

Can the Arctic remain a region of international cooperation in the context of the Ukrainian crisis?

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Russia's special military operation¹ in Ukraine has radically changed an international discourse on the prospects of cooperation and security in Arctic region. In contrast with the post-Cold war understanding of the Arctic as a region of peace and cooperation, today one can observe a clear shift to confrontation between the West and Russia. There is no obvious answer if it is possible to return to an atmosphere of cooperation in the Arctic while military conflict in Ukraine is unpredictable in scale, duration, and consequences. Based on the global significance of the Arctic and historical cooperative experience it seems that is still possible to keep cooperation in the less politicized area – scientific cooperation (Arctic science diplomacy).

Introduction

Strategic documents regulating Russia's Arctic policy place emphasis on social and economic priorities. This is because the Arctic Zone of Russian Federation (AZRF) became a resource base for development from a long term perspective. Today the AZRF provides about 70% of gas and 17% of oil. Russia focuses on international cooperation in the Arctic in all areas and has never demonstrated an intention to resolve regional disputes by military instruments (shelf expansion, maritime borders, cooperation in Svalbard and in the sea areas).

Russia's Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine which started in February 24, 2022 has dramatically changed the political landscape. On the one hand, the Western states are consolidated in condemning the SMO and trying to stop conflict by imposing sanctions on Russia. On the other hand, the military activity seems dragged for an unpredictable period, and it undermines international cooperation in some areas which are not directly related to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Stakeholders of the Arctic policy are faced with questions that have no obvious answers: can the Arctic remain a zone of international cooperation? Should all states interested in

¹ The editors of the Arctic Yearbook disagree with the characterization of the invasion of Ukraine as a 'special military operation', however have retained the author's original wording in this commentary.

the Arctic development prevent the conflict's spill-over effect in the Arctic region or should they put pressure on Russia and stop cooperation in the Arctic?

Proponents of the cooperative approach point to the Cold War experience when cooperation between the USSR and the West was possible in certain areas and continued regardless of numerous conflicts between them. This means that existing conflicts don't exclude partial cooperation. Those who support confrontation with Russia in all dimensions and regions, including the Arctic, believe that sanctions finally will force Russia to change its political regime and stop the SMO.

Sanctions against Russia

Several waves of Western sanctions were imposed to restrain escalation and to stop hostilities in Ukraine. In the economic dimension, the largest western companies like *BP*, *Shell*, French *Total Energies* and Norwegian *Equinor* withdrew from *Novatec*, *Rosneft* and *Gazprom* joint projects in the Arctic Zone of Russian Federation including *Yamal LNG*, *Arctic LNG-2*, *Vostok-oil*, *Sakhalin LNG-2*, and *Kharyaga oilfield*. Swiss-Dutch *Vitol* refused the trading of Russian oil and gas products by the end of 2022 and stopped investment in future projects while some of the companies continue ongoing contracts. Canadian *Kinross Gold* sold its assets in *Kupol* mine and *Udinsk* project in gold mining at half price. Finnish corporation *Fennovoima* broke its contract on building a nuclear station in Hanhikivi, and Korean *Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering* cancelled its contract on LNG-carriers for *Yamal-LNG*, and so on. While some companies like *Bomesc Offshore Engineering*, *Mitsui*, *JOGMEG*, *Arctech Helsinki Shipyard*, and *Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering* try to continue cooperation with Russia, they are under powerful political pressure. India and China do not rush to buy former western assets because of the threat of U.S. sanctions.

In the military dimension, Russia faces growing risks. NATO allies increased the number of exercises and are trying to improve anti-submarine facilities on the line of Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (*GIUK*). Albeit NATO intensified its activity in the Arctic not only because of the Ukrainian war, but also in reaction to climate change and the rise of global competition for Arctic resources. Another trouble for the Russian military comes from the program "Freedom of Navigation Operations" (*FONOP*). The logic of *FONOP* is clear: the United States can use military operations to assert its interpretation of international law including "innocent passage" in territorial waters and free access to Exclusive Economic Zones of littoral states. Demonstrations of access and presence of U.S. and NATO forces through naval and aerial operations will create high risks of unforeseen incidents. Possible joining of Finland and Sweden to NATO will change dramatically the strategic environment in the Arctic and Baltic regions because the alliance receives about one-day military deployment in territories of these states, including strike capabilities. Russia definitely will respond by military build-up, but nobody knows how. One should keep in mind that Russia is more sensitive to military threats compared to any littoral Arctic state because of the imbalance between Russia and NATO. From a military perspective, the situation in the Arctic looks more and more like a "vicious circle" with increasing probability of an arms race.

Political sanctions resulted in the boycott of all official events under Russia's chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2021-2023). In the working groups, most of the programs with membership of Russia were frozen. While some western experts spoke out against the collapse of scientific cooperation, others discuss how to isolate or even exclude Russia from the Arctic Council.

Additionally, the U.S. promises sanctions against any company that considers to start, or to continue cooperation with Russia in the Arctic.

The results of the sanctions had a strong negative impact on the further development of the AZRF. Russia is forced to rebuild funding and to look for new partners, which is extremely difficult to do. But the sanctions did not affect Russia's policy in the Ukrainian conflict because it depends on the other factors. In this sense, Western sanctions in the Arctic have not brought the necessary effect. The reverse side of the coin is that all participants who had to leave joint Arctic projects lost prospective assets in Russia. Not all agree that these losses are compatible with the Ukrainian problems which have no ties with the Arctic policy. Some experts see the Ukrainian crisis "spill-over" effect in the Arctic as a part of a great game in the energy sector of Europe where the U.S. gets Russia out.

Return to cooperation with Russia is still possible?

The above obstacles raise the question of whether cooperation with Russia in the Arctic is possible in the new geopolitical reality?

The answer "no" opens the door for the total escalation in the spirit of the Cold War but with higher risks of nuclear disaster. The threshold for the use of nuclear weapons was lowered after the U.S. and Russia withdrew from agreements like the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Treaty on the Open Skies. Perspectives of "spill-over" effects of the Ukrainian crisis in the Arctic, expansion of NATO responsibility in the Far North, and a lack of regulations on tactical nuclear weapons will contribute to the loss of control on the strategic environment in Eastern Europe, the Baltic and finally in the Arctic region.

The answer "yes" demands a definition of the forms, conditions, legal and institutional frameworks to renew international cooperation in the Arctic. Considering the over-politicized perception of Russian foreign policy as well as the unpredictable scope, scale and duration of war in Ukraine, it seems appropriate for the Arctic stakeholders to confirm if the Arctic remains a zone of peace and cooperation in spite of problems in other regions. This point may be put in the agenda of the coming Norwegian chairmanship of the Arctic Council for 2023-2025.

The way to keep the Arctic a peaceful and cooperative zone

What can be the first step to return to cooperation with Russia in the Arctic? The key link might become Arctic science diplomacy as a less politicized area of interactions between states. The other forms of cooperation will return later, after at least relative stabilization of Russian-Western relations.

In this view, the Agreement in Enhancing Arctic Scientific Cooperation (2017) offers a good start for opportunities but its implementation was stopped in 2022. Looking to the future, this document can be a powerful driver for scientific cooperation between Arctic and non-Arctic states because it assumes a removal of various barriers to international collaborations, including visa delays, difficulties in carrying equipment and samples across national borders, and restrictions on access to data. Additionally the Agreement stimulates international cooperation in education, training, and a combination of traditional and local knowledges with modern scientific methods. Even today foreign scientists try to continue interactions with Russian colleagues, informally neglecting

modern political tensions because many international projects can't be cancelled without complete failure of research.

The most powerful impulse to renew scientific cooperation can be global climate change, resulting in unpredictable and often negative consequences: variations of ice dynamic in polar seas, melting permafrost, far going climate changes in the other regions of the planet, degradation of Arctic flora and fauna, and a decrease of living conditions for Indigenous peoples. The consequences of climate change apply to all states of the planet regardless of the final resolution of Ukrainian crisis. In a political sense, the Arctic science diplomacy maintained "bridges" for dialogue during the Cold war and this experience should not be forgotten.

The other directions of global importance comprise legal issues like implementation of the Polar Code, completion of the ratification processes on delimitation of the Bering Sea, delimitation of the maritime space in the Chukchi Sea beyond the 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone, and a resolution of Russia's territorial disputes with Canada and Denmark regarding the Arctic extended continental shelf (the Lomonosov ridge and Mendeleev elevation).

A lot of economic and infrastructure projects are of high significance for all Arctic stakeholders: cooperation in search and rescue missions, maintaining sustainable communication and monitoring systems in the Arctic, improvement of port infrastructure on the Northern Sea Route, international transit, development of transport hubs in Murmansk and Kamchatka, railroads, development of gas & oil production and processing projects, and the exchange of shipbuilding technologies.

As for security issues, the idea to start negotiations to establish a nuclear-free zone in some parts of the Arctic looks promising. Measures of military confidence in the Arctic were discussed many times since the Cold War ended. Taking into account specific features of the Arctic region, the confidence measures should cover all domains: air, land, and sea. Discussing confidence measures may start in the form of bilateral consultation between Russia and Norway, Russia and the U.S., and Russia and Finland (in the case of NATO-membership). To set spatial and temporal limitations on specific military activity seems to be the most urgent topic. For example, spatial limits may be established in Bear Gap located to the south from Svalbard and GIUK Gap located between Iceland and United Kingdom.

In the institutional dimension, many experts express pessimism about the effectiveness of international organization including Arctic Council. Even more sophisticated is a question about regional security institutions. Different plans on how to exclude Russia from the Arctic are discussed: from reform of the Arctic Council up to the creation of a new organization without Russia. Not specifying how realistic these plans are, the next steps to cooperation look more feasible in a bilateral format rather than a multilateral one.

To conclude, the view of world policy through the lens of the Ukrainian war looks at least narrowed as the Arctic has global significance without reference to how the war will end.