



Polar Initiative Policy Brief Series  
**ARCTIC 2014: WHO GETS A  
VOICE AND WHY IT MATTERS**

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## **CONTINUING COOPERATION PATTERNS WITH RUSSIA IN THE ARCTIC REGION**

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### **Policy Recommendations**

- The United States should engage more in the Arctic, which is the main region in which cooperation patterns can be developed with Russia after the Ukrainian crisis. All Arctic players would stand to lose were Russia to retreat from these cooperation patterns, or become an unpredictable neighbor.
- Priority should be given to: joint projects on polar knowledge; people-to-people exchanges between Arctic regions; information sharing on environmental issues; and cooperation around improving transport infrastructure and communication.
- Russia should be supported in its efforts to open and securitize the Northern Sea Route, and to consolidate good neighborhood relationships with its Arctic neighbors.

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This policy brief series seeks to share with a wider audience the proceedings of the May 2014 conference at the Woodrow Wilson Center that explored emerging challenges facing Arctic governance, analyzed the goals and policies of stakeholder nations, and evaluated means for promoting international cooperation. The conference was co-hosted under the Wilson Center's Polar Initiative by the Center's Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, Asia Program, Canada Institute, China Environment Forum, Kennan Institute, and Global Europe Program.

## Overview

The 2014 Ukraine crisis has dramatically affected the U.S.-Russia relationship, which was already strained by several tensions concerning Russia's domestic evolutions: the Pussy Riot trial and law on foreign agents in 2012; the law against so-called gay propaganda in 2013; the Snowden issue, where Russia's actions put the United States in an awkward position; and the irreconcilable positions both countries hold on the Syrian crisis.

Today cooperation between Washington and Moscow is limited to two regions: Afghanistan and the Arctic. U.S.-Russia cooperation on Afghanistan is mostly a short-term overlap of interests, based on the need of the United States and NATO countries to use the northern transport corridors, which go through Central Asian states and Russia, for their (now ending) military presence. But it will likely wane in coming years if Moscow fortifies its right to oversee Central Asia and if Washington again turns its attention to its relationship with Pakistan.

Unlike with Afghanistan, U.S.-Russia cooperation in the Arctic is a long-term process and a forward-looking one, which delineates new spaces for state cooperation but also for interaction between state and non-state actors. Russia is already heavily involved in the Arctic region, an area that is relatively low on the list of U.S. priorities. This latter fact can only be lamented, since the region is unrivalled as a theater for testing notions of soft, smart power and of peaceful leadership.

## Russia – The Number One Actor in the Arctic

Russia is probably the least known actor of the Arctic region, but:

- Russia dominates the Arctic geographically (it encompasses half of the Arctic coastline, 40 percent of the land area beyond the Arctic Circle, and three-quarters of the Arctic population),
- Russia conquered the Arctic historically early on (in the 16th century),
- Russia is dependent on the Arctic for its economic development (around 20 percent of Russia's GDP and exports are generated north of the Arctic Circle),
- and Russia is setting the tone on strategic issues: escalation during the Cold War, and a de-escalation since then.

Not all the Arctic states share the same relationship with the Arctic portion of their territories; for some it is marginal, whereas for others it is more central. For Russia, the Arctic is an integral part of its Siberian landmass, with a reduced autonomy and a high dependency on the center, both politically and financially.

Russia's policy in the Arctic is driven by three elements:

- The search for new resources to maintain the country's energy superpower status. Russia's economic choices remain largely dependent upon the evolution of the world hydrocarbons market. The Russian authorities have to deal with the rising costs associated with maintaining Soviet-era energy infrastructure and diminishing human and technological capacities while simultaneously looking to develop new sectors for investment.
- The will to reassert state control over regions, territories, and demographic trends, and to impose a state-funded industrial revival. Moscow's policies have to be understood as a way to overcome the trauma of the collapse of the Soviet Union,

and are motivated by the fear of becoming a fragmented country and a failing state.

- The hope for international recognition and integration into the world community. As long as Russia perceives that it is not being marginalized from the international scene, it privileges a cooperative rather than a competitive framework with the other Arctic states, an approach that is less costly and from which Moscow stands to gain some advantage.

## Russia's Engagement in Arctic Cooperation

Russia has been successful in forging cooperation patterns with other state actors involved in Arctic issues. Since 2008–2009, Moscow has been noticeably focused on creating a highly cooperative “Arctic brand” and positioning itself as the co-leader of any prospective international cooperation on the region.

This cooperative pattern is based on the already long and positive role played by Russia in Arctic institutions. Even though Moscow has traditionally been disdainful of multilateral organizations with exclusively consultative functions, it is a determined actor both in the Arctic Council and in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. Patterns of cooperation in soft security were boosted by the adoption of the Agreement on Maritime and Aeronautical Search and Rescue (SAR), an agreement which the eight Arctic states negotiated under the auspices of the Arctic Council.

At the bilateral level, Russia's relations with the other Arctic coastal states are relatively friendly,

except sometimes with Canada. Norway, Finland, and Sweden all have succeeded in developing multiple bilateral projects with Russia, as much at the state level as between border regions. For Europe as a whole, the capacity to build partnerships with Russia in the Baltic Sea–North Sea–Arctic regions is a positive engine of the global Europe-Russia partnership, which has been weakened by many problems, from establishing a visa-free system to energy cooperation, and now the Ukraine crisis.

## Conclusion

Russia sometimes has a divergent agenda from the other Arctic players— on the role of NATO in the region, on the place given to indigenous issues, on the claims of non-Arctic players such as China. But Russia aims to harmonize with the international community by displaying its support for polar knowledge, the need for a coordinated search and rescue system, and its concerns for preserving the fragile ecosystems. Multilateralism and sustainability have become part of the Russian thematic arsenal on the Arctic, even if questions can be raised about Moscow's real desire to take environmental issues into account. For a decade, the Arctic framework, more cooperative than confrontational, has acted as a process for Russia's “socialization” in the international system and should be pursued. Everybody in the Arctic would stand to lose were Russia to retreat from these cooperation patterns or become an unpredictable neighbor.

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