

Finland to chair the Arctic Council 2017-2019



Minister of Foreign Affairs of Finland Timo Soini (third from the right) at the Glacier-meeting in Alaska in 2015.

Courtesy of the U.S. Department of State

Finland will take over the two-year chairmanship of the Arctic Council from the U.S. at the beginning of May 2017. The focus will be on implementing the Paris Agreement on climate change and the UN sustainable development goals as part of Arctic cooperation. A more detailed programme will be published in April 2017.

The Arctic Council was established twenty years ago as a high level intergovernmental forum to enhance cooperation, coordination and interaction on common Arctic issues. The member states are Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Russian Federation, the United States of America and Canada. The region's indigenous peoples such as the Sami also participate in the cooperation. The Council is a forum for promoting environmental protection, sustainable development, and the wellbeing of the inhabitants of the Arctic areas.

The Council has during its existence played a leading role in delivering world-class scientific assessments, addressing the impacts of globalisation and climate change, and facilitating cooperative responses to these challenges. The Arctic Council has also provided a forum for the negotiation of two important legally binding agreements among the eight Arctic states, both of which came into force in 2013. These are the Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic, and the Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic.

The Arctic Council's foreign ministerial meeting is organised every second year. The next ministerial meeting will be held in May 2017 in Fairbanks and the following towards the end of the Finnish chairmanship in spring 2019.

Finnish goals

The Arctic Team at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs will coordinate Finland's Chairmanship. The programme has been prepared in cooperation between actors representing the entire state administration and different interest groups. The Finnish Chairmanship will focus on environmental protection, meteorological cooperation, as well as improving communication and education as part of Arctic cooperation. According to René Söderman, Senior Adviser at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Arctic Team will publish a more detailed programme in April 2017.

In issues related to the economy, close collaboration with the Arctic Economic Council will be sought. The Arctic Council's Chairmanship provides an opportunity for Finland to strengthen its Arctic image and raise awareness of Finnish expertise in operating in cold conditions.

Finland has a great deal to offer to Arctic cooperation in terms of Arctic-related expertise. Finland has several biological research stations in Lapland, where Arctic ecology is being studied. The Arctic Centre, a separate institute affiliated to the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi, carries out interdisciplinary research on the effects of global changes on Arctic nature and Arctic societies. The University of Oulu is a centre for Arctic medical sciences. Arctic-related issues can be found also in the teaching and research programs of many other institutions of higher education in Finland.

Finnish industry has expertise and modern technology in such fields as Arctic transportation and navigation in ice-covered waters, Arctic construction, Arctic environmental technology as well as the development of Arctic infrastructure.

Mr Timo Soini, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Finland, expressed in his speech at the Arctic Circle Conference in October 2016 why Arctic cooperation is important.

"In the 21st century, the Arctic has the potential to become a hub between Europe, America and Asia. Natural resources and the opening of new sea routes in the Arctic may bring many benefits, but also challenges. In view of these unprecedented changes we need to safeguard sustainable development of the Arctic region."