

High North: How Gulf states can have a better presence in the Arctic



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INTRODUCTION

The Arctic region's increasing geo-political, economic and scientific importance — particularly as its ice recedes from the effects of climate change to allow for greater exploration — has seen more interest than ever before from the world's policymakers. And the region should ideally also be the focus of greater attention from the Gulf states if they seek to benefit from its markets and resources, which includes tourism, hydrocarbons, minerals, wildlife and fish.

But Gulf involvement is critical also to help offset global economic, security and environmental concerns as competition intensifies between the world's leading powers for the region's riches — foremost of which could be disruptions to oil and gas markets. These are potentially significant considerations for the GCC that could be placed on the agenda of the embattled Arctic Council, or raised under the auspices of the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, of which Saudi Arabia is a signatory.

The Arctic region, commonly referred to as the High North, is gaining more attention than ever before. The Arctic encompasses the lands and territorial waters of eight countries: Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland,



Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the US (Alaska). The region stretches across the northern-most regions of the North American, European and Asian continents. Unlike Antarctica, the Arctic has no land mass covering its pole (the North Pole), just ocean. The region is home to some of the roughest terrain and harshest weather on the planet. There is debate over population numbers, but the Arctic Council estimates the figure is “almost 4 million,”¹ which is roughly the same as Kuwait.

The melting of Arctic ice from the

The Arctic Council's ministerial meeting on May 7, 2019, ended without a declaration for the first time since its inception. AFP



deleterious effects of climate change creates security and environmental challenges, but also new opportunities for economic development. Reduced ice means new shipping lanes opening, increased tourism, and further natural-resource exploration. The region is rich in hydrocarbons, minerals, wildlife, fish and other natural resources, which has attracted considerable outside attention and investments. Although there are no exact figures, in 2008 the US Geological Survey estimated that up to 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and almost one-third of the world's undiscovered natural gas reserves are located in the Arctic.² Much of these resources are in Alaska and the Russian Arctic.

For the Gulf states there are three main reasons why a greater presence in the Arctic is important. Firstly, the Arctic region is becoming a focal point of geo-politics, and as more countries seek to ramp up their involvement, the Gulf states could benefit from greater participation. Secondly, the Gulf states would want to be well-placed to profit from what appears to be the increasing number of economic opportunities. Finally, there are many areas for scientific research in the region.

The scope of this paper will be limited to two potential ways the Gulf states can

China's expeditions and research stations in the Arctic have gained the self-proclaimed 'near-Arctic state' influence in the region. Xinhua News Agency via Getty Images

increase their presence and engagement with the region: the Arctic Council and the 1920 Treaty of Svalbard. Both are underappreciated in the Arctic policy debate, but they merit more discussion, increased awareness, and consideration from policymakers.

THE ARCTIC COUNCIL

The Arctic Council is the world's primary multilateral forum concerned with the region and focuses on all the policy issues other than defense and security. It was established in 1996 with the Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council, also known as the Ottawa Declaration, as a way for the eight Arctic countries to work together on mutually important issues in the region.³ The chairmanship rotates every two years. The current chair is Norway.

Having recognized that there are many countries, organizations, and indigenous groups that have legitimate interests in the region, the Arctic Council has outlined three categories of membership:

Member states.

This category consists of the eight countries that have territory in the Arctic. Only member states have decision-making power in the Arctic Council.



The Arctic Yellow River Station, established in July 2004, is China's first scientific research base in the High North. Supplied

2 Permanent participants.

This category is reserved for the six organizations representing indigenous groups that live above the Arctic Circle, often across national boundaries — the Aleut International Association, the Arctic Athabaskan Council, the Gwich'in Council International, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, and the Saami Council.⁴

3 Observers.

Due to the possibility of new shipping lanes opening, some non-Arctic countries may also have a stake in the region. For example, China, Singapore, and South Korea have observer status in the Arctic Council. This category is open to non-Arctic states, intergovernmental and inter-parliamentary organizations, and global and regional nongovernmental organizations. There are currently 38 observers. There are no observers from the Arab world.⁵ Observers are allowed to attend meetings, make oral statements, present written statements, submit relevant documents, participate in and fund working groups (less than 50 percent of the working group's budget), and provide views on the issues under discussion.

However, the breakdown in Western relations with Russia over Ukraine has impacted the functioning of the Arctic Council. Even after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, cooperation continued inside the council. But since Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year cooperation has ceased. For the time being, the Arctic Council has all but stopped functioning.⁶

THE 1920 SVALBARD TREATY

The 1920 Svalbard Treaty (originally the Spitsbergen Treaty) is named after the Svalbard archipelago located well above the Arctic Circle off the coast of Norway and about 500 nautical miles (926 km) from the North Pole. Svalbard has a small population of around 2,000 and is home to the northernmost permanently-inhabited human settlement in the world. As part of the series of international agreements and treaties that followed World War I, Norway was granted sovereignty over the islands as part of the 1920 treaty. However, the terms of the treaty allow any of its signatories to have non-discriminatory access to the islands' fishing, hunting and natural resources.⁷

These signatories include major powers such as Russia, the US, the UK, and China, as well as countries far from the Arctic, such as Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and even Afghanistan. In total, some 46 countries enjoy equal access to Svalbard's natural resources. Türkiye is in the process of ratifying the treaty.⁸

Russia and China have taken advantage of the access to Svalbard granted to them under the treaty. Russia is present on Svalbard today with its coal mining settlement at Barentsburg.⁹ This remote village is only accessible by ship, helicopter, or snowmobile and is home to a few hundred people. Today, Barentsburg only produces enough coal to sustain itself. For Moscow, this settlement has always been more about national prestige and not making money.

As a signatory of the Svalbard Treaty, China has conducted scientific research on Svalbard since 2004 at its Arctic Yellow River Station located in Ny Alesund.¹⁰

This center is one of several scientific research stations in the Arctic operated by China. Much of the scientific research China focuses on in the Arctic, such as polar high-altitude atmospheric physics and meteorological geology, could have a military application.

Saudi Arabia joined the Svalbard Treaty in 1925, as the Kingdom of Hejaz. There is nothing preventing Saudi Arabia from having a presence in Svalbard too. Considering the global role that Riyadh aspires to play, a role in the Arctic region makes sense.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Competition between the world's leading powers, changes in the oil and gas markets, scientific research possibilities, and developments in shipping routes mean that geopolitical developments in the Arctic can have consequences for the Gulf region. Even so, there are only limited options for Gulf countries to get involved. If the Gulf states and the GCC want to play a bigger role in the Arctic there are a number of policy options to consider:

1 Saudi Arabia could become the convening platform of Gulf cooperation on Arctic issues.

Saudi Arabia is the only Gulf state to be a party to the 1920 Svalbard Treaty. The terms of the Svalbard Treaty allow any of its signatories to have non-discriminatory access to the islands' fishing, hunting and natural resources. The treaty also allows the signatories to conduct scientific research. Saudi Arabia's status is unique inside the GCC and allows Riyadh to serve as a GCC platform for engagement in the Arctic region.

2 Individual Gulf states should consider joining the 1920 Svalbard Treaty.

As mentioned, Saudi Arabia has been a signatory of the treaty since 1925. There is nothing preventing other GCC members from ratifying the agreement today. Due to its location in the Arctic region and its particular environmental conditions, Svalbard is very



attractive for scientific research. This would be the most direct and fastest way for a Gulf state to establish a presence in the Arctic region.

3 Gulf states can apply for observer status in the Arctic Council.

Observers cannot vote but can shape the agenda behind the scenes. Geography is not a factor in obtaining observer status. For example, Singapore became an observer in 2013. A quick glance at a map shows that the Gulf states are closer to the Arctic Circle than Singapore. With several Gulf states looking beyond their region and becoming increasingly globally minded, it could make sense for some to apply for observer status. Even the GCC, as an international organization, could apply. However, this possibility might be only for future policymakers to consider. With the Arctic Council not meeting because of the breakdown in relations with Russia, it is unlikely that gaining observer status could happen in the near future.

Almost 68% of the planet's glaciers will have melted by 2100 if the current 2.7C degrees warming continues, revealed research published in Science on Jan. 5, 2023. Shutterstock

4 Appointing a special envoy or ambassador to the Arctic.

Several non-Arctic countries, such as Japan and Singapore, have appointed senior diplomats to represent their country's affairs in the Arctic region. The Gulf states or the GCC should consider doing the same. This individual could serve as the primary interlocutor for the Gulf states in the Arctic and devote the required time and energy needed to develop personal relationships across the region.

CONCLUSION

Global interests in the Arctic region will only increase in the years to come. It remains to be seen whether the Gulf states want to be a part of the Arctic debate. If they choose to, working through the Arctic Council or the 1920 Svalbard Treaty offer opportunities. As other nations devote resources and assets in the region to secure their national interests, the globally-minded Gulf states should not fall behind.

FOOTNOTES

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