
In Conversation with Ambassador Morten Høglund

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *In the plenary session on Thursday, October 19, 2023, you spoke of the Arctic Council being the only forum where Indigenous peoples sit at the same level as the states. You spoke of this commitment to the Arctic Council acting with the backing of all eight states, that it is not a Council of Seven. Is there any idea within the Arctic Council, or push from the Indigenous communities, to become a council of fourteen bodies where the six Permanent Participants would sit at the same level as the eight states?*

AMBASSADOR MORTEN HØGLUND: No, not really at the moment. This has been the way it was constructed twenty-seven years ago. And there is no ongoing discussion to alter that format. So, we are in consultation with and have full and active participation from the Indigenous Permanent Participants. And having them sit around the same table, at every table, at all levels, ensures that their interest and viewpoints will be considered. It is a fine-tuned construction. There are no discussions to change this.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *Is there any possibility that one of the Indigenous peoples' groups would ever chair the Council?*

AMBASSADOR HØGLUND: I will not speculate on this.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *A unique element of the Arctic system is the level of cooperation between different entities at the state level, community level, and between businesses. What makes cooperation possible here, and how do you think that other regions and areas of the world can adapt to this model?*

AMBASSADOR HØGLUND: It is important to look at who has the proper knowledge and insight on any given issue and bring them to the table. People with scientific knowledge, business knowledge, traditional Indigenous knowledge or interests; and people who are both affected by or have expertise on a particular issue, should be setting the premise for that

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discussion and making sure that it is fact-based and relevant to the people living in these communities.

That is so much part of the DNA of how we operate. Of course, it is not that we get it perfect every time. But, I think there are so many good examples of how we have done it, and that creates buy-in and commitment also from those who are able to engage. Participants have a voice and they can interact with government officials or other stakeholders. You get this collaboration across different groups. When it functions best, there is a more holistic consideration of issues and a collection of voices. And, we are always mindful of the traditional silos. You have them in academia, you have them in government, everywhere. It is always a challenge to tear down the walls and encourage people's interaction across disciplines because there are all these cultures and so on. The Arctic Council can facilitate such cooperation. That is definitely a goal, but one that comes with challenges. At the same time, we see that this is truly important.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *Speaking of who sets the agendas and brings together all these voices, can you tell us a little bit about how Norway came to prioritize the four pillars you mentioned—oceans, climate and environment, sustainable economic development, and people in the North—during your plenary session yesterday?*

AMBASSADOR HØGLUND: The priorities are really a follow-up on previous Norwegian priorities for the High North and the Arctic. So it is very recognizable in that sense. These priorities also build on what has been going on in the Arctic Council in the past years. There is a strategic plan for the Council. We wanted this to be recognizable and we conducted very thorough and long rounds of consultations with, I believe, more than eighty stakeholders for months to get an understanding of what is important and relevant. Then we narrowed that down to four overarching priorities, each with more specific focus areas and ambitions. Of course, these priorities are wide in scope. It has been a process that nevertheless builds on the existing agenda and should be quite familiar to those who have been working on this previously.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *In your opinion, is there any need for the Arctic Council to increase its legally binding mechanisms, to make it perhaps more like an international organization or a multilateral platform where states are legally bound to any of the working projects or agreements?*

AMBASSADOR HØGLUND: Well, the Arctic Council, as such, is not a treaty-based organization; it is an intergovernmental forum. However, under the Arctic Council umbrella, we have previously negotiated three legally binding agreements. So I think there are opportunities to do more, but given the current political circumstances, it is not the time to push for it. In the meantime, we will be ready to identify, and have already identified, areas where we could look further into this. However, it requires a good window of opportunity and consultations with the states. It is not something we have as an immediate priority, but it is not totally ruled out. It is perhaps a little bit down the road.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *You also spoke of this focus on fact-finding and incorporating science and value into your work. Have you or any other leaders in the Arctic Council found that the recent rise of populism across the world is affecting the values or the direction of the Council?*

AMBASSADOR HØGLUND: In 2019, in Rovaniemi, the ministerial meeting produced a joint statement rather than a ministerial declaration because of a disagreement on the language of climate change. That was a clear example where it was not politically acceptable or plausible, especially from one state at that time. That can certainly happen again. At the moment, I do not see the risk around the main issues—issues of climate change for instance. There is certainly strong support for it to be recognized as an important issue, so we are not at risk of this changing at this time. But there is always something you have to take into consideration, so what we experienced in 2019 could, of course, possibly happen again.

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *My last question has two parts. From your vantage point as one of the senior leaders, what keeps you awake at night, and what gives you hope?*

AMBASSADOR HØGLUND: The very careful balancing act we have at the moment, trying to keep everyone within the organization and show that it is not only an empty logo with nothing going on. That we actually are able to progress. That, in a way, keeps me awake, because it requires a lot of continuous and daily consultations.

During the transition meeting in May, all states, with the support of the Indigenous Permanent Participants, basically said the Arctic Council is important. That gives me hope. We want it to continue to be important. We want it to be a functioning body. So that kind of commitment from

the highest political levels in every country gives me hope that behind all the nitty-gritty details, there is an interest to keep us not only floating but actually doing more. *f*

*This interview was conducted by The Fletcher Forum's Managing Web Editor, **Piyusha Mittal** (F '24), on the sidelines of the Arctic Assembly, in October 2023.*