

New Voices at the Arctic Council's Table

By Nils Andreassen, Institute of the North

The increasing attention paid to the Arctic is well-deserved. The phenomenal rate of change taking place in the circumpolar north – with corresponding impacts to social, cultural, political and environmental systems – is cause for pause...and planning. The Arctic Council is the premier multilateral decision-making forum ensuring both.

By pause, I mean that the Arctic Council has invested heavily in groundbreaking assessments of the historic and current state of conditions in the Arctic. The degree to which peoples and communities are affected by change needs some context from which to build solutions, and the Arctic Council has taken the time to learn what change looks like.

More importantly, the Working Groups and Senior Arctic Officials have prioritized planning efforts and are currently working on following up on recommendations made during this phase. Already, the recently concluded Search and Rescue Agreement is a success engendered by the Council's work, and movement is under way to secure an Oil Spill Preparedness and Response Agreement. Both speak to the efficacy of the organization.

I'm just returning from the Munk School of Global Affairs and Gordon Foundation conference *The Arctic Council: Its Place in the Future of Arctic Governance* held in Toronto. This was an ideal platform for considering both the success of the Arctic Council and measures for strengthening this body. I'm not sure I've come away with clarity in terms of answers, but many of the questions raised are poignant and powerful for northern peoples.

Much of the dialogue dealt with the concept of who is "at the table." The Arctic Council is unique in that it has formally included the voices of Permanent Participants, organizations representing indigenous cultures, traditions and ways of life. These members, four of which are represented in Alaska, bring a compelling perspective to policy making in the North.

Also "at the table" are observers, non-Arctic states, organizations and NGOs that are there to listen and contribute when asked but who have no role in the decision-making that takes place. One of the more challenging questions at present is determining the criteria with which new observers are admitted. We heard a fascinating perspective about Asia Rising, and the call for India and China to be admitted as observers. This market-driven approach was weighed against retaining a strong focus on northern peoples on communities.

A common refrain throughout was the absence of sub-national/local representation and the need for including and educating the Arctic's young leaders. Both of these resonated with me, as both issues are central to the Institute of the North's mission.

Our participation in the PNWER Arctic Caucus – a body comprised of the governments of Alaska, Yukon and Northwest Territories – means that we are actively supporting bringing state and territorial issues to the forefront of discussions about the Arctic. For the Institute of the North, this is about northern solutions for northern peoples. One of the action items recommended by the Arctic Caucus has been for a renewed focus on economic and infrastructure development during the Canadian and U.S. chairmanships. I was able to bring this up in Toronto.

At the same time, the Institute has hosted a young leaders program for the past five years, and this May will be bringing the Emerging Leaders Dialogue to Whitehorse where we can discuss cross-border challenges and opportunities. There is much that we can learn from one another, I believe, and we're excited to be able to include in that discussion planning for an Arctic Emerging Leaders Dialogue. In Toronto, we heard about the need to involve the Arctic's young leaders as well as build capacity for leadership. I believe that an Arctic Emerging Leaders Dialogue could do both, and with an appropriate feedback loop established to the Arctic Council, could have a decision-shaping influence.

That said, it is clear that not everyone can be "at the table" when deciding policies that affect sovereign states, nor should they be. However, in a world as dynamic and changing as the Arctic, processes can be put in place that incorporate multiple voices iteratively, translating local, traditional, emerging voices into practices that support northern peoples and communities.