

Arctic Council: navigating global change

Climate change and globalisation have increased the focus on the Arctic region and thus on the Arctic Council (AC) as a circumpolar player. Ahead of the ministerial meeting in April 2015 – where the AC will decide on the EU's bid for observer status – preparations for the US to take over the rotating chairmanship for 2015-17 are rekindling debate on the AC's future priorities and role.

Informal forum for Arctic cooperation

The inter-governmental [Arctic Council \(AC\)](#) was founded in 1996 by the five Arctic coastal states, Canada, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Norway, Russia, and the United States, plus Finland, Iceland and Sweden, as a '[high level forum](#)' to promote [sustainable development and environmental protection](#). Since then, the AC has continued to develop its organisational structures, for example by making the temporary secretariat in Tromsø, Norway, permanent in 2013. However, the AC [lacks legal personality](#) and formally speaking is not an international organisation. Its decisions and standards are [consensual and non-binding](#), and it does not impose policies or payments on its member states. On the basis of this soft legal status, the AC has established itself as a key forum for Arctic scientific and policy cooperation.

Between the [biennial AC Ministerial Meetings](#), the **eight member states** are represented by appointed national Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs), who meet at least twice a year. The current membership would only change if Greenland were to gain full independence, causing Denmark to lose its status as an Arctic state. In addition to the member states, the AC also has [permanent participants](#) (PPs) and [observers](#), neither of which have voting rights. **Permanent participants** can propose supplementary agenda items or cooperative activities in AC meetings. The AC has granted PP status to six indigenous communities, in recognition of the importance of consulting the Arctic indigenous peoples: [The Inuit Circumpolar Council](#); [The Saami Council](#); [The Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North](#); [The Aleut International Association](#); [The Arctic Athabaskan Council](#), and [The Gwich'in Council International](#). **Observers** include 12 states, nine inter-governmental/inter-parliamentary organisations (including the Standing Committee of the Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region, in which the European Parliament participates) and 11 NGOs. They are invited to meetings and may contribute to debates in meetings of task forces and in six expert-level **working groups**: Arctic Contaminants Action Programme, Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme, Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna, Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response, Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment, and Sustainable Development Working Group.

Climate change puts the Arctic Council in the global spotlight

The growing global interest in Arctic developments and actors – triggered by [explicit expectations](#) that the combination of climate change and globalisation will increase human activities in the region – was reflected in the multiple applications for observer status ahead of the [2013 AC summit](#). The AC welcomed China, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea and Singapore, but deferred its decision on the EU's bid until the dispute with Canada over the EU's [import ban on seal products](#) – [backed by the WTO](#) in May 2014 – is resolved. While [some analysts](#) fear expansion of the AC may decrease its efficiency, blur the regional focus and weaken the voice of the indigenous peoples, [others](#) see the move as an opportunity to reaffirm the AC's [legitimacy](#) as a key circumpolar coordinator, boosting its role and [preventing the creation of new, competing fora](#).

EU observer status bid: The next opportunity to accept new observers to the AC will arise on [24-25 April 2015](#), when Canada passes the chair to the US at the ministerial meeting in Iqaluit, Canada. In its [2014 resolution on the EU's Arctic Strategy](#), the **European Parliament** highlighted 'the need for an active engagement of the EU in all relevant working groups of the Arctic Council', urged the Commission to 'follow up on the outstanding seal products ban issue with Canada' and regretted the effects of the seal products ban, 'in particular for indigenous culture and livelihood'.

Canada launches Arctic Economic Council

Canada's [main objectives](#) for its 2013-15 chairmanship included advancing sustainable-resource, community and economic development in the Arctic, as well as strengthening the voice, capacity, and participation of indigenous peoples and PPs in the AC. The overarching priority, 'development for the people of the North', also included safe Arctic shipping, responsible resource development, protection of the marine environment and guidelines for sustainable Arctic tourism. The Canadian chair's most visible achievement was the launch of the Arctic Economic Council (AEC) [in 2014](#), a circumpolar business forum aiming to foster business development in the Arctic, engage in deeper circumpolar cooperation, and provide a business perspective to the work of the AC. The move has been criticised by some [NGOs](#) for reportedly giving industry 'direct access to Arctic decision-makers'. Others have deplored that Canada has largely ['ignored'](#) climate-related issues.

US signals growing political focus on Arctic issues and climate change

In the October 2014 [draft agenda](#) for the US Arctic Council chairmanship, the Canadian focus, the AEC, does not feature prominently. Instead, the State Department addresses climate change as a core focus, along with improving economic and living conditions in the Arctic as well as strengthening Arctic Ocean stewardship. In a clear signal from the White House that the US chairmanship and its focus on climate change are priorities for the administration, US President Barack Obama on 21 January 2015 issued an [executive order](#) on 'Enhancing Coordination of National Efforts in the Arctic'. He stated that, as the US assumes the chairmanship of the Arctic Council, 'it is more important than ever that we have a coordinated national effort that takes advantage of our combined expertise and efforts in the Arctic region', and underlined the US 'responsibility to strengthen international cooperation to mitigate the greenhouse gas emissions driving climate change'. The executive order stipulates the creation of an 'Arctic Executive Steering Committee', chaired by White House Office of Science and Technology Policy Director, John Holdren. The steering committee will establish a working group to deliver recommendations by 1 May 2015, on 'how to strengthen agency Arctic policy coordination' and 'address potential gaps in implementing Arctic priorities'.

Arctic ambitions and expectations highlight need for stable frameworks

The changing priorities under the two-year chairmanships – allegedly a [more visible problem](#) in the transition from Canada to the US than when Norway, Denmark, and Sweden took turns at the helm between 2006 and 2013 – remain a [source of concern](#) with regard to the future role of the AC, particularly in the light of the increasing security focus on the region. Media attention to Arctic military activities increased steeply when Russia released [video footage of mini-submarines planting a Russian flag](#) on the North Pole seabed in 2007, sparking fears of a potential ['scramble for the Arctic'](#). Since then, research expeditions in preparation for [territorial claims](#) have made prominent headlines, accompanied by reports on other Arctic climate change-related developments, such as [Chinese economic interests](#) and increasing [military/technological](#) investments – for example, in [underwater combat robots](#) and [ice breakers](#). While the US Defense Secretary recently referred to climate change as a ['threat multiplier'](#) with the 'potential to exacerbate many challenges', the Ottawa Declaration [explicitly states](#) that the AC should not deal with matters related to military security.

The Arctic coastal states – of which Russia is the only non-NATO member – do not seem interested in major changes to the current framework of the soft AC and the hard [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#), which regulates the potentially contentious [territorial claims](#) in the Arctic Ocean. The intention to keep the current framework stable and to avoid a [battle for the Arctic](#) was formalised in the [Ilulissat Declaration](#) in May 2008, in which the five Arctic coastal states – Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the US – stated that there is 'no need to develop a new comprehensive international legal regime to govern the Arctic Ocean', as 'the law of the sea provides for important rights and obligations concerning the delineation of the outer limits of the continental shelf(...)' and the current framework 'provides a solid foundation for responsible management by the five coastal states and other users of this Ocean'.

The original goals of the AC – sustainable development and environmental protection – still serve as the basis for practical collaboration on concrete challenges in terms of search and rescue capabilities, oil spill response and preparedness. The increased attention to activities in the Arctic – combined with the strained ties with Russia – will probably continue to [challenge cooperation](#) in the region, thus highlighting the need for furthering collaboration in non-military fora. The AC in its current form remains one of very few informal structures for high-level communication and cooperation with Russia, thus having the potential to [temper possible future tensions](#).