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U.S. Stance on Climate Change Puts Chill in Arctic Talks

Council's declaration stalls over Pompeo's objection to clause on emissions, participants say



The eight countries of the Arctic Council, observer nations and local groups gathered in Rovaniemi, Finland on Tuesday.

Discussions about the future of the Arctic stumbled over U.S. opposition to collective goals on climate change, U.S. officials and participants at a gathering of top diplomats in Finland said.

The eight-country Arctic Council failed to approve a signed, joint declaration, leading several participants to back a statement issued separately by the Council's chairman, Finnish Foreign Minister Timo Soino, who wrote that "a majority of us" consider climate change an urgent challenge.

The Council is a group of countries with Arctic territory—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the U.S.—and includes local groups and observer nations with **interests in** the region.

The breakdown in discussions at Tuesday's meeting reflects the Trump administration's diplomatic preferences. The administration plays down multilateral agreements, especially those that don't bind other countries by law, and instead seeks to maximize benefits for the U.S. on the international stage.

“Collective goals, even when well intentioned, are not always the answer,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said during a Council session.



Secretary of State Mike Pompeo signs a joint statement at a ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council in Finland on Tuesday. The U.S. declined to agree to a provision on emissions in a proposed joint declaration.

The secretary cited the administration’s preference for multilateral organizations it believes respect national sovereignty. In 2017, the Trump administration withdrew from the Paris climate accord, citing similar reasons.

Some U.S. lawmakers criticized Mr. Pompeo’s approach to the Arctic Council meeting.

“It’s almost silly not to talk about climate change,” said Sen. Angus King (I., Maine) in an interview. Mr. King is recognized as a lawmaker who has focused on Arctic issues for years. “To ignore what brought the current reality into being is not very helpful.”

Despite his disagreement with Mr. Pompeo’s approach, Mr. King said it is a positive sign that the administration is giving greater attention to the region.

Mr. Pompeo at the Arctic Council meeting also worked to mend relations with Canada over statements he made about American claims in the region.

“The U.S. has a long-contested feud with Canada over sovereign claims through the Northwest Passage,” the waterway connecting the Pacific and Arctic oceans, Mr. Pompeo said on Monday. Winding through Canada’s northernmost territories, Canada claims the passage as its own, but the U.S. has said it is an international strait.

The U.S. plans to increase its Arctic presence, Navy Secretary Richard Spencer said last week, including plans to send ships through the Northwest Passage on a freedom-of-navigation operation, intended to assert international access rights.

After Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland restated her government’s position on Tuesday that the Northwest Passage is Canadian, Mr. Pompeo didn’t challenge the assertion.

“The challenges in the Arctic aren’t between the United States and Canada, let me assure you,” he said. “We’ll continue to have great conversations on these issues with our close friends, the Canadians.”

The breakdown in talks over a joint declaration occurred when the U.S. refused to agree to a provision about the need to reduce emissions of black carbon, the product of diesel engines and wood burning.

Mr. Pompeo said the U.S. has nonetheless recently logged the largest reduction in black carbon emissions by any Arctic Council state.

Rather than issue a declaration, the foreign ministers meeting in Finland issued a short “joint statement” that didn’t mention climate change, instead stressing the importance of the work of the Arctic Council in maintaining peace in the region.

Mr. Pompeo, leaving Finland on Tuesday, canceled plans to travel to Germany as the next stop on a European tour due to pressing issues, said State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus.