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“Arctic conferences as arenas for power games and collaboration in international relations”

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ABSTRACT

International Relations (IR) considers states to be the central actors in the international system, and IR's main theories have been heavily focused on great powers. While many scholars that politics is about more than government and broadens the analytical emphasis to also include non-state, sub-national, sub-regional actors – conferences have attracted limited attention. Still, global conferences do function as arenas for states, non-state, sub-national and sub-regional entities to advance their interests and position within a region or within an issue area. Conferences are arenas for dialogue and cooperation, as well as for political games. This article adopts a comprehensive approach to what should be considered relevant empirical entities, and inquiries into the space for conferences in IR-analysis. The article applies realism and neoliberalism to conceptualise conferences within established frames of the discipline, and examine whether conferences can be instruments of statecraft, drivers of innovation, or contribute to shape preferences and outcomes. Applying these perspectives enables scholars to assess whether conferences have similar characteristics to institutions, or whether they should be treated as separate empirical entities within IR analysis. The article also questions the state-centric view of these perspectives by asking whether including conferences in analysis of policymaking can make an empirical contribution. Specifically, the article asks whether conferences produce outcomes that must be addressed when analysing how and where policy, diplomacy, deal-making and cooperation occur. The article looks specifically at the functions of conferences within Arctic governance, and the Arctic Circle Assembly in particular. The article accounts for the novel function conferences appear to have taken within Arctic governance – also for small states and non-state actors – and enquires what we can infer from this when examining both cooperation and interests within international relations.

KEYWORDS

IR theory; conferences; governance; diplomacy; cooperation; state interests

Introduction

The boundaries of the Arctic are being stretched by the wide range of actors seeking to engage with regional issues. As such, the Arctic has been reimagined as a social and inhabited area and a governable space.¹ Alongside increasing interest in the Arctic from

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¹Albert & Vasilache, 'Governmentality of the Arctic,' 13.

beyond the region, and emerging governance challenges arising from the impacts of climate change and geopolitical developments, Arctic conferences are being expanded in number and scope.² Indeed, conferences have become ‘important sites for the sharing and contesting of ideas and practices about the present and future geopolitical make-up of the Arctic’.³ It is therefore increasingly necessary to examine how conferences function within the region. It is also worth considering whether there are lessons to be drawn regarding how conferences might influence other areas of international affairs.

Global conferencing has been largely neglected by International Relations, with only a few exceptions. The scholarship that does exist has tended to adopt a constructivist approach.⁴ Notably, the epistemic community framework has been applied to the examination of conferences as sites for knowledge production and the performance of ideological positions and identities.⁵ Scholars studying the UN environmental and sustainability conferences have demonstrated how summits operate as ‘political theatres’ that govern the conduct of global policy,⁶ why different actors attend conferences,⁷ and why the UN summits sometimes fail to create international legitimacy and order.⁸ Despite these contributions, there are still significant knowledge gaps regarding the importance of conferences to international affairs.

This article begins to address these gaps in two ways. First, it examines whether applying International Relations (IR) theory, i.e. realism and neoliberalism, to the analysis of Arctic conferences enhances our understanding of these arenas, as well as conference diplomacy in general. Specifically, the article examines whether conferences can be considered instruments of statecraft, drivers of innovation, or influence the preferences of actors in the international arena.⁹ Second, the article investigates whether conferences have similar characteristics to institutions, or whether they should be treated as separate empirical entities in IR analysis.

For this enquiry, the article distinguishes between academic conferences and conferences with government involvement, and the latter is of interest here. The Arctic Science Summit Week, the International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences and Arctic Change are all examples of academic conferences. The Arctic Circle Assembly is a conference with government involvement. Furthermore, it is the largest conference concerning international dialogue on Arctic issues and gathers around 3,000 people from over 70 countries in Reykjavik every October (prior to the Covid-19 pandemic). Previous President of Iceland (1996–2016), Olafur Ragnar Grímsson, launched the Arctic Circle Assembly in 2013, and the Icelandic Prime Minister’s Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are central partners of the conference. The Arctic Circle Assembly is thus organised in close alignment with Iceland’s national priorities, as well as in line with the interests of Icelandic economic and strategic partners.¹⁰

²Steinveg, “Exponential Growth.”

³Depledge & Dodds, “Bazaar Governance,” 145.

⁴Haas, “UN Conferences.”

⁵Craggs & Mahoney, “The Geographies of the Conference.”

⁶Death, “Summit theatre,” 8.

⁷Lövbrand et al., “Making Climate Governance Global.”

⁸Carter et al., “When science meets strategic realpolitik.”

⁹Jervis, “Realism, Liberalism, and Cooperation.”

¹⁰Arctic Circle, “Partners.”

In addition to the annual Assembly held every October in Reykjavik, the Arctic Circle organisation has hosted Forums at different international locations since 2015. These are arranged in partnership with local government and private institutions. Such initiatives are intended to emphasise the international structure of the Arctic and indicate that the debate on the Arctic cannot only take place inside the region.¹¹ The organisers of the Arctic Circle Assembly have also launched other projects that blur the lines between conference activities, institutional outcomes, and state actions. These include the promotion of Iceland's geopolitical and economic interests and the creation of Mission Councils and Task Forces. On this basis, the position occupied by the Arctic Circle Assembly within Arctic governance makes it a valuable empirical case to study.

The format and participation pool are also important features. The Arctic Circle Assembly was founded on the philosophy that everyone should be able to participate on an equal footing, regardless of their formal status.¹² This 'open and democratic platform' was intended to provide a new model for international cooperation that 'allowed people to come and present their case without losing any sovereignty or control over their agenda or their presentations'.¹³ The Arctic Circle Assembly also empowers sub-state and sub-regional entities by giving their representatives as much speaking time in plenary sessions as state officials. Consequently, by constructing an arena where state representatives do not necessarily dominate the dialogue, the Arctic Circle Assembly organisers have created space for various state, sub-national and non-state actors to challenge conventional forms of international governance.¹⁴

The empirical material underpinning this article was gathered between 2016 and 2020 for a study that sought to situate conferences within Arctic governance.¹⁵ Data collection for that study included participant observation at Arctic conferences, document analysis and interviews with conference organisers and attendees (see [appendix](#)). The interview material has been revisited for this article, with a particular emphasis on extracting information about the Arctic Circle Assembly, the broader impacts and concrete outcomes produced by this addition to the Arctic governance structure. For the purpose of analysis in this article, it was also relevant to re-examine and interpret statements from these interviews about dominant actors in the Arctic conference sphere, how different stakeholders in the region utilise conferences, and which purposes conferences serve for participants – especially for non-Arctic states. Written sources, such as the Arctic policies and strategies of Arctic and non-Arctic states, white papers, press releases and speeches, were also revisited and analysed for this article. These sources were particularly useful for identifying states' primary interests and objectives in the region.¹⁶ Lastly, the conference programmes of the Arctic Circle Assembly have been useful for the inquiry into how conference agendas related to other central issues and developments within Arctic affairs.

¹¹Einarsdottir, "A New Model of Arctic Cooperation."

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Steinveg, "Governance by conferences."

¹⁶See for example: Heininen et al., "Arctic Policies and Strategies."

What can international relations theory tell us about conferences?

If theories comprise statements reflecting assumptions about how the world operates, as well as the entities and processes that exist in the real world,¹⁷ then it is worth asking what IR theories can tell us about conferences, and whether these theories can benefit from also including conferences as relevant empirical entities. The article draws on realism and neoliberalism which both perceive self-interested states to be the main actors within the international system.¹⁸ Some have argued that realism was rendered obsolete after the Cold War because the international system has been transformed so fundamentally that it was no longer relevant to understand the world from this outlook.¹⁹ To this point, Waltz responded that the structure of the international system had simply been remade after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.²⁰ Therefore, for realists such as Waltz, while structural change may affect the behaviour of states and the outcomes their interactions produce, it does not break the essential continuity of international politics.²¹

At the same time, states are not the only relevant actors in international relations, and politics can be about more than government.²² This article therefore pushes beyond the traditional state-centrism of these perspectives for the examination of conferences, and also asks whether conferences are arenas for non-state, sub-national and sub-regional actors to pursue their interests and have a voice independent of their central governments. As such: whether conferences can produce outcomes that were not intended by the or that are in the interest of their host states. Thus, the article asks whether conferences are arenas for the performance of the idea(l) not only of the state, but also of other actors.²³

The fact that a multitude of stakeholders increasingly contribute to shaping the flow of international affairs makes it pertinent to ask whether conferences can facilitate the interests and interactions of these different actors – as supplements to more formal cooperative arrangements in international relations. Conferences are not institutions, as they do not have permanent membership, alliances or headquarters, and they do not produce binding agreements or set rules that explicitly govern the behaviour of states. Still, different stakeholders can benefit from the space created by open arenas, such as the Arctic Circle Assembly. Conferences blur the line between governance and dialogue²⁴ and can be parallel arenas for discussion that add to the workings of intergovernmental institutions and government forums.²⁵ However, because conferences are an under-theorised phenomenon, it is still pertinent to draw parallels to how IR theories view institutions for analytical purposes. To that end, it is useful to turn to Jervis' typology of institutions.²⁶

The first type of institution – e.g. binding and self-binding alliances and trade agreements – is in line with how realists view international institutions: as instruments of statecraft with no life of their own.²⁷ According to realism, institutions are the product of

¹⁷Mearsheimer & Walt, "Leaving theory behind," 431–432.

¹⁸Grieco, "Anarchy and the limits of cooperation," 497.

¹⁹Waltz, "Structural Realism," 39.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Medby, "Articulating State Identity," 120–121.

²³Medby, "Articulating State Identity," 121; Craggs & Mahony, "The Geographies of the Conference," 415.

²⁴Depledge & Dodds, "Bazaar Governance," 143.

²⁵Babin & Lasserre, "Asian states at the Arctic Council", 5.

²⁶Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation," 55.

²⁷Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions."

the same factors that influence whether states choose to cooperate: namely the self-interests of states and the constraints of the anarchical international system. Institutions are considered to reflect states' pre-existing interests and are institutionalised because national leaders want them to have binding effects. They are not autonomous in the sense of overriding or shaping the preference of the states that established them.²⁸ Whether institutions have strong or weak effects depends on what states intend, and states use institutions in ways that suit themselves.²⁹

The second type covers institutions as drivers of innovation, which are outside the realm of normal statecraft and cover an area of unrealised common interest and potential for increased international cooperation. Jervis notes that there is debate about whether these fall within the category of devices that states have neglected, or whether they are simply not appreciated by scholars as being within the range of devices utilised by states.³⁰ This is a key point, which the article returns to later when enquiring whether the IR discipline can benefit from the inclusion of conferences as entities for analysis.

The third type comprises institutions that cause changes in preferences over outcomes and have a 'life of their own'. These institutions can change beliefs about what is possible and desirable, and can shape the interests of actors.³¹ This position aligns with neoliberalism, where the argument is that the process of self-help within the anarchic international system can produce cooperative behaviour among states,³² in particular with the assistance of international institutions.³³ Neoliberal institutionalists consider institutions as 'enduring patterns of shared expectations of behaviour that have received some degree of formal assent'.³⁴ Moreover, institutions can have an independent impact on international outcomes.³⁵ For example, NATO is a security organisation built upon shared fundamental values and underpinned by strong institutions and interdependencies.³⁶ The organisation has thus provided a tool for joint action to foreign office officials, and has influenced states' beliefs and preferences.³⁷

Jervis furthermore argues that we have underestimated the importance of the dynamic effects of institutions, and that the unintended consequences of institutions are both the most interesting and most powerful.³⁸ This article considers whether the same argument can be applied to conferences, and whether these entities can produce outcomes that need to be addressed when analysing how and where policy, diplomacy and cooperation occur. For the remainder of this article, conferences are examined through this typology of institutions: as instruments of statecraft; as drivers of innovation; and as arenas that can influence preferences over outcomes.

²⁸Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation," 57.

²⁹Waltz, "Structural Realism," 24.

³⁰Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation," 58.

³¹*Ibid.*, 59.

³²Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it," 392.

³³Axelrod and Keohane, "Achieving cooperation under anarchy."

³⁴Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation," 51.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Schuette, "Why NATO survived Trump," 1865.

³⁷Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation," 60.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 61–62.

The history and development of Arctic conferences

There is a long history of conferences serving as sites for international deliberations and cooperation. Conferences have contributed to changes in how the world deals with peace and war, as well as to defining new political world orders with novel mechanisms for negotiation.³⁹ Following the end of the Cold War, conferences supplemented bilateral diplomacy and supported the achievement of foreign policy aims.⁴⁰ Kaufman defines conference diplomacy as ‘that part of the management of relations between governments and of relations between governments and international organisations that takes place in international conferences’.⁴¹ He further argues that conference diplomacy, more than traditional means of diplomacy, provides for back-channel negotiations or contacts. While conferences cannot replace official state diplomacy, they can nonetheless have implications for policy.⁴² Indeed, conferences can be used to reinforce and reaffirm state-centric constellations of global power relations. They can also challenge state-centric visions of power relations within the international system.⁴³ From these functions of conferences, we should be aware of their broader purposes.⁴⁴ The following section accounts for the Arctic governance system and the emergence of conferences within this realm.

Arctic governance is a dynamic space in which the Arctic states share an interest in maintaining a stable political environment.⁴⁵ Yet the region is impacted by bio-physical changes and is not isolated from international political developments,⁴⁶ including most recently, Russia’s war on Ukraine. From the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996, and other regional forums, organisations and institutions, the Arctic community seems to have settled within a semi-formalised governance system centred around these regional cooperation bodies. The member states of the Arctic Council are the United States, Russia, Canada, Iceland, Denmark/Greenland, Norway, Finland and Sweden. In addition, six indigenous peoples’ organisations hold a privileged position as Permanent Participants, and several non-Arctic states and non-governmental organisations are included as observers. There are thus different stakeholders with diverging interests in the region, and while the prevailing mode of interaction in the Arctic is collaborative, there are also governance challenges.

For one, states have national interests and sovereignty concerns related to the Arctic.⁴⁷ Non-Arctic states, especially China, have demonstrated a growing interest in Arctic economic development, which has drawn increased engagement and a change in rhetoric from the United States.⁴⁸ While events in the Arctic have not led to direct conflict among states, the region plays a role in the competitive relationships between not only the US and China, but also NATO and Russia.⁴⁹ The role of observer states in the Arctic Council,

³⁹Best, “Peace Conferences.”

⁴⁰Kaufman, “Conference Diplomacy,” 7.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Haas, “UN Conferences.”

⁴³Death, “Summit theatre.”

⁴⁴Cooper, “The G20.”

⁴⁵Østhagen, “The Arctic security region,” 6–7.

⁴⁶Young, “Arctic Politics in an Era of Global Change.”

⁴⁷Wegge, “Arctic security strategies.”

⁴⁸Pompeo, “Looking North.”

⁴⁹Østhagen, “The Arctic security region,” 8.

and who should be considered legitimate stakeholders in the region, are also contested issues.⁵⁰ The Arctic Council is thus increasingly challenged by a growing stakeholder pool,⁵¹ as well as the increasing importance of military and security issues, which the Arctic Council cannot address.⁵² On this basis, it is important to consider whether conferences provide state and non-state actors with alternative means for responding to the challenges of Arctic governance period.

The first conferences on Arctic issues were held in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵³ After the Cold War, the number of meetings increased. However, the most notable expansion Arctic conference activity occurred in the mid-2000s, and peaked around 2013.⁵⁴ This development followed the general trend in Arctic affairs since the turn of the millennium, which saw the region attracting evermore attention from the international community, mainly due to the spread of globalisation and the impacts of climate change.⁵⁵ More recently, Arctic conferences have developed from being issue-specific events to becoming more sophisticated 'hybrid' arenas,⁵⁶ where people from policy, science, business, NGOs, civil society and indigenous communities are gathered to deliberate on a range of issues. These connections take place both in panels on the conference stage and in side-meetings and private encounters facilitated by how the conference arena constitutes a meeting place for people from different nationalities and affiliations. In this way, Arctic conferences have become 'testing grounds' for the epistemic community to generate and present innovative ideas, for politicians to present new policies, and for business representatives to familiarise new customers and potential partners with their products. By broadening the agenda and involving more stakeholders in the dialogue, conferences have added to the overall structure of Arctic governance period.

When Icelandic president Olafur Ragnar Grímsson announced the Arctic Circle Assembly in 2013 as an 'open tent' for dialogue about the Arctic's future, he provided a new globalised vision of the region that no longer inherently preferred the interests of the circumpolar states. This prompted several commentators to view the Arctic Circle Assembly as a rival to the Arctic Council.⁵⁷ In this regard, the timing of the launch of the Arctic Circle Assembly seemed particularly significant: at the time, there was considerable uncertainty around whether a new tranche of non-Arctic states would be accepted as observers to the Arctic Council.⁵⁸ There was real concern among the Arctic Eight that the pending Asian observer states would create their own council or claim the need for an Arctic Treaty, if they were not accepted into the Arctic Council. For some though, it was not just the idea of a separate forum that was concerning, but the possibility that the Arctic Circle Assembly might be used by non-Arctic actors as a 'back door' through which to influence regional governance.

The launch of the Arctic Circle Assembly must also be understood in relation to Iceland's desire to reposition itself within the international arena at that time. The Arctic

⁵⁰Young, "Navigating the Interface."

⁵¹Rossi, "The club within the club."

⁵²Åtland, "Interstate Relations in the Arctic," 152.

⁵³Heininen & Southcott, "Globalization and the Circumpolar North."

⁵⁴Steinveg, "Exponential Growth," 147.

⁵⁵Young, "The Arctic in Play."

⁵⁶Steinveg, "Exponential Growth," 148.

⁵⁷Rossi, "The club within the club," 15.

⁵⁸Lackenbauer, "Canada and the Asian Observers," 24.

had become a key component of Iceland's foreign policy as a result of three factors: the US military forces' withdrawal from Keflavik airbase in 2006, the 2008 financial crisis, and the effects of climate change.⁵⁹ It is noteworthy that *The Parliamentary Resolution on Iceland's Arctic Policy* issued in 2011 was the only Arctic state strategy explicitly mentioning the significance of conferences through the priority of: 'Advancing Icelanders' knowledge of Arctic issues and promoting Iceland abroad as a venue for meetings, conferences, and discussions on the Arctic region'.⁶⁰ The establishment of the Arctic Circle Assembly was therefore presented as a means to draw attention towards the Arctic, and more significantly: to reposition Reykjavik as a central geopolitical hub gathering people from different nationalities and affiliations to deliberate on the future of the region. This in turn could draw attention to Iceland's economic viability, particularly in such areas as natural resource extraction and trans-Arctic shipping and boost the Icelandic tourism industry.⁶¹ This shows how conferences can be designed to promote states' interest and serve a purposeful function within the international system.

According to the organisers of the Arctic Circle Assembly when interviewed for the study supporting this article, the conference has made three essential contributions to the Arctic governance structure. Firstly, the country sessions have enabled Arctic and non-Arctic states to present their visions, policies and plans for the Arctic on an international platform.⁶² Secondly, the Arctic Circle Assembly has given sub-national and sub-regional entities, as well as Arctic Council observer states, an additional role and platform where they can act independently of their capitals. Thirdly, the Forums arranged by Arctic Circle organisation since 2015 have brought the Arctic dialogue and an emphasis on cooperation on Arctic issues to non-Arctic states. This addition to the Arctic governance structure is described by the organisers as a key contribution for non-Arctic states to become more constructive partners in the region. Through these contributions, the Arctic Circle Assembly supplements the structure and activities of the Arctic Council.

Since 2013, the Arctic Circle organisation has developed into a far broader platform than the Assembly taking place in Reykjavik every October. The aforementioned Forums, initiated in 2015, are held in cooperation with local government and private institutions cities around the world. Moreover, following the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the range of 'products' provided by the Arctic Circle organisation was enhanced. New initiatives that emerged in 2021 include the Arctic Circle Virtual, the Arctic Circle Journal, a podcast, and of particular interest to this article: three new Mission Councils adding to the first – the Mission Council on Shipping and Ports – established in 2015.⁶³ The three Mission Councils created in 2021 were the Mission Council on Greenland in the Arctic, the Mission Council on Global Arctic, and the Mission Council on Global-Arctic Indigenous Dialogue.⁶⁴

Taken together, these initiatives have resulted in what is now year-round outreach for the Arctic Circle organisation, expanding the organisation's audience beyond those who

⁵⁹Ingimundarson, "Framing the national interest," 86.

⁶⁰Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Iceland, "A Parliamentary Resolution," 3.

⁶¹Ingimundarson, "Framing the national interest," 84.

⁶²See also Einarsdottir, "A New Model of Arctic Cooperation."

⁶³Arctic Circle Secretariat, "Mission Councils," <http://www.arcticcircle.org/about/mission-councils>.

⁶⁴Arctic Circle Secretariat, "The Global-Arctic Indigenous Dialogue. Launch of a new Arctic Circle Mission Council,"

<http://www.arcticcircle.org/Media/arctic-circle-journal09-GAIMDC.pdf>.

travel to the Assembly in Reykjavik. Indeed, it seems as if the organisers are actively seeking to occupy a space within Arctic governance that goes well-beyond conventional conferencing. The Mission Councils especially resemble the operations and activities of the Arctic Council, such as the Working Groups and Task Forces. However, a key question remains around whether – in line with Jervis’ typology – these initiatives, activities and other developments should lead us to treat the Arctic Circle Assembly as an instrument of statecraft, a tool of innovation, or an entity with a life of its own that can spur changes in the preferences of Arctic stakeholders. It is to this question that this article now turns.

The Arctic circle assembly: instrument of statecraft, driver of innovation, or autonomous entity?

Conferences as instruments of statecraft

Firstly, there are indicators of how the Arctic Circle Assembly’s Mission Councils can be considered instruments of statecraft that reflect states’ pre-existing interests. The Mission Councils attend to priority issues for the Icelandic government, as well as matters of relevance for central allies and partners to both Iceland and the Arctic Circle organisation.⁶⁵ *The Mission Council on Shipping and Ports* came at the right time, with the development of the International Maritime Organization’s Polar Code from 2009 to 2014. It was launched at *The Alaskan Arctic – a summit on shipping and ports* Arctic Circle Forum in 2015 and is chaired by Mead Treadwell, Lieutenant Governor of Alaska (2010–2014).⁶⁶

The intention of the team behind the Mission Council on Shipping and Ports was to establish a League of Arctic Ports and an Arctic Seaway Regime, with the intention of developing a business model for the return on investment in Arctic shipping, while also reducing the risk of accidents and harm to societies and the environment.⁶⁷ Of particular relevance is how the team succeeded in engaging legislators and parliamentarians across the world on the idea of commissioning an Arctic Seaway Authority, which included proposed legislation to create a US Arctic Seaway Infrastructure Development Corporation – the Shipping and Environmental Arctic Leadership Act (SEAL-Act).⁶⁸

The Mission Council on Shipping and Ports further accentuates the economic alliance between the Arctic Circle Assembly and the US state of Alaska. Here it is also worth noting that Senator Lisa Murkowski sits at the Arctic Circle’s Honorary Board and has been involved with the Arctic Circle organisation since its establishment in 2013.⁶⁹ The Mission Council on Shipping and Ports specifically relates to key challenges in the state of Alaska and the interests of Lieutenant Governor Treadwell: the need for a deep-water port and more icebreakers. The latter could be resolved through a system for sharing icebreakers among the Arctic states – an ‘Uber for icebreakers’.⁷⁰ This illustrates the ambition of the Arctic Circle Assembly’s organisers, namely to provide an arena for sub-

⁶⁵Steinveg, “Governance by Conference,” 193–195.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Treadwell, “The cost of doing nothing.”

⁶⁹Steinveg, “Governance by Conference,” 182.

⁷⁰Treadwell, “The cost of doing nothing.”

national actors to pursue their interests independently of the federal government, which in the case of the United States has a history of a lack of engagement in the Arctic region.⁷¹ This also shows how conferences can be arenas for individuals, smaller states and sub-national and sub-regional entities to form transnational partnerships and political and economic alliances to strengthen their position on the international arena.

The Mission Council on Shipping and Ports also covers key economic interests of China, which is looking to invest in port development projects in the Russian Arctic. Iceland was the first European state to sign a free trade agreement with China in 2013,⁷² and two months after the Arctic Circle Assembly was announced in April 2013, the Icelandic firm Eykon Energy partnered with China's National Offshore Oil Corporation to explore the area around Jan Mayen.⁷³ As such, the Arctic Circle Assembly was by some considered not only a challenger to the Arctic Council, but also an attempt to force the inclusion of Asian states with which Iceland wanted to do business in Arctic affairs. The Mission Council on Shipping and Ports initiative supports this interpretation, and the argument that the Arctic Circle organisation functions as an instrument of statecraft.

The Mission Council on Greenland in the Arctic reinforces the close alliance between Iceland and Greenland. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the launch of an 'energy triangle' between Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands became part of Iceland's natural resource policy.⁷⁴ To that end, the Arctic Circle Assembly can be considered an attempt to ally with small-scale partners and position Iceland 'geopolitically as a gateway for the expression of global and marginalised interests in the Arctic'.⁷⁵ With the Mission Council, established to 'facilitate dialogue on the important role of Greenland in the Arctic and its economic and political development',⁷⁶ this expression has been formalised.

The Mission Council on the Global Arctic reinforces what has been at the heart of the Arctic Circle organisation all along: bringing the global to the Arctic through the Assembly and bringing the Arctic to the global through the Forums.⁷⁷ Promoting this vision through the Arctic Circle Assembly contributes to the manifestation of Iceland as an 'Arctic hub' that connects North America, Europe and Asia in Reykjavik. This branding effort has been noted by several participants who were interviewed for the study supporting this article, and it is considered a counter initiative to the Arctic Frontiers' host city's (Tromsø, Norway) ambition to grasp the title of the 'Arctic Capital'.⁷⁸ Tromsø is also the location for the Arctic Council Secretariat (since 2013), the Arctic Economic Council's Secretariat (since 2015) and the Indigenous Peoples Secretariat (since 2016). These bodies contribute to consolidate Tromsø's claim to the 'Arctic Capital' title.⁷⁹ The Arctic Frontiers has further been described by participants as mirroring the Arctic Council's 'members and observers' structure – thus drawing a distinction between those 'on the inside' and 'those on the outside' of Arctic

⁷¹Wegge, "Arctic Security Strategies," 366–367.

⁷²Ingimundarson, "Framing the national interest," 91.

⁷³Depledge & Dodds, "Bazaar Governance," 143.

⁷⁴Ingimundarson, "Framing the national interest," 91.

⁷⁵Depledge & Dodds, "Bazaar Governance," 145.

⁷⁶Arctic Circle Secretariat, "Mission Councils," <http://www.arcticcircle.org/about/mission-councils>.

⁷⁷Einarsdottir, "A New Model of Arctic Cooperation."

⁷⁸Østhagen, "Norway's Arctic policy," 75.

⁷⁹Steinveg, "Governance by Conference," 130.

governance, as opposed to the philosophy behind the Arctic Circle Assembly. Lastly, the *Mission Council on Global-Arctic Indigenous Dialogue*, which aims to examine aspects related to indigenous knowledge and stewardship of the Arctic in an increasingly globalised world, allows the Arctic Circle Assembly to provide a platform for traditionally marginalised voices that adds to the workings of the Arctic Council on indigenous issues.

The function of conferences as purposeful stages for states to advance their interests, priorities and positions internationally is also illustrated by the Arctic Circle Forums. These have, as mentioned, been held since 2015 at various locations, in partnership with local government and private institutions (see Table 1). The Forums not only reflect the interests of non-Arctic states which are looking to promote themselves as legitimate Arctic stakeholders, but also the geopolitical and strategic interests of Iceland. For example, West-Nordic cooperation is emphasised as important for Iceland in the 2011 Arctic Policy, as a means to ‘strengthen their international and economic position as well as their politico-security dimension’.⁸⁰ The aforementioned ‘energy triangle’ between Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, and the Arctic Circle Assembly’s significance for the promotion of small states and marginalised interests, are also evident through the Forums and on reviewing the conference programmes of the Assemblies.⁸¹ Alaska, Greenland and the Faroe Islands have been featured in the plenary, and have hosted several breakout sessions, since the first Arctic Circle Assembly in 2013.

Another example is the noteworthy presence of China at the Arctic Circle Assembly. As described above, the Arctic Circle Assembly was perceived by some as an initiative to force the inclusion of China, which Iceland wanted to do business with, into Arctic affairs. Undoubtedly, China, which describes itself as a ‘near-Arctic state’,⁸² has been given a stage from which to argue for its legitimacy as an Arctic stakeholder through the Arctic Circle Assembly, with a country session in 2015, a large exhibition at the 2019 Assembly, and a Forum held in Shanghai in May 2019.

A third example of how the Arctic Circle Forums have been utilised as instruments of statecraft is the Scottish Forum held in December 2017. Scotland has been seeking new partnerships in Europe since the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in 2016. The Arctic Circle Assembly platform was a purposeful means towards this end. The 2017 update of the Scottish Government’s Nordic-Baltic Policy states that the government will promote its relationship with Iceland, and ‘continue to work with the Arctic Circle Secretariat based in Reykjavik to bring together Scottish strands of work related to the Arctic, including Ministerial participation at the Arctic Circle Assembly and the hosting of an Arctic Forum in Edinburgh in 2017.’⁸³

The Scottish government’s Arctic Policy Framework issued in 2019 further states that Scotland is an Arctic neighbour that shares many interests and challenges with the region, that it is important that Scotland contributes to the work on relationships with the Arctic states, and that ‘involvement with the Arctic Circle organization is an excellent opportunity to do this.’⁸⁴ As such, the Arctic Circle platform has provided an

⁸⁰Ministry for Foreign Affairs Iceland, “A Parliamentary Resolution.”

⁸¹Programs available at: <https://www.arcticcircle.org/assemblies>.

⁸²State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Arctic Policy.”

⁸³Scottish Government, “All points North.”

⁸⁴Scottish Government, “Arctic Connections.”



Table 1. Arctic circle forums.

Date and location	Collaborating organiser(s)	Topic and main objectives
2015, August Anchorage, Alaska	The State of Alaska, Alaska Dispatch News, Pt Capital, the Governor, legislative leaders.	Shipping and Ports: Articulate plans and facilitate partnerships for developing safe, secure and reliable shipping through the Arctic, with a focus on the Bering Sea and other northern sea routes. Attended by over 200 political leaders, experts, and business and indigenous community representatives.
2015, November Singapore	Singapore Maritime Institute, the Singapore Government.	Shipping, infrastructure financing, ocean science, research, global collaboration on Arctic affairs.
2016, May Nuuk, Greenland	The Government of Greenland: Naalakkersuisut.	Economic development for the people of the Arctic, tourism, shipping, airlines, natural resources, fisheries and the empowerment of indigenous people across the Arctic.
2016, December Quebec Canada	The Government of Quebec.	Sustainable development of northern regions, regional planning and governance, investments, socio-economic development, and the impacts of climate change.
2017, June Washington DC, US	The Woodrow Wilson Centre's Polar Initiative, Washington DC.	Organised around four thematic tracks: investment, cooperation, science and research, and security. Addressed policies and plans of the United States and Russia in the Arctic, relations with other states, and Asian and European countries seeking an increasing role in the region.
2017, December Edinburgh, Scotland	The Scottish government.	<i>Scotland and the New North</i> Areas of common interest between Scotland and the Arctic: resilient communities, young people, innovation and community empowerment, shipping and aviation connections, Arctic seas – environment, fisheries and monitoring, blue growth, energy innovations and tourism.
2018, May Tórshavn, Faroe Islands	The government of the Faroe Islands.	<i>Arctic Hubs: Building Dynamic Economies and Sustainable Communities in the North</i> Arctic fisheries and responsible use of ocean resources, ocean and air transport, tourism, science and research, and the policies of Asian states regarding Arctic development. Cooperation among North Atlantic states: Greenland, Iceland, Faroe Islands, Norway and Scotland.
2018, December Seoul, Korea	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, Korea Polar Research Institute, Korea Maritime Institute.	<i>Asia Meets the Arctic: Science, Connectivity and Partnerships</i> Arctic science, connectivity and sustainability, energy, shipping and transport, the role of Asian countries and companies in the Arctic Ocean, and cooperation between Asian and Arctic states on the future of the region.
2019, May Shanghai, China	Ministry of Natural Resources, the Polar Research Institute of China, the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, the Chinese Society for Oceanography.	<i>China and the Arctic.</i> China's involvement in the Arctic through the Belt and Road Initiative, science and innovation, transport and investment, sustainable development, oceans, energy, indigenous socio-economic development and stewardship, and governance. Sponsored by the China Oceanic Development Foundation.

opportunity for Scotland to broaden the audience for its Arctic policy, to promote its priorities in the region, and to develop closer relationships with new partners.

Conferences as drivers for innovation

Conferences function to strengthen the autonomy of sub-national and sub-regional entities, independently of the actions of the state or federal government. It is thus insufficient to conclude that conferences, like institutions, according to the realist perspective, are ‘simply tools of great powers’.⁸⁵ The second type of institution, as described by Jervis, is interesting in this regard. Namely, those that are outside the realm of normal statecraft because leaders have not thought of them or do not appreciate their effectiveness.⁸⁶ This is, according to Jervis, an area of unrealised common interests and greater cooperation and features that has been neglected not only by state leaders but also by IR scholars. This section examines the unintended consequences of conferences, to promote the argument that adding these entities to the IR analysis can make a valuable empirical contribution.

The Arctic Circle Assembly was created to advance international awareness of central issues and challenges in the Arctic, and to promote dialogue among all those who consider themselves stakeholders. This purpose is also promoted through the Mission Councils, which aim to ‘encourage general activity of the Arctic Circle network beyond the Assembly and Forums’. In this way, the Arctic Circle supplements the work of the Arctic Council, which does not in its current form incorporate all voices and interests in the region.⁸⁷ Conferences offer alternatives to formalised institutions and official diplomacy, since they broaden the pool of actors who can engage in an issue or geographical area. This can be considered essential for driving developments forward, as conferences in this way can be arenas for launching new ideas and deliberation of solutions to joint challenges.

It should be noted, however, that while the conference fee at the ‘open and democratic’ Arctic Circle Assembly started out as a symbolic sum, the cost of attending the 2022 conference does not match this characteristic.⁸⁸ Statements from the empirical material applied for this article also concerns how the low admission fee contributed to the Arctic Circle Assembly’s initial success, because it was affordable to attend and see what kind of arena it was. Now, there is a possibility that the increased fee will create a significant entry barrier for civil society and academia, which could – although possible unintentionally – reduce the conference to more of a policy and business arena.

Moreover, there are also unintended consequences regarding the open philosophy of the Arctic Circle Assembly. Specifically, how the organisation serves as a legitimising tool for non-Arctic states seeking to advance their position in the Arctic. The Assembly and the Forums provide a stage for these actors to express their visions and priorities in the region. This outcome is viewed with scepticism by some Arctic state representatives.

⁸⁵Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail,” 11.

⁸⁶Jervis, “Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation,” 57.

⁸⁷Young, “Arctic Arctic Politics in an Era of Global Change.”, 175.

⁸⁸At the 2022 Arctic Circle Assembly, the participation fee was 450 Euro for breakout session speakers, 500 Euro for academics/scientists, 600 Euro for business/government/organisation representatives, 300 Euro for citizens and 150 Euro for students.

Specifically, informant statements in the empirical material this article draws on indicates that there is concern about the 'open tent' format of the Arctic Circle Assembly, and the fact that 'anyone can say anything', which gives a voice to perspectives that may be disconnected from Arctic sovereign states or rights holders. This in turn can contribute to upholding myths and misconceptions about the Arctic, which Arctic state representatives have worked to correct.

Still, the unintended consequences of conferences can also be positive. As described by Mr. Grímsson, the Arctic Circle Assembly is a new model for Arctic cooperation where government representatives, business and science representatives, civil associations, environmental organisations, individual citizens and students can come together in an open, dynamic and flexible way.⁸⁹ In this way, conferences contribute to keeping the Arctic a peaceful and stable region, by facilitating information sharing, contributing to trust-building, and reducing uncertainties about the motives of others. While the Arctic Circle Assembly is still unique in this regard, it could be an inspiration for other areas of international relations. This function should therefore not be overlooked by states or scholars of IR seeking to examine how international cooperation develops, how shared challenges can be resolved, and which lessons can be transferred from Arctic cooperation to other areas of international affairs.

Conferences as arenas with a life of their own

Lastly, looking at the third type of institutions – those that can bring changes in preferences over outcomes – underscore their, and conferences', dynamic effects. According to Jervis, official instruments of diplomacy can achieve some degree of cooperation, but these are fragile unless they are accompanied by deeper changes in what actors want and how they perceive their interests.⁹⁰ Whether this is a traceable outcome of conferences is difficult to measure. Still, by gathering such a diverse pool of stakeholders under the Arctic Circle Assembly umbrella, the organisation does provide a space for interactions, dialogues and processes that are outside of the organisers' control. While this is not to say that conferences are autonomous entities with a life of their own, they do generate feedback, facilitate information and knowledge-sharing, and are instruments of unofficial diplomacy. In this way, conferences create multi-faceted meeting places for dialogue and cross-border cooperation. One example of positive ramifications of this function has been to facilitate interactions at lower levels of government and among scientists and academics from Russia and the West – which has contributed to amend East-West tensions – at least prior to Russia's war on Ukraine since February 2022.

It is thus possible that the encounters and discussions that take place on the margins at the Arctic Circle Assembly, outside the main conference hall as side-events, meetings and coffee breaks, can contribute to participants changing their view on an issue and bringing new perspectives back to their work. Because, as argued by Fomerand, it is often the case at multilateral forums that what determines the outcome of a conference take place behind the scenes rather than on the main stage.⁹¹ However, an Arctic state institute

⁸⁹Einarsdóttir, "A New Model of Arctic Cooperation."

⁹⁰Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation," 61.

⁹¹Fomerand, "UN conferences," 372.

director interviewed for the study underpinning this article, describes how this requires that people attend conferences with the purpose and intention of bringing forward some of the initiatives launched at the gathering. It is thus not the conference itself that can contribute to changing peoples' perceptions and preferences, but the actors that engage in conference diplomacy and have the will and ability to push for changes in how the international system works. In this way, the Arctic Circle Assembly, as well as other conferences in the region, contribute as purposeful supplements to the Arctic Council in that these arenas gather a larger group of actors who can also discuss a broader agenda.

In summary, conferences understood as the third kind of Jervis' institutions entails that these arenas can contribute to change how actors perceive their interests. It can also be that new issues are elevated on the agenda, and that these issues are perceived as important for participants. Fomerand finds that the UN global conferences bring about new norms, new policies and new modalities of action – but that these conferences and their impact must be seen in a long-term continuum.⁹² The same is also true for Arctic conferences, and the focus of this analysis: the Arctic Circle Assembly. While it is challenging to observe changes in actors' preferences, interest or behaviour from a one-time gathering, it could be that this is an observable outcome over time. As such, conferences could be perceived as arenas 'with a life of their own' that spur changes in how actors behave and interact in international relations.

Conclusion: Is there a space for conferences in IR analysis?

Developments and trends in Arctic governance include the impacts of climate change, societal changes and technological advancements, and how military and security issues are becoming increasingly important as great power engagement and rivalry are resurfacing.⁹³ Fear and uncertainty about the intentions of others can have harmful effects on regional security dynamics,⁹⁴ which intensifies the need for increased international collaboration, information sharing, trust building and dialogue. This can be achieved by strengthening the Arctic governance system, including the Arctic Council.⁹⁵ It can also be achieved through conferences that function as communication channels, and as arenas for information sharing and for advancing cooperation on issues of common interest and concern in the Arctic, even in turbulent times in international relations.

Based on these features of Arctic governance, how can IR theory contribute to our understanding of the role of conferences within this realm? Are conferences different from institutions in such a way that they should be considered relevant empirical entities in IR analysis? For one, IR theory can contribute to conceptualising conferences within established frames of the discipline, and thereby enhance our understanding of these arenas not only as 'political theatres'⁹⁶ or 'testing grounds' for the epistemic community. Since conferences can be instruments for states to achieve their interests and priorities within a realm or issue area of international relations, they can also be purposeful

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Wegge, "Arctic security strategies."; Bye, "Leaving its Arctic reluctance behind."; Østthagen, "Norway's Arctic Policy."

⁹⁴Åtland, "Interstate relations in the Arctic," 161.

⁹⁵Ibid., 160.

⁹⁶Death, "Summit theatre," 8.

instruments to enhance cooperation, and can potentially spur changes in preferences over outcomes.

This article has demonstrated how conferences, particularly those with government involvement such as in this study, can function as instruments of statecraft. In this respect the Arctic Circle Assembly has been central to the advancement of Iceland's geopolitical position, while also serving as an arena for promoting the (economic) interests and visions of non-Arctic states and legitimising them as stakeholders.⁹⁷ The realist perspective is largely confined to great powers, and smaller states are considered subject to the will and power of great powers in the international system.⁹⁸ Small states can achieve important international goals and exercise influence – but not without overcoming significant constraints.⁹⁹ Moreover, international institutions and organisations are, according to the realist perspective, created and upheld to serve the interests of great powers.¹⁰⁰ In practice, international democracy is also limited for smaller states – as many major decisions are taken in great power enclaves, outside formal frameworks or unilaterally.¹⁰¹ Even egalitarian designs, such as the UN General Assembly's system, provide room for great-power manipulation.¹⁰²

To that point, an interesting feature of conferences is how they serve as instruments also for smaller states to exercise influence and shape the discourse. The Arctic Circle Assembly has been described as an initiative to reposition Iceland as a gateway for the expression of both global and marginalised interests in the Arctic.¹⁰³ As such, conferences can add something to analysis of IR, as entities where great powers, such as China, alongside smaller states in the system, such as Norway and Iceland, can pursue their policy and priorities on an equal basis. Conferences can further be arenas for smaller states to exploit diplomacy in ways that enhance their image and role within international affairs.¹⁰⁴

By extension, conferences can produce unintended consequences. In this regard, the article has accounted for how conferences challenge the state-centric view of international relations by including a broader stakeholder pool. A key objective of the Arctic Circle Assembly organisers is to create a global, open and democratic platform that gathers all stakeholders. On the one hand, providing a stage for marginalised voices contributes to a more inclusive debate on contemporary issues. The strengthening of the autonomy of sub-state and sub-regional entities is a central contribution of the Arctic Circle organisation within the region's governance system. On the other hand, an example of the unintended consequences produced by conferences is the Arctic Circle Forums, through which non-Arctic states are given a more active role in the agenda-setting process in the region, and thus potentially weaken the authority of the Arctic states. As such, the analysis has supported the argument raised by Jervis that the unintended consequences produced by institutions, or conferences, are not only the most interesting, but also the most powerful. This indicates that paying more attention to

⁹⁷Steinveg, "Governance by Conference," 147.

⁹⁸Waltz, "Theory of international politics."

⁹⁹Long, "A small state's guide to influence in world politics," 2.

¹⁰⁰Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail," 11.

¹⁰¹Long, "A small state's guide to influence in world politics," 29.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

¹⁰³Depledge & Dodds, "Bazaar Governance," 144.

¹⁰⁴Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," 104.

the effects and outcomes of conferences can be a productive choice for both scholars and governmental representatives.

Lastly, looking at the third type of institutions that change preferences over outcomes and develop a life of their own requires interpreting conferences as autonomous entities. While this touches upon the dynamic features of conferences, there are fewer indicators of this characteristic. Most participants who were interviewed for the study from which this article finds support contend that the Arctic Circle Assembly was created and is held in the interests of Iceland, and former president Grímsson in particular, and that it serves to promote the interests of both Iceland and central allies. However, through conferences, the growing pool of stakeholders that are engaged in Arctic affairs are given the opportunity to shape the global discourse and influence each other's outlook. Thus, in theory, conferences can contribute indirectly to changing actors' preferences over outcomes, and these gatherings can as such be autonomous from states' pre-existing interests.

In closing, the main contribution of conferences within Arctic governance and international relations is providing an alternative to the intergovernmental model for cooperation. Developments in the Arctic are evidence of there being alternative ways for the global community to solve problems and come together in constructive cooperation, through platforms that are not dominated by nation states. Conferences are further distinct from state-based institutions, and the weight attributed to conference participation by both state and non-state actors speaks to their relevance in international affairs. Adding conferences to analyses of policymaking and interaction among various actors can thus make an empirical contribution that deepens IR analysis of how diplomacy, negotiations, deal-making and power games unfold in the contemporary international system. This article has argued that bringing IR theory into analysis of conferences as sites for diplomacy and interaction can enrich this field of research and contribute to our understanding of these arenas. Both as instruments for states, as innovative arenas to activate common interests and cooperation, and as entities that can develop a life of their own and potentially change preferences over outcomes.

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Appendix – Informants to the study by affiliation and nationality

Nationality	Position
Canada	Research associate
Finland	University professor, and member of the Arctic Circle Board of Advisors
Finland	Business organisation Secretary Director
Finland	President and CEO
Germany	Research institution director
Iceland	Initiator and Chairman of the Arctic Circle Assembly
Iceland	Arctic Council associated
Norway	Initiator and Chairman of the Arctic Frontiers
Norway	Secretary Leader of the Arctic Frontiers
Norway	Senior official, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Norway	Senior official, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Norway	President of research collaborative and member of the Arctic Circle Board of Advisors and the Arctic Frontiers steering committee
Norway	Research institute director, and member of the Arctic Circle Board of Advisors and the Arctic Frontiers steering committee
Norway	Senior adviser, university
Norway	CEO and member of the Arctic Circle Board of Advisors
Norway	Journalist
Norway	Journalist
Switzerland	Scientific collaborator, Department of Foreign Affairs
United States	Chair of the Arctic Circle Board of Advisors
United States	Senior fellow at research institute, former ambassador
United States	Chair of research commission, and member of the Arctic Circle Board of Advisors
United States	Executive director, research institute
United States	Vice chancellor (research), university
United States	Conference organiser