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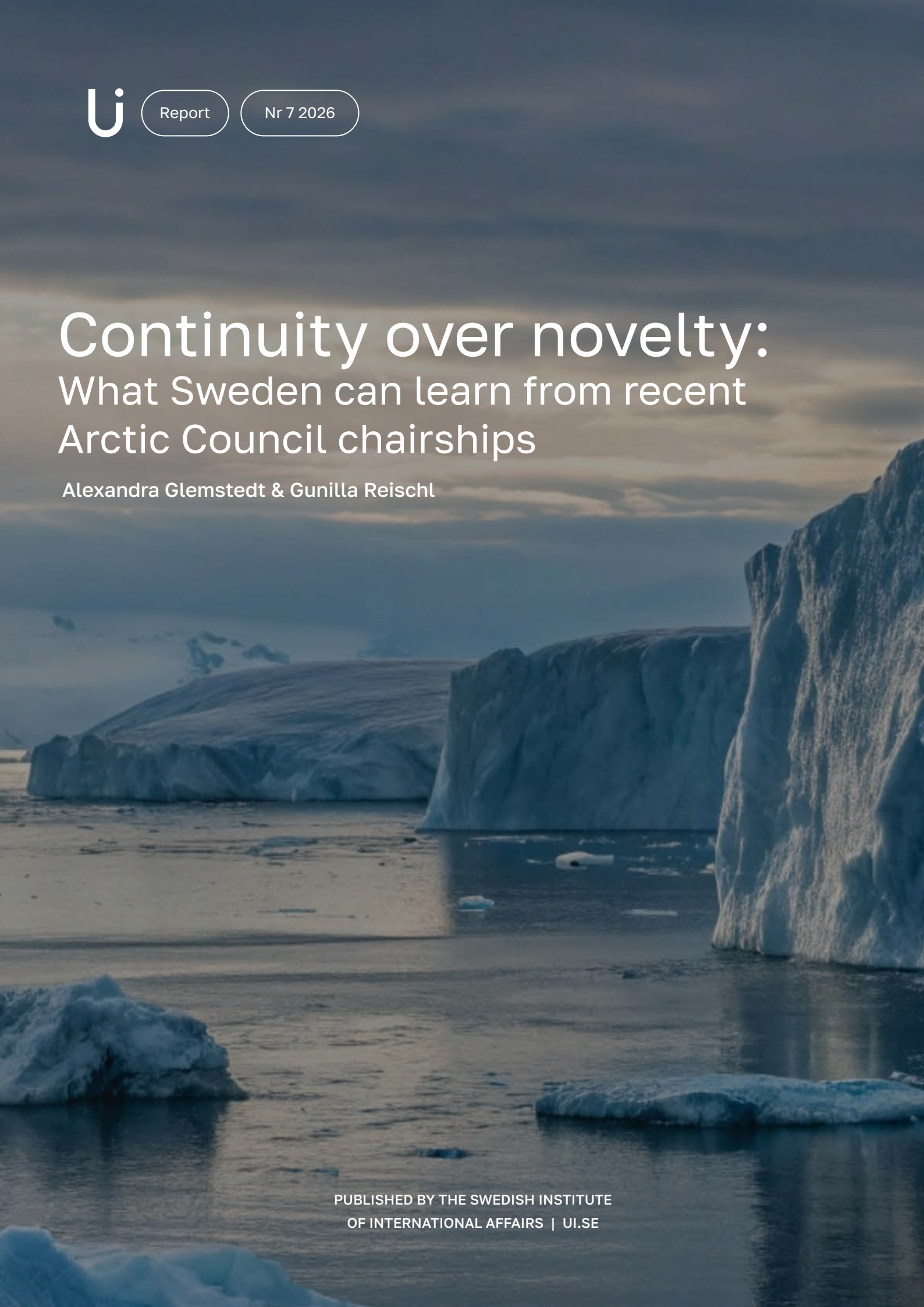
Continuity over novelty:
What Sweden can learn from recent Arctic Council chairships

Alexandra Glemstedt & Gunilla Reischl



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Summary

Against a backdrop of growing geopolitical tensions and accelerating climate change in the Arctic, Sweden will assume the Chairship of the Arctic Council in May 2027. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 disrupted established patterns of cooperation, while strategic competition and international interest in Arctic resources have placed additional pressure on Arctic governance. Military security is outside the Council's mandate but increasingly shapes the conditions under which Arctic cooperation takes place. This policy report examines what Sweden can realistically achieve as Chair under these conditions. Drawing on a comparison of the Norwegian (2023–2025) and Danish/Greenlandic (2025–2027) terms as Chair, it shows how recent Chairships have sought to maintain cooperation despite political divisions among the Arctic states. The comparison highlights three lessons for Sweden. First, institutional continuity matters more than novelty when political tensions constrain cooperation. Second, Chairs' initiatives are most likely to succeed when they build on existing Working Group activities and enjoy broad support across the Council. Third, Indigenous participation is most effective when embedded in the Council's everyday decision-making practices rather than treated as a separate objective. Sweden's most important contribution will therefore not lie in resolving broader geopolitical tensions. Rather, Sweden can best serve the Council by strengthening environmental cooperation, scientific collaboration and Indigenous participation, while helping to preserve the institutions and relationships that make Arctic cooperation possible.



Alexandra Glemstedt

Former Research Assistant at the Programme for European and Global Politics at UI.



Gunilla Reischl

Senior Researcher at the Programme for European and Global Politics at UI.

1. Introduction

The Arctic has long been strategically important because of its natural resources and its geopolitical and security significance. Accelerating climate change, renewed great power competition and expanding access to Arctic shipping routes and resources are now reshaping the region from a zone of relative cooperation to one of increasing geopolitical contestation. For decades, the Arctic Council has served as the central forum for cooperation, dialogue and knowledge-sharing among Arctic states (Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States), helping to shield regional collaboration from broader geopolitical tensions. Built on consensus-based decision making, strong inclusion of Indigenous Permanent Participants and a mandate focused on environmental protection and sustainable development, the Council has facilitated cooperation even during periods of political strain.[1] In recent years, however, geopolitical developments have altered the political context in which Arctic cooperation takes place. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Finland's and Sweden's accessions to NATO, renewed US attention on Greenland and increased interest from non-Arctic actors have contributed to a more contested regional environment.

While the Arctic has never been insulated from international politics, cooperation now operates under significantly greater political constraints than in previous decades. The Council's institutional design has historically allowed practical cooperation to continue despite wider diplomatic disputes, such as following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and disagreements over climate language during the 2019 Ministerial Meeting.[2] The 2022 invasion, however, represented a turning point. High-level political engagement with Russia, which held the Chairship at the time, was suspended, ministerial-level cooperation stalled and core elements of Arctic multilateralism were disrupted. While aspects of the Council's technical and scientific work have since resumed, the crisis exposed the limits of a governance model that depends heavily on trust, regular communication and political consensus among its members. The timing of this disruption is particularly significant. Climate impacts in the Arctic are unfolding at unprecedented speed, amplifying risks to ecosystems, livelihoods, and Indigenous and local communities. These challenges are inherently transboundary and require sustained international cooperation.

At the same time, the Arctic is increasingly discussed through the language of security, military capability and strategic competition. Although these developments fall outside the Arctic Council's formal mandate, they influence the political environment in which the Council operates and raise questions about its future role and relevance.

Since its foundation in September 1996, the Council has been defined by an institutional model built on consensus-based cooperation among Arctic states, the formal inclusion of Indigenous Peoples' organisations as Permanent Participants and a mandate focused

1 Conley, H. A. & Melino, M. (2016). *An Arctic Redesign: Recommendatios to Rejuvenate the Arctic Council,* Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.
2 Dyck, C. (2024). *On Thin ice: The Arctic Council's Uncertain Future*. Marine Policy 163.

on environmental protection and sustainable development that explicitly excludes military security.[3] The Council's influence has historically rested on shaping priorities, producing scientific assessments, developing shared approaches and fostering regular interaction among Arctic actors. At a time when political dialogue has become increasingly constrained, these functions could be among the Council's most valuable contributions.

As the Council celebrates its 30th anniversary, it finds itself at a critical juncture. Its future relevance will depend not only on its ability to continue political cooperation, but on whether its institutional model can adapt to a more contested Arctic while continuing to deliver on its core mandate. Critics have frequently highlighted the Council's lack of formal decision-making authority and legally binding powers. However, evaluating the Council solely through this lens risks overlooking its broader contribution to Arctic governance.

At the centre of this challenge lies the rotating Chairship. While formally constrained by the Council's mandate and consensus-based rules, the Chairship has long been recognised as a platform for agenda-setting and institutional stewardship. Recent Chairships have demonstrated that practical cooperation can endure even under conditions of political rupture, particularly through the continued work of the Council's six Working Groups on environmental monitoring, marine protection, biodiversity, wildfire management, community resilience and emergency preparedness.[4] In times of crisis, the Chair's ability to maintain cooperation, facilitate communication and prioritise areas where consensus remains possible is especially important.

The Chairship's greatest value is not in shaping Arctic geopolitics but in sustaining environmental cooperation, scientific collaboration and Indigenous participation at a time when these forms of cooperation are under growing pressure. This policy brief examines how the Norwegian (2023–2025) and Danish/Greenlandic (2025–2027) Chairships sought to preserve cooperation under conditions of geopolitical tension.

Drawing on Arctic Council meeting records, Chairship programmes and secondary literature, it analyses how the two Chairships managed political constraints and adapted to changing circumstances. The analysis applies three lenses (institutional structure, leadership and adaptive capacity) to assess how each Chairship responded to crises and maintained cooperation. Finally, this brief considers how recent Chairships have used this constrained but meaningful space to sustain climate cooperation and Indigenous participation, and what lessons this offers Sweden as it prepares to assume the Chairship in 2027.

3 Arctic Council (1996). *Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council (The Ottawa Declaration)*. Ottawa, Canada, Arctic Council.

4 Conley & Melino, *An Arctic Redesign: Recommendatios to Rejuvinate the Arctic Council;*
Edvardsen, A. & Hansen, B. A. (2026). 30 years of the Arctic Council: Problem Solving in a Northern Community with Wisdom and Sense of Humour. Retrieved 12 March 2026 from https://en.highnorthnews.com/politics/problem-solving-in-a-northern-community-with-wisdom-and-sense-of-humour/1104795; and Groenning, R. (2016). *Why Military Security Should be Kept out of the Arctic Council*.
Retrieved 12 February 2026, from https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/why-military-security-should-be-kept-out-of-the-arctic-council/.

2. The Arctic Council Today: Mandate, Structure and Emerging Challenges

At the foundational core of the Arctic Council lies the inclusion of and participation by the Arctic's Indigenous Peoples through Permanent Participant status, which grants Indigenous representatives a seat at the same table as the Arctic states' foreign ministers. At the time of its creation, this institutional design made the Council a leading forum for the international recognition of Indigenous participation in governance.[5]

The Council's six Working Groups lead activities, programmes and projects on a broad range of issues. While the Council has been successful in ensuring cooperation on the protection of important ecosystems, such as marine life, and on preventing oil spills,[6] it faces increasing challenges linked to military and territorial threats to the region and geopolitical division among the Arctic states. At the same time, climate change mitigation and environmental protection risk being deprioritised as the region becomes the focus of intensified plans for resource extraction.[7] While some aspects of the Council's work have been paused since 2022, and some meetings are on pause or being held online, the Working Groups' projects involving experts from all member states are still highly active.[8]

In recent years, Arctic scholars have been warning that without clear strategies, Arctic states and the Arctic Council itself risk becoming reactive rather than helping to frame responses to the region's evolving geopolitical dynamic.[9] This concern was echoed at the Arctic Frontiers Conference in February 2026, where scholars and politicians argued that Europe must articulate its interests more clearly and pursue strategic choices rather than rely solely on a values-driven self-image.[10]

The position of the Chair was not explicitly defined in the Arctic Council's original procedures. Instead, it was referred to as the "Host Country".[11] It was only during the 2013 Ministerial Meeting in Kiruna that the term "Chairmanship" was formally incorporated into the Rules of Procedure.[12] The Chair coordinates the preparations for Ministerial Meetings, convenes the Senior Arctic Official (SAO) meetings, which are normally held twice a year, and represents the Council with external parties.[13] The Arctic Council's mandate and rules of procedure define the Chair's scope for action by outlining its formal tasks and functions, notably agenda-setting, brokerage and representation.[14] While formally constrained, the Chairship nonetheless offers a modest but meaningful capacity to influence priorities, convene actors and sustain institutional continuity.

5 Axworthy, T. S. & Dean, R. (2013). *Changing the Arctic Paradigm from Cold War to Cooperation: How Canada's Indigenous Leaders Shaped the Arctic Council*. The Yearbook of Polar Law Online, 5(1), pp. 7–43.

6 Siem, B. (2024). A Cold Exit? Implications for Climate Change and Security Should Russia Exit the Arctic Council. Retrieved 20 February 2026, from https://medium.com/centre-for-international-and-defence-policy/a-cold-exit-implications-for-climate-change-and-security-should-russia-exit-the-arctic-council-6dcfd4-aed362.

Arctic Council (2025). *Emerging Risks in the Arctic,* Tromsø: Arctic Council Secretariat.

7 Klimenko, E. (2019). *The Geopolitics of a Changing Arctic,* Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

8 Eduards, H. (2026). *Vad står på spel i Arktis?* 18 March 2026, public event organised by The Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI).

9 Thorsson, E. (2026). *Is the Arctic on the menu? Arctic Frontiers opens with stark warnings for Europe.* Retrieved 9 February 2026, from https://www.arctictoday.com/is-the-arctic-on-the-menu-arctic-frontiers-opens-with-stark-warnings-for-europe/.

Barry, T., Daviðsdóttir, B., Einarsson, N. & Young, O. R. (2020). *The Arctic Council: an agent of change?* Global Environmental Change, Volume 63, pp. 1-10.

10 Thorsson, *Is the Arctic on the menu? Arctic Frontiers opens with stark warnings for Europe.*

11 Smieszek, M. & Kankaanpää, P. (2015). *Role of the Arctic Council Chairmanship.* Arctic Yearbook 2015, 29 October, pp. 1-16.

12 The Council adopted the term Chairship in 2023. The move towards a gender-neutral position was led by Norway's Chairship.

Arctic Council (2013). *Arctic Council Rules of Procedure. Revised by the Arctic Council at the Eight Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting.* Kiruna, Sweden, Arctic Council; Smieszek & Kankaanpää, *Role of the Arctic Council Chairmanship.*

13 Smieszek & Kankaanpää, *Role of the Arctic Council Chairmanship.*

14 Ibid.

3. Case Comparison: Chairships Under Geopolitical Stress

3.1 Norway, 2023–2025: Restoring Functionality after Rupture

The Russian Federation concluded its Chairship of the Arctic Council in May 2023, marking the beginning of Norway's Chairship in a *Statement on the Occasion of the 13th Ministerial Meeting.*[15] The meeting itself did not proceed as planned due to the continuing pause in much of the Council's work following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This vacuum at the political level underscored the fragile state of Arctic multilateralism at the outset of Norway's term. Nonetheless, as part of this transition, Norway published a brochure outlining its Chairship priorities.

Norway's Chairship was uniquely difficult because it was the first to assume office following the pause in the Council's work and no Ministerial Declaration had been adopted at the May 2023 meeting. Trust among member states and within Council structures therefore had to be rebuilt. Norway's Chairship was underpinned by the overarching aims of promoting stability and resuming constructive cooperation in the Arctic. The Chairship programme stated that "Norway will focus on the core issues the Council deals with".[16] The deliberate breadth of this formulation reflects how Norway prioritised continuity and institutional recovery rather than pursue new or potentially contentious initiatives. Ahead of assuming its Chairship, Norway emphasised that the Council's task was more important than ever, given the accelerating pace of climate change in the Arctic and the challenges facing international cooperation which had affected cooperation within the Council.[17]

During Norway's Chairship, its priority topics were the Oceans, Climate and the environment, Sustainable economic development and People in the north.[18] The preliminary Chairship programme also emphasised youth in the Arctic, alongside continued support for the ongoing projects of the Working Groups.

This emphasis was a deliberate response to the previous decline in the Council's activities, aiming to revitalise participation and re-engage actors throughout the institution. By elevating People in the north, and young people in particular, as a core priority, Norway sought to reaffirm the Council's relevance at a time when its operational capacity was under pressure. Norway's focus on youth engagement in the Arctic region resulted in the creation of the Arctic Youth Conference in 2025. In addition, the Chairship programme included a commitment to organise an international conference on Ecosystem-based Ocean Management, to be held in partnership with Observers of the Council. Norway also proposed a conference on emergency preparedness, which was subsequently organised in Bodø on 18–20 March 2025. The Arctic Emergency Management Conference promoted an integrated approach to climate-related risks and emergency preparedness, with a particular focus on the challenges facing Indigenous communities in the Arctic.

15 Arctic Council (2023). *Statement on the Occasion of the Thirteenth Meeting of the Arctic Council,* Tromsø Norway: Arctic Council Secretariat.
16 Arctic Council, n.d.. *Norway's Chairship, 2023-2025.* Retrieved 3 March 2026, from https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/norway-chair-2/.
17 Arctic Council (2023). *Norway's Chairship Arctic Council 2023-2025.* Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
18 Ibid.

Norway adapted to the Council's political constraints by focusing on policy areas where cooperation remained feasible despite wider geopolitical disagreements. While initiatives such as youth engagement had limited immediate policy consequences, they performed the important institutional functions of maintaining participation, preserving working relationships and preventing further erosion of Council activity. In this sense, Norway's principal achievement was not the introduction of new policy initiatives, but preservation of the institutional structures, professional networks and working relationships necessary for future cooperation.

This strategy allowed Norway to show that the Council could continue to function as a venue for low-tension, consensus-based cooperation, even after a prolonged institutional pause. Scholars have characterised the Arctic Council Chairship as a particularly powerful "platform for leadership".[19] While the Chair must operate within the Council's consensus-based rules, it retains meaningful room to promote national priorities through agenda-setting, issue framing and the initiation of projects.[20] This creates a delicate balance between seizing a "window of opportunity" and maintaining collective legitimacy.[21] Crucially, for Chairship initiatives to produce lasting impact, they must endure beyond the two-year term. Otherwise, they risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive.[22]

At the 14th Ministerial Meeting in Tromsø in May 2025, which concluded Norway's Chairship, the Norwegian Chair of the SAOs stated that Norway's term had "enabled the Council to regain its momentum and begin delivering on its vital mandate".[23] While Norway highlights how to operate within a narrow space for permissible action, deliberately steering the Council's work away from military issues towards its core environmental and societal agenda, it is also arguable that the limits of Norway's achievements reflect both institutional constraints and the narrow scope for ambitious initiatives under prevailing geopolitical conditions.

However, Norway's focus on youth engagement contributed to the resilience of the Council as it builds for long-term investment. Norway also reopened channels of communication within the Council and between the Arctic states following the agreement to hold virtual meetings in February 2024. According to the Arctic Council, this was a milestone that increased the momentum of its work.[24] Despite continuing constraints, Norway succeeded in reactivating both political level engagement, such as the Ministerial Meetings, and Working Group activities, strengthening the resilience of the Council and the cooperation between the Arctic states and Indigenous Peoples in a period of disruption.[25] The significance of these initiatives should not be measured primarily through short-term outputs. Their value lies in preserving networks, expertise and mechanisms for participation that it would be considerably

19 Smieszek & Kankaanpää, *Role of the Arctic Council Chairmanship.*
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ivanova, A. (2025). After Norway, What's Next? The Kingdom of Denmark and the Arctic Council's Future. Retrieved 24 February 2026, from https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/after-norway-whats-next-kingdom-of-denmark-arctic-councils-future/.
Barry, Daviðsdóttir, Einarsson & Young, *The Arctic Council: an agent of change?*
23 Arctic Council (2025). *14th Meeting of the Arctic Council Tromsø, Norway / Virtual*. Tromsø, Norway / Virtual, Arctic Council.
24 Ibid.
25 Ivanova, *After Norway, What's Next? The Kingdom of Denmark and the Arctic Council's Future.*

more difficult to rebuild if they were allowed to disappear during a period of geopolitical disruption.

3.2 Denmark/Greenland, 2025–2027: Building Ambition and Resilience

Denmark's Chairship commenced amid enduring geopolitical tensions, which this time included heightened US interest in Greenland and growing strategic competition throughout the Arctic. At the same time, intensified interest in Arctic resources, territory and shipping routes has drawn global attention to the region. Against this backdrop, Denmark's Chairship programme suggested a shift from institutional recovery to more active agenda-setting, with a stronger emphasis on reinforcing long-term institutional resilience.

Denmark assumed the Chairship from Norway at the 14th Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council on 12 May 2025. Greenland's then Minister of Foreign Affairs and Chair of the Arctic Council, Vivian Motzfeldt,[26] presented the Chairship programme for 2025–2027. The programme emphasised keeping the Arctic Council vibrant and resilient for the Indigenous Peoples and other inhabitants of the Arctic, while sustaining the region as a space of stability and constructive cooperation.[27] The Danish Chairship identified five priority areas: Indigenous peoples and communities of the Arctic, Sustainable economic development and energy transition, Oceans, Climate change and Biodiversity.[28] Central to the agenda was a strong emphasis on the human dimension of Arctic governance, including Indigenous participation and youth engagement in all policy areas.

Midway through the Chairship, Denmark organised an Ocean Connectivity Conference in Tórshavn, Faroe Islands, on 26–28 May 2026. The aim of the conference was to facilitate knowledge exchange and improve monitoring and management of the changing marine environment through the integration of research findings and Indigenous knowledge.[29] The event was part of UArctic's 2026 Congress.[30] The direct policy effects of such conferences are difficult to assess. However, their significance lies less in immediate outcomes than in their ability to bring together policymakers, researchers and Indigenous representatives to discuss shared governance challenges. These interactions help to sustain networks of expertise and cooperation that could facilitate future policy coordination.

Denmark also tasked a Chairship Youth Committee (CYC) with selecting themes for the upcoming Arctic Youth Conference in 2027. The committee will engage with representatives from across the Arctic Council and its Working Groups, and promote intergenerational dialogue and collaboration within the Council. By extending Norway's youth-focused initiatives, Denmark is demonstrating how Chairships can build

Jacobsen, M. & Vigeland Rottem, S. (2025). *The Arctic Council in the Shadow of Geopolitics.* Retrieved 4 March 2026, from https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/arctic-council-shadow-geopolitics/.

26 Since March 2026, Vivian Motzfeldt is not Greenland's minster of Foreign Affairs. This a result of Danish domestic politics ahead of the general election in March 2026.

27 Arctic Council, n.d.. *Kingdom of Denmark's Chairship, 2025-2027.* Retrieved 3 March 2026, from https://arctic-council.org/about/kingdom-of-denmarks-chairship-2025-2027/.

28 Arctic Council (2025). *The Kingdom of Denmark's Chairship.* Arctic Council.

29 Ibid.

30 Nordic Co-operation (2026) Meet the Nordics at the UArctic Congress and Ocean Connectivity Conference. Retrieved 17 July 2026, from https://www.norden.org/en/news/meet-nordics-uarctic-congress-and-ocean-connectivity-conference.

cumulatively on one another, strengthening initiatives to persist beyond individual terms.[31]

Overall, the Danish Chairship has placed greater emphasis on expanding existing initiatives than its Norwegian predecessor. Whereas Norway focused on institutional stabilisation under exceptional constraints, Denmark has so far sought to build on this recovery to pursue a more expansive agenda, involving deeper engagement with youth, greater opportunities for knowledge exchange, and more detailed activities in the Working Groups.[32] The decision to locate the Chairship leadership in Greenland further reinforces the emphasis on proximity to Arctic communities and Indigenous-led governance. It is too early to say whether these efforts will have longer-term institutional effects.

Ahead of Denmark's Chairship, scholars and practitioners argued that Denmark and Sweden should propose a new binding agreement focused on protecting the rights of Arctic Indigenous Peoples.[33] Such a proposal would reflect the combined commitments made during the previous Danish and Swedish Chairships (2009–2011 and 2011–2013). These resulted in two binding agreements of the Council: the Agreement on Cooperation on Search and Rescue and the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response.[34] However, no such agreement has been developed or proposed as a result of the previous or upcoming Chairships.

Denmark's Chairship sought to contribute to institutional resilience by advancing environmental cooperation and Indigenous participation while respecting the Council's non-military mandate. The immediate policy effects of these initiatives are difficult to assess. However, dismissing them as merely symbolic would risk overlooking an important feature of Arctic governance. In a context where the Council's formal mandate excludes security affairs, and where political divisions constrain new agreements, convening researchers, policymakers, Indigenous representatives and Arctic communities becomes a form of governance in itself. Such activities help to sustain the knowledge networks and cooperative practices on which future policy coordination depends.

The cases of Norway and Denmark suggest that the Arctic Council's value under current geopolitical conditions lies not in its ability to resolve strategic rivalry, but in its capacity to prevent that rivalry from crowding out all forms of regional cooperation. The Council cannot address military competition directly, but it can preserve channels for scientific cooperation, sustain Indigenous participation in regional governance, generate shared knowledge about rapidly changing Arctic conditions and maintain a degree of institutional continuity in periods of political tension. These functions may appear modest, but become increasingly significant when other forms of cooperation are weakening.

31 Ivanova, A*fter Norway, What's Next? The Kingdom of Denmark and the Arctic Council's Future.*
32 Jacobsen & Vigeland Rottem, *The Arctic Council in the Shadow of Geopolitics*.
33 Jacobsen, M. (2023). Norway, the Kingdom of Denmark and Sweden Should Prioritize Societal Security to Help Saving the Arctic Council. Retrieved 4 March 2026, from https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/norway-kingdom-denmark-sweden-should-prioritize-societal-security-help-saving-arctic-council/.
34 For more information see: https://arctic-council.org/explore/work/cooperation/.

4. Lessons and Implications for Sweden's Chairship, 2027–2029

Sweden can draw three main lessons from Norway's and Denmark's Chairships in times of geopolitical strain.

First, institutional continuity matters more than novelty when political tensions constrain cooperation. Norway's Chairship focused on restoring the Council's functionality after the disruption caused by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, while Denmark's Chairship has largely focused on expanding existing initiatives rather than introducing entirely new priorities. Together, they suggest that maintaining the core Council functions and preserving established channels of cooperation may be more valuable than pursuing ambitious but politically divisive initiatives.

In order for the Arctic Council to remain relevant, it must continue to function as an "early adopter" in addressing multidimensional and cross-cutting challenges in the region.[35] As the Finnish President, Alexander Stubb, observed in 2009, the Arctic is "evolving from a regional frozen backwater into a global hot issue".[36] This transformation has accelerated markedly since 2022. The Russian invasion of Ukraine fundamentally altered cooperation among Arctic states, while Finland's and Sweden's accessions to NATO reshaped the regional security landscape.[37] At the same time, renewed US interest in Greenland, Russia's search for alternative Arctic partnerships beyond the traditional Arctic framework, and intensifying competition over Arctic resources have increased political pressure on existing governance arrangements.

In this environment, Sweden's upcoming Chairship should focus on persevering the Council's core functions. Strengthening environmental cooperation, scientific assessments and practical collaboration where consensus remains possible will do more to support the Council's long-term relevance that pursuing new headline initiatives.

Second, Chairship initiatives are most likely to succeed when they build on existing Working Group activities and enjoy broad support across the Council. Historical experience suggests that geopolitical tensions do not necessarily eliminate opportunities for cooperation. However, the current situation differs from earlier periods of strain. Throughout the 2010s, tensions between the Arctic states were high and continued to intensify after Sweden's 2011–2013 Chairship, particularly following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. The past decade has been particularly marked by growing international concern over Russia's violations of international law and human rights.[38] Nonetheless, the Arctic Council has produced binding agreements, most notably the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic (2013) and the Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation (2017). This demonstrates that even in politically difficult periods, the Council has occasionally been able

35 Conley & Melino, *An Arctic Redesign: Recommendatios to Rejuvinate the Arctic Council*. Page 5.
36 Stubb, A. (2009) A New Arctic Era and Finland's Arctic Policy Keynote speech in the 20th Anniversary Seminar of the Arctic Centre. 29 September [Speech]. http://um.fi/speeches/-/asset_publisher/up7ecZeXFRAS/content/ulkoministeri-alexander-stubbin-puhe-arktisen-keskuksen-20-vuotisjuhlassa-rovaniemella-29-syyskuuta/35732.
37 Leclerc, G. (2024) Russia's war on Ukraine: Implications for the Arctic. Retrieved 15 July 2026, from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/754604/EPRS_BRI(2024)754604_EN.pdf.
38 Amnesty International (2025). Russia. Retrieved 1 August 2026, from https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/eastern-europe-and-central-asia/russia/report-russia/.
Al Jazeera (2025) Top European rights court says Russia broke international law in Ukraine. Retrieved 1 August 2026, from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/9/top-european-rights-court-says-russia-broke-international-law-in-ukraine.

to translate technical cooperation into concrete outcomes.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, cooperation has been more constrained than during previous periods of tension. As a result, Sweden should focus on policy areas where mutual interests persist despite broader political disagreement. Climate monitoring, biodiversity, environmental risk assessments, emergency preparedness and Indigenous participation remain areas where the Council can generate practical value without requiring consensus on wider geopolitical questions.

The Council has also shaped how non-Arctic states engage with its work, influencing both their behaviour and the extent to which they follow its recommendations. The last time Sweden was Chair of the Council, the 2013 Kiruna Ministerial Meeting drew global attention due to its decision to admit five major Asian economies and the European Union as Observers.[39] The Council's original focus was on sustainable development and environmental protection, but it has since evolved into a forum that also addresses cultural, social and economic issues on a global scale. These outcomes are the results of ambitious Chairships.

Although it has previously been argued that the Council's two-year Chairship cycle limits its potential to make real change,[40] recent experience demonstrates that Chairship agency can be significant when anchored in continuity and cumulative ambition. While the previous Chairships of Sweden, Norway and Denmark used their position to pursue a collective agenda (2006–2013), such organised collaboration for continuity has been less pronounced since 2022.

Third, effective Arctic governance depends on embedding Indigenous participation in the Council's everyday decision-making practices. The Arctic Council's legitimacy rests significantly on its ability to serve as a forum for dialogue among states, Indigenous Peoples and regional communities.[41] However, imbalances persist: in 2020, only 16 of the 90 Council activities had Permanent Participants as a co-lead, possibly as a result of an inability to engage due to restricted capacity or resources.[42]

Denmark's decision to locate its Chairship in Greenland demonstrated a practical commitment to Indigenous-led governance rather than merely rhetorical endorsement. Sweden could build on this example by embedding Indigenous participation more firmly within the Council's institutional practices, for example by using co-leadership roles in Working Groups. Expanding opportunities for Indigenous organisations to co-lead Working Group activities would strengthen the Council's legitimacy and help to align its practices more closely with its longstanding commitment to Indigenous participation.

Together, these three lessons suggest that Sweden's Chairship should balance continuity

39 Smieszek & Kankaanpää, *Role of the Arctic Council Chairmanship.*
40 Ibid.
41 Conley & Melino, An Arctic Redesign: Recommendatios to Rejuvinate the Arctic Council. For more perspectives on Indigenous-led governance in the Arctic, see Dittmer et al. (2011) who argue not just for de facto inclusion of local and Indigenous communities, but for seeing these communities as collective actors. This perspective highlights the everyday and the local in understanding Arctic geopolitics and governance. Corine Wood-Donnelly (2023) more critically argues that Indigenous participation in the Council is not equal participation in decision-making processes, which legitimise states' authority over the Arctic region in a way that does not fully recognise Indigenous sovereignty.
42 Barry, Daviðsdóttir, Einarsson & Young, *The Arctic Council: an Agent of Change?*

with carefully targeted ambition. Norway's Chairship focused on restoring functionality following the post-2022 rupture, while Denmark has built on these foundations and expanded cooperation in areas where consensus remain possible. By consolidating recent gains from previous Chairships and focusing on areas where cooperation remains possible, Sweden can help to preserve the Arctic Council's relevance in increasingly difficult political conditions. The Council is unlikely to shape the broader trajectory of Arctic geopolitics. Its value instead lies in maintaining scientific cooperation, sustaining Indigenous participation and preserving institutional relationships that could prove important when political conditions become more favourable.

Main insights from this Report

- **Build on existing initiatives**: Rather than launching new priorities, Sweden should strengthen ongoing Working Group activities and carry forward initiatives that already have broad support across the Council.

- **Focus on areas where cooperation is still possible:** Climate monitoring, biodiversity, ocean governance, environmental risk assessment and emergency preparedness are among the areas where practical cooperation can continue despite political tensions.

- **Strengthen Indigenous participation in practice:** Sweden should expand opportunities for Permanent Participants to co-lead Working Group activities and contribute to agenda-setting processes.

- **Preserve the foundations for future cooperation:** Sweden is unlikely to resolve wider geopolitical disputes, but it can help to sustain the networks, expertise and working relationships on which future cooperation depends.

- **Protect the Council's core role:** As security and strategic competition increasingly dominate Arctic politics elsewhere, Sweden should reinforce the Council's role as a forum for environmental cooperation, knowledge production and dialogue.

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The Swedish Institute of International Affairs
Visiting Address: Amiralitetsbacken 1, 111 49 Stockholm
Postal Address: Box 3163, 103 63 Stockholm
Phone: +46 8 511 768 00
www.ui.se | info@ui.se | X: @UISweden

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