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## Trump 2.0's Arctic Opportunity: Thawing Frozen Dialogue

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Strategy and statecraft abound with well-worn adages: "Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer"; "The enemy you know is better than the one you don't." While these phrases may hold wisdom for some, they do not guide U.S. policy toward Russia. The Obama administration's 2015 [prohibition](#) on bilateral military cooperation between the U.S. and Russia was a strategic miscalculation, intended to punish Moscow for violating sovereignty and disrupting the rules-based order. Successive administrations have upheld this ban, restricting Pentagon funds for "bilateral military-to-military cooperation between the Governments of the United States and the Russian Federation." While politicians defend this stance as necessary to counter Russian aggression in Ukraine, the reality is that it hinders Western interests. Any proposal to restore military dialogue is swiftly labeled as appeasement, stifling discussions that could reduce tensions.

Trump's second term has clearly signalled a different relationship with Russia but military-to-military dialogue is still illegal. Rather than select US decision-makers with direct access to Russian representatives, which can concentrate dis and mal information campaigns by Russia, the ban preventing conversations with Russian counterparts at every level of US government needs to be lifted. Where the US leads, allies will follow.

The Biden administration's 2022 [National Security Strategy](#) pledged to restore American leadership on the global stage while tacitly criticizing the previous Trump administration's self-interested and transactional approach to world affairs. However, when it comes to Russian relations, neither the Trump 1.0 nor Biden administrations did anything to rescind Obama's Kremlin ban. Decreased dialogue between Washington and Moscow only degrades diplomacy, exacerbates tension, and increases the unknowns. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in [2014](#), the global situation has gone from bad to worse. It has become particularly troubling in the Arctic where military and commercial activities continue to [increase](#) in scope and scale and where there are no functioning forums – at the official level – enabling Washington and Moscow to deescalate tensions. Absent a structured forum for deescalation, the risk for miscalculation and escalation increases.

The Arctic presents an opportunity for the Trump administration to pursue pragmatic and more open engagement between Washington and Moscow, specifically in the military and security space. Such a forum currently [exists](#) at the Track 2 level, but absent official participation from Washington and Moscow decision makers, this forum's efforts to curtail conflict will struggle.

Currently, official U.S.-Russia dialogue on Arctic security is non-existent, increasing the risk of miscalculation. For nearly two decades prior to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the eight Arctic states—Russia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the U.S.—collaborated under the [Ottawa Declaration](#), engaging in diplomacy through the Arctic Council. The Council, however, excludes military and security from its mandate. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, collective Arctic cooperation collapsed, with Moscow blaming Western [sanctions](#) for the diplomatic freeze. As a result, mistrust now dominates Arctic relations, despite the fact that much of this discord originates outside the region.

Conflict avoidance demands engagement. While Russia and the West communicate through the United Nations and on issues like border disputes, [fishing rights](#), and search-and-rescue protocols, Arctic-specific security dialogue remains absent. Russia was expelled from Arctic defense forums like the Arctic Chiefs of Defense ([ACHOD](#)) and the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable ([ASFR](#)) in 2014. Today, Russia participates in the Arctic Council only virtually. Without an official security dialogue, Arctic states risk misjudgment and escalation.

The reluctance to re-engage with Russia is driven by political risk aversion rather than strategic logic. Reviving dialogue does not mean endorsing Russia's actions in Ukraine—it is, rather, a pragmatic necessity for Arctic stability. The HNT's proposed measures focus on ensuring that military activities in the Arctic remain predictable and professional. Key initiatives include prior notification of military exercises, an Arctic '911' communication platform for emergency deconfliction, and commitments to refrain from escalatory activities like GPS jamming or buzzing commercial vessels. Promoting and ensuring a rules-based Arctic requires changing past policies that have done more to raise tensions than they do to lower risk.

These confidence-building efforts align with long-standing Arctic governance [traditions](#). The region has a history of groundbreaking agreements between Arctic and non-Arctic states, such as the moratorium on commercial fishing in the central Arctic Ocean. Many of these agreements originated from informal expert discussions before being adopted at the state level. The same process could apply to Arctic security: discussions on military

transparency and risk reduction could eventually translate into formal agreements, fostering stability not just in the Arctic but beyond.

Strengthening military dialogue between the U.S. and Russia in the Arctic serves a broader strategic goal—preventing unintended conflict. Unlike arms control treaties, which require mutual trust, CBMs are designed to function in adversarial relationships. By enabling predictable military behavior, they reduce the likelihood of dangerous miscalculations.

The war in Ukraine has undoubtedly strained Arctic relations, but the region’s future is not predetermined. The dismantling of conflict-resolution mechanisms in recent years has left a dangerous void, but that does not mean rebuilding them is impossible.

Renewing dialogue with Russia is not about legitimizing aggression—it is about restoring pragmatic engagement to prevent conflict elsewhere. The West’s refusal to engage with Russia is viewed internationally as punitive rather than strategic. However, dialogue is occurring in unofficial forums, demonstrating that productive engagement is possible.

The Trump administration has a chance to correct course and return the Arctic to the “[High North, Low Tension](#)” label it once enjoyed. Rescinding the prohibition on military-to-military cooperation with Russia is a critical first step toward reestablishing security dialogue in the Arctic.

At a time when geopolitical tensions have stifled official communication, a structured backchannel approach offers a viable alternative. The Arctic is an ideal testing ground for renewed engagement, given its history of diplomatic agreements and its critical role in global stability. A future framework for Arctic security should incorporate structured, informal discussions among experts, complementing existing diplomatic efforts. Such an approach does not replace official negotiations but provides a foundation for deescalation and risk reduction. The stakes in the Arctic are too high to ignore—now is the time to act.

*The views expressed here are those of the authors’ and do not reflect the official position of the United States Air Force Academy, Department of the Air Force, Department of Defense, the University of Manitoba, Canada, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, or of any other organization with whom the authors are affiliated.*

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