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Maine and the Arctic: Why Maine Should Develop an Arctic Strategy

by Jonathan Wood

INTRODUCTION

Despite recently being in the spotlight as an Arctic player, Maine does not currently have a formal published Arctic strategy. The US Chairmanship of the Arctic Council during the years 2015 to 2017 provided a windfall of opportunities for the United States to refocus its Arctic strategy and take the lead in many policy areas. For Maine, this was a boon. Portland, Maine's largest city, hosted a closed-door Senior Arctic Official (SAO) meeting led by US diplomat David Balton, which allowed Maine to highlight "its successful [economic] pivot towards the north over the past three years" (McGwin 2016). Balton emphasized three additional focus areas at the Portland SAO meeting: "improving economic and living conditions in Arctic communities; Arctic Ocean safety, security, and stewardship; and climate change" (Canarie 2016: 15). These goals were emblematic of the United States' Chairmanship.

In addressing these goals, there were many successes, such as an Obama-era executive order creating the Arctic Executive Steering Committee.¹ Both the United States and Maine, however, failed to capture this momentum due to domestic policy shifts. Because of Maine's recent history as an Arctic player and a detached federal administration, coupled with other Near-Arctic sub-national entities creating their own Arctic strategies, it is a good time for Maine to articulate its own Arctic strategy. The state of Maine has distinct

historical, social, economic, and political interests in the Arctic, which will form the subject matter of this commentary.

MAINE'S RECENT HISTORY AS AN ARCTIC PLAYER

Successes (2013 to 2016)

The period from 2013 to 2016 is arguably the high-water mark in Maine's Arctic influence. Along with the 2016 SAO meeting in Portland, the US Senate created the Arctic Caucus in 2015 with cochairs Angus King (I-Maine), who caucuses with the Democrats, and Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska). A press release from Senator King's office quoted Senator Murkowski: "The United States is an Arctic Nation because of Alaska, but the Arctic community is an economic partner to each and every state, and the sooner we fully engage and take our rightful seat at the table for discussions, the better" (Office of Senator King 2015). This bipartisan caucus provided the stability and harmony on the domestic level that is commonly practiced in the international sphere through the Arctic Council. Murkowski noted that Maine sends more than half of its exports to Canada and lauded Maine's large delegation to the Arctic Circle Assembly in Iceland in 2015 (Rosen 2016).

Maine accomplished much on its own during this time. The University of Maine School of Law's *Ocean & Coastal Law Journal* published an Arctic symposium issue celebrating the US Chairmanship of the Arctic

Council. Senator King delivered the key note address to Maine's Arctic Forum, founded in 2015 to coincide with the chairmanship. Senator King's introduction indicated this could be a critical moment for the state:

The Maine Arctic Forum was precisely the type of symposium we needed at this moment in history. By bringing together a wide variety of local stakeholders and problem solvers—including policymakers, non-profits, advocacy groups, academics and business leaders—the forum provided a rare opportunity for a common dialogue about the region's future. Participants shared innovative ideas and forged new relationships that I trust will result in new and productive global partnerships. (King 2017)

In 2013, Maine reached across the Atlantic to make a lucrative deal with Eimskip, Iceland's largest shipping firm; Eimskip moved its North American headquarters to Portland, opening up a trade network that includes Europe and Greenland (McGwin 2016). This relationship was formalized by Governor LePage's signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Iceland, outlining "a desire for increased cooperation in the areas of business development, transport, logistics and culture" (*Iceland Review* 2014). Iceland's former president Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson reaffirmed this relationship at Maine International Trade Day stating, "Iceland and Maine are strategically

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placed in this new global transportation system” and calling for Maine’s leadership to actively involve itself in the business of the Arctic Council when the United States takes over the chairmanship (*Iceland Review* [2014](#)). Senator King turned Grímsson’s words into action as he led a plenary session at the 2015 Arctic Circle Assembly² in Reykjavik, Iceland, titled “U.S. Leadership in the Arctic” (AJOT [2015](#)).

Failure to Capitalize on Momentum (2016 to 2019)

The election of President Donald Trump altered US Arctic policy away from Balton’s three goals towards preoccupation with China’s investment, Russia’s militarization of the Northern Sea Route, and resource extraction (Orttung and Weingartner [2019](#)). Scholars have noted the lack of a comprehensive Arctic strategy during the Trump presidency: “During the Obama era, the president played an active role in Arctic policymaking whereas the current administration has not made any substantive comments about the Arctic” (Orttung and Weingartner [2019](#)). This lack of strategy changed on May 6, 2019, in Rovaniemi, Finland, when Secretary of State Michael Pompeo made a speech on security and militarization in the Arctic, personally referencing China and Russia. His language went against Gorbachev’s 1987 Murmansk declaration calling the Arctic “a zone of peace” and that geopolitics should be set aside when discussing Arctic issues. Pompeo’s speech contributed to a failure to reach consensus for the first time in the history of the Arctic Council.³

Furthermore, successes of the US Chairmanship years were lost: for example, although the Arctic Executive Steering Committee continues to exist, it has been left dormant. Senator Lisa

Murkowski introduced legislation in December 2018 to make the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) the chair of the steering committee in an attempt to restore DHS’s status as a driving mechanism of Arctic strategy (Orttung and Weingartner [2019](#)). While this proposal was not adopted, the attempt to have the DHS steer the program signals to the rest of the Arctic nations that the United States is straying from the cooperation embodied in previous Arctic policies and towards hard security leadership. Issues of importance to the members of the Arctic Caucus, such as climate change for Senator King and shipping for Senator Murkowski, have not been accepted by the current administration or have not been able to override the presidential veto.

Similarly to how President Trump has derailed the national Arctic agenda, former Maine Governor Paul LePage stalled Maine’s gains after the US Chairmanship. While there were positive advances in Maine’s engagement with Arctic issues during Governor LePage’s tenure, such as the previously mentioned MOU with Iceland and the formation of the Maine North Atlantic Development Office (MENADO) in 2014, those policies stagnated during the US Chairmanship. Now, however, with the election of a new governor, Maine has a window of opportunity for articulating its own Arctic strategy. Maine has already taken some action under its new administration. Whether these actions coalesce into a formal Arctic strategy in line with Maine values of business growth combined with environmental protection is yet to be seen.

Renewed Interest at the State Level (2019 to Present)

With the election of Janet Mills, “the Democrats have a trifecta in Augusta for the first time since 2008,” providing

a resounding Democratic mandate from Mainers while also incorporating more diversity than any of Maine’s previous administrations (Gurley [2019](#)). Governor Mills quickly put herself on the international stage by addressing the Climate Action Summit before the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019. Ninety-three people were invited to speak before the UN General Assembly, and Janet Mills was the only elected US official from any level of government. During her speech, Governor Mills announced “that she has signed an executive order directing the Maine Climate Council—a body she created with legislative approval—to provide recommendations on how to make the state a carbon neutral economy by 2045,” reflecting the climate action bill requiring Maine to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to 45 percent below 1990 levels by 2030 and by at least 80 percent by 2050 that she signed on June 26, 2019 (Woodard [2019](#)).

Governor Mills has also been active in Arctic policy, attending the 2019 Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik. Describing the connections between Maine and the Arctic in a speech during a plenary session of the Arctic Circle Assembly, Governor Mills stated,

it is not just our waters that draw us together. It is, as well, a vision of a future where nations trust one another, where we can accept science without polemic, where we can work in a solid front, with a common goal, with sometimes uncommon means, to mitigate global climate change ...on the health and very survival of our citizenry and our planet. (Office of Governor Janet Mills [2019a](#))

Prior to this speech, Governor Mills signed an MOU with Prime

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Minister of Finland Antti Rinne, regarding an enhancement in forest-sector collaboration, focusing primarily on bioeconomic innovation, enhancing forest health, and sustainability in light of the climate crisis by leveraging the common culture, insights, strengths, and resources of Maine and Finland (Office of Governor Janet Mills [2019b](#)). According to Dana Eidsness, head of MENADO, Governor Mills is currently negotiating an MOU with Troms County, Norway, with regard to renewable energy technology, forest-sector collaboration, and scientific cooperation surrounding climate change, which is to be released in early 2020 (pers. comm., 2019). As of this writing, Governor Mills has been in office for just a year, but she has already made progress for Maine by speaking at both the Climate Action Summit and Arctic Circle Assembly. She has concluded more deals with Arctic nations than any other Maine governor (Dana Eidsness, pers. comm., 2019).

Backed by a Democratic state legislature, Governor Mills can use this time to develop an Arctic strategy to reestablish Maine as a significant Arctic player. Given the gridlock in Congress, it is time for individual states to create their own policies. Politicians at the state level can show the international community that not all of the United States is at odds with the Arctic Council's ideals, while at the same time ensuring Maine's own interests are protected.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

Policies of Near-Arctic States

Although Maine cannot be defined as an Arctic state, Maine may look to other near-Arctic regions, such as the Faroe Islands and Scotland, for examples

of Arctic strategies. As is Maine, both are subnational, creating a precedent for lower-level government entities to create their own Arctic policies. The Faroe Islands is a non-Arctic subnational entity of an Arctic state (Denmark via Greenland), just as Maine is to the United States. The Faroese model acknowledges that its strategic protection is the domain of the nation of which it is a part, but recognizes that the region may need to develop its own solutions to certain external challenges. The Faroese strategy focuses on “economic opportunities... fisheries; research and education; the environment; and maritime safety and emergency response” (Bailes and Jakupsstovu [2013: 1](#)). These same issues are also important for Maine: its location makes it important to North Atlantic fisheries and allows it to serve as the northernmost Atlantic seaport in the United States for ships moving through the Northwest Passage.

Scotland released its own Arctic Policy Framework on September 23, 2019, and Scottish Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands Paul Wheelhouse gave a plenary session speech regarding its new strategy.⁴ In its formal policy release, Scotland addressed many issues that echo issues of importance in Maine, such as rural connections, climate change, clean energy, and sustainable development (Hyslop [2019](#)).

The Arctic Council recognizes that ecosystems and biodiversity have impacts well beyond the Arctic. Changes in the High North are already influencing fish migration patterns, creating tensions for resource governance. Meanwhile, climate change is affecting the ecological and physical makeup of Maine's marine and terrestrial ecosystems (Johnstone [2012](#)) given that the Gulf of Maine is warming faster than 99 percent of Earth's water sources (Office of Governor Janet

Mills [2019a](#)). Using both the Scottish and Faroese precedents in regards to an Arctic Strategy, the state should follow-up the work Governor Mills has done on the international stage and articulate an Arctic strategy with concrete goals and aims.

Cultural and Historical Ties

There are historical ties between Maine and the Arctic. According to researchers at the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum and Arctic Studies Center at Bowdoin College, “ancestors of the Wabanaki people traded with tribes farther north and used the Ramah chert, a stone quarried from Ramah Bay on the coast of Labrador, as a form of currency.” Later, Maine fishermen would travel to Labrador to fish for cod. Perhaps the most famous connection involves Admiral Robert E. Peary, “a man who lived with the Inughuit of northwestern Greenland, and later claimed to have reached the North Pole with his expedition in 1909 sailing on the Maine-built steam schooner, the Roosevelt” (Bell [2016](#)).

More-recent attempts have been made to foster a cultural connection between Maine and the Arctic. Portland's SPACE Gallery celebrated Icelandic culture in 2014 with a series of events under the name Iceland Cometh! The events were sponsored by Soli DG, a Portland-based port management and maritime consulting firm, Eimskip, and Iceland Naturally. These were part of a government-sponsored program to promote tourism and the value of Icelandic products in North American markets (*Iceland Review* [2014](#)). These ties continue to strengthen as individuals from Arctic nations move to Maine to take advantage of growing opportunities. For example, Hans Peter Kirkegaard, a Greenlandic Inuit living in Portland, is

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looking to export Maine goods to Greenland given that Maine is 700 miles closer to Greenland than Denmark is (Bell [2016](#)). As more individuals and delegations continue to travel between Maine and the Arctic, cultural exchange will cement the relationship between the state and the Arctic nations.

Economic Ties

Eimskip plays the most pivotal role in Maine's Arctic economy; however, MENADO has continued to develop economic deals in the Arctic. For example, in 2018 MENADO led a four-day business trip to Greenland to allow Hancock Lumber to understand Greenland's supply chain and channels of distribution (MITC [2018](#)). Dozens of meetings were organized with building retailers, distributors, infrastructure experts, and ports. Eimskip will begin connecting Portland and Nuuk through collaboration with Greenland's Royal Arctic beginning in 2020 (Dana Eidsness, pers. comm., 2019).

According to Dana Eidsness, "Maine has more in common with Nordic countries than we do with New Jersey. Our coastal communities, small enterprises, resource utilization, sustainability of industry, these are all common threads" (MacLean [2018](#)). For people in the Nordic region, seeing Maine as an Arctic state and a High North stakeholder took a bit of time, but Eidsness won over skeptics, such as Nils Arne Johnsen, Norwegian founder of the High North Business Alliance:

At first I didn't quite understand why the business community of Maine was so interested in the Arctic. But through collaboration with Dana Eidsness and meeting businesses through the MENADO effort, I have learned to see Maine as one of the most important players when it comes to establishing international

business development in the high North Atlantic. (MacLean [2018](#))

MENADO's success has allowed it to achieve nonvoting status on the Arctic Economic Council (MacLean [2018](#)) and continuing integration will only foster Maine-Arctic growth; growth that could be increased in a formal Arctic framework.

Scientific and Academic Ties

Maine academic and research institutions have been major participants in student exchange. For example, University of Southern Maine (USM) students have travelled to Iceland for educational exchanges, while faculty from the University of Iceland and the University of Akureyri have come to USM (MacLean [2018](#)). At the Arctic Circle Assembly in 2019, the University of New England signed an MOU to collaborate with the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. The University of New England also began talks with the Highlands and Islands Enterprises in Scotland, the University of Iceland, and Reykjavík University (UNE [2019](#)). Finally, Maine has its own leading Arctic academics, such as Charles Norchi, who was recently the Fulbright-Ministry of Foreign Affairs Arctic Scholar in Iceland.

As to environmental and scientific cooperation, the University of Maine has created UMaine Arctic, pulling together faculty and staff with an interest in the high latitudes. Researchers at UMaine's Climate Change Institute have worked on a variety of Arctic research in Greenland and Alaska. The Bigelow Laboratory of Ocean Sciences also has a research focus on the changing Arctic.² Ocean Renewable Powers Co., based in Portland, has been developing hydrokinetic energy technologies in oceans and rivers to assist remote Alaskan villages thousands of kilometers away in the

High Arctic, which may eliminate the use of 25,000 gallons of diesel fuel a month (Andrews [2016](#); Caldwell [2016](#)). As these institutions develop more research and technology, Maine will continue to play a key role in the fight for the survival of the Arctic as we know it.

A PRELIMINARY PROPOSAL

Much needs to be considered for a state-level Arctic strategy, but here I will attempt to flesh out the elements of a proposal to start the discussion about how best to move forward politically. In this section I will synthesize the above sections to create a preliminary outline of an Arctic strategy, incorporating heavily from the Scottish framework proposed at the Arctic Circle Assembly in October 2019.

Justification

- **Recognize current and historical connections:** An Arctic strategy for Maine should start with an acknowledgment of the historical ties between the state of Maine and the Arctic and how these ties have had a lasting impact on our cultural, economic, and social fabric. It would recognize the similarities between our forestry and fishing industries, along with the many cultural features and outlooks the two regions share, and how we have often looked to each other for inspiration, solutions, and ideas in areas such as fisheries management, climate change, and sustainable development.
- **Outline existing partnerships and exchanges:** Maine's Arctic strategy should describe existing academic and research partnerships and exchanges through the

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University of Maine System, the University of New England, and other research and educational organizations in the state, trade exchanges via MENADO, and other artistic projects and joint business cooperation.

Scope

- **Put people at the heart of Maine-Arctic dialogue:** Maine's Arctic strategy should highlight Mainers' expertise that is relevant to Arctic issues and encourage greater mutual learning with a view to improving the resilience and well-being of our communities. The strategy should focus on the core competencies that have made Maine a business and thought leader in climate change and Arctic technologies in the United States, to serve as a prospectus for even closer Maine-Arctic cooperation through an exchange of best practices.
- **Consult widely with organizations, businesses, and citizens:** To build a new platform for policy and knowledge exchange, Maine needs to involve organizations, businesses, and citizens at many levels. Increased input will strengthen the foundations of the state's discussion with its Arctic partners. The strategy is intended to reach both our international partners and Maine-based organizations that we encourage to look north for new collaborations and opportunities.

Themes

- **Identify areas of strategic importance:** Maine's Arctic strategy should list shared areas of strategic importance to the two

regions. The state will need to encourage collaborations should focus across a range of areas: climate change, fisheries, forestry, rural connectivity and economies, renewable energy, business connections and shipping, and cultural heritage among others.

- **Acknowledge the threat of climate change:** Maine's Arctic strategy should acknowledge the threat of climate change to the well-being of the Arctic region in particular and that the need for closer ties has never been greater. These challenges cannot be tackled in isolation, but can only be addressed if countries come together to confront them. Language in the strategy should promote neighborly engagement with the Arctic states and appeal to the wider international community to increase collective action and accelerate decarbonization to build a sustainable future for all.

CONCLUSION

Maine has found itself in an enviable position both domestically and internationally to create an Arctic strategy for Maine. With an engaged state government, a well-respected international presence on both Arctic and climate change issues, and academic institutions and corporations ready to contribute, the time is right for Maine to recapture its position as an Arctic player. Following the recent Faroese and Scottish models of focusing on core competencies and capitalizing on the subnational Arctic framework movement restarted by Scotland in 2019, Maine can provide an alternative

to the Trump administration's Arctic policies and preserve Maine's state-specific interests through a formal Arctic strategy document as outlined here. 

NOTES

1. Exec. Order No. 13689, (January 21, 2015) available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/executive-orders>.
2. The Arctic Circle Assembly is distinct from Arctic Council meetings, yet Senator King's 2015 speech coincided with the US Chairmanship, showing Maine's willingness to engage with other Arctic states.
3. Arctic Council address by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wY1oFADT1kA>; and the Rovaniemi Ministerial Statement from May 7, 2019 is available here: <https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/2418>.
4. Plenary session speech by Paul Wheelhouse, "Scotland's First Arctic Policy Framework," at the Arctic Circle Assembly (October 12, 2019) is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjlnrAA7rbY>.
5. Information about UMaine's Arctic programs is available at the following websites: <https://umaine.edu/arctic/> and <https://climatechange.umaine.edu/research/>. A description of the Arctic research at the Bigelow Laboratory for Ocean Sciences is available on this website: <https://www.bigelow.org/science/topics/changing-arctic.html>.

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