

Commentary

The GLACIER Conference & President Obama's Links to the Arctic

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The U.S. Department of State, led by Secretary of State John Kerry, hosted an improbable international Arctic conference in Anchorage, Alaska on 31 August 2015. That President Obama spoke at this conference, conducted a signature tour of Alaska, and became the first sitting U.S. President to visit above the Arctic Circle in Alaska made it an historic trip that emphasized the importance of the Arctic to America and the globe. It was very clear from the outset that the conference, together with the entire visit of the American leader to Alaska, was a political event organized to highlight the President's climate change agenda in preparation for the 21st Session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, or COP21 (to be held 30 November to 11 December 2015 in Paris).

Interestingly, the U.S. is currently chair of the Arctic Council (to May 2017), the intergovernmental forum of the eight Arctic states chartered in 1996. However, the State Department advised that the Anchorage venue was explicitly *not* an Arctic Council meeting. Nor was the gathering an official preparatory meeting for COP21.

On one hand the GLACIER (Global Leadership in the Arctic: Cooperation, Innovation, Engagement and Resilience) Conference was an *international venue* with the heads of delegation of 19 nations and the European Union joining Secretary Kerry in Anchorage to discuss Arctic climate change issues. Seven nations sent their foreign minister (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Republic of Korea, Netherlands,

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Norway and Sweden) to join Secretary Kerry and the remaining delegations were led by high-level representatives, many who represent non-Arctic states as Observers to the Arctic Council. In my judgment equally important is that this was a *U.S. domestic political venue* crafted to address three themes: remind Americans the United States is an Arctic nation; emphasize the importance of rapid Arctic climate change observed in Alaska; and, provide an opportunity for President Obama to speak with Alaskans and hold key meetings with indigenous people who live in America's Arctic. The GLACIER Conference and the President's visits to Seward, Dillingham and Kotzebue (a community located above the Arctic Circle on the Chukchi Sea) gained global media coverage highlighting a broad range of Arctic, Alaskan and global climate issues.

The GLACIER Conference – led by Secretary Kerry – was organized into three sets of sessions for the more than 400 participants: one for the foreign ministers and official delegations, and two for the experts, actors and stakeholders who were invited by the White House and State Department. The 'Foreign Minister Sessions' focused on three themes: 'The Arctic's Unique Role in Influencing the Global Climate; Climate Resilience and Adaptation Planning; and, Strengthening Arctic Cooperation and Coordination on Ocean Stewardship, Environmental Protection, and Support to Local Communities.

A designated 'Track A' focused on an array of key Arctic community issues: Building the Resilience of Arctic Coastal Communities in the Face of Climate Change; Protecting Communities and the Environment through Climate and Air Quality Projects; and, Healthy Arctic Homes: Designing Structures for the 21st Century. 'Track B' sessions were focused on international challenges: Strengthening International Preparedness and Cooperation for Emergency Response; Preventing Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean; and, Strengthening Observation Networks.

GLACIER was opened by a Denai'na leader, Lee Stephen, First Chief of the native village government of Eklutna, Alaska who spoke of the more than 10,000 years of indigenous life in his ancestral region. He was followed by: Mayor Ethan Berkowitz of the host city Anchorage; Mayor Reggie Joule (an Inupiaq leader) of the Northwest Arctic Borough; Alaska's Lieutenant Governor Byron Mallot (a Tlingit Indian from southeast Alaska); Dr. John Holdren, the President's Science Advisor and Director of the White House Office of Science and Policy; and, Admiral Robert J. Papp who is the U.S. Special Representative for the Arctic. Secretary Kerry completed the introductions by acknowledging Alaska was surely the place to be to discuss Arctic climate change issues, and noting that the GLACIER outcomes would help shape the COP21 discussions in Paris. Following the conference, the State Department issued a *Joint Statement on Climate Change and the Arctic* that was from the United States, the attending Foreign Ministers, and other representatives from France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Poland, Singapore, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. Together they affirmed that "climate change poses a grave challenge to the Arctic and the world." The statement noted that the many observed Arctic changes are at unprecedented rates and are impacting Arctic communities where adaptive management strategies and new infrastructure are imperatives. The group affirmed their strong determination to work together on addressing the challenges of a warming Arctic and planet.

President Obama's speech came at the end of the GLACIER Conference and after he had met early in the afternoon with a group of Alaska Natives. After thanking all Alaskans for hosting the conference, he told the assembled international delegations that America was ready to work with their nations on the many challenges the Arctic presents. Select key passages from his remarks taken from The White House Press Release on 1 September 2015 include:

- *We're here today to discuss a challenge that will define the contours of this century more dramatically than any other ... and that's the urgent and growing threat of a changing climate.*
- *The Arctic is the leading edge of climate change – our leading indicator of what the entire planet faces.*
- *Climate Change is no longer some far-off problem. It is happening here. It is happening now ... And climate change is a trend that affects all trends – economic trends, security trends. Everything will be impacted.*
- *I've come here today, as the leader of the world's largest economy and its second largest emitter, to say that the United States recognizes our role in creating this problem, and we embrace our responsibility to help solve it.*
- *We can have a legitimate debate about how we are going to address this problem; we cannot deny the science. We also know the devastating consequences if the current trend lines continue. That is not deniable.*
- *If we were to abandon our course of action, if we stop trying to build a clean-energy economy and reduce carbon pollution, if we do nothing to keep the glaciers from melting faster, and oceans from rising faster, and forests from burning faster, and storms from growing stronger, we will condemn our children to a planet beyond their capacity to repair.*
- *On this issue, of all issues, there is such a thing as being too late. That moment is almost upon us. That's why we're here today. That's what we have to convey to our people – tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. And that's what we have to do when we meet in Paris later this year.*

All who were present would confirm that it was an eloquent speech filled with candor about a hugely complex Arctic and global challenge. Sprinkled with examples of profound Arctic change – sea ice melting, permafrost thawing, glaciers retreating, increasingly acidic oceans, changing migration patterns, and eroding coastal communities – the speech indicated the President is well-prepared to argue all of these issues and more in some detail at COP21 in Paris.

As with most Presidential visits to a U.S. region or state, the administration in power announces a number of initiatives prior to and during such a visit to build political capital and create a legacy of action. One of the unanticipated and immediate decisions for the Alaska visit was made by Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell who has authority over U.S. place names. With the President's support, the name of the highest peak in North America was returned to *Denali*, the Athabascan name for 'the high one.' Re-establishing *Denali* in place of *Mount McKinley* has been argued for nearly four decades and this decision set a very positive tone for most Alaskans. It was announced that the Denali Commission (a federal body) would take the lead in coordinating new federal funds and competitive grants devoted to assisting villages that are heavily impacted by climate change. President Obama also announced several new federal investments to enhance safety and security in a changing Arctic: accelerating the acquisition of new U.S. Coast Guard icebreakers; action to be taken by NOAA and the Coast Guard

to promote safe marine operations and transportation in the Arctic through mapping and charting of the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort seas; evaluating the feasibility of deepening and extending Nome's harbor by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in view of making it America's Arctic deep water port; launching a five-year demonstration project for Arctic marine biodiversity observing; and, hosting an international workshop on community-based ecological monitoring. Each of these select federal initiatives is consistent with current U.S. national Arctic strategies and implementation plans published since 2013.

A distinctly American event, nonetheless the GLACIER conference brought global attention to the Arctic. The visit of President Obama to Alaska and the Arctic reaffirmed America's commitment to the region and brought his climate change message to the very place where change is most rapid and is directly impacting people.

For most Americans, as well as perhaps many around the globe, his speech and visit provided unprecedented attention to the Arctic by an American President.