

Commentary

Finnish Chairmanship of the Arctic Council

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Last May, Finland started its two-year chairmanship of the Arctic Council, conscious of the fact that Arctic cooperation is facing great challenges.

The Arctic will not remain what it is now. Climate change will have a fundamental impact on the Arctic. Global warming will bring drastic changes to the Arctic environment. Human activity in the region will increase.

Globalization will reach the Arctic with full strength. The region may soon become a hub for commercial activities. Arctic resources may attract worldwide interest and globally significant transport routes may be created.

For several years, international tensions have been running high. So far they have not affected Arctic cooperation. As the Chair, Finland will certainly work to keep it that way and emphasize the common interests of the Arctic countries in further developing their cooperation. The Arctic Council can be seen as an important confidence-building measure in an otherwise turbulent international situation.

It is time for the Arctic countries to decide what kind of Arctic we want in the future. We should make sure that all activity introduced to the region is sustainable. Increasing opportunities should benefit the people who already live in the Arctic, including Indigenous peoples and their communities.

We should develop appropriate stewardship, based on international law, to govern activities in the Arctic.

When preparing for the Arctic Council chairmanship, Finland benefitted from the viewpoints expressed by other Arctic states and the Permanent Participants representing Indigenous peoples in the Arctic. All agreed that Arctic cooperation should concentrate on goals that will make a difference also in a longer perspective.

Arctic cooperation should aim at results that will be achieved together. To underline this Finland chose the motto *Exploring Common Solutions* for its chairmanship program.

We identified two broad frameworks that should be taken into account in all Arctic Council activities. They are climate change, especially the Paris Climate Agreement; and the Sustainable Development Goals, or Agenda 2030, adopted two years ago by the United Nations.

Finland chose four priority areas of Arctic cooperation that we believe deserve particular attention. They are environmental protection, connectivity, meteorological cooperation and education.

Environmental protection includes many environment- and climate-related activities. Finland would like to take forward work to implement the Paris Climate Agreement, to safeguard biodiversity, slow down the acidification of oceans, to curb the emissions of black carbon and methane, to reduce marine waste and to strengthen the resilience of Arctic communities.

Improved connectivity is a lifeline for all activities in the changing Arctic. Groundbreaking technological innovations are made, and we should speed up work identifying solutions that are best suited for the Arctic. It will be useful to work together with the Arctic Economic Council in this and other areas to make sure that the region will develop an infrastructure that meets modern requirements.

Meteorological cooperation is a new theme for the Arctic Council. It is vital for improved research of the changing climatic conditions. We also need a strong network of stakeholders providing weather, climate, ice and sea monitoring and related services in the region. The Arctic Council and its working groups will benefit from close cooperation with the World Meteorological Organization and national meteorological institutes.

The fourth priority is cooperation in education. The goal is to provide good basic education to all children in the Arctic, and Finland regards it as part and parcel of sustainable development in the region. We already have the technical means to cope with the challenges posed by long distances and minority languages. Here, the Arctic Council cooperates closely with the University of the Arctic and its network of teachers and educators.

When thinking of the future, we should be prepared to strengthen Arctic cooperation and ensure its political support in our countries. Finland is ready to host an Arctic Summit, provided that the international situation is favourable, and that we can agree on an agenda, which is appropriate for a Summit.

As the global significance of the Arctic is growing, Finland recognizes the important role that the observer states and organizations play in the activities of the Arctic Council. Several new observers were invited in the recent ministerial meeting in Fairbanks, Alaska. We look forward to close cooperation with all observers and appreciate their increasing interest in Arctic affairs.