



COLD SHOULDER

Barry Scott Zellen examines why the Arctic Council 'pause' puts Arctic cooperation into a deep freeze

On 3 March, 2022 seven of the eight Arctic Council (AC) member states – called herein the “A7” – announced a historic, unanimous boycott of AC participation in protest of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, after just over 25 years of nearly continuous operations since its inaugural meeting in Ottawa on 19 September, 1996. While this is the first time the A7 agreed to suspend participation in AC activities, it’s not the first time tensions over Russian aggression in Ukraine strained the AC’s impressive track record for circumpolar unity. In 2014, after Russia’s first assault upon

Ukraine, the USA and Canada jointly boycotted a meeting of the AC’s Task Force for Action on Black Carbon and Methane (TFBCM) held in Moscow on 14–15 April, but soon rejoined their fellow AC members at the table. As Environment Minister Leona Aglukkaq then explained, Ottawa was taking a: “principled stand,” marking the first time – but not the last – that conflict over Ukraine would disrupt the long tradition of Arctic cooperation at the AC.

The 3 March decision by the A7 differs from the 2014 boycott in its unanimity and endurance, part of a global realignment against Russia that would be

This is not the first time that the council has confronted a deep division in its ranks

powerfully magnified by comparable decisions by countless other organisations around the world to isolate Russia in protest for its aggression against Ukraine. In their announcement, the A7 condemned Russia’s: “unprovoked invasion” and noted: “the grave impediments to international cooperation, including in the Arctic, that Russia’s actions have caused.” They reasserted their conviction: “of the enduring value of the Arctic Council for circumpolar cooperation” and reiterated their: “support for this institution and its work. We hold a responsibility to the people of the Arctic, including the indigenous peoples, who contribute to and benefit from the important work undertaken in the Council.” They explained the: “core principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, based on international law, have long underpinned the work of the Arctic Council, a forum which Russia currently chairs. In light of Russia’s flagrant violation of these principles, our representatives will not travel to Russia for meetings of the Arctic Council. Additionally, 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.”

The A7 decision caught several of the AC’s Permanent Participant organisations, representing the indigenous peoples of the region, by surprise as they were not consulted – a break with the spirit and long tradition of the AC, which stands first among the world’s many intergovernmental forums for its efforts to unite state and indigenous interests and for elevating state-tribe consultation to the highest of normative values. While unequal in their institutional power, with the eight founding member states (the A8) holding all of the formal power, the Permanent Participants are essential partners in the formation of the consensus that defines AC governance, and they have played a vital role in both the formation of the AC in 1996 and its operations in the quarter century since. Indeed, the stability of the Arctic region owes much to the spirit of collaborative governance that aligns indigenous and state interests, as reflected in the AC’s structure as well as other novel and innovative governing institutions across the circumpolar Arctic.

While surprised by the boycott (and their not being consulted ahead of time by the A7), most of the Permanent Participants quickly endorsed the decision, but the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) – viewed by many observers as a mouthpiece for, and controlled by, Putin’s government in Moscow – came out in full and enthusiastic support of Moscow’s “peacemaking” effort in Ukraine. This outraged a network of indigenous leaders in involuntary exile from Russia who were formerly associated with RAIPON, who in turn issued their own counterstatement ten days later, while also announcing the formation of their own parallel organisation to fill the vacuum created by RAIPON’s lost legitimacy and morally outrageous support for Russia’s unjust assault on Ukraine.

The AC is a unique organisation, with legitimacy that extends across the entirety of the circumpolar world, from the western tip of the Aleutian Islands all the way to the eastern tip of Siberia spanning a diverse mosaic of states, tribal peoples, remote environments and fragile ecosystems undergoing an historic climatic transition.

It brings together the eight founding Arctic states, of which Russia is the most vast (spanning 11 time zones) with states as small as Iceland, and includes within its innovative governance structure the six aforementioned Indigenous Peoples’ organisations, the Permanent Participants, providing them with much influence and a voice at the table with a diverse range of observers, both state and non-state, allowing countries as far away as Singapore and as consequential to the world economy as China an opportunity to participate, regardless of their domestic governing structures or ideologies.

RUSSIA IS THE LARGEST OF THE ARCTIC STATES, WITH THE LARGEST ARCTIC POPULATION

Moreover, the issues facing the Arctic, of which climate change is perhaps the most pressing for all stakeholders, small and large, cannot be paused. Nor should they. And excluding Russia from any discussions, with the Russian Arctic representing some half the Arctic’s geographical extent, would render the AC’s efforts, which for 25 years have demonstrated their efficacy around the circumpolar world, substantially reduced. There are no half-way solutions to the future of the Arctic, whether it’s peacetime or wartime. After a quarter century of Arctic cooperation, this is the first time this unique intergovernmental forum, which I believe is an exemplary model for the world to emulate, has been suspended by all seven democratic member states. Even during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the AC managed to meet virtually, finding like so many others that vast distances could be overcome through digital connections. Somehow the Arctic felt less vast, less isolated, at a moment when it was more cut off from the rest of the world than it had been for generations.

And while Russia’s actions in Ukraine are reprehensible, putting at risk the post-Cold War order of which the formation of the AC was an exemplary and illustrative moment, stopping its operations now because Russia presently holds its rotating chair, seems as illogical as shuttering the UN General Assembly – or putting a pause on meetings of the Security Council. Intergovernmental bodies are the one space in world politics where rivals and opponents can meet face to face, even in times of war. Their business does not stop when hostilities commence; often, their responsibilities multiply manifold at such times as now. We need the AC no less today than we did before the Ukraine invasion, and may indeed need it more than ever. AC members find unity in their diversity, and approach their Arctic borders with a collaborative spirit seldom found along borders further south. The challenge, of course, is in minimising tensions across Arctic borders, at a time when one of the Arctic states is at war with a neighbour on friendly terms with the other Arctic states. This is no easy feat. But it’s not the first time there’s been strategic dissension at the top of the world; indeed, with five of the eight AC members part of the NATO alliance, there can hardly be a day

without strategic dissension in the Arctic even at the best of times. And yet, the Arctic has been one of the most stable regions of the world, despite the preexisting condition of strategic competition.

THE AC HAS LEGITIMACY THAT EXTENDS ACROSS THE ENTIRETY OF THE CIRCUMPOLAR WORLD

There was a time not long ago when the AC confronted a deep division in its ranks that threatened the very consensus that serves as the bedrock of its successful first quarter century. That member challenged the accepted consensus by all the AC's other stakeholders (member states, Permanent Participants, and observers alike). After two impressive decades of sustained consensus in good times and bad, that member state broke ranks with that unanimity – and in so doing, made it impossible for a joint declaration to emerge from a ministerial meeting for the very first time. That time was just three years ago: in 2019. The founding member state was not Russia, but the United States. And the issue that drove a wedge between the USA and its fellow AC members (and its other stakeholders) was a change in policy on climate change, long a unifying issue for all AC stakeholders and the most pressing and salient issue before it. Despite this collapse in consensus, the AC survived, and only a few short years later, consensus was fully restored. The organisation proved as resilient as the diverse collective of Arctic peoples, states, cultures and organisations it represents.

With Russia now on the war path, having launched what the world sees as an unprovoked war of aggression that once again challenges the consensus that has so long united the Arctic world, we are back to this very same precipice of collapsing Arctic consensus we saw just three years earlier when America unilaterally quit the global coalition against climate change. The brutal conflict presently unfolding is different in nearly every way from that previous disagreement at AC's Rovaniemi ministerial in 2019, but the stakes are perhaps comparable, if imperfectly so – with the future of humanity once again at stake, and consensus on unifying values once again eluding a single yet essential member of the circumpolar family. And while this comparison will not be greeted with equal receptiveness amidst the current crisis unfolding across Ukraine, the moral scale of both global challenges, and their mutual risk to humanity, have an equivalency even if not the same palpable sense of immediacy.

If the AC can survive the collapse of the climate consensus that was forged at its inclusive and consensual table during its first quarter century, and which came to define in its expansive circumpolar agenda from 1996-2021, there is no reason it can't do the same again. Indeed, it must do so. Russia is the largest of the Arctic states, with the largest Arctic population, and most diverse Arctic economy and mosaic of cultures. Its portion of the Arctic represents half the circumpolar world. As bad as things are now, and as bad as they might become in the current war, now is not the time to shutter the AC's operations altogether, nor to stop meeting with all its diverse and important stakeholders, whether states, Indigenous Peoples organisation or NGOs – and by framing the A7's suspension as a pause in quest of new modalities does create at least a modest window of hope that the AC will find its way toward a resumption of its important business ●

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