

Arctic Council
8th Ministerial meeting
Kiruna, Sweden
May 15, 2013

Statement by Mr. Erkki Tuomioja, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland

Dear Arctic Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen!

The work of the Arctic Council has been remarkable during the last years. I am referring to, e.g. the Reports on Arctic Biodiversity, Arctic Ocean Acidification, Ocean Review, Arctic Resilience, Ecosystem Based Management, Obsolete Pesticides and Short-lived Climate Forcers which substantially increase our awareness of the challenges in the Arctic.

Offshore drilling of oil and gas in the Arctic involves great risks. Conditions are harsh and prevention of oil spills technically challenging. The Arctic marine ecosystems differ in many aspects from ecosystems in other seas. We need more scientific information about these differences and especially on how large scale exposure to oil and chemicals could affect the Arctic environment. We need also cooperation and exchange of information and know-how concerning such methods for oil spill response that really do minimize the total adverse effects of the spills and the response measures on the nature. The Agreement on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response – to be signed shortly – is an important achievement as the first step to minimize the damage of possible oil spills or accidents. Next we need to complement the Agreement in a very near future with a binding instrument on Oil Pollution Prevention. Ultimately, there should be common standards for offshore oil and gas drilling. And we need to finalize the work on IMO Polar Code for safety of ships operating on Polar waters soon.

The Arctic is important for global biodiversity, for several migratory species and for the conservation of marine ecosystems. The Arctic Biodiversity Assessment on fragility and degradation of the pristine Arctic nature and its recommendations earn serious consideration and early implementation. Protection of areas of ecologically important marine, terrestrial and freshwater habitats, as a part of building international regulation, would also define the operating space for economic activities in the Arctic. The Arctic Ocean beyond the Exclusive Economic Zones of Arctic states would be a natural element in a wider network of marine protected areas.

Expectations towards the Council are growing constantly, both within and outside the region. We need to respond to the challenges. This is a continuous,

evolving process. I have proposed to consider making the Council a fully fledged international organization. We may not all of us be ready for this right now, but inescapably we are already moving to that direction.

While the leading figures of the AC are the ministers of Foreign Affairs, I think that having also other sectorial ministers meet regularly within the framework of the council would bring important value-added to our work. So far the work of the Arctic Council has relied on the environmental sector, but in future sectors such as transport, culture, education and research will play an increasing role in the Arctic.

The Arctic cooperation preceded the Council. The first intergovernmental meeting between the Arctic States was held in 1991, when the “Rovaniemi Process”, which contains as a key element the concept of the Environmental Impact Assessment, was launched. Time has come now to review the concept and its implementation. This should be put on the future agenda of the Arctic Council.

Furthermore, Rovaniemi will follow up the process initiated there with a series of conferences starting this year in December. Sustainability – and particularly Arctic Urban Sustainability – is a key topic these discussions. This is another issue we would like to see on the Arctic Council Agenda.

In our “Vision for the Arctic” we state that “the Arctic is changing and attracting global attention and as we look to the future, we will build on our achievements and will continue to cooperate to ensure that the Arctic voices are heard and taken into account in the world”. The key word here is cooperation which should be intensified between us, states, but also all actors with legitimate interest in the Arctic. After all, the Arctic is a regional issue with global dimensions.

In strengthening the role of the Council we need to safeguard and enhance the participation of indigenous peoples fully in the work of the Council. We need to consider, both members and observers, how best to do this. Nationally, my Government has many funding programmes for our Saami people. Also the EU – e.g. through the Arctic Information Center to be established in Rovaniemi – can increasingly contribute to the indigenous communities.

We welcome the consensus reached regarding the observers and we expect that the finalizing of this common concern regarding the EU’s application needs not to take more than a few months.

In Finland we are just finalizing our new updated Arctic Strategy which will reflect the growing interest in and attention given to the Arctic. Our Arctic Vision can be summarized as: “Finland can reconcile business opportunities and potential in

the Arctic with sustainable development and environmental requirements through international cooperation”.

We stress that all economic activities have be conducted in a controlled manner, taking into account the economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts above all to the people living in the Arctic, including the indigenous peoples. A significant new opening for the Arctic Council is the addition of economic issues on the agenda. As a co-chair of the new task force dealing with this question Finland will bring to the table the thinking incorporated in our Strategy.

Finally, let me express our gratitude to the excellent leadership Sweden has shown during the last two years, and pledge our full support to the incoming Canadian Chair.