The Arctic Climate Change and Security Policy Conference

FINAL REPORT AND FINDINGS

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* This conference report summarizes the integrated discussions that emerged from four focused panels, but its findings and policy recommendations are the sole responsibility of the authors.
Executive Summary and Key Findings

The pace of change in the Arctic due to global climate conditions demands that greater attention be focused on the region, its needs and the issues surrounding its development over the near and intermediate term. The implications for U.S. citizens in the region and important U.S. security, economic, environmental, and political interests as a result of changes in the Arctic are profound. The present global financial crisis has relieved some of the mounting pressure for Arctic economic and resource development. During this hiatus, the U.S. should seize the opportunity to address critical needs in and around the Arctic region to ensure a sustainable future for the Arctic environment and its people.

- As a first priority, the U.S. should ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

- The President should create a sub-cabinet commission on global warming headed by the Vice President that elevates the importance of Arctic issues related to climate change and its effect on people, ecosystems, and economies, and ensures interagency coordination and cross-disciplinary engagement.

- The U.S. should support and promote a stronger role for the Arctic Council as the principal international forum for addressing Arctic issues. New measures should include support for a permanent secretariat for the Council, along with adequate funding to support effective program coordination, scientific research priorities, and attention to the increasing international interest in the Arctic, particularly by China, the EU, and Japan.

- The U.S. should support Arctic sub-regional forums, such as the Northern Forum, where issues and research of common concern can effectively be addressed on a regional basis.
Arctic environmental security should receive priority attention as the key regional security issue. The region’s most pressing need is the development of an effective mechanism and protocol for responding to environmental disasters, and contingency planning to ensure regional and international cooperation in response to environmental or natural calamities. Fishing, tourism, and energy development require special attention.

Note: Since this conference was held, there have been significant new developments such as the Presidential Directive on Arctic Regional Policy, a new Russian Federation Arctic policy statement, new scientific evidence regarding the role of black carbon/carbon soot in the Arctic, and the first ever joint meeting of the Arctic Council and the Antarctic Treaty partners. These events do not change the tenor or fundamental findings and recommendations of this conference report. The Presidential Directive on Arctic Regional Policy (January 9, 2009) includes recommendations consistent with the conclusions set forth by our conference experts. We must now ensure that the Directive’s calls for change are implemented. We are currently preparing a study that we hope will accelerate that process.
KEY FINDINGS

A. As a major Arctic power, the U.S. has responsibility for stewardship and protection of vital environmental, security, economic, and political interests in the Arctic region.

B. The failure of the U.S. to ratify UNCLOS weakens the ability of all institutions in the international system, as well as the American government, to advance U.S. interests in developing stronger regional governance.

C. Global warming is accelerating the pace at which climate change is affecting the Arctic region as well as climatic and environmental conditions in the U.S.

D. While evidence that global warming is affecting both the Arctic region and the world’s environment is incontrovertible, the scientific basis for understanding these phenomena and the information available for making policy decisions remains inadequate.

E. In order to define issues for decision and set priorities for action, governments should demand accelerated scientific study of issues critical to informed policy making and should be willing to fund needed research. The scientific community must work in closer coordination with policy and political decision makers to reach a better mutual appreciation and understanding of each other’s needs and processes.

F. The present global economic slowdown provides a much-needed hiatus in Arctic commercial pressures during which important Arctic powers could work on developing coordinated rules and best practices by which to govern the development of Arctic resources.

G. While global warming is expanding the opportunities available for Arctic resource extraction, the pace of development will be governed more by economic considerations, commodity pricing in particular, than by possible greater access due to climate change. Moreover, since ice cover will remain for much of the year, even shipping will remain difficult and treacherous.

H. Global warming will significantly affect regional economies, their fish and wildlife resources, and the livelihood of peoples living in the Arctic. These consequences already have begun to affect the lives of indigenous peoples engaged in subsistence economies and large-scale Alaskan development projects.

I. Despite alarmist predictions of a new “great game,” the prospect for a significant confrontation among Arctic powers over resources, boundaries, or claims is now low. The United Nations Convention on the Law of
the Sea (UNCLOS) provides a significant body of rules and precedent to adjudicate the majority of disagreements. Most regions with resources at stake are governed under the rules of the 200-mile economic zone. Where there are disputed regimes or boundaries, these remain subject to accommodation by the parties involved, in particular the U.S. and Canada.

J. The key security issue confronting the Arctic powers will be environmental and political. Rules controlling shipping, emissions, pollution, and land use are weak, and enforcement mechanisms are inadequate. The need for large-scale ecosystem-based management regimes to protect the integrity of the Arctic Ocean is receiving increasing attention, including proposals for an Arctic Treaty or Park in order to manage and protect the Arctic Ocean as an international commons.

K. The Arctic does not lend itself to a new treaty regime similar to that which has governed Antarctica (Treaty System). However, there is a clear need for more robust institutional governance to address issues that are becoming more acute as environmental change accelerates and regional development pressures rise.

L. The rights and lifestyle of indigenous peoples demand continuous attention from governments, and the voice of Native peoples must be central to decisions on management of Arctic issues and claims.

M. A key issue in Arctic governance is finding the appropriate balance between national interests and actions and the interests and role of the international community.

N. Currently the institution most broadly supported by the Arctic states is the Arctic Council, which addresses the range of governance issues arising in the region. It works on the basis of consensus and has no role on security issues. However, the Council needs stronger support and backing from leading countries, including the U.S. Sub-regional organizations within Arctic nations have become important sources of support for development and coordination of Arctic policy.