

THE ARCTIC SUSTAINED, INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION, AND RUSSIA.

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One major potential victim of the ongoing war in Ukraine and its aftermath may be the Arctic. The full extent of damage will depend on how long the war rages and the actions taken by Russia and the West in the months ahead. One focus of the war's effects is on its environment and sustainability. The impacts even if not direct can be real and long-lasting.

Russian actions are of immense importance to sustainability of the Arctic. Russia is a coastal state for a major sea route that will soon rival the Suez Canal. The Russian Arctic is gigantic. Russia accounts for 53 percent of Arctic Ocean coastline. One-fifth of the Russian land mass is north of the Arctic Circle. Russia has vast oil and gas reserves in the Arctic. Two point eight million people live in Arctic Russia—almost three-quarters of the Arctic population. These include about a quarter of a million indigenous peoples. Russia is a member of several international Arctic organizations including the very influential Arctic Council. Russia engages in valuable Arctic research including, historically, in cooperation with other Arctic nations.

Environmental change in the Arctic affects Russia's and all the Arctic's futures in serious ways. Permafrost is thawing; seacoasts are eroding; ultraviolet radiation is bombarding people and nature; temperatures are high and destructive; sea levels are rising; climate change is threatening the traditions of indigenous peoples; iconic species are threatened; nuclear materials dumped in the Arctic remain an international worry.

Major tensions between the West and Russia [or the Soviet Union] have been great and cyclical. What is constant is multinational sharing of the Arctic. What's more and extremely relevant now: the region has been one of cooperation among Russia and its neighbors, known as the Arctic Eight. Besides Russia they are Denmark/Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the United States, and Canada. Now all Arctic nations are signatories to numerous international environmental treaties and almost innumerable cooperative agreements on Arctic protection.¹

Mikhail Gorbachev, general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and later its President, initiated the movement toward Arctic cooperation with a remarkable speech in 1987. Among the notable reforms Gorbachev made was to propose that the Arctic states cooperate in various fields in what he called “Our common European home.” *Let the North of the globe, the Arctic, become a zone of peace[...] the scientific exploration of the Arctic is of immense importance for the whole of mankind [...] What everybody can be absolutely certain of is the Soviet Union's profound and certain interest in preventing the North of the planet, its Polar and sub-Polar regions and all Northern countries from ever again becoming an arena of war, and in forming there a genuine zone of peace and fruitful cooperation.*

Gorbachev's initiatives set in place several productive ventures including the creation of the influential Arctic Council, the international forum, exceptional for how it includes indigenous peoples, that has guided non security and military activities in the Arctic for many years. Meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies bring together Member States, Permanent Participant indigenous peoples, and Observers including China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Poland, and the United Kingdom, at senior levels, who interact formally and informally.

Russia is now the chair of Arctic Council, a rotating role. But “The Arctic Seven,” as they are beginning to be known without Russia, have declared that they will not participate in activities in Russia. They condemn *“Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine and note the grave impediments to international cooperation, including in the Arctic, that Russia's actions have caused.”*

And the official Russian position since the Ukraine War and the West's sanctions and military support show the depth of antipathy toward the Arctic West and sound very different from Mr. Gorbachev's.

The Russian former president and prime minister Dmitry Medvedev in a recent statement called Western leaders “bastards and scum.” “I hate them. They want death for us, and as long as I'm alive, I will do everything to make them disappear.” This is the man who in 2013 said “Cooperation in the Barents Region and the Arctic policy are two interconnected things, as for that matter is our participation in the Arctic Council.”..... We don't harbour any secret plans; our policies are open and we hope that our partners and friends will abide by the same principles.”ⁱⁱ

So does the official warlike attitude mean the end of Arctic cooperation and the slowing or the end of efforts to sustain the Arctic, its physical environment, and its peoples and traditions? The answer must be no. President Putin's activities will stymie, perhaps for many years, Arctic cooperative activities of great significance. But Putin will someday be gone as is Joseph Stalin.

The Arctic environment needs continuing attention now with involvement of all Arctic nations and indigenous peoples. Depending on next steps by each side damage to international cooperation in the Arctic can be managed. One such next step is to continue or revive communication between Arctic nations and Russian scientists and civil society leaders.

To be sure, the other Arctic nations and indigenous peoples will continue to work to protect the Arctic without the involvement of Russia. But long term success in sustaining the Arctic must involve Russia. In the meantime some good work can continue now and in the foreseeable future: As occurred at the Pugwash conferences during the Cold War, scientists, public figures and scholars can meet in informal situations over issues of Arctic sustainability, as they have over armed conflict and global

security threats since 1957. [Pugwash founders won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995 for work on nuclear disarmament.] Invitations can remain open to Russian scientists *as people* wherever they are for meetings, including those that can serve as proxies to the Arctic Council. Groups, nation states, non-governmental organizations and tribes, can sponsor and fund cooperative initiatives among Russia's and other indigenous peoples who are part of the Arctic Council. The environmental and social stakes of conflict in the Arctic are too high to not make these and similar attempts.

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ⁱ See DiMento, Joseph F. and Kelly, Melissa and O'Donnell, Kaitlin, Arctic Sustainability Law: Almost Sufficient (June 23, 2022). North Carolina Law Review, Vol. 47, No. 2, Winter, 2022, UC Irvine School of Law Research Paper No. 2022-21, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4144874>

and Joseph F. C. DiMento, Polar Shift: The Arctic Sustained (Anthem 2022)

ⁱⁱ <http://government.ru/en/news/2273/>