

Press Releases: Briefing on the Arctic Council Ministerial

Special Briefing
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Via Teleconference
May 8, 2017

MS NAUERT: All right, thank you so much. Well, good afternoon, every one, and thank you for joining us for the call today. We're previewing this week's Arctic Council ministerial. Today we are joined by the phone from Alaska by Deputy Assistant Secretary David Balton of the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. David, thank you.

As a reminder, today's call is on the record and the call will be embargoed until the conclusion of this call. And with that, I'll turn it over to our speaker, the Deputy Assistant Secretary Balton. Thank you.

MR BALTON: Thanks very much, Heather, and hello to all of you. So, the nations and people of the Arctic are gathering in Fairbanks, Alaska this week to bring to fruition the two-year chairmanship of the U.S. of the Arctic Council and to pass – watch the passing of the baton from the United States to Finland, who takes over the chair of the Arctic Council this week.

What I thought I'd do at the outset here is just provide a little background of what the Arctic Council is, what the U.S. chairmanship tried to accomplish, and talk a little bit about what will actually happen here in Fairbanks this week, and then I'm happy to answer questions on any of this from any of you.

So the Arctic Council is 20 years old. The eight nations of the Arctic created it through a – out of a declaration. It mostly focuses on sustainable development and environmental protection of the Arctic region. Every two years a different state of the Arctic takes over as chair. The United States assumed the chairmanship from Canada about two years ago at a meeting in Iqaluit in Nunavut, Canada.

We laid out at that time three principal areas of focus we hoped the Arctic Council would follow over the course of these two years that have come – that are coming to closure now. First, we were trying to improve the economic and

living conditions of the people who actually reside in the Arctic, and I can talk about some of the projects that relate to that.

The second topic dealt with Arctic Ocean safety, security, and stewardship. As I think many of you know, the Arctic Ocean is opening up in a very real sense, so there are a lot of issues dealing with the increased human activity in the Arctic Ocean that we follow. And thirdly, we were dealing with adapting to climate change in the Arctic, strengthening our resilience and adaptation of Arctic communities in particular.

Some of the main things that you will hear about being brought to fruition this week: Now, one is a – the third binding agreement that the eight Arctic nations will sign. This one is on enhancing scientific cooperation in the Arctic. This was a negotiation that took place under the auspices of the Arctic Council, actually, over the course of several years. The negotiations themselves were co-led by Russia and the United States, and they have produced a binding agreement that we anticipate the Arctic ministers will sign on Thursday.

One other thing that has been completed already: For the first time ever, there is an assessment of the telecommunications infrastructure in the Arctic. Any of you who have spent time in the Arctic will know that there certainly are gaps and limitations in telecommunications here in the Arctic. Here, we spent two years with taking a hard look at that, with the idea that those gaps are to be filled over the next few years. Finland will take up this issue during its chairmanship, working with the private sector, trying to improve telecommunications delivery in the Arctic.

With the increase in Arctic shipping, we now have launched a new Arctic Shipping Traffic Database. The idea is to have a much better understanding of – in real time of ships that are coming into and going out of and passing through the Arctic region. This will help in the management of Arctic shipping going into the future.

And one other thing I would mention: In the past years, two other agreements that have been signed previously have been implemented rather successfully over the last two years. One relates to improving search-and-rescue in the arctic region, and the second relates to preparing and responding to potential oil pollution incidents in the Arctic. Over the last two years, there were joint exercises among the Arctic states on both of those, and I think we made a lot of progress in getting ready for things that might happen in the future.

Obviously, there are a couple of dozen other individual initiatives that are coming to fruition this week. If you are interested in knowing about more of them and about them in more detail, the Arctic Council website is a good resource for you.

Let me say a word or two now about what actually will happen here in Fairbanks this week. The ministerial meeting itself will take place on Thursday morning. It will be livestreamed and Secretary of State Tillerson will chair the meeting. It will include a brief summary of the

accomplishments of the Arctic Council, including some of the things I just mentioned now.

Each of the states, the governments of the Arctic, will also have statements, and so too will the representative of six organizations who represent the indigenous people for the Arctic and who participate in their own name and right in the Arctic Council. They will all be able to give statements as well. Finland will have a moment to lay out its plans for the next two years of the Arctic Council too, and there will be a passing of the gavel – literally and figuratively – from the United States to Finland to conclude the meeting.

One other document that will be signed in the course of the time here is what we will call the Fairbanks Declaration. Every two years when the Arctic Council meets at the ministerial level, it has developed and the ministers sign such declarations, the main purpose of which is to summarize in a little more detail the work that has been completed and to look ahead also in a little more detail at the two years of work to come.

The – there are quite a few other events taking place over the course of the week. A group called the Alaska Arctic Council Host Committee has organized a lot of these events. Some of them will take place up at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, others at different places around town. There is a summit to look at broadband issues in the Arctic, for example. There is an International Arctic Assembly Day, when lots of speakers will offer views about pending Arctic issues, and quite a few other events as well.

So that is some sense of what is happening here in the – in Fairbanks. We do anticipate all eight foreign ministers of the Arctic here. And now I am happy to turn over the floor back to Heather or others who have – can bring the questions forward.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Thank you, David. Do we have any questions from anyone? We'll take the first.

OPERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, once again, if you wish to ask a question, please press * followed by the 1. You'll hear a tone indicating that you've been placed in queue. You may remove yourself from queue at any time by pressing the # key. Please press *1 for questions.

Our first question today comes from the line of Anne Gearan with *The Washington Post*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks very much. Just a couple of housekeeping matters. Just a moment ago, you said you were expecting all eight prime ministers. Do you mean –

MR BALTON: Foreign ministers.

QUESTION: Foreign ministers. And does that include Minister Lavrov?

MR BALTON: Yes.

QUESTION: Okay. So Secretary Tillerson's meeting with Lavrov in Washington on Wednesday is in addition to meeting – or to his participation in Alaska?

MR BALTON: Yes, that's right.

QUESTION: Okay. And will there be a separate meeting with – between the two of them in Alaska, or is the one in Washington it and done?

MR BALTON: I think the one in Washington is the one time they will be together just the two of them. They will be together, but joined by the other foreign ministers, for several events here in Fairbanks.

QUESTION: Okay. And will there be other bilaterals or other activities that Secretary Tillerson is participating in on the sidelines here?

MR BALTON: Yes, that's right.

QUESTION: Can somebody run through those for us?

MR BALTON: Well, among other things, there will be a dinner the night before the ministerial – that will be on Wednesday evening – where Secretary Tillerson and the other foreign ministers will be together. And then following the ministerial meeting Thursday morning, there is similarly a lunch that he and the other foreign ministers will attend. And there are likely to be some at least brief bilateral meetings he has with one or more of the other foreign ministers who are coming to Fairbanks this week.

QUESTION: Okay. And then if I could just ask one substantive question before you move off from this question, which is the U.S. participation in the Paris Agreement. Do you expect Secretary Tillerson to come with an answer to that question on behalf of the Trump administration on whether the U.S. is going to stay in, and will that be a matter and topic for the other foreign ministers at this meeting?

MR BALTON: Let's unpack that a little bit. The question of the U.S. view of the Paris Agreement is still under consideration within the U.S. Government. The last thing I heard is that the President, our President, has indicated he plans to make a decision sometime over the next couple of weeks, but not this week, and that Arctic Council ministerial will not be the venue for that.

As for the views of the other governments – well, you should probably ask them. But my sense is that they are certainly committed to staying in the Paris Agreement and see that as an important – an important international accord.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Next question, please?

OPERATOR: Our next – thank you. Our next question today will come from the line of Henry Fountain with *The New York Times*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Can you tell us anything about the negotiations for the final

declaration? For instance, does – has there been discussion about incorporating the word “climate change” into it?

MR BALTON: Certainly, the final declaration will have a lot of material about climate change in the Arctic. That was one of the topics – one of several topics that was a prime focus of the Arctic Council during the U.S. chairmanship. Anybody who spent time in or studying the Arctic knows that the region is warming, that climate change is a real issue here, and the Arctic Council has certainly been paying attention to it. And so the Fairbanks Declaration will certainly be talking about that work that the Arctic Council has done.

MS NAUERT: Okay, next question, please.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Next we’ll go to the line of David Clark with the AFP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks for doing this. Just relative to the – what you described as the third binding agreement, can you be a bit more explicit about what kind of scientific cooperation that would oblige the members to take part in? And would this be complicated if the United States did pull out of the Paris Agreement?

MR BALTON: Let’s take those – take the last part of that question first. There’s essentially no relationship between this new agreement on enhancing Arctic scientific cooperation on the one hand and the Paris Agreement on the other. The agreement to be signed here this week, the one on scientific cooperation, is essentially designed to allow scientists and their equipment and their data to flow more freely across international boundaries within the Arctic. There have been times in the past when permissions that scientists seek to do scientific research in another country have not been granted or not been granted as readily as need be. This agreement is designed to facilitate scientific agreement across international boundaries, not on any particular topic, but on any topic –

QUESTION: Okay, so it helps people who are going to carry out scientific research anyway to move around more freely, but it doesn’t oblige members to take the issue seriously or to fund the research themselves?

MR BALTON: This is a serious agreement, but I think it’s – if you’re asking whether it obliges any of the governments to conduct specific scientific research projects, no – the answer to that is no.

QUESTION: Thanks.

MS NAUERT: Okay, next question, please.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Next we’ll go to the line of Michelle Kosinski with CNN. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you. I’m just wondering if you could – I know this won’t really be a topic necessarily at the ministerial meeting, but can you describe how this administration sees Russia’s growing influence in the

Arctic? How big of a problem or a threat would you frame it as? And what do you think of the current pace of the U.S. expanding things like additional icebreaker ships? What else do you see in the future in trying to counter that? Thanks.

MR BALTON: These questions don't really relate to the Arctic Council directly, so I would say in brief: Compared to a lot of other regions in the world, the Arctic remains stable and peaceful. The threat of armed conflict, I believe, is low in the Arctic compared to many other places in the world. The threat of terrorism or other ills that have befallen other parts of the world – similarly quite low in the Arctic. And through the Arctic Council, we have a venue that has been doing very well in promoting international cooperation among all the eight nations, including Russia. Whatever other differences may exist between the United States, Russia, and other members of the Arctic Council and Russia, relating to other parts of the world don't manifest themselves in the work of the Arctic Council. That has remained a very cooperative body.

MS NAUERT: Okay, next question, please.

OPERATOR: Our next question today comes from the line of Nafeesa Syeed with the Bloomberg News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks for doing this. I just wanted to clarify. You said that any meetings between Secretary Tillerson and Minister Lavrov at the Arctic Council will be with them as well as other people. They're not – there's not going to be any kind of bilateral with just the two of them, it will be including the other ministers there.

MR BALTON: That's right. In Fairbanks, my understanding is the – when they are together, they will also be with other foreign ministers and indeed at the ministerial meeting with several hundred other people too. But there is a bilateral meeting between Foreign Minister Lavrov and Secretary Tillerson scheduled for Wednesday in Washington.

MS NAUERT: Okay, next question, please.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question today comes from the line of Rachel Waldholz with the Alaska Public Media.

For additional questions, please press *1. They just took themselves out of queue, so we'll go the line of Oren Dorell with *USA Today*.

QUESTION: Yeah. Hi, thanks for taking this call and for doing it on the record. You mentioned security issues in your introduction, and I'm curious. What are – what security issues have been discussed, in what vein they're discussed? You also said, I think relation to the last – second to last call or question, that really everybody's been very cooperative. So what are the security issues and how are they talked about in the council?

MR BALTON: So there's only one topic that is beyond the reach of the Arctic Council, and that is military security issues. When the Arctic Council was created 20 years ago, that was the one topic that was excluded from its

mandate. The real problems in the Arctic, if you've been watching it at all, are socioeconomic and environmental in nature, and there are some security issues related to those topics. So, for example, the increase in human activity in the Arctic raises the prospect of search and rescue problems that might arise. I consider that to be a security issue and the Arctic Council has been working to prepare for that. The increase in shipping through the Arctic may lead to some oil spill or other environmental damage. That's a kind of security issue too, preparing for those types of incidents, and the Arctic Council has been working on things like that as well. So those are the security issues that the Arctic Council is immersed in.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: And we have –

MS NAUERT: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from the line of Josh Lederman with the AP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hey, thank you so much for holding the call. I just wanted to get a little bit more clarification on (inaudible).

MR BALTON: Sorry, Josh, you're breaking up. Could you start over again, please?

QUESTION: Yeah. Can you hear me better now?

MR BALTON: Yes.

QUESTION: You were – you talked about climate change being a real issue here related to the Arctic Council, but the other members of the council, particularly Finland taking over, have expressed concern that the Trump administration's questioning of the science of climate change could undermine the work that's been – the council has sought to do on it. So I'm just curious, is Tillerson's message as he heads into this meeting that the U.S. continues to want to prioritize climate change as an issue within the Arctic Council as the previous administration has, or will he be communicating a change of policy that way?

MR BALTON: I guess I would put it this way: Climate change has been an ongoing topic of interest for the Arctic Council for many chairmanships going back in time, and I foresee that it will continue to be one of the things the Arctic Council focuses on over the next few chairmanships, including Finland's to come and beyond. And the U.S. will remain engaged in the work that the Arctic Council does on climate change throughout. I am very confident there will be no change in that regard.

QUESTION: Thanks.

MS NAUERT: Okay, we'll take our final question. Do we have our final question?

Okay, apologies, we can't – Alaska Public Media can't get through, apparently, right now. So I want to thank everybody, and special thanks to Deputy Assistant Secretary David Balton of the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs for joining us from Alaska today. As a reminder, this call was on the record, and the call is embargoed. That embargo is now over now that our call has concluded. Thank you so much.

MR BALTON: Thanks very much.

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