

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Perceptions of decision-makers about a potential forum of cooperation in the eastern part of the North American Arctic

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## Abstract

Cooperation in the Arctic region has been fruitful in the past few decades, generating several multilateral organizations and forums covering the entire circumpolar North. In many cases, forums were created to serve as catalysts, bringing together decision-makers from different backgrounds in a conference setting to promote dialogue and the exchange of ideas. To enquire about the possibility of creating a forum of cooperation in the eastern North American Arctic, a total of five governmental officials from Canada, Denmark, Nunavut, Québec and Greenland, and one elected representative from Greenland were interviewed with the same set of five questions. The governmental officials were in senior positions at the main department focusing on foreign affairs in their respective jurisdictions. Most thought that a new forum of cooperation in the region would be highly desirable, on the grounds of shared interests, common identity and cultural affinities. Consensual positions were also found regarding the central role that civil society would play in a new cooperative venue and on sub-national governments assuming a leading role to spearhead the initiative. Following these interviews, it is difficult to pinpoint one government that could alone spearhead this new forum of cooperation. However, the governments of Nunavut and Greenland were the most enthusiastic about such a new regional forum. Given Greenland's drive to complete independence, this type of forum could prove to be a statement of diplomatic motivation and ambition, tilting toward proto-diplomacy and an international policy that prepares the terrain for complete autonomy.

## Introduction

Cooperation in the Arctic region has been fruitful in the past few decades, with the creation of several multilateral organisations and forums covering the entire circumpolar North. However, cooperation is also possible at the sub-regional level. This article focuses on such a possibility by assessing interest in establishing a cooperation forum in one specific Arctic-sub-region, the eastern part of the NAA.

Numerous initiatives have emerged to stimulate cooperation among various actors—national governments, sub-national governments, indigenous groups, companies, non-governmental organizations, etc.—in the region. In many cases, forums were created to serve as catalysts, bringing together decision-makers from different backgrounds in a conference setting to promote dialogue and the exchange of ideas. The annual Arctic Circle Assembly

(Iceland) and the Arctic Frontiers conference (Norway) are good examples. In other cases, multi-stakeholder efforts have been undertaken to bring local governments in northern regions (Northern Forum, initially based in Alaska and at the moment in Russia) or companies (Arctic Economic Council) around the same table to discuss topics of common interest.

These governance initiatives have been mostly successful in bringing together decision-makers and sharing their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities they face in the Arctic. However, this type of cooperation has seldom produced tangible results or initiatives in the form of action programmes and implementable measures (Landriault et al. 2019).

Multilateral Arctic institutions have been studied extensively. Among these, the Arctic Council is the most studied and analysed multilateral forum in the scholarly literature. Specific initiatives, such as the Polar Code

## Keywords

Cross-border cooperation; diplomacy; autonomy; people-to-people ties, economic development; governance

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## Abbreviations

BEAR: Barents Euro-Arctic Region  
NAA: North American Arctic

adopted at the International Maritime Organization, have also been extensively studied. In comparison, cross-border cooperation initiatives in the Arctic have been overlooked. These cooperative mechanisms have been more circumscribed, focusing on joint management of a shared region. BEAR is the best illustration of such a venture. Surfacing from the immediate post-Cold War era, the impetus emerged from a perceived necessity by Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia to cooperate in the Barents region. Although the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought the initiative to a halt, the region cooperated for 30 years on issues of common interests. The Nordic Council, the West Nordic Council and the Beaufort Sea Partnership are examples of other targeted, region-specific cooperative ties and organizations.

These different initiatives provide a rather nuanced picture of Arctic cooperation, one emphasizing different sub-regional political landscapes. We will look at governments in the eastern part of the NAA and the prospect of establishing a forum of cooperation among them that would work on multiple issues. Naturally, the BEAR cooperation represents a relevant precedent. A potential eastern NAA forum would also include sub-national governments: the cases of the Northern Forum and the West Nordic Council constitute examples of regional cooperation involving sub-national governments. We need to understand what factors contributed to the success or failure of these regional organizations to understand the potential for, and limitations of, an eastern NAA forum.

This article will focus on the following key main line of inquiry: is a forum of cooperation possible in the eastern NAA? On the basis of interviews with governmental decision-makers in the region, we will investigate the potential of, and obstacles to, formalized cooperative ties in this region. Our hypothesis is that there is willingness to cooperate in the eastern NAA, especially emanating from Nunavut and Greenland, but practical limitations and limited resources discourage this collaborative scenario.

### **Arctic cross-border cooperation and the NAA**

Each cross-border initiative in the Arctic region was carried out for specific reasons. For example, the BEAR was established in 1993 through the adoption of the Kirkenes Declaration. The initiative was mostly driven by Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish desires to engage with post-Soviet Russia. Finland, for one, had established economic ties with Russia in the 1980s and 1990s. Norway spearheaded the BEAR initiative and invested significant diplomatic and financial resources to “handle both the opportunities and the problems arising out of the post-Cold War reality of East–West relationships” (Zimmerbauer 2013: 93), especially with north-west Russia. BEAR projects have

been designed to tackle ‘low-politics’ issues, such as environmental protection, transportation, and social-economic development, so as to avoid controversies. BEAR institutions were conceptualized to facilitate state-to-state contacts while empowering sub-national administrations and units to establish a dialogue and pursue shared objectives, especially in a context in which Russian sub-national units were more independent from their central government (Akimov 2021). The multiplicity of activities and programmes managed by the BEAR (before the Russian invasion of Ukraine) is an example of successful cooperation. However, the bulk of the investments and initiatives was initiated by Finland, Sweden or Norway, with Russia as the main recipient. Cooperation was not entirely reciprocal as the main objective for Norway was to maintain a pathway of engagement with Russia and to limit the possible impact of cross-border phenomenon, such as pollution (Landriault et al. 2019).

Cooperation involving sub-national governments has been fraught with obstacles linked to political willingness and limited resources. For example, the Northern Forum was created in the early 1990s—spearheaded by the US state of Alaska—as an occasion for sub-national governments to reap the peace dividend of the immediate post-Cold War. The organization’s influence waned when key members, including Alaska, lost interest in the forum, citing fiscal constraints. Membership in the Northern Forum also declined because of the limited common interests among members (Tsui 2016). The current state of the Northern Forum serves as a cautionary tale that illustrates how effective institutional cooperation between sub-national governments must be defined around a specific geographical area and that members must perceive that there are significant benefits to reap from the initiative: sub-national governments typically do not possess ample financial resources to develop their international relations, so international initiatives must generate results (Landriault et al. 2021). Areas of cooperation within the Northern Forum are also eclectic, with little coherence among them, leading members to question the relevance of the organization.

Other multilateral cooperation initiatives have been fostered by similar factors. The creation of the Arctic Caucus in the Pacific Northwest Economic Region can be significantly attributed to already strong social and economic relations between Alaska and the Canadian territory of Yukon. Multilateral mechanisms such as the Nordic Council and the West Nordic Council were founded on cultural affinities, perceptions of a common neighbourhood and economic ties (Anderson 1963; Larsen 1984; Nielsson 2013). Lately, the importance of the West Nordic Council, including Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe

Islands, grew as a result of Arctic developments and increased international attention toward the region. West Nordic Council members further relied on the organization to “share experience, expertise and information on issues of regional concern” (Bailes & Ólafsson 2017: 57) although the resources available to the Council to pursue these objectives are quite limited (Caddell 2022).

Overall, key actors leading multilateral initiatives are pivotal for the creation of cooperative mechanisms. These leading governments are the ones perceiving significant geopolitical changes deserving the creation of formal regional institutions, whether the end of the Cold War (BEAR, Northern Forum) or Arctic regional developments (West Nordic Council). Financial resources to facilitate collaboration have also been a defining factor differentiating successful and failed regional institutions. Disparate membership, vague mandates and unclear agendas have also impacted multilateral initiatives.

Formal government-to-government multilateral cooperative mechanisms are scarce in the eastern part of the NAA, which encompasses Greenland, Nunavut, Nunavik (northern Quebec) and Newfoundland-and-Labrador. Governments in the NAA have been convened to take part in dialogues and summits, but no sustained organization, forum or initiative has emerged from these encounters. For example, while the NAA administrations that Higginbotham and Spence brought together in 2018 and 2019 shared similar priorities, interests and outlooks on cooperation, there were issues, including limited financial means, that prevented formalized cooperation (Higginbotham & Spence 2018). This outcome could also be explained by the fact that the NAA is a heterogeneous space covering a vast geographic area. On the other hand, more fruitful and dynamic cooperation at the sub-regional level between Alaska and Yukon can be observed, both jurisdictions co-managing a common border and environment and enjoying significant trade relations with one another.

Rather than the entire NAA, the eastern part of the NAA presents as a more natural setting for multilateral cooperation. However, some key factors must be considered before assessing the possibility of a cooperation forum in the eastern NAA. For one, Greenland’s quest for independence can prove an impediment as much as an incentive for further cooperation. Disagreements over competencies between Denmark and Greenland have occasionally led to frictions as Danish competencies over security and defence can overlap with Greenlandic jurisdictions over natural resources (Ackrén & Jakobsen 2015; Henriksen & Rahbek-Clemmensen 2017). On the other hand, the government of Greenland’s para-diplomatic activities have been increasing, the region signing

agreements with sovereign states and opening diplomatic offices abroad. Much of these activities have consisted of either engaging with great powers (US, China) or cooperating with other Nordic countries, including Iceland, while cooperation at the governmental level with northern Canada and NAA neighbours has been limited. Additionally, air connections exist between Greenland and Iceland but not between Greenland and northern territories in Canada although most of the Greenlandic population resides in western rather than eastern Greenland.

As for Canada’s northern jurisdictions, federal structures in Canada generate different types of government with their own set of competencies. For the eastern NAA, one is a territory (Nunavut) and the other two are part of provinces (Nunavik in Quebec, Labrador in Newfoundland-and-Labrador). For Nunavut, the status of territory limits its power, and a devolution agreement that would transfer competencies and permanent funding from the federal government to Nunavut has yet to be signed. Issues of underfunding, especially for international initiatives, persist. The same could be said to a lesser extent about Nunavik and Labrador, with provincial priorities (for Quebec) and a financial predicament (for Newfoundland-and-Labrador) that do not bode well for significant diplomatic initiatives. On the other hand, civil society has built bridges and spearheaded cooperative endeavours. The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami represents Inuit living in Canada, while the Inuit Circumpolar Council brings together Inuit communities living in Canada and Greenland. Moreover, civil societies in Canada and Greenland have been active in working toward protecting the Pikialasorsuaq North Water through the Pikialasorsuaq Commission.

It remains to be seen whether civil society partnerships can spill over into government-to-government cooperation. This article will present findings derived from interviews of NAA governmental decision-makers and elected representatives to uncover whether there is an appetite for a multilateral forum of cooperation in the eastern NAA. Through these interviews, we asked participants about the issues that could be addressed through such a forum and what they believed to be the most salient obstacles to such an initiative.

## Methods

Governmental officials from Canada, Denmark, Nunavut, Québec and Greenland were interviewed. (We reached out several times to governmental officials and elected representatives from Newfoundland-and-Labrador, but we were unable to organize interviews.)

In total, seven public servants and one elected representative were interviewed. These officials were in senior positions at the main department focusing on foreign affairs in their respective jurisdictions: Global Affairs (Canada), Ministère des Relations Internationales et de la Francophonie (Québec), Intergovernmental Affairs (Nunavut) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Greenland and Denmark). The choice of these seven public servants was made by these respective governmental departments after an initial enquiry by the researchers: they were deemed to be the most cognizant about cross-border cooperation in this region by their organizations. These eight participants, with the exception of the elected representative interviewed, were not in a political role and could not propose such an initiative. However, we presume that they reflect the dominant perceptions, interests, and priorities in their respective departments.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom from February to June 2022, and all participants were asked the same set of five questions in a semi-structured interview format. Participants were questioned about the potential for the creation of an eastern NAA-specific forum as well as limitations and opportunities to further cooperation in the sub-region. Answers were then transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software. The codification used grounded theory methodology (e.g., Glaser & Strauss 1999; Suddaby 2006). On the basis of the content of the interviews, the interviewees' statements and answers were first categorized into two broad categories: positive critiques (encoded as [Potential]) and negative critiques (encoded as [Critiques]) about the potential creation of an NAA cooperative forum. After the completion of all interviews, sub-codes were attributed by themes to reflect opinions and understandings in each broad category (Table 1). The sub-codes describe the statements made by the respondents and categorize them in order to best respond to the research question: is a forum of cooperation possible in the eastern NAA? In a yes-or-no type of answer, the broad categories [Critiques] and [Potential] and their sub-codes aim to provide detail about the reasons supporting either answer. Each sub-code had a prevalence of use; some had a match in only one or two interviews while others were prevalent across all interviews, indicating the importance of the theme (Table 1). In a grounded theory methodology manner, the sub-codes were developed through the interviews; the goal here was not to categorize our interviews in pre-conceived categories but to build the categories through the answers given in the interviews, thereby allowing us to report most truthfully on the impressions, opinions, and analysis of our respondents.

**Table 1** Answer codes derived from the interviews. Asterisks mark the most prevalent sub-codes that emerged when the interview material was coded.

Broad code categories	Sub-codes
Potential (positive)	potential—context—positive signal* potential—boundaries potential—comparison* potential—government level potential—involvement* potential—purpose*
Critiques (negative)	critiques—added value—comparison* critiques—capacity* critiques—boundaries—competences* critiques—added value—purpose critiques context—negative signal critiques—political will

## Results and discussion

### *Potential and nature of a cooperative forum*

The eastern NAA is a sub-region that is part of a broader ensemble. As such, regional pan-Arctic governance institutions (e.g., Arctic Council) play an important role for Arctic governments and administrations and were discussed by all participants. The existence of established Arctic cooperation organizations, forums, and venues poses a double-edged sword for the establishment of a potential NAA-specific cooperative forum. Indeed, making a comparison between the existing cooperative forums—such as the Arctic Council—has been used both as a critique and as a proof of need and potential: the sub-code “critique—added value—comparison” was linked 20 times, while its opposite, “potential—comparison,” was linked 15 times in the combined six interviews. This indicates that views are split on the added value that such a forum would bring to governance. The representatives of the governments of Québec and Denmark had marked doubts about the creation of a new cooperative forum because of the already existing working presence of similar cooperative structures: a new structure did not seem to generate sufficient added value and would be redundant given the Arctic Council (for Québec and Denmark) and (for Québec) also the Arctic Circle Assembly. These two subjects suggested that relationships between Greenland and Canadian jurisdictions can already happen and be strengthened in these existing cooperative venues.

The case of Québec is interesting as this Canadian province values its independence and distance from the federal government. Therefore, the creation of a new forum would provide a new venue to reinforce regional

cooperation and deploy an autonomous international policy. However, the representative treated such a possibility in a rather pragmatic fashion: if existing structures are already in place, and they work well, why not simply use them to foster cooperation with NAA jurisdictions? The representative of the government of Québec was not opposed to the creation of a new cooperative structure, but he believed this structure should be inserted into an already-existing forum, such as the Arctic Circle Assembly.

This skeptical opinion was balanced by other respondents who perceived great potential in a new cooperative forum: this enthusiastic camp consisted of representatives of the governments of Canada, Nunavut and Greenland. Our participants from the government of Greenland, the government of Nunavut and the government of Canada all perceived great potential benefits in the creation of such a forum. The Canadian official made a comparison with the Barents Council and the Council of Baltic Sea States, pointing at welcomed precedents. The official from the government of Nunavut official expressed the opinion that agreements and memoranda of understanding already in place between Nunavut and Newfoundland-and-Labrador as well as Greenland would facilitate further collaboration. A similar observation was also raised by the government of Greenland official: joint ventures between Greenlandic entities and Canadian partners were offered as illustrations of shared interests. Further, such a cooperative venture would be welcomed by both the government of Greenland official and the Greenlandic elected representative, as Greenland is in the process of attempting to strengthen ties with North American partners. Westward partnerships are perceived as valuable complements to Greenland's already well-established collaborations with Nordic countries.

The impact the Russian invasion of Ukraine may have on such an initiative is unclear. Western sanctions related to the Arctic mostly consisted of suspending the activities of the Arctic Council. To assess this possible impact, we focused on the sub-code "critique—political will." This sub-code was detected nine times in three interviews—of the representatives of the governments of Canada and Denmark and of the Greenlandic elected official. For example, the government of Denmark official expressed reservations about creating new forums while the activities of the Arctic Council are suspended as there is an imperative to avoid signalling a further decline in the relevance of the Arctic Council. Here again, however, its opposite sub-code "potential—context—positive signal" was linked 14 times to three interviews—of the representatives of the government of Canada and Greenland and the Greenlandic elected official. The government of Canada official perceived no connection between establishing new forums and the Arctic Council hiatus: new

cooperative initiatives can be spearheaded without having detrimental effects on the Arctic Council's legitimacy. Likewise, the Greenlandic elected representative stressed that the suspension of Arctic Council activities rendered people-to-people connections and cultural ties even more salient. In the view of this interviewee, reductions in contact between Northern inhabitants can only generate negative outcomes for Greenland.

The nature of this potential cooperative forum is also for up for debate: what issues would this forum tackle? Questions related to agenda setting are indissociable from concerns about constitutional boundaries and the distribution of powers in the different jurisdictions under study. While further cooperation is needed, as reasserted by all respondents, this cooperation cannot impede on existing mandates determined by respective constitutions. Constitutional boundaries delimit what is within the state's jurisdiction or the sub-national units' jurisdictions. The eastern NAA is characterized by two different modalities for the distribution of competencies. In Canada, the powers of the provinces (e.g., Québec) differ from competencies held by territories (Nunavut). Also, Greenland enjoys extensive autonomy compared with northern territories in Canada. Similarly, those jurisdictional boundaries and the difference in political-legal powers between, for instance, the Territory of Nunavut and Greenland, posed an issue according to the representative of Nunavut in the determination of the potential NAA cooperation agenda. Issues discussed at such a cooperative forum would need to be aligned on competencies shared by all governments in the region. Governance structures, because of their multiplicity in the region, pose a legal and constitutional boundary issue for which clear guidelines would have to be detailed. The representative of the government of Denmark also expressed concern for respecting constitutional boundaries: foreign policy and security, two controversial issues, are within the constitutional boundaries of the Danish state. Hence, a potential NAA cooperative structure cannot impede these competencies. The representative of the government of Greenland also made this distinction very clear: military, defense, and security matters would have to be off the discussion table as these issues are not the prerogatives of the government of Greenland. Issues that could be perceived as bordering on these competencies, such as coast guard capabilities and coordination, were also perceived as problematic for such a forum.

Proponents of a new forum of cooperation in the eastern NAA zeroed in on specific issues to highlight the added value that such an initiative might bring forth. For example, the representative of the government of Canada strongly emphasized "the very high potential" for such a regional forum, citing a great need to reinforce

commercial and people-to-people ties. The Greenlandic elected representative shared this opinion, putting forward regional cultural ties as well as trade; similar priorities were mentioned by the representative of the government of Greenland. Greenland's government official highlighted how Greenland has had contact with Canada "for decades" and saw no "problem for cooperation with neighboring administrations." The potential for establishing a regional forum—focused on trade and cultural ties—appeared to be split in half: either the existence of current Arctic cooperation structures was seen to hamper the need for creating a new structure, or their existence was seen as proof that more cooperation is needed.

All respondents mentioned trade and people-to-people ties as aspects of regional cooperation within their respective constitutional boundaries. The representative of the government of Canada prioritized trade and commerce as well as family links and cultural development while maintaining that the chosen topics of enhanced regional cooperation "[should] be driven by the communities themselves." The representative of the government of Greenland opened the door to the many possibilities while making clear that defense and military issues cannot be considered as they are not within their jurisdictional rights. "Commercial issues, [...] social issues, [...] education, culture" were among the avenues mentioned for possible further cooperation and are therefore potential avenues of choice for the establishment of a new regional forum. The representatives of the governments of Nunavut and Québec both emphasised the need for greater regional cooperation on marine protection; the representative of Québec in particular put forward the need for greater scientific coordination and cooperation. Trade, for instance, in the commercial areas of hunting, mineral extraction, and digital infrastructures, was mentioned as a potential avenue for regional cooperation by the representatives of Greenland, Nunavut, and Canada and by the Greenlandic elected official. The elected official also made clear the need for regional cultural exchanges: "I think it would be very interesting to focus much more on the cultural perspective but also the people-to-people perspective."

Therefore, there appears to be a consensus that trade and cultural people-to-people ties are, firstly, within the necessary constitutional boundaries and are, secondly, issues of great importance across the borders for which greater cooperation and exchange are in demand. The representative of the government of Denmark did not make suppositions about the potential issues that would be most conducive for regional cooperation, instead emphasizing that regional actors and administrations should be the ones deciding on this. The government of

Denmark added that it is imperative that any cross-border cooperation structure or strategy be designed by the regional actors themselves, referring to Greenland specifically.

The sub-code "potential—purpose" had 25 references in five interviews (all but the representative of the government of Denmark), making it the most prevalent sub-code across all interview responses. There is no doubt that furthering NAA cooperation was of interest and that there was a perceived need to further collaboration; the lack of cross-border cooperation was seen by most interviewees as having negatively impacted communities and peoples. The comment made by the representative of the government of Greenland is important in this context: "Many of these challenges from moving from the traditional society to the modern society—the traumas, the forced development—that we have seen since back in the 1950s [...] these things that have been built with could be something that might be a good idea to discuss between Kallaalit Inuit and Inuit in Canada." The listing of areas for further cooperation, such as the arts, including film and music, mentioned by the Greenlandic elected official, echo this sentiment. There was a perceived need for cultural rekindling: "We look like each other and their family members. To that extent, I think that art can really help us create ties between countries." Cross-border cooperation was also thereby seen as a way to address some of the wrongs of colonization, and an NAA forum or structure could constitute a venue to discuss a locally relevant reality and to find ways to remediate past wrongs and to reconcile.

Furthermore, the representative of the government of Nunavut emphasized "fisheries, tourism, including cruise ships, transportation links, both air and sea" as potential areas in need of further reinforced cooperation. In addition to marine protection, Arctic security is also an area that could see increased regional cooperation, according to this representative. Security, however, does not fall within the constitutional remit of the territory. The fact that security was mentioned as an area necessitating greater regional cooperation does call into question the role and place of national governments in a potential NAA forum. Such an issue could bring forth the possibility that a new cooperative structure could include both national and sub-national governments and tackle a broader array of issues.

### **Limitations and obstacles**

Probing past the widespread support for further cooperation, we interviewed participants about the perceived obstacles and limitations of creating a cooperative forum in the eastern NAA. Three sub-codes, "critique—added

value—comparison,” “critique—boundaries—competences” and “critique—capacity,” stand out with the most references within our sample (20, 23, and 18 references, respectively). We addressed the first sub-code in the first section of this article: the government of Québec and Denmark questioned the added value of this new forum. The second sub-code, “critique—boundaries—competences,” had 23 references in five interviews and was the second only to “potential—purpose” as the most frequent sub-code. Therefore, while there was a very high potential in terms of purpose, that is, there was a demand for a higher level of regional cooperation, the different competences of the governments of the region and the constitutional boundaries of what could become a subject of cooperation could hamper this potential. Firstly, concerning the different levels of government competences, the representative of the government of Denmark questioned how such a forum would operate in the face of the differences in levels of competence of the different regional administrations: “I believe that the government of Greenland has much more competence than the government of Nunavut [...] You would have uneven players sitting at the table.” The representative of the government of Nunavut highlighted the same potential issue: “Our governance structures are so different that there’s a lot of education needed to know, [...] Who are the authoritative bodies?” “Dealing with different organizational structures and hierarchy,” as the representative of the government of Nunavut put it, summarizes the main political and administrative limitation of such a regional forum: what each administration can do varies from actor to actor. Whereas the representative of Nunavut highlighted how the main negotiating partner in Nunavut would be the government itself, in Greenland two levels of governance would likely be involved: the municipal as well as the higher-level government. The representative of the government of Greenland joined this position by highlighting the potential for Greenland to become independent, something that is not in the cards for Nunavut, Nunavik (northern Québec) or Newfoundland-and-Labrador. The 2009 act of self-government granted the government of Greenland the possibility of establishing its own trade agreements—as it did with the UK—which is within their full jurisdiction. In short, the Greenlandic government representative concluded that “there is a difference in terms of sovereignty and autonomy between the provinces and the territories of Canada and the government of Greenland.” On the topic of the level of governance, the representative of the government of Québec did not necessarily see this as problematic for regional cooperation but rather framed it as a domestic affair for each partner. The idea was that cooperation as a whole is going very well despite these differences, so these differences should not be an impediment to further collaboration.

In addition, the constitutional boundaries of each regional governments also dictate what can or cannot be part of regional discussions. On this point, the representatives of both Denmark and Greenland expressed similar views. Coast guard and military issues were off the discussion table for both as these are not within the constitutional boundaries of the government of Greenland, while business cooperation, education, culture and social issues would be the preferred topics of a regional cooperation forum. These answers suggest that Greenland is interested in expanding its para-diplomatic activities without the presence and support of the government of Denmark. Focusing solely on issues for which the government of Greenland has sole jurisdiction would fulfill this purpose.

However, the representative of Nunavut mentioned several times the potential for NAA cooperation on Arctic security and marine protection. But, on account of the lack of a “consistent history of cooperation with all these regions and dealing with different organizational government structures and hierarchy” (including constitutional boundaries), the Nunavut representative thought that was unclear what potential there really is for NAA security cooperation, even though this is a major political topic in the region. In September 2021, former Greenland Minister for Foreign Affairs, Pele Broberg, commented during an interview with the newspaper *Sermitsiaq* on Greenland’s ambition to establish its own coast guard following the Icelandic model, that is, a civilian coast guard rather than one subordinated to the military (Wenger 2021). Broberg has since then been replaced as Minister of Foreign Affairs and is now the Minister of Business and Trade. Arctic security is a controversial topic that would bring forth circumpolar and international consequences for actors such as the US and Russia. On the topic of security, the Greenlandic elected official mentioned the devastating effects of the Russian war in Ukraine, which has negatively affected regional cross-border cooperation—especially for civil society cooperation—and said that it would “take time to build up trust after the war.”

The other sub-code that stood out centered on capacities: would necessary resources be mobilized to bring this initiative to fruition? This line of limitations was expressed by all participants and touched on some of most fundamental dynamics influencing Northern communities. For example, the representative of the government of Canada pointed to limited accessibility, both physical and virtual, as posing a significant limitation to the development of such a regional cooperation forum. Poor digital infrastructures render any virtual format or structure difficult to sustain: the lack of high-speed connectivity in the North limits virtual contacts and modes of participation. Broadband deficiency hampers commerce, cultural development and

communication, which are vital to the establishment of regional cooperation. Moreover, great distances between jurisdictions and the limited options in terms of transportation connecting communities carry the potential to impede cooperation. The representatives of the governments of Canada, Nunavut, and Greenland, as well as the Greenlandic elected official, all responded to the question of technical limitations by highlighting the lack of air or sea cargo connection between north-eastern Canada and Greenland. The scheduled airlink between Greenland and Nunavut has been discontinued, and at present there is no direct, rapid mode of transportation. The representative of the government of Greenland joined the critique regarding the lack of infrastructures as an important limitation, stating that it is expensive and time consuming to travel in the region: "Physically we are extremely close, of course in the High North. But it's very hard for us to say hello to each other." This lack of infrastructure joins a larger potential limitation in terms of capacity: the costs of establishing and maintaining such a new forum is: "always down to resources. It's a matter of money, it's a matter of time" (Greenlandic elected official). The limited resources, as also mentioned by the representative of the government of Denmark, significantly dampen the benefits of establishing a new NAA forum: does the establishment of a new forum respond to a need and demand that could not be fulfilled by using most cost-efficient venues, such as existing Arctic cooperation structures? The representative of the government of Québec responded by maintaining that creating a working group within an existing structure, such as the Arctic Council or the Arctic Circle, might be more efficient, in terms of resources and time, than creating a new forum. The Greenlandic elected official also leaned more toward this opinion: "I'm not sure if we necessarily need forums to do that or if we just need to have a political focus on collaborating with each other."

A final notable limitation to the creation of a new NAA forum is political will, which collected nine sub-coded references. "Would they think it's a great idea?" (representative of the government of Denmark) essentially summarized the issue at hand: there needs to be a political will to drive the creation of a regional, low-level, practical cooperation regarding cross-border issues. This political will must come from the top as financial resources must be mobilized for cooperation to happen, as highlighted by the Greenlandic elected representative who was interviewed. A similar dynamic is at play in Canadian jurisdictions. In the context of Canada, finding funds for the establishment of a new cross-border forum might prove to be a long and arduous process, according to the representative of the government of Canada. Maintaining both capacity and political will on a long-term horizon is also very difficult: support for one-off events is much

easier to obtain while funding long-term initiatives and structures requires a more serious commitment.

### **Structure and membership**

An eastern NAA forum would involve both national and sub-national governments. As such, the role that respondents foresaw national governments playing in such an initiative was intriguing. National governments can assume different roles depending on the institution. For example, the BEAR elaborated a structure comprising two bodies, one convening national governments and another strictly for sub-national administrations (Barents Regional Council). The government of Canada plays a pivotal role in the Beaufort Sea Partnership, convening stakeholders and offering administrative and logistical support. Other sub-regional arrangements have a mix of national and sub-national governments interacting together, such as the West Nordic Council, with Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands as members. So, what about the role of national governments in a possible eastern NAA forum?

There was a clear consensus on this question. Both the government of Canada official and government of Denmark representative acknowledged that the leading role must be filled by sub-national governments: they must be at the center of the process, developing the agenda and agreeing on priorities. The representative of the government of Nunavut saw the primary leading role as sub-national in nature as well, emphasizing that talks leading to a devolution process are underway in Nunavut while Greenland already have self-rule in place. This level of decentralization opens the door for more direct involvement by sub-national governments in a wide array of issues. However, the representatives of the governments of Canada and Nunavut also recognized the possibility of governmental involvement in cases of hot issues or "on an ad hoc basis if there were things of a national importance or priority that they need to be roped in" (representative of the government of Nunavut). Here again, the government of Canada was seen in a supporting role, rather than driving the process, a position that would complement and help local stakeholders fulfill their objectives. As such, the government of Canada perceived its potential role as one of convener, bringing interested parties together by facilitating the organization of events and using its political relationships and influence in Global Affairs Canada headquarters and its embassy in Copenhagen. Additionally, the Department of Global Affairs of the government of Canada could potentially coordinate the actions and participation of other federal departments in such a cooperative venture.



For the Greenlandic elected official, self-determination was primary. The importance of self-determination was echoed by the representative of the government of Greenland, mirroring the position of the Danish counterpart: the government of Greenland would have the leading—sole—role in the creation and maintenance of an NAA cooperation forum. Because the importance of staying within constitutional boundaries was raised multiple times by both actors, the potential NAA cooperation forum would remain within the jurisdiction boundaries of the government of Greenland. As such, the involvement of the Danish government would not be required and the representative of the government of Denmark did not envisage participating in any form in an NAA cooperation forum. The Danish official used the example of the West Nordic Council to illustrate that Greenland can be active in some multilateral initiatives without the involvement of the Danish state: ‘low-politics’ issues are conducive to this acceptance.

The representative of the government of Denmark also highlighted that the resources for the creation and maintenance of such a forum would have to come out of Greenland’s budget. Concerning federal or national governments’ involvement or the lack thereof, the representative of Québec had an interesting position, echoed by the representative of the government of Nunavut: the nature of Arctic cooperation is centered on cooperating. The exchanging nature of regional relations makes the role of communities and individuals central to cooperation. The most noticeable difference is the central, leading role of indigenous communities and governing powers. While not responding explicitly to the issue of federal involvement, the representative of the government of Québec noted that the leading role to establish and maintain an NAA cooperation forum would have to be sub-national and local.

However, the official of the government of Québec also added that the relationship with the government of Canada is positive and productive, citing the agreement that led to the Canada–Inuit Nunangat–United Kingdom Arctic Research Programme as an example. Collaboration is possible as long as competencies are respected.

Similar to the role of national governments, the presence of civil society does not appear to be controversial: civil society considered by all respondents as essential to the workings of cross-border regional cooperation. For example, the Greenlandic elected representative stated that “What first comes to mind is of course Indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations, civil societies and especially the Inuit Circumpolar Council [which] is so important for us in Greenland. I think we are going to see this strengthened in the years to come.” The key role of Arctic and Northern civil society was highlighted by

the representative of the government of Canada, who stated that projects must be anchored in local realities and demands: credibility is built through civil society. Building credibility for an NAA cooperation forum would come through the involvement of civil society, which would bring their expertise to the table. The representatives of the governments of Nunavut and Greenland both referred to the involvement of fishermen and hunters’ organizations as well as private enterprises: chambers of commerce, tourism bodies, and different corporate associations could participate in this type of initiative.

The involvement of Inuit organizations—such as the aforementioned Inuit Circumpolar Council, as well as Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated or Qikiqtani Inuit Association—was seen as fundamental also in terms of reconciliation: “In this day of reconciliation and to be very inclusive of Indigenous participants of the region, that would be wise to think from the onset” (representative of the government of Nunavut). The Inuit Circumpolar Council was the most often mentioned civil society organization. The organization was cited by the government of Greenland official and Greenlandic elected representative as an example of an organization collaborating and cooperating with governments to deliver tangible results to communities. Civil society organizations were presented as highly capable of contributing and generating positive outcomes for people.

In a similar vein, the representative of Québec believed that civil society is already to be found within existing cooperation structures in the Arctic, such as the Arctic Council, where organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund and youth organizations are not only a reality but also a necessity: “We cannot only work with governments. I think that it’s essential to involve everyone because these are topics that concern us all. We cannot arrive at solutions that only concern the governments” (representative of the government of Québec, translated). While the context of the representative’s comments was scientific collaboration, this represents the tone of thoughts on larger, overall, cooperation in the Arctic: strictly hierarchical relations are not sustainable, nor do they echo the lived realities of the Arctic, where indigenous knowledge is fundamental both to further scientific research but also for social and political relations within the region. Indigenous peoples as well as non-governmental organizations and private enterprises constitute key actors in the region and must be part of every cross-border regional talk. The representative of the government of Nunavut, informed by the accessibility difficulties in the FarNorth, also saw civil society as holding an outreach role in order to build bridges and ties both within and between regions.

While the involvement of civil society therefore does not seem to be controversial, the representative of Denmark emphasized the need to understand the purpose of both the cooperation forum and its participants: if civil society were to be involved, what would its role be—to advise or to practically implement policies? The official of the government of Canada also raised concerns about capacities: civil society organizations must be given the capacity to participate and meaningfully contribute to the work of the forum. These organizations are often focused on day-to-day activities and programmes and possess very little resources to partake in the activities of a multi-lateral organization.

### Conclusion: toward an eastern NAA forum?

Our main research question was geared toward understanding whether there is a will to establish a forum of cooperation in the eastern NAA. A second area of inquiry was to identify and understand the incentives and obstacles to institutional cooperation in the region. The interviews offered insights into officials' perceptions of cooperation in the eastern NAA. A majority of the officials interviewed believed that a new forum of cooperation in the region would be highly desirable, on account of shared interests, common identity and cultural affinities. Consensual positions were also found regarding the central role that civil society would play in a new cooperative venue and about how sub-national governments would assume a leading role to spearhead the initiative. There was general agreement among those interviewed on the issues that this prospective forum might address: trade issues, cultural ties, education and environmental protection were all raised by several participants, with the first two being the most popular. All issues are within the sphere of 'low politics,' follow jurisdictional lines and represent a positive-sum game. This is consistent with Higginbotham & Spence's findings that NAA decision-makers have a "desire to continue to work together" while stressing "the importance of identifying practical activities for collaboration" (2018: 5).

On the other hand, the representatives of national governments who were interviewed did not perceive their roles similarly. The official of the government of Canada indicated that the federal government could play a role of support and convener to sub-national governments. The government of Denmark official perceived such forum as an initiative not involving Denmark: Greenland would participate without additional support from the central government. Additionally, the respondents from the governments of Québec and Denmark did not think that a new forum in the region

would add value to the forums and institutions already in place in the Arctic.

Through these interviews, we heard about similar obstacles to cooperation for the eastern NAA as reported by Higginbotham & Spence (2018) for the NAA as a whole. Limited financial resources is still the main limitation to further cooperation in the eastern NAA: this is consistent with other findings on Arctic para-diplomacy, where sub-national governments have limited options to be active diplomatically (Landriault et al. 2021). A major irritant to cooperation is the lack of transportation infrastructure connecting these territories. The absence of a Nuuk–Iqaluit air connection was raised by several participants and presented as a key node missing from efforts to strengthen collaboration between Greenland and northern Canada.

Looking at multilateral forums present in the Arctic region, there is a clear idea as to which issues should animate this multilateral cooperation, contrary to the Northern Forum. A dominant perception was that the moment was ripe to increase collaboration between Greenlandic and Canadian partners: the main issue remained how to transcend physical or infrastructure barriers, such as low connectivity and deficient transportation infrastructures. The issue of limited financial resources is also left unresolved, and there is no obvious driving force that could lead the creation of such forum, as Norway did for the BEAR cooperation in the early 1990s. The financial support of the government of Canada could help supplement financial constraints shared by northern jurisdictions. The presence of a federal government willing to act as convener could lower the costs of international diplomacy for a territory characterized by limited financial resources.

Following these interviews, it is difficult to pinpoint one government that could spearhead alone this new forum of cooperation. However, two entities seemed more enthusiastic about such a possibility: the governments of Nunavut and Greenland. The latter is orienting its international policy toward furthering ties with North American governments and administrations. Given the territory's drive to complete independence, this type of forum could prove to be a statement of diplomatic motivation and ambition, tilting toward proto-diplomacy, an international policy to prepare the terrain for complete autonomy. The government of Nunavut perceived shared interests into cooperating with neighbouring Canadian jurisdictions and Greenland. The presence of a federal government willing to act as convener could lower the costs of international diplomacy for a territory characterized by limited financial resources. With cultural affinities, an explicit desire to further collaboration and very

little ideological opposition, there is genuine willingness to the establishment of a cooperative venue in the eastern NAA. It remains to be seen if barriers to cooperation can be removed to tap this potential.

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