
Arctic: Regionalism Perspective

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Regionalism as a political project has been a significant phenomenon in post-1945 international relations. The third phase of regional integration began towards the end of the 1980s within the international context created by the end of the Cold War. Academics dubbed it as “new regionalism”.¹ Most of the regional organisations that came up in those days were based on economic cooperation among the states. It was an era of globalisation. The Arctic Council (AC) which emerged in 1996 was a unique case. The ‘Arctic’ has emerged as a region in international cooperation during the past 20-30 years, as manifest in the creation of the AC. The objective of the AC was sustainable development and environmental protection only, and that is why it may be termed as a unique case in that period.

Regional organisations are an instrument of regionalism. This paper reviews regionalism in the Arctic region through the Arctic Council beginning with the evolution of the Arctic Council, then region-building in the Arctic, applying theories of regionalism to Arctic regional experiences, assessing the success or failure of the Arctic Council, discussing the future of the Arctic, the key challenges before it, and, finally, the conclusion.

Evolution of the Arctic Council

During the Cold War, the geopolitical situation in the Arctic was caught

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up in the overall bipolar tension between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. During this period, the region was heavily militarised. In the late 1970s, the Arctic was given a great deal of attention as a result of the exploitation of oil and gas resources in the North.² But in the 1980s, these superpowers began exploring ways to reduce the rivalry between them. In the late 1980s, ideas of ‘human interests’

and a ‘zone of peace’ related to the Arctic region³, started evolving. The issue of ‘environmental protection’ also came to the fore which, in turn, resulted in the non-binding Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) signed by the eight Arctic states in 1991. Out of the AEPS emerged the idea of an Arctic Council.

In 1996, the Ottawa Declaration formally established the Arctic Council as a high-level inter-governmental forum to provide a 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; in particular, issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic. The eight Arctic countries are Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Russian Federation and the United States of America. The chairmanship of the Arctic Council is held on rotational basis, changing every second year.⁴

Arctic Council

Only states with territory in the Arctic can be members of the Arctic Council. All eight countries are permanent members, making the AC a circumpolar forum. Observer status is open to non-Arctic states approved by the council at the ministerial meetings that occur once every two years.

Permanent observers have no voting rights in the council. As of May 2013, 12 non-Arctic states have permanent observer status. They include China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Also, nine inter-governmental and inter-Parliamentary organisations and 11 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have been given observer status. Chairmanship of the council rotates every two years. The

current chair is Canada, which will serve until the ministerial meeting in May 2015. Seven of the eight member states have sizeable indigenous communities living in their Arctic areas (only Iceland does not). So, the Arctic Council gives importance to the organisations that represent the indigenous Arctic people. As of 2010, six Arctic indigenous communities have permanent participant status.

There are various working groups like the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF), Emergency Prevention Preparedness and Response (EPPR), Arctic Contaminants Action Programme (ACAP) which study environmental issues in the region with high scientific standards and prepare reports which are implemented successfully. They deal with issues like monitoring and assessing pollution in the Arctic, dealing with contaminants like mercury and persistent organic pollutants, Arctic biodiversity and conservation, resources in the region at risk from oil spills, climate impact assessment, etc.

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Region-building in the Arctic

There is no commonly accepted definition of what a region is. Most would agree that a region implies some “geographical proximity and contiguity”,

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and mutual interdependence. Some would add a certain degree of cultural homogeneity, sense of community, or “regionness”.⁵ After two centuries of nation-building, the world has entered an era of region-building in search of political stability, cultural cohesion, and socio-economic development. The region-building approach focusses on regional awareness, on the shared sense of belonging to a particular regional community. Attention is paid to the processes by which interests/identities

are created. In his region-building approach, Neumann argues that in the formation of a region, “similarities and dissimilarities are processed politically by [region-builders], and that these political actors are the ones to decide which similarities should henceforth be considered politically relevant, and which should not”.

Regionalism, then, refers to processes and structures of region-building in terms of closer economic, political, security and socio-cultural linkages between states and societies that are geographically proximate.⁶ The ‘Arctic’ case illustrates Neumann’s arguments regarding region-building. Unlike the Antarctic, the Arctic has been inhabited by human beings and includes areas of sovereign states. At the core of the formation of the AC were issues of environmental protection, sustainable development and scientific research. The region was built around these issues and the AC has strictly stuck to these agendas throughout the period.

But despite the large role that the environment and environmental vulnerability were given as a motivator for region-building, the ‘Arctic’ environment was never seen to be particularly threatened in comparison to other areas in the world. This assessment has been confirmed later

by the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme⁷ report, 1997, which acknowledged that the Arctic is a region for moderate environmental concern: in comparison with most other areas of the world, it remains a clean environment. This makes probable that there were other motivators than just the perceived environmental urgency for undertaking the major region-building efforts.⁸

Theories of Regionalism and Its Application

The theories of regionalism can be divided into two broad categories – those emanating from the liberal approach to international relations and those from the realist approach. The transactionalist, functionalist, neo-functionalist and federalist theories originate from within the liberal framework. The inter-governmentalist theory and also the theory of the regional security complex have their roots in the realist approach.⁹ It can be said from the perspective of the transactionalist theory, that states in the Arctic region were capable of overcoming their parochial orientation, capable of cooperating and could form an organisation to promote common interests. As per Karl Deutsch's¹⁰ definition of an amalgamated security community, nation-states in this region have retained their sovereignty and national identity; but harmonised their policies to achieve common goals of sustainable development and environmental protection.

If we were to apply David Mitrany's functionalist theory to the Arctic Council, it passes a few criteria but not all. As per this theory, the Arctic Council has been established to address the environmental concerns of the region – hence, it is a functional organisation; also, it has permanent working groups – technical elites who play a huge role in the working

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of this organisation. But Mitrany's concept of "spillover" has not proved right so far. Also 'states' play a very important role in the Arctic Council which is in contradiction to what Mitrany says, that the state system will collapse, resulting in the transfer of a "slice of sovereignty" from nation-states to regional organisations.

The inter-governmentalism approach developed by Kenneth Waltz does hold true for the Arctic Council. The Arctic states have come together because their national goals were compatible with regional goals. But as the economic, energy and security significance of the region increases, we can expect some conflict in the national goals of the nation-states in this region and in common regional goals. There is a link between climate change and national security or security of the region. When we say that there is a threat to regional security, it is not just conventional threats but also non-conventional threats. In this regard, the Arctic Council, fundamentally, is a regional security complex built around the interdependence on environmental and ocean issues.¹¹

The newest interpretation of regionalism, the new regionalism theory developed by Bjorn Hettne, can be applied to the Arctic Council in a limited sense. The core argument of this theory is based on the concept of 'regionness'. The term 'regionness' is used to indicate the different levels of integration in a geographical unit. The Arctic region fulfils the first three levels of regionness, i.e. region as regional space, regional complex and regional society.¹² We cannot categorise the Arctic Council in any of the three regions according to this theory; viz, core regions, intermediate regions or peripheral regions. And there is no economic integration of the region.

Arctic Council: Successful Regionalism?

The Arctic Council came into existence with the objectives of sustainable

development and environmental protection. And if we look at its performance over the years regarding these issues, we must say that there exists clarity of objective and commitment on the part of the members and, hence, it is a strong case of successful regionalism. Though the Arctic Council is comparatively young, 16 years old, there can be little doubt that the environmental protection part has been a highly successful aspect of its activities, providing a bridge between scientists and decision-makers and focussing greater attention and, in some cases, also resources, to problems of the Arctic environment.¹³

The Arctic Council has been effective in increasing international cooperation in the Arctic and raising general awareness about the Arctic. It has some impact on the ability of the Arctic's indigenous peoples to influence local, regional or international policies and on the coordination of national Arctic policies internationally.¹⁴ It has been successful in the sense that it has been able to divert the attention of the world towards it for good reasons and has been able to improve the region's standing internationally. As the opening of sea routes and resources in the region is attracting global players towards this region, the AC has created an institutionalised structure that is regulating the activities of external players as well as member states.

The success of the AC becomes more prominent on the background that the Arctic sprawls over-one sixth of the Earth's landmass, some 35 million sq km, 24 time zones, has a population of less than four million and dozens of native languages. It is cold and dark for long periods of the year. People living there have as yet a limited sense of solidarity or common destiny. The AC has some negatives which include no fixed domicile, no set logo, and no regular budget. But efforts are being made to overcome these negatives.

Globalisation and the 'Arctic'

We can say, along with climate change, globalisation is a major factor

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that gave this region the prominence it enjoys today. Globalisation increased interdependence between the countries, facilitated free flow of labour, money, technology, etc. The Arctic countries would like to make use of the process of globalisation and would like to maintain a complementary relationship between regionalism and globalisation. According to Professor Heininen of the University of Lapland, globalisation brings economic modernity and weakens states in the region. State sovereignty and defence are, therefore, top priorities in the national strategies of the littoral Arctic countries. Globalisation also

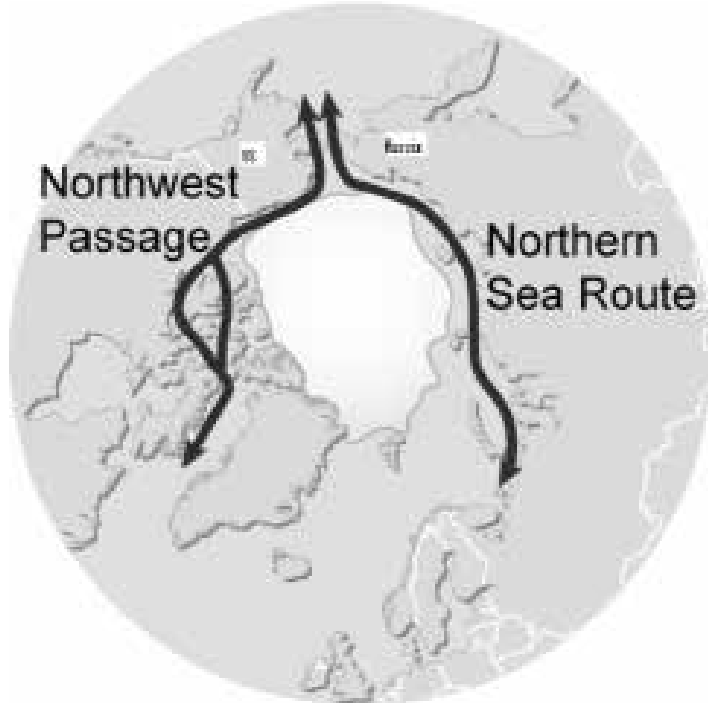
has positive benefits such as decolonisation and the growth of regional autonomy, universal recognition of indigenous rights, strengthening of the rule of law, and multilateral environmental initiatives.¹⁵

‘Arctic’ Future

Global warming and climate change have led to the melting and shrinking of sea ice in the region. As the ice melts, the Arctic region has emerged as the prime region in international politics. The prospect of an increasingly accessible Arctic has raised a variety of important questions about the exploitation of natural resources, the delimitation of territory, the nature of security and political relations, the voice of indigenous peoples, and the place of outside actors—such as China and the European Union (EU)—in the development of the region. The Arctic had shrunk to its lowest level since the initiation of satellite measurements 30 years ago.¹⁶ The significant reduction in sea ice in recent times has raised the prospects

for the opening up of long-sought navigational routes, the Northwest Passage— aptly termed the “Arctic Grail”¹⁷—and the Northern Sea Route (formerly known as the Northeast Passage),¹⁸ and even a transpolar route.¹⁹ Fig 1 shows the Northwest Passage and Northern Sea Route.

Fig 1: Northwest Passage and Northern Sea Route



Indeed, it has been suggested that, if navigable, the Northwest Passage would offer a 7,000 km saving on the route between Asia and the East Coast of the USA over the route via the Panama Canal, whilst the Northern Sea Route would entail a 40 percent distance saving on the transit between Northern Europe and Northeast Asia as compared with a route via the Suez or Panama Canals.²⁰ It has been estimated that the Arctic region holds about 22 percent of the world’s remaining supplies of oil and much more of natural gas.²¹ The region is rich in terms of other

resources also, like gold, zinc, lead, diamonds, etc. This vast economic potential of the region has led to extended continental shelf claims in the central Arctic Ocean by the Arctic nations. Though the Arctic is governed by the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the ice melt was not factored in when UNCLOS was being drafted.

‘Outsider’: Threat or Opportunity for AC?

These factors mentioned above may, in the future, become a potential source of conflict in this region between the Arctic nations or between Arctic and non-Arctic nations. Already, some non-Arctic nations are pushing for the ‘Global Commons’ theory in the Arctic. Yin Zhuo, a retired Vice Admiral of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) said in March 2010, “The Arctic belongs to all the people around the world as no nation has sovereignty over it”.²² On the other hand, the Russian delegation noted, “Lately, the fashion has emerged in the Arctic due largely to the economic possibilities it offers...many countries that have no relation to the Arctic, now have a desire to get a piece of the Arctic pie...”²³ One view is that the ‘Arctic is for Arctic states exclusively’ and there is no place for non-Arctic countries. However, there is another view that the AC should be inclusive to prevent misperceptions of it being an exclusive club that may result in non-Arctic states taking no notice of the rules and codes of conduct for the Arctic, causing unwarranted friction.²⁴ Norwegian Foreign Minister in 2010 observed that “the Arctic is, and must remain, an open region”.

The dilemma in the AC is that these nations want the investment and technical expertise of non-Arctic nations but not at the cost of the exclusive authority they maintain over the Arctic region. The council is trying to resolve this dilemma by granting non-Arctic states permanent observer status in the council – the primary criterion for becoming a permanent observer is to yield to the Arctic countries sovereignty over their corresponding territories in the region. This

would imply non-Arctic countries giving up the claims that the Arctic region is a global commons, ruling out the role of any international agency in its management.²⁵

Key Challenges

Exploitation of Energy Resources: According to Dr Kristine Offerdal of the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, the region has become the world's new energy frontier, which has caused disputes over economic zones between the littoral states. This may hamper the very process of regionalism in the Arctic region.

Environmental Effects of Economic Development and Climate Change: There are various environmental challenges facing the Arctic. These include pollutants, oil spills, changes to species migration and breeding behaviour, adverse impact on flora and fauna, etc. The AC is currently handling these issues quite competently, but they remain a major challenge.

Indigenous People: Another important issue in the Arctic is the role of the indigenous people who are directly affected by both economic development and environmental disruption. Today, the concerns of these people are heard, but in the changing nature of the AC, their voices may be ignored.

Migration and Military Security: According to Professor Heininen,²⁶ the growing exploitation of natural resources might lead to an influx of non-indigenous workers. Trafficking and illegal immigration are new problems in the region.

According to Professor Andrei Zagorski of IMEMO²⁷, the Russian military budget is rising and the increasing economic activity and melting of the ice in the Arctic can be a motive for strengthening of military activity in the region. According to Alyson J. K. Bailes²⁸, Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) should be a topic in the council. The agreement on cooperation in search-and rescue operations in 2011 was a step involving the military.²⁹

In the future, there is a possibility that non-Arctic states will try to interfere in the region and, influence policy decisions in their favour.

Conclusion

The Arctic has in recent times become a hot topic. This is the result of a number of economic, environmental and security reasons. Regionalism in this region is state-led regionalism with importance being given to various non-state working groups and indigenous people. The Arctic Council is neither a multilateral organisation nor an international one with a legal personality³⁰. It is a case of regional integration keeping environmental issues at the core. The Arctic states have opted to pursue a “soft law” voluntary regime focussing on the coordination of scientific research, environmental management and sustainable development³¹ but what is needed is a “hard law Arctic treaty”. To meet future challenges, according to the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region (SCPAR), the AC will need structural reforms³².

In the future, there is a possibility that non-Arctic states will try to interfere in the region and, influence policy decisions in their favour. We can expect two trends. First, the AC becoming more cohesive as a result of a perception of threat from non-Arctic nations and their emphasis on the “Global Commons” theory. Second, the AC will be divisive due to internal conflicts among the Arctic countries or interference by extra-regional powers. This trend can jeopardise the process of ‘regionalism’. According to former Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, “...developments in the Arctic Ocean will redraw the geopolitical map of the world”. The Eighth Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council, on May 15, 2013, at Kiruna, Sweden, included six new nations, including China and India, as observer states, and also adopted only its second legally binding agreement: to prepare and coordinate a response to potential spills that could result from increasing oil and

gas exploration. Interestingly, in the same meeting, the AC adopted a shared vision statement for the future development of the region as a “zone of peace and stability.” “This sends an important signal to the rest of the world,” said the Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, at the conclusion of Sweden’s two-year Arctic Council chairmanship.³³

This means that the AC is welcoming non-member states as observers but, on the other hand, adopting binding agreements against potential environment threats and, at the same time, sending a message to emerging powers that the Arctic is no place for a military adventure or implementing hegemonic policies through economic or military clout. Today, we are at a crossroads between peace and conflict in the Arctic but conflicts are not inevitable. Issues can be solved through mutual trust and cooperation. The Arctic Council should be seen as a body that can help resolve Arctic issues, and develop and implement strategies that will mitigate adverse impacts in the region, enable countries to approach the Arctic as a global region and facilitate an integrated approach for discussions, because if conflicts in the region escalate, it will have an irreversible adverse impact on the entire world.³⁴

Notes

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