

Commentary

International Meeting of the AC Member States in September 2015 in Archangelsk

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The V [Fifth] International Meeting of Representatives of the States-Members of the Arctic Council, States-Observers and Foreign Scientific Community took place on September 15-16, 2015 in Archangelsk, Russia. The meeting was specially devoted to preparedness and safety in the Arctic, sustainable development and indigenous peoples. It consisted of two parts, the demonstration of rescue exercises by the EMERCOM Arctic Emergency Centre in Arkhangelsk, and the international conference “Ensuring Safety and Sustainable Development in the Arctic Region, Preservation the Ecosystems and Traditional Way of Life of the Indigenous Peoples in the North”.

The high-level meeting was organized under the auspices of the Russian Federation Security Council in cooperation with the Northern (Arctic) Federal University, NArFU in Archangelsk. NArFU invited members of small international delegations from the Arctic states and the Arctic Council observer countries, as it did last year, when this annual meeting took place in Naryan-Nar, and the Varandei Oil Terminal in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug.

The demonstration of rescue exercises by Arkhangelsk’s EMERCOM Arctic Emergency Centre took place on a sunny afternoon on the Dvina river just beside downtown Arkhangelsk. We had front row seats to follow the exercise, since we were on board of the “2N.V.Gogol” paddle steamship in the middle of the river. The situation and accident was simple but realistic: there was a fire on board of a tanker, and a few crew members of the tanker were dropped down to the sea, when they tried to put out the fire. Following from this, the mission of the exercise was two-fold: on the one hand, to put out the fire, which was done both by a helicopter and aircraft dropping water from the tanks on the fire, and a rescue-vessel spray water on; and on the other hand, to rescue the crew members from the sea, which was done by surface divers who were dropped onto the water from a helicopter. The mission was accomplished, the fire went down and the crew members were rescued. I am not an expert on the field – though I followed another rescue exercise

last August (2014) at the Prirazlomnaya Oil Rig in the Pechora Sea - but I was impressed by how efficiently all parties acted and fulfilled their tasks (of course so often in a real situation the sun is not shining and the conditions can be very harsh).

The international conference (with a long official name) was divided into three sessions based on a theme, “Personal preparation and training for the Arctic development and global Arctic projects”, “Strengthening of the international cooperation in the preservation of the ecosystems and environmental protection of the Arctic” and “Conservation of the traditional life-styles and maintenance of sustainable development of indigenous population of the Arctic territories”. Each agenda item had a short film and an oral report as an introduction, and were followed by interventions from the participants. There were very many of these short (about 5 minutes) interventions in each session, and as so often, only little time for open discussion. Thus, the challenge was first, how to express all relevant matters within that short time frame; second, how to manage to get the audience’s attention, when your presentation was at the end of a list of speakers; and finally, how to keep the interest and intensity going at the end of a long day.

Well, I don’t know how accurate this evaluation is, but I have a feeling that the intensity was on until the end. And though some presentations were neither that interesting nor new, there were many interesting presentations (yes, there was a simultaneous interpretation from Russian to English, and from English to Russian, and the interpreters were professionals). Thus, there was much to be learned as a foreigner, and the other way round, the Russians learned many new things from us, foreigners. In a time of turbulence, as it is now in international politics, it is very useful to know what the others, including your potential rivals, are thinking, and let the others know, what you think. And furthermore, demonstrate that you are ready to listen and learn new ways to do things, and maybe even apply new methods and new kind of thinking.

My presentation was in the 2nd session devoted to international cooperation to preserve the Arctic ecosystem and strengthen cooperation. Unlike a few of my academic colleagues, I didn’t use my short time, although it is important and timely, to introduce any new academic and educational project, or to try to convince others how joint efforts in research and higher education would benefit policy-making in the Arctic. I went straight to the point which I thought would interest most of the audience – policy-makers from regional and federal levels of Russia, and from many Arctic Council member and Observer countries: why it is so important to maintain the high stability of the Arctic region, and how it would be beneficial for the entire Arctic region and its peoples.

Indeed, how come have the prognoses of emerging conflicts in, or a ‘scramble’ for, the Arctic not, yet, been materialized? And why is this achieved, man-made Arctic stability so resilient? An answer lies in the fact that the stable and cooperative Arctic is so valuable for its states and peoples in the era of globalization. The post-Cold War period has been successful due to the shift from military confrontation into political stability and growing international cooperation – there are only winners. This is seen for example, in how the Kingdom of Denmark and Russian Federation played, and play, according to the rules of UNCLOS, when they submitted their proposals on the Arctic Ocean’s shelves to the Commission – the proposals compete, the states cooperate. This shows the power of immaterial values, such as peace, human capital and that of cumulative, ‘soft’ methods in politics and governance (which is seen for example, by the self-governing status of Greenland, Nordic devolution, policy-shaping by the Arctic Council, paradiplomacy, and

implementation of the interplay between science and politics). These are among the ways that we have managed to maintain the received state of political stability and willingness to cooperate, much needed preconditions for sustaining Arctic research.

This goes a long way to demonstrating the social relevance of science, which is also called ‘science diplomacy’, i.e. that science is more than laboratories and theories, it is people, societies, the environment. This includes the interplay between science, politics and economics, and this has been implemented in the Arctic for some time now. The International Meeting of Representatives of the States-Members of the Arctic Council, States-Observers and Foreign Scientific Community is a good example of a platform, where it is both intended to happen, and it is happening. This clearly came out in several presentations and comments, though there was too little time for open discussion (this seems to be a universal ‘bottleneck’ for the sharing of thoughts and ideas), as well as in smaller social contacts during the two days.

A new Arctic security and political agenda is emerging due to the reflections of regional wars, the constant warfare against international terror, and flows of globalization, as well as due to ‘Grand challenges’ as main drivers, such as long-range pollution and climate change, and ethical questions concerning mass-scale utilization. Here the Arctic states and their state-owned enterprises will strongly influence future development by choosing either to prioritize business activities only, or adopt a more holistic approach by taking into consideration the commitments to environmental protection and wellbeing of the inhabitants, as the Arctic states promised almost 20 years ago, when the Arctic Council was established.

The answer cannot, however, be simply more mass-scale utilization by extractive industries, but also smaller and soft ways, as many Arctic actors have shown being able to be innovative and resilient. For that we need on the one hand, more and deeper interdisciplinary research, and on the other hand, keener cooperation between policy-makers from the Arctic states and the AC Observer states under the auspices of the Arctic Council. Now when the post-Cold War era has come to a close in the Arctic, and the region has become a part of global (political, economic, technological, environmental and societal) changes, this is not enough, I am afraid. Hence, it has become more demanding to maintain this stability and strengthen cooperation. We need more meetings, such as the 2015 Archangelsk meeting and the annual Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik, where the interplay between science, politics and economics/business takes place.