Polar Record

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US Arctic policymaking under Trump and Obama

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Research Article

Cite this article: Weingartner KA and Orttung RW (2019) US Arctic policymaking under Trump and Obama. *Polar Record* **55**: 402–410. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247419000810

Received: 11 June 2019
Revised: 27 November 2019
Accepted: 3 December 2019
First published online: 16 January 2020

Keywords:
US policymaking; Obama; Trump; Science; Military

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Abstract

Though presidential personality and preferences heavily influence US Arctic policy, climate change and the perceived threat to US interests posed by rising international engagement in the north among great powers such as Russia and China are increasingly impacting US policy in the region. Recognising that these trends are likely to persist into the future, it is important to understand the US Arctic policymaking apparatus, how geopolitical and environmental factors affect the creation and implementation of such policies through the presidency and how the resulting presidential policies may impact US leadership in the region for years to come. Consequently, this article examines how the distinct styles and preferences of Presidents Obama and Trump interact with growing climate change and defence challenges in the region within the US Arctic policymaking process. We illustrate this interaction through examples at both domestic and international policy levels and then place it in the larger context of the differing presidential approaches to institutionalisation when setting policy. Ultimately, we conclude that not only do presidential priorities regarding climate change, rising international engagement, and institutionalisation critically influence Arctic policymaking, but how a future president views these issues will heavily impact the direction of policies affecting the region.

Introduction

What drives US policymaking in the Arctic? Though external factors have always contributed to US Arctic policies, climate change and the growing interest in the region it has helped fuel, particularly among the great powers, are having a larger impact on US domestic policy decisions than in the past. International dynamics such as great power competition and enhanced cooperation have played a role in the country's approach to Arctic policy since the US became an Arctic state in 1867 with the purchase of Alaska from Russia (Nilsson, 2018). During the Cold War, Washington projected its power in the north as a counterweight to USSR operations. When new opportunities became available in the post-Cold War environment, the US's initial support for the Arctic Council and subsequent involvement in Council activities helped foster decades of successful international cooperation to address environmental issues in the region. US Arctic interests, whether federal, Alaskan, corporate, or societal, have been subject to international pressures for some time. However, the unparalleled impacts of climate change in recent years are fundamentally altering the way people live in the region, opening up new prospects for resource exploitation and trade, creating new challenges, and drawing in new players seeking opportunities, with Russia, China, and other Asian trading states the most visible among them.

Recognising that the president and his appointees define how the US will address the challenges and opportunities provided by the external environment, there is a need to better understand how presidential personality and preferences relate to climate change and increasing international engagement in the Arctic among great powers such as Russia and China to impact Arctic policymaking. To achieve this greater understanding, it is critical to first understand internal US Arctic policy processes and the actors supporting them. This article is among the first to provide a detailed discussion of the internal workings of the US policymaking apparatus and the major actors involved in Arctic policymaking. By examining how US Arctic policy is formed, we establish a foundation upon which to better recognise how Presidents Obama and Trump have reacted to, and been influenced by, unprecedented global changes in the region when pursuing Arctic policies. Observations from the analysis can then be used to illustrate how the interactions between a president and external forces affecting the Arctic can impact US Arctic policy in the future.

Literature review

This work fills a gap in the existing literature on Arctic policymaking. Analyses of Arctic politics have typically taken a macroperspective, examining whether the region will be subject to conflict in the realist paradigm or benefit from more liberal cooperation (Young, 1992). From this perspective, the competition for natural resources often defines the contours of conflict

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in the far north (Keil, 2013). Authors who want to emphasise cooperation focus on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Kraska, 2011b) and the more than twenty-year successful functioning of the Arctic Council, which specifically excludes military issues while focusing on environmental protection and sustainable development (Huebert, 2009; Young, 2016, p. 12). Given its central role in Arctic governance, the evolution of the Arctic Council has been a primary focus of concern (Huebert, 2010; Koivurova, 2010).

Although works by Alexander Sergunin, Valery Konyshev, Elana Wilson Rowe, and others have explained Arctic policy processes inside of countries like Russia, for example, there has been less focus on US processes (Sergunin & Konyshev, 2019; Wilson Rowe, 2013, 2018). Specific analyses of US policy towards the Arctic typically describe the various strategy and policy documents that are relevant without explaining the numerous actors and coalitions that crafted these statements. The emphasis is usually on US definitions of its national interests in regard to the Arctic. While these analyses are generally well done and valuable, they tend to treat the policymaking process as a black box, though some details are provided in anecdotal form (Kraska, 2011a). Since the Defense Department and the various services have issued their own Arctic strategies, there is more granularity of coverage in these areas (Titley & St. John, 2011). Perhaps the most detailed analyses of Arctic policymaking in the US include an article that focuses on the frames that shape US policy (Nilsson, 2018) and one that examines policy coherence and component-driven policymaking through the interest groups that shape policymaking (May, Jones, Beem, Neff-Sharum, & Poague, 2005; Nilsson, 2018). Though our approach does not address interest groups, we hope to add societal actors to our analysis in the future.

Methodology and data

In explaining US Arctic policy, we draw on Putnam's classic analysis of domestic politics and diplomacy as a two-level game (Putnam, 1988). In this conceptualisation, international relations and domestic politics are entangled, but it is important to figure out when and how these interconnections are important. To gain insights into these relationships, our research question was multifold: *What are the major components of the US Arctic policymaking apparatus, how have climate change and heightened Russian and Chinese regional involvement influenced the policies of Obama and Trump, and what are the implications for future US Arctic policymaking?* In order to answer these questions, we trace the different approaches Obama and Trump take towards Arctic policymaking and explore the way they defined and interacted with appointed policymakers and the civil service in creating Arctic policy (Beach & Petersen, 2019). Our analysis specifically focused on how the personal characteristics of the president shaped their Arctic policy approach in two key areas: the role of climate change, science, and research in policymaking and the response to great power competition within the larger international environment. Lastly, we examined the role that the level of institutionalisation played in the overall Arctic policymaking process of both presidencies.

The information contained in this analysis draws on elite interviews with key players involved in the US Arctic policymaking process who helped us understand how the Arctic policymaking system functions in line with standard political science techniques (Tansey, 2007). Documents and publications referenced in these interviews, combined with desk research, provided additional data sources for this paper.

While we do not have enough data to conduct a full network analysis (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2018), the data presented here provide the basis for beginning such an analysis. In particular, we try to reconstruct the Arctic policymaking networks under the two presidents. Figure 1 lays out these networks under Obama and Trump. The sizes of the circles represent our estimate of the approximate level of influence for the corresponding organisation in Arctic policymaking. In terms of the presidents themselves, the size of the circle represents their respective engagement in Arctic policymaking. Though both men have impacted Arctic policymaking, our analysis suggests that Obama was more engaged in this area. We recognise that at some level, nearly every circle can or does have some connection with most, if not every, other circle. However, for the purposes of illustration, we have attempted to capture key relationships and hierarchies among Arctic entities, particularly those discussed in this analysis, and how these relationships have changed between presidents. For example, we realise the president is connected to the various agencies listed in the graphic in several ways but sought to highlight the hierarchy connecting the presidency to the Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee (IARPC) and its agency members. The Supplementary material lists individuals who held major Arctic policymaking positions under both the Obama and Trump Administrations, though we recognize this is not a comprehensive list.

Figure 2 provides a brief summary of the major events that have taken place related to US Arctic policymaking historically and within the Obama and Trump Administrations, organised by policy types (for example external policy engagement). Though we refer to these events in the sections that follow in greater detail, this chart helps give an overview that describes how key events fit together chronologically.

The role of climate change, science, and research in US Arctic policymaking

The ways in which Obama and Trump perceive climate change as well as science and research more generally have had a notable impact on their respective approaches to US Arctic policymaking. Obama's Arctic policies were closely informed by well-respected scientists and influenced by scientific conclusions, particularly on the topic of climate change. Obama's recognition of climate change and its impact on the Arctic can be demonstrated in several ways. In 2016, Obama signed the Paris Agreement, calling it a historic achievement in the fight to protect the planet for future generations (Obama, 2016). During the second US Chairmanship of the Arctic Council, Obama expanded his commitment to the Arctic by becoming the first sitting president to travel above the Arctic Circle when he visited Alaska in 2015. Throughout his visit, Obama emphasised the threat that climate change poses to Alaskans and the world at large (Kennedy, 2016). In contrast, actions by the Trump Administration have undermined the science supporting climate change and generally indicate that science and research are not priorities. To illustrate, Trump has attempted to remove the US from the Paris Agreement and questioned the conclusions of the Fourth US National Climate Assessment by establishing a new climate review panel (Davenport & Landler, 2019). His administration has also engaged in a wide range of efforts to facilitate oil and gas production in the Arctic, while Obama sought to limit such drilling. These differing perspectives on climate change, science, and research are critical to how both presidents pursued US Arctic policies, as described in greater detail below.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247419000810 Published online by Cambridge University Press

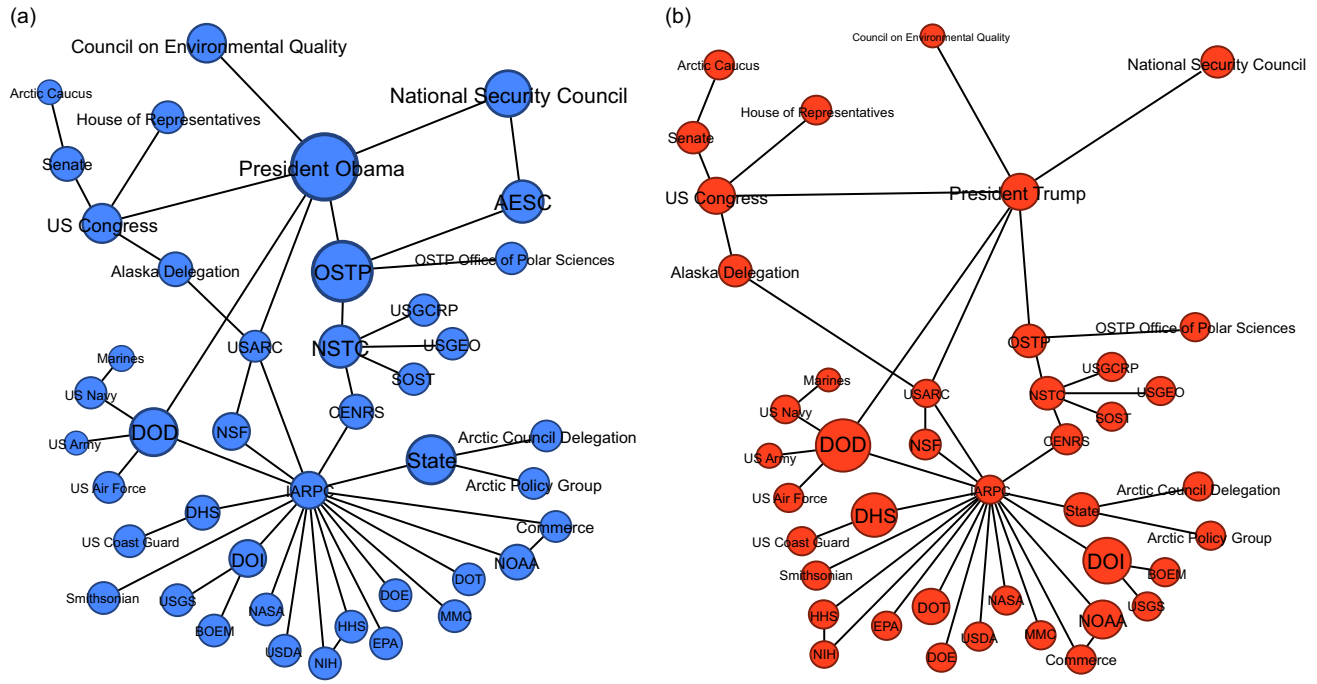


Fig. 1. Arctic policymaking under Obama and Trump.

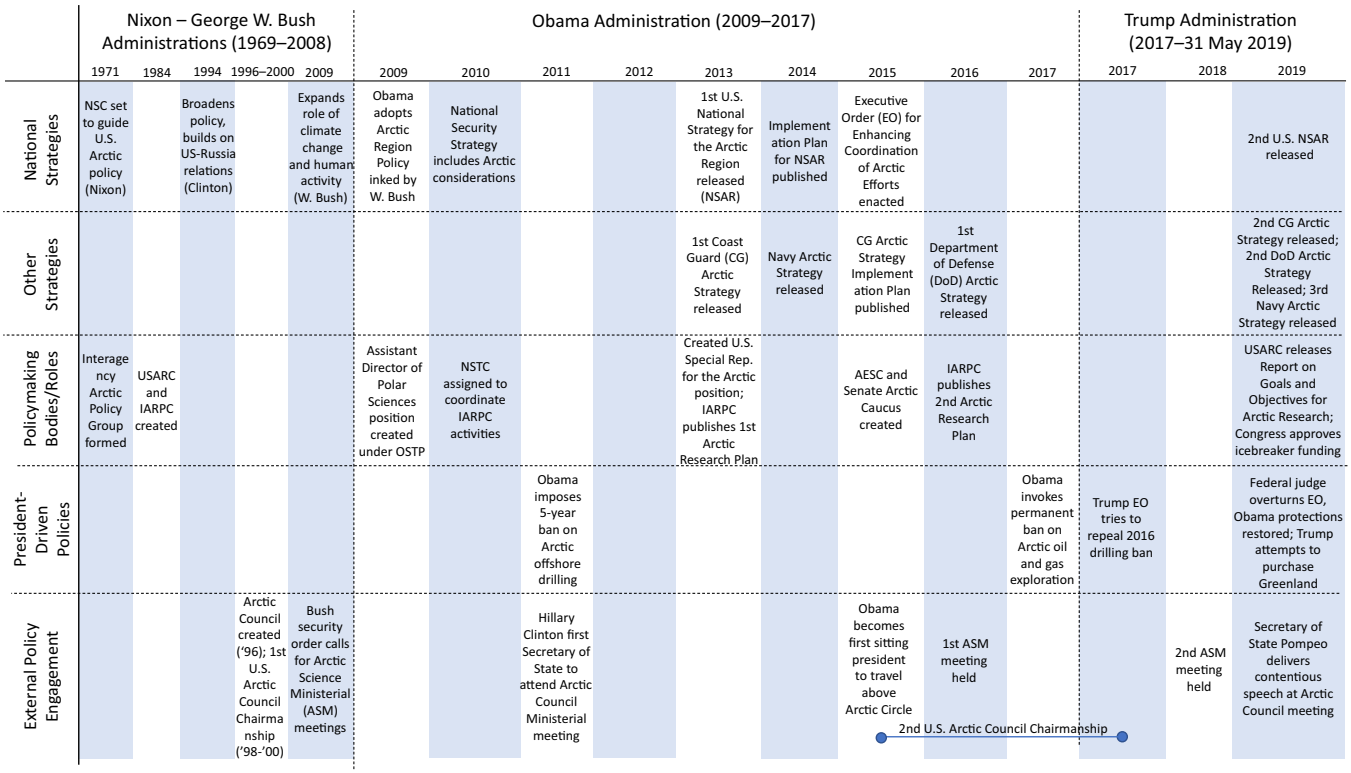


Fig. 2. Timeline of key Arctic policymaking events.

Congress established the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) in 1976 to advise the president and other executive agencies on science policy (Sargent Jr. & Shea, 2017). OSTP Director John Marburger (2007–2009) greenlighted the creation of a senior policy analyst to deal with a range of issues, including the Arctic. Under Obama, the widely respected John Holdren headed the office and in the early stages of his tenure, the senior policy analyst position evolved into the position of assistant director of Polar Sciences. The combination of Holdren's leadership, this new position, and Obama's priority on science allowed OSTP to play a powerful and important role in Arctic policymaking.

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Key players in the US government for Arctic policymaking include the US Arctic Research Commission (USARC), an independent federal agency, and IARPC, which became part of the National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) in 2010. The 1984 Reagan-era Arctic Research and Policy Act (amended in 1990) set up the USARC and IARPC to establish Arctic research policy, to identify goals and objectives for research, to establish and implement research plans, and to advise the president and Congress on Arctic research and research policy. Effectively the Commission identifies goals and objectives for Arctic research, and IARPC establishes and updates a five-year Arctic research programme plan to achieve those goals and objectives.

USARC is an independent agency tasked with advising Congress and the president on addressing critical Arctic research topics both domestically and internationally. To do so, USARC publishes biennial reports that recommend scientific research objectives and goals to allow the US to meet its needs, responsibilities, and ambitions as an Arctic country. In May 2019, USARC released its *Report on the Goals and Objectives for Arctic Research 2019–2020 for the US Arctic Research Program Plan*. The report emphasises five priority research areas, namely (1) advance Arctic infrastructure; (2) assess Arctic natural resources; (3) observe, understand, and forecast Arctic environmental change; (4) improve community health and well-being; and (5) enhance international scientific cooperation in the Arctic (United States Arctic Research Commission, 2019). Fran Ulmer, Alaska Lieutenant Governor from 1994 to 2002 and former Chancellor of the University of Alaska Anchorage, has been the Chair of the USARC since being first appointed by President Obama in 2011.

Formally established by Executive Order 12501, IARPC is responsible for furthering the scientific research on and monitoring of Arctic environmental issues on the local, regional, and global level. Composed of principals from 16 departments, agencies, and offices throughout the US federal government, IARPC is chartered as a subcommittee under the NSTC, and is coordinated by the National Science Foundation (NSF) with the NSF director serving as its chair (Office of Science and Technology Policy, no date). Through a 2010 Presidential memo, Obama assigned IARPC as an Interagency Working Group of the NSTC's Committee on Environment, Natural Resources, and Sustainability (CENRS) within OSTP. Before this, IARPC's lack of direct links to the White House limited the authority of the interagency science committee to the National Science Foundation. Placing IARPC under NSTC was a major advance in Arctic science policymaking.

Although the 1984 law required the preparation of a five-year Arctic research plan, the first one was not written until 2013 under the Obama Administration, covering the period from 2013 to 2017. The IARPC plan can be considered a policy document since it describes the topics on which the federal agencies will focus. Some members of the committee foresaw that there would be a change in presidential leadership and therefore sought to demonstrate that Arctic research was focused on practical issues, such as health, stewardship of the Arctic region, national and homeland security, and understanding the Arctic as part of the Earth system. Those policy drivers are in the second five-year research plan which was released in mid-December 2016, just before Trump took office, and covers 2017–2021 (Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee of the National Science and Technology Council, 2016).

Given the fact that USARC and IARPC tasks are mandated by law, both groups have been able to maintain their intended functions under both Obama and Trump. Because the most recent IARPC five-year research plan goes through 2021, it is not subject to challenge within Trump's current term in office.

In addition to working closely with the Arctic Council, the Obama Administration implemented bipartisan plans to push forward more ambitious international scientific cooperation. Bush's 2009 national security order called for regular meetings of the Arctic nations' science ministries. The US hosted the first ever Arctic Science Ministerial (ASM) meeting on 28 September 2016 in Washington, DC, and the USARC was instrumental in making the inaugural ministerial happen (United States Arctic Research Commission and Arctic Executive Steering Committee, 2016). The meeting was intentionally organised outside of the framework of the Arctic Council to allow non-Arctic Council member states to take part in the discussions. Twenty-five countries participated, including China. The US also participated in the second ASM meeting which took place in October 2018 in Berlin, Germany. The third ASM is planned for October 2020 in Japan and will be cohosted by Japan and Iceland.

Though US engagement in Arctic science continues, science has received far less attention under Trump. The position of OSTP director/presidential science advisor remained vacant after Trump's inauguration on 20 January 2017 until August 2018, when he appointed University of Oklahoma meteorologist Kelvin Droegemeier. The Senate confirmed Droegemeier on 2 January 2019, and he was able to assume his duties when the partial government shutdown ended later in the month. Droegemeier was initially positively received by members of the scientific community, but he appears to have little influence in an administration that seeks to cut the budget for scientific research and rejects the idea of human-caused climate change (*Mervis*, *2019*; *Science News Staff*, *2018*). In his public statements, Droegemeier does not discuss increasing federal funding to address climate change. Under Obama, the OSTP had a staff of 135 people. In April 2019, Droegemeier said that the staff was 65–70 people (*FYI Team*, *2019*).

The increasing importance of defence in US Arctic policymaking

China and Russia have expressed great interest in taking advantage of emerging opportunities in the dramatically changing Arctic in several ways. China is interested in the Arctic as a source of natural gas, a faster trading route for its goods transiting to western Europe, and as a symbolic way to demonstrate its great power status as a country with interests that span the globe. It has declared these interests through the 2018 White Paper "China's Arctic Policy" where China claimed status as a "near-Arctic state" and announced its intention to build a "Polar Silk Road" as part of the larger Belt and Road Initiative (The State Council, 2018). Even research activities are suspect by some as a tool to advance Chinese interests in the north. In a report to Congress, the Department of Defense warned that "civilian research could support a strengthened Chinese military presence in the Arctic Ocean, which could include deploying submarines to the region as a deterrent against nuclear attacks (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2019)." In contrast to China, Russia is a long recognized Arctic state with an extensive history in the region. Russia is constructing new ports and other infrastructure, modernising Soviet-era military installations, expanding its icebreaker fleet, and commissioning new aircraft, tanks, and submarines (Closson, 2019). Russia is developing oil and gas sites in the region and is counting on these as a central component of its future economic growth. Russia hopes to profit

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247419000810 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from the expansion of trade through the Northern Sea Route, though upgrading the necessary commercial infrastructure will take at least a decade and the potential commercial viability of shipping through the high north is yet to be fully proven. China could potentially play a role in these efforts by providing the financing that Russia lacks.

While Obama and Trump both recognised the national security and defence implications of rising international engagement in the north, especially from Russia and China, their approaches differed. Obama sought to address potential security issues in the region by utilising existing Arctic policy institutions while largely remaining neutral towards Russia and China. For example, through the National Security Council (NSC), Obama gathered input from across the government to create the first US National Strategy for the Arctic Region in 2013. The Strategy developed themes from earlier national strategy documents and produced a holistic Arctic approach that included national security issues, protecting the Arctic environment, managing natural resources, and strengthening international cooperation (Obama, 2013). In addition to the NSC, key players in producing the strategy included OSTP and the Council on Environmental Quality. Obama employed traditional mechanisms to guide the US's international Arctic activity with a heavy focus on diplomacy. In contrast, Trump has taken a much more aggressive approach to these Arctic actors, bypassing traditional policy processes. In August 2019, Trump proposed purchasing Greenland as part of an effort to ensure China does not gain a foothold on Arctic territory. The decision was not run through a policy process or closely coordinated with the State Department, as would have been expected under previous administrations (Lippman, 2019). In October 2019, Trump gave an apparent warning to China regarding the country's Arctic activities, stating "Simply put, we believe that the affairs of the Arctic should be governed by the actual nations of the Arctic. And, as you know, there are other people coming into the Arctic, and we don't like it. And we can't let it happen, and we won't let it happen (Brennan, 2019)." It does not seem that Trump has plans to create a second US National Strategy for the Arctic at this time.

The military and the State of Alaska have played their own roles in shaping Arctic policymaking. For example, as China and Russia step up their Arctic activities, some domestic constituencies in the US have advocated for increased military spending, including the individual branches of the US military and members of the Alaska congressional delegation who seek to direct federal dollars to their districts. The following section describes these and other contributions that the military and Alaska have made to Arctic policymaking under Obama and Trump in more detail.

Department of Defense

The activities of Russia and China are viewed in an atmosphere of distrust, leading other states to build up their own assets (Kravchuk, 2019). Within this environment, the Pentagon released its first Arctic strategy in 2016 (Department of Defense, 2016) and the updated version appeared in 2019 (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, June 2019). According to the 2018 US National Defense Strategy, China and Russia pose the most significant threat to US interests. Though the document does not mention the Arctic specifically, it declared that "Long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities for the Department, and require both increased and sustained investment, because of the magnitude of the threats they pose to US security and prosperity today, and the potential for those threats to increase in the future" (Mattis, 2018, p. 4). In this sense, the US's broader competition with Russia and China has had a notable impact on its Arctic policy.

Air Force

No other US military branch has a greater stake in the Arctic than the Air Force. The Air Force is responsible for 79% of Department of Defense operations and missions in the Arctic (Department of Defense, 2016). With the largest US defence presence in the region composed of radar systems, air bases, early warning and missile defence stations, and training facilities, Air Force operations in the Arctic are key to larger national security efforts (Pope, 2019). To bolster Air Force presence and operations in the north, the Air Force has decided to base 54 F-35 fifth-generation fighter jets at Alaska's Eielson Air Force Base. With the resulting addition of two combat F-35 squadrons to support a new combat mission for the base, the Air Force intends to project and demonstrate air power in the region (Bross, 2018). In fact, by 2022, the state will house more advanced fighter jets than anywhere else on the planet (Pope, 2019). In addition, the Air Force is modernising more than 50 radars that support defensive actions against bomber and missile attacks and training for cold condition operations, among other activities (Secretary Heather Wilson & Gen. David Goldfein, 2019). The Air Force is currently developing its own Arctic strategy, set to be released soon.

Navy

In response to the rapidly melting Arctic sea ice that stands to increase resource exploitation, vessel traffic, and fishing, the Navy issued its first Arctic strategic document called the "U.S. Navy Arctic Roadmap" in 2009 which was updated in 2014 (Navy Task Force Climate Change, 2014). The strategy emphasises close coordination with the US Coast Guard to protect their expanding area of responsibility and anticipates an uptick in the Navy's presence starting around 2020. The Navy released its Arctic Strategic Outlook in April 2019 which supersedes its 2014 Arctic Roadmap (Chief of Naval Operations The United States Navy, 2019). This document assesses the risk for conflict in the region to be low despite recognising risks, threats, and opportunities posed by a return to great power competition. However, this finding does not mean that the military branch is passive in the north. The strategy highlights the Navy's intention to continue strengthening partnerships with key international and interagency stakeholders, monitoring the evolving environment, and evaluating Navy Arctic capabilities (Chief of Naval Operations The United States Navy, 2019). Furthermore, the Pentagon intends to add Navy P-8 reconnaissance planes with submarine-hunting capabilities in Iceland (Lamothe, 2019). In 2018, the Navy's declaration of free navigation within Arctic waters to exercise its legal navigational rights reignited a US–Canadian conflict over contested rights to the Northwest Passage (Tømmerbakke, 2019). That same year, a US aircraft carrier sailed above the Arctic Circle for the first time in decades (Woody, 2018). In 2018, the Navy also re-established its second fleet which opposed the Soviet Navy in the North Atlantic during the Cold War (Faram, 2019). Based in Virginia, it will deploy warships to the Barents Sea off the coasts of Norway and Russia.

Army

In response to the recent uptick in Chinese and Russian activities in the Arctic, the Army is increasing its presence and operations in the north. Currently, US Army Alaska ground forces total

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247419000810 Published online by Cambridge University Press

approximately 25,000 troops. To increase troop resilience to the unforgiving Arctic cold, the Army has conducted additional medical evacuation training, airborne operations, and armored vehicle deployment exercises in recent years (Rempfer, 2019). The US Army Engineer Research and Development Center's Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory (CRREL) is expanding the size and scope of the Army's Arctic science and engineering research to bolster its regional expertise. Nevertheless, despite modest growth in Army engagement in the Arctic, there still seems to be a lack of enhanced Arctic policy and soldier training on how to successfully operate in Arctic conditions (South, 2018).

Coast Guard

As a part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Coast Guard put out its first Arctic Strategy in 2013 (U.S. Coast Guard, 2013) and an implementation plan two years later (U.S. Coast Guard, 2015). In 2019, the Coast Guard released a revised Arctic strategy entitled *United States Coast Guard Arctic Strategic Outlook*. The 2019 document starts by noting that in the intervening six years, China conducted six Arctic expeditions and Russia built 14 icebreakers. The Coast Guard expressed concern about US competitors: "Russia and China's persistent challenges to the rules-based international order around the globe cause concern of similar infringement to the continued peaceful stability of the Arctic region (U.S. Coast Guard, 2019, p. 4)." In 2019, Congress approved spending $655 million to construct a new icebreaker that will replace the dated Polar Star and another $20 million to begin building a second icebreaker (Sisk, 2019). The 2019 Congressional defence authorisation further stated that the Coast Guard should have no less than six icebreakers by the 2029 fiscal year (U.S. Congress, 2018). The move to fund the first new icebreaker is a significant milestone, representing the single largest financial investment to advance the US Arctic strategy. Moreover, the Coast Guard sees Congressional willingness to finally fund the first new icebreaker in more than forty years as a confirmation of rising US interest in tempering Russian and Chinese actions in the region (Sisk, 2019). On a day-to-day basis, however, the Coast Guard is focused on cooperation. According to Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz, "When you're talking about great power competition — that's not a Coast Guard mission, that is sort of a backdrop of geostrategic political reality. How do you conduct those missions [law enforcement and search and rescue] against that backdrop?" (Schreiber, 2019).

Alaska's interests

With a state budget deficit of $1.6 billion in 2019, Alaskan Arctic policy emphasises economic development (Brooks, 2019). Alaska has a strong interest in ensuring that the federal government continues to spend money on Arctic-related projects since federal funds account for 20–30% of its state budget (Thomas, Savatgy, & Klimovich, 2016, p. 249). Moreover, military employment and related construction contribute considerably to the Alaskan economy. Former Alaska Senator Ted Stevens chaired the Senate Appropriations Committee from 1997 to 2005 and used his power to channel considerable sums of money to Alaska (Serreze, 2018, p. 167). The delegation's power in collecting money has not been as strong since he left office in 2008 and since congressional earmarks fell out of favor. Senator Lisa Murkowski, Senator Dan Sullivan, and Representative Don Young, all Republicans, consistently support more military spending in their state.

Impact of presidential perceptions on domestic and international Arctic policy issues

Now that we have established the different ways in which Obama and Trump have responded to climate change and defence issues within the existing Arctic policymaking apparatus, we can explore examples of how these often-contrasting approaches affect policymaking at the domestic and international policy levels. First, we look at how climate change has led to conflicting presidential policies affecting Alaska. Then, we explore how both climate change and defence differences have directly influenced US engagement in the Arctic Council.

Regarding domestic politics, Trump has sought to increase fossil fuel production in Alaska. At Trump's urging and with the support of Alaska's Congressional delegation, the Department of the Interior has sought to remove Obama-era regulatory barriers to enhance oil and gas drilling in Alaska, including in the previously off-limits Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). Murkowski included the permission to drill in the ANWR into the large tax cut the Republicans passed in 2017 when they controlled both branches of Congress and the White House (Cole, 2019). That same year, President Trump signed an Executive Order to conduct a multiyear review of federally prohibited waters for oil and gas drilling and repeal Obama's 2016 drilling ban (Trump, April 28, 2017). However, the statute on which the ban was based does not include a provision authorising a reversal without Congressional approval and there is no precedent for a president attempting such a reversal, indicating a break with previous policy mechanisms (Gleason, March 29, 2019). On 29 March 2019, US District Judge Sharon L. Gleason overturned Trump's order and restored Obama's protections of the off-shore sites. The Trump Administration plans to appeal this decision.

While the US can implement its Arctic policy through a variety of mechanisms, its actions in the Arctic Council both synthesise and articulate the direction of US efforts in the Arctic at the international level. Founded in 1996, the Arctic Council serves as a high-level intergovernmental forum to enhance coordination, cooperation, and engagement among key Arctic stakeholders on issues such as environmental protection, coordinating search and rescue operations, and sustainable development. It is important to note that the Ottawa Declaration, which established the Council, explicitly excluded military security from its scope. Arctic Council member states include the US, Russia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, and Canada. These member states are joined by Arctic indigenous communities which hold Permanent Participant status. Several countries, including China, have observer status. Since its founding, the Arctic Council has been an international model of cooperation that has succeeded in keeping regional tensions low.

The US Department of State represents the US at Arctic Council meetings. The Department coordinates federal Arctic activities through its chairmanship of the interagency Arctic Policy Group (APG), which was established in 1971 and is charged with coordinating US Arctic policy efforts among federal and other relevant agencies (Kissenger, 1971). Rather than making policy, the group focuses on updating participants on Arctic actions taken by the group's various organisations. Any questions requiring the president's attention are referred to the NSC. The APG typically includes

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247419000810 Published online by Cambridge University Press

30–75 people on its monthly phone calls. Not much has changed under the Trump Administration for this body.

The second US chairmanship of the Arctic Council ran from 24 April 2015 to 11 May 2017, covering the end of the Obama Administration and the beginning of the Trump tenure. The Obama Administration was engaged in and supportive of the Arctic Council. Hillary Clinton was the first American Secretary of State to attend an Arctic Council ministerial meeting in 2011. Additionally, the 2017 agreement on international scientific cooperation, which came into force through the Arctic Council in May 2018, is a prominent example of Obama-era accomplishments (Berkman, Kullerud, Pope, Vylegzhanin, & Young, 2017).

Initially, US participation in the Arctic Council under Trump continued on as before. Led by the State Department, the US delegation size to the Council under Trump and Obama was similar. The US delegation supported efforts to reduce black carbon, enhance search and rescue cooperation, bolster resilience activities, and discussed protection areas with Russia in Bering Strait. The Arctic Council ministerial meeting in Fairbanks on 10–11 May 2017 was considered a continuation of past activities. Some feared that the then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson would hamper Arctic Council climate initiatives at the ministerial but in the end, Tillerson was convinced to support several climate efforts (Breum, 2017). In 2018, the US tempered calls for setting more ambitious goals on black carbon by highlighting the importance of energy development and economic prosperity in the region (Chater, 2019).

The May 2019 ministerial meeting, however, represented a stark departure from business as usual. US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo shocked Arctic Council ministerial attendees in a speech that attacked Russia and China. Given the lack of institutionalised policymaking in the Trump Administration, the speech likely articulated what Pompeo thought Trump would want him to say in this situation. Pompeo declared on 6 May, the day before the ministerial (as transcribed on the State Department website):

> China has observer status in the Arctic Council, but that status is contingent upon its respect for the sovereign rights of Arctic states. The U.S. wants China to meet that condition and contribute responsibly in the region. But China's words and actions raise doubts about its intentions. Beijing claims to be a "Near-Arctic State," yet the shortest distance between China and the Arctic is 900 miles. There are only Arctic States and Non-Arctic States. No third category exists, and claiming otherwise entitles China to exactly nothing. ... Our Pentagon warned just last week that China could use its civilian research presence in the Arctic to strengthen its military presence, including our deployment of submarines – including deployment of submarines to the region as a deterrent against nuclear attack. ... Let's just ask ourselves: Do we want Arctic nations broadly, or indigenous communities specifically, to go the way of former government in Sri Lanka or Malaysia, ensnared by debt and corruption? Do we want crucial Arctic infrastructure to end up like Chinese-constructed roads in Ethiopia, crumbling and dangerous after only a few years? Do we want the Arctic Ocean to transform into a new South China Sea, fraught with militarization and competing territorial claims? Do we want the fragile Arctic environment exposed to the same ecological devastation caused by China's fishing fleet in the seas off its coast, or unregulated industrial activity in its own country? I think the answers are pretty clear. ...
>
> No one denies Russia has significant Arctic interests. We recognize that Russia is not the only nation making illegitimate claims. The U.S. has a long-contested feud with Canada over sovereign claims through the Northwest Passage. But Russia is unique. Its actions deserve special attention, special attention of this Council, in part because of their sheer scale. But also because we know Russian territorial ambitions can turn violent. 13,000 people have been killed due to Russia's ongoing aggressive action in Ukraine. And just because the Arctic is a place of wilderness does not mean it should become a place of lawlessness. It need not be the case. And we stand ready to ensure that it does not become so.
>
> We must hold each other accountable. And we must not allow this forum to fall victim to subversion – from Arctic or non-Arctic states. (Pompeo, 2019)

While the US has legitimate complaints about Russian and Chinese policies, the use of the Arctic Council platform to raise these issues violates the Council's explicit exclusion of military security in its mandate. This exclusion was intended to preserve the Arctic as an area of cooperation between the US and other powers and in doing so, ensure that military issues did not impinge on efforts to protect the Arctic environment. Attempting to introduce military considerations into Council discussions may threaten to upend the cooperative structure of the forum and its organising principles which could, if continued, erode the strength of the Council itself. It is unclear if the US will return to the traditional format or persist in its efforts to include defence in the forum but the latter could result in significant consequences for international Arctic collaboration and policymaking.

Pompeo avoided the mention of climate change in his speech, instead framing the melting ice in the Arctic as a positive development that sparks new economic opportunities, a view that is out of step with a considerable part of the American and international community. This aversion to recognising climate issues aligns with Trump's position on climate change.

Traditionally, every Arctic Council meeting ends with a long declaration. However, shortly after Pompeo's speech, US refusal to include climate change language in a joint statement by Council member states not only prevented the body from releasing a declaration for the first time in its history but infuriated the other member states and observers like China and India (Milne, 2019).

Institutionalisation of US Arctic policymaking under Obama and Trump

Taking a comprehensive look at Arctic policymaking under Obama and Trump reveals how institutionalisation was a significant underlying driver of both presidential approaches to Arctic policymaking in response to climate change and defence issues.

Obama not only tended to uphold the norms of previously established institutions like the Arctic Council and OSTP but used institutionalisation as a tool to advance Arctic policymaking. He created new Arctic governing bodies, positions, and strategy documents as well as engaged closely with the State Department and various scientific institutions involved in the Arctic region. Beyond the president, members of Obama's Administration relied on institutions to advance their policies. On 16 July 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry created the first US Special Representative for the Arctic position, filled by retired USCG Commandant Robert Papp, from July 2014 to January 2017. A cross-cutting example of institutionalisation under Obama can be found in his creation of the Arctic Executive Steering Committee (AESC). Established through an Executive Order signed on 21 January 2015, the AESC operated within the NSC to coordinate the actions of federal agencies, state, local, and tribal governments in Alaska and the business and nonprofit sectors (Obama, 2015). The new body, drawing on staff support from the OSTP and to a lesser extent, the NSC, guided the initial efforts of the US's two-year rotating chairmanship of the Arctic Council. Mark Brzezinski, former US Ambassador to Sweden, served as the AESC's Executive Director. OSTP Director John Holdren served as AESC co-chair.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247419000810 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Though to date the Trump Administration has not eliminated any Arctic institutions, its approach to Arctic policymaking has often either directly challenged previously established norms, policies, and institutions affecting the region or caused them to be inactive. Attempting to introduce military issues into the Arctic Council, remove the US from the Paris Agreement, and reverse a drilling ban without needed Congressional approval are just some examples. In some cases, Trump has undone previously established policies. For example, he revoked Obama's Executive Order entitled "Northern Bering Sea Climate Change Resilience" which served to protect the Bering Sea in 2017 (Haecker, 2017). Several key Arctic positions were either not filled for some time or remain unfilled. The newly established US Special Representative for the Arctic, for instance, has been left vacant under both Secretary of State Tillerson and then Pompeo. Although the AESC continues to exist in the Trump era, the body has not been convened during the current administration, effectively downgrading the role of the Arctic in administrative decision-making. In an attempt to increase the importance of the Arctic in the executive branch as well as revive the AESC and restore its status as a driver of Arctic policy, Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski introduced legislation in December 2018 to make the DHS its chair and a White House office a co-chair. To date, her efforts have not borne fruit.

Conclusion

This analysis described how the Arctic policymaking process functions in the US. The ways in which Obama and Trump interpreted climate change and increasing Arctic engagement from major international actors through the prism of their own preferences and interests impacted their respective Arctic policies within the larger Arctic policymaking structure.

While in many ways, Trump's policies and behavior are a clear departure from those of his predecessors, the question remains—how much of his Arctic policy approach will endure after he leaves office? The next president will have a different personality and his or her administration will have different ways of interacting with the other Arctic states, but many of the factors driving modifications to US policy will remain in place. Russia and China are both actively pursuing their own national interests in the Arctic and these do not always converge with US interests. Accordingly, features of Trump's great power competition approach to US Arctic engagement may persist through future administrations by, for example, increasingly justifying the deployment of more military resources to the north. This increase may take place even if the chance of direct conflict in the region remains low. Climate change is transforming the Arctic and future leaders will have to address these emerging variations. Should the next president share Trump's denial of climate change, support for increased fossil fuel production, and reduced reliance on science, these positions would have a notable impact on the US's ability to address the challenges presented by the changing conditions in both domestic and international Arctic arenas.

While great power competition and climate change are to some extent exogenous factors for US policymaking, they are increasingly influencing the nature of the country's Arctic policy through the lens of the domestic policymaking apparatus described here. Recognising the important role of the US president in Arctic policymaking, it is critical that voters in the 2020 election consider how not just the position but the personality of their candidate for the Oval Office may influence the US's approach to these emerging Arctic challenges.

Acknowledgements. This work was supported by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs with support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247419000810

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