

China & the Arctic Council

Tony Penikett

Does China's economic clout outweigh the democratic voices of American and Canadian citizens, even on Arctic policy?

Despite its notorious reputation for human rights injustices, the economic superpower China is now an accredited Observer to the eight-nation Arctic Council. What does this mean for the human rights of Inuit, Athabaskans, Gwich'in and other Indigenous peoples? For the region's vulnerable and fragile environment? For Canada's democratic accountability? Or, for Arctic Council rules?

John English's new book, *Ice and Water: Politics, Peoples, and the Arctic Council*, tells the marvelous story of the Arctic's evolution, from Gorbachev's celebrated "zone of peace" speech in 1987 to Brian Mulroney's Leningrad proposal in 1989: "Why not a council of Arctic countries eventually coming into existence to co-ordinate and promote co-operation among them?"

The eight Arctic states — Canada, Russia, the United States, Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland — spent years negotiating over the roles of Indigenous peoples, as well as the criteria for admitting non-Arctic Observers into such a council.

In 1996, Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy and Arctic Ambassador Mary Simon were able to officially launch the Arctic Council. They did so with one innovative addition: the inclusion of six international Indigenous organizations as Permanent Participants.

Permanent Participants, who represent the Arctic's permanent residents, are given more seniority than Observers — a status which is open to non-Arctic states, inter-governmental and inter-parliamentary organizations, and non-governmental organizations. The Council assesses Observer applications based on their potential contributions and only accepts applicants once a consensus is reached.

At the Nuuk ministerial meeting in 2011, the Council adopted two rules for Observer applicants: they had to respect the sovereignty of all Arctic states and they had to respect the rights of the Indigenous peoples of those states. This laid out the welcome mat for the long list of applicants vying for Observer status, such as the European Union. For states like China, however, a country known for its hostility to-

wards both democracy and minority rights, the door appeared closed.

At the 2012 Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Conference on the future of the Arctic Council, former Iqaluit Mayor Madeleine Redfern questioned whether a powerful nation, once admitted, could ever be expelled for breaking the rules? The answer was unclear.

Of the six Indigenous organizations with Permanent Participant status, three have deep roots in Canada. Inuit, in particular, have always been vocal about their fear that China's admission could marginalize their role in what had once been an exclusive club of Arctic actors. As climate change and globalization open up resource exploitation and shipping routes, a long list of non-Arctic nations applied for Observer status, among them economic powerhouses Brazil, China, and India. Handicapped by financial and staff shortages, Permanent Participants feared being shunted aside.

Outsiders had expected protracted debate on the applications by China and the EU. China refused to express support for the rights of the Arctic's Indigenous peoples, as Arctic Council rules required for Observer applicants. Inuit leaders, including Mary Simon, have expressed real fears about the Inuit voice and Arctic environmental values being sidelined by a resource-hungry and powerful state that does not respect minority rights. Ultimately though, China, India, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore were admitted as Observers.

The Arctic Council put the EU application on hold, likely resulting from Canada's objection to the EU ban on the importation of seal products, despite an eloquent plea to Prime Minister Stephen Harper from president of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso: "The EU respects the values, interests, culture and traditions of Arctic Indigenous peoples and other Arctic inhabitants."

The admission of China, therefore, is curious. The Arctic Council criteria should have excluded the country from Observer status. Chinese representatives have declared they agree with the first rule,



Photo credit: Arctic Council

but have “no position” on the second. What might this mean for the Arctic Council and Canadian Indigenous voices – the Athabascans, the Gwich’in, and the Inuit?

In May 2013, at Kiruna, Sweden, Canada took over the Chair of the Arctic Council for the second time. Leona Aglukkaq, recently appointed as Canada’s environment minister, took the gavel from outgoing chair Carl Bildt, former Swedish prime minister.

According to John English, who attended the Kiruna conference, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry “talked almost exclusively about climate change.” Aglukkaq, who presented on “Development for the People of the North,” mentioned it not once. Given the Arctic Council’s beginnings as an organization fostered by Canadian diplomacy, and its focus on the vulnerability of Arctic lands and waters (not to mention China’s enormous appetite for natural resources), Canada’s silence on this question

was deafening.

When surveyed, Northern Canadians and Alaskans both objected vehemently to China’s admission. Apparently, the decision was made at a private meeting. But who was Canada’s representative at this meeting, Minister Aglukkaq or Foreign Minister John Baird? Did the prime minister, who rejected the EU bid, make the China decision?

There may be good arguments for inviting China into the Arctic Council, but nobody from the American or Canadian governments has yet to articulate those arguments. Given the domestic opposition, one might expect some democratic accountability on this point. ●

Tony Penikett is Fulbright Visiting Scholar in Arctic Studies, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington. He served as the third premier of Yukon from 1985 to 1992.

Current Yukon Premier, Darrell Pasloski, and Chair of the Arctic Council, the Hon. Leona Aglukkaq during an Arctic Council meeting in Whitehorse, Yukon, October 2013.