

Diplomatic Deadlock in the Arctic: Science as an entry point to renewed dialogue

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The ongoing geopolitical confrontation over Russia's war in Ukraine led to the severing of constructive diplomatic communication on many issues of multilateral relevance. The Arctic, long considered a model of international collaboration, has not avoided the consequences; on a number of pressing topics, including security, science, and the environment, there is little cooperation remaining between the West and Russia. The lack of an adequate forum for addressing the urgent threats facing the Arctic led the Switzerland-based Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) to launch a discreet dialogue process (the 'High North Talks') to address some of these gaps. These talks convene experts from the states most invested in the Arctic, with a view to developing creative solutions and conveying them to decision-makers for consideration. One area of attention is scientific collaboration, which has largely ceased since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Regardless of the geopolitical fallout from the war, it is imperative that an accommodation be found to jointly address the most pressing of the Arctic's challenges, which are long-term and global in nature, and in some cases irreversible if they are left unattended.

Introduction

In the decades since the end of the Cold War, science has regularly been depicted as an entry point to dialogue aimed at alleviating political conflict or diplomatic tensions. Science is after all not politics; it is a universal good, a common language, and a shared value; moreover, it is grounded in widely-agreed fact rather than opinion, which means that - at least in theory - it is less prone to ideological influence.

Even during the Cold War, science diplomacy helped to maintain threads of communication across ideological divides, and provided the vehicle and substance for dialogue (see for example Davis & Patman (eds), 2015). Thanks to science diplomacy, despite geopolitical tensions the superpowers were able to find common ground and work together where they perceived a mutual interest or a shared threat. Convergence around the language of science may have helped them to avert an even greater rupture, and perhaps more dangerous escalations.

Regrettably today's geopolitical climate appears to be less amenable to constructive exchange and joint, pragmatic problem-solving. Russia's brutal attack on Ukraine triggered an enormous counter-reaction that has led to the severing of West-Russia communications on multifarious international issues and in various regions, including the High North.

As such, the Arctic is fast becoming a new theatre for great power politics. The recent sharpening of geopolitical tensions introduces new unknown variables into the international security landscape, and affects a broad gamut of issues on which West-Russia coordination was once taken for granted, including science. Without constructive communication - which has almost completely ceased - there are risks that misunderstandings, miscalculations, or simple neglect may lead to an environmental disaster or a dangerous new conflagration.

In the absence of an adequate forum for addressing the urgent threats facing the Arctic, in 2022 the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) launched a discreet dialogue process, the 'High North Talks', which has met regularly since. The Talks offer an informal platform for discussing - in a neutral setting - the threats and challenges, potential solutions, and possible areas of renewed cooperation in the Arctic. Attendees include experts from states with a stake in the region - Arctic Council members (including Russia), as well as other actors like China, the EU, Japan and India.

In the context of Russia's attack on Ukraine, the High North Talks explore how Arctic affairs could be managed more effectively in spite of the geopolitical turbulence. The Talks constitute one of the few remaining venues where representatives from the countries most invested in the Arctic can meet, in a safe and discreet environment, to discuss the future of this region.

One of the most urgent topics is the need to restore some meaningful cooperation between the West and Russia, at least on the most pressing issues like climate change monitoring. While the rationale for the West's response to Russian aggression in Ukraine is clear and understood, it is crucial that ways be found - perhaps through policies that allow for targeted coordination in 'exceptional' cases - to manage ongoing problems of global significance.

The case for resuming (the most urgent) scientific cooperation

There are at least three compelling arguments as to why scientific cooperation in the Arctic should be resumed, with a view to averting an environmental disaster. These arguments are based on law, principle, and scientific fact.

A legal obligation

The 2017 *Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation*, whose explicit purpose is to 'enhance cooperation in Scientific Activities' (Article 2), is still in force. The signatories - who are the eight Arctic states¹ - recognised in their Agreement the importance of *constructive cooperation* and *environmental protection* in the Arctic (preambular paragraphs 1 and 2); reiterated the urgent need for *increased actions* to mitigate and adapt to climate change (preambular paragraph 3); and noted the importance of international *scientific cooperation* (preambular paragraph 5).

Moreover, in order to achieve said enhanced cooperation, the states parties entered into a number of commitments, including to facilitate the entry and exit of persons and equipment involved in

¹ The Government of Canada, the Government of the Kingdom of Denmark, the Government of the Republic of Finland, the Government of Iceland, the Government of the Kingdom of Norway, the Government of the Russian Federation, the Government of the Kingdom of Sweden, and the Government of the United States of America.

scientific activities (Article 4), as well as access to research infrastructure and facilities (Article 5), research areas (Article 6) and data (Article 7).

These commitments are legally binding. Article 18 provides for the amendment of the Agreement, and 19(3) for automatic renewal after its initial five-year validity unless a party announces its withdrawal from it. Also, any party may withdraw via written notification (Article 19(4)). However, since these provisions have not been triggered, the Agreement remains valid and binding.

Acute regional and global shocks since the signing of the Agreement have significantly altered the geopolitical landscape, and rendered various forms of collaboration untenable. However, the urgency of the problems afflicting the Arctic has not diminished in line with reduced cooperation, nor have the obligations contained in the 2017 Agreement been put on hold. The parties must be cognizant of the fact that if its provisions are not followed, not only will states be in breach of their international legal obligations, but the rest of the world will face real life repercussions.

The principle of Open Science

An argument can be made that impeding science is equivalent to restricting academic freedom and free speech within science. Moreover, in a time of diplomatic tension a clear line should be drawn between trust between scientists and trust between governments; while the latter focus on matters of state, including security, scientists bear the vital responsibility of finding solutions for the long-term wellbeing of the planet. Their work requires establishing facts, which demands sustainable dialogue and cooperation, whatever the (geo)political climate. In other words, there is a greater good, even a social responsibility in ‘ringfencing’ this essential pursuit from the vagaries of politics.

In that context, science diplomacy is a valuable tool for reopening dialogue on issues of common interest, and for enabling policymakers to better understand Arctic processes, ecosystems, and environmental changes and to make informed decisions based on evidence. ‘Open science’ plays a vital role in the Arctic; it encourages knowledge sharing, collaboration, and transparency among researchers, Indigenous communities, policymakers, and other stakeholders (UNESCO, 2021).

Through open science, monitoring can occur in real time, which constitutes the basis for early warning, climate modelling, and adaptation strategies. Critically, these important functions have been discontinued over the Ukraine war, which harms not only the Arctic but also other parts of the world affected by the knock-on effects of climatic conditions in the Arctic.

Perhaps most importantly, by focusing on shared scientific goals and objectives and addressing common global challenges, scientists can transcend political differences and work together towards a common purpose. In turn, abiding by the principle of open science, scientists can pool their expertise and resources to develop sustainable and impactful solutions that transcend national boundaries. Reviving this sense of common purpose requires a political choice to decouple geopolitical tensions (as least on an exceptional basis) from the principle of open science.

The scientific imperative

The Arctic is experiencing unprecedented environmental changes, including melting sea ice, permafrost thaw, and shifts in ecosystems. Temperatures in the region continue to rise at four times the global annual average (Rantanen et al. 2022). These transformations directly affect the entire globe and therefore require urgent and global responses.

The international scientific community has not been immune to recent geopolitical tensions, with Western countries and Russia introducing reciprocal bans on joint research and scientific projects. There are notable exceptions, including continuing cooperation on fisheries, but these are relatively few. While important scientific research continues in the Russian Arctic, this too is under threat as sanctions reduce access to Western technology.

Of course, the environmental problems of the Arctic do not recede when there is a break in international collaboration - if anything they accelerate. Accordingly, it is important to consider ways to 'compartmentalise' scientific/environmental issues from hot security issues. The former are urgent for the globe, not just the region, and they are sometimes irreversible.

With Russia representing almost 60 percent of the Arctic coast, there is no escaping the need for constructive engagement with this key stakeholder - at least at the level of scientists - when it comes to global concerns. Close monitoring of the Arctic is key to improving understanding of the changes that climate change will bring in the future. These are existential and global challenges.

It goes without saying that Russia's brutality in Ukraine has profound consequences - for its millions of victims, but also well beyond Ukraine, not least for the basic norms underpinning the international normative framework. This deserves a severe and comprehensive response. At the same time, though, both in timescale and scope the urgent problems of the Arctic require joint and sustained attention if they are to be effectively mitigated, for the sake of the future of humanity.

The dangers associated with the emergence of possibly dangerous pathogens (including viruses) from the melting permafrost (Cohen, 2023), and the spread of radioactive waste (Miner et al. 2021), are just two examples of risks that will persist and potentially undermine global safety and health, whether the war in Ukraine is resolved or not. Taking the latter point further, there are thousands of radioactive objects - including spent fuel and corroding nuclear reactors inside sunken vessels - that were dumped at the bottom of the Arctic seas during the Cold War. Today, political tensions and international sanctions hinder any retrieval and clean-up efforts as Russia lacks the equipment and technical expertise to extract these vessels without foreign assistance (Digges, 2022).

The severe impact that radioactive contamination can have on the environment is undeniable. It can harm plant and animal life, disrupt ecosystems, and potentially impact human health through the consumption of contaminated food and water. As such, the idea of resuming a discussion on extracting the sunken vessels and their radioactive waste constitutes one tangible and universally valuable project that could prove the worth of decoupling certain issues - even if only on an exceptional basis - from the situation of the war in Ukraine.

A way forward

Geopolitical uncertainty is jeopardising years, if not decades, of trust-building efforts amongst scientists and researchers across countries, and directly impeding their work. The problems of the Arctic have a direct connection with the rest of the world, and if not addressed in a coordinated manner, may have harsh and irreversible repercussions for global health and environmental equilibrium, not to mention peace and stability.

With this in mind, the resumption of some level of communication between relevant stakeholders on all sides of the geopolitical divide is vital. There is no substitute for dialogue, though in the short term it is unlikely to resume at the Track 1 level. As a fallback, the informal High North Talks, led

by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, may assist in developing creative policy options aimed at addressing some of urgent problems in the Arctic, and in sustaining unofficial communication links that help avoid damaging misunderstandings.

Whatever the geopolitical fallout from the war in Ukraine, it is imperative that an accommodation be found to jointly address the most pressing of the Arctic's challenges, which are long-term and global in nature, and in some cases irreversible if left unattended.

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