

STRATEGIC FILE

NO. 4 (96), MAY 2021 © PISM

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Rising Challenges for the Arctic Council:

Between a Great Power Competition and Multilateralism?

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Throughout its 25 years of existence, the Arctic Council has contributed heavily to preserving the Arctic as a zone of peace. Nowadays, changes in political realities present more complex challenges. The Council wants to continue tackling environmental problems while deescalating the growing power and military competition between China, Russia, and the United States, which may spread to the Arctic. However, balancing the Council’s mandated role of regional cooperation with security management risks losing the clear focus on the pressing climate emergency and overlooking the military nexus. If this happens, the tense relations in the region may further escalate.

The Arctic Council (AC) is viewed as the preeminent international organisation geared toward coordinating sustainable development and environmental issues in the northern circumpolar part of the world. Twenty five years after its creation, the stakes in the region are high, as the Council faces a “new” Arctic.[[1]](#footnote-1) Until recently, events in the High North were not meant to have a major impact beyond the confines of the region. Interest has grown as Arctic and non-Arctic nations increased activities there, including commercial and military. Environmental impacts stemming from climate change are opening potentially valuable strategic assets, including shipping routes and natural resources. The region’s economic potential (although exploitation of some resources may turn out to be unprofitable) has reintroduced military concerns to the Arctic. Tensions are rising between Russia (the current AC chair), the U.S., and China, creating a strategic “triangle” in the High North.[[2]](#footnote-2)

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**Multilateral Facilitator and Regional Forum**

After the Cold War, the Arctic was regarded by the eight circumpolar stakeholders—Canada, Denmark (via Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States—as a distinct region. The collapse of the Soviet Union shifted attention away from its role as a theatre for the planned, wartime deployment of strategic weapons in favour of a policy zone of peace emphasising mutually-beneficial cooperation to tackle common regional concerns (e.g., shipping, indigenous people’s issues, environmental protection, and science). This policy appealed to the Arctic states and lacked global consequences that might have engaged broader international interests. The crystallisation of this approach was establishing the Arctic Council on 19 September 1996. Although not a binding treaty, the Ottawa Declaration created a high-level inter-governmental forum dominated by eight member states and underpinned by a common interpretive framework that notably precludes dealing with military security matters.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Institutionally, beside the eight members, the AC consists of observers, permanent participants representing about 1 million indigenous inhabitants[[4]](#footnote-4) and a series of workgroups dealing with regional interests, for example, sustainable development, contamination prevention, emergency response, and environmental protection. The two-year chair rotates among AC members and sets an agenda often reflecting state-specific interests or goals.

Since 1996, the AC develops and disseminates information on environmental and socioeconomic changes. Members facilitated the establishment of Arctic-related entities (e.g., the University of the Arctic and the Arctic Economic Forum) and implemented three legally-binding agreements on search and rescue, scientific cooperation, and oil pollution response. In 2017, AC maritime and shipping-related reports were adopted by the International Maritime Organisation as a legally-binding safety code for transport ships operating in ice-covered waters.

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Multilateral work has been relatively shielded from the repercussions of conflicts and deteriorating relations among members elsewhere in the world. Despite a decline in relations between Russia and the West since Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2014, cooperation on soft security issues in the Arctic deepened. Russia and the U.S. coordinated joint coast guard search and rescue or patrol operations. In 2015, both collaborated through the AC to gain consensus for creating an Arctic Coast Guard Forum aimed at enhancing operational activities in maritime border areas among Arctic states.[[5]](#footnote-5)

A prominent trend among members is the understanding that they play a crucial role in controlling and governing the Arctic despite growing demands by indigenous peoples to be included in local innovation projects or greater interest among non-Arctic states in regional development. In particular, the five AC members directly bordering the Arctic Ocean[[6]](#footnote-6) are generally reluctant to acknowledge the region in a global context by asserting their role in solving issues outside the AC forum. In 2008, they committed to handling regional matters peacefully under guidelines established by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Longstanding disagreements over maritime borders have either been resolved (e.g., between Norway and Russia) or are being negotiated (e.g., between Canada and Denmark). Russia is, however, extending its continental shelf claims (i.e., over the Lomonosov Ridge) by up to 200 nautical miles from its shore down to the maritime borders of Greenland and Canada. This area alone would potentially give it access to about 1.1 billion barrels of oil and 7.1 trillion cubic feet of natural gas[[7]](#footnote-7) on top of the 2.5 billion tonnes of oil and 30 trillion cubic feet of gas already developed in Russia’s Arctic regions. Russia pursued proving its claim at the UN for years. Yet, Canada and Denmark also have territorial claims to the region.

**Observer States—Emerging Game Changers in the Arctic?**

Integral to the AC are governmental and non-governmental observers because their policies contribute to putting the region in the global context. The only formal mode of involvement in discussions concerning the region for external entities is through observer status. They follow the work of member states, add insight to policy discussions, propose projects through members or permanent participants, and submit written statements to AC ministerial meetings. Lacking formal voting privileges, their participation is limited to scientific expertise, information exchange, and financial contributions. Yet, observer membership can impact the development of national policies or strategies and provide opportunities for bilateral relationships that operate outside the AC forum.

There are currently 39 observers, 13 of which are governmental. Of these the majority—France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom—are also members of the European Union (EU), NATO, or both.[[8]](#footnote-8) Ireland has recently expressed interest in becoming an observer. In 2020, Czechia and Estonia submitted applications for observer status, aiming to contribute to digital development and scientific research. The EU, which is in the process of updating its Arctic policy,[[9]](#footnote-9) observes Council proceedings but a final decision over its observer application has yet to be reached by the AC. It sees itself as an Arctic economic alternative to China, Russia, and the U.S. in terms of a market for resources shipped to and from the region. The amended policy will seek to strike a balance between environmental and sustainable development, on the one hand, and security concerns stemming from climate change on the other. Some AC member (e.g., Sweden’s) and observer (e.g. Germany’s) strategies lobby for more EU involvement in regional activity or in Arctic security policy implications.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In 2013, the AC broadened its observers by admitting a series of Asia-Pacific states—China, India, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea. Diversification through this “Pacific lens”[[11]](#footnote-11) aimed to raise AC’s clout and its profile in international governance. It also reflects growing interest among non-Arctic states to be in line for the region’s strategic prizes, i.e., greater political and economic activity.

Observers have contributed to internationalising Arctic issues.

Observers have contributed to internationalising Arctic issues. Traditionally, observer policy approaches and the identities they constructed have been science-based and focused on battling pollution and calling attention to rapidly degrading environmental conditions. Such observers include Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Switzerland. Expansion of the Arctic into a global matter has “blurred” the lines between what issues are Arctic and non-Arctic among observers. Many claim that they have a crucial role to play in Arctic governance and policymaking, including in security matters. The most active is China. Observers like Japan and the UK in part link national security with the possibility of heightened military activities associated with maritime transit by China or Russia. Germany and Singapore seek to remain attached to Arctic affairs not only out of climate concerns but also because security confrontations (e.g., over access to northern shipping routes) could seriously affect their economic livelihood.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Regional Challenges and Global Interests**

The Arctic is ground zero for climate change, giving credence to the phrase what happens in the Arctic no longer stays in the Arctic. Rapidly diminishing ice sheets, coastal erosion, and melting permafrost releasing greenhouse gases (GHG) are leading to volatile changes in global weather patterns. The foundations of buildings in regions experiencing permafrost erosion can no longer support the loads they once did, leading to environmental disasters. In June 2020, the collapse of a fuel tank at a power plant in Russia’s Arctic caused 20,000 tonnes of diesel to leak into rivers and lakes that empty into the Arctic Ocean, contaminating 350 km2. Conversely, the flood of freshwater from melting ice into the Arctic and North Atlantic Oceans has altered the operation of the ocean system worldwide. Since 2010, temperatures in the region have risen annually to 1-3ºC above average. During the 2020 wildfire season, more than 244 million tonnes of CO2 was released into the atmosphere above the Arctic Circle (compared to 180 million tons in 2019). Warming temperatures directly contribute to the melting of sea ice, which annually could disappear entirely by 2035.

Developments in the High North are also affecting indigenous communities residing throughout the Arctic. Climate changes impact distributions of fish and marine or land mammals, often a source of sustenance and income for them.

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Diminishing environmental conditions have given rise to new economic possibilities. Estimates suggest that 25-30% of remaining global oil and natural gas resources might be held beneath the Arctic. The speed of melting ice is quickly giving way to new and shorter sea routes opening up throughout the Northern Sea Route (NSR) along Russia’s coastline. In 2020, goods shipped between Europe and Asia through the NSR (about 27 million tonnes) increased by 3% from 2019. Russia has set a target for increasing shipping volume through the NSR to 130 million metric tonnes by 2035. Successful winter deliveries of LNG by Russia’s state-owned Novatek to China, Japan, and South Korea without icebreaker escort will make the company’s goal of year-round gas transport a reality in the near future. Similar transit openings are appearing in Canada’s Northwest Passage (NWP).

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Economic interests and what they have to offer stakeholders, however, may be passing. Resources largely lie uncontested within the lands and waters of Arctic states. Once unlocked, natural resources in the Arctic will be costly to extract and deliver while their utilisation will speed up environmental degradation. The increasing volumes of deliverable renewable energy and AC member commitments to vigorously implement the Paris Climate Agreement targets by 2035 will likely decrease future dependence on fossil fuels. With profitability directly linked to global markets and trends, the Arctic’s natural resources may be less competitive than might have been thought in recent years.

Tourism has also become a growing sector for Arctic stakeholders. Between 2006 and 2016, winter travel to “exotic” parts of the High North increased by 600%. Key destinations include the Svalbard Islands and Alaska or cruises along the NSR and through the NWP. Greenland recently launched a campaign to develop its tourism industry. Arctic state neighbours (e.g., Scotland) are seeking closer cooperation to develop practices for sustainable adventure tourism year round.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Most recently, the global COVID-19 pandemic has affected the Arctic in several ways. Those inhabiting the region (i.e., older indigenous generations) are more vulnerable to the pandemic due to insufficient public healthcare infrastructure in areas isolated from urban centres and medical facilities. This forced AC members to take specific measures. For example, Canada’s federal government committed $129.9 million to its northern response—boosting regional healthcare departments and ensuring airline companies deliver essential goods (i.e., food and medical supplies) to indigenous communities.

Travel restrictions enacted by Arctic state governments to stop the spread of the virus has impacted the physical and mental health of indigenous people who traditionally gather together. Throughout the world, the sharp decrease in tourism has cut valuable income from states and communities. While some stakeholders (e.g., Russia) are developing more cruise ships in preparation for a return to tourism, Canada extended a ban on cruise vessels in its Arctic waters until 2022 as a measure to eradicate the virus spread. Longer tourist disruptions will lead to increased layoffs or bankruptcies. Limited entry restrictions also affected polar scientists, severely limiting or postponing international research projects related to climate change, weather, or biodiversity. The U.S. National Science Foundation cancelled the majority (90%) of the 150 Arctic projects funded by the agency. Scientific disruptions will cause data gaps in predicting future developments in the region.

**Power Politics in the Arctic**

The Arctic’s growing strategic significance prompted **China** to seek observer status, establishing itself as the largest non-Arctic stakeholder. Chinese multidimensional policy positions it as a “near Arctic state”. While seeking to develop scientific acumen in the High North (e.g., collecting information on the effects of changing weather conditions), it engages in joint ventures with AC members to pursue economic and political opportunities associated with creating a Polar Silk Road (the third arm of its broader Belt and Road Initiative).[[14]](#footnote-14) Unsatisfied with the limited scope of AC observer status, China has pursued bilateral relations with Arctic actors. In only a few years of regional engagement, Chinese state companies have invested assets in oil, gas, and infrastructure projects in Russia and mining development in Greenland. It pursues free trade with Iceland where it also opened a new research station in 2018 and considers constructing shipping centres in Norway. China seeks to obtain and protect energy supplies while accessing emerging maritime corridors, including the NSR, for quicker commercial shipping between Asia and Europe. For this reason, China is developing nuclear-powered icebreaker technology. Unease is also growing among some AC members (e.g., Denmark) that scientific research is being used as a back door for greater Chinese military access to the High North.[[15]](#footnote-15)

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As the largest stakeholder bordering the Arctic Ocean, **Russia** views the region as crucial to maintaining its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and global power status. Part of its strategic goal is to take advantage of rising maritime transport via the NSR.[[16]](#footnote-16) Russia currently has the largest icebreaker fleet (40) among the AC members, including four nuclear-powered ones. In 2021, the Russian government approved six Arctic infrastructure investment projects (e.g., a mining and metallurgical plant, deep-water terminal, and lead ore extraction and processing company) worth over $2.6 billion. Russia sees the Arctic as yet another region where it can challenge the West, using its advantages—access to the region, specialised capabilities, and record of using the High North for defence purposes. Consequently, Russia is modernising its military capabilities and infrastructure throughout the entire region. Over the last few years it has rapidly re-established a significant armed presence in the High North. Long-range bombers accompanied by fighter jets have increased operations over the Barents, Norwegian, and Greenland seas and near Alaska. Russia also conducts hypersonic missile tests throughout the Arctic, including in international waters north of Norway. Northern Fleet submarines armed with ballistic nuclear missiles conduct exercises in North Atlantic waters leading to the NSR.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Russia will further strive to legitimise the Arctic’s importance to Russia, on the one hand, and Russia’s centrality in regional affairs on the other.

Russia, the current chair of the AC (2021-2023), may strive to position it as a good stakeholder in addressing pressing concerns following U.S. inaction under the Trump administration. It will further strive to legitimise the Arctic’s importance to Russia, on the one hand, and Russia’s centrality in regional affairs on the other.[[18]](#footnote-18) Russia plans to focus on the dimensions of resource extraction and economic growth. Key aspects include increasing collaboration with international partners to foster socio-economic development curtailed by a combination of Western sanctions,[[19]](#footnote-19) anti-government protests,[[20]](#footnote-20) and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.[[21]](#footnote-21) This approach lies directly in line with Russia’s Arctic policy.[[22]](#footnote-22) As AC chair, Russia will also welcome more engagement from observer states and has expressed interest in addressing military security policy by resuming the Arctic Chiefs of Defence (CHOD) forum, put on hold since 2014 following Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea.

Having previously shown little interest in Arctic politics, the **U.S.** began recently articulating more robust assertions in the region. A series of strategic documents[[23]](#footnote-23) declare that the U.S. seeks to develop power-projection capabilities to maintain freedom of navigation and strengthen national security from potential military threats arising in the Arctic, principally by China or Russia. It also plans to update its icebreaker fleet by building six modern vessels. The U.S. is simultaneously increasing bilateral defence cooperation with key NATO allies through joint air and naval exercises.[[24]](#footnote-24) It increased training operations of B-1 bombers in Norway’s northern Orland air base and has agreed with Canada to modernise the ageing North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and Northern Warning System of radars.

In contrast to previous administrations that focused exclusively on either climate concerns (Obama) or great power politics (Trump), President Biden will pursue re-balancing security issues stemming from environmental changes with military-based politics to decrease regional competition and tensions. U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin seeks to continue cooperation with Russia in the Arctic. Breaking with Trump’s environmental scepticism, Biden has directly linked climate change to national security priority, including in the Arctic. His climate envoy, John Kerry, has a seat on the president’s National Security Council. Immediately after Biden assumed office in January 2021, the U.S. rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement and placed a moratorium on oil and gas leasing in the Alaskan Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Power politics compelled AC members to react. Authorities in Greenland rejected a 2016 offer by China to buy a disused naval base, and in 2018, Denmark denied permission to a Chinese company to bid on a construction contract for a new airfield in Greenland. In 2020, citing national security concerns, the Trudeau government rejected a Chinese company’s bid to purchase a gold mine located near the NWP in Canada’s mineral-rich Arctic region. In light of Russia’s militarisation in the High North, Nordic AC members allied in NATO (e.g., Denmark, Iceland, and Norway) or partnering with the Alliance (Finland and Sweden) undertook projects to upgrade military infrastructure, committed to increase long-term Arctic-related defence spending, participated in northern military exercises, and strengthened bilateral security cooperation with the U.S.[[25]](#footnote-25)

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**Adapting to the New Arctic**

For 25 years, the AC has tackled distinct regional issues stemming from environmental problems through a format of mutual cooperation and consensus. Greater attention and activity in the Arctic is, however, progressively merging one-time regional concerns with challenging global vectors. This puts pressure on the AC format to act toward pandemic relief, controlling climate change, making decisions on shipping or resource extraction, and exercising influence over the trajectory of power politics all at the same time.

Changes in Arctic realities present an opportunity for the organisation to evolve. Like all multilateral forums, the AC could benefit from a complex assessment of its internal strengths and weaknesses (e.g., work between the ministerial and scientific levels, engagement with indigenous communities, and the role of working groups and observers). There is general agreement among members for a need to fine-tune frameworks. A 2015 audit conducted by Denmark, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the U.S. raised several concerns.[[26]](#footnote-26) AC competences are structured but the work does not always run smoothly. Inconsistent communication between working groups stemming from the absence of reporting mechanisms weakens communication with the ministerial level and reduces overall prioritisation. Projects risk losing continuity or being forgotten once the chair of the Council changes hands. Of the 43 projects tabled during Iceland’s tenure (2019-2021) only seven were completed.[[27]](#footnote-27) Scientists have raised concerns of political issues gaining more weight, that research is manipulated to benefit political agendas, or that recommendations are ultimately ignored. The political agendas of some members have also impacted the recalibration efforts. In 2017, the AC agreed to develop a strategic plan by 2019 aimed at adjusting future structures and operations. The Trump administration’s climate scepticism, however, caused a breakdown in drafting the plan.

The AC’s tempered focus on resolving and gaining coordination on regional issues enables it to continue the job it was mandated to do without marginalising its footprint in the Arctic. Rationalisation among members to address environmental changes in the context of a regional security dilemma will further direct AC efforts to tackle a problem that it is in a position to solve effectively. Engagement with indigenous communities has been a central pillar of the AC’s work. The Council’s dedication to support critical indigenous issues such as health, economic, education initiatives, and cultural preservation programmes have prepared it to address the most immediate challenge affecting the way of life of these people—the COVID-19 pandemic.

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The AC’s experience in regional coordination and cooperation is invaluable in assisting in managing Arctic military security—the natural extension of growing regional economic opportunities caused by climate change. Some argue that calls to direct the AC to address military security matters may distract or inhibit its ability to continue tackling environmental or sustainable development concerns. Others contend that not addressing the topic in an open and transparent forum could raise regional stakes to such a point where unintended incidents trigger severe consequences in the region and potentially spill over elsewhere. There is currently no venue for an Arctic military security dialogue that includes Russia. Mobilising the political willpower towards a favourable consensus among the members to extend the AC’s mandate may prove demanding. Nonetheless, some policymaker stakeholders (e.g., Finland and Iceland) have recently expressed support for the idea of extending the mandate. In the meantime, the AC could fill the security gap by convening an annual dialogue among all members (e.g., Arctic Chiefs of Defence forum and Arctic Security Forces Roundtable). The recent precedent of member cooperation in reaching international agreements and establishing Arctic-related entities (including one dealing with soft security matters) suggests that the AC could facilitate in creating similar entities with a defined policy scope (e.g., a military code of conduct akin to the maritime Polar Code or a security institution) to ensure transparency of military intentions among Arctic stakeholders.

**Conclusions**

For 25 years, multilateral cooperation in the AC has contributed to maintaining the Arctic largely as a low-tension region. However, the Arctic is in flux. The rush underway is to determine who the principal stakeholders are and what they will be able to do in the Arctic in the near future.[[28]](#footnote-28) Vectors stemming from new opportunities arising amid climate change are shifting the AC’s attention outside its mandate and may constitute a daunting challenge between coordinating regional cooperation and managing international competition in the near future. Additionally, bilateralism practiced by some observers (i.e., China) risks competing with the longstanding multilateral approach to regional cooperation embedded in the AC’s work. Balancing the nexus entails institutional evolution if the AC intends to continue its role as a facilitator for safe, secure, and sustainable development in the region. This may mean prioritising issues it is currently mandated to tackle, such as climate change, while acknowledging and addressing growing concerns. Failure to do so risks upsetting future regional governance to a political rivalry and competition between Arctic stakeholders and non-Arctic interests.

**POLAND AS AN ARCTIC COUNCIL OBSERVER**

* Poland formally became an observer during the first AC ministerial meeting on 17-18 September 1998. In 2015, the foreign ministry published Poland’s first comprehensive Arctic framework policy, *Cele i narzędzia polskiej polityki arktycznej (Goals and Aims of Polish Arctic Policy)*. It emphasises the importance of scientific research, underlines the role of international law (i.e., the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea), and stresses the AC as the primary forum for multilateral cooperation in the region.
* Polish scientific exploration in the Arctic predates the Council’s creation. It established a connection with the region on 2 September 1931 as a party to the Svalbard Treaty. The first polar research expedition was conducted in 1934. Poland holds a unique scientific position among non-Arctic stakeholders. The Stanisław Siedlecki Research Station in Horsund on Spitsbergen Island in the Norwegian Svalbard archipelago is one of only two permanently manned stations of EU Member States. It provides a unique opportunity for Polish scientists to study and predict climate developments with international experts.
* After 1990, Polish foreign policy pivoted towards integration with a network of European multilateral frameworks. Based on its longstanding research experience in the High North, Poland was invited to observe deliberations that led to the adoption of the 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy. Besides the AC, Polish interests extended to observer roles in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, and the Nordic Council of Ministers (the so-called “Four Councils of the North”).
* Scientific experience in the Arctic has translated into broader political engagement in Arctic diplomacy. Poland views further developing the Arctic governance system in order to respond to growing regional interests (e.g., shipping and utilisation of natural resources) as essential. The AC is considered the most important place to discuss these concerns, and Poland supports further strengthening it to efficiently tackle them. In addition, Poland actively pursued maintaining and developing relations between AC members and observers, for example, by advocating the introduction of Deputy Minister Meetings as a new political level within the Council (2008 and 2010) or hosting the Warsaw Format Meeting (most recently in 2019) to discuss observer concerns with the AC Senior Arctic Officials group chair.
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