

Russia's presidency of the Arctic Council: Multilateralism à la russe

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At the Arctic Council meeting in Reykjavik, held on 19–20 May 2021 at the foreign-minister level, Russia took over the rotating chairmanship of this intergovernmental forum for the next two years. It will try to use its position to promote the normalisation of its relations with the West (especially in the economic field), without having to cease the activities that have led to the current tension in these relations. The Russian Federation's verbal or very limited real support for the West's priority goals of climate and environmental policy is primarily intended to improve its image in the West. It is also intended to fuel the hope in the West that by avoiding sharp reactions to Russia's aggressive actions, it can get Russia to cooperate in dealing with the global challenges like climate change and the destruction of the natural environment.

Allegations against the West

In his speeches in Reykjavik, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov emphasised that Moscow fully shares the belief of other Council member states that the Arctic should remain an area of international cooperation excluded from geopolitical rivalry, to which the conflicts which exist between Russia and the West should not be transferred. The aim of the Russian presidency's programme is to support the sustainable development of the region which combines ecological, economic and social components (improving the living conditions of the region's inhabitants). The programme – which reflects the main interests of the other Council member states, as contained in the newly adopted strategy for 2021–2030 – places particular emphasis on ecological and climate issues, particularly on the use of “climate-neutral fuel in transport and energy, and the development of energy policy based on renewable sources”.

At the same time, however, Lavrov used the forum to accuse NATO, the United States and Norway of stoking tensions in the region by increasing their military activity and presence. In particular, he emphasised the new Norwegian-American agreement on defence cooperation, which expands the options for US troops to use Norwegian bases. He also accused NATO of violating the obligation contained in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act to refrain from permanently transferring combat units from other NATO countries onto the territories of new Alliance members (Lavrov raised the issue of the stationing of US troops in Poland in this context). Also, the Russian minister proposed the resumption of the annual consultations of the chiefs of general staff of the Arctic states, which the West suspended in 2014. Meanwhile, military conferences concerning the Arctic have been held without Russia as part of the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (the last such meeting took place in

May). These are attended by representatives of the armed forces of the US, Norway, Canada, Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and Finland, as well as four non-Arctic countries: the UK, France, the Netherlands and Germany.

An instrument for normalising relations with the West

The main goal of Russian diplomacy is to use the Arctic Council as another area where it can work for the selective normalisation of relations with the West – that is, one that does not require Moscow to make any concessions on contentious issues (the annexation of Crimea; its support, including military, for pro-Russian forces in the Donbas; its military activity in Syria; aggressive actions by Russian services on the territory of Western countries; cyber-attacks). The Council provides Russia with a convenient tool to implement a model of interaction with the West that is favourable to it. Publicising its participation in Arctic cooperation is intended to set positive precedents for Moscow's cooperation with the West, and give the impression that it is ready to cooperate constructively in the name of transnational challenges such as environmental protection, the fight against global warming, etc. Another important aim is to create an atmosphere which will encourage Western investment.

Ecology vs. economic development

The Russian presidency of the Arctic Council is also intended to mask the fundamental divergences between Russia and the organisation's other members in their approach to the Arctic area. Moscow's priority is to increase the exploitation of natural resources, in particular the extraction of raw materials for energy: crude oil, natural gas (LNG projects) and hard coal. For the Western countries, the most important issues are ecology and climate policy, as well as satisfying the demands of the Arctic's indigenous peoples. This difference in approach was particularly visible at the International Arctic Forum in St. Petersburg in 2019. In their speeches, Western leaders focused solely on climate and ecological policy, while President Putin was primarily interested in the Arctic as a resource for the exploitation of raw materials and economic development.

This is reflected in the policy documents Russia adopted in 2020: the decree entitled 'On the foundations of the state policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic to 2035', and the government's *Strategy for the development of the Russian Arctic zone and the guaranteeing of national security to 2035*. These assume the transformation of the Arctic into a key region for the extraction of energy resources; this will enable Russia to maintain its current position on global markets, and thus preserve the existing model of the Russian political economy based on revenues from the export of raw materials.

Therefore, the real goal of the Russian presidency of the Council will be to ensure that any internationally adopted environmental regulations will not restrict its exploitation of Arctic resources.

'Good' and 'bad' militarisation

Moscow will also try to use its presidency of the Council to neutralise Western reactions to its policy of intensively militarising the Arctic region. Since at least 2014, Russia has been systematically increasing its military potential and expanding its military infrastructure in the Far North. New units are being established, including a specialised Arctic brigade; new weapons systems (surface-to-water and surface-to-air guided missiles) and radar stations

are being installed; and military airports which had been abandoned after the collapse of the USSR are being reactivated and new ones established (14 in total since 2014). In December 2014, the 'North' joint strategic command (also known as 'Arctic') was established on the basis of the Northern Fleet. In January this year it was assigned a territorial basis (along the lines of the previously created strategic directions) in the form of the newly created Northern Military District (with territories transferred mainly from the Western Military District).

It should be emphasised that Moscow initiated the militarisation of the Arctic in a situation where the presence and military activity of Western states in this area has remained, unchanged, at the minimal level that was set in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War.

Moscow's diplomatic and media strategy consists in cutting off any Western attempts to discuss Russian armaments in the Arctic by repeating the slogans of "leaving the Arctic as an area excluded from geopolitical rivalry" and "not transferring the Western-Russian conflict to the Arctic", while using the same phrases in order to counteract Western military activity in the region.

Disputes over territory and jurisdiction

The contradictions of interest between Russia and the West that have emerged in connection with global warming (and hence the increasing accessibility of Arctic areas) also cover three issues that were not raised at the Reykjavik meeting. These relate to the delimitation of jurisdictions in the Arctic, the contested nature of the rules governing navigation in the Arctic, and the conduct of economic activity in the region. Russia's claims (which in March were extended again, up to the borders of the exclusive economic zones of Greenland and Canada) overlap with claims by Denmark, Canada and the US; the dispute is currently being examined by a special body established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The second point concerns Russia's claim to unilaterally regulate the Northern Sea Route, a shipping route running along the coasts of the Russian Federation. It is the shortest sea lane connecting the Pacific Ocean with the Atlantic Ocean, and runs entirely through Russian territorial waters or waters belonging to the Russian Federation's exclusive economic zone. The Russian regulations mean, among other things, that the use of this route is associated with the payment of a fee and the obligation to use the services of its icebreakers. Particularly controversial is the law adopted by Russia in 2019 which restricts the principle of free passage of the Northern Sea Route for warships, which in principle is contrary to the Law of the Sea, and has been called into question by Western countries, especially the United States.

This situation may lead to conflict if the US Navy tries to carry out 'freedom of navigation' operations along the Northern Sea Route (which it does regularly, for example, in the waters of the South China Sea, to which the People's Republic of China claims rights).

The third issue is the dispute between Russia and Norway over the scope of the rights Russia has in Spitsbergen under the 1920 treaty governing the international status of the Svalbard archipelago. Over the past few years, Moscow has increasingly been challenging Norway's right to restrict fishing in the waters around the area.

Conclusions

Russian diplomacy treats cooperation within the Arctic Council as part of the geopolitical and ideological conflict the Kremlin is waging against the West, and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. In this context, the Council is no more than another tool enabling Russia to maintain a situation in which it can continue to reap benefits (economic and political) from relations with Western countries, despite its aggressive and destabilising policies. The Council is also one more space where Moscow can improve its image by playing the role of a responsible partner, ready to work together within multilateral institutions in the interests of all the regional players (ecology, climate, humanitarian issues). Russia also gets another opportunity to build up a network of relationships with Western entities which could hamper the West's political responses to Russian actions affecting its interests. In practical terms, Moscow will use its presence on the Council to prevent the adoption of any international regulations that would legally halt or significantly restrict its plans to exploit the Arctic regions economically.