

Research Article

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Abstract

There has been great popular and scholarly interest in the activities of non-Arctic actors in the Arctic region, and in the Arctic Council specifically. We find controversy around the activities of Observers in the Council, with some seeing challenges to Arctic states and others seeing positive co-operation. The Arctic Council is the preeminent governance forum for the Arctic region, consisting of the Arctic states (as of 2023, minus Russia) and six Indigenous peoples' organisations. Non-Arctic states, intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations can be Observers in the institution. Existing literature has examined the significance, interest and powers of these actors; this paper answers the research question, what do Observers actually do in the Arctic Council? To answer this question, this paper presents the results of content analysis of official Arctic Council Observer reviews and reports, which catalogue their activities. The answer may seem obvious: Observers observe. However, Arctic Council Observers do more than this simple function. This paper proposes that all of the activities of Observers fit into a typology of six types of activity. The ultimate finding is that Observers in the Arctic Council work with Arctic states to enhance institutional work around climate change and sustainable development; we see examples of positive co-operation that enhances regional governance. It is another example of peaceful international relations in the Arctic.

Introduction

There have been debates about whether Observers in the Arctic Council represent a concern for member states or Permanent Participants. The Council is the premier governance body for the Arctic region, consisting of the eight states with territory in the Arctic (Canada, Denmark on behalf of Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States) and six Indigenous peoples' organisations as Permanent Participants (Arctic Athabaskan Council, Aleut International Association, Gwich'in Council International, Inuit Circumpolar Council, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North and the Saami Council). The mandate, found in the *Ottawa Declaration* (1996), is to broadly promote co-operation on environmental protection and sustainable development in the region, though it can and does engage with other non-military issues. Thirteen Observers were accredited when the Council began in 1996 (Arctic Council, 1996, p. 5). In total, as of 2024, 38 non-Arctic states, intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations are accredited Observers in the Council, and other Observers can attend meetings on an ad-hoc basis. Table 1 lists the Observers. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the other Arctic Council member states paused their work in the institution (United States Department of State, 2022) before recommencing without Russia in May 2023 (Arctic Council, 2023). The Council is not the creation of a treaty, and research has shown that Arctic co-operation with Russia in non-treaty governance mechanisms declined after the invasion of Ukraine (Koivurova, & Shibata, 2023). Prior to 2022, Senior Arctic Officials from Arctic Council states and Permanent Participants met about twice per year, with an additional Ministerial Meeting every other year at which the chair of the Council passed between member states. The work of the Council is organised into projects, which member states and permanent participants sponsor. Sponsoring a project includes leadership, organisation and administration of the initiative. The Council has six working groups that substantively complete the projects of the Arctic Council.¹

Debates about Observers in the Arctic Council focus on whether they represent a challenge to the interests of Arctic states. While in Rovaniemi, Finland on May 6 2019, for an Arctic Council meeting, American Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, "The region has become an arena for power and for competition." He criticised China, saying, "China has Observer status in the Arctic Council, but that status is contingent upon its respect for the sovereign rights of Arctic states" (Pompeo, 2019). A media frame in articles that mention the Arctic Council is that Observers such as China present an uncertain factor, using words such as "concerns,"

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¹They are: Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP); Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP); Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF); Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR); Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME); Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG).

Table 1. Arctic Council observers

Observer	Year first accredited
States	
Germany	1998
Netherlands	1998
Poland	1998
United Kingdom	1998
France	2000
Spain	2006
China	2013
India	2013
Italy	2013
Japan	2013
Singapore	2013
South Korea	2013
Switzerland	2017
Intergovernmental organisations	
Standing Committee of the Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region (SCPAR)	1998
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN-ECE)	1998
United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)	1998
International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)	2000
International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)	2000
Nordic Council of Ministers (NCN)	2000
North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO)	2000
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)	2002
Nordic Environment Finance Corporation (NEFCO)	2004
International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES)	2017
OSPAR Commission	2017
West Nordic Council (WNC)	2017
World Meteorological Organization (WMO)	2017
International Maritime Organization (IMO)	2019
Non-governmental organisations	
International Arctic Science Committee (IASC)	1998
International Union for Circumpolar Health (IUCH)	1998
Northern Forum (NF)	1998
World Wide Fund for Nature-Global Arctic Program (WWF)	1998
Advisory Committee on Protection of the Sea (ACOPS)	2000
Association of World Reindeer Herders (AWRH)	2000
Circumpolar Conservation Union (CCU)	2000
International Arctic Social Sciences Association (IASSA)	2000

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Observer	Year first accredited
International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)	2002
University of the Arctic (UArctic)	2002
Arctic Institute of North America (AINA)	2004
Oceana	2017

“ambitions” and “scramble.”² Back when the Arctic states were negotiating to create the Arctic Council during the mid-1990s, according to American diplomat Evan Bloom (1999), “Negotiation of terms for admission and participation of Observers proved particularly controversial in light of some states’ concerns about the role that might be played by organizations involved in animal rights issues” (720). Later work reveals that apprehension came from Denmark, Iceland and Norway, which had policymakers that feared environmental organisations would use the Council as a venue to criticise whaling industries (for example Greenpeace or People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). A general concern was that they would be disruptive (Chater, 2016, p. 176).

Under rules adopted in 2013, Observers cannot become members of the Arctic Council (Arctic Council, 2013, article 4.1) and are admitted with a consensus of the member states (4.3). They can attend Council meetings (7.1), take part in and even lead projects (7.5) and go to working group meetings (7). However, participation in those projects and meetings is contingent upon member state support (7.4 and 7.5). If one member state government did not approve of the actions of Observers, they could in essence ban them from attending further meetings of the Council, stop their representatives from speaking or veto their project ideas.

China, which is an Arctic Council Observer state, attracts particular attention. We often read that China wants to “thread together more countries, resources, and trade routes” in the Arctic (Goodman, & Freese, 2018) seeking “two big prizes: new sources of energy and a faster shipping route across the top of the world” (Sengupta, & Myers, 2019) with companies that “have acquired a reputation for destroying natural ecosystems, including marine environments” (Mac Ghlionn, 2023) and “a clear disdain for properly addressing the climate change challenge” (“NATO and the Arctic,” 2022). We also read that it is a country with efforts “committed to actively responding to the challenges brought about by the changing Arctic” (“China and the Arctic: Engaging After the Global Pandemic,” 2022) that “support a diverse range of research” (Funaiole, Hart, Bermudez Jr., & Powers-Riggs, 2023) and have “played an essential role in climate talks since the 1990s” (Moore, & Sikorsky, 2023) due to the fact it “will face increasingly harsh consequences of climate change in the coming decades, including flooding and droughts” (Maizland, 2021).

²For example, Pompeo Seen Attending Finland Arctic talks Amid China Concerns” (Reuters, March 15, 2019); “Arctic Ambitions of China, Russia – And Now the US – Need Not Spark a Cold War” (South China Morning Post, March 11, 2019); “Has China Already Won the Scramble for the Arctic?” (Maritime Executive, October 28, 2018); “China’s Ready to Cash in on a Melting Arctic” (Foreign Policy, May 1, 2018); “China Wants to Be a Polar Power” (The Economist, April 14, 2018).

This paper addresses the research question: what do Observers actually do in the Arctic Council? It is possible that Observers might support or enhance the goals of member states, or they might challenge member state priorities. To answer the research question, this paper provides a typology of Observer activity in the Arctic Council. It proposes that the work of Observers falls into six categories. The paper concludes that Observers do not challenge the priorities of Arctic states in the Council; they support the projects and priorities of Arctic states by contributing data, providing opportunities to share information, facilitating collaboration and sometimes serving special functions. We do not see instances of Observers emphasising ideas that are at odds with member states. Clearly, Observers do more than simply observe meetings. The data comes from reviews and reports that Observers must provide to the Arctic Council about their activity every four years, as per 2013 rules of procedure. The next section of this paper reviews existing literature, followed by a summary of the method, description of results and discussion.

Literature

There are three common threads in the literature on the Arctic Council's Observers, which this paper seeks to supplement. First, a good deal of work examines the significance of the presence of Observers in the Arctic Council, but not necessarily what they do at a practical level. Multidisciplinary researcher Timo Koivurova (2010) writes that Observers in the Arctic Council are re-defining the significance of the Arctic and "framing new governance possibilities" (p. 153). Geographer Philip E. Steinberg and geopolitical scientist Klaus Dodds (2015) see the situation as a debate between "statehood" and "localness"; the question is whether a role in governance demands geography in the region, or if interest is enough (p. 109). Historian Valur Ingimundarson (2014) sees Observers as crucial to understanding regional governance, defined by "the power disparities of stakeholders" (p. 185). As a result of the presence of Observers, political scientist Page Wilson (2016) writes that a club mentality has developed in the Arctic Council, with "the Council as a society for Arctic states" (p. 56). Some see this governance discussion as resulting in anxieties over sovereignty, or a "nationalist, coastal-state orientation" within the Arctic states, according to historian Whitney Lackenbauer (2014, p. 26). A second common thread is that work frequently examines the interests of Observers, or the reasons they seek a role in governance, defined as some combination of climate change as well as the economic potential of Arctic oil, gas and shipping (for example, Bennett, 2014; BR, 2019; Buchanan, 2023, p. 97; Chater, 2016; Dodds, 2010; Lasserre, 2010; Maincom, & Lackenbauer, 2013; Solli, Wilson Rowe, & Lindgren, 2013). Third, existing work on the powers of Observers has examined the implications of Observer formal powers under the Arctic Council rules of procedure (for example, Graczyk, & Koivurova, 2014). Political scientist Sebastian Knecht (2017) has created a dataset that comprehensively shows attendance by Observers over time at various Council meetings. He notes that member states still dominate Council meetings: "It is little surprise that the member states score highest on all meeting levels" (p. 211). This paper seeks to compliment this work by examining the content of Observer work in the Council. Literature has identified this gap: "Other research could also investigate the conditions under which Observers participate in Arctic Council meetings and the strategies they choose to successfully influence negotiations and projects" (Knecht, 2017, p. 220). Existing work examines Observer

significance, interests and powers, which this paper seeks to supplement.

The scholarly interest in the role of Observers in the Arctic Council is part of a larger debate about whether Arctic international relations are conflictual or peaceful. Some writers argue that the interest of states such as China in institutions such as the Arctic Council is indicative of increasing regional competition, bringing, for example, the "United States' strategic competitors into Alaska's backyard" (Tingstad, & Shokh, 2023). The argument is that non-Arctic actors seek regional legitimacy and influence through Arctic Council membership just as "nations have begun to engage in a modern gold rush over the region's unclaimed territory, natural resources and strategic position" (Gross, 2020), resulting in "an attendant increase in international tensions" (Perez, 2020). Other scholars argue that international relations in the Arctic are peaceful (even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine) and call the notion that there is something akin to a new cold war in the Arctic "a rather prickly work of fiction" (Buchanan, 2023, p. 2). This work contributes to this debate. It shows that, in the Arctic Council, rather than competition between Arctic and non-Arctic actors, we see an example of co-operation around environmental issues and positive governance activities.

Method

The research method employed is content analysis of Arctic Council Observer reviews and reports. Under rules adopted in 2013, accredited Observers must deliver an accounting to the Arctic Council's secretariat every four years that summarises their activities in the Council and the broader Arctic region. This research examined three sets of reports, making the years 2016, 2018 and 2020. The Council secretariat makes these reviews and reports available via the Arctic Council's online archive.³ Each Observer did not submit a report each year, but every Council Observer has submitted at least one report as of 2023. These reviews and reports illuminate the role and influence of Observers in a comprehensive fashion because they provide a complete listing of actor activities. This paper seeks to contribute a systematic analysis of this data. The reviews and reports were reviewed, and recurring activities emerged. Six categories were inductively created to classify these activities: project leadership or sponsorship (Category 1); active contributions to projects (Category 2); informal contributions (Category 3); participation by national or group scientists (Category 4); special contributions (Category 5), and; intention or aspirations for future participation (Category 6). While reading the reviews and reports, an instance of an Observer undertaking an action fitting a particular category was coded "1." This coding allows summative tracking across categories. Every Observer activity falls into one of the six categories. Table 2 summarises the results of the analysis.

Project sponsorship or leadership (Category 1) includes specific mention of leadership of an Arctic Council project by an Observer. As noted, the Council divides its work into projects. Sponsoring or leading a project includes proposing an idea or goal; structuring the method to achieve that goal; organising the logistics, such as recruiting personnel and holding meetings; assembling the findings; and disseminating the results in written form, or at an event of some sort. Observers can lead these projects unless vetoed by a member state. Examples of projects might be a report, a set of

³All are available here: <https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/1842>.

Table 2. Results

Observer	Category 1			Category 2			Category 3			Category 4			Category 5			Category 6			Total categories (# reports)
	16	18	20	16	18	20	16	18	20	16	18	20	16	18	20	16	18	20	
States																			
China				1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1							3 (3)
France				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1					1		4 (3)
Germany				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							3 (3)
India					1	1	1	1	1			1	1						3 (3)
Italy				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							3 (3)
Japan				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							3 (3)
Netherlands				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							3 (3)
Poland			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1				1	6 (3)
Singapore				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							3 (3)
South Korea			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							4 (3)
Spain				1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1							3 (3)
Switzerland	-			-	1	1	-	1	1	-	1	1	-			-		1	4 (2)
UK			1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1						4 (3)
Int. orgs.																			
ICES	-			-	1	1	-	1	1	-	1		-			-			3 (2)
IFRC	-			-		1	-	1	1	-	1		-			-		1	4 (2)
IMO	-	-		-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-		-	-		3 (1)
IUCN							1	1										1	2 (3)
NCM				1		1			1						1				3 (3)
NEFCO	-			-			-			-			-	1		-		1	2 (2)
NAMMCO						1	1	1	1	1	1	1							3 (3)
OSPAR Com.	-	1	1	-	1	1	-	1	1	-		1	-			-			4 (2)
SCPAR							1	1	1										1 (3)
UN-ECE			-	1			-	1	1	-			-			-		1	3 (2)
UNDP	-			-			-			-			-			-		1	1 (2)
UNEP				1	1	1	1	1	1										2 (3)
WMO	-	1		-	1	1	-	1	1	-	1	1	-			-		1	5 (2)
WNC	-			-			-		1	-		1	-			-		1	3 (2)
NGOs																			
ACOPS		-		-			1	-	1	-	1		-			-		1	3 (2)
AINA		-	1	-			1	-	1	1	-	1	1	-		-			4 (2)
AWRH	-	1	1	-	1	1	-	1	1	-	1	1	-		1	-		1	6 (2)
CCU		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1							4 (3)
IASC		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	1						4 (3)
IASSA					1		1	1	1	1	1	1						1	4 (3)
IUCH					1	1	1	1	1										2 (3)
IWGIA							1	1	1	1						1	1	1	3 (3)
NF		-		1	-	1	1	-	1	-	1		-			-			3 (2)
Oceana	-			-	1	1	-	1	1	-	1	1	-			-		1	4 (2)
UARctic						1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1			1	5 (3)
WWF		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1							4 (3)
Total	0	6	9	18	24	28	27	31	35	15	22	27	2	4	2	1	9	10	

(-) = no report submitted; (1) = activity.

policy options, an assessment, a technical exercise, a workshop, an action plan, a coordinated monitoring effort, an international agreement or a treaty. The substantive work to complete projects occurs in working groups, which Observers can be a part of. The Arctic Council has about 100 projects ongoing at a time, so there are many opportunities available for this type of contribution.

Active contributions to projects (Category 2) include specific mention of an Observer providing data or input to an Arctic Council project without providing leadership. For example, the Council completes various monitoring programmes, such as tracking the number of ships moving through the Arctic, cataloguing the toxic substances found in the environment and observing the flora and fauna in the region, among other areas. Observers can contribute information from national or private monitoring stations, data from group research facilities and other government statistics to these efforts. This category includes board information-sharing activities. In this case, Observers do not lead or sponsor a project but do provide assistance in the project.

Informal contributions (Category 3) include specific mention of Observer contributions to Arctic Council work in a broad way. For instance, some documents note that the Observer generates information that the Council or a particular working group could utilise in some way, though not necessarily directed to a particular project. It also includes hosting general Arctic meetings and conducting broad Arctic research not directed to any particular Council project. Efforts to publicise or translate the work of the Arctic Council or a working group would fall into this category. In this case, the Observer is not contributing to specific projects, but rather Council work in a quite general sense.

Participation by national or group scientists (Category 4) includes mentions of participation of Observer scientists in Arctic Council working groups and task forces. It often is participation by independent scientists who are from an Observer country, intergovernmental organisation or non-governmental organisation. For instance, reviews and reports often discuss scientists from universities in a particular country contributing to the work of the Arctic Council or attending working group meetings. It is not a contribution to a particular project, *per se*, but rather a contribution to a project by someone from an Observer organisation or state.

Special contributions (Category 5) include any mention of a unique or niche activity by an Observer. Some Observers perform a special function in the Arctic Council, such as monitoring a particular research fund. In this case, an Observer is providing a support function for an Arctic Council project in a limited way.

Intention or aspirations for future participation (Category 6) includes apologies for lack of participation in Arctic Council activities by an Observer. In this case, this category of contributions is not a contribution at all. It is a stated goal to make contributions in the future, often containing ideas on how to further the Council's work.

There are two shortcomings to this method. First, representatives from the Observers themselves write these reviews and reports rather than an independent auditor. There may be an incentive for some Observers to stretch, embellish or omit activities. Yet, we can consider these documents generally trustworthy as they are a straightforward listing of activities; plus, the Arctic Council secretariat administers these documents. Second, it can be difficult to categorise particular activities. For instance, it may not be clear if the availability of an open access database is a formal or informal contribution, so different researchers could categorise the activity in different ways. To

Table 3. Breakdown of observer activity

Activity	Number of observers taking part		
	2016	2018	2020
(1) Project sponsorship or leadership	0	6	9
(2) Active contributions to projects	18	24	28
(3) Informal contributions	27	31	35
(4) Participation by national or group scientists	15	22	27
(5) Special contributions	2	4	2
(6) Intention or aspirations for future participation	1	9	10

overcome this shortcoming and ensure the coding was as objective as possible, a student research assistant re-coded 15 total documents to check for consistency. The original coding and the re-coding are 84% similar in total, indicating that the coding is reliable overall.

There also is a shortcoming to a focus on the Arctic Council. The ambitions of non-Arctic actors do not stay confined to the Arctic Council. There are other avenues that states, institutions and non-governmental organisations can use to fulfil their purposes and interests, including unilateral, bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. An Observer state might behave cooperatively in the Arctic Council yet pursue policies in other venues that challenge the interests of Arctic states. Understanding the work of an Arctic state in the Arctic Council does not give the entire picture of its Arctic activity. Yet, the Arctic Council is a key venue of Arctic governance. It is worthy of consideration as work in the institution comprises a considerable amount of Arctic international governance. The nature of this work is important to understanding the nature of Arctic international relations, such as whether it is conflictual or cooperative in an overall way.

Results

Table 2 summarises the results of the analysis and Table 3 summarises the total activities in each category. Project sponsorship or leadership (Category 1) is a relatively rare activity. The number of countries, institutions or organisations sponsoring projects has increased, from zero in 2016 to six in 2018 and nine in 2020. Yet, in each year, it represents the second-smallest category of Observer contributions (the smallest being special contributions). Sponsoring projects is more common among non-state actors, though the sample size is small; only three states have actively sponsored projects, compared to two intergovernmental organisations (the OSPAR Commission and World Meteorological Organization, both of which became accredited Observers in 2017) and five non-governmental organisations (Arctic Institute of North America, Association of World Reindeer Herders, Circumpolar Conservation Union, International Arctic Science Committee and the World Wildlife Fund, all of which had been Council Observers since at least 2004). The intergovernmental organisations sponsoring projects are among the most recent to become Observers, illustrating the potential contribution and energies of new Observers. The five non-governmental organisations sponsoring projects are among the longest-standing Observers, indicating the potential of Observers to build contributions to the Arctic Council over time. Of note, China is

not actively sponsoring projects in the Arctic Council; rather, Poland, South Korea and the United Kingdom (UK) sponsor projects. Two of the Observer states that have sponsored projects became Observers more recently (Poland and South Korea, in 2013), while the other is a longstanding Observer (the UK, since 1998).

Active contributions to projects (Category 2) are more common. In each year, this category is the second-largest type of activity. Every type of actor takes part in this activity, as well as nearly every state. Reports and reviews from every Observer mention this type of activity at some point, except eight (of 38 total). Of the eight that do not mention these types of contributions, five are intergovernmental organisations and three are non-governmental organisations. All the intergovernmental organisations that did not make active contributions are longstanding members (since at least 2004) while one is more recent (the West Nordic Council, since 2017). The three non-governmental organisations that do not note active contributions have been accredited Observers since at least 2004. Every Observer state notes this type of contribution in each year they submitted reports, with two exceptions (China in 2020 and India in 2016). Clearly, most of the accredited Observers seek to make active contributions to the work of the Arctic Council by doing things like contributing data to Council projects.

Informal contributions (Category 3) are frequent, indeed the largest category of activity each year, with every state and nearly every other actor contributing to the Council in an informal way. Every state notes this type of contribution in each year they submitted reports. Each intergovernmental organisation has made this contribution at some point, except for the Nordic Environment Finance Corporation and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Every non-governmental organisation has made this type of contribution at some point, as well.

Participation by national or group scientists (Category 4) is the third largest category of activity each year. Every type of Arctic Council Observer takes part in this activity. It is more common among Observer states and non-governmental organisations; every Observer state notes this contribution, while only half of intergovernmental organisations do so. Every non-governmental organisation notes this type of contribution except for one (the International Union for Circumpolar Health).

Special contributions (Category 5) are relatively rare, though five Observers do provide such support, including one state, two intergovernmental organisations and two non-governmental organisations.

Intention or aspirations for future participation (Category 6) is less common, though we do see such activity from sixteen Observers at some point, including three states, seven intergovernmental organisations and six non-governmental organisations.

Overall, most Observer state contributions fall into Categories 2, 3 or 4, while the activity of intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations are more varied. Poland has activities in more categories than any other Observer, in all six categories. The World Meteorological Organization, which is a United Nations agency, has activities in more categories than any other intergovernmental organisation, at five of six; it is a more recent Observer, becoming accredited in 2017. The Association of World Reindeer Herders, a longstanding accredited Observer (since 2000) that is an important advocate on behalf of Saami reindeer herders, has activity in five of six categories, more than any other non-governmental organisation. Most Observers across

all categories note activity in three of six categories. We see particular moments in time when waves of Observers became accredited in the Council, such as the beginnings of the Arctic Council from 1998 to 2004, six new states in 2013 and five new Observers in 2017. The contributions of Observers are consistent regardless of the time they have been attending Council meetings; there are contributions from longstanding participants and more recent additions, too.

Discussion

A closer look at the Observer reviews and reports reveals that the project leadership by Observer states, intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations in the Arctic Council (Category 1) frequently has to do with information sharing and monitoring. For example, in 2018, the Circumpolar Conservation Union, a non-governmental environmental organisation, co-led one project in the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) Arctic Council working group, called “Assessing the Use of Heavy Fuel Oil in Indigenous Communities,” to do with environmental conservation. The purpose of this project was to catalogue ships that use heavy fuel oil in Indigenous communities, to aid the International Maritime Organization and others in phase-out efforts. In 2020, “The UK is a co-sponsor with Iceland and Canada of the current PAME project Arctic Marine Tourism: Development in the Arctic and Enabling Real Change,” which sees states “assessing tourism statistics to better understand developments and identify gaps in the data.” It was an attempt to share data as well as guidelines to do with tourism from marine vessels and pleasure craft in Arctic coastal communities. Beyond these activities, Observer project leadership also helps states fulfil national goals. In 2020, in the South Korean report, it notes that, “The Korea Maritime Institute (KMI) . . . is one of the co-leads in PAME’s project on ‘Strengthening Observer engagement with PAME’s shipping-related activities.’” It is a project to get buy-in from Observers into PAME policy recommendations, which have the approval of the Arctic Council member states. Overall, it is difficult to identify a project sponsored by an Observer, state or non-state, that is at odds with any goals of a member state, or really has to do with anything other than information sharing and monitoring.

Many Observers actively contribute to projects that they do not lead (Category 2). In 2016, South Korea’s report says that the Korean Maritime Institute “has been involved in a project . . . which is led by [Aleut International Association] [that] aims to produce a tool based on established techniques and open-source software that will allow coastal Indigenous communities to produce their own scientifically justifiable maps of marine use.” In 2018, Singapore’s report says that the country’s Maritime and Port Authority provided input into several projects to do with shipping and emergency preparedness, such as data and information about the profile of ships leaving Singapore that could potentially travel in or near the Arctic. In 2020, the government of China noted that it “actively participates in the drafting, review and implementation of the Arctic Migratory Bird Initiative Work Plan 2019–2023 (AMBI 2.0).” The Arctic Council provides a mechanism for Observers to contribute national data to projects, ultimately enhancing the comprehensiveness and quality of those projects; it is difficult to identify a contribution that proved challenging to the power of an Arctic Council member state.

Observer status in the Arctic Council provides a means of communication about avenues for collaboration and sharing of

Council work, which is an informal contribution (Category 3). Observer reports from the International Arctic Social Science Association, for example, notes that it is a forum for the Arctic Council to gain information and advertise its work, as it is a professional association for Arctic social scientists. The association has provided opportunities for Arctic Council representatives to attend its meetings and conferences, as noted in its 2016 report. Observer status gives the association a way to coordinate such efforts. The International Arctic Social Science Association is an association of Arctic researchers that publishes newsletters, organises conferences and coordinates funding opportunities for its members. To give another example, the 2018 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies report highlights its work monitoring emergency situations in the Arctic and indicates that its Observer status allows the federation to report such work, as it has “actively taken part in the relevant Arctic Council Working Group meetings.” In 2020, “two sessions of China-Nordic Arctic Cooperation Symposium were held respectively in Tromsø, Norway in June 2018 and Shanghai, China in May 2019.” At the event, “experts from China and Nordic countries had in-depth discussions on the Arctic scientific cooperation and other emerging issues on Arctic affairs.” To give one more example, in 2018, the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), which is a non-governmental organisation, included “an article on the work of the Arctic Council in IWGIA’s yearbook *The Indigenous World*.” The 2020 report says, “A number of IWGIA Board members, as well as members, have worked with the Arctic Council for many years and have contributed to our strategic development in the area.” The Arctic Council facilitates sharing information about events such as these, as well as other informal contributions from Observers, which are ultimately of mutual benefit.

Observer status in the Arctic Council also allows independent researchers from the Observer countries to attend meetings and provide their expertise (Category 4). For example, the 2018 report by the UK says, “At the end of 2017, researchers from across the UK took part in the latest in a series of multi-day events involving local community and Indigenous representatives from the Yamal-Nenets region in Northern Siberia with the aim of building capacity to monitor, understand and predict extreme weather events in the Arctic.” Germany’s 2018 report says, “Dr. Heike Herata (German Environment Agency, UBA) has participated in the [Arctic Contaminants Action Program, or ACAP] Working Group since 2017.” It goes on, “The task of ACAP is to initiate and support projects to reduce or prevent the input of pollutants by certain substances (such as Black Carbon, [Persistent Organic Pollutants], Mercury and short-lived climate pollutants) and waste in the Arctic region.” In 2019, “Ms. Wang Xiaoping, Researcher of Chinese Academy of Sciences and two experts participated in the Workshop on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) and Climate Change in Stockholm, Sweden,” which saw “discussion of the assessment report on POPs and climate change” including a “proposal [from Chinese participants] to include the reference of POPs emission in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the Antarctica.” The Arctic Council’s Observer status allows state and non-state experts from non-Arctic countries to make contributions to the work of the Council.

Some Observers make special or niche contributions (Category 5). For example, the Nordic Environmental Finance Co-operation (NEFCO) is a Council Observer because it manages a Council project, namely overseeing the Council’s Project Support Instrument, which is a fund for member states to give

voluntary contributions that support the Council’s work. Project sponsors can draw from this fund if the work falls into certain priority areas. NEFCO acts as a repository and manager of the funds. To give another example, the University of the Arctic is an Observer because it maintains “thematic networks” that the Council uses to feed and disseminate its work as well as organise participation in specific Council projects. The University of the Arctic, in fact, began its existence as an Arctic Council project, in which member states sought to create a network of universities that would grant degrees aimed at small Arctic communities. Without the Arctic Council, it is possible that the University of the Arctic would not exist, and now it is part of the institution as an Observer. Overall, non-governmental organisations and intergovernmental organisations in particular can play a specialised role in the Arctic Council through Observer status.

Observer reviews and reports also include apologies for failing to make significant contributions (Category 6). In 2020, the International Working Group for International Affairs (IWGIA) wrote, “Unfortunately, in recent years, due to lack of funding, IWGIA had challenges following Arctic Council work closely and particularly participating in meetings of the Arctic Council.” The report goes on, “We were therefore not able to contribute to the work of the Arctic Council in the way we would have liked to.” In 2018, the UNDP wrote, “UNDP is looking to re-engage, as the UN Development Programme organization [is] providing support to developing countries towards achieving the Global Goals by 2030.” Observer status in the Arctic Council can be a way to reflect on enhanced participation in the future, even if participation has been lacking in the past.

It is worth paying special attention to the language around Indigenous peoples, as six Indigenous peoples’ organisations are Permanent Participants in the Arctic Council. Arctic Council procedural rules say that Observers must “enhance and complement the work conducted in the Arctic Council, including the unique and critical role of Permanent Participants” (Arctic Council 2013, p. 2). In 2016, 24 reviews and reports mentioned supporting Indigenous peoples, as well as recognising their importance in the region and in Arctic governance. There were even greater numbers of reviews and reports making these types of statements in 2018, at 29 in total, as well as 30 reports in 2020. For example, China’s 2020 report says, “China respects the traditions and cultures of the Arctic residents including Indigenous peoples, and is committed to preserving their unique lifestyles and values.” It notes more than just support: “China encourages research institutes like Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to enhance research on the Arctic Indigenous peoples and supports the exchanges and co-operation with Permanent Participants of the Council through platforms such as the Association of World Reindeer Herders.” Singapore’s 2020 statement goes further: “The Singapore-AC Permanent Participants (PPs) Cooperation Package is a customized technical cooperation package to enhance the human resource development and governance capacities of the PPs.” Under the programme, “a representative from the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) attended a two-year Masters in Public Policy course in [National University of Singapore] as the first recipient of the postgraduate scholarship.” Observer reviews and reports do not indicate a challenge to the role of Permanent Participants from Observers, but rather an opportunity for Indigenous peoples to get support from non-Arctic states, international organisations and non-government organisations. The mentions are not merely performative, highlighting real contributions and opportunities for Indigenous peoples. In the

Arctic Council, we see constructive engagement, which speaks to the significant role that Indigenous peoples play in Arctic governance.

Conclusion

Existing literature has examined the Arctic Council Observer significance, interests and powers, while this work sought to examine their contributions. Thus, what do Observers do in the Arctic Council? Their activity reviews and reports highlight science and climate change, such as contributing data on flora and fauna, ship traffic, environmental regulations and more. Observers have sponsored projects, but do so infrequently, and when they do, the focus is monitoring and information sharing. Member states and Indigenous peoples' organisations sponsor the vast majority of projects. Observers have contributed data from national or organisational efforts to Arctic Council projects, providing a richer, more valid and reliable research base. Observers have made informal contributions; the Arctic Council facilitates collaboration and communication outside of the institution. The Council often is a venue for Observer states, intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations to inform member states or Permanent Participants of general Arctic activities, research resources or notable events. Observer status opens an invitation for independent scientists and experts to take part in the work of the Arctic Council and its working groups, which widens the knowledge base of the institution. Some Observers have made specialised contributions, such as NEFCO's administration of the Arctic Council's Project Support Instrument. Some have apologised for not contributing more. Overall, these activities form six categories: (1) project sponsorship or leadership; (2) active contributions to projects; (3) informal contributions; (4) participation by national or group scientists; (5) special contributions; and (6) intention or aspirations for future participation. States most frequently provide formal and information contributions (Categories 2 and 3) and contribute national scientists to Council projects (Category 4), while intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations perform more varied tasks, across the categories. There are Observers that contribute in all categories, such as Poland, but the majority contribute to about three. We also see contributions regardless of how long a particular Observer has been part of the Council, with activities such as project sponsorship found among longstanding Observers and more recent additions, too. Overall, the action of Observers (state and non-state alike) supplements and supports the activities and priorities of Arctic Council member states. Clearly, Arctic Council member states are at the apex of the institution; again and again, Observer reviews and reports highlight ways that Observers agree with member state priorities in the institution and means that they possess to help address issues of common interest. Through the Arctic Council, states like China and the United States can find a common set of interests and work together on issues such as climate change.

We see many examples of peaceful governance in the Arctic region – widespread compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in the region (particularly around the delineation of outer continental shelves), the creation of three international agreements in the Arctic Council (namely the 2011 *Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic*, the 2013 *Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic* and the 2017 *Agreement on Enhancing International*

Arctic Scientific Cooperation) or the continued existence of the Council itself, even after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, are a few examples. The activities of Arctic Council Observers are another example of peaceful co-operation in the Arctic region. Since Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and then invaded Ukraine in 2022, we have seen a decline in some co-operation, particularly with the 2022 pause in the Arctic Council. With Observer activity, we have seen science diplomacy and activities that enhance co-operation around the ultimate transboundary issue, which is climate change. We see important work from intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental organisations across a wide range of categories. This paper shows the potential of the Arctic Council to facilitate co-operation between non-Arctic actors, Arctic states and Indigenous peoples' organisations. Beyond the Arctic Council's mandate, we can conclude that this role as a facilitator between member states, Permanent Participants and Observers is one of the institution's major functions. The institution is helping to create examples of unified regional governance activities.

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