

A regular Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council has come to an end in Fairbanks. Meetings of this kind are held every two years. This time, it focused on reviewing a number of draft documents. A ministerial declaration was approved by all eight Arctic states, reaffirming the commitment to the peaceful development of the Arctic and mutually beneficial cooperation with a focus on environment protection. It also stressed the importance of devising joint steps to adapt to climate change. This overlaps with the objective articulated recently by President of Russia Vladimir Putin at The Arctic: Territory of Dialogue forum in Arkhangelsk.

Russia affirmed its commitment to resolving all issues that may arise in the Arctic through political talks and in full compliance with the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea, which sets forth all the necessary provisions for solving any issues related to the Arctic. In our opinion, there are no issues that could require military action. Our partners agree. We reminded them that until 2013 the regular meetings held by the eight Arctic countries included annual meetings of their chiefs of general staff. In 2014, Russia's partners decided to suspend this format, although it is my belief that it did not help build trust or promote cooperation and mutual understanding, if anyone was interested in doing so, as we reminded our colleagues today. I think that this made them think whether the decision to suspend this very useful format had been the right thing to do.

Apart from the declaration, a legally binding intergovernmental agreement was signed. This is the third document of this kind adopted by the Arctic Council. The first two dealt with preventing oil spills and organising search and rescue operations in the northern latitudes. Today, an Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation was signed, since it is clear that the Arctic is a region that still needs to be explored and may be one of the world's least studied regions. This is especially important in terms of environmental protection and adaptation to climate change, as well as promoting regular systematic exchanges between researchers from the eight countries. This is also essential for reconciling economic development with environmental protection, while promoting development, fulfilling the needs and improving the living standards for the indigenous peoples inhabiting the North and the population of the Arctic in general.

Question: In your statement, you mentioned the initiative to revive the meetings of the chiefs of general staff.

Sergey Lavrov: I have just said that.

Question: How did your partners respond to this initiative?

Sergey Lavrov: I said that too. This gave them some food for thought.

Question: You also mentioned the international law of the sea. Does the US intend to ratify the 1982 Convention?

Sergey Lavrov: I cannot guarantee that, but everyone noted that although the US has yet to ratify the Convention, in its actual actions the US by and large abides by its provisions.

Question: Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland surprised everyone today by beginning her statement in Russian to welcome the delegation. Did you have any contacts with her? What are the prospects for removing her from Russia's black list?

Sergey Lavrov: Yesterday we talked at the informal dinner reception that was open to ministers and representatives of the Arctic Council only. Russia-Canada relations were among the topics that were raised. We had a brief conversation ahead of this event. During the dinner the Ukraine issue was mentioned and how it affected Russia's relations with western countries, which gave rise to a small debate. I highlighted the manifestations of neo-Nazism and chauvinism we are currently witnessing in Ukraine. In fact, radicals have hijacked the agenda from the president and prime minister in our neighbouring country that we care about. I referred to the draft law on the state language whereby, if adopted, all the citizens of Ukraine would have to use only the Ukrainian language in their day-to-day activities regardless of the language they prefer (be it Russian, Hungarian, Romanian or Polish). This initiative is clearly discriminatory and runs counter to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. My Canadian colleague was not aware of this draft law, and I promised to send it to her. I am looking forward to her comments on the situation. The Russian delegation was surprised to discover that she is fluent in Russian (today she addressed the representatives of the indigenous peoples of Russia in Russian), but while Chrystia Freeland is free to speak Russian here in Alaska, in Ukraine, where Russian has long been a native language for a huge number of people, it could soon lose its standing and status. This was an interesting conversation. We will see where it takes us.

Question: It is still unclear how much the Americans will be involved in monitoring the situation in the de-escalation areas in Syria. Has US President Donald Trump or Secretary of State Rex Tillerson promised to send American observers to these areas? If so, when will this happen? And will Iran be present in these de-escalation areas?

Sergey Lavrov: We did not discuss this issue. We said that we would welcome any US contribution to the implementation of this initiative, considering that it was Donald Trump who was the first to speak about creating safe zones in Syria for the people. As you know, experts from Russia, Turkey and Iran, the guarantors of the ceasefire in Syria, will meet in 10 or 12 days to discuss concrete parameters for the administration of these areas, including the security zones around them, with observation posts and checkpoints. The memorandum signed in Astana says that third parties can be attracted for the administration of these areas, by consensus of the concerned parties, primarily the Syrian Government. We are in talks with the potential participants in this process. I hope that we will be able to discuss this with our partners in greater detail soon.

Question: Did you discuss the possibility of re-launching the working groups of the Russia-US Bilateral Presidential Commission? Can this happen in 2017 or in the near future?

Sergey Lavrov: No, we did not discuss this issue on the practical plane. Everyone knows that the Bilateral Presidential Commission was a very useful instrument. Since the United States has a new administration, we will leave the issue of the best forms of developing cooperation with Russia to the discretion of President Trump and his team. During our meeting in the White House yesterday, President Trump reaffirmed his resolve to normalise relations. He later wrote about this on Twitter. We are ready to go as far and as fast as the US administration is willing to, although the formation of the new US team is not complete yet, including its foreign policy group.

Question (retranslated): Why did you visit the Alaska-Siberia Airway monument today? What does it have to do with the Arctic Council's work?

Sergey Lavrov (speaking in English): Well, I did come to the Arctic Council ministerial. I attended

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during my tenure each and every Arctic Council ministerial except one, I think, four years ago. And being here, and not to visit this memorial would have been a shame. We highly appreciate the way the Alaskans keep the memory of our common fight against fascism in World War II.