Briefing Note

Can Cooperation be Restored?

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Despite the breakdown of relations between Russia and the seven other Arctic states, there is still limited room to restore cooperation today – primarily between non-state actors. As the Arctic faces a climate emergency that threatens the whole world, cooperation in research to understand the dramatic changes unfolding in the region, in environmental protection, and in joint climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts remain imperative for all involved.

In the context of the pause of the Arctic Council (AC), cooperation between non-state actors may be the most important form of cooperation now. Science and citizen diplomacy remain important. Researchers, Indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations, and civil societies may be able to influence states to reignite intergovernmental cooperation as such non-state actors and non-aligned states pressured the superpowers during the Cold War to converge on issues of common interest – especially around climate change and environmental protection. The Cold War holds many lessons for the contemporary situation and thinking about restoring cooperation in the midst of steep political tensions.

The freezing of state-to-state cooperation: Russian reactions

We are witnessing a severing of state-to-state cooperation after Russia's military actions in Ukraine. Right up until February 24, 2022, there was effective interstate circumpolar cooperation across various institutions and frameworks. Even just the day before, on February 23, 2022, Russia's ambassador to Norway read an opening speech written by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the Kirkenes Conference in the Norwegian Arctic. The speech mentioned "mutual assistance and good-neighborly relations" in the Arctic and complimented the Kirkenes conference as a setting for "constructive and depoliticized discussion of the pressing issues of international cooperation" (Lavrov, 2022).

From my experience as an American scholar based in Russia during this volatile period, I believe most Russian decision makers would still be supportive of Arctic cooperation, but government-level cooperation, such as collaboration between state funded scientists, is more difficult than ever. Some Russian decision makers are wholly pessimistic about the return of cooperation. Alexey

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Drobinin, director of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) policy planning department, said, "The period of constructive cooperation between Russia and Western countries is gone for good, regardless of the outcome of Russia's special operation in Ukraine" (TASS, 2022).

After seven of the AC states boycotted Russia's AC chairmanship in March, Nikolay Korchunov, Russia's Senior Arctic Official and Arctic Ambassador, called the pause "regrettable" and warned that it would pose "risks and challenges to soft security" (Dickie, 2022). Korchunov stressed that Arctic cooperation "should not be subject to the spill-over effect of any extra-regional events." Korchunov said, "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" (ibid).

Evidently, Russia places great importance on its position in the AC. Russian experts and diplomats have said Russia's exclusion from it is counterproductive and irrational. Russian Ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov, and Minister of Natural Resources, Alexander Kozlov, have gone as far as calling it illegitimate and claiming that the boycott violates the principles of consensus given that Russia is the chair of the AC during this period (RIA Novosti, 2022). Russian and international scientists have also drawn attention to data gaps that result from cutting off Russian Arctic scientists. Arctic climate research is crucial since warming in the region is a bellwether for global climate change.

As such statements demonstrate, Arctic cooperation with Western states is important to Russia, especially in regards to its recognition as a great power. Discussions of great power status may remind many of realist theory in international relations but I would argue that the English School theory of international relations is a more accurate framework for thinking about Russia's great power ambitions in the Arctic. English School theory contends that great powers must be recognized by others in their responsibilities to maintain peace and security in international society (Kopra, 2018). Great power status, not just as it applies to Russia, depends not only on how a state views itself but on how other actors recognize a country as a responsible power. In this sense, being seen as a willing and responsible actor in environmentalist and progressive forms of Arctic cooperation is important for Russia's claims to great power status.

Russia looking to non-Arctic states?

Instead of cooperation with the West, Russia is increasingly looking to the East and doubling down on collaboration with the U.S.' strategic competitors such as China. This trend is one of the main consequences of pausing the work of the AC and discontinuing cooperation with Russia. Korchunov has proclaimed that "it is difficult to imagine Arctic cooperation without the participation of Russia [and that] Russia remains open to cooperation, including with non-Arctic states" (Arctic.ru, 2022).

Russia's welcoming of Eastern partners to the Arctic is part of a larger global trend that has been going on for years, but it has been especially noticeable since February as Russia's diplomats engage with the states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Commonwealth of Independent States, Middle East, Turkey, India, Africa and others. In the Arctic, Russia is welcoming Chinese, Indian, and Middle Eastern companies to invest in projects previously involving Western firms. For example, after Western companies withdrew from the Russian Arctic due to sanctions, Russia's Novatek is now looking to the Emirati firm Green Energy Solutions to receive important

technology to construct liquefied natural gas projects and to the Turkish company Karpowership for a floating power plant (Humpert, 2022a; 2022b).

There are increasing signs of Russia-China strategic cooperation in the Arctic. The U.S. Coast Guard unexpectedly encountered Chinese and Russian warships operating together close to Alaska in September 2022 (Nelson, 2022). A month later at the Arctic Circle Assembly, China's Special Arctic Envoy, Feng Gao, said that China would not support Norway's AC chairmanship if Russia was excluded. Feng Gao criticized the interruption of international cooperation due to geopolitical competition and confrontation (Jonassen, 2022).

The Snowflake international science stations in the Russian Arctic, which were expected to launch at the end of 2024 and become a hub for international research, now seem to be developing into another Russia-China collaboration (Ministry of Science and Education, 2022). The cancellation of U.S.-China climate change talks in the wake of Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit may also speed up the process of Russia-China cooperation in climate and environmental research in the Arctic.

However, it must be said that the degree to which a Russia-China partnership exists in the Arctic is still ambiguous. One of Russia's leading Arctic scientists, the president of Russia's Arctic Academy of Sciences Valery Mitko, was arrested and charged with allegedly sharing state secrets with China (Reuters, 2020). Despite the hype around the Polar Silk Road, there has been no shipping from the Chinese Overseas Shipping Company along the Northern Sea Route since February 2022 (Staalesen, 2022).

Korchunov said at the 2022 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum that since dialogue with Russia has stopped, AC member states have not proposed creating alternative cooperation formats because they see the situation as temporary and that there is an assumption "that sooner or later, the situation will be resolved and we will continue our cooperation" (Arctic.ru, 2022). This is good news as there was a fear from some experts that Russia or the seven other Arctic states would create their own new Arctic regional institutions without the other party, but this is a low possibility. We also heard an optimistic view on this from Ambassador David Balton at the Arctic Circle Assembly in October 2022, who still sees cooperation with Russia possible for a peaceful and cooperative Arctic (Breum, 2022).

Areas to restore circumpolar cooperation

If these new signs of Russia's pivot to the East are alarming, then the task is now to find the gaps in the current freeze and identify areas where scientific cooperation, track 2 diplomacy and other forms of dialogue are possible between the largest Arctic state, Russia, and the seven other Arctic countries. Non-state actors, such as researchers, will now play a particularly important role as state-level cooperation is frozen. Academic conferences that bring together researchers regardless of nationality to share insights based on a common concern for the dramatic changes unfolding in the Arctic are themselves examples of science and citizen diplomacy. Recent examples include the USC-NSF Conference on Strategic Ambition and Environmental Constraint and the Calotte Academy (USC, 2022; Calotte Academy, 2022). Though government-level science may be restricted, cooperation at the individual-level is still manageable but laden with obstacles such as visa restrictions and closed consulates.

What specific areas are there for cooperation today? Special attention can be paid to the synergies that exist between the National Science Foundation's Navigating the New Arctic agenda and the

Russian AC chairmanship agenda. Both programs mention knowledge coproduction with Indigenous peoples as well as and scientific and cultural exchanges with Indigenous knowledge holders (NSF, 2021; Arctic Council, 2021). Research communities should prioritize working with Indigenous knowledge holders, not least because of their unique circumpolar organizations that go beyond national borders and could be an avenue for scientific cooperation at the international, people-to-people level.

At the end of February 2022, the Russian Section of the Saami Council said "now, more than ever, the Sami people in Russia need international support to continue cooperation between the Sami of the four countries" (Sámiráđđi, 2022a). Nonetheless, some Indigenous representative organizations such as the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East (RAIPON) came out strongly in support of Vladimir Putin's actions in Ukraine (RAIPON, 2022). The Kola Saami Association signed onto RAIPON's letter of support and the Saami Council paused cooperation with its Russian member organizations in April (Sámiráđđi, 2022b). Consequently, cooperation between government-backed Indigenous peoples' organizations will remain a challenge.

In seeking opportunities for international cooperation during these political tensions, one can look to the Bering Strait – a region of historically successful cooperation supported by the State Department and Russian MFA and of longstanding shared cultural heritage between Alaska and Chukotka. Collaborations with a cultural aspect may be less likely to face national security concerns. For example, peace activist Cynthia Lazaroff is organizing a Bering Strait Festival to connect residents and Indigenous peoples of Alaska and Chukotka in a cultural diplomacy project that could incorporate scientific cooperation and knowledge coproduction (Lazaroff, 2021).

The U.S. and Russia have also maintained maritime safety cooperation in the Bering Strait since February. This collaboration concerns the areas of search and rescue, oil spill response, law enforcement and fisheries management. However, joint Coast Guard exercises are on pause (Rosen, 2022). Similarly, Norway paused nuclear safety cooperation with Russia, but maintains contact channels, emergency preparedness and information sharing (Digges, 2022). This shows that there are some critical areas of cooperation that can be maintained.

Non-state actors and lessons from the Cold War

These concerns about maritime and nuclear safety can be extended even further to climate change and environmental security cooperation. If this is not currently feasible, then the states may be pressured by civil society, Arctic residents and non-governmental organizations – as they have been in the past. In the nineties, such non-state actors influenced national authorities to the urgency of nuclear safety in the Arctic. During the Cold War, the political struggle between the U.S. and USSR created an atmosphere where the environment was another battlefield of ideological competition; virtuous ecological achievements were highlighted to show one socio-political system's advantages over the other. International concerns from non-aligned countries over environmental degradation played a major role in pressuring the superpowers to demonstrate their system's environmentalist superiority as well as develop mutually advantageous forms of cooperation (Devyatkin, 2022).

Arctic residents, Indigenous peoples, scholars, civil societies and NGOs also became concerned with environmental protection after experiencing air and water pollution that largely originated

from lower latitudes. Indeed, cooperation between Indigenous peoples' organizations, sub-national governments, environmental NGOs and the scientific community was a key trend that caused a paradigm shift from military tension to political stability in the Arctic (Heininen, 2022). This history of external pressure on states presents a lesson to us today. However, today, these groups operate under more difficult political conditions such as restrictions on Russian organizations from working with foreign partners and restraining foreign agent laws.

Such external pressure provided the context for a number of Arctic science diplomacy agreements signed by U.S. and USSR administrations. These included the 1972 Nixon-Brezhnev Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Environmental Protection, which named the "Arctic and sub-Arctic ecological systems" as focus areas for the "exchange of scientists… exchange of scientific and technical information… [and] joint development and implementation of programs." Another example was the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears – a deliberate effort at using science to build confidence during détente. Environmental groups had competing visions on the appropriate management of wildlife, but mutual concern was pressing enough that the multilateral treaty was concluded (Devyatkin, 2022).

The 1986 and 1988 Reagan-Gorbachev summits in Reykjavik and Moscow respectively facilitated high-level discussion of ecological concerns. The joint statement from the 1988 Moscow summit reaffirmed the leaders' "support for expanded bilateral and regional contacts and… increased scientific and environmental cooperation." Such diplomacy for science produced a joint research report titled "Prospects for Future Climate" in 1990. This work helped alert scientists to rising temperatures and changing weather in high latitudes (ibid). The valuable findings it produced arguably would not have been achieved had the research been conducted unilaterally. Though we are living under different political conditions to those of the Cold War, it is noteworthy that such agreements were able to be implemented under high political tensions.

As the Cold War came to an end, relations between scientists proved to be a significant source of trust-building that spilled over into the political and military spheres in the form of arms reduction talks. U.S.-Soviet/Russia tensions eased and scientific cooperation gradually entered more sensitive fields such as oceanography and natural resources. In this way, it makes sense to start thinking and planning for the post-Ukraine conflict period when the West and Russia may be able to restore cooperation at the state-to-state level too.

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