



PATH TO PEACE

Barry Scott Zellen explains why as the Arctic thaw continues, lifting the Arctic Council pause presents Russia a viable route to resolution

While it took the collapse of the Soviet Union to make possible the unique multi-level, multilateral collaboration that the Arctic Council (AC) has nurtured for a quarter century since its 1996 formation, with its new model of inclusive diplomacy uniting states and indigenous peoples, its foundations took form before the Cold War ended, when its foundational vision was articulated eloquently by Mikhail Gorbachev in his famed Murmansk speech in 1987. The maritime boundary line separating the USA from the USSR (and now Russia) was negotiated by the last Soviet

foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze with his US counterpart, James Baker, and has been respected by both post-Cold War USA and Russia since 1990, laying a stable foundation on what could otherwise be a volatile border. The current shipping lane through the Bering Strait was jointly negotiated by the USA and Russia, reflecting the ongoing stability on this Arctic frontier, with the US Coast Guard and the Russian Border Service developing a laudable bilateral relationship that contrasts with so many of Russia's other borders. All this says something about the fundamental

The Arctic Coast Guard Forum works to ensure that rules-based order is maintained in polar waters

importance of Arctic collaboration to world order, regardless of which party or individual sits atop either country's government.

As shocking as the recent threat made by Russian President Vladimir Putin to fellow AC member states Finland and Sweden on the question of their consideration of NATO membership was; as worrisome as the recent Russian military exercise in Norway's EEZ was; as foreboding as was the destination for Russia's northern fleet during that self-same exercise, positioning a Russian flotilla just offshore the vast and vulnerable island colony of Greenland – it's imperative that the AC find its way back together, and for meetings between its diverse stakeholders inclusive of Russia, even in the absence of a unifying consensus as they once enjoyed, to continue.

Among some potential modalities to consider for resuming AC meetings under Russia's term as chair are: boycotting in-person meetings until peace is restored in Ukraine, utilising remote technologies to maintain a virtual connection until then among all its stakeholders; deploying junior proxies in place of senior officials as a more subtle but no less obvious Russia under its chair than a complete cessation of meetings, modelled on White House policy regarding China's hosting of the Olympics, where top officials were notably absent in protest of Beijing's long occupation and mistreatment of the Uighur homeland while athletes were free to compete; and adoption of symbolic yellow and blue attire by attendees of such meetings to echo the world's embrace of Ukraine's independence. Additionally, the A7, united in its opposition to Russia's aggression, could assist Ukraine with an application to become an AC observer, a move that Russia would surely oppose – but the point would be made. Additionally, if Moscow succeeds in extinguishing Ukraine's sovereignty by forcibly absorbing all or part it into an expanded Russian state, Ukrainians, in their occupation and subjugation, will share an historic experience with indigenous people, as acutely experienced by the Aleuts under Russian colonisation and Japanese occupation, the Sami under Scandinavian state formation and northward expansion and the Athabaskans and Inuit under the economic domination of the fur empire monopoly chartered companies, which colonised so much of Arctic North America.

The AC's six Permanent Participants may thus be in a helpful position side-by-side with the Arctic states (inclusive of Russia). The AC can thus leverage its rich mosaic of perspectives and perhaps help the world find a way toward a multilateral solution to the current crisis. Additionally, while Russia is at war in the heart of Europe, all the world hopes and prays the war does not horizontally escalate and draw in NATO members. One potential tool to leverage is the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF), which like the AC is under Russia's current rotation as chair and which, together, works to ensure the rules-based order is maintained in polar waters.

The ACGF could, if permitted by its member states, continue to collaborate on so many important issues ranging from search and rescue missions, to oil spill cleanup and environmental protection, to implementing the IMO Polar Code. How to continue this important collaboration in a time of war will, of

course, require diplomatic agility and ingenuity, but it's not beyond the capabilities of those who have managed the world's response to the present crisis, and is worth consideration. Indeed, if meeting in Russia remains a non-starter, the ACGF could meet in the Russian coal-mining community of Barentsburg on Svalbard, formally part of Norway and whose populace, owing to Soviet history, is in near equal parts Russian and Ukrainian, offering additional symbolic resonance.

THE A7 COULD ASSIST UKRAINE WITH AN APPLICATION TO BECOME A COUNCIL OBSERVER

This is not the first time world politics has intruded into the otherwise calm spirit of Arctic cooperation. Aidan Chamandy, in *Politics.ca*, recounts the brief 2014 boycott and how Canada: "was keen 'to support the important work of the Arctic Council' in future, according to a statement that year by former Environment minister Leona Aglukkaq. The 2014 boycott was the only one, however" – until now. Chamandy cites Nicole Covey, a fellow of the North American Arctic Defence and Security Network, who explained this limited 2014 boycott contributed to the widely held: "belief that the Arctic Council could withstand a lot of international tensions. So what happened with the pause is very substantial" with its: "unified response... The fact that they're only pausing, and that they haven't ended the Arctic Council, is important, because that shows they're hoping things might resolve in some way." Indeed, as Covey further explains: "If Russia is no longer involved in the Arctic Council, you no longer get that circumpolar, holistic approach".

Such a view is shared by Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) chair Dalee Sambo Dorough, who is also cited by Chamandy as explaining: "Everything (in the Arctic) is interconnected... It (could) be difficult for seven other Arctic states... to be effective and move forward in a constructive fashion," and the AC: "wouldn't be the same if one of our clear and genuine members is absent."

Russia holds the rotating AC chair until 2023, when it will pass to the next AC member state in line to hold the post, and until the invasion there had been much continuity with Russia's tenure, testament to the endurance of consensus among its diverse stakeholders. To completely boycott the AC under Russia's chair would undermine the very spirit of collaboration that gave form to the AC during more optimistic times. The agenda for the AC, even under Russia's chair, shows much overlap with the previous chair (Iceland), and this continuity alone can serve as an important, symbolic bridge to a restoration of that founding cooperative spirit in the future. And because consensus is the lifeblood and governing paradigm for the AC, there is nothing Russia can achieve as chair without the full consensus of the other AC members. Each biannual Ministerial meeting, each semiannual Senior Arctic

Officials meeting, each Working Group session, will provide an opportunity to rebuke Russia and deny it consensus on any issue that deviates from the collective will of the AC as a whole; and, on issues where consensus is preserved, it will demonstrate that Russia, even at the worst of times, remains committed to the values and principles of the AC. Looking forward, this channel of ongoing diplomatic interaction could serve as a bridge to the future, and the restoration of a world where Russia is a responsible member of the international community.

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There is thus much opportunity from participating in, and in so doing thwarting Russia's ambitions with, the power of consensus that undergirds the AC. Even while Europe is aflame, the Arctic continues to melt. The challenge of climate change does not go away, nor do the many pressing challenges across the remote and isolated communities of the Arctic region. And, with tensions high in Europe, Moscow may choose to ship more of its petroleum products through the Northern Sea Route to Asian markets rather than to European ports – and if it does, its economy will

come to increasingly rely on the stable border with the United States it worked so hard to create and to sustain since the final days of the Soviet Union. When Russia sold Alaska to the United States in 1867, it did so for a good reason: it was the best neighbour to have, in good times and bad. This remained true during World War II when that border provided a lend-lease lifeline to the eastern front, and it remained true during the Cold War even when tensions were high. And despite the uncertainty and chaos unleashed with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it remains true even today.

By keeping today's pause on AC participation as brief as possible, and resuming meetings among its stakeholders virtually and in symbolic protest while trying to restore consensus with Russia on the many important issues that still unite the whole of the circumpolar world, the AC can become part of the answer to, and resolution of, the current conflict. It can offer the very same bridge to a collaborative future that it has promised since 1996 and show that its second quarter century can be as successful as its first. The AC survived the collapse of consensus once before, on an issue of great import, that of the climate change challenge facing humanity and requiring our collective unity to overcome. The AC can – and must – survive the current collapse in consensus that has accompanied the conflict over Ukraine and keep this important bridge to a more peaceful and united future open for the time when Moscow is ready to reset its policies, and rejoin the consensus it once embraced ●

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Picture credit: US Dept Defense