Briefing Note

25 Years of the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC)

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The Arctic Council (AC) is generally considered the primary circumpolar forum for international cooperation in the region (Graczyk 2012; Koivurova 2009). This view is reflected in the increasing interest that the Council has attracted over the last couple of years – both from the non-Arctic states and actors as well as from Arctic nations, in particular the United States which holds the AC Chairmanship from 2015 to 2017. Yet, while the Arctic Council is coming to its 20th anniversary in 2016, another body established by the eight Arctic states celebrates this year twenty-five years of its operation.

The International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) founded in 1990 is a non-governmental international scientific organization, which today encompasses national science organizations from 23 countries conducting research in and on the Arctic. Over the past 25 years IASC has evolved into the leading international science entity focused on the North and thus the anniversary provides an excellent opportunity to recall its beginnings and to reflect upon its evolution, achievements made to date and challenges that lay ahead of it in future.

Foundation of IASC

The initiative for the development of IASC drew largely on the history of polar exploration (Keskitalo 2004) and international scientific cooperation in the Arctic that began in the late 19th century with the first International Polar Year (IPY) (1882-1883) organized by the International Polar Commission.[1] The first IPY did not only collect an enormous amount of material and information, but it was also the first successful attempt at collaboration by different countries in the field of scientific research (Barr & Luedecke 2010) and a major breakthrough in the conduct of research in the Arctic, dominated until that time by patriotic rivalries and separate competitive national explorations (Stone 2015: 71). The second IPY took place fifty years later in 1932-33 and

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the third, under the banner of International Geophysical Year (IGY), in 1957-1958. The IGY had a strong focus on Antarctica and, as a form of its legacy, the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU, today's International Council for Science) established in 1958 the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR), which later came to serve as a model for scientific cooperation in the Arctic. It was during the SCAR meeting in San Diego in 1986 that the idea of creating an equivalent body for scientific collaboration in the Arctic was informally discussed among delegates from both Arctic and non-Arctic countries. The initiative came from the United States and the then President of SCAR and the Chairman of the newly established US Arctic Research Commission (USARC) who proposed the creation of similar collaboration mechanisms that existed for the Antarctica also for the North. However, the situation in the Arctic was much different from that around the South Pole and still strongly marked by the Cold War divisions.

Apart from single occasions like the signing of the Polar Bear Treaty in 1973, the Soviet Union had a strict policy of bilateral contacts in the region, which during the 1980s took form of scientific cooperation between the USSR and Canada, and the USSR and Norway. Moreover, the long-standing Soviet position was that Arctic affairs should be dealt with by Arctic rim states alone (Keskitalo 2004: 45). Hence, even though the main outcome of the San Diego meeting was a consent to continue to explore the possibility of creating an international Arctic science committee (Rogne, Rachold, Hacquebord & Corell 2015: 9), due to the USSR stance it was agreed that the next meeting would include representatives solely from Arctic nations. However, at that time no clear definition of the Arctic nation yet existed. It was only after a series of consultations, which began with the Arctic littoral states, that it was decided that countries with territories north of the Arctic Circle would be considered the Arctic ones, hence laying ground for the final identification of the eight states as "Arctic" (Keskitalo 2004: 45), the definition later adopted by the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) and subsequently by the Arctic Council.

With regard to what later became the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), the planning process and elaboration of the organizations founding articles continued in the cycle of meetings between February 1987 and May 1989. In the meantime, in October 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev delivered his groundbreaking speech in Murmansk, which paved the way for future collaborative efforts in the region. Next to proposing an integrated plan for protecting Arctic natural environment, Gorbachev put forward the idea of an international organization to facilitate scientific research in the North. While the discussions on its creation had already been well underway, the Murmansk speech ensured the USSR support to the initiative and provided the impetus for further work.

However, it turned out that the main obstacle in the process was reaching an agreement among Arctic countries on participation and a role of non-Arctic nations in the new body. Even though delegates from the Federal Republic of Germany, France, Japan, Poland and the UK took part in the abovementioned gathering during the SCAR meeting in San Diego, due to the USSR position and to the disappointment of leading scientists from those countries, further talks continued without them. Hence, to clarify the situation on the founding process of IASC, they asked their governments to take action and in March 1989 France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK formally approached the Arctic countries with a 'Note Verbale' to explain their policy on the IASC (Rogne et al. 2015: 22).

The note drew significant attention of the Arctic eight and resulted in a temporary standstill of the negotiations as it occurred that there was no consensus among Arctic states on the role of non-Arctic countries in the new organization. Both Canada and the USSR strongly opposed participation of non-Arctic states on an equal basis and argued that "the founding articles of IASC must reflect the broader range of scientific interests and responsibilities of the Arctic countries" (Note Verbale Canadian Foreign Office Ottawa in: Rogne et al. 2015). On the contrary, the United States was in favour of the exclusively scientific body without any governmental control or distinction between the scientific organizations from Arctic and non-Arctic states. This point illustrates well the degree of politicization of the whole process, where despite IASC being a non-governmental organization, "representatives of national governments played a central role in its creation" (Young 1992: 40-41, draft in: Keskitalo 2004).

To find a way out and to move forward, representatives of three states (Canada, USA and the USSR) met in December 1989 in Moscow and came up with a new proposal for a structure and founding articles of IASC. To find compromise on the interests of both sides, it was agreed that next to the IASC Council, i.e. the highest decision-making body of the organization, where all the member countries – both Arctic and non-Arctic ones – would enjoy equal rights, the Regional Board would be created with inclusion of representatives of relevant national organizations solely from the Arctic eight (Rogne et al. 2015: 24). The Board was to consider general regional problems affecting the common interests of the Arctic countries and ensure that the activities of IASC would remain consistent with those interests (IASC Founding Articles, part D, art. 1).[2] This agreement removed the last obstacle on the way to establishment of the International Arctic Science Committee, which was eventually founded in Resolute Bay, Nunavut, Canada in August 1990. Whereas representatives of France, Germany, Japan, Poland and the United Kingdom attended the meeting still solely as observers, during the first regular meeting of the IASC Council in January 1991 the science organizations of France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom were admitted as the first non-Arctic full members of IASC.

IASC Founding Meeting in Resolute Bay, Canada, August 1990.

From early days to ICARP III

The founding of IASC marked the beginning of a new era of collaborative efforts in the region. Not only fruitful completion of negotiations on the Committee helped to energize the process which led to signing of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) in Rovaniemi in June 1991 (Young 1998: 116), but the International Arctic Science Committee played a pivotal role in overcoming divisions and developing cooperation between Russian and Western scientists working on the Arctic who previously had had very limited contact.

Initially, even though according to its founding articles IASC was supposed to operate through the working groups, most of its work was done through international projects, to deliver tangible outcomes within a prescribed period of time. The projects revolved around the themes of impacts of global changes on the Arctic region and its peoples, Arctic processes of relevance to global systems, natural processes within the Arctic, and sustainable development in the region. In order to provide a more robust roadmap for researchers working on the region, in 1995 IASC convened the first International Conference on Arctic Research Planning (ICARP I), which brought together more than 250 scientists and defined ten large research themes, later undertaken by scientists and translated into concrete research projects. Moreover, as Oran Young notes, ICARP I provided IASC with a programmatic identity and enhanced links between Arctic and global science. It also brought a sense of community among scientists working on Arctic issues (Oran Young in: Rogne et al. 2015: 42-43).

IASC Working Group Workshop in Potsdam, Germany, January 2011.

As the first conference proved to be a success, it was decided that it would be repeated every ten years. Hence, the second ICARP took place in 2005 in Copenhagen. It gathered more than 450 participants and produced twelve scientific plans, which helped to identify fundamental questions for Arctic science as well as numerous activities that later contributed to the fourth International Polar Year (2007-2008) and were subsequently implemented. Another form of legacy of ICARP II and the fourth IPY has been a very strong encouragement for inclusion of early career scientists into the work of IASC, which began in the preparations to both initiatives. Since its foundation in 2006 the Association of Polar Early Career Scientists (APECS) has developed a close partnership

with IASC and greatly profited from the Committee's support. In addition, in 2014 IASC established a Fellowship Program to promote the next generation of scientists working on the Arctic and to involve them in works of five of the IASC working groups (WGs): Atmosphere WG; Cryosphere WG, Marine WG, Social & Human WG; and the Terrestrial WG.[3]

However, the partnership between IASC and APECS is only one among many synergies that the Committee has generated over the course of time. From the perspective of bringing science closer to policy-making circles perhaps the most important one is the relationship with the Arctic Council with which IASC partnered in producing one of the most seminal works documenting the region's change, the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA).[4] Moreover, IASC has been an observer to the AEPS, and consequently to the Arctic Council, from the time the Rovaniemi Process started in 1991. Since that time IASC has supported works of the AC by bringing the scientific expertise from all of its members, including non-Arctic states, to the AC assessments or by coordinating the reports' scientific review processes as it did in case of the Arctic Human Development Report-II (AHDR-II) or the Arctic Resilience Report (ARR). A further step towards bringing the two institutions closer together and towards facilitating the science-policy dialogue is organizing the March 2016 meeting of the Arctic Council's Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) in Fairbanks, Alaska in conjunction with the Arctic Science Summit Week (ASSW), which is the largest gathering of the international organizations supporting and facilitating Arctic research that convenes annually under the auspices of IASC since 1999.

Arctic Science Summit Week 2011 held in Seoul, Korea, March/April 2011.

It was also during the ASSW, which this year took place in Toyama, Japan that the 25th anniversary of IASC was celebrated. The summit gathered more than seven hundred participants from twenty-seven countries - international scientists, policy makers, research managers, indigenous peoples and students - and saw the culmination of the ICARP III process that began a year earlier, during the ASSW 2014 in Helsinki. Whereas its final report is to come out in fall 2105, the ASSW 2015 concluded with the Toyama Conference Statement *Integrating Arctic Research: A Roadmap for the Future*, which contains a set of overarching messages for future Arctic research planning process.

The document also pinpoints major challenges that lie ahead of Arctic science and our understanding of changes occurring in the region which transformation spurs global interest and unprecedented attention.

Into the Future

Nothing better confirms the organization' focal position in promotion and facilitation of international research on the Arctic than the incoming applications for IASC member status. Since the time of its foundation in 1990 the IASC membership has been constantly growing and today includes twenty-three countries conducting research in the Arctic. Throughout the time IASC has become a market place (Rogne et al. 2015) or a "forum where an idea first germinated before being brought to fruition through extensive international collaboration in other organizations (particularly those controlling infrastructure and other resources)" (Stone 2015). The organization played also an important role in moving Arctic science onto the cutting edge of science at large and deepening our comprehension of the dynamics of the coupled socio-ecological systems (Rogne et al. 2015). Yet today, changes in the Arctic are still challenging our understanding of their consequences both on the regional as well as on global scale, and the scientific community's ability to provide relevant and timely knowledge for decision-makers (Toyama Conference Statement). Addressing those challenges requires sustained scientific observations and combining them with insights from local and traditional ecological knowledge - both efforts strongly encouraged and supported by IASC. And while the Arctic moves from the periphery of international relations closer to the center of the world's political and economic interests, science still remains the key to sustainable development and future of the region. As the long historical tradition of polar research shows, greatest achievements down this road come through international collaboration and cooperation where over the last twenty-five years the role of IASC has been indisputable.

Notes

1. The International Polar Commission included the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Dominion of Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.
2. However, with the creation of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) in 1991 the Regional Board soon lost its main rationale and while its meetings contributed to exchange of information between key Arctic science managers, eventually the Board decided to disband in 2008 (Rogne et al. 2015).
3. In 2010 the IASC Council decided, in order to best harness capacities and expertise of its members, to come back to the originally prescribed structure, finalize the ongoing projects and replace them with the thematically divided working groups listed above.
4. The idea of ACIA was brought to attention of the Arctic Council by Robert Corell, who at that time was the IASC representative to the Arctic Council as Chair of the IASC Regional Board. During the first US chairmanship of the AC (1998-2000) he presented to the Council a proposal of a comprehensive assessment of climate change in the Arctic.

Since the idea corresponded closely with a task given to Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) and Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF), two AC working groups, by the ministers at the 1998 AC Ministerial meeting, IASC and AMAP entered into a partnership to develop ACIA.

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