

Russia's war and the prospects for Arctic States' cooperation

Michael Paul

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has opened a Pandora's box of consequences across the globe, also affecting Arctic governance. The seven remaining Arctic states have temporarily suspended all Arctic Council-related activities. The temporary pause on meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies does not mean a withdrawal or a reconstitution of the Council but with the ongoing war in Ukraine the future of Arctic cooperation is highly unpredictable.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Ukraine's counteroffensive in late September 2022 marks a turn, but not yet a turning point, in the war that Russia started in 2014. Ukrainian forces recaptured thousands of square kilometers of occupied territory in the Kharkiv region in just six days. But Russia still occupies more than 100,000 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory. The Ukrainian counteroffensive nevertheless is making progress. Russian forces appear to be attempting to slow it by falling back to more defensible positions rather than being able to stop or reverse it. Ukrainian forces have been successful but will they be able to recapture all of the occupied territory, including Crimea? The Kremlin signaled that if Russia were to go forward with annexation — even if no other countries recognized it — further military action by Ukraine in those regions could be seen as an attack on Russia itself, justifying any military response and allowing it to use all the forces of self-defense. That could be a potential trigger for a general mobilization or another escalation.

Nevertheless, due to worsening weather conditions and Russia's organizational problems, there is some hope that a reduction in fighting in winter 2022/23 will give leaders in Ukraine and Russia time to reflect on their war aims, military options, and whether they are prepared to compromise. The next six months could be a good time for the Kremlin to offer negotiations. That's the optimistic perspective, although through such an offer Moscow is sure to try and split the Western alliance.

The more realistic perspective is that as long as Vladimir Putin is president of the Russian Federation, he will follow an imperial policy of extending the territory by reassembling as much so-called Russian earth as possible. Integrating illegally annexed Ukrainian territory into the Russian Federation could be a first step of further aggressive expansion.

Russia has become a threat again. Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz noted that the West will have to get used to the fact that Putin's Russia "will define itself as an adversary" to the European Union and NATO "for the foreseeable future."¹

Both the effects of the war and its geopolitical context give some hope

There is a growing sense that Russia's weaponizing of energy exports is a strategy of diminishing returns and that Putin may have overplayed his hand. The European Union and NATO are more united and stronger than before. Finland and Sweden will soon join NATO, strengthening the Arctic capabilities of the alliance and countering Putin's strategy of reducing NATO's influence. In Germany the so-called *Zeitenwende* really could become a turning point for its national security strategy and for the armed forces, ending a counter-productive policy towards Russia and decades of neglect of the Bundeswehr.

But the war has also caused concerns in Asia: Putin had to acknowledge President Xi's concerns over his war in Ukraine during their meeting on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit. If the cautioning of China's president was not enough, India's president Modi told Putin that "today's time is not a time for war"² and stressed the importance of democracy, diplomacy and dialogue.

Prospects of dialogue and Arctic states cooperation in the future

After Russia's announcement that the gas pipeline Nord Stream 1 would remain shut, Robert Habeck, Germany's economy minister, said that it would have been surprising the other way around: "The only thing from Russia that is reliable are the lies."³

Russia is no reliable partner anymore – neither for business, nor for peace. There cannot be a return to business as usual. Russia has violated the most important international treaties which tried to keep the peace – from the UN Charter to the Charter of Paris and the Budapest memorandum. But we have to deal with climate change problems in the Arctic and we need Russia's partnership for saving the future. Unfortunately this means, under current conditions, with a future Russia. Do we have the time for that?

Indeed, it is time to explore common interests and find workable solutions together, with and without Russia. An inclusive approach means both ending the war in Ukraine and starting a new Arctic security dialogue, otherwise there is always the danger of facing a spillover from the war.

A comprehensive approach of a peace treaty should be combined with arms control, CSBMs (confidence and security-building measures in the OSCE world) and an Arctic Military Code of Conduct as proposed in *Arctic Yearbook 2019*. The purpose of such a document would be for all states with armed forces capable of operating in the Arctic to define the red lines of military activities in the northern high latitudes, while also creating a dialogue mechanism that would promote greater transparency and lay the ground for a less conflict-prone relationship between NATO and Russia in the Arctic region.⁴ Also it would be good to take another look at the 2020 Recommendations of the Expert Dialogue on NATO-Russia Military Risk Reduction in Europe.⁵

Nevertheless, an intrinsic weakness of CSBMs is that they only work to reduce risks of accident or miscalculation. They are of little use if one side intends to risk - or initiate - another conflict. So reestablishing peace and cooperation in the High North involves a mixture of both deterrence and CSBMs.

A hard security dialogue over the Arctic *with* Russia is preferable, which could reduce the risk of incidents leading to unintended consequences. This is important because Russia's reduced military capabilities on land will enhance the value of Russia's sea power and its maritime nuclear deterrent in the Arctic. The problem is how to negotiate a document or another peace treaty with a regime which seeks to eliminate a whole nation. Putin's strategic failure could eventually destroy Russia's future and Russia as a failed state could become even more problematic, much beyond the Arctic.

Arctic states' cooperation depends in the short and mid-term on how and under which conditions the war in Ukraine has ended. In the long-term perspective, an approach without Russia makes no sense. The effects of climate change, receding sea ice and melting permafrost do not stop at frontiers. So, we need strategic patience. We must plan for future engagement in the Arctic with and without Russia.

Notes

1. DW (September 16, 2022). Germany: 'Armed forces must become best-equipped in Europe'. <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-armed-forces-must-be-best-equipped-in-europe-scholz-says/a-63146510>
2. New York Times (September 16, 2022). Amid Russia's Growing International Isolation, India's Leader Tells Putin that Today is No Time for War. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/world/europe/modi-putin-ukraine-russia.html>
3. New York Times (September 7, 2022) Europe Says Putin's Gas Power is Weakening. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/07/world/europe/eu-russia-putin-gas.html>
4. Duncan Depledge, Mathieu Boulègue, Andrew Foxall & Dmitriy Tulupov (2019). Why we need to talk about military activity in the Arctic: Towards an Arctic Military Code of Conduct. Arctic Yearbook. <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2019/2019-briefing-notes/328-why-we-need-to-talk-about-military-activity-in-the-arctic-towards-an-arctic-military-code-of-conduct>
5. SWP Berlin (2020). Recommendations of the Participants of the Expert Dialogue on NATO-Russia Military Risk Reduction in Europe. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/sonstiges/-NATO_Russia_Military_Risk_Reduction_in_Europe_Expert_Dialogue_Recommendations.pdf