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Deep Freeze: Security and International Relations in the Arctic Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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The Arctic has long been perceived as exceptional – as set apart from events and tensions elsewhere. Also in the Arctic, however, the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine heralded a new era. While the impact on Arctic security will likely be limited – even with Finland and Sweden joining NATO – the war has put cooperation with Russia into deep freeze. A core challenge ahead for both Arctic and non-Arctic states like Germany, is to preserve important achievements without compromising the ostracism of Putin's Russia.

For decades, politicians and academics alike have portrayed the Arctic as exceptional and argued that relations between states in the region have been, and should be, insulated from the ebb and flow of global affairs. On 3 March 2022, the limits of this exceptionalism became clear as the seven non-Russian members of the Arctic Council decided to pause the Council's work in reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹ Other Arctic cooperative frameworks followed suit, including on 9 March the Barents Euro-Arctic Council that comprises the Nordic countries, the European Union and Russia. But beyond putting Arctic cooperation into deep freeze, what impact has Putin's war had in the Arctic? What could and should it entail for security and international relations in the region in the long run? What will Finnish and Swedish NATO membership mean? What are the prospects for future Arctic cooperation, and how can non-Arctic states like Germany contribute to preserving important achievements notably in Arctic governance?

What is the Arctic?

The Arctic is commonly defined as the area north of the Arctic Circle (see Figure 1 below). Primarily an ocean surrounded by states, the Arctic is very different from the Antarctic, which is an uninhabited continent surrounded by ocean. The five Arctic coastal states – Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Norway, Russia and the United States – confirmed in their Ilulissat Declaration of May 2008 that the United Nation's Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) constitutes the primary legal basis of Arctic maritime borders and governance.

Analysing the Arctic as one region is useful in many circumstances. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that the Arctic is a vast area with substantial local differences. Whereas the North American and Eurasian parts are sparsely populated and largely inaccessible, the smaller European Arctic is, in relative terms, bustling with human activity.

¹ The member states of the Arctic Council are Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States.

FIGURE 1. The Arctic



A brief history of the Arctic

While indigenous peoples have lived in the Arctic for millennia, until the 20th century most of the region saw only sporadic visits from the outside. During the Cold War, the Arctic suddenly gained strategic importance. With the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles and bombers it became the line of fire between the two superpowers. As a result, the Arctic saw the construction of many early warning radars, such as in Thule, Greenland. From the 1960s, the European Arctic became increasingly important also from a naval perspective. From its ports on the Kola Peninsula the growing Soviet Northern Fleet became a threat to NATO's sea lines of communications across the Atlantic. The military significance of the European Arctic increased further in the late 1970s and 1980s, when it became the operating area of the Northern Fleet's submarines carrying nuclear missiles (SSBNs). The Soviet Union sought to defend the SSBNs and their bases in a naval bastion centred on the Barents Sea (see Figure 1 above). Also today, the Russian SSBNs and their Bastion render the European part of the Arctic the most important from a strategic military perspective.

From 1985, the thaw in East-West relations found expressions also in the Arctic. Notably, in a famous 1987 speech in Murmansk, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev called for the establishment of an Arctic zone of peace. Gorbachev's speech helped inspire not only the notion of Arctic exceptionalism, but also the development of Arctic cooperation in the 1990s. Among the international fora dealing with Arctic affairs that emerged in the post-Cold War period, the Arctic Council – founded in 1996 – became the most significant.

With the end of the Cold War, the military significance of the Arctic quickly waned. From the turn of the millennium, two new issues came to spur renewed international attention. The first was the assessment that the Arctic contains a large share of global, undiscovered petroleum resources. The second was the growing awareness of rapid climate change in the region. Initially, the two prompted mainly commercial interest and environmental concern.

In 2007, however, perceptions changed in line with a general deterioration of relations between Russia and its Arctic neighbours. The planting of a Russian flag on the sea floor at the North Pole in early August 2007 helped trigger the emergence of a notion of a “race” or a “great game for the Arctic”. The combination of rich resources and unsettled borders, and the opening of important new shipping lanes, meant that great power competition and conflict loomed in the Arctic.

Such warnings have been exaggerated. Little has come of the heralded Arctic petroleum klondike and commercial interest in trans-Arctic shipping has remained far short of predictions. Moreover, compared to the South China Sea and even the Eastern Mediterranean, maritime border issues in the Arctic are uncomplicated. Thus, while the Arctic climate is warming fast, in geopolitical terms the region is far less hot than some argue. The predictions of Arctic competition and conflict did, however, dispel much of the notion of Arctic exceptionalism. While the shift has been more rhetorical than actual, the Arctic has in recent years been “normalised” in world affairs. A vivid expression of this is the US emphasis on counter-ing purported Chinese influence in the region.

The war against Ukraine and Arctic security

From an Arctic security point of view, the impact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 has been limited. The main reason is that most of the Arctic is not only far from Ukraine, but also (still) largely uninhabited and inaccessible. Even in the closer and more populated European Arctic the repercussions have been modest, however. The Norwegian Chief of Defence has, for instance, repeatedly stated in spring 2022 that there are no signs of increased threat or unusual Russian military activity in the European North. Indeed, activity is lower than normal, as units and vessels from the Northern Fleet have been deployed to Ukraine.

Similarly, the defensive measures adopted by NATO were primarily to strengthen land and air forces in Eastern member states. Norway and Iceland have not asked for battle groups like those deployed to Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria – nor has Denmark asked for an allied presence in Greenland. The question of a NATO presence in Canada or Alaska as a reaction to the war has probably not even been thought of. Arctic security is not unaffected, though. The emergence of the notion of a “race for the Arctic” led to the establishment of Arctic-specific confidence building cooperation – another example of the region’s exceptionalism. One was the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) created in 2010-11.² When NATO countries stopped military-to-military cooperation with Russia in 2014, including in the ASFR, an Arctic Coast Guard Forum was set up in 2015 to enable continued dialogue on maritime safety. In spring 2022, this forum was put on hold as well. While some bilateral contact has continued, there is no longer any multinational dialogue with Russia on Arctic security issues.

Finland and Sweden in NATO and Arctic security?

How will Finland and Sweden joining NATO – and thus all Arctic states except Russia becoming NATO members – affect Arctic security? The impact should not be exaggerated. Finland and Sweden do not border the Arctic Ocean. Their Arctic security interests and concerns are therefore primarily tied to their northern land territories. While Sweden does not have a land border with Russia, the border between Finland and Russia will double the length of the land border between NATO and Russia when Finland joins. Finland, like Sweden (and Norway and Denmark), seems likely to adopt a policy of not allowing the permanent stationing of allied combat forces, or presence of nuclear weapons, on its territory in peacetime. Still, Finland’s entry into NATO may both intensify and change Russia’s regional threat perceptions.

Finnish and Swedish membership might lead to more NATO training and exercises in the European Arctic, including activity closer to Russia. It will probably not, however, entail any major change in NATO’s posture in or policy towards the wider Arctic. The attention to the Arctic will likely remain limited and tied mainly to assessments of the security implications of climate change. While particularly Norway for some years promoted increased emphasis on Arctic issues in NATO, this subsided after 2014. Moreover, Canada’s position is that NATO’s purview in the Arctic is limited to the area of responsibility of NATO’s operational commander (SACEUR) – a point prime minister Justin Trudeau clearly alluded to at a press conference with NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg on 26 August 2022. This area is “the High North” in NATO terminology and as the reference to it in paragraph eight of the 2022 Strategic Concept confirms, NATO’s perspective is on the North Atlantic, not the wider Arctic.

Longer-term security implications

The war and the sanctions will likely weaken Russia greatly militarily and economically. If they do, Russia will be forced to prioritise when it reconstitutes its armed forces. The deployment of new NATO forces in East-Central Europe should dictate Russian prioritisation of ground and air forces along its western borders. A weakened Russia will, however, rely even more heavily on nuclear deterrence. The SSBNs could thus become even more important. This has at least two potential implications for Arctic security.

First, Russian military resources in the Arctic could be concentrated in the European Arctic to an even greater degree than today. With limited resources, strengthening the Bastion may take preference over bases and forces in more remote parts of the Arctic. Moreover, as suggested, Russia’s regional threat perception may increase and change with Finland joining NATO. Notably, Russia might feel compelled to strengthen its defence of the Kirov Railway that runs from St. Petersburg to Murmansk not far from the Finnish border. The railway is a vital communication link to the Kola Peninsula. If disrupted, as it was in 2020 when a bridge collapsed, both civilian and military activity will quickly suffer.

² In addition to the eight members of the Arctic Council, the ASFR included France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and, until 2014, Russia.

Second, Russia's sensitivity to foreign military presence in the region might increase. In recent years, US and British naval vessels and US strategic bombers have ventured close to the Kola Peninsula. There have also been speculations that both the Royal Navy and US Navy plan freedom-of-navigation voyages through the Northeast Passage. This leads to a first recommendation: In a situation where tensions are high and Russian sensitivity for the security of its SSBNs is increased, NATO allies should consider their military activities around the Kola Peninsula extra carefully. A weakened Russia – a wounded bear – might act more aggressively to protect the crown jewels of its national security. Allied carefulness should not be interpreted as a concession, as going soft, but rather as sensible escalation management.

The war against Ukraine and Arctic relations

Unlike the modest implications for Arctic security, the broader effect of the war on relations with Russia in the Arctic has been marked and goes beyond the freeze in cooperation. The economic sanctions introduced after the first Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 limited the scope for investments in the Russian Arctic, particularly in the petroleum sector. The 2022 sanctions will have an even greater effect. Russia uses the term the Northern Sea Route (NSR) for part of the Northeast Passage that stretches from Novaya Zemlya to the Bering Strait (see Figure 1 above). In recent years, Moscow has (re-)established bases along its Arctic coastline, to protect its sovereignty in a resource-rich and symbolically important part of the homeland. The installations also have a role, however, in enabling both military and civilian transit through the NSR.

In addition to its interest in attracting foreign investments to Arctic petroleum development, Russia's interest in profiting from Arctic shipping is likely an important reason why it has supported the development of Arctic governance based on international law. Russia has shared its Arctic neighbours' enthusiasm for adhering to UNCLOS in regional affairs, as it has much to gain from such adherence. At the very least, the 2022 sanctions will decrease the prospects for profitable shipping through the NSR. Even paying for support from Russian icebreakers, as Russia clearly wants vessels to do, might now prove difficult. If Russia ends up abandoning its ambitions for the NSR, it may also push Russia towards abandoning its constructive role in Arctic governance.

In April 2022, president Vladimir Putin insisted that Russia would not reduce its Arctic ambitions. Admitting the impact of the new sanctions, however, Putin argued that Russia “must more actively engage in Arctic cooperation with countries and alliances from outside the region.”³ A likely effect of the new sanctions is thus that Russia will become even more dependent on Chinese investments and engagement, also in the Arctic. This includes not only resource extraction, but also realising Russia's ambitions for shipping – along the ‘Polar Silk Road’, in Chinese terminology. While Chinese investments in the Arctic have so far been modest, Russian desperation might provide new, lucrative opportunities. If China, which defines itself as a “near-Arctic state”, gains a stronger Arctic foothold through Russia, this may complicate regional relations, particularly given the noted US emphasis on countering China (also) in the Arctic.

A future reset?

The prospects for Arctic cooperation with Russia are thus bleak. The ostracism of and sanctions against Russia will likely remain in place for a long time. However, Russia will hopefully one day return to the international community as a responsible actor. When it does, the Arctic represents a region that is of great significance to the country and one in which it has shared interests with its neighbours. It is no coincidence that several US administrations have looked to the Arctic as a region where improving relations with Russia seems feasible. The Arctic still holds the potential for one day serving as a vehicle for reengaging with a changed Russia.

³ Staalesen, Atle (2022): Isolated Russia says it will invite “non-Arctic” states to develop its North, *The Barents Observer*, 18. April.

The significance of the Arctic Council is sometimes exaggerated. It is not a decision-making body that sets rules and decides borders. The Council's mandate is quite narrow: It is "a high-level forum" that promotes "cooperation, coordination and interaction [...] in particular [on the] issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic."⁴ Despite this limited scope, the Council has become the principal platform for Arctic cooperation and has attracted many outside observers. Indeed, contrary to the "race for the Arctic" depiction of a *terra nullius* over which the great powers will compete, the region has been an important and, in some areas, pathbreaking arena for international cooperation. The 2018 Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean signed not only by the Arctic states, but also by the European Union and China, is a good example.

To keep the door open for future reengagement with Russia, alienating Moscow from the Arctic Council and other key building blocks of Arctic governance should be avoided. This can be achieved by keeping them on pause until such time that Russia can re-join. Alternatively, the non-Russian members could resume cooperation without Russia, but should then explicitly and consistently hold the door open for its future, condition-based reintegration. Their June 2022 decision on a "limited resumption" of Arctic Council "projects that do not involve the participation of [Russia]" suggests they favour the second option.⁵ Managing and preserving the Arctic requires international cooperation, and Arctic cooperation without Russia makes limited sense.

What can Germany do?

Overall, there isn't much anyone can do just now to improve security and relations in the Arctic – apart obviously from Russia, which should immediately end its illegal and unwarranted aggression against Ukraine. However, to support continued, sustainable development and protect Arctic governance without compromising on the united front against Russia, Germany should in line with its 2019 Guidelines for German Arctic Policy promote and support wider international efforts that indirectly or directly affect the region. Implementing the Paris Agreement, the United Nations sustainable development goals and the International Maritime Organisation's Polar Code regulations for shipping, are prime examples. They all entail both national measures in Germany and working internationally within the framework of the United Nations, where Russia would be just one (unavoidable) participant among many.

Similarly, Germany should continue to support EU and other European and international research and capacity building efforts in and for the Arctic, such as in the European Space Agency. Given the vastness and inaccessibility of the Arctic, satellites are indispensable tools for both safety and research in the region – and there is a clear need for increased Arctic satellite capacity. While the war in Ukraine has brought a deep freeze in relations with Russia, neither Arctic and non-Arctic stakeholders should freeze their activity and engagement in the region. Indeed, continuing Arctic cooperation is important not only in and of itself, but could one day prove useful when conditions are right to reengage with a changed Russia. Ultimately, this is in both Russia's and everyone else's interest.

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⁴ [Declaration on the establishment of the Arctic Council](#), 19 September 1996.

⁵ [Joint Statement on Limited Resumption of Arctic Council Cooperation](#), 8 June 2022.