

Briefing Note

Impacts of geopolitical tensions: What Russia's War in Ukraine Means for Cooperation and Scientific Programs in the Arctic

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Introduction

In August of this year, the greatly hyped summit in Anchorage, Alaska between President Trump and President Putin raised eyebrows around the world and prompted protests across America's lone Arctic state. Inviting a leader who is charged with war crimes and responsible for the illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine to the United States for a peace-making mission seemed misguided and ill-conceived on many levels. At the same time, some Arctic experts viewed the selection of Alaska for this high-level meeting as an opportunity to highlight commonalities that the U.S. and Russia share in the region. Russia pundits pointed to the significance of Putin's inclusion of Finance Minister Anton Siluanov and Kirill Dmitriev, Russia's envoy on foreign investment, in his delegation to Alaska¹ and wondered whether Alaska's natural resources might be part of a future deal.²

In addition to discussions about potential deals to exploit Arctic resources, many observers wondered whether the summit would also signal a thawing of the U.S.-Russia relationship and lead to renewed cooperation in sectors beyond business and finance. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, hundreds of international and bilateral projects in the Arctic have been suspended. Many of those were scientific in nature, involving Russian, American and European researchers in efforts to document the status of climate and oceanic conditions, wildlife populations, and numerous other aspects of the Arctic environment. Other programs were aimed at conserving shared ecosystems and species.

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Over a period of 18 months from 2023 to 2025, the authors of this Briefing Note interviewed dozens of American and Russian scientists and conservationists whose work had been impacted by the interruption of this cooperation. Interviewees included ornithologists, fisheries scientists, marine mammal biologists, environmentalists, climate experts, and other experts. Their responses consistently highlighted cooperation as an essential element of their professional successes for two main reasons: (1) working across the U.S.-Russia boundary gave them access to information that was central to understanding their particular topic or species in question; and (2) regular contact with their international partners built a foundation of trust and led to long-term friendships on which many successful projects depended, even thrived.

Cooperation in the Bering Strait: a history of milestones for biodiversity protection

The Bering Strait offers a perfect case study in how bilateral work advanced conservation and research. This narrow passageway, a 58-mile wide waterway that connects the North Pacific with the Arctic Ocean, in one sense separates Russia and Alaska. But natural processes such as currents, wildlife migrations, and weather patterns for millennia have actually served to unify North America and Eurasia for centuries. Indeed, in a previous geological era, a vast area known as the Bering Land Bridge allowed for the free movement of people and animals from Siberia to Alaska, serving as a crossroads of continents.

In more recent history, the Bering Strait has been a place that connected scientists and environmentalists in joint efforts to study and conserve the rich natural heritage of this region. In the late 1980's and early 1990's, as the Soviet Union was faltering, new agreements laid out plans and opportunities for scientists and citizens from each nation. As early as 1987, the USSR's General Secretary of the Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev pointed to the Arctic in his now-famous "Murmansk speech"³ as a place where the "interrelationship of the interests of our entire world is felt [...] perhaps more than anywhere else." Gorbachev envisioned a joint approach to "scientific exploration of the Arctic" and the importance of "cooperation of the northern countries in environmental protection." Three years later, at a summit between Gorbachev and U.S. President H. George Bush, the two leaders called for the establishment of a joint protected area in the Bering Strait, Beringian International Heritage Park.⁴

When the newly independent Russian Federation emerged from the USSR in 1991, researchers, Indigenous peoples and conservationists launched many new joint projects between Alaska and the Russian provinces of Chukotka and Kamchatka. A bilateral agreement on cooperation in environmental protection – initially signed between the USSR and the United States and renewed in 1994 between the new Russian Federation and the U.S. – supported these initiatives with funding and logistical support.

For the next three decades, cooperation blossomed in these fields, particularly in the Arctic and Bering Sea regions, where the two nations share ecosystems, species and many cultural connections. U.S.-Russia cooperation enabled many "firsts" and milestones in scientific knowledge and biodiversity protection, which could not have been achieved without this scientific bridge. For example, bilateral programs made it possible for the first time to assess joint populations of seabirds, Pacific walruses, and the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population.

In numerous interviews that we conducted, experts expressed how the skills, trainings and knowledge of their counterparts on the opposite side of the maritime boundary turned out to be essential to advance their own research. For example, an American ornithologist noted that Russian ornithologists were “really skilled naturalists,” and that “bringing in such people [could] cut years off the effort” for their activities. Similarly, a Russian biologist commented that “we cannot effectively study and conserve our common populations of marine mammals without cooperating with American colleagues and Indigenous people of Chukotka and Alaska, who have a lifelong connection with local nature and [those marine mammals].”

Through these bilateral projects, important institutional relationships developed, forming a strong foundation for multi-year long efforts. Biologists from the Alaska branch of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) partnered with Russian counterparts from the Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution and the Russian Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources on polar bear and walrus research. The Marine Mammal Lab of the U.S. National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) conducted field work to study the movements and population status of Arctic ice seal populations. As one biologist noted, “without the exchange of information on wildlife that are moving across boundaries, we don’t know what is happening in those populations.” One interviewee, an ornithologist, also reflected that “through [the joint] project, we obtained the first-ever data on bird migration, timing of movements and breeding sites [in some regions of] the Bering Sea.”

As these institutional ties developed, personal connections between individual researchers also became a central factor in effective cooperation. Nearly all respondents from both nations in our interviews spoke of the trust that developed over years of cooperation as an essential ingredient to ensuring results. One expert involved in salmon conservation made the point that “four nations share the North Pacific salmon ecosystem” and felt strongly that “there’s no way you can sustain that ecosystem without trust.”

The outcomes of this joint approach to science and conservation were tangible and endure, even today. For example, conservationists, fishermen, and biologists from Alaska and researchers from University of Washington teamed up with counterparts in the Kamchatka Institute of Geography to document the status of seabird populations such as the endangered Short-Tailed Albatross. Thought to be extinct after millions of these birds were harvested for their feathers, a small population was found in Japan, but the birds were vulnerable to active volcanoes in their nesting area and mortality from industrial-scale long line fishing. An international recovery initiative involving the U.S., Russia and Japan in the 1990’s and 2000s succeeded in implementing bycatch avoidance programs, leading to a turnaround for this oceanic traveler. As of 2020, the population of short-tailed albatross exceeds 7,000⁵ – far from the millions that once soared across the North Pacific, but the number still signals a successful comeback.

Another example can be found in the restoration of the Aleutian Cackling Goose in Alaska, which eventually inspired a similar recovery program in Russia. In the 18th-19th centuries, the introduction of foxes to many Bering Sea islands by Russian fur traders led to the near extirpation of this species that had once thrived in predator-free habitats. Following the passage of the 1973 Endangered Species Act, the USFWS led a captive breeding and release program, building on a tiny remnant population they discovered in Alaska’s Aleutian Islands. Bolstered by the eradication of foxes from over 40 islands, the program allowed the population of Aleutian Cackling Geese to rebound in the

North American part of their range. In the early 1990's, as restrictions on communication and travel loosened for Russians, a Kamchatka-based ornithologist sought to replicate the effort in the Eurasian portion of the species' range. With the support of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Japanese entities, WWF and Russian partners also, Dr. Nikolai Gerasimov developed a captive breeding program in Kamchatka that succeeded in returning the species to its former range. As of August 2025, the Eurasian Cackling Geese population had reached 14,000, a success partly credited to the cooperation with Americans.

Transboundary cooperation between civil society in the U.S. and Russia was also vibrant and central to several conservation successes in the Bering Strait. One non-governmental organization (NGO) initiative involved measures to decrease the environmental risks posed by increased vessel traffic in response to longer ice-free seasons in the Arctic. Throughout the 2000's, conservation groups on both sides of the Bering Sea coordinated their advocacy to federal governments to implement management and conservation tools recognized by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). As a result of their strategic efforts, in 2018 the IMO established new shipping routes and "Areas To Be Avoided" in the Bering Strait with the official approval of both Russia and the United States. These regulatory areas are still in place today.

NGOs were also instrumental to expanding the scale of protected and managed areas in the transboundary region of the Bering Sea. One highly effective cooperative effort in this sphere was led by the Wild Salmon Center (WSC), which convened scientists from the U.S., Russia, Mongolia, Japan, and Canada to identify the remaining "strongholds" of wild salmon habitat in their respective countries. Subsequently, in Russia, WSC and numerous Russian entities embarked on a multi-year process to conserve those outstanding ecosystems in designated protected areas, resulting in six million acres of new protected areas.

Suspension of cooperation and the outlook for science and conservation

Today, however, three and one-half years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, most projects involving the exchange of experts have been terminated. Increasingly restrictive and repressive policies for Russian individuals and organizations working with Western partners or receiving international funds, coupled with an anti-western sentiment, have resulted in the expulsion and departure of many international environmental organizations from Russia and in the closure of many domestic NGOs.⁶ Moreover, in response to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Western governments, NGOs, and universities have also moved to isolate Russia diplomatically, including by restricting or completely severing communication with Russian scientists.⁷ Logistical challenges such as the freezing of western banking systems, the exodus of many international airlines out of Russia, the closing of consulates in Moscow, which had supported numerous bilateral conservation projects, and the withdrawal of most international donors and charities from Russia, among other factors, also limited international work.

Among the most poignant observations about the fall-out of the diplomatic rupture shared during our interviews was that of a Russian biologist who reflected on a sensation of living in an "iron bubble." (The person made that comment after reassuring us that the kitchen where he was taking our interview had been soundproofed, which he had tested by blasting loud music and hearing no complaints from his apartment neighbors). This person, and others in Russia who greatly lamented

the loss of communication and cooperation with American counterparts spoke of their apprehension of being designated as “foreign agents.”

As we reflect on past forms of cooperation in the Bering Strait, today’s prospects for similar initiatives still seem very limited. The grip of the Putin administration on science and education in Russia clearly tightened as the country also withdrew from the European system of education.⁸ The so-called “Bologna process”⁹ encouraged cohesion among universities, for example through comparable degree programs and transferable academic credits between Russian and European institutions. Now that the higher educational system has reverted to a Soviet-like system,^{10,11} Russian students will have new difficulties applying to western universities or to pursuing graduate work abroad.

Russian scientists face additional obstacles as scientific institutions now require staff to ensure their articles are cleared by a non-science official before submitting their work for publication, a Soviet-era practice. Individual experts who have been designated as “foreign agents” by the Russian Ministry of Justice are barred from making public presentations.¹²

This is not to say that all opportunities for joint publications between Russian scientists and their western colleagues have ceased. Such an approach might be one of the few viable paths for keeping ties alive within the academic community. Also, cases where trusting friendships still exist between colleagues, simply maintaining communication, even on non-professional topics, is a valuable option as a path for re-building future cooperation.

What’s Next for Cooperation in the Bering Strait

For the Bering Strait, action to protect the marine environment is needed more than ever. But the opportunities for cooperation are more elusive than ever. Until Russia has ceased its illegal and lethal war on Ukraine and civil society is restored inside the Russian Federation, it is difficult to imagine any meaningful bilateral programs in conservation or science in this region. On the U.S. side, the current administration’s shifting priorities have created substantial uncertainty surrounding the legacy of programs built over three decades. In particular, funding for wildlife research and public lands has been cut significantly and staffing reduced in key agencies.¹³ Many American senior scientists in federal agencies have lost their positions or were given strong incentives to accept early retirement during the early stage of the Trump Administration’s “efficiency” measures. As a result, fewer people with years of experience working with Russia will be available to re-start joint programs with Russia or provide support to the next generation of scientists attempting to do the same.

NGOs and universities in the West can still play a valuable role in this sector, no longer by hosting exchanges of experts and information but instead by serving as repositories of what was accomplished. Preserving project databases and recording the history of cooperative programs may prove to be a valuable foundation for re-starting these efforts in the future. Where possible, individual researchers in the West could try to maintain unofficial communication with their Russian colleagues – of course, only if that is welcomed by those colleagues and will not jeopardize either individual’s personal safety.

One remaining forum for potential dialogue among scientists not only from the U.S. and Russia but from all Arctic countries is the Arctic Council. The fact that (virtual) meetings of Working Groups such as the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) and the Protection of the

Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) are continuing and do allow for Russian participation, could offer a foundation upon which future efforts may be re-created. Occasional international conferences, such the International Symposium on Arctic Research, held in Japan in October of 2025, and the Asian Conference on Permafrost (ACOP) to be hosted in Mongolia in 2026 by Institute of Geography and Geoecology, also serve as useful but rare places for discussion of science.

Conclusion

As Arctic Yearbook goes to press in November 2025, three months since the August 15 Trump-Putin summit in Alaska, a few things are clear: peace and security for Ukraine – the stated goals of the Anchorage meeting – are far from settled. Far from thawing relations, tension remains high between the U.S. and Russia. Just days following the summit, Russian surveillance planes flew close to Alaska air space^{14, 15} in three separate incidents – as though to test the response of the U.S. military, and Trump announced that he was “disappointed” in Putin¹⁶ over the lack of progress on Ukraine. Additionally, despite the pre-summit rhetoric about potential business deals the nations might strike, it appears that no movement was made on that front.

Although it may be a while, when the time comes to rebuild ties between the U.S. and Russia, science and conservation can be a unifying theme, and there is no better opportunity for this work to be re-ignited than in the Bering Strait.

Notes

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