



DISRUPTED COOPERATION: IMPACT OF THE RUSSIA – UKRAINE CONFLICT ON THE ARCTIC COUNCIL

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Abstract

This article aims to assess the impact of the 2022 Russia–Ukraine war on Arctic regional governance, focusing specifically on the Arctic Council’s capacity to maintain its cooperative framework. Employing a qualitative and analytical methodology based on document analysis and a review of secondary literature, the study examines the political, institutional, and security-related shifts in Arctic cooperation since the outbreak of the conflict. The findings indicate that the exclusion of Russia from Arctic Council activities has severely challenged the Council's inclusivity, disrupted scientific collaboration, and contributed to a more fragile regional governance environment. The study concludes that the future viability of the Arctic Council will largely depend on its ability to innovate, adapt to a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment, and restore a functional cooperative framework despite enduring tensions. In this context, the article argues that maintaining Arctic stability and multilateral cooperation may require not only restoring cooperation but also pursuing broader institutional adaptations.

Keywords: Arctic Council, Arctic Governance, Arctic Politics

JEL Classification: F51, F55, F59

KESİNTİYE UĞRAYAN İŞ BİRLİĞİ: RUSYA – UKRAYNA ÇATIŞMASININ ARKTİK KONSEYİ ÜZERİNDEKİ ETKİSİ

Öz

Bu makale, 2022 Rusya–Ukrayna savaşının Arktik bölgesel yönetimi üzerindeki etkilerini değerlendirmeyi ve özellikle Arktik Konseyi'nin iş birliği çerçevesini koruma kapasitesini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Belgesel analiz ve ikincil literatür taramasına dayalı niteliksel ve analitik bir yöntem benimseyen çalışma, savaşın başlamasından bu yana Arktik iş birliğinde meydana gelen siyasi, kurumsal ve güvenlik temelli değişimleri incelemektedir. Bulgular, Rusya'nın Arktik Konseyi faaliyetlerinden dışlanması Konsey'in kapsayıcılığını ciddi şekilde zedelediğini, bilimsel iş birliğini aksattığını ve bölgesel yönetimde daha kırılgan bir yapının ortaya çıkmasına katkı sağladığını göstermektedir. Çalışma, Arktik Konseyi'nin gelecekteki varlığının, hızla değişen jeopolitik ortama uyum sağlama, yenilikçilik geliştirme ve kalıcı gerilimlere rağmen işlevsel bir iş birliği çerçevesini yeniden kurabilme yeteneğine bağlı olacağını savunmaktadır. Bu bağlamda makale, Arktik'te istikrarın ve çok taraflı yönetimin sağlanabilmesi için sadece iş birliğinin yeniden tesis edilmesinin değil, daha geniş çaplı kurumsal uyarlamaların da gerekebileceğini savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Arktik Konseyi, Arktik Yönetimi, Arktik Siyaseti

JEL Sınıflandırması: F51, F55, F59

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1. Introduction

During the last twenty years, the Arctic has emerged as a central focus of global politics, driven by the convergence of environmental changes, economic opportunities, and evolving geopolitical dynamics. The Arctic's once inaccessible landscape is transforming due to global warming, unlocking unprecedented opportunities for resource extraction and maritime shipping, while simultaneously triggering various environmental challenges both for the region and the globe. This shift has drawn the attention of both Arctic and non-Arctic states, with global powers eager to capitalize on the region's vast oil, gas, and mineral reserves, as well as the strategic advantages of shortened shipping routes. In other words, throughout the past two decades, the Arctic has transitioned from a peripheral area to a strategic focal point in international relations. This transformation has triggered a complex interplay of environmental, economic, and political interests, resulting in intensified competition among nations. For instance, Young (2022) underlines that, "While we may not sink back to the conditions of the Cold War when the Arctic was divided into two armed camps (...) the growing tendency to approach the Arctic as an arena for exercising power politics is undeniable". As the region continues to evolve into a strategic hub, fostering international cooperation and crafting comprehensive governance frameworks will be essential to mitigating the risks posed by rising competition while maximizing the benefits of new economic opportunities.

Central to the governance of this region is the Arctic Council (AC), a unique intergovernmental forum established in 1996. The AC brings together the eight Arctic states - Russia, Canada, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and the United States (US) – in order to promote cooperation and coordination on issues ranging from environmental protection and climate change mitigation to Indigenous rights and sustainable development. Since its establishment, the AC has been widely regarded as a successful model of regional cooperation, particularly in its ability to bring together diverse stakeholders to address common challenges. The Council's inclusive structure, involving not only the Arctic states but also Indigenous community organizations through Permanent Participant status, has fostered a spirit of collaboration that has led to significant milestones in regional cooperation. Through its six working groups, the AC has spearheaded important initiatives, such as monitoring and mitigating climate change effects, preserving Arctic biodiversity, and addressing issues like marine pollution and safety. Various reports and studies conducted by AC working groups have also influenced global discussions, elevating Arctic issues on the global agenda. Moreover, the AC has initiated key legally binding agreements among the Arctic States demonstrating the Council's ability to coordinate cross-border cooperation on critical regional issues. It is important to note that the Council does not function as a decision-making body in the formal legal sense, but rather as a decision-shaping forum where outcomes are reached by consensus and are non-binding in nature. Nevertheless, these recommendations carry significant political and normative weight, guiding national policies and international discourse. Another foundational principle of the Council, as explicitly stated in the Ottawa Declaration's first footnote, is the exclusion of military security issues from its mandate (Arctic Council, 1996). This limitation has allowed the AC to preserve a cooperative atmosphere by avoiding the securitization of Arctic governance, even amid rising geopolitical tensions.

However, the AC's ability to maintain its cooperative spirit has been increasingly challenged by evolving geopolitical dynamics. The heightened interest of non-Arctic states in the region, coupled with the intensification of global power rivalries, has introduced new complexities to the Council's operations. Moreover, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has placed unprecedented strain on the Council's consensus-driven framework, raising questions about its future effectiveness. The 2022 suspension of AC activities following Russia's invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point for the organization. While activities have since partially resumed, this incident underscores the need to reassess the Council's role and capacity to navigate future challenges. From a policy standpoint, however, it is important to note that all Arctic states continue to frame the AC as the primary forum for regional cooperation in their strategic outlooks (Arctic Portal, n.d.). This ongoing recognition

has been reflected not only in rhetoric, but also in institutional practice—most notably through the smooth transition of the chairmanship from Russia to Norway in 2023, and the gradual resumption of selected working group activities. These developments suggest that, despite operational disruptions, the Council maintains a degree of functionality, political legitimacy, and institutional resilience. Rather than viewing the suspension as a definitive rupture, it may be more accurate to interpret it as a critical juncture that tests the Council's adaptive capacity amid shifting geopolitical realities.

In light of these developments, this article delves into the dynamics of Arctic politics, focusing on the AC's role in shaping cooperation. The critical aspect of this examination will be recent developments within Arctic Politics and, more precisely, regarding the AC since the Russia–Ukraine War outbreak in early 2022. By examining the impact of recent geopolitical tensions on the Council's operations and exploring potential pathways for preserving cooperation, this study aims to engage with the current scholarly debate on the future of the Arctic governance. This study adopts a qualitative research approach based on document analysis and secondary literature review. Focusing on the AC as a case of regional institutional cooperation, the analysis draws on official documents and relevant academic and policy sources selected for their relevance to recent geopolitical developments—particularly the 2022 Russia–Ukraine war. The main research question guiding the study is: How has the Russia–Ukraine conflict affected the AC's capacity to function as a cooperative platform amid rising geopolitical tensions? The study aims to identify general trends and shifts in cooperation practices, while also reflecting on the broader challenges facing institutional resilience in a changing strategic environment.

2. The Arctic Council in an Evolving Strategic Landscape

While often portrayed as a region of peaceful cooperation, the Arctic has, over the past two decades, intermittently become a theater of geopolitical tensions. The melting of Arctic sea ice has unlocked valuable economic opportunities, particularly in resource extraction and maritime trade, thereby intensifying strategic competition among Arctic states. Moreover, unresolved legal and strategic questions— from overlapping continental shelf claims and differing interpretations of international maritime law to disputes over the Northern Sea Route—have contributed to a persistent sense of uncertainty and growing competition in the region. A symbolic turning point came in 2007 when a Russian expedition planted its flag on the seabed at the North Pole. While largely theatrical, this gesture was perceived by other Arctic states as a signal of Moscow's assertive intent to reinforce its territorial claims and strategic ambitions in the region (Baev, 2018, p. 408). The incident drew widespread international attention and was seen as the beginning of a more competitive era in Arctic affairs or the opening salvo of an emerging "Arctic Race" (Borgerson, 2008, p. 74). Despite this symbolic confrontation, during this period, the AC continued to function as an effective forum for cooperation, enabling scientific collaboration, environmental protection, and legal consensus-building among Arctic states. This ability to compartmentalize Arctic affairs from broader global rivalries was seen as a key feature of the Council's success and reinforced the perception of the region as an exceptional zone of peace and stability.

Yet, in the mid-2010s, the Arctic's political landscape became increasingly entangled with external geopolitical conflicts. For instance, the Crimea Annexation in 2014 marked a turning point in relationships between Russia and the West, leading to a significant deterioration in diplomatic ties that also impacted Arctic cooperation (Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2017). Although Canada, as chair at the time, pushed to suspend some working group activities involving Russia (Huebert, 2014), the Arctic Council continued its work without disruption, showing the members' shared commitment to cooperation despite rising tensions. However, the broader economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the US and several other Western nations also appear to have indirectly strained collaborative efforts within the AC. Joint initiatives that required close collaboration with Russian entities became more challenging to manage, as Western-aligned Arctic states had to comply with their respective governments' sanctions policies. In parallel, formal military cooperation between

Western Arctic states and Russia—previously conducted through venues such as the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable—was suspended. Moreover, it is observable that the militarization of the Arctic region accelerated after the 2014 Crimea Crisis, driven by both Russia and its Western counterparts. Klimenko underlines that "against the background of the conflict in Ukraine and growing tensions between Russia and the West, Russia's military build-up in the Arctic has become a trigger for renewed concern regarding the potential militarization of the region" (Klimenko, 2016, p. 7). This suggests that the 2014 Crisis had a notable spillover impact on Arctic politics, even though the AC itself did not experience a formal suspension of its activities. For instance, Kapyla and Mikkola (2015) have underlined that the Ukraine Crisis has demonstrated that the Arctic can no longer be treated as detached from global political dynamics but becoming less peaceful and co-operative as it is often expressed. In this regard, this crisis did not dismantle Arctic cooperation, but it marked the beginning of a more fragile and contested political environment for the AC.

The tensions surrounding Arctic cooperation were further exacerbated during the Trump administration (2017–2021), which brought a more unilateral and unpredictable approach to US foreign policy. One significant point of contention was the US administration's skepticism toward climate change and its much-debated decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. This move was particularly disruptive to Arctic cooperation, given that climate change is a central focus of the Council's work. The US stance created friction with other Arctic states, especially those in Europe, who viewed climate action as crucial to the region's future. Furthermore, the Trump administration adopted a more assertive and competition-driven approach to Arctic, viewing the region primarily through the lens of strategic rivalry and resource security. For instance, Paul underlines that "Unlike its predecessors, Donald Trump's administration assigned "relative priority" to the Arctic region. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo elevated it in May 2019 to a geopolitically significant "arena" in the struggle for power and influence" (Paul, 2023). In 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered a controversial speech at the AC Ministerial Meeting in Rovaniemi, criticizing Russia and China and portraying the Arctic as a geopolitical arena—marking a sharp rhetorical shift. This shift caused unease among Arctic states, who were concerned that the US's approach could undermine the Council's collaborative efforts and escalate regional tensions (Conley & Melino, 2019, p. 3). It is essential to underline that this was the first AC ministerial meeting that could not produce a declaration due to the sharp disagreements among the member states, primarily due to disagreements over climate language. This breakdown in consensus marked a significant departure from the Council's tradition of collaborative decision-making, raising concerns about the future of cooperative governance in the Arctic. As Chater observed "the Arctic Council emerges as a weakened body – more political, less collegial, and marked by uncertainty" (Chater, 2019). Moreover, this growing emphasis on zero-sum strategic interests over multilateral cooperation further eroded mutual trust and cohesion among Arctic states. In this context, the Arctic began to resemble other strategically contested regions, where cooperation was increasingly overshadowed by great power rivalry.

Perhaps as a consequence of these developments, the late 2010s witnessed growing recognition of the Arctic as a new arena for great power competition, particularly among the US, Russia, and China (Olesen & Sørensen, 2019). This period was marked by heightened strategic interest and intensified military activities, as each power sought to assert its influence over the region (Delepierre et al., 2020). Following the 2014 Crimea Crisis, Russia expanded its military footprint by reopening Soviet-era bases, constructing new facilities, and deploying advanced weaponry (Wezeman, 2016). In reaction, NATO allies—including the US, Norway, and Canada—ramped up their own Arctic deployments, reflecting concern over Russia's growing capabilities and its potential to shift the balance of power (Olesen & Sørensen, 2019, p. 8). This mutual buildup triggered a classic security dilemma, with defensive moves interpreted as threats, reinforcing distrust. Given that the AC's mandate excludes security matters, it remained largely absent from these developments, limiting its stabilizing role. Meanwhile, China's growing interest and expanding presence in the Arctic added another layer of complexity to the great power

competition narrative. China's involvement in the Arctic, particularly its cooperation with Russia raised concerns about a potential Sino-Russian alliance in the Arctic that could challenge US and NATO interests (Delepierre et al., 2020). Accordingly, these strategic and military developments not only intensified regional tensions but also triggered a discursive shift in how the Arctic was conceptualized—no longer as a zone of peace, but increasingly as a contested geopolitical space. As Olesen and Sørensen argue that the Arctic, once a region of cooperation, has increasingly become a "stage for great power competition, with Russia, the US, and China all maneuvering to secure their strategic interests" (Olesen & Sørensen, 2019, p. 10). In a similar vein, Young compellingly notes that "What was once a peripheral region regarded as a zone of peace has turned into ground zero for climate change on a global scale and a scene of geopolitical maneuvering" (Young, 2019, p. 1). Therefore, by the early 2020s, the Arctic had evolved into a critical focal point of great power rivalry, shaped by overlapping military buildups, strategic rhetoric, and diverging national interests. Against this backdrop, the 2022 Russia–Ukraine war would further destabilize regional dynamics, presenting a direct and lasting challenge to the AC's viability as a forum for peaceful cooperation.

3. Crisis and Continuity: The Arctic Council after the Russia–Ukraine War

The 2022 Russia-Ukraine war marked a pivotal moment in the geopolitical dynamics of the Arctic. The invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces not only intensified global tensions but also had a profound and immediate impact on Arctic cooperation. On March 3, 2022, just few days after the events in Ukraine began to unfold, the seven other Arctic states – excluding Russia – issued a historic statement announcing the suspension of their participation in the AC, the primary intergovernmental forum for Arctic cooperation. According to Zellen, this was "an historic, unanimous boycott of Council participation in protest of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, after just twenty-five years of continuous operations" (Zellen, 2023, p. 138). This decision directly responded to Russia's actions, which the other member states viewed as a violation of international law and a threat to regional stability. The suspension of AC activities had immediate and far-reaching consequences, disrupting key cooperation initiatives which have been carefully established and developed over decades. According to Winkel "The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has altered the status quo in the Arctic (...) the tense situation will make multilateral cooperation much more difficult in the coming years" (Winkel, 2023, p. 2). While the long-term implications of the suspension remained uncertain, its immediate effect was the abrupt halting of all AC activities marking an unprecedented rupture in the Council's operational continuity.

This comprehensive suspension affected all areas of cooperation under the AC's mandate, from environmental protection to Indigenous affairs, highlighting the breadth and severity of the disruption. The significance of this suspension becomes even more apparent when compared to earlier geopolitical tensions. For instance, after the Crimea crisis in 2014, while there was a cooling of relations within the AC, cooperation largely continued, albeit with increased caution. In the early days of the suspension, Vindevogel notes that "This is 2014 all over again for cooperation in the Arctic, but on a significantly larger scale" (Vindevogel, 2022, p. 3). The 2022 decision to suspend activities marked a clear break from this precedent; it was the first time in the AC's history that its operations were effectively paused due to geopolitical conflict, highlighting the deepening rift between Russia and the seven other Arctic states and raising critical concerns about the future of the AC. In a reflection published nearly a year after the suspension, Young emphasized that "Even after the crisis subsides, it will not be possible to turn the clock back regarding the work of the Council" (Young, 2022). The suspension suggested that the Council, which had been able to compartmentalize geopolitical issues in the past, may no longer succeed in doing so given the intensifying great power competition in the Arctic. It is also important to note that, beyond the AC, the ripple effects of the suspension extended into other prominent regional cooperation platforms, such as International Arctic Science Committee and Barents Euro Arctic Council (BEAC).

After the suspension of AC activities, various diplomatic efforts were initiated to restore the AC's operations, though these efforts encountered considerable institutional and political challenges. The seven Arctic states began actively considering ways to resume selected Council activities without Russia, focusing on less politically charged areas such as environmental protection. For instance, the seven Arctic states, issued a second joint statement on June 8, 2022, announcing their intention to resume some of the AC's activities without Russia's participation. This was intended as a pragmatic compromise to ensure institutional continuity and address urgent regional concerns. However, at that time, Russia still held the AC chairmanship, raising uncertainty over how the Council's working groups could operate without its participation. While a limited number of low-profile activities resumed during the summer of 2022, all high-level meetings or large-scale projects involving Russia stayed at an impasse. Norway, which was set to assume the chairmanship of the AC in May 2023, announced its intentions to lead efforts to restart Council activities. Despite the absence of high-level engagement, the transition of the AC chairmanship from Russia to Norway in May 2023 proceeded smoothly—demonstrating the procedural resilience embedded in the Council's governance framework. This transition was facilitated by months of negotiations between Russia and Norway to find a solution within the Council's Rules of Procedure and the principles of the Ottawa Declaration. According to these rules, the outgoing Chair is responsible for proposing the date and venue of the next Ministerial meeting at least six months before the term ends. (Arctic Council, 2013). In this case, Russia fulfilled this obligation before the crisis escalated, which laid the procedural groundwork for Norway's accession as Chair. The 13th AC meeting took place on 11 May 2023 in Salekhard, Russia, and online. The Norwegian Senior Arctic Official (SAO) participated from Tromsø, Norway, along with other SAOs and heads of delegations of Indigenous peoples' organizations. Observers were also invited to attend. Notably, for the first time, the meeting was not a Ministerial meeting; no ministerial declaration was signed, only a statement, demonstrating a minimal yet unified approach (Canova & Pic, 2023). This continuity was critical in enabling the gradual resumption of selected working group activities and preserving the Council's legitimacy as a functioning institution. Even without full political consensus, the smooth transfer of responsibilities underscored the importance of established protocols and rules-based cooperation mechanisms within the Arctic governance architecture. During this period, other Arctic states also expressed their support for resuming the Council's activities. They emphasized that the work of the AC was too vital to remain entirely suspended—particularly in light of accelerating climate change and the urgent challenges confronting the region (Spence & Chenok, 2024). Therefore, this transfer of chairmanship not only marked a shift in institutional leadership, but also embodied a renewed attempt to reframe Arctic cooperation around pragmatic and depoliticized issues. However, the path to fully restoring the Council's operations proved to be politically and institutionally complex. Central to this complexity was the question of whether a Russia-less AC could retain its legitimacy and effectiveness. This structural dilemma prompted an intense academic debate on the future of Arctic cooperation and the Council's ability to adapt to a changing geopolitical landscape. As Spence and Chenok (2024, p. 2) underlines "charting a path forward for the Arctic Council is not about returning to business as usual. Rather, it is about finding ways to advance cooperation based on emerging needs and broader geopolitical dynamics". As such, while support for the Council's continued relevance remained strong, its ability to function meaningfully without Russia remained an open question.

As the chairmanship transitioned to Norway in May 2023, the AC initiated a gradual and selective reactivation of its functions. Working groups focusing on non-contentious issues such as biodiversity, pollution control, and scientific research slowly resumed their activities (Spence & Chenok, 2024). However, the exclusion of Russia meant that these efforts were limited in scope and lacked the comprehensive, region-wide engagement that had previously defined the Council's operations. In particular, the absence of Russian data and expertise in areas such as environmental monitoring, biodiversity conservation, and emergency preparedness severely constrained the Council's effectiveness (Dyck, 2024). As Timo Koivurova observes "Without Russia, half of the Arctic disappears from the remit of the Arctic Council, making it difficult to consider the body as

representative of the whole region” (Koivurova, 2022). Therefore, any interim arrangement involving the A-7 must acknowledge the eventual necessity of re-engaging Russia in regional cooperation. Moreover, it has been emphasized that following Russia's 2022 invasion and the subsequent reactions from the A7, Arctic diplomacy has lost much of its capacity to provide practical responses to the pressing challenges confronting Arctic state cooperation, regional communities, and environmental concerns. (Thomassen, Cervasio & McClafferty, 2024). Subsequently, in September 2023, under Norwegian leadership, all eight Arctic states approved new guidelines to resume the work of the Council's Working Groups—marking a cautiously optimistic step toward normalization of the AC. However, as negotiations stagnated, on 14 February 2024, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Russia would suspend its annual contributions to the AC's budget until the resumption of practical work within the Council's working groups—and even threatened to withdraw entirely from the organization. Shortly thereafter, on 29 February 2024, it was announced that all eight Arctic states had reached a consensus to resume working group meetings in a virtual format, allowing technical activities to move forward despite the ongoing political impasse (Edvardsen, 2024). Since then, the Council's working groups have continued to convene digitally. However, the absence of high-level political and diplomatic dialogue has significantly hindered the Council's overall effectiveness. Current engagements remain limited to technical discussions, with no substantial strategic coordination among member states—reflecting the persistent atmosphere of mistrust, particularly between Russia and the seven other Arctic states. Consequently, the Council has struggled not only to launch new initiatives but also to maintain existing ones—resulting in a prolonged state of operational stagnation. Throughout 2024, working group activities remained only partially functional, facing persistent difficulties in re-establishing a coherent and inclusive collaborative framework. As a result, by early 2025, the AC remains in a state of cautious progress: some activities have resumed, yet the broader geopolitical environment continues to impede full restoration.

4. Shifting Dynamics and the Future of Arctic Cooperation

From the outset, Russia viewed the suspension of AC activities and subsequent efforts to resume them without its participation as deeply problematic. Russian officials criticized these developments as a violation of the Council's foundational principles of inclusivity and consensus among all Arctic states. As Borozna notes “Since the pause in AC cooperation with Russia after 2022, there have been notable negative changes in Russia's official stance on Arctic governance” (Borozna, 2024, p. 5). In addition, Russia signaled its intention to pursue Arctic strategies independently, potentially through bilateral or multilateral partnerships with non-Western actors—most notably China. This pivot has been interpreted as both a reaction to Western isolation and a proactive effort to maintain influence in Arctic affairs. Russian officials suggested that the Western Arctic states' approach to excluding Russia from the Council could lead to a more fragmented and less cooperative Arctic governance landscape, with competing blocs rather than a unified framework (Borozna, 2024). Arguably, this trend toward fragmentation threatens to undermine decades of collaborative governance in the region, increasing the risk of geopolitical rivalry and institutional irrelevance. The exclusion of Russia from the Council's activities has created a significant gap in Arctic governance, one that may be difficult to fill even after the conflict subsides (Dyck, 2024). In a similar vein, Paul underlines that “Generalised mistrust has supplanted the trust that once anchored the Arctic Council, and it is difficult to see at what level and by what means the forum can be brought back to constructive engagement” (Paul, 2024). The AC had been regarded as a model of international cooperation, where states with diverse interests could come together to address shared challenges in the region. However, the current geopolitical climate has brought these achievements into question, revealing the fragility of the AC's consensus-based decision-making process. The fragmentation of Arctic governance could lead to the emergence of competing regional blocs, while China increasingly cooperating with Russia and stepping in to fill the vacuum left by Russia's exclusion from Arctic Governance. This shift could result in a more polarized and less cooperative Arctic, where the focus on environmental stewardship and

sustainable development is overshadowed by strategic rivalries and resource competition (Thomassen, Cervasio & McClafferty, 2024). Furthermore, the disruption of scientific collaboration has been particularly detrimental. According to Kopra and Wall (2022, p. 13) the suspension of joint research initiatives and the exclusion of Russian scientific institutions from international projects have significantly hindered the global understanding of climate change in the Arctic, a region that perhaps plays most vital role in regulating the global climate system. In this sense, it is arguable that the breakdown of regional cooperation in the Arctic represents notable challenges for both regional and global ecosystems.

Beyond institutional and scientific ramifications, the 2022 war has reshaped security dynamics in the Arctic—complicating the prospects for renewed cooperation and regional stability. While NATO states have gradually expanded surveillance, naval presence, and air operations in the region, Russia's conventional land forces in the High North, especially in the Kola Peninsula, have been significantly weakened due to reallocation to the Ukrainian front (Loon & Zandee, 2024). Nevertheless, Russia's naval and nuclear deterrent capabilities, particularly the Northern Fleet based in the Kola Peninsula, remain intact. As such, the region is witnessing a shift rather than a straightforward intensification of militarization. However, as Kopra and Wall (2022, p. 14) note, the evolving security dynamics—marked by NATO's increased presence and Russia's strategic adjustments—have added new layers of complexity to Arctic governance. While the region has historically been a space of cooperation, current developments risk a gradual shift toward heightened strategic competition. This shifting posture may increase the likelihood of tensions, with potential risks of miscalculation or friction over resources and territorial interests. For instance, Winkel underlines that "Russia's sensitivity to increased activity by NATO units in the region will grow. The activities of the U.S. and NATO in the region are seen as a threat" (Winkel, 2023, p. 4). In a similar vein, Borozna underlines that NATO's increased military activity in the region has been consistently perceived by Russia as a security threat, a perspective that is explicitly reflected in key official documents which underscores Russia's intent to counter what it sees as the militarization of the Arctic (Borozna, 2024, p. 9). While actions of both NATO and Russia may be justified from a security standpoint, they risk further escalating tensions in an already fragile region, complicating efforts to preserve the Arctic as a space for peaceful cooperation and environmental stewardship. Paul underlines that "The security dilemma in the Arctic should be defused, the build-up of military capabilities contained, and crisis and conflict prevention measures should be introduced" (Paul, 2024). In this shifting security environment, the AC's role as a forum for peaceful cooperation might become more important than ever, yet its capacity to mediate these tensions has been severely undermined. The growing divide between NATO and Russia in the Arctic reflects a broader shift in global security dynamics, where the Arctic, once insulated from global power rivalries, is now deeply embedded in them. Moreover, the security dynamics in the Arctic have been further complicated by Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO. Both countries officially became NATO members in 2023, a development that has profound repercussions for the security architecture of the Arctic. Both Nordic countries, which had maintained a policy of neutrality for decades, viewed NATO membership as a necessary step to bolster their security and ensure collective defense under the alliance's umbrella. The accession of these two countries expands NATO's presence in the Arctic and Northern Europe, effectively encircling the Russian Arctic with NATO members, thereby altering the strategic power balance in the region (Loon & Zandee, 2024). Russia has responded to NATO's expansion with alarm, viewing the accession of Finland and Sweden as a direct threat to its northern flank. Russian officials have vowed to increase their military presence in the Arctic and have warned of the potential for heightened tensions and conflicts in the region as a result of NATO's expanded footprint. The Kremlin's rhetoric has been matched by an increase in military patrols and the deployment of additional forces and equipment to Russia's Arctic regions (Hughes, 2024). For instance, Winkel underlines that "Finland's accession and Sweden's imminent entry into NATO are further hardening the fronts. This has ramifications for Russia's sense of security and will drive a fast remilitarization" (Winkel, 2023, p. 4). In this altered security environment, the AC now finds itself hosting seven NATO-aligned states and one

isolated Russia—an unprecedented dynamic that further deepens the existing security dilemma and undermines the Council’s foundational principle of inclusive consensus.

Lastly, it is important to note that the reluctance of the US and Western countries to engage with Russia on Arctic cooperation projects has created a strategic opening for closer Sino-Russian alignment in the region. This shift is reshaping not only the economic landscape, but also the geopolitical balance and institutional frameworks of Arctic governance. Winkel underlines that “Isolation and sanctions against Russia will most likely lead to Russia relying more on Chinese investment (...) This increases China’s influence in the Arctic and could lead to additional tensions with Western countries” (Winkel, 2023, p. 4). With its growing Arctic ambitions, China is likely to expand investments in Russian-led projects, thereby consolidating a new axis of regional influence. This strategic alignment increasingly extends into the security domain as well. Loon and Zandee (2024, p. 3) highlight that China and Russia are pursuing closer military cooperation in the Arctic, including joint naval and air exercises and greater coordination in regional defense strategies. These developments reflect both countries’ shared interests in counterbalancing Western presence and asserting alternative governance norms. The deepening Sino-Russian alignment raises the prospect of parallel institutions or informal forums that bypass the AC, eroding its centrality. As Paul (2024) and Young (2022) warn, such fragmentation could make it increasingly difficult to address transboundary challenges in a coordinated and inclusive manner. Accordingly, the AC’s ability to function as the primary forum for regional cooperation is under mounting pressure—not only from shifting power dynamics, but also from the emergence of rival governance models that prioritize strategic interests over collective well-being. Whether the Council can adapt to this evolving landscape remains one of the most pressing questions for the future of Arctic governance. Nevertheless, despite the growing fragmentation of regional governance, Russia has continued its formal participation in the AC. Unlike its withdrawal from platforms such as the BEAC, Russia appears to consider the AC a strategic venue for maintaining visibility, legitimacy, and long-term influence over Arctic affairs. This continued engagement may reflect Moscow’s recognition of the AC’s symbolic and diplomatic value—despite the suspension of most practical cooperation. This suggests that even under strained geopolitical conditions, the AC retains a degree of institutional resilience and relevance that may serve as a foundation for eventual re-engagement.

5. Conclusion

Once seen as a model of peaceful cooperation, the Arctic region now finds itself at a crossroads, shaped by accelerating climate change, intensifying geopolitical rivalries, and the profound ripple effects of the 2022 Russia–Ukraine war. The AC, long considered the cornerstone of regional governance, faces unprecedented challenges that threaten its relevance and operational effectiveness. The suspension of its activities exposed critical institutional vulnerabilities, while the exclusion of Russia has created enduring gaps in scientific, environmental, and political cooperation. The suspension also revealed the vulnerabilities in the current governance structures, highlighting the difficulties of maintaining cooperation in a region increasingly influenced by global power dynamics. The exclusion of Russia, a key Arctic state, has created significant gaps in governance and cooperation, leading to the emergence of new strategic alliances and a more fragmented approach to regional issues. The growing militarization of the Arctic, the reconfiguration of the regional security landscape and the disruption of economic and scientific collaboration efforts all point to a future where the Arctic may no longer be insulated from global conflicts. The potential for the Arctic to become a new theater of great power competition looms large, complicating efforts to address the region’s complex challenges, from environmental protection to Indigenous rights. Yet it is important to acknowledge that the continued presence of the AC in the strategic narratives of all Arctic states suggests that, even in times of fragmentation, its value as a stabilizing and legitimizing institution remains widely recognized. This political recognition, while not a substitute for operational unity, signals that the Council still holds strategic relevance in the region’s evolving governance landscape.

Whether the AC can reassert itself as a legitimate and inclusive forum depends on the ability of its members to reconcile geopolitical tensions and renew their commitment to shared priorities. As the Arctic continues to warm and its geopolitical significance grows, the need for a robust, adaptable, and inclusive governance framework has never been more urgent. The stakes are high, not just for the Arctic but for the global community, as the region plays a notable role in the global climate system and holds vast economic and strategic resources. It has been three years since the first suspension decision of the AC; despite the efforts it is arguable that there is not much progress for revival of the AC until now. As Young aptly states “Can the Arctic Council survive in this setting? There is no way to turn the clock back; the Council will not be able to resume business as usual, even after the dust settles from the current Ukraine crisis” (Young, 2022). In other words, what lies ahead requires more than restoration—it requires transformation. Such transformation may involve broader institutional adaptations, including more flexible decision-making procedures, mechanisms to ensure continuity during political crises, or enhanced formats for Indigenous and scientific actors to sustain cooperation in times of geopolitical disruption. In this context, the future of Arctic cooperation will hinge on the willingness of Arctic states to embrace institutional innovation, reengage diplomatically across divides, and uphold multilateralism in the face of strategic fragmentation. It is only through such efforts that the Arctic can continue to serve as a region of stability, cooperation, and sustainability amid growing global uncertainty. Moreover, the arrival of a second Trump administration may bring a significant shift in the US stance on Arctic politics, as well as its broader approach to the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Whether this shift will foster renewed efforts to rebuild trust in the Arctic remains uncertain. However, any substantive change in US policy could have lasting consequences for the AC’s future and the broader landscape of regional cooperation.

In light of these developments, the AC stands at a critical juncture. Its ability to endure and evolve will depend on whether it can navigate not only the ongoing geopolitical rifts, but also the structural limitations embedded in its consensus-based framework. This moment presents an opportunity—not merely to preserve what the Council once was, but to reimagine what it can become. The choices made in the coming years will determine whether the Arctic continues to fragment along geopolitical lines, or whether it can once again offer a model for pragmatic, peaceful cooperation in an increasingly divided world.

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