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Sergunin, Alexander

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Upcoming Russian Arctic Council Chairmanship: Priorities and Implications for the High North

By Alexander Sergunin (St. Petersburg State University and Nizhny Novgorod State University)

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Abstract

This study aims to examine Russia's policy priorities for its chairmanship in the Arctic Council and the possible implications thereof for the region. The author argues that Russia's Arctic Council presidential agenda will likely include the following priorities: climate change action; sustainable development; social cohesiveness and connectivity in the region; indigenous peoples; conservation of biodiversity; science diplomacy; and partial institutional reform of the Council. Moscow will not, however, renew its earlier efforts to transform the Council from an intergovernmental forum into a full-fledged international organization and introduce military security issues to the Council's agenda. Russia's chairmanship will likely strengthen the Arctic Council's role in asserting regional stewardship by responding to the challenges of a rapidly changing Arctic.

Introduction

The Arctic Council (AC) is seen by Russia as both a centerpiece and cornerstone of the regional governance system, a view that is confirmed by Russian strategic documents¹ and numerous statements on the part of the Russian leadership. Compared to other regional and subregional organizations and forums (such as the Nordic institutions, Barents-Euro-Arctic Council, Northern Forum, etc.), the AC is viewed by the Kremlin as a more geographically representative, multidimensional (in terms of areas covered by its activities), science-based, and efficient international entity. Even though the seven other AC member-states belong to Western institutions that do not include Russia (NATO, the EU, Nordic organizations), Moscow feels comfortable in the Council because it functions there on an equal footing and is able to participate in AC decision-making. Russia's forthcoming AC chairmanship (2021–2023) further elevates the Council, making it the highest priority of Moscow's Arctic strategy in the short- and medium-term.

The objective of this article is two-fold. On the one hand, it aims to outline Moscow's presidential agenda; on the other, it seeks to discuss the potential reactions of other Arctic players to Russian initiatives.

Moscow's View of the Arctic Council: Changing Perceptions

Important changes have recently taken place in Russian academic and official thinking about the future of the AC, its functions, and its role in the regional governance system. Prior to the Ukrainian crisis and the escalation

of tensions between Russia and the West, Moscow's official position and Russian academic discourse favored the transformation of the AC from an intergovernmental discussion forum to a full-fledged international organization (with a formal charter, institutional structure, and power to conclude binding agreements).

With the outbreak of a "new Cold War" in East–West relations, however, both the Kremlin and the Russian expert community serving the government realized that any plans to make the AC an intergovernmental international organization were unrealistic. All the other Council member-states introduced economic sanctions against Russia. Five of them, being NATO member-states, cancelled military-to-military contacts with Russia, initiated military build-up in the North, and increased their military activities (including land and sea military exercises, air and sea patrolling in the Arctic region, etc.). Overall, mutual trust between Russia and the rest of the AC member-states was significantly undermined. Russian activities within the framework of the Council decreased in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis. It took some time to identify areas where cooperation between Moscow and the other Arctic countries was still possible and delineate them from areas of conflict.

For the above reasons, Russian diplomats and politicians stopped speaking about imbuing the AC with new legal powers and its transformation from a "discussion forum" into a full-fledged international organization.

There are at least two plausible explanations for why Russian leaders changed their minds about the Council's status. First, in the current—conflictual—situation, it is unrealistic to expect non-Russian AC member-states

1 V. Putin. Ukaz Prezidenta RF ot 26 oktyabrya 2020 g. no. 645 "O Strategii razvitiya Arkticheskoi zony Rossiyskoi Federatsii i obespecheniya natsional'noi bezopasnosti na period do 2035" [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation no. 645, October 26, 2020 "On the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Ensuring National Security up to 2035"]. <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/J8FhckYOPAQQfxN6Xlt6ti6XzpTVAvQy.pdf> (in Russian).

(especially the US) to agree to create a new full-fledged regional intergovernmental organization in which Russia would have equal standing with Western states. Second, under current circumstances, the AC, as an informal and flexible institution, is more efficient and preferable as a cooperative platform to a formal organization with rigid structure, rules, and procedures. As “classical” international organizations (eg., the UN and OSCE) demonstrate, antagonisms among member-states in turbulent times can bring the entire work of international institutions to a halt. The AC, by contrast, has not only “survived” the crisis in Russian–Western relations, but also made some progress in developing Arctic cooperation.

Another important change in Russia’s perceptions of the Council’s prospects relates to its role as a regional security provider. Before the Ukraine crisis, both Moscow and the expert community believed that with time, the AC should add a military security agenda to its mandate, becoming a sort of Arctic OSCE. However, the crisis compelled Moscow to abandon this idea. According to present-day Russian assessments, the Council should retain its role as an international body dealing only with “soft” security issues, such as socioeconomic problems, environment, conservation of biodiversity, climate change mitigation, maritime safety, search and rescue operations, local communities, the connectivity and social cohesiveness of Arctic regions, and Arctic research, among others.

Russia’s Priorities for Its Arctic Council Chairmanship

Based on numerous interviews and statements made by the Russian leadership and officials involved in preparations for the Russian AC chairmanship, one can identify the following policy priorities: (1) sustainable socioeconomic development of the Arctic region on the basis of environmentally clean technologies; (2) development of renewable sources of energy; (3) promoting a circular economy; (4) further development of Arctic shipping, including the Northern Sea Route (NSR); (5) environmental protection; (6) climate action; (7) social cohesiveness and connectivity in the region; (8) improving the well-being of those living in the Arctic, especially the indigenous peoples, and preserving their languages, cultures and traditions; (9) Arctic science diplomacy;

and (10) joint educational projects, including further support for the University of the Arctic.²

According to the Russian Government’s Action Plan to implement the Russian chair program, 116 events will be organized under the Council’s auspices and in Russia itself. Among these important events are the Conference of Ministers of Science (September 2021), the International Arctic Forum “The Arctic—A Territory of Dialogue” (December 2021 and April 2023), the Arctic Meteorological Summit (2022), the Arctic Indigenous Peoples Summit (2022), an Arctic summit (heads of the AC member-states) (April 2023), a ministerial meeting on environmental protection (May 2023), the World Summit on Climate Change and Thawing Permafrost (September 2023), and the Arctic Young Leaders Forum (fall 2023).³

Russia also plans to establish an international Arctic Hydrogen Energy Applications and Demonstrations station known as “Snowflake” (in the polar Urals) and organize international drifting expeditions on the icebreaker “Captain Dranitsin” (winter 2021–2022) and a self-propelled ice-strengthened platform (winter 2022–2023).

According to presidential advisor Anton Kobayakov, during the Russian chairmanship, 17 federal agencies, 11 members of the Russian Federation, and 12 universities and NGOs will take part in organizing the above events.⁴

As for institutional reform of the AC, certain changes are possible, including:

- Improving coordination of the Council’s structural elements and implementation process;
- Improving coordination of AC activities with other regional and subregional institutions (Arctic Economic Council, Arctic Coast Guard Forum, Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Nordic institutions, Northern Forum, etc.);
- Streamlining the secretariat system with the aim of making working groups’ secretariats more accountable to the main Council’s Secretariat;
- Proposing specific measures to implement the Council’s Strategic Plan, which is supposed to be adopted by the Reykjavik ministerial summit on May 20, 2021. This plan could provide for better coordination of AC activities not only with other regional institutions, but also with the UN bodies dealing with the Arctic, making the Council a real focal point of Arctic cooperation and regional governance.

2 S. Lavrov. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks at the 11th Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting, Rovaniemi, 7 May 2019. https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/2405/2019_Rovaniemi_Ministerial_Statement_by_the_Russian_Federation_English.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y; Interview Posla po osobym porucheniyam MID Rossii N.V. Korchunova gazete “Kommersant” 15 yanvarya 2021 goda [Interview of the Ambassador at large of the Russian MFA N.V. Korchunov to the “Kommersant” newspaper, 15 January 2021]. https://www.mid.ru/arkticseskij-sovet/-/asset_publisher/0vP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/4525318 (in Russian).

3 M. Mishustin. Plan osnovnykh meropriyatiy v svyazi s predsedatel’stvom Rossiyskoi Federatsii v Arkticheskom sovete v 2021–2023 godakh [The plan of major activities in relation to the Russian Federation’s chairmanship in the Arctic Council in 2021–2023]. April 30, 2021, no. 4161p-P2 (in Russian).

4 Yuri Trutnev proved pervoe zasedanie orgkomiteta po podgotovke i obespecheniyu predsedatel’stva Rossii v Arkticheskom sovete v 2021–2023 godakh [Yuri Trutnev held the first meeting of the organizing committee on preparations for the Russian chairmanship in the Arctic Council in 2021–2023]. February 17, 2021. government.ru/news/41562/ (in Russian).

- Making the role of permanent participants and observers more visible, not only in the activities of working groups and task forces, but also in the work of other AC units and structures.

Some AC budget reform can be expected under the Russian presidency as well. The AC Project Support Instrument, of which Russia has been the major donor since the institution's inception, could be further expanded. Further AC budget centralization, streamlining, and transparency are also possible. Moscow also plans to suggest creating an International Arctic Development Fund to make various joint circumpolar projects financially sustainable.

Possible Implications of Russia's AC Chairmanship

It should be noted that Russia has a reputation for being a responsible and active AC member-state. Moscow has supported all the major Council endeavors in areas such as sustainable development, energy security, environmental protection, climate change mitigation and adaptation, conservation of biodiversity, maritime safety, search and rescue operations, connectivity of Arctic regions, telecommunications, sustainable fisheries, and well-being of local communities (including indigenous peoples). Russia favored further institutionalization of the Council and strengthening its role in the regional governance system. In other words, Russia has a rather impressive record of being a "good citizen" on the Council.

At the same time, there have been serious changes in Russia's thinking about the AC since the Ukraine crisis. Moscow no longer wishes to transform the Council into a full-fledged international organization, instead preferring to keep the AC as an informal and flexible intergovernmental mechanism that is better able to respond to difficult times than "classical" international organizations. Russia has also abandoned its previous plans to introduce hard (military) security issues to the Council's agenda; it currently favors limiting the AC to the soft security sphere. These changes have made Russia's policies on the AC more acceptable even to the US, which has always been rather skeptical about the Council's role in Arctic governance.

As regards Russia's forthcoming AC presidency program, it will both ensure continuity of the Finnish and

Icelandic agendas and focus on sustainable development of the Arctic region using environmentally safe technologies. Moscow will try to operationalize and start implementation of the Council's new Strategic Plan and streamline the AC's organizational structure. That being said, it is unlikely that the Russian chairmanship will initiate any radical institutional reforms.

A close look at the Russian program raises some questions. First, it may be overly ambitious, and given the current tense relations between Russia and the rest of the AC member-states, there is no guarantee that it will be fully implemented.

Moscow, however, points out that the AC member-states' preliminary reaction to Russia's emerging presidential agenda was quite positive. John Kerry, Special Representative of the U.S. President on Climate Change, also expressed his interest in cooperation with Russia on climate-related issues in the Arctic.⁵ Despite the tense relations between the EU and Russia (including over the Arctic), EU Special Representative on the Arctic Michael Mann supported Moscow's AC chairmanship agenda, pointing out that it aims to solve the region's common environmental, socioeconomic, and cultural problems.⁶

Second, it is not entirely clear how Russia is going to reconcile its policy priority of developing renewable energy with its plans to increase hydrocarbon production in the Russian Arctic.

Moscow, however, responds to this criticism by saying that alternative and hydrocarbon energies can complement rather than contradict each other. For example, a significant part of the oil and gas produced in the Russian High North is exported, while in the region itself, consumption of LNG and alternative energy sources (nuclear, wind, solar, and tidal) is increasing. Moscow encourages Russian and foreign shipping companies to use LNG and light fuel instead of diesel for navigating the NSR. New wind, solar, and tidal power stations are being built and the deployment of additional floating nuclear power stations is planned.

In general, Russia will likely use its AC presidency both to promote its national interests in the High North and to increase the Council's role in an emerging regional governance system.

About the Author

Alexander Sergunin is Professor of International Relations at St. Petersburg State University and Nizhny Novgorod State University, Russia.

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5 O telefonnom razgovore Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova so Spetsial'nym predstavitelem Prezidenta SShA po voprosam klimata J. Kerri [On the telephone conversation between Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov and the Special Representative of the US President on Climate Change J. Kerry]. February 13, 2021. https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/ecology/-/asset_publisher/9jm0ASADm3qm/content/id/4571810 (in Russian).

6 Spetspredstavitel' ES po Arktike: Evrosoyuz nameren tesno rabotat' s Moskvoi vo vremya predsedatel'stva RF v Arkticheskom sovete [EU Special Representative for the Arctic: The EU intends to work closely with Moscow during the Russian presidency of the Arctic Council]. March 19, 2021. <https://www.interfax.ru/interview/756798> (in Russian).