

Commentary

U.S. Chairmanship of the Arctic Council: Mid-Point

Ambassador David A. Balton

Anniversaries provide an opportunity to take stock of where we are, and to consider where we hope to go. The U.S. Chairmanship of the Arctic Council has taken this opportunity to heart in considering the 20th Anniversary of the Council's founding, on September 19.

The first twenty years of the Arctic Council have seen remarkable change. The Council has grown – in stature, in ambition and in effectiveness. An increasing number of non-Arctic States, as well as intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, have sought and obtained accredited observer status. The Council has established a permanent secretariat and strengthened its internal operations.

The issues confronting the Arctic Council have also grown – in number and significance – in reflection of the dramatic changes in the region. The warming Arctic climate in particular commands unprecedented attention, as governments, Arctic residents and civil society strive to understand and address the potentially profound consequences of climate change for the Arctic and the planet as a whole.

Ambassador David A. Balton is the Chair of the Arctic Council Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) during the U.S. Chairmanship, 2015-2017.

As the United States assumed the Chairmanship of the Council, we also recognized that climate change was not the only topic demanding attention. We created a Chairmanship theme (“One Arctic: Shared Opportunities, Challenges and Responsibilities”) to address the impacts of climate change as well as to promote Arctic Ocean safety, security and stewardship, and to improve economic and living conditions.

At the mid-point of our two-year Chairmanship, we have a better sense of what the Arctic Council has accomplished, and what remains to be done. To mention just a few initiatives:

- The Circumpolar Local Environmental Observer network (CLEO) took a major step forward with the launch of the “LEO reporter” app, enhancing the ability of indigenous communities to share their observations of weather and environmental anomalies.
- The “One Health” initiative completed a survey of some 450 participants in 14 countries, believed to be the largest ever survey of One Health awareness and practices at a regional level.
- The Council developed a set of guidelines for the safe operation of unmanned aircraft systems in the Arctic, the first time such guidelines have been developed for any geographic region.
- In follow-up to the Agreement on Cooperation on Arctic Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response entering into force, which strengthened international cooperation in the event of an oil spill in the Arctic, the Arctic States have begun to implement the agreement through joint exercises.

Looking ahead, the Arctic States expect to conclude a legally binding agreement to enhance scientific cooperation in the Arctic, to be signed by Arctic Ministers at the 10th Arctic Council Ministerial meeting on May 11, 2017 in Fairbanks, Alaska. Work also continues on a broad range of other initiatives including:

- increasing local capacity for managing renewable resource microgrids;
- tracking and mitigating black carbon and methane emissions;
- assessing circumpolar telecommunications capacity;
- evaluating the effectiveness of suicide interventions;
- improving sewage treatment and local water delivery;
- producing high-resolution digital elevation models of the Arctic;
- building a network of Arctic marine protected areas;
- broadening cooperation on Arctic Ocean issues; and

- much more.

We have also strengthened the Council itself in a variety of ways. The Council adopted Communications and Outreach Guidelines, updated its Communications Strategy, and worked to raise Arctic awareness in the United States and other countries. We have made it easier to access Arctic Council documents and have improved the Arctic Council website. Perhaps most importantly, we have taken steps to improve Arctic Council cohesiveness, including in the ways the Council interacts with other international bodies.

I am particularly pleased with the work of the Council in relation to its many observers. We have found new ways to engage with observers. We have created an application form for those who seek observer status, as well as a new template for use by observers when submitting their regular reports. Finally, we will soon complete the first-ever review of observer participation.

The Council is also already looking beyond the U.S. Chairmanship. We are considering the development of a long-term Strategic Plan and are seeking to make Arctic Council financing more secure and predictable. We are considering whether the work of the Council should become more systematic and cross-cutting, including with respect to climate change and sustainable development. The United States and Finland have also begun the critical process of ensuring a smooth transition in chairmanships.

The United States has had the great honor of chairing Arctic Council for the second time. At the twenty year mark, this has been a dynamic and important period. We will do our best to finish with as much momentum as when our chairmanship began, and look forward to continuing to serve the Council as an active, constructive member in the future.