

## 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference

### 2020 North Pacific Arctic Conference

### *Will Great-Power Politics Threaten Arctic Sustainability?*

Organized by the East-West Center and the Korea Maritime Institute  
Honolulu, Hawaii, 19-21 August 2020

#### CONCEPT PAPER

#### NPAC Objectives

The North Pacific Arctic Conference (NPAC), now in its tenth year, provides a venue for intensive but off-the-record engagement among policymakers/practitioners and scientists/analysts regarding Arctic issues of mutual interest to leading North Pacific Arctic states (Canada, Russia, and the United States) and non-Arctic North Pacific states (China, Japan, and Korea). It aims to provide early warning regarding emerging policy issues and to promote improved understanding of major options for addressing them among these six states both in the setting provided by the Arctic Council and in other settings. All six states are members of the G-20. Together, they account for more than 50% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions as well as a large share of global commerce.

Specifically, NPAC endeavors to:

- **Provide a Forum for Considering Arctic Issues in a Global Frame:** Provide a forum in which key individuals from relevant countries and major stakeholder groups are able to develop relationships of trust that allow participants to discuss and explore solutions to complex issues of change, both in an Arctic context and within a global context;
- **Identify Emerging Key Policy Trends:** Identify emerging key policy-relevant Arctic issues, increasingly framed by global realities and to explore alternative ways to frame them and to develop innovative options for addressing them;
- **Develop a Network of Well-Informed Leaders:** Provide a venue for well-placed people who know and trust each other and who can communicate easily concerning emerging Arctic policy and scientific issues;
- **Facilitate an Exchange Across a Range of Perspectives:** Improve the dialogue between practitioners (including government officials, industry executives, Indigenous leaders, and civil society leaders) and analysts (including scientists, engineers, emerging young analysts and other experts), both from the Arctic region and more broadly;

- **Identify Innovative Approaches for Effective Outreach Strategies:** Facilitate the development of effective strategies for communicating emerging policy findings and the results of relevant scientific research to a range of targeted audiences;
- **Engage Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic:** Include and facilitate Indigenous peoples' participation in NPAC's processes to engage their distinctive cultures and increase the awareness of others regarding their rights and interests; and
- **Attract and Involve the Next Generation of Policy and Science Leaders:** Explicitly engage the contributions of the next generation of knowledgeable people who will become leaders in addressing Arctic science and policy issues.

## **The NPAC Story – Accomplishments of the First Decade**

The North Pacific Arctic Conference (NPAC) got underway in 2011 as a joint venture of the Korea Transport Institute (KOTI) and the East-West Center (EWC). The first session of the conference took place during August 2011 on the campus of the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. The Korea Maritime Institute (KMI) co-sponsored the first session and has become the principal Korean sponsor of subsequent conferences. Each August since 2011, NPAC has reconvened for another session. The 1<sup>st</sup> Phase of the KMI-EWC NPAC joint venture took place during 2012-2014, followed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Phase during 2016-2017 and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Phase during 2018-2020. The August 2020 session will round out a decade of the NPAC experience.

Two considerations have motivated the organizers of NPAC from the outset. One centers on dramatic changes in the Arctic itself, starting with the initial collapse of sea ice in the Arctic Basin in 2007 producing, among other things, a surge of interest on the part of outsiders in the development of the Arctic's increasingly accessible natural resources. The second arises from the observation that mainstream discussions of Arctic issues in the past have reflected a North Atlantic perspective. NPAC, by contrast, adopts a North Pacific perspective, rooted in the recognition that there is rising interest in Arctic affairs among Asian states like China, Japan, and Korea, and dedicated to stimulating enhanced communication regarding Arctic matters between the Asian states on the one hand and the United States, Canada, and Russia on the other.

Each year NPAC brings together at the East-West Center a group of 35-40 individuals who engage in extensive and free-flowing conversations about emerging Arctic issues on an off-the-record basis. Participants include government officials, scientists, Indigenous persons, representatives of the business community, and those associated with nongovernmental organizations. They spend 2.5 days together in an environment that encourages informal but substantive exchanges about issues of mutual interest. Each annual session of the conference includes a core group of returning participants together with a larger group of individuals possessing expertise on topics selected for discussion at that session. The conference organizers produce a proceedings volume following each session that includes all the presentations made during the session as well as summaries of the discussions that ensued. A total of 322 individuals have participated in NPAC sessions since the beginning in 2011. A major achievement of NPAC is the

development of a growing group of people located in different countries and drawn from different walks of life who know each other personally and are able to communicate comfortably and confidently about a range of issues pertaining to the Arctic.

Recently, NPAC has paid increased attention to the importance of providing opportunities for emerging professionals to participate actively in the formulation and dissemination of innovative ways of thinking about Arctic issues. This has resulted in the development of a practice of inviting members of the next generation of men and women interested in the Arctic to participate in the annual conference as NPAC Fellows. Nine fellows attended NPAC 2019, with one or more of them playing an active role in each of the panels. This practice, evolving toward the end of the first decade, has become a fixture and will remain a priority for those responsible for designing annual sessions in 2020 and beyond.

NPAC addresses issues of current interest from a policy perspective. But it does so in a holistic manner that integrates the perspectives of a highly diverse range of participants. The goals are to provide early warning regarding the nature of emerging Arctic issues, to frame them in ways conducive to constructive policy consideration, and to stimulate innovative thinking about these issues (e.g. the development of the Arctic's energy resources, the implementation of the Polar Code, the role of non-state actors in the Arctic Council) rather than to work out the details of responses to specific issues on the policy agenda. Participants in NPAC sessions will not come away with precise language to be used in dealing with specific items on the policy agenda. But they often benefit from forward-looking thinking regarding issues that are coming into focus as policy concerns and from informed discussion regarding alternative ways to frame issues to make them actionable in policy arenas. Participation in NPAC offers an opportunity both to explore innovative approaches to issues already populating the Arctic policy agenda in a safe environment and to gain insight regarding issues likely to make their way onto this agenda in the near future. The NPAC format encourages vigorous discussion in a setting in which participants can express themselves without concerns about political sensitivities.

## **NPAC 2020 – The Power of Narratives in Policy Settings**

During the decade that has elapsed since the inception of the North Pacific Arctic Conference, the Arctic has experienced a cascade of transformative changes calling into question the central premises that have guided Arctic policymaking since the end of the cold war. These changes, which interact in complex ways, involve biophysical, economic, political, and social forces that will condition and potentially threaten efforts to achieve sustainability in the high latitudes during the foreseeable future. Taken together, they pose growing challenges to the Arctic governance system put in place through the development of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy and the creation of the Arctic Council during the 1990s and refined during the 2000s and 2010s. The perpetuation of the status quo is not a realistic option for those committed to a sustainable Arctic. While the way forward remains unclear at this stage, the need for innovation in Arctic governance is emerging as a critical challenge for the 2020s. A central issue for NPAC 2020 concerns the merits of alternative ways to frame this challenge.

In the aftermath of the cold war, the Arctic states took the lead in launching a series of initiatives aimed at promoting international cooperation in the high latitudes on a regional basis. A clear vision, often described as the Arctic Zone of Peace narrative, evolved to guide the development of practices arising from these efforts and to ensure the coherence of the resultant arrangements. According to this narrative, the Circumpolar Arctic is a distinctive international region with a policy agenda of its own highlighting issues of environmental protection, the well-being of the region's human communities, and more broadly sustainable development. Military security is not a suitable topic for consideration in this setting. The eight Arctic states can and should take the lead in addressing these issues by virtue of their sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction in the region. Indigenous peoples organizations have a right to engage in these initiatives as Permanent Participants. Other interested parties – non-Arctic states and non-state actors – should be allowed to participate but only in the role of observers subject to explicit limitations on their engagement in Arctic affairs. There is no need to negotiate an Arctic Treaty to formalize these arrangements; a more flexible system of informal practices will provide a sufficient basis for pursuing sustainable development in the Arctic.

For some years, this narrative proved effective in guiding the course of international cooperation regarding the high latitudes. It supplied the conceptual basis for the creation of the Arctic Council in 1996 and for its development over time into a more complex body including a multiplicity of operational mechanisms supported by an international secretariat. It provided a basis for launching a series of influential policy initiatives, such as the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (2004) and the Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment (2009). It served as a platform for the development of legally binding agreements on specific topics, such as search and rescue (2011), oil spill preparedness and response (2013), and scientific cooperation (2017).

By 2013, the foreign ministers of the Arctic states assembled at the biennial Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting felt justified in proclaiming with a clear note of satisfaction that “We have achieved mutual understanding and trust, addressed issues of common concern, strengthened our co-operation, influenced international action, established a standing secretariat, and, under the auspices of the [Arctic] Council, Arctic States have concluded legally binding agreements.”

With the passage of time, however, a number of developments have triggered growing concerns about the adequacy of the Arctic Zone of Peace narrative as a basis for framing and addressing Arctic issues. The central thread tying these developments together is a growing interest in the Arctic on the part of both powerful Arctic states and outside actors fueled by priorities extending beyond issues relating to environmental protection, the well-being of Arctic communities, and sustainable development. In addition, spillovers from broader shifts in the global landscape of international relations are impacting the handling of Arctic issues increasingly. The effect has been to catalyze a reemergence of great-power politics in the Arctic and a move toward securitization as the basis of an alternative perspective running counter to the Arctic Zone of Peace narrative. Though it has not yet crystalized into a compelling competitor to the dominant perspective of the postwar era, the rise of this new way of framing Arctic issues has turned the region into an increasingly contested space among those responsible for policymaking.

The collapse of sea ice, starting in 2007 and continuing during the ensuing years, has increased the accessibility of the Arctic and stimulated interest among powerful economic players seeking to exploit the natural resources of the Arctic and to explore the potential of Arctic shipping routes. As a resurgent great power, Russia has developed a strategy centered on exploiting Arctic hydrocarbons, stimulating international interest in the use of the Northern Sea Route, and bolstering its military presence in the country's northern region. China has shown increasing interest in the economic potential of the Arctic, initiating the concept of the Arctic Silk Road as an element in its larger Belt and Road Initiative. The United States, under the Trump Administration, has reacted to these developments defensively, treating them as security issues requiring enhanced measures to respond to perceived threats to the country's national interests. Globally, especially in the wake of Russia's annexation of the Crimea in 2014 and the imposition of western sanctions in response to this action, relations among the great powers have become increasingly conflictual. The effect has been to draw the Arctic increasingly into a global system featuring both acceleration in the onset of climate change and interactions among major players whose thinking about matters of Arctic policy is colored by a heightened influence of great-power politics.

The result is the growth of a sense of uncertainty regarding narratives to be used in thinking about the future of the Arctic. Does it make sense to continue to treat the Arctic as a distinctive region with a policy agenda of its own, despite tighter links to global developments? If so, is there a need to revise or replace the Arctic Zone of Peace narrative as a basis for framing issues for consideration in policy arenas? Will securitization trigger developments that interfere with efforts to achieve sustainability in the Arctic? How to maintain Arctic Sustainability in the wave of high politics? Are there ways to address issues involving great-power politics without interfering with ongoing efforts to achieve sustainability in the Arctic? Do these developments raise questions about the effectiveness of the Arctic Council in addressing Arctic affairs? Is there a need to consider adjustments in the constitutive provisions of the Arctic Council to allow it to operate effectively under the conditions now arising in the Arctic? If so, what adjustments would make sense and how can they be introduced during the foreseeable future? These questions form the backdrop for discussions of specific issues at NPAC 2020.

## **Conference Structure**

NPAC 2020 will tackle these issues in four substantive sessions bracketed by short opening and closing sessions. The first substantive session will provide a broad overview of recent developments in the Arctic. Three additional sessions will explore these developments as they arise in more specific issue areas. In each case, the critical concern centers on sorting out the relative merits of competing interpretive frameworks and not just documenting the actual course of events in the Arctic. Each of the four substantive sessions will include a consideration of three embedded themes: climate change, community well-being, and governance.

### **Opening Session**

**Rationale.** The opening session will set the stage for NPAC 2020. It will consist of two presentations: one by a long-term NPAC participant reflecting on the accomplishments of NPAC on the occasion of the

10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conference and a second by a senior policymaker drawing attention to policy issues regarding the Arctic coming into focus today.

**Session objectives:** To reflect on a decade of experience with NPAC and to launch the discussion of Arctic policy issues arising during the 2020s

### **Session I: Great-Power Politics in the New Arctic**

**Rationale:** Over the last 30 years, most thinking about the Arctic has reflected the idea that the region is properly regarded as a zone of peace and directed attention to the pursuit of cooperation regarding issues of environmental protection and sustainable development. In recent years, however, great-power politics have resurfaced in the Arctic in a number of forms, including renewed East-West tensions and a growing rivalry among China, Russia, and the United States. Perhaps even more important is a pronounced tendency to interpret developments in the Arctic through the lens of power politics highlighting competition rather than cooperation on a regional scale. What are the underlying drivers of this securitization in thinking about Arctic issues? Does this development pose a threat to the continued pursuit of broader and longer-term objectives like sustainable development in the region? Fundamentally, will a growing concern with a narrative emphasizing competition and power politics undermine the search for innovative responses to the profound changes unfolding in the Arctic and beyond as a result of the accelerating impacts of climate change and the societal impacts of a range of transformative technological developments ranging from artificial intelligence to synthetic biology?

**Session objectives:** To establish an understanding of the re-emergence of great-power politics in the Arctic, the resultant securitization of Arctic policy discourse, the consequences of this development for the operation of the Arctic Council and, more generally, ways to craft suitable responses to a range of profound biophysical and technological forces affecting Arctic sustainability.

### **Session II: Beringia: What's in Store for the Bering Strait Region**

**Rationale:** The Bering Strait provides the only passage for ships transiting the North Pacific into the Arctic Ocean. It is also a narrow international strait that is seasonally ice-covered and is a highly productive area providing habitat for many species (such as seabirds, walruses, and whales). The Russian and United States coastlines extending northward and southward from the strait are populated with predominantly Indigenous communities that depend on marine resources (fish, birds, marine mammals, shellfish and more) for their livelihood as they have for more than a thousand years. But Beringia is experiencing rapid and dramatic changes. Sea ice is disappearing, and coastal communities are subject to intensified storm surges. Marine life is changing rapidly. Commercial ship traffic passing through the Bering Strait, including LNG tankers and bulk carriers, is increasing. Russia and the United States exercise jurisdiction over the waters of the Bering Strait and both states have worked together bilaterally and at the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to develop measures of protection for the people in the region as well as the marine environment. The complex issues of expanded marine traffic through this critical marine region will require key engagement of Arctic communities and commercial stakeholders in decision-making related to marine safety and environmental protection.

**Session objectives:** To understand the complex suite of drivers of change, uncertainties, and issues relating to the well-being of Arctic communities and preservation of the environment in the Bering Strait Region in an era of increasing commercial ship traffic.

### **Session III: The Northern Sea Route – Sustainability of Large-scale Businesses in the Arctic**

**Rationale:** The Northern Sea Route (NSR) running along Russia’s northern border provides a link between Asia and Europe that is substantially shorter than the Suez Canal Route. Treated as a priority by Russia and as a matter of growing interest on the part of China, Japan, and Korea, the NSR is already seeing significant increases in destination shipping (e.g. the operations of ice-strengthened tankers transporting liquified natural gas from the Yamal Peninsula). But the future of the route as a shipping artery for through traffic is sensitive to a variety of biophysical, economic, legal, political, social, strategic, and technological considerations. Despite the considerable attractions of the NSR, an air of uncertainty lies over the future of the route. A critical question concerns the extent to which uses of the route that meet economic and political requirements can be made sustainable in terms of biophysical and sociocultural considerations.

**Session objectives:** To examine a variety of issues relating to increased commercial shipping along the Northern Sea Route and, in the process, to explore more general questions relating to the sustainability of largescale economic development in the Arctic.

### **Session IV: The Future of the Arctic Ocean: Challenges and Opportunities**

**Rationale:** Although all Arctic states recognize the applicability of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to the Arctic Ocean, efforts to deal with specific issues relating to governance in this area have developed piecemeal. The Polar Code dealing with shipping in Arctic waters is an instrument adopted by the International Maritime Organization. The Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement is a stand-alone arrangement negotiated by the five Arctic coastal states and five others. Issues of search and rescue and oil spill preparedness and responses are subject to separate agreements negotiated under the auspices of the Arctic Council. The International Arctic Science Committee plays a central role in organizing scientific research on marine issues. The challenge is to transcend this piecemeal approach, finding ways to manage issues relating to the Arctic Ocean in a more comprehensive or synoptic fashion. In 2015, at the beginning of the US Chairmanship, the Arctic Council sought to address this challenge by creating a Task Force on Arctic Marine Cooperation (TFAMC) with a mandate to develop proposals for one or more mechanisms to achieve comprehensive Arctic marine management. Renewed for another two years in 2017 at the start of the Finnish Chairmanship, the TFAMC was unable to produce significant results. Nevertheless, Iceland, the current chair of the Council, continues to place high priority on Arctic marine issues. What are the obstacles to achieving success in this realm? Is the Arctic Council the right venue for addressing this challenge?

**Session objectives:** To assess the adequacy of existing arrangements to promote marine cooperation in the Arctic and to explore options for promoting comprehensive cooperation in the Arctic Ocean in the future.

**Closing Session: NPAC's Future – Where are we going?**

**Rationale:** The 2020 conference marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NPAC process. This is a moment not only to reflect on past achievements but also to think about opportunities for enhancing the effectiveness of NPAC going forward. What lessons can we draw from a decade of experience with (i) promoting dialogue regarding Arctic issues among participants from the major North Pacific states and (ii) exploring innovative ideas intended to broaden the range of options considered by policymakers responsible for dealing with Arctic issues? How should the answers to these questions be reflected in the planning process for NPAC 2021 and beyond?

**Session objectives:** To distill lessons from the NPAC experience over the last decade that can strengthen NPAC going forward.

**Embedded Themes**

Some issues arise repeatedly in the deliberations of NPAC; they cut across the topics of the individual sessions and provide lenses to be used by those probing the dimensions of each topic. Bearing these common threads in mind serves to lend coherence to the work of the conference. Three such themes are prominent in NPAC 2020: climate change, community well-being, and governance.

**Climate change:** The impacts of climate change in the Arctic, already developing more rapidly than anywhere else on the planet, are accelerating at an alarming rate. Among these are the dramatic loss of sea ice, increased melting of the Greenland ice sheet, the thawing of permafrost, the spread of wildfire, and associated changes in Arctic plants and animals. In many ways, the Arctic is the leading edge of the emerging global climate emergency. Ironically, climate change also is an important driver of the growth of interest in the Arctic on the part of the outside world as it has increased the accessibility of the region and its stores of natural resources. For those who live in the Arctic, the critical question focuses on the development of adaptation strategies, since the course of climate change is driven by forces beyond their control. At the same time, there are Arctic feedback mechanisms (e.g. the absorption of carbon dioxide by open water, the release of methane from melting permafrost) ensuring that the impacts of climate change in the Arctic will affect the global climate system.

**Community well-being:** The Arctic's human communities have experienced disruptive impacts driven by both biophysical changes and sociocultural developments. In extreme cases, these communities are facing the need to relocate due to coastal erosion and to devise strategies to cope with the world's highest suicide rates. Yet Arctic communities have a reputation for maintaining resilience, even in the face of extreme pressures. There are success stories in the Arctic that can serve as a source of inspiration as well as disturbances posing profound challenges. The critical issue for Arctic communities centers on the need to develop strategies to enhance sustainability in the face of disruptive changes that show no sign of abating.

**Governance:** Cutting across all the issues addressed by NPAC 2020 are questions regarding the adequacy of existing governance systems to address emerging needs for governance. Some of the relevant questions are best thought of in broad terms. For example, will the reemergence of great-power politics in the Arctic require adjustments in the Arctic Zone of Peace narrative that has provided an interpretive framework for the development of the Arctic Council and related arrangements since the 1990s. Others are more concrete. Is there a need to make adjustments in the Arctic Council's rules of procedure regarding the roles of observers? What are the prospects of strengthening the provisions of the Polar Code to address issues like the use or carriage of heavy fuel oils? What steps should be taken to implement the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement? The critical issue here concerns the need to adjust governance systems to address changing conditions, without undermining their effectiveness.