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Norwegian Arctic Perspectives: State Secretary Eivind Vad Petersson

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On 8 November 2022, the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN) and the Canadian Defence and Security Network (CDSN) were pleased to partner with the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Ottawa to welcome H.E. Eivind Vad Petersson, Norway's State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, for an event to discuss Norway's perspectives on Arctic affairs. State Secretary Petersson gave a speech followed by an open conversation with approximately 50 diplomats, scholars, and university students on Arctic priorities as Norway looks forward to assuming its responsibilities as Arctic Council chair on 11 May 2023. The event was preceded by a closed briefing for the State Secretary and his team from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which Canadian Arctic security analysts and scholars offered assessments of Arctic security priorities in conversation with the State Secretary and his team.

The impending handover of the Arctic Council chair from Russia to Norway comes amid the greatest turning point in Arctic regional affairs and the greatest disruption in Arctic Council work since the forum's creation in 1996. The scale and brutality of Russia's 24 February 2022 escalation of its war in Ukraine has resulted in suffering for Ukrainians and for the world's most vulnerable populations affected by global food and energy shocks. It has also resulted in profound geoeconomic and political realignments. The Arctic regional impacts of these global realignments are visible in three diplomatic signals by allied Arctic states, including Canada, Finland, Iceland, the Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the United States, in response to Russian aggression.

First, the [Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine](#) on 3 March 2022, paused participation in all meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies, and affirmed the international legal principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity as foundations for the Arctic Council's enduring value for circumpolar cooperation. Second, the [Joint Statement on Limited Resumption of Arctic Council Cooperation](#) on 8 June 2022, indicated the seven like-minded Arctic states' intent to resume work on Arctic Council projects not involving the participation of the Russian Federation, and signalled the pragmatic value for coordinating multilateral work. In his November speech and conversation in Ottawa, State Secretary Petersson offers a keynote for the third signal: the transition from the Russian to Norwegian chair of the Arctic Council.

State Secretary Petersson’s speech portends that Norway’s aspiration for a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Arctic will guide its approach as Arctic Council Chair from 2023 to 2025. For Norway, the Arctic Council remains the most important international forum for managing Arctic issues. Pragmatically, the Arctic Council provides a forum for organising continued multilateral work with friends and allies to advance scientific knowledge, sustainable resource management, and the wellbeing of Arctic populations. While Russia has “a natural place in the Arctic Council” as a fellow Arctic state, Norway is clear that with Russia’s “current regime, business as usual is no longer possible.” Norway’s pursuit of Arctic cooperation will therefore continue to occur in “naturally close coordination with our friends and allies in Canada, the U.S., and the Nordic countries.” These observations further illuminate the Arctic Council as a forum through which Arctic states and permanent participants can pursue interest-based international cooperation with partners of choice.

State Secretary Petersson presented four elements of [Norway’s Arctic Policy](#), including Norway’s commitments to international cooperation, sustainable development, Arctic security, and the green transition. Within a well-regulated Arctic region, Norway seeks shared solutions to common challenges with friends and allies, and aims to be “a predictable and responsible neighbour” with Russia. Norway’s approach to sustainable development seeks to balance environmental protection and economic development, prioritising northern solutions to make northern regions “attractive places to live, work, study, raise families, and continue the traditions” of Indigenous peoples and Arctic citizens. Norway is a founding member of NATO, and Finland and Sweden’s NATO accession will mark the first time that all of the Nordic and North American Arctic states will be formal allies in collective defence. Protection of critical infrastructure and research security complements commitments to long-term investment in infrastructure, science, and technology to combat climate change and create sustainable livelihoods. As Norway sees the Arctic as its most important area of strategic responsibility, its Arctic Policy offers foresight into its likely approach to Arctic Council leadership.

In the open discussion that followed the State Secretary’s speech, participants considered several themes in security and diplomacy, including how middle powers like Canada and Norway can best work together and with friends and allies amid renewed great power competition. For Norway, NATO provides a pillar of predictability and stability in Arctic strategy that supports deliberation of non-security issues elsewhere, including the Arctic Council. Climate change, biodiversity, fisheries management, emergency response, and sustainable development remain crucial areas for continued circumpolar collaboration. Participants also considered to what extent a broadening of threats should inspire a similar broadening of recognised security contributions, appreciating two per cent of GDP as an important indicator that NATO allies have set together. Participants discussed NORAD modernisation, expertise in cold weather land operations, air and naval capabilities in the Barents Sea and Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap, and protection of critical telecommunications, health, and energy infrastructure. Participants also considered calibration of comprehensive deterrence and reassurance, especially anticipating hybrid threats. Reassurance includes both foreign and domestic dimensions, as accurate assessment and response to hybrid threats relies on trust and cooperation between security services and Arctic populations.

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Foreign and domestic policies converge most in the Arctic for those who call it home. State Secretary Petersson’s openness and generosity in conversation with public servants, scholars, and students in Ottawa complements Norway’s approach to Arctic diplomacy. Indeed, his emphasis on shared Arctic leadership by Arctic States and peoples is all the more important amid rising global interest, competition, and connectivity in the Arctic. While the Arctic Council deliberately does not discuss military security, intersecting global and regional security priorities will continue to inform relations among Arctic States and their articulation of their relationships through the Arctic Council. Climate change, sustainable development, science and technology, and Arctic security alike provide opportunities for partners and allies to pursue common interests and priorities. As Norway takes the chair of the Arctic Council, these patterns of alignment in interests will continue to guide how Arctic states navigate the options ahead.