

Changing Arctic governance landscape: The Arctic Council navigating through geopolitical turbulence

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1 Introduction

The Arctic governance landscape has been experiencing profound changes amid geopolitical turbulence since Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine initiated in February this year. The most distinct change is the widespread move suspending cooperation with Russia, that is, the 'deep freeze' in cooperation with Russia¹. The Arctic Council, the EU's Northern Dimension and the Barents-Euro Arctic Council have all suspended their activities involving Russia. One can add the Arctic Economic Council, a non-governmental international body, to the list. Considering the fact that these were to a significant extent platforms for cooperation with a Russia that was law-binding and predictable after the collapse of the USSR, this reality might have implications for the region and entail an end of 'a zone of peace' in the post-Cold

War period². Some have argued that the Arctic international cooperation would begin to move into the 'two Arctic', with closer cooperation between the Western States in the Arctic on the one hand and intensified regional cooperation between Russia and China on the other³. Therefore, investigating the prospect for the Arctic governance landscape is an emerging and crucial agenda for understanding the future stability and peace in the region. For the moment, arrangements of Arctic cooperation are on hold and have possibilities both to be resumed and to be abolished. Besides the progress of Russia's war in Ukraine, which exceeds the scope of this study, the key factor deciding such possibilities could be the function provided by the secretariats of cooperative frameworks since they are supposed to serve not for individual member states but for the interest of arrangements. Bearing

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¹ Paal Sigurd Hilde, "Deep Freeze: Security and International Relations in the Arctic Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", *Security Policy Working Paper* (No. 8, Federal Academy for Security Policy), 2022, ISSN 2366-0805.

² Stefan Kirchner, "Nordic Plus: International Cooperation in the Arctic Enters a New Era", *Polar Connect*, March 6, 2022 <<https://polarconnection.org/nordic-plus-cooperation-arctic/>> (accessed 29 June 2022).

³ Timo Koivurova, Marc Lanteigne, "One Arctic or Two? Polar Geopolitics in the Wake of the Ukraine Conflict", *Polar Connect*, May 11, 2022 <<https://polarconnection.org/one-arctic/>> (accessed 4 August 2022).

this perspective in mind, the author conducted interviews with several diplomats and officers related to the Arctic Council in September 2022. This article summarizes the findings out of this research.

2 Arctic Council on hold

The Arctic Council, being established in 1996 and succeeding the spirit of the 'zone of peace' made by Gorbachev's Murmansk speech of 1987 and efforts taken under the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, has been a key international cooperation tackling Arctic issues such as environment protection and sustainable development, except 'matters related to military security'. Although it is merely a 'high level forum with no legally-binding authority over the Arctic states, not alike international organizations, it was believed the Council to be the most important building blocks cementing the region in cooperation and thus keeping it predictable, stable and peaceful. It's 26 years' experience of the well-functioning and no interruption from the geopolitical clouts, most eminently as in the case of the 2014 Russia's invasion to Crimea, led Arctic officials and observers to

believe the robustness of 'Arctic exceptionalism'.

Contrary to this background, the Russian full-scale aggression in Ukraine did not allow the Arctic Council to stand outside the geopolitical clouts. The Council for the first time in its history risked breaking down. Several experts predicted infeasibilities of cooperating with Russia, being the member of the Council and currently sitting in the chairmanship position, and proposed alternatives such as the 'Nordic Plus'⁴ and the 'Arctic Council 2.0'⁵. Judging the situation and acting accordingly on March 3, seven members of the Arctic Council (hereafter mentioned as the A7) issued a joint statement saying, "our states are temporarily pausing participation in all meetings of the Arctic Council and its subsidiary bodies, pending consideration of the necessary modalities that can allow us to continue the Council's important work in view of the current circumstances". They claimed that the 'core principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity' based on international law which had long underpinned the work of the Arctic Council was flagrantly violated⁶. While this move was unilaterally done, it is

⁴ Kirchner *op.cit.*

⁵ Alice Rogoff, "It's Time for An Arctic Council 2.0", *Polar Connect*, March 5, 2022 <<https://polarconnection.org/arctic-council-2/>> (accessed 29 June 2022).

⁶ Office of the Spokesperson, "Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", *U.S. Department of State*, March 3, 2022 <<https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-arctic-council-cooperation-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>> (accessed 29 March 2022).

worth noting that the official account of the Twitter of the Council updated and reiterated its pausing in participation all meetings in the next day.

The statement caused concerns on prospects of the Council, especially its important work contributing to the communities of Circumpolar North in terms of adaptation to the impacts of climate change, sustainable development and environmental protection. Importantly, the joint statement stressed the “enduring value of the Arctic Council for circumpolar cooperation” and a “responsibility to the people of the Arctic, including the indigenous peoples, who contributed to and benefit from the important work undertaken in the Council”⁷. Arctic officials generally understand its importance and responsibility that the Arctic Council has taken so that there was a broad set of consensus on maintaining the Arctic Council without changing its membership and structure⁸. It was no surprising with

Russia, arguing that the Arctic Council should remain the key international forum for the region and be resumed as soon as possible⁹. Accusing the A7’s decision, Russia continued to implement the Council’s programs domestically. There were also demands from different local communities including the Indigenous peoples for resuming the work of the Arctic Council.

Circumvented from the situation being locked in the imperative both of immediate restart of the Council’s work and of avoiding cooperating with the war fighting Russia, the A7 announced to resume their work in the Arctic Council with the projects that did not involve the participation of the Russian Federation on June 8¹⁰. It is no wonder that in the announcement, the A7 stressed the importance of their responsibility to the people of the Arctic, including Indigenous peoples¹¹.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Astri Edvardsen, “USA’s Arctic Coordinator: “We Do Not Want to Change the Structure or Membership of the Arctic Council”, *High North News*, May 18, 2022 < <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/usas-arctic-coordinator-we-do-not-want-change-structure-or-membership-arctic-council> > (accessed 29 June 2022).

⁹ Astri Edvardsen, “Arctic Council Paused: The Search for A Future for Arctic Cooperation Continues”, *High North News*, April 27, 2022 <<https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-council-paused-search-future-arctic-cooperation-continues>> (accessed 29 June 2022).

¹⁰ Trine Jonassen, “The Arctic Council: The Arctic 7 Resume Limited Work Without Russia”, *High North News*, June 8, 2022 <<https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-council-arctic-7-resume-limited-work-without-russia>> (accessed 29 June 2022).

¹¹ Office of the Spokesperson, “Joint Statement on Limited Resumption of Arctic Council Cooperation”, *U.S. Department of State*, June 8, 2022 < <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-arctic-council-cooperation-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>> (accessed 29 June 2022).

3 Where the Arctic meets global - the issue of setting modalities to resume the work

In addition to such the responsibility, an urgent issue is to tackle with global warming. In so doing, it is needed to resume scientific collaboration with Russia in areas like monitoring and observation in the Arctic Ocean and its landmass. Needless to say, Russia occupies a half of the Arctic landmass and marine areas including territorial seas and the exclusive economic zones. Addressing the impacts of climate change in the field of research has also significant implications on local communities across borders. In this vein, the discussions on possible modalities to resume the work in the Arctic Council centered on how to resume collaboration with Russia at scientific level¹².

Pending consideration of the necessary modalities to resume the work is also important in terms of saving the Arctic governance intact. Even though it is not practical to set realistic modalities to resume the work in the Arctic Council while Russia does not stop resorting its political agenda by means of military power in Ukraine, placing a sort of reservation in resuming cooperation showed that the A7

countries had a will to cooperate with Russia in the medium or long term, if not a shorter term. Without such a political message, the Arctic governance landscape would risk deteriorating to the point of no return.

Against this background, however, setting agreeable modalities among the A7 would be not straightforward. 'Domestic' pressures for resuming the Arctic scientific collaboration with Russia would be diverse among the A7 according to their geopolitical realities in relation to Russia¹³. In sum, setting such modalities represent crossroads where Arctic officers and diplomats meet with requirements from larger geopolitical landscape such as Russia's war in Ukraine and global strategic competition.

4 Navigating through political turbulence with cautious optimism

These developments described above brought the Arctic governance into a unique situation. The projects and programs installed by the Strategic Plan 2021 to 2030 at the Reykjavik ministerial meeting in May 2021 are now separately operated in Russia which holds the current

¹² An Interview with officials at the Arctic Council Secretariat, Tromø, Semptember 14, 2022.

¹³ An Interview with officials at the Arctic Council Secretariat, Tromø, Semptember 14, 2022. Same is observed in an interview with Mr. Pétur Ásgeirsson, Ambassador, Senior Arctic Official, Director for bilateral and regional affairs, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iceland, Reykjavik, Sempember 7, 2022.

chairmanship and in the A7 countries. Norway is supposed to take over the chairmanship from Russia in Spring 2023. In fact, Norway began the preparation for its own priorities for the next term early this year¹⁴. The procedure that chairmanship member state is supposed to propose a date and the location for a biennial ministerial meeting at least six months in advance signifies that the transition of chairmanship from Russia to Norway is the first and foremost important agenda now in the Arctic Council (See Art. 18 of the Arctic Council Rules of Procedure). In a normal setting, there used to review the accomplishments during the term of the outgoing chairmanship and discuss priorities for the next chairmanship in the occasion of the biennial ministerial meeting. Such agreements on these matters formalize in a format of a ministerial declaration, which need to be on the basis of consensus. The Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs) are supposed to support and give advice to the transition process of the chairmanship among others¹⁵. However, the SAOs' advisory function is also severely limited under the current situation. These difficulties amount to the

problem to hold a ministerial meeting in next May.

Under this circumstance, what seems to be in a crucial position for successfully navigating the situation is the Arctic Council Secretariat (ACS), which serves not for the interest of individual member state but one for the whole. In an interview, the Director of the Arctic Council Secretariat Mr. Mathieu Parker explained the situation, "currently, the secretariat started working with Norway preparing their incoming chairmanship. We are also involved in discussions with current and incoming chairmanship to determine on how the process of transition unfolds this time around. Because our governing documents and procedures are not developed under this type of situation in mind, it will be a unique transition process. But we help it as smooth as possible. We have 'cautious optimism'"¹⁶.

5 Conclusion

Big picture is important to grab the trends of times but always involves speculations and often misses to overestimate things. To avoid such mistakes in the similar vein, the big picture needs to be scrutinized

¹⁴ Trine Jonassen, "Gathering Input for Norway's Chairmanship", *High North News*, January 25, 2022 <<https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/gathering-input-norways-chairmanship-arctic-council>> (accessed 17 September 2022).

¹⁵ Senior Arctic officials meet at least twice a year. Their general function is to oversee the work and ensure that the priorities of chairmanship are met.

¹⁶ An Interview with officials at the Arctic Council Secretariat, Tromø, September 14, 2022.

carefully. In the Arctic context, it happened once when the Russian expedition placed its national flag on the seabed under the pole in the summer of 2007. The event incurred speculations on scramble for resources in the Arctic, but it turned out misleading later. Now, we are facing with the moment that risks speculating or overestimating about “what could be the longer-term consequences of the war” in the Arctic¹⁷.

The Arctic governance landscape is inevitably affected by geopolitical clouds as they now loom into everywhere in the world. The Arctic could not stand out of it as it did before and will continue to stand in the midst of it for at least a certain time being. However, this process does not undergo overnight. It incrementally and necessarily involves push and pull factors. In this research the paper found that there were two important issues related to the Arctic Council in prospecting the Arctic governance landscape. One is about the modalities to resume its work, and another is the transition of chairmanship from Russia to Norway. It also found that in the

latter issue the role of the ACS would be important especially when normal contacts among state representatives are severely restricted. It also revealed that negotiations on how transition uphold was about to start. In order to improve the understanding of the changing Arctic governance landscape this research needs to be complemented by further investigation on the Arctic Council and other Northern arrangements of international cooperation.

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¹⁷ Timo Koivurova, Marc Lanteigne, *op.cit.*