New challenges in the High North: A common Arctic governance against incoming threats

*Emanuela Somalvico**

In the past years the Arctic has long been the main target of international scientific cooperation, focusing mainly on the effects of climate change. Today, the polar region is rapidly changing its appearance, and with it, the perspectives of interest and actors are also undergoing. The consequences of global warming, by changing polar geographic features, have simultaneously contributed to both easier access to land and the raw materials it contains. In addition, melting ice is making the possibility of opening up new sea routes increasingly concrete, with its implications for the global economy.

As a result, both access to the northern territories and navigation of the sea routes will become more feasible, which in the future may provide additional opportunities for shipping and port infrastructures. A forthcoming infrastructural development in the polar area is therefore likely to open up the possibility of significant investments from local and international players. This includes possible exploitation by criminal actors to move more easily in the international trade of legal and illegal goods.

Easier access to the polar regions makes it likely that organized crime will seek to expand its influence, relying on an increased capacity to penetrate previously remote and isolated areas. Opportunities for navigable routes may provide unexpected access to fisheries resources, just as access to mineral resources will become more viable.

Furthermore, the growth in legal activities related to the Arctic economy may also lead to an increase in illicit activities, including drug trafficking. It is widely acknowledged that organized crime utilizes the same channels as legal businesses, employing the same infrastructure and transportation networks and engaging the services of corrupt shippers. This scenario could lead to the exploitation of indigenous communities, and encourage crimes against the environment, such as trafficking and illegal dumping of industrial waste.

> *Easier access to the polar regions makes it likely that organized crime will seek to expand its influence ...*

According to the recent analytical report "Business Index North", which provides a picture of economic development in the Arctic, more than $106 billion will be invested in the period 2017-2021, focusing on natural gas extraction, production and transportation[1]. Investment is likely to increase as polar ice in the Arctic shrinks, attracting the interest of numerous players eager to capitalize on the growing economic opportunities. It is inevitable, after all, that such investment horizons will attract not only investors with transparent intentions, but also entities interested in investing in sectors where it is easier to profit or launder money.

In addition to issues already receiving special attention, such as hybrid threats and growing tensions in the High North, several other areas require a more comprehensive and preventive approach to risk management. It is thus imperative to prevent non-state actors, including transnational organized crime groups, from exploiting unions already present in the Arctic states, creating new synergies and expanding crime scenarios. A detailed examination of criminal networks already active and structured within the Arctic countries is therefore required in order to identify potential areas of collaboration and convergence in criminal activities[2]. As a consequence, it is appropriate to outline the eventual interests of international organized crime, and, with it, the necessity to prevent ways of infiltrating the economy or other infringements. Over the last few decades, organised crime has largely demonstrated its ability to manage its interests by adapting to different realities around the world.

It is also possible, for example, that the recent increase in Sino-Russian cooperation could lead to new forms of interaction between Russian and Chinese criminal networks. This could involve the use of legitimate business channels and the exploitation of the Northern Sea Route to facilitate the trafficking of illicit goods to Europe, the United States and Canada, such as drugs, weapons, illegal timber, diamonds and minerals. Furthermore, new criminal collaborations may emerge in the ports along the route.

Provided that each Arctic state has full sovereignty over its own internal structure (also in terms of fighting and preventing crime and corruption), it would be necessary to assess a common shared

---

*Director of the Arctic Intelligence Observatory, a non-profit think tank within the Italian Society of Intelligence (SOCINT).

[1] Russia is the Arctic country that invests the most in its polar territory, while the remaining approximately 45 percent is distributed among the other seven Arctic nations.

[2] In many Arctic countries there are criminal groups such as the Hell's Angels or mafias of foreign origin such as the *'ndrangheta* and *cosa nostra* families in Canada. Furthermore, a boss of a criminal organization associated with the Sinaloa Cartel has recently been convicted of involvement in a transnational drug trafficking operation that reached communities in Alaska.

governance structure that would raise awareness about corruption, money laundering or other threats by different forms of crime in the future scenario. As the Arctic becomes increasingly ice-free and more attractive for human activities, the Arctic Council should address the challenges that this shift will present, with the aim to ensure the effective maintenance of the Arctic as a region characterised by "peace, stability and constructive cooperation", in alignment with the Council's Strategic Plan for the period 2021-2030[3].

In consideration of the imminent challenges that will affect all Arctic states, it would be advisable to implement a comprehensive strategy, to adhere to a prevention-centric holistic approach, and to be prepared to act in a timely and effective manner. Against the backdrop of a complex and evolving situation, the role of the intelligence takes on decisive importance in analysing possible scenarios and assessing their consequences, in order to protect the national interest of the Arctic States and the common security interests of the Arctic populations. Therefore, it is appropriate to deepen the complexity of the Arctic landscape in all its aspects in order to inter-relate its effects, connections and opportunities. To accomplish this, it is essential to apply criteria of 'intelligence', a term whose Latin etymology 'inter legere' evokes the discernment of interconnections between elements. This implies a different approach to the conventional duties typically assigned to law enforcement agencies in the field: a proactive strategy is required to identify and prevent potential critical issues, including those with economic and social implications.

> *... recent increase in Sino-Russian cooperation could lead to new forms of interaction between Russian and Chinese criminal networks.*

There are a considerable and interrelated number of aspects to be monitored. Effective coordination and intelligence collaboration are therefore essential to ensure common security objectives, which can be broadly grouped into two macro-areas:

- The protection of the activities of companies present in the Arctic and managed by local actors, which may be achieved by monitoring the investments of non-European actors, managing possible foreign interference;
- The analysis and countering of the possible penetration of international

[3] Arctic Council Strategic Plan 2021-2030, Strategic Goal 7 "Stronger Arctic Council", Reykjavik, 2021.

organized crime in the management of developing economic activities, including tourism, shipping, trade, fishing activities, and especially mining[4].

The best forum to address these future challenges could be the Arctic Council, which among its goals aims to strengthen cooperation and coordination for maintaining peace and stability in the Arctic. To achieve this, the Council should consider finding shared measures to address and fight against criminal infiltrations, promoting greater cooperation in criminal analysis and economic intelligence, In light of the fact that all Member States are signatories to the ONU Convention against Transnational Organized Crime[5]. This could be done by creating a new ad hoc working group or by expanding the scope of the ongoing Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG) with a specific focus. The SDWG, among its objectives, focuses on strengthening joint analysis and monitoring of trends, investments and economic activities in the Arctic, generating information to guide responsible and sustainable investment in Arctic infrastructure and sustainable business engagement and development and exploring economic development, including in new and emerging sectors. These activities should be complemented by analytical support for the study of organized crime in the region, linked to university and research institutions, as well as specialized police departments, enhancing shared experiences.

[4] Global attention is focused on the challenges posed by critical mineral supply chains, as outlined in a number of United Nations resolutions that highlight concerns about illicit trafficking in natural resources, particularly gold and "other precious metals," and its further links to money laundering and corruption. “Noting that illicit trafficking in precious metals and illegal mining may have links to other forms of transnational organized crime and may occur alongside or in conjunction with other crimes and illegal activities, including money-laundering and corruption”. (E/CN.15/2019/L.2/Rev.1)

[5] The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, adopted by General Assembly resolution 55/25 of 15 November 2000, is the main international instrument in the fight against transnational organized crime. It entered into force on 29 September 2003.