

Book Review

The Arctic Council: Governance within the Far North. By Douglas C. Nord. Routledge, 2016. 110 pages. Index.

Reviewed by Andreas Kuersten

As the world warms, the imposing Arctic ice sheet that once substantially impeded the encroachments of modern society melts away. Its recession lays bare territory, seas, sea beds—for which a litany of actors (governments, companies, non-governmental organizations, etc.) have designs—and vulnerable ecosystems. This process makes apparent the importance of an international mechanism for managing the opening roof of the world, and “[t]he Arctic Council has emerged as perhaps the most important of these” (4).

In light of the aforementioned, Douglas Nord’s treatment of the council is most welcome. He begins *The Arctic Council* by charting its initial formation. Caught in the throes of the Cold War, there were scant issues upon which the West and the Communist Bloc could agree. But then came Chernobyl and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. The Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 made all too apparent the potentially devastating environmental impacts that contemporary technological capacities can unleash. Then, in 1987, Gorbachev gave his famous “Murmansk Speech,” calling for the Arctic to be made a “zone of peace,” and for cooperation in regional environmental protection and management (13). Finland seized on the heightened awareness of environmental issues and the Soviet leader’s entreaty, proposing the “Finnish initiative” in 1989, which led to the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy in 1991—a multilateral, non-binding commitment by Arctic states to cooperate to protect the Arctic environment (13). Canada subsequently sought to build on this success by creating an international organization with independent legal personality that would have the mandate of addressing all Arctic issues. This proposal, however, met strong resistance from the United States, which was wary of investing so much authority in such an entity, and the scheme went nowhere for some time. In the mid-1990s, the Clinton Administration re-engaged Canada’s plan, but demanded, in a “take it or leave it” manner, that any resulting international

body be a forum with no independent legal existence, rather than an international organization, and be limited to addressing solely Arctic environmental and development issues (23). Canada and the other Arctic states “took it,” and the Arctic Council was established via the “Ottawa Declaration” in 1996 (23–24).

Though the product of a non-binding declaration rather than a binding treaty, the Arctic Council has developed into a robust and organized consortium to the point that Nord refers to it as a “*proto* or *quasi* international organization” (34). The council functions in two primary ways: (1) as a “high level intergovernmental forum” given that it is not an international organization with independent legal character, but rather a space and framework for state action (Rottem 2016, 169); and (2) as “a research shop [, since] [i]ts core and most consistent activities are conducted through six working groups that research Arctic environmental and development matters” (Kuersten 2016, 390–91).

As a forum, the Arctic Council is organized in a hierarchical manner. The eight Arctic states (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States) are “Member States” — the apex actors that make all decisions by consensus. The council chair rotates among the members every two years. Below the member states are the six organizations that represent Arctic Indigenous peoples as “Permanent Participants” — agents with no voting power, but possessing full consultation rights in all council negotiations and decisions. And at the bottom are state, international organization, and non-governmental organization “Observers” — parties that may participate in council affairs to limited degrees at the discretion of the member states.

In turn, the Arctic Council’s research functions are primarily carried out by six working groups that focus on Arctic environmental science and sustainable economic development. “In addition, task forces are also regularly established to investigate specific issues over set time periods. The research, findings, and reports that these organs produce are what the Member States and others principally rely on to inform their discussions of Arctic issues and formulate policy” (Kuersten 2016, 391).

At the bureaucratic level, the working groups and task forces each have their own mandates, internal administrative structures, and staff. Above them are the “Senior Arctic Officials” — representatives of

member states and permanent participants who meet two times per year to govern the council and track working group and task force progress as needed. Finally, at the top are the foreign ministers of each member state, who meet every two years to transfer the chair, assess the council's work, and chart its future course. In addition, serving in a purely administrative and outreach capacity for the council as a whole, the permanent Arctic Council Secretariat, based in Tromsø, Norway, was established in 2011, and became operational in 2013.

Despite the Arctic Council's clear and relatively firmly established architecture, developed over roughly two decades of existence, Nord properly notes that it faces its share of challenges going forward. One of the biggest is the representation afforded to the council's various actor classes. Permanent participants want equal status to member states and worry about the increasing number of observers in the council drowning them out; observers lament their lack of voice in council affairs given their rights to large areas of the Arctic under international law; and member states are adamant that they retain all decision-making power as the only Arctic states whose sovereign status and location give them unparalleled regional interests and rights. Additionally, the mandate of the Arctic Council is a source of disagreement. As originally formulated, the council was intended to be a means for addressing all Arctic issues, but as enacted it was limited to environmental and development matters. The melting ice sheet will, however, increase national security assets and concerns in the region, and lead to more calls to broaden the council's mandate to encompass issues that will emerge. Finally, the Arctic Council's lack of secure funding is problematic. The association is dependent on voluntary and project-based contributions from parties (mainly member states). In the absence of an ongoing budget, efficient planning can be difficult.

Amid his excellent accounts of the history and functioning of the Arctic Council and its future challenges, Nord does, however, offer one deficient presentation. He insinuates that the council may organically evolve into an international organization or is somehow already behaving like one, and that the fact that binding international agreements are emanating from the group's meetings is evidence of this (65). Yet any decisions reached are attributed to the states, not to the Arctic Council as a distinct entity. As presently constructed, states

work through the Arctic Council, they do not invest sovereignty or any decision-making power in it, and this situation will continue until the foundational document of the council is significantly amended or a new one is drafted.

The aforementioned fault aside, Nord has produced a valuable work that anyone interested in the Arctic Council or Arctic affairs generally should pick up.

References

- Kuersten, A. 2016. "The Arctic Five Versus the Arctic Council." *Arctic Yearbook 2016*: 389–95.
- Rottem, S.V. 2016. "The Arctic Council in Arctic Governance: The Significance of the Oil Spill Agreement." In *The New Arctic Governance* edited by L. Jakobson & N. Melvin, 147–73. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

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