

Diplomacy is knowing how to walk on thin ice

by John Bechtel

Aleksis Härkönen is an affable but serious man with a wry sense of humor that takes you by surprise when you are least expecting it. I decided after the first ten minutes that Aleksis would make a great next door neighbor, and that is exactly what he promotes: good neighbor relations in the far north. He represents both his own country and the entire European Union with regard to all things Arctic, and that is particularly significant because in a little over a year from now, Finland will assume the chairmanship of the Arctic Council from the U.S.

Mr. Härkönen has been in the Finnish Foreign Service, mostly security policy, for over thirty years. He served for two years as foreign policy adviser to Finland's president. He has lived in a number of countries, including twice in the U.S.—once in the late sixties and again later in the early nineties. He has been the Arctic Ambassador since 2014 and has been enjoying new perspectives on international cooperation. He says in his free time he loves outdoor activities such as mushroom picking and fishing, especially ice fishing.

Finland is a small country, with a population of a little over five million persons. Geographically, the Arctic region of his country, known as Lapland, comprises a little over a third of the country. He said less than 10,000 native Laplanders live there; the rest are Finnish. Finland is very modern, technically savvy, with great infrastructure. He says the indigenous peoples in Finland, the Sami, are very well assimilated, are probably the most studied indigenous ethnic group in history, and they know how to take care of themselves.

During World War II Finland found

itself in the awkward situation of being sandwiched between the Soviet Union on the East and Germany to the South.

At one time or another during the war Finland was invaded by both of its neighbors, and when Germany was finally driven out by the Russians, they despoiled Lapland in the north of the country with a scorched earth policy. Through it all Finland managed to retain their democratic form of government, but they lost 10% of their land to the east to the Soviets and were left with no port in the far north, on the Arctic Ocean.

When asked what it was like working closely with Russia on Arctic matters at the same time that there was open warfare going on in the Ukraine just a few hundred miles south of Finland. Mr. Härkönen responded with an appropriate double metaphor: "You need a cool head when walking on thin ice." He added that Arctic cooperation with Russia was not derailed by the Ukraine conflict and they hope to keep things that way.

Ambassador Härkönen says being involved with the Arctic Council gives you new perspectives. Finland is more north central to many nations than they had even realized. Their neighborhood looks different now, because across the top of the world, the U.S. and Canada are now their neighbors. With regard to the enhanced awareness of the strategic importance of the Arctic region, his government and the E.U. want to make sure that the people who live and work in the Arctic are prepared for change, and that as they welcome the new, the old ways are not pushed out of existence. He said many of the locals in small towns and villages would continue working in forestry, reindeer herding, hunting and fishing (although it is very difficult to



Ambassador Aleksis Härkönen

compete on price with the Norwegian salmon farms.)

It was obvious that Mr. Härkönen was proud of his country, as well he might be. He said that 60% of all the icebreaker ships currently in operation in the world were built by Finland. As a matter of fact, recently two of their new ships had been leased to the U.S. government for an assignment in Alaska. The task had been completed and the ships were making their way through the Northwest Passage and the Canadian archipelago back to Finland as we spoke. If you look at a map or globe of the world from the top, you will understand what he was describing. The ships came home over the top of the world.

I asked Mr. Härkönen, as an ambassador to our readers, what he would recommend we visit in Finland during the winter, and we discussed the new, spectacular Opera House in Helsinki, and he said anything outdoors, especially downhill or cross-country skiing.

If we're going to be neighbors, we should probably drop in sometime and say hello! Maybe we can stowaway on an icebreaker!