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Opinions

OPINION: Arctic ambassador's confirmation is good for Alaska

By Paul Fuhs

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From left, Finnish Ambassador Tiina Jortikka-Laitinen, Danish Ambassador Lone Dencker Wisborg, and U.S. Arctic Research Commission chair Dr. Michael Sfraga converse on stage during a luncheon at the Arctic Encounter Symposium on Thursday, April 7, 2022 at the Dena'ina Civic and Convention Center in Anchorage. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

I was very pleased to see the confirmation of Alaska's Mike Sfraga as Arctic ambassador for the U.S. Every other Arctic nation has reached the same conclusion in appointing their own Arctic ambassadors – that the Arctic is unique enough to justify it. We have seen over and over what happens when people try to speak for the Arctic who know nothing about us. I don't think you could find a person more versed in Arctic issues than Ambassador Sfraga.

And thanks to our Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who, along with Sen. Angus King of Maine, saw this through after many months of trying.

I was disappointed to see opposition to his confirmation based on his previous cooperation with Russia and China on Arctic issues. Our cooperation with our Arctic neighbors has been based on safe and responsible resource development, safe shipping, tourism, Native travel to relatives, youth cultural and education exchanges and environmental protection. We have steadfastly stayed away from national security issues and left that to the federal government.

That being said, any time we had interactions with Ambassador Sfraga or watched him make presentations, he was always aware of and considered the national security aspects of any program. These national security issues have always been in the forefront of the Polar Institute of the Wilson Center which he founded.

So what are some of the non-national security measures of importance to Alaska, and how have they been influenced by Ukraine-related issues?

Perhaps most important is the prohibition of cooperation with Russian scientists on reporting climate change. Russia constitutes 40% of the Arctic and our own climate change scientists openly decry the loss of data which foils their predictive models, but their voices fall on deaf ears.

Likewise, the cooperation on fisheries management in the Arctic. As ocean waters in the Bering Sea warm, fish stocks are moving further north into Alaskan and Russian waters. A proposed cooperative fisheries research and management program was scuttled. And while we have a fishing moratorium on the U.S. side due to lack of data, we now see Russian fishing vessels openly operating in their own Arctic Exclusive Economic Zone.

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We also had a cooperative fisheries research project with Seattle, Canada, Alaska and Russia to determine what was happening with salmon stocks in the Gulf of Alaska, looking at their overall health, eating habits and the impact of salmon hatchery programs. Of course, this is all critical to management of our salmon stocks, with the recognition that we know very little about what happens after they leave our spawning rivers. But it was halted due to the fact that the research platform was a Russian vessel.

The Chinese have also expressed a strong interest in the Arctic, both with research and trans-Arctic transportation. Their two icebreakers, Xue Long I and II, have accomplished many Arctic research programs, the results of which they have openly shared. In the U.S., we have only one 50-year-old, deteriorating icebreaker, and the last time it was in the shipyard, they removed the towing gear so it wouldn't even be able to render emergency towing to a vessel in distress. A newly built U.S. icebreaker is apparently not expected to be complete until the end of the decade.

Which raises the issue of vessel safety in the Arctic. This year we have seen a tremendous growth of shipping on the Northern Sea Route, and it appears this will continue to grow. The lack of response capability is obvious, but prevention measures could be put in place to reduce the risk. Due to European sanctions on Russian oil, massive crude oil tankers are now transiting through the Bering Strait to Asian markets. An oil spill in the Arctic would be devastating and represents the greatest threat to food security in the Arctic for our own Alaskan people.

The Marine Exchange of Alaska has instituted an enhanced prevention program of vessel tracking, monitoring, and assisting in emergency response called "Arctic Watch." While it covers Alaska waters, it could also be extended to Russian waters, either through a bilateral agreement or by prevention standards adopted by the International Maritime Organization.

Regarding emergency response vessels, there should be an international agreement that a vessel in distress in the Arctic can call upon any icebreaker of any nation flag to respond — an 'Uber for Icebreakers' program.

Of course, for now, these will just have to be ideas. On the U.S. side, there are apparently those who believe there should be no cooperation with Russia, as if blocking climate change data will change President Vladimir Putin's policies on the war. On the Russian side, although they have been willing to cooperate, their national filter now is that the U.S. is providing the weapons to directly attack Russian facilities and villages. So this is going to take a while and a negotiated settlement.

Its obvious that the programs described above would be good for Alaska, so the least we can do is to advocate for provisions in a negotiated conflict settlement that would mandate an immediate resumption of Arctic cooperation.

I feel very comfortable that Ambassador Sfraga will provide a good, balanced outlook on all of these interests in his new position. We are navigating treacherous waters, a lot is at stake, and we really need a capable leader at the helm.

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