

Indigenous Participation in the Arctic Council: An Analysis of Principle and Practice

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**Abstract**

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The Arctic is an ever-changing region, specifically in its environment and the increasing number of political actors interested in natural resource development in the region, which requires innovative modes of policy creation, specifically to guarantee the sovereignty and self-determination of Indigenous peoples who preside over the land. The Arctic Council is the predominant forum through which Indigenous peoples in the Arctic exercise power over decision-making. This study examines the mechanisms by which Indigenous peoples participate in the Arctic Council through comparing the Arctic Council's *Meaningful Engagement of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in Marine Activities* project documents to interviews with participants, consultants, and scholars of Arctic Council activities. This study aims to determine how Indigenous peoples participate in Arctic Council decision-making and discover the existing successes and obstacles of participation mechanisms within the forum. This study finds differences in the rhetoric of engagement and participation in Arctic Council documents compared to the practical applications of engagement and finds that state-dominant frameworks

govern the level of participation of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic Council.

## Introduction

The Arctic is a complex and dynamic region, specifically in its sensitivity to environmental changes and its distinct and diverse systems of governance by state entities and non-state entities. The Arctic is a critical place for understanding and responding to climate change for both global actors and local communities as it serves as a touchpoint for environmental impacts. Rapid ice melt and the “opening” of the Arctic Ocean have increased international activities in the Arctic and require global coordination of state, Indigenous, and corporate interests in the Arctic, specifically in natural resource development and international trade routes. In an increasingly crowded Arctic space, it is important to understand the opportunities and limitations of Arctic governance in its ability to form lasting policy recommendations. From a global perspective, the critical juncture of economic development and climate change mitigation is exemplified in the Arctic space, and the international nature of the region and the transboundary nature of the problems there warrant academic exploration. The Arctic consists of many diverse communities and political institutions, especially in Indigenous nations. Indigenous nations in the Arctic have different ways of exerting power, one of which is through the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council is notable in its inclusion of Indigenous peoples through its designation of Permanent Participants. According to Article 2 of the Ottawa Declaration establishing the organization, the focus of the creation of the Permanent Participants in the Arctic Council was “to provide for active participation and full participation with the Arctic indigenous representatives within the Arctic Council” (Arctic Council, 1996).

This intraorganizational study identifies diverse meanings of Indigenous participation and engagement within the unique advocacy and governance context of the Arctic Council. Specifically, I consider how transnational Indigenous political organizations engage the Council

as “Permanent Participants” and the opportunities and limits for Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination within existing institutional structures. This research asks: How is Indigenous participation conceptualized and enacted in the Arctic Council? What are the successes and challenges for Permanent Participants from Indigenous organizations to influence policy in a substantive way, and why?

This study applies concepts of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination to understand the mechanisms of engagement of Arctic Indigenous peoples in the Arctic Council. I argue that it is important to acknowledge the success of Indigenous peoples in achieving participation in an international, state-based forum such as the Arctic Council. As Permanent Participants, however, Indigenous peoples participation is primarily through non-governmental advocacy organizations, rather than as Indigenous states or nations. How does this impact the actualization of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination in the Arctic region?

First, I will provide a background on the Arctic context in which I am working, along with the significance of my proposed research and my research question. I will provide background on the Arctic Council, including its structure and history, and a brief history on Indigenous internationalism. I then describe my research design and methods to answer my current research question and provide data to support my current theory. My analysis draws on Gordon Christie’s (2011) concept of power and sovereignty invested in narratives of decision-making. The Arctic Council does engage Permanent Participants in decision-making, however, there are obstacles to full participation in the forum, operating within the structure of the current institution of the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council, based on a framework of state-dominant policymaking, has few mechanisms for Indigenous nations to exercise sovereignty and self-determination outside of transnational advocacy organizations.

## **Background**

### *The History and Structure of the Arctic Council*

International governance following the Cold War has increasingly been a globalized economic and political system. Within diplomatic spaces, Arctic international relations are a relatively new idea in comparison to other international organizations, as it originates from Post-Cold War dynamics that involve cooperation, peace-making, and region-building in the Arctic (Heineken 2022). Treatment of the Arctic as a distinct region by policy analysts started in the 1980s, and Cold War tensions in the High North were reduced with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The collapse served as a catalyst for region formation in a way that was not previously observed before by policymakers. Mikhail Gorbachev, in a historic speech in Murmansk, declared that the Arctic should “become a zone of peace,” (Gorbachev 1987) and called for international cooperation to pursue this goal (Young 2019). In 1991, the Rovaniemi Declaration on the Protection of the Arctic Environment established a practice of treating the circumpolar Arctic as a distinctive international region (Young 2019). On September 19, 1996, the Ottawa Declaration on the establishment of the Arctic Council was ratified by what would eventually be called the ‘Arctic Eight’: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and the United States (Ottawa Declaration 1996).

The Arctic Council describes itself as “the leading intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation, coordination, and interaction among the Arctic States, Arctic Indigenous Peoples, and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues, in particular on issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic” (Arctic Council Secretariat 2021, 4). The Council provides scientific research reports and non-legally binding policy recommendations. Chater (2019) describes the Arctic Council policies mainly as a means of

disseminating information, and the forum “serves as a venue to create technical environmental projects” (150). The Arctic Council consists of the eight Arctic States, including Canada, Denmark (representing Greenland), Norway, Russia, Iceland, and the United States; the six Permanent Participant organizations, including the Inuit Circumpolar Council, Saami Council, Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich’in Council, and Russian Association of Indigenous People of the North; and nearly 40 observers, including NGOs and non-Arctic states (Arctic Council Secretariat 2021). The organization of the Arctic Council incorporates a Chairmanship of the Arctic Council, which rotates Arctic states every two years, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the state holds the Chairmanship. Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs), appointed by each member state, handle the Arctic Council’s daily tasks, and meet with Permanent Participants at least twice a year. Subsidiary bodies, such as Arctic Council Task Forces and Working Groups, hold meetings in addition to other Arctic Council meetings and operate as the basis for Arctic Council recommendations and declarations (Arctic Council 2021). The six working groups of the Arctic Council initiate research projects that inform policy recommendations. A diagram of the structure of the Arctic Council is presented in Figure 1.



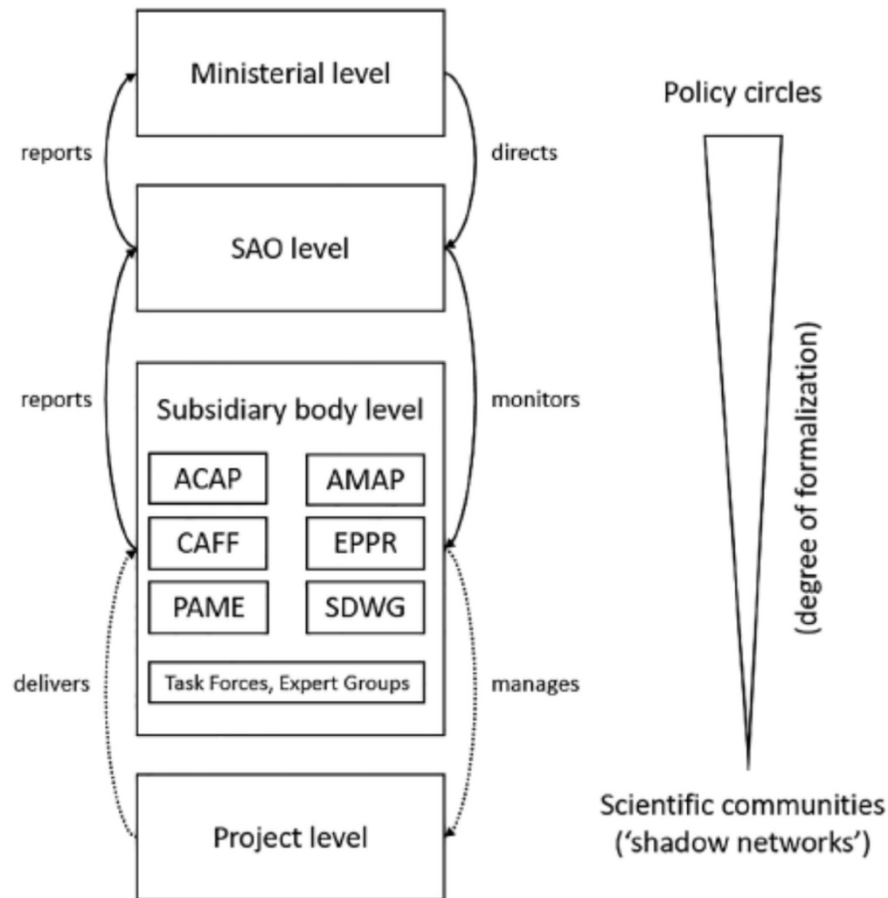


Figure 1. Diagram of the Organizational Structure of the Arctic Council (Knecht 2020)

The predecessor to the Arctic Council, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), situated the founding of the Arctic Council predominantly on international environmental problems. Hence, the Arctic Council principally focuses on environmental issues. These include the transboundary nature of the problems being distinctly felt in the Arctic, specifically environmental problems associated with climate change, which require transboundary, consensus-based solutions. The Arctic Council was envisioned by Arctic nation states as a way for all Arctic nations to find a path to working together that did not impinge on national sovereignty or defense issues (Axworthy and Dean 2013).

Inclusiveness in the Arctic Council was a central principle in the inception of the organization, as its intention was to value collective actions and foster cooperation across transboundary issues (Nord 2010). In the development of AEPS and then the Arctic Council, the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), Russian Association of Northern Minorities, and Sami Council worked together to ensure that one of the key functions of the Arctic Council was increasing the role of Indigenous peoples in environmental decision-making (Tennberg 1996). These three Indigenous political organizations were instrumental in the creation of the Arctic Council: “Through every phase of the Council’s creation— agenda formation, negotiation, and operationalization— indigenous leaders, especially the ICC, have promoted a cooperative, peaceful, circumpolar Arctic” (Axworthy and Dean 2013, 43). The incorporation of Indigenous knowledge was critical to the development of Indigenous people’s involvement in the Arctic Council. The ICC, in particular, emphasized the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in AEPS programs (Tennberg 1996). Indigenous political organizations became increasingly involved in the development of the Arctic Council, to the extent to which Indigenous peoples became responsible for finding a method for joint representation for different Indigenous groups and the details of participation in the forum (Tennberg 1996). As a result, the formation of the Arctic Council included the designation of Permanent Participants.

As previously mentioned, the Permanent Participants are organizations that represent Indigenous peoples in the Arctic and have “full consultation rights in connection with the Council’s negotiations and decisions” (Arctic Council 2021, 6). The Permanent Participants represent Indigenous peoples of the Arctic in multiple nations. For example, the Inuit Circumpolar Council represents Inuit from Greenland, the United States, and Canada. The structure of the Arctic Council and Permanent Participants “facilitates interactions and dialogue

between different Indigenous organizations and between Indigenous organizations and the governments of the member states” (Wilson 2020, 36). A “seat at the table” provides Permanent Participants with the opportunity to participate prominently and interact with states that can foster positive policy outcomes for Indigenous peoples (Bloom 1999, Cambou 2018). Permanent Participants predominantly serve as consulting bodies, whose work can be most observed at the working group level (Cambou 2018; Koivurova and Cambou 2020). Consultation can take form in the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge into Arctic Council policy documents. The PPs are not voting members, but Koivurova and Cambou (2020) argue they still have influence due to de-facto veto powers in Arctic Council assemblies.

Bloom (1999) highlights the uniqueness of the Permanent Participants as the following: “Creating the category of Permanent Participation is a unifying theme of the Council, and one that sets it apart from other bodies. These Permanent Participants are more than observers; they have the right to participate in all meetings and activities of the Council, and their representatives sit alongside Ministers and SAOs” (716). The Arctic Council is also unique because of the high level of non-state involvement through the designation of Permanent Participants and represents a newer era of international relations, specifically in terms of its form of policy proliferation. Additionally, it is critical to recognize that the Arctic Council is not a governance organization, it instead recommends policy actions and operates primarily through soft law. The Arctic Council, through the use of soft law and the development of non-legally binding but normative instruments via scientific monitoring, is conducive to influencing international policymaking (Loukacheva 2020). Cambou and Koivurova (2020), Nadarajah (2020), and Loukacheva (2020) discuss the benefits of the proliferation of soft law as a way to form adaptable and non-binding laws that can be particularly applied to environmental governance. This can be an effective form

of policy making in environmental governance due to the changing nature of the Arctic environment and scientific developments. Thus, the pliant nature of the Arctic Council helps achieve the purpose of addressing changes evolving in the region. With climate change, the Arctic is particularly susceptible to ecosystem changes, and requires increased flexibility regarding policy. Knowledge and science are constantly changing in the Arctic, so flexibility is essential for formulating policy that responds to these shifts. Due to the distinct and nascent nature of the institution compared to organizations like the UN and EU, there is a need for further understanding of policy proliferation.

### *Indigenous Internationalism*

Indigenous internationalism is the concept of Indigenous nations interacting with other Indigenous nations and nation-states diplomatically to pursue international governance goals. Increased Indigenous internationalism began in the post-war period with Indigenous political mobilization to regain economic and political control domestically. This coincided with a worldwide movement of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, which saw alterations in the political order at a global and local level (Wilson 2020). In the 1970s, resource development activities threatened the traditional territory of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic, which led to demands for autonomy throughout the region. The collapse of the Soviet Union had a profound impact on Indigenous peoples in the Arctic as the Cold War had separated Indigenous peoples from the West and Russia. The end of the Cold War meant that Indigenous peoples in Russia became more involved in international Indigenous political organizations (Wilson 2020). The formation of the AEPS and the subsequent development of the Arctic Council furthered Indigenous political agency on an international scale.

Following the creation of the category of Permanent Participants in the Arctic Council, the United Nations made strides in Indigenous internationalism through the ratification of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Poto (2017) reasons that self-determination, as guaranteed in UNDRIP, has contributed to Indigenous participation in the Arctic Council. UNDRIP provides a framework for the implementation of Indigenous people's rights, and that self-determination is inherently linked to participation in international forums such as the Arctic Council (Carroll 2012; Poto 2017). Poto (2017) argues that UNDRIP has contributed significantly to the consolidation of the principles of self-determination, including the provision of rights of Indigenous peoples to observe, recognize, and enforce international treaties.

Modes of Indigenous power on a national and international level can be conceptualized through sovereignty and self-determination. Sovereignty has its origins in European political thought, but it has come to be an organizing principle for Indigenous politics writ large. Sovereignty has been defined in dominant international relations literature as domination over territory and the creation of subjects, tracing back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Dennison 2017; Karkainen 2004; Teves et al 2015). The European conceptualization of sovereignty was applied as settlers began to occupy the Americas and were used to discredit Indigenous forms of governance, however Indigenous nations have worked through and beyond colonial entanglements to pursue their own self-determined, albeit negotiated futures (Dennison 2017). Notions of sovereignty have been used to lay territorial claims over resources in the Arctic by nation-states (Christie 2011). "Sovereignty" as a concept in Indigenous studies transforms the term in Western political discourse to encompass not only claims to territory and political and economic power but entails self-determination with mutual respect for other nations. There are

many diverse approaches to Indigenous sovereignty, including the former definition and asserting Indigenous power to make decisions that affect the lives of communities (Teves et al 2015).

Poto (2017) defines self-determination as a comprehensive right combining substantive and procedural guarantees, asserting that there are rights of participation that are preceded by self-determination, including procedural rights, such as the means by which Indigenous peoples get involved on an international level. An approach to self-determination includes participation in decisions that affect the homelands of Indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Participation is critical to asserting self-determination, which in the case of the Arctic Council can be exemplified through sovereignty over decision-making over the land that Indigenous groups are connected to economically, culturally, and spiritually (Poto 2017). Exercising autonomy is a salient aspect of self-determination and international participation, as Tennberg (2010) writes “The power to act is the basic form of political agency” (264). The power to act, including meaningfully participating in decision and policy making processes of the Arctic Council, means ensuring the rights to engage in decision-making on a practical as opposed to procedural level (Poto 2017; Tennberg 2010). For example, practical modes of participation can be through agenda setting or utilizing language proposed by Indigenous actors<sup>12</sup>.

Self-determination can additionally be conceptualized in political agency. Tennberg (2010) argues that political agency can be based on the resources of power, which includes identity, knowledge, and history. Knowledge, in particular, is an important facet of Indigenous political agency as Indigenous peoples in the Arctic are experts on environmental change in the

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Huntington, Zoom interview with author, April 27, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Coates, Zoom interview with author, April 18, 2023.

region and can be influential in Arctic Council policy developments. I expand on this notion in later sections.

### *Significance*

This study is relevant and significant because increasingly, Arctic, and non-Arctic actors are pursuing developmental and economic interests in the Arctic. Developmental interests include natural resource extraction and the development of shipping routes as ice recedes due to climate change (Khan 2019). It is critical to involve the original stewards of the land, the Indigenous communities, in policy decision-making and recommendations for states and corporations as the region becomes increasingly crowded with corporate and state interests. This is to ensure that Arctic Indigenous communities can maintain and sustain culturally relevant practices that could be disrupted by both climate change and development, including subsistence practices. Additionally, increased non-Arctic state interests in the Arctic Council have been cause for perceived concern for Permanent Participants, as they have the possibility to influence the level of impact the Permanent Participants have on policy, particularly in how increased observer presence in the Arctic Council could obfuscate Indigenous policy goals (Knecht 2012; Wilson 2020). This research aims to contribute to ideas about post-sovereign governance in international organizations, particularly how Indigenous political organizations can transcend the nation-state system of international environmental governance. Conceptually, these are important considerations due to the historical and ongoing colonization and oppression of Indigenous peoples throughout the world and the unequal distribution of climate impacts on Indigenous communities (Smith and Sharp 2012; Wolfe 2006).

## Methods

This study is focused on the North American Arctic and the Indigenous peoples that reside within the region, which include Indigenous peoples represented by the Inuit Circumpolar Council, the Aleut International Association, the Gwich'in Council International, and the Arctic Athabaskan Council. Centering on the North American Arctic allows for the study to consider two large state powers, Canada and the United States, and the geographic area accounts for four of the six Permanent Participant organizations.

This research offers a critical examination of prevailing literature on Indigenous participation within international governance organizations, specifically the Arctic Council. I am looking for the presence of Indigenous peoples' involvement in Arctic Council projects and in narratives of engagement based on qualitative documentary analysis and interviews with participants, consultants, and scholars of Arctic Council activities.

This project uses multiple qualitative methods to fill possible gaps among different methods, in the case of this research utilizing interviews and document analysis (Axinn and Pearce 2006). This approach accounts for biases in both of these datasets, which will contribute to a clear answer to my research question. Interviews come with biases based on the nature of memory and social relationships, and documentary analysis does not fully communicate the actuality of involvement based on possible political jargon and rhetoric. For interviews, I utilize the snowball sampling method of interviews, where participants will recommend other participants who hold knowledge about the research. Within the interviews, I applied Swidler's (2001) methodological approach, examining the "range of ideas, understandings, and even inarticulate assumptions people might bring to bear on a problem" (221). In this way, I aim to capture how engagement and participation of Indigenous peoples is understood in the Arctic



Council. The research is a qualitative, small-n study in the application of theoretical ideas and policy specifically associated with the Arctic.

The qualitative documentary analysis allows for the interpretation of the text for themes and patterns, as well as broader political discourse in the Arctic Council (Moscato 2020). The Arctic Council provides written policy recommendations that are indicative of the values of the organization, thus documentary analysis is useful in answering the research question at hand. Ahlness (2021) argues Arctic Council documents “play a role in framing and highlight issues on the Arctic Agenda”, in addition to establishing best practices and informing binding law (10). Reports additionally increase the visibility of interests of Indigenous peoples and can inform policy at an international and domestic level.

I examine how Indigenous peoples in the Arctic pursue policy priorities in the Arctic Council through the Permanent Participants’ involvement with the Arctic Council’s Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) working group, with a focus on the Meaningful Engagement of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in Marine Activities (MEMA) project. MEMA is an innovative project in the Arctic Council. One of the main purposes of the project is to collate all documents related to Indigenous engagement in the Arctic Council to create a working definition of ‘meaningful engagement’. MEMA Report I (2017) is a collated summary of Arctic Council documents, ministerial declarations, and additional policy documents on the engagement of Indigenous peoples in the work of the Arctic Council, which serves as a summary for “Arctic Council members to reference as a reminder of their stated guidance and advice for how to engage and involve the Permanent Participants and Arctic indigenous peoples they represent” (1). Report I provides foundational components of engagement based on the documentary analysis, which includes Relationship Building, Quality of Communications,

Processes of Communications, Available Support & Tools, and Legal Obligations. I examine MEMA Reports I and II to uncover the main themes in the rhetoric of meaningful engagement and analyze language associated with the Arctic Council's agenda to engage with Indigenous nations.

The MEMA reports provide recommendations for states, Permanent Participants, NGOs, and academics for the engagement of Indigenous peoples and local communities in projects in the Arctic. MEMA is an official, endorsed Arctic Council document which indicates Arctic Council discourse on the participation of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. MEMA in particular is the basis of analysis for Indigenous participation in the Arctic Council as the intention of the MEMA reports is to provide a guideline for all actors involved in Arctic Council projects. Additionally, Permanent Participants indicated the need for MEMA before its inception, due to the ongoing issue of engagement and inclusion<sup>3</sup>. Within the MEMA reports, I note statements that signal values of inclusion and participation in the Arctic Council. Words such as "important" or "should" indicate organizational desires and priorities. The MEMA reports serve as an influential case study as they will be used to explore the larger cross-scale theory of Indigenous involvement in international policymaking (Seawright and Gerring 2008).

I interviewed six individuals who have professional experience with the Arctic Council. My interlocutors were consultants, government officials, historians, and professionals working in a Permanent Participant organization. All of the individuals I interviewed were located in North America. The interviews were semi-structured, with questions about the respondents' position and involvement in the Arctic Council, how the respondent would define meaningful

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Huntington, Zoom interview with author, April 27, 2023.

engagement, and if the Arctic Council is successful in engaging Indigenous peoples.

Descriptions of the interviewees are listed below:

Lauren Divine is the Ecosystem Conservation Office Director at the Aleut Community of St. Paul and works with the Aleut International Association (AIA). Divine specifically works with the Protection of the Marine Environment (PAME) working group of the Arctic Council, with a focus on representing the AIA in issues surrounding marine litter. Divine's work as a representative for the AIA in the PAME working group is to provide AIA perspectives to working group assemblies.

Jessica Veldstra is the Executive Director of the AIA. Veldstra is in charge of grant writing and the overall functioning of the AIA, in addition to overseeing the individuals in charge of representing the AIA in international forums.

An Indigenous expert on the Arctic Council and northern governance, who participated in the negotiations of the Arctic Council. During the formation of the Council, this individual engaged with the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), the Sami Council, and the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) to promote Indigenous peoples' interests in the forum.

An official with Government Affairs Canada supports the Canadian Senior Arctic Official who works to coordinate Canada's involvement with the Arctic Council. This individual has worked with the Arctic Council and the government of Canada for over twenty years.

Henry Huntington with Huntington Consulting Group was interviewed for the MEMA report and contributed to ideas about engagement within the publication. Huntington has worked with the Arctic Council before its inception, working for the Inuit Circumpolar Council on the

predecessor of the Council, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy. Huntington has been involved in multiple assessments in Arctic Council working groups.

Ken Coates is a historian with a focus on Indigenous economic and political engagement. Coates engages in comparative research in the north, which includes the Arctic Council.

When discussing engagement, I focus on my respondents' understanding of the term, and the meaning of engagement as specified in MEMA Reports I and II. The MEMA Part I and II Reports signal Arctic Council values concepts to encourage engagement with Permanent Participants. The discussions with respondents included means of engagement, and I observed variation in engagement through their discussion of ways Indigenous participation and engagement can be improved. Interviews were coded based on themes present in the MEMA reports, specifically elements of engagement listed in the MEMA Part II report.

The analysis of this specific Arctic Council output and perspectives from those who have worked in or done work about the Arctic Council will contribute to my understanding of Indigenous participation in the Arctic Council. My research applies ideas of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination in Indigenous governance to consider how participation is conceptualized based on involvement in the Arctic Council. This research explores the notion of principle versus practice, meaning the examination of language in the MEMA documents versus the actualization of the language in the interviews. 'Principle' is represented in the MEMA documents, and 'practice' is exhibited through the interviews.

## **Results**

The results of my research center around engagement with Indigenous peoples in the Arctic, specifically in the involvement of Indigenous peoples in research projects in the Arctic

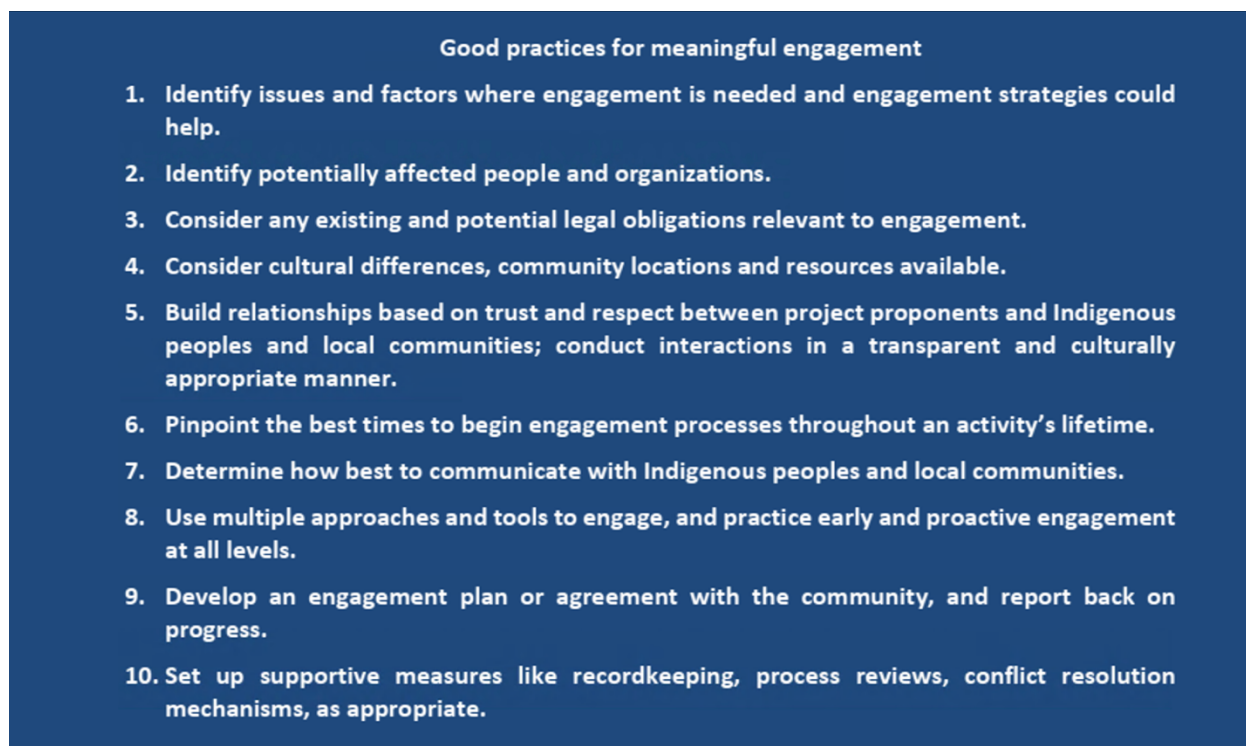
Council. The results are presented through themes found from interviews and MEMA Reports I and II.

### *Forms of Engagement*

Through my documentary analysis and interviews, I found that engagement has multiple definitions and various practices that include engaging Indigenous peoples. The aspects of engagement mentioned in the data are exhibited below:

#### 1. Relationship Building

The MEMA Part II Report provides a list of good practices for meaningful engagement (Figure 2), including, “Building relationships based on trust and respect between project proponents and Indigenous peoples and local communities; conduct interactions in a transparent and culturally appropriate manner” (Arctic Council 2019, 6). The MEMA Part II Report emphasizes the importance of clear communication, mutual trust, responsibility, and clear expectations in engaging Indigenous peoples in projects (Arctic Council 2019). The report acknowledges that time is a critical part of building relationships. In regard to relationship building, the Part II Report highlights the importance of maintaining an ongoing relationship with communities to render it meaningful, and to be based on mutual respect.



*Figure 2: A list of “good practices” for meaningful engagement of Indigenous peoples and local communities in the Arctic from the MEMA Part II Report (Arctic Council 2019)*

These themes were also echoed in the experts I spoke with. For example, the Global Affairs Canada official that I spoke with affirms the need for building relationships in order to ensure meaningful engagement, “I think engagement is very much the relationship we [Global Affairs Canada] built”. Lauren Divine, Ecosystem Conservation Office Director at Aleut Community of St. Paul Island, said, “there’s a level of investment and relationship building that you have to do as someone who wants to work with our communities” in Arctic Council projects. The Indigenous expert on Arctic governance I spoke with also emphasized the role of trust as a vital part of relationship building. They noted developing trust with communities due to the history of Indigenous peoples being misquoted or misrepresented. Engagement involves building mutual trust through the development of expectations and metrics, which allows for open

conversations about project topics and concerns about projects without the worry that a community will be misrepresented.

## 2. Incorporation of Indigenous Knowledge

The MEMA Part II Report highlights the incorporation and application of Indigenous and local knowledge as one of the factors that “commonly lead to meaningful engagement” (Arctic Council 2019, 5). The Report mentions the use of Traditional knowledge and local knowledge with Western knowledge more broadly as a means of relationship building. Traditional knowledge is considered a foundational component of relationship building, based on the Report’s analysis of Arctic Council recommendations (Arctic Council 2019, 39). The Arctic Council recommends that Traditional knowledge (used interchangeably with Indigenous knowledge in the document) be incorporated at the outset of a project and used in conjunction with scientific analysis.

There was also emphasis on the need for Indigenous knowledge to be taken seriously in the creation of Arctic Council documents informing policy. An Indigenous person with expertise in the Arctic Council and northern governance explained that Arctic Council research reports are centered on peer-reviewed, Western science, and often do not include Indigenous knowledge systems: “The problem of the Permanent Participants is that, too often, their knowledge—Indigenous knowledge, traditional knowledge, local knowledge—takes a second place to scientific knowledge”. The Indigenous person I spoke with also talks about how engagement also involves the implementation of Indigenous knowledge to “the extent or in the way that the Indigenous peoples desire it to be”.

Henry Huntington mentions that the wording of Arctic Council policy documents needs to be inclusive of Indigenous goals. Huntington says the way to ensure that Indigenous

knowledge is included in policy is through Indigenous communities being involved at the beginning of Arctic Council projects, “making sure that the right topics are covered”. “The right topics” implies approaching topics that are salient to Indigenous peoples in the Arctic in Arctic Council projects.

Lauren Divine and Jessica Veldstra, both representing the Aleut International Association, spoke on the importance of the co-production of knowledge, and how that can take different forms in the context of the Arctic Council.

### 3. Being “At the Table”

The MEMA Part I and II Reports did not discuss attendance or presence as a mode of engagement.

Interviewees highlighted having Indigenous representatives present, or ‘at the table’ as a means of engaging Indigenous peoples. Jessica Veldstra, in our interview, talks about the importance of being present at the negotiating table, “having somebody in those meetings when they take place, is a big way that we make sure that all voices are heard”. Additionally, Veldstra emphasizes that being present at negotiations is pertinent for voicing concerns and exercising influence over decision-making. The Indigenous expert I spoke with maintained the value of Indigenous attendance in Arctic Council project meetings in order to ensure “their lived experiences, their concerns, were going to be addressed in policy”.

### 4. Expectations and Accountability

A good practice of engagement listed in the MEMA Part II Report is developing an engagement plan and reporting back on progress (Arctic Council 2019). The report acknowledges managing expectations as important aspect of meaningful engagement. Providing clear expectations and



taking accountability while working with Indigenous communities promotes communication and respect, building trust with researchers.

Indigenous communities determine the metrics of meaningful engagement, according to Lauren Divine. A method of evaluating engagement is through Indigenous metrics that an outsider can co-create with the community and decide, “what does success look like to you?”. Creating metrics based on community desires allows for community input in Arctic Council projects, which contributes to accountability to Indigenous communities.

The Government Affairs Canada (GAC) official spoke on the importance of developing accountability mechanisms in projects and in discussions on policy as a means of evaluating engagement. The GAC official highlights structures within the Government of Canada to follow up with Indigenous political organizations following meetings in the Arctic Council, asking Indigenous representatives if policy issues were addressed.

## 5. Capacity Building

Though it did not also come up in my interviews, another point of emphasis within the MEMA Part II Report was the two modes of capacity for participation: ‘capacity’ in the sense of material resources, and ‘capacity’ in the realm of political capacity (Arctic Council 2019). The MEMA Part II Report describes engagement as the development of community capacity through “providing education, training, infrastructure, and funding, when available” (Arctic Council 2019, 44). Additionally, the report discusses building capacity “to enable inclusion in projects and activities” (Arctic Council 2019, 42).

## **Discussion**

I applied Gordon Christie’s (2011) theory of power and sovereignty invested in narratives of decision-making to understand how Indigenous participation is conceptualized and enacted in

the Arctic Council and to uncover its successes and limitations. Christie asserts that decision-making abilities can be conceptualized within a nation-state narrative of sovereignty *or* beyond narratives of sovereignty. Christie applies sovereignty as the assumption of nation-state authority and legitimacy over policy outcomes (2011). For the purpose of this research, the Arctic Council represents the state-dominant framework of decision-making that according to Christie would involve Indigenous peoples in the Arctic accepting the legal trappings of the Arctic Council and building upon current intergovernmental relations. An alternative to the narrative of state sovereignty is pairing that narrative with another narrative that generates separate meanings of decision-making and governance. This alternative operates within a larger narrative structure created by Indigenous peoples themselves. The following sections apply Christie's concepts of narratives to the Arctic Council, specifically how Indigenous peoples in the Arctic can operate within and outside of the structure of the organization.

### *Within the Arctic Council*

In the Arctic Council, Indigenous participation is conceptualized and enacted through the inclusion of Indigenous peoples via the Permanent Participants. Many observers, scholars, and participants in the Arctic Council view the forum as successful in giving Indigenous political organizations a meaningful way to propel policy priorities on an international scale. This involvement expands the capabilities of Indigenous groups in engaging on an international level. Individuals interviewed acknowledge that this is one of the biggest successes of the Arctic Council and set a new standard of Indigenous involvement.

However, the development of the MEMA reports themselves indicate the need for increased participation of Indigenous peoples. Henry Huntington posits that one of the driving agents of the production of the MEMA project was the Permanent Participants. When asked

about the motivation for MEMA, Huntington highlighted the difference between theory and practice, and observed, “if everything worked just as swimmingly as you might have hoped from the Arctic Council Declaration in 1996 you wouldn't have had to [develop MEMA]. But the fact that it wasn't working to the satisfaction of the Permanent Participants suggested there was some gap here to address”. The Permanent Participants noticed the lack of engagement from the Arctic Council, and advocated for creating a framework to provide guidance on engaging Indigenous peoples. In this case, the Arctic Council notes the issues that Permanent Participants highlight and attempt to address them through recommendations for Arctic Council members.

#### 1. Traditional Knowledge and Exercising Sovereignty in the Arctic Council

Traditional knowledge is an integral part of Arctic governance, and securing intellectual property is a key facet of Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty (Arruda and Krutkowski 2017; Tennberg 1996). Sovereignty exists not only on a political and economic level, but an ideological level. This implies not only power over decision-making in territories, but also control over intellectual resources, knowledge, narratives, and language acquisition to challenge modes of colonialism ideologically (Teves et al 2015). Thus, the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge in the Arctic Council is a salient aspect of Indigenous participation. Sovereignty can be exercised through the incorporation of knowledge in policy documents but also requires institutions to carry out related actions.

The incorporation of Indigenous knowledge was critical to the development of Indigenous people's involvement in the Arctic Council. The ICC, in particular, emphasized the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in AEPS programs (Tennberg 1996). Language of integration of Indigenous knowledge has been at the forefront of notions of participation in the Arctic Council, “almost every declaration of the [Arctic Council] emphasized the inclusion and

integration of TEK [Indigenous knowledge] as one of its main priorities” (Sidorova 2020, 2).

Indigenous knowledge in the Arctic Council is a constant point of discussion, and the Arctic Council has struggled to incorporate Indigenous knowledge in policy recommendations.

Sidorova (2020), using documentary analysis, observes how the Arctic Council’s incorporation of Indigenous knowledge continues to change over time. The author notes there are obstacles in the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge currently in the Arctic Council, due to the problems of politicization of the term and the lack of incorporation of social scientists on Indigenous knowledge projects.

My interlocutors mentioned consultation, incorporation of Indigenous knowledge in Arctic Council projects, Indigenous communities involved ‘at all levels’ of the project (from conception to completion), and collaboration with Indigenous communities as a means to incorporating Indigenous knowledge in Arctic Council projects. Consultation includes being involved in the project ‘at all levels’ and includes communications with the Indigenous community an outsider aims to work with. For example, Henry Huntington provided an anecdote about working on a project involving an Inuit community in Alaska. Huntington received approval of this project with the ICC office in Anchorage, but the project requires the approval of the leadership in the Inuit community. In order to engage Indigenous peoples ‘at all levels’, the project would need to start with an inquiry by an Indigenous community for research and be led by questions and concerns from that community, as opposed to a research agenda being forced onto a community from outsiders. Additionally, community members would be involved in the development of metrics to measure the progress and success of the project, and at its conclusion will have the data to use for the community in the future.

Another mode of incorporating Indigenous knowledge into the Arctic Council is through Arctic Council policy documents. Arctic Council rhetoric highlights the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge but currently does not successfully incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems in a manner that Indigenous peoples desire in Arctic Council documents, meaning Arctic Council documents do not incorporate specific policy language offered by Indigenous peoples during Arctic Council meetings<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, a point at the intersection of project collaboration and incorporation of Indigenous knowledge is developing holistic policy that is inclusive of Indigenous desires and scientific findings. Meaningful engagement of Indigenous peoples requires holistic policy development that includes Indigenous needs and interests. These policies contain scientific backing from both Western and Indigenous science and expertise<sup>5</sup>. Holistic policy approaches would be indicative of collaboration between outsiders and Indigenous peoples on Arctic Council projects.

## 2. Obstacles to Participation in the Arctic Council

The Permanent Participant's engagement with the Arctic Council faces obstacles, which include barriers related to resources and organizational and bureaucratic structures in the Arctic Council. The Permanent Participants face bureaucratic barriers to equitable participation due to their limited capacity in comparison to the apparatus of settler states. The Permanent Participants experience burnout through accommodating the settler state and their ideas of recognition. Interviewees mentioned Permanent Participants have "a lot of irons in the fire" at one time. The multiple demands on Permanent Participant organizations require staff and monetary resources to conform with the state apparatus. Over-consultation relates to the obstacle of capacity. Due to

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

mandates and obligations of states, specifically Canada, to consult with Indigenous nations regarding projects, there can be an overwhelming number of demands for Indigenous political organizations to respond to. While the increased demand for Indigenous peoples' perspectives on policies can be considered a positive development, organizations are overextended.

One of the biggest obstacles interviewees mentioned that comes with the territory of representing Indigenous peoples in the Arctic Council is that the individual or the group of individuals has to occupy multiple roles. Henry Huntington highlights scale and finding representatives who can work within the scientific community and who have Indigenous knowledge or expertise on what kind of policy they want to communicate. Not only is the staff member a scientist, but a diplomat, and an Indigenous knowledge holder, which is substantial for one staff member or a group of staff. Lauren Divine and Jessica Veldstra describe the need for increased personnel in order for there to be more involvement of the AIA. Individuals filling multiple roles that should be for one person leads to organizational fatigue and contributes to barriers to participation. Indigenous leaders “wear many hats” and are being “pulled in multiple different directions by the private sector, non-governmental organizations and a myriad of government agencies, Indigenous and non-Indigenous” (Wilson 2020, 37). The demands from colonial structures, combined with limited staff resources, obfuscates meaningful participation in Arctic Council projects.

Chater (2019) argues that Permanent Participants and states have different levels of capacity in regard to participation, and the ability to sponsor projects is one of the primary modes of setting agendas in the Arctic Council. States have more material resources, and as a result states sponsor more Arctic Council projects that serve national interests, and therefore more power lies in the member states than Permanent Participants. Permanent Participants have to be

more selective in the Arctic Council projects they chose to sponsor because of the relative lack of funds in comparison to member states (Chater 2019). For example, questions of funding arise in discussions about participating in Arctic Council projects. Lauren Divine calls these questions of funding “inevitable” and as critical to consider during ministerial meetings. Jessica Veldstra also discussed the obstacle of funding, specifically highlighting that the AIA’s involvement in Arctic Council projects relies on human or monetary resources. Operating within a settler-colonial system requires resources which can limit participation and engagement of Indigenous peoples, which can also be described through the concept of entangled sovereignty.

Another barrier to engagement includes what I understand as the various scales of involvement. Interviewees spoke of the multiple scales in which researchers had to operate. MEMA also references the various scales, specifically citing the various layers of governance in tribal contexts. For example, Henry Huntington mentioned a variety of approval structures within tribal, regional, and municipal governments, which contributes to confusion regarding which organization is the authority to get involved in the process of a project. Ken Coates voiced that since the formation of the Arctic Council in 1996, forums and modes of participation for Indigenous peoples have increased. There are multiple institutions within which Indigenous political organizations can operate beyond the Arctic Council.

Lack of elected Indigenous participants serve as an obstacle to participation due to increased bureaucracy and institutional separation from essentially the beneficiaries or constituents of the policy (Alfredsson 2021). The author contrasts this to the UN, as Indigenous experts and community members are appointed as representatives, specifically the UN’s Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Alfredsson 2021). Alfredsson writes “It is noteworthy... that it is umbrella organizations that fill

the seats of the permanent participants rather than elected bodies of the various Indigenous groups” (7). According to Alfredsson, this obfuscates the ability of Indigenous peoples to fully engage in procedural participation and highlights the need of the Arctic Council to appoint Indigenous peoples as independent experts.

Wilson (2020) describes the multilevel governance structure representing the interests of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic as a “complex matrix of organizations and governments” (36). Wilson (2020) and Huntington, in our interview, cite the Inuit governance system as an example. When discussing engaging Indigenous peoples, Henry Huntington mentioned the different levels of local, regional, and international governments and organizations working amongst one another across the Arctic to pursue Inuit policy goals writ large. This multilevel governance requires coordination that Wilson (2020) argues occurs, but due to differences in opinion, there can be problems with cohesion among the organizations.

A critical point interviewees emphasized was avoiding a “one-size-fits-all” approach to engagement with Indigenous peoples in the Arctic<sup>6,7,8</sup>. A “one-size-fits-all” approach flattens all Indigenous peoples in the Arctic to a monolith, when there is immense diversity among and between Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. In this way, the Permanent Participants may not account for all Indigenous identities, so it is necessary to consider the multiplicity of agencies and inequalities of the agencies that are acting (Tennberg 2010).

Ken Coates believes that the Arctic Council needs to be altered in some way to remain a relevant forum on the international stage, meaning political actors are closely following the agenda of the organization. Coates indicates that the forum of the Arctic Council is no longer the

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<sup>6</sup>Henry Huntington, Zoom interview with author, April 27, 2023.

<sup>7</sup>An Indigenous person with expertise in the Arctic Council and northern governance, Zoom interview with author, April 27, 2023.

<sup>8</sup>Lauren Divine, Zoom interview with author, March 10, 2023.



most appropriate site for Indigenous political engagement, and that the Arctic Council is no longer needed, at least from the perspective of the Permanent Participants, for their agendas to be heard. Many Indigenous political organizations now navigate through alternative fora that have arisen since the inception of the Arctic Council to pursue their policy goals.

Hierarchical systems constitute spheres of influence and create rules restricting what Indigenous participation will look like, including rights to speak in certain institutional spaces within the Arctic Council (Tennberg 1996). The arrangement of the Arctic Council has provided Indigenous peoples with indirect power, as Indigenous peoples have been able to express concerns at the nation-state level of decision-making. Christie (2011), however, notes that only the members of the Arctic Council can make binding decisions. Indigenous peoples are relegated to certain issues, and as a result issues including mining and resource development are restricted to states<sup>9,10</sup>. Policy issues such as mining and resource development need to be put on the table for discussion or Permanent Participants will go ‘forum shopping’ for a decision-making apparatus outside of the Arctic Council<sup>11</sup>.

Nord (2010) argues that the current iteration of the Arctic Council is not reflected in its founding document, the Ottawa Declaration. The Arctic Council is a more exclusive and unilateral space, different than the original intentions of the organization. For example, at the Ilulissat summit in Greenland in 2008, coastal Arctic states made a distinction between involving all members of the Arctic Council, including Permanent Participants and non-coastal Arctic states, and the littoral states in decision-making (Nord 2010). This action negates the notion of consensus-based policymaking the Arctic Council was founded upon. States in the Arctic

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Huntington, Zoom interview with author, April 27, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Ken Coates, Zoom interview with author, April 18, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Council have acted unilaterally, exercising sovereignty over rights of resources, national defense, and environmental protection in the region, negating the intentions of collective action in the Arctic Council.

*Entangled Sovereignty in the Arctic Council*

According to Ken Coates, it is important for the Arctic Council to remain relevant because of its historic precedent of involving Indigenous peoples, specifically in its provision of a seat at the table for Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. In order for Permanent Participants, and Indigenous communities, to ‘care’ about the Arctic Council is to allow Indigenous stakeholders to engage in issues that intersect with the sovereignty of the state, to be granted the ability to negotiate with state powers on issues that are important to Indigenous peoples. However, because this power is predicated by the state granting it to the Permanent Participants, Permanent Participants must currently work through a system that grants state primacy over Indigenous peoples. An opportunity in the Arctic Council lies in its current establishment and legitimacy as an international institution, in addition to the soft law nature of the organization. The Arctic Council can utilize soft law to change and be altered for Indigenous peoples to participate at a higher level than they currently do now and address the obstacles of participation highlighted in conversations with my interlocutors. The success of the Arctic Council in its inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic should not be overstated, but as shifts occur in the Arctic, the organization has to shift in order for Permanent Participants to remain interested in participating.

The language of the Arctic Council and MEMA reports aims for practices of engagement of Indigenous peoples that ensure sovereignty over decision making. In practice, the nature of the organization limits the participation of Indigenous peoples as its decision-making apparatus is based on states. The Arctic Council has an opportunity to evolve and maintain its relevance in a

shifting Arctic context through the increased involvement of Indigenous peoples in projects and recommendations.

The MEMA reports center Indigenous people's participation based on a framework of recognition by states, which obfuscates Indigenous policy goals because although MEMA could be considered a success in the realm of institutional engagement with Indigenous political organizations, it does not mean that policy goals are being communicated at the level of the Arctic Council. Indigenous peoples need to assert self-determination at all levels, not just the local level that is explicitly addressed in human rights frameworks, Indigenous peoples need to assert their right to effectively engage at an international level. My argument is that the Arctic Council, with all of its intentions of inclusion, still participates in the colonial, settler state domination of Indigenous nations, and requires Permanent Participants to conform to work within the system that is provided for Indigenous peoples via the Arctic Council. There is a clear demarcation between principle and practice in the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council can be conceptualized as an "entanglement" through which Indigenous peoples pursue self-determination. Dennison (2017) describes "entangled sovereignty" among political actors as "an ongoing process of engagement with other authorities" (685) in order to pursue their own objectives. Indigenous peoples are operating within a settler-colonial system but do so in hopes of moving beyond that system, requires resources which can limit participation and engagement of Indigenous peoples.

### *Operating Beyond the Structure of the Arctic Council*

The Arctic Council lacks formalized or legal support for Indigenous people's policy desires, which impacts the rights of self-determination within the society Indigenous peoples live in. The limitations of the Arctic Council are attributed to the settler state apparatus that rules

decision-making in the forum, operating under the assumption of state sovereignty in the Arctic region. The structure of nation-state sovereignty functions through its reinforcement by citizens and noncitizens — “parties who make decisions and those who not only abide by them but who vest with them legitimacy in their acceptance of the power that this structure generates and operates through” (Christie 2011, 334). The legitimacy of a state dominant framework is based on the recognition of its power and through abiding by its rule. When working within the Arctic Council system, Indigenous peoples via the Permanent Participants reinforce the normative assumptions of state authority over decision-making. State-dominant frameworks “minimizes [sic] Indigenous voices and paints an inaccurate picture of the capabilities of the Indigenous Permanent Participants within the Council” (Ahlness 2021, 52). It is crucial, then, for Indigenous peoples to work to exercise self-determination and sovereignty outside of the frameworks that reinforce colonial structures.

Recent contributions to critical Indigenous political theory raise parallel questions about the limits of participation, especially through the mode of recognition. Recognition, in its current application, reinforces colonial structures Indigenous peoples are operating within the dominance of the settler state, thus, it is important to consider the word “recognition” as a more asymmetric form of self-determination because state institutions are the mediators in contemporary politics of recognition (Coulthard 2007). The modes of recognition in the Arctic Council are an ineffective way of assuring Indigenous representation in international governance because they reinforce configurations of colonial power. Individuals interviewed indicated that requirements for engagement lead to possible tokenism and not true consultation at all stages of the project; the framework could possibly be used as a box to check, signaling the existence of Coulthard’s (2007) problem with recognition. For example, in Canada, there is a mandate to consult with

Indigenous peoples on projects, which the GAC official mentions contribute to burnout and ‘over-consultation. Individuals interviewed discuss high levels of institutional or consultation fatigue, meaning the organizations asked for guidance on so many projects that it could lead to overall fatigue within the organization. Consultation fatigue most likely stems from the fact that Indigenous peoples are being consulted on matters outside of their immediate purview or interest and are fatigued because they do not see the results that directly impact their communities. The issues mentioned above could be addressed by considering participation *beyond* the structure of the Arctic Council.

Indigenous political organizations can utilize soft law beyond the Arctic Council through modes of post-sovereign governance (i.e., outside of a hierarchical system) to approach decision-making in the Arctic, and work further towards sovereignty and self-determination as intended by Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. The Arctic Council is a soft law institution, which is to the benefit of the Permanent Participants. At the same time, the soft law governance structure could be applied to fora outside of the Arctic Council, specifically because it allows the flexibility of changing knowledge and information on the Arctic climate. International law in the Arctic is not as binding as in other regions of the world, enabling Indigenous peoples to utilize soft law to gain power in the Arctic, “Indigenous actors may benefit from leveraging the language of soft law— norms, legitimacy, and socialization— that color which internationalization strategies are used” (Ahlness 2021, 43). There is a preference of Indigenous peoples to a soft law system that produces non-binding agreements that allows for ongoing and continuous dialogue and has the flexibility to shift as the state of the Arctic shifts (Nord 2010). Koivurova and Heinämäki (2006) claim that soft law instruments give Indigenous peoples a better opportunity to be influential

because international law is based on states, and so they will most likely be excluded. Policy outputs from soft law would include declarations and action programs.

Engaging with soft law systems and a multilateral approach that circumnavigate the state apparatus is a way for Indigenous peoples to participate in the Arctic without being constrained or without experiencing the constraints of a dominant system within which they need to conform, which, in this case is the Arctic Council. This will provide more autonomy and agency to Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. Additionally, approaching multilateral decision-making through post-sovereign governance can subvert conventional notions of sovereignty, which Karkainen argues:

presume an authoritative lawgiver, the sovereign state, whose hierarchically imposed commands are binding on all parties subject to its jurisdiction, while at the international level decisions are taken by sovereign states acting unilaterally or through [sic] formal or informal modes of inter-sovereign cooperation. (76)

In contrast, post-sovereign governance arrangements are based upon ongoing, non-hierarchical commitments between actors (Karkkainen 2004). In the Arctic, hierarchical, fixed structures of decision-making are not sufficient for the task of addressing environmental goals.

The Arctic Council is limited as a forum for Indigenous peoples in the Arctic to assert sovereignty and self-determination, and instead should work to beyond the Arctic Council to form coalitions among Indigenous nations to engage in policy dialogues and decision-making. This involves a separation from the assumption of state sovereignty in the Arctic and the production of Indigenous circumpolar thinking and conceptualizing the Arctic as an interconnected region (Ahlness 2021). An Indigenous person with expertise on northern governance emphasized the interconnectedness among Indigenous peoples in the Arctic:

Some of us are in the subarctic but we come from colder climates. We come from polar nights to the midnight sun. We have shorter growing periods. Some of us are harvesters. Some of us are hunters, others are herders, so there's difference in our lifestyles, and and

how we hunt, trap, gather, and herd, but there's also some similarities with respect to the geopolitical world that there's colonization, patriarchy has really impacted, not negatively the the existence of Indigenous peoples. So what what we can do is when we're when we're collaborating is that we can offer up support for each other that we don't feel like we're just one voice, you know, amongst a billion. That we have the ability to caucus, to sit together, to share stories, to share meals and to work through some of the harder issues that we're impacted with and by every day.

This individual reinforces the notion of autonomy and connectedness as critical to exercising power in the Arctic. Indigenous circumpolar thinking can be applied through coalition building. One mode of coalition building is through the coordination of policy issues among regional governments. For example, Executive Director of the AIA, Jessica Veldstra, spoke of the importance of collaborations with regional governments to help address topics that are of most interest to the region and the people in the Arctic. Indigenous peoples in the Arctic can exercise their sovereignty and self-determination through building coalitions based on the power of Indigenous stories.

The work of Maaka and Flera (2000) discuss constructive engagement which requires actors both Indigenous and non-Indigenous to act jointly within a settler-state paradigm. This adds nuance to the idea that the state and indigenous peoples are two forces in opposition of one another. Carroll (2012) accounts for the duality of a third space of sovereignty that allows for a different political relationship between settler societies and indigenous peoples. Constructive engagement allows for Indigenous statehood in its recognition of the inherent sovereignty of Indigenous nations as opposed to the neoliberal discourse that regards Indigenous nations as special interest groups demanding rights over other citizens within the state (Carroll 2012).

The model of decision-making in the dominant narrative of state primacy limits the imaginations of alternatives (Christie 2011). Indigenous peoples in the Arctic, via post-sovereign governance structures which de-center hierarchies, can expand imaginations of governance

beyond the structure of the Arctic Council. In order to fully employ concepts of sovereignty and self-determination, as understood in critical Indigenous theory as asserting Indigenous power to make decisions that affect the lives of communities and political agency, the recognition amongst Indigenous peoples in the Arctic of a common story can empower Indigenous peoples to build upon existing coalitions to develop soft law policy recommendations that converge notions of participation that actualize sovereign power of Indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Current sovereign entanglements, meaning the inevitable nature of consensus-based decision-making that relies on relationships between powers, must be modified to position Indigenous peoples and states at equal status. Indigenous peoples can leverage their knowledge and relationships to the land to assert sovereignty over decision-making.

In the application of post sovereign governance, there are modes of interacting with the state that simultaneously assure the sovereignty and self-determination of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. The possibility of working beyond the Arctic Council would mean abandoning hierarchies that prioritize state demands. Approaching guarantees of sovereignty and self-determination, not through a mode of recognition, creates room for autonomy for Indigenous peoples. Without a state-centered hierarchical system, Indigenous peoples would be fully able to exercise power in a way that maintains their autonomy over territory and resources. Through modes of coalition building, and a holistic approach to the Arctic as an interconnected region, Indigenous peoples have the power to influence policy and outsider interaction with the land they have stewarded since time immemorial.

## **Conclusion**

The Arctic Council, with all of its intentions of inclusion, still participate in the colonial, settler state domination of Indigenous nations. There is a clear demarcation between principle



and practice in the Arctic Council. There are problems with sovereignty in the international governance institution, and simultaneously there has been significant progress for Indigenous peoples in international governance, specifically in the Arctic Council for Permanent Participants. Indigenous nation's sovereignty is entangled with state sovereignty, as sovereignty is based on engagement with other authorities, and power is based through negotiations with other powers. This relates to Gordon Christie's (2011) approach to governance and sovereignty, as approaches to sovereignty are dominated by settler state frameworks. Indigenous nations can choose to operate within that state-based framework, in this case within the Arctic Council, and demand to address the obstacles to capacity presented in my results. Another mode of exerting self-determination and power in the Arctic is through creative means of exerting authority by ways of respect, reciprocity, and collaboration among Indigenous nations.

This work examines the political participation of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic through the lens of the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council conceptualizes Indigenous peoples through the designation of the Permanent Participants, non-governmental organizations formed to represent Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. The inclusion of the Permanent Participants in the Arctic Council is a notable achievement for the political agency of Indigenous peoples, specifically in agenda setting and decision-making in the consensus-based forum. However, the nature of international institutions centers the settler state, and places institutional and operational constraints on the Permanent Participants that prevents the full application of sovereignty and self-determination by Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. This is important because encroaching resource development interests, such as oil drilling and shipping, have local and global consequences, and it is critical to include the original stewards of the land, the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic, in making decisions about the land that sustains them.

Through a qualitative mixed methods approach of documentary analysis and interviews I found that there are obstacles within the Arctic Council that obfuscate the participation of Indigenous peoples to the fullest extent. I examined the Protection of the Marine Environment's Meaningful Engagement of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in Marine Activities project to understand how the Arctic Council conceptualizes meaningful engagement and the participation of Indigenous peoples in Arctic Council projects. I interviewed professionals who work in Permanent Participant organization and those who have studied the Arctic Council to elucidate levels of Indigenous participation in practical applications of Arctic Council projects. The MEMA Reports signaled the value of engagement of Indigenous peoples in Arctic council projects in principle, but the interviews with individuals who have worked in and about the Arctic Council indicate that there is room for improvement and the engagement principles are not actualized in practice.

The Arctic Council is not an efficient forum in its current iteration and could be altered due to its soft law structure which enables flexibility in the procedural actions of the forum. An alternative approach to governance in the Arctic that centers the desires of Indigenous peoples is the expansion of current coalitions and the building of new ones to assert sovereignty over land and resources. This approach would involve applying Indigenous circumpolar thinking to policy making in a radical move beyond the constraints of the state dominant frameworks.

A policy-related implication for this research includes community capacity building for continued autonomy and sovereignty over decision-making concerning natural resources, including marine resources. This research contributes to critical Indigenous literature in its application of current concepts and hopes to expand on increasing Indigenous power in a world dominated by colonial frameworks. It is my hope that this research contributes to the scholarship

on the Arctic Council in particular on how the Council is incorporating Indigenous thinking and needs into its policies.

Further research is necessary to address the current halting of Arctic Council negotiations due to the Russian conflict, and its impact on Indigenous peoples in the Russian Arctic. There could be a new status quo regarding the Arctic Council due to the fact that all meetings have been postponed indefinitely due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is an unprecedented situation because the Arctic Council was established as an organization focused on peace. The current Norway chairmanship of the Arctic Council until 2025 warrants observation of how leadership in the forum handles the conflict in Russia.

Questions raised that warrant further research include expanding upon individuals who have the ability to participate in Arctic governance forums, and differences in perspectives of international governance in comparison to individuals on the ground. This could key into whether or not Indigenous peoples at the community level have buy-in or observe impacts from policy recommendations by the Arctic Council. Further research on specific localized impacts of policy on Indigenous communities is needed and requires intentional time and relationship-building.

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