

## The Future of the Arctic Council: Russian Perspectives since February 2022

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From May 2021 to May 2023, Russia assumed the chairship of the Arctic Council for the second time. As chair, it was expected to lead the collective efforts of the primary regional forum comprised of the eight Arctic nations, six Permanent Participants representing Arctic Indigenous Peoples, six working groups, and thirty-nine observer states, intergovernmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations. This represented a critical opportunity for Russia to focus international attention on the importance of the Arctic through its distinct lens.<sup>1</sup> “Despite the fact that seven other AC member-states belong to Western institutions that do not include Russia (NATO, EU, Nordic organizations), Moscow feels itself comfortable in the Council because it functions there on the equal footing and it is able to partake in the AC decision-making.” Russian international relations scholar Alexander Sergunin astutely noted in anticipation of Russia assuming the chairship. This elevated “the Council’s role to the highest priority of Moscow’s Arctic strategy in the near- and midterm future.”<sup>2</sup>

Arctic priorities, however, were subordinated to Russia’s revisionist designs seeking to restructure the global order through military aggression and blatant violation of international law. Consequently, Russia’s decision to further invade Ukraine ensured that its Arctic Council chairship would be a dramatic failure. On 3 March 2022, the like-minded Arctic states of Canada, Finland, Iceland, Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the United States released a joint statement announcing a “pause” of Arctic Council activities, “pending consideration of the necessary modalities that can allow us to continue the Council’s important work in view of the current circumstances.” That June, the seven countries released a joint statement announcing their intention to “implement a limited resumption of our work in the Arctic Council on projects that do not involve the participation of the Russian Federation.” The statement explained that “these projects, contained in the work plan approved by all 8 Arctic states at the Reykjavik ministerial, are a vital component of our responsibility to the peoples of the Arctic, including Indigenous peoples.” The states would “continue to examine additional modalities to allow us to further continue the council’s important work.”<sup>3</sup>

With Russia effectively prevented from running a consensus-based circumpolar organization without the participation of the seven other Arctic states, it chose to narrow its Arctic Council agenda to focus on domestic Arctic development and conducted scheduled events without Western participation.<sup>4</sup> (Of course, none of this required a circumpolar forum to do.) Official statements from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) indicated a desire to resume “normal” Council operations as soon as possible. “The Arctic Council is and should

remain the key international forum of the Arctic region,” the Russian ambassador-at-large for the Arctic and Senior Arctic Officials chair, Nikolay Korchunov, emphasized in late May 2022. “The future of the Council will depend on the Arctic countries’ spirit of cooperation and commitment to collective approaches and solutions. We confirm that this work should be resumed in full as soon as possible. This would be in the interest of all the Arctic states and the welfare of Arctic inhabitants and indigenous people.”<sup>5</sup> With Russia refusing to end its unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, however, the seven like-minded Arctic states could not follow this course.

This NAADSN *Strategic Perspectives* provides an analytical summary of Russia’s reactions to the seven like-minded Arctic states’ decision to *de facto* halt cooperation with Russia under the umbrella of the Arctic Council. In tracing Russian narratives on the Council since February 2022, it discerns dominant lines of thought articulated by Russia’s most prominent groups on Arctic-related issues: political-diplomatic circles; members of think tanks and policymakers; and Arctic-associated academics and scientists.

## Background: The Arctic Council and the Russian Chairship (2021-23)

Russia’s updated plan for the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF), unveiled in three 2020 strategic policy documents and an April 2021 implementation document, framed its broader Arctic strategy. On this basis, Russia highlighted its Arctic developments and priorities in carefully crafted language during its Arctic Council chairship, seeking to entrench and enhance its self-defined position in the region. By placing Russia at the centre of circumpolar affairs, the Kremlin’s strategy did not seek to revise Arctic governance structures or undermine regional peace. Instead, it sought to encourage other Arctic stakeholders to internalize and repeat Russian narratives, particularly Russia’s self-perception as the largest, strongest, most developed – and thus most legitimate – Arctic player. Early in its Arctic Council chairmanship, Russia’s strategic messages also encouraged further reproachment with other Arctic countries pursuant to the idea that regional cooperation should be buffered against external conflict wherever possible.<sup>6</sup>

In the decade leading up to the 2021-23 chairship, Russian strategic documents depicted the Arctic Council as “both a centerpiece and cornerstone of the regional governance system,” given its representation of all Arctic states, its multidimensional mandate, and its science-based approach that preserves the autonomous decision-making powers of its members.<sup>7</sup> Former Russian Senior Arctic Official and Ambassador to Iceland Anton Vasiliev (one of Putin’s key Arctic emissaries) noted in March 2021:

The Arctic Council turns 25 this year as unquestionably one of the most successful multilateral regional and international bodies of our times. Its success is based on common interests and efforts of the Arctic States, clear agenda and the rules of the game, as well as reasonable flexibility to meet new challenges. Russia intends to build on this success, including the excellent outcome of the current Icelandic Chairmanship which had to overcome unprecedented pandemic-related difficulties, to lead the Council into its second quarter century.

The Russian Chairmanship will also be motivated by the national Arctic Strategy updated in 2020 for the period up to 2035. It provides for a major step forward in development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and welcomes mutually beneficial cooperation of Russia with its Arctic partners and, besides, interested non-regional states.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, Russia's chairship represented a key opportunity for agenda-setting and for showcasing the country's "Arctic-ness" and circumpolar leadership for domestic and foreign audiences. Its four priorities – "the Arctic inhabitants, including Indigenous peoples; environmental protection and climate change; social and economic growth; and further strengthening the Arctic Council – the key framework of international Arctic cooperation" – connected directly to Russian strategic objectives. In illustrating "the serious, holistic and constructive approach of Russia to its forthcoming Chairmanship," Vasiliev ended with the declaration that "*Russia bears special responsibility for the state of affairs in the Arctic and counts on support from its regional partners*" (emphasis added).<sup>9</sup>

The absence of any reference to strategic competition or to the "growing potential for conflict in the Arctic" (as asserted in Russia's October 2020 strategy) in Russia's chairship priorities came as no surprise. The 1996 *Ottawa Declaration* forbids members from raising military security issues during Arctic Council deliberations and activities. Accordingly, Russian leaders avoided any direct references to national security considerations as Arctic Council chair and touted the region as a territory of peace, stability, and constructive international cooperation. Nevertheless, when Russia officials mentioned economic development, natural resources, and the Northern Sea Route for domestic audiences, they backed their comments with reassurances that the Kremlin is vigorously protecting national sovereignty and bolstering its regional military presence.<sup>10</sup>

Russia's ambitious chairship program<sup>11</sup> came to an abrupt halt after Russia launched its further invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, prompting the seven other Arctic states to declare a "pause" on their participation in Arctic Council activities. On 4 March 2022, Russia's Senior Arctic Official, Nikolay Korchunov, called the "pause" on Council activities as "regrettable" and warned that a temporary freeze on Council activity would "inevitably lead to the accumulation of the risks and challenges to soft security in the region." Korchunov stressed the Council's strong history of facilitating depoliticized dialogue, telling Reuters that "the Arctic should remain as a territory of peace ... and thus, this unique format should not be subject to the spill-over effect of any extraregional events. For us there is no alternative to uninterrupted sustainable development of our Arctic territories." Accordingly, he announced that Russia would refocus its "Chairmanship toward addressing our domestic needs in the region." All events organized under the Russian chairship would go ahead as planned except for official meetings with the other Senior Arctic Officials, with Korchunov insisting that "it is of utmost importance to safeguard the project activities of the Arctic Council in order to be able to pick up where we paused and step up cooperation."<sup>12</sup> Ten days later, the Russian MFA issued a press release quoting Anton Kobayakov, an adviser to the President of the Russian Federation on Arctic issues, expressing the country's readiness to resume dialogue in the Arctic Council in the interests of Northerners, sustainable socio-economic development, and environmental protection.<sup>13</sup> We analyze subsequent messaging by Russian officials, commentators, and scientists in the sections that follow.

## Political-diplomatic circles

A close analysis of Russian language open sources produced by Russia's political, diplomatic, and government circles yields five main narratives promulgated by the Russian officials with respect to the Arctic Council, Russia's membership therein, and Russia's future role within the organization:

1. Any Arctic Council decisions adopted without Russia's participation are illegitimate.
2. The Western states' decision to "marginalize" Russia (which, according to the Russian side, stems from the West's irrational reaction to the developments in Ukraine) is bound to result in a dramatic increase of security challenges and disagreements between Russia and other Arctic nations.
3. If the other seven Arctic states persist in ignoring Russia, Russia is ready to abandon the Arctic Council and may change the format and structure of Arctic cooperation by welcoming more input from non-Arctic countries.
4. Western attempts to marginalize Russia in the Arctic Council are counterproductive and harmful to Russia's foreign partners, causing damage to other Arctic nations but not to Russia.
5. Over time, the West will return to a "business as usual" model of collaboration with Russia in the Arctic.

*Narrative One: Any Arctic Council decisions adopted without Russia's participation are illegitimate.*

This thesis was first articulated by Alexander Kozlov, Russia's Minister of Natural Resources and Ecology, who stated that any Arctic Council decisions of the AC made without Russia will be deemed illegitimate (by Russia) and could result in dire consequences for the Arctic region. In his statement, Kozlov underscored that the aforementioned "serious negative consequences" could negatively affect such areas as sustainable development in the Arctic, the conservation of biodiversity and local ecosystems, and environmental remediation. In the same statement, Kozlov also reiterated a point made frequently in Russian circles prior and after its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine: Russia still sees the macro-region as a territory of peace and cooperation and does not consider armed conflict in the macro-region to be a likely scenario.<sup>14</sup>

Russia's Ambassador to the US, Anatoly Antonov, also expressed deep concern about the seven other Arctic Council members' decision to continue activities of the organization without Russia's participation. Antonov asserts that this renders the organization and its decisions illegitimate, as does violating the founding principles of the Council by deviating from a consensus-based decision-making process. According to this logic, decisions made by other members in Russia's absence have no standing as actual Arctic Council decisions.<sup>15</sup>

On 10 June 2022, MFA spokesperson Mariya Zakharova attributed what she described as the West's haphazard and illogical behavior with regard to Arctic-related issues to a "sense of confusion." She insisted that "any attempts to isolate Russia in the Arctic are illusory, and [our] Western partners are trying to cling to any ideas just to make an impression of their independence in Arctic-related matters."<sup>16</sup> Deputy head of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev made a similar statement four days later, arguing that the sheer scale of Russia's Arctic presence (both geographically and demographically) means that any decisions taken without Russia's participation would have no effect and that Russia would disregard them.<sup>17</sup> On 31 October 2022, Korchunov also emphasized that "statements by US authorities suggesting that the Arctic Council could function without Russia are unfounded" and illegitimate.<sup>18</sup>

*Narrative Two: The Western states' decision to "marginalize" Russia (which, according to the Russian side, stems from the West's irrational reaction to the developments in Ukraine) is bound to result in a dramatic increase of security challenges and disagreements between Russia and other Arctic nations.*

Prior to 24 February 2022, representatives of Russia's Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the so-called *siloviki* faction promoted the "growing conflict potential in the Arctic" thesis. Over the last eighteen months, this idea has been widely espoused in Russian diplomatic and civilian political circles as well. For example, on 5 March 2022 Ambassador Korchunov unequivocally warned that the decision of the other Arctic states to halt participation in the Arctic Council heightened tensions in the region and jeopardized the Arctic security environment more generally.<sup>19</sup> Later he noted that "Russia is facing a situation where the seven other Arctic Council states will be NATO members," posing a serious security challenge to Russia. Korchunov also asserted that:

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [was] stepping far beyond the military-political agenda; he resorts to commenting on the content and prospects of non-military, purely civilian cooperation between Russia and other non-Arctic states, such as China. Of course, this cannot leave us unconcerned, just like the expansion and the intensification of the alliance's activities in high latitudes.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, Russia's Ambassador to Denmark, Vladimir Barbin, noted in February 2023 that "attempts to sideline Russia in terms of international cooperation in the Arctic are counterproductive. These lead toward its fragmentation and are contributing to generation of confrontational moves that are damaging the authority of the Arctic Council. It is impossible to secure sustainable development of the Arctic without its largest actor, Russia."<sup>21</sup>

*Narrative Three: If the other seven Arctic states persist in ignoring Russia, Russia is ready to abandon the Arctic Council and may change the format and structure of Arctic cooperation by welcoming more input from non-Arctic countries.*

On 11 May 2023, Ambassador-at-large for the Arctic Nicolay Korchunov declared that, if the other seven Arctic states continued to ignore Russia in the future, it made no sense for Russia to remain a member of the Arctic Council. In this case, Russia, as the largest Arctic country, could create an alternative council on Arctic issues in which Russia (already purported to be "performing most Arctic-related actions anyway") could invite two so-called friendly nations, India and China, to become key actors. Nevertheless, Korchunov noted that the existing Arctic Council format as a consultative organ still works for Russia, given that some consultations continue despite what the ambassador described as anti-Russian behaviour, thus allowing the forum to perform its fundamental function.<sup>22</sup> While apparently contradictory, this messaging showed the Russian MFA's inclination to continue to hedge its bets while also revealing Russia's growing predilection to court Asian partners.

During the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF)-2023, Korchunov praised the presence of both Beijing and New Delhi in the Arctic region and confirmed Russia's readiness to enhance cooperation with them. As a sign of growing ties between the countries, he mentioned the emergence of the Russia-Asia Consortium of Arctic Studies (founded at the Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University) headquartered in Yakutsk.<sup>23</sup> Korchunov had previously alluded to Russia's readiness to reconfigure its international collaboration in the Arctic with non-Arctic actors on at least two separate occasions. On 26 May 2022, he hailed Chinese participation in

Russia's Arctic projects, suggesting new forms of Sino-Russian cooperation along the lines of the Arctic Council.<sup>24</sup> On 15 June of that year, he announced that Moscow was consulting on an ongoing basis with other, non-regional actors on Arctic issues, noting that “almost all of the BRICS countries” and “many members of the Big Twenty” expressed an interest in collaborating with Russia on various issues, ranging from climate change to new transportation routes.<sup>25</sup>

*Narrative Four: Western attempts to marginalize Russia in the Arctic Council are counterproductive and harmful to Russia's foreign partners, causing damage to other Arctic nations but not to Russia.*<sup>26</sup>

On 3 March 2023, Korchunov argued that the pause in the Arctic Council meant that “several Arctic countries that do not have the necessary skills and competences” had already lost “access to Russian technologies and scientific achievements” in areas such as climate change and permafrost (citing Finland and Sweden as specific examples of countries lacking their “own expertise in this area”). By contrast, he suggested that changes in Arctic Council work plans did not affect Russia's Arctic research and related capabilities in any substantive way.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Maksim Dankin, the deputy director for regional development at the Information and Analytical Centre of the State Commission for Arctic Development, noted that the seven other Arctic states' boycott of Russian events hosted under the auspices of its Arctic Council chairship did “not decrease the effectiveness of [our] work aimed at the development of the Arctic zone.”<sup>28</sup> These narratives seek to downplay the effects of the pause on Russia while suggesting that it has a deleterious effect on the other Arctic states.

*Narrative Five: Over time, the West will return to a “business as usual” model of collaboration with Russia in the Arctic.*

Soon after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the seven other Arctic states paused their participation in Arctic Council activities, Maria Zakharova called the other Arctic nations' responses “irrational” and “politicised,” suggesting that it “greatly obstructs joint work on regional development” and undermines collaborative efforts aimed at improving the “lives of Indigenous people, ensuring sustainable social-economic development, climate change, implementing programs associated with the environment, and ... preserving bio diversity.” Zakharova added that “the desire of some countries to ‘punish’ Russia will backfire.” Accordingly, she encouraged the other Arctic states to “come to their senses and resume constructive cooperation” in the Arctic Council.<sup>29</sup> Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov also noted that the future of effective work in the Council depended upon the ability to continue “civil dialogue for the sake of preserving the Arctic as a territory of peace, stability and constructive cooperation.”<sup>30</sup>

Overall, Russia's political leadership appears poised to change its course with respect to international cooperation in the Circumpolar Arctic. On 13 March 2023, President Putin's revised statement on the “Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic Region until 2035” dropped any references to the Arctic Council or the Barents-Euro Arctic Council (BEAC) by name. Instead, the decree states that Russia will forge “international economic, scientific-technological, cultural and cross-border cooperation in the Arctic with respect to Russia's national interests.”<sup>31</sup> This signifies a strategic deviation from Russia's consistent post-1991 policies in the Arctic and may portend a shift in principles that guide Russia's approach to regional cooperation.

## Policymakers and Russia's expert community

We discern three major narratives (that align with those discussed in the previous section) promulgated by Russia's expert community about the Arctic Council and Russia's role therein:

1. The Arctic region is evolving from a "territory of peace" into a theatre of geopolitical confrontation and, potentially, of area of conflict.
2. Given that Western countries aim to sideline and marginalize Russia, Moscow must take the lead and form a system of Arctic dialogue either without Western partners or with limited input from them.
3. Western countries' policies that prohibit scientific and academic exchanges between Russian and Western experts undermine regional cooperation and knowledge gathering and force Russia to seek new partnerships.

Russian experts also identify scenarios that describe potential or prospective developments with respect to the Arctic Council.

*Narrative One: The Arctic region is evolving from a "territory of peace" into a theatre of geopolitical confrontation and, potentially, of area of conflict.*

In April 2022, Andrey Kortunov, the director of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), insisted that the growing political crisis between Russia and the West implicated the Arctic Council, with the breakdown in communications worsening the security situation.<sup>32</sup> Other Russian experts are more accusatory in their assessments, with some openly calling the Arctic Council "a branch of NATO" for its allegedly anti-Russian stance.<sup>33</sup> Alexander Perendzhiev, a conservative political and military analyst and a member of the "Officers of Russia" organization, asserted that Russia's "eviction from the Arctic Council" bears the same traits as "Russia's eviction by the collective West" from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and other international organizations. He asserted that this situation reflects a more complex strategic game. In his narrative, the ongoing struggle for resources in the Pacific region (of which he considers the Arctic an integral part) between the US and China aims to reduce Russia's control over the Arctic. By extension, Perendzhiev concludes that Russia has no friends in the Arctic Council and that "there are only enemies in this organization."<sup>34</sup>

Another Russian language article provides a similar, albeit more detailed reflection on the subject. Dmitry Mikhailichenko suggests that the formation of a new anti-Russian circumpolar structure is underway. This architecture will likely exclude Russia, he predicts, which now faces "Arctic ostracism." Although the other Arctic states will find it difficult to completely exclude or isolate the country, Russian political leadership should prepare for this scenario. The author asserts that this new circumpolar organization will be dominated by security-related tasks (which was not the case before) and used by the US to consolidate its alliances. Mikhailichenko forecasts that while political and security relationships between Russia and other Arctic Council members likely will continue deteriorating, the end of the active phase of the war in Ukraine might revitalize the need to rebuild ties between Arctic partners. He also suggests that while Moscow and Northern European capitals may be ready to

re-initiate dialogue, the US is deliberately halting the process and it may be a long time before Washington is ready to collaborate as it did previously.<sup>35</sup>

Other Russian scholars adopt similar themes. “The forced temporary pause in the full functioning of the Arctic Council, caused by the decisions of the other seven Arctic countries, should be used by Russia to analyze the situation in the region and to develop additional concrete steps to ensure Russian interests, ... [including] strengthening security in the northern direction,” Diana Timoshenko of the Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences, wrote in August 2022. Describing how “the Arctic order reflects the international system with its distribution of influence among the leading states,” she insists that “Russia is forced to assert its rights in the face of the ‘collective West.’” Excluding Russia and Russian Indigenous peoples from circumpolar governance “demonstrates the unbridled desire of the United States to establish its monopoly in the North.” Timoshenko insists that “this behavior is nothing short of reckless, as it contradicts geography itself, ... undermines mutual trust between circumpolar countries, and destabilizes an open approach to cooperation in the high latitudes.”<sup>36</sup>

*Narrative Two: Given that Western countries aim to sideline and marginalize Russia, Moscow must take the lead and form a system of Arctic dialogue either without Western partners or with limited input from them.*

Alexander Vorotnikov, a coordinator of the Russian Expert Council PORA,<sup>37</sup> asserted in May 2023 that Russia needs to create its own analogue to the Arctic Council. He insisted that the Council was no longer a platform for dialogue “where the Russian position was listened to and heard,” and that the organization no longer serves Russian interests. In Vorotnikov’s view, “even if any Western country [in the Arctic Council] wanted to collaborate with Russia, it would not be allowed to do so – they are all in NATO now.”<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, he declared that Russia needs to deepen its engagement with new partners, primarily India and China, that are interested in the Northern Sea Route and in natural resources in Russia’s Arctic.<sup>39</sup>

Reflecting on Russia’s options to end isolation without destroying the Arctic Council, other Russian experts also propose intensifying cooperation with non-Arctic players that are strategically interested in increasing their footprint in the region. For example, Luiza Brodt, a senior lecturer at Novosibirsk State University, has argued that, having gained an observer status in the Arctic Council, India’s expanded role in the Arctic should contribute to deepening ties with China, Japan, and South Korea.<sup>40</sup> This would make the Council less Western-centric and more diverse. For his part, Dmitry Trenin has forecasted “freezing” the Arctic Council, with Russia tightening its cooperative ties with so-called “friendly countries,” particularly China and India. In his view, Russian self-interest encourages it to focus on bilateral relations with both Asian states simultaneously (and trilateral opportunities where appropriate. This stated, Trenin suggests that creating an alternative regional forum to compete against the Arctic Council would make no sense.<sup>41</sup>

*Narrative Three: Western countries’ policies that prohibit scientific and academic exchanges between Russian and Western experts undermine regional cooperation and knowledge gathering and force Russia to seek new partnerships.*

Since the Soviet period, Russia’s academic and scientific communities have played a key role in Arctic research, with Russian officials continuing to use scientific achievements as an example of Russia’s special place in the



Arctic. At a March 2023 press conference following a scientific conference on climate change and melting permafrost in Yakutsk, Nikolay Korzhunov announced that Russia's Arctic projects with foreign partners are essentially stalled. "Western authorities have prohibited their scientists to maintain any official contacts – unofficially, there are some contacts – with their Russian colleagues," he noted; "thus we cannot speak of effective scientific cooperation in the Arctic." Andrey Fedotov, the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) to the President of the Russian Federation and First Deputy Chairman of the Government of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), called Western countries' policies that "prohibit" academic and scientific exchanges with their Russian colleagues as "diktats."<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Russian officials insist that they are determined to continue scientific cooperation with international partners willing to engage with the Russians. Specifically, Russian authorities highlight the Russian-Asian Consortium for Arctic Research, which offers "financial, political and information mechanisms for long-term cooperation in Arctic research."<sup>43</sup> This dovetails with messaging about how (as a May 2023 Valdai Club article suggested) "the continuing Western boycott of constructive dialogue with Russia will only push Russia further into the 'Arctic embrace' of China, thus deepening Russian–Chinese cooperation and increasing Beijing's presence in the region."<sup>44</sup>

Some of Russia's most notable Arctic-related experts and scientists have been vocal against severing ties with Western partners through Arctic Council networks. For example, Arkady Tishkov, the principal scientific fellow at the Institute of Geography of the Russian Academy of Science, insists that Russia must not unilaterally abandon its place in the Arctic Council, which would have a profoundly negative effect on Russia's Arctic research.<sup>45</sup> Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute (AARI) director Alexander Makarov also refers to cooperation with Russia's Western partners through the Arctic Council as a "current" of opportunities.<sup>46</sup> Others, such as Boris Hananovich Krasnopolski, highlight that "without Russia's participation it is impossible to implement projects in the field of energy security, climate change, and health preservation" – topics that are of core interest to Russia and the other Arctic states.<sup>47</sup>

*Scenarios: A dramatic exit, the Arctic-7, or continued participation in the Arctic Council?*

A July 2023 RIAC working paper co-authored by Alexander Vylegzhanin, Mikhail Lysenko, Natalia Viakhireva, and Andrey Snyatkov discusses three scenarios along which the development of the Arctic Council could proceed:<sup>48</sup>

- *Option #1:* Russia's withdraws from the Arctic Council (following example of its exit from the Council of Europe) in response to Western declarations that it is an "aggressor" state. According to the authors, Russia's national interests will be harmed if NATO transforms the Council into an authoritative anti-Russian international structure, where the "Arctic Seven" dominate all decision-making processes. In a situation where Russia is no longer a member of the Council, the authors allege, the US will be given a freer hand to aggressively promote its constraining environmental agenda and hinder economic activity in the region, hurting not only Russia but also Norway and Iceland (given their dependence on Arctic fisheries).

- *Option #2:* The Western member states create an alternative intergovernmental forum limited to the “Arctic Seven” that excludes Russia. In this scenario, could Russia take a similar step and, acting jointly with China and India, create a parallel structure that would effectively entrench an “east-west legal divide in the Arctic.” According to the report, this option is viable from an international legal perspective, but it would present several challenges to powerful non-Arctic countries (primarily China and India), forcing them to choose between forums and undermining their stable position as observers in the existing Arctic Council. Moreover, the authors argue that Indigenous peoples and their representatives would resent any scenario in which the Arctic Council breaks down and they lose their unique position in circumpolar governance. The authors also emphasize that a new, pro-Western Arctic Council would lack legitimacy without the involvement of Russian Indigenous peoples, given how much weight Western media, academics, and policymakers place on Indigenous rights.
- *Option #3:* Russia remains a *de jure* member of the Arctic Council, which it has a right to do based on the funding principles of the organization encapsulated in the Ottawa Declaration of 1996 under which Western countries cannot simply expel Russia from the forum. Alleged Western attempts to marginalize and ignore Russia and its interests do not change this objective reality. According to the study, Russia will find this option difficult to pursue but it could yield optimal results. If the Russian political leadership follows this course, Russia will retain a say on major Arctic-related decisions in an important regional arena, even if Western countries articulate anti-Russian policies and maintain a hostile political-legal environment in which the Russian side must operate. The authors specifically emphasize how ongoing Russian membership in the Arctic Council allows the Kremlin to participate in critical decisions (and block them if necessary) in the environmental and economic realms – two areas of strategic importance to Russians.

In the final analysis, Russia’s mainstream observers and policymakers tend to favour a course of action that avoids drastic and overtly aggressive moves with respect to Russia’s membership in the Arctic Council. While some experts advocate for stronger ties with non-Arctic members who have not criticized Russia’s aggression, the general mood is against unilateral Russian withdrawal from the Council.

## Conclusions

Russia’s full-scale invasion against Ukraine beginning on 24 February 2022 surprised Russia’s ruling elite in three main ways. First, Russia had been preparing for imminent sanctions and its economy in 2021 bore all main traces of so-called “mobilization economy” that was more commensurate with war than peace time.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the Western seizure of its foreign assets (approximately \$300 billion) mesmerized the Russian elite. Second, the amount and quality of Western military aid to Ukraine, coupled with the outstanding bravery of the Ukrainian armed forces (ZSU), enabled the Ukrainians to withstand Russia’s assault and subsequently to conduct a series of successful counter-offensives. Third, the decision of the seven like-minded states in the Arctic Council to pause their participation in the forum during Russia’s chairship dealt a significant blow to Moscow’s plans to showcase its circumpolar leadership and promote its narrative of the Arctic as a territory of peace as well as a region of Russia’s unconditional dominance and supremacy. Although the Arctic Council’s charter (the Ottawa

Declaration) forbids the discussion of hard security issues under the forum’s auspices, Russia’s brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine meant that the circumpolar body could no longer function as if the Arctic was an exceptional space separate from the rest of the world. Accordingly, the seven like-minded Arctic member states’ decision to “pause” their participation in Arctic Council activities involving Russia was a carefully calibrated response that sought to preserve the institution in the face of brutal Russian aggression in Europe – although Russian narratives certainly painted it otherwise.

Messaging from Russia’s political, diplomatic, and government circles promotes five main narratives that seek to delegitimize any Council decisions taken without Russian participation, discredit attempts to marginalize Russia as destabilizing to the region (and bring more harm to other Arctic states than to Russia), and justify Russia engaging with China and India – thus breaking from its traditional focus on having the Arctic states manage regional affairs. They also suggest that, in due course, the West will return to a “business as usual” model of collaboration with Russia in the Arctic, but that Russia’s pursuit of “international economic, scientific-technological, cultural and cross-border cooperation in the Arctic with respect to Russia’s national interests” may no longer prioritize the Arctic Council.

Russia’s think tank, policy, and academic experts offer narratives suggesting that the Arctic region is evolving from a “territory of peace” into a theatre of geopolitical confrontation and, potentially, of area of conflict. They also argue that Western attempts to marginalize Russia may compel Moscow to create a system of Arctic dialogue that does not require Western partners, and that Western countries’ policies that prohibit scientific and academic exchanges between Russian and Western experts undermine regional cooperation and knowledge gathering, forcing Russia to seek new partnerships. Proposed scenarios include Russia’s withdrawal from the Arctic Council, the creation of a Russian-led parallel forum to the Arctic Council designed to bolster cooperation with China and India, and Russia’s continued membership in the Arctic Council (as there is no mechanism to rescind this status under the Ottawa Declaration). We find that most mainstream observers and policymakers tend to favour a course of action that avoids drastic measures with respect to Russia’s membership in the Arctic Council, and few advocate for a unilateral Russian withdrawal from the circumpolar forum.

In the final analysis, Russia’s scientific and academic Arctic experts have been pessimistic about Russia’s potential exit from the Arctic Council, with many of them indicating that Russian leaders would find this outcome undesirable. These sentiments are echoed in diplomatic circles. “We still consider the Arctic Council an important forum for cooperation in the Arctic,” Nikolay Kurchunov wrote in late March 2023. “At the same time, we witness a weakening of the role of Arctic multilateral formats of cooperation, including the Arctic Council.”<sup>50</sup> The following month, he lamented that confrontation between the Arctic states has been transferred to multilateral structures, such as the Arctic Council,” but that “this has not been of Russia’s choosing. All this leads to the weakening of multilateral institutions and formats for interaction in the Arctic, the erosion of collective approaches to solving regional problems, and a growing atmosphere of distrust and confrontation in the region.”<sup>51</sup>

Predictably, Russian narratives completely omit the linkages between their unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine and the decline of international cooperation with Russia in the Arctic, instead blaming the West for “short-sighted policies” that have “slammed the door and actually ruined the work of the Arctic Council.”<sup>52</sup>

Russia's new foreign policy concept, approved by President Putin on 31 March 2023, stated that "unlike the strategic documents of other Arctic and non-Arctic countries, ours is not directed towards confrontation or deterrence of other nations in the Arctic." It emphasized the "peaceful resolution of international issues connected to the Arctic, based on the Arctic states' special responsibility for the sustainable development of the region and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea," coupled with "neutralizing the course of unfriendly states toward the militarization of the region and limiting Russia's ability to exercise its sovereign rights in its Arctic zone." It also highlighted "establishing mutual beneficial cooperation with non-Arctic states which [have] a constructive policy toward Russia and are interested in international activity in the Arctic."<sup>53</sup> As noted earlier, the deliberate omission of any direct references to the Arctic Council signals ambiguity about Russia's commitment to the circumpolar forum, as has explicit messaging about Moscow's desire to enhance Arctic cooperation with the BRICS countries.<sup>54</sup>

Discerning a feasible path forward remains challenging. "How can we, in the future, even if the Arctic Council resumes its work in certain areas, build cooperation on a long-term basis? Well, we obviously cannot because the most important element is lost – the trust is lost," Korchunov noted in May 2023.<sup>55</sup> Although he was making reference to the Western Arctic countries that refused to participate in Council activities with Russia while it continued with its brutal and unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine, it was Moscow's decision to launch a full-scale invasion of a neighbouring country that shattered trust in Putin's Russia – globally and, by extension, in regions like the Arctic where Russia has emphasized that it has core interests.

## Notes

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