

Commentary

Yukon as a Regional and Circumpolar Actor

Hon. Currie Dixon

As the Arctic and its variety of governance institutions and intergovernmental forums have gained significant international attention, sub-national governments in the circumpolar north have begun to play an increasingly important role on the international stage. While high level foreign policy and international relations continue to be in the realm of national governments, sub-nationals like provinces, territories, states, autonomous regions, First Nations and Aboriginal governments are participating and interacting in many new ways. While this involvement is a welcome step forward, enhanced roles for sub-national governments should come with some greater scrutiny and analysis of their respective positions and policies. Such a review will elucidate why and how sub-national governments conduct themselves outside of their own borders and may reveal observations not only about how these governments are viewed by others, but how they view themselves.

As an initial contribution to this end, the Yukon provides interesting subject matter. I would argue that the Yukon adopts and assumes multiple identities as it conducts its business outside of its territorial borders. It would seem that there are four such identities, which are defined by the Yukon's geography, economy, population, and political institutions.

First and foremost, Yukon is quite clearly an Arctic territory. It participates actively in intergovernmental Arctic forums like the Arctic Council and the Northern Forum. During Canada's chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2013-2015), Yukon led Canadian efforts on Arctic Council

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Working Groups, typically focusing on issues related to climate change research and adaptation. Notably, Yukon spearheaded the development of the Arctic Adaptation Exchange information portal. On the international stage, Yukon has a decidedly Arctic identity.

Secondly, regarding the structure of the economy, Yukon seems very much Pacific-northwestern. Its economic reliance on natural resource development and tourism focuses Yukon's interest on border and trade issues, labour mobility, and access to resource-hungry Asian markets. For these reasons Yukon is an active participant in the Pacific NorthWest Economic Region (PNWER). Like its PNWER colleagues Yukon tends to cast its economic gaze to the Pacific.

Third, Yukon's relatively small population significantly influences its role in Canadian confederation. On many intra-Canadian matters Yukon has much in common with other members of confederation with small populations. At Federal-Provincial-Territorial meetings on subjects like internal trade, regional economic development, or capital markets regulation, Yukon often aligns its policy positions with the Atlantic Provinces who share similar challenges. So in this sense, Yukon's identity within Canada is defined to a degree by its small population.

Finally, Yukon's most obvious identity is as a northern Canadian territory. As a result of devolution the Yukon functions as a province in all but name, but its federal funding and unique constitutional status set it apart. It is a leader in Aboriginal-State relations with First Nations land claims and self-government having altered the foundation of its political architecture. These realities influence how Yukon interacts with its regional neighbours, particularly on issues of trans-boundary renewable resource management. While it is exceedingly obvious, Yukon's identity as a territory has an undeniable role in how Yukon conducts itself outside of its borders.

Like all sub-national governments in the circumpolar north the Yukon is dynamic and multifaceted. Its geography, economy, population and political institutions all influence how it is perceived by others, and how it perceives itself. Recognizing and understanding these identities help explain its policies and positions, and how and why it conducts itself on the international, national, and regional stage. This is particularly important given the increasing role of sub-national governments in the Arctic and circumpolar north. As the relevance of sub-national governments like Yukon ascend, so too should the scrutiny, analysis and understanding of what makes them tick.