

Roundtable Discussion: The Arctic Council and Multilateral Cooperation

Wednesday, September 24, 2008

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This session echoed the overall opening speeches, and was held among the Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) of the “Arctic Eight” and representatives of two permanent observers.

Given president Grímsson’s emphasis on the need for unity of the “Arctic Eight” to act multilateral all of the SAO confirmed that the exclusion of some members in the discussions about the development of seaways earlier in 2008 in the Arctic was an event that should not happen again. The overall reports that the audience listened were about the operational procedures within the Arctic Council (AC).

Under the heading of multilateral cooperation the Icelandic SAO Mr. Ragnar Baldursson opened the presentations by arguing that the AC was a result of the overall changing political arena after the end of the “Cold World”. For that reason the Arctic cooperation about affairs of common concern would be still quit young. Furthermore the legacy of the “Cold War” still would overshadow the agenda of the AC by excluding some policies fields of which the most prominent is security policy.

Talking about the most prominent issues that Iceland currently pursues is in particular the non-concern with security issues and indigenous issues on a broad discussion basis. Here it was indicated that often nation-states silenced-off indigenous affairs, but that those are becoming discussed more openly by representatives of the nation-states that have indigenous people on their overall territory.

Echoing the concern for indigenous people the two representatives of the permanent observers group indicated the difficulties of integrating “Traditional (Ecological) Knowledge” (T(E)K) into the proceedings of the research conducted in the different working groups embodied in the AC

(Patricia Cochran, Inuit Circumpolar Council). According to the two representatives the awareness for importance of its recognition had grown, but in an operational view western scientific knowledge would still figure quite prominent. On this matter the representative of the Aleut International Association, Victoria Gofman, reported about a research project partially financed by the National Science Foundation where for the first time ever TEC and western knowledge would have been used on an equal standing. Ms. Cochran indicated that the status of permanent observers for indigenous people would pose significant economic constraints, as they have to lobby for financing to make themselves heard. In terms of policies ICC had taken up a position whereby indigenous interests are pursued more actively and thereby also breaking the silence about problems of these population segments in the respective nation-states.

A novel approach to the operationalising of internal procedures in the AC was suggested by the Finnish SAO Jyrki Kallio as an idea. According to his model for now there is too much differentiation between committees concerned with Sustainability, and its impact for the different policy fields. For this reason he suggested that the AC might consider a distinction between natural and human systems and how sustainability might be achieved by having a dedicated, coordinating working group that should ensure that Sustainability were not only a “talk” item but also one that structures the proceedings of the different working groups.

Furthermore, this could increase transparency in the handling of affairs within the AC. He too reiterated the problem of the exclusion of some AC states presented to its own understanding. He reported that often SAOs would be drawn into the running of operational affairs from the working groups, thereby increasing the SAOs already heavy workload.

Answering implicitly the invitation from president Grímsson to increase Russia’s involvement in the AC Mr. Anton Vasiliev as SAO declared that the Russian Federation perceives itself as an active member of the AC. He reiterated in this account of the Russian involvement the new Foreign Policy that was described in the early morning session by Professor Nikita Lomagin. Accordingly Russia perceives itself as a major player in the Arctic and the Arctic is a major part of Russia. In line with the FPC, he declared that this policy would seek to enhance the economic situation of the overall North and thus also the indigenous people. In his view there is a perspective growing in Russia that seeks a strategic relationship between Russia and the United

States of America on Arctic Affairs. From this perspective Russia would be in a process to balance itself between unilateral action on Arctic issues, and one of multilateralism as security would be an overall Arctic affair.

Taking recourse to last years demarcation of the Russian shelf possession Mr. Vasiliev declared that there would not be a problem with the Russian Northern Border that was evident, but that the Northern Border of the Russian Shelf freedom that was assured. From this perspective he argued that the Northern Russian Shelf itself were for access. On an strategic planning perspective for AC affairs he declared that Russia would deliver its contributions to ongoing research projects. Furthermore, he reported that Russia would attempt to integrate and enhance the link-up between AC work and that of the NRF.

This valuation and positive feedback on the work of the NRF was reiterated by MSs. Adèle Dion who spoke as Canadian SAO. In her view the NRF would act as an important source for arctic researchers, and simultaneously allowed forging cooperation and links between the different sciences involved in Arctic research.

On this notion of cooperation she stressed that the AC should continue working on the principle of consent among the Arctic Eight. On the policy fields dealt with by the AC she reiterated that this body is the sole body that had final decision making power on nation- state embracing research of the Arctic among the Arctic Eight. Ms. Dion reminded in her speech that Canada is the founder of the AC, and that it considers the Arctic and the circumpolar cooperation as vital. In a longer research perspective, and not only for that, she emphasized the need to orientate actions to Human needs. On the prevalent issue of additional members to the AC or status changes for some permanent observers to full members she maintained the position that the AC's charter was clear that this status of full membership should left to the adjacent states to the Arctic itself.

During the Q&A session the question was raised whether the exclusive character of the AC membership would not be something "elitist". This was denied by Ms. Dion. She pointed out that the AC member's would not refuse the status of permanent observer given to other international organisations or nation-states. However, it should be clear that the AC would not grant this status for free, and it would expect valuable inputs to the AC and the territory represented by it. This remark was echoed and reiterated by Mr. Vasiliev, who told the audience that the AC is

seemingly perceived as governance body for the Arctic. Furthermore, and indicative of the utilisation view that some observers have of the AC, often their involvement would shrink if asked for dedicated input to the work on the working group level.