



## BACKGROUND GUIDE

# *WAMUNC XXIV*

The Arctic Council

# *LETTER FROM THE CHAIR*

Hello Delegates,

Welcome to WAMUNC and the Arctic Council! My name is Erika Filter, and I'll be your chair for this committee. I'm currently a first year at GW studying International Affairs with a concentration in International Environmental Policy and a minor in Journalism. I'm originally from Carson City, Nevada. I started doing Model UN in 8th grade, and I continued through all 4 years of high school. Outside of Model UN, I volunteer with GW's community garden, the GroW Garden, and I do a lot of hiking and crosswords.

I'm really interested in Asian international politics, and I look forward to committee as a way of deepening understanding of Chinese movements in the Arctic and across the world. I'm especially interested in hearing about the indigenous perspectives in this committee. Furthermore, I'm interested in the Arctic as a site of preservation. Some of the world's most crucial resources and beautiful, fragile landforms are in the Arctic, so their protection is exceedingly important. The Permanent Participants of the Arctic Council are a unique opportunity for the international community to hear directly from indigenous representatives. I hope to see significant collaboration between delegates to craft policies that will benefit all involved parties.

Please let me know if you have any questions about committee. You can reach out to me via email at [efilter531@gwu.edu](mailto:efilter531@gwu.edu). I look forward to hearing passionate speeches and constructive debates on this issue.

Best,

Erika Filter

# *COMMITTEE OVERVIEW*

The Arctic Council consists of eight member states—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the U.S.—and 7 Permanent Participants—the Aleut International Organization, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich'in Council International, Inuit Circumpolar Council, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples in the North, and the Saami Council. The Permanent Participants represent the indigenous groups across borders of the Arctic States. The Aleut International Organization represents Aleuts in the U.S. and Russia, the Arctic Athabaskan Council (AAC) and Gwich'in Council International represent their respective indigenous groups in the U.S. and Canada, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, based in Canada, represents Inuit interests for the U.S., Canada, and Greenland, and the Saami Council represents Saami interests in Norway.

In the past, the Arctic Council has created the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) and the Arctic Human Development Report. Many of the Arctic Council's sessions have centered around environmental protection and related data monitoring. The Arctic Council votes by consensus, with both the formal states and indigenous representatives getting votes. Observing states do not vote in the Arctic Council. The formal states and indigenous representatives must collaborate to decide their level of participation with China on the Polar Silk Road and how they will address climate-related challenges.

## Historical Background

While the Arctic Council was founded relatively recently in 1996, international maritime agreements have a long history. Arctic collaboration has always centered largely around environmental protection. Though other international compacts, like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, address the environment, UNCLOS's maritime regulations are more all-encompassing. UNCLOS discusses the borders of the sea and defines the internationally accepted laws relating to maritime crime and trade.

## Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy.

International cooperation in the Arctic began in 1991 with the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy. The Strategy, also known as the Finnish Initiative, encouraged cooperation between Arctic states and permanent observers for scientific research and monitoring of the environment. Even in 1991, the nations contributing to the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy realized how vulnerable the Arctic is to climate change. The members contributing to the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy were the eight member states and representatives from the Inuit, Sami, and Russian indigenous peoples.

## Foundation of the Arctic Council

The Arctic Council was formally established in 1996 via the Ottawa Declaration, and it meets every other year. The Declaration followed directly from the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy. It established the Arctic Council as a means of improving the lives of Arctic inhabitants, and it stressed economic and social development. The Declaration incorporated all current members of the Arctic Council, including the Permanent Participants.

## Relevant Treaties

### *Svalbard Treaty*

The Svalbard Treaty, formerly known as the Spitsbergen Treaty, is a treaty between Norway, the U.S., Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and Ireland that was signed in 1920. It gave Norway sovereignty over the Archipelago of Spitsbergen, but it gave all signatories of the treaty the right to hunt, fish, and use the waters in the area. This treaty began formal international involvement in Arctic waters.

### *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is the foundational document for international maritime disputes. It sets out the official borders of the sea and regulates the passage of watercraft through international waters. However, not all nations have acceded to UNCLOS, and there are still some jurisdictional disputes in Arctic waters. It also advises that states should regulate marine pollution, but it leaves the specifics of proposed laws and regulations to individual states.

# *BACKGROUND GUIDE*

## Topic A: The Polar Silk Road

In 2013, China was accredited as an observer to the Arctic Council. One year later, China announced its plans for the Belt and Road Initiative, including the “Polar Silk Road.” The plan focuses on bolstering the existing infrastructure on the shipping routes going through the Arctic Circle connecting North America, East Asia, and Western Europe. Though China is not an Arctic state, it considers itself a “Near-Arctic state,” and it has professed interest in increasing its role in the Arctic via maritime shipping and scientific research. However, China has said it “will not interfere in the exclusive affairs between Arctic countries within the region.” Arctic waters have three main shipping routes: the Northwest Passage, the Northeast Passage (also known as the Northern Sea Route), and the Transpolar Sea Route. China’s plan is primarily focused on the Northern Sea Passage. Refer to the map at the top of the background guide for a general idea of the placement of these shipping routes. The Northwest Passage and Northeast Passage are significantly quicker than traditional routes through Europe, with some estimates saying the Northern Sea Passage reduces shipping time and costs by 35%. These quicker routes mean fewer resources used and reduced emissions.

### *The Belt and Road Initiative*



The Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI, was launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. Getting its name from the historical Silk Road, the Belt and Road Initiative is a wide-spanning Chinese infrastructure plan. The BRI is part of China's demonstrated desire to become more assertive in the global community. It consists of two economic endeavors: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. The Economic Belt is a series of railways across Eurasia (in red in the image above), and the Maritime Silk Road includes shipping routes in the Arctic and Indo-Pacific. For the purposes of committee, delegates should focus their research on the Maritime Silk Road. The map below shows how the Arctic region's trade route passages fit into China's overall plan. The BRI lists the Arctic Ocean "as one of three routes in the 'Vision for Maritime Cooperation.'"

### *China's Scientific Interests*

China is interested in performing research on climate and technology in the Arctic. It is currently a member of the International Science Committee, and it has vocalized strong support for UNCLOS. Its first research base in the Arctic was built in 2004 on Svalbard Island in Norway. Since then, it has expanded its scientific efforts on the Arctic. In December 2018, China announced the Arctic Environment Satellite and Numerical Weather Forecasting Project, which would supplement existing environmental monitoring in the Arctic. Some countries have been concerned that China is using civilian scientific research as a front to gain military intelligence.

Because the Polar Silk Road will change global shipping habits, it will likely change trade relationships between nations. The majority of Polar Silk Road projects have been partnerships between China and Russia (the Yamal LNG Project, Pakaya oil field, Zarubino port, and Arkhangelsk deepwater port). Not all of these projects are exclusively between Russia and China, however. Furthermore, Russia has tried to exact domestic jurisdiction over the Northeastern Passage, which has been disputed by the U.S.

Furthermore, the Arctic maritime shipping routes currently have poor infrastructure, meaning it is economically risky to send cargo. The waters in the Arctic can be quite shallow, and there are fewer search and rescue deep water vessels. Additionally, for container ships, timing must be very precise, requiring many oversight employees. Because of these infrastructural risks, insurance companies have been charging premiums to send materials through the Arctic routes, deterring many companies. China is willing to bolster the existing infrastructure via the proposed Polar Silk Road.

## Possible Solutions

### *Developing Infrastructure*

The solution that China would be most in favor of would be the Arctic Council's full support and cooperation in the development of Arctic infrastructure. If choosing to pursue this route, delegates would need to provide specifics on how best to resolve the current problems with Arctic infrastructure. Most likely, the Council would need funding for this endeavor, but China has demonstrated its willingness to contribute financially.

### *Reducing Support*

Up to this point, the Arctic Council has largely cooperated with China. However, some delegations have proven hesitant to continue this relationship. Some, like the U.S. and Russia, still view China as a competitive threat. Therefore, one option for committee is to slowly reduce cooperation with China. It would be up to committee members to determine whether the Arctic Council still wants to take advantage of the existing maritime shipping routes and oil resources in the Arctic. Financially, capitalizing on the Arctic's resources may be difficult without Chinese support.

## Bloc Positions

*Arctic States: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the U.S.*

The Arctic States will take differing approaches based on where they are located in the Arctic and where their economic interests and loyalties lie. However, the 8 members are all sovereign states. The U.S., Russia, and China have well-documented

historical disagreements and competitions. Furthermore, The U.S. and Russia both have jurisdiction over areas of the Arctic with high oil content.

*Permanent Participants: Aleut International Organization, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich'in Council International, Inuit Circumpolar Council, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples in the North, Saami Council*

Because the Permanent Participants represent indigenous interests, these delegates will likely be less focused on economic pursuits in favor of preserving and highlighting indigenous cultures in governmental policy. One area of concern is China's dubious support for indigenous groups. In 2013, when China was being considered as a potential observer state, it refused to declare support for indigenous groups in the Arctic. Since then, though, China has said it will respect "the historical traditions of indigenous peoples."

*Observers: France, Germany, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, Poland, India, South Korea, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom*

The Observers are non-Arctic states, but they frequently have interests in the Arctic. Though none of the delegates will be representing China, China is one observer to the Arctic Council. Observers' positions on the Polar Silk Road will relate to their relationship with China and the U.S.

### Questions to Consider:

1. Should the Arctic Council as a whole begin collaborating with China on the Polar Silk Road?
2. How can committee promote environmental protection through this initiative?
3. What incentives can committee create for businesses to use new Arctic trade routes?

## Topic B: Arctic Environmental Protections

The Arctic is rich with natural resources. On one hand, some delegations have interest in these resources being protected. Other delegates will be interested in utilizing these natural resources to maximize profits. A balance will have to be found to ensure that if resources are extracted from the arctic, the process is safe and sustainable.

The Arctic is characterized by long periods of darkness and considerable ice. Part of the Arctic includes marginal ice zones, which are only present during the winter and vary in width. These areas are particularly sensitive to climate change. The Arctic is also very rich in oil. In 2015, the U.S.'s National Petroleum Council reported that 25% of the world's undiscovered "conventional resources" are located in the Arctic.

Specifically, Alaska's North Slope has produced over 18 billion barrels of oil, bringing in significant revenue and industry for the state and for the U.S. at large. However, oil demand is declining, and the environmental impact associated with extracting the oil is significant.

Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) is plentiful in the Arctic. More than 90% of Russia's LNG resources are located in the Yamal region. The Yamal LNG Project on Russia's Yamal River began in 2017.

If significant action is not taken to combat climate change, the Arctic may have no sea ice in the summer by 2030. The Arctic is warming three times as quickly as the rest of the world. At the same time, Arctic environmental features are being threatened by increased pollution. The primary pollution sources in the Arctic are designated by AEPS as "organic contaminants, oil, heavy metals, noise, radioactivity, and acidification." Heavy metals also have a presence in the Arctic due to global transport. Because of the high levels of ice in the Arctic, noise pollution from ships is a much more pressing concern. Furthermore, the increased presence of industrial chemicals, including mercury and lead, in the atmosphere has devastating effects on the Arctic

ecosystem. These chemicals do not often come from Arctic production. Instead, industrial emissions in Europe move up to the Arctic, where they accumulate in the atmosphere, then enter Arctic rivers and oceans. From there, Arctic marine life is contaminated, meaning the food chain consumes more contaminants. Some indigenous groups in the Arctic hunt Arctic fauna, meaning they too have adverse health effects due to these chemicals.

Another modern source of pollution is plastics. Arctic waters are rife with plastics, especially microplastics. One problem unique to the Arctic is that these microplastics can enter sea ice, making it more likely for Arctic fauna to consume these microplastics. Once again, the food chain is contaminated and indigenous peoples suffer.

Especially for the Permanent Participants, environmental regulation is crucial. The Council was founded on the basis of environmental protection. Therefore, even if committee chooses to pursue a route that extracts oil from the Arctic, committee should add on to the existing environmental regulations surrounding pollution and dumping.

### Possible Solutions

#### *Petroleum Regulation*

Several member states in the Arctic Council utilize oil resources in the Arctic to bolster their economies. However, oil extraction from the Arctic is largely unsustainable. Committee can choose to continue extracting petroleum from the Arctic, but bearing in mind rapidly changing conditions due to climate change, delegates will need to impose regulations on how frequently and petroleum can be extracted from the Arctic and what methods will be used to preserve Arctic features while extracting.

### *Pollution Reduction*

Increased traffic in the Arctic has led to increased pollution. Furthermore, industrial activity in Europe and the Global North has led to an increase of chemicals in the atmosphere. Many of the initial sources of Arctic pollution do not begin in the Arctic. Member states, participating parties, and observer states will all need to cooperate to reduce pollution in the Arctic, both in the Arctic itself and in nations whose industries emit chemicals into the atmosphere.

### Bloc Positions

#### *Arctic States*

Member states are largely interested in resource extraction, especially given that extraction is becoming easier due to melting sea ice. The U.S. and Russia in particular are interested in Arctic development and resource extraction as a method of militaristic advantage, though the U.S. has stated that environmental protection and peace in the Arctic should be worked toward. Canada and the Nordic countries are more sympathetic toward environmental protection initiatives.

#### *Permanent Participants*

The indigenous groups that the permanent participants represent are directly harmed by climate change and its effects in the Arctic. Hence, these delegates will be most passionate about setting environmental regulations and active measures for reducing pollution. Permanent participants should also consider how best to achieve justice for the indigenous peoples who have already been harmed.

#### *Observers*

Observers' role in this topic will relate to the actions they can take in their countries to reduce climate change, especially emissions into the atmosphere that travel up to the Arctic. However, not all observer states are strongly in favor of making changes relating to environmental protection in their nations.

Questions to Consider:

1. What environmental factors of the Arctic should be prioritized most highly?
2. How can Arctic states continue to extract oil in a sustainable manner? Is it even possible in the first place?
3. What methods of environmental protection are most likely to be followed by council members?



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