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Towards a North American Arctic Region

by Joël Plouffe
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POLICY UPDATE PAPER

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This May, as Canada kicks off the second cycle of Arctic Council chairmanships, we are reminded of the achievements brought by international cooperation in the circumpolar world since the end of the Cold War. From reduced military tensions to increased stability, transnational dialogue has brought states, sub-regional actors and people to work together on a continued basis to attain common goals, with shared beliefs of increased prosperity and well-being.

While the Arctic Council is the most prominent intergovernmental forum for circumpolar state-to-state dialogue, it is not the sole institution that promotes and strengthens regional cooperation.

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Northern Europe has seen several institutions emerge over the past sixty years designed to increase cooperation around issues of culture, politics and finance. Two examples include the Nordic Council, an inter-parliamentary advisory body created in 1952, and the Nordic Council of Ministers, a forum for intergovernmental co-operation, launched in 1971.

With the collapse of the USSR, and the end of the Cold War, the establishment of Barents cooperation heralded an unprecedented sequence of bilateral and multinational collaboration in the European Arctic, mainly to insure stability between states that needed to work more closely with Russia.

This year the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR) – and its related institutions – celebrates twenty years of region building on cross-border issues including the environment, education, and economic development. New commitments are being made on issues of climate change and extractive activities, as well as indigenous development.

Although the BEAR has specific geopolitical needs and security issues, with tailored objectives and institutions based on post-Cold War regional stability, it nevertheless has the potential to inspire increased (and needed) interregional, “people-to-people,” and international collaborations here at home, in the North American Arctic.

There have been some attempts to instigate region building in northern Canada and Alaska, such as the Northern Development Ministers Forum, established in 2001, but integrated and



coordinated cooperation across the North American Arctic with clear objectives of prosperity and well-being has never really taken off, as demonstrated by the former's low profile and even lower impact. This disjuncture leaves northerners isolated from each other, with limited human and financial resources and expertise when it comes to dealing with common pan-Arctic or pan-northern issues.

Today, with emerging 'common' security issues brought on by climate change, as well as increased human and economic activities in the North American Arctic, subnational governments and regional actors seem more than ever primed for a coordinated approach to interregional, intergovernmental and "people-to-people" cooperation as a way to foster knowledge sharing and region building in the North.

A pan-North American Arctic forum could not only bring all northerners together to discuss challenges on building stronger communities based on new economic initiatives, it would also create a needed network that promotes education as the basis to any sustainable community.

Dialogue and knowledge sharing between localities and borders, between policymakers, northerners and stakeholders from Alaska to Greenland, have the potential to empower local decision makers to take the lead in planning their futures in a decentralized North and to take innovative steps to create and strengthen local economies and economic cooperation throughout the region.

Important steps have already been taken over the past few years, suggesting that North American decision makers from national, subnational and regional governments are willing to address northern issues from a different angle, based on local, regional and international exchanges that would foster a better understanding of the challenges that lie ahead.

Québec's Northern Agenda

Québec has been active in many ways, both at the subnational government level in Québec City, but also at the regional level in the North (i.e. Nunavik). Earlier this year, the government of Québec's growing interest in circumpolar affairs was confirmed when the Marois government signed a historical declaration of intention with the Nordic Council of Ministers to initiate new avenues of collaboration between the regions of Northern Europe and Québec on what it calls "responsible northern development."

This initiative creates new opportunities for both Québec and the Nordic countries to learn from each other on various common socio-economic issues such as the impact of climate change on northern peoples and environments, mining practices in fragile northern areas; renewable energy and energy supply for regions of the North; and transportation infrastructure. It should also lead to the establishment of transarctic knowledge sharing networks, innovative research collaborations between these regions of the circumpolar world, and adapted policies for similar social, environmental, and economic issues in the North.

Such an initiative suggests that Québec seeks to discuss and understand northern issues beyond its borders and to play a leadership role in promoting collaborative approaches with well-informed and experienced neighbours. Furthermore, it has the potential to strengthen the North American Arctic as a regional actor that can also bring valuable contributions to the Arctic



neighborhood. Creating a regional identity can be the first step in consolidating relationships between all actors in the North.

Another case in point is Québec's integration into the Northern Forum in 2010 by then premier Jean Charest (who that same year launched the *Plan Nord* platform to primarily promote mining activities in Northern Québec). Established in 1991, the Northern Forum is an international organization with observer status at the Arctic Council. It is composed of subnational and regional governments from five northern countries (Canada, Iceland, Japan, Republic of Korea, and the Russian Federation). Since it became a member region, the government of Québec hosted a workshop in 2012 on "Climate Change Adaptation in Northern and Arctic Regions and Permafrost Degradation Solutions," in Québec City to explore practical and technological solutions to issues such as permafrost degradation, transportation and housing infrastructure, mineral, gas, and oil development in the North, as well as adaptation for northerners.

The Northern Forum certainly has the potential to play a greater coordination role in the Canadian and American Norths, and Québec has demonstrated its interest in making the Northern Forum work for the regions of the Arctic. However, Québec and the Yukon are currently the only North American member regions involved in the Northern Forum. Indeed, an effective and sustainable pan-Arctic framework would need to include all northern/Arctic regions of North America, with constant participation and funding.

At the local subregional level in Northern Québec, empowerment has been a big issue over the last few years, as Nunavimmiut have been seeking to build a sustained relationship between Nunavik and the government of Québec to "put forward a common vision of economic and community development." Following the launch of Plan Nord by the Charest government in 2010, Nunavimmiut has responded (and followed up) with Plan Nunavik and now [Parnasimautik](#), an ongoing process that was put in place in 2013 to "create a comprehensive vision" (based on the Inuit traditional way of life) for the development of Nunavik and Québec.

Parnasimautik is a major move forward for region building in the North American Arctic. On the one hand, it empowers Inuit in planning for their future, in consultation and collaboration with other northerners. On the other hand, it promotes a sustained and pragmatic approach to northern development based on a decentralized approach between the North and the South. It definitely serves as a model for the entire northern neighbourhood, as did the 1975 James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement (JBNQA) for indigenous peoples and government.

Alaskan Initiatives

In the American North, Alaska has recently initiated a somewhat similar process of consultations with Alaskans on Arctic policymaking initiatives that are also in line with region building.

The Alaska Arctic Policy Commission (AAPC) was created by House resolution HRC23 in April 2012, to "identify a mission/vision for Alaska in the Arctic, as well as goals and action items to guide future decision-making" (the NWT, Yukon and Nunavut appear to have done a comparable exercise in 2007).



The Commission, which met for the first time last March, will travel around the state throughout 2013 to meet with Alaskans and hear their concerns on various topics (i.e. indigenous peoples, oil and gas development, mining, fisheries, and infrastructure). Recommendations will be penciled into an Alaska Arctic Policy by early 2014 and a final report should be published in 2015.

AAPC emerged in the Alaska Northern Waters Task Force (ANWTF) 2012 report, another process intended to build knowledge and inform policy on the changes taking place in the marine Arctic. AAPC's driving force is the need to have conversations on the United States as an Arctic nation, and how Alaska is a key component of this identity and reality. Thus, like other regions of the North American Arctic, Alaska is called to work closely with the federal government and to coordinate and collaborate with its nearest neighbors, like northern Canada (and Russia to the East). According to Nils Andreassen, Executive Director of the Institute of the North (a think tank based in Anchorage), the main driver of this whole region building process around AAPC is that “[r]ather than trying to convince more than 300 million Americans that they are now “Arctic,” let’s focus on the significance of Arctic issues and how what happens in Alaska impacts the individual lives of everyone. We have to do that by drawing on small-and large-scale examples of economic connections, climate changes, safety, security, sovereignty, and recreational opportunities.”

While Alaska seeks to inform public policy and create a better understanding and relationship between the federal government and American northerners, it has also been an important player in shaping the emerging regional Arctic dimension of the Pacific Northwest.

Arctic Networking

The Arctic Caucus, officially formed in 2009-2010 as an informal sub-set of the Pacific Northwest Economic Region (PNWER), is a working group that seeks to explore issues of common interest and concern between its member regions (Alaska, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories) and identify areas of cross-region and cross-border collaboration. It is a tool to bring together regional neighbors “to look for mutually beneficial solutions” to communal challenges faced while developing the Arctic.

Topics addressed by member regions since the first Arctic Caucus forum, held in Barrow (Alaska) in 2010, span from American and Canadian Arctic policy challenges, to specific needs with regards to Arctic infrastructure, to environmental and socioeconomic assessments.

The working group is a timely initiative that is made up of public and private sector PNWER members. Although largely a forum for discussing regional issues in the Western Arctic (mostly business oriented), the Arctic Caucus serves as a model for future talks on the establishment of a pan-North American Arctic. It seems to be the most advanced framework for collaboration in the North American Arctic, providing “the public and private sectors a cross-border forum for unfiltered dialogue that capitalizes upon the synergies between the business leaders and elected officials working to advance the region’s global competitiveness.”

While intergovernmental forums like the Arctic Council, or regional governance structures like the institutions of the BEAR remain the prominent frameworks that inform national and subnational policymakers on specific concerns that fall into their areas of jurisdictions, North America is ripe for its own pan-Arctic dialogue forum that includes knowledge-sharing and



problem solving discussions (and mechanisms) for common concerns that are specific to the region and its people.

▲ About the Author

Joël Plouffe is a researcher at CIRRICQ (Center for Interuniversity Research on the International Relations of Canada and Québec) at the École nationale d'administration publique (ENAP) in Montréal, managing editor of the ArcticYearbook (www.arcticyearbook.com), and is a U.S. State Department International Visiting Program Alumnus (IVLP Arctic Security). His research interests include security and defense, geopolitics of the Arctic, regions of the circumpolar North, Northern Québec, and U.S.-Canada relations and foreign policy.

Mr Plouffe is involved in various northern research groups and programs. He is a member of the Northern Research Forum's Thematic Network on Geopolitics and Security (www.nrf.is), led by Dr Lassi Heininen from the University of Lapland (Finland); is actively involved in the annual Calotte Academy that takes place in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region; and is a project member of ArcticNet's group on Climate Change and Commercial Shipping in the Arctic, led by Dr Frédéric Lasserre of Université Laval in Québec City (Canada). In August 2012, Joël Plouffe was embedded with Canada's National Defense and Canadian Forces in the Western Arctic (Northwest Territories) during the annual 'Operation Nanook'.

Mr Plouffe has conducted research in the Arctic regions of Russia, the US (Alaska), Norway (Svalbard and mainland), Finland, Sweden and Canada (Nunavik, Northwest Territories). He has also delivered addresses and lectures in many international venues and was an invited Arctic expert at the National Assembly of France and the German Bundestag in 2010. That same year, he pursued oil and gas research in Norway's High North with international experts from the Bodø Graduate School of Business and also addressed key ministers at the European Parliament on non-Arctic state interests and policies for the Arctic region. He has also collaborated with the Canada Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC on issue of Arctic geopolitics.

In 2013, Mr Plouffe served as Visiting Professor at the Jackson School for International Studies (JSIS) at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he was co-teaching a Task Force on Arctic Security. He was also Visiting Scholar at NYU's Center for Global Affairs (CGA) in Spring 2013, as part of the Polar Politics program led by Dr Carolyn Kissane at the School of Continuing Professional Studies (NYU-SCPS). He was also Visiting Scholar at Western Washington University in 2010 where he was invited to teach Québec Politics and Contemporary Issues while pursuing research at the Canadian-American Studies Center.

Joël Plouffe was born in the mining town of Sudbury in Northern Ontario, Canada, and is now living in Montréal, Québec where he is working on his PhD thesis at UQAM, looking at how the Arctic has influenced US foreign policy making from the Nixon presidency to President Barack Obama's first mandate.

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