

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

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May 2015

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The Road to Iqaluit: The Arctic Agenda on the Eve of the U.S. Chairmanship

A SERIES OF DISCUSSIONS HOSTED BY THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (CSIS) EXAMINING U.S. ARCTIC POLICY, WITH A FOCUS ON ENERGY DEVELOPMENT AND HEALTH, PRIOR TO U.S. CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE ARCTIC COUNCIL.

In April 2015, the United States assumes chairmanship of the Arctic Council (AC), a multinational organization comprised of eight Arctic nations, with an agenda focused on climate change, stewardship, and economic development. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) provided the keynote address on April 17th, 2015 at the CSIS event "The Road to Iqaluit: The Arctic Agenda on the Eve of the U.S. Chairmanship". Panels on *The Economic Dimension: The Future of Energy Development in the American Arctic* and *The Human Dimension: Addressing Arctic Health and Well-Being* examined challenges and potential solutions for U.S. Arctic policy.

Presenting the keynote address, **Sen. Lisa Murkowski**, Chairwoman of the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, emphasized the importance of "Arctic opportunity" for the United States (U.S.), particularly with respect to economic development. The primary challenge identified by Sen. Murkowski to U.S. Arctic policy as a lack of national awareness or the economic and human potential of the American Arctic.

Sen. Murkowski stressed the economic importance of the circumpolar region as a source of natural resources and trade and for protecting U.S. national security interests in Europe, Russia, Asia and the Pacific. She stated that "the Arctic touches every corner of our own nation", yet Arctic policy remains a low-priority. Current U.S. policy regarding the Arctic centers on climate change and environmental concerns, a focus that, according to Sen. Murkowski, detracts from a broader conversation about improving living standards in the Arctic region through economic development. In Sen. Murkowski's opinion, interest from for-

eign nations signifies the Arctic's opportunity and underlines the need for the United States to actively participate in Arctic development in order to maintain its economic and security position. Canada and Russia, in particular, have thorough plans for economic development and resource extraction that reflect their prioritization of the Arctic. Similarly, other non-Arctic nations, such as China and Germany, are actively exploring economic opportunities in the region.

On issues related to national security, Sen. Murkowski supported continuing partnerships with Arctic nations, including Russia, but expressed her opinion that the U.S. should be prepared to send "strong signals" when Russia threatens peace and partnerships in the region. Recent activity by Russia in the region, including new claims of resource-rich territory and disregard for Arctic nation's sovereign borders, hints at a Russian Arctic agenda at odds with peaceful scientific, environmental, and well-being initiatives set for the U.S.'s AC chairmanship.

Sen. Murkowski's call to "institutionalize" an "enduring" U.S. Arctic policy that concentrates on improving the lives of Arctic residents, fostering economic development, and preserving the Arctic as a "zone of peace" was echoed in the two panels that followed her address.

The Future of Energy Development in the American Arctic panel included three speakers who offered reflections on the "Arctic Potential: Realizing the Promise of U.S. Arctic Oil and Gas Resources" study performed by the National Petroleum Council. The report provides recommendations on environmental stewardship, economic viability, and government leadership and policy coordination. Each of the panel's speakers ex-

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pressed satisfaction with the caliber of the study as a foundation for U.S. national Arctic policy and AC initiatives, citing its scientific and technological basis and inclusion of a diverse array of Arctic stakeholders.

According to **Dr. Paula Gant**, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Oil and Natural Gas for the Department of Energy, the Obama Administration's Arctic policy is one of "prudent" development: striking a balance between energy, national security, and climate issues while employing modern technological and scientific advancements to ensure safe, transparent exploration. Dr. Gant emphasized that there is an increasing focus on the Arctic as a resource to develop for future generations, but that environmental and political considerations remain significant.

Carol Lloyd, Engineering Vice President for ExxonMobil, echoed previous sentiments regarding the safe development of Arctic energy reserves. Ms. Lloyd suggested that due to previous natural resource disasters, public confidence in safe resource development is low, representing a political barrier for increasing activity in the Arctic; however, she stressed that the majority of U.S. oil and gas resources can be harnessed with current technology. Ms. Lloyd called for an expedited permitting process and lengthening of exploration seasons in order to facilitate research and reduce environmental risks.

Offering an Alaskan perspective to Arctic energy development was Ms. **Drue Pearce**, senior policy advisor for Crowell and Moring's Environment and Natural Resources and Government Affairs groups and former Alaska legislator. According to Ms. Pearce, any development projects in the American Arctic should aim to promote business and economic opportunities for native communities. The Arctic Economic Council (AEC), established during the Canadian chairmanship of the AC, provides a business-oriented perspective on Arctic issues – a perspective that Ms. Pearce supports. Ms. Pearce predicted that the AEC would soon assume a rotating chairmanship with Tara Sweeny, Executive Vice President of External Affairs for the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, assuming the chairmanship, providing the U.S. with an additional opportunity to lead economic development in the circumpolar region.

The second panel, *Addressing Arctic Health and Well-Being*, returned to the human di-

mension of Arctic policy raised by Sen. Murkowski with a discussion on health and wellness challenges in Arctic communities. The discussion centered on health challenges in the circumpolar region, especially with regards to mental health, access to water and sewage resources, and continuing health disparities within and between Arctic nations. **Heather A. Conley**, senior vice president for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic at CSIS, offered the recommendations of the CSIS Global Health Policy Center for the U.S. Arctic Council Chairmanship for enhancing Arctic health and well-being. The primary recommendation consists of creating a new Arctic Council Working Group focused on improving the health and well-being of Arctic communities, through medical, economic, and traditional means.

This recommendation follows the establishment of an Arctic Executive Steering Group by President Obama to coordinate U.S. national Arctic policy and determine Arctic priorities. The creation of an AC Working Group devoted to health and well-being would signal that the U.S. Federal government recognizes the unique health challenges of the Arctic, such as increased rates of suicide and lack of sanitation, as priorities, beyond the current environment-focused policy approach.

Health and well-being disparities among the Arctic nations highlight continuing tensions in the circumpolar region. Russia remains at the bottom of the list in terms of providing health services to its Arctic communities, with correlation between economic downturns and decreases in Arctic life expectancy, according to **Dr. Timothy Heleniak**, Research Assistant at the George Washington University. Russian Arctic policy emphasizes resource development and territorial expansion – not the well-being of Arctic populations. The Russian focus provides a challenge for the U.S. chairmanship to maintain "Arctic diplomacy", as Ms. Conley describes efforts to maintain peace and cooperation in the region, and advocate for increasing the health and well-being of communities in the circumpolar region.

The American Arctic represents an area of tremendous opportunity for the United States. Development of Arctic energy resources would provide economic benefits for both Arctic and Continental American communities. Sen. Murkowski's message placing human needs first in crafting U.S. Arctic policy resonated across each panel's discussion. To paraphrase Ms. Conley's synopsis

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of U.S. Arctic policy, the question is not whether the United States can develop the economic, human, and resource potential of the American Arctic; but whether it has the political will and public support to do so.