

## **Impressions from the Seminar on “Arctic Cooperation in Difficult Times”**

organized by the Stefansson Arctic Institute, the Institute of Arctic Studies in the John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth College, and the University of Akureyri as part of the programme for the Arctic Days in Akureyri, Iceland, November 15-17, 2023<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Under the auspices of the Stefansson Arctic Institute, 32 people mainly from Iceland and the United States gathered at the University of Akureyri on 17 November for a day-long conversation on the future of Arctic cooperation. The group included a mix of practitioners and analysts who share an interest in advancing cooperation on Arctic issues of common concern, despite the disruptive impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic followed by the shock waves arising from the Ukraine crisis. The conversation, conducted off-the-record under the Chatham House Rule, featured a frank and vigorous exchange of views on a variety of topics ranging from practical matters relating to the work of the Arctic Council’s Working Groups (WGs) to broader matters relating to the science/policy interface and the role of the international Arctic community.

### **Practical matters**

Individuals associated with several of the Arctic Council’s Working Groups (CAFF, PAME, SDWG) and with the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) provided observations about their current circumstances and participated in a substantial discussion of opportunities and obstacles facing these organizations under the conditions prevailing today. Several significant conclusions emerged from the discussion.

**1. The current state of play.** To begin with, it is important to recognize that all these organizations are still able to engage in some constructive activities. Under the Norwegian Chairship, the AC WGs have

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<sup>1</sup> This document has been prepared as an informal summary of the proceedings by the following: Oran. R. Young, professor emeritus of the Bren School of Environmental Science & Management at the University of California Santa Barbara; Melody B. Burkins, Director, Institute of Arctic Studies in the John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth College; Thomas Barry, Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Akureyri and Niels Einarsson, Director, Stefansson Arctic Institute. Individual participants have not been asked to approve the text. The seminar on “Arctic Cooperation in Difficult Times” was supported by the Evelyn Stefansson Nef Endowment, a joint program of the Institute of Arctic Studies at Dartmouth and the Stefansson Arctic Institute of Iceland.

resumed work on projects already in their portfolios. IASC is working energetically on the planning process involved in the development of ICARP 4. That said, there is considerable variation among these organizations in terms of their ability to operate effectively under current conditions. Some reported moving forward on substantial initiatives. Others feel constrained to limit their products to relatively low-level reports dealing with more technical matters. In the case of IASC, formal relationships remain unchanged. No actions have been taken to restrict activities involving Russian participation, though informal practices are sometimes needed to overcome obstacles. On the other hand, the obstacles confronting foreign scientists desiring to conduct field work in Russia and continuing restrictions on engagement of scientists from the western states with Russian counterparts mean that many projects are stalled or severely limited.

**2. Future prospects.** At the same time, all expressed uncertainty about what happens next. The 28 August guidelines of the Norwegian AC Chair are ambiguous when it comes to moving them from paper to practice with regard to the conduct of existing projects. The prospects for new initiatives are highly uncertain. A number of participants expressed the hope that new and more explicit guidance from the AC chair would be forthcoming in the near future. In the case of IASC, there have been ups and downs in Russian participation over the years. The determinants of this pattern are unclear, making it difficult to foresee how this relationship will play out in the near future.

### **Substantive themes**

A number of substantive themes relating to the future of Arctic cooperation arose during the course of the conversation. Highlights included:

**1. Integration of knowledge.** Arctic scholars from mainstream scientific disciplines now recognize the importance of integrating Indigenous Knowledge into Arctic research programs. Many are making concerted efforts to learn how to co-create knowledge with Indigenous Knowledge holders in the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities in dealing with common Arctic concerns. This is a sign of progress, though all acknowledged it is still easier said than done. Indigenous Knowledge, for example, is often the result of day-to-day activities and is critical to the continuing success of these activities. Thus, although hunters of marine mammals are highly sophisticated observers of the effects of climate change on the behavior of these animals, the results are often overlooked by mainstream scientists. There are

also structural inequities (e.g. differences in the availability of funding) that create a burden for Indigenous Knowledge holders to engage meaningfully in knowledge co-production and/or lead their own Arctic research. For their part, western scientists who work in individual disciplines make use of specialized concepts that are difficult to integrate with parallel constructs employed by those working in other disciplines. A way forward may be to launch a concerted effort including participation on the part of Indigenous Knowledge holders to construct a common vocabulary for addressing Arctic issues involving both anthropogenic and biophysical elements.

**2. The science/policy interface.** Many efforts to encourage constructive interactions between analysts and practitioners fail, but some succeed. What conditions determine success and failure in this realm? Do we need to train members of both communities to understand each other's circumstances in order to achieve effective communication? It may be useful to identify some success stories (i.e. cases in which interactions between analysts and practitioners clearly produced beneficial results) and engage in intensive case studies to identify the determinants of success in these cases. We can then consider the application of the findings of these studies to interactions between members of the two communities going forward.

**3. The well-being of the Arctic's Indigenous Peoples.** While the seminar did not include Indigenous participants, there was considerable discussion relating to the impacts of the current crisis on the Arctic's Indigenous Peoples. The Arctic Council has been a particularly important forum for Indigenous Peoples due to its inclusion of Indigenous Peoples Organizations as Permanent Participants (PPs). Participants in the seminar noted hearing that the disruption of the Council is a matter of great concern to Indigenous Peoples. In addition, they expressed concern that the new political context in the Arctic will deflect attention from the threats to indigenous well-being arising from the impacts of permafrost thawing, wildfires, coastal erosion, and changes in the abundance and availability of subsistence resources.

**4. The international Arctic community.** The informal network of individuals working on Arctic issues, which has grown up alongside the development of more formal mechanisms of cooperation since the 1980s, is a form of social capital. This network may be able to play a significant role in the pursuit of cooperation on Arctic issues of common concern during these difficult times when the effectiveness of the formal mechanisms has been compromised. Yet the current crisis has imposed severe stresses on the

informal network as well. The impediments to normal collaboration between Russian and western members of the community are severe. What remains to be seen is how difficult it will be to revitalize working relationships in a variety of areas once there is some resolution of the current crisis.

### **Broader observations**

Embedded in the conversation in Akureyri were a number of more general concerns that are noteworthy. While they are not unique to the current situation, addressing these concerns will be highly relevant to the fate of Arctic cooperation in the coming years.

**1. Forms of effectiveness.** There are different ways to evaluate effectiveness in thinking about the outcomes of interactions between analysts and practitioners. Some people measure effectiveness in terms of the extent to which the impacts of analysis can be traced to specific policy outcomes. For example, it is possible to trace a relatively clear path of influence between the production of the Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment completed in 2009 and the development of the Polar Code as a set of legally binding regulations under the auspices of the IMO formalized in 2015-2016 with entry into force in 2017. On the other hand, analysts may exercise influence by identifying emerging issues, framing them for consideration in policy arenas, and developing narratives or interpretive frameworks that guide thinking regarding the choice of particular strategies for addressing the issues. Influence here has more to do with the development of discourses that guide or channel policy processes than with the determination of specific choices. Some regard the Arctic Human Developments Reports as sources of this sort of influence.

**2. Competing priorities.** Policy agendas are always congested; individual issues often compete for attention in policy forums. The current preoccupation with matters regarding the fate of the Arctic Council and other organizational arrangements relating to the Arctic runs a risk of deflecting attention from efforts to come to terms with substantive issues of common concern. The obvious case in point is the increasing urgency of dealing with the impacts of climate change in the Arctic. Surface temperatures in the Arctic are rising at 3-4 times the global average. Thawing permafrost is leading to the collapse or degradation of all sorts of infrastructure in the Arctic. Wildfires are destroying communities and resources critical to their welfare. Coastal erosion is making the relocation of whole communities unavoidable. The

impacts of climate change on flora, fish, and wildlife of critical importance to Arctic communities are threatening human well-being in many areas. The result is the onset of a climate emergency.

**3. Political context.** Institutional arrangements like the Arctic Council are embedded in an underlying political context. When the context shifts dramatically, institutions must adapt or run the risk of becoming ineffective or falling by the wayside. In 1996, leaders in Russia and the western states were looking for opportunities to promote East-West cooperation in the aftermath of the cold war. The Arctic emerged as a target of opportunity. There were no serious conflicts in the Arctic itself; most outsiders were content to leave Arctic matters to the initiatives of the Arctic states. Today, the political context has shifted dramatically. Events dating back to the first Ukraine crisis in 2014 and culminating in the current Ukraine war have produced a sharp intensification in East-West conflict. At the same time, a tighter coupling of the Arctic with global developments (e.g. climate change) has produced a situation in which many non-Arctic states have taken a growing interest in Arctic affairs. We cannot turn the clock back. Even if the Arctic Council survives, it cannot simply pick up where it left off at the time of the onset of the Ukraine crisis. If the Arctic Council is to play a useful role in the coming years, it will be necessary to continue dialogs about the character of its practices in the political context of the 2020s and 2030s, perhaps introducing adjustments and updates to its current practices.

**4. Human relationships.** In the final analysis, relationships among key individuals who are able to interact with one another with confidence and candor and to operate effectively in international settings will be a critical determinant of the future of Arctic cooperation. Without denying the value of rules of procedure and other formal features of institutional arrangements, it is essential to recognize the role of human relationships in developing innovative approaches to issues of common concern and hammering out agreement on the terms of mutually acceptable agreements. The value of the Arctic Council as a setting for this type of engagement is clear in the cases of the interactions eventuating in the 2011, 2013, and 2017 agreements on search and rescue, oil spill preparedness, and scientific cooperation. It is essential not to lose sight of this factor as we search for ways to ensure continued cooperation and to adjust the practices of the Arctic Council under the conditions prevailing today.

### **Some modest suggestions**

The conversation in Akureyri was not designed to produce specific recommendations regarding current issues. Nevertheless, several suggestions worthy of further consideration did arise in the course of the conversation.

**1. Next generation leaders.** The combination of Covid-19 and the Ukraine crisis has limited opportunities for younger members of the international Arctic community to participate vigorously in the activities of the community. If the current difficulties drag on, the impacts of this situation will become increasingly severe not only for individuals but for the community as a whole. There is a need to find effective means to address this problem. Constructive responses to this situation include the Nansen Professorship at the University of Akureyri, IASC and CAFF Fellowships, Stefansson Fellowships at the Institute of Arctic Studies, and the American Fulbright Arctic Initiative. There is a growing need for a broader range of activities of this sort.

**2. The science/policy interface.** There is an implicit assumption that analysts and practitioners will find ways to interact with one another successfully without outside assistance. Sometimes this works. But miscommunication is common. In this connection, there is a role for intermediaries, people who can operate comfortably in both communities and who are able to serve as facilitators of the efforts of members of the two communities to engage with each other productively. A problem in this regard is the difficulty in finding suitable institutional homes for such people. Acknowledging their role explicitly would be a constructive first step toward finding suitable positions for these people in prevailing institutional structures.

**3. Alternative paths to scientific data gathering.** The current crisis has imposed severe constraints on international cooperation in the realm of in-person scientific data gathering, especially in cases where research calls for fieldwork in the Russian Arctic. The conversation in Akureyri indicated that some western and Asian scientists are continuing to engage in significant work in Russia. Nevertheless, the limitations are severe, especially in cases where extensive fieldwork is required. As a result, there is a need to focus on the development of alternative paths to scientific data gathering, procedures that allow research to progress even under current conditions. A number of options are worthy of consideration. But one promising avenue to explore in this context centers on the roles that satellite observations may be able to play in cases where in situ observations are not possible under current conditions and conventional procedures for sharing data are blocked.

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