



Just where is the “Circumpolar” dimension supposed to fit in the larger scheme of foreign policy. And, can it really compete — especially in the continued absence of a broad national constituency of interest — for sufficient share of the foreign affairs budget to become more than just a token. Unless taxes are increased, or other federal spending envelopes, perhaps Health or Defence, are raided, the cost of developing a meaningful “Northern” dimension to foreign policy will come at the expense of other foreign affairs initiatives. In that context, spending less on the UN or trade development, or the promotion of Canadian culture abroad, may meet stiff resistance from other and larger Canadian interest groups.

Subsidiarity and informal links

Perhaps the most remarkable and impressive Circumpolar achievement to date is not the Arctic Council, which ultimately is the child of nation states, but the myriad links across boundaries which have been created by Northerners. Often those links have been established without support from national governments. Sometimes without even their knowledge. First Nations, scientists, regional governments and sub-regional entities have created a web that spans the top of the globe. The ICC (Inuit Circumpolar Conference), has demonstrated that a pan-Arctic organization can be effective without sheltering under the umbrella of a government-to-government organization. Similarly, the Northern Forum, which includes members as diverse as Lapland, Dornod in Mongolia, several regions in Northern Russia, Alaska and Alberta has underscored the value of region-to-region grouping. Smaller, formalized groupings, span the Nordic countries, and link the Canadian territories with Alaska.

Informal linkages, ranging from the Arctic Winter Games, to exchange visits by local and municipal authorities, are even more diverse.

These are universally applauded as important, not only in themselves, but as building blocks to develop a “Circumpolar” dimension in the larger foreign policy context. However, there seems to have been little consideration of the danger for larger, more formal structures, like the Arctic Council, created at the level of national governments, to dominate and perhaps even throttle the lower-level linkages.

At least worthy of discussion is whether the widely-held objective of a vibrant, effective Arctic Council, and the continued development of myriad lesser links are mutually compatible.

Canada, notably in the francophonie, where Quebec and New Brunswick also have seats at the table, has been a leader in developing the concept of multi-level representation in multilateral institutions. Is that type of structure workable? Does Canada want to champion it with respect to Circumpolar affairs?

There is an allied notion, proposed by some Northerners and others, that they as stakeholders, should be the prime movers in determining Arctic and Circumpolar policy. The difficulty, perhaps especially for Canada, where the North has the least domestic weight among any of the Arctic eight, is that any “Circumpolar” dimension in foreign policy will require full force of the national government. It is unlikely to enjoy that backing unless that dimension is seen as directly relevant to all Canadians.