

**Arctic Opportunity: The Benefits of Cooperation at the Top of the World**

Even the most casual observer of global affairs can infer that, presently, relations between the West and Moscow have reached a nadir not seen since the most contentious days of the Cold War. Debate on Crimea, Donetsk, and the Assad regime in Syria has headlined international news and raised tensions between Russia and the United States and Europe. Former areas of cooperation on terrorism, nuclear arms control, and regional security have suffered and been replaced by the imposition of economic sanctions and general distrust.

However, one bright spot, among otherwise dim prospects of cooperation, has been dialogue on the challenges and opportunities associated with the Arctic. The United States and Russia are permanent members of the Arctic Council and have worked diligently on issues related to climate change, sustainable development, and glacial melting<sup>i</sup>. Along with the six other Council members, Russia and the United States have promoted “an extensive legal framework for responsible management of the ocean” and pushed for an Arctic region free of nuclear weapons<sup>ii</sup>. Despite a number of geopolitical differences, the United States and Russian Federation could benefit from even greater bilateral relations and communication, with regards to Arctic affairs, on topics of environmental protection, access to natural resources, and procedures to deescalate the threat of inadvertent military conflict. The European Union also has an opportunity to grow its presence in the region and to use the Arctic Council as a platform to promote its relations with Moscow. As Finland takes over the chair for the next two years, the European Union is encouraged to use this venue to promote energy security and to build a stronger partnership with the Russian Federation.<sup>iii</sup>

The European Union had a greater presence on the Arctic Council as ad hoc members prior to a trade disagreement with Canada in 2008. Following the disagreement, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden were the only countries from the EU to remain as permanent members on the Council. Further tension between the EU and the Arctic Council members arose after the EU called for an international Arctic Treaty.<sup>iv</sup> The fear that developed following the EU’s suggestion for a treaty, which the Council perceived as an attack on the primacy of the Arctic states and Arctic affairs, led to a suspension in Arctic Council member applications.<sup>v</sup> Furthermore, additional EU member’s accession into the Arctic Council is less probable today due to the economic sanctions put in place by the EU Commission on Russia- an Arctic Council voting member. Therefore, it is ever more critical for the European Union to use their current members as a channel of communication to Moscow. As the EU’s voice wanes, the United States and Russia’s relationship in the North has progressed.

On September 11, 2015, “Russian and (American) negotiators signed a bilateral agreement to jointly combat unreported and unregulated fishing in the Bering Sea.”<sup>vi</sup> Lost among better publicized articles related to conflicts in the Ukraine and the Levant, this cooperative endeavor has been one of many efforts pushed by both sides in preserving the ecologic, economic, and security environment at the top of the world. U.S. and Russian coast guards have agreed to memorandums of understanding pertaining to search and rescue efforts, hazardous spill containment, and maintenance of navigation equipment<sup>vii</sup>. As polar ice continues to recede, the importance and challenges of maintaining protected sea lanes, environmental standards, and respect for indigenous populations, will become even more critical and it is imperative that both parties work together to solve the issues of an ever changing and increasingly important Arctic region.

Over the coming decade, there is still a great deal to be accomplished to improve both cooperation in the Far North and US-Russian geopolitical relations at large. From a security prospective, it is important that the West seeks clear and unabated lines of communication with Moscow regarding military intentions and deconfliction of air traffic over polar regions. Economically, it is critical that all parties adhere to international law and delineate exclusive economic zones in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, a treaty which must, and should, be ratified by the United States Congress. Most importantly, the protection of the environment and the limiting of human impact on Arctic ecosystems is not only in the interest of Russians, Americans, and Europeans, but all of mankind. By developing this framework for joint engagement in the Arctic, the United States, Russia, and the EU can maintain cooperative and mutually beneficial relations, divorced from preexisting conflicts, that can serve as templates for future areas of collaboration for many years to come.

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<sup>i</sup> Masters, Jonathan. “The Thaw Arctic: Risks and Opportunities.” Council on Foreign Relations. 16 Dec. 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> Farre, Albert. “Commercial Arctic shipping through the Northeast Passage: routes, resources, governance, technology, and infrastructure.” *Polar Geography*. 06 Dec 2014.

<sup>iii</sup> Nilsen, Thomas. ““If It Works in Finland, It Works Everywhere”.” *The Independent Barents Observer*. 25 Jan. 2017.

<sup>iv</sup> Depledge, Duncan. “The EU and the Arctic Council.” *ECFR*. European Council on Foreign Relations, 20 Apr. 2015.

<sup>v</sup> Depledge, Duncan. “The EU and the Arctic Council.” *ECFR*. European Council on Foreign Relations, 20 Apr. 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> Parlow, Anita. “U.S., Russia must keep talking, cooperating in Arctic.” *Alaska Dispatch News*. Anchorage, AK. 25 Sep 2015.

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vii **Parlow, Anita. "U.S., Russia must keep talking, cooperating in Arctic." Alaska Dispatch News. Anchorage, AK. 25 Sep 2015.**