

## Commentary

# The Establishment and Progress of the Standing Arctic Council Secretariat

Magnús Jóhannesson

In 2011, Ministers of the Arctic States met in Nuuk for the biennial Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting. Among the most prominent outcomes from the Nuuk meeting was the newly-minted “Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic.” Ministers also decided to “strengthen the capacity of the Arctic Council [...] by establishing a standing Arctic Council Secretariat” in Tromsø, Norway.

The Arctic Council Secretariat was to be operational at the beginning of the Canadian Chairmanship, which would arrive in spring 2013. The first director of the Secretariat was chosen in November 2012, and I feel both fortunate and humbled to have been selected for this role.

In January 2013, on the margins of the Arctic Frontiers conference, the host country agreement for the Secretariat was signed by Norway’s Minister of Foreign Affairs. The standing Secretariat then began operations on 1 June 2013 after recruitment of the first staff members.

The Secretariat was instructed to support the Arctic Council’s work by providing “institutional memory, operational efficiency, [and] enhanced communication and outreach,” as well as supporting the Council in other ways big and small. It offers administrative and organizational

---

Magnús Jóhannesson is the Director of the Arctic Council Secretariat, Tromsø, Norway.

support, manages the Arctic Council's website and social media accounts, houses the secretariat for two of the Council's six Working Groups (ACAP and EPPR), and assists with Russian-English translation and interpretation for many Arctic Council initiatives.



**Host Country Agreement signing ceremony**, Arctic Council Secretariat, Tromsø, Norway 22 January 2013. Source: Arctic Council, Arctic Council Photo Archives.

In its first three years of operation, the Secretariat and its international staff have taken on many new challenges. In addition to its day-to-day efforts supporting the work of the Council's Task Forces, Working Groups, and Senior Arctic Officials, the Council has undertaken such ambitious initiatives as:

- archiving of the Council's historic documents stretching back to the establishment of the Arctic Council,
- creating a public, open access archive that links Arctic Council reports and documents to library databases worldwide,
- establishing a tracking tool that provides an overview and status report for the Arctic Council's current initiatives,
- centralizing and streamlining the Council's interactions with Observers, and
- expanding the Council's communications channels, materials and activities, including providing updates on the Arctic Council's work to external bodies and visiting delegations.

In many of these initiatives, the Council's staff has been "learning by doing," and has profited greatly from the guidance of the Canadian and U.S. Chairmanships. The Arctic Council is certainly a unique entity, and the Secretariat has been charting new territory in much of what it has done.

Presently, the Secretariat has 13 staff members from seven of the eight Arctic States. Most recently, the Secretariat has welcomed new team members to Tromsø in the form of the Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat, which relocated from Copenhagen in early 2016. This important move allows both entities to profit from, and share in, the other's experience, knowledge, and resources.

The Secretariat has undoubtedly helped the Arctic Council to deal with growing tasks and challenges in the Arctic. With twenty years under its belt, the Arctic Council is taking stock of where it stands and where it could go. Looking to the future, I can see only a bright horizon for the Secretariat as it continues to help the Arctic Council in its work. The experienced and dedicated staff in Tromsø continuously strives to find ways to expand and improve the services that it provides, and to meet the demands of the Arctic Council's ongoing growth and development.

The foundation for the Arctic Council Secretariat was laid at the Nuuk Ministerial Meeting in 2011. This was also the first Ministerial attended by the U.S. Secretary of State (Hillary Clinton, at that time), so it is fitting to reflect during the U.S. Chairmanship on how far the Secretariat has come, and how it might continue to grow in its efforts to serve the Arctic Council.