Handout C: The Arctic Council

The Arctic Council is an intergovernmental organization that fosters cooperation among the Arctic states. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union presented an opportunity for the Arctic states to bridge the ideological divide and to work together to solve problems that affected the entire Arctic. In 1991, the eight Arctic states signed the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), pledging to monitor and preserve the environment while respecting the needs and traditions of the Arctic’s indigenous inhabitants, with the eventual goal of eliminating pollution in the Arctic. In 1996, the same states signed the Ottawa Declaration forming the Arctic Council, expanding the mandate of the AEPS to include sustainable development and creating a more proactive forum to promote cooperation and coordination of the Arctic policies of member states.

Today, the Arctic Council is the main forum for intergovernmental cooperation in the Arctic. Its membership includes the eight signatories of the Ottawa Declaration – Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States – and six Permanent Participants representing the indigenous peoples of the Arctic, which are consulted regarding the Arctic Council’s decisions. In addition, several international organizations such as the UN Environment Programme and the Nordic Council of Ministers have been granted observer status, which allows them to contribute to the Council’s various working groups and task forces. Several non-Arctic states that have declared an interest in Arctic governance have been admitted as observers as well. France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom were admitted in 2000, with Spain following in 2006 and China, Italy, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea joining in 2013. The European Union has also sought permanent observer status.

In general, the decisions made by the Arctic Council are not binding upon its member states. Instead, the Council aims to provide accurate and reliable information about the Arctic that its members can draw upon when crafting policy. It has produced many landmark studies on topics important to the Arctic, including climate change, environmental pollutants, shipping, tourism, maritime safety, biodiversity, human health, and indigenous languages. However, discussions of military security are explicitly excluded from the Council’s mandate. In 2011, the Council’s members signed a landmark agreement on search and rescue (SAR) operations in the Arctic. This legally-binding agreement obliges Arctic states to coordinate their respective SAR forces. In 2013, a similar binding agreement was signed which requires member states to prepare for and coordinate responses to oil spills in the Arctic. These agreements have been hailed as proof that the Arctic Council can effectively and proactively address areas of mutual concern.