

BOOK REVIEW

The Arctic Council: Between Environmental Protection and Geopolitics

By Svein Vigeland ROTTEM

Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 104 pages, ISBN: 978-981-13-9289-4 / 978-981-13-9290-0 (e-book)

Svein Vigeland Rottem, who currently works at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute (FNI) in Norway as a Senior Research Fellow, studies politics and international relations in the Arctic region as well as the Arctic Council. The Arctic region in general is rarely studied in the international relations (IR) literature possibly because it is located far away from many countries and is thus detached from the main debates in IR except for environmental issues. However, as the issues of global warming and control of natural resources have become increasingly visible on the international agenda, the Arctic - as well as Antarctica - have attracted significant attention in the last few years. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the percentage of IR scholars in the world who specifically study the Arctic region is still only 0.5.¹ This also points out to the need to explore the Arctic from an academic viewpoint and also inform the policy making bodies regarding the developments in the region. In fact, it is not only the circumpolar states such as the U.S., Russia, Canada, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland which could be easily influenced by the turn of events in the Arctic, but also the other states of the world which are closely concerned with environmental issues like climate change.

The book is comprised of five chapters and in the first one, the author highlights the lack of knowledge on the Arctic and the region's growing importance following the negative developments that have taken place regarding environment, while also mentioning the technological advancements in the region in the monitoring and extracting of the natural resources. The book outlines the Arctic's geopolitical history starting from the Cold War period and the cooperation efforts between the Arctic states since the Stockholm Conference of 1972 as well as Gorbachev's initiatives in 1991. The foundation of the Arctic Council and its sub-institutions such as the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) have directed the attention from realpolitik to issues like climate change and environmental protection. The change in the marine and terrestrial life of the Arctic resulting from pollution and

¹ Mustafa Aydın & Cihan Dizdarođlu, "Türkiye'de Uluslararası İlişkiler: TRIP 2018 Sonuçları Üzerine Bir Deđerlendirme," *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 16, No. 64 (2019), p. 10.

global warming has been greater compared with the rest of the world. Another important issue affecting the Arctic has been the natural resource extraction and related problems such as the oil spill in the ocean and the transportation activities in the area. The chapter also mentions the political rivalry between the states in the Arctic and argues that security disputes concerning the member states of the Arctic Council in other parts of the world should be kept away from the Council's agenda.

In the second chapter, the organizational structure of the Council is outlined including a detailed description of the duties of the ministries, senior Arctic officials (representatives of each state) and the working groups. The chapter also discusses the functions of the member states, permanent groups and the working groups and observers other than the Council's own secretariat. As opposed to the general belief that the members of the Council only include states and international organizations, indigenous population, which is estimated to be around 500,000, also gets represented in the Council. The author underlines that the Arctic Council has become a suitable platform to bring all players such as the observers of states and organizations, local people and scientists together to discuss the future of the Arctic region. The Council's six working groups whose members are chosen from the scientific communities of the member states perform the core functions of the Council ranging from monitoring pollution to protecting fauna and flora and recommending solutions for various problems. The chapter also mentions other issues in the Arctic with regard to the conflicting interests and attitudes of the member states. For instance, while some member states like the United States view political problems and national interests as the most important dimension of the Arctic-related issues, other states like Canada pay greater attention to the protection of the rights of indigenous people.

The author discusses the Arctic governance in the third chapter and focuses on the legal issues, power politics, signed agreements and the role of the scientific knowledge which is produced by the working groups of the Council. One of the challenges regarding the Arctic has been the Council's non-binding decisions except for the "Search and Rescue Agreement" which was signed between the Arctic states. Another challenge faced by the Arctic Council is the presence of at least two different groups of members with different agendas regarding the Arctic in the decision-making procedure. For instance, in addition to NATO countries and Russia, there are also neutral states in the Council which triggers a debate as to whether security issues should be tackled by the Council. There is also a distinction between the coastal states (A5) and non-coastal states (A3) which affects the hierarchy of the discussion topics on the Council's agenda. For instance, while the UN Law of the Sea applies to the A5 group, it cannot be applied to the A3 group. The chapter also emphasizes that the efforts of the working groups of the Council have been successful in drawing attention to a number of important issues in the Arctic including fisheries, biodiversity/protected areas and emission reduction measures.

The fourth chapter of the book analyzes the Council with all its components and focuses on the main problems of the organization such as the management, funding of projects, competition between members, practicality of the produced knowledge, etc. The chapter also shares the suggestions of various individuals and institutions in order to make greater use of the scholarship and field experience in the Arctic. As the author underlines, even the coordination between the sub-institutions of the Council has been problematic, although it has become better in the 2010s as a result of various initiatives. Some of these initiatives include the SAO and working group coordination meetings as well as the setting up of a permanent secretariat in Tromsø. In addition, the overlapping of the responsibility areas of the working groups seems to be an important problem that should be resolved. At the same time, however, the author believes what improves the continuity and stability of the activities of the Council has been the rotation of the chairmanship of the Council among the members. Finally, the chapter discusses the role of the observers and argues that even though the role of the observers is still a bit ambiguous, it could boost the effectiveness of the Council in terms of attracting more participants.

In the final chapter, the author discusses his own views about the Arctic Council and the Arctic region in general. After providing information regarding the structural and financial changes that has taken place in the Council over the years, the author indicates that the Council gets larger in size and increases its responsibility areas. It is important to note that the Arctic Council has been the only governance body in this region and the states of the Arctic region have been implementers of its decisions. Therefore, it is important to make the Council more effective and the knowledge they generate should become more practical for the region and for the world at the macro level. By recognizing the Arctic Council as the only governance organization in the region and avoiding the establishment of another minor organization or replacing the Council with another organization (e.g. the UN), the Arctic states could mitigate their contending geopolitical interests. The chapter is concluded with a brief summary of the factors that influenced the decision of each state to become a member in the Council which includes variety of factors like environmental concerns, protecting the indigenous people's rights or maintaining the balance of power in the region.

As a criticism, it should be mentioned that the fact that the same issues are repeatedly discussed in the different chapters of the book creates an organization problem. For example, the differing interests of the member states and the overlapping responsibility areas of the working groups are discussed in every chapter again and again. It would be much better for the readers to understand the issues if each chapter was exclusively devoted to a specific dimension of the Arctic governance. Furthermore, the positions and interests of the member states and non-member states vis-à-vis the indigenous people of the region could have been elaborated a little more. This would also reveal the complexity of the decision making process as well as the main weaknesses

of the Arctic Council. As a final criticism, the way the book describes the institutions of the Council as well as the relations between them is sometimes quite fragmentary which prevents the readers from fully comprehending the main issues.

Overall, the main purpose of this book is to familiarize the readers with the functions and activities of the Arctic Council as an international organization. These functions and activities at the local and global level are quite important in shaping the course of the political and especially environmental issues in the Arctic. When we take into consideration the growing importance of environmental challenges in world politics, it becomes more significant to study the Arctic region. The book provides the readers with a broad overview as to which states and international organizations have been playing a greater role in influencing the decision making process. In this regard, it is an important contribution to the study of the Arctic region in the IR literature.

İbrahim Tekeş

PhD Candidate

Marmara University,

Department of Political Science and

International Relations

ORCID: 0000-0003-3807-1982