The Arctic Council – from Knowledge Production to Influencing Arctic Policy Making

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The Arctic Council is a high-level intergovernmental cooperative forum consisting of the eight Arctic states (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States of America) and Arctic indigenous peoples who act as Permanent Participants in order to ensure the sustainable development and environmental protection of the Arctic. Established in 1996, the Arctic Council has provided the region’s policy makers with useful information in various way, such as presenting Arctic issues at relevant international fora. Since its inception, the Council has gradually developed a mature organisational structure, as well as attracted states and other actors from outside the region to its activities.

The Arctic Council is a soft institution, rather than a formal international organisation, and cannot establish legally binding obligations on its member states and other associated partners (e.g., permanent participants and observers). It collates, summarizes, and popularizes scientific knowledge that is regarded as relevant to Arctic issues. It develops political recommendations in order to address challenges faced by the people and governments of the Arctic. These activities have played an influential role in inspiring different stakeholders and the Arctic states’ national policy makers.

The Arctic Council is known for its role as a catalyst for scientific studies. This is rightly so as the Council’s various types of assessments have been influential at many levels of governance. This study examines what the Arctic Council performs and manners that may influence policy even more effectively. The article’s third chapter provides an analytical view of the Arctic Council’s competence regarding its knowledge creation. It will be argued that the Council’s Sustainable Development Working Group has the capability and potential to

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truly promote the ideology of the global Rio Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 and the Agenda 21 that is a plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally in every area in which human impacts on the environment.\textsuperscript{1} This may take place via the inclusive and interactive Arctic Chance Assessment process together with other on-going work in the Arctic Council, such as the Arctic Resilience, Ecosystem Based Management, and Sustained Arctic Observatory Network. However, prior to this, it may be useful to briefly examine various activities and outcomes that are produced under the auspices of the Council. Moreover, a short explanation about the way that the Arctic Council influences Arctic policy will be made before entering Chapter 3 and the main argument of this article.

1. Introduction to the Work Undertaken at the Arctic Council

The Council's basic organizational structure consists of the eight Arctic member states. Its chairmanship rotates among these states biennially. The chair country convenes the ministerial meeting and the highest policy making body is mainly comprised of the member states' Ministers of Foreign Affairs. In 2009, in order to “strengthen the political role of the Arctic Council”, the ministers decided that meetings held at the deputy ministerial level will be organized between the ministerial meetings.\textsuperscript{2} The Council recently also introduced irregular meetings between ministers responsible for other departments in order for them to discuss common concerns and to promote cooperation.\textsuperscript{3}

Senior officials from each member states’ foreign ministry act as Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs) who meet at least biannually. The Arctic Council's chair country’s senior official also acts as the head of the SAO meetings. In fact, the SAOs comprise the main body, which oversees the activities of its subordinate bodies and prepares recommendations for Ministerial Meetings.

To ensure the participation of Arctic indigenous peoples into the work of the Arctic Council they have been granted Permanent Participant (PP) positions. The PPs are entitled to attend all open meetings (e.g., ministerial, deputy min-


\textsuperscript{3} For instance, the Health Ministers from Arctic states met first time in Nuuk, Greenland, 16 February 2011, where they adopted “The Arctic Health Declaration” which could be explained as their intention of strengthening Arctic circumpolar cooperation on health issues. http://uk.nanoq.gl/emner/government/departments/ministry_of_health/ahmm.aspx (accessed January 26, 2012).