Briefing Note

Beringia After the Ice Curtain: Governance Without Territorial Revision

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The Bering Strait is one of those places where the map can make a political fact look like a human fact. Russia ends on one side. The United States begins on the other. The line is real. So are the states, laws, sanctions, military postures and territorial jurisdictions attached to it. But none of that means the line contains the whole political reality of the region.

Beringia is often invoked as a vanished connection between Asia and North America. The National Park Service describes it as the immense Ice Age land and maritime region that once linked the continents; it also notes that peoples on both sides of the present strait remain connected through language, kinship, tradition and dependence on the same environment (National Park Service, 2023). That history matters. But it should not be converted into a fantasy of a lost state that ought to be restored. Beringia was not a modern nation-state waiting beneath the water. The useful question is not how to redraw the border. It is how to design institutions that remain answerable to relationships the border does not erase.

That question has become harder since 2022. Russia's invasion of Ukraine ruptured much of the cooperative architecture that had made the post-Cold War Arctic look unusually insulated from great-power conflict. In February 2026, the Arctic Council's senior-official chair described political-level meetings as still paused even as scientific and working-group activity had resumed virtually (Arctic Council, 2026). A 2025 Arctic Yearbook briefing note on the Bering Strait put the difficulty more starkly: meaningful bilateral conservation and scientific programs across the strait have become much harder to imagine under present geopolitical conditions (Williams & Marquant, 2025, p. 5).

Yet the institutional picture is not simply one of severance. In July 2026, the Inuit Circumpolar Council held its fifteenth General Assembly in Iqaluit with delegates from Alaska, Canada, Kalaallit Nunaat and Chukotka (Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2026). The 2026-2030 executive includes

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Chukotka Vice-Chair Irina Meshcheriakova and Council Member Maria Leita (Inuit Circumpolar Council, n.d.). The Aleut International Association remains structurally binational, governed by Alaskan and Russian Aleut representatives (Arctic Council, n.d.). These organizations do not abolish state borders. They demonstrate something more useful: political and cultural organization can remain transboundary without requiring territorial revision.

That distinction should become a design principle for the Bering Strait. When state-to-state relations deteriorate, Indigenous and ecological relationships should not have to disappear with them. The region needs a protected layer of institutional continuity that can survive below the level of grand diplomacy and above the level of isolated personal contact.

Five functions are especially important. First is cultural and family mobility: not an open border in the abstract, but durable, rights-respecting mechanisms for legitimate kinship, cultural and community travel when security conditions permit it. Second is Indigenous-to-Indigenous institutional continuity, so organizations that span Alaska and Chukotka are not treated as incidental appendages to state diplomacy. Third is ecological and subsistence co-management. Marine mammals, fish, contaminants, sea ice and coastal hazards do not stop at the maritime boundary. Fourth is emergency coordination, because search and rescue, spills, food security and rapidly changing ice conditions punish political delay. Fifth is protected knowledge exchange, with Indigenous communities retaining authority over the data and knowledge they produce rather than being reduced to raw inputs for outside science.

There are already pieces of this architecture on the Alaska side. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) current Arctic strategy emphasizes Indigenous data governance, community-designed observing and collaboration with Arctic Council Permanent Participants (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2025). In the Bering Sea, the fisheries council has a protocol for Local Knowledge and Traditional Knowledge (Local Knowledge, Traditional Knowledge, and Subsistence Taskforce, 2023). On St. Paul Island, the Tribal Government leads monitoring and subsistence research (Ladd et al., 2025). Those are not substitutes for cross-strait cooperation. They are the institutional muscle that makes future cooperation more credible because communities enter it with their own knowledge systems, data governance and technical capacity.

The harder question is what can persist during rupture. At a 2025 Arctic conference, Vera Kingeekuk Metcalf of the Eskimo Walrus Commission took part in a panel on the strait. Its discussion connected family ties across the border with shared concerns about erosion and the marine food web (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2025). A separate 2025 Point Lay project paired Alaska-based walrus knowledge with the experience of Chukchi Indigenous leader Eduard Zdor, who described the work as a possible link between Chukotka and Alaska (Naiden, 2025). These are small examples, but small examples matter when the large architecture is frozen.

The mistake would be to romanticize them. People-to-people contact cannot substitute for agreements that only states can make. Indigenous organizations should not be burdened with repairing a geopolitical conflict they did not create. Nor should the language of shared Beringian history be used by Washington, Moscow or anyone else to make territorial claims over people who are capable of speaking for themselves.

The better model is layered sovereignty: existing territorial jurisdiction remains intact, while specific cross-border functions receive stronger institutional protection and Indigenous authority. That can include standing Indigenous advisory or co-governance structures attached to future bilateral environmental agreements; predefined humanitarian and cultural-mobility channels; joint emergency protocols designed before crisis; data-sharing arrangements that respect Indigenous data sovereignty; and a presumption that when formal scientific cooperation resumes, Indigenous organizations are participants in the architecture rather than stakeholders consulted after it is designed.

This is not a proposal to bring Beringia back. It is a proposal to stop treating the modern border as if it erased everything that came before it and everything that still crosses it. The Arctic Council's partial working-level recovery, the continued circumpolar structure of ICC, and the persistence of Aleut and Bering Sea knowledge networks all point toward the same institutional lesson: cooperation does not have to mean pretending geopolitics is absent. It can mean deciding in advance which human and ecological relationships are too important to let geopolitics destroy.

The Bering Strait does not need another outside power deciding where Indigenous peoples belong. It needs a political architecture capable of recognizing that some relationships are older than the line; some problems are larger than the line, and sovereignty can remain real without requiring every meaningful form of governance to stop at it.

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