

Barents Region: The Arctic Council as a Stabilizing Magnet

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The Arctic Council (AC) is a stabilized and consolidated intergovernmental regional body created in 1996. It has deployed a consistent work on environment issues and produced key documents such as the Agreement on Search and Rescue (SAR) reached in 2011. In the context of the Barents region, the Arctic Council is not the core of the regional dynamics as other regional institutions emerged earlier in the 1990s. Meanwhile, the establishment of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) in 1993, and then the Barents Regional Council (BRC), has underlined the willingness to encourage the neighboring cooperation and coordination, it marks the openness process between the Russian Federation and Western countries, and particularly the Northern European countries. Far from being competing, these organizations according to their nature and functioning are complementing each other in some way. The lack of legal framework in the area for over two decades is substantially moving forward as concrete steps on both environmental issues and social and economic projects are further interlocked than ever. Adding that the Barents region is unique in the Arctic context for its evolving neighboring policy between Nordic countries and the Russian Federation. Despite the tumult of the geopolitical tensions, the Barents institutions followed by the support of the Arctic Council has demonstrated its ability to be resilient and bargain for further development. As a result, the Barents region converts itself as a major core for shaping Arctic governance.

Introduction

The establishment of the Arctic Council has been a notable step but not decisive for the cooperation of the Barents area. Its perspective goes beyond the premise of the regional governance attempt. Indeed, the Arctic Council brings forward a new sphere of cooperation on security issues such as Arctic search and rescue (SAR). In that perspective, the Arctic Council symbolizes a dramatic shift from a tense political and military confrontation to a peaceful and constructive intergovernmental arena. Although the Arctic held the status of sensitive theatre for military deployment including during the Cold War, the region became a focal point for political initiatives to set out transnational cooperation (Young, 2005:9).

For over two decades, the Barents region has experienced significant progress in neighboring cooperation. The case of the Norwegian-Russian cooperation in the area has been illustrated through various facts of an enhancing dialogue. In the light of the establishment of the Arctic Council, the regional organization has made the case to improve cooperation in the area.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that other regional organizations such the Barents Euro-Arctic Council¹ have also been created to catalyze cooperation in the post-Cold war era.

Emphasizing the conceptual support in order to understand the institutional mechanism at stake in the Barents region, Cécile Pelaudeix properly identified the involvedness for the characterization of governance:

“Since there is no official or dominant definition of governance, scientists refer either to processes, activities, set of rules or the very framing of governance issues. The analytical logic used by scientists and the different ontological assumptions or theories within disciplines that they refer to, determine the criteria of evaluation used in the analysis”(Pelaudeix 2015: 401).

As a result, the parallel evolution of both Arctic Council and Barents regional institutions identifies a new path for local governance and illustrates the empirical building of a sophisticated mechanism and vast governance network in the area. For this purpose, the Barents region may be seen as a significant core for applying this empirical model. To this point, it can be assumed as a substantial success for over two decades.

20 Years of Strengthening Cooperation in the Barents Region

As Norway and Russia pledge to expand business and institutional cooperation in the Barents region, we can trace the institutionalization process in the Barents region to the end of the Cold war, starting in 1993 with the Kirkenes Declaration. Signed on 11 January 1993 by ministers of foreign affairs and other delegates from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the Commission of the European Communities (EC), the Declaration aimed to enhance cooperation in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region: the signatories agreed to contribute substantially both to stability and progress. As a result, this institutionalization process in the area is a component of the European construction in order to overcome confrontation and division that characterized the 20th century. In that perspective, the Barents cooperation is studied as a part of the process of evolving European cooperation and integration (Declaration on the 20th Anniversary of the Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation, 2013).

For over 20 years, Barents cooperation has played a constructive role in economic and social development. The region has been the center for promoting people-to-people contacts including creation of positive conditions for interregional exchange in a significant number of fields (e.g. culture, indigenous peoples, youth, education, IT, trade, environment, transportation and so on). As a remarkable example, the project “Finnish-Russian Arctic Mining Initiative” was carried out by Spinverse Ltd. in recent years. It aimed to create sub-clusters of companies, research organizations and other actors to offer a better service to the customer. As the project was funded by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it sought to spot key needs for research and innovation activities concerning mining in North-Western Russia.

The BEAC was established as a forum in order to materialize the idea of northern cooperation as it was previously promoted by the Nordic Council of Ministers (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden), during the 1960s. Four key documents articulate Barents regional governance since 1993:

1. The Kirkenes Declaration (January 11, 1993)
2. Regional agreement signed by regional authorities and a representative of Sami people (1993)
3. The Barents Euro-Arctic 10th Anniversary Declaration 2003 (January, 2003)
4. The Barents Euro-Arctic 20th Anniversary Declaration 2013 (June 3-4, 2013)

Along with the establishment of a Barents governance mechanism, the wider grouping of Arctic States began to structure themselves as a region. Since 1996, the Arctic Council has emerged as a legitimate regional body. Since then, several aspects such as environment, health, and maritime safety issues have been under the auspices of the Arctic Council.² The Arctic organization enhances multilateral relations through a legal and supportive framework. Established by the Ottawa Declaration, the Arctic Council seeks to promote “cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States” (Ottawa Declaration, 1996).

In addition, a bilateral agreement between the Russian Federation and the Kingdom of Norway regarding the Maritime Delimitation and Cooperation in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean was signed on 15 September 2010, an illustration of “the decisive role that trust can play in settling disputes and creating new opportunities for cooperation” (Declaration on the 20th Anniversary of the Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation, 2010). As the agreement between the two countries was welcomed, it has a significant value regarding Barents cooperation. On one hand, this signed agreement solved a complex and long-term issue. On the other hand, it exemplified a successful cooperation between equal parties in the Arctic region, and represented momentum in Barents cooperation.

Since then, constant convergence has emerged as a key evolution of the regional governance in the Barents area. Tangible steps are taken particularly at a working group level to enhance coherence and synergy of regional and cross-border cooperation between different forums, such as the Arctic Council, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Northern Dimension (BEAC 15th Ministerial Session, 2013). Indeed, regarding the different working groups in action within the framework of the BEAC, many issues are similarly tackled at the Arctic Council. For instance, the working group on rescue cooperation from the BEAC found a striking echo with the “Agreement Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic” reached by the Arctic Council members in 2009. Other similar issues such as environmental protection and water issues are dealt by both regional organizations. This increasing synergy is a fundamental factor in avoiding redundancy and loss of efficiency in a regional cooperation mechanism.

It is important to underline that after decades of isolationism, the Russian Northwest progressively opened up to Western Europe. As a consequence, this geopolitical change partially opened a unique atmosphere of cooperation and shared ideas of mutual prosperity in the region (Plouffe, 2013). Following two decades of positive development in the Barents region, however, there have been over the past two years serious challenges as relationships between the Russian Federation and the West have sharply deteriorated since the 2014 Ukrainian crisis. New questions have arisen regarding the nature and density of cooperation with the Russian political regime, questions that involve Nordic countries and their commitment to maintain constant and fruitful relation with their Arctic neighbor.

The Perception of the Russian Federation

At this juncture, it is relevant to hold a comprehensive approach of the geopolitical dynamics in the Barents region by focusing on Russian policy and strategy. According to the Russian vision, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council has become an effective and relevant regional cooperation mechanism. Described as a success story, BEAC's activities managed, according to their point of view, to create a neighborhood of confidence and stability in Northern Europe. Based on the principles of indivisible and comprehensive security, this council would not be affected by fluctuations of political environment (Lavrov, 2015). To this point, Russian public authorities openly praise the work of the Barents institutions. In that unique regional governance scheme, the conduct of the Russian Federation as a key player for maintaining stability and peaceful development in the Barents region toward these regional organizations is critical.

During the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012), further improvements in Barents cooperation were reached between the relevant parties. According to the Foreign Policy Concept (2013), it stressed its positive appreciation for practical cooperation with Northern Europe. The nature of this cooperation includes the completion of joint projects through various multilateral structures both in the Barents and Arctic region. During that time, the Russian government expressed its support for the BEAC, and viewed both the latter and the Arctic Council as valuable structures by which to organize regional governance (Oldberg, 2014: 45).

Within regional organizations in the High North, Russia limits itself to tackling 'soft' security issues in multilateral fora. Indeed, Russia rules out resolving most existential concerns throughout these regional institutions (Oldberg, 2014: 62). The Russian Federation defines its policy in accordance to the role it aims to offer to various international intergovernmental organizations. Both the Arctic Council and subregional Barents organizations have therefore been conceived as limited but workable institutions. In that respect, the Russian Federation continuously praises the councils for their constructive and fruitful in the cooperation sphere in the region.

According to the 2008 Russian doctrine, the Arctic policy until 2020 defines its national interests in the area in the following terms (Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic up to 2020, 2008; Oldberg, 2011):

- To use and expand the resource base for Russia's socio-economic development
- To maintain peace and cooperation in the Arctic, including military security
- To safeguard the unique ecological systems
- To use and develop the Northern Sea Route

The main objective of this defined political orientation aims to maintain the Russian Federation as a 'leading Arctic power'. Undeniably, this position has been upheld for over two decades. Consequently, the Arctic Council in the context of the Barents region represented a helpful instrument for the Russian government in order to resolve peripheral issues. With respect to environmental security issues, the Arctic Council brought to Russia an enhancement of neighboring cooperation on a long-ignored matter.

Arctic Council vs. Barents Institutions: Neither Superposition, Nor Competing, but Complementing Regional Governance

As the vision of the Barents cooperation is to improve living conditions in northernmost Europe, the Arctic Council is committed to protect the Arctic ecosystem and safeguard human well-being in the area. However, the Barents regional governance bodies also underline their commitment both to support sustainable economic and social development and to contribute to stability, progress and peaceful development. In this specific context, the Arctic Council appears as a supportive governance tool for this Arctic subregion. As a result of this duality in the intergovernmental institutions in the area, the Barents region is a consistent example of the post-Cold War governance enhancement that paves the way for fruitful cooperation between neighboring States.

The Arctic Council aims to cope with national interests in the High North as they have no clear boundaries. Therefore, the Ilulissat Declaration (2008) encompasses the need for an institutional framework to resolve boundaries' issues in the Arctic region. As a result, the five member-States of the Arctic Council pledge that "questions of jurisdiction and territorial claims should be solved by negotiations within the existing international legal framework" (Hønneland & Østerud, 2014: 165).

According to Hønneland and Østerud, the Arctic Council remains a forum for coordinating Arctic environmental monitoring and science. In order to do so, the council organizes itself by producing and exchanging information, through several working groups. And one of the manifestations of the efficiency of this framework has been demonstrated by the treaty coordinating international SAR coverage and response in the Arctic.

It is worth mentioning that the Arctic Council strongly welcomes in its framework a strong participation from the region's indigenous peoples. At the same time, the Barents Euro-Arctic Region collaboration – as well as the EU Northern Dimension – were struggling to meet the initial expectations of thriving East-West cooperation on trade and industry. Despite all the benefits made by the regional organization, it is described as lacking a legal framework in key issues related to sustainable development and environmental protection (Lamers, Pristupa, Amelung & Knol, 2015: 50). To date, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides a roughly accepted legal mechanism to promote the interests of the Arctic states that signed the convention. However, the United States did not sign the convention, and consequently are not bound by this international legal framework.

The Arctic Council is the most prominent intergovernmental body that generates and exchanges information about Arctic (marine) ecosystems, and the economic activities that affect these ecosystems (Lamers et al., 2015: 51). By doing so, the AC exemplifies itself as a model of regional governance to resolve complicated issues such as marine governance despite no legal framework specific to the Arctic having yet been implemented and entered into force. Furthermore, the consistent role played by the AC in this domain has positively attracted non-State stakeholders (i.e. NGO, private companies, civil society and so on). For the Barents region, the purpose of its core activities implies a range of issues compatible to its regional political framework. Indeed, SAR operations encompass the current economic and social development in the area alongside transportation and oil and gas exploration in the Barents Sea.

In that view, the Arctic Council gives an impression of complementarity towards the Barents institutions. As these latter are devoted to support and maintain essentially economic and social cooperation between the neighboring states, decisions adopted by the AC enhance the feasibility of promoting sustainable development in the Barents region through an environmental framework.

The Future of the Arctic Council: Challenges and Opportunities

Before delving into the Barents context, it is worth stating that the Ukrainian crisis has shaped new dynamics in the relationship between the West and Russia. The imposition of financial and economic sanctions, mainly by the European Union and the United States, and counter-sanctions led by the Russian Federation, threaten to undermine relations. Indeed, a primary consequence of the sanction and counter-sanction regimes has been a negative impact on the local economy in the Barents region. The fishery industries, for example, have been severely affected by the embargo on food products initiated by the Russian Federation against the Scandinavian countries – and beyond to include other Western countries. Accordingly, in the long term the stability and cooperation relations in various spots could be shaken wherever Russian and Western interests confront one another.

To date, the Russian Federation has expressed its support for Arctic regional bodies to increase international cooperation in order to solve numerous problems in the area and ensure the sustainable development of the region overall (Heininen, 2013). But as a balance to these regular and acclaimed political statements, the current geopolitical landscape in the Barents region demonstrates that an increase in challenges needs to be coped with. Both climate change and a resulting, potential, economic boom are interlocked as accelerated ice-melting may open new spaces for further economic opportunities (e.g. maritime transportation, O&G exploitation, fishing industry).

The Arctic Council remains the central organization to maintain cooperation and substantial coordination on various issues at stake in the scope of its activities. According to speeches delivered by the Arctic States Ministers and representatives in April 2015, it is imperative to preserve regional stability far from the strained international situation:

“It is in no-one’s interest to let problems elsewhere to impact negatively on Arctic cooperation and the Arctic environment” (Tuomioja, 2015).

“There is no room for confrontation or aggravation of tension in the Arctic region – especially from outside sources – and there is a strong public demand for joint responses to common challenges and for joint use of shared opportunities in the Arctic” (Donskoy, 2015).

From these statements, respectively from Finland and Russia, public positions in the Barents region are presumably positive, though somewhat surprising considering the political and military tensions in the Barents-Baltic axis.³ Regarded as a conflictual position, parties on both sides appear to prioritize economic and social goals in the Barents region.

In the light of this impending outlook, Tromsø – the largest Norwegian city above the Arctic Circle (~70,000 inhabitants) – has since 2013 permanently hosted the Arctic Council Secretariat (ACS), designed to “strengthen the capacity of the Arctic Council to respond to the challenges and opportunities facing the Arctic” (Nuuk Declaration, 2011). Indeed, the installation of the

ACS in the Barents region is rather more a symbolic than a strategic decision in terms of regional governance. The function of the Arctic Council Secretary is first of all an operational one. As it is stated, the ACS is an administrative and organizational unit for coordinating all involved processes of the Arctic Council (e.g. arranging and servicing meeting, assisting the Chair, transmitting reports, and so on).

Economic Cooperation: A Core Pillar for the Barents Region

More recently, on September 8, 2015, the Arctic Economic Council Secretariat was officially opened in Tromsø. It is worth mentioning that this organization is not formally connected to the Arctic Council. As an independent organization, it aims to facilitate Arctic business-to-business activities. But again, the establishment of this regional organization within the so-called Norwegian Arctic capital underlines the ongoing build-up of the municipality as a hub for Arctic governance.

As economic cooperation is one of the pillars of the BEAC, this establishment may emphasize once again the regional stakeholders' will to implement a lasting peaceful cooperation. The regional governance through Barents institutions has involved economic and social development in the premise of its objectives for over 20 years. Indeed, the Declaration on the 20th Anniversary of the Barents Euro-Arctic Cooperation reminds us that the Barents intergovernmental platform expresses its support for a sustainable development of the region's natural resources.

Within this context, the Arctic Council Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat (IPS), established in 1994 as a support body for the international indigenous peoples' organizations with Permanent Participant status in the Arctic Council, moved its office to Tromsø in January 2016. The IPS' office is located within the premise of the ACS. For this purpose, Ethel Blake (2015) underlined that this move aims to benefit both the ACS and IPS by working closely. Finally, the Barents region has emerged as a formidable magnet for combining the Barents governance with the support of the Arctic Council framework.

Conclusion

The extent to which the Barents region has evolved can be explained only through a condition of tremendous circumstance. Emerging from the Cold War years, stakeholders experienced a glum picture of how extreme geopolitical differences could wreak havoc on a region locked in a posture of heavy militarization. Similarly, nowadays the region faces the prospect of a melting cryosphere, bringing amplified awareness to the High North as a region where human beings have once more spoiled the environment. Indeed, it is the outcome of industrialization processes over the past two centuries (Dingman, 2015: 96). The Barents region has witnessed the establishment of complex intergovernmental and interregional institutions for over 20 years. Alongside the AC, the Barents institutions such as BEAC and BRC are known for their main value and strength: consensus. Consequently, the capacity for effectiveness relies on the desire of nations to provide the strategy and structure capable of promoting and supporting cooperation.

If this example can inform the global European policy both on border dialogues and sustainable development, the Arctic Council for its part can play a key role in stabilizing critical issues that have emerged in the post-Cold War transition timeframe. Besides, Heather Exner-Pirot stresses

the critical move decided by the eight Arctic states for establishing a Permanent Secretariat in Tromsø. It has afterward enlightened “the idea that the Arctic states are newly accepting of a level of authority from the Arctic Council that has previously been unknown” (Exner-Pirot, 2012: 235).

Since the Arctic Council is a consensus-based body, the endorsement of its actions by all Arctic states is essential to its continued functioning. As a result, the conditions of animosity may significantly reduce the scope of action for the chair and limit its potential to deliver practical resolutions (Smieszek & Kankaanpää, 2015: 12). In the same way, Barents institutions also established on the basis of consensus are exposed to the turbulent breeze of the geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West. Nonetheless, regional governance in the area somehow demonstrates its ability to resist, and thus provides acknowledgement of the resilience of Barents cooperation.

To sum up, the Arctic Council strengthens the function of the BEAC and legitimizes it as a key stakeholder by providing a framework and emphasizing this lasting cooperation. In the meantime, the Arctic Council accompanies the state of the development in the Barents region in the context of specific geopolitical dynamics. Indeed, it openly exposes the fragility of the established cooperation with the Russian Federation in the Arctic for over two decades.

Notes

1. The Barents Euro-Arctic Council holds two secretarial bodies: The International Barents Secretariat and the Norwegian Barents Secretariat. On the one hand, the International Barents Secretariat aims to provide technical support for the multilaterally coordinated activities within the framework of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Barents Regional Council. On the other hand, the Norwegian Barents Secretariat aims to make it as easy as possible to initiate Norwegian-Russian cooperation projects.
2. The Arctic Council is articulated by six Working Groups tackling environmental and safety issues in the Arctic region. The structure of these groups are as follows: Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP); Conservation of Arctic Flora & Fauna (CAFF); Emergency Prevention, Preparedness & Response (EPPR); Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME); Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG); Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP).
3. Currently under my investigation, the concept of Barents-Baltic axis is based on a spatial insight for a geopolitical purpose. By interlocking two seas, this verticality axis proposes another analysis of the existing dynamics (e.g. military, policy, economics and so on) between the Northern European countries and the Russian Federation.

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