

Commentary

Place Holding but Noteworthy: Canada & the Arctic Council

Andrea Charron

In 1996, Canada was the first of eight Member States to chair a newly-founded Arctic Council. From May 2013 to April 2015, Canada again resumed the chair (headed by the Honourable Leona Aglukkaq, Canada's Minister for the Arctic Council) and set "development for the people of the North" as the overall theme of its two years. To achieve this goal, Canada called for responsible Arctic resource development, safe Arctic shipping and sustainable circumpolar communities with subthemes under each of these three goals.¹ Unique to Canada was the call to create an Arctic Economic Council (AEC)² – a subgoal of responsible resource development. On the one hand, the focus Canada had directed on the people of the North is laudable and perfectly in keeping with the mandate of the Council. On the other hand, the creation of the AEC has been divisive. How should we evaluate this agenda? Did Canada's Chairmanship break new ground or was it just caretaking?

The Arctic Council cannot be expected to make grand pronouncements or oversee the creation of new international agreements³ every year; it is voluntarily funded and has only recently benefited from the creation of a permanent secretariat. Canada's agenda promoted the continuation of many projects initiated under previous Chairs and oversaw the unanimous decision to not accept new Observers for a constellation of reasons including the ratio of Arctic states and Permanent Participants (the decision makers) to Observers which is 14:32 or 1 to 2.

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From an administrative point of view, Canada's enthusiasm for the Arctic Council was uneven. The final meeting of its Chairmanship held in Iqaluit April 24-25, 2015 was prepared months in advance although some final details were last minute. As well, Canada has been reluctant to acknowledge Observer states' concerns about the diverse costs of engaging with the Arctic Council without the benefit of influence over decisions.

Canada achieved its goal to create an Arctic Economic Council (which met in Ottawa for its 2nd meeting on 23 April 2015) despite uneven support by some members of the Council. The AEC comprises business representatives (to date, 42 members in total) solely from the eight Arctic states and six indigenous Permanent Participant organizations of the AC. The AEC selected a US chair (from the Inuit Circumpolar Council) and two vice chairs from Russia and Finland to guide its work. Big businesses, like the Baffinland Iron Mines Limited and PAO Sovcomflot (SCF Group), Russia's largest shipping company, are likely to dominate the membership. The AEC's businesses, which include a mix of very small and giant companies, and the lack of participation by Observer state companies, are glaring flaws. The "success" of the AEC will likely depend a great deal on commodity prices given the involvement of big resource-driven business with international focus and is unlikely to benefit local, traditional/subsistence businesses that are important to the economic sustainability and cultural well-being of Arctic hamlets.⁴

Meanwhile, the Working Groups of the Arctic Council continued to do some very important work indeed. The SAO's Report to Ministers (24 April 2015) outlines their progress.⁵ Projects over the course of Canada's term included a Circumpolar Mental Wellness Symposium (thanks to Canada's particular push for this event) and a review of cancer among indigenous peoples. A framework plan for Cooperation on the Prevention of Oil Pollution from Petroleum and Maritime Activities in the Marine Areas of the Arctic, a framework for Action on Enhanced Black Carbon and Methane Emissions Reductions, and an Arctic Marine Strategic Plan for 2015-2025 were all approved in April. The Council also established two new task forces: the Task Force on Arctic Marine Cooperation, and the Task Force on Telecommunications Infrastructure in the Arctic.⁶

Volunteer funding from member and Observer states, however, makes planning of these multi-year projects a challenge. That the Working Groups are still functioning, especially given background geopolitical tensions involving Russia, Eastern Europe and five NATO Arctic Council member states, is probably the greatest of Canada's achievements despite sometimes contradictory political rhetoric on the part of Canada. Likely a full evaluation of Canada's Chairmanship will only be possible in comparison to the US term focused on "One Arctic" which, as currently outlined, tackles the very important but difficult issue of climate change, at least under the current US administration. That a four-year North American agenda was not coordinated similar to the six-year Scandinavian terms to benefit from longer-term planning is lamented. That the Arctic Council continues to promote cooperation (reaffirmed in the Iqaluit Declaration 2015)⁷ and has weathered recent, jarring geopolitical tensions means that Canada's modest, place holding Chairmanship is noteworthy.

Notes

1. See <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/document-archive/category/425-main-documents-from-kiruna-ministerial-meeting?download=1763:canadian-chairmanship-program-2013-2015-english>.
2. See <http://arcticeconomiccouncil.com/>.
3. See Arctic Council. 'Agreements.' Available at: <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/environment-and-people/agreements-statements/agreements>.
4. *Arctic Human Development Report: Regional Processes and Global*. (2015). Joan Nymand Larsen and Gail Fondahl (Eds.). Copenhagen: Nordisk Ministerråd. pp. 155 and 164.
5. Available on the Arctic Council's website. See <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/document-archive/category/604-declaration-sao-report>.
6. See "Review of Cancer among Circumpolar Indigenous Peoples" at <https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/434>; "Framework Plan for Cooperation on Prevention of Oil Polluting..." at <https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/609>; "Enhanced Black Carbon and Methane Emissions Reductions..." at <https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/610>.
7. See "Iqaluit Declaration 2015" at <http://hdl.handle.net/11374/662>.