

Officials from Arctic nations meet amid drilling concerns

May 11 2017, by Mark Thiessen



A few hundred people chanted slogans and made speeches to protest the presence of U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Fairbanks, Alaska, on Wednesday, May 10, 2017. High-level officials from the world's eight Arctic nations, including Tillerson, will meet in Alaska amid concerns about the future of the sensitive region after President Trump called for more oil drilling and development. (AP Photo/Mark Thiessen)

High-level officials from the world's eight Arctic nations will meet in

Alaska amid concerns about the future of the sensitive region after President Donald Trump called for more oil drilling and development.

Among those expected to attend the meeting of the Arctic Council beginning Thursday in Fairbanks are U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who met Wednesday with Trump and Tillerson in Washington.

No formal discussions were set in Alaska but key issues such as climate change, development and drilling will provide a backdrop as the chairmanship of the council passes from the U.S. to Finland.

"We are unsure what the Trump administration thinks about the Arctic region in general, about the Arctic Council in particular and about its role," said Victoria Herrmann, president of The Arctic Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based group that provides research to shape Arctic policy.

The Arctic Council is an advisory body that promotes cooperation among member nations and indigenous groups. Its focus is sustainable development and environmental protection of the Arctic.

It does not make policy or allocate resources, and its decisions must be unanimous.

"In terms of being a reflection of a nation's priorities, it can only go so far since all eight have to agree to the same thing," said Nils Andreassen, executive director of the Anchorage-based Institute of the North, a non-partisan organization focused on Arctic resources.



U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, seated right, and U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, seated left, speak with representatives of Alaska Native groups at an Arctic Council event in Fairbanks, Alaska. High-level officials from the world's eight Arctic nations will meet in Alaska this week amid concerns about the future of the sensitive region after President Trump called for more oil drilling and development. (AP Photo/Mark Thiessen)

Tillerson arrived late Wednesday afternoon in Fairbanks and immediately held a meeting with a congressional delegation as well as Arctic representatives from Alaska's indigenous people.

Protesters gathered in a city park nearby to denounce the presence of Tillerson, who was president of Exxon Mobil Corp.

"My message for Rex Tillerson is: Alaska shouldn't be for sale for what's in our earth," said Hannah Hill, 36, who works at a Fairbanks soup kitchen. "This place is beautiful, and this place is delicate, and what

already is happening on in the Arctic will affect the rest of the Earth. And that is science."

Pat Lambert, a retired University of Alaska math professor, attended the rally because he believes climate change is a serious problem.

He suggested Tillerson "should get away from his cronies in the oil business and start listening to the people of Alaska, for instance, and the people of the world who are so interested in these issues."



U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson speaks at the welcoming ceremony to kick off Arctic Council events in Fairbanks, Alaska, on Wednesday, May 10, 2017. High-level officials from the world's eight Arctic nations will meet in Alaska amid concerns about the future of the sensitive region after President Trump called for more oil drilling and development. (AP Photo/Mark Thiessen)

After the rally, the protesters marched behind a sign reading, "Welcome to the frontline of climate change," to the building where the Arctic Council welcoming celebration was being held.

The United States—an Arctic country because of the state of Alaska—is joined on the council by Canada, Russia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

The U.S. began chairing the council two years ago. Much of the council's work during that time stemmed from the policies of President Barack Obama, who made climate change and the Arctic priorities of his administration.

Obama became the first sitting president to travel above the Arctic Circle when he went to the largely Inupiat community of Kotzebue.

The U.S. highlighted three areas during its two-year chairmanship—improved living conditions and economies for those living in the Arctic, stewardship of the Arctic Ocean and [climate change](#).



The logo for this year's theme for the Arctic Council appears on a television at a welcoming ceremony to kick off Arctic Council event in Fairbanks, Alaska, on Wednesday, May 10, 2017. High-level officials from the world's eight Arctic nations will meet in Alaska amid concerns about the future of the sensitive region after President Trump called for more oil drilling and development. (AP Photo/Mark Thiessen)

David Balton, a deputy assistant secretary of State, said other accomplishments included an agreement for scientific cooperation among Arctic nations, an assessment of improvements needed for better telecommunications, and implementation of a database of ships passing through the Arctic.

One of the council's last official acts before the chairmanship is handed to Finland will be issuing the Fairbanks Declaration, which in part will outline the focus of upcoming work by the Arctic Council during the next two years.

Andreassen said the document should provide some understanding of how the U.S. is approaching the Arctic.

Christina-Alexa Liakos of Greenpeace USA, said her group will watch the meeting with an eye toward U.S. policy on broader environmental issues, such as the Paris Climate Agreement.

"The biggest thing we are really pushing is to make sure that (during) any negotiations in this meeting, the U.S. essentially doesn't bully the other Arctic nations or pressure them into taking out language around keeping the Paris agreement," Liakos said.



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Citation: Officials from Arctic nations meet amid drilling concerns (2017, May 11) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-05-arctic-nations-drilling.html>

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