Potential Roles of NATO and the EU in High Northern Security

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1. Introduction

If the international debate on High Northern issues today reflects something of a dialectic between the ‘old hands’ who have always worked in and on the region, and the ‘new boys’ being drawn in by a combination of possible higher profits and possibly growing tensions, much the same image could be applied to the roles of international organizations. On the one side are bodies that have been contributing to the governance of the Arctic for at least a decade, and which draw on earlier cooperative traditions (notably in science). Those with a geographical remit include most obviously the Arctic Council established in 1996, but also the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) which covers much of the European High North and has shown its value notably as a framework for Norwegian-Russian cooperation. The global frameworks of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO), even if not purpose-built for the Arctic, seem to be seen by most parties as the most practical and legitimate frameworks for norm-setting and dispute handling in the

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functional spheres they cover. Somewhat newer is the EU’s Northern Dimension, which made limited impact from its first launch in 1999 but was relaunched with (apparently) more genuine support from Russia in November 2006. The more blatant ‘new boys’ on the scene are the European Union as a whole – where the European Commission published its first Communication on an Arctic Strategy only in November 2008, followed by the Council of Ministers’ adoption of policy guidelines in December 2009 – and NATO which held its first major Arctic seminar in Reykjavik in January 2009 and has so far only published its conclusions in the form of a non-binding Chairman’s statement.

The present paper will focus on the relevance and potential roles of these two newcomer institutions, without seeking to imply that they have any superior importance or even a necessarily positive role. On the other hand, experience and the logic of institutional evolution seem to this author to militate against dismissing them too hastily. The general context of institutionalization and institutional interplay as it affects the Arctic will be discussed here first; and next, the way that NATO and the EU have sought to define their place amongst existing bodies. Finally, the paper will analyse the apparent or emergent aims of each institution and what the prospects are for their realization.

2. A Regional Institutionalization Perspective

It is very common today, at least in inhabited parts of the globe, to find the same territory covered by the competences and activities of a multi-layered web of different international groupings: starting with the UN, more specialized global organs and universally applicable international-legal conventions; then coming down to large groups that take in most of a continent; and ending with sub-regional neighbourhood groups typically of between 4 and 15 states. This causes obvious problems of confusion and possible duplication (including waste of time and resources), of turf wars and competition between institutions, and potentially of forum-hopping – i.e., a state insist-