

IPS Corporate Associates Lunch with His Excellency Tony K Siddique: Singapore and the Arctic Council

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At first glance, the Arctic would seem like a very distant subject – both literally and figuratively – to Singapore. Singapore sits a mere 1 degree north of the Equator in a tropical region, effectively situated as far away from either pole as possible. Yet in May 2013, Singapore was granted Observer status to the Arctic Council. A few months earlier, *The Economist* magazine, in commenting on Singapore’s application for observer status, remarked: “Sometimes a small event gives you mental whiplash¹.”

Singapore is one of 12 non-Arctic countries, including China, Germany and India that have been admitted to the Arctic Council. The Council has eight member states, including the United States, Russia and Finland. To better understand Singapore’s interest in the Arctic, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) organised a Corporate Associates Lunch on 21 April 2014, with His Excellency Tony K Siddique, Singapore’s Special Envoy for Arctic Affairs. Ambassador (Amb) Siddique, who is concurrently the Non-Resident Ambassador to the Caribbean Community, was asked to give his take on the Arctic Council’s relevance to Singapore, offer insights into the workings of the Council and explain how Singapore obtained Observer status.

Introducing Amb Siddique, IPS Director Janadas Devan noted the significance of climate change in the bigger picture. Rising temperatures in recent years have led to melting sea ice in the Arctic region, turning previously impassable frozen waters into potential routes for transportation of cargo via ship. This could have far-reaching consequences, as these shipping routes are able to bypass Singapore, potentially affecting our status as a leading global port and cargo handling hub.

Amb Siddique was then invited to address the audience and take questions. The following are some highlights of the session, including the question and answer segment:

¹ *The Economist* (2013, Feb 2). The roar of ice cracking. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21571127-will-asian-countries-consolidate-or-disrupt-arctic-stability-roar-ice-cracking>

History of the Arctic Council

The Arctic Council was established in 1996 as an inter-governmental organisation to promote greater cooperation between Arctic governments. It has eight member countries: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States.

Singapore's Application for Observer Status: Route to Success

Amb Siddique cited three major concepts in Singapore's successful application: credibility, creativity and consolidation. On credibility, he noted the strong "brand equity" that Singapore had cultivated over the years, allowing for "leveraging on the brand". Singapore worked closely with the Nordic states in preparing its application, and showcased that it had technology relevant to the needs of the Arctic, with Keppel Corporation having previously built icebreaker ships for Russia.

On creativity, he explained that Singapore went to great lengths to prepare its application and show genuine interest in the Arctic, from putting "boots on the ground" to speak with its indigenous people to visiting Greenland to better understand Arctic culture and history and create empathy – the only country to do so. Singapore also sought bilateral support from each member state of the Arctic Council.

Finally, on consolidation, Amb Siddique pointed out that Singapore was granted Observer Status together with countries such as China, India, Korea, Japan and Italy, showing the success of the above strategies. Singapore however would not be resting on its laurels and has been taking an active role as an observer – it has participated in the Arctic Task Force on Oil Pollution Prevention, and has expressed support for the Polar Code² for ships.

Q&A Segment

1. More on Arctic Council Meetings

An audience member asked about how often the Council meets, and what topics of discussion are typically covered during meetings. Amb Siddique replied that each member country is headed by a Senior Arctic Official, and officials meet twice a year.

In addition to high-level official meetings, the Council is also divided into six working groups; each group has a different scope of work and mandate, ranging from the environment to maritime law to oil pollution. Observers are allowed to attend working group meetings, but are not permitted to raise points during the official proceedings as the Council does not wish for observers to take over – observers may only speak during informal, off-the-record meetings.

² The Polar Code is a set of guidelines governing the safety of ships operating in polar waters. It is currently being proposed as a binding international framework.

2. International Boundaries

Regarding international boundaries, Amb Siddique explained that the Arctic route fell within the jurisdiction of a few different nations, including Canada, the United States, and Russia. Some parts of the territory are also contested, such as an area between Canada and the US, which has not yet been resolved. Ships intending to use the route would thus need to seek permission from the respective countries before being granted passage through.

3. Viability of the Arctic Route

Several participants asked questions relating to the viability of the route, how likely ships would be to use it in future, and how accessible it would be going forward, given that the ice is still frozen for most of the year.

Amb Siddique answered that the route is indeed viable. Ships have increasingly been using the route as time has gone by, and it has become accessible for longer periods each year due to higher temperatures. Regardless, the route mostly serves bulk cargo as opposed to container cargo, which Singapore handles. Thus, the threat to Singapore as a port is not yet great. Adding on, another participant mentioned that the route is not yet viable for long periods of the year, and lacks the requisite support in the form of ports with good connections.

Conclusion

Rounding out the dialogue, Amb Siddique explained that Singapore is indeed attempting to place itself in a good position to gather information about and understand developments in the Arctic region so that it can respond to potential change.

Mr Devan closed by praising the achievements of Amb Siddique as a remarkable effort, making Singapore the only country so close to the Equator to be an Observer on the Arctic Council. He said that Singapore's interest in keeping up with Arctic developments so that it can sense the potential implications on global trade routes, the environment and geopolitics reflects "the type of thinking that Singapore is famous for when at its best".

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