

## Arctic Circle Assembly 2022

Reykjavik, Iceland

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NAADSN had a prominent presence at the [Arctic Circle Assembly](#) in Reykjavík, Iceland (13-16 October), with participants covering a range of issues including the war in Ukraine and how it is affecting the Arctic, the U.S. Arctic vision, information and disinformation on social media, strong northern communities, Arctic policy change, the Arctic during the global pandemic, geopolitics and the Arctic, the potential for future cooperation, and stability and resilience in the region.

### Background

The Arctic Circle is a non-profit organization, established in 2013, which convenes meetings featuring delegates from Arctic and non-Arctic state governments, Northern governments, universities, think tanks, environmental organizations, the private sector, and Indigenous communities. An annual Arctic Circle Assembly is held in Reykjavik, with Forums held periodically in various other Arctic and non-Arctic cities.

The 2022 Assembly had more than the 2000 attendees from more than sixty countries. Among Canada's estimated 150 delegates were Her Excellency the Rt. Hon. Mary Simon and His Excellency Whit Fraser, Northwest Territories Premier Caroline Cochrane, Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) Canada President Lisa Koperqualuk, Chief Bill Erasmus of the Arctic Athabaskan Council, and representatives from the territorial governments, various federal departments and agencies, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI), and various Canadian universities and non-governmental organizations.

### NAADSN Representation and Sessions:

Justin Barnes

*The Arctic During the Global Pandemic: What Have We Learned?*  
*The Russian Arctic: Economics, Politics and Peoples*

Andrew Chater

*Potential for Cooperation in the Eastern Part of the North American Arctic*

Gabriella Gricius

*Using Narratives to Decode Arctic Policy Change*

*The Arctic Institute Network North Series: Debating Polar (In)Securities*

Major Gen (ret) Randy “Church” Key

*Stability and Resilience in the Arctic: An Interdisciplinary Security Approach*

*The U.S. Arctic Vision*

P. Whitney Lackenbauer

*Strong Communities for a Strong North*

*The Arctic in the World: Security and Diplomacy*

*The Future of Arctic Cooperation – How to Maintain Peace and Stability*

*‘Close, like-minded partners committed to democratic principles’: Settling the Hans*

*Island/Tartupaluk Territorial Dispute*

Suzanne Lalonde

*The War in Ukraine and the Arctic: Is Operational Co-Existence Possible?*

Marc Lanteigne

*The Revenge of Geopolitics: New and Old Security Questions in the Arctic*

*The Russian Arctic: Economics, Politics and Peoples*

*Great Power Engagement in the Barents and West Nordic Regions*

Jean-François Savard

*Information and Disinformation About the Arctic Region on Social Media*

Mike Sfraga

*The U.S. Arctic Vision*

## Setting the Tone: Icelandic Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir

During the opening of the Assembly, Icelandic Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir began on a positive note, acknowledging the “broad political determination” to protect the Arctic and capitalize on opportunities. “We see expanding scientific networks, greater knowledge with both the public and businesses and growing skills, there is more investment in green technology, and we are witnessing various green solutions emerging,” she noted. She quickly warned, however, that the Arctic could become “unrecognisable in a few decades” if decisive action was not taken. Examples included extreme weather, “glaciers receding, permafrost is melting, heat records are beaten and forests are burning. And all this is happening much faster in the Arctic – where the

ecosystem is sensitive and the resources are great.” She highlighted “big business and big countries showing more and more interest in the Arctic – not least because of its rich resources which should not all be harnessed.” She directly applauded decisions by Greenland and Iceland to refuse to issue licences for oil exploration and drilling – a clear expression of her stance on non-renewable resource extraction in the Arctic.

Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir also highlighted the war in Ukraine and the exclusion of Russia from the Arctic Council and other circumpolar bodies. “Our region is directly affected as the aggressor is an important player in the Arctic with legitimate interests,” she explained. “But Russia’s illegitimate actions made it impossible for us not to respond and they were rightly excluded from the Arctic Council. From day one Iceland has condemned Russia’s aggression in the strongest possible way. Iceland has solidly supported Ukraine, and we will continue to do so, together with our Nordic, European, US, and Canadian friends.” This theme factored heavily into the conference as a whole. She noted that while the participants “represent different interests, different politics, different ideas, ... we should all be united in the will to protect the Arctic and provide a sustainable future for the local populations in the area, as well as for our ecosystems. The task is massive, but the solutions exist, and it is ours to get the job done.”

## Governor General Mary Simon: *Ajuinnata* - Never Give Up

Her Excellency the Rt. Hon. Mary Simon gave a keynote address on 13 October emphasizing critical issues in the region, including the impacts of climate change, the autonomy of Indigenous peoples (particularly Inuit), sustainable development, defence and security, and conservation. “While the future of the circumpolar region remains bright, it also continues to face many challenges, some old and some new,” she highlighted. “And it will take all of us to ensure we remain on the right path for the benefit of northern Indigenous peoples and everyone who calls the Arctic home.”

Simon expounded on how the principle “of co-operative approaches to addressing circumpolar challenges” provided the foundation for the creation of the Arctic Council in 1996. “Since then, we have seen the Arctic Council play a convening role for states to negotiate legally binding agreements in such areas as science, search and rescue, and oil spill preparedness,” she said. “Project co-operation under the Council has supported sustainable economic and social development, environmental protection in the Arctic and broader policy discussions beyond the Council. ... Simply put, co-operation is how people in the Arctic get work done.”

The Governor General then pivoted to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine earlier this year and its impact on regional co-operation. “Unfortunately, Russia’s unethical and unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine has impacted global co-operation, halting a number of collaborative projects in the Arctic,” she noted:

Unfortunately, Russia's unethical and unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine has impacted global co-operation, halting a number of collaborative projects in the Arctic. But above all, our priority needs to be the Ukrainian people, whose lives have been shattered.

We cannot ignore the humanitarian crisis that Ukraine now faces as they continue to confront unimaginable trauma brought about by violent conflict. Neither can we ignore the threat that the Ukrainian people face to their sovereignty, territorial integrity and security. We must do everything in our power to condemn Russia's illegal actions and continue to provide aid to Ukrainians.

But it's never too late to hope for peace, to work towards an end to the conflict.

In the Arctic, there is no doubt that there are challenges. Yet, there are also opportunities ahead.

Simon highlight the Inuktitut word “ajuinnata,” which means “persevering in the face of obstacles. It means to never give up.” She found inspiration in this spirit for Northern partners seeking a pathway forward, encouraging them to embrace “dialogue and peace, to respect the rule of law and international law, [and] to encourage collaboration between Arctic and non-Arctic nations.” Inuit “have always viewed the Arctic as a zone of peace,” she emphasized, and “there is a long history of working with the circumpolar family of nations and Indigenous groups to resolve common challenges and to take advantage of opportunities. I know these values are shared by Indigenous peoples across the Arctic, as well as the nations who are working together to preserve and save our Arctic spaces.” Her final appeal was to “the next generation of Arctic leaders.”

## Youth

In attendance are over 115 Canadian participants—the largest number to ever attend the Arctic Circle Assembly. And I'm proud to see a strong representation of northern Canadian youth. Young people need to be sitting at the table, participating in dialogue. Their voice is integral to discussions on the future of the Arctic, which today has emerged as a global strategic region.

- Mary Simon, Governor General of Canada

The Arctic Circle Assembly began with a panel about “Engaging Young Leaders in Arctic Policy,” which featured six Students on Ice (SoI) Arctic Policy delegates. They emphasized how youth need to have their basic needs met before they have the capacity to contribute to community decision-making. This includes safe and affordable housing, mental health resources, and food security. They also insist that young leaders needed to be compensated for their contributions, internships, community projects, advice and insights. Furthermore, young people must have opportunities to work in engaging jobs and community events so that they will want to stay in

their home communities, and conversations about pressing issues need to be brought to youth at in places and forms where they are participating, such as community centers, sports teams, social media, and local radio. Finally, the participants emphasized that young people need to develop a strong connection and love for the land if they are going to feel drawn to protect it.

On the second day, a plenary session about the “Future of Canada’s North” featured four Sol delegates and facilitator His Excellency Whit Fraiser. The panel talked about mental health, life promotion, suicide prevention, and intergenerational trauma. Calls to action included the need for more community-led culturally appropriate mental health resources, connection to culture through time on the land, prioritizing Truth and Reconciliation Commission commitment #66 (which calls on “the federal government to establish multiyear funding for community-based youth organizations to deliver programs on reconciliation, and establish a national network to share information and best practices”), and acknowledging that increasing suicide rates in the North constitute an emergency.

## “Nothing About Us Without Us”: Indigenous Leadership

Indigenous leadership featured prominently throughout the Assembly proceedings. Greenlandic and Canadian Indigenous voices were particularly strong. His Excellency Múte Egede, the Prime Minister of Greenland, emphasized about non-Arctic people that “you are welcome to have an opinion, but we will make the decisions.” For the first time, Greenland has imposed sanctions on another country (Russia), and is fully supportive of the NATO response to that country’s brutal aggression in Ukraine. This has created a fear of uncertainty, and a fear of the unknown, he explained – and “luck” is not a strategy.” Egede also emphasized that “we all live under the same sun,” appealing to a common humanity that should undergird a commitment to peace and respect.

Sara Olsvig, the International Chair of the ICC, emphasized how Inuit organizations are built on democratic principles, and promote strong and peaceful development. The ICC is deeply concerned about the pause of the seven like-minded Arctic states’ participation in Arctic Council activities involving Russia and the future of that forum in which Permanent Participants play such a distinctive role. With the new pressures facing Arctic democracy, Olsvig insisted that we must sustain the spirit of “nothing about us without us.” Arctic governance is not democratic without Inuit representation and participation, she noted, and “Arctic democracy is under pressure.” The tools are at hand to prevent “a complete meltdown,” and she urged leaders to “feel the pressure on your shoulders but also the strength of your backbone.”

## Healthy Northern Communities

The Premier of the Northwest Territories (NWT), the Hon. Caroline Cochrane, invited Lackenbauer to join her on a 13 October panel that she organized on Healthy Northern Communities, in which he emphasized opportunities for smart investments in defence infrastructure that could help to address inequities in the Canadian North. The session was moderated by Shaleen Woodard, the Principal Secretary, Department of the Executive, Government of the NWT, and also included Paula Isaak, the President of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency (CanNor).

In her panel presentation and her plenary speech the next day, Premier Cochrane cast a spotlight on healthy communities and their connection to economic opportunities. She noted how geopolitical instability has brought a renewed focus on Arctic sovereignty and security, but that security is not just about a robust military presence. She emphasized that it is mostly about building strong, resilient communities through significant investment in critical infrastructure like roads, ports, telecommunications and energy. She warned that global powers are moving quickly and boldly to extend their influence and control in the Arctic through massive investments, increased marine traffic, and partnerships through which they seek to advance Arctic projects and position themselves for future advantage. In response, she urged Canada to launch ambitious new nation building projects in partnership with the territorial governments and Northern Indigenous governments. Northerners need to be at the decision-making table, she emphasized, with the regional and national tables for the [Arctic and Northern Policy Framework](#) offering as an example of where this is taking place. Securing investments and support from federal partners to act on Northern-specified priorities is critical to the future success of the territories and of Canada, Cochrane explained, and the North cannot be treated as an afterthought but rather as a contributing part of Canada's economic future. "Canada needs to hear our cries," she responded to one audience question during a session, "and put the funding into these" priority areas.

## The United States

On 7 October 2022, the White House released its [National Strategy for the Arctic Region](#) (NSAR) which replaces the [2013](#) strategy released by the Obama Administration. Laying out an agenda for the 2022-2032 timeframe, the new Arctic Strategy outlines four pillars to organize action: security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, and international cooperation and governance. It relies on five principles to guide actions within the four pillars: consult, coordinate, and co-manage with Alaska Native tribes and communities; deepen relationships with allies and partners; plan for long lead-time investments; cultivate cross-sectoral coalitions and innovative ideas; and commit to a whole of government, evidence-based approach. The NSAR "also accounts for increasing strategic competition in the Arctic, exacerbated by Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine and the People's Republic of China's increased efforts to garner influence in the region, and seeks to position the United States to both effectively compete and manage tensions."

Five days after the U.S. Arctic Strategy appeared, the White House released its 2022 [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS) which articulates a vision for “cooperation in the age of competition.” In order to pursue “a free, open, prosperous, and secure world,” the U.S. seeks to “effectively compete with the People’s Republic of China, which is the only competitor with both the intent and, increasingly, the capability to reshape the international order, while constraining a dangerous Russia.”

During his plenary address at the Arctic Circle Assembly, U.S. Department of State Counselor Derek Chollet outlined the four pillars of the new NSAR. He emphasized that the strategy represented an “enhanced commitment” from the United States to focus plans “around long-term investments. We will work to develop new ideas and approaches. We will work with a broad set of stakeholders; deepen our relationships with Allies and partners; and leverage our strengths across the U.S., state, and local governments. “ Chollet also noted that the Arctic Council remains at the heart of U.S. efforts to sustain institutions for Arctic cooperation and discern new ways to cooperate in the region.

## Security and Governance

Lackenbauer also served as a Canadian voice on two panels about Arctic security and governance.

The first, on the “Future of Arctic Cooperation – How to Maintain Peace and Stability,” was co-organized by the UArctic Thematic Network on Geopolitics and Security and the GlobalArctic Mission Council of Arctic Circle. Sara Olsvig highlighted people-to-people cooperation but noted that the recent “Arctic turn” has changed the situation to fixate once again on state-to-state relations. Instead, she noted that a nation-to-nation model, inclusive of Indigenous peoples and self-governing nations, offers a stronger conduit to peace and stability *for* and *of* the people of the Arctic. Liisa Kauppila of the University of Turku in Finland spoke on China’s future role, and the continued dependence on critical, security-relevant China-originated flows to and in the region. She cautioned against “demonizing” China too quickly, urging people to “understand before judging.” Lassi Heininen of the University of Lapland in Finland contemplated the potential future of Arctic cooperation without Russia, emphasizing the importance of functional cooperation (rather than bloc building). He made a convincing argument of why the transition to an “Arctic-7” is undesirable and goes against the animating spirit the led to the Arctic governance regime now in place. He lamented the lack of talk about arms control and the concomitant lack of expertise of how to do confidence building today. Are we going back to Cold War confrontation, he asked? We do not want this “old normal,” he concluded, and we do not want to isolate Russia – or allow Russia to isolate itself. Lackenbauer highlighted the US strategy’s language on the importance of *maintaining* peace and stability, emphasizing that the old “cooperation or conflict” binary was less helpful in an era of competition in which the Circumpolar Arctic is inherently

implicated. He highlighted the importance of clear strategic messaging and the preservation of space for future re-engagement with Russia, noting the limitations of “Arctic exceptionalism” as a totalizing concept setting expectations for regional while also suggesting that specific areas of common ground between all the Arctic states (such as scientific diplomacy and climate change) might still offer a platform for “exceptional” cooperation in due course.

The second, on “The Arctic in the World: Security and Diplomacy,” was expertly moderated by Mike Sfraga, the Chair of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission, and featured panelists Elana Wilson Rowe, a professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI); Hannes Hansen-Magnussen, a senior lecture at Cardiff University; Ingrid Medby, a lecturer in human geography at Newcastle University; and Marisol Maddox, the senior Arctic analyst at the Wilson Center in Washington. Discussions included how governance mechanisms have adapted since Russia launched its further invasion of Ukraine in February, how our analytical lenses have fared, the competition for narratives in the region, definitions of security (and how energy security is changing the equation), and the four “arcs” of how we frame the Arctic (Sfraga).

## The Main Event: Admiral Rob Bauer versus Ambassadors He Rulong and Gao Feng

The most dramatic part of the Arctic Council Assembly came near the end of the final day (15 October), when a senior NATO official gave a provocative speech condemning Russian and Chinese aggression and Chinese ambassadors responded forcefully, prompting a strong audience reaction.

The chair of NATO’s Military Committee, Dutch Admiral Robert Bauer, delivered a plenary speech about the state of regional security through an alliance lens. His tough statements on Russia – highlighting how that country represents the most direct threat to NATO security and continues to destabilize the global situation using cyber warfare and false narratives – seemed to meet with general audience approval (or at least no outright discontent). Bauer then pivoted to China, describing Beijing as “another authoritarian regime that does not share our values and undermines the rules-based international order.” He warned that the PRC is “building the world’s largest icebreaker and planning for more heavy icebreakers, some of which are nuclear powered,” then transitioning to the assertion that “by embracing shortened distances and reaction times, naval formations could move more quickly from the Pacific to the Atlantic, and submarines could shelter in the Arctic if required.” Bauer emphasized that China had invested “tens of billions of dollars” into Arctic infrastructure projects, and noted the growing cooperation between Moscow and Beijing that Putin and Xi had pledged earlier this year. (Of note, Bauer did not provide any specific examples of how China had actually sought to undermine Arctic governance or the regional order, instead offering general references to the Polar Silk Road and China’s identification as a near-Arctic state.) “At this pivotal moment for global security, NATO will do



what it has done best for the last 73 years: unite and adapt,” he noted. “With strength and unity, we will continue to deter aggression, protect our values and interests, and keep our people safe. The Arctic has always had a strategic relevance for NATO as the obvious gateway to the North Atlantic, hosting vital trade and communications links between North America and Europe. As such NATO will do everything it can to make sure the Arctic remains free and open.”

When Olafur Ragnar Grímsson, the chair of the Arctic Circle, asked Bauer about where NATO might place its enhanced defence capability, the admiral responded that this depended on Russian and Chinese activities. He described Russia as the Alliance’s “first and foremost threat at the moment,” highlighting potential effects on NATO states’ “freedom to maneuver” and stating that the potential opening of northern routes would produce “a new flank in the Arctic” that would require that the alliance “do more in the North” (and particularly the central and eastern parts of the Arctic – presumably referring to the European and Eurasian Arctics). In answer to another question (about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s suggestion that Western allies might launch a preventative nuclear strike against Russia), Bauer affirmed that “NATO is a defensive alliance” and that “we are not at war with Russia.”

The Chinese Ambassador to Iceland, He Rulong, then directly challenged Bauer’s accusations towards China, stating: “Admiral, with due respect, your speech is full of arrogance and paranoia. The Arctic is an area for high cooperation and low tension. The Arctic plays an important role when it comes to climate change.” Bauer replied: “I have a question for you, because you underline the principle of sovereignty and the importance of the internationally recognized borders in the world. I am correct, isn’t that true? Yeah. So why is it possible then that China still is not condemning Russia’s attack in Ukraine?” The audience applauded. The Chinese ambassador insisted that China’s view of the “Ukraine crisis” includes a historic perspective and the world needs to “understand the root cause.” The audience was cool to these remarks, and some laughed when He called China “the peacemaker in the world.” The ambassador emphasized that he resented China being cast as a threat. Bauer then explained that he did not say that China should be disallowed from Arctic affairs, only that NATO must be prepared to take steps if China does not conform to the rules. The Chinese ambassador then reiterated China’s foreign policy of “peace and independence,” and tried to justify why Beijing has not condemned Russia’s war in Ukraine.

After Musa Filibus, the Archbishop of the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria and the President of the Lutheran World Federation, committed to “waking the giant” to raise awareness of climate change (and concluded his presentation with the quip how he was appreciative that he “could mediate between NATO and China”), China’s special representative for Arctic affairs, Gao Feng, took the stage. He described the PRC as an “old friend” to the Arctic Circle, with its 2015 delegation systematically discussing China’s Arctic policies (which were subsequently incorporated in the country’s 2018 Arctic white paper). He lauded China’s contributions to the

“stability and development of the Arctic” – a stark contrast to Bauer’s earlier characterization – and emphasized how important a “peaceful, clean, and prosperous Arctic” is to the international community, including China. He noted that, “in theory,” transarctic shipping routes “have the potential” to become important arteries of global trade, and that China supports the “exploration” of potential uses through its “experimental voyages.” Gao also highlighted how Chinese scientists play an effective part in Arctic science programs.

During the question and answer period, Gao offered several revealing insights. First, when asked by Grímsson whether China would participate in an Arctic Council without Russian participation, Gao responded that it was too early to answer. Nevertheless, he indicated that the PRC would not support excluding Russia in punishment for the war in Ukraine. “Geopolitical competition and confrontation should not impede or interrupt international cooperation in the Arctic,” he stated. “China hopes that the related multilateral cooperative institutions and mechanisms could resume operations soon, and people could set up or restore dialogues and cooperation and reactivate the programs already in their place. The Arctic cannot – we cannot afford – long-lasting pause or suspension or paralysis, or whatever you call it, of international organization in the Arctic.”

Furthermore, Gao noted that “there is no procedure to get anybody out of the Council.” Because the Arctic Council operates by consensus, he asserted that it would be difficult for the chairmanship to pass from Russia to Norway (as is scheduled to happen in May 2023) without Russia’s participation. Second, when asked about a possible Chinese military role in the Arctic, Gao responded that “in theory, yes,” it would have one as one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. The PRC did not have a single soldier in the Arctic region, China’s special representative emphasized – but it might need to assume its responsibilities to maintain peace in the region if called upon. This was the first time that I had heard this logic articulated by a senior Chinese official in a public forum.

## Further Reading

NAADSN Network Coordinator Marc Lanteigne published a [Quick Impact](#) on the Arctic Council Assembly where he shares his insights on the conference and discusses inconvenient truths about the current political state of the Arctic reflected at the event.

See also Mia Bennett’s insightful Eye on the Arctic blog post “[A NATO admiral, Chinese diplomat, & Faroese metal band walk into a concert hall.](#)”