

Soft institutions in Arctic governance—who does what?

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Abstract

The linkages between the Arctic and the rest of the world have become more profound and the region is increasingly attracting attention, also from non-Arctic state actors. Parallel to this development, the discussion about the future Arctic is taking place in various arenas, forums and among an increasing number of actors with interest in the region. At a time of high tension in international relations, and an increased likelihood of spill-over to Arctic cooperation, issues of governance of the Arctic region are potentially at stake. This makes it important that scholars are accurate in their analyses; confusing the mandate, responsibilities and purposes of different arenas for cooperation can be unfortunate. This article finds support in the literature on regime complexes and aims to show and analyse the differences between three key players in the Arctic: the Arctic Council, Arctic Frontiers and the Arctic Circle Assembly. In addition to exploring their differences, we ask what role these entities play in shaping policy in and for the Arctic. From mapping out the mandates, roles and responsibilities of the Arctic Council, Arctic Frontiers and Arctic Circle Assembly, and by nuancing their formal and informal aspects, we aim to contribute to clarifying misunderstandings regarding their functions and positions vis-à-vis each other.

Introduction

The international conversation about the Arctic of the future has accelerated as the effects of climate change in the region have become more visible, and as the region increasingly attracts the interests of great powers and non-Arctic states alike. This discussion is taking place in various arenas and forums—first and foremost through the Arctic Council, where cooperation is based on the logic of intergovernmentalism among the eight Arctic states: the United States, Russia, Canada, Iceland, Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark/Greenland (Ingimundarson, 2014; Keil & Knecht, 2017, p. 195). However, while the Arctic Council is the foremost international forum for cooperation in the Arctic, it is increasingly challenged by a growing stakeholder pool, bidding for a more meaningful position in the region. These non-state and non-Arctic actors actively use conferences to promote their interests in and priorities for the Arctic (Steinveg, 2023, pp. 84–91; 94–99). While conferences do not provide direct governance influence, they still challenge the state-centric view of Arctic governance (Steinberg & Dodds, 2015, p. 110), and the way in which these open arenas facilitate an unfiltered stage for outsiders has not always been viewed positively among the Arctic states (Steinveg, 2020, p. 15).

Russia's war against Ukraine has changed the framework for the discussion of Arctic cooperation, especially considering how Russian participation in the Arctic Council is currently kept at a minimum. Yet, the Arctic is still on the agenda, and the Arctic Council is working to figure out how to function in the new geopolitical reality (Jonassen, 2023b). At a time when issues of governance of the Arctic region are at stake, it is important that scholars are accurate in their analyses. Confusing the mandates, responsibilities and purposes of different arenas for cooperation can be unfortunate and can hamper constructive and enlightened discussions about the future of the Arctic.

In this article, we take a closer look at three arenas for cooperation and discussion regarding the challenges and opportunities in the Arctic: the Arctic Council, Arctic Frontiers and the Arctic Circle Assembly. The main objective is to contribute to role clarification and to correct misunderstandings by asking two questions: “What role do Arctic Frontiers, the Arctic Circle and the Arctic Council play in shaping policy in and for the Arctic?” and “What exactly is the difference between the Arctic Council and Arctic conferences?” By extension, it is interesting to inquire how these arenas can work in light of Russia's war on Ukraine and what will be the consequences if they collapse.

Theoretical approach and empirical material

This article examines Arctic conferences in relation to the Arctic Council within the broader governance system in the Arctic region. For this purpose, we find support in the regime theoretical perspective (Keohane, 1982; Levy, Young, & Zürn, 1995; Young, 2008;

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Gómez-Mera, Morin, & Graaf, 2020). We follow Orsini, Morin, & Young (2013) and define a regime complex as “a network of three or more international regimes that relate to a common subject matter; exhibit overlapping membership; and generate substantive, normative, or operative interactions recognised as potentially problematic whether or not they are managed effectively” (p. 29). The Arctic regime complex comprises treaties, intergovernmental and inter-parliamentary organisations, non-governmental organisations and transnational networks. These entities often have overlapping membership and deal with overlapping issue areas, such as those of the Arctic Council and Arctic conferences.

The Arctic governance structure has previously been described as a mosaic of issue-specific arrangements (Young, 2005, p. 10), a globally embedded space of issues and communities (Keil & Knecht, 2017), a patchwork of formal and informal arrangements operating on different levels (Stokke, 2011) and a set of interlinked and overlapping policy fields (Wilson Rowe, 2019, p. 2). Today, the density of the Arctic regime complex is increasing, which necessitates drawing attention towards how to avoid fragmentation and how to encourage harmonisation (Young, Yang, & Zagorski, 2022). Our contribution in this regard is examining the roles of the Arctic Council and conferences within the Arctic regime complex. These are in many ways different arenas, as the Arctic Council is a high-level interstate forum with permanent membership that is intended to provide cooperation, coordination and interaction on Arctic matters. The two conferences on their end, are open meeting places for anyone to participate in the dialogue. At the same time, all three bodies are similar in that they are soft institutions that do not make legally binding decisions, but which nevertheless have significance in Arctic governance.

By mapping out the mandates and responsibilities of these entities, and by nuancing their formal and informal aspects, we aim to clarify misunderstandings regarding their positions vis-à-vis each other. A secondary aim is to make clear how these entities may supplement each other by serving distinct functions within the Arctic regime complex. This is particularly pertinent at a time when the Arctic is subject to the interests of great powers and when the liberal world order, understood as institutional arrangements on the international level (Levy et al., 1995, p. 274), is in play as a consequence of Russia's aggression on the European continent (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022). The liberal international order has contributed to the peaceful management of the Arctic region since the end of the Cold War. The current situation, with a war in Europe and democratic decline in several Western countries, necessitates faith in institutions and a solid framework for governing the Arctic. Moreover, that there are no doubts concerning the mandates and power of different entities, or regarding who the region's rightsholders are. Thus, our main ambition is empirical, not theoretical, and we seek to portray and analyse the three entities within the Arctic.

The analysis in this article is founded on the authors' extensive experiences with Arctic conferences and the Arctic Council, that is, participant observation and interviews at conferences and observation at Arctic Council meetings. This article is also based on an analysis of Arctic Council documents, official Arctic state documents, public statements and news articles about developments concerning the Arctic Council and the region following Russia's war on Ukraine. The article is structured as follows: First, we present key characteristics of the Arctic Council and the two conferences, which lay the foundation for looking at key differences. In the conclusion,

the roles and functions of these entities are discussed in light of Russia's war on Ukraine.

The arctic council and arctic conferences

Arctic council

In January 1989, Finland invited the other Arctic states to cooperate regarding the protection of the Arctic environment—the Rovaniemi process. Working groups were set up and indigenous groups and non-Arctic states were also invited to the process. In June 1991, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) was formally established. At the same time as the Finnish initiative, Canada was pursuing the idea of an Arctic Council. The proposal for a new meeting place for Arctic states was first aired by then-Prime Minister of Canada Brian Mulroney in Leningrad in November 1989. The aim was not for AEPS to become part of the Arctic Council. The Canadians rather wanted to support the demilitarisation process that followed the end of the Cold War, and an Arctic Council to be an arena for discussing security policy issues, which was an initiative also supported by Finland (English, 2013).

However, not all states were supportive of this initiative; the United States, in particular, was sceptical. For Americans, it was (and still is) important that such a forum should not deal with questions of military and security policy (Elgsaas, 2019, p. 29). There were varied reasons for such scepticism, but explanations include a traditional American distrust of binding cooperation on sensitive political issues and the idea that it could overshadow other important cooperation. Another point of contention in the discussions surrounding the establishment of the Arctic Council was whether this collaboration should be developed into an international organisation. The Arctic states agreed that the cooperation should be organised as a forum; again, it was the Americans who did not want to commit themselves more than necessary.

Such a forum would have a weaker mandate than an international organisation and have less legal impact (Bloom, 1999). The decisions taken by the Arctic Council are not legally binding—only politically binding. In 1996, through the Ottawa Declaration, the Arctic Council was formally established. The declaration's first point is: “The Arctic Council is established as a high-level forum to: (a) provide means for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of the Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues [...]” With the creation of the Arctic Council, AEPS was absorbed into this new forum, and indigenous groups, observers, member states and working groups followed suit. During the ministerial meeting in Iqaluit in 1998, the statutes by which the Arctic Council was to be governed were established. All decisions in the Arctic Council and its underlying working groups were to result from consensus among the eight permanent member states. In addition, only member states and permanent participants had the ability to propose new projects. The chairmanship was to rotate between the member states and each state would chair the council for two years (Bloom, 1999).

The observers were, and still are, a diverse group of NGOs, international organisations and non-Arctic states. As the name suggests, they were supposed to observe the council's work and primarily be associated with the working groups. Several criteria are considered to determine applicants' suitability to become an

observer. There are three that deserve attention. First, observers must recognise the legal framework that applies in the Arctic. This point is connected to the Arctic coastal states' underscore of the importance of the Law of the Sea in the Arctic. The second point is that the observers must be able to demonstrate relevant Arctic expertise. A final point is that the observers shall contribute to strengthening the work of the permanent participants.

The main work in the Arctic Council takes place at three levels: the ministerial level, the Senior Arctic Official (SAO) level and the working group level. These receive support from the secretariat in Tromsø. The work in the secretariat rests on two main pillars: administration and communication. When the Arctic states hold ministerial meetings, the Arctic Council receives the public spotlight. Through declarations from the ministerial meetings, the member states demonstrate how they want the council to develop. This is where the main direction of the collaboration becomes apparent. The SAOs meet at least twice a year. Each state appoints an SAO to promote its interests in the Arctic Council. The SAO is, thus, the government's representative, usually from a member state's foreign ministry. Formally, they must guide and monitor the Arctic Council's activities in line with the decisions and instructions from the Arctic Council's foreign ministers. In this way, they function as the link between the ministerial and the working group levels (Rottem, 2019).

The core of the Arctic Council is still the working groups, which can be described as scientific knowledge producers aiming to map and analyse Arctic challenges. They are the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme, the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF), the PAME (Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment), Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR), the Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP) and the Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG). The working groups make recommendations on the national and international regulation of environmental toxins and the overall route choices in the Arctic. Empirical studies have shown that the scientific knowledge generated by the Arctic Council has affected international environmental and climate policy (e.g. Downie & Fenge, 2003; Duyck, 2012; Kankaanpää & Young, 2012; Stone, 2015; Rottem, 2017; Platjouw, Steindal, & Borch, 2018; Barry, Davidsdottir, Einarsson, & Young, 2020).

Each working group has its own history and different portfolios. They also vary in size from the three "big" groups, AMAP, CAFF and PAME to the three "small" groups, EPPR, ACAP and SDWG. Nevertheless, they share certain common features. Representatives from the states' sector ministries and national administration and researchers are present in all the working groups. They have a specific mandate according to which they operate, a chairmanship (that also rotates between the states), and a board or steering committee supported by a secretariat. All decisions require consensus, as in the rest of the Arctic Council's work. It is also important to emphasise that the working groups receive their mandates from the ministerial meetings and from the SAOs, but that it is easier to reach an agreement on a recommendation at the working group level than at the SAO and ministerial levels. This does not mean that it will be followed up at the SAO level or ministerial level, but the knowledge generated, and the recommendations formulated will set the agenda and, at best, apply pressure for political action.

Arctic frontiers and arctic circle assembly

Conferences in and about the Arctic have expanded in number and scope since the beginning of the 2000s (Steinveg, 2021). These

arenas attending to Arctic issues, held in Arctic as well as non-Arctic locations, comprise issue-specific conferences, on topics including the Arctic ocean, shipping, energy and climate change. There are also distinct business arenas, such as the High North Dialogue in Bodø, Norway, and science conferences, such as the rotating Arctic Science Summit Week, the International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences and the International Conference on Arctic Research Planning (Steinveg, 2021). This article takes a closer look at the two largest international conferences on the Arctic, which aim to combine science, policy and business, and to bring science into policymaking processes: Arctic Frontiers, held in Tromsø, Norway and the Arctic Circle Assembly, held in Reykjavik, Iceland.

Arctic Frontiers was established in 2006 and was held for the first time in 2007. The purpose of the conference was to contribute to sustainable social and business development in the Arctic and to fulfil the need for an arena that could promote knowledge-based policymaking and information exchange across different disciplines (Steinveg, 2023, p. 28). In that context, it has been important to bring together actors from different levels of government—national, regional and local political representatives—as well as researchers, academics, business representatives, indigenous peoples and civil society for the conference held in Tromsø, Norway.

The launch of Arctic Frontiers coincided with the Norwegian government's ambition to promote an active Arctic strategy and position itself internationally after the end of the Cold War (Steinveg, 2023, p. 28). The Norwegian government's overall goal in 2005 was to ensure the political stability and sustainable development of the northern regions, safeguard Norwegian interests, involve Norwegian business in cooperation with Russia and ensure that the indigenous population participates in decision-making processes that concern them (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005). The 2005 High North policy also emphasises the importance of ensuring that issues pertaining to the High North are viewed from a holistic perspective, both at the national and international levels (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005).

Since the beginning, Arctic Frontiers has been organised closely in line with the interests and priorities of the Norwegian government in the High North. The Norwegian authorities have also used the conference to promote their priorities and interests in the region. *Norway's Arctic Strategy—between geopolitics and social development* from 2017 states that the government makes active use of conferences to "have a dialogue about Nordic policy and to set the agenda regionally, nationally, and internationally" (Norwegian Ministries, 2017, p. 14). Arctic Frontiers is further described as "one of the most important international platforms for promoting Norwegian positions in the Arctic" in *The Norwegian Government's Arctic Policy* from 2020 (Norwegian Ministries, 2020, p. 14).

The Norwegian authorities are however also concerned that the Arctic Council should retain its status as the central meeting place in the region and have expressed concern that parallel meeting places will arise (Norwegian Ministries, 2017, p. 16). The Arctic Frontiers has always supported this view, as it gives primacy to the Arctic states and holds a more restrictive view of who might be legitimate participants in the discussion of developments in the Arctic than the view promoted at the Arctic Circle Assembly (Steinveg, 2023, p. 89).

The Arctic Circle Assembly was launched by then-president of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson in April 2013 (Webb, 2013), and was arranged for the first time in Reykjavik in October of the same

year. At the time, it was perceived as though Grímsson was challenging the Arctic Council to take on a more global profile, and if not: the Arctic Circle would be prepared to provide a platform for observer applicants to the Arctic Council (Depledge & Dodds, 2017, p. 143). The Arctic Circle initiative also coincided well with the Icelandic government's ambition to reposition itself in the international arena as a result of the US withdrawal from Keflavik air base in 2006 and the financial crisis in 2008 (Ingimundarson, 2015). This ambition is expressed in the Icelandic Arctic Strategy from 2011, which states that the government seeks to promote "Iceland abroad as a venue for Arctic conferences" (Icelandic Parliament, 2011). The Icelandic government directed its focus towards the political, economic and legal dimensions of the Arctic and the growing interest of Asian states in the region (Depledge & Dodds, 2017). In that context, the Arctic Circle is described as an open, democratic platform to include everyone with a self-declared interest in participating in the dialogue about the region's future, regardless of geographical position or institutional affiliation (Einarsdóttir, 2018).

At the Arctic Circle Assembly, there is no distinction made between representatives from Arctic and non-Arctic states when it comes to speaking time or visibility in the programme. The conference is therefore an important platform for representatives from non-Arctic states, in addition to those from the local and regional levels of governance, to promote their perspectives on, and interests in, the region. In contrast to the observer role in the Arctic Council, conferences are spaces where these actors can have a more prominent voice. However, this conference model is, as mentioned, not always valued by Arctic states.

Since 2013, the Arctic Circle Assembly has grown to welcome over 3,500 participants from more than 60 countries, and the number of breakout sessions in the programme has expanded in number and thematic scope. In addition to the annual Assembly held in Reykjavik every October, Arctic Circle Forums have also been held at various international locations in collaboration with local authorities and institutions since 2015. For example in Anchorage, Alaska (2015), Singapore (2015), Nuuk, Greenland (2016), Washington, DC (2017), Edinburgh, Scotland (2017), Seoul, Korea (2018), Shanghai, China (2019), Abu Dabi, United Arab Emirates (2023) and Tokyo, Japan (2023) (Arctic Circle, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisers of the Arctic Circle initiated several activities for a larger audience than that attending the annual Assembly or Forums—for example, the online media platforms Arctic Circle Virtual, Arctic Circle Journal and three new Mission Councils—that bring together experts to discuss challenges in the Arctic from different perspectives (Steinveg, 2022). The latter initiative can be said to be closer to the format of the Arctic Council's working groups and indicates that the organisers of the Arctic Circle are aspiring to assume a role within Arctic governance that goes beyond the mandate and role of a conference (Steinveg, 2022).

In like manner, the Arctic Frontiers organisation has since 2014 arranged Seminars Abroad at various international locations, such as the Nordic countries, the United States, Canada, southern Europe and, previously, Russia. Since 2015, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been involved in the conduct of these arrangements, which are hosted in collaboration with Norwegian embassies. Hence, while the primary aim of these seminars is networking, for the conference and partner organisations, they also serve to promote Norwegian Arctic policy, interests and priorities. One example is the Arctic Frontiers Abroad seminar held in Aberdeen, Scotland in March 2023, which

focuses on energy transition and a sustainable blue economy—key interests for the Norwegian Government. Moreover, the Seminars Abroad have served a function in maintaining and improving Norway's relationship with Russia, even after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. There were two Seminars Abroad held in Russia in 2015 and, by 2016, the number of Russians attending the Arctic Frontiers had doubled (Steinveg, 2023, p. 33). This function of the conferences—contributing to bridge-building between Russia and its western neighbours—now faces an uncertain future.

Arctic Frontiers and the Arctic Circle Assembly are in competition to attract participants, sponsors, prominent speakers and attention. Furthermore, these two apparently similar arenas represent two different models for conference organisation. The Arctic Frontiers prioritises Arctic state representatives, and the organisers are largely in control of the agenda and influence the topics that will dominate the discussion regarding the future of the Arctic during this week in Tromsø. The Arctic Circle stands in contrast to this, organised as an "open tent" that welcomes Arctic and non-Arctic states alike to participate in the dialogue as equals, together with non-state actors.

Who does what in arctic governance: central differences between Arctic Frontiers, Arctic Circle and the Arctic Council

Conferences are recurrent elements in the Arctic governance regime, which function as networking arenas that facilitate discussions about political priorities, the research agenda and premises for business development in the Arctic. Conferences contribute to information-sharing and trust-building between representatives from lower government levels, academics, representatives from business and the local community. This informal atmosphere may, according to regime theoretical assumptions, contribute to the promotion of cooperation based on a mutual understanding of key challenges and a shared set of norms and rules of conduct. From the premise that regimes can affect the behaviour of actors by constructing norms and rules of conduct, and as such, reduce barriers to cooperation (Keohane, 1982), conferences can contribute to preserving the Arctic as a "zone of peace" (Young, 2011). In this regard, conferences are also more than what takes place on the main stage, and the numerous side meetings and informal encounters at these arenas hold the potential for unofficial diplomacy (McConnell, Moreau, & Dittmer, 2012).

By bringing together and involving a wide range of actors from different institutional affiliations and governance levels, conferences contribute to challenging the state-centric view of Arctic governance (Steinberg & Dodds, 2015). At the same time, an indicator of these conferences being more than merely networking arenas is how they serve a function for the vested interests of their host states: Norway and Iceland. They help to promote the states' economic and geopolitical interests and to put Reykjavik and Tromsø on the map—the former as an "Arctic Hub" linking North America, Europe and Asia, and the latter as the "Arctic Capital" (Steinveg, 2023, pp. 131-132). Tromsø also houses the secretariat of the Arctic Council, the Arctic Economic Council and the Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat, and it has been an expressed aim of the Norwegian government to create synergies between the secretariats of Arctic Frontiers and the Arctic Council, among other things to support Tromsø's status as the "Arctic Capital" (Norwegian Ministries, 2017, p. 16).

Moreover, conferences are platforms for discussing the Arctic region's geopolitical structure and arenas where representatives

from Arctic and non-Arctic countries can present their policies for the region to a wide audience (Depledge & Dodds, 2017, p. 145). Hence, the conferences enable room for a larger scope of actors to present their viewpoints and priorities for the Arctic region. Political priorities can be presented in a favourable light and wrapped in buzzwords such as “sustainability,” “the green transition” and “climate neutral.” Non-Arctic states such as China have made inroads into these conferences, particularly the Arctic Circle, taking advantage of the conference scene to argue why they are legitimate participants in the discussion about the region’s future (Steinveg, 2022, p. 250). This is framed within climate and environmental issues but also has a sometimes poorly hidden economic and political undertone. The Arctic Circle contributes to raising Arctic issues in the global agenda and to involving all interested stakeholders in the dialogue about the region’s future.

Despite the close involvement of national governments in these forums (Depledge & Dodds, 2017, p. 145), it is important to note that conferences do not have decision-making authority and they do not produce binding agreements or formal political recommendations. Conferences can be useful for politicians and government officials but are not arenas for policymaking or decision-making. Nor does the Arctic Council make legally binding decisions, and the council is primarily a decision-shaping body. However, political decisions within the Arctic states are still made on guidelines from the Arctic Council on how to develop the region.

The Arctic Council’s most important function is as a provider of knowledge to national administrations and international negotiations. It is also important to recognise that the Arctic Council is only one of the elements in the Arctic regime complex. The states are the most important actors, and the Law of the Sea is the supporting legal framework. As long as the Arctic Council does not transform into a treaty-based organisation, which is highly unlikely, its main role will be to contribute to knowledge and recommendations (and in some cases constitute a framework for the negotiation of internationally binding agreements) about developments in the Arctic. Such contributions can be used at the global, regional, national and local levels. The Arctic Council is therefore not an international organisation with strong follow-up mechanisms for binding decisions.

However, in contrast to the Arctic Frontiers and the Arctic Circle Assembly, the Arctic Council is structured with a higher degree of formalisation and involvement with authorities in the Arctic states, and the scientific results created by its working groups obtain a significantly greater weight in the decision-making processes than the discourses at Arctic conferences. Despite its soft law function, the Arctic Council is a more powerful instrument than Arctic conferences.

In addition to delivering knowledge to national administrations and international negotiations, the Arctic Council is characterised by processes of science diplomacy and active interactions between science and politics. This is a characteristic that the Arctic Council shares with conferences. Most of the coordination, production and dissemination of research results take place in the working groups, which form the core of the Arctic Council’s work. For the Arctic Council to exercise its function as a knowledge provider, it depends on three premises: that the knowledge that develops is transferred, that the researcher networks that are part of the working groups are active, and that the functions within research and politics interact actively demonstrate clear distinctions.

The processes involved in knowledge transfer in the Arctic Council are reflected in the communication that takes place between research and politics. The threefold division between

ministerial meetings, the SAO level and the working groups ensures that research practice has the greatest weight at the working group level and that political practice characterises the remaining levels. The reports and publications that result from the work at the working group level represent the perspectives of the working group, and not necessarily the Arctic Council as a whole, to ensure clear distinctions between research and policy. Nevertheless, though the working groups mainly work with knowledge production, they are not independent of the political level (Rottem, 2017; Platjouw, Steindal, & Borch, 2018). The projects that receive financial support and priority have usually done so because of political decisions. In addition, the strategies and plans that form part of the working groups’ practice are in line with the decisions and priorities that take place at a political level.

Further, all the Arctic states point to the Arctic Council as the most important cooperation body in the Arctic, albeit often without a clear profile. First, it can be argued that this active approach to the Arctic Council is based on strategic realpolitik assessments. By supporting multilateral cooperation mechanisms, Arctic states can restrain any expanding ambitions of non-Arctic states in the region. Emphasising the well-functioning cooperation mechanisms in the region also helps to dampen the conflict-oriented discourse we have seen regarding developments in the Arctic. The Arctic Council can also stem possible competing regimes in the area and the idea of an Arctic Treaty modelled after the Antarctic Treaty. This was evident in, among other things, the debate on the inclusion of new observers. The argument has been that, with a positive attitude towards the involvement of non-Arctic states in the region (through observer status in the Arctic Council), one has a “hand on the wheel”, to a greater extent. The former foreign minister of Norway, Espen Barth Eide, for example, stated ahead of the Kiruna meeting: “I often say that it is better that they want to join our club, than that they create another club” (Rottem, 2019).

At the same time, and as an extension of the argument above, it is a particularly key point for the coastal states that the Arctic Council underpins the primacy of the Law of the Sea in the Arctic Ocean, which gives them unique advantages. This is evident in, among other things, the fact that to become an observer, one must recognise the coastal states’ rights in the area. So, strategically, the collaboration and its framework are more important than the content of the collaboration. Through active support for the Arctic Council, the Arctic states bar any competing regimes from the region and by referring to the work of the Arctic Council, one may say that the Arctic is not an unregulated no-man’s land. Here, the Arctic Council clearly differs from Arctic conferences in that the former is well situated to not only contribute to knowledge production and norm building, but also to capacity building and, however indirectly, sustain the key component in Arctic governance, namely the Law of the sea. The main difference between the Arctic conferences and the Arctic Council is thus: the degree of formalisation, the weight of political decision-making, the involvement of authorities and the scope of the “membership” actors’ participation. As such, conferences and the Arctic Council fill important—yet distinct—functions within the Arctic regime complex.

After 24 february 2022

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 sent shock waves through diplomatic relations with Russia and in the Arctic. The conditions that had been conducive to international

cooperation and governance in the region were changed and the discourse on the Arctic as an exception to geopolitical tensions was significantly weakened. The member states of the Arctic Council were forced to deal with Russia primarily as an aggressor and a possible military threat and could only recognise the opportunities for diplomacy and scientific cooperation secondarily. Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Canada and the United States announced on 3 March 2022 that they were temporarily pausing all Arctic Council activities while Ukraine's sovereignty was threatened. In June 2022, the seven remaining member states declared a partial restart of the projects of some working groups only if they did not depend on Russian participation. The role of the Arctic Council as a knowledge producer has been challenged across several areas, and the limited access to Russian participation in Arctic forums has led to earlier questions about cooperation in the Arctic gaining new weight.

The Arctic Circle Assembly and Arctic Frontiers have also been affected by Russia's ongoing military aggression in Ukraine. The theme of Arctic Frontiers 2023 was migration, but the lion's share of the discourse was characterised by conversations about how to relate to Russia and to the current geopolitical tensions (Jonassen, 2023a). Where there had previously been a significant number of Russian participants, this has been significantly reduced. During Arctic Circle 2022, several discussions were characterised by the debate over whether the Arctic Council, as it had been in the past, could continue. If not, what would be the alternative? After the Russian chairmanship period of the Arctic Council 2021–2023, Norway began their chairship on 11 May 2023. The current Norwegian chairship has been referred to as a crucial point in the history of the Arctic Council, being decisive for the future prospects of Arctic cooperation (Jonassen, 2023b).

Until 24 February 2022, there had been a common understanding of the conditions and room for action among the member states of the Arctic Council to be able to convey new knowledge. The non-legally binding principle underlying the Arctic Council helps to create an opportunity for soft diplomacy. This leeway has also enabled the continuation of work in the Arctic Council, even with Russian participation temporarily interrupted. At the same time as the soft law principles of the Arctic Council incentivise room for manoeuvre, they also make arenas more receptive to geopolitical change than legally binding agreements, especially taking into consideration international cooperation after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Koivurova & Shibata, 2023). However, the fact that the legal scope exists does not mean that the Arctic Council is without limitations in the development and transfer of knowledge. The knowledge produced in the working groups involves, among other things, measurements of permafrost, environmental toxins, biodiversity and pollution (Arctic Council, 2021a). These are used for project work and to support the strategic vision and plan of the Arctic Council in the long term (Arctic Council, 2021b). As of March 2022, it had not been possible to collect data from the ground in Russia in these fields (Nature, 2022).

Thus, the ripple effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have challenged the possibilities of producing knowledge in the working groups of the Arctic Council and, eventually, transferring this to the political level. This has severe consequences for the ability of the Arctic states to develop a common understanding regarding climate changes in the region. In addition, the war has created obstacles for knowledge transfer in the Arctic Council's research networks. These have required time to develop, and researchers in working groups no longer have opportunities to maintain contact

with their Russian colleagues, often with uncertainty about whether or when contact will be restored.

An altered scope of possibilities after 24 February 2022 shows how the core function of the Arctic Council as a knowledge provider for national governments and the international level has been challenged and may be prone to change. Thus, it also makes sense to question how Arctic cooperation has been affected in its core functions by the war. Without Russia in the Arctic Council, the Barents Council, the Arctic Circle Assembly and Arctic Frontiers, significant parts of producers and recipients of Arctic knowledge are lost. For the conferences, this is demonstrated by a significant reduction in Russian participants, which hampers the informal encounters between Russian and Western actors at different levels of government and from various affiliations. In this way, conferences lose their function as entities that contribute to lowering the barriers to cooperation within the Arctic simply because the Russians are not there. The content of the future toolbox for Arctic science diplomacy is therefore currently unclear.

Concluding remarks

Initially, we asked the following two questions: "What role do Arctic Frontiers, the Arctic Circle and the Arctic Council play in shaping policy in and for the Arctic?" and "What exactly is the difference between the Arctic Council and the Arctic conferences?" We have shown how there are fundamental differences between the Arctic conferences and the Arctic Council. These differences appear in the form of continuity, formalisation, political involvement and decision-making capacity. The conferences are simply less integrated into the management system of the individual states than in the Arctic Council. On the other hand, conferences are open for a larger pool of stakeholders to partake in the discussions about the future of the Arctic, which is an important addition to the Arctic regime complex.

Initially, we argued that it is necessary to understand the differences between these different arenas in order to encourage informed discussion about the way forward towards a new geopolitical reality. Central questions are whether and how Russia can again fully participate in the Arctic Council and at Arctic conferences and how to accommodate the interests of China and other non-Arctic states within the existing governance structure in the region. It is not viable that observers in the Arctic Council should have the same rights and privileges as the region's rightsholders: the Arctic states and indigenous peoples. Thus, conferences play a supplementary role in providing arenas for non-Arctic states and non-state actors to have their voices heard, even if not in formal policymaking and decision-making processes.

It is an expressed goal of all Arctic states to shield the Arctic from geopolitical conflict and it remains central after Russia's war against Ukraine from February 2022. Arctic Frontiers and the Arctic Circle have played an important role in this context, as they facilitate informal dialogue, information sharing and the development of a joint understanding of common challenges. From the premises of regime theory, these are all necessary elements for trust-building and reducing barriers to cooperation. However, the function of conferences in this regard is now, like everything else, on hold because of Russia's war on Ukraine. Here, too, the changes taking place in Europe and in the relationship with Russia will have long-term and extensive consequences, and the future of science diplomacy is uncertain.

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