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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Stellungnahme / comment

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Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Paul, M. (2022). *Arctic repercussions of Russia's invasion: council on pause, research on ice and Russia frozen out*. (SWP Comment, 39/2022). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2022C39>

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SWP Comment

NO. 39 JUNE 2022

Arctic Repercussions of Russia's Invasion

Council on Pause, Research on Ice and Russia Frozen Out

Michael Paul

While Russia remains chair of the Arctic Council until May 2023, the other seven member states have suspended their participation in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The impacts on Moscow are multiple. Politically the move sidelines a policy area where Russia still played a significant role after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Economically it creates question marks over important Russian Arctic projects and their markets. The interruption of the Council's work also touches the interests of other states such as China and erodes Russia's standing in the region. All Western partners have suspended scientific and research cooperation. While Russia is especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change in the Arctic, the disruption of climate-related research is ultimately detrimental to all nations. In the military sphere, Finland and Sweden are seeking to join NATO. That outcome would double the length of Russia's border with NATO states, and represents the exact opposite of Moscow's original intention to halt the Alliance's expansion.

The work of the Arctic Council has always been based on the fundamental principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and consensus. In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine the other seven Arctic states declared that they would not be sending representatives to the Council's meetings in Russia, although they remained convinced of the value of Arctic cooperation. The joint statement issued by Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the United States spelled out the implications: "Our states are temporarily pausing participation in all meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies, pending consideration of the necessary modalities that can allow us to continue the Council's important work

in view of the current circumstances". In practical terms, all activities of the Council and its working groups are in abeyance. Russia's Arctic ambassador Nikolai Korchnov said that was "regrettable" and called in vain for the Arctic to be excluded from "the spill-over effect of any extraregional events".

Research on ice

The Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany condemned the Russian invasion as "an attack on the elementary values of freedom, democracy and self-determination that form the basis for academic freedom



and scientific cooperation”. It recommends that “scientific cooperation with state institutions and business entities in Russia should be frozen with immediate effect, Russia should be excluded from all German research funding and all scientific or research-related events should be cancelled. New collaborations should not be initiated at this juncture.”

Russian-American polar bear research and the long-term climate data series are veritably frozen, as is the decades-old German-Russian scientific collaboration in Siberia. The entire Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) is now out of bounds to Western researchers. They have lost access to important facilities in the Russia Arctic, and in some cases had to end personal relationships going back decades. More than seven thousand Russian researchers and scientific journalists signed a petition against the war, understandably fearing that Russia faces years of isolation and ostracisation.

The Arctic represented one field where Moscow’s international status was unaffected by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Its chairmanship of the Arctic Council could have offered Moscow an opportunity to confirm that role and present its Arctic research successes to a global audience. The first research station on a drifting ice floe was created by Soviet researchers in 1937. Now a modern version is under construction, an 83-metre research platform named *North Pole*. Its trials in autumn 2022 could have been the high point of the Russia chairmanship. Beginning in 2023, the new platform is due to drift the Arctic Ocean for up to 24 months at a time with a team of thirty-four researchers on board (plus a crew of fourteen). Russia will use the data it gathers to back its territorial claims in Arctic waters, and the station itself leverages the normative power of the factual: in the Arctic, simple presence is a decisive factor.

Uncertain prospects for the Arctic Zone as a national resource base

As an integral part of the Russian Federation, the AZRF is of great geostrategic and economic importance. According to Vladimir Putin, the region holds “a concentration of practically all aspects of national security – military, political, economic, technological, environmental and that of resources”.

The Kremlin’s sights are set correspondingly high. To date however, as demonstrated in an SWP Research Paper, its aspirations are hindered by the heavy bias towards fossil fuels in socio-economic development planning, the reduction of the Northern Sea Route to fuel transport, and the high costs incurred by military measures against fictitious enemies, avoidable environmental disasters and administrative procrastination. Even before the war, a landmark ruling by a Netherland’s court in May 2021 had serious implications for Russia. The court ruled that oil giant Shell – and by implication other investors – must do more to reduce climate emissions. Other energy companies and investors have withdrawn completely from Russian projects in response to Putin’s war. In the absence of pipelines, shifting energy sales to Asia will require expensive tankers and involves markets that will neither absorb the volumes hitherto delivered to Europe nor bear the high prices Europe pays. In 2021 Russia supplied about 33 billion cubic metres of gas to Asia, while Europe imported up to 200 billion cubic metres.

The idea that rising demand in Asia will be the saving of Russian fossil fuel producers remains a risky bet. Enormous technical effort and investment will be required to facilitate the extraction and transport of fossil fuels, and to modernise and expand the infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route. Russia possesses neither the financial nor technical means to accomplish that on its own.

In the absence of alternatives, Moscow must rely on Beijing as its strategic backer, technology supplier and investor. The war

makes Russia even more dependent on China and strengthens Beijing's role in the AZRF, in the scope of the Belt and Road project, where infrastructure projects are always bound up with geostrategic objectives. The prospect looms of a war-weakened Russia and its national resource base falling increasingly under Chinese influence. This could bolster China's status as a "near-Arctic state" to a point where the Arctic becomes a real "arena for power and for competition".

A new era in the High North

It is an irony of history that Putin's actions have provoked Finland to apply to join NATO. Even in January 2022 surveys showed just 28 percent in favour and 42 percent against. The mood shifted in March 2022, following the invasion, and by May support exceeded 70 percent. In Sweden too, support for joining NATO grew with the hostilities. Russia's war has produced majorities for membership in both countries. Sweden and Finland presented their applications to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on 18 May 2022.

Putin has said Russia will treat Finland as an "enemy" if it joins NATO, and issued all kinds of threats. Russian nuclear weapons would be stationed in the region, he said, and the Russian Ministry of Defence declared that its forces in the Kaliningrad enclave had simulated the launch of nuclear-capable Iskander missiles. Russia's willingness to take greater risks, its ability to deploy 100,000 soldiers without additional mobilisation and "loose talk in Russia about weapons of mass destruction" were the reasons for Helsinki to request to join NATO, Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto explained. How else could the country defend itself against the threat of weapons of mass destruction? The Kremlin plainly underestimated the Nordic response to its repeated threats and military aggression — just as it underestimated the resistance of the Ukrainian population and armed forces.

The accession of Finland and Sweden will make NATO the dominant military

actor in the Baltic Sea and enhance the defences of the Baltic states. It will double the length of Russia's border with NATO states, Moscow will lose diplomatic options, and the Russian navy will face growing constraints on its movements as the Baltic Sea becomes dominated by NATO allies. This incisive change in Russia's security situation results from the Kremlin's mistakes and the brutality of the Russian armed forces. But it will demand a wise policy of reserve and vigilance on the part of the NATO states.

The upshot of all this is that a conflict in the Arctic — provoked by events outside the region — can no longer be excluded. Despite the return of a rhetoric of containment and the desire "to see Russia weakened" militarily, as US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin put it before visiting Kyiv in April 2022, the NATO states will remain concerned to avoid any international escalation. But the Arctic region will also be part of a robust and networked containment strategy against Russia — and in future China. It is already an area of operations for NATO.

Whether the Arctic can become a region of cooperation again is an open question after Russia's war. If need be, the lowest common denominator would be the kind of unavoidable cooperation dictated by the region's harsh conditions. Climate change creates new — and non-traditional — security problems for human society and the environment, which offer openings for cooperation. If the associated challenges are to be tackled effectively, cooperation will be indispensable. But any such initiative will face strong headwinds from a new confrontational security policy that threatens to utterly marginalise collaboration in the long term. The Arctic Council's "intermission" is just one expression of this fatal complex.

What now?

The seven states remain members of the Arctic Council. But in the fog of Russia's

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ISSN (Print) 1861-1761
ISSN (Online) 2747-5107
DOI: 10.18449/2022C39

Translation by Meredith Dale

(English version of
SWP-Aktuell 34/2022)

war it is impossible to predict how long the pause will last, nor the circumstances under which it could be ended. A bilateral agreement would offer a better basis than a militarily “frozen” but unresolved conflict in Ukraine. Nobody can know when the time will be opportune for the Arctic Council to resume its normal functions. “We are focused on making sure that what we do now will not create obstacles to our later returning to normalcy,” said Norway’s Arctic ambassador Morten Høglund. The tricky task of gathering up the pieces and reassembling a viable basis for future cooperation will likely fall to Norway’s chairmanship in 2023 – 25.

Russia accounts for about half the Arctic’s population and territory. For that reason alone, cooperation cannot be suspended indefinitely. But which issues could be meaningfully discussed with Moscow – and how, when and with whom? Together with an American colleague, Russian researchers have identified one topic. Their proposal for an effective regional governance system for civil nuclear safety in the Arctic builds on the Arctic Military Environmental Cooperation of 1996, which dealt with the radioactive legacy of the Soviet navy (and contributed indirectly to the founding of the Arctic Council). It also takes up one element of the Arctic Council Strategic Plan, which was adopted in 2021 in Reykjavik under the Icelandic chairmanship. Along with rescue operations and cleaning up oil pollution, these are issues whose significance is uncontested among the Arctic states – and in retrospect formed a significant basis for successful cooperation in the Arctic.

But restarting cooperation will not be easy, even if Russia ended the war tomorrow. It will be a long time before the Arctic can become a region of constructive dialogue again.

Further Reading: Michael Paul, *Der Kampf um den Nordpol. Die Arktis, der Klimawandel und die Geopolitik der Großmächte*, Freiburg: Herder, 2022.

Minna Ålander and Michael Paul, *Moscow Threatens the Balance in the High North*, SWP Comment 24/2022, (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2022)

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