



# ARCTIC SECURITY BRIEFING PAPERS

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## Arctic Security Cooperation - Still Needed, but is it Still Possible?

*Russia's brazenly illegal war on Ukraine certainly means business as usual is not a serious option for relations with Russia, including in the Arctic. But the effort to repel aggression in Europe should not be the occasion to escalate tensions and reject cooperation or engagement in a hitherto stable region. Given that pan-Arctic cooperation is a professed and genuinely practiced Arctic value, shutting down dialogue forums ought not to be the go-to Arctic response to conflict and gross violations of norms and laws outside, or inside, the region.*

In response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO [suspended all practical cooperation with Russia](#). Meetings of the [Arctic Chiefs of Defence](#) ended, and Russia, in response to sanctions, stopped participating in the [Arctic Security Forces Roundtable](#). The decision by the seven non-Russian states of the Arctic Council to [temporarily pause](#) "participation in all meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies" (currently with Russia as chair) was thus not a surprise, but it does raise the broader question of why dialogue and direct engagement mechanisms cannot be designed to carry on when needed most, when relations and violations of norms and laws are at their worst, without parties to the dialogue thereby condoning, or being seen to condone, the violations.

There may be a visceral temptation to make the horrific events in Ukraine the "[breaking point of Arctic cooperation](#)" with Russia, but cooperation is not the only objective of engagement. Dialogue and engagement are also about mutual accountability – about challenging interlocutors and managing adversarial relations. Dialogue with adversaries is pursued, as realists should recognize, because refusing to talk risks having confrontation spin out of control. The American think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), recognized in [a 2020 report](#) that a deficit in diplomacy meant lost opportunities. It called for "annual meetings of the foreign and defense ministers of the eight Arctic Council nations, outside of the Arctic Council venue," along with "more frequent meetings of the five Arctic coastal states to discuss management of the [Central Arctic Ocean]."

The contention, in [Arctic Today](#), that "peaceful engagement" at the Arctic Council table is untenable as long as Russia threatens Sweden and Finland with "military and political consequences" if they join NATO, ignores the long history of Russia and the West threatening each other to the point of nuclear annihilation without leaving dialogue tables. In the Cold War it was precisely the dangerous threats and counter-threats that *required* the creation of reliable avenues of sustained engagement. If, as the Norwegian Border Commissioner [says](#), things are "back to a cold-war mode," it doesn't follow that all contact is ended – something retired Canadian diplomat Gar Parfy understands well in his [critique](#) of ministerial and media responses to a Canadian official attending a Russian national day event.

### Security Dialogue

When "[convening power](#)" is a central strength, as it is for the Arctic Council, refusing to meet invites self-inflicted injury. And quite apart from the Arctic Council, the current absence of a reliable security forum in the Arctic ought to be especially concerning. It is in the midst of crises that engagement with adversaries or across deep political divides becomes more important than ever. A 2020 essay in [Modern Diplomacy](#) on security dialogue in the Arctic, argues that "after six years [since the 2014 annexation of Crimea] it is apparent that the ban on mil-to-mil engagement with Russia is adversely affecting all Arctic states."

A recent (May 2022) *Council on Foreign Relations* [blog](#) on the importance of engagement with Russia, argues that, “given Russia’s Arctic assets, any organization governing the region without Moscow would be attempting to oversee an area mostly outside its control.” The focus is the Arctic Council, and while the Council is a dialogue forum, not a governance body, the basic point broadly applies, especially with regard to Arctic security engagement. Engaging with adversaries is essential, and in the Arctic would be a welcome instance of “regional functionalism” taking precedence over “international geopolitics.”<sup>1</sup> The value or effectiveness of engagement with adversaries obviously depends on the substance of the dialogue and the seriousness with which deep differences and threatening postures are addressed. Security dialogues in the Arctic that are confined to the seven non-Russian states, the kind Canada’s Defence Minister [hosted](#) in May 2022, are bound to be helpful, but they are no substitute for pan-Arctic engagement.

The distinguished American Arctic diplomat, David Balton, [wrote in 2021](#) that “despite serious tensions between Russia and other Arctic Nations concerning other regions and other issues, Arctic governments have largely chosen to compartmentalize the Arctic – to set aside those tensions in favor of cooperating with each other in the region.” In October 2021, for example, an Arctic Coast Guard Forum gathering included all eight Arctic states, in spite of their profound differences in other contexts, and focused on cooperation in search-and-rescue operations and marine pollution responses, and on other “threats to maritime security.”<sup>2</sup>

But that was then. The Russia that now visits catastrophe on Ukraine seems to have little in common with the Russia that cooperates with Arctic coast guards, and that of course leads to the question of when the Russia of Ukraine might show up in the Arctic. Amb. Balton has thus more recently [lamented](#) that “some of what made the Arctic special, made it exceptional, seems not at hand at the moment.”

But that does not mean that all military actions taken in response are constructive. A Wilson Center [paper](#), written before but published after Russia’s February 24 attack on Ukraine, rightfully raises concern about naval operations by the US and NATO in the Barents Sea near the homeports for Russia’s Northern Fleet. It particularly notes U.S. attack submarines operating in the waters (bastion) used by Russian intercontinental ballistic missile subs, and in sea lanes used by Russian attack subs between the Kola Peninsula and the North Atlantic. As argued before in these pages, [threatening Russia’s deterrent forces](#) does not advance strategic stability in the Arctic or beyond.

[Stephen Walt](#), the noted international relations scholar now at the Harvard Kennedy School, was also insisting in the pre-Feb. 24 context that the pursuit of sustainable peace in Europe would not be advanced by “containment” or a “major military buildup,” but “by a serious effort to reduce the mutual suspicions that have risen between Russia and NATO since the late 1990s” – in these post-Feb. 24 times, his counsel is as relevant to the Arctic as to Europe. Writing for *The Conversation*, [Gabriella Gricius](#), an American Arctic security scholar, points out that “working with Russia in the Arctic is even more important now than it was before the invasion.” Expanded engagement could, as Gricius suggests, even “precipitate a cooperation spiral” that would not only enhance Arctic stability but also help to “lessen tensions elsewhere.”

The need to engage with Russia in a region where it is obviously prominent, heightens the importance of the proposal for an Arctic security forum, made in the 2020 [Modern Diplomacy](#) essay noted earlier. Developed by Arctic experts Troy J. Bouffard, Elizabeth Buchanan, and Michael Young,<sup>3</sup> the proposal reviews the multiple Arctic forums that already exist, noting that “a glaring gap in these fora is one that addresses Arctic security or defence issues.”

### **Indigenous communities and security**

The Arctic’s dialogue gap is also reflected in the failure, as Indigenous leaders in the Arctic have confirmed,<sup>4</sup> of the seven non-Russian state members of the Arctic Council to consult the Council’s Indigenous permanent participants before taking the decision to pause participation in its work. Not consulting Indigenous communities

on such a consequential decision, even though they are formal participants in the Arctic Council's work, suggests they are even less likely to be consulted on explicitly security matters, for which there is now no formal consultative table.

Neither the [Gwich'in Council International](#) nor the ICC objected to the pause, but the [ICC](#) in particular used the occasion to emphasize the importance of respecting indigenous interests in the development of Arctic security policies: "Inuit are committed to the Arctic remaining a zone of peace, a phrase coined by former USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev in a 1987 speech in Murmansk." It noted that the ICC's guiding documents repeat that basic message, including in 2018 when it was mandated to "lay the groundwork to declare the Arctic as a peaceful Zone."

In 1989 Mary Simon, now the Governor-General of Canada but then the President of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, wrote a seminal article entitled, "[Toward an Arctic Zone of Peace](#)," in *Peace Research* journal. She reasserted the need for indigenous communities to become directly involved in shaping Arctic approaches to peace and security, reminding Arctic states that the "vital starting point" was for them to recognize "that vast regions in Northern Canada, Alaska, Greenland and eastern Siberia constitute first and foremost the Inuit homeland." She said, "we do not wish our traditional territories to be treated as a strategic military and combat zone between eastern and western alliances." She pointed out, among other things, the dangers of military powers abusing "freedom of navigation" in Arctic waters and calling for an examination of "how naval uses of the Arctic and other seas might be limited" in order to "advance arms control and the common security of all nations."

Northern perspectives highlighted in a 2020 publication of the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN), [Voices from the Arctic](#),<sup>5</sup> recalls a series of resolutions, beginning in 1977, calling for "peaceful and safe uses of the Arctic Circumpolar Zone." Ambitious and challenging in many of the details, the indigenous scholar, writer, and Chair of the International ICC, Dalee Sambo Dorrough nevertheless reminds governments that those resolutions remain relevant and important calls to demilitarize the Arctic. These Inuit Circumpolar Conference calls for the Arctic to be respected as a zone of peace have been consistent over the decades, emphasizing an ongoing commitment to dialogue and cooperation that is not conditional on the willingness of the major powers to cooperate with each other.

That raises the question of how the ICC's "[political universe](#)" intersects with the state and military centred security universe that now holds sway in the Arctic. Bridget Larocque, also writing in *Voices from the Arctic*, points out that the credible pursuit of a peaceful and prosperous Arctic cannot happen without direct Indigenous involvement in decision-making. A northern indigenous leader with extensive experience in indigenous organizations, self-government negotiations, and government, Larocque warns that "policies developed without the knowledge and wisdom of indigenous expertise, which we bring as life-long Northerners, is nothing more than the continuation of the colonial methodology that perpetuates antagonism."

### **NATO and Arctic bridge building?**

One can only guess at Vladimir Putin's appreciation of irony, but a war begun in large measure to blunt the spread and influence of NATO that has succeeded in elevating it into one of the more coveted clubs to join surely qualifies as such. And while Putin may have a genuine irony to contemplate, for the Arctic, where cooperation is not just an option but a necessity, a heightened Russia/NATO divide looks more like tragedy. With seven of eight Arctic states destined to be in NATO, Russia seems to be left on its own, but of course the most prominent, dominant, presence in the region will not be isolated – it will have to be reckoned with.

Geography determines neighbors, not political preferences, and strategic realism should recognize that stability is not achieved by shunning powerful or prominent neighbours but by managing neighborhoods. And here is the critical point, the management of intra-Arctic stability cannot credibly be outsourced to NATO. A Western defence

alliance is not the institutional medium through which to pursue mutuality and stability in a region that includes Russia.

Acknowledging and collectively responding via NATO to perceived military vulnerabilities on the alliance's eastern flank or in the North Atlantic is obviously central to its defence mandate, but it does not follow that NATO's institutional military presence is required, or could be constructive, in the high Arctic, or especially that NATO could be an effective vehicle for addressing political/security controversies with Russia. The requirement in the Arctic is cooperation and the search for mutuality across the gaping geostrategic and indigenous/state divides. That means bridge-building, which is not the purpose, and certainly not the hallmark, of defence alliances.

Pan-Arctic engagement on security, with a view to resuming cooperation on the full range of issues on which Arctic well-being depends, is needed now more than ever. It is thus the collective responsibility of all the diverse custodians of Arctic region security to muster the will, prudence, and uninterrupted engagement to advance the shared interests and well-being of the people of the Arctic, without giving an unintentional or implied pass to Russia on its gross violations of the well-being of Ukrainians and Ukraine.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The debate over the extent to which conflicts with Russia outside the Arctic should be allowed to intrude on and limit practical cooperation with Russia in the Arctic has been helpfully characterized as "the tension between international geopolitics and regional functionalism." P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Troy Bouffard, and Ryan Dean, "Effects of Recent Developments on Arctic Regional Governance: Arctic Academic eTalks Closed Session Executive Summary," NAADSN, Activity Report, 3 March 2022. <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Activity-Report-3-March-2022-Closed-Arctic-Etalks-Exec-Summary.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "Coast guards of eight Arctic countries discuss expanding border cooperation," 12 October 2021. <https://arctic.ru/international/20211012/997301.html>

Eilís Quinn, "Arctic Coast Guard Forum meeting underway in Russia," *Eye on the Arctic*, 7 October 2021.

<https://www.rcinet.ca/eye-on-the-arctic/2021/10/07/arctic-coast-guard-forum-meeting-underway-in-russia/>

<sup>3</sup> **Troy J. Bouffard** is retired from the US Army, is on the faculty at the University of Alaska Fairbank, is a research fellow with the Centre for Defence and Security Studies (CDSS) and member of the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN); **Elizabeth Buchanan** is Lecturer of Strategic Studies with Deakin University for the Defence and Strategic Studies Course (DSSC) at the Australian War College and a Fellow of the Modern War Institute at West Point; and **Michael Young** is a retired Foreign Service Officer with the U.S. Department of State and is now a Fellow at the Payne Institute for Public Policy focusing on Arctic policy and security.

<sup>4</sup> "The Arctic Region in an Era of Uncertainty," an on-line forum sponsored by the University of Ottawa's Centre for International Policy Studies, June 2 and 3, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Dalee Sambo Dorough, Bridget Larocque, Kaviq Kaluraq, Daniel Taukie, with David Sproule and Whitney Lackenbauer, *Voices from the Arctic: Diverse Views on Canadian Arctic Security*, North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, November 2020. <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20-nov-ArcticVoicesProceedings-upload.pdf>