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ANALYSIS

The Russian Arctic Council Chairmanship: National Security Considerations in the Shadow of Regional Cooperation

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Abstract

From May 2021 to 2023, Russia will hold the chairmanship of the Arctic Council for the second time in the forum's history. As chair, it will lead the collective efforts of the foremost regional deliberative body, comprised of the eight Arctic nations, six permanent participants representing Arctic Indigenous Peoples, six working groups, and thirty-nine observer states, intergovernmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations. This represents a critical opportunity for the host country to orchestrate focused attention on the importance of the Arctic through its particular lens.

Although the Arctic Council conducts itself through consensus decision-making and ultimately speaks with a single voice, the potential to synchronize and leverage opportunities alongside official activities provides a window of opportunity for Russia to solidify its Arctic-related national interests. The forum's charter forbids the discussion of hard security issues under its auspices, thus ensuring that high politics associated with great power competition in the military sphere do not inhibit the Council's ability to address environmental and human security issues. Although inter-state and sub-state cooperation and adherence to established international norms help to mitigate these concerns, increased defense-related activities and strategic competition influence how political actors and policymakers frame regional dynamics.

Anticipating the Russian chairmanship encourages sober reflection on how Russia might seek to advance its national interests in the Circumpolar Arctic over the next two years and the implications of these actions for the other Arctic states and regional rightsholders. Although the members of the forum will generally avoid upsetting protocol and expected conduct during official Arctic Council events, Russia will seek to advance its national interests in non-official activities hosted concurrently. In this short reflection, we discuss ways in which Russia can implicitly and explicitly engage with strategic security issues during its tenure as chair while conforming to the expectations and constraints associated with that formal role.

Fundamental Security Circumstances of the Arctic

In 2007, Russian expeditioners planted a titanium national flag on the seabed at the North Pole, generating excitement about sovereign rights and the enabling role of advanced technology in facilitating access to hitherto inaccessible polar spaces. The following year, the United States Geological Survey's seminal (if overly optimistic) study estimated undiscovered oil and gas reserves in the Circumpolar Arctic, sparking international excitement about an alleged "race for resources" (even though the lion's share of resources fell within the well-established sovereign jurisdictions of the coastal states). Alongside irrefutable evidence of diminishing sea ice and scientific models predicting greater maritime accessibility to Arctic waters in the future, these developments thrust the circumpolar region into a new era of competition. The prospect of more reliable access, matched with geopolitical motivations to access regional resources and shipping routes, sparked the imagination of both Arctic and non-Arctic states.

Given the United States' "hyperpower" status, Russia's relatively robust and rapid militarization of its Arctic Zone (buoyed by oil and gas revenues in the late 2000s) aroused modest attention. Although Russian adventurism in Georgia and provocative statements by Putin (such as his 2007 Munich speech) suggested that Russia would no longer adhere to the Western rulebook for international affairs, few commentators anticipated that Russia would upset the Arctic order. As the largest Arctic state and one that is heavily economically dependent on regional resources, it had the strongest vested interest in maintaining the regional status quo. Accordingly, Russian remilitarization of the Arctic remained more of a subject of academic debate than of strategic concern for the United States, its NATO allies, or its Partnership for Peace members in Finland and Sweden.

In due course, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, aggressive activities in Eastern Ukraine and Syria, and increasingly belligerent rhetoric toward the West raised new concerns about whether the Arctic region could remain insulated from resurgent strategic competition globally. Fortunately, the Arctic Council's limited mandate ensured that it could continue its work even in the face of Western sanctions on Russia. The Council's

working groups continued their important research; Senior Arctic Official and Ministerial meetings continued unabated.

Military cooperation in the region followed a different course. The United States and its allies suspended military-to-military contact with Russia in the wake of the Crimean invasion, thus removing formal mechanisms for dialogue on Arctic security issues. Prior to sanctions, all of the Arctic states discussed security issues through the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) and regular contact between the Northern Chiefs of Defense (NCHoDs). Such events allowed for transparency and confidence-building, as well as making it possible to establish rules to help manage military interaction and expectations in the region.

The end of formal military contact since 2014 has forced the Arctic states to resort to other forms of strategic communication. Countries such as Canada, typically hesitant to have NATO articulate an explicit Arctic role and thus potentially provoke Russia, have changed their tune. The United States Department of Defense has published a recent suite of Arctic strategies and Congress has directed military-related infrastructure development in Alaska. In 2018, NATO mounted Trident Juncture, the largest military exercise in the Arctic since the Cold War, and in May 2020 three U.S. 6th Fleet warships and a UK Royal Navy frigate operated in the Barents Sea to "conduct maritime security operations" for the first time since the mid-1980s. More exercises of this nature are likely to follow as part of the strategic messaging dance between the Western allies and Russia.

These developments involving the United States and NATO have generated apprehension in Russian circles. Although both Washington and Moscow have repeatedly indicated their respective interest in renewing formal Arctic security dialogue, such activity requires that the U.S. Secretaries of both Defense and State send concurrent notification to Congress for a specific waiver of the sanctions. Lawmakers would then have fifteen days to decide one way or the other. In the meantime, representatives from all the Arctic states except Russia participated in the ASFR in Finland on May 5–6, 2021. Discussing critical Arctic security issues without the involvement of the largest Arctic state, however, has obvious limitations.

The Arctic Council Chairmanship and Russian Security Interests

On March 29, 2021, former Russian Senior Arctic Official Anton Vasiliev outlined the four priorities of the Russian Chairmanship:

- the Arctic inhabitants, including indigenous peoples;
- environmental protection and climate change;
- social and economic growth;
- further strengthening the Arctic Council—the key framework of international Arctic cooperation.

Vasiliev insisted that "the game plan conceived by Russia has many ideas, but no surprises," given that "the Arctic Council is a collective body operated by consensus. It treats in a balanced way the two designated areas of the Arctic Council mandate—environmental protection and sustainable development."

That being said, the four Arctic priorities connect directly to Russian strategic objectives: enhanced economic cooperation; investments in Arctic urban infrastructure, health care, education, and Indigenous welfare; and climate change. Furthermore, the strong emphasis on the "rational use of natural resources," presented in the language of stewardship and socio-economic wellbeing, reinforces Moscow's strong emphasis on the energy and mining sectors. Broadly speaking, its main domestic Arctic interests center on "Development of the Arctic Zone" and management of the Northern Sea Route (NSR—Sevmorput / СМП—Севморпуть). Thus, promoting "safe and beneficial all-season navigation" in the NSR and enhancing search-and-rescue capacities dovetails with national priorities.

The absence of any reference to strategic competition or the "growing potential for conflict in the Arctic" (as asserted in its October 2020 strategy) is unsurprising. Opportunities to invoke national security issues as part of Arctic Council deliberations and activities remain implausible—and ultimately counterproductive—for Russia as chair. During official Arctic Council events such as working group, plenary, and executive sessions, members are explicitly barred from discussing matters of military security per the 1996 Ottawa Declaration. Such issues cannot even be introduced to the agenda. Offering an "off-script" intervention involving hard security issues would represent a significant breach of protocol.

Thus, Moscow will avoid directly referencing national security considerations as Arctic Council chair and will emphasize its work to preserve the region as a territory of peace, stability, and constructive international cooperation. Nevertheless, analysts should recognize how Moscow's position on many Arctic Council-related projects and initiatives intersects with its broader security priorities, both protecting its territories and resources and advancing its strategic deterrence capabilities. Military concerns will not take the form of an agenda item during Arctic Council business, but Russia will continue to find occasions—in events and activities organized in close proximity and timing to Council meetings—to articulate its national security interests and to accuse NATO of militarizing the Arctic and forcing the Kremlin to strengthen its defenses. Senior officials will carefully craft and authorize these statements, which will be synchronized and aligned with Putin's requirements.

Nikolay Korchunov, the Russian ambassador at large for the Arctic and the leading champion of Russia's northern agenda, has articulated Russia's Arctic interests, strategic plans, and chairmanship priorities since the start of this year. His framing of the official narrative illustrates how Russia can signal its national security interests in apparently benign statements that emphasize sustainable development, improved living conditions for Arctic residents, biodiversity, and economic development. On the one hand, he emphasizes for international audiences that achieving these goals "require[s] the collective efforts of all participants in the Arctic G8." On the other hand, whenever Russian economic development, natural resources, and the NSR are mentioned to domestic audiences, this is backed by reassurances that the Kremlin is vigorously protecting national sovereignty and bolstering its regional military presence. Domestic discussion of relatively neutral topics like the environment or economic development—even in the context of Russia's upcoming Arctic Council chairmanship—is generally linked to Russia's national security interests. As such, Russia will not link Arctic defense and security considerations to its official agenda as chair of the Council, but we must acknowledge that they are never far out of mind.

Conclusion

Russia's updated plan for the AZRF, unveiled in three 2020 strategic policy documents and an April 2021 implementation plan, provides essential insights into its broader Arctic strategy. It suggests that Russia is likely to highlight its Arctic developments and priorities in carefully crafted language during its 2021–23 chairmanship of the Arctic Council, with the goal of expanding and enhancing its self-defined position in the Circumpolar North. It has set the major pieces in place to pursue a *legitimizing* campaign, and the world can expect consistent themes and messaging that emphasize the Arctic's importance for Russia—and the centrality of Russia in circumpolar affairs. By linking issues that are a normal part of Arctic Council business with ancillary activities, Russia can promote and advance its national security priorities. This is part of an overarching strategy that does not seek to revise Arctic governance structures or undermine regional peace; instead, Moscow seeks to define the region in its preferred terms. The goal is to get other Arctic stakeholders to internalize and repeat the language and narratives that Russia is promoting, particularly Russia's self-perception as the largest, strongest, most developed—and most legitimate—Arctic player.

During its Arctic Council chairmanship, Russia will also explore avenues for how it can use Arctic narratives and relationships to facilitate a "return to normalcy" and frame the dialogue in a manner consistent with its national priorities and interests. Strategic messages intended to encourage further rapprochement with other Arctic countries align with an institutional norm/practice within the Arctic Council that cooperation throughout the region should be buffered from external conflict where possible. They are also crafted to advance national self-interest and solidify frames that position Russia as the most legitimate Arctic rightsholder. How the other Arctic states respond to such framing activities and advance a cooperative agenda while countering narratives prejudicial to their interests and values remains an enduring challenge—and one that we anticipate will become increasingly critical over the next two years.

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ANALYSIS

Upcoming Russian Arctic Council Chairmanship: Priorities and Implications for the High North

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Abstract

This study aims to examine Russia's policy priorities for its chairmanship in the Arctic Council and the possible implications thereof for the region. The author argues that Russia's Arctic Council presidential agenda will likely include the following priorities: climate change action; sustainable development; social cohesiveness and connectivity in the region; indigenous peoples; conservation of biodiversity; science diplomacy; and partial institutional reform of the Council. Moscow will not, however, renew its earlier efforts to transform the Council from an intergovernmental forum into a full-fledged international organization and introduce military security issues to the Council's agenda. Russia's chairmanship will likely strengthen the Arctic Council's role in asserting regional stewardship by responding to the challenges of a rapidly changing Arctic.

Introduction

The Arctic Council (AC) is seen by Russia as both a centerpiece and cornerstone of the regional governance system, a view that is confirmed by Russian strategic documents[1] and numerous statements on the part of the Russian leadership. Compared to other regional and subregional organizations and forums (such as the Nordic institutions, Barents-Euro-Arctic Council, Northern Forum, etc.), the AC is viewed by the Kremlin as a more geographically representative, multidimensional (in terms of areas covered by its activities), science-based, and efficient international entity. Even though the seven other AC member-states belong to Western institutions that do not include Russia (NATO, the EU, Nordic organizations), Moscow feels comfortable in the Council because it functions there on an equal footing and is able to participate in AC decision-making. Russia's forthcoming AC chairmanship (2021–2023) further elevates the Council, making it the highest priority of Moscow's Arctic strategy in the short- and medium-term.

The objective of this article is two-fold. On the one hand, it aims to outline Moscow's presidential agenda; on the other, it seeks to discuss the potential reactions of other Arctic players to Russian initiatives.

Moscow's View of the Arctic Council: Changing Perceptions

Important changes have recently taken place in Russian academic and official thinking about the future of the AC, its functions, and its role in the regional governance system. Prior to the Ukrainian crisis and the escalation of tensions between Russia and the West, Moscow's official position and Russian academic discourse favored the transformation of the AC from an intergovernmental discussion forum to a full-fledged international organization (with a formal charter, institutional structure, and power to conclude binding agreements).

With the outbreak of a "new Cold War" in East–West relations, however, both the Kremlin and the Russian expert community serving the government realized that any plans to make the AC an intergovernmental international organization were unrealistic. All the other Council member-states introduced economic sanctions against Russia. Five of them, being NATO member-states, cancelled military-to-military contacts with Russia, initiated military build-up in the North, and increased their military activities (including land and sea military exercises, air and sea patrolling in the Arctic region, etc.). Overall, mutual trust between Russia and the rest of the AC member-states was significantly undermined. Russian activities within the framework of the Council decreased in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis. It took some time to identify areas where cooperation between Moscow and the other Arctic countries was still possible and delineate them from areas of conflict.

For the above reasons, Russian diplomats and politicians stopped speaking about imbuing the AC with new legal powers and its transformation from a "discussion forum" into a full-fledged international organization.

There are at least two plausible explanations for why Russian leaders changed their minds about the Council's status. First, in the current—conflictual—situation, it is unrealistic to expect non-Russian AC member-states

1 V. Putin. Ukaz Prezidenta RF ot 26 oktyabrya 2020 g. no. 645 "O Strategii razvitiya Arkticheskoi zony Rossiyskoi Federatsii i obespecheniya natsional'noi bezopasnosti na period do 2035" [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation no. 645, October 26, 2020 "On the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Ensuring National Security up to 2035"]. http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/J8FhckYOPAQQfxN6Xlt6ti6XzpTVAvQy.pdf (in Russian).

(especially the US) to agree to create a new full-fledged regional intergovernmental organization in which Russia would have equal standing with Western states. Second, under current circumstances, the AC, as an informal and flexible institution, is more efficient and preferable as a cooperative platform to a formal organization with rigid structure, rules, and procedures. As "classical" international organizations (eg., the UN and OSCE) demonstrate, antagonisms among member-states in turbulent times can bring the entire work of international institutions to a halt. The AC, by contrast, has not only "survived" the crisis in Russian–Western relations, but also made some progress in developing Arctic cooperation.

Another important change in Russia's perceptions of the Council's prospects relates to its role as a regional security provider. Before the Ukraine crisis, both Moscow and the expert community believed that with time, the AC should add a military security agenda to its mandate, becoming a sort of Arctic OSCE. However, the crisis compelled Moscow to abandon this idea. According to present-day Russian assessments, the Council should retain its role as an international body dealing only with "soft" security issues, such as socioeconomic problems, environment, conservation of biodiversity, climate change mitigation, maritime safety, search and rescue operations, local communities, the connectivity and social cohesiveness of Arctic regions, and Arctic research, among others.

Russia's Priorities for Its Arctic Council Chairmanship

Based on numerous interviews and statements made by the Russian leadership and officials involved in preparations for the Russian AC chairmanship, one can identify the following policy priorities: (1) sustainable socioeconomic development of the Arctic region on the basis of environmentally clean technologies; (2) development of renewable sources of energy; (3) promoting a circular economy; (4) further development of Arctic shipping, including the Northern Sea Route (NSR); (5) environmental protection; (6) climate action; (7) social cohesiveness and connectivity in the region; (8) improving the well-being of those living in the Arctic, especially the indigenous peoples, and preserving their languages, cultures and traditions; (9) Arctic science diplomacy; and (10) joint educational projects, including further support for the University of the Arctic.[2]

According to the Russian Government's Action Plan to implement the Russian chair program, 116 events will be organized under the Council's auspices and in Russia itself. Among these important events are the Conference of Ministers of Science (September 2021), the International Arctic Forum "The Arctic—A Territory of Dialogue" (December 2021 and April 2023), the Arctic Meteorological Summit (2022), the Arctic Indigenous Peoples Summit (2022), an Arctic summit (heads of the AC member-states) (April 2023), a ministerial meeting on environmental protection (May 2023), the World Summit on Climate Change and Thawing Permafrost (September 2023), and the Arctic Young Leaders Forum (fall 2023).[3]

Russia also plans to establish an international Arctic Hydrogen Energy Applications and Demonstrations station known as "Snowflake" (in the polar Urals) and organize international drifting expeditions on the icebreaker "Captain Dranitsin" (winter 2021–2022) and a self-propelled ice-strengthened platform (winter 2022–2023).

According to presidential advisor Anton Kobyakov, during the Russian chairmanship, 17 federal agencies, 11 members of the Russian Federation, and 12 universities and NGOs will take part in organizing the above events.[4]

As for institutional reform of the AC, certain changes are possible, including:

- Improving coordination of the Council's structural elements and implementation process;
- Improving coordination of AC activities with other regional and subregional institutions (Arctic Economic Council, Arctic Coast Guard Forum, Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Nordic institutions, Northern Forum, etc.);
- Streamlining the secretariat system with the aim of making working groups' secretariats more accountable to the main Council's Secretariat;
- Proposing specific measures to implement the Council's Strategic Plan, which is supposed to be adopted by the Reykjavik ministerial summit on May 20, 2021. This plan could provide for better coordination of AC activities not only with other regional institutions, but also with the UN bodies dealing with the Arctic, making the Council a real focal point of Arctic cooperation and regional governance.

2 S. Lavrov. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the 11th Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting, Rovaniemi, 7 May 2019. https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/2405/2019_Rovaniemi_Ministerial_Statement_by_the_Russian_Federation_English.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y; Interview Posla po osobym poruchenyam MID Rossii N.V. Korchunova gazete "Kommersant" 15 yanvarya 2021 goda [Interview of the Ambassador at large of the Russian MFA N.V. Korchunov to the "Kommersant" newspaper, 15 January 2021]. https://www.mid.ru/arkticeskij-sovet/-/asset_publisher/0vP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/4525318 (in Russian).

3 M. Mishustin. Plan osnovnykh meropriyatiy v svyazi s predsedatel'stvom Rossiyskoi Federatsii v Arkticheskom sovete v 2021-2023 godakh [The plan of major activities in relation to the Russian Federation's chairmanship in the Arctic Council in 2021–2023]. April 30, 2021, no. 4161p-P2 (in Russian).

4 Yuri Trutnev provel pervoe zasedanie orgkomiteta po podgotovke i obespecheniyu predsedatel'stva Rossii v Arkticheskom sovete v 2021-2023 godakh [Yuri Trutnev held the first meeting of the organizing committee on preparations for the Russian chairmanship in the Arctic Council in 2021–2023]. February 17, 2021. government.ru/news/41562/ (in Russian).

- Making the role of permanent participants and observers more visible, not only in the activities of working groups and task forces, but also in the work of other AC units and structures.

Some AC budget reform can be expected under the Russian presidency as well. The AC Project Support Instrument, of which Russia has been the major donor since the institution's inception, could be further expanded. Further AC budget centralization, streamlining, and transparency are also possible. Moscow also plans to suggest creating an International Arctic Development Fund to make various joint circumpolar projects financially sustainable.

Possible Implications of Russia's AC Chairmanship

It should be noted that Russia has a reputation for being a responsible and active AC member-state. Moscow has supported all the major Council endeavors in areas such as sustainable development, energy security, environmental protection, climate change mitigation and adaptation, conservation of biodiversity, maritime safety, search and rescue operations, connectivity of Arctic regions, telecommunications, sustainable fisheries, and well-being of local communities (including indigenous peoples). Russia favored further institutionalization of the Council and strengthening its role in the regional governance system. In other words, Russia has a rather impressive record of being a "good citizen" on the Council.

At the same time, there have been serious changes in Russia's thinking about the AC since the Ukraine crisis. Moscow no longer wishes to transform the Council into a full-fledged international organization, instead preferring to keep the AC as an informal and flexible intergovernmental mechanism that is better able to respond to difficult times than "classical" international organizations. Russia has also abandoned its previous plans to introduce hard (military) security issues to the Council's agenda; it currently favors limiting the AC to the soft security sphere. These changes have made Russia's policies on the AC more acceptable even to the US, which has always been rather skeptical about the Council's role in Arctic governance.

As regards Russia's forthcoming AC presidency program, it will both ensure continuity of the Finnish and Icelandic agendas and focus on sustainable development of the Arctic region using environmentally safe technologies. Moscow will try to operationalize and start implementation of the Council's new Strategic Plan and streamline the AC's organizational structure. That being said, it is unlikely that the Russian chairmanship will initiate any radical institutional reforms.

A close look at the Russian program raises some questions. First, it may be overly ambitious, and given the current tense relations between Russia and the rest of the AC member-states, there is no guarantee that it will be fully implemented.

Moscow, however, points out that the AC member-states' preliminary reaction to Russia's emerging presidential agenda was quite positive. John Kerry, Special Representative of the U.S. President on Climate Change, also expressed his interest in cooperation with Russia on climate-related issues in the Arctic.[5] Despite the tense relations between the EU and Russia (including over the Arctic), EU Special Representative on the Arctic Michael Mann supported Moscow's AC chairmanship agenda, pointing out that it aims to solve the region's common environmental, socioeconomic, and cultural problems.[6]

Second, it is not entirely clear how Russia is going to reconcile its policy priority of developing renewable energy with its plans to increase hydrocarbon production in the Russian Arctic.

Moscow, however, responds to this criticism by saying that alternative and hydrocarbon energies can complement rather than contradict each other. For example, a significant part of the oil and gas produced in the Russian High North is exported, while in the region itself, consumption of LNG and alternative energy sources (nuclear, wind, solar, and tidal) is increasing. Moscow encourages Russian and foreign shipping companies to use LNG and light fuel instead of diesel for navigating the NSR. New wind, solar, and tidal power stations are being built and the deployment of additional floating nuclear power stations is planned.

In general, Russia will likely use its AC presidency both to promote its national interests in the High North and to increase the Council's role in an emerging regional governance system.

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6 Spetspredstavitel' ES po Arktike: Evrosoyuz nameren tesno rabotat' s Moskvoi vo vremya predsedatel'stva RF v Arkticheskom sovete [EU Special Representative for the Arctic: The EU intends to work closely with Moscow during the Russian presidency of the Arctic Council]. March 19, 2021. https://www.interfax.ru/interview/756798 (in Russian).

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