



# A SACRED PROMISE BROKEN?

Barry Scott Zellen, PhD, explains why decline in indigenous consultation at the Arctic Council signals a retreat from the spirit of the 1996 Ottawa Declaration

**T**he unprecedented four-month boycott of the Arctic Council was unexpected news to the six Permanent Participant organisations representing the indigenous peoples of the Arctic. While the Council is predicated upon the spirit of meaningful and inclusive participation of Arctic indigenous peoples, who hold special status under the foundational terms of the 1996 Ottawa Declaration, the Permanent Participants were not consulted before this historic boycott of Council meetings was announced in March.

The Arctic Council (like the Arctic region generally) is distinctively collaborative, where indigenous peoples and sovereign states regularly meet to jointly deliberate

and collectively govern, embracing a region-wide commitment to co-management. While the Council does not de jure address matters of national security and defence, its distinct composition and high regard for indigenous knowledge and values has positioned it to redefine Arctic security to include environmental, ecological, cultural and human security as core pillars.

The omission by the A7 of this important consultation with the six Permanent Participants ahead of the boycott decision signals a return to a more Westphalian conceptualisation of Arctic security, risking an erosion of the prominence of indigenous voices in Arctic international relations. Indeed, this collaboration between tribe and state at the top of our world is now at risk.

**While the Council does not address matters of national security, it remains responsible for Arctic security**

The Council is comprised of eight Arctic states, including the United States, Canada, and Russia and six permanent participants (Indigenous Peoples), which together with a growing cohort of state and non-state observers: “serves as the leading forum for the Arctic... that promotes cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic states and permanent participants.”

Ten days before the invasion began, with war in Ukraine appearing increasingly imminent, AAC called upon world leaders to remember their commitments to the indigenous peoples, noting that Crimean Tatars: “comprise the largest population of Indigenous Peoples in Ukraine” Specifically, it wants to remind state leaders that Canada, United States and Ukraine are all party to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), originally adopted in 2007. AAC points to Article 30 which states: “Military activities shall not take place in the lands or territories of indigenous peoples, unless justified by a relevant public interest or otherwise freely agreed with or requested by the indigenous peoples concerned,” Further it proclaims: “States shall undertake effective consultations with the indigenous peoples concerned, through appropriate procedures and in particular through their representative institutions, prior to using their lands or territories for military activities.”

Chief Bill Erasmus, the AAC’s Canadian Chair, commented: “We want to remind all governments that the Arctic Council is the world’s only forum where we, as Indigenous People have inclusion at a global level. As concerns over the Russian-Ukraine crisis are increasing, we feel the need to speak out.” He emphasised the importance UNDRIP, which: “must be adhered to through this process. The loss of human life, the economic and environmental costs should a war commence, is troubling. We do not support or endorse any war and urge all parties to seek a diplomatic solution.” He noted there were: “several upcoming meetings set to take place that involve Indigenous Arctic organisations including Arctic Territory of Dialogue 2022,” scheduled (before the Arctic Council pause was announced) to be hosted by the Russian Federation in St. Petersburg in April.

AAC’s effort to directly reach out – not only to the leaders of the Arctic states but the global community of nations – to protect the rights of indigenous peoples from the ravages of war reflects the powerful diplomatic innovation of the Arctic Council, and the inclusive diversity inherent in the structure of the Council structure and its novel effort to align the formal sovereign powers of the Council’s state actors with the informal influence of its indigenous actors in the formation of Arctic policies. While most (but not all) the Permanent Participants would endorse the Arctic Council boycott after it was announced two weeks later, like AAC they did so while expressing their concern for the future of Arctic cooperation, knowing how great indigenous gains have been since the Council’s formation, and how much Arctic indigenous peoples have to lose in a world without an Arctic Council.

The Russian section of the Saami Council (SC) issued its own statement on 27 February, among the first, commenting they: “cannot ignore the current situation in the country or remain silent about it,” and while: “in no case will we touch upon the question of who is right and who is wrong,” the SC’s Russian section: “understands that there is no justification for military action.” Amid the dizzying cascade of sanctions, suspensions and boycotts of Russian participation in various forms of international cooperation

since the war began, the SC’s Russian section expressed their desire: “to make sure that the Sami people from the Russian side can continue to participate in international meetings and conferences.”

Gwich’in Council International (GCI) issued its own Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation following Russia’s Invasion Ukraine on 3 March, in which GCI: “welcomes the collective pause of activities of the Arctic Council as we explore new modalities for pursuing peace and cooperation in the north”. GCI reiterated that it “remains committed to engage in productive dialogues that advance the collective aim and responsibility of stewarding a peaceful Arctic region built on cooperation and our shared value of mutual respect.”

Four days later, the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) released its Statement from the Inuit Circumpolar Council Concerning the Arctic Council, which acknowledged the A7’s: “calling for a temporary pausing of participation at all meetings of the Arctic Council and its subsidiary bodies,” as well as a: “message from the Russian Chair of the Arctic Council agreeing to the request of the other countries.” ICC noted that four of the six Permanent Participants have Russian constituents – ICC, SC, the Aleut International Association (AIA) and the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), and that ICC serves: “as a unifying voice for Inuit across our collective homeland”. At the same time,

## EVERYBODY IS NOT IN AGREEMENT ABOUT REOPENING THE ARCTIC COUNCIL RIGHT NOW

ICC expressed its concern for: “the future of the Arctic Council which is based on peaceful cooperation and mutual respect” and its hope that: “this temporary pause will allow time to consider ‘the necessary modalities that can allow us to continue the Council’s important work in view of the current circumstances.’”

RAIPON, increasingly criticised for serving as a mouthpiece for the Russian Federation, issued its own statement on 1 March, ahead of the pause by two days, in which it takes Moscow’s side: “Respected Vladimir Vladimirovich! A peaceful sky, land of our ancestors and the safety of children – nothing can be more important for every inhabitant of our planet. For everyone. No exceptions. Regardless of ethnicity or native language. The North, Siberia and the Far East remembers with gratitude those who have dedicated their destinies to the formation of our regions... Peacemaking is never easy. [RAIPON] supports your aspiration and decision to protect the rights and interests of the residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics and the security of a multiethnic Russia. We, representatives of 40 small indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East express hope for quick mutual understanding to ensure peace and harmony.”

Ten days later, on 11 March, a newly formed organisation, the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia, put out its own statement rebutting RAIPON, signed by seven indigenous leaders in involuntary exile from Russia, and contrasting greatly with RAIPON’s endorsement of Putin’s aggression: “We – the undersigned representatives of the Indigenous

peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East living outside of Russia against our will – are outraged by the war President Putin has unleashed against Ukraine” and: “by statements of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) on 1 March, 2022 in support of the decisions of President Putin.” ICIPR calls upon the international community (including the Arctic Council in addition to the UN): “to ignore the statements of RAIPON representatives and spokespeople

## THE FUTURE OF THE COUNCIL IS BASED ON PEACEFUL COOPERATION AND MUTUAL RESPECT

of other organisations which supported Vladimir Putin’s decisions,” and announced: “the creation of a new, independent organisation – the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia.” The fate of RAIPON and the challenge presented by ICIPR remains uncertain.

On 22 June, Nunatsiaq News reported that the Arctic Council is: “resuming work on a limited scale – but Russia won’t be allowed to participate” and: “according to James Stotts, head of the Inuit Circumpolar Council delegation to the Arctic Council the seven Arctic Council nations other than Russia made the decision without consulting the council’s other permanent participants, the six Indigenous groups in the forum.” As Stotts described: “We were notified after they made their decision” – to which he added: “we don’t like it that we weren’t consulted.” Stotts further described that within his organisation: “not everybody is in agreement, I think, on reopening the Arctic Council right now – or even in a limited way.”

Stotts added: “it’s not clear how activities can resume without Russia. There are more questions than answers with what’s going on now for us.”

This decision for the Arctic Council to resume meeting, without Russia’s participation, suggests that Westphalian security interests are once again ascendant in the Arctic. Will the Council remain bifurcated along the old East/West fault line – with the A7 representing a “free Arctic” now united by their common NATO membership, and exclusive of the vast Russian Arctic? Will the whole Council, inclusive of Russia, ever find its way back together or has Arctic security returned to the Cold War’s bipolarity? And in its future form, how will the Council reconcile the interests of indigenous peoples and modern states?

The Arctic Council has since its inception in 1996 been about more than Arctic states, and its distinct contribution to statecraft has been rooted in its diverse, multilevel collaboration between indigenous peoples from across the circumpolar world, working in partnership with a diverse group of states – from microstates to middle powers to superpowers, and from democracies to colonial-states to autocracies – to reimagine responsible statecraft as a synthesis of national and indigenous interests, and Arctic security as a distinctly northern synthesis of hard and soft security interests. With Finland and Sweden swapping generations of official neutrality for NATO membership, it appears that national security interests are once again trumping indigenous reconciliation – putting the long, peaceful interlude known as ‘Arctic Exceptionalism’ at risk. Finding a path back to a restoration of the Council’s important, indeed sacred, reconciliation of tribe and state is imperative – ideally with the eight founding member states (inclusive of Russia) and the six Permanent Participants all at the table once again – providing the world with an innovative, inclusive, and importantly viable, model for regional stability ●

**Barry Scott Zellen** is Arctic International Correspondent for Intersec, a Senior Fellow of the Institute of the North and a Visiting Scholar of Polar Geography at the University of Connecticut. He has authored and/or edited a dozen books.

**The Arctic Council is resuming work on a limited scale, but Russia isn’t allowed to participate**



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