

Arctic nations agree to fight global warming despite tensions



Arctic countries on Thursday pledged to fight global warming, which is happening three times faster in the northern reaches of the earth than elsewhere [File: Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP]

Reykjavik, May 23 (RHC)-- Arctic countries have pledged to fight global warming, which is happening three times faster in the northern reaches of the earth than elsewhere and to preserve peace in the region as its geopolitical importance increases.

Accelerated global warming, untapped resources, new maritime routes opened up by retreating sea ice, and the future of local populations all topped the agenda as foreign ministers of countries bordering the

Arctic gathered in Reykjavik in Iceland this week.

“We are committed to advancing a peaceful Arctic region where cooperation prevails on climate, the environment, science and safety,” US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told his Arctic Council counterparts from Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia and Sweden.

“The Arctic as a region for strategic competition has seized the world’s attention” but ‘rule of law’ must be ensured so that it remains a region free of conflict where countries act responsibly,” he added. The warming climate has opened up the Arctic for shipping, fishing, drilling and mining, and China, an observer to the Council, has made no secret of its interest in the vast territory rich in natural resources and where retreating sea ice has opened up new maritime routes.

Meanwhile, Russia has beefed up its military presence in the Arctic – reopening and modernising bases abandoned since the Soviet Union collapsed – and the United States has stepped up naval exercises. “It is important to extend the positive relations that we have within the Arctic Council to encompass the military sphere as well,” Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the participants at the meeting.

“We have highlighted at the meeting that we see no grounds for conflict here. Even more so for any development of military programmes of some blocks here,” Lavrov told reporters. The Russian envoy also said his country supported the idea of hosting a summit of Arctic nations during its two-year presidency of the Council. Lavrov has also called for a resumption of regular meetings between the chiefs of staff of the Council’s member countries.

Annual meetings between armed forces chiefs from Arctic states were halted in 2014 following Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Russia has not participated in another forum, the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, since 2014.

The Arctic Council was set up 25 years ago to deal with issues such as the environment and areas of international cooperation, and its mandate explicitly excludes military security.

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