

US-China and the future of the Arctic

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Jose Kusugak, a leader of the Arctic Native Inuit community, wrote this in a book on Arctic climate entitled “The Earth is Faster Now”: *“Finding examples of the effects of climate change is easy and endless. I know Inuit, old and young, want to be informed of outside influences of global warming. Like acupuncture, they know the pain is much in their homelands but the needles have to be inserted in the south since that is where the disease really is.”*

Kusugak’s words capture the essence of the increasingly ominous impact global warming is having in the Arctic region. The Arctic is warming faster than anywhere else on earth. We’ve underestimated the acceleration of that change, which has profound consequences for communities, economies and ecosystems of the region and also around the world. Sea ice near some Alaskan villages that rely on it for subsistence hunting has vanished. With warming temperatures, parasites like ticks never before seen in certain areas of the Arctic have arrived, and ticks are disease vectors that affect not just animals. Thanks to coastal erosion and sea level rise, literally the outer limits of some coastal towns in the Arctic are contracting, forcing relocation.

Because of feedback loops, these consequences are not limited to the Arctic. They impact people in America and China and around the world. Increased discharge of meltwater from glaciers contributes to acceleration of sea-level rise worldwide. Carbon dioxide and methane release from Arctic wildfires and melting permafrost speeds up global warming. The weather - including storm tracks and extremes of hot and cold - is being affected by the more rapid warming of the Arctic compared to the rest of the world.

To raise the level of the America’s game on the Arctic, President Obama took several important steps, starting with literally going to the region to bear witness. In 2015, President Obama became the first-ever sitting U.S. President to set foot in the Arctic, to walk on its thawing permafrost and visit local communities. “The looming crisis in Alaska’s Arctic is a tangible preview of the looming crisis of the global condition,” said President Obama in an interview

following his visit. Those were wise words, as the Arctic is simultaneously a strategic challenge and a human challenge.

Within the Executive Office of the President, a new Arctic Executive Steering Committee (AESC) was created to foster coordination among 25 Federal agencies with responsibilities in the region. The President tasked the AESC, of which I was the first Executive Director, with helping to shape and reconcile Arctic priorities among the participating Federal entities. The AESC drove forward key initiatives ranging from promoting reliable and affordable energy for remote Arctic communities, advancing international search and rescue and oil-spill preparedness, developing high-resolution satellite imagery for regional planning and emergency response, among other initiatives.

“In Washington, you are your budget,” as the saying goes. The Arctic featured prominently in President Obama’s 2017 budget. For the first time, it was proposed that key Arctic priorities would receive hundreds of millions of dollars, including \$150 million towards construction of a new polar-class icebreaker to provide year-round accessibility to the Arctic for Coast Guard missions. The budget also provided for over \$100 million to support planning and infrastructure in high-need Alaska Native Villages. The way the budget was framed was proactively meant to depoliticize the issue. This was not a Democratic or Republican issue; this is an issue of the future which garners bipartisan support.

In 2016, President Obama used state visits by Canada (March 2016) and the five Nordic countries (May 2016) to dramatically shift the markers on Arctic commercial development. In Joint Statements issued during the two state visits, it was agreed that all future commercial activity in the Arctic will adhere to strict environmental standards and climate goals. It is significant these commitments encompass seven of the world’s eight Arctic countries, and included oil and gas drilling.

To build a process for dealing with the global challenge the Arctic represents, in September 2016 a White House Arctic Science Ministerial was convened with 24 other governments and representatives of Arctic indigenous communities to engage in a cooperative setting of priorities in Arctic science. In attendance were science ministers or their equivalents from the seven other

nations with territory in the Arctic (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia and Sweden) and from fifteen additional nations and the European Union that have active Arctic research programs. This included, among others, China, France, Germany, Italy, India, Japan and the U.K. All participating governments in the Ministerial signed a Joint Statement conveying that a new collective approach in Arctic science is being launched to inform national policies concerning Arctic development, stewardship and the needs of the region's indigenous peoples. That there is a track record of collaborating with China on the Arctic can be built upon.

So a greater internal coherence and broader international response on the Arctic issue that others can share in and join in was handed to the Trump Administration. Unfortunately, the Trump Administration executed very little follow on the Obama record.

Key questions facing the new team pertaining to the international ramifications of the Arctic issue include:

- How best to convey to international partners that we need to engage in a cooperative setting of priorities, which is the best way to avoid friction and conflict? Are countries around the world at a stage in which we can work more closely together on the Arctic? Looking at the various problems and challenges collectively, how much genuine readiness for more ambitious cooperation is there? This is a real opportunity to engage in bridge-building on issues of shared interest.
- How can we scale the model and best practices we have created through the White House Arctic Science Ministerial to collectively develop new knowledge and understanding of the Arctic and its interconnections with the global climate system, and apply these jointly with other countries in response to the huge challenges we face?
- Government can't act alone; how can we better leverage the business community through public-private partnerships to address some Arctic challenges?
- Is the Arctic issue likely to be increasingly politicized? If so, how do we avoid a situation whereby the politicization of these problems becomes a real handicap to international cooperation?

We are at a critical stage of human history. There is increasingly a new reality in the Arctic that has to be addressed, but also an opening for a collective response. The Arctic is the kind of issue we can all botch up if we don't work together, but if we do work together with other countries, our children will benefit. We owe it to future generations to rise to that challenge. The Arctic provides a foreshadow of the danger lurking in the future, but also the opening for a collective response, and an effective response.

Mark Brzezinski served as United States Ambassador to Sweden between 2011-2015, and as Executive Director of the Arctic Executive Steering Committee in the White House between 2015-2017.