

ACTIVITY REPORT



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Arctic Circle Assembly 2022

Arctic Circle Assembly 2022 - Activity Report

Justin Barnes

Taking place during the most geopolitically turbulent time for Arctic relations since the Cold War, the Arctic Circle Assembly (ACA) 2022 felt like a significant moment. Debates about the “pause” of the Arctic Council and the possibility of regional cooperation were everywhere, with diplomats, academics, and government representatives weighing in on the many different possible scenarios they see for the future. The war in Ukraine was front of mind in many discussions, and the tense exchange between NATO’s Military Committee Chair and China’s Ambassador to Iceland over NATO’s view of Russia and China in the Arctic during a plenary session highlighted the gulf that exists between both actors regarding certain issues in a very public way, and managed to make headlines outside the conference. At the same time, however, in the context of the broader Arctic Circle Assembly, this exchange was an important reminder that while these “hard” security concerns are important, they cannot overshadow other work taking place in the Arctic such as supporting mental health in Indigenous communities, addressing policy issues related to gender, the continuing implications of COVID-19, advancing our understanding and models for managing global climate change, and finding “green” solutions to energy insecurity. The Arctic Circle Assembly was also an important reminder of the strong interests of non-Arctic states in the region, and their continued involvement in the region despite the pause of the Arctic Council.

Perspectives from Non-Arctic States (Scotland and Asian States)

Consistent with previous years, the Arctic Circle Assembly had a notable amount of sessions focused on the perspectives and contributions of non-Arctic states in the region. As forums like the Arctic Council remain on pause, various sessions focused on past, present, and future contributions of the UK, Scotland, South Korea, Japan, India, and China in Arctic science, economic development, green energy transitions, and environmental protection. Speakers shared diverse opinions about whether the Arctic Council will survive the current geopolitical crisis, or if an “Arctic 7” without Russia should be pursued (or accepted), and many non-Arctic state representatives articulated their desire to continue scientific work that they see as crucial to understanding global climate change. Additionally, Asian state representatives, particularly from India and the UAE, advocated for the “Third-Pole Process” narrative in various sessions, whereby the Himalayan region is seen as a space with notable climatic and environmental parallels to the two poles. Because the Himalayan region includes regional powers such as China, India, and Pakistan, and has an important influence on a large percentage of the global population, this “Third Pole Process” narrative is worth taking seriously.

The View from Asia: Arctic science as a key driver for involvement

This non-Arctic perspective was particularly salient in the plenary session “The View from Asia,” where state representatives from China, Japan, India, and South Korea shared their overarching and continuing concerns related to the Arctic primarily through their interest in maintaining Arctic science initiatives.

Gao Feng, Special Representative for Arctic Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, who in a previous session’s Q&A suggested that China would not recognize the Arctic Council without Russia’s involvement (citing a lack of legal basis or agreement for such an Arctic Council to exist), also noted the serious implications of the Russian-Ukrainian war (described by Gao as a conflict) on Arctic governance more broadly. While describing the sudden interruption of the Arctic Council and its working groups as a “big blow to Arctic governance,” Gao shared his view that managing “climate change, marine protection, biodiversity, the welfare of Indigenous peoples, and the sustainable development of the Arctic” needed to be “continued at lower levels and forward, despite the pause of the Arctic Council.” Gao reaffirmed China’s continued interest in being involved in these areas, suggesting here and in an earlier session that China will continue its cooperation and collaboration with all actors working in these spaces.

Keizo Takewaka, Ambassador in Charge of Arctic Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, shared three overarching areas of focus that continue to guide Japan’s involvement in Arctic affairs despite the pause of the Arctic Council. The first was Japan’s green commitment to achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, and in the context of expected strong economic growth, a “greener” Asia needs to be achieved at the same time. The second area focused on resource conservation as a priority, with Japan’s commitment to the [G20 Osaka Blue Ocean Vision](#) meant to reduce additional pollution and plastic to zero by 2050 portrayed as a key indicator of Japan’s perspective on these types of issues. Finally, without specifically referring to Russia’s war in Ukraine, Takewaka articulated that Japan is committed to maintaining the rule of law and the rules-based international order.

Dr. M. Ravichandran, General Secretary, Ministry of Earth Sciences, highlighted India’s interest in continuing its contributions to Arctic meteorology and science. He emphasized the important role of science in society, noting that because the monsoon is directly connected to India’s food security and because the Arctic climate is a major driver for the monsoon, India therefore has a keen interest in understanding the global implications of climate change in the Arctic. Developing better modelling and predictions related to the Arctic and the globe is part of India’s interest in the region. Also, by reiterating the “third pole” narrative, Ravichandran argued that traditional knowledge found in the Himalayas about this cold region can be harnessed in polar sciences.

Finally, Youngki Hong, Ambassador for Polar Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea (ROK), noted his country’s interest in the Arctic is related to developing its scientific capabilities to fight climate change. According to Hong, this commitment to the region can be seen by the ROK’s building of a second icebreaker that will be launched in 2027. Part of Korea’s contribution to Arctic science will be through its promotion of an Arctic integrated information system that will collect information to be shared with researchers around the world in order to fight climate change in the Arctic and other areas.

Asian Perspectives on continuing Arctic Cooperation

While all of the speakers' comments focused primarily on their state's contributions to Arctic science, when asked about Arctic cooperation in the current geopolitical environment, all of the state representatives in this session stated that they believe cooperation and collaboration is important and still possible in certain areas. Gao Feng stated that "we can still move ahead with scientific research, with sustainable development, and continue work in fisheries resource management and biodiversity." While noting this is a deeply challenging situation, Keizo Takewaka stated "my answer is very simple: science is equally and globally important regardless of the situation. International cooperation and research and development will continue and survive." Regarding the pause of the Arctic Council, while a lot is currently not accessible, Japan is keenly looking towards what is possible and what can be done next. According to Dr. Ravichandran, from India's perspective science is their main driver and this needs to continue to be enabled by the Arctic Council and other meetings. He stated that "we need to continue negotiations and collaboration to have Russia on board because of their huge coastline." Youngki Hong noted that the conflict has had a significant impact on the Arctic because Korea's cooperation and contribution to the region has been made mainly through the Arctic Council and its working groups. South Korea is encouraging its scientists and researchers to continue their work with their international counterparts.

China and the Arctic: Engaging After the Global Pandemic

Gao Feng articulated that China views itself as an important international actor and stakeholder in Arctic affairs as well as trans-regional and global issues such as climate change, environmental protection, scientific research, sustainable development, and the utilization of shipping routes. According to Gao, a peaceful and clean Arctic serves the common interest of the international community, including China. He pointed to China's actions related to climate change, such as its carbon neutrality goal by 2060, as proof of its continued commitment to the Arctic agenda throughout the pandemic. Gao argued that China is a major player in the Arctic, a role demonstrated through its membership in the 10-party agreement to develop to prevent unregulated high seas fisheries in the central Arctic Ocean; China's involvement in polar rulemaking through the International Maritime Organization related to passing through Arctic waters; and the participation of Chinese scientists in Arctic research cooperation.

Besides reiterating China's view of itself as a major player in the Arctic, Gao provided three main priorities for China in the Arctic in the current geopolitically uncertain post-pandemic context: (1) China's view is that peace and stability are the "utmost prerequisite for everything in the Arctic" and the Arctic should remain a region of low tension and high cooperation, a status that is in the common interest of all countries no matter their "Arctic" status; (2) sustainable development in the Arctic remains a long-term task, and ensuring peaceful and prosperous lives of Arctic peoples will remain the primary goal for Arctic governance; and (3) "geopolitical competition and cooperation should not impede or interrupt international cooperation in the Arctic." According to Gao, China hopes that current institutions and mechanisms resume operations soon: "we cannot afford a long-lasting pause... of cooperation in the Arctic".

When asked about China's view on the future of the Arctic Council, Gao shared his doubt about the Chair being successfully passed onto Norway without the full involvement of Russia, primarily due to a lack of a procedure

under the AC's declaration to accommodate such a situation. Gao stated that the "Arctic Council is still there, we are still the observer, an A7 would not be the original, that would be a different organization. When there is an opportunity to work together, we will do that."

Scotland in the Arctic

In a speech delivered by the Scottish Government's External Affairs Secretary H.E. Angus Robertson, the ACA was reminded of Scotland's enduring commitment to be recognized as a near-Arctic country and an important stakeholder in Arctic developments. Robertson articulated the connections that Scotland shares with Iceland as representative of Scotland's desire to exercise its ability to be an expert partner in international dialogues, share their best practices, and to learn from others. Robertson highlighted Scotland's shared history with places like Iceland that goes back over a millennium to the Vikings. Common challenges include rural well-being, connectivity, renewable energy, and tackling climate change, all issues that are similarly experienced due to Scotland's geographic proximity to the Arctic. According to Robertson, Scotland has become a confident near-Arctic actor, and through its Arctic policy it has shown its commitment to cooperation and expanding its role in the region. Examples of this include a Scottish academic research network related to the Arctic, and the second most universities of a non-Arctic country involved in the UArctic. Scotland sees itself as part of a common northern European neighbourhood where topics including shipping and academic cooperation are important, as well as Scotland's strong potential to produce renewable energy (2% of Europe's population, but have 25% of Europe's renewable energy resources, 99% of Scotland's energy consumption is from renewable energy) and hydrogen. According to Robertson, Scotland is thus keen to explore the potential for developing better interconnections between Greenland, Iceland, Faroe Islands, Shetland, Norway, Denmark and the rest of Europe.

Arctic Peoples and Arctic Governance

Even in the context of current geopolitical concerns, participants at the ACA provided important reminders of the continuing challenges facing Arctic peoples in the region. The Honorable Caroline Cochrane, Premier of the Northwest Territories, stated that "We are at the front lines of climate change and the potential impacts of a changing geopolitical climate and of shifts in international natural resource interests, and because of this we need to be heard in conversations of the Arctic." In a Q&A session about the future of the Permanent Participants of the Arctic Council, ICC President Sara Olsvig made a similar statement, expressing that in regards to any development in the Arctic "we must be at the table," noting that what is "characteristic of us as Indigenous peoples in the Arctic is that we live across these borders." This presents difficulties in the best of times, but in the current context, it is important to remember that while Indigenous organizations like the ICC work on non-security or soft-security related issues, hard-security developments also have direct impacts on Arctic Indigenous Peoples. Olsvig explained that "any hard security development affects us directly and affects our human rights directly, so we live under a very, very difficult time where we must balance everything that we do."

In the session "Canada's North and the Future of the Arctic," youth representatives from the Canadian Arctic shared important perspectives of the ongoing crises taking place in Arctic communities. According to Alyssa Carpenter, mental health and wellness is one of the most important issues. Inuvik and Sachs Harbour have one

of the worst rates of suicide in the last two years in the NWT. According to Lianna Rice, working to understand the bigger picture of what has been contributing to this crisis is crucial for responding to it. In regards to this, Alianai Niviatsiak stated:

Colonial systems are set up for us to fail as Indigenous people. These systems do not work, they do not align with the values of Indigenous people, they do not align with the ways in which Indigenous people have survived and thrived for time immemorial, and the fact that if indigenous peoples do fail, its placed on the indigenous communities and not within the colonial systems themselves. So, the question is where do we start decolonizing these systems? How do we begin to ensure that these individuals and communities are able to reframe those systems that will only lead to their success?

Jacey Firth-Hagen from the Western Arctic Youth Collective offered some suggestions for immediate action at the beginning of the session, including empowering youth by hiring youth, supporting and advancing mental health programming, and language programming.

Gender Equality and Diversity in Arctic Leadership

According to Her Excellency the Right Honourable Mary Simon, Governor General of Canada, success in managing challenges relies on diverse voices. By reflecting on Canada's process of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, Simon articulated that reconciliation should be understood as "an ongoing conversation about getting to know one another and giving each other space for diversity" and by "renewing and strengthening relationships to find new opportunities to work towards the common good." According to Simon, the Arctic is "integral to world peace and climate change and Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that make the Arctic their home." Gender equality is a crucial aspect of addressing the challenges that the Arctic collectively faces, and that during her time working in Arctic politics, there has been a tremendous change in terms of having men and women working together.

Icelandic Prime Minister H.E. Katrín Jakobsdóttir argued that gender equality has become a central issue and mainstream topic in the country. She explained that "when we experience a table where decisions are made where we have both men and women... we get better decisions." Jakobsdóttir related this to the Arctic because it is:

a very diverse place and no decision should be made without the involvement of Indigenous peoples, it is our common duty to make sure they can build a sustainable economy. Iceland has been a homogenous society for some time, but it's becoming more diverse, and there are so many decisions that need to be made around the Arctic and better decisions can be made with both men and women around the table.

H.E. Naaja H. Nathanielsen, Minister of Finance and Gender Equality for Greenland, shared similar thoughts, stating that:

it's important to be mindful that the Arctic is a diverse place. Matters of diversity and gender equality are often considered a soft topic compared to issues related to economy and commerce, but gender diversity and diversity are central to these issues. Colonialism has shaped our discussions on this in many ways to the detriment of women in Greenland, but the children of Greenland have been taught their history of colonialism and related inequality, and these issues are now being discussed in the public sphere... It could be a controversial thought that our history has prepared girls and women to navigate unequal power structures and tackle them and maybe this goes for other Arctic countries and territories as well... In Greenland women are achieving leadership in all sectors private and public and on the cultural scene and they all had to fight for it.

Conclusion

This activity report shows that while the eight Arctic states are continuing to work out how to proceed with cooperation at the Arctic Council and other fora, the ACA 2022 made clear that non-Arctic states continue to demonstrate their readiness to continue their involvement in Arctic science and other areas. While some non-Arctic states have outright condemned Russia over its war in Ukraine, others have yet to do so (China and India). Resuming the Arctic Council rests in the hands of its member states, but non-Arctic states have articulated their readiness to continue without it. At the same time, the many challenges that local Arctic peoples face on a day-to-day basis remain. While the current geopolitical context complicates Arctic politics immensely, it is important that Arctic stakeholders continue to work towards addressing local-level challenges related to climate change, colonial legacies, and sustainable development in whatever ways might be possible and appropriate. The broad set of perspectives shared at the ACA 2022 demonstrate that there are no clear paths ahead at the moment, but that continued dialogue and investment could help to resume or adapt existing Arctic fora -- or eventually lead to something new.