

# One Arctic

**T**his month, the United States takes over the chairmanship of the Arctic Council, a position it last held in 1998. Since then, global interest in the Arctic has increased, and the council has evolved considerably. What has spurred that interest, and what will the council focus on under U.S. leadership?

Increased interest in the Arctic is being driven by dramatic change in a region that is both valuable and vulnerable: a warming climate (sea-ice retreat, thawing permafrost, and coastal erosion); globalization and the demand for resources (increasing population and an expanding middle class); and geopolitics (claims on extended continental shelves and potential northern shipping routes). Taken together, these factors create opportunities and challenges, all of which require preparation, informed by knowledge acquired through Arctic research.

The Arctic Council was formed in 1996 by the eight Arctic nations (Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States) as a forum to address sustainable development and environmental issues. The council promotes cooperation and collaboration among its member states and indigenous peoples' organizations and with formally recognized observers. The council has produced well-regarded reports, such as the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment and the Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment, which stimulated cross-border science and the adoption of best practices.

In recent years, discussion initiated by the council led to the creation of two multilateral agreements on search and rescue and on marine oil pollution preparedness and response. A third agreement, to increase international scientific cooperation, is in progress. Last year, the council created the Arctic Economic Council, an independent organization that facilitates economic

development in the region.

The U.S. theme for the chairmanship is One Arctic: Shared Opportunities, Challenges and Responsibilities. Three areas of focus are: Ocean Safety, Security, and Stewardship; Improving Economic and Living Conditions of Arctic People; and Addressing the Impacts of Climate Change. Specific initiatives will be conducted under each focus area by the council's working groups (see [www.arctic-council.org](http://www.arctic-council.org)).



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Are the Arctic Eight still working well together? Yes. There is more political alignment in the Arctic than in many other places, as evidenced by good relations at council events and by similar national objectives. Each member nation has its own strategy for the Arctic, with remarkably similar goals: international cooperation, national security, environmental stewardship, and economic and social benefits for the people of the region. In January 2015, President Obama issued an Executive Order to focus federal efforts in the Arctic under the U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region, as aug-

mented by an implementation plan, and a 5-year Arctic research program plan. These documents recognize federal responsibilities in the region and offer hope for increased coordination and efficiency to meet evolving challenges. U.S. chairmanship initiatives will advance these goals and will require the support of Congress, the State of Alaska, and local and tribal entities to be successful.

Scientific observations and research provide the knowledge base for prudent decisions. The initiatives proposed for the U.S. chairmanship require resources and coordinated effort. An essential ingredient is continued federal investment in Arctic science and technology. If the United States is to lead in these next 2 years and beyond, then it must have the capability and commitment to do so.

– Fran Ulmer



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