

The Arctic Council and US domestic policymaking

Elana Wilson Rowe and Helge Blakkisrud

Summary

One widely recognized achievement of the Arctic Council and its various working groups has been the production of collectively generated assessments on Arctic problems. Assessment reports such as the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) provide an important baseline of shared knowledge for making collective circumpolar policy recommendations. But how does the knowledge produced through Arctic Council working groups figure into the policymaking of the Arctic states?

This is an important question for understanding Arctic politics and the relationship between national decisionmaking and international relations more generally. Much of what the Arctic Council produces is in the form of recommendations, declarations of intent, and commitments to “best practices” in areas of shared interest and activity. While in recent years the Council has produced three binding agreements covering specific functional areas—search and rescue (2011), oil pollution preparedness and response (2013), and science cooperation (2017)—much ongoing Arctic collaborative work falls outside of these areas.

This policy brief explores how science/policy outputs of and discussions at the Arctic Council fit into the Arctic political discourse of the USA, with an emphasis on key actors within the executive branch: the White House, the Department of the Interior, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

US Arctic politics

Over the past decade, the United States has paid increasing attention to Arctic politics, peaking with the 2015–2017 US chairmanship of the Arctic Council. However, Alaska is the country’s only foothold in the Arctic, and how the Arctic figures in Beltway politics is marked by the vast distances between Washington DC and Alaska. It is frequently argued that the USA lacks a specific national “Arctic identity,” and approaches Arctic international issues in a broader global perspective—for instance, as part of the country’s global oceans politics.

The centrality of the USA in Arctic politics is unquestionable. The U.S. was for example instrumental in transforming the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy into what became the Arctic Council in 1996. While many Arctic initiatives are brought forward and developed by “smaller” states, the approval and support of regional great powers remains important if an Arctic policy is to gain broader political traction. For example, all three binding agreements that have been adopted by the Arctic Council were negotiated with the United States and Russia as co-chairs. Moreover, the USA vastly outstrips other Arctic states in its support of Arctic-related science projects—in funding devoted and in the number of ongoing projects (see Digital Science Report 2017).

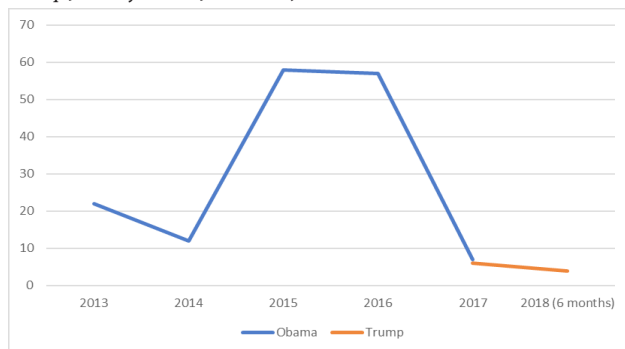
The Presidential Arctic

Looking at the US executive branch, how have the two most recent US Presidential Administrations approached the Arctic? Does Donald Trump’s line represent a major departure from that of his immediate predecessor? To explore this, we have examined the presidential websites of Barack Obama (second term) and Donald Trump (up to June 2018) for indications of how “the Arctic” fits into broader national priorities and political rhetoric.¹ In addition, we have looked specifically at how and when the Arctic Council or its associated working groups were mentioned, to get a better sense of how the products and work of this circumpolar multilateral forum have been considered and discussed.

1. All mentions of the word “Arctic” on the websites were coded. To supplement these data, we conducted 11 expert interviews in Washington DC and Oslo between January and September 2018.

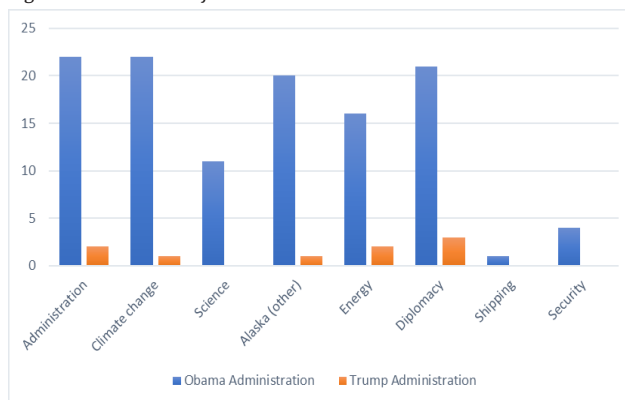
The final years of the Obama Administration witnessed heightened attention to Arctic issues. In 2015, attending the GLACIER conference in Anchorage that kicked off the US Arctic Council chairmanship, Obama became the first US president to visit Alaska (and the Arctic) while in office. More than half of the 156 hits for “Arctic” on the Obama White House archived website were associated with the years of the US chairmanship of the Arctic Council. In comparison, Trump’s Arctic mentions have been few indeed: only 10 hits for the period studied here (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. “Arctic” hits on presidential sites (Obama 2013–January 2017, Trump January 2017–June 2018)



The various mentions of “Arctic” were coded in eight categories based on policy areas/themes (see Figure 2). Between the two administrations, the policy areas discussed remained generally the same, but the perspectives on these themes and frequency have varied.

Figure 2. Breakdown of “Arctic” hits²



Much of the work coded as “administration” in Figure 2 relates to the Obama Administration establishing the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (2013) and adopting plans for implementation and follow-up, as well as an extensively coordinated national plan for research and science (the Arctic Research Plan FY2017–2021, adopted in 2016). For the Trump Administration, we found two hits—a log entry concerning an Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee report and the announcement of a nomination.

A dominant theme in the Obama Administration’s written records was climate change, emphasizing the Arctic as a region under threat from

rapid climate change—everything from permafrost melt in Alaskan villages to broader ocean acidification. Most of the statements about Alaska stressed climate-change impacts and resilience, and renewable energy projects. By contrast, the only hit for Arctic “climate change” for the Trump Administration during the period studied here concerned a journalist pressing the Environmental Protection Agency’s director on climate-change science in a global sense, with the Arctic sea ice as an example. Similarly, the sole hit coded “Alaska (other)” under Trump was a wide-ranging piece by Energy Secretary Rick Perry and Senator Lisa Murkowski outlining resource potentials and the importance of innovation for the economy of Alaska.

Science-related activities during the Obama Administration included the September 2016 White House Science Ministerial and various big data projects, including the production of an Arctic digital elevation map. Despite the apparent lack of attention to Arctic science under the Trump Administration (see Figure 2), the robustness of the networks developed during the previous administration was highlighted in several interviews with policy actors in Washington DC (see also Orttung & Weingartner 2019). Additionally, our interviewees mentioned that support for Arctic science and respect for core findings have remained relatively high in Congress and in executive bodies outside the White House.

In keeping with the Obama Administration’s concern for climate change, its energy policy for the Arctic region itself focused on renewable, innovative energy and a conservationist/protectionist approach to the Arctic offshore and onshore environments (not always popular in Alaska, where this was seen as detrimental to further oil and gas development). In contrast, the two hits related to energy themes from the Trump Administration refer to the opening of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for potential oil and gas exploration and the reversal of the Obama Administration’s offshore Arctic leasing ban. These policy changes are closely linked to the prospects for job creation and ensuring US energy independence.

The conservationist/protectionist approach was also evident in how the Obama Administration pursued inter-state diplomacy: a major issue in the “diplomacy” category was working with Canada on a joint statement to protect the Arctic offshore from oil and gas development. (The Arctic also came up in discussions with the Nordics as well as China and South Korea, in more general formats.) As for the Trump Administration, two of the three hits relate to a call and a meeting with Finnish President Sauli Niinistö in 2017. In a joint press conference following the bilateral meeting, Trump stated: “We had a very good discussion, in particular on the Arctic and black carbon. And I think we have much in agreement. One of the things we also agree on: we want crystal-clean water and we want clean air—the cleanest ever. Very important, so we have a lot of agreement.” The third hit followed a conversation with Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, in which the Arctic was mentioned alongside the importance of maintaining security and stability in the Baltic Sea region.

2. *Administration* covers the launch of new policies or Arctic-relevant appointments; *climate change*: climate-change mitigation, impacts, and adaptation; *science*: national and international Arctic science prioritizations and results; *Alaska (other)*: Alaska-relevant topics involving multiple categories simultaneously; *energy*: renewables and/or petroleum; *diplomacy*: instances where the Arctic is mentioned in connection with meetings with other heads of state; *shipping*: Arctic shipping opportunities and challenges; and *security*: maritime and other security issues. Altogether 40 hits were coded as “irrelevant” (39 from the Obama Administration, one from the Trump Administration) and are not included in the Figure.

“Shipping” proved not to be a major issue, but the Obama Administration highlighted investments in search and rescue, and the commissioning of additional icebreakers. In the “security” category, the acquisition of new icebreakers and the Defense Department’s assessment of the potential impacts of the thinning Arctic ice on US security were core themes.

Specific mentions of the Arctic Council counted 41 for the Obama Administration and four for the Trump Administration. As for Obama, the greatest number of hits, 16, concerned the Arctic Council as an arena for deepening partnerships in the pursuit of common goals, often vaguely defined as “sustainable development” or “low tension” (as opposed to a specific policy direction). Two of these 16 mentions relate to the launch of the US National Strategy for the Arctic Region, where it was noting that the United States was now joining “Arctic Council” colleagues in clarifying its Arctic interests. Another ten hits relate to the US chairmanship of the Arctic Council on a range of topics, with the emphasis on US-led or US-introduced initiatives. A further ten hits are connected with science, where the role of the Arctic Council in science cooperation is mentioned, often alongside the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC)—or, in a few instances, specific projects like the digital elevation map. Interestingly, only one of these ten hits involves “assessments” as an important output, and then only in highly general terms. Black carbon reduction as an aim of the 2013 Kiruna Declaration has two specific mentions, whereas there is only one mention of an Arctic Council social project, relating to youth.³

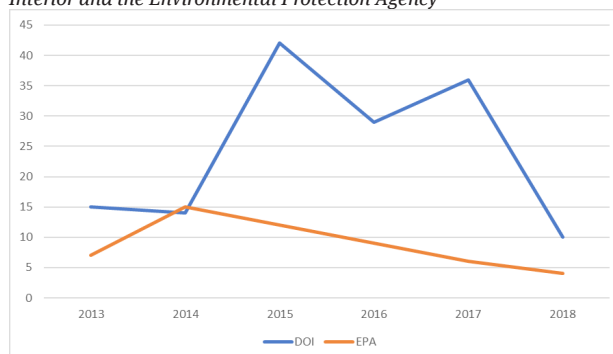
With the Trump presidency, all four hits stem from the above-mentioned 2017 press conference with the Finnish President Niinistö: the Arctic Council is referred to as a site for environmental cooperation, and Trump expresses his best wishes for the Finnish chairmanship. This is the only instance in Trump’s presidential administration that the multilateral forum is mentioned at all.

In sum, we see that the Arctic Council has featured in White House political statements primarily as an arena where states consult and coordinate around broad goals, rather than being mentioned in relation to specific policies. The US chairmanship of the Council resulted in many talking points, with an emphasis on US leadership and priorities. However, when science is mentioned, assessments are rarely involved, and other bodies, such as the IASC, figure equally alongside the Arctic Council.

Arctic worker bees: the Department of the Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency

What, then, of the Arctic focus of the US federal executive branch beyond the White House? As this policy brief concerns the impact of Arctic Council work on domestic policymaking in the United States, we have not studied the “outward”-oriented departments, like the Department of State, but have deliberately concentrated those with more domestic-oriented direct responsibilities. Further, we have zeroed in specifically on mentions of the Arctic Council, rather than Arctic issues more generally, in order to bring the multilateral forum into focus and to delimit the wide range of material generated by a search for “Arctic.”

Figure 3. US Federal government Arctic attention: Department of the Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency⁴



As shown in Figure 3, the US Department of the Interior (DOI) shows the same peak of interest in the Arctic Council as the Obama Administration during the US chairmanship. After that, also in line with the general trend in the new Trump Administration, we see a dramatic decline in Arctic Council-related coverage, even below the level prior to the US chairmanship.

Regarding the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), it should be noted that EPA’s engagement with the Arctic Council has focused mainly on cooperation with Russia through the Council’s Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP) Working Group. The aim has been to achieve responsible handling of pollutants, most of which are found in Russia, stemming from current or Soviet-era activities. The decline that we find in active discussion of the Arctic Council after 2014 is therefore probably linked to Russia’s annexation of Crimea and deteriorating East–West cooperation. Our interviewees report that cooperation continued unabated on this front through the difficult year of 2014 and onwards—but this may not have been “celebrated” to the same degree in written outputs on the EPA website.

Turning from trends to content, the hits on the webpages of the Department of the Interior are so varied that it is difficult to generate a classificatory scheme. However, a few mentions may be illustrative. Arctic Council outputs have often been used by field officers and scientists in the US National Park Service (NPS). For example, one document notes that output from the Arctic Council has helped the NPS to see its Alaskan work in a “large landscape perspective,” considered important for managing the distant, almost inaccessible Arctic protected areas. Several reports about the Bering Land Bridge National Preserve drew on Arctic Council publications. Further, the NPS has been involved in the Arctic Council’s Working Group on Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF).

The Arctic Council also came up several times in relation to Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM)-led Arctic Council projects on oil and gas standards and the establishment of the Arctic Offshore Regulators Forum. The participation of the US Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) in the Arctic Council’s Working Group on Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR) was also mentioned. The BSEE director referred to the Arctic Council as an important source of information and contact, also between federal bodies that may not work directly together otherwise (like the BSEE and the US Coast Guard).

3. The last two mentions of the Arctic Council were irrelevant, as the Council came up in connection with a person’s biography.

4. For DOI there were 148 hits, for EPA, 58. Two of the DOI hits and five of the EPA hits were excluded from Figure because there was no information on the year.

Conclusions and recommendations

The above data set shows that the Arctic has been a theme in both the Obama and the Trump Presidential Administrations, albeit with significantly less attention in the latter thus far. There are clear differences in the emphasis on the importance and the role of the Arctic. The Obama Administration focused on developing comprehensive plans for Arctic issues and paid considerable attention to the climate-change vulnerabilities of the region. Trump's attention to the Arctic has been driven by international efforts at engagement (e.g. the response to the Finnish President on black carbon) and by emphasis on the region's oil and gas potential. During both Administrations, however, the Arctic Council and its outputs have featured mostly on the level of generalities. In contrast, several US executive bodies, especially the Department of the Interior, seem to use Arctic Council outputs more actively, and have engaged in setting the agenda in Council's working groups.

Recommendations

1. International work is often visualized as arising at the international level. Our interviewees, and the empirical sources analyzed here, indicate that, when the United States participates in an Arctic initiative, it is generally because the proposed work already aligns with nationally-established priorities/practices/budgetary posts. *Therefore, in launching new initiatives in Arctic cooperation, other Arctic actors seeking US buy-in should carefully survey the relevant policy/regulatory landscape to find correspondence with established interests/conceptual categories and vocabularies/budget posts, also when seeking to expand or change these interests and practices.*
2. Our interviewees indicated that Arctic Council assessments were valuable not as direct inputs to political processes but rather as a resource to "inform the informers," a kind of interim step and resource for those working more closely at the science/policy interface within the USA. *Therefore, identifying and working closely with these mostly domestic science/policy actors may be more valuable than high-profile launches of specific assessments,*
3. *or relying on Arctic Council assessment authors to act as informational entrepreneurs in their respective home countries.* Many interviewees described the Washington DC-based Arctic science/policy network as robust. The depth and breadth of this network probably has a function in maintaining policy continuity on a range of Arctic issues, despite broader shifts in the political landscape. This should be considered up against the periodic requests for Arctic Council reform or streamlining. From a small-state perspective, where limited groups of actors are sent to frequently overlapping activities, the Arctic Council can be perceived of as in need of an efficiency overhaul. However, *while at the international level a more streamlined Arctic Council may seem more effective, eliminating unnecessary duplication of activities, it might also limit the direct anchoring points that the Arctic Council has into the extensive bureaucracy and science/policy-making circles of a larger state, like the USA. This broad anchoring may prove particularly important for ensuring stability and progress in Arctic regional cooperation in the long term.*

References

- Digital Science. 2017. *The State of Open Data 2017*. Available at <https://www.digital-science.com/resources/portfolio-reports/state-open-data-2017/>
- Orttung, Robert W. & Katherine Weingartner. 2019. "U.S. Arctic Policy-Making under Trump and Obama and Implications for Russia and China." *PONARS Policy Memo*. Washington, DC: George Washington University.

