

Commentary

Transdisciplinary Dialogue on Board between Eurasia and America: The 6th International Meeting of the State-Members of the Arctic Council, State-Observers to the AC & Foreign Scientific Community

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The 6th International Meeting of the State-Members of the Arctic Council, State-Observers to the AC and Foreign Scientific Community took place on 29 August – 2 September 2016 on board the Russian icebreaker *50 Years of Victory* (*50 Let Pobedy*) from the Bering Sea to the Eastern Siberian Sea through the Bering Strait. The meeting was organized by the Russian Security Council and hosted by Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security

Council, and Russian Hero Artur Chilingarov. The meeting was very international, accommodating official representatives of all the Arctic Member states and four Asian

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Observer states of the Arctic Council (i.e. China, India, Singapore and South Korea) as well as several ambassadors, a few deputies and several other officials. We academics from the Arctic states and those Asian countries consisted of the Foreign Scientific Community of the meeting. In addition, the business community was represented by two Russian companies, Rosneft and Atomflot.



The first session of the meeting on board was dedicated to political, economic and cultural cooperation, as well as security, of the Arctic. This session accommodated a few academic presentations, including mine, and several presentations by representatives of the Arctic states. The second session, devoted to legal, economic, technologic and logistics aspects of Arctic maritime transport, included several Russian experts presenting and sharing their information and expertise on the fields, which is significant. There was also a demonstration on the Bering Sea of how the ice-class tanker, *Navigator Albanov* is able to operate in Arctic seas in problematic situations, particularly in conditions of an oil spill. The last session, with less presentations, was on scientific cooperation, ecological security and tourism in the Arctic.

The sessions consisted of several short presentations and reports, after the organizers managed to shorten the time of each presentation down to 10 minutes. The participation of the meeting was based on the idea of ‘transdisciplinarity’ by representatives from the major stakeholders – politics, business and academia. This is the main precondition for the interplay between science and politics, and business. The aim was partly achieved, since there was much new information, the dialogue was interdisciplinary, and there was also time allocated to comments and questions.



Interestingly, the setting – state representatives were sitting around a separate table in the middle of the room – as well as the procedure were like in the official meetings of the Arctic Council and its working groups.

I introduced the theme of the 1st session, and was also asked to moderate two parts of it including 13 presentations by several state representatives. In my presentation, I analyzed the current political situation of the Arctic, and concentrated on how we have managed to maintain the high geopolitical stability of the Arctic, in spite of the fact that there are regional conflicts and wars in other parts of the world, where also Arctic states are parties. Since the stability is not inevitable, but manmade, my aim was on the one hand to point out that the Arctic states, including Russia and the U.S., have consciously been keeping the Arctic, and Arctic issues, out of crises and by that way maintained the region's high stability, and this is never passive but needs actors and their political will. On the other hand, I asked how to go further, as well as how to deepen international and interregional cooperation, in order to make a peaceful change.



The state representatives agreed on the most important issue, that the high geopolitical stability of the Arctic should be maintained, and they emphasized its strategic importance. I didn't, however, manage to encourage the representatives to go beyond the current situation and brainstorm new ideas how to create new measures for confidence-building, make Arctic

structures more resilient with flexible rules, and rethink security premises and paradigms. No wonder, since this is not easy but a challenging, as well as sensitive, issue, with some thinking that the current situation is not ripe for that kind of brainstorming or rethinking.

Politically the meeting was a success, since this was the first time since the beginning of the Ukrainian war and the Russian annexation of Crimea that all the Arctic states were officially represented in these meetings in Russia. Academically it was a real field trip, particularly for a political scientist, due to the fact that the interplay between science and politics was not only said to be important, but also implemented. Further, it was a rather unique experience, since everything happened on board the nuclear icebreaker *50 Years of Victory* between Anadyr and Pevek in the Chukotka Autonomous District, the Russian Far East.



An impressive finding of the gathering was the high level expertise of Russian experts, and how carefully they described and follow the rules of UNCLOS. Maybe those of us in other Arctic states should slowly start to acknowledge this, and that Russia maintains a special expertise on the Arctic Ocean, northern sea routes and maritime safety. Actually, this is not surprising, when taking into consideration for how long the Russians have been constantly present in these cold waters and done research in the Arctic, starting from the ice-stations by Admiral Papanin.

Also, the demonstration of the tanker, as well as the search and rescue exercises as a part of the program of the meetings in 2014 in Naryan-Mar and the Pechora Sea, and in 2015 in Archangelsk, gave valuable information on the state of maritime safety in Russia and by Russian officials. Maritime safety – or as it was put on the chimney of the tanker “SCF (Security comes first)” – is much the priority in international Arctic cooperation, hence the Arctic is all about the Arctic Ocean. This brings me to think how unwise were the earlier

decisions by other Arctic states not to send experts on the field(s) of search and rescue to the previous years' meetings in 2014 and in 2015 (see my commentary in the [Arctic Yearbook 2015](#)). Even if the seven Arctic states, due to political reasons, do not want to send high-level representatives to these meetings, they could do much better, act more boldly, and send their experts there to observe these exercises.



I'm not naïve to be able to take into consideration that this was a political decision (according to the sanction by the U.S. and the EU), and that in politics boycotts used to happen every now and then. I, however, think that if maritime safety, which is a good example of a functional field, is so fundamental, as the Arctic states and Observer countries are saying, then they should be willing and able to go beyond political tension and narrow-minded national interests, and cooperate at the expert-level; particularly when there is the legally-binding SAR agreement, which all the Arctic states have signed and are committed to. This is also a confidence-building-measure to share information and knowledge between the Arctic states and their officials, as well as others who are in charge of maritime safety. There is no a danger of being misused, or hijacked, by Russia or anybody else, even if Arctic states would send their experts to observe these exercises, as we could see in this very international meeting where Ambassadors and other state representatives were present.

The conventional wisdom, which is wise, it to keep some important issues, fields and areas – for example, nuclear arms control, pollution, climate change, research, space – out of fundamental disagreement and separate them from the larger conflictual relations between parties. This is to minimize damage, not put all the eggs into the same basket, and make sure that we will not put the humankind at stake. This wisdom, also called 'Arctic exceptionalism', has already been used in the Arctic, as mentioned earlier, and also the EU's

policies go accordingly, by keeping Arctic cooperation as a ‘protected’ area out of political crises.

Finally, the interesting discussions and the agreement on the importance of Arctic exceptionalism was made possible and encouraged by the good atmosphere of the meeting. This is in a way ironic, when taking into consideration the image and perception of the Russian Security Council in the West. It is not unusual that in the meetings of the Arctic Council and its Working Groups there is a nice atmosphere, but that the same happens in the gatherings organized by the Russian Security Council is less known internationally. This was partly because the 2016 meeting took place on board the strongest icebreaker in the world – she is very impressive, as I experienced already in October 2013, when we brought the [Olympic flame to the North Pole](#) – but mostly this was due to common interests. Although, texts construct geopolitics and popularized geopolitics is more than written text, as we have seen in several illustrations of the Arctic by international media, I do not want to speculate how this could be interpreted. More importantly this is much the core of international politics and diplomacy, that we need confidence and trust between parties, even if we will not agree on everything. This can be promoted and enhanced by confidence-building, and correspondingly, it requires a good atmosphere. In the case of the Arctic this is supported by the fact that Arctic cooperation with its scientific, environmental and political achievements, as well as due to the global interests towards the Arctic region, has been beneficial for all the Arctic states, as well as indigenous peoples and other inhabitants of the region.

All in all, this international gathering on board was exciting and fruitful in all respects, and therefore its reporting might interest those who are closely following Arctic politics and cooperation.

