instrument (PSI), which it has used principally for projects aimed at addressing environmental problems in the Russian Arctic.

The Council should find ways to engage more productively with its Observers. In doing so, the Council can build upon some efforts it has made in recent years. For example, it has—

- updated the Observer Manual in an attempt to specify roles and responsibilities of Observers;
- dedicated portions of SAO meetings to hearing from Observers on specific topics;

- accepted invitations from Observer States to host Arctic Council workshops; and
- instituted a practice of reviewing the activities of each Observer once every four years.

Additional steps could include “co-branding” appropriate Arctic Council activities with its Observers that are intergovernmental organizations, such as the World Meteorological Organization and the International Maritime Organization. The Council could also give its Observer States more input into Arctic Council projects that it wishes those States to implement as well, such as efforts to reduce emissions of black carbon and to protect migratory birds.

Recommendation 4: Set Aside Calls to Overhaul the Council

The recommendations outlined above, as challenging as they may be to implement, nevertheless represent a fairly incremental set of changes to the Arctic Council, consistent with the evolution that the Council has experienced to this point. In short, these are not radical suggestions, but rather ideas to build on the strengths of the Council as it exists today.

Others have called for more fundamental overhauls to the Arctic Council. Some of have suggested that the Council should be reconstituted as a formal international organization, no longer based on the Ottawa Declaration but on a binding agreement. Others have proposed to amend the Ottawa Declaration in various ways, perhaps most significantly by removing the provision barring consideration of “military security” issues. Still others have called into question the two-year rotating chairmanship system.¹¹

Now is not the time to take up these calls, whatever their merits. The Arctic Council needs to reaffirm its role as a forum for cooperation and to rebuild a sense of comity and collaboration among among the Arctic States and Permanent Participants. A steady, purposeful approach to strategic planning of the sort recommended in this paper can help.

¹¹ Conley and Melino; Young; Axworthy.

Conclusion

Perhaps now, more than at any time since its founding, the Arctic Council needs to demonstrate its usefulness as a forum for promoting cooperation in one of the world's critical regions. The lack of an agreed Ministerial Declaration in Rovaniemi has called this usefulness into question. Will the next period reveal the Rovaniemi meeting to be an aberration, a minor setback in the ongoing evolution of the Arctic Council's growth and scope? Or will it prove to be the beginning of a new period of discord among the Arctic States that leaves the Arctic Council unproductive and marginalized?

The Arctic Council's best days almost certainly still lie ahead. The Council continues to have the opportunity to contribute substantially to a peaceful and cooperative Arctic. Its record of accomplishments over more than two decades suggests a determination among its Members and Permanent Participants to make the Council a productive venue. That said, the Council would do well to take a sober look right now at its challenges and shortcomings. A sound Strategic Plan and some adjustments to its operations and structure would help secure the Council's role in the future of the Arctic.

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