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Discussion paper

Climate Change Activity in the Arctic Council

February 15, 2016

Introduction

Climate change has been part of the Arctic Council's program of work for many years. In keeping with the overall aim of the Council, we have aimed to complement other efforts as well as focus on climate issues not addressed by other bodies, especially where an Arctic perspective was useful. Coming out of Paris, where 192 countries adopted an historic global climate agreement and set national emission reduction targets, the U.S. chairmanship is of the view that it is time for the Council to take stock of its climate-related work and explore whether new opportunities exist for the Council to increase ambition, keeping in mind the need to avoid duplicating efforts.

Background

The Arctic Council has been instrumental in advancing the scientific understanding of climate impacts in the Arctic through its widely regarded scientific assessments, and by conducting strategically important real-world projects to demonstrate the potential of reducing emissions in major emitting sectors.

The first such major assessment was the 2004 Arctic Climate Impact Assessment that CAFF and AMAP co-led. The ACIA not only guided much of the Council's work on climate change in the following few years but also helped raise awareness of the impacts of climate change in the Arctic and the effects of Arctic climate change on the rest of the world.

Other climate-related assessments include AMAP's Snow, Water, Ice and Permafrost in the Arctic (SWIPA), CAFF's Arctic Biodiversity Assessment (ABA), AMAP's Arctic Ocean Acidification (AOA) assessment, AMAP's Black Carbon and Ozone as Arctic Climate Forcers assessment, AMAP's Methane as an Arctic Climate Forcer assessment, PAME's Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment (AMSA), and the forthcoming AMAP-led Adaptation Actions for a Changing Arctic (AACA). Related to the AACA is the Council's multi-faceted work on Arctic Resilience.

Beginning with the 2009 Ministerial in Tromsø, the Council began to focus seriously on *actions* to reduce emissions, especially of short-lived climate pollutants (SLCPs) – namely methane and black carbon. Not only do these short-lived substances persist in the atmosphere for far shorter periods than CO₂, but they also trap far more heat on a per-unit basis. In addition, black carbon that falls on Arctic ice or snow reduces reflectivity and increases heat absorption, further accelerating melting and warming.

Recognizing that reducing SLCP emissions is the best opportunity to slow the pace of climate change in the near to medium-term, and is especially important in protecting regions such as the Arctic, the Council launched the first of three subsidiary bodies to catalyze methane and black carbon emission reduction.

In Tromsø in 2009, the Ministers established a Task Force on Short Lived Climate Forcers to produce technical reports on the technologies and economics of, primarily, black carbon mitigation in the Arctic States. After its conclusion, the Council launched a Task Force on Black Carbon and Methane that established the first-ever reporting requirements for Arctic States on actions to reduce black carbon and methane emissions; required submission of national emissions inventories; agreed to adopt a collective, aspirational black carbon goal by the 2017 Ministerial; and launched an Expert Group to make specific recommendations for enhanced action, amongst other things. This Expert Group held its first meeting in January 2016 and does not have a sunset date. The Council's move into mitigation action could be some of the most important work the Council has undertaken to date on climate change – all the more so if the Observer States join with Arctic States to dramatically reduce black carbon and methane emissions affecting the Arctic region.

Questions for Discussion

1. Raising the visibility of the Arctic's role in climate change
 - a. Should the Council do more to highlight – for policymakers and key public constituencies – the dramatic effects of climate change in the Arctic and the potentially profound consequences of Arctic climate change on the world as a whole? What can the Arctic Council and its members do to raise global awareness that “What happens in the Arctic doesn't stay in the Arctic”?
 - b. How can we educate our Ministers specifically about the importance of addressing climate change in the Arctic, and the need for our Ministers as individuals to be champions on this issue? For example, should we have short, climate-related presentations for the Ministers at future Ministerial meetings?

2. Raising the visibility of short-lived climate pollutants

What can the Arctic Council and its members do to raise with policymakers the visibility and prioritization of actions to reduce methane, black carbon and HFCs? Are there specific forums where they can be influential, events they can host, etc.?

3. Paris Agreement

How can the Arctic Council demonstrate global leadership in making progress towards national emissions reductions targets, or nationally determined contributions?

4. New Opportunities

As described above, the Arctic Council has focused its efforts to date on (1) producing scientific studies on Arctic climate change; (2) launching projects to help Arctic communities adapt to climate change; and (3) inventorying and reducing emissions of short-lived climate forcers, particularly black carbon. Are there new areas the Council should embark upon? For example, are there mitigation opportunities for carbon dioxide that the Arctic Council should consider?