

## Report: **Russia and the Arctic Council**

By:

Mathilde Roedenbeck / Mikko von Bremen  
*Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Nordic Countries Project*

*The Arctic region is currently gaining more attention for its changing significance. Due to climate changes and the increased vulnerability as well as the global geopolitical developments, the attention to the North is growing. The Arctic region had always a geopolitical relevance but the prospects of new trade routes such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR), access to previously unattainable resources and overall economic potential have raised the global interest in the Arctic and in its forums for cooperation. The Arctic Council is an example of that with its amount of observers states and organizations. The council is focusing on environmental issues and sustainable development, but security and military issues between the member states are explicitly excluded from the council's agenda. In May 2021, Russia takes over the chairmanship in the Arctic Council from Iceland for the upcoming two years. This is the second Russian chairmanship in the Arctic Council since 2004-2006. What issues will the Russian chairmanship prioritize and what will it implicate? Due to the recent geopolitical developments, how will Russia deal with the military and security issues as chair and how might the Arctic Council evolve?*

### **Arctic Council**

The Arctic Council is a consensus based, intergovernmental forum working for cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic states, Arctic Indigenous people and the Arctic inhabitants. It consists of eight member states; Sweden, Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Norway, the Russian Federation and the United States, which are defined in the Ottawa Declaration. The council was formally established in 1996. Main focus areas of the council are issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic. The council's work covers a broad field of subjects; they work among others to prevent and reduce environmental risks, to monitor and assess pollution and climate change issues alongside with conservation of Arctic biodiversity.

Along the member states, there are permanent participants like organizations representing indigenous people and states with observer status. Monitoring, research and other work is mainly

performed by six different working groups. The council also works with the human dimension to protect and enhance the environment, economy, social conditions and health of indigenous communities and Arctic inhabitants. As stated above, military security is excluded from the Arctic Councils mandate<sup>1</sup>.

### **The Russian Arctic Council Chairmanship 2021-2023**

The Arctic is a place where Russia has a lot of natural resources, and also quite a substantial population. Looking at numbers, Russia is the biggest Arctic country and stretches over 53 per cent of the Arctic Ocean coastline and almost half of the Arctic population lives in the Russian Arctic. From economic point of view the extraction of natural resources, such as natural gas and oil is Russia's primary industry in the Arctic<sup>2</sup>. At the top of the agenda as chair, the Russian Federation mentions sustainable development, including the human dimension, the environmental dimension and sustainable economic growth<sup>3</sup>. Nikolay Korchunov, Ambassador at Large and Senior Arctic Official of the Russian delegation to the Arctic Council, emphasized the importance of balance between focusing on minimizing the negative consequences of climate change as well as focusing on new opportunities both in maritime navigation and extraction and processing of natural resources.

Korchunov articulates that both the goal to improve living conditions and the goal to enhance the economic development in the Arctic requires common work from all the member states<sup>4</sup>. Projects that are mentioned are extraction and processing of natural resources, increasing shipping along the NSR, growth of trade and tourism through ensuring accessibility and connectivity in the region. Russia is also aiming to address adaptation to climate change and preservation of biodiversity<sup>5</sup>.

Russia's focus on environmental issues and social development are in line with the work of the Arctic Council and the working groups, but there is also a contradiction between working for

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<sup>1</sup>Arctic Council Secretariat, 2020. The Arctic Council: A Quick Guide, 2nd edition. 32pp. [https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/2424/AC\\_quickguide\\_2020.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y](https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/2424/AC_quickguide_2020.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y) [2021-05-04].

<sup>2</sup>Arctic Council Secretariat, 2021. The Russian Federation. <https://arctic-council.org/en/about/states/russian-federation/> [2021-05-04].

<sup>3</sup>Arctic Council Secretariat, 2020. Sustainable Solutions in a Virtual Setting. <https://arctic-council.org/en/news/sustainable-solutions-in-a-virtual-setting/> [2021-05-04].

<sup>4</sup>Peter B. Danilov., 2021. Russia Wants to Resume Meetings Between Arctic Defense Chiefs. High North News. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-wants-resume-meetings-between-arctic-defense-chiefs> [2021-05-04].

<sup>5</sup>Alina Bykova, 2021. Russian Arctic Council Chairmanship: Will Welcome More Active Engagement Observer States. High North News. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russian-arctic-council-chairmanship-will-welcome-more-active-engagement-observer-states> [2021-05-04].

environmental protection and the extraction of natural resources. When it comes to the economic development, Russia is primarily emphasizing the NSR, which is a common name for navigational routes in the Russian Federation exclusive economic zone<sup>6</sup>. President Putin has announced that the goal is to increase the traffic to 80 million tons in the Northern Sea Route, from today's traffic that is lower than 30 million tons per year. Ekatarina Klimenko, Researcher in Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), means that this only can be achieved if Russia's resource projects achieve their prospective, because the NSR international transit shipping traffic does not go above 500 thousand tons a year. Even though, the development of the NSR, to a globally national transport corridor is a goal for Russia<sup>7</sup>.

### **Arctic Security Dilemma**

The Arctic region is facing an increasing security dilemma. In a basic definition security dilemma describes a cyclic development in which the striving for (military) power of one state leads to the same in other states, who see their security threatened by the action of the first state. This leads to a cyclic arm race where states mistrust each other and never feel safe enough. Applying this understanding of the security dilemma to the Arctic region, the assumption is, that security concerns or striving for power of Arctic states can only be seen in a regional context. On the level of geopolitical tensions, the Arctic can be seen as "just" another stage in international great-power politics and therefore cannot be solved only in regional context. Additionally, the climate change raises regional security challenges that require also joint military and police operation which has to be addressed in cooperation on regional or sub-regional level. The security dilemma we see in the Arctic is, that great-power politics and tensions in international relations lead to increasing mistrust and the existing cooperation frameworks in the Arctic with their purpose are not capable of addressing such developments.

As seen above the Arctic Council has an exclusive focus on environment issues and sustainable development and military security issues are explicitly excluded of the council's mandate. Due to the consensus driven modus operandi the Arctic Council seems to be ill-equipped to catch and

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<sup>6</sup>PAME, 2021. Northern Sea Route Shipping Statistics. <https://pame.is/projects/arctic-marine-shipping/amsa/259-projects/arctic-marine-shipping/northern-sea-route-shipping-statistics> [2021-05-04].

<sup>7</sup>Ekatarina Klimenko, 2021. Russia's new Arctic policy document signals continuity rather than change. SIPRI. <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2020/russias-new-arctic-policy-document-signals-continuity-rather-change> [2021-05-04].

govern the increasing geopolitical tensions in the Arctic region.<sup>8</sup> The militarization of Arctic coastlines and increasing amount of military exercises and operations potentially challenge the cooperative nature of the council. The long described and proclaimed Arctic “exceptionalism” where military security issues are excluded from the peaceful cooperation in the Arctic region seems to be more and more under pressure.

The question is, how Russia understands and approaches the security dilemma in the Arctic in the following two years. Russia has some good reasons to include military security issues in the council but also wants to strengthen its military and economic power on its own terms. Numerous articles and studies have in recent weeks and month sketched different scenarios for the upcoming chairmanship. The core question is, if military security issues shall remain out of the Arctic Councils mandate, or not.

*a. Military security issues and national arctic policy is separated from Arctic Councils agenda.*

Russia has along its military build-up on its Arctic coastline also very strong economic interests.<sup>9</sup> This approach takes into consideration that climate change is not entirely a bad thing for Russia. The warming arctic temperatures make the exploration of natural resources more accessible and longer ice-free seasons enable to pursue the development of the NSR. Russia, indeed has, in line with its goal of sustainable economic growth, announced its interest and attempts to explore the development of the NSR also during its chairmanship in the Arctic Council. This is problematic because there is a necessity for increased technical military and police cooperation for example in safe shipping, rescue cooperation at sea and border- and coast guard.

The paradox here is also that climate change endangers Russia’s environment and therefore has consequences on the current economy. The melting permafrost makes Russian pipeline infrastructure in Siberia instable and wildfires and broken pipelines with extensive oil spills have disastrous and irreparable consequences not only for the environment and indigenous people, but eventually also for the backbone of Russian economy. Previous already occurred wildfires and oil-spills also show that Russia is not willing to take any help of other Arctic states to deal with such

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<sup>8</sup> Ruben Tavenier, 17.02.2021 Global Risk Insights (ed.), Russia and the Arctic Council in 2021: a New Security Dilemma: <https://globalriskinsights.com/2021/02/russia-and-the-arctic-council-in-2021-a-new-security-dilemma/>, [04.05.2021].

<sup>9</sup> Laura Leddy, 29.09.2020, American Security Project (ed.), Russia and the Arctic Council: What Happens Next?: <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/russia-and-the-arctic-council-what-happens-next/>, [04.05.2020].

disasters. The development of the NSR and its supervision by Russia could be seen as a long term back-up to ensure economic development. Separating security and economic interest from the goals and agenda of the Arctic Council, could lead to increasing tensions and military mistrust and have a contra productive spill-over effect on the cooperation within the regional cooperation and in the Arctic Council overall.

*b. Military security matters could be introduced and addressed stronger within the Arctic Council.*

This approach might give Russia some legitimization for its military activity in the Arctic and support its claim of leadership as the biggest Arctic country but also risk to jeopardize needed cooperation in technical areas mentioned and also in other policy fields.<sup>10</sup> Such institutional change of the Arctic Council would require a joint declaration among all Council members and is therefore more than unlikely.<sup>11</sup> If the Arctic Council would take military security issues into its mandate, the institutional practice could possibly develop in disadvantage for the influence of indigenous people, because member states would make sure to maintain their security policy sovereignty. This means that indigenous people could either not participate in security consultations at all, or the Council member states would keep military security issues out of discussion in which there would be no difference to the current contractual framework of the Arctic Council.<sup>12</sup> For Russia to support the inclusion of military security issues in the Arctic Council would give some advantages in the own positioning as leading power in the region. Such change in the Councils mandate still is unlikely and undermines the overall purpose of the council for what it was established.

## **Conclusion**

The Russian Arctic Council Chairmanship might define the nature of Arctic region cooperation for the following years and even decades to come. Even though the Russian chairmanship agenda is overall in line with the mandate and purpose of the Arctic Council, there is room for interpretation. A key issue will be how Russia sets the agenda particularly in sustainable development. The balancing of sustainable economic and sustainable environment protection and human dimension will be decisive. Russia has strong economic motivation to explore and develop

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<sup>10</sup> Ruben Tavenier, 17.02.2021, a New Security Dilemma.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Leddy, 29.09.2020, What Happens Next?.

<sup>12</sup> Christoph Humrich, Sicherheitspolitik im Arktischen Rat? Lieber nicht!, in: Sicherheit und Frieden, January 2015, page 7.

the NSR and also on the exploration of new natural resources. The paradox for Russia is that national economic interests and the challenges of climate change don't seem to fit very well together.

The Russian chairmanship also raises the question of the increasing security dilemma in the Arctic. Military security issues are so far excluded of the Arctic Councils mandate and most likely will remain so. However, the urgent need to address military security issues and military cooperation in the Arctic beyond technical cooperation is inevitable. Russia itself could benefit of including military issues in the Arctic Council to strengthen and legitimize its claim as the biggest Arctic state. The required institutional reorganization and changed agenda setting for the council would however have unpredictable and negative consequences on the Arctic Council as a cooperative and consensus driven forum.