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Juha Käpylä & Harri Mikkola
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Passing the Arctic Council torch to the US and beyond > Will discontinuity in the Arctic agenda remain the name of the game?

Canada will pass the chairmanship of the Arctic Council to the United States in May 2015. The two states have distinctly different agendas, and the change is likely to herald discontinuity in Arctic governance. This may reoccur in 2017 unless Finland rediscovers its traditional Arctic policy for its chairmanship agenda.

The chairmanship of the Arctic Council (AC) is about to change in May 2015 when Canada passes the torch to the United States. The Canadian focus during its two-year chairmanship has been primarily on economy, on “responsible Arctic resource development, safe Arctic shipping and sustainable circumpolar communities”.

The key outcome of the Canadian chairmanship, the establishment of the Arctic Economic Council (AEC), highlights this focus. Unsurprisingly, this agenda has also sparked criticism. Canada has been seen to utilize the AC for domestic political purposes by focusing on the economic development of its own Arctic regions. In addition, by focusing on economic development, Canada has also been seen to fail to exhibit real leadership in environmental issues.

The recently unveiled US chairmanship agenda charts a different course for the AC. The primary focus of the US will be on addressing climate change and its effects. Special attention will be paid to the impacts of pollutants, such as black carbon and methane.

The US also seeks to improve governance and stewardship of the Arctic Ocean. This will include topics such as regional seas agreements, maritime safety, and standardiza-

tion of safe Arctic drilling. The third focus of the US chairmanship will be on the improvement of economic and living conditions in the Arctic. Topics such as suicide prevention and advances in local energy sources and communications technology are likely to be integral in this regard.

This framing works well for the US. Subscribing to a “wait-and-see” approach, Washington remains uncertain about precisely when and how to commit its resources to developing the transforming Arctic as well as its own Arctic capabilities. As a leading science power on climate change and with Barack Obama set to make the climate question a legacy item of his presidency, the environmental focus is seen as the best available – both cost-effective and actionable – option to show US leadership in the contemporary Arctic.

At the same time, this framing of the US agenda is heavily focused on the more traditional tasks of the AC, namely environmental protection and sustainable development instead of the more recent economic and business focus that Canada has advanced.

Emblematic of this, the unveiled US agenda remains ominously silent about the AEC. Admiral Robert Papp,

the US special representative for the Arctic, chose not to mention the AEC in his first public addresses on the agenda. In fact, the US Senior Arctic Official Julie Gourley did not even attend the founding convention of the body. These omissions typify the well-known secret that the US State Department has been reluctant about the idea of the AEC since its inception.

The upshot of the differences in foci suggests that the US and Canada will be able to establish a very limited degree of strategic continuity in the official agenda of the AC. The economic momentum of the AC, particularly the AEC, appears to be in question. While the AC Working Groups will continue their practical work and the US and Canada will find certain common ground with regard to the socio-economic development of the North, the passing of the torch next May is likely to represent something of a break in contemporary Arctic governance and co-operation.

The US will pass the AC chairmanship to Finland in 2017. Finland has traditionally been known for its strong focus on Arctic environmental protection, playing a leading role in the formulation of the 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy and subsequently the AC itself. This

Finnish Institute of
International Affairs

Kruunuvuorenkatu 4

POB 400

00161 Helsinki

Telephone

+358 (0)9 432 7000

Fax

+358 (0)9 432 7799

www.fiia.fi

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solid tradition in Finnish Arctic policy could entail a possibility for a clear continuity of the renewed environmental agenda in the AC that the US will initiate.

However, it is not totally out of the question that Arctic governance could face another discontinuity when Finland assumes the AC chairmanship. Much akin to Canada, the current focus of Finnish Arctic policy is increasingly on economy. For instance, Finland's new 2013 Arctic strategy devotes much of its attention to elaborating Finnish business opportunities in the Arctic. Finland has also been active in the establishment of the AEC, and is expected to assume the chairmanship of the economic body in 2015.

This Finnish focus on economy can also be illustrated by Finland's country session in the 2014 Arctic Circle assembly. Unlike many other country sessions that revolved around environmental science, the Finnish session was heavily focused on promoting commercialized Finnish Arctic know-how ranging from world-class ship-design and ice-management capability to meteorological services in the North.

This current Finnish policy orientation, much like its Canadian counterpart, does not go hand in hand with the Arctic policy of the US,

which will foreground environmental protection and stewardship.

Of course, the forthcoming agenda of the Finnish chairmanship is yet to be decided and does not necessarily correlate with the country's current, more general Arctic orientation. Most likely, the Finns will look closely at how the US agenda actually shapes up, and will discuss the key national and international priorities broadly within the government and society.

However, if Finland were to remain committed to its economically-oriented Arctic policy while planning its approaching AC chairmanship foci, the passing of the Council's torch from the US to Finland in 2017 might come to represent another missed opportunity in advancing a long-term Arctic policy, particularly in the context of the AC. This would further blur the focus and enduring priorities of Arctic governance and cooperation.

To avoid this, the more traditional aspects of Finnish Arctic policy would need to be re-acknowledged seriously, and the traditional environmental and scientific foci of the AC endorsed. This would also be in line with the EU agenda on the Arctic.