

Speaking Notes

Lisa Koperqualuk

Meridian Diplomacy Forum

Breaking the Ice: The Emerging Landscape for Arctic Diplomacy

White-Meyer House, 1624 Crescent Place NW, Washington, DC

12 April 2022, 3 p.m.

Ullaakuut, Good afternoon,

I would like to thank the organizers for this opportunity to share the perspective of Inuit at this important forum. I want to talk about the role of Inuit in Arctic diplomacy from three perspectives:

- Where we have been
- Where we are
- Where we may be going

You can appreciate that if this session was held two months ago, some of what I would say would be different. But some things would be the same.

Where we have been

The first thing to know is that Inuit have been engaged in Arctic diplomacy for decades.

We are an international people living in four countries across the Arctic, sharing one language and one culture.

One hundred and eighty-five thousand Inuit live in Canada, Greenland, Alaska and Russia, in four different political realities. Together, these lands form Inuit Nunaat, or the Inuit homeland, where Inuit have lived for thousands of years.

As a marine people our lives and our culture are inextricably linked to our environment for food security, transportation needs and mobility.

The ability to move freely over the landscape is a key part of Inuit culture and an expression of sophisticated knowledge of the Inuit homeland. When we travel on the land and sea, it connects us to our ancestors. To help non-Inuit understand the importance of sea ice to Inuit, think of it as 'critical infrastructure.'

Our dependence on the environment has meant that Inuit have been on the front lines of climate change for some time.

Climate change also intersects with other challenges. Contaminants released in the south travel around the globe and deposit in the Arctic, leading to worrisome levels of chemicals.

Microplastics and marine litter are an increasing threat to our ecosystem.

Inuit have been noting changes in our environment for decades. In 1977, the ICC was formed to give our people a voice in the political dialogues and research discussions that were beginning to emerge. To thrive in the circumpolar homeland, we realized we needed to speak with a united voice on issues of common concern, and combine our energies and talents towards protecting and promoting our way of life.

At the end of the Cold War, our leaders brought our fellow Inuit in Chukotka into the fold and we were engaged in discussions that eventually led to the 1996 creation of the Arctic Council. In fact, ICC's former Chair, Mary Simon who is now Canada's Governor General, our Head of State, played a key role in making sure Inuit and other Indigenous Peoples were able sit at the table with the eight Arctic states. This was groundbreaking – no other multi-governmental institution had ever welcomed Indigenous Peoples as equals.

But our place at the table is not based on a kind gesture by Arctic states. Our participation in the Council and other international fora such as the United Nations – where we have Consultative Status under the Economic and Social Council, known as ECOSOC - the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and other bodies is based on our Indigenous right of self-determination.

Our rights are enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Article 18 of that declaration states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.

In Canada, Alaska and Greenland, our rights are enshrined in land claims settlements and other governmental arrangements. In Canada for instance section 35 of the Constitution recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to self-government.

On the international stage, ICC has played a key role in pushing for treaties to control persistent organic pollutants and mercury, both of which originate in the south but are deposited in the Arctic through air circulation patterns. In fact, ICC's diplomatic efforts, in concert with Indigenous, NGO and government allies, were instrumental in getting the first reference to the Arctic and Indigenous Peoples into an international environmental agreement, the 2001 Stockholm Convention.

To all of our diplomatic endeavours, we bring our Indigenous Knowledge and deep connection with our environment. Indigenous Knowledge (in short IK) is a systematic way of thinking. It has developed over millennia and includes insights based on evidence acquired through direct, extensive and multigenerational experiences and observations.

The concept and importance of IK as a knowledge base is now acknowledged, for example, in reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the 2018 Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean and most recently, the International Maritime Organization.

Where we are

Which brings me to where we are.

First, some good news. ICC recently became the first Indigenous Peoples Organization to gain provisional observer status at the International Maritime Organization, or IMO.

As the IMO's first Indigenous observer, we feel the weight of how disproportionately climate change affects Indigenous peoples and communities throughout the world.

ICC has been encouraged at IMO meetings this year with how most states have supported the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge in assessing impacts and developing mitigation measures to reduce underwater radiated noise from shipping.

Sea ice is integral to Inuit culture, transportation, harvesting, and economy. Without it, and with it thinning, our way of life is disrupted in a profound way. Unfortunately, shipping, which often brings the necessities of life to our remote communities, also brings pollution, like black carbon, that can destroy our way of life. This isn't theoretical -- it's a reality we face.

Where we are going

This has always been our message at the Arctic Council: We can see where we are headed and Arctic states like Canada and the United States have a special responsibility. Unfortunately, the world is distracted at the moment by Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine.

Early last month, the other seven Arctic states, including the United States and Canada, called for a "pause" in all work involving the Russian Federation. ICC and other Indigenous Peoples Organizations agreed. As Chair of the Arctic Council until May 2023, Russia was to host the biennial Ministerial meeting where the leadership would have been handed over to Norway. At this point, it is very difficult to see this meeting going ahead. The Arctic Council's future is uncertain.

While the Arctic Council is not a decision making body nor a treaty based organization, its assessments and deliberations are an important part of the discourse on the changing Arctic. Over the years, the alliances between Indigenous Peoples and Arctic states have furthered understanding of the important influences of the Arctic on the global climate system.

We have a saying: What happens in the Arctic doesn't stay in the Arctic. Meaning, changes in weather patterns, declining sea ice and melting permafrost have global implications. We know the causes of these changes come from the outside. So what happens in the rest of the world affects the Arctic.

However, there has always been a sense that the Arctic is not affected by the geopolitical storms that rage in other parts of the world. Perhaps it was naïve to think that peaceful cooperation can continue in the Arctic no matter what differences between the countries at the table. This has been called Arctic exceptionalism and it seemed to apply when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.

Now Arctic exceptionalism, the idea that global geopolitical events don't interfere with peaceful Arctic cooperation, is no more.

Even so, ICC remains committed to peaceful Arctic cooperation. We have said this many times. Every four years we hold a General Assembly to discuss important issues, develop a new declaration to guide ICC for the next period, hold elections and celebrate our collective culture. This year that meeting will be virtual, and our international chair will move from Alaska to Greenland.

And while we don't have final wording on our declaration, I can guarantee you ICC will once again call for the Arctic to be made into a global zone of peace. The stakes are too high and the need is pressing. We must figure out a way to return to peaceful cooperation – for our future, and the future of the planet.

Nakurmiik. Thank you.