

THE ARCTIC COUNCIL AND THE RUSSIAN SPHERE OF INFLUENCE: DECONSTRUCTING THE RUSSIAN SOFT POWER AND ECONOMIC AMBITIONS IN THE ARCTIC

SHASHI BHUSAN KR VISHWAKARMA

Shashikumar4215@gmail.com

PhD Student, Department of Politics and International Studies, School of Social Sciences & International Studies, Pondicherry University (India). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0894-2652>

Abstract

The Arctic Council (AC) is the single credible institution for collaboration in the Arctic, and the growing geopolitical tensions could disrupt the Council's functions, as military affairs fall outside the scope of the Council's jurisdiction. The Russian Federation (RF) holds a significant stake in the High North (HN) due to its extensive coastline and arctic population. Russia's Arctic policy is rooted in a blend of economic ambition, sovereignty assertion, and development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Notwithstanding RF's hard power potential, Moscow projects itself as a proactive partner for cooperation in the HN. The paper argues that despite militarisation, Russia's AC engagement reflects a preference for soft power to advance economic goals, though Ukraine-related tensions risk undermining this strategy as it portrays the RF as an aggressor in international politics. Moscow's exclusionary sphere of influence (SOI), rooted in Cold War politics, resists non-Arctic state involvement. The principal question that this paper seeks to address is why Russia asserts its sovereignty in the HN context while simultaneously favouring the use of its soft power strategies. The paper applies a thematic literature review and qualitative analysis of AC statements to draw its inference that Russia showcases soft power through environmental initiatives and inclusion of Indigenous Communities (IC) in the AC. The paper analyses the Russian ambitions in the Arctic amid the heating geopolitics and tries to substantiate its central objective to explore the Russian soft power politics in the region. The paper also evaluates various dimensions of Russian interests in the Arctic and its behaviour inside the AC. Furthermore, the paper navigates through the idea of a Russian SOI through a constructivist perspective. The growing importance of the Arctic and the Russian hegemony in the region necessitate a comprehensive analysis of the AC and its relation with the RF.

Keywords

Arctic Council, Russia, Geopolitics, Soft Power, Sphere of Influence.

Resumo

O Conselho do Ártico (AC) é a única instituição credível para a colaboração no Ártico, e as crescentes tensões geopolíticas podem perturbar as funções do Conselho, uma vez que os assuntos militares estão fora do âmbito da jurisdição do Conselho. A Federação Russa (RF) detém uma participação significativa no Extremo Norte (HN) devido à sua extensa costa e população ártica. A política ártica da Rússia tem as suas raízes numa mistura de ambição



económica, afirmação da soberania e desenvolvimento da Rota do Mar do Norte (NSR). Apesar do potencial de poder duro da RF, Moscovo projeta-se como um parceiro proativo para a cooperação no HN. O artigo argumenta que, apesar da militarização, o envolvimento da Rússia no AC reflete uma preferência pelo poder brando para promover objetivos económicos, embora as tensões relacionadas com a Ucrânia possam comprometer essa estratégia, uma vez que retratam a RF como um agressor na política internacional. A esfera de influência (SOI) excludente de Moscovo, enraizada na política da Guerra Fria, resiste ao envolvimento de Estados não árticos. A principal questão que este artigo procura abordar é por que razão a Rússia afirma a sua soberania no contexto da HN, ao mesmo tempo que favorece o uso das suas estratégias de poder suave. O artigo aplica uma revisão temática da literatura e uma análise qualitativa das declarações da AC para chegar à conclusão de que a Rússia demonstra o seu poder suave através de iniciativas ambientais e da inclusão das Comunidades Indígenas (IC) na AC. O artigo analisa as ambições russas no Ártico em meio ao aquecimento da geopolítica e tenta substanciar seu objetivo central de explorar a política de soft power russa na região. O artigo também avalia várias dimensões dos interesses russos no Ártico e seu comportamento dentro do AC. Além disso, o artigo explora a ideia de uma SOI russa através de uma perspectiva construtivista. A crescente importância do Ártico e a hegemonia russa na região exigem uma análise abrangente do CA e da sua relação com a RF.

Palavras-chave

Conselho do Ártico, Rússia, Geopolítica, Soft Power, Esfera de Influência.

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Introduction

The Arctic Ocean (AO) is surrounded by eight sovereign states known as the Arctic Eight (AE); therefore, these states form the membership of the Council. The AC features a unique characteristic in its operation, as six organisations, representing IC in the region, are part of the Council as its permanent members and possess full negotiation and decision-making rights in the Council's affairs, and their participation is facilitated by a separate secretariat inside the Council.¹ The AC was established in 1996 with the initial aim to foster a multi-stakeholder approach towards sustainable development in the region, primarily focused on environmental protection, but the Council progressively expanded its scope of operation by including socio-cultural and economic issues under its mandate, specifically excluding military affairs in the HN (Barry et al., 2020). The initial purpose of the Council was to promote cooperation on environmental issues, which is why military affairs were strategically excluded from the Ottawa Declaration. The Council has been a successful forum for negotiation and discussion since its formation, despite major transformations in international power politics; scholars explain this success through the concept of Arctic Exceptionalism,² but rising geopolitical tension in the region may reduce the importance of the central inter-governmental organisation in the region, as the Council witnessed a two-year suspension due to the Ukraine war (Brimmer, 2023). In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, all seven other AC's members paused the function of the Council in protest against Putin's so-called "special military operation."³

After the sudden transformation of the Cold War competition with the collapse of the Soviet Union, its successor, Russia, assumed the status of a regional power. Moscow

¹ Ottawa Declaration. (1996). Arctic Council. <http://hdl.handle.net/11374/85>

² The concept of "Arctic Exceptionalism," rooted in Mikhail Gorbachev's 1987 Murmansk speech, positions the Arctic as a "zone of peace," perceiving the High North as a region insulated from global conflict and political tensions.

³ Read more about the Council's suspension and its survival at "How and Why the Arctic Council Survived Russia's Invasion of Ukraine" <https://jordanrussiacenter.org/blog/how-and-why-the-arctic-council-survived-russias-invasion-of-ukraine>



maintains an undisputed notion of a SOI in the Arctic due to its geographical proximity and regional power structure, and is often hesitant to expand the stakeholding of the Arctic to non-Arctic nations (Pay & Calvo, 2020). The RF has the largest coastal territory in the Arctic from the Barents Sea in the west to the far-east Bering Sea with over 2.5 million Arctic inhabitants. The Russian ambitions are multifaceted yet overlapping in the Arctic, as the development of NSR is crucial for shipping facilities, which can be utilised for both international and domestic transportation of natural resources present in the Arctic, such as petroleum, minerals, and coal (Lamazhapov & Moe, 2025). International and regional players may gradually come to acknowledge the sovereignty of the RF in the region. This recognition could be driven by the growing global demand for resources and the advantages of the NSR, which is under Moscow's control and offers a shipping route that is 40 per cent shorter than the current international shipping route.

The Russian interests in the HN are driven by the economic benefits of the region, but Putin's aspiration to develop the Arctic as a reliable resource hub certainly requires a combination of both hard and soft power projection. Due to its large population and vast geography, Russia is the most significant stakeholder in the Arctic based on a state-centric evaluation. As a result, Russian policies can greatly influence the overall physical and political landscape of the HN. It is crucial for Russia to maintain a delicate balance in this strategic environment, as any escalation could jeopardise Moscow's interests in the region. (Paul & Swistek, 2022). The RF and AE are willing to cooperate on the environment issue since the thawing ice can dilute the special privilege provided in Article 234 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea⁴ (UNCLOS) for the governance of the Arctic to littoral states (Gavrilov et al., 2019). The growth and advancement of IC can act as a source of soft power for the RF in the HN, since the growing civilian-military infrastructure can be justified by the cause of IC.

The Russian stakes in the Arctic, the significant role of the AC as a negotiation forum and the necessity to evaluate the current geopolitics of the Arctic require comprehensive studies emphasising the subtle aspects of Russian strategies in the Arctic. Existing literature often portrays Russia as a disruptor of regional arrangements due to the expanding military presence of the Russian Federation in the Arctic. However, this paper aims to analyse the Russian aims and ambitions, providing a plausible explanation for their actions. This paper argues that Russia leverages the AC to project soft power, advancing its economic ambitions while navigating sovereignty concerns. To substantiate this, Section 2 examines Russia's tangible interests; Section 3 analyses its SOI; Section 4 evaluates soft power dynamics within the AC; and Section 5 assesses challenges from rising geopolitics.

The paper analyses the Russian policies and behaviour in the Arctic, specifically focusing on the various narratives surrounding the soft and hard power of the RF. The paper

⁴ "Coastal States have the right to adopt and enforce non-discriminatory laws and regulations for the prevention, reduction and control of marine pollution from vessels in ice-covered areas within the limits of the exclusive economic zone, where particularly severe climatic conditions and the presence of ice covering such areas for most of the year create obstructions or exceptional hazards to navigation, and pollution of the marine environment could cause major harm to or irreversible disturbance of the ecological balance. Such laws and regulations shall have due regard to navigation and the protection and preservation of the marine environment based on the best available scientific evidence." Article 234 of UNCLOS



emphasises the Russian cooperation with the AC as the central argument, mainly because of geo-economic reasons, which foster the concept of Russian soft power in the Arctic. The paper also discusses the SOI and how heating geopolitics in the Arctic can be detrimental to Moscow's soft power. The paper uses a thematic literature review with qualitative content analysis complemented with data and narratives to substantiate the main argument of the paper. The paper mainly relies on the AC statements for its inferences while assimilating data from other valid secondary sources. The major limitation of the paper lies in the omission of detailed Russian military strength and its growing presence in the region, which is justified by the delimited focus of the paper on soft power analysis. The current literature on the area demonstrates a clear abundance in the military and strategic analysis; therefore, this paper seeks to uncover the low-political area that influences the Russian behaviour in the region.

Russian tangible interests and power projection in the Arctic

The tangible interests of the RF in the Arctic largely lie in the natural resources and the NSR. Owing to the increasing demand for oil and gas in the international market, the hydrocarbon reserves in the Arctic are becoming a global attraction. As per a report, approximately 13 per cent of the world's undiscovered oil reserves may be located in the Arctic, alongside 30 per cent of liquid natural gas and 20 per cent of natural gas liquids found in this offshore region. The report estimates that there are 90 billion barrels of undiscovered oil, 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids in the Arctic, with 90 per cent of these resources situated within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of the Arctic states, indicating a potential for conflict in the area (Gautier et al., 2009). Despite growing concerns regarding climate change, the availability of non-traditional sources of energy remains significantly lower than that of fossil fuels on a global scale (Vishwakarma, 2025a). The Arctic also has a rich mineral reserve, including rare earths and critical minerals, which are essential for various emerging technologies such as semiconductors, wind turbines, electric vehicles, etc (Moe, 2020). These hydrocarbons and minerals are largely situated in the 'Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation' (AZRF),⁵ which offers leverage to Russia in the international market (Bortnikov et al., 2015). Figure 1 illustrates the concentration of placer minerals along Russia's Arctic coast, aligning with NSR development zones and reinforcing resource-transport synergies.

The NSR is another evident priority for Moscow in the Arctic, as it desires to develop the route as an international shipping passage. The NSR via the Northeast Passage (NEP) connects the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and is 40 per cent shorter than the current international shipping route. The increasing traffic of international cargo and frequent supply-chain disruptions at key choke points in global shipping routes via Panama and the Suez Canal significantly enhance the need for infrastructure development and heighten the international appeal of these passages (Ziomecki, 2024). The receding ice cover in the Arctic has the potential to fully operationalise the NSR, while the variance in

⁵ Russian coastal territories along the Arctic Ocean comprising 10 regions. Read more about AZRF at <https://erdc.ru/en/about-azrf-old/>



the weather and ice thickness, official permits and navigational rules, the Russian ice-breaking fee, and insurance cost are hovering challenges that RF needs to address. Additionally, the Russian Federation has signed a \$29 billion deal for the development of the NSR, aiming to increase shipping traffic sevenfold, reaching up to 240 million metric tons of cargo by 2035 compared to 2022 levels. NSR holds strategic and economic significance for Russia since it can be used for the transportation of fuel and minerals present in the Arctic, and Moscow can benefit from the international shipping as it remains under the territorial jurisdiction of Russia (Moe, 2020).

Fig. 1. Placer mineral deposits in AZRF⁶



The RF's coastal size and proximity, along with Russian civilian and military infrastructures (including ice-breaking facilities) in the Arctic, make it the biggest player in the region (Pay & Calvo, 2020). While having the extensive boundary along the AO, Moscow intends to expand it further and claim a large part of the Arctic. Article 76 of UNCLOS provides for the delineation of the EEZ⁷ up to 200 nautical miles, but it can be extended further by submitting scientific evidence of continental shelf extension. The RF

⁶ Bochneva, A., Lalomov, A., & LeBarge, W. (2021). Placer mineral deposits of Russian Arctic zone: Genetic prerequisites of formation and prospect of development of mineral resources. *Ore Geology Reviews*, 138, 104349. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oregeorev.2021.104349>

⁷ "The exclusive economic zone is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, subject to the specific legal regime established in this Part, under which the rights and jurisdiction of the coastal State and the rights and freedoms of other States are governed by the relevant provisions of this Convention" Article 56 of UNCLOS



has submitted a bid in the CLCS⁸ to claim approximately 70 per cent of the AO, which includes two out of three major ridges in the whole region.⁹ The Russian lawfulness in the Arctic showcases its desire to strengthen the economic base of resources and NSR through non-conflictual means, since it will be harmful to the RF's interests if geopolitics heats up in the region.¹⁰

The Russian sphere of influence and sovereignty concerns

The concept of SOI gained popularity during the Cold War era of superpowers' competition, but the idea can be traced back to the Athenian and Spartan empires or the reign of the Qing dynasty in China. The definition of SOI involves *control* and *exclusion* as Jackson (2019, p. 255) defines SOI as a "hierarchical structure, the construction and maintenance of which results from a practice involving two specific features: some amount of *control* over a given territory or polity by a foreign/outside actor, especially as regards third-party relations, and *exclusion* of other external actors from exercising that same kind of control over the same space". Russia considered the Arctic as a region of its SOI, as the other AE states have limited presence in the region, compared to an all-season-capable Russian fleet¹¹. The RF obviously has both qualities outlined by Jackson (2019) in the region. In order to comprehend the Russian SOI in the Arctic, a proper acquaintance with the Cold War politics is essential in international politics. According to Grajewski (2017), the RF succeeded the Soviet Union after its disintegration in 1991, which conferred the status of a regional power to Russia, but the image of a great power remained intact in the ruins of the USSR;¹² the Russian assertion in the Arctic can be explained through the pride and prestige it attaches to regional politics to demonstrate its international stature (Pay & Calvo, 2020). Godzimirski (2008) states that Russian behaviour in the Arctic is characterised by "the syndrome of lost empire". This syndrome fuels Moscow's sovereignty assertions, evident in its CLCS bid for 70% of the AO.

The Russian sovereignty assertion in the HN has two motivations: firstly, Russia's urgency to safeguard its territorial integrity in the region, including the jurisdiction over the NSR, and secondly, the desire to manifest its dominance in the global arena (Grajewski, 2017). Moscow is constantly increasing its presence in the Arctic in the name of national security and the advancement of the Arctic population through building civilian and military infrastructure, including reviving old military and nuclear facilities. These infrastructures can be used for military purposes in times of crisis, and Russia's insecurities regarding its claim of the Arctic, mainly due to NSR and resources, are

⁸ 'Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf' established by UNCLOS as a body to consider the coastal states' submission for claim of EEZ under Article 76 and provide technical and scientific advice if required by states.

⁹ Three major ridge systems in the AO: the Alpha-Mendeleev Ridge, the Lomonosov Ridge, and the Gakkel Ridge.

¹⁰ Read Prof. Hossain's 'Russia's Proposed Extended Continental Shelf' at <https://polarconnection.org/russia-extended-continental-shelf-arctic/>

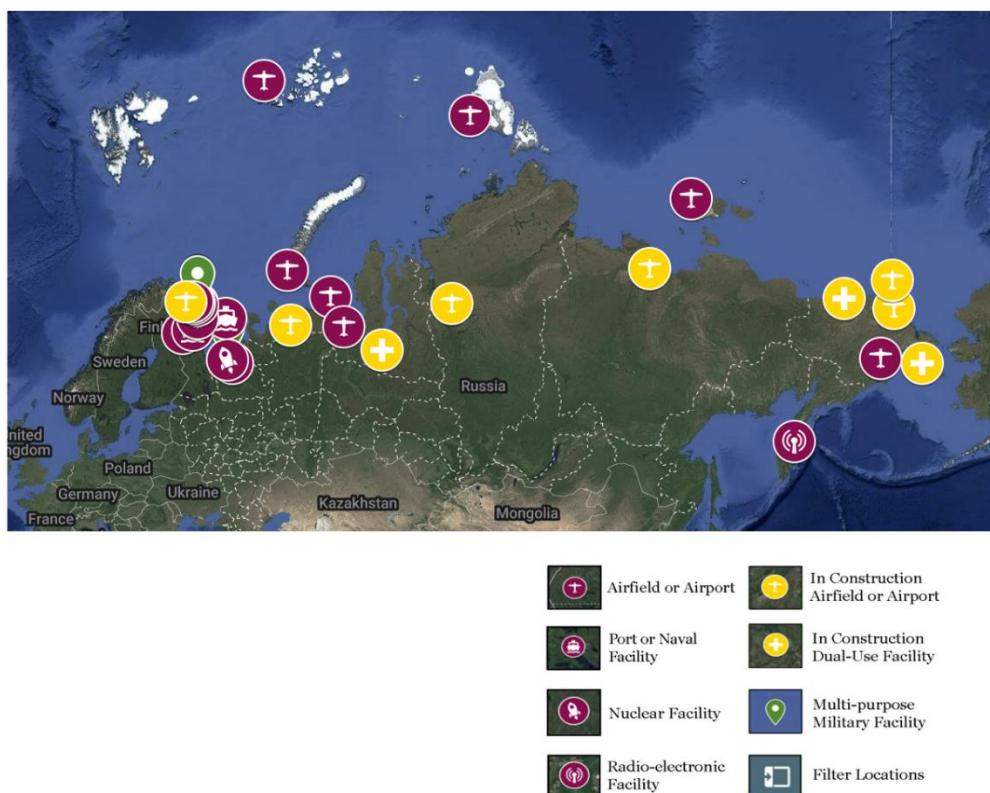
¹¹ Read more at Cold Realities: Russia's Arctic Security actions and implications <https://cspc.gmu.edu/2024/05/20/cold-realities-russias-arctic-security-actions-and-implications/>

¹² The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), also known as the Soviet Union, consisted of Russia and 14 surrounding countries from 1922 to 1991.



evident in its preparedness for any conflict in the region (Paul & Swistek, 2022). Figure 2 shows the Russian military bases; it's evident that Russia has been expanding its military infrastructure to the HN.

Fig 2.



Source: ASP¹³

The majority of the bases are situated in the Murmansk Oblast region; however, development of other sites can be observed as well. According to Laruelle (2020), Russian behaviour in the Arctic can be categorised into three categories: (a) Proactive power, (b) Status quoist power, and (c) Reluctant power. Here, Russia is prepared to cooperate on environmental issues, IC, search and rescue operations, and scientific explorations as a proactive partner, while it is hesitant to expand the Arctic stakeholding to non-Arctic states or the idea of freedom of navigation (control over NSR).

Between these two extreme behaviours, Russia wants to preserve the status quo regarding its sovereignty over its territorial boundary, NSR, and EEZ, including various claims over the expansion of EEZ in the CLCS. The tripartite claim over the Lomonosov Ridge involves Russia, Canada, and Denmark, highlighting a dispute over economic

¹³ Franiok, N. (2020, May 4). *Russia's Arctic Military Bases* | ASP. American Security Project. <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/russian-arctic-military-bases/>



interests and geopolitical ambitions. Notwithstanding Russia's increasing militarisation for reasons of national security, Gavrilov (2019) argues that Moscow genuinely seeks peace and cooperation in the Arctic. This is because any disruption in the region would harm Russia's own interests, particularly in light of its ambitions to commercialise the NSR and exploit natural resources. These cooperative gestures can be observed in (a) peaceful settlements of border issues with Norway and the United States, (b) an active role in founding the AC, and BEAC¹⁴ and the *Polar Code*¹⁵ (c) enacting special legislation for environmental protection and IC, (d) advocacy for confidence-building and arms reduction, and (e) being lawful to CLCS and its mandates rather than being aggressive towards the Arctic. The RF held its first congress of indigenous people in 1990, and that became the foundation of RAIPON. The RAIPON is a permanent participant in the AC and is associated with multiple international organisations with a goal "to protect Indigenous Peoples' human rights, defend their legal interests, assist in solving environmental, social, economic, cultural and educational issues and to promote their right to self-governance"¹⁶.

The Arctic Council and Russian soft power politics

The term soft power was coined by Prof. Nye, and he defines it as "the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2017). He further elaborates on his concept as an analytical tool, serving as a complement to address the gaps in traditional power analysis. For example, the USSR sought to promote communism internationally by heavily investing in propaganda, youth movements, and scientific initiatives during the Cold War¹⁷. Lee (2011), in his work, defines soft power with three foundational elements: cognitive, affective, and normative. The international image/reputation of a particular nation falls under the cognitive sphere, the affective sphere is linked with the perception of that particular state excluding its national power, and the international legitimacy of the state comes under the normative dimension of its soft power. While the RF stands strong in terms of the first two dimensions in the Arctic, the Ukraine war dilutes the legitimacy of its actions. However, if I observe the Russian behaviour exclusively in the Arctic, it fulfils all three dimensions of soft power. This section analyses the Russian behaviour and its soft power politics inside the Council.

The RF was the founding member of the AC through the Ottawa Declaration, and Russia's perception of the AC has been positive since its establishment, mainly because of its inclusive and multidimensional approach towards the Arctic in comparison to the other translational entities in the HN (Voronchikhina, 2019). Russia has actively collaborated within the AC, though its behaviour in the AO region has often been criticised as

¹⁴ The Barents Euro-Arctic Council, or the Barents Council, is the official body for inter-governmental co-operation in the Barents Region.

¹⁵ Read more on International Maritime Organisation (IMO) website, "IMO's International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code) is mandatory under both the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL)."

¹⁶ Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), founded in 1990, is a Russian national organisation which represents the IC of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of Russia. Read more at <https://arctic-council.org/about/permanent-participants/raipon/>

¹⁷ Read What Is Soft Power? At <https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/what-soft-power>



disruptive to regional harmony. Despite this criticism, Russia has previously expressed its willingness to upgrade the Council into a full-fledged international organisation that includes military matters under its mandate (Sergunin, 2021). The Council's intergovernmental and consensus-driven structure, lacking any enforcement mechanisms for its directives, frequently results in stalemate or a lack of adherence among its members (Barry et al., 2020).

According to Melchiorre (2017), Russian strategies in the Arctic are often categorised as those of a revisionist power. However, a closer examination reveals that the Russian Federation (RF) functions more as a reformist power. This is evident in its active cooperation on various fronts, including economic initiatives, cultural exchanges, the question of IC, and environmental protection. Through these avenues, Russia seeks to exert its soft power influence in the region, fostering collaboration rather than confrontation, and AC serves as a silver platform where Russia can demonstrate its diplomatic skills. The qualitative content analysis of several statements by the Russian official in the AC meeting suggests that the RF desires peace in the Arctic. The Russian Chairmanship of the AC in 2021 delineates several key priorities aimed at enhancing the Council's effectiveness and addressing pertinent issues in the region. These priorities include: (a) safeguarding the Arctic population through initiatives focused on resilience and sustainable development; (b) advancing environmental protection efforts; (c) promoting socio-economic development; and (d) strengthening the operational capacity and cohesiveness of the AC itself¹⁸.

Ministerial statements by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) during the 8th AC meeting held in 2013 outline Russia's vision for collective efforts to support the Arctic population, the development of the Arctic transport route, and the sustainable exploitation of marine resources. In 2015 (9th AC Meeting), Russian MNRE¹⁹ Donskoy emphasised the necessity for cooperation in the Arctic and a collaborative venture to advance the transport, industry, communication, and tourism. He added that "Russia has prepared the National Inventory Report for Black Carbon and Methane Emissions in the Russian Arctic as part of fulfilling its international commitments under the AC. Project Support Instrument to support environmental projects of the AC, which took place last year. Russia contributed 5.0 million EUR to this fund in 2014, and the same amount has already been allocated this year"²⁰. The Lavrov in 2017 referred to the "Arctic as a territory of peace" and expressed concerns over the partial suspension of the Council between 2014 and 2017²¹. This suspension was caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The RF restated its adherence to the goal of sustainable development of the Arctic in line with the 'United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', and prioritising the energy security of the Eurasian continent²².

¹⁸ Russian Chairmanship. Arctic Council. <https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/russian-chairmanship-2/>

¹⁹ The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of the Russian Federation

²⁰ Ministerial meeting in Iqaluit, Canada, April 24-25, 2015, <https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/collections/91f8c212-514e-4a82-b956-d255c905eb83>

²¹ Ministerial meeting in Fairbanks, USA, May 11, 2017. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, at the 10th AC Meeting. <https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/>

²² Ministerial meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland, May 6-7, 2019. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, at the 11th AC Meeting. <https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/>



The Russian minister again in 2021 stressed the need for multilateral cooperation for climate change, IC, and energy security through the strengthening of the AC.²³ The transition of chairmanship from the RF to Norway and the survival of the AC were major events of global significance as the Russia-Ukraine war started in February 2022, which paused the cooperation in the HN, along with various operations of the Council. Notwithstanding the disruption, the Council gradually reinitiated its functions with the inception of Norway in the chair (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). The 14th edition of AC's meeting was recently convened, during which a Russian official emphasised the RF's commitment to fostering a peaceful Arctic region. He cited Putin's statement made in Murmansk, declaring the Arctic a "Territory of Dialogue."²⁴ He expressed that "we have consistently advocated for equitable cooperation in the region and are ready to collaborate not only with Arctic States but with all who share a like-minded commitment to ensuring a stable and sustainable future, along with the ability to make balanced decisions." Furthermore, he expressed firm conviction regarding AC's potential to restore the "spirit of cooperation"²⁵. Russia clearly envisages a collective approach towards the Arctic, inclusive of observer states.

The strategic outlook of the RF regarding the future of the Arctic region suggests a preference for soft power strategies over hard power assertiveness. This approach aligns with Russia's broader interest in securing its stakes in the resources and upgrading the infrastructure of the NSR (Sergunin, 2017). The RF mainly focuses on the low political areas of the Arctic to gather support for its ambitious plans (Østhagen, 2016), and the above analyses highlight the Russian Federation's effective use of soft power in the AC, enhancing its influence through diplomatic engagement and scientific collaboration. Moscow, notwithstanding rising geopolitical tensions in the region, adheres to the idea of "Arctic Exceptionalism" or "zone of peace" inside the Council, which serves its strategic interests in the region. The guiding theme of the chairmanship, as cited by the RF in 2021, was "Responsible Governance for Sustainable Arctic."²⁶ Russia played an important role in founding 'the Rovaniemi process/the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy' (AEPS) in 1991, as it considers the AEPS as vital for the identification and institutionalisation of collaboration areas for multilateral engagement in the region.²⁷ The RF was instrumental in the formulation of the AC's 'Strategic Plan 2021 to 2030,' which outlines seven distinct objectives for sustainability in the HN²⁸.

²³ Ministerial meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, May 20, 2021. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, at the 12th AC Meeting. <https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/>

²⁴ 6th International Arctic Forum: https://forumarctica.ru/en/?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F

²⁵ Fourteenth Meeting of the Arctic Council in Tromsø, Norway, May 12th 2025. Senior Arctic Official of the Russian Federation: H.E. Vladislav Maslenikov at the 12th AC Meeting. <https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/>

²⁶ Russian Chairmanship 2021-2023 at <https://arctic-council.org/about/previous-chairmanships/russian-chairmanship-2/>

²⁷ 'The Arctic year book' at <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2016/2016-commentaries/186-from-inspiration-to-action-from-action-to-institution-some-early-interventions-of-arctic-collaboration-in-sustainable-development>

²⁸ 'Arctic Council Strategic Plan' at <https://arctic-council.org/explore/goals/>



Rising geopolitics and decline of the Council: A setback for Russian soft power

The geopolitical landscape of the Arctic, once marked by a period of harmony and cooperation even during the Cold War, is now facing emerging competitive and conflictual dynamics due to climate-induced ice melting, posing significant challenges to regional stability and the AC's capacity to maintain a balanced order (Dyck, 2024). Although the current market prices for hydrocarbons and minerals are not conducive to resource exploitation in the Arctic, the thawing ice in the HN is gradually making these reserves accessible and decreasing extraction costs (Lindholt & Glomsrød, 2012). The shipping routes and the resources brought strategic significance to the Arctic, depleting the spirit of "the Arctic exceptionalism", where the chances of conflict have increased due to the clash of interests (Pechko, 2025). The growing presence of the AE in the AO is a clear sign of their insecurities regarding the stakes in the region. Russia is strengthening its northern fleet with icebreakers (including nuclear-powered) with various plans such as Project 22220 and Project 10510. NATO activities in the Arctic have increased due to Russia's growing military presence in the region.

The recent termination of the bilateral agreement between Russia and Finland, subsequent to Finland's accession to NATO, indicates a significant shift in regional dynamics. The former neutral states of Sweden and Finland have joined NATO, marking a significant shift in international politics that poses a direct challenge to Russia's SOI, as seven out of eight regional states are now part of a historically rival alliance (Brimmer, 2023). This shift is further exacerbated by the Russian military buildup in the Arctic, the suspension of the AC due to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, and Russia's withdrawal from the BEAC. Collectively, these developments suggest a diminishing capacity for the AC to effectively uphold peace and foster cooperation within the region (Dyck, 2024). Furthermore, the rising interest of non-Arctic states in the AO complicates the strategic equation, especially the growing Chinese presence in the HN. China issued a white paper in 2018, declaring itself a 'near-arctic country', which demonstrates its ambitions to gain a share in the Arctic resources and so the so-called "polar silk road"²⁹. The Chinese investment in the multiple AE states and growing proximity with Russia are perceived negatively by the US and its allies. Chinese equity acquisition in the Yamal peninsula, a joint venture of 'Power of Siberia 2 Pipeline' and investment in the NSR, along with naval collaboration, certainly indicates a Sino-Russian convergence of interests in the region (Khanna, 2025). While the bilateral Sino-Russian cooperation is positive on the economic front, China's NSR investments contradict Russia's exclusionary SOI rhetoric, alienating AE and weakening its 'Arctic for Arctic states' soft-power narrative.

According to Lamazhapov and Moe (2025), the war in Ukraine has significantly damaged Russia's reputation as a cooperative partner within the Council. This decline in trust was particularly evident when seven AC member states collectively suspended their participation, and two non-aligned countries opted to join NATO, along with various economic sanctions from Western nations. Speculation about Russia's potential withdrawal from the Council was rampant, as predictions about the new 'Arctic Seven'

²⁹

China's

Arctic

Policy.

https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm



came to light, and there was growing interest in the implications and developments surrounding it³⁰. However, diplomatic relations began to improve with the subsequent leadership of Norway due to the role of non-state actors and a consensus-based institutional structure. The AC's strategic plan enabled Norway to maintain strategic autonomy while fulfilling its responsibilities on the Council and avoiding negotiations with Russia during its initial chairmanship period (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). The imposition of Western sanctions aimed at isolating Russia has consequently fostered a closer relationship between China and Russia, evidenced by a series of bilateral agreements in several key areas, including military cooperation, navigation through the NSR, and resource extraction (Khanna, 2025).

The Russian behaviour in the Council, as discussed above, exhibits traits of a responsible player through frequent emphasis on dialogue, peace, sustainability, and development, and the RF's policy for the Arctic emphasises the need for a more collective approach towards the region. The RF policy for the Arctic evidently demonstrates a preference for soft power rather than assertiveness, despite its increasing military presence in the HN. The discourse surrounding melting ice in the Arctic and its geopolitical implications poses challenges for Russia's economic ambitions. This resource-conflict nexus is further exacerbated by Russia's 2007 flag planting on the seabed of the North Pole, the claim of the Lomonosov Ridge, and the frequent disputed bids for territorial extension (Carlson et al., 2013). Increased media coverage and scholarly attention on militarisation and potential conflicts may portray Russia as an aggressive actor, complicating its strategic goals and inviting international scrutiny (Vishwakarma, 2025b).

Conclusion

The physical and geo-strategic landscape of the Arctic has been dramatically transforming with the depleting ice cover, creating various narratives about the staking of the region's hydrocarbons, minerals, and transportation routes (Dyck, 2024). The massive global demand and the accessibility of resources with diminishing permafrost, complemented by the emerging cost-efficient technologies in the HN, create a perfect situation for the "Scramble for the Arctic", as sovereign states persistently seek to extend their territorial boundaries through frequent submissions to the CLCS despite hovering environmental concerns (Carlson et al., 2013; Grajewski, 2017; Paul & Swistek, 2022). Such reckless scrambling poses severe climatic implications for the physical environment, including rising sea levels, floods, and extreme weather conditions. In the geopolitical arena, these issues may lead to conflicts and even military confrontations as countries seek to protect their economic interests. Given the coastal length and sizable population in the AZRF, the RF is the biggest player in the region. The Russian presence in the Arctic portrays multiple narratives regarding its long-term objectives in the region. Reflecting upon the Russian interests, the tangible interests encompass resources and NSR, where Russia asserts its sovereignty and claims more than half of the AO through the extension of the continental shelf. These interests are backed by a further set of secondary

³⁰ Read 'Arctic Council Without Russia: A Spearhead for Democracy and Freedom of Expression' <https://www.hightnorthnews.com/en/arctic-council-without-russia-spearhead-democracy-and-freedom-expression>



interests: environmental protection, advancement of Arctic inhabitants, and preserving the status quo of regional dominance. The constructivist approach to the Russian policies towards the Arctic seems to identify the past experiences of a great power which drives the current ambitious regional power.

The AC has been a successful regional institution, but the success is not entirely attributed to its capabilities in the region; the isolation of the Arctic also contributes to the peaceful functioning of the Council, which aims to foster cooperation in low political areas such as sustainability, the Arctic inhabitants, socio-economic growth, etc. The Council is the major platform where Russia utilises its soft power diplomacy by showing its commitment towards Arctic cooperation and frequently designating HN as the "territory of dialogue." While the peaceful Arctic narrative is beneficial for the Russian economic interests, the rising geopolitics driven by shipping lanes and resources often contradicts the discourse of "Arctic Exceptionalism" (Dyck, 2024). The Russian invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, which led to the suspension of AC activities on two occasions, highlight a clear gap in Moscow's policy towards the Arctic. These military operations undermine Russia's soft power capabilities in the region. The Kremlin's increasing hard power presence in the HN may trigger counter-reactions from the other seven Arctic countries, as these developments are viewed with concern.

The territorial assertion and insecurities catalyse the militarisation of the Arctic. Notwithstanding Russia's unmatched military presence, the Russian policies always illustrate its preference towards soft power over hard power in the region. The growing attraction of the Arctic among the non-Arctic states is a cause of concern for the already delicate regional geopolitical balance. In the context of the AC, it is advisable for AE to prioritise sustainability in the region, despite external power dynamics. The sense of insecurity has increased following the Ukraine war, which means Moscow must balance its geopolitical ambitions with diplomatic engagements to effectively use its soft power within the Council. The Arctic governance should be reconfigured to better include non-Arctic interests, as the effects of Arctic degradation extend beyond the region.

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