

Svein Vigeland Rottem, *The Arctic Council: Between environmental protection and geopolitics* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2020)

In 1996, government officials of eight States, who would later be known as the “Arctic 8”, gathered in Ottawa alongside representatives of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (now Council), the Saami Council and the Association of Indigenous Minorities of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation (now RAIPON) to sign the Ottawa Declaration on the establishment of the Arctic Council. To the few attentive observers and experts present at the time, the Arctic environment was already undergoing drastic physical changes. Arctic collaboration, however, was not high on the agenda. A forum bridging the gap between politics and Arctic scientific research was therefore regarded as a means to develop cooperation on environmental issues.

As the world of Arctic governance celebrates the council’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it does not come as a surprise to see an array of both monographs and edited volumes looking back at how this high-level intergovernmental forum has managed to put itself at the centre of Arctic affairs. Published last year (2020), Rottem’s *The Arctic Council: Between Environmental Protection and Geopolitics* gives a rather thorough overview of the history and work of the Arctic Council. It is a careful retelling of the Council’s well-documented journey from a body solely focused on environmental matters in the late 1990s and early 2000s to one that finds itself at the forefront of international cooperation in the Arctic. In the now typical style of Palgrave’s Pivot series, which often offers concise and to-the-point introductions to specific specialised topics in around a hundred pages, the book manages to explore the nuance and diversity of an organisation whose prime focus is the production of relevant Arctic knowledge.

The Arctic Council is, of course, only one element of Arctic governance. Many other more regional and subregional fora spring to mind when thinking of Arctic cooperation (e.g. Barents Euro Arctic Council, West Nordic Council, Arctic Military Environmental Cooperation Program, Northern Forum, etc). However, few have found themselves under so much spotlight as the Arctic Council has. Studies and publications about the council’s role in Arctic governance, such as *The Arctic Council*, have therefore become common occurrences. Across five different chapters, the book weaves Rottem’s own broad experience and knowledge of Arctic issues with the history and challenges facing regional cooperation.

Readers interested in the functioning of the Arctic Council will, without doubts, relish reaching Chapter 4 where Rottem advocates for ways in which the Arctic Council could be reformed to foster closer coordination. Of course, the conversation around reforming the Arctic Council is not a new one. For instance, a few years ago, Exner-Pirot et al.[\[1\]](#) and Smieszek[\[2\]](#) published their research assessing the Council’s strengths and weaknesses in light of the 2019 strategic plan. Acknowledging that both efficiency and effectiveness are

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key for the AC going forward, these recent publications suggested concrete recommendations to improve the Arctic Council's form, function, and funding streams. In the same vein, Rottem's *The Arctic Council* regards structural changes as key for the high-level intergovernmental forum to keep its place as the main venue for discussions around the future of Arctic governance (p.73).

Once again, rooting its analysis in calls for past reforms and ensuing reports, the book identifies some proposals to streamline the Council's work. According to Rottem, the recurring challenges for the AC are the lack of clear long-term vision and strategy that could offer certainty and continuity to the Council's work (p. 86). Amongst his suggestions, the author makes the case for appointing an expert panel tasked to overview potential structural changes, discuss and recommend steps to improve coordination, avoid overlaps between Working Groups and reorganise the Council's structure. The idea of a clearer strategic vision is pivotal to Rottem's book. His other suggestions, the creation of an Arctic Summit and holding SAO meetings in capital cities for relevant organisations to attend and partake in an "Arctic Week", are both linked to give the Council's a broader reach and better clarity going forward.

Beside chapter 4, which explores the above-mentioned recommendations, there is nothing significantly new about the book. Rather, it is an ode to the Arctic Council itself, as a platform navigating between the global and regional challenges of a changing region. Early in the book, Rottem expresses the hope that having read it, readers would have gained some understanding of the Arctic Council (p. 2). With *The Arctic Council*, not only does Rottem provides *some* understanding of the Council, but he also manages to brush a complex and nuanced portrait of its crucial role as a focal point for bringing a broad range of different stakeholders, not just indigenous representatives and state governments, to the same table, or at least to the same room. *The Arctic Council* provides a starting point for people interested in geopolitics, from seasoned academics to undergraduate students, who are looking to dive into the world of Arctic affairs.

## Endnotes

1 Heather Exner-Pirot et al, "Form and Function: The Future of the Arctic Council", The Arctic Institute (5 February 2019) Available online: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/form-function-future-arctic-council/>

2 Gosia Smieszek, "Costs and Reality of Reforming the Arctic Council", The Arctic Institute (9 April 2019) Available online:

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<https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/costs-reality-reforming-arctic-council/>

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