

Briefing Note

Lessons to be Learned from Three Recent Chairmanships of the Arctic Council

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This year, the Arctic Council celebrates its twentieth year of existence. Such an anniversary is no small milestone for any international institution. It is especially notable as some early observers worried that this body might not survive its first decade of operation. The combination of its unique membership roster and its consensus style of operation was seen by many as making it too fragile of an organization for the realities of traditionally practiced international politics.

The sudden emergence of the Arctic as a prominent region in the economic, political and military calculus of many nation-states also raised a number of questions as to Arctic Council's ability to function as an effective mechanism for forging circumpolar consensus. Yet, two decades out from the issuance of the Ottawa Declaration the body seems now to be well on its way to meeting the expectations of many of its original advocates (See Nord 2016a).

It can be argued that some of the forward progress—as well as the occasional setbacks—of the Arctic Council over the past two decades is a direct consequence of the character of leadership provided by the successive chairs of the organization. It has been observed that not all of the body's chairs have possessed equal amounts of interest, resources, focus and political will as they have operated at the helm of the body. Similarly it has been noted that not all Arctic Council chairmanships have been undertaken with the same intent nor have been conducted in the same manner. Some have been organized around rather narrow national priorities or concerns while others have been more broadly inclusive. Some have been conducted in a directive manner while others have been more

consensus-oriented. It is suggested here that both the willingness and the ability of the rotating national chairs of the Arctic Council to promote common concerns and to instill an attitude of collective problem-solving among its diverse membership has been critical to the success and effectiveness of the body.

A quick review of the conduct of the past three Chairmanships—those of Sweden, Canada and the United States—seems to confirm this assessment. Before undertaking to do so, it is important to first consider the influence that chairs can exercise within most international organizations.

The Influence of Chairs within International Organizations

Many observers often share a particular vision of the nature of the chair within any international organization. It tends to be a somewhat limited and constrained view. According to this perspective, the chair of any international body is simply as the presiding officer who attends to the smooth operation of the organization. The chair sits at the head of the table and makes sure that the particular debate or negotiation is conducted according to the established agenda and rules. As an entity, itself, the chair has minimal power and has limited influence over the outcome of events. As a consequence, the role played by chairs in the development of such bodies is rarely investigated. A review of the extensive literature on international diplomacy and negotiation provides limited insights. Until very recently, most chairs from nearly all international organizations were portrayed as performing basically the same functions and conducting themselves in the same manner (See Barnett and Finnemore 2004).

Traditionally, the efforts of the chair were seen to be allocated around four undertakings. The first was to insure the smooth unfolding of organizational meetings or negotiations. In this “convening” or “presiding” role the chair had the responsibility for initiating discussion and for recognizing subsequent speakers. The chair was also tasked with the assignment of seeing that any agreed agenda was followed and that the time schedule and rules of procedure were observed. As a particular organization grew and developed the chair, might also take on a second role related to longer-term operational responsibilities. Within this “management” role the chair would endeavor to oversee its external activities and internal operations. Often in concert with a support staff or a secretariat, the chair would issue reports to the membership and supervise funding allocations. A third role that a chair might acquire was seen to be “representational” in character. The chair could take on the task of presenting the views and program of the organization at other international meetings or forums. The chair might also assume the responsibility of providing a “face and voice” for the organization. In so doing, the chair would serve to offer an audible and visible reference point for a variety of external audiences. Finally, the last of the key functions of the chair could perform was seen to be that of facilitator of agreement between members of the body. In this “go-between” or “brokerage” role the chair would seek to build consensus and maintain harmony within the organization. Often utilizing informal means of information sharing and extended discussion, the chair would endeavor

to perform the important tasks of reconciling opposing viewpoints and bridging differences between contending groups within the membership (See Bengtsson et. al, 2004).

While most analysts agree that these four roles continue as the modal patterns of behavior for most chairs within contemporary international organizations, increasingly it is pointed out that the manner in which they perform these functions can vary significantly. These observed variances in chair behavior may be reflective of differences in personality or cultural background, the nature of the organization of which they are a part or the particular style of leadership that a chair adopts. Each of these factors may contribute to the creation of individualized chair profiles.

Finally, chairs may adopt a distinctive style of leadership which may arise from a combination of the factors listed above. Some may see themselves as committed to promoting a very specific agenda that embodies either their own national or personal objectives or the internal organizational priorities of the bodies they head. This “entrepreneurial” style of leadership tends to emerge when a chair believes it enjoys a significant degree of autonomy in performing its various roles and where it can exercise a substantial degree of influence over desired outcomes (Young 1998). Alternatively, some chairs adopt a leadership style that has at its core a preference for advancing a more inclusive agenda that reflects collective membership needs. This “honest broker” style of leadership tends to emerge when the chair often does not possess a burning ambition to promote their own individual projects and recognizes it may not have complete control over ultimate decision outcomes of the organization. A third leadership style, that of “the professional”, may be utilized in response to an existing internal norm within the body that favors neutral or limited efforts by the chair and demands a minimal leadership profile (Tallberg 2003).

Regardless of the leadership style that is adopted, the chairs of most international organizations can—and do—exercise significant influence in performing their several roles. This fact, however, has not always been adequately acknowledged or discussed in many studies of international relations and global diplomacy. Prime attention tends to be allocated to the power dimensions and relationship behavior among the individual state-nation state participants. Their actions and interactions when exercising their clout and influence tend to be focused on and discussed in great detail. The impact of effective organizational leadership tends to be overlooked (Nye 2004).

When the “powers of the chair” has been considered, it has been usually limited to the context of its role as the convening or presiding officer of the body. Some acknowledgement is usually made of the inherent power of the chair that is secured by determining who shall speak, for how long and in what order. Also, on occasion, the chair’s influence is sometimes considered when note is made of its contributions in setting the agenda of the body and in insuring that its rules and procedures are observed. Most often, however, other forms of its power tend to be overlooked. It is often forgotten that the chair can also exercise considerable influence through its managerial role within an organization. This can be seen in its ability to help shape operational budgets and to allocate staff and other support services. It can also be discerned in its involvement the supervision of the release of information, data and reports coming from the organization. The chair can also exercise its power through its “representational” role. In becoming the “voice and face” of the body it can help

determine which of the organization's programs and objectives are prioritized in the minds of both internal and external audiences. In performing this role, a chair can also contribute to the development of an identity and mandate for itself and for its organization that may be independent of that of its nation-state members. Similarly in performing its "go-between" or "brokerage" role, the chair can exercise a form of transactional influence that may not be available to other participants within the organization. Taken together these separate avenues of influence contribute to a considerable base of potential power within the organization and with regard to the membership (See Tallberg 2010).

The Leadership Styles of Three Recent Arctic Council Chairmanships—Sweden, Canada, the United States

Each of the last three Chairmanships of the Arctic Council has provided a distinctive model of leadership for the organization. These alternative approaches can be seen to reflect both differences in their assessment of the needs of the body as well as their own national priorities and goals within the Arctic. In providing both direction and focus for the efforts of the Arctic Council each of the three chairs has performed several of the different formal and informal roles associated with their institutional position. Each, at times, has also made use of some of the "powers of the chair" that have been described above.

Sweden, for its part, provided one of the clearest examples of an Arctic Council Chairmanship whose efforts and energies were directed primarily toward the needs of the body as a whole. With a limited national Arctic profile and an established tradition of working for the collective interest within international organizations, Sweden announced from the start of its Chairmanship its desire to play the role of an "honest broker." In this capacity, it would seek to reconcile discordant views within the body and strive for the development of a common Arctic vision among the membership. Its Chairmanship Program was organized around this theme of a "common vision" and directed toward three themes—the needs of the Arctic environment, the needs of the peoples who inhabit the region, and the need to strengthen the operation and effectiveness of the Arctic Council as a whole (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011).

In noting its intention to focus the Council's work on both environmental protection and sustainable development concerns, the Swedish Chairmanship signaled its desire that the body should make headway in both areas. It would seek to reconcile divisions within the organization between proponents of each cause. By taking such a conciliatory position the Swedish Chairmanship was able to advance research efforts in both areas during its leadership term.

It was, however, in the third thematic area—"building a stronger Arctic Council"—that the Swedes excelled in their role as an "honest broker." By listening to differing views around the table and seeking to build consensus among a variety of contending participants, the Swedish Chairmanship was able to establish common ground that allowed the body to move forward on a variety of fronts that had earlier plagued the body. This included formalizing new rules of procedure, implementing

an effective communication strategy, establishing a permanent Secretariat and, perhaps most critical, breaking the logjam that had prevented the addition of new national observers to the Arctic Council (Economist 2013).

In achieving these objectives, the Swedish Chairmanship performed adroitly each of the previously discussed roles of an organizational chair and made use of the formal and informal powers associated with its position. It effectively moved its objectives forward by carefully crafting the agenda as the presiding officer of the body and by the skillful use of its gavel. In performing its “managerial” role it oversaw the specific steps by which undertakings as the creation of a common communication strategy and the establishment of the Secretariat in Tromsø moved forward from plan to full implementation. It undertook to perform its “representational” role by actively becoming the “voice and face” of the body as it attended a variety of international meetings dealing with global climate change and actively participated in social media around the circumpolar North. It performed its “brokerage” role repeatedly throughout its leadership term utilizing its “good offices” to promote compromise and consensus on difficult and complex matters—perhaps most notably in the case of the lingering observer question. The end result of such endeavors was a truly reinvigorated international organization with a sense of common purpose and expectations (Nord 2016b).

Canada, for its part, offered a very different leadership approach. It could be best described as being “entrepreneurial” in nature. As the originator of the Council and as a country with a strong Arctic profile, Sweden’s successor at the helm of the organization was less interested in forging consensus and more interested seeing a specific agenda and program endorsed and acted upon by the body. Under the thematic heading of “Development for the Peoples of the North” the Canadian Chairmanship announced that it had three specific programmatic objectives to advance within the Arctic Council during its leadership term. These included: 1) Providing for Responsible Arctic Resource Development; 2) Fostering Safe Arctic Shipping; and 3) Securing Sustainable Circumpolar Communities. In addition, it would seek to enhance the participation of indigenous peoples within the organization (Arctic Council Secretariat 2013).

Contrary to the Swedish approach of seeking to balance and redress contending views within the body, the Canadians were primarily interested in pushing forward their own understanding as to what action should be taken in support of specific initiatives under each rubric. This was most evident in their almost single-handed insistence that an Arctic Economic Council be established in order to build circumpolar trade and foster business and natural resource development opportunities in the Far North. Encountering significant resistance from representatives favoring a more environmentally conscious approach to such economic development efforts, the Canadian Chairmanship insisted ever more strongly that the initiative should go forward as originally framed. In its mind, the Council needed to get on board with the proposed plan and not engage in unnecessary debate and delay (McGwin 2014).

In undertaking their Chairmanship, the Canadians were not seen as performing their requisite chair functions as effectively as their predecessors. Nor did they seem as skillful as the Swedes in utilizing

the formal and informal tools and powers of the position. In their “convening” role they often seemed confused and at cross-purposes with themselves. Agendas were regularly delayed and reworked. Discussions at scheduled meetings seemed to wander. The Canadians appeared to fare little better in undertaking their “management” role. Oversight of the formal working groups of the Council lagged as did liaison with the newly established Secretariat. Progress toward creating concrete deliverables for presentation and discussion at the Ministerial Meeting was, at best, measured. The “representational” role of the Canadian Chairmanship was also somewhat diminished during this time. Although frequent press releases and photo sessions were offered by the Chair of the Council, Leona Aglukkaq, the frequent change of personnel and assignments within the Canadian Chairmanship failed to provide a consistent “voice and face” for the organization (Axworthy and Simon 2015). This was most in evidence with the sudden replacement of the Canadian Chair of the Senior Arctic Officials, Patrick Borbey, not even half-way through his term. Finally, the Canadians did not really seek to undertake much of a “brokerage” role in their capacity of Chair of the body. As indicated above, they did not really see the need to foster agreement or consensus within the organization. As they understood it, their primary role was to lead and to have the others follow. Unfortunately for the Canadian Chairmanship this proved not to be an automatic relationship. An insightful observer was to note that: “The Canadian Chairmanship featured lots of leadership—but saw few followers” (Exner-Pirot 2014).

Although the United States Chairmanship of the Arctic Council is only half-way completed, one can discern elements of a distinctive leadership style that seems to borrow from both the approaches of the Swedes and the Canadians. Under the thematic heading of “One Arctic: Shared Opportunities, Challenges and Opportunities” the Americans have launched a series of initiatives within the Arctic Council that are reflective of their own national priorities for the region. These include efforts to 1) address the impact of climate change in the region; 2) enhance Arctic Ocean safety security and stewardship and 3) improve the economic and living conditions of Arctic communities (Arctic Council Secretariat 2015). This list of objectives emerged from a prolonged discussion within the bureaucracy of the U.S. federal government and from sometimes heated discussions with other national policy players such as the state of Alaska. They have now become the central touchstones for their Chairmanship Program. As such, like their Canadian predecessors, the Americans have seemed to favor more of an entrepreneurial style of leadership than either a “professional” or “honest-broker” approach. They have definite objectives they wish to advance and as a major global player inclined to make use of their established influence and power to secure their endorsement by the Council.

Unlike the Canadian Chairmanship, however, the United States has been far more willing to seek the assent and cooperation of its fellow Council members when promoting its priorities. This can be seen in the manner in which it has sought to build support for action on topics as diverse as circumpolar health and Arctic Ocean acidification. It can also be observed in the way it has endeavored to accommodate the views and perspectives of the Russian Federation within the work

of the Council. Whereas during the Canadian leadership term there existed a somewhat tense standoff between the Canadian and the Russian representatives, the Americans have sought to bridge differences with the Russians when they have arisen (Bergh and Klimenko 2016). In this manner, the United States approach at the helm of the body has adopted features of a brokerage leadership style that was seen earlier during the Swedish Chairmanship

Also like the Swedes, the Americans have been far more willing to perform the other necessary roles associated with being an effective organizational chair. They have received generally good reviews in their “convening” capacity. The Americans have also been seen to be effective managers of the behind-the-scenes operation of the body providing necessary oversight and accountability. Furthermore, they have done a credible job in offering a visible “voice and face” for the organization within the circumpolar region and in the broader international community. The United States Chairmanship has also been quite skilled—like its earlier Swedish predecessor—in utilizing both the formal and informal “powers of the chair” in advancing its overall objectives.

Lessons to be Learned from the Experiences of Recent Chairs of the Arctic Council

Looking back over these recent leadership experiences at the helm of the Arctic Council there seem to be several “lessons to be learned.” First and foremost of these is the need for the chair of the organization to properly prepare for this responsibility. This preparation may not require a significant expenditure of time in detailed planning exercises, but it does require a commitment to careful study and analysis. Future chairs should make sure that they have clearly identified the key issues and concerns where they are likely to encounter during their leadership term and have done the necessary investigation of the history and source of those matters which are likely to figure prominently on the agenda of the organization during their watch. This careful study and analysis was central to the ultimate success of the Swedish Chairmanship even though it was conducted initially on a “just-in-time” basis. In comparison, both the Canadian and U.S. Chairmanships wasted considerable effort in “arranging and re-arranging seats on the deck” of the organizational ship when a more careful review of its log and of the future issue forecast was required.

Secondly, once having identified and assessed the primary concerns of the body, the Chair needs to maintain a clear focus on the process of providing solutions to them. This the Swedes did with almost laser-like precision. They noted which issues were likely to prove the most difficult to advance within the organization and engaged in an ongoing calculus regarding what initiatives were required to facilitate their passage. They carefully reviewed what could be done from their position as chair of the body and what would require ongoing discussion and negotiation with the other participants in the organization. As noted above, the Canadian Chairmanship failed to recognize this distinction and wasted considerable time and effort pushing for the adoption of the AEC even when it was clear they had limited support among the other members.

Thirdly, it is important as chair not to overpromise. The Swedish Chairmanship was careful in not committing itself to an overly broad and extensive agenda. It identified from the outset what “deliverables” it might likely secure during its leadership term and what issues would have to remain

as future undertakings for the Council. The Swedes did not raise expectations among either the external or internal audiences of the Arctic Council to a point that they could not meet. The Canadian Chairmanship, unfortunately, was full of promises and short on concrete deliverables. As a consequence, there was a notable degree of dissatisfaction within and without the organization at the conclusion of its leadership term. The Americans have seemed to have learned from this experience and have offered a more modest set of proposals for action by the Council.

Fourthly, the success of Swedish Chairmanship was rooted in having an intelligent and capable staff. Their experience proved that it was not necessary to have a large number of individuals involved in the operation. Nor is it necessary to have participants from several different ministries of the host government. Having a dozen or so focused and dedicated individuals from only two major ministries was sufficient. The quality of the staff involved, not the quantity of individuals mattered the most. This “lesson” was clearly not learned by the Canadians. Their chairmanship was regularly hobbled by the coming and going of often ill-prepared staff from countless arms of the Canadian government. The same “lesson” has also only partially been taken to heart by the U.S. Chairmanship. Note has been made that the latter has at times stumbled over a plethora of plans and priorities that have emerged from its vast national bureaucracy.

Fifth and finally, the Swedish Chairmanship pointed to the utility of making use of the full menu of the formal and informal “powers of the chair.” Rather than limiting itself to simply a presiding role, Sweden adopted a series of other leadership roles to advance its identified agenda. This adept use of the managerial, representational and brokerage capabilities of the chair in addition to the traditional presiding role of the head of the organization enabled it to secure results that a less experienced state might have failed to accomplish. Without utilizing such a multifunctional approach, complex matters like the final establishment of the Secretariat and the resolution of the “observer problem” could have eluded the Swedes. As noted above, the Canadians proved to be far less aware and adept in their use of the “powers of the chair” and failed to provide organizational leadership from the chair. The Americans, in contrast, have seemed to have learned this “lesson” during their stewardship of the body and have performed with positive effect the multiple roles inherent in their leadership position.

Conclusions

The comparative analysis undertaken here has noted that like the heads of other international bodies, the Chair of the Arctic Council can and often does exercise influence over the path and direction that the organization has taken. Successive chairs have elected to pursue alternative leadership styles and strategies that have been reflective of their assessment of the needs of the organization and their own national objectives and capacities. The three most recent Chairmanships—those of Sweden, Canada, and the United States—have each chosen to pursue distinctive leadership paths. They have performed the necessary formal and informal roles of the

chair with differing degrees of enthusiasm and success. They have also exercised the “powers of the chair” in their leadership position with varying degrees of effectiveness.

It is important to recognize the fact that while alternative leadership styles might appeal to different chairs, the nature of the Arctic Council itself sets some parameters on the effectiveness of each approach. Most significantly, the number and variety of its participants, as well as the requirement for consensus, suggests that any chair of the body must work to address and accommodate differing perspectives and priorities within the body. If a chair too quickly narrows the agenda for discussion or limits the alternatives for action there is the danger that one might have “decisive leadership” but in the end achieve little in the way of results. The dual challenge for any future chair of the organization is to present both innovative ideas and approaches for the Arctic Council and to help build the consensus within the body that will enable their adoption.

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