

# UNDERSTANDING THE ARCTIC COUNCIL:

A 'SUB-REGIONAL' PERSPECTIVE

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## INTRODUCTION: ARCTIC 'ARCHITECTURE' OR THE LACK OF IT

The international architecture of the circumpolar Arctic region is unusual in several ways. All countries directly involved – Canada, the USA, Russia and the five Nordic nations, who are also the states members of the Arctic Council – are regarded in other contexts as part of a 'Euro-Atlantic' nexus, and all belong to bodies like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Yet the classic Euro-Atlantic institutions have so far barely engaged with the new issues created by the opening up of the region through ice melting. NATO does not have an Arctic policy as such, while the OSCE itself and the Council of Europe have been only marginally involved. The European Union has a *de facto* presence in several dimensions (climate management, the energy market, shipping, research and monitoring etc), but has so far failed to secure the status of an observer at the Arctic Council.<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, the United Nations, which has a remarkably limited role in European security aside from seeking a Cyprus settlement, generated the legal foundation for governance in the polar seas through the UN Law of the Sea Convention (UNLOSC) negotiated under its auspices in 1982. The International Maritime Organization, IMO, is working towards adoption of a code for safety of Arctic shipping that was first developed in the Arctic Council. Other UN agencies such as the Environment Programme (UNEP) have potential relevance. Thus far, however, no significant player has made a move to engage the UN Security Council or to bring issues of Arctic management before the General Assembly.

Some of the gaps in Arctic governance that this unusual pattern implies may be more apparent than real. For instance, NATO is and always has been 'in' the European Arctic by virtue of its commitment to defend the High North territories (and seas) of Denmark, Iceland and

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank Kristmundur Þór Ólafsson for research support and advice, and for co-authoring an earlier paper (see note 4) on which this analysis draws.

<sup>2</sup> The Arctic Council Ministerial meeting on 15 May 2013 at Kiruna in Sweden, which accepted 6 new observer states, deferred a decision on the EU while stating that it 'receives [the EU application] affirmatively' For the Ministerial declaration and other documents adopted at Kiruna see <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/document-archive/category/425-main-documents-from-kiruna-ministerial-meeting>.

Norway. NATO's and Russia's strategic nuclear deployments face each other across the top of the world just as in Cold War times, though mercifully at reduced levels. Russia and the Western powers could hardly risk a conflict in the Arctic without courting the same disastrous consequences that are supposed to provide more than adequate deterrence, anywhere else that their zones of interest intersect. However, the circumstances do focus attention heavily on the one dedicated institution that includes all the Arctic powers and was explicitly formed (in 1996) to help them coexist and cooperate: the Arctic Council.<sup>3</sup> Just how much of the gap can it be expected to fill?

The first – negative - part of the answer is hardly contested. The Council is explicitly self-debarred from addressing military issues or other aspects of security, such as those handled by NATO and in the NATO-Russia Council. By the same token it does not discuss arms control and disarmament. It does not have legal personality or the ability directly to adopt legally binding regulations, as does the European Union – although its member states have negotiated two binding agreements among themselves under its aegis (on Search and Rescue in 2011, and response to major maritime oil-spills in 2013).<sup>4</sup> It has neither the economic and financial competence, nor the funds, to steer private sector developments and/or to invest in major programmes itself. Where it has proved very important, and still has further potential, is in the handling of environmental, societal, and civilian safety issues; the coordination and sharing of scientific research and monitoring; and the general strengthening of cooperative relationships and normative standards for managing the Arctic, now and in future. In Euro-Atlantic terms, the Arctic Council's inclusive nature and its functionality are perhaps most reminiscent of the OSCE; yet that comparison falls down on the facts that the OSCE openly addresses military security, and is mandated to examine internal politics in the name of democracy and human rights. Though the Arctic partners have expressed some general positions on the protection of (mainly indigenous) rights, they have so far been extremely prudent about trying to discuss - still less interfering in - the internal affairs of each others' polar regions.

This paper will propose another framework of comparison and evaluation that may make more sense in terms of understanding the Arctic Council: namely the practice of what is called 'sub-regional' cooperation in the European context. The Arctic is untypical also in terms of what is normally viewed as a 'sub-region', but it will be argued that its local Council shares most of the strengths and weaknesses characteristic of sub-regional groupings in Europe and elsewhere. Since some of these groupings extend their operations into the Arctic itself, we may further ask whether the presence of such half-siblings complicates the Arctic Council's task, or whether they

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<sup>3</sup> Official website at <http://www.arctic-council.org>

<sup>4</sup> Texts available at <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/document-archive/category/20-main-documents-from-nuuk>, and <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/05/209406.htm>, respectively.

may – rather – provide useful models and support for its efforts.<sup>5</sup> Drawing lessons for the Council's own governance would demand greater knowledge of its workings than this author possesses; but some points for further research are suggested at the end.

### BACKGROUND ON SUB-REGIONALISM

While there is always room for debate on terminology, the UN has granted observer status to the OSCE as representing the European 'region' under Article VIII of the Charter:<sup>6</sup> so sub-regions may reasonably be defined as smaller groups of neighbouring states that share identifiable common concerns. The same applies in Africa where the African Union covers the whole continent, but several sub-regions with a special character may be identified; some formally organized under inter-governmental groupings, and others with a more traditional, geographical/cultural character such as the Mashraq, Maghreb, Sahel or Great Lakes.

For present purposes the story of European sub-regionalism may be traced to the period after World War Two, when two small groups of countries – the Benelux three (Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands) and the Nordic four (Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, presently joined by Finland) established close and formal cooperation structures. The Benelux grouping and Nordic Council/Nordic Council of Ministers<sup>7</sup> have survived to this day and are duly recognized in the treaties constituting the European Union and European Economic Area. They might be called 'brotherhood' groups since they built upon the long-standing cultural and historical ties, shared values and broadly parallel international aspirations of their members. Their agenda could cover anything from economic integration (in Benelux) and freedom of travel (the Nordic Passport Union) to social reforms, education and culture; but they have generally avoided 'harder' security matters, and *a fortiori* do not involve defence guarantees. Belgian/Dutch military cooperation has been developed through separate agreements, while the Nordic states still exhibit a diverse pattern of NATO and EU membership, Allied or non-Allied status. In Cold War times, indeed, the central aim of Nordic cooperation was arguably to hold the Nordic family together through an era of unusually sharp security divisions.

In the late 1980s, a new set of 'sub-regionalizing' initiatives began that had the crossing of dividing lines as a more prominent, strategically motivated aim. These are best described as

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<sup>5</sup> For more on North European sub-regional groupings (and the EU's Northern Dimension) see Alyson JK Bailes and Kristmundur Th Ólafsson, 'Northern Europe and the Arctic Agenda: Roles of Nordic and other subregional organizations' in the *Yearbook of Polar Law 2013*, Leiden and Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishing, forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.osce.org/ec/43240>. The UN Economic Commission for Europe has similarly extensive membership.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.norden.org>.

'neighbourhood' groups since their members could have different or even antagonistic security affiliations, and might not be close in political values either, but did at least share geo-strategic experiences and preoccupations that gave them an interest in stabilizing relations. A leader in the field was the Pentagone (five-sided group) of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Italy and (former) Yugoslavia, later joined by Poland, which set out to build bridges and encourage reforms amid the turbulence of the Warsaw Pact's last years. As the Communist bloc and Soviet Union collapsed, similar groups proliferated to serve a variety of goals: bridging the remaining strategic divides (notably with the new Russian Federation itself), boosting members' claims to join the EU and NATO, pooling expertise and resources for reform processes, or simply offering the nations something positive to build on in a rapidly changing and challenging Europe. Broadly speaking, in richer and more stable sub-regions the local groups could tackle more substantial tasks. In weaker areas and where many new-created states were present, even under-performing sub-regional groups could still serve existential purposes: not least as a risk-free laboratory for new regimes to 'grow into' their identities and gain diplomatic experience. This latter role remains significant today in the wider Europe beyond the NATO/EU perimeter, such as the major part of the Western Balkans and Black Sea littoral sub-regions.<sup>8</sup>

For present purposes the most relevant of the post-Cold War creations were the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), established in 1992 on Danish/German initiative,<sup>9</sup> and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC),<sup>10</sup> designed in 1993 by Norway in partnership with Russia and Finland. Table 1 below compares the key structural features of these groups, and of Nordic/West Nordic<sup>11</sup> Cooperation, with those of the Arctic Council today, while Table 2 compares the membership structures of the BEAC, the CBSS and the Arctic Council. Since the BEAC promotes cooperation in the Northernmost frontier regions of Norway, Russia, Finland and Sweden (historically also called Nordkalotten) - an area that extends well above the Arctic Circle - its competence overlaps with that of the Arctic Council and this relationship will be discussed again below. The CBSS has not sought a role in Arctic affairs, but is of interest as a parallel

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<sup>8</sup> For examples structured around a comparison between the Nordic region and Eastern/South-eastern Europe see the proceedings of a conference at the University of Iceland Centre for Small State Studies on 9 October 2008, published as *Sub-regional organizations in Europe: Cinderellas or Fairy Godmothers?* (Reykjavik: Centre for Small State Studies) and available at [ams.hi.is/sites/ams.hi.is/files/Bæklingur\\_0.pdf](http://ams.hi.is/sites/ams.hi.is/files/Bæklingur_0.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.cbss.org>.

<sup>10</sup> BEAC consists of an inter-governmental council and a Barents Regional Council, on which see more below: <http://www.beac.st>.

<sup>11</sup> West Nordic cooperation is an offshoot of Nordic Cooperation that covers the Faroes, Iceland and Greenland for purposes of parliamentary cooperation, and includes 'coastal' (mid-Western) Norway for educational, cultural and social purposes. For details in English see <http://www.vestnordisk.is/Apps/WebObjects/SW.woa/wa/dp?id=1295>.

because it shows that 'neighbours' can be defined by a sea area that they share, as well as by mutual frontiers on land.

**Table 1: Structural comparison of sub-regional groups**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Year created</b>	<b>Central organs</b>	<b>Subordinate structures (<i>other than parliamentary</i>)</b>
<b>Nordic Cooperation</b> <i>NC = Nordic Council, NCM = Council of Ministers</i>	NC 1952 NCM 1971	NC+NCM Secretariats since 1972, Copenhagen	20 working groups 20 'cooperation bodies' (centres, funds, offices etc etc)
<b>West Nordic Cooperation</b>	1985	Secretariat since 1997, currently at Reykjavik	
<b>BEAC</b>	1993	Secretariat since 2007, Kirkenes	Regional Council (of provinces) Regional Committee 17 sectoral working groups/committees
<b>CBSS</b>	1992	Secretariat since 1998, Stockholm	Baltic 21, HELCOM, Euro-faculty, Taskforces, Working Groups, expert groups etc etc
<b>Arctic Council</b>	1996	Secretariat from 2013, Tromsø	6 scientific working groups (From 2011) Three Task Forces + an eco- system management group. From 2013, four new Task Forces

**Table 2: Membership structures of the BEAC, CBSS and Arctic Council**

	<b>BEAC</b>	<b>CBSS</b>	<b>Arctic Council</b>
<b>Full members</b>	<i>(Observer)</i> <i>(Observer)</i> Denmark Finland Iceland Norway Russian Federation Sweden <i>(Observer)</i> <i>(Observer)</i>  European Union	<i>(Observer)</i>  Denmark Finland Iceland Norway Russian Federation Sweden Germany Poland Estonia Latvia Lithuania European Union	USA Canada Denmark Finland Iceland Norway Russian Federation USA <i>(Observer)</i> <i>(Observer)</i> (Indigenous groups*)
<b>Other observers*</b> <i>(ie, not in the country list above)</i>	France Italy UK Netherlands	France Italy UK Netherlands Spain Slovakia Ukraine Belarus Romania	France UK Netherlands Spain (+ admitted 2013:) China Italy India Japan R.O.Korea Singapore

\* In the Arctic Council, six indigenous peoples' representative groups are Permanent Participants and have the same access as Members to Council proceedings. In addition to states, accredited observer status is held by 9 international institutions and inter-parliamentary groups, and by 11 non-governmental organizations. For all details see <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/>.

### TYPICAL SUB-REGIONAL WEAKNESSES AND STRENGTHS

Aside from bringing together diverse neighbours across institutional dividing lines, the Arctic Council – as we have seen - resembles all sub-regional groupings (including those of Northern Europe) in three typical weaknesses or limitations.<sup>12</sup> First, it does not involve binding defence

<sup>12</sup> The corresponding strengths are analysed below.

relationships, nor explicit arms control arrangements, and in general does not tackle hard defence issues. Second, it is not a legally-based nor a (directly) legislative/regulatory institution; and third, like most (if not all)<sup>13</sup> sub-regional groups it has quite limited funds at its disposal. Further, it is only lightly institutionalized and created a permanent secretariat for the first time only in January 2013 - based in Tromsø and led initially by an Icelandic official. The main burden of the Council's intergovernmental proceedings is borne by the nation holding a rotating two-year Chairmanship, while detailed work is conducted in six scientific working groups with their own chairs and secretariats, located in various member states. Three new task forces and an ecosystem-based management group also have diverse chairs/co-chairs.

To get a fuller picture, it may be interesting to take other sub-regional 'weaknesses' identified in a seminal European work on the matter<sup>14</sup> and see how they relate to the Arctic Council:

**Figure 1: Weaknesses or limitations of sub-regional institutions**

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Typical weaknesses	The case of the Arctic Council
<b>Geographical limitations and specificities:</b>	
Limited range of resources/expertise	Resources plentiful – 2 large, one medium and other rich states.
Possible old enmities	Cold War enmity but now US/Rus., EU/Rus. + NATO-Rus. cooperation.
Possible asymmetries which the sub-regional approach <i>per se</i> cannot correct	Strategic asymmetry an issue only between Russia and the Nordics.

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<sup>13</sup> Nordic Cooperation is supported by a wealth of funds - see <http://www.norden.org/en/about-nordic-co-operation/financing> and <http://www.norden.org/en/resources/funding-and-calls/funding-schemes-and-calls-sorted-by-subject> - and the Northern Dimension is a funding mechanism by essence.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Cottey (ed.), *Sub-regional Cooperation in the New Europe: building security, prosperity and solidarity from the Barents to the Black Sea*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999. The points listed here are excerpted from the introductory chapter and from the chapter 'The Role of Sub-regional Cooperation in Post-Cold War Europe: Integration, Security, Democracy' by Alyson JK Bailes in the same volume, pp. 153-183.

**Limitations of agenda:**

Hard security not directly addressed  
= 'desecuritized'<sup>15</sup> approach, risk of  
false sense of security

Clearly desecuritized, but this is  
only a problem if others are not  
*de facto* stabilizing the strategic  
relationship. AC does effectively  
address aspects of soft security.

**Bureaucratic weakness:**

Limited enforcement/follow-up power

This is a problem: almost everything  
depends on a good Chairman and  
follow-up by member states.

Structures may be over-complicated

Structures are inordinately complex.

Overlap/confusion with other bodies

Risk of confusion mainly with other sub-  
regional institutions (see more below).

**Political weaknesses:**

Low political profile and salience

Better known than many sub-regional groups.  
Positive image among all members -

Not likely to be trusted for crucial tasks

- but bypassed by past meetings of the  
'inner Five' littoral states where the  
most serious issues of coexistence were  
addressed.<sup>16</sup>

The picture that starts to emerge here is of the Arctic Council as a relatively slow starter and perhaps problematic case in terms of institutionalization, but as a grouping that covers a much larger, richer, and potentially more powerful geographical area than the average sub-regional body. The key question then becomes, what do this powerful group of Arctic nations want to use

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<sup>15</sup> Desecuritization can be defined as a process in which a political community downgrades or ceases to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and reduces or stops calling for exceptional measures to deal with the threat (from Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press 2003, p 489).

<sup>16</sup> These states – Canada, Denmark by virtue of Greenland, Norway, Russia and the USA – held two much-publicized high-level meetings at Ilulissat in 2008 and near Quebec in 2010, to adopt shared and cooperative principles for Arctic management. The other Arctic Council members including indigenous groups have strongly protested at being left out.

the Arctic Council *for*? How much of the region's considerable resources of wealth and political energy are being or will be channelled into this particular mechanism for handling Arctic affairs, compared with other available institutions, old-fashioned diplomacy and power play, and/or other approaches including business transactions? Objectively speaking, there is no *a priori* reason to demand that any one institution should be privileged for such purposes. What matters is, first, that the overall pattern of international activity should be appropriate and adequate for stabilizing the region and tackling its challenges; and secondly, that each institution/method involved should relate synergistically and supportively towards the others. This brings us to consider the potential strengths of the sub-regional method in general, and the Arctic Council in particular:

**Figure 2: Strengths and advantages of sub-regional cooperation**

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<b>Typical strengths</b>	<b>The case of the Arctic Council</b>
<b>Geo-strategic commonalities:</b>	
Historical familiarity, shared experiences	Long-standing cooperation in polar research, shared lifestyles of locals.
Common interests, also vis-à-vis outsiders	Common interest in controlling terms of outsiders' (eg Chinese) access <sup>17</sup> .
Easier local/popular understanding Room for local cross-border cooperation and acceptance	Popular support for + participation in cooperative work inc. across relevant land borders.

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<sup>17</sup> The Chinese/East Asian issue is addressed further at the end of this text.

**Hands-on local development:**

Local expertise, logic of 'subsidiarity'<sup>18</sup>  
Benefits (even of limited spending)  
directly felt by local peoples  
Local programmes also allow non-state  
involvement, build popular/sectoral  
bonds across borders

All these apply to present activity+  
funding patterns. However the AC  
overlaps here with the BEAC, Nordic  
funds, and others and spends much less  
than them. Further, the relevance of  
local expertise to major new economic  
exploitation is qualified; more pertinent for  
limiting ecological/societal side-effects.

**Security effects:**

Indirect/existential impact on strategic  
tensions by greater contact and under-  
standing (also across institutional  
dividing lines), plus chance of using  
'corridors' to discuss hot issues.

All very true. Among other things  
the AC creates a 'club' of responsible  
officials with mutual sympathy and  
understanding. NB also 2 meetings of  
military experts on Search and Rescue

Well fitted to tackle special local  
civil and 'soft' security,  
including threats to local environment.

Very true, as seen in AC successes challenges in  
in environmental monitoring,  
shipping issues, search and rescue  
and oilspills

Able to fill gaps in others' efforts.

Yes.

Able to combine state and non-state  
efforts

True in terms of scientists' and indi-  
genous involvement, only lately  
extending to business actors<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The principle of subsidiarity is that matters should be dealt with by the smallest, lowest or least centralized competent unit available. The principle is now enshrined in the EU treaties where it reflects a drive for decisions to be taken as close as possible to the affected citizen.

<sup>19</sup> It is a priority for the Canadian Chairmanship of the AC, 2013-15, to establish a Circumpolar Business Forum and to enhance the role of private enterprise generally; see <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/resources/news-and-press/news-archive/735-canadian-chairmanship-program-2013-2015>.

**Bureaucratic 'lightness':**

Limited costs	True
Less binding regulation = easier to accept and pursue within different political systems and societies	True and very relevant among this diverse set of nations
Flexibility and room for growth	True to a degree, as shown by the new paths/achievements of recent years. Limits set mainly by need for consensus (also with indigenous groups)

In sum, the Arctic Council corresponds extremely well to the typical pattern of sub-regional strengths in Europe (and elsewhere). The nature of its region, with small and far-flung populations, means that the scope for direct, popular, cross-border cooperation is limited except in the Nordkalotten, but to balance this it has been unusually active in the governance of maritime activities. Further, the interaction of Russia with seven Western nations in the Arctic Council since the latter became an inter-governmental organization seems to have developed in much the same way as in the slightly earlier-created BEAC and CBSS. It has been relatively calm and workmanlike, continuing undisturbed by the ups and downs in the same actors' bilateral security relationships (eg, the US/Russian disagreement over missile defence), or in institutional relations like those of Russia and NATO, or even by short-term 'scares' in the Arctic itself such as the Russian flag-planting adventure beneath the North Pole in August 2007. This stable and stabilizing aspect of the Council's work, together with the more intangible building of common perceptions and Arctic-related values, have undoubtedly helped to promote the resolution of some territorial disputes in the region - notably, the signing of a Russia-Norway treaty on maritime boundary demarcation in September 2010 - and to reduce the risk of others leading to conflict. In this way, as well by attending to specific practical problems in 'subsidiarity' mode, the Arctic Council has done its part in setting the scene and improving the conditions for the remaining 'harder' issues to be tackled by other institutions and/or other methods. And it has done so while absorbing only a fraction of the funds and political energies of the nations that belong to it.

This modestly supportive, synergistic role is typical of other sub-regional groups that involve Russia, of which several exist in the Black Sea region and Central Asia as well as the North European ones mentioned here. They could not exist and work in civilized fashion if the

larger US/Russian, NATO/Russian and EU/Russian relationships were not holding some kind of strategic umbrella over them; but the 'high politics' might not work either without the grounding and support provided at local level. The difference in the Arctic case, as argued in the introduction, is that it is (so far) less clear exactly how the 'high political' issues will be resolved and by whom, especially when it comes to the roles or lack of roles of the UN (in political terms) and the major Euro-Atlantic organizations. While waiting for the answers to emerge, the value of the Arctic Council in - at least adequately - filling the sub-regional slot in the architecture becomes clearer than ever.

### THE ARCTIC COUNCIL AMONG OTHER SUB-REGIONAL GROUPS

It remains to ask about the inter-relationship of the Arctic Council with the BEAC and the longer-standing Nordic Cooperation, which includes a West Nordic sub-set of Iceland, the Faroes and Greenland.<sup>20</sup> Table 2 above has shown the high degree of overlap between participants in the Arctic Council and BEAC, while the five Nordics have common membership across the board, and Greenland and the Faroes (as well as the Åland Islands) have their own seats in Nordic Cooperation. Table 1 above offers a comparison of other structural features, with the CBSS included for further reference.

The first question raised earlier was whether the other groups that cooperate across at least part of the Arctic region constitute a challenge for the Arctic Council in terms of competition or confusion. Without space to go into full detail, it may first be acknowledged that the other bodies do overlap with the Arctic Council's spheres of activity in the areas of environment monitoring and protection, societal cooperation including support for popular exchanges, research and education, and various »soft« dimensions of security including notably transport safety and civil emergency response. Secondly, the five Nordic states both at inter-governmental and parliamentary level have taken overt joint initiatives for their common interests and aims within the Arctic Council, notably by coordinating the series of Norwegian-Danish-Swedish AC Presidencies in 2006-13. Nordic and West Nordic parliamentarians have more recently pressed for the nations they represent to adopt joint or at least coordinated Arctic 'strategies';<sup>21</sup> and while

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<sup>20</sup> The West Norwegian provinces also take part in cultural/social/educational aspects of this cooperation; see <http://www.nora.fo>.

<sup>21</sup> On Arctic strategies including those of the AC members see Alyson Bailes and Lassi Heininen, *Strategy Papers on the Arctic or High North*, Institute of International Affairs (Reykjavik) 2012, available at <http://stofnanir.hi.is/ams/sites/files/ams/Strategy Papers - PDF - SinglePage.pdf>.

this may be a bridge too far at present, the five Nordic states have taken some more specific steps towards joint responsibility eg by their commitment in April 2011 to help each other in major civil emergencies ('Nordic solidarity clause'), which applies equally to the Arctic. Thirdly, both the BEAC and Nordic group have considerable funds (larger than the Arctic Council's) for projects and programmes, and are funding many of these partly or entirely in the circumpolar space. The Nordics have a specific Arctic research and cooperation fund, currently running to 2014.

The challenge of coordinating projects extends even further since the EU's Northern Dimension (ND) initiative, aimed at improving EU/Russian cooperation along common borders in the North, also channels funding to the High North and has set up an 'Arctic window'. The EU puts further funds into the Arctic - including substantial payments to Greenland - from its sectoral budgets, notably for research and environmental monitoring. A study commissioned by the ND itself has called for much tighter control to avoid both overlaps and gaps in the pattern of spending<sup>22</sup> While the groups are unlikely to accept any reduction of their independence or interference with their varied identities, some improvements might be made rather simply - as the Nordic ministers have shown by asking their representatives on the Arctic Council to vet projects proposed for the Nordics' own Arctic fund. There is also a drive for systematic staff/ Presidency consultation between the set of 'four Councils' (Arctic, Nordic, BEAC and CBSS).

Overall, however, the elements of synergy and support between the Arctic Council and other groups seem much stronger than any complications arising. The BEAC in particular has done its part to stabilize relations with Russia in the High North's most densely populated zone, and has helped ward off societal and economic problems that could have proliferated after the Soviet Union's collapse. The Nordics' coordination has not undermined the interests of any other Arctic state and has achieved improvements in the Arctic Council's own structure and standing, notably by securing agreement to convert their temporary joint secretariat at Tromsø into a permanent one for the Council as a whole. West Nordic cooperation is one way for the region's smallest and potentially most fragile actors to pool their knowledge and adopt consistent lines on issues they share, such as shipping safety, fisheries management, new oil/gas exploration and the handling of foreign investments. In terms of handling Russia, the more networks that can be used to identify common interests and inculcate calm, inclusive and cooperative ways of behaving, the better. Finally, the North European sub-regional bodies (including the Northern Dimension) have clearly defined geographical limits and no scope to expand them. Even if they wanted to, they can

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<sup>22</sup> The Northern Dimensions Institute (Sept. 2012), *Coherent Northern Dimension: The Policy Priorities of the Arctic Council (AC), the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM)*. Available at; [http://www.ndinstitute.org/images/documents/coherent%20nd\\_final.pdf](http://www.ndinstitute.org/images/documents/coherent%20nd_final.pdf)

offer no alternative to the Arctic Council when it comes to working with Canada and the USA in the High North - let alone considering the roles of China and other non-European actors.

Could the other, and older, groups nevertheless provide guidance for the Arctic Council's own development? Some practical answers are clear: as these others moved earlier to establish secretariats and operational work-forces, their experience of doing so with meagre resources should be worth studying both for positive and negative lessons. If the Arctic Council chooses to develop a larger budget and more spending programmes that cover the North Atlantic and Northern Europe *inter alia*, it should obviously coordinate with the others in the most effective and least bureaucratic way possible.

The remaining issues arising from our two tables of comparison are more delicate. While the patterns of inter-governmental (state) membership are remarkably close in all the groups – the USA and Canada being present at least as observers in the non-Arctic ones – only the Arctic Council has given seats to non-state actors (the indigenous representative groups) in its highest policy-making body. It also has by far the most complicated observer system, including additional ad hoc invitees and dialogue relationships not shown here. The BAEC makes an interesting contrast since it has established a separate Barents Regional Council consisting of local administrators from the Northern provinces of each member state in Nordkalotten plus the Saami Assembly.<sup>23</sup> This second-level group has the major say in allocating funds and carrying out projects but cannot delay or veto decisions at the top level. Would the Arctic Council be able to evolve and adapt faster if it had a similar, clearer demarcation of its state and non-state elements? Almost certainly yes; but it is equally plain that the current members attach high normative value to the presence of the indigenous groups, making it hardly practical to imagine a change of structure. In material terms, also, some – not all - of the indigenous groups may be said to play a quasi-state role in Arctic governance, when they hold (for instance) land ownership rights that make them the subject rather than object of relevant policy formation. Nevertheless, so long as matters stay the way they are, the temptation will never quite fade for some or all of the states members to 'break out' into discussions of a more purely inter-governmental kind (like the meetings of the Five littoral states held so far).

A related issue worth noting, even if less directly linked to effectiveness, is the nature of the 'substructure' of each group in question. The Nordic Cooperation architecture is unique in having a joint parliamentary assembly as its oldest and central feature, and this Nordic Council still wields considerable influence over the five member governments when it comes to launching and following through new joint policies. (The West Nordic Council does the same on

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<sup>23</sup> The BRC created an indigenous peoples' working group in 1995 to represent all relevant communities, but this group has only an 'advisory' function vis-a-vis the inter-governmental Council: <http://www.beac.st/in-English/Barents-Euro-Arctic-Council/Working-Groups/Working-Group-of-Indigenous-Peoples>.

a smaller scale.)<sup>24</sup> This reflects the strongly bottom-up and 'popular' nature of the whole Nordic process which involves cross-border networks in almost every imaginable sphere of life. The Barents Euro-Arctic Council has created less comprehensive but significant sub-networks of its own across the specific territories it covers, in fields like education and youth, business, trade union activity, health services and tourism – aside from the Regional Council of provincial authorities already mentioned. By contrast the Arctic Council's substructure centres upon six research-based working groups, a distinctive feature that reflects the Council's origins in decades of Arctic scientific cooperation; it also has strong associated networks in the fields of indigenous affairs and education. It provides less, however, in the way of multilateral networking among local authorities or other societal and professional actors, and it was only in May 2011 that it created its first operational task forces to follow up specific policy initiatives.<sup>25</sup> A gathering of Arctic parliamentarians meets every two years with a wide and diverse membership (over 100 participants at its latest meeting in autumn 2012), including national parliamentary delegations but also representatives of the Arctic Council working groups, other parliamentary assemblies, and further interested parties.

Perhaps the most delicate issue for comparison concerns the various groupings' handling of observers. The applications for Arctic Council observership made by China and other Asian nations, and of the European Union, are known to have evoked divided reactions and lengthy debate in the Council in the run-up to the Swedish Chairmanship's last high-level meeting at Kiruna on 15 May 2013.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, as seen in Table 2, the EU has been a member of the BAEC and CBSS since their inception, and this is in fact the main divergence in the three Councils' treatment of interested non-member states or institutions.<sup>27</sup> The practice of the other two Councils has been to welcome (a) EU representatives who might bring money and technical expertise with them, and (b) large European states who can provide additional balance vis-a-vis Russia. Both those motives have some *prima facie* relevance to the Arctic case as well.

Clearly, however, the EU's role and general legitimacy in circumpolar affairs is a much larger and more complicated issue than it could ever be in the Baltic Sea or Nordkalotten. The Union is supposed to be a close and friendly partner – for general purposes – of Russia, the USA and

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<sup>24</sup> A Baltic Assembly was created on the same model in the 1990s, while BEAC and CBSS have their own parliamentary gatherings.

<sup>25</sup> Namely the planned establishment of a secretariat, oil pollution preparedness, and search and rescue. In May 2013 four new Task Forces were created: to prepare the establishment of a circumpolar business forum, to seek means of reducing black carbon and methane emissions, to develop an oilspill prevention plan, and to improve scientific research cooperation (p. 5 of the Kiruna Declaration, as note 2 above).

<sup>26</sup> For documentation see note 2 above.

<sup>27</sup> Italy was also given observership earlier in BEAC/CBSS than in the Arctic Council, but this has never been a contentious issue.

Canada, while all Nordic States belong either to the EU or European Economic Area (EEA). Yet other factors have combined to make the Arctic case more sensitive, and help to explain why Arctic actors are unlikely to see the BEAC's and CBSS's relations with Brussels as a compelling or even relevant precedent. In terms of political geography the 'pivot' of the Arctic community lies in the North Atlantic where Greenland, Iceland,<sup>28</sup> the Faroes and Norway have all turned their backs on EU membership. Another obvious stumbling-block, obliquely referred to in the Kiruna communiqué (Arctic Council 2013; 6), is created by specific disputes between Brussels on the one hand and Canada plus Greenland and indigenous groups on the other hand over the trade in seal products. The importance this issue has taken on reflects, in turn, the distinctive membership structure of the Arctic Council with its top-level representation of non-state/societal concerns. More conceptually, it might be argued that the European sub-regional groups 'know their place' in a rather clear multilayered structure where the EU and NATO hold the 'strong' roles under an OSCE and a more remote UN umbrella. Subsidiarity is a fact as well as a recognized principle: and institutions that interact vertically, like the EU and the localized groups, have no reason not to concretize their relations for mutual benefit. So long as the larger Arctic architecture – by contrast - remains unclear and some key roles unfilled, concerns in some Arctic Council quarters about precisely what ambitions the the EU might have are comprehensible, and not necessarily unjustified.

The quest of China and other Asian powers for formal representation at the Arctic Council created an issue in its own right for which other sub-regional groups could offer no guidance.<sup>29</sup> It was adjudicated positively at the May 2013 Ministerial meeting only after elaborate measures had been taken to clarify and circumscribe the roles of observers, including a provision for their possible expulsion.<sup>30</sup> Without going into the substantive debate on China's Arctic role, it is interesting to note here that no sub-regional cooperation structure analogous to the BEAC exists in the North-East quadrant of Eurasia, or between that area and Alaska. The Russia-US relationship across the Bering Strait is usually described as good both at state and societal level, but no serious attempt has been made to multilateralize it by bringing in China and/or Japan.

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<sup>28</sup> The present Icelandic government has put the country's 2009 application for EU entry on hold: see Alyson JK Bailes and Baldur Thorhallsson, 'Iceland and Europe: Drifting further apart?', Finnish Institute of International Affairs Briefing Paper 139, September 2013; available at [http://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/360/iceland\\_and\\_europe/#.UIG2NyRO\\_w4](http://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/360/iceland_and_europe/#.UIG2NyRO_w4).

<sup>29</sup> Linda Jakobson and Jingchao Peng, *China's Arctic Aspirations*, SIPRI Policy Paper 34/2012, text at [http://books.sipri.org/product\\_info?c\\_product\\_id=449](http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=449).

<sup>30</sup> See note 2 above and also the documentation from the AC's 2011 meeting at Nuuk, at <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/document-archive/category/14-7th-ministerial-meeting-in-nuuk-greenland>. Observers are required to observe a number of principles including respecting the rights and responsibilities of the AC's full members, and they may not, for example, become the largest funders in any AC project. Their observership may be reviewed, and in principle withdrawn, in the event of any infringement.

Multilateral frameworks for the Asian Far North exist only at lower and more specialized levels, notably for fisheries management and coastguard work. This is not the place to discuss why, although the Japanese-Russian territorial dispute over ownership of certain islands in the region is one obvious hindrance. For present purposes it is more interesting to speculate whether the existence of a 'Bering Council' including China might have allowed the issue of China's role to be seen in the Arctic Council – and elsewhere? – in a more natural, less challenging and controversial light. It would at least have underlined the distinction between the concerns of North-East Asian powers who will share some of the environmental, societal, and multi-dimensional security impacts of Arctic melting, and those like India and Singapore who have a more remote and indirect economic stake.

### CONCLUSIONS AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The analysis so far suggests two contrasting conclusions. First, it is unfair to evaluate the Arctic Council's strengths and weaknesses by the standards of institutions of fundamentally different type (or indeed, by comparison with the Antarctic régime). What it resembles most closely are the sub-regional organizations of Europe, including those pre-existing in its own neighbourhood. By their standards it has no unusual major weaknesses, and it shares all their typical strengths, which are especially relevant for handling the Arctic in a time of rapid evolution and architectural ambiguity. Trying to force it into a 'stronger' mould and/or placing more controversial questions on its agenda would most likely undermine these positive qualities while guaranteeing no useful results.

On the other hand, comparison with the Nordic and Barents networks raises the question whether the Arctic Council has yet become 'the best sub-regional organization that it could be'. The former groups cannot provide exact models for managing a much larger zone, a larger cooperative family, and unfamiliar issues such as Chinese access; but they may at least help to detect where the blockages lie in the Arctic case. Proceeding to consider possible applications for such findings would demand far more inside knowledge of the Arctic Council than the present author possesses - and that is one obvious direction for future research. Another would be to see whether some or all of the Arctic nations have so far been handling the Arctic Council and the other sub-regional groups in different bureaucratic compartments. If so, it would be worth seeking ways for practitioners also to look at the kind of comparisons and cross-cutting issues that this paper has tried to open up.

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