

85

FIIA Working Paper
April 2015

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ON ARCTIC EXCEPTIONALISM

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS IN THE LIGHT OF THE
ARCTIC SUNRISE CASE AND THE CRISIS IN UKRAINE



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ISBN: 978-951-769-447-6

ISSN: 2242-0444

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY	4
Introduction: on Arctic exceptionalism	5
The emergence of political exceptionalism of the Arctic	6
The Arctic as an exceptional region of peace and co-operation	8
The global Arctic and the limits of the exceptionalist paradigm	10
Conclusion: Beyond Arctic exceptionalism	17
BIBLIOGRAPHY	19

SUMMARY

During the last decade, the Arctic has generally come to be understood as an exceptional 'zone of peace' and a 'territory of dialogue'. In this sense, the Arctic has been seen as a unique region detached, and encapsulated, from global political dynamics, and thus characterized primarily as an apolitical space of regional governance, functional co-operation, and peaceful co-existence.

This paper discusses and critically analyzes this notion of 'Arctic exceptionalism'. In particular, the paper argues that the contemporary Arctic is not only global but – precisely because it is global – no different from any other region in terms of being increasingly subject to politico-strategic (or other kinds of) dynamics.

The paper begins by discussing the recent history of Arctic exceptionalism, after which it discusses in more detail why the Arctic is often considered to be an exceptional zone of peace and co-operation. While these arguments have validity in avoiding/defusing intra-Arctic conflict dynamics, the paper argues that the regionalist approach brackets out global political dynamics and their impacts on the Arctic region, thus neglecting the potential for extra-Arctic conflict dynamics as well.

By focusing on two cases – the *Arctic Sunrise* case and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine – the paper illustrates how forces and dynamics external to the region have had an impact on the co-operative spirit and governance practices of the Arctic. The Arctic Sunrise case, in which the Russian coast guard seized a ship carrying Greenpeace activists near the Prirazlomnoye oil rig, revealed the actual limitations and handicaps of the UNCLOS as a reliable governance framework – and particularly as a legitimate arbitration mechanism in the case of an interstate dispute – also in the Arctic. This is important since the UNCLOS has been regarded as the bedrock of Arctic cooperation.

The second, and even more important, case is the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, which has brought external political and conflict dynamics to the Arctic. This has had direct and indirect effects on Arctic cooperation in at least four ways, by affecting: a) the way the Arctic is discussed and understood, b) existing practices of security co-operation in the Arctic, c) in a limited way, the workings of governance structures and particularly the Arctic Council (there have been active and mostly successful measures to prevent spillover), and d) economic cooperation in the Russian Arctic through the policy of sanctions.

While not necessitating alarmism, the paradigm of Arctic exceptionalism appears to be an insufficient approach to understanding both the present and future of the global Arctic. The contemporary Arctic is not – and should not be viewed as – a closed system that can be separated from exogenous political (or other) dynamics and managed only by relying on governance structures, practices and imperatives related to the region itself. Unshielded from global dynamics, the Arctic has many potential trajectories that may, or may not, be realized due to a number of global uncertainties and challenges. The Arctic is just like any other region in an interconnected world; regional development is both constrained and enabled by global forces and dynamics – be they economic, political or environmental in nature.

Introduction: on Arctic exceptionalism¹

The Arctic region is typically seen as an exceptional space. Traditionally, the idea of 'Arctic exceptionalism' has referred to a romantic tradition of thought that emphasizes the exotic and unique properties of physical, biological and human systems in the region – the Arctic as a vast desert-like area where the forces of nature challenge human capabilities to the utmost; as a pristine wilderness whose extraordinary beauty has made it a focal point of environmental conservation; and/or as a space where indigenous peoples of the North are contented hunters and gatherers living a simple existence in harmony with the natural environment and uncorrupted by the forces of modernity.²

More recently, a distinctly more political vision of the exceptional Arctic as a 'zone of peace'³ and a 'territory of dialogue' has emerged.⁴ In this sense, the Arctic has become understood (1) as a unique region detached from global political dynamics and thus characterized primarily as (2) an apolitical space of regional governance, functional co-operation, and peaceful co-existence. The Arctic, as Oran Young once put it, was increasingly seen as a 'distinctive region in international society'.⁵ It is this latter form of political exceptionalism of the Arctic that this paper will discuss and critically analyze. In particular, the paper argues that the contemporary Arctic is not only global but – precisely because it is global – no different from any other region in terms of being increasingly subject to politico-strategic (or other kinds of) dynamics.

The paper proceeds in the following manner. It begins by discussing the recent history of Arctic exceptionalism, after which it discusses in more detail why the Arctic is often considered to be an exceptional zone of peace and co-operation. While these arguments have validity in avoiding/defusing intra-Arctic conflict dynamics, the paper argues that the regionalist approach brackets out global political dynamics and their impacts on the Arctic region, thus neglecting the potential for extra-Arctic conflict dynamics as well. By focusing on two cases – the Greenpeace protest at the Prirazlomnoye oil rig and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine – the paper illustrates that forces and dynamics external to the region have had an impact on the co-operative spirit and governance practices of the Arctic. While not necessitating alarmism, the paradigm of Arctic exceptionalism appears to be an insufficient approach to understanding both the present and the future of the global Arctic.

1 This paper was presented in the 2014 CUSPP Summer Session 'Nordic-Baltic Security and US Role in the Region after Ukraine', organized in Helsinki and Tallinn 27-30.8.2014 by the Center for US Politics and Power at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

2 Young 1992.

3 Gorbachev 1987/2012.

4 Lavrov quoted in ITAR-TASS 2014.

5 Young quoted in C. Keskitalo 2007, 195. See also Heininen et al. 2013, 25.

The emergence of political exceptionalism of the Arctic

Today's exceptional political vision of the Arctic emerged with the end of the Cold War. The end of superpower rivalry meant that the region lost most of its geostrategic and geopolitical relevance even if strategic military assets, such as nuclear forces and detection technology, remained in the region. In fact, the geopolitical status and dynamics of the Arctic started to transform as early as the latter years of the Cold War as a result of an increase in interaction and co-operation in 'non-strategic' areas of scientific research and environmental protection. Symbolically, if not concretely, it was the 1987 Murmansk speech by Soviet Secretary General Mikhail Gorbachev that laid down the vision of the Arctic as a zone of peace and co-operation, and initiated the gradual process of 'desecuritization' of the Arctic as an element of the broader Soviet re-orientation.⁶

In 1989, the process took on a more concrete form when Finland seized the opportunity and convened officials from eight Arctic states to start a discussion on matters of environmental protection, resulting in what came to be known as the 'Rovaniemi Process'. Two years later, in 1991, the eight Arctic states came to agree on the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) and seven years later, in 1996, this arrangement was surpassed by the establishment of the Arctic Council (AC).

From its inception, the AC was an international high-level forum for co-operation that relied on consensus in adopting its non-binding political resolutions and recommendations. More importantly, the mandate of the AC was limited to the promotion of cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States and Arctic indigenous communities in issues of sustainable development and environmental protection. This not only constructed the Arctic as a *de facto* 'internal affair' of the community of Arctic Council states and other representatives, but also effectively excluded 'high political' matters with geopolitical implications, most notably security policy or military security, from the AC agenda.⁷ Together, these developments solidified the vision of the Arctic as an exceptional, encapsulated zone of peace and co-operation.

However, during the last decade or so, the Arctic re-emerged as a component of contemporary high politics. The key driver behind this development was, of course, the rapid and exceptional warming of the area that resulted in a continuous reduction and thinning of the Arctic sea ice cover, especially during the summer months. This, in turn, meant that the previously secluded geopolitical frontier was opening up and substantial natural resource bases as well as new maritime routes in the area were becoming more easily exploitable.⁸ Securing access to, and control of, the opening Arctic and its resources heightened the strategic interest in the region. The resulting political dynamics in the opening Arctic were increasingly characterized by geopolitical friction, great power competition, and fears of a new arms race or Cold War. A number of specific interconnected factors at the time contributed to, and reinforced, this understanding of the Arctic:

6 Åtland 2008, 289–311.

7 Pedersen 2012, 147–148; Koivurova 2010, 146–148.

8 Mikkola and Käpylä 2013.

- In 2007, Russia planted its titanium flag deep into the North Pole seabed in a manner that was initially interpreted as a land-grab in Wild West style.⁹
- In 2007, Russia adopted a more self-assured and even belligerent anti-Western rhetoric, exemplified by President Putin's famous 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference.¹⁰
- In 2007–2008, Russia resumed its regular long-range aviation patrols to the Atlantic, across the Arctic and into the Pacific Ocean, and announced the resumption of the routine presence and activity of the Northern Fleet in the Arctic.¹¹
- In 2008, the US Geological Survey published its often-cited report on Arctic hydrocarbon reserves, which increased confidence in the abundance of Arctic natural resources. According to the USGS assessment, an estimated 13% of undiscovered oil reserves and 30% undiscovered gas reserves as well as a significant amount of (other) minerals were located in the Arctic. This estimate was published opportunely at a time when there was both a lot of talk about dwindling oil reserves around the world and a growing demand for oil in the emerging markets. Taken together, these factors increased the geopolitical and geoeconomic importance of the Arctic.¹²
- And lastly, both expert literature and journalistic articles at the time tended to warn or at least speculate about whether the sizeable natural resource reserves in the Arctic could lead to an interstate conflict or a new Cold War when states compete to claim these reserves.¹³

These activities and the growing tensions that resulted in the Arctic were taken seriously and they started to de-escalate as early as 2008 with the help of confidence-building measures by the Arctic states themselves. Subsequent policy and academic literature also highlighted that the Arctic was not going through a serious arms race or militarization, and that the calls for resource conflicts or a new Cold War in the region were misinterpretations of the empirical state of affairs.¹⁴ Gradually, the discourse of a “new Cold War” was overshadowed by the paradigm of continuing, if not intensifying, “Arctic cooperation”. This reaffirmation of the paradigm of Arctic exceptionalism has allowed the emergence of a more stable investment environment and, in the process, has enabled a shift of focus from security policy (and partly also environmental) concerns towards economics and tempting business opportunities.

9 Chivers 2007.

10 Zysk 2011, 88.

11 Ibid., 86–87.

12 Claes and A. Moe 2014, 97. For an estimate of Arctic hydrocarbon resources, see US Geological Survey 2008.

13 See e.g. Borgerson 2008.

14 See e.g. Wezeman 2012; Lasserre et al. 2012.

The Arctic as an exceptional region of peace and co-operation

At the core of the paradigm of Arctic exceptionalism lie several key assumptions about why the Arctic is a zone of peace and co-operation, namely why the Arctic conflict potential is exaggerated.¹⁵

First, there is the assumption that there is *not that much to fight over to begin with*. A large part of the region consists of land areas above the Arctic Circle that are – with the inconsequential exception of the tiny Hans Island between Greenland and Canada – under the uncontested sovereignty and national legislation of the Arctic states. Furthermore, in the maritime domain, the existing Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of the Arctic states are to a large extent uncontested and well defined.¹⁶ It is estimated that around 90% of undiscovered hydrocarbon reserves in the Arctic are within these undisputed EEZs. Consequently, most hydrocarbon activities are expected to take place within the accepted limits of the EEZs and not, for example, in the partly uncontested area around the North Pole where economic exploitation remains close to impossible due to harsh operating conditions and extremely high costs. The existence of legitimate sovereign authority over the uncontested and operationally feasible areas in the EEZs downplays the notion of the Arctic as a *terra nullius*, claimable by anyone.

Second, there is the assumption that the Arctic area has *existing governance structures that foster co-operation and can defuse potential conflict dynamics*. In fact, as the agenda of issues in Arctic governance is manifold, it is not subject to one single comprehensive treaty regime (like the Antarctic is) nor does it fall under the mandate of any single governance structure or organization. Instead, Arctic governance amounts to what Humrich and Wolf have called ‘a fragmented rather than a properly integrated multi-level system’¹⁷ that has evolved incrementally as a response to practical needs; that has been operationalized through multiple federal, national, regional, international and global mechanisms; and which remains divided into partly overlapping sectoral spheres.

The most important governance mechanism in the Arctic is the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)¹⁸, which provides a global multilateral legal framework¹⁹ for defining the status of maritime areas and settling intra-Arctic sovereignty and border issues regarding maritime routes and continental shelf extensions. For example, national claims for extending continental land mass beyond the 200 nm EEZs to gain the legal right to utilize the sea bed (e.g. in terms of potential hydrocarbons) are regularly submitted to the scientific analysis of the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), which issues considered recommendations

15 See Käpylä and Mikkola 2013.

16 Young 2009, 77.

17 Humrich and Wolf 2012, ii.

18 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982.

19 The U.S., which has not ratified the treaty, accepts the UNCLOS as customary international law.

that may legitimize, though not ultimately settle, the proposed extension claims of the Arctic states.²⁰

Other established and operational governance structures include the Arctic Council (AC), which is recognized as the most important multilateral institutional framework in the region, particularly through its co-operative scientific contributions via the Council's Working Groups, and the two recent international agreements on search and rescue and oil pollution preparedness and response that were negotiated under its auspices. Other governance structures include the International Maritime Organization (IMO) as an important sectoral multilateral framework, particularly due to the co-operative preparation of the mandatory *Polar Code* for safe maritime transport in Polar Regions in the organization; and the Barents-Euro Arctic Council (BEAC), which facilitates day-to-day trans-border movement and co-operation in the wider Eurasian north.

While these governance mechanisms do not deal with hard security issues, there is broad agreement that they foster and contribute to the spirit of co-operation, the rule of international law, and peace in the region. As Michael Byers has highlighted in the case of the Arctic Council, the AC 'has become the proverbial "town square" for an expanding transnational community of politicians, diplomats, and other experts who, through their repeated interactions, are gradually acquiring shared expectations, identities and interests [that, in turn, are] likely to promote even more cooperation and lawmaking'.²¹

According to the third assumption, while geo-economic competition exists, *Arctic states have explicitly expressed their interest in international cooperation*. For example, the infamous 2007 Russian flag-planting episode did not lead to intensifying competition, but instead the five Arctic coastal states decided to defuse the situation through the adoption of the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration²² in which they expressed their commitment to existing international law and co-operation.

More practically, co-operation and measures to build confidence have included regular military and emergency exercises among Arctic states, such as the *Cold Response* that brings together NATO members and Partnership for Peace countries;²³ the *Northern Eagle* between the Norwegian, US and Russian navies;²⁴ and the *Barents Rescue* between emergency officials in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia.²⁵ In addition, the Chiefs of Defence of the Arctic states have held regular discussions, and a broader gathering of military officers of the Arctic states have convened regularly in the context of the *Arctic Security Forces Roundtable*.²⁶

20 Byers 2013, 5–7.

21 Ibid., 9.

22 The Ilulissat Declaration 2008.

23 Norwegian Armed Forces 2014. See also Conley 2014, 56.

24 Pettersen 2012.

25 Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection 2013.

26 Hilde 2014, 159–160.

Moreover, all Arctic Council member states, as well as its permanent observers, have endorsed Arctic multilateralism and especially the Arctic Council. This was most recently carried out at the ministerial level in the Arctic Council's 2013 Kiruna meeting, the end product of which – the Kiruna Declaration²⁷ – reiterated and reinforced the status of the Council as the principal forum for international co-operation in the Arctic.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the assumption that *Arctic states have little to gain* by letting the Arctic dynamics slip into a conflict state that would create an unfruitful investment and development environment for Arctic exploitation. As the Kiruna meeting historically underlined, the focus of Arctic co-operation is moving away from the traditional emphasis on environmental protection and sustainable development towards economy and business opportunities. The decision to establish what is today known as the Arctic Economic Council²⁸ underlines this tendency and necessitates the endurance of the co-operative spirit that was initially forged in the framework of environmentalism and sustainable development.

The global Arctic and the limits of the exceptionalist paradigm

While these arguments have validity when it comes to avoiding intra-Arctic conflict dynamics, we argue that there is a fatal conceptual flaw in the approach: these assumptions and the very paradigm of Arctic exceptionalism is problematic because of its regional focus, which often brackets out global political dynamics and their impacts on the region. As we have argued previously, '[t]o understand the Arctic today, one needs to have a global perspective. The Arctic is not a closed system and regional development is increasingly intertwined with global dynamics'.²⁹

Building on this, we further argue that recent conflictual events in world politics give some reason to reconsider the exceptional character of the Arctic – both in terms of its regional as well as its co-operative aspects. To illustrate this, we focus on two empirical cases, namely the Greenpeace protest at the Pirazlomnoye oil rig and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

The Arctic Sunrise case

As mentioned, political exceptionalism in the Arctic was recently sustained by various confidence-building measures, including the aforementioned 2008 Ilulissat Declaration where the five Arctic Ocean coastal states re-affirmed their commitment to settle Arctic disputes in accordance with international law, and especially the UNCLOS. This commitment was re-iterated in the Arctic Council in 2013.³⁰ While the provisions of the UNCLOS have been challenged in other circumstances, most notably in the South China

27 Arctic Council 2013.

28 Arctic Council 2014.

29 Käpylä and Mikkola 2013.

30 See Arctic Council Secretariat 2013, 2.

Sea,³¹ so far the treaty has been working relatively well in the Arctic. This, we argue, is primarily because in principle the treaty works for the benefit of coastal states and was not really tested, effectively leaving a lot of room for unproven promises and political lip service.

The recent diplomatic dispute between the Netherlands and Russia over the capture of the Greenpeace ship *Arctic Sunrise* after the organization's protest at the Prirazlomnoye oil rig constituted such a test. This test didn't go as one would have expected – at least if one's expectations are based on the official policy statements, which highlight the exceptional strength of the rule of law and cooperation in the Arctic.

The Prirazlomnoye oil rig is the flagship project of Russian offshore development in the Arctic. It is currently the only operational off-shore oil rig in the Russian Arctic, located in the Pechora Sea. After years of construction, it finally went operational and started to produce oil in December 2013. Some months earlier, in September 2013, Greenpeace activists aimed to draw the world's attention to the threats of off-shore hydrocarbon extraction in the Arctic by attempting to board the rig in protest.

The protest resulted in the seizure of the vessel in Russia's EEZ and the arrest of the Greenpeace activists by the Russian authorities (FSB). After two months under the global media spotlight and imprisonment in Russia, the activists were released on bail. The flag state of the vessel, the Netherlands, regarded Russian action to seize the vessel in the Russian EEZ as illegal and filed a case against Russia to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). Russia declined to participate in the ITLOS hearing. In November 2013, ITLOS ruled in favour of the Netherlands and considered Russian actions to be against the UNCLOS provisions.³²

In particular, Russia failed to follow the UNCLOS provisions and its own explicit commitment to the treaty on two counts. First, it captured the Greenpeace ship illegally by violating the fundamental element of global maritime law, the principle of freedom of navigation that also applies in the EEZs (in the absence of 'hot pursuit').³³ Secondly, and more importantly, Russia's unwillingness to accept UNCLOS arbitration mechanisms to resolve the dispute raised serious doubts about Russia's consistent commitment to the UNCLOS when its vital national interests, such as resource exploitation, are threatened.

This was an eye-opening case where the actual limitations and handicaps of the UNCLOS as a reliable governance framework – and particularly as a legitimate arbitration mechanism in the case of an interstate dispute – became increasingly clear in the Arctic as well. This is important since the UNCLOS has been regarded as the bedrock of Arctic cooperation. This event can be seen as a serious setback for the Arctic cooperative spirit. More than that, it transformed Arctic dynamics away from technical grass-roots cooperation towards politics.

31 See Raine and Le Miére 2013.

32 Greenpeace activists also violated international maritime law by entering the 'safety zone' surrounding the Prirazlomnoye oil rig.

33 See e.g. International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea 2013.

The crisis in Ukraine

The second, and even more important, case is *the ongoing crisis in Ukraine*. Whereas the Greenpeace case moved the Arctic away from apolitical co-operation, the crisis in Ukraine has accentuated the role of high politics and international power dynamics. The crisis has brought external political and conflict dynamics to the Arctic, and this has had direct and indirect effects on Arctic cooperation.

First, the crisis has had an effect – albeit a limited one – on the *established discourse on the Arctic*. Western perceptions of Russia and its intentions have taken a turn for the worse as a result of the crisis. Today, there is a widespread distrust of Russia in the West, particularly given the perceived discrepancy between what Russia says and what it, in fact, does. This stems not only from its hybrid warfare in Ukraine, but more broadly from Russia's dismissal of various international norms and commitments, such as the European security infrastructure based on the OSCE agreement, conventional and nuclear arms limitation frameworks, and best practices for conducting military exercises. While Russia has always been seen as a pragmatic foreign policy player that can utilize both harder and softer power to advance its interests, even in the Arctic, it – unlike its predecessor, the Soviet Union – is today seen as a very unpredictable power in Europe.

Given the recent change in Western perceptions of Russia, similar events taking place before and after the crisis – such as Russia's military modernization and particularly the increase in Russian military capability in the Arctic (both preceded the crisis in Ukraine even if they have taken on new features more recently³⁴) – are increasingly interpreted with more caution and concern, or even as threatening.

Before the crisis in Ukraine, the increase in Russian Arctic capabilities was widely interpreted as legitimate state behaviour to monitor and secure the opening of a new 7,000-kilometre-long border region and strategic assets therein, and to support civilian activities in a harsh environment (e.g. through various emergency services, many of which rely on the military component). After the crisis, increased Russian capability and activity in the Arctic has been read, again, as a sign of aggressive and threatening behaviour in a conflictual geopolitical situation, and as an illustration of Russia's intention to militarize and dominate the Arctic region in a situation where there are multiple overlapping claims to extend continental shelves, and growing international interest in the region as a result of opening sea lanes and undiscovered, but recoverable, natural resources.

The influential remarks of the former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton are a particular case in point. Speaking in the context of the annexation of Crimea, Clinton has criticized the ongoing reopening of old Soviet military bases in the Russian Arctic.

34 With regard to new developments in the Arctic, Russia has, for example, announced the re-opening of various Soviet-era aerodromes throughout the Russian Arctic and the re-establishment of new military bases on key islands in the region. The securing of the Arctic was also recently highlighted in Russia's new 2014 military strategy. In late 2014, Russia also established a new military command – Strategic Command North (Sever) – that brings together the Northern Fleet and other units in the Arctic under a unified structure. This force structure engaged in an unannounced snap exercise in March 2015 (in the temporal vicinity of Norway's *Joint Viking* and Nordic-US-UK *Arctic Challenge* exercises during spring 2015).

This development, according to her, threatens to militarize the region, and the US and Canada should seek to establish a ‘united front’ to counter Russia’s intensifying activities. While it may well be that Clinton’s strong remarks ought to be read in the light of her pessimistic overall assessment of Putin’s Russia, as well as her potential Presidential candidacy, which necessitates a tough foreign policy attitude towards currently revisionist Russia, one also needs to bear in mind that as Secretary of State Clinton was active in, and supportive of, Arctic co-operation, particularly the work of the Arctic Council, and thus her remark could also be read as a potential indicator of a change in the way the Arctic is perceived and talked about in the light of the Ukraine crisis and the new Russia therein.

While perhaps not a reality yet, this externally induced change in public discourse and awareness of the Arctic – driven by the changing perception of Russia itself – could become the ‘new normal’ and affect the political imagination towards the Arctic in general. This, of course, would be detrimental to the Arctic cooperative spirit.

Secondly, the crisis has affected the *established practices of security co-operation in the Arctic*. Even at an early stage, the crisis resulted in the cancellation of the *Northern Eagle* naval exercise between the Norwegian, Russian and US navies.³⁵ The crisis also resulted in the cancellation of the annual Chiefs of Defence meeting among Arctic states, while the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable was organized without Russian participation.³⁶

These developments are significant as military cooperation between Russia and NATO countries has been a distinctive and exceptional Arctic feature, and particularly important in building mutual trust in the region.³⁷ While one should not read too much into this as yet, these cases are nevertheless significant indicators of the possibility that an external crisis – here the crisis in Ukraine – can cancel out the important work done in building confidence and trust in the sphere of hard/military security between the Arctic states during recent years.

Arctic co-operation in terms of a softer form of security has also suffered. For example, a US-Russo hazard-reduction workshop that was being planned for June 2014 was cancelled. The workshop was to bring together scientists and emergency management experts from both countries on a tour of natural disaster landmarks in Alaska so that information and lessons learned could be shared between national expert communities. However, the event never took place as the US State Department withdrew the funding as a result of the crisis in Ukraine. But it is not only the US that has reduced participation in cooperative soft security constellations in the current situation. Contrary to prior plans, the head of Russia’s emergency service agency failed to show up at an international meeting on emergency response at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.³⁸

35 Pettersen 2014a.

36 Le Miére 2014. The participating countries in the ASFR were Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.

37 Hilde 2014, 160.

38 Rosen 2014.

Thirdly, *Arctic governance structures* have also been affected by the crisis in Ukraine, even though there have been active efforts to limit the spillover. Prior to the crisis, there was wide agreement that the Arctic Council is more or less sheltered from major turbulences and conflicts in world politics. This is because its mandate did not include matters pertaining to traditional national security and military policy, and instead its focus was on non-strategic issues, such as environmental protection and sustainable development.

To a certain degree, this is true even today: the most important and still enduring element of the Council's work is the pragmatic, hands-on scientific cooperation in its working groups, not high politics. This applies to other regional governance structures, too. For example, the Governor of Arkhangelsk and the current chair of the Barents Regional Council (BRC), Igor Orlov, has stated that developing co-operative relations and solving shared cross-border problems between people in the Barents Region is 'beyond big politics'.³⁹ In short, it remains true that a significant part of the complex Arctic governance is carried out in regional structures and fora, such as the AC, BRC and Barents-Euro Arctic Council (BEAC), where informal people-to-people instead of formal state-to-state relationships are central to solving shared practical challenges.

However, the rapidly worsening relationship between the West and Russia has affected the Arctic political cooperation, particularly in the context of the Arctic Council. First, the finalization of the EU's observer status in the AC is unlikely to proceed due to the crisis. The EU's application for an observer status was received affirmatively by the Arctic Council member states in the 2013 ministerial meeting in Kiruna, Sweden.⁴⁰

However, given the disagreement between Canada and the EU over the sale of seal products in European markets, the final decision on the implementation of the decision to accept the EU was deferred until such time as all AC member states, Canada included, are in agreement. This disagreement has subsequently been worked out and the formal obstacle to the EU's observer status was supposed to have disappeared.

However, with the crisis in Ukraine and worsening relations between Russia and the EU, Russia has quietly expressed that it will not agree to the EU becoming an observer. Whether this Russian position predated the crisis in Ukraine is uncertain, but at the very least Russia's current objection means that the whole issue will not even be raised in the 2015 ministerial meeting and the EU will remain formally in a liminal state for the time being (the EU does, however, participate in the work of the AC's working groups). It is also likely that Russia's objection towards the EU's observer status will block the processing of other observer applications, particularly from Switzerland, Greece, Turkey and Mongolia, as various AC states will call for the EU issue to be resolved prior to the addition of others to the AC.

Furthermore, the US and Canada decided to boycott Arctic Council meetings that are organized in Russia or chaired by a Russian, such as the AC working group meeting on black carbon and methane in Moscow in April 2014. The US decision to boycott the event was based on a broader stance according to which '[g]iven Russia's ongoing

39 Nilsen 2014.

40 Arctic Council 2013.

violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the US government has taken a number of actions to include curtailing official government-to-government contacts and meetings with the Russian Federation on a case-by-case basis consistent with US national interests'.⁴¹ On the Canadian front, the Environment Minister responsible for Arctic affairs, Leona Aglukkaq, has expressed her country's similar 'principled stance against Russia' according to which Canada decided to boycott the AC meeting in Moscow as 'a result of Russia's illegal occupation of Ukraine and its continued provocative actions in Crimea and elsewhere'.⁴²

This policy has not been continued systematically, and there is widespread agreement in the US, Canada, Europe and Russia that it is important to continue the pragmatic grass-roots-level co-operation in Arctic governance structures, and particularly in the AC. For example, in autumn 2014 the US Administration declared in a conciliatory tone that it 'is keenly aware of the value of maintaining scientific cooperation on collaborative research projects, especially in the Arctic, and will assess our interactions consistent with that awareness'.⁴³ Illustrative of this policy line, the US Special Representative to the Arctic region, Robert J. Papp, decided to go ahead with the last leg of his Northern European tour and flew from Helsinki to Moscow in January 2015 to present and discuss the agenda of the upcoming US chairmanship of the AC with Russian officials.⁴⁴ This was apparently in accordance with a decision that was made at a very high level of leadership in the US.

Canada is currently chairing the Arctic Council and will pass the torch to the US in spring 2015. As the crisis in Ukraine and the tension in the East-West relationship are likely to continue in one form or another – and especially if the inflamed situation were to worsen – it is not out of the question that conflictual political dynamics could become even more prominent within the Arctic Council during the US chairmanship. As Fran Ulmer, the chair of the US Arctic Research Commission, has acknowledged, while there is still hope that the Arctic will remain mostly isolated from the crisis in Ukraine, 'obviously, everyday decisions are being made in Moscow and Washington and other capitals that could set us back'.⁴⁵

This could entail the AC effectively being sucked into the vortex of the 'crisis in Ukraine' and the 'East-West confrontation'. In the worst case scenario, the AC might end up being a dysfunctional and crippled cooperation platform, despite the official line of ongoing co-operation⁴⁶ and the best intentions of the officials and experts who actually do the practical work on a regular basis in the Council's working groups and diplomatic meetings.

41 Carney 2014.

42 Government of Canada: Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada 2014.

43 Quoted in Rosen 2014.

44 Sputnik International 2015.

45 Ulmer quoted in Rosen, 2014.

46 Grady 2014.

Fourthly, it is in the *economic sector*, however, where the most significant effects have been seen. The contemporary Arctic is run in an increasing manner by an economic logic, and a number of Arctic stakeholders – whether public or private, or intra-Arctic or extra-Arctic – promote the Arctic cooperative spirit to generate a stable investment environment for infrastructure development and resource exploitation. Now, when the region is gradually increasing its geo-economic (and as an opening and more active region, also geopolitical) importance, it can be expected that the connection between Arctic affairs and global politics will grow. This also means that economic co-operation in the Arctic is likely to face external dynamics – and challenges.

This has become evident with Western sanctions against Russia, some of which are clearly focused on the future of Russian Arctic development, which has been premised on continuing international co-operation, and particularly on joint ventures between Russian and international energy corporations, including the American Exxon-Mobil, Italian ENI and Norwegian Statoil, as well as service companies, such as Schlumberger, Halliburton or Nord Atlantic Drilling.

The gradually tightened sanctions imposed on Russian Arctic off-shore oil projects have been one of the primary tools of the West to counter Russia's actions in Ukraine. In the third round of sanctions, the West decided to prohibit the exportation of Western goods, services and technology for the development of Russian Arctic offshore oil prospects. Previously, the US and the EU had already imposed financial sanctions that restricted the access of Russia's oil companies and their highly expensive Arctic megaprojects to Western capital. As a result, joint ventures in the Russian Arctic, such as the exploratory drilling in the Kara Sea between Exxon-Mobil and Rosneft, have been halted now due to the (third round of) sanctions.⁴⁷ Through the policy of sanctions, the Ukraine crisis has clearly spilled over to the economic sphere of cooperation in the Arctic.

Perhaps more importantly, it is likely that the (ongoing) crisis in Ukraine will affect the future of Russian Arctic development by increasing the overall country risk for international investors. If traditional risks emanating from corruption, political interference and the complex judicial system have caused wariness among Western investors in Russia, the crisis in Ukraine has certainly not improved the situation. What have been called 'sympathy sanctions'⁴⁸ – the avoidance or exit of western companies and other entities from Russian markets in the absence of legally binding restrictions – are illustrative of the increased risk-sensitivity in Russia. For example, the US private equity group Blackstone pulled out of Russia due to exacerbated operational difficulties in the current situation, while the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has also suspended new investments to Russia.⁴⁹

The increased country risk is unlikely to help Russia's hydrocarbon sector as it struggles with both lack of funding and advanced technology from the West. This coincides ominously with a growing trend in the West in which the acceptance of the (severe consequences of) global climate change and the possibility of 'stranded assets' due to

47 Mikkola and Käpylä 2014.

48 Farchy 2014.

49 Sender and Chassany 2014.

policies that seek to cut carbon dioxide emissions are making investors concerned about the long-term prospects of the capital-intensive hydrocarbon business – and perhaps even turning the focus towards investments in green, renewable energy.⁵⁰

Of course, other Arctic economies have been (somewhat) affected by the crisis, too. As a counter-move to Western sanctions, Russia has introduced limitations on the import of food products from Western markets. This has had some effects in the European Arctic, such as halting the import of Finnish dairy products and Norwegian seafood into Russia. Overall, however, the effect of the import restrictions in combination with the ongoing economic downturn in Russia (that precedes but is reinforced by Western sanctions) has been estimated to remain limited. In fact, Russia has subsequently allowed the import of certain dairy products from Finland, and Norwegian fish has found ways to avoid import bans via rerouting through the Baltics and Belarus.⁵¹

Conclusion: Beyond Arctic exceptionalism

The Arctic is often understood as a unique region that is geopolitically isolated and consequently also co-operative and peaceful in nature. This paper has argued that this political version of Arctic exceptionalism represents, at best, a limited approach to the region. The contemporary Arctic is not – and should not be viewed solely as – a closed system that can be separated from exogenous political (or other) dynamics and managed only by relying on governance structures, practices and imperatives related to the region itself.

The two empirical cases of the paper – the Greenpeace protest at the Prirazlomnoye oil rig (the Arctic Sunrise case) and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine – concretely illustrate the ways in which the Arctic is not only connected to global dynamics, but also potentially less peaceful and co-operative than typically expected precisely because of them. While this does not imply alarmism in the Arctic – as military confrontation and/or massive re-militarization remain unlikely – it does suggest that the very potential for important and endorsable regional co-operation (or lack of it) must be understood in a broader and more complex context.

In fact, the empirical cases illustrate the limits of Arctic governance mechanisms in complex political situations. For example, Russia's ambiguous stance towards the UNCLOS arbitration procedure in the Arctic Sunrise case raises the possibility of illegitimacy when vital national interests are at stake, whereas the crisis in Ukraine highlights not only the well-known limitedness of formal Arctic institutions, particularly the Arctic Council, as they lack the mandate and capacity to address security issues in the region, but also the paralysis of the less formal institutions as forms of military and emergency co-operation have been put on hold for extra-Arctic reasons.

The argument against strict Arctic exceptionalism is even more valid if it is viewed from a historical perspective. As Tamnes and Holtsmark have recently elaborated, the Arctic has been a theatre into which modern international conflicts taking place elsewhere

50 Drajem 2014; Clark 2014; Scott 2014.

51 Ministry of Finance, Finland 2014; Troianovski and Jervell 2014; Pettersen 2014b.

have spilled recurrently – with varying social, economic and political consequences. This global Arctic pedigree began, at the very least, with the Great Nordic War (1700–1720) when a small Swedish naval contingent attacked a Russian fort in the White Sea area, continued through the Crimean War (1853–1856) when French and British naval forces blockaded the White Sea and raided its coastal areas, and became full-fledged in the two World Wars and the Cold War in the 20th century when the region’s sea and air lines of communications were critical for various reasons, including trans-Atlantic resupply and strategic deterrence.⁵² As the two scholars aptly remark, ‘[t]he totality of a potential war between the [super] powers was a key element in the history of the Arctic, as it was elsewhere. As in earlier centuries, the Arctic’s involvement came about as a result of larger events outside the region, a factor that remains as relevant to conflict and cooperation today’.⁵³

Building on this, the idea of the global Arctic essentially opens up a broader perspective for making sense of the region and its future – a perspective that is not reducible to external conflicts alone. Unshielded from global dynamics, the Arctic has many potential trajectories that may, or may not, be realized due to a number of known and unknown global uncertainties and challenges. These include, for example, changes in future hydrocarbon demand and price, developments in global trade dynamics, the future of traditional maritime routes, potential environmental catastrophes, global effects of climate change, technological development, domestic or international political dynamics (e.g. vis-à-vis Russia, China, and the US), and the future of multilateral governance in general. All of these factors highlight the complex and global character of the transforming Arctic of today. The Arctic is just like any other region in an interconnected world; regional development is both constrained and enabled by global forces and dynamics – be they economic, political or environmental in nature.

52 Tamnes and Holsmark 2014, 12–35.

53 Ibid., 18.

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