Policy Brief

Upcoming U.S. Arctic Council Chairmanship: Preparations and Predictions of Impact on Arctic Issues

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INTRODUCTION

The United States of America will assume the chairmanship of the Arctic Council, a high level intergovernmental forum established to promote coordination, cooperation and interaction among the Arctic States and various interest groups on common Arctic issues, from 2015 – 2017. Due to the effects of the changing global climate, new possibilities for development in the Arctic come to light. The Arctic Council stands to become more and more important for the region, both in actions and in leadership.

This collection of policy briefs will delve into potential historical impacts of previous chairmanships on the upcoming U.S. chairmanship. These analysis will focus on how the U.S. is preparing for the chairmanship and will examine how U.S. leadership of the Arctic Council may affect Arctic relations with indigenous groups, the European Union, Russia and China. Conclusions will then be drawn as to what these findings might mean to the future of Arctic policies.

ARCTIC CHAIRMANSHIPS: PAST CHAIRMANSHIPS INFLUENCING THE FUTURE

*Development of Arctic Council National Chairmanship Programs*

By 2014, all of the Arctic countries have had the opportunity to host the chairmanship of the Arctic Council once with Canada currently serving in their second chairmanship (2013-2015). During the chairmanships of the Arctic Council, there have always been overarching national themes selected either through a national strategy, planning document or perhaps pinpointed in retrospect after the completion of the chairmanship. In the past, the eight Arctic countries have collaborated to develop their Chairmanship Programs, in particular with the preceding and succeeding countries. How Arctic States could potentially work together was exemplified by Norway (2006-2009), Denmark (2009-2011) and Sweden (2011-2013), and when all three states agreed on overall themes for their Chairmanship programs.  

Though no official North American Arctic strategy document was developed for the Canada and U.S. Chairmanships, there has been an alignment of priorities developed through an ongoing bilateral dialogue regarding Arctic regional strategies. As noted by Leona Aglukkaq, the Canadian Minister for the Arctic Council, at a visit to Washington in February 2014, “The United States is a key partner for Canada in environmental cooperation and the Arctic. We are working together to advance shared priorities to protect the environment in addition to advancing our shared priorities in the Arctic during our back-to-back chairmanships of the Arctic Council.”  

Nonetheless, there has been no bilateral American Canadian joint official statement with regards to ongoing overarching priorities.

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2 The overall themes being: climate change, integrated management of resources, International Polar Year, indigenous peoples and local living conditions, and Arctic Council management issues.

Setting a Joint Policy Agenda for Arctic Council 2013-2017

In May 2013, Canada started its Chairmanship and released their official national strategies for their two-year term. It was the same month that the United States released their most recent National Strategy for the Arctic Region. There are clear parallels between the Canadian agenda for the Arctic Council and the U.S. national strategy. The overall theme for the Canadian Chairmanship was the "development of the people of the North" with a focus on three overall topics: 1) responsible Arctic resource development, 2) safe Arctic shipping and 3) sustainable circumpolar communities all while working on strengthening the mechanisms and coordination of the Arctic Council.

In the U.S. Arctic Strategy, there were three major points. Firstly, the document noted a desire for the advancement of national interest with consideration to all activities (commercial, scientific and military) in the Arctic whether by sea or air with consideration to international law. Secondly, the pursuit of responsible Arctic stewardship by encouraging environmental protection and resource conservation was indicated as a priority. Thirdly, the document stressed the importance of strengthening international cooperation both through bilateral and multilateral relations, including working within the Arctic Council.

Within their national strategies, Canada and the U.S. both embrace future economic developed of the Arctic, while also speaking of stewardship of the resources and the environment. Though both nations also highlight the importance of the Arctic Council as tool for international cooperation within the region. What separates the two strategies is the amount of weight U.S. puts on its own national interests, as it is their key overall priority.

The US Arctic Legacy

Though there are collaborative unofficial and official bilateral and multilateral Chairmanship Programs and overall themes selected by each chairmanship, there has also always been a desire to establish a national legacy. National legacy is often reflected in which programs and action plans are implemented during the chairmanship such as the initiation and establishment of the Arctic Economic Forum expectantly to be remembered as part of the legacy of Canada’s chairmanship.

The U.S. first held the chairmanship of the Arctic Council in 1998-2000 and had "human health" as their overall theme. Its overall activities supported not only major Arctic health initiatives such as International Circumpolar Surveillance to monitor diseases and human health but they also initiated the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, the first scientific climate impact assessment of the Arctic.

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Though it is not yet clear what the legacy of the upcoming U.S. chairmanship will be, its renewed commitment to arctic stewardship and its collaboration with current chair suggest that the U.S. will try to implement policies with a lasting impact for the future of the region.

U.S. PREPARATIONS FOR THE ARCTIC COUNCIL CHAIRMANSHIP

As the United States prepares to take on the chairmanship of the Arctic Council, initiatives are being taken to strengthen U.S. relations in the Arctic.

Congressional Arctic Working Group

On August 1, 2014, Congressmen Don Young (R-Ak) and Rick Larsen (D-Wash.) published a press release calling on the US to strengthen its role in the Arctic. As part of the press release, the Congressmen announced they are forming a Congressional Arctic Working Group. This group will include native communities and interested parties in the fields of oil and gas, national security, mining, the environment and navigation who will advise Congress on Arctic issues.7

New United States Arctic Appointments

On July 16, 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry announced that Lieutenant Governor Fran Ulmer had been appointed to serve as Special Advisor on Arctic Science and Policy. Retired Coast Guard Admiral Robert Papp has also been appointed by Kerry as US Special Representative for the Arctic, and will be chairing the Arctic Council on behalf of the US.8 Papp has already begun engaging with Alaskans to get ideas about policies the U.S. should champion during its Arctic Council chairmanship.9

United States Ambassador at Large for Arctic Affairs

Although the recent appointments by Secretary of State John Kerry are seen as a step in the right direction, Congressmen Young and Larsen stress the importance of a congressionally approved ambassador to the Arctic Council.10 Congressmen Jim Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.) and Rick Larsen (D-Wash.) introduced a bill on April 30, 2014 to establish a United States Ambassador at Large for Arctic Affairs by amending the State Department Basic Authorities Act of 1956. This legislation would allow the Ambassador to be in charge of the coordination of all Arctic policies. These policies are currently handled by 20 government agencies. The Ambassador would also serve as Chair of the Arctic Council from 2015-2017 on behalf of the United States.11

7 Young, D., Larsen, R., (2014). “The United States needs to turn its attention to the Arctic Ocean” Washington Post
10 Young, D., Larsen, R., (2014). “The United States needs to turn its attention to the Arctic Ocean” Washington Post
**U.S. Strategy Development for Arctic Region**

U.S. President Barack Obama released the National Strategy for the Arctic Region on May 10, 2013, followed by the detailed Implementation Plan for The National Strategy for the Arctic Region released in January 2014. In combination with the Department of Defense 2013 Arctic Strategy and the U.S. Navy Arctic Roadmap for 2014 to 2030, these reports demonstrate targeted efforts to develop a more comprehensive Arctic strategy prior to the U.S. Arctic Council chairmanship in 2015.

**IMPACTS OF THE US CHAIRMANSHIP ON INDIGENOUS PARTICIPATION IN THE ARCTIC COUNCIL**

"We seek an Arctic region that is stable and free of conflict, where nations act responsibly in a spirit of trust and cooperation, and where economic and energy resources are developed in a sustainable manner that also respects the fragile environment and the interests and cultures of indigenous peoples."

*2013 US National Strategy for the Arctic Region*

**Current Status Of Indigenous Participation In The Arctic Council**

The Arctic Council offers a unique structure for the participation of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have been involved in discussions of the region since the *Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy*, the predecessor of the Arctic Council, was written.

This vision is further affirmed in the first paragraph of the Declaration on Establishment of The Arctic Council (The Ottawa Declaration), where the Arctic Council is established as a high level forum to “provide a means for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues, in particular issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic.” Paragraph 2 of the Ottawa Declaration officially makes certain Arctic organizations of indigenous peoples Permanent Participants. This category is created to provide for active participation and full consultation with the Arctic indigenous representatives within the Arctic Council.

**Expectations for Indigenous Participation during the U.S. Chairmanship**

1. Legislative framework

The basis for U.S. Arctic policy is the 2009 National Security Presidential Directive 66 – Homeland Security Presidential Directive 25. Even though this document is focused on environmental protection and sustainable development of the region, it emphasizes the role and involvement of indigenous people as well as other Arctic residents as stakeholders in the Arctic.

The document implementing this policy, the 2013 National Strategy for the Arctic Region, reiterates these priorities and further adds that the U.S. will not only prioritize national security interests; it will also address the challenges

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and opportunities connected with climate change in accordance with other Arctic nations, the State of Alaska and local and tribal entities.\textsuperscript{17}

2. Expectations

As it is still quite early on in the process of taking over the Chairmanship from Canada, official documents expressing a US vision have yet to be published. However, on its Arctic website, the U.S. states that it "... seeks to promote the viability and socioeconomic well-being of Arctic communities and supports scientific research and international cooperation in achieving these goals.”

Hence, one can presume a continuation of the current policy of consultation of the Permanent Participants through the Arctic Council. Moreover, if the U.S. national Arctic Directive and the 2013 National Strategy for the Arctic Region can be taken as a baseline, one can presume that the US will continue building upon existing initiatives by Arctic states, local and tribal authorities and will take traditional knowledge into account in decision-making.

The idea that the U.S. is favorable towards Arctic indigenous peoples and their participation is further strengthened by the statement Secretary of State John Kerry made at the Arctic Council meeting in Kiruna, Sweden on the 15th of May 2013. At that meeting he stated "I greatly respect the hundreds of generations of tradition, culture and expertise that has been built by the indigenous communities who have called this extraordinary place home for thousands of years. They shape this council’s work and they guide our decision-making, and they should.”\textsuperscript{18} One can conclude from this that the U.S. 2015-2017 chairmanship will positively impact indigenous participation in the Arctic Council.

\textbf{US RELATIONS WITH THE EU AND RUSSIA: IMPACT ON U.S. CHAIRMANSHIP}

\textit{Expectations for Arctic Council enlargement}

Unlike Canada and Russia who expressed concern about the enlargement of the Arctic Council, on the official level, the U.S. held a positive stance on the admission of new observers to the Arctic Council. During the official visit to Norway in 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2009-2013) outlined the issue of creating opportunities to integrate non-Arctic nations in the establishment of a cooperative framework. \textsuperscript{19}

At the expert level, some concerns were expressed on the prospective enlargement of the Arctic Council. Luke Coffey, fellow at the Heritage Foundation, expressed an opinion that European Union membership in the Arctic Council would erode the importance of state sovereignty in the region and undermine the influence in the Council, and, thus, calling on the U.S. to block the application.\textsuperscript{20}

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\textsuperscript{17} The White House (2013) \textit{National Strategy for the Arctic Region.}
In general, the Arctic Council enlargement was in line with the U.S. official Arctic policy, expressed in the 2013 National Strategy for the Arctic Region and 2014 Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for the Arctic Region. Both documents include U.S. interests in promoting collaboration between Arctic and non-Arctic states in the frames of the appropriate institutes, including addressing the emerging challenges and opportunities in the region.\(^\text{21}\)

Several experts consider the prospective U.S. Chairmanship as a way to bring changes to the Arctic Council. In particular, Dr. Lawson Brigham, professor at the University of Alaska, views the role of the U.S. Chairmanship as an opportunity to encourage evaluation of the current observers’ role in the Arctic Council and to enhance their contribution to the work of the permanent participants and to the Council’s Working Groups.\(^\text{22}\).

In 2011 by adopting the Nuuk Declaration, the Arctic states strictly limited the role and functions of the approved observer states. It is mostly likely that first and foremost Canada and Russia were the ones to support limitation of the observer’s powers, since the enlargement of the Arctic Council is viewed by the states as a potential threat to their security interests and of losing their exclusiveness in the decision-making process on the Arctic issues. In the long-term perspective, the potential growing role of observer states in the Arctic Council will most likely not be in line with the U.S. interests in the region. In case of the Arctic Council empowering with a binding function and decision making process on other issues, including security ones, it mostly likely that the U.S. will not favor decisions made on state issues by non-Arctic member-states, as well. It is most likely therefore that the organizational status of the Arctic Council will remain status quo. However, the U.S. could initiate enhancement of financial regulations of the Arctic Council and its Working Groups.

**Expectations for U.S. - Russian relations in the frames of the Arctic Council**

The current tense geopolitical situation raises question concerning the state of the U.S.-Russian cooperation in the Arctic region and in the Arctic Council.

Despite the fact that the U.S. delegation was not present at the fourth international meeting of the Arctic Council on August 6-7 in Naryan-Mar (Russia), according to Secretary of the Security Council of Russia Nikolai Patrushev, “in bilateral communications Americans are expressing interest in cooperation in the Arctic.”\(^\text{23}\) Leandra Bernstein, program director at the George Washington Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian studies, views the Arctic cooperation as an area for cooling the existing political tension between Russia, the U.S. and NATO.\(^\text{24}\) According to Marlene Laruelle,


\(^{24}\) Ria Novosti (2014) “Arctic cooperation may ease Russia-US Tensions”, May 22. Retrieved from
Research Professor at George Washington Institute, "U.S.-Russian relations will be less focused on security issues; however, there are other areas for cooperation between the states." A part of the topic launched during the Canadian Chairmanship, it is mostly likely that the states will continue working on introducing regulation for safe shipping and for sustainable exploration and production of mineral resources in the Arctic region. Thomas S. Axworthy, President & CEO of the Walter & Duncan Gordon Foundation, states that "it might be very useful if the Arctic states will think about how to address the security issues at least around confidence building measures or on cooperation on the matter."

In general, under the U.S. Chairmanship in the Arctic Council the dialogue between the West and Russia is most likely to continue on "soft security issues" that are in the scope of interest of all Arctic states, avoiding "hard security issues." The fora could also be used by the U.S. and Russia to discuss the issues on other matters.

Expectations for U.S. – EU relations in the frames of the Arctic Council

In May 2014 the EU released the "Council conclusions on developing of the Arctic region" calling for "intensifying the EU's constructive engagement with Arctic states". Due to the lack of the opposition from the U.S. on the EU involvement in the Arctic, it is most likely to consider that the relations will develop in a positive and constructive manner. On certain Arctic issues the interests and positions of both actors coincide. The U.S. and the EU hold a stance on viewing the Northern Sea Route and North-West Passage as international straits, opposing the positions of Russia and Canada, respectively, considering the Passages as internal waters. In this case, the U.S. could try to lobby recognition of the Passages as international waters by forming a coalition with the EU, and Asian states, first and foremost China, who at least at the academic level, expresses the view of the Arctic being a common heritage.

CHINA'S ROLE IN THE ARCTIC AND THE US CHAIRMANSHIP: A GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

In May 2014, the Russian major natural gas provider Novatek and the Chinese China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) concluded an important deal on the Yamal LNG plant. Apart from its economic relevance, the deal sets the scene for a significant Chinese presence in the Arctic. It also confirms a shift in Russian geopolitical strategy. In times of direct confrontation with Europe and the West, Russia looks east and openly seeks to diversify its alliances and its markets towards China.
this context, where is China’s presence in the Arctic heading? What are the prospects of U.S.-China relations under the U.S. chairmanship of the Arctic Council?

**China’s Interests and Status in the Arctic**

Prospects of melting Arctic sea ice, increased navigation and new economic opportunities have triggered renewed attention for the Arctic. Although formally it does not have an Arctic policy or strategy, China is often described as a near-Arctic state and it has security, strategic and economic interests in the Arctic.

Overall, Chinese activities in the Arctic are focused on environmental issues, energy resources, and shipping. China is concerned for potential repercussions of melting polar ice on its continental and oceanic environment and, more generally, on the country’s development. As a result, Beijing has engaged in polar research since the 1990s. China participates to several polar research projects and organizations, and contributed to the International Polar Year Program. Cooperation with Norway on Arctic research is particularly robust and revolves around the Yellow River Station on Svalbard Research Station. Undiscovered energy resources represent attractive opportunities for China. The Russian Arctic is a promising destination for Chinese investments. Norway and Canada are also likely partners for energy cooperation with China. The Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route represents two important waterways for commercial shipping. Being heavily dependent on shipping for energy imports and good exports, China would benefit from new and faster navigable routes. Arctic shipping would lower logistical and regulatory costs associated with shorter trips.

In March 2010, Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo said that “the Arctic belongs to all the people around the world, as no nation has sovereignty over it ... China must play an indispensable role in Arctic exploration as we have one-fifth of the world’s population.” Three years later, in May 2013, China was awarded the status of permanent observer to the Arctic Council. This marked an important symbolic step in China’s Arctic presence, ending a period of mutual mistrust and suspicion between Beijing and the Arctic states.

**Beijing’s Strategy**

Most recently, Beijing has emphasized respect for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the sovereign rights of the Arctic states, stressing the need to work with non-Arctic states to achieve common goals of resource exploitation, navigation safety, and environmental protection. In China's view, “it is unimaginable that non-Arctic states will remain users of Arctic shipping routes and consumers of Arctic energy without playing a role in the decision-making process, and [that] an end to the Arctic states' monopoly of Arctic affairs is now imperative.” To this aim, ”the Arctic states should

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30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.


strike a balance between their national interests and the common interests of the international community.”

Being a non-Arctic state, China cannot claim any Arctic territory or resources thereof. It is believed that China has been pursuing a low-profile approach toward the region and will have to rely on other states’ invitation (especially Russia and Canada) to promote its interests. If China wishes to strengthen its involvement in the Arctic, it will increasingly engage in bilateral and multilateral relations with single Arctic countries through joint projects and research expeditions. China has been putting much effort especially in relations with Nordic countries. In 2012, Chinese top leaders visited Demark, Iceland, and Sweden, discussing Arctic cooperation and economic development. This proved not only increased importance of these countries for Chinese diplomacy but it also demonstrated expanded bilateral cooperation on Arctic affairs.

**China-US Relations and the Arctic**

Traditionally a reluctant Arctic power, the U.S. is looking with renewed interest at China’s role in the Arctic. Asia and China are high on the U.S. agenda for the coming years. An example of the U.S. global strategy at the economic level is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and other initiatives under the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). The “return to Asia” of the U.S. has been seen also as a way of engaging and containing China.

Arctic issues were on the table at the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) in 2011 and in 2012. The S&ED is the main high-level forum for bilateral relations between China and the US. The sixth round of the U.S.-China S&ED held in July 2014 revealed some of the most critical issues at stake in Sino-American relations. Cyber espionage and maritime disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea dominated the agenda of the summit. Though Arctic interests were not directly addressed in the course of the meeting, tensions in other fields risk undermining bilateral Arctic cooperation.

**China and the US Chairmanship: Prospects for the Future**

Despite the fact that China’s presence in the Arctic Council is likely to have a purely reputational significance, Arctic governance will see a broader involvement of China in the implementation of the Arctic agenda. Partnerships like the one between Novatek and CNPC will boost China’s involvement in the Arctic. For the US, strengthening cooperation with China is not only a goal on its own but it will also allow Washington to pursue its security interests and an effective Arctic stewardship. Achieving this will require engaging in a cooperative dialogue with China, moderating existing tensions. In the course of the U.S. chairmanship of the Arctic Council, fruitful Arctic cooperation with China will be

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34 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
paramount to counterbalance the Sino-Russian emerging alliance and accomplish broader goals of leadership in Asia.

The U.S. should also take into account that the low profile strategy chosen by China will likely change in the future. Being heavily dependent on shipping and energy imports, Beijing will become more assertive once new shipping routes and natural resources become available in the Arctic.41

CONCLUSION

Though it is too early to know the specific overall theme and chairmanship program of the U.S. Arctic Council Chairmanship, the U.S. is taking various steps to become more involved in Arctic issues both at home and abroad. It is likely that their chairmanship will look to the preceding Canadian Chairmanship when shaping their agenda. It is also expected that the U.S. chairmanship will be collaborative in nature with the other Arctic States, and certain non-Arctic actors.

Indigenous involvement in Arctic Council affairs is a high priority and it appears that the U.S. intends to continue to make their involvement a priority during their chairmanship. Relations with the European Union under U.S. leadership will continue to be positive. China, a relatively recent addition to the Arctic Council and major player on the international stage, should be met with a U.S. Chairmanship that favors strengthening relations with it. Overall, the upcoming U.S. Chairmanship is positioned to be one of progress both for the U.S., the Arctic Region and the world as a whole.