

## AT A GLANCE

# The outcome of the ninth Arctic Council ministerial meeting

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## The completion of the Arctic Council's Canadian Chairmanship

The ministerial meeting in Iqaluit, Nunavut (Canada), closed Canada's two-year Arctic Council (AC) chairmanship.

Arctic cooperation seems relatively unaffected by the poor state of Russia's relations with the West.

Canada invested much in its AC Chairmanship, but its deliverables have been less significant than those of previous chairs.

Canada's two main achievements are the Arctic Economic Council and the framework for action on black carbon and methane.

The two-year Canadian chairmanship of the Arctic Council (AC) – a key body for pan-Arctic cooperation – was completed with the ninth ministerial meeting. At the gathering held in Iqaluit, the capital of Canada's Nunavut territory, on 24 April 2015, all eight AC member states were represented by foreign ministers, with the exception of Russia (represented by the minister of the environment, probably for political reasons) and Sweden (represented by the minister for Nordic affairs, for logistical reasons). Despite the deterioration in relations between Russia and the West, the AC appears to be proceeding with 'business as usual'. US President Barack Obama has advocated that all international gatherings that include Russia and that may affect climate change negotiations be maintained. Similarly, the EU has pushed for cross-border cooperation to be treated independently of other issues in the bilateral relationship (as expressed by the European Council on 16 July 2014). Yet media participating in the press conference in Iqaluit appeared as interested in the ministers' parallel discussions on Ukraine as in official Arctic cooperation. Moscow's military push in the Arctic has also stoked – unspoken – apprehension among other AC members.

Canada has invested substantial effort in its chairmanship, focussing particularly on human development in the Arctic. Canada's prime minister set up a ministerial post to chair the AC, appointing an ethnic Inuit MP from Nunavut. However, although Canada has promoted numerous activities, the Iqaluit AC ministerial meeting did not deliver as much as the two previous meetings: under a Danish chair, the Arctic Search and Rescue agreement was signed in 2009, in Nuuk (Greenland); and in 2013, in Kiruna (Sweden), the Arctic Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response agreement (known as 'the Arctic oil spill agreement') was signed.

The Canadian chairmanship did establish two flagship projects: the establishment of an Arctic Economic Council (which will be open to businesses of non-Arctic states) and the framework for action on black carbon and methane emissions. By accelerating climate change, these emissions pose a major problem for the endangered Arctic environment; the temperature increase in the region has already exceeded the targeted

The framework is only a step in the right direction, not a full agreement.

The programme of the new AC chair, the USA, has the potential to enhance practical cooperation between the EU and the AC.

global ceiling of two degrees. Black carbon emissions cause the darkening of ice, increasing the absorption of the sun's rays and thereby increasing warming. The good news is that these emissions have a short life in the atmosphere, and reducing them rapidly improves the situation. Methane emissions, on the other hand, work by multiplying the effects of other greenhouse gases. The framework for action represents a step in the right direction, although it is not a proper international agreement.

In Iqaluit, the AC chairmanship was passed to the USA for the next two years. The theme selected by the country for the coming term, 'One Arctic: Shared opportunities, challenges and responsibilities' and the priorities chosen (the impact of climate change, Arctic Ocean safety, security and stewardship, and sustainable development) provide a good basis for enhanced, practical cooperation between the EU and the AC.

## The issue of the EU's observer status

As Canada and the EU had resolved their differences, it seemed possible that the EU would at last receive formal observer status to the Council at the Iqaluit meeting...

...but Russia's geostrategic interests led Moscow to block the process.

Given the growing number of observers, the US chair may propose that only one third of observers join high-level AC meetings under any one chair.

The EU had hoped that the procedure to formalise its observer status in the AC could be completed in Iqaluit. The Union applied in 2008 and was blocked by Canada in response to the EU regulation banning the trade of seal products, which was being prepared the same year. This situation caused increasing unease in the AC. Three EU Member States are AC members; the European Parliament is a full member of the Conference of Arctic parliamentarians (CPAR); and Asian countries with much weaker Arctic links than the EU were granted observer status<sup>1</sup> in 2013.

At the Kiruna meeting, the AC welcomed the EU's request, but put off consenting until the disagreement between the EU and Canada was resolved. The EU did obtain the right to attend all AC meetings (high-level and working groups) without having to receive an invitation each time; this has amounted to *de facto* observer status. With the 2014 completion of the negotiations on the EU-Canada Comprehensive Trade and Economic Agreement (CETA) and the Canadian authorities' application of the exception for indigenous peoples included in the EU's seal regulation, the two partners' position on the observer status issue grew closer. Canada formally lifted its veto at the Iqaluit ministerial meeting. This time, however, it was Russia that prevented the EU from gaining its formal status. Moscow had its own geostrategic considerations. Like the US, Russia has its own ban on the trade in seal products.

Despite this failure to resolve the issue, the *de facto* status obtained by the EU in Kiruna has not been affected. The situation is unlikely to evolve until at least the next ministerial meeting, to be hosted by the USA in 2017. No other observer application was accepted in Iqaluit. While the USA has expressed its intention to resolve the EU issue, the country may also challenge the general situation of all AC observers. Some AC members increasingly feel that the number of observers is too large, and the USA has hinted that it may propose a rolling procedure in which only one third of observers would be given access to high-level AC meetings under each AC chair.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us/arctic-council/observers>