

Commentary

Report from the USC-NSF Arctic Security Conference

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Introduction

On Thursday, October 20th, scholars, policy makers, and government officials met for the NSF-sponsored workshop, on *Strategic Ambition and Environmental Constraint: a Conference-Workshop on the Impact of Rapid Environmental Degradation on the Security Strategies of Arctic States*. This conference was designed to facilitate cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary discussion on the emerging and intersecting threats to diverse forms of security in the Arctic. Specifically, it aimed to emphasize the preeminence of climatic and environmental security in the Arctic domain, which due to rapid and accelerating changes in the cryosphere have an outsized impact on other elements of security, namely national, food, and human security. In this commentary we, the graduate student fellows invited to the conference, share our observations and commentary on the day's proceedings.

Main Takeaways from Conference

A central takeaway from the conference is the corrosive nature of current great power politics in causing a breakdown of relations across all sectors of Arctic cooperation. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has restored the Cold-war era stalemate between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states and Russia. The disruption to Arctic Council activity and the cessation of numerous Russian-associated research projects has shifted national efforts from joint environmental preservation to more competitive and adversarial forms of Arctic development. The consequences of this for the necessary global effort to monitor, combat, and adapt to climate change are dire, what one participant described as an “opportunity cost” of immense proportions, and another as “a waste of intellectual resources”.

Even within the Arctic Strategies Workshop, several Western diplomats who had confirmed their attendance of the workshop, later boycotted the event due to the presence of Russian social scientists and scholars. This demonstrated how global geopolitics can shape communicative spaces and individuals' exposure to diverse perspectives within an interdisciplinary academic sphere. It

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also underscores the perceived negative political costs that affiliating with Russian counterparts provokes in Western officialdom. The oft-encountered dismissal of productive dialogue with Russian colleagues and peers furthermore ignores the fact that the collapse of a truly representative pan-Arctic institutional structure does not free up Western ambitions or interests in the Arctic. Instead, it limits their ability to achieve their goals and opens the space to more anarchic geopolitics. It also gestures to a perhaps unwitting disregard for the efforts of Arctic Indigenous peoples who have been central to facilitating Arctic cooperation over the past thirty years. As discussed later on, the absence of Indigenous representatives at the workshop was a profound inadequacy that deprived the participants of essential insights.

From the perspective of the natural sciences, the sudden dissolution of dialogue and data sharing has acted as a barrier to substantive action against climate change. As a result of warming, zoonotic diseases along with harmful algal blooms (HAB), and other toxicological risks have emerged as catastrophic threats to the Arctic marine system and Indigenous peoples that rely on it. Gaps in knowledge can result in dangerous misperceptions regarding critical areas like permafrost thaw or coastal erosion. Such inaction additionally drives decision-makers closer to perilous false solutions, such as geoengineering, which have a high probability of inducing unanticipated and negative outcomes. Consequently, we must recognize that because climate change disproportionately impacts those communities that have contributed least to anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, decision-makers have a duty to welcome and collaborate with them to develop appropriate responses.

A final takeaway was the controversial nature of sustainable resource development in the Arctic. There was substantial debate among the experts on the tradeoffs in social, cultural, environmental, and economic costs and benefits, especially in the area of critical mineral mining. This provoked another set of questions: what are the economic alternatives to extraction in the Arctic? How can Indigenous people be directly empowered/involved at the decision-making table instead of being “symbolically” included by governments to ease political pressures? What models/ strategies can we use to restore substantive cooperation among nation-states? These questions reflect the challenges faced at local, national, and international levels of Arctic development.

Critical Perspectives on Outcomes

A key theme of the policy-scholarly discussions was comprehension of the concept and application of security and securitization discourse under the geopolitical and climatic changes occurring in the Arctic and beyond. Scholarly literature has shown that security is a socially- and politically-constructed concept, serving express governmental agendas to address state-defined “threats”, which often conveniently exclude the intensification of threats or threat-perception driven by the securitizing state actor. Discussions on the concept evolved around its bifurcation into hard (military) security and soft (environmental, health) security, but understanding the Arctic as a place where hard security concerns are entangled with and often displaced by environmental concerns raises many questions about how dominant security paradigms prime organizations like the US military to respond in predetermined and perhaps maladaptive ways.

A closer look at the hard security discussions revealed few examples of how security discourses connect across international, national, and local levels. Such connectivity was identified in the debate on the US military's role in addressing civic functions to respond to the adverse effects of

natural disasters, like Typhoon “Merbok,” which devastated several communities in western Alaska in September 2022. In global terms, the audience raised questions about US military responsibilities to reduce CO2 emissions and fossil energy dependence, as well as the military’s long-term vision for climate actions that are currently impeded by financial and jurisdictional constraints. But apart from that, the gap between scalar approaches was not addressed in the discussions. As scientists forecast that climate will continue to change rapidly, what could be the immediate ways to connect global interests and actions to local ones to address the complexity of security challenges for all actors in the Arctic? Cooperation in climate science remained the strongest argument for a quick resolution of the conflict, as gaps in the current knowledge can’t be closed without the territorially-based observations and contributions of scientists.

Moving away from the dominating focus on the nation-state scale, the soft security approach targeted the local level by raising problems related to health and food security (reliable subsistence harvesting, accumulated toxins, potential spread of novel diseases), environmental security (thawing permafrost, coastal erosion, assorted contaminants), and economic security (aging infrastructure, out-migration, mining imperatives and community impacts). As should be well-understood, Indigenous peoples of the Arctic are frontline climate communities, whose vulnerabilities to environmental degradation include not just the well-publicized issue of erosion-driven relocation but also exposure to contaminants, poor air quality, inadequate housing conditions, and high reliance on wild foods. It should be noted, however, that without a representative of an Indigenous nation present at the conference to provide input, this issue and all other discussions of Indigenous interests were impoverished.

Future Possibilities

An early speaker in the conference discussed three scenarios considering Russia’s acceleration in security build up and the potential NATO expansion. Under the first scenario, the Ukraine War ends with a ceasefire and Arctic cooperation on science and climate is gradually restored; under the second scenario, the Ukrainian conflict worsens and embroils Arctic nations in armed conflict; under the third scenario, the status quo of an unresolved proxy war is maintained with but with climate change heightening insecurity in the Arctic and globally. What these scenarios indicate is that the fundamental disruption to the global, Western-centric order leveled by a reckless Moscow has apparently become *the* determining factor in whether or not Arctic states and the whole world can rise to the challenge of climate change. Though one speaker offered the glib observation that the Russian- and OPEC-driven energy crisis may compel a faster green transition in the West, the grim outlook was largely undisturbed by the end of the workshop.

Among crucial long-term issues, ethical cooperation with Indigenous peoples remains front and center. Indigenous communities in the Arctic are on the frontline of climate change. Environmental problems and increased human activities in the Arctic have impacted their communities’ well-being most severely, particularly through reduced access to culturally-appropriate foods, exposure to poor housing, water, and air quality, and limited capacity to make their voices heard in Arctic decision-making. Community security, as one speaker put it, must be understood as commensurate with national security. Policy making, scientific research and even academic conferences such as this workshop need to invite and elevate Indigenous voices, not just on “their own” issues but on questions of peace, technology, and economics. States should take a more holistic approach to working with Indigenous knowledge and supporting community-driven

initiatives. People in the community should have the resources to realize their own goals for self-determination.

Detailed strategies in resolving the contradictions among Indigenous peoples, private sector actors and government agencies need to be equitably and democratically developed. The importance of co-production of knowledge and the co-management or stewardship of natural resources are highlighted in the newest US Arctic Strategy and require clear guidelines for implementation. For the United States, a commitment to Indigenous-centered research and development means that the needs of Alaska Native communities and people living in the Arctic must take precedence in defining research priorities. Providing resources and time for Alaska Native participation in both research and decision-making spaces is also critical. As the National Inuit Strategy on Research pointed out, Indigenous peoples are clear that when it comes to research, “Nothing about us without us.”

Further, the Arctic Council, however it is reconstituted following the cessation of war, can better build upon its role not only as a policy-shaping, cooperative body, but as a policy-driver. Peace is not the status quo but the result of continuous efforts among good faith actors; rather than submitting to the agendas of its constituent nation-states, the Arctic Council could adopt a more autonomous status, based in an environmental peace-building mandate. Its status as the only high-level intergovernmental forum where Indigenous peoples’ organizations have a seat at the table could evolve into a properly equitable and polycentric structure. Should it resume cooperation not just at the international level, but with entities such as the Northern Forum and other subnational interests, it could herald a more dedicated orientation to the human dimension of Arctic life and change. Considering its large policy shaping capacity, its influence can only be expected to grow as climate change accelerates and the Arctic becomes an increasingly central economic and security space.

Before any commitments to geoengineering in the Arctic, critical minerals are expected to be a key factor in both combating climate change and exacerbating geopolitical contentions over land, resources, and energy. Critical minerals, such as copper, lithium, cobalt, nickel and rare earth elements are essential to the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. While the “rules-based international order” continues to prevail in Arctic seabed claims, however, landscape degradation and the possibility for inequitable and even violent dispossession of Indigenous lands for mining remain a major concern. The development of critical minerals in the Arctic faces challenges such as underdeveloped technology and infrastructure in rural areas, health, environmental and labor issues, unbalanced costs and benefits, vulnerable supply chains and lack of community engagement.