ACTIVITY REPORT

NAADSN
North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network

naadsn.ca

November 18, 2025

Arctic Circle Assembly 2025 – Activity Report

André Moreau
NAADSN Fellow

This past October, I joined 2,000 others from around the world who gathered at the Arctic Circle Assembly (ACA), a three-day conference that is often touted as “the largest annual international gathering on the Arctic.” These three days featured an extensive series of panels, plenary sessions, networking opportunities, and discussions that brought together individuals from a range of fields: academia, government, NGOs, journalism, business, and politics.

The ACA is an exceptional venue for fostering collaboration and dialogue, but the conference is not without its faults, notably its increasing commercialism and the lack of substantive representation from some key Arctic players. This year, there was a noticeable overall decrease in U.S. participation at the Arctic Circle Assembly, which was particularly marked by the absence of U.S. government representatives. Their meagre attendance numbers can largely be attributed to the federal government shutdown – the longest in U.S. history – which kept government officials from attending the conference; it’s also likely that this reduced presence is a reflection of the current U.S. administration's shifting foreign policy and its problematic rhetoric around Arctic geopolitics (not to mention the fact that the same administration has espoused problematic statements regarding the potential annexation or invasion of its Arctic allies, notably Greenland and Canada).

Nevertheless, the absence of U.S. government delegates did not impede the momentum of the Assembly. Rather, it served to emphasize the growing leadership role of other Arctic states, particularly Denmark and Greenland, both of which now chair the Arctic Council. The Nordics, along with Canada, easily stepped up to fill the leadership vacuum left by the U.S. These countries’ strong participation – both in terms of panelists and plenary speakers – highlighted the continued commitment of the Arctic community to address critical issues such as climate change, Indigenous self-determination, resource management, and security. In other words, the U.S.’s absence served as a good reminder that the Arctic's future is shaped not by the influence of one nation alone, but by the collective efforts of Arctic states and other non-state actors working together.

While the ACA’s format remains relatively unchanged each year, its ambition continues to expand. The event is often referred to as the "Grímmson Show," a reference to former Icelandic President Ólafur Ragnar Grímmson, the Assembly's founder and, in effect, its master of ceremonies. Grímmson's role has been instrumental in turning the ACA into a spectacle of both ideas and power, with key figures often offering their well-rehearsed speeches on stage while one can only imagine what other dealings are taking place off-stage. Grímmson has

created an impressive platform for Arctic discourse over the years, bringing together a diverse and ever-growing global cohort of stakeholders, from heads of state to academics to businesspeople: a significant achievement, to be sure, but one that also raises the question as to whether the growing commercialization of the event and its increasingly elite character is really necessary to serve the Assembly's purpose.

The growing international participation in the ACA – particularly from Asian and Gulf states – suggests an effort to expand the conference's scope beyond its original, more grassroots, Arctic focus. This growth, while commendable in its inclusivity, can at times feel more like a strategy to attract sponsorship and elevate the Assembly's global profile rather than a genuine reflection of Arctic-centered engagement and problem solving that was the ACA's original purpose. As the event grows in scale, I cannot help but wonder whether this broader reach muddles or detracts from the core issues affecting the Arctic and those who call it home. The heightened conference registration fees, which now exceed CAD $1,000 per ticket, have only compounded these concerns. While the expansion of the ACA can be viewed as a success in terms of visibility and reach, one must ask whether the voices of Arctic communities – especially those from Indigenous regions – are adequately represented and whether the cost of attendance poses a barrier for those who perhaps have the most at stake and the most valuable insights to offer.

Despite these concerns, the Arctic Circle Assembly remains a unique opportunity to bring together individuals from across the globe. There is something undeniably special about gathering in one place with like-minded individuals who are deeply invested in Arctic issues. As much as I may critique the growing commercialization of the event, I cannot deny the value of the personal connections and professional relationships that are forged in those three days. For me, the ACA represents a rare chance to re-connect with colleagues and friends whom I otherwise would not meet, and the opportunity to share experiences and ideas in an environment where professional ties feel a bit more informal, personal and genuine. The scale of the conference, while at times overwhelming, provides a platform for Arctic scholars, policymakers, and industry experts to exchange ideas and build connections across geographic, political, and disciplinary boundaries. In this way, the ACA's very size can be seen as both a strength and a weakness.

Thus, while there have been challenges with the ACA's growing scale and an unnecessary tendency to embrace pomp and pageantry at the cost of increased ticket prices, its value as a gathering place for Arctic-focused dialogue and action is undeniable. The conference continues to serve as a vital forum for Arctic discourse and provides a space for Arctic actors to build relationships and work together on long-term goals. In a fast-changing political landscape, the ACA endures as a much-needed constant in the Arctic community: a space for collaboration, connection, where participants from around the world assemble and engage with the existential challenges facing the Arctic and contribute the region's future. Its continued success, however, will depend on how effectively it can balance expansion with a continued focus the region's most pressing issues.