

# Return Of Geopolitics: Navigating Through A New Normal In The Arctic

*Rashmi BR<sup>a</sup>*

On 20 May 2021, when the 12<sup>th</sup> Arctic Council Ministerial meeting adopted the first 'Arctic Council Strategic Plan 2021-2030'<sup>1</sup>, it marked the culmination of the Icelandic chairmanship and more importantly, 25 years of the Arctic Council. Lest one would have suspected that its functioning would be paused owing to a conflict that is geographically not in the Arctic, but one that involves the Arctic states. The post-Cold War achievement in cooperation in the Arctic now seems in danger. Does this mark the 'return of geopolitics' to the region and its numerous institutions? This may or may not be the new normal, but it certainly has impacted the dynamics in the Arctic.

## **1 Cooperation and sustaining peace**

Often, the perceptions from outside debated and predicted (and continue to do so) the outbreak of conflicts in the Arctic, owing to its growing global importance,

resource 'rush' fuelled by climate change and technology, overlapping maritime claims and the thawing West-Russia diplomatic relations.

The expression 'return of geopolitics to the Arctic' may not find consensus, given that it was never absent even after the Cold War ended and cooperation began. However, standing by that expression is the fact that the multiple cooperative mechanisms realized among the Arctic actors, have successfully found ways to use diplomatic tools, negotiate, initiate dialogue and sustain the process.

In 2010, Norway and Russia signed the *Treaty on the Maritime Delimitation and the Cooperation in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean*, ending a forty-year-old dispute over 175,000-square kilometer area<sup>2</sup>. The treaty divided the area equally

---

<sup>a</sup> Rashmi is a doctoral student (registered with TDU) at the School of Conflict and Security Studies, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, India. She is a Visiting Researcher with the Arctic Governance Research Group at the Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, Finland.

<sup>1</sup> Gunn Bye, H. (2021). *Arctic Council Adopts First-ever Strategic Plan*. High North News. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-council-adopts-first-ever-strategic-plan>

<sup>2</sup> Henriksen, T., & Ulfstein, G. (2011). Maritime Delimitation in the Arctic: The Barents Sea Treaty. *Ocean Development and International Law*, 42(1–2), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320.2011.542389>

and enabled both Norway and Russia to carry the oil and gas exploration<sup>3</sup>.

On 14 June 2022, Foreign Ministers of Canada and Denmark and Prime Minister of Greenland signed an agreement to resolve the outstanding maritime border dispute over the small, uninhabited Hans Island in the Kennedy Channel of the Nares Strait<sup>4</sup>. Being the only land dispute in the Arctic, there was no actual confrontation, barring planting national flags, the 'whiskey wars' and occasional verbal exchanges between the leaders.

Outstanding security issues are often strong reasons for states not to engage in cooperation - bilaterally, regionally, or on global forums. Additionally, it may upset the working of an organization. The South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a classic example of how geopolitical conflicts, unsettled borders and historical grievances will impede a regional cooperative initiative. Though South Asia and the Arctic are not comparable in terms of the magnitude of the security and political challenges, the

latter has been successful in sustaining cooperation among the countries that were on different sides during the Cold War.

## **2 How will the 'new normal' shape the Arctic?**

In March this year, the seven Arctic countries issued a joint statement condemning Russia's war in Ukraine. Stating violation of the principle of sovereignty, they called for a temporary pause in the Arctic Council meetings and their participation in pending projects<sup>5</sup>. The Arctic, since the end of the Cold War, has largely been protected from bearing the consequences of external geopolitical issues, irrespective of differences between the US and Russia, the impact of which is reflected across the world in different regions.

The Crimean Annexation in 2014 strained West-Russia relations, and the latter was sanctioned by the remaining members of the Arctic Council. Barring the effect of sanctions on Russian oil and gas, the event did not threaten cooperation and the soft-law regime in the Arctic. The cooperation

---

<sup>3</sup> Treaty between the Kingdom of Norway and the Russian Federation concerning Maritime Delimitation and Cooperation in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean, September 15, 2010.

[https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/smk/vedlegg/2010/avtale\\_engelsk.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/smk/vedlegg/2010/avtale_engelsk.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Global Affairs Canada. (2022, June 14). *Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark, together with Greenland, reach historic agreement on long-standing boundary disputes* [Press release]. <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2022/06/canada-and-the-kingdom-of-denmark-together-with-greenland-reach-historic-agreement-on-long-standing-boundary-disputes.html>

<sup>5</sup> Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine. (2022). *US Department of State*. <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-arctic-council-cooperation-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>

continued, and the Council functioned. With the current developments at the Council, the Arctic is no longer unaffected by external occurrences, which in itself is a 'new normal'.

Have the 'hard' issues and the situation in Ukraine taken centre stage compared to the more non-traditional challenges like climate change in the Arctic? The states have often pondered over the possibility of 'buying' time in case of climate change and associated initiatives while they have to swiftly deal with hard-pressing military conflicts and 'national priorities' with all their options and resources at their disposal. The joint statement by the seven countries, in an attempt to balance, said that "we remain convinced of the enduring value of the Arctic Council for circumpolar cooperation and reiterate our support for this institution and its work. We hold a responsibility to the people of the Arctic, including the Indigenous peoples, who contribute to and benefit from the important work undertaken in the Council."<sup>6</sup> Some of them have reiterated that currently, their work is focussed on ensuring that when the time is 'appropriate', a smooth return to the Arctic

Council is possible. However, there is no knowing of the right time, and it is a gamble to keep 50 percent of the Arctic out of the primary pan-regional institution<sup>7</sup>.

When the Council resumes its work when it thinks it is the right time, differences are bound to cause friction. With Finland and Sweden opting to join NATO, seven countries would be part of the military alliance essentially against Russia- in short, 'NATO-ization of the Arctic'. In March, NATO held an exercise called "Cold Response" north of Norway, where the country is fictionally under attack and the allies are responding in its aid. This is an exercise that has been held over the years. Yet, due to the war, it gained more traction, more mobilization, and approximately 30000 troops, including 3000 US marines<sup>8</sup>, in preparation for an unpredictable Russia.

The 'return of geopolitics', militarization, and strong borders with Russia have most negatively affected the Indigenous people of the Arctic. Suspension of cross-border movement, internet and free speech restrictions, political pressure, and Russia's isolation have again divided the Sámi community and the Sápmi since state

---

<sup>6</sup> Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine. (2022). *US Department of State*. <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-arctic-council-cooperation-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>

<sup>7</sup> Edvardsen, Astri. (2022). *Arctic Council Paused: The Search for a Future for Arctic Cooperation Continues*. High North News. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-council-paused-search-future-arctic-cooperation-continues>

<sup>8</sup> Ali, Idrees; Emmott, Robin. (2022). *NATO, in Arctic training drills faces up to Putin's 'unpredictable' Russia*, Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/nato-arctic-drill-takes-new-significance-after-russia-invasion-ukraine-2022-03-23/>

borders came into force<sup>9</sup>. The Russian Sámi are not new to suspicion, political oppression, forced relocation and isolation, which they experienced during the Soviet Union era. Since the fall of the USSR, the Sámi leaders and activists tried and pushed for rights that their counterparts would benefit from in Finland, Norway and Sweden. Decades of efforts were also channelized towards building contacts between the Nordic and Russian Sámi, involving the latter in the Sámi Council and the Arctic Council meetings. In Liisa Holmberg's words, multiple collaborative initiatives happened, cross-border movements existed and the once-divided families could meet their relatives, all of which no longer happens<sup>10</sup>.

Cross-border collaborations and meetings have helped to preserve and revitalize the endangered Sámi languages and dialects, particularly in Russia, and implement Arctic Council's projects that track mining, drilling, pollution levels and effects of climate change<sup>11</sup>. The war has now paved the way for suspicion. There is a pause on

the flow of funds from the Nordic countries, data collection and sharing that is critical for sustaining climate action in the Arctic and scientific cooperation. In Morten Høglund's (Norway's Arctic Ambassador) words, "neither the working groups nor the expert groups are meeting, and no outreach activity is taking place. The affiliated scientists can work on their analyses, each on their side; however, there should be no data exchange or official publishing."<sup>12</sup>

### 3 Conclusion

In a world that is closely related, connected by multiple social and political relationships, and in which force has less weightage, cooperation between states through different means is a natural consequence. Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane call this a 'complex interdependence'. They put forth three conditions for complex interdependence - first, increased ways of contact between states; second, reduced use of military might; and lastly, security is no longer the main concern in the international system<sup>13</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> Last, J. (2022, June 28). *The Russia-Ukraine War is Dividing the Sámi Indigenous People of the Arctic*. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/27/russia-ukraine-war-saami-indigenous-arctic-people-norway-sweden-finland/>

<sup>10</sup> Excerpts from the interview (conducted on 11 June 2022 at Inari, Finland) with Liisa Holmberg, Film Commissioner, International Sámi Film Institute-Norway; Rector, SIIDA- Sáami Museum and Nature Centre; former Rector, Sámi Education Institute, Inari; and former Chair of the Council of the University of Arctic.

<sup>11</sup> Last, J. (2022, June 28). *The Russia-Ukraine War is Dividing the Sámi Indigenous People of the Arctic*. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/27/russia-ukraine-war-saami-indigenous-arctic-people-norway-sweden-finland/>

<sup>12</sup> Edvardsen, Astri. (2022). *Arctic Council Paused: The Search for a Future for Arctic Cooperation Continues*. High North News. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-council-paused-search-future-arctic-cooperation-continues>

<sup>13</sup> Maxime, G. (2013, March 8). *Joseph Nye on Soft Power*. E-International Relations. <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/34119>

For defining an “ideal type” of complex interdependence, neoliberalism takes three diametrically opposite assumptions as opposed to realism. First, states are not the only actors in the international system. Second, military power is secondary in relationships of interdependence. Third, goals are not hierarchical; instead, many “issue areas” exist horizontally<sup>14</sup>.

When the Arctic landscape was crowded with cooperative initiatives in the 1990s, it seemed a near “ideal type” complex interdependence. The states are certainly not the only actors in the Arctic. Added to this is the important role of institutions, sub-national governments, NGOs, scientific groupings, and civil society in governance matters. The states were also hesitant to use military power as a political tool, and common issues, particularly climate change, encouraged them to cooperate. In current circumstances, the Arctic governance is shaping in a manner in which cooperation has taken a backseat, militarization is on the rise, and security is growing as one of the most discussed issues in the region. In the coming days, sovereignty, legal issues surrounding shipping in NSR, resource extraction, hard power, and data exclusivity will be the important realist aspects that will have

more say in regional governance. Climate change, however, may come back as the central element in how the Arctic is perceived, given that it is at the frontline of facing climate catastrophes and existential challenges. Climate change, therefore, will still be the push factor for the states to find ways to cooperate in the future using the Arctic Council as a platform.

Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, Iceland’s foreign minister, wrote in *Pathways* (2021) that “it is now more important than ever before that we, in the Arctic region, continue to use the platform the Arctic Council has provided us with for the past 25 years to strengthen our cooperation in the circumpolar North”<sup>15</sup>. When there were tough questions on globalization, institutions, and multilateralism, the Arctic Council stood as an example that provided a forum for dialogue and cooperation. It is now a test for the Arctic and its institutions.

#### 4 References

Ali, Idrees; Emmott, Robin. (2022). *NATO, in Arctic training drills faces up to Putin’s ‘unpredictable’ Russia*, Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/nato-arctic-drill-takes-new-significance-after-russia-invasion-ukraine-2022-03-23/>

---

<sup>14</sup> Spindler, M. (2014). Interdependence. In S. Schieder, & M. Spindler, *Theories of International Relations* (pp. 60-61). Routledge.

<sup>15</sup> Council, A. (2021, May 10). *Pathways, Issue 1, May 2021*. <https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/2597>

- Council, A. (2021, May 10). *Pathways, Issue 1, May 2021*. <https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/2597>
- Edvardsen, Astri. (2022). *Arctic Council Paused: The Search for a Future for Arctic Cooperation Continues*. High North News. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-council-paused-search-future-arctic-cooperation-continues>
- Gunn Bye, H. (2021). *Arctic Council Adopts First-ever Strategic Plan*. High North News. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-council-adopts-first-ever-strategic-plan>
- Henriksen, T., & Ulfstein, G. (2011). Maritime Delimitation in the Arctic: The Barents Sea Treaty. *Ocean Development and International Law*, 42(1–2), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320.2011.542389>
- Last, J. (2022, June 28). *The Russia-Ukraine War is Dividing the Sámi Indigenous People of the Arctic*. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/27/russia-ukraine-war-saami-indigenous-arctic-people-norway-sweden-finland/>
- Maxime, G. (2013, March 8). *Joseph Nye on Soft Power*. E-International Relations. <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/34119>
- Spindler, M. (2014). Interdependence. In S. Schieder, & M. Spindler, *Theories of International Relations* (pp. 60-61). Routledge.
- Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine. (2022). *US Department of State*. <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-arctic-council-cooperation-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>
- Treaty between the Kingdom of Norway and the Russian Federation concerning Maritime Delimitation and Cooperation in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean, September 15, 2010. [https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/smk/vedlegg/2010/avtale\\_engelsk.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/smk/vedlegg/2010/avtale_engelsk.pdf)
- Global Affairs Canada. (2022, June 14). *Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark, together with Greenland, reach historic agreement on long-standing boundary disputes* [Press release]. <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2022/06/canada-and-the-kingdom-of-denmark-together-with-greenland-reach-historic-agreement-on-long-standing-boundary-disputes.html>