

# Cooperation & conflict in the Arctic

## Will BRICS become an arctic institution?

by Prof. Glenn Diesen,\* Norway



Glenn Diesen.  
(Picture ma)

*Cooperation in the Arctic has traditionally been largely immune to geopolitics. Even during the great power conflicts of the Cold War, cooperation in the Arctic continued for mutually beneficial collaboration and trust-building. This era appears to have come to an end.*

Over the past three decades, relations between NATO countries and Russia have steadily deteriorated, and the Arctic has increasingly become the home of competing interests. The decision by the collective West to suspend cooperation with Russia in the Arctic Council over the war in Ukraine suggests that reliable cooperation in the Arctic has likely come to an end. As Russia reduces its reliance on NATO states and increases collaboration with non-Arctic powers in the high north, it is reasonable to expect that BRICS will eventually also become an Arctic institution.

### From common interest to competing interests

For a long time, the Arctic was considered a frozen desert without many competing strategic interests that would fuel rivalry. This ensured mutually beneficial cooperation for sustainable development, environmental protection, scientific discoveries, the protection of indigenous peoples, economic security and other areas of positive-sum cooperation exempted from power politics.

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As the Arctic becomes warmer and the ice recedes, the region is revealed to be an incredible treasure cove. Large amounts of energy resources have become available for extraction, and an Arctic maritime transportation corridor outside the control of the US Navy can outperform rival transportation corridors in both time and cost. There are subsequently great economic opportunities in the Arctic that can contribute to shifting the geoeconomic balance of power in the world from the West to the East, which implies that competition and conflict are to be expected in the future.

### From Greater Europe to Greater Eurasia

The eight Arctic states include Russia, with approximately half of the Arctic coastline, plus seven NATO states that pursue the post-Cold War objective of constructing a Europe without Russia and thus against Russia.

Reliable cooperation between Russia and the West in the Arctic was largely predicated on bridging competing concepts of post-Cold War Europe. A mutually acceptable post-Cold War settlement was never reached, which produced two competing visions for a new Europe. While Russia envisioned an inclusive Europe based on Gorbachev's concept of a Common European Home that would eliminate dividing lines on the continent, the West decided to move the dividing lines eastwards by expanding NATO and the EU to eventually include all states except Russia.

President *Bill Clinton* cautioned in January 1994 that NATO expansion could “draw a new line between East and West that could create a self-fulfilling prophecy of future confrontation”. Clinton eventually embraced NATO expansion, which implied abandoning key tenets of the *Charter of Paris for a New Europe* in 1990 and the principles of the OSCE in 1994 which both called for “indivisible security” in a Europe without dividing lines. Clinton’s Secretary of Defence, *William Perry*, explained that others in the administration knew NATO expansion would unravel the peace with Russia, although the sentiment in the Clinton administration was that Russia was weak: “the response that I got was really: ‘Who cares what they think? They’re a third-rate power’”.<sup>1</sup>

Russia continued to pursue its ambitions for an inclusive European security architecture until February 2014, in which the Western-backed coup in Ukraine signalled the death of its Greater Europe Initiative. In an even wider context, Russia’s 300-year-long Western-centric foreign policy since *Peter the Great* came to an end as Moscow instead began to look to the east for partnerships. At the same time, China began challenging the US global hegemony by striving for technological and industrial leadership, re-drawing the arteries of international trade with the *Belt and Road Initiative* and establishing new financial instruments of power.

The consequences for Arctic cooperation are immense. While Russia had previously considered Arctic cooperation as a part of the Greater Europe Initiative, it is now integrated into the Greater Eurasian Partnership. Russia’s vast energy resources in the Arctic are no longer a source of economic connectivity and integration with Europe and will instead fuel China and other industrial giants in the East.

Similarly, the Northern Sea Route will be an important part of physical economic connectivity in the Greater Eurasian Partnership to break the control of the US Navy over international maritime transportation corridors. China refers to this as the Polar Silk Road, thus conceptually including it in the Belt and Road Initiative, while India has also set its eyes on the Arctic as an extension of the Chennai–Vladivostok corridor. This great economic realignment is increasingly organised with non-Western technologies, ships, insurances, investment banks and currencies. As the economic infrastructure is de-Amer-

icanised and transformed, it is reasonable to expect the institutional framework to change. This will also occur in the Arctic.

### **Collapse of Arctic cooperation under Western-centric institutions**

Under a balance of power, cooperation usually entails harmonising interests between sovereign equals through mutual compromise. During the skewed balance of power of the unipolar era, cooperation changed fundamentally as Russia was expected to accept unilateral concessions. In a redivided Europe, the West promoted a system of sovereign inequality and took on the role of a political subject and a teacher with a civilising mission, while Russia was largely demoted to a political object and a civilisational student. In a pedagogic language, cooperation meant the West would socialise Russia by punishing “bad behaviour” and rewarding “good behaviour”. This subject-object or teacher-student organisation of relations was premised on Russia not having any other partners in the unipolar world order. Russia’s option was to either adapt and adjust to NATO dominance or be isolated.

This approach also changed cooperation in the Arctic as NATO asserts itself increasingly in the high north. *Mike Pompeo*, as the then US Secretary of State, challenged Russia’s claim to energy resources in the Russian Arctic and the exclusive right over the Northern Sea Route in a blistering speech at the Arctic Council in 2019. The US does not recognise the Arctic seas as internal waters, and the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS) that allows states to lay claim to exclusive rights was never ratified. Pompeo’s speech drew much criticism as the Arctic Council had previously not been a platform for aggressive Cold War rhetoric.

Other NATO members are adjusting to US visions of greater confrontations in the Arctic, which only increases as the Europeans must prove their value to the US as Washington seeks to pivot to Asia. Sweden and Finland have joined NATO, and US military bases are spreading



Video 1:01 min: Statement by Sen. Joseph Biden, 20 June 1997.



Video 2:42 min: Statement by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, 2019 in the Arctic Council.

across Scandinavia. An increasingly militarised Scandinavian region will be a new NATO frontline and thus unavoidably affect Arctic cooperation.

The decision to suspend cooperation with Russia in the Arctic Council to punish its “bad behaviour” made mutually beneficial cooperation hostage to geopolitics. The reluctance to even cooperate on mutually beneficial areas that have nothing to do with geopolitics, such as environmental protection, demonstrated that the current institutions may no longer be reliable.

### **Eurasian Arctic Institutions**

The main challenge for Russia is to facilitate cooperation with non-Arctic states and to pressure the West to return to the principle of making the Arctic a region of positive-sum cooperation. Developing Arctic competencies for institutions such as BRICS could achieve both aforementioned objectives.

To ensure a favourable balance of dependence in the Arctic, Russia invited various partners in Greater Eurasia to participate in the development of the Arctic. The vacuum left by the West leaving cooperation in the Arctic is possibly filled by companies from China, India, the United Arab Emirates, ASEAN states and others. Replacing the Western partners is not an easy task due to geographical realities and the conditions for investments. As non-aligned states,

their inclusion in the Arctic is a great opportunity to reduce the zero-sum format that defines the bloc politics of European security. In a multipolar system, the decision to bring conflict into the Arctic is punished as more reliable partners take over the business.

A multipolar Eurasian Arctic thus creates mechanisms that punish geopolitics as those engaging in economic sanctions or political disruption will see their role in the region diminished. The West and Russia are locked in a military confrontation for the foreseeable future, although there will be a great cost for the West if it continues to bring these geopolitical disputes into the Arctic.

Source: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/p/cooperation-and-conflict-in-the-arctic>, 17 March 2025

<sup>1</sup> Borger, J., 2016. Russian hostility 'partly caused by west', claims former US defence head, *The Guardian*, 9 March 2016.



Glenn Diesen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFc7PxY7l8Y&t=1s>