



*A frozen bay in the Arctic where multiple, massive vessels maneuver through ice. Source: Tsuguliev / Shutterstock.com.*

# The “New” Arctic as a Zone of Peaceful Competition

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**A note to readers: This edition of *Polar Perspectives* was written in the latter part of 2021 before the outbreak of armed hostilities in Ukraine in February 2022.**

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## PREFACE

By **Dr. Mike Sfraga**, Chair and Distinguished Scholar, Polar Institute, and **Dr. Charles E. Morrison**, Chair, Steering Committee of the North Pacific Arctic Conference

The North Pacific Arctic Conference (NPAC) was established in 2011 by the Korea Maritime Institute (KMI) and the East-West Center (EWC) in response to the dramatic impacts of climate change in the Arctic on a broad range of issues, including resource development, shipping, governance, and geopolitical dynamics. NPAC has convened Arctic and Asia-focused experts, policymakers, industry leaders, and the general public to provide a North Pacific lens to these important concerns. In doing so, NPAC provides a supplemental and complementary set of perspectives to those focused solely on or connected to the North American, Nordic, and Russian regions of the Arctic.

Over the course of NPAC's first decade of work, participants and partners witnessed the rise of geopolitical competition and its inherent linkages to the Arctic with concern. As NPAC began its second decade of work, three distinguished Arctic specialists with long NPAC associations—Dr. Oran R. Young (United States of America), Dr. Jian Yang (People's Republic of China), and Dr. Andrei Zagorski (Russian Federation)—have explored the nature and reality of these geopolitical dynamics in broader and longer-term perspectives. By doing so, they bring attention to important areas of common interest, concern, and responsibility.

As this special edition of *Polar Perspectives* goes to press, we note the hostilities in Ukraine with growing concern for colleagues, friends, and citizens of that nation. We see in stark relief how interconnected, interdependent, and inherently linked the peoples, governments, resources, and landscapes of Arctic nations are with others around the globe.

The normal course of Arctic affairs has been disrupted, and clearly there will be no return to the previous modes and spirit of governmental cooperation on Arctic issues any time soon. Still, it is worth noting both that the Arctic itself remains an area of low tension and that there are numerous globally significant Arctic issues that require collaboration or explicit cooperation. When circumstances permit addressing these issues constructively, there will be a need for intellectual capital featuring well-informed, innovative perspectives on Arctic issues. We hope this essay, reflecting the insights of senior experts on the Arctic from China, Russia, and the United States, will help generate further discussion and provide a useful point of departure at that future time.

The Korea Maritime Institute, East-West Center, Steering Committee of the North Pacific Arctic Conference, and the Wilson Center's Polar Institute are pleased to advance our partnership through publication of this paper. KMI and EWC will also publish this paper and others from NPAC 2021 in book format, which will be available for download at [EastWestCenter.org](https://EastWestCenter.org) in late spring 2022.

# The “New” Arctic as a Zone of Peaceful Competition

## I. THE ARCTIC IN THE 2020s

Conditions arising in the Arctic today differ substantially from those prevailing in the aftermath of the Cold War, when the Arctic states took the initiative to create a distinctive regional governance system by launching the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy in 1991 and then moving on to establish the Arctic Council in 1996 as a “high level forum” with a mandate to promote “cooperation and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of the Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues” (Arctic Council 1996). Underpinning this arrangement was a vision of the Arctic as a somewhat peripheral region in international affairs primarily of interest to the Arctic states and featuring a policy agenda of its own focused, for the most part, on issues relating to environmental protection and, somewhat more broadly, sustainable development (Young 2020). On this account, it made sense to foreground the role of the eight Arctic states in the Arctic Council, to provide Indigenous peoples’ organizations with the special status of Permanent Participants, and to restrict others to the status of Observers.

Now, twenty-five years on, changing conditions are raising fundamental questions about the

### KEY POINTS

- *The Arctic in the 2020s has emerged as a critical arena in the global climate emergency and as an area of increasing sensitivity in terms of great power politics.*
- *Some see this “new” Arctic becoming a zone of conflict; others react to these developments by doubling down on the view of the Arctic as a zone of peace.*
- *An alternative narrative treats the “new” Arctic as a zone of peaceful competition in which there are opportunities to cooperate on specific issues, even though the interests of major players diverge.*
- *Specific opportunities include developing codes of conduct to avoid armed clashes, responding to climate change, managing commercial shipping, protecting biodiversity, and meshing scientific activities.*
- *Taking advantage of the Arctic Council’s convening power to manage the emerging Arctic regime complex while taking steps to protect its distinctive features will enhance the prospects for success in these areas.*

Figure 1. Background image: Arctic snow texture. Source: Andrei Stepanov / Shutterstock.com

adequacy of this vision as a basis for addressing issues of Arctic governance arising in the 2020s. It has become clear that the high latitudes of the northern hemisphere play a crucial role in the dynamics of the Earth's climate system. The Arctic's deposits of natural resources, including large reserves of hydrocarbons, have attracted the attention of policymakers not only in Arctic states but also in outside states such as China and in international corporations such as TotalEnergies, ExxonMobil, and Shell. Shifts in the political configuration of international society as a whole have heightened tensions among China, Russia, and the United States. While the Arctic itself is not a locus of severe conflicts, great power politics

are spilling over into the Arctic, raising growing questions about the status of the Arctic as a peaceful region somewhat separated from the mainstream of international affairs (Brigham et al. 2020).

Some have responded to these developments by deploying a neorealist or geopolitical narrative and treating the Arctic as an emerging arena for the interplay of great power politics. As former U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo asserted in a speech preceding the 2019 Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council, "the region has become an arena of global power and competition" (Pompeo 2019). On this account, the trajectory of Arctic affairs in the coming years will be driven in large



*The Minister-level representatives from the eight Arctic States and the Heads of Delegation from the six Permanent Participants pose at the 11th Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland. Source: Arctic Council (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).*

measure by spillovers from global interactions among China, Russia, and the United States into the regional arena. Increasingly prominent among journalists looking for provocative angles on current developments in the Arctic, this narrative is also evident among foreign policy analysts and students of international relations who have a limited grasp of the details of Arctic affairs but little difficulty applying a neorealist narrative of great power politics to events unfolding anywhere in the world.

Others have responded by doubling down on the appropriateness of the governance system for the Arctic put in place in the 1990s. They ground their thinking in the terms of the vision statement adopted at the 2013 Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting asserting that the Council “has become the pre-eminent high-level forum of the Arctic region and [has] made this region into an area of unique international cooperation” (Arctic Council 2013). At the 2021 Ministerial Meeting, ministers adopted a Strategic Plan for the Council that reaffirmed this vision and asserted, “[i]n 2030 we envision the Arctic to remain a region of peace, stability and constructive cooperation, that is a vibrant, prosperous, sustainable and secure home for all its inhabitants, including Indigenous Peoples,” and “the Arctic Council will remain the leading intergovernmental forum for Arctic cooperation” (Arctic Council 2021). While it may make sense to consider modest adjustments in the architecture of Arctic governance (e.g. enhancing opportunities for Arctic Council Observers to participate in specific projects), there is no need to entertain more far-reaching proposals for adjustments in the existing Arctic governance system (e.g. altering any of the constitutive features of the Arctic Council).

In this article, we argue that neither of these responses provides an adequate point of departure or interpretive framework for coming to terms

with Arctic issues in the 2020s. The geopolitical or neorealist narrative ignores a range of areas where the major players have clear-cut common interests in devising cooperative responses to Arctic issues. For its part, the strategy of doubling down on existing arrangements ignores fundamental changes that limit the effectiveness of arrangements established under the conditions prevailing in the 1990s. To unpack these propositions and to explore their implications for Arctic governance, we proceed in three steps. In the next section, we provide an introduction to the “new” Arctic highlighting the ways in which conditions prevailing in the 2020s differ from those of the 1990s. This sets the stage for an examination in the following section of a number of areas where there is common ground giving rise to opportunities to devise cooperative responses to Arctic issues coming into focus in the 2020s. It also provides a point of departure for an additional substantive section in which we discuss adjustments to the existing architecture of Arctic governance needed to achieve success in taking advantage of these opportunities. The result, we emphasize in the conclusion, would be an Arctic governance system retaining key features of the existing system but also incorporating significant adjustments designed to enhance the prospects for success in dealing with the Arctic as a zone of peaceful competition during the 2020s.

## II. THE RISE OF THE “NEW” ARCTIC CALLS FOR INNOVATIVE PERSPECTIVES

An unusual constellation of conditions arising in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union led many to embrace a perspective often referred to as Arctic exceptionalism. The essential elements of

this perspective were the propositions that the Arctic itself was an area of low tension and that its status as a region peripheral to the main currents of world affairs made it possible to deal with Arctic issues on their own merits, with little reference to events taking place in the rest of the world. What we have come to know as the Arctic zone of peace narrative captured this perspective on the Arctic and provided the conceptual foundation for the development and operation of institutional arrangements like the Arctic Council.

From a variety of biophysical and socioeconomic perspectives, Russia is the preeminent Arctic state. But in the 1990s, Russia was struggling to come to terms with the impacts of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The new Russian Federation was preoccupied with the challenge of creating the legal and political institutions needed to form the basis of a post-Soviet governance system. The capacity of the central government to exercise effective control over remote oblasts and republics was limited. The national economy had experienced a sharp decline. Russia was in no position to launch ambitious initiatives in the Arctic. Many Soviet military installations in the Far North were closed or abandoned; traffic on the Northern Sea Route declined sharply.

What we have come to think of as China's economic miracle was in full swing during the 1990s, following the dramatic economic reforms initiated at the end of the 1970s. In due time, this would create the basis for China's rise as an economic powerhouse on a global scale and ultimately for the emergence of China as a fully-fledged great power. It is worth noting that these years played an important role in establishing China's preference for deploying economic instruments in efforts to exercise influence at the international level; a preference that has become a striking feature of China's international activities

in recent years. But there is no reason to believe that China's policymakers were thinking about Arctic initiatives at this time, much less about the importance of articulating an explicit Chinese Arctic policy.

As a result, many thought of the United States during the 1990s as the sole remaining superpower. Whatever the merits of this characterization, it did not translate into policies featuring any explicit concern for Arctic affairs. The Clinton Administration, enjoying the benefits of a rising economy, focused largely on domestic issues. To the extent that the United States was active on the international stage during the 1990s, the center of attention was the consolidation of the nuclear nonproliferation regime, the violence associated with the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, and, to a lesser extent, continuing tensions arising in the Middle East. Preoccupied with its image as a global power, the United States showed little interest in regional concerns in low-tension areas such as the Arctic. Considering this connection, it is noteworthy that the United States, more than any of the other Arctic states, resisted ambitious Arctic initiatives and insisted on limiting the remit of the Arctic Council to matters of low politics such as environmental protection and sustainable development (English 2013).

Given these circumstances, the central premises embedded in the Arctic zone of peace narrative seemed perfectly reasonable. Contrast this situation with the conditions arising in recent years and likely to dominate the politics of the Arctic during the 2020s. Russia has reemerged with a strong central government and a reconstituted economy heavily dependent on the exploitation of large deposits of natural resources and especially natural gas located in the Arctic (Mitrova 2020). Russian policymakers are understandably interested in an acknowledgement on the part of



*An Air China Cargo Boeing 777 waits for takeoff at Ted Stevens International Airport in Anchorage, Alaska. Source: Michael Rosebrock / Shutterstock.com.*

outsiders that Russia is a great power capable of exercising influence on a global scale. In the Arctic, this has led to a stream of developments, including the modernization of the Northern Fleet, the reoccupation or strengthening of old military installations, a rapid growth in the extraction of hydrocarbons in northwestern Siberia, and the development of the Northern Sea Route into an important commercial artery.

China increasingly sees itself as a global power on a par with the United States, entitled to take an interest in issues arising in seemingly remote areas like the Arctic. Exercising its preference for economic policy instruments, China has proceeded to express an interest in the development of the Arctic's natural resources and the growth of commercial shipping using Arctic routes. Chinese actors have explored investment opportunities in a variety of projects ranging from Canada and

Greenland in the North American Arctic to Iceland, Fennoscandia, and Russia. While many of these efforts have yet to bear fruit, China has become both a major investor in natural gas projects in northwestern Siberia and a market for liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipped in state-of-the-art tankers eastward along the Northern Sea Route (Yang and Tillman 2018).

For its part, the United States discovered soon enough that being the sole remaining superpower provided no assurance of success in dealing with specific issues arising in various parts of the world. Protracted and ultimately disappointing military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq coupled with rising tensions associated with Chinese initiatives in areas like the South China Sea made clear the limits of the ability of the United States to deploy power effectively in specific situations. In the Arctic, these developments had the effect

of increasing the sensitivity of the United States to actions on the part of others that could be interpreted as challenges to U.S. dominance in the realm of high politics. Concretely, the United States began to deploy warships to Arctic waters adjacent to the North Atlantic, take steps to replenish its severely depleted fleet of icebreakers, and plan war games in cooperation with NATO allies such as Norway designed to enhance capacity to engage in effective operations under Arctic conditions (Closson and Townsend 2021; Department of the Navy 2021).

A series of specific events unfolding during the 2010s served to focus and lend immediacy to these general trends, producing significant consequences for Arctic international relations (Lanteigne 2020). In 2014, Russian actions featuring the annexation of Crimea and intervention in developments unfolding in eastern Ukraine triggered an international crisis. The United States and its NATO allies reacted forcefully by imposing sanctions on Russia, including measures forcing the termination of activities on the part of companies like ExxonMobil engaged in collaborative activities in the Russian Arctic. Triggering an action-reaction process leading to a general deterioration in relations between Russia and the United States, this situation also gave rise to a pragmatic interest among Russian and Chinese policymakers in cooperation with regard to Arctic issues. China, which had unveiled its comprehensive Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, found it easy to extend the logic of this initiative to include collaboration with Russia and with Arctic actors more generally. The result was the articulation of the idea of a Polar Silk Road and the initiation of Chinese investments in specific projects like the extraction of natural gas on the Yamal and Gydan Peninsulas along with an interest in exploring the potential of the Northern Sea Route as a commercial artery.

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2016 added an element of volatility and unpredictability to the international relations of the Arctic. Trump made friendly gestures toward Vladimir Putin on a personal level. But the United States intensified post-2014 sanctions aimed at Russia and allowed several strategic arms limitation agreements to lapse. Trump initiated open conflict with China over issues of international trade, and decried what he saw as indications that China was seeking to achieve parity with the United States as a global superpower. The result was a growing sense of turmoil regarding the future of the global political order. With regard to the Arctic in particular, these developments had the effect of creating an atmosphere of tension and derailing efforts to promote international cooperation. In his speech on the eve of the 2019 Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting, then U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo followed his assertion that the Arctic had become an “arena of global power and competition” by noting that the United States was “hosting military activities, strengthening our force presence, rebuilding our icebreaker fleet, expanding Coast Guard funding, and creating a new senior military post for Arctic Affairs inside our own military” in response (Pompeo 2019).

What should we make of these developments? One striking result is a newfound interest in the Arctic among foreign policy analysts, students of international relations, and journalists who follow issues of international security broadly defined. Whereas those of us who thought about the Arctic as a region of rising importance during the 1990s found it hard to stir up any broad interest in Arctic affairs, a remarkable range of practitioners and analysts now seem eager to take on Arctic issues and to express their opinions about what could or should be done regarding a variety of Arctic concerns. In the absence of in-depth knowledge

of Arctic issues, however, it is all too easy for commentators to fall back on general narratives about international politics applied to the Arctic with little concern about the extent to which these generic perspectives are well-suited to addressing Arctic issues.

More often than not, the result is these observers deploy a neorealist narrative as a basis for organizing thinking about the international politics of the Arctic. On this account, nation states (especially major states) are self-interested actors motivated largely by a desire to maximize relative power in their interactions with their counterparts. Conflict among the major powers is the normal condition of international society; international institutions are of limited value in dealing with matters of high politics. It follows that individual states must assume others will pursue their own interests by all available means and make preparations to protect their interests in the face of all potential threats. While cooperation may be feasible regarding matters of low politics like environmental protection, there is no escaping the force of geopolitical pressures when it comes to dealing with matters of high politics arising in specific international regions. In the case of the Arctic—a region seen as a theater of operations for increasingly sophisticated military assets as well as a critical source of raw materials such as natural gas still considered essential resources even in the face of growing concerns about the impacts of climate change—this means that a three-way competition among China, Russia, and the United States is likely to dominate the 2020s (Pincus 2020).

Without losing sight of the political ambitions of both the Arctic states and other states with growing interests in the Arctic, it is easy to see that this narrative leaves a lot to be desired as a framework for organizing thinking about Arctic

international relations today. All informed observers acknowledge that the Arctic remains an area of low tension. There are, of course, disagreements and even disputes about issues arising in the Arctic such as the legal status of the waters of the Northwest Passage, the legitimacy of Russian regulations pertaining to parts of the Northeast Passage, overlapping claims to jurisdiction over portions of the deep seabed in the Central Arctic Ocean, and the compatibility of Norway's Svalbard Fisheries Protection Zone with the provisions of the 1920 Treaty of Paris. However, it is clear that these are not the sorts of issues likely to generate international crises, much less the outbreak of armed clashes. The key players have expressed repeatedly their commitment to the principles set forth in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and pledged to resolve these Arctic issues in a peaceful manner. None of these issues seems likely to become a focus of escalating claims and counterclaims on the part of the protagonists.

There is no doubt that links between the Arctic and the outside world have become stronger. This is true whether we think about the onset of climate change, the dynamics of global energy markets, or the efforts of countries such as Russia and China to hasten the decline of the American-dominated postwar world order. But it would be a mistake to jump from this observation to the conclusion that the (re)emergence of great power politics in the Arctic will ensure the failure of all efforts to promote international cooperation regarding specific Arctic issues (Brigham et al. 2020).

Russia is rebuilding and modernizing its armed forces as part of its effort to reassert its great power status on a global scale. Given the geography of Russia, the Arctic inevitably figures prominently in this effort. But it is important to note that Russia has not sought to deploy its armed forces as a means of exercising influence over

current Arctic issues. China is endeavoring to lend substance to the claim first articulated in its 2018 Arctic policy statement that it is a “near Arctic state.” So far, however, this effort has been limited to the modest growth of investments in projects involving the extraction of Arctic resources, a rising interest in the commercial potential of the Northern Sea Route, and the enhancement of Chinese scientific research in the Arctic. The various branches of the American armed forces have announced newfound interests in Arctic issues, at least at the declaratory level. But the departure of the Trump Administration has produced a toning down of American rhetoric about such matters, and there is little evidence to suggest that we will see a sharp rise in the deployment of U.S. military assets to the Arctic during the foreseeable future.

A reasonable conclusion is that the Arctic remains a peripheral area with regard to great power politics. The central focus of Sino-American strategic competition is located in the South and East China Seas; it does not extend farther north. The resumed mutual deterrence postures of Russia and the United States emphasize Europe and the North Atlantic. Recent Russian and U.S./NATO Arctic military activities are concentrated almost exclusively in the Norwegian and Barents Seas, properly understood as extensions of the North Atlantic. These areas of sensitive strategic competition have virtually nothing in common. They do not affect the core of the Arctic, which will remain inaccessible for conventional maritime operations except in the unlikely event that major players invest heavily in special capabilities that can operate sustainably in harsh conditions (Zagorski 2020).

Overall, the international relations of the “new” Arctic are hard to square with the Arctic Council’s vision that “[w]e have made this region into an area of unique international cooperation,”

turning the Arctic into an exceptional oasis of peaceful cooperation in the overall landscape of international politics. In our judgment, the idea of Arctic exceptionalism is not helpful as a basis for addressing Arctic issues today. Great power politics will be a prominent feature of Arctic international relations during the coming years. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the impact of securitization will turn the Arctic into a zone of conflict, precluding the pursuit of cooperation regarding a range of specific but significant issues arising in the Arctic during the 2020s.

The question is not whether the Arctic of the 2020s will be a zone of peace or a zone of conflict. There is room to address specific issues in a cooperative manner, without losing sight of the differences between the Arctic of the 1990s and the Arctic of the 2020s. In this regard, it is notable that at their May 2021 meeting the foreign ministers of the G7 countries included “peaceful, sustainable economic development and environmental protection in the Arctic” on a short list of issues where cooperation with Russia is desirable and feasible, despite the continuing stalemate on other issues (G7 Communique 2021).

### III. CONFLICT AND COOPERATION ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE IN THE ARCTIC

In our view, it makes sense to shift attention away from broad efforts to characterize the international relations of the “new” Arctic as either cooperative or conflictual and to direct attention instead toward specific issues where the interests of the Arctic states and other interested parties are evolving in ways that generate opportunities for fruitful cooperation. The result, we argue, is a more complex picture in which mixed-motive

interactions can give rise to cooperation on specific issues, even while political maneuvering driven by developments unfolding on a global scale becomes more prominent. To flesh out this perspective on the Arctic as a zone of peaceful competition, we consider opportunities for cooperation in five areas: (i) avoidance of armed clashes, (ii) climate change, (iii) commercial shipping, (iv) biodiversity protection, and (v) scientific research. The initiatives we propose are innovative but still broadly compatible with themes outlined in the document entitled “Arctic Council Strategic Plan 2021-2030” adopted at the council’s May 2021 Ministerial Meeting (Arctic Council 2021).

### Avoiding armed clashes

As we have said, the Arctic remains an area of low tension with regard to issues of military security. Yet this does not eliminate the need to develop informal but effective practices designed to minimize the danger of unintended clashes and to defuse the prospect of escalation following the occurrence of isolated incidents. Several states are stepping up the deployment of advanced military systems in the Arctic. War games and military exercises of one sort or another are increasingly common, especially in the sector of the Arctic bordering on the North Atlantic. There are persistent reports of aircraft engaging in



*U.S. soldiers photographed during cold weather training in Alaska. Source: Getmilitaryphotos / Shutterstock.com.*

provocative activities leading others to scramble aircraft of their own to intercept them.

No one stands to benefit from the occurrence of armed clashes in the region, even in an era featuring a renewal of great power politics in the Arctic. But experience accumulated in many parts of the world involving numerous states makes it clear that unintended incidents do occur in settings of this sort and that such incidents can lead to ugly developments that are harmful to the interests of all concerned. What is needed in such settings is the development of codes of conduct designed to minimize the likelihood of armed clashes and to deescalate tensions arising when incidents do occur. Even during the Cold War, such codes of conduct emerged and played a constructive role in interactions between Soviet and American armed forces. With regard to the Arctic, there have been repeated calls to resume the informal Arctic Chiefs of Defense Forum broken off in 2014 in the wake of the conflict over the annexation of Crimea. No doubt, the resumption of these meetings would be helpful. But more specific measures are needed.

Recently, the United States and Russia reinvigorated arrangements based on an agreement dating back to 1972, designed to prevent the occurrence or escalation of dangerous military incidents at sea and in the airspace above it. These arrangements are applicable to the Barents and Norwegian Seas where operations of Russia's Northern Fleet and the reactivated American 2nd Fleet overlap. Military risk reduction mechanisms covering activities of China, the United States, and some of its allies are also in place for the Western Pacific. China does not deploy military assets in the Arctic and has no plans to do so during the foreseeable future. But in the unlikely event of a future extension of Chinese

naval operations farther North, it would be possible to make use of these mechanisms.

The most urgent need for an effective code of conduct pertains to the Barents Sea. The United States and its NATO allies are now carrying out naval operations in the Barents, which provides homeports for Russia's Northern Fleet including the bulk of Russia's nuclear-powered submarines equipped with sea-launched ballistic missiles. A concern of particular importance involves the operations of U.S. attack submarines in the vicinity of Russia's naval bases and the reliance of Russian attack submarines on the Barents Sea to move back and forth between their bases on the Kola Peninsula and the North Atlantic.

### Responding to climate change

The impacts of climate change are showing up more rapidly and more dramatically in the Arctic than anywhere else on the planet. Accelerating losses of sea ice and glaciers, severe coastal erosion, rapid thawing of permafrost, massive wildfires, uncontrolled flooding, and rising threats to wildlife are current realities in the Arctic rather than future prospects (Blunden and Boyer 2020). Despite American denialism under the Trump Administration and recurrent expressions of hope on the part of some Russian policymakers that climate change may produce positive effects in the Russian North, almost everyone now understands that issues relating to climate change are moving to the top of the Arctic policy agenda. Both the most recent Russian Arctic strategy adopted in 2020 and the Russian program for its 2021-2023 Chairmanship of the Arctic Council, for example, indicate clearly that there is no time to waste in taking steps to counter this rising threat (Russian Arctic Strategy 2020, Arctic Council 2021a). With



*Wind farm in the Swedish Arctic. Source: Feher Istvan / Shutterstock.com.*

regard to Arctic cooperation, this development suggests two avenues for fruitful initiatives: 1) measures designed to facilitate adaptation to the impacts of climate change in the Arctic itself and 2) Arctic initiatives that may help promote global efforts responding to the onset of climate change.

Whereas reductions of emissions of greenhouse gases anywhere contribute to efforts to mitigate climate change on a global scale, efforts to adapt to the impacts of climate change are typically local in scale. Still, there is much to be said for encouraging collaboration in efforts to protect the integrity of socioecological systems in the Arctic. Communities throughout the Arctic face similar threats arising from coastal erosion, permafrost thaw, and riverine flooding. There is considerable room for comparing notes and exchanging expertise with regard to the effectiveness of concrete measures to come to terms with these threats. The Arctic Council might

well become a clearinghouse for those seeking to identify strategies that have proven successful in responding to specific problems caused or intensified by climate change. Educational activities, designed especially for young people and coordinated by the University of the Arctic, also may help to increase adaptive capacity.

Although the Arctic itself is not a significant source of emissions of greenhouse gases, initiatives in this region may offer opportunities to get the ball rolling on measures that could be taken up and amplified in other settings. A promising case in point involves growing interest to take the initiative on black carbon and methane, both of which are important short-lived climate pollutants (Miller, Zaelke, and Andersen 2021). The Arctic Council has adopted a framework for action to reduce emissions of these short-lived pollutants in the Arctic and beyond. To this end, it has established an Expert Group on

Black Carbon and Methane which has advanced a pan-Arctic aspirational goal of reducing emissions of these pollutants by 25-33% below 2013 levels by 2025. Going forward, the Council may provide a convenient venue for those interested in promoting a binding agreement on these pollutants extending ultimately to both Arctic and non-Arctic states. An Arctic agreement on black carbon and methane would not solve the global threat associated with emissions of these pollutants. But it would constitute a start in dealing with a major concern that could play a role in energizing efforts to come to terms with these pollutants on a global scale (Smieszek 2021).

### **Managing commercial shipping**

International cooperation relating to the regulation of commercial shipping in the Arctic has increased markedly over the last twenty years. Starting with voluntary guidelines in 2002 and stimulated by the Arctic Council's 2009 Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) developed the legally binding Polar Code whose provisions were agreed upon within the relevant committees of the IMO in 2014-2015 and became legally binding in the form of amendments to existing conventions (SOLAS and MARPOL) at the beginning of 2017. Featuring measures dealing with both maritime safety and environmental protection, the Polar Code stands as a clear example of the feasibility of making progress in devising cooperative measures to address concrete issues of real importance when the interests of key players can be brought into alignment. There is every indication that commercial shippers are taking the necessary steps to comply with the provisions of the Polar Code in its current form.

As commercial shipping continues to grow in Arctic

waters and as concern regarding the environmental impacts of shipping continues to rise, however, it has become clear that there is more to be done regarding the regulation of commercial shipping in the Arctic and related matters such as the improvement of hydrographic charts and the strengthening of search and rescue capabilities. At this stage, the campaign to ban the combustion and carriage of heavy fuel oils in the Arctic has emerged as the top priority. But other concerns are coming into focus as well, including ship strikes on marine mammals, underwater noise pollution, the dangers of invasive species making their way to the Arctic, and potential interference with the subsistence activities of residents of coastal communities. Progress will not be easy regarding any of these issues, given the divergent interests of shippers, environmentalists, residents of coastal communities, and others. The recent decision by the IMO to strengthen the Polar Code by including a ban on heavy fuel oils in the Arctic from 2024, to take a concrete example, has come in for intense criticism from environmentalists as inadequate to address what many see as a pressing problem (Reuters Staff 2020). What is likely during the coming years is a pattern of incremental advances that environmentalists criticize as inadequate but shippers fear as increasingly burdensome. There is no reason to conclude that the conditions prevailing in the Arctic during the 2020s will present insurmountable obstacles to the process of hammering out mutually acceptable additions to the governance system for commercial shipping that has been evolving over the last several decades.

### **Protecting biodiversity**

There is a substantial record of international cooperation regarding the development and implementation of measures to protect wildlife

moving across international boundaries in the Arctic or living in or migrating through Arctic waters. Aboriginal subsistence whaling is managed under the provisions of the 1946 International Convention on the Regulation of Whaling. The 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears provides for coordination of the efforts of the five Arctic coastal states to protect polar bears throughout their range. There are bilateral arrangements that have proven useful in protecting wildlife and conserving habitat essential to their welfare. Prominent examples are the bilateral regime between Norway and Russia dealing with environmental protection in the Barents Sea region

and the bilateral arrangement between Canada and the United States dealing with the conservation of the Porcupine caribou herd that migrates annually across the border between Yukon and Alaska. A recent addition to this network of arrangements is the Arctic Migratory Bird Initiative, an activity spawned by the Arctic Council's Working Group on the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna and designed to foster collaboration among states with jurisdiction over components of the Australasian Flyway stretching from Siberia and Alaska in the North to Australia in the South. A notable feature of these arrangements is that they have provided a basis for effective cooperation among issue-



*Polar bear walks along pebbly shoreline in Svalbard, Norway with exploration vessel anchored in background. Source: FloridaStock / Shutterstock.com.*

oriented agencies located in relevant governments without reference to the overarching dynamics of high politics among the participating states.

What new needs of this sort are coming into focus today? Specific threats to wildlife in the Arctic are associated with biophysical changes and with the impacts of climate change in particular. The dramatic decline of sea ice in the Arctic threatens the welfare of ice-dependent species such as polar bears and walrus. The welfare of terrestrial species such as caribou/reindeer is threatened by an increasing difficulty in accessing adequate food supplies during the winter months. Changing conditions in areas such as the Bering Sea are triggering largescale die offs of a number of species of seabirds. Ultimately, responding to these challenges will require effective responses to the problem of climate change on a global scale. In the meantime, however, there are opportunities to launch protective measures in the Arctic to alleviate some of these threats. A particularly promising approach is to focus on the maintenance of biodiversity in ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs): taking steps to protect these areas from the impacts of human activities including fishing and shipping as well as monitoring them closely to provide early warning of developments likely to prove harmful to key species (Convention on Biological Diversity 2021). Another significant initiative is the development of the Arctic Council's Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter (Arctic Council 2021b).

### **Meshing scientific research**

Unlike Antarctica where scientific research constitutes the principal ongoing human activity, the Arctic is a region providing a permanent home for millions of people and affected by intensive human activities ranging from fishing and the extraction of natural resources to the deployment

of armed forces. Nevertheless, all the Arctic states and a number of non-Arctic states support sizable research programs in the Arctic, and cooperation regarding issues relating to science has emerged as a prominent endeavor. This has provided the basis for the development of a web of cooperative arrangements. The International Arctic Science Committee, established in 1990, has 23 members (mostly national academies of sciences) and represents the views of the science community regarding priorities and opportunities for cooperation in the conduct of Arctic science. Starting in 2016, ministers of research and education (or their functional equivalents) have developed an informal practice of meeting on a biennial basis to exchange information on their Arctic work and discuss opportunities for collaboration at the level of national science programs. In 2017, the eight Arctic states entered into a legally binding agreement designed to enhance scientific cooperation through practical measures like improving access to field sites, easing restrictions on the movement of scientific equipment and materials, and facilitating the exchange of data.

These are all constructive steps. What is missing at this stage is an effort to harmonize this web of discrete arrangements so that agencies responsible for funding research work closely with the science community regarding the identification of research priorities. Moreover, representatives of foreign offices who control the movement of people and materials across national boundaries can work more closely with the national funding agencies and representatives of the science community to minimize the obstacles to conducting research within their jurisdictions, as well as support the activities of multinational teams of researchers working in areas beyond national jurisdiction. Some constructive responses to this need are currently underway. A case in



*Satellite dish with Northern lights background in the mountains of Longyearbyen, Spitsbergen, Norway. Source: ginger\_polina\_bublik / Shutterstock.com.*

point is the ICES/PICES/PAME Working Group on Integrated Ecosystem Assessment for the Central Arctic Ocean (WGICA). But there is much more to be done to mesh the activities of scientific organizations, funding agencies, and those who control access to Arctic sites in order to move scientific cooperation to a new and more productive level.

Science programs reflect the interests of governments and other organizations that support them, which means that priorities sometimes diverge, and significant limits to cooperative practices in the world of scientific research are

unavoidable. Nevertheless, there are substantial common interests in this realm, and cooperation in the conduct of scientific research can play a constructive role in the coproduction of knowledge needed to implement international agreements effectively. A current example involves the development of knowledge required to operationalize the “precautionary approach” called for under the terms of the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement that entered into force in June 2021 (Balton and Zagorski 2020). We should be on the lookout for other cases in which scientific cooperation can play a helpful role in the creation and implementation of international agreements

dealing with matters of common concern to the Arctic states and key non-Arctic states.

This account of opportunities for international cooperation regarding specific Arctic issues is not meant to be exhaustive. Our purpose in providing these examples has been to demonstrate that the conditions prevailing in the Arctic during the 2020s do not rule out focused efforts to promote international cooperation. In effect, we seek a middle way in this realm. The idea of Arctic exceptionalism is no longer realistic as a basis for dealing with the international relations of the Arctic. But neorealist accounts stressing the reemergence of great power politics in the Arctic convey an excessively pessimistic view regarding the prospects for cooperation in the Arctic. We suggest that a perspective avoiding both extremes is needed, as is a process designed to flesh out this perspective as a basis for thinking constructively about concrete issues arising in the 2020s. For shorthand purposes, we characterize this as a narrative of peaceful competition.

#### IV. WE CAN ADJUST THE ARCHITECTURE OF ARCTIC GOVERNANCE TO ADDRESS THE ISSUES OF THE 2020S

The existing architecture of Arctic governance, with the Arctic Council as its centerpiece, has proven more effective than many of those present at its creation anticipated. While the Council lacks the authority to make binding decisions and the capacity to take the lead in implementing substantive programs, there is convincing evidence regarding the constructive roles it has played in a number of areas (Barry et al. 2020). Yet the exceptionalist narrative underlying the creation of the Council in 1996 and articulated

explicitly in the vision statement adopted at the 2013 Ministerial Meeting does not offer an appropriate lens for viewing issues arising under conditions prevailing today. Nor does this narrative provide a proper point of departure for considering ways to maximize the effectiveness of the Council in addressing the issues discussed in the preceding section. What adjustments in the existing architecture of Arctic governance would improve the performance of these arrangements going forward? Are there ways to approach such adjustments that would maximize their acceptability to all parties concerned? In this section, we respond to these questions, starting with a discussion of adjustments in the practices of the Arctic Council itself and moving on to observations relating to the overall architecture of Arctic governance.

#### Adjusting the Arctic Council

The constitutive provisions of the Arctic Council are set forth in a ministerial declaration rather than in an international, legally binding instrument (Arctic Council 1996). Some view this as a weakness; their inclination is to take steps as quickly as possible to turn the Council into a fully-fledged intergovernmental organization with a recognized legal personality. In our judgment, this line of thinking reflects a mistaken view regarding the role of the Council in addressing issues of governance in the high northern latitudes. The Arctic Council is not destined to become a body capable of making and implementing authoritative decisions on a range of issues of interest to the Arctic states and others with growing interests in Arctic affairs. Rather, the influence of the Council lies in its capacity to provide early warning regarding emerging issues, mount well-respected monitoring services, offer an informal venue to hammer out the terms of agreements regarding a

variety of specific issues, and exercise convening power allowing a wide range of parties to interact with one another and explore issues of common concern on an informal basis. Adjustments in the existing practices of the Council should seek to strengthen these forms of influence, while avoiding changes that would serve only to muddy the waters or even undermine its contributions.

With regard to early warning, agenda formation, monitoring, and the incubation of innovative policy initiatives, the key to the success of the Arctic Council lies in the work of the Council's working groups. To illustrate, consider the work of the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) in enhancing understanding of the role of the Arctic in the Earth's climate system; the initiatives of the Working Group on the Protection of the Marine Environment (PAME) in identifying the need to regulate commercial shipping in the Arctic and framing issues for treatment in the IMO; and the efforts of the Working Group on the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) in incubating the Arctic Migratory Bird Initiative. What is needed at this stage is an effort to reconfirm the central role of these activities in the work of the Council, while avoiding developments likely to detract from the role of the working groups in handling such matters. In this connection, we recommend reverting to the early practice of the Council treating all meetings of the Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs) as opportunities to engage in substantive and in-depth conversations between the leaders of the working groups, representatives of the foreign ministries of the Arctic states, and representatives of the Permanent Participants.

There is also a need to proceed with care in articulating the mission of new arrangements such as the recently created SAO-based Marine

Mechanism (SMM). In the specific case of the SMM, the danger is that its activities will overlap with the work of PAME, running the risk of politicizing the Council's work on marine issues in a manner that detracts from PAME's efforts to address similar concerns. The Arctic Council created the SMM in 2019 following a failure to agree on a mandate for a new subsidiary body to employ an ecosystem-based approach to marine management in the Arctic. So far, the activities of the mechanism have been confined to organizing webinars dealing with a range of marine issues of current interest (e.g. shipping, marine litter). To achieve a distinct and lasting place in the architecture of the Arctic Council, the SMM must take advantage of the convening power of the Council to provide a venue in which a wide range of players are able to engage in policy-relevant discussions of marine issues on an informal basis (Young 2021).

An important development in the practices of the Arctic Council dating from 2009 centers on the establishment of task forces to provide an informal setting for those engaged in efforts to hammer out the terms of agreements that are not formally Arctic Council agreements. As the cases of the 2011 search and rescue agreement, the 2013 oil spill preparedness and response agreement, and the 2017 scientific cooperation agreement make clear, task forces have produced significant results even in the face of the shifting conditions prevailing in the Arctic during the 2010s. It is notable that Russia and the United States served as co-leads for all three of these task forces. In our judgment, the key issue in this realm going forward is a need to clarify the relationship between working groups and task forces and to exercise extreme care in framing the remit of any new task force created to deal with a specific issue. Though



*Representatives of Observer states gather at the Senior Arctic Officials' plenary meeting in Hveragerði, Iceland. Source: Arctic Council Secretariat/Kristina Baer (CC BY-ND 2.0).*

misunderstandings have arisen in several cases, it should be possible to draw a clear distinction between the roles of the working groups and those of the task forces. The working groups are ongoing bodies with mandates that cover a broad range of concerns such as the protection of the Arctic marine environment or the conservation of Arctic flora and fauna. The task forces are transient bodies intended to focus on a specific issue such as search and rescue and to go out of existence once that issue is resolved. Exercising care in formulating the remit of task forces should help to

clarify this distinction.

The convening power of the Arctic Council has grown substantially in recent years. With the participation of representatives of 38 Observers divided almost equally among non-Arctic states, intergovernmental organizations, and nongovernmental organizations, meetings of the Senior Arctic Officials now bring together most of the important players concerned with issues arising in the Arctic. Such gatherings provide opportunities for informal consultations regarding

emerging issues over and above the issues on the formal agenda of the SAOs. Adjustments to the Council's existing practices can enhance this important function. The goal should be to welcome input from the Observers, without triggering opposition arising from sensitivities relating to matters of terminology. Constructive measures may include eliminating obsolete procedural rules dealing with the suspension of Observers, self-reporting as a condition for the continuation of observer status, and financial contributions on the part of Observers (Zagorski 2019). The recent practice of organizing special sessions of the SAOs in which Observers are given the floor is a step in the right direction. Taking advantage of the Council's convening power, there may also be opportunities to organize special sessions the day before or the day after SAO meetings in which all participants can discuss issues of current interest in a setting not subject to the Council's formal rules of procedure. No doubt, other innovations are worthy of consideration. But the general point is clear: There is a need to encourage constructive engagement on the part of many actors, without distorting the architecture of the Arctic Council or undermining its unique features.

### **Coordinating the Arctic regime complex**

While the Arctic Council is the centerpiece of the existing Arctic governance system, what is developing is an extensive network of the sort that analysts call a regime complex or, in other words, a collection of discrete institutional arrangements dealing with interrelated issues but not organized in the form of a hierarchical structure (Young and Kim 2021). Thus, we have distinct arrangements dealing with fishing, shipping, oil and gas development, wildlife management, environmental protection, and scientific research that apply to all or parts of the

Arctic but that are not linked to one another in any explicit way. An interesting observation in this regard is that new arrangements featuring international cooperation on specific issues are continuing to emerge, despite the onset of great power politics highlighted in neorealist accounts of the "new" Arctic. The Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement entered into force in June 2021. The IMO is in the process of forging measures designed to regulate and eventually ban the combustion and carriage of heavy fuel oils on ships operating in the Arctic. There are preliminary indications of an emerging interest in the development of an Arctic agreement dealing with methane and black carbon. Regarding the future, this development raises two issues: One dealing with the content of specific additions to this regime complex and the other dealing with the need to coordinate the various elements of the complex to avoid fragmentation and to promote harmonization.

With regard to specific elements, there is no alternative to proceeding on a case-by-case basis. The next step in the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement, for example, is to establish the machinery needed to move this arrangement from paper to practice. Fortunately, there are indications that both Russia and the United States are able and willing to join forces to make this happen. In the case of commercial shipping, the challenge is to push the parties to accept a ban on the combustion and carriage of heavy fuel oils with real teeth and, at the same time, to advance the dialogue on related matters like the problems of ship strikes on marine mammals and underwater noise pollution. With respect to methane and black carbon and similar issues that are just now coming into focus, the next steps involve framing the issues in a manner suitable for consideration in specific policy arenas and enlisting the support of

players in a position to move the issues toward the top of crowded policy agendas. Perhaps the way forward in this realm is to provide opportunities for those working on specific issues to compare notes regarding their experiences, and to encourage constructive exchanges between practitioners working to achieve progress on specific issues and analysts who think more generally about effectively promoting international cooperation.

As the density of the Arctic regime complex increases, the need to pay attention to avoiding fragmentation and encouraging harmonization is rising (Biermann et al. 2020). How should we deal with the interface between the regulation of commercial shipping in the Arctic and arrangements regarding marine mammals, such as whales and walrus, and the human harvesters of these species? Is there a need to think about interactions between emerging proposals dealing with Arctic sea ice restoration as a means of coping with climate change and regimes dealing with artisanal and commercial fishing, commercial shipping, and offshore oil and gas development (Strawa et al. 2020)? In our judgment, the case for creating a new mechanism to deal with this function is not compelling; nor is it likely that proposals for such a mechanism would gain traction under the conditions prevailing in the 2020s. Proceeding with care, it should be possible to use the forum provided by the Arctic Council to address this matter effectively. In this connection, the Council's convening power may provide the key to success. SAO meetings today bring together representatives of most of the major players, including key non-Arctic states such as China, relevant intergovernmental organizations such as the IMO, and important nongovernmental organizations such as IASC, that need to be consulted in efforts to coordinate the expanding Arctic regime complex. What would be helpful

at this stage is to recognize this function of the Council explicitly and to institute informal practices aimed at enhancing this role. For example, it would be relatively easy to organize informal consultations on specific issues among interested parties alongside formal SAO meetings.

## V. A CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

We have sought to articulate a view of Arctic international relations during the 2020s that recognizes the limits of the idea of Arctic exceptionalism embedded in the Arctic zone of peace narrative but that also provides an alternative to the proposition that the Arctic has become what a former U.S. Secretary of State has called an "arena of global power competition." We characterize our perspective as a view of the "new" Arctic as a zone of peaceful competition. It is pointless to ignore the growing links between the Arctic and the global system and to perpetuate the belief that the currents of great power politics will not spill over to affect the treatment of issues on the Arctic policy agenda. At the same time, this should not blind us to the success of ongoing efforts to promote international cooperation on specific issues and to the prospect that similar opportunities will continue to arise in the 2020s. We have suggested a number of specific areas where cooperative initiatives seem feasible and discussed ways to adjust the existing machinery of Arctic governance to capitalize on such opportunities. This is not a matter of wholesale restructuring of arrangements like the Arctic Council or calling for an effort to negotiate the terms of a comprehensive Arctic treaty. What is needed at this stage, we argue, are adjustments in existing practices that are individually modest but that, taken together, could make a real difference in addressing Arctic challenges arising in the 2020s.

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