

Commentary

The Arctic Council: A Tool for Regional Development & Policy-Shaping

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The establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996 allowed not only the 8 Arctic countries but also many countries situated southward, as well as international organizations, to combine efforts in the coordination of international and external economic relations in the Arctic region, which is of exceptional significance in shaping the global climate and has huge reserves of natural resources, primarily hydrocarbons.

Over the course of twenty years, the Arctic Council has provided a quite clear platform for discussing the issues related to the countries' interests. New areas of testing cooperation, approaches and methods of joint work has appeared, and working groups on specific themes, interesting to all stakeholders, have been formed.

At the same time, the Arctic Council still doesn't have a clear-cut answer to the possibility of engaging sub-regional partners to their full potential; all its activity has been aimed at the development and enhancement of inter-state cooperation. This article discusses the importance of involving sub-regional governments in global international cooperation in the Arctic.

Establishing the Arctic Council

The 1990s were marked by a rapid development of international cooperation across the globe, but it was the Arctic region where the burst of a movement to each other was witnessed the most. Within a short amount of time there appeared a whole range of international organizations with different priorities and aims, and it was obvious that the establishment of an inter-state agency, coordinating the activities of all countries interested in dealing with the issues of

development and use of the Arctic resources, was on the horizon. Generally, that was what happened.

In 1996, the eight countries with territory in the Arctic Circle announced the establishment of the Arctic Council, being a forum for discussing all issues requiring cooperative decision making, in order to avoid a chaotic and spontaneous approach, primarily with regards to the use of the Arctic's rich natural resources. The Agreement on Protection of the Arctic Environment in Rovaniemi (Finland) in 1991 laid the foundation for the Arctic countries' unity.

From the very beginning the Arctic Council set up states' meaningful joint work on solving global issues; at present, the working groups are implementing a significant number of projects; and the Arctic Economic Council has been established. All decisions made by the Arctic Council have direct relevance to the life of all people living beyond the Arctic Circle. Yet, the heads of the sub-national governments barely have access to the work of the Arctic Council, which results in a certain gap in the decision-making system, taking into account all trends in the global Arctic. Some regional leaders are joined within the framework of the Northern Forum (NF), that has an Observer status at the Arctic Council; they have an opportunity for indirect participation in the work of the inter-state agency in the Arctic, without a right to a direct involvement in the decision-making process, which is a major deficiency, taking into account that all of the Arctic Council's projects are implemented in the territories governed by regional administrations.

We must give credit where it is due to the far-sightedness of some regional leaders who foresaw a significant thaw in relations between the USA and USSR, and prepared a foundation for a quick interaction of the regions in the new conditions. Almost straight after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991, 11 regions of Russia, USA, Canada, Japan, China, Mongolia and Finland established the NF under the initiative of the Governor of Alaska (USA) Walter Hickel. The International Arctic Science Committee appeared a year earlier. Later on, other international organizations were appearing in sequence, the most significant of them being the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the University of the Arctic, and the Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region.

The NF obtained an Observer status at the Arctic Council right from the very start and took active part in its events (Ministerial Meetings, Senior Arctic Officials Meetings (SAOs), working group meetings) and some projects. Interestingly, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council has not formalized its presence in the Arctic Council. Probably, the Council decided to focus on cooperation within North Europe, participating in the activity of the Arctic Council within national delegations.

Therefore, the question is raised: is active participation of regional governments and administrations in the work of the Arctic Council possible, and if so, what are the available forms and mechanisms for that, and which ones can be developed?

Regional Governments in Arctic Politics

Basically, the NF can ensure the presence of regional leaders at the meetings of the Senior Arctic Officials, but the current Observer participants quota doesn't allow all members of the NF to be simultaneously involved in these events. At that, even when present at the meetings, regional leaders cannot give their point of view or make a proposal, as long as the Arctic Council's bylaws

do not provide for the Observers' right to speak at the forum's meetings. The same was true for the Working Groups' meetings, but since 2014, under the proposal of the NF, brief comments from Observers have been allowed at the Sustainable Development Working Group meetings.

At the same time, in 2013, while holding its extended session in Yakutsk (Sakha Republic, Russia), the Working Group on Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) agreed to not only include in the agenda the presentations of the hosting region's local experts, but also to arrange extra meetings with young specialists and speak on local television, which allowed the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) to be fully and actively involved in the meeting and make efficient proposals. I am confident that such an event was beneficial to all stakeholders. Should this practice continue, the involvement of regional potential in the activity of the Arctic Council's working groups would become tangible.

Generally, the participation of regional experts in the Arctic Council's project activity is not restricted. Provided they can speak English and have relevant qualifications, the experts can be included in different project groups through national delegations, Permanent Participants or international Observer organizations. This is quite a constructive means of cooperation with the Arctic Council, securing the involvement of the regions with a sound scientific and technical potential, but almost inaccessible for the Arctic regions where the number of such experts is limited.

Whereas the regions can participate at the expert level by some means, the participation of leaders and regional governments in the decision-making process in the global Arctic cooperation remains doubtful. Obviously, the participants of the NF can make certain joint decisions, taken into account at elaborating the plans and programs of the regions' socio-economic development. The regions are actively involved in the development of the Arctic territories in the law-making environment of their countries, and their opinion can be taken into account at developing the countries' positions when constructing the dialogue within the Arctic Council. At the same time, it would be much more useful and effective to ensure direct participation of regional leaders in the work of the Arctic Council.

Together with the indigenous peoples of the North, the Arctic Council qualifies settlers, hunters and reindeer herders, rural populations and citizens as the Arctic population. Thus, many Arctic governors sometimes wonder why Arctic indigenous organizations have a Permanent Participant status at the Arctic Council, whereas regional governments/administrations do not have those, although the leaders and governments/administrations are the ones who are more responsible for the development of the Arctic territories, and, therefore, it seems logic enough for their voice to be always present at the Arctic Council.

In my opinion, the best form of regional involvement in the decision-making processes within the Arctic Council is the involvement through an international organization joining most of the world's Arctic regions.

The NF is the only interregional organization of the Arctic and the North aimed at such unification; the organization has survived through a period of decline and is now on rise, gradually increasing the number of its members. Four Russian regions joined the NF in 2015: Krasnoyarsk Krai, Primorsky Krai, Magadan Oblast and Nenets Autonomous Okrug. Two key regions – Alaska (USA) and Lapland (Finland) have returned to the NF in 2016. In the

foreseeable future there is certain confidence in the inclusion of Scandinavian and a number of Russian regions. There is certain difficulty with Canadian territories' making a decision on joining the NF, but the organization's strengthening both in terms of its quantity and quality may tilt in favor of the NF. Although Canadian regions have begun to form their Northern regional council, without other regions of the Circumpolar Arctic it may not claim to voice their interests.

Thus, the NF may become a true partner of the Arctic Council, being a regional wing of the Arctic's major inter-state agency. Most probably, for the NF, there is no point in seeking a Permanent Participant status at the Arctic Council. It would make the most sense to give it a partner status based on either an agreement between the Arctic Council and the NF or introduction of a new concept of "partner" in the Arctic Council's structure, and giving this status to the NF on the basis of the Ministerial Meeting's resolution. Certainly, this issue requires discussion and is given in this article as an idea.

In any case, considering the issue of enlarging the quota for the NF's participants in the SAO and Ministerial Meetings will allow the regions to gradually enhance their input in the Arctic Council's activity, bring its decisions to a wider range of the population, and effectively use all available resources. Organizing the meetings of the NF Governors within the Arctic Council events, where their recommendations will be presented to the inter-state forum, can become one of the compelling forms of cooperation.

The introduction of regional input to the Arctic Council or signing of an agreement between the interstate and interregional organizations will allow us to streamline the structure and hierarchy in Arctic cooperation and take into account the interests of all stakeholders.