

October 30, 2022

Arctic Circle Assembly 2022 - Activity Report

Gabriella Gricius

After attending the Arctic Circle Assembly, two themes became clear: 1) the real strength of longtime relationships and connections that have been built over time, and 2) the self-referential nature of Arctic expertise.

Relationships & Connections

Across both the plenary and the breakout sessions, one of the most discussed themes and ideas was the importance of relationships formed and strengthened by continual meetings – specifically at the Arctic Circle. Former Icelandic President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson mentioned many times in both his introductions to world leaders as well as across his questions how important the development of relationships is. During even the slightly contentious exchange between NATO Admiral Rob Bauer and the Chinese Ambassador to Iceland He Rulong, Grímsson interjected the real significance of forming connections and new relationships that the Assembly could create. Leaders, including Prime Minister of Iceland Katrín Jakobsdóttir and Governor General of Canada Mary Simon, also reiterated how they have attended the Assembly many times since its founding in 2013.

Beneath these high-level interactions, individual researchers and scientists across breakout sessions also echoed how partnerships have formed both preparing for the conference as well as long-standing relationships that shaped discussions about, for example, Arctic security and diplomacy over time. In the Arctic Institute's session, Managing Director Romain Chuffart shared on the essential aspect of community that was prevalent in the Arctic region.

Self-Referential Arctic Expertise

No less important, a second theme was the circular and self-referential nature of Arctic expertise that was prevalent at the Assembly. Panelists shared personal friendships that they shared with other panelists and how conversations about the nature of, for example, the EU's role in the Arctic, have been ongoing for many years and evolve over time. Within these conversations, it was clear that those who were recognized as experts on the Arctic regularly were reflexive about their position and referenced the same experts across the conference. Further, these experts were often reflective about the growing importance of the Arctic region broadly, asking important questions about what it means to be an Arctic (or non-Arctic) nation, referencing earlier ways that they themselves had understood the region, and questioning how their own views had changed over time. For example, in many of the sessions where the war in Ukraine was mentioned, many panelists acknowledged that their thinking on Russia had

drastically changed over the last eight months, with implications for how – if at all – cooperation with Russia could continue and broadly on the future of the Arctic Council.

This self-referential and reflective behavior also lent itself to circular dynamics. Many sessions were opened with language implying that panelists had come to the Assembly again and again, continuing the same conversations over many years with a sense of familiarity. This circular nature of expertise was also reflected in how people interacted with one another outside of the panels. During the coffee breaks, groups of people formed that clearly shared rapport and the phrase “Arctic family” was heard widely across the space.

Conclusion

Any small region that has a relatively small community will naturally have a particular emphasis on building relationships. However, this is particularly clear at the Arctic Circle Assembly – an event that has invited those interested in Arctic affairs since 2013. Nearly ten years later, the Assembly has grown – this year reaching nearly 2,000 attendees, which directly places the event as a centerpiece of Arctic politics and expertise. This has implications for how the region will evolve in the future. Will or how can newly emerging actors in the Arctic space break into these long-standing relationships and circles of expertise? Further, how will this sense of circularity change as interest in the Arctic grows and changes. For example, NATO made its first appearance formally at the Assembly this year, matched by longer-standing interest by Asian states, and a lack of official Russian participation.

However, these two key themes were present at this Arctic Circle Assembly:

- 1) Longtime relationships and connections are key to understanding Arctic politics and security. The close connections that many researchers and political leaders share both amongst one another as well as with the Arctic Circle Assembly itself have created a sense of community that infuses the overall positive character of the event. How this might change or stay the same in the face of increasing crises regionally and globally remains an open question.
- 2) The character of Arctic expertise as self-referential and circular create a type of atmosphere in the conference where individuals know one another and often reflect critically on their past views and the Arctic as a region. That the Assembly represents an “Arctic family” poses important questions about possible familial expansion and insider-outsider dynamics in the broader scheme of the changing character of the Arctic.