

## What future for cooperation in the Arctic? Scenarios after Putin's war on Ukraine

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The war in Ukraine gives reason to fear the worst: Will the Arctic turn again into a region of confrontation, remain a region of cooperation or become a region “on hold”? Three scenarios for future collaboration in the Arctic and their implications for global cooperation on climate change.

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Since the very first day, people around the globe are in shock about Putin's invasion of Ukraine. The misery and human tragedy unfolding in this country has also severe effects on transnational and international cooperation at large – also in “the far North”. The voting behaviour in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on a resolution condemning the Russian Federation's attack on Ukraine seven days after it had started “showed great solidarity with Ukraine and support for the fundamental principles of the UN Charter”. Seven of the eight Arctic states voted in favour of the UNGA resolution and contributed to Russia's isolation in international relations by also deciding to temporarily pause “participation in all meetings of the [Arctic] Council and its subsidiary bodies”. Russia is currently chairing the Arctic Council (until May 2023). The Arctic Council is the main intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation in the Arctic. It was formed in 1996 as a high-level forum by the Arctic states to ensure peace, environmental protection and sustainable development in the region. Together with six organizations representing Arctic Indigenous Peoples and experts from 38 Observers (non-Arctic states including Germany and Poland, intergovernmental and interparliamentary organizations and non-governmental organizations) the Arctic Council produced regularly comprehensive assessments on the Arctic and provides a forum for the negotiation of binding agreements between the Arctic states.

The decision of the “Arctic-7” puts cooperation in the Arctic “on hold” for the very first time since the end of the Cold War - at a time when particularly in the Arctic, where climate change is most visible, cooperation is desperately needed to facilitate research and policy making for limiting its effects in and beyond the Arctic. Also the Barents Euro-Arctic Council condemned Russia’s “unprecedented military aggression against Ukraine” and “suspend[ed] activities involving Russia in the Barents Euro-Arctic cooperation”. While the popular saying “what happens in the Arctic does not stay in the Arctic” has mostly been used to emphasize the need of holistic, integrated approaches to fight climate change, in these times it seems very likely that future collaboration in the Arctic – its scope and possible formats – will also be exemplary for global cooperation on climate change, likely also in other areas.

How will the war in Ukraine affect Arctic politics and research on and in the Arctic? There are many uncertainties at this point in time, given the dynamics, but at least three scenarios seem likely to realize.

### **Scenario 1: The Arctic will be a region of confrontation (again)**

During the Cold War, the Arctic was widely perceived as “an arena of great power competition”. Before Putin’s invasion in Ukraine, concerns from that time revived in light of Russia’s military presence in the Arctic and its build-up, which are now seen as “amplif[ying] the potential for a conflict between Russia and NATO-allied states to spill over into the region”. The successful cooperation among the members of the Arctic Council and its institutional expansion seemed to balance this perception to some degree. Last year, the Arctic Council celebrated its 25th anniversary and the Council was described once more as an exceptional venue for peace and collaboration. At the same time, hard security has always been excluded from the mandate of the Arctic Council. As the statement of the “Arctic-7” shows, Putin’s war in Ukraine changes this. As a response to this statement, the Russian chair of the Senior Arctic Officials (high-level diplomats working underneath the ministries) warned that the decision of the “Arctic-7” to pause collaboration in the Arctic Council will “inevitably lead to the accumulation of the risks and challenges to soft security in the region”. Further, with Moscow’s warnings expressed on Finland and Sweden possibly joining NATO trust in peaceful relations between the Arctic states has been significantly damaged, which is why hard security questions will most likely dominate any potential collaboration with Russia, like the more intense “development of a security co-operative regime between the Americans and northern Europeans”. Against this background, it is difficult to imagine any pan-arctic cooperation in non-military issues under the auspices of the Arctic states, including research or cooperation for sustainable development in the near future.

### **Scenario 2: The Arctic remains (partly) a region of cooperation - the Arctic Council will be replaced by an “Arctic Council 2.0”**

In this case, environmental concerns like climate change, which have been treated as matters of soft security, remain dominant. In view of climate change, the newest IPCC-report stresses that it is still possible to avoid the worst, it requires, however, urgent action. Given the Arctic’s exceptional vulnerability to climate change and the cutting edge reports that have been co-produced by a wide range of experts from Arctic states, Indigenous Peoples Organizations and from Arctic Council observers, it

is most likely that cooperation will continue to better understand the role of the Arctic in the global climate system. For that reason, it has been suggested to form an Arctic Council 2.0 or “Nordic Plus cooperation” allowing continued informal cooperation by the Arctic Council working groups - without Russia. Russia is the largest state in the Arctic, it accounts for almost a third of the Arctic that is inhabited by over 2.5 million people. Any potential output in this scenario would lack the perspectives of researchers based in Russia, including the traditional knowledge shared by Indigenous experts from Russia’s Arctic. This has also negative effects on knowledge production on climate change, which requires cooperation among scientists irrespective of their nationalities, the sharing of resources and expertise to reach the best knowledge available, as well as permits to conduct research in all Arctic regions. Although this scenario is not a desirable solution, it still offers some important opportunities for cooperation for the Arctic region, where political boundaries have never been a barrier to changes in the natural environment.

### **Scenario 3: Circumpolar scientific cooperation will be “on hold”**

Also in transnational Arctic forums that are not driven by states, research collaboration with experts from Russia will be limited for the time being. Various research organizations already decided to no longer fund scientific cooperation with state institutions and business enterprises in Russia. Despite the open letter from Russian scientists to protest against the Putin’s hostilities in Ukraine, which has been supported by thousands, other statements, such as the one released by the International Arctic Sciences Committee (IASC) and by the Arctic Economic Council illustrate that researchers and experts in Russia follow different narratives. Even though these forums did not officially stop scientific collaboration yet, in practice, it will be impossible to continue “research as usual”. Panels proposed at international conferences, like the UArctic Congress 2022 to be held in Moscow have already been cancelled. At this point, it is also not clear if and how the Russian government will sanction researchers from Russia who collaborate with researchers elsewhere. The suspension of scientific cooperation means the end for many ongoing projects and it requires rethinking future projects. Like the previous two scenarios, this is also a kind of shock for the international Arctic research community.

All three scenarios are disruptive and triggered by Russia’s aggression and the drastic loss of trust in cooperation. None of them is desirable. At this point in time, it seems likely that the “Arctic-7” will agree on “one or another form of interim arrangement” to continue collaboration with Indigenous Peoples Organizations and experts from Arctic and non-Arctic states. In a longer-term perspective, it will be important to develop avenues for including knowledge on and research from Russia’s Arctic again to understand, mitigate and adapt to climate change also elsewhere.

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