

# Keeping the Arctic Council alive



## Policy brief December 2024

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## Summary

A new study of state (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council provides key insights about how to sustain the effectiveness of international environmental cooperation.

## Key messages

- The United States and China engage in both extensive legitimation and delegitimation of the Arctic Council at specific times.
- Their delegitimation of the Arctic Council was driven by growing security tensions and breakdown of trust.
- The Arctic Council can take several measures to protect itself from challenges to its legitimacy from this kind of state delegitimation.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in the spring of 2022 presented a sizeable geopolitical shock to the workings of the Arctic Council, one of the main institutions established to provide environmental governance over the Arctic. Responding to the invasion, which was carried out by an Arctic Council member state, the other members of the organization – Canada, Finland, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and the US – chose to temporarily suspend its operations. At the time, Russia was the chair of the Council, and it continued its program with participation from other countries.

Since then, and particularly after Norway took over the Arctic Council chair in May 2023, there have been considerable efforts to resume at least some of the work of the organization.<sup>1</sup> However, the suspension of the Arctic Council has brought to the surface numerous pressing, almost existential, questions about its future. How can the Arctic Council manage to continue to operate effectively in a region increasingly beset by geopolitical tensions, with or without the Russian involvement?<sup>2</sup>



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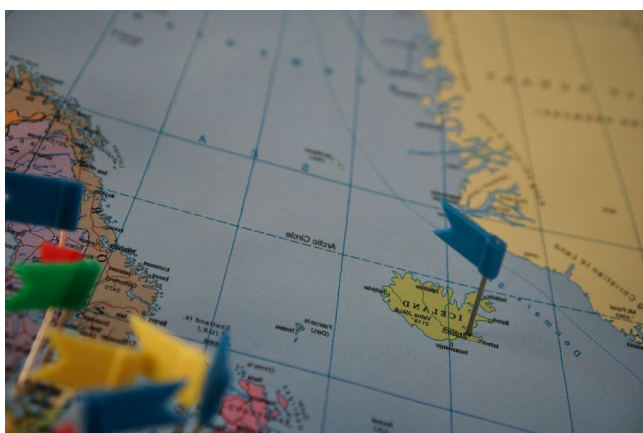
Photo (above): © Visit Greenland / Unsplash

<sup>1</sup> Canova, E., & Pic, P. (2023, June 13). The Arctic Council in Transition: Challenges and Perspectives for the new Norwegian Chairship. The Arctic Institute. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/arctic-council-transition-challenges-perspectives-new-norwegian-chairship/>

<sup>2</sup> Edvardson, A. (2024, February 20). Seeking Consensus for More Efficient Arctic Cooperation. High North News. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/seeking-consensus-more-efficient-arctic-cooperation>

Will other global actors potentially important to the governance of the Arctic, such as China, continue to support the Arctic Council in this new context?<sup>3</sup> The answers to these questions depend to a considerable degree on the extent to which different stakeholders believe in the purpose of the Arctic Council.

This is an example of a broader question faced by policymakers: how can we maintain the ongoing effectiveness of environmental international organizations (IOs) in the face of geopolitical turbulence? Answering this question requires an understanding of the way in which different states support and challenge the legitimacy of these IOs.



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The recent study carried out by Mistra Geopolitics, which examines the legitimation and delegitimation of the Arctic Council, provides new insights into this. It points to policies that global governance organizations can take to ensure their ongoing effectiveness, including producing more targeted self-legitimation, working to build trust between members, and increasing connection between different IOs.

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Research has increasingly shown that in order to continue to operate effectively, global governance organizations need a high level of legitimacy in the eyes of different audiences.<sup>4</sup> This legitimacy is seen in the sociological sense as different individuals’ beliefs that the governance organization is appropriate to provide governance, or essentially their belief that it is the right actor to carry out this role. For the United Nations to effectively deal with climate change, for instance, people need to believe that it is the appropriate body to tackle this challenge. Where such legitimacy is lacking, global governance organizations may struggle to get people from different states to participate in their activities, and also to get people to comply with policies or regulations they try to implement.

There has also been growing research looking at what affects people’s legitimacy beliefs regarding governance organizations.<sup>5</sup> This has shown how actors engage in practices of legitimation and delegitimation which work to either enhance or reduce belief in an organization. When former US President Trump describes the World Health Organization (WHO) as an institution manipulated by China, for example, this can be seen as a form of discursive delegitimation that might challenge broader legitimacy beliefs about this organization. This research into (de)legitimation practices has highlighted the important role of state actors in supporting and challenging the legitimacy of organizations, particularly those major states with considerable voice in international society.<sup>6</sup> What states such as the US and China say about global governance organizations can have far-reaching consequences in terms of legitimacy beliefs.

## Studying (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council

Our recent study sought to provide new understanding of the processes through which key states engage in legitimation and delegitimation of global governance organizations. It did this through detailed analysis of how two key actors, the United States and China, engaged in (de)legitimation of the Arctic Council over an extended period between 2010 and 2022. In this study, *legitimation* was defined as statements or actions which could potentially reinforce legitimacy beliefs about the Arctic Council.

3 Jonassen, T. (2022, October 15). China: “Will Not Acknowledge Arctic Council Without Russia.” High North News. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-will-not-acknowledge-arctic-council-without-russia>

4 See for example: Hurd, I. (1999). Legitimacy and authority in international politics. *International Organization*, 53(2), 379–408; Dellmuth, L., & Tallberg, J. (2015). The social legitimacy of international organisations. *Review of International Studies*, 41(3), 451–475.

5 See for example: Bexell, M., Jönsson, K., & Uhlin, A. (Eds.). (2022). *Legitimation and Delegitimation in Global Governance*. Oxford University Press.

6 Binder, M., & Heupel, M. (2015). The Legitimacy of the UN Security Council: Evidence from Recent General Assembly Debates. *International Studies Quarterly*, 59(2), 238–250.

Meanwhile, *delegitimation* was defined as statements or actions that could challenge these beliefs. The study primarily focused on discursive forms of (de)legitimation or statements that were made in speech or writing by representatives of the two states.<sup>7</sup> In addition to analysing the variation in the amount of (de)legitimation statements these two states produced, the study also sought to investigate how this variation was linked to political developments taking place around the world.

Overall, this analysis can tell us how these large powers, which are both influential voices within international society with the potential to have significant effects on broader beliefs, are acting to support or challenge the legitimacy of the Arctic Council. It can therefore help those working with the Arctic Council to develop measures to increase support for the organization, as well as measures to counter potential challenges to its legitimacy that state actors might produce.

### Main findings

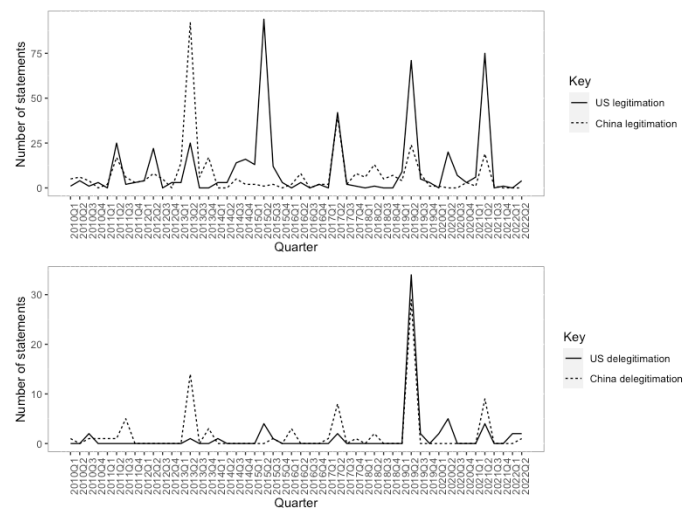
This analysis found that both the US and China vary in the amount of legitimation and delegitimation of the Arctic Council they produce over time (Figure 1). The US produced relatively sustained legitimation of the Arctic Council throughout the period 2012 to 2022, but the amount of legitimation statements did still vary slightly, with the US appearing to engage in legitimation in a periodic way. This ongoing support for the Arctic Council from the US might be expected, given that it is a founding member of the organization and also the leader of the liberal international order (LIO).

However, the US was still found to produce a surprising amount of delegitimation of the Arctic Council as well. This was particularly towards the end of the period analysed (2010–2022), which was when the US was governed by the Trump administration. This interesting finding might be seen as a warning that even those states whose ongoing support of liberal international institutions is often taken for granted can also, at certain times, engage in practices that undermine the legitimacy of these organizations. During the late Trump administration, the US produced considerable delegitimation of the Arctic Council, which could have had damaging effects on its legitimacy.

China was found to produce fewer legitimation statements about the Arctic Council across the 12-year period. This might be expected given the less central role that China, which has had observer status since 2013, plays in the organization. However, China was still found to provide some discursive support for the legitimacy of the Arctic Council. This finding challenges the often-made assumption that non-Arctic states and emerging powers only act to challenge existing forms of governance. It usefully reveals how there is potential for states such as China to play an active role in supporting the overall legitimacy of organizations like the Arctic Council, something which could potentially be fostered more through carefully calibrated engagement with these states.

At the same time, China was also found to produce a considerable amount of delegitimation of the Arctic Council across the 12 years. This can be seen as evidence of the way in which states that are late participants to organizations, or are restricted in their participation, might act to discursively challenge the overall legitimacy of these organizations. Recognising that this kind of challenge is occurring can be useful to policymakers to enable them to take steps to prevent it from damaging broader beliefs about the organization.

**Figure 1.** The US and China’s legitimation and delegitimation of the Arctic Council between 2010 and 2022.



<sup>7</sup> The study involved content analysis of texts produced about the Arctic Council by state actors from these two countries between 2010 and 2022. These were 223 documents produced by the US State Department and 309 articles produced by the Chinese state media outlet Xinhua. The analysis coded statements in these articles taken as legitimation or delegitimation of the Arctic Council, as well as references to political developments made alongside these statements.

## Policy recommendations

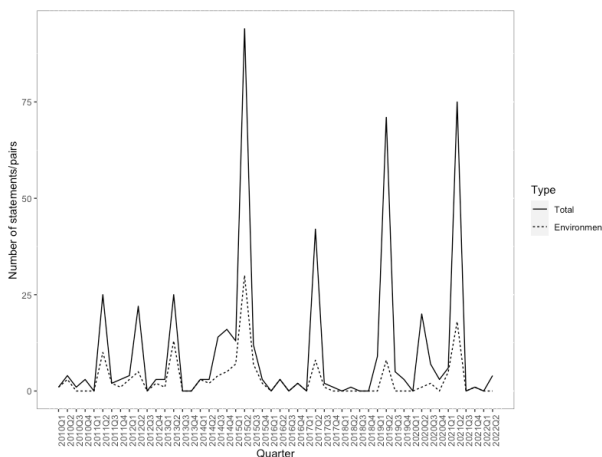
The findings in this study point to different measures which policymakers involved in the Arctic Council, or other governance organizations, could take in order to sustain the broader legitimacy of the organization and ensure their ongoing effectiveness.

- Governance organizations should engage in targeted self-legitimation which aims to address those situations when states frequently produce delegitimation. For example, China produced a considerable amount of delegitimation around the time it was granted observer status, possibly as part of an attempt to project its voice within the organization. Both the US and China engaged in considerable amounts of delegitimation around 2019, when security tensions between major powers were heightened. If the Arctic Council can identify such periods when states are likely to make delegitimation statements about it, then it can respond to these with its own statements which both refute claims being made and justify its appropriateness for governing environmental issues in the region.
- Governance organizations should work to build trust between different member states/participants in organizations, particularly those with tense relations, such as the US and China. The analysis showed that states are particularly likely to engage in delegitimation of the Arctic Council at times when there is a breakdown of trust between them.<sup>8</sup> For example, many of China's delegitimation statements during 2019 were made alongside references to tensions between it and the US, or references to particular US actions around the world. To counter the emergence and spiralling of such delegitimation, the Arctic Council could work to build up trust between different members. This might be achieved through mechanisms promoting frequent engagement, informal meetings, or ways for states to articulate their positions. This might be achieved through mechanisms promoting frequent engagement, informal meetings, or ways for states to articulate their positions.

**Figure 2, left.** Total US legitimation statements and the number made in reference to developments in international environmental cooperation.

The study also analysed how different political developments affect the two states' (de)legitimation practices, leading to them producing more legitimation or delegitimation statements. Here it also generated a number of interesting findings. First, it found that *growing security tensions* between major powers appeared to be connected to increased delegitimation from both the US and China. Towards the end of the period analysed, when the US made most of its delegitimation statements, these were made in texts alongside references to security tensions and the actions of both China and Russia. Meanwhile many of the delegitimation statements produced by China were made alongside references to tensions between it and the US, or references to US actions around the world.

Second, the study found that political developments in *global environmental cooperation* were linked to changes in the (de)legitimation practices of the two states. When the US made more legitimation statements about the Arctic Council, these tended to be made in documents alongside references to progress in broader international climate cooperation (Figure 2). In a similar way, when China engaged in more legitimation of the Arctic Council, many of its statements were made alongside references to positive developments in broader climate cooperation. Meanwhile, when China made more delegitimation statements, at least some of these were made alongside references to issues occurring in this wider international environmental cooperation on climate change, particularly the Trump administration's attitude towards this. Overall, this suggests that developments in broader climate change governance can have spillover effects on states' (de)legitimation practices towards one institution within this.



<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of the important role of trust in international organizations, see: Rathbun, B. C. (2011). Before hegemony: Generalized trust and the creation and design of international security organizations. *International Organization*, 65(2), 243–273.

## Acknowledgements

- Governance organizations should work to enhance connections between different environmental IOs and processes, to produce positive spillover effects of the kind found in this study. It was found that when there are positive developments within broader climate change governance, this leads states to produce more legitimation of the Arctic Council. There is therefore a positive spillover effect from the developments occurring in the wider environmental regime. Such an effect could potentially be increased through a number of different measures. First, the Arctic Council could endeavour to be included and mentioned in discussions about environmental issues occurring in different IOs and at different levels of governance, which would potentially benefit its legitimacy. Second, the Arctic Council should ensure that in its communications and self-legitimation it echoes the developments occurring in other IOs and particularly those under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Taking these steps, the Arctic Council can ensure it is closely linked with broader developments and will gain legitimacy as a result of this association.

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## Navigating towards a secure and sustainable future

Mistra Geopolitics examines the dynamics of geopolitics, human security and environmental change. Mistra Geopolitics brings together an interdisciplinary research team of six Swedish consortium partners: Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Linköping University, Uppsala University, Stockholm University and Lund University, with two high-profile international research institutes, E3G and adelphi.

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