2019 North Pacific Arctic Conference Proceedings

# The Arctic in World Affairs

*A North Pacific Dialogue on Global-Arctic Interactions: The Arctic Moves from Periphery to Center*

*Edited by*
*Robert W. Corell, Jong Deog Kim, Yoon Hyung Kim, Arild Moe, Charles E. Morrison, David L. VanderZwaag, Oran R. Young*

KMI KOREA MARITIME INSTITUTE

EAST-WEST CENTER

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# A Perspective from an NPAC Fellow

**Sebastian Knecht**

The former Danish ambassador to South Korea was quoted as saying in 2013, "I don't really care if there are 30 observers—it's not going to dramatically change the workings of the Arctic Council. Networking is important, and presence is important" (Bennett 2014, 84). As much as his remark praises forms of non-institutional cooperation outside the Arctic Council, including but not limited to bi- and multilateral agreements, joint ventures, or cultural, educational and exchange programs, it also raises skepticism about what actors in the capacity of observer can achieve in the Arctic's most important regional forum.

Despite ongoing discussions about weaknesses and inefficiencies in the Council's institutional setup, working group coordination, and internal procedures, it remains a well-functioning organization serving the Arctic region and its peoples. When judged against the means it has available to achieve the ends it was designed for, the Arctic Council remains a highly successful, adaptable and effective institution for the region (Kankaanpää and Young 2012; Young 2016). Today, Arctic Council working groups (WGs), task forces (TFs) and expert groups (EGs) conduct and finalize more projects and assessment work than ever before, some of it highly influential in regional and global climate governance and multilateral negotiations for environmental protection and sustainable development. At the same time, it has also become clear that the direct participatory benefits to some Arctic Council stakeholders are far from obvious and in many cases reflect neither their expectations nor their aspirations. State and non-state actors participating as observers are in positions that are too weak to substantially alter Arctic Council processes or outcomes. They are more often targets of than contributors to the work of the Arctic Council. This constraint leaves little room for observers to advance their own agendas, interests and policies, and is intended by design.

However, there are advantages of observer status that pull more and more actors into the Council. The first is a legitimacy-boosting effect of admission to the "preeminent intergovernmental forum for the Arctic region." Admission as an Arctic Council observer is one if not the ultimate gateway to recognition as a *rightful* Arctic stakeholder, no matter how

strong "networking" and "presence" really are. Once these actors are in, the second benefit is to receive first-hand information not only about the state and development of the Arctic region, but also of Arctic states' future intentions for regional governance arrangements. Even if observers may not be able to wield any direct influence on these policies, they receive a fuller picture of the region that allows them to constantly assess, develop and alter their own strategies, preferences, and policies in response.

In exchange for these benefits, observers are asked to contribute to the work of the Arctic Council, primarily at the level of WGs, TFs and EGs. The admission and readmission of observers has become increasingly conditional on their performance in these subsidiary bodies, and the Arctic Council invests more and more resources in monitoring performance and reviewing state and non-state actors in their observer capacities. With the reform of the Council's rules of procedure (RoP) in 2013, observers are required to submit activity reports to the Council. The original 1998 regulations included a directory provision that was optional (as opposed to a mandatory provision) regarding the submission of such activity reports (Arctic Council 1998, paras. 4, Annex 2). The 2013 RoP reform established a continuous and close-meshed monitoring system made up of two complementary components for assessing observers: a self-reporting mechanism on the one hand, and internal reviews conducted by the Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs) on the other.[1]

Under the self-reporting process, observers are asked to submit an activity report with information on concrete contributions to the Arctic Council before the biennial Ministerial meeting if they want to retain observer status with the Council (Arctic Council 2013, paras. 4, Annex 2). Submission of activity reports is a necessary requirement for observers to signal their continued interest in the status to the Council. The reporting guidelines provided to all observers make it very clear that non-compliance with this condition will be interpreted by the Arctic states as "an indication that the Observer is no longer interested in maintaining status as an accredited Observer to the Arctic Council"[2] (Arctic Council 2019a, 2). Regular submission of a report, however, does not guarantee the observer will also stay on the Council. The complementary observer review process by SAOs evaluates the reports that observers submit in a four-year interval after first admission. In the two review rounds already completed in 2017 and 2019, the status of all observers was renewed.

Another monitoring mechanism the Arctic Council has installed

recently is the project-tracking tool AMAROK. This was developed under Canadian Chairmanship of the Council (2013-2015), and its first edition was presented to Arctic ministers at the Iqaluit meeting in April 2015. The Council introduced AMAROK as "a database of all ongoing Arctic Council projects […] to help Arctic Council members, as well as Observers and the general public, to better appreciate the breadth and diversity of the Arctic Council's work, as well as to track progress and coordinate cross-cutting efforts" (Arctic Council Secretariat 2018, 40). AMAROK should therefore be seen in combination with the establishment of an observer reporting-and-review process and the Council's broader efforts to achieve institutional adaptation, procedural streamlining, and increased efficiency and effectiveness in a changing regional and global context. Initially managed and updated by the Arctic Council Secretariat, AMAROK was in 2017 transferred to an online database that allows for direct entries by WGs, TFs and EGs. It is thus not an impartial and centralized monitoring system, but is fed—just as the observer reporting process—with information from decentralized self-reporting, in this case by the chairs of the subsidiary bodies. The kind of information they are asked to provide to track progress in the work of the Arctic Council has become more and more detailed and now also includes contributions by observers, thus implying that the Arctic Council indeed considers their contributions an asset to successful and timely project implementation.[3]

All these different monitoring devices tell us a great deal about observers' integration into Arctic Council work, especially when assessed in combination. Comparing AMAROK entries with observer self-reports reveals striking differences in the notified and perceived performance of observers. More precisely, observer states seem to systematically over-report their performance in Arctic Council subsidiary bodies to a non-trivial extent. Only about half of all direct project contributions reported by the 13 observer states in the recent observer reporting process have also been recognized by subsidiary body chairs in AMAROK. While all observer states misrepresented their contributions, the degree to which they have done so varies from twenty-five percent to two-thirds of all projects mentioned.

Over-reporting does not necessarily equal low performance, as even observer states with a high percentage of over-reported activity have contributed to several projects, and usually allocate additional in-kind and financial resources to the Arctic Council. It may not even be that this difference is necessarily a result of misrepresentation on the side

of observers or subsidiary bodies. A certain margin of error is intrinsic to the reporting process, since both instruments rely on imperfect monitoring and subjective assessments. The discrepancy between the two mechanisms may rather point to different standards, understandings and interpretations of what "performance" means in the context of Arctic Council work rather than an actual performance-recognition gap. In the observer reporting process, observers shall provide information on "contributions to the subsidiary *bodies through project participation and support*, as well as collaboration with Permanent Participants" (emphasis mine). "Participation" and "support" are rather broad terms to measure performance, in that mere attendance at Arctic Council meetings would count as a contribution. And what many observer states indeed do in their activity reports is to list instances of representation at certain Arctic Council meetings, irrespective of whether this has actually resulted in voice or influence. On the other hand, AMAROK asks subsidiary bodies to report instances where "Observers *contributed in a particularly meaningful way* to this initiative" (emphasis mine), which sets a much higher bar for performance closer to impact.

What this cursory review of the different monitoring mechanisms shows is the necessity to distinguish between different "worlds of commitment" that includes varying levels of access, participation, and integration of observers in the work of the Arctic Council and particularly its subsidiary bodies. The observer reports and the AMAROK project-tracking tool further indicate that observer states' contributions are not as varied as would be possible or as Arctic actors probably consider desirable. Although all observer states contribute to Council projects in one way or another, it is remarkable that there is limited diversity regarding where they contribute. Most non-Arctic states concentrate as observer coalitions in a few projects, including the *Adaptation Actions for a Changing Arctic* (AACA) project, the *Sustaining Arctic Observing Networks* (SAON) project, the *Actions for Arctic Biodiversity 2013-2021* implementation plan, the Arctic Migratory Birds Initiative (AMBI), the *Short-lived Climate Forcers (SLCFs) EG*, and the *Expert Group in Support of the Implementation of the Framework for Action on Black Carbon and Methane*.

But (when) does presence result in impact? We know very little about how observer states engage in epistemic communities that constitute the Council's subsidiary bodies, which roles they ought or intend to play, how these roles vary across WGs, TFs, EGs and projects, what strategies

observers use to seek access, voice, and impact in these networks, and whether or not they succeed in establishing social ties with Arctic states and Indigenous communities in the long run. Much of the debate about the inclusive model of the Arctic Council implicitly or explicitly rests on the normative assumption that observer states' involvement and contributions are welcomed, needed and valuable in furthering the goals of the Arctic Council (Stokke 2013; Lunde, Yang, and Stensdal 2015; Bennett 2014). Others argue that observer status is a weak institution that comes with unfavorable terms for status holders, decreases their policy space with regard to Arctic affairs and gives Arctic states much more room to influence observers than the other way around (Young 2012; Guo 2012; Bekkevold and Offerdal 2014; Graczyk et al. 2017). I do not intend to dispute any of these claims, but only hint at the fact that to date no study has empirically assessed the amount and quality of contributions that observers bring to the Arctic Council, nor the conditions under which they can have a positive and lasting impact on its work.

What we know so far is that access, participation, and contribution is an integrative process and the three categories are connected. However, the level of integration in the work of the Council is not necessarily correlated to the level of participation in its meetings. Many observers score high on presence, and yet do not make a difference to the agenda or output of the Arctic Council (Knecht 2017b). On the other hand, some observers can be singled-out as having a larger impact on the Council although they are not represented at all levels or in a wide variety of projects. Previous research has shown that observer states with a higher degree of domestic policy coordination through strategic planning, inter-departmental harmonization or institutionalized focal points for polar affairs—such as an "Arctic ambassador"—have a significantly higher participation record in Arctic Council meetings (Knecht 2017a). Beyond representation, stronger engagement at the subsidiary body level and in distinct projects is often hampered by access barriers to Arctic Council epistemic communities, which are largely organized in "shadow networks" decoupled from the wider Arctic Council infrastructure (Knecht Forthcoming). Several case studies have tried to shed light on the mechanisms behind these more general patterns, with mostly Asian observer states being in the spotlight. Drawing on the Chinese example, some scholars suggest observer delegations are bigger and more diverse in the years following admission in order to get to know how the Council operates, only to see a decline in

presence later when observers are asked to contribute to specific projects (Koivurova et al. 2017, 169-78). There is little evidence supporting the idea that China—or any other observer state for that matter—would engage in forms of hard power diplomacy to further its own agendas, interests and governance solutions in the Council. Most analyses point to Chinese science diplomacy as a soft-power strategy for trust-building (Su and Mayer 2018; also Bertelsen, Li, and Gregersen 2017) or as a form of norm entrepreneurship to promote ideas of Arctic governance as an international responsibility that China would be ready and particularly well-suited to assume in partnership with Arctic states (Lanteigne 2017).

With the RoP reform of 2013, observer status has been restructured from a flexible and rather informal institution deeply rooted in the Council's WGs to a rules-based and formalized mechanism. Today, political criteria play a much greater role in the admission and review of observers than their capacity and ability to contribute to the scientific work conducted under the auspices of the Arctic Council. Any proposal to reorganize the future relationship among Arctic Council member states, PPs, and observers will have to strike a balance between the desire of Arctic states to keep observers at a fair distance and non-Arctic states' wishes to be involved as closely as possible. To achieve such reconciliation of interests, Oran Young has already suggested in 2012 to create an "informal mechanism that will not seem threatening to the members of the A8 but that will seem appealing to key non-Arctic states as a means of gaining a serious hearing for their views about matters of Arctic Ocean governance" (Young 2012, 293). Such a mechanism became a regular part of Arctic Council deliberations since the SAO meeting in Anchorage in October 2015. At "observer special sessions," Arctic states engage with observers in a "general discussion on the role of observers in the Arctic Council, with particular emphasis on how Observers can contribute to the Working Groups (WGs), Task Forces (TFs), and Expert Groups (EGs)" (ACSAO 2015). Observer special sessions take place back-to-back with SAO meetings, and thus are paradoxically both an instrument of deeper integration into Arctic Council governance as well as an instrument of exclusion from it. Participants consider the observer special sessions a valuable instrument for stakeholder interaction between Arctic and non-Arctic actors, though the benefit for deepened observer integration in Arctic Council projects is not entirely clear yet. The latest proposal to promote observer contributions has been to have "speed-dating" events at which WG representatives and observers can discuss concrete ways and opportunities

for collaboration in specific projects and initiatives (Arctic Council 2019b, 8). With proposals for institutional and procedural reform only increasing in number, the ultimate question the Arctic Council is soon likely to face is whether a piecemeal approach can have visible and sustained effects on observer integration in Arctic Council projects or whether the observer system needs to be rethought and reorganized in its entirety.

## Notes

1. SAOs review the reports provided by observers and formulate recommendations for readmission based on this information. The final decision rests with Arctic ministers at Ministerial meetings.
2. In 2018, only 19 out of 21 observers that were supposed to report for the review process also submitted a report, while two non-governmental organizations failed to do so. The *National Geographic Society* (NGS) withdrew from observer status within a year after admission in May 2017 and before the deadline for the activity reports on December 1, 2018. Another non-state observer, the *Advisory Committee on Protection of the Sea* (ACOPS), has for unknown reasons missed the deadline. Apparently, this had no consequences for its observer status. Although not formally an accredited observer, also the European Union (EU) has to regularly report on its activities and contributions to the work of the Council.
3. Similarly, also contributions by Indigenous communities represented by Permanent Participants (PPs) have only become a criterion to be monitored and tracked in AMAROK at a later stage. Having been a controversial issue, the SAOs agreed at an executive meeting in Washington, D.C. in June 2015 to add elements to the AMAROK checklist that reflect and cover PP involvement in project planning and implementation (Arctic Council 2015).

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