

ARCTIC COUNCIL IN THE MIDST OF UKRAINE CRISIS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

[More from the author](#)

The Arctic region witnessed extensive militarisation during the Second World War. In the Cold War period, despite military exercises conducted by rival blocks—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact countries—the Arctic remained stable without any confrontation. In fact, the 196-km border between the Soviet Union and Norway (the only NATO-member country to share a border with the Soviet Union) remained peaceful throughout the Cold War. In 1987, with the Cold War in its end-phase, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in his famous 'Murmansk Speech', called for the Arctic as a 'Zone of Peace' and emphasised the need for cooperation in the region. [1](#)

Gorbachev's vision was reciprocated by the West. The first environmental cooperative initiative, called the 'Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy' (AEPS), was signed by eight Arctic states in 1991. [2](#) AEPS was the initiative of government of Finland that resulted in successful conclusion of various cooperative measures to protect the Arctic environment. [3](#) These eight Arctic states in 1996 signed the Ottawa Declaration which led to the establishment of the Arctic Council. [4](#) Since its formation, the Arctic Council has become an important forum for addressing issues of environment, sustainable development and purveying the socio-economic context in the region. [5](#) The Arctic Council is the most important intergovernmental forum for cooperation between the Arctic states in the high north. The working of the Arctic Council is executed through its six working groups and the decision making within the Council is based on 'consensus basis'.

In February 2022, as a result of Russia's military action in Ukraine, the seven Western Arctic states (A7), [6](#) five of which are members of NATO, [7](#) have issued a joint statement to 'temporarily pause' their participation in all meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies. [8](#) These states argued that the Arctic Council works on the fundamental rules of international law, and Russia, which currently holds the chairmanship of the Arctic Council, has violated it. While describing the action as 'regrettable', Russia, in response, highlighted that the Arctic Council has remained depoliticised, despite the past geopolitical issues. [9](#)

The A7's decision could have serious implications for the Arctic. First, all the eight Arctic states are at close geographical proximity to one another. Even a temporary suspension of the Arctic Council could challenge its established credibility and decision making. This could enhance geopolitical competition by superseding the existing scientific cooperation, consensus on environmental concerns and other mutually agreed solidarities between the states in the region.

Second, the Arctic contains multiple existing issues of territorial sovereignty, resource exploitation and disagreements over national/international shipping routes. Suspending the working of the Arctic Council would terminate the existing cooperation, resulting in unwanted strategic competition in the region. Furthermore, in order to protect their own self-interests in the Arctic, a potential military build-up can be expected.

Third, Russia holds the largest territorial and coastal extent in the Arctic. It remains the only state with strong Arctic infrastructure and military capabilities. The Russian Arctic accounts for almost half of the total Arctic population living in the region. [10](#) If the current situation prevails or the A7 countries consider forming any new alliance or forum without Russia, it would polarise the Arctic region, which could lead to dangerous outcomes. Similarly, any such alternative

approach/alliance by Russia with non-Arctic states, would further challenge the existing cooperation in the region.[11](#)

Fourth, the issue of climate change is serious in the Arctic, where the global warming is occurring at thrice the average normal. Suspension of all established cooperation with Russia through Arctic Council, would seriously affect academic and scientific engagements between states on climate research in the region.

Fifth, the Arctic Council has become successful in negotiating three important legally binding agreements in the region. These include 'Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation',[12](#)'Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response',[13](#) and the 'Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic'.[14](#) Also, all the Arctic states have successfully concluded an 'International Agreement on Prevention of Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean'.[15](#) As a counter measure to A7's decision on the Arctic Council, Russia may consider withdrawing from these important agreements in the Arctic, which would further lead to greater insecurities in the region.

Sixth, apart from the Arctic permanent states, there are 13 non-Arctic observer states in the Arctic Council.[16](#) Though these states remain outside the decision-making process of the Council, they are actively engaged in the various working groups of the Council. Asian observers such as India, China, Japan, Singapore and South Korea face vulnerabilities as a result of climate change in the Arctic. A pause in the Working Groups of the Arctic Council will have significant implications for the ongoing and future projects undertaken by these states.

Finally, the ongoing debate within the Finnish and the Swedish parliaments to join NATO membership will make the revival of the Arctic Council difficult, if not impossible. As and when these two Arctic Council members join NATO, it will have significant geopolitical repercussions for the region. Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of Russia's Security Council, has already warned of Russia's nuclear and hypersonic deployments, if Finland and Sweden secured NATO membership.[17](#)

The Arctic Council, till recently, has proved itself to be a successful model of cooperation. Security issues were consciously kept away from the charter of the Arctic Council. The heightened political contestations in the wake of Russia–Ukraine war could radically alter the spirit as well as structure of the Council. With Finland and Sweden seeking membership of NATO, the situation in the region will, in all likelihood, aggravate further. How the Arctic Council responds to these developments and whether it will remould itself is a moot question.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com