

Towards an Arctic Council strategic plan - Discussion paper

2016-08-24

U.S. Chairmanship

Arctic Council Secretariat

<http://hdl.handle.net/11374/1793>

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Arctic Council SAO plenary meeting (eDocs code: ACSAOUS203) 5-6 October 2016, Portland, Maine, U.S.A.

Document Title

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Agenda item number

9

Submitted by

U.S. Chairmanship

Document filename

EDOCS-3753-v1A-
ACSAOUS203_Portland_2016_9_Towards_an_AC_strategic_plan-
Discussion_paper.PDF

Number of pages, not including this cover sheet

4

Type (e.g. report, progress report, etc.)

Discussion paper

TOWARDS AN ARCTIC COUNCIL STRATEGIC PLAN
DISCUSSION PAPER
2 August 2016

INTRODUCTION

The Arctic Council has, in different ways and at various times, articulated its basic objectives and the fundamental principles that inform its work, including through the 1996 Ottawa Declaration, the 2013 Vision for the Arctic, and Declarations adopted at Arctic Council Ministerial meetings. The Working Groups of the Arctic Council have also developed numerous strategic planning documents.¹

The Arctic Council as a whole has not, however, undertaken the development of an overarching strategic plan with a long-term view; e.g., looking out 10-20 years into the future. At the SAO Executive Meeting in Fairbanks (March 2016), delegations exchanged preliminary views on the possibility of undertaking such an initiative. As a number of delegations noted, such a strategic plan could enhance the ability of the Arctic Council and its subsidiary bodies work together as a more coherent whole and could guide the subsidiary bodies in setting priorities and developing their own future work plans. A strategic plan could build on the existing strategic documents noted above and accelerate their implementation.

As requested, the Arctic Council Secretariat (ACS) has since compiled and circulated some materials to assist in further consideration of this topic, including:

- Relevant excerpts from the Ottawa Declaration, the Vision for the Arctic and various Ministerial Declarations;
- Strategic material provided by the six Working Groups; and
- A summary of strategic planning documents adopted by select international bodies similar in size or nature to the Arctic Council.

This paper offers some further thoughts on this topic and suggests a possible way forward for further discussion at the SAO Meeting in Portland.

DISCUSSION

At the Fairbanks SAO meeting, most participants seemed willing to consider the development of an Arctic Council Strategic Plan or similar document. Levels of enthusiasm for such an initiative varied, and no general consensus emerged regarding the scope of the initiative, the process by which it would be undertaken or a timeline for the work. Drawing on the initial discussion in Fairbanks and the material received from the ACS since that meeting, below are

¹ These include, *inter alia*, the ACAP Strategy to Address Contamination of the Arctic Environment and its People (2016-2000)(under development); the AMAP Strategic Framework 2010+; CAFF's Actions for Biodiversity 2013-2021: Implementing the Recommendations of the Arctic Biodiversity Assessment; the EPPR Strategic Plan; the Arctic Marine Strategic Plan (updated for 2015-2025); and the Sustainable Development Action Plan (2004) and Strategic Plan (under development).

some suggested guidelines and parameters that could help to keep such an initiative manageable while also producing a worthwhile outcome.

A. Guidelines for Development of an Arctic Council Strategic Plan

It would be necessary to agree on some basic parameters before undertaking this initiative. Below are some ideas for consideration:

- **Form should follow function** – An Arctic Council Strategic Plan should identify key principles and priorities for work (“functions”). Once those are agreed, the Council could consider – either as a Phase II of the initiative or as a second, distinct initiative – whether to make any changes to its structure (“form”) so as to best carry out these functions.
- **Time period should cover at least a decade** – an Arctic Council Strategic Plan should assess likely needs and set priorities over a period of at least 10 years and possibly as long as 20 years. The Strategic Plan should contain a commitment to update it at appropriate intervals.
- **Do not “reinvent the wheel”** – Rather than beginning with a blank slate (“imagine that we were creating the Arctic Council for the first time today – what should its strategic plan contain?”), the initiative to develop an Arctic Council Strategic Plan should take account of the 20-year history of the Council and its accomplishments as a starting point. In light of that history, the initiative should consider what the Council seeks to accomplish, and the challenges such as climate change that it is likely to face, in its next 10 (or 15, or 20) years.
- **Relationship to existing strategic documents** – An Arctic Council Strategic Plan should complement the strategic documents that the Council has already approved, such as those referred to in footnote 1. However, the Arctic Council Strategic Plan should also inform the development of *future* strategic documents (and updates of existing strategic documents) by the Working Groups; *e.g.*, by setting priorities for future work of the Council as a whole.
- **Use of external reviews** – The Arctic Council should develop a Strategic Plan “in-house” through a process of discussion and negotiation among SAOs, PPs and WGs. However, as part of this process, participants should consider the broad range of recommendations contained in external reviews of the Arctic Council (*e.g.*, the reports of the Multilateral Audits Groups, think-tanks and other non-governmental sources, academics, etc.).

B. Possible Substantive Areas for Inclusion in an Arctic Council Strategic Plan

Based on the material that the ACS has compiled from the Ottawa Declaration, the Vision for the Arctic and various Working Group strategic documents it is clear that the Arctic Council has a broad mandate and has pursued initiatives on a wide range of topics during its first 20 years. Indeed, the Ottawa Declaration established the Council to “provide a means for

promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among States, with the involvement of Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues.” Although the Ottawa Declaration highlights issues of sustainable development and environmental protection as central to the work of Council, the only topic that falls outside the Council’s mandate is “military security,” and thus the remit of the Council includes a wide range of Arctic issues.

The following topics arise most often in the material circulated by the ACS and these common topics could serve as a starting point for considering the strategic priorities for the Arctic Council over the next 10, 15 or 20 years, with the understanding that different or additional strategic priorities could emerge in the course of developing an Arctic Council Strategic Plan:

- **Promoting sustainable development in the Arctic** – this has been one of the Arctic Council’s core missions since its inception. In recent years, there has been a renewed emphasis on the aspects of sustainable development that promote responsible economic development and improving living conditions in Arctic communities.
- **Addressing Climate Change and Protecting the Arctic environment** – environmental protection has been another core mission of the Arctic Council since its inception. In recent years, the growing awareness of the profound effects of Arctic climate change has made this topic a related focus of the Council’s work, along with protecting Arctic biodiversity.
- **Advancing the well-being of Arctic inhabitants, particularly of Arctic indigenous peoples.**
- **Improving our understanding of the Arctic.**
- **Strengthening Arctic Ocean stewardship.**
- **Maintaining the Arctic as a region of peace and international cooperation.**
- **Strengthening the Arctic Council as the premier intergovernmental forum for addressing Arctic issues.**

C. Possible Process and Timeline for Development of an Arctic Council Strategic Plan

The development of an Arctic Council Strategic Plan could be started – and completed – during the upcoming Finnish Chairmanship. The Fairbanks Declaration could include a basic mandate to develop a Strategic Plan for approval of Ministers in 2019. The guidelines to be followed in developing the Strategic Plan, and the possible substantive areas to be included, (as suggested in this paper and improved through input by all concerned and ultimately agreed by consensus) could be included in the SAO Report to Ministers in 2017.

The SAO Chair could produce a first draft of a Strategic Plan early in the Finnish Chairmanship, which could be circulated in advance of the first SAO meeting. The SAOs, PPs and WG chairs could discuss and improve the draft in an iterative process for ultimate consideration by Arctic Council Ministers.