

Darkness at Noon?
As a New Cold War Arises, Arctic Indigenous
Homelands Find Themselves Increasingly
Embattled

by Barry Scott Zellen, PhD

Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine there's been a tectonic shift in Arctic diplomacy away from the region's long and exemplary post-Cold War history of circumpolar cooperation among the Arctic 8 (or 'A8') as the eight member states of the Arctic Council are collectively known. This shift started with a March 2022 boycott of the Arctic Council (AC) under Russia's two-year term as rotating chair (2021-23), causing the A8 to fragment into an 'A7' versus solitary Russia.⁸⁷ It accelerated with the rapid pivot by Finland and Sweden away from their long-established policies of neutrality (which established a stable buffer along Russia's Nordic frontier) to formal NATO membership (with Finland accessioning the alliance in 2023, and Sweden the next year in 2024, re-positioning NATO

⁸⁷ Zellen, B.S., "[As War in Ukraine Upends a Quarter Century of Enduring Arctic Cooperation, the World Needs the Whole Arctic Council Now More Than Ever](#)," *The Northern Review*, No. 54 (2023).

along that hitherto neutral buffer), formalizing the split between the A7 and Russia as a permanent fixture of Nordic geopolitics. With the sudden end of Finland's and Sweden's historic neutrality, so essential to the openness and cooperative dynamics of the Nordic region hitherto bookended by Norway (a founding NATO member since 1949) and Russia (NATO's principal opponent during Soviet times, and now again the alliance's principal nemesis), a tightening alliance solidarity and military integration began to emerge among the A7. Russia – whose northernmost territories represent half the Arctic region, and whose Arctic economy and population exceed all other AC member States combined - thus found itself increasingly isolated.⁸⁸

This concurrent strengthening of unity within the A7; consequent expansion of NATO to now include Finland and Sweden; and exclusion of Russia has greatly strained the preceding climate of circumpolar Arctic cooperation dating back to the end of the Cold War that had given rise to the phenomenon known to many as “Arctic Exceptionalism,” undermining Russia's turn as rotating chair of the Council, and putting most

⁸⁸ Zellen, B.S., “[Calculated Risk?](#)” *Intersec: The Journal of International Security*, April 2023, 12-14.

cooperative Arctic programs spanning the old East-West divide into a deep freeze that risked many of the gains achieved since the 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) brought East and West together across the circumpolar North.⁸⁹ This was followed in 2025 with the return to the oval office of President Trump, whose muscular courtship of Greenland – with an eye toward its annexation, and a comparable pivot in America’s relations with Canada, which Trump described as America’s “51st state” – has brought new internal tensions to the NATO alliance just as President Trump sought a rapprochement with Putin’s Russia, bringing us to a revised state of an Arctic divided where a newly emergent ‘A6’ (the remnants of the A7, minus the United States) and a newly emergent ‘A2’ (Russia, now joined by the United States, both perceived by the other Arctic states and their allies as mutual threats to the Arctic order).

Indeed, this in turn precipitated a hardening of borders through military deployments and fortifications, erecting a new ‘Ice Curtain’ across the Arctic that is no less divisive than the ‘Iron

⁸⁹ Zellen, B.S., *Arctic Exceptionalism: Cooperation in a Contested World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers), 2024.

Curtain' erected at the start of the last Cold War which physically partitioned Europe between competing military-political blocs. Pan-Arctic collaboration between the East and West was famously called for by former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (who passed away six months after the 2022 Ukraine war began) in his famed 1987 Murmansk Speech. Gorbachev offered the world an off-ramp for ending the Cold War (he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize three years later for boldly and successfully easing East-West tensions), aligning contemporaneously with the inclusive vision put forth by the Inuit Circumpolar Council.⁹⁰ This collaborative vision is widely shared by other Arctic Indigenous organizations that joined the ICC in partnership with the Arctic States to form the 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), the precursor to the AC – guiding the region toward a stable and cooperative post-Cold

⁹⁰ Gorbachev, M., [*Speech at Ceremonial Meeting on Occasion of Presentation of Order of Lenin and Gold Star to City of Murmansk*](#), Murmansk, Russia, October 1, 1987; Inuit Circumpolar Conference, *Principles and Elements for a Comprehensive Arctic Policy*, Center for Northern Studies and Research, McGill University, January 1, 1992.

War era with a shared vision of collaborative Arctic governance.⁹¹

This State-Tribe partnership was united by a multilevel commitment to collaboration at the local, tribal, regional, national and transnational levels that held strong from the 1991 establishment of the AEPS through to the 25th anniversary year of the Arctic Council in 2021, but when Russia invaded Ukraine the next year, this multilevel consensus would shatter under new pressures of war, quickly catalyzing NATO's expansion across the Nordic Region. NATO's Nordic expansion was portrayed as a win by the West and a necessary step to protect the Arctic from a newly menacing and expansionist Russia. While NATO's expansion was catalyzed by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, tensions between Russia and the West in the Arctic had already been on the rise since at least 2014 when its resurgence became evident, most dramatically with the annexation of Crimea and hybrid invasion of eastern Ukraine), and later reflected in updated Arctic policy statements and revised Arctic strategies in the West in the preceding years.

⁹¹ [Declaration on the Protection of Arctic Environment: The Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy](#), Rovaniemi, Finland, June 1991.

Because Arctic cooperation is rooted not only in East-West multilateral cooperation, but also in North-South State-Indigenous cooperation, this new bifurcation into re-emergent Arctic blocs threatens the transnational and Indigenous unity of the Arctic, with multiple Indigenous homelands undergoing a *de facto* partitioning, reversing the gains achieved since the Cold War's end.⁹² This has undermined the transnational unity of the Sami Council, whose member communities and regional organizations span the newly expanded Russia-NATO frontier⁹³ as well as that of the ICC, whose member communities and regional organizations, in turn, span the Russia-Alaska frontier, and who, like the Sami, find their homelands now in the crosshairs of an international struggle.⁹⁴ The Aleut International Association is similarly divided, though like the ICC, most of its member communities are on the

⁹² Zellen, B.S., "[Co-management as a Foundation of Arctic Exceptionalism: Strengthening the Bonds between the Indigenous and Westphalian Worlds](#)," *The Yearbook of Polar Law XIII* (Brill, 2022), 65–92.

⁹³ Russian Section of the Saami Council, "[The Russian section of the Saami Council has issued a statement regarding the current situation in Russia](#)," February 27, 2022.

⁹⁴ Inuit Circumpolar Council, "[Statement from the Inuit Circumpolar Council Concerning the Arctic Council](#)", March 7, 2022.

NATO side of the divide, but an outward flow of refugees since the war began across land borders between Russia and Finland and icy maritime borders between Siberia and Alaska indicates another potential vector of confrontation that could engulf the once isolated Arctic in an expanding armed conflict.

While the present hot war is largely confined to Eastern Europe, the risk of escalation beyond Ukraine is omnipresent, with Ukrainian forces having struck as far north as *Olenya*, just 92 km south of Murmansk and over 2,726 km from the Ukraine border, and as far east as *Buryatia*, over 5,883 km by road from Ukraine and just north of Mongolia – and the militaries of both sides expanding their activities in the Arctic region, with a rise in hybrid provocations by Russia in the Nordic region, and efforts by both Russia and its NATO-member neighbors to re-fortify the extended NATO/Russia military frontier that now runs from the Arctic to the Baltic and beyond. Indeed, more recent news reports indicate Ukraine has now extended its reach to Russia's far eastern city of Vladivostok, home of its Pacific fleet 9,168 km by

road from Ukraine.⁹⁵ As the *Kyiv Independent* reported: “Ukraine’s military intelligence agency (HUR) was behind explosions near Desantnaya Bay in Russia’s Vladivostok on May 30, which reportedly damaged military personnel and equipment, a source in HUR told the *Kyiv Independent*. If confirmed, the Vladivostok operation would be Ukraine’s furthest incursion into Russian territory - approximately 6,800 kilometers from the Ukrainian border.”⁹⁶ Note the distance calculated by the *Kyiv Independent* is measured in point-to-point air miles, but rail and road links across Russia bypassing the frontiers of Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China are much longer, over 9,000 km. Moreover, just two days later, the *Kyiv Independent* reported that Ukraine had successfully launched simultaneous drone strikes against Russia’s strategic bomber fleet dispersed far and wide across Russia, destroying over 40 aircraft at bases from as far afield as *Ukrainka* in Amur Oblast (7,708 km by road away) to *Belaya* near

⁹⁵ See: Denisova K (2025) [Ukraine Attacks Elite Russian Unit Base Nearly 7,000 km Away in Vladivostok, Source Claims](#), *Kyiv Independent*, 30 May.

⁹⁶ Denisova K (2025) [Ukraine Attacks Elite Russian Unit Base Nearly 7,000km Away in Vladivostok, Source Claims](#), *Kyiv Independent*, 30 May.

Irkutsk (5,275 km by road away) to *Olenya* (once again) near Murmansk (2,726 km away).⁹⁷

Ukraine's increasing capacity to strike distant Russian military targets as far away as the Russian Arctic and Far East has the potential to destabilize both the Nordic region as well as Northeast Asia, and bring war closer to remote Arctic Indigenous homelands.

Pressures on Arctic Indigenous leaders to support their countries in wartime have had something of a chilling effect on public expressions of criticism of the war effort and its impacts on pan-Arctic cooperation, primarily through increasing self-censorship by hitherto outspoken leaders, several who greeted news of the Arctic Council boycott in 2022 with surprise and concern.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ York C (2025) '[Russian Bombers Are Burning En Masse](#)' – [Ukraine's SBU Drones Hit 'More Than 40' Aircraft in Mass Attack, Source Claims](#), *Kyiv Independent*, 1 June.

⁹⁸ Quinn, E., "Eye on the Arctic: Condemnation of Ukraine invasion needed at Arctic Council but work pause may be a mistake, says Cdn Indigenous leader," *Radio Canada International* (March 4, 2022). Indeed, Eilis Quinn's article was removed from the Internet within a single day of publication at the request of the Indigenous leader interviewed, even though the article was accurate and the important points made by Dene National Chief Bill Erasmus regarding Indigenous exclusion were and remain widely supported across the circumpolar world – indicating one of the

But in Russia, the risks have proven even graver than self-censorship – where exile, imprisonment and even the omnipresent threat of physical harm or assassination in a nation where assassination remains a tool used by the State to silence its opponents are a gathering risk to outspoken Indigenous and opposition leaders, and disproportionate deployments of remote, non-Russian ethnic peoples to the front lines have hollowed out numerous Arctic villages of fighting age men, with non-Russian military casualties disproportionately high and tragic losses of Indigenous men widely noted by western media and think tanks.⁹⁹ Exiled Udege leader Pavel Sulyandziga, the outspoken founder and president of the Batani Foundation, an Indigenous rights organization, discussed his concerns while in exile of the long reach of Putin’s assassins with *Novaya Gazeta*’s Laura A. Henry – he fled Russia for the United States in 2017 after “numerous threats to Sulyandziga’s personal safety, as well as to his

first casualties of this war may have been open and free self-expression of transnational Indigenous perspectives that challenged the West’s unity of effort to isolate Russia in the Arctic.

⁹⁹ See: [Statement of the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia](#), March 11, 2022.

family members and colleagues, because of his political activism.”¹⁰⁰

Reports of disproportionate casualties among remote Indigenous communities are also worrisome and present a unique threat to the cultural survival of Russia’s Arctic Indigenous peoples. As Kennan Institute senior advisor Izabella Tabarovsky describes in the *Russia File* blog on the Wilson Center website: “Russia’s recruitment of soldiers to fight its war in Ukraine has disproportionately drawn from the country’s Indigenous peoples. Individuals from these communities – most notably Buryats, Tuvans, Kalmyks, as well as members of small-numbered nations – have been recruited at above-average rates and experienced higher-than-average combat death rates,” and “it is their specific ethnic communities that face the most long-lasting and potentially devastating consequences.”¹⁰¹ As Tabarovsky explains, “The smaller the Indigenous group, the higher the impact,” and “[f]or some communities, the stakes

¹⁰⁰ Henry, L., “[Exit, Pursued by a Bear](#),” *Novaya Gazeta*, January 20, 2024.

¹⁰¹ Tabarovsky, I., “[Russia’s Indigenous Communities and the War in Ukraine](#),” *The Russia File*, March 27, 2025.

are existential.”¹⁰² Citing exiled Udege leader Pavel Sulyandziga, the “42 small-numbered Indigenous nations living in Siberia and the Russian Far East” are particularly vulnerable, as “7 have fewer than 1,000 members, 12 have fewer than 2,000, and none exceed 50,000. For these groups, every loss to recruitment – and certainly every combat death – poses a potential threat to the survival of the entire ethnos.”¹⁰³

The existential nature of this threat to Indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic from the Yupik homeland in Russia’s eastern Arctic all the way to the Sami homeland in Russia’s western Arctic has caught the attention of worldwide media, with one article in the UK-based *Metro* ominously titled “The Indigenous People ‘Breathing Last Breath’ in Putin’s War 4,000 Miles from Home” and chronicling the war’s adverse impacts on Yupik communities in Russia’s Far East.¹⁰⁴ Buryat scientist and co-founder of the Free Buryatia Foundation,

¹⁰² Tabarovsky, I., “[Russia’s Indigenous Communities and the War in Ukraine](#),” The Russia File, March 27, 2025.

¹⁰³ Tabarovsky, I., “[Russia’s Indigenous Communities and the War in Ukraine](#),” The Russia File, March 27, 2025.

¹⁰⁴ Layton, J., “[The Indigenous People ‘Breathing Last Breath’ in Putin’s War 4,000 Miles from Home](#),” *Metro*, February 28, 2025 as reposted by *MSN.com*.

Maria Vyushkova, has worked to verify these claims of disproportionate Indigenous losses, as the *Moscow Times* has noted: “While Indigenous activists long sounded the alarm about the disproportionate mobilization of minorities for the war, Vyushkova was the first to back these claims up with hard data and shed light on the true scale of ethnic disparities in the confirmed Russian-side casualties.”¹⁰⁵ The war has also had a severe impact on the Sami of Russia’s western Arctic, where Moscow’s concerns about border security and regional stability under dual pressures of the war’s mobilization and NATO’s expansion have led to a recent rise in persecution of the Sami. As described in *The Guardian*, “Sami people in Russia are being forced to hide their identity and live ‘outside the law’ for fear of imprisonment and persecution, leading figures from the community have warned,” after “Russia’s Ministry of Justice added 55 Indigenous organizations to a list of terrorists and extremists” late last year.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ A transcript of her *Moscow Times* interview is available at “[‘Extermination of Entire Nations’: Scientist Maria Vyushkova Counts Russia’s Indigenous War Dead](#),” *Batani.org*, February 12, 2025.

¹⁰⁶ Bryant, M. “[‘They Want Total Control’: How Russia is Forcing Sami People to Hide Their Identity](#),” *The Guardian*, September 20, 2024.

As Borders Harden, Arctic's Exemplary Diversity of Transnational Viewpoints Diminishes

The Ukraine war has transformed both the practice of Arctic diplomacy and the conceptualization of Arctic security, which since the 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) and its evolution in 1996 to the AC¹⁰⁷ has been defined by its distinctive multilateral East-West (international) and multilevel North-South (Indigenous-State) cooperation. The resulting “mosaic of cooperation,” as famously described by Oran R. Young, has blessed the Arctic region with enduring stability rooted in this exceptional collaboration.¹⁰⁸

While Russia's invasion of Ukraine was an affront to all people of conscience, it was not Russia that broke ranks with its Arctic partners on matters of cooperation – it was the West, in response to Russia's aggression, without prior consultation with Arctic Indigenous peoples – thus threatening the very fabric of Arctic international cooperation.

¹⁰⁷ [Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council \(Ottawa Declaration\)](#), Arctic Council Archives, 1996.

¹⁰⁸ Young, O.R., “[Governing the Arctic: From Cold War Theater to Mosaic of Cooperation](#).” *Global Governance*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2005, pp. 9–15.

This re-emergent division of the Arctic into competing blocs risks silencing the plurality of voices that had hitherto defined the Arctic region and strengthened its multilateral and multilevel cooperation. Since Russia's invasion there has been a hardening of Arctic security to focus predominantly upon the increasingly palpable military threat from Russia against its neighbors, not just in the Arctic region but along much of its periphery, superseding in urgency and thus upending the prior pillars of a more holistic Arctic security (environmental, human, cultural and Indigenous) that had remained prominent since the latter days of the Cold War, but seemed to become (in relative terms) largely forgotten as the Arctic began to be re-militarized at a frenetic pace (first in the Nordic region in the wake of the Ukraine War as NATO expanded, and more recently in Arctic North America amidst new intra-Arctic tensions between the United States and its Arctic neighbors Greenland and Canada.)

On March 3, 2022, the seven western Arctic countries (the A7) announced their historic boycott of AC participation in protest of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, after over 25 years of continuous operations since its inaugural meeting in Ottawa on

September 19, 1996.¹⁰⁹ The boycott (self-described as a “pause”) was one of many similar responses by numerous organizations around the world, part of a quickly-achieved consensus within the West to isolate Russia in protest for its aggression against its neighbor.

However, the boycott caught several of the Arctic Council’s Permanent Participant organizations representing the Indigenous peoples of the region by surprise, as they were not consulted – a break with the spirit and long tradition of the Council, which stands first among the world’s many intergovernmental forums for its efforts to unite State and Indigenous interests, and for elevating State-Tribe consultation to the highest of normative values.¹¹⁰ While unequal in their institutional power, with the eight founding member States (the A8) holding all of the formal power, the Permanent Participants are essential partners in the formation

¹⁰⁹ Chamandy, A., “[Russian invasion puts Arctic Council’s future on ice](#),” *iPolitics.ca*, March 4, 2022; Koivurova, T., “[Is It Possible to Continue Cooperating with Russia in the Arctic Council?](#)” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, (June 29, 2022).

¹¹⁰ Zellen, B.S., “[The Arctic Council Pause: The Importance of Indigenous Participation and the Ottawa Declaration](#),” *Arctic Circle Assembly Journal*, June 14, 2022.

of the consensus that defines AC governance, and they have played a vital and important role in both the formation of the Council in 1996, and in its operations since. Indeed, the stability of the Arctic region owes much to the spirit of collaborative governance that aligns Indigenous and State interests, as reflected in the Council's structure as well as other novel and innovative governing institutions across the circumpolar Arctic. While surprised, most of the Permanent Participants endorsed the decision made by the democratic Arctic States, but not all with the same level of enthusiasm and most expressing concern for the future of Arctic cooperation.¹¹¹

Only one of the Permanent Participants, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), viewed increasingly as a mouthpiece for, and controlled by, Putin's government in Moscow, came out in full support of Moscow's "peacemaking" effort in Ukraine, though news media report that the Russian section of the Sami Council also publicly supported the invasion, albeit under enormous coercive pressures of the Russian

¹¹¹ Gwich'in Council International, "[Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine](#)," March 3, 2022.

State, which treats opposition to the war as treason, with the risk of arrest, detention, exile and assassination having a chilling effect on public opposition to the war.¹¹² RAIPON's support for Moscow's military action outraged a network of exiled Indigenous leaders formerly associated with RAIPON, who in turn launched a competing organization, the International Committee on Indigenous Peoples of Russia (ICIPR) which issued its own counterstatement ten days later.¹¹³

Rethinking Russia's Isolation and the Risk to Circumpolar Climate Cooperation

Ironically, even as Russia embarked on its expansionist war, Moscow remained committed at the outset of its 2021-2023 term as rotating AC chair to cooperation with its circumpolar neighbors, regardless of their alliance membership. That Russia could and would

¹¹² Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, Document No. 64 (March 1, 2022); Lothead, D., "[Russian invasion of Ukraine creates strain for Arctic organizations: Russia is member of Inuit Circumpolar Council and Arctic Council](#)," *Nunatsiaq News*, March 7, 2022.

¹¹³ [Statement of the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia](#) (March 11, 2022).

continue nurturing a collaborative Arctic even as it engaged in regional conflicts as far afield as Syria and Ukraine (with only one brief interruption, when in 2014 the US and Canadian AC representatives boycotted a Moscow meeting in protest), was the conventional wisdom by both the Council's member States and its Indigenous Permanent Participants from 1996-2022.¹¹⁴

Russia still represents fully half of the circumpolar world and isolating it from Arctic cooperation punishes more than Moscow: it put at risk the very foundation of Arctic cooperation and the region's stability. Governing the Arctic effectively, and peacefully, and sustaining multilateral commitment to protecting the Arctic environment and mitigating the collective dangers of climate change, continued to require Russia's participation to succeed. Arctic Indigenous peoples recognized this from the very outset of the war. As Edward Alexander, Co-Chair of Gwich'in Council International (GCI), a Permanent Participant of the AC, observed: "There is no military solution to the

¹¹⁴ Zellen, B.S., "As War in Ukraine Upends a Quarter Century of Enduring Arctic Cooperation, the World Needs the Whole Arctic Council Now More Than Ever," *The Northern Review*, No. 54 (2023).

problems in the north. We want diplomatic solutions. We do not fight with our friends to solve problems. We talk and makes compromises.”¹¹⁵ While leaders of the A7 emphasize Russia’s gathering threat to the West, Arctic Indigenous leaders convey their empathy for Russia’s Indigenous peoples; Chief Gary Harrison of the Arctic Athabaskan Council (AAC), a fellow Permanent Participant organization on the Council, said he was “deeply concerned about the indigenous population of Russia, who lives behind the new iron curtain. ‘Almost all of us have people in the Russian Arctic. We need to know how they are doing. For example, have we heard that the Russian authorities make indigenous people join the military, and this worries us.’”¹¹⁶ Re-engaging across the Arctic’s borders, as so strongly desired by the Permanent Participants of the Council, remained ever more essential, even longer universally popular among the Council’s member States.

¹¹⁵ Jonassen, T., “[Arctic Indigenous Leaders: We Did Not Shut Down](#),” *High North News* (March 31, 2023).

¹¹⁶ Jonassen, T., “[Arctic Indigenous Leaders: We Did Not Shut Down](#),” *High North News* (March 31, 2023).

The Long-Road Back: Rebuilding Inclusive Multilateral/Multilevel Arctic Cooperation

Restoring Russian and Indigenous engagement – as Norway incrementally did under its term as rotating chair of the Arctic Council from the start of its term in 2023 through its end this year¹¹⁷ - amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine and the complex aftermath that will follow, will help ensure the Arctic remains the very zone of peace imagined by Gorbachev, whose passing at such a tumultuous time reminds us of the fragility of the Arctic peace we have long known.

Stepping back from these efforts to restore the Arctic's prior inclusivity would jeopardize the very existence of the Council, but as the gavel was symbolically passed from Norway to Denmark last month under the leadership of Denmark's new Arctic Ambassador, veteran Greenlandic diplomat Kenneth Hoegh, he presented a hopeful vision of unity among the Council's State and Indigenous constituents, with "Indigenous Peoples and

¹¹⁷ Jamal, M., "[Arctic Council resumes work on limited scale, without Russia](#)," *Nunatsiaq News*, June 22, 2022; Young, O.R., "Can the Arctic Council Survive the Impact of the Ukraine Crisis?", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (December 30, 2022).

Communities in the Arctic” topping the list of “five priority areas” for Denmark’s chairship, and observing: “The work of the Arctic Council is important not only for the Arctic States, but also for the Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic, for us here in Greenland and for the Kingdom.”¹¹⁸

While some scholars and diplomats have suggested that the Arctic Council may no longer be viable as presently configured,¹¹⁹ the Council has survived the collapse of consensus before, and on an issue of great importance – when the United States, during the first Trump presidency, broke ranks with its fellow Council members on the issue of climate change which had hitherto united the entire Council,

¹¹⁸ Arctic Council, “[The Kingdom of Denmark’s 2025-2027 Arctic Council Chairship Program](#),” April 11, 2025. After Indigenous Peoples and Communities, the priorities are as follows: 2. Sustainable Economic Development and Energy Transition Solutions; 3. Oceans; 4. Arctic Climate Change; and 5. Biodiversity. For a thoughtful, informative and timely discussion by Marc Jacobsen and Svein Vigeland Rottem of the geopolitical tensions facing the Arctic Council as Denmark takes over the Council’s rotating chairship, see: Jacobsen, M. and Rottem, S.V., “[The Arctic Council in the Shadow of Geopolitics](#),” *The Arctic Institute*, May 12, 2025.

¹¹⁹ Exner-Pirot, H., “[Blog – Arctic Exceptionalism is Over. Who Will Tell the Diplomats?](#),” *Eye on the Arctic*, *RCINet.ca*, May 11, 2023; Rottem, S.V., “[The Arctic Council in Danger](#),” *High North News*, March 28, 2023.

both its member States and Permanent Participant organizations.¹²⁰ As Evan Bloom prematurely argued six months into the Ukraine War, “Arctic exceptionalism was a mirage,” and America and its allies must now “search for other ways to promote Arctic cooperation.”¹²¹ In contrast to naysayers who prematurely proclaimed the death of Arctic exceptionalism, I believe the Arctic Council can unite the entire Arctic once again – but bold thinking reminiscent of Gorbachev’s and the ICC’s vision at the Cold War’s end is again required.¹²²

As War Continues, Risk of Escalation to the Arctic and Beyond Remains

Russia’s war has now entered its fourth year, devolving into a violent war of attrition that has brought destruction to both eastern Ukraine and western Russia, with each country eventually occupying the soil of its neighbor, and escalation beyond the current theater of war always possible

¹²⁰ Pompeo, M., “[Looking North: Sharpening America’s Arctic Focus](#),” Speech in Rovaniemi, Finland, May 6, 2019, U.S. State Department Archives.

¹²¹ Bloom, E., “[After a 6-month Arctic Council pause, it’s time to seek new paths forward](#),” *Arctic Today*, September 6, 2022.

¹²² Zellen, B.S., *Arctic Exceptionalism: Cooperation in a Contested World*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2024.

– though thus far horizontal escalation beyond Ukraine’s and Russia’s borders has been avoided, even amidst substantial allied military support on both sides. Though in recent months, particularly since the return of President Trump to the White House in January, there has been a pronounced cooling in America’s support for Ukraine and instead a push to bring the warring parties to the peace table, which in turn constrains the risk the conflict will escalate beyond the present theater of war at this stage in the fight. Of particular concern regarding the war’s potential escalation was widespread news coverage of a significant deployment of North Korean troops, said to total 12,000, to aid Russia in its defense of the embattled Kursk region in February – an intervention predicated on the recent Treaty of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, signed in June 2024 and which came into effect this past December, and which was implemented after the surprise Ukrainian incursion on to Russian soil in August 2024.

The goal of the DPRK intervention was not further territorial conquest in Ukraine, but instead the expulsion of Ukrainian forces from Russia’s Kursk region (a goal that was achieved, but at reportedly

staggeringly high casualties suffered by DPRK troops, which have since been withdrawn from the front lines). The DPRK intervention fell short of catalyzing a geographic expansion of the war, instead restoring stability to the battlespace, which has come to more resemble the static trench lines of World War I than the dynamic battles of maneuver of World War II. But it raised concerns that a war over territory in Eastern Europe could escalate to engulf distant regions as far from the front lines as Russia's Arctic and Far East. While shrouded in both controversy and mystery, Russia acknowledged North Korea's contribution to its war effort on April 26, 2025, when Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, "commended the role of North Korean fighters in the liberation of the Kursk Region. 'I want specially to note the participation of servicemen of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in liberating border areas of the Kursk Region who in accordance with the Treaty on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between our countries rendered considerable assistance in crushing the Ukrainian army's combat group that had launched an

incursion,’ Gerasimov said.”¹²³ Two days later, North Korea also acknowledged its intervention, as reported by North Korean news service, *KCNA*: “WPK Central Committee Highly Praises Combat Sub-units of Armed Forces of DPRK for Performing Heroic Feats in Operations to Liberate Kursk Area of Russian Federation.”¹²⁴ This was discussed the next day in the *38 North* blog, published by The Henry L. Stimson Center: “North Korea’s Acknowledgement of War Participation.”¹²⁵

Representing the conventional view of DPRK’s intervention, consider Samuel Ramani’s February 19 analysis, “North Korea’s Military Intervention in Kursk: A High Casualty Learning Curve,” in *38 North*.¹²⁶ Ramani writes: “On February 8, North

¹²³ Tass, “[Russia’s military chief reports on complete liberation of Kursk Region](#),” *Tass*, April 26, 2025.

¹²⁴ KCNA, “[WPK Central Committee Highly Praises Combat Sub-units of Armed Forces of DPRK for Performing Heroic Feats in Operations to Liberate Kursk Area of Russian Federation](#),” *KCNA.kp*, April 28, 2025.

¹²⁵ See Rachel Minyoung Lee, “[North Korea’s Acknowledgement of War Participation](#),” *38 North*, April 29, 2025.

¹²⁶ Author Samuel Ramani, Ph.D., is an Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and geopolitical risk consultant. Samuel is the author of two OUP books on Russian foreign policy: *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great*

Korea's (Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK) Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un issued his strongest statement of support yet for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. By vowing to 'invariably support and encourage the just cause of the Russian Army,' Kim implicitly acknowledged North Korea's direct participation in the Ukraine War. Kim's comments followed warnings from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that Russia-North Korea cooperation would continue to expand and reports that a second wave of North Korean force deployments to Russia's Kursk region was imminent. While it appears as if North Korea is staying the course, its military performance thus far should give it room for pause. During the first three months after their arrival in October 2024, North Korea lost 40 percent of its 11,000-strong force contingent. An estimated 1,000 of those troops perished while 3,000 more were too severely injured to continue

Power or Bellicose Pretender? (Oxford University Press/Hurst, 2023) and *Putin's War on Ukraine: Russia's Quest for Global Counter-Revolution* (Oxford University Press/Hurst, 2023). He is also a regular contributor to media outlets that include *Foreign Policy*, the *BBC World Service* and *CNN International*, and frequently advises NATO governments on security issues relating to Russia, North Korea, Afghanistan, the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.

fighting. Presumably due to these staggering rates of attrition and urgent needs for additional training, North Korean troops were noticeably absent in Kursk in mid-January.”¹²⁷

A contrarian viewpoint – one largely overlooked by the mainstream media and major strategic studies and defense organizations – has been presented by Ted Snider in his February 5, 2025 article, “North Korean soldiers in Russia: Were they ever there? Their reported sudden departure last week raises a lot of questions,” on the *Responsible Statecraft* blog published by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.¹²⁸ In his article, Snider observes that: “The reported number of North Korean troops in the Kursk region before they reportedly left late last month has been steadily inflated, finally ballooning to 12,000. But aside from photos of captured soldiers the Ukrainian government has claimed are proof, witnesses appear scarce.” He suggests the deployment may be nothing more than a

¹²⁷ See: Ramani, S., “[North Korea’s Military Intervention in Kursk: A High Casualty Learning Curve](#),” 38 *North*, February 19, 2025.

¹²⁸ Snider is a regular columnist on *Antiwar.com* and *The Libertarian Institute*.

propaganda campaign to justify American permission to strike deeper into Russian territory using long-range ATACMS: “So, that rabbit – if it is a rabbit – can be pulled out of the hat again if needed. If North Korean troops really were in Kursk, and they really were wasted and decimated, then their presence didn’t justify the escalatory risk of granting permission to Ukraine to fire U.S. supplied long-range missiles deeper into Russian territory. If they really weren’t, then the whole affair was a sleight of hand to justify that decision.”¹²⁹ While intriguing, the limited acceptance of this contrarian theory and the eventual acknowledgement by all major stakeholders on both sides of the conflict despite the risks inherent in the intervention and the embarrassing losses experienced by the DPRK troops deployed has left the conventional wisdom largely unscathed – and with it the specter of a regional war in Europe escalating horizontally to engulf not only the distant Russian Arctic and Far East, but allied nations of those regions.

¹²⁹ See: Snider, T., “[North Korean soldiers in Russia: Were they ever there? Their reported sudden departure last week raises a lot of questions.](#)” *Responsible Statecraft*, February 5, 2025.

While the kinetic battlespace has not for the most part spread beyond the current theater of war, it has profoundly and adversely affected Indigenous Peoples and communities of Russia's vast Arctic far from the battlefields in Ukraine and southwestern Russia. As discussed in detail above, Indigenous peoples in Russia have found themselves disproportionately recruited to fight on the frontlines even as Moscow has endeavored to protect Russian conscripts from such dangers, emptying northern villages of fighting-age men and leaving its own Arctic peoples in great distress and under intense pressure to support the war, or to go into exile or underground if they don't.¹³⁰

Ukraine, in its efforts to reduce the offensive threat posed by Russia, has launched drone attacks against Russia as far north as the Olenya air base on the Kola Peninsula, just 92 km south of Murmansk and 2,676 km from the Ukraine border,

¹³⁰ Tabarovsky, T., "[Russia's Indigenous Communities and the War in Ukraine](#)," *The Russia File*, March 27, 2025; Layton, J., "[The Indigenous People 'Breathing Last Breath' in Putin's War 4,000 Miles from Home](#)," *Metro*, February 28, 2025 as reposted by *MSN.com*; "['Extermination of Entire Nations': Scientist Maria Vyushkova Counts Russia's Indigenous War Dead](#)," *Batani.org*, February 12, 2025; and Bryant, M., "['They Want Total Control': How Russia is Forcing Sami People to Hide Their Identity](#)," *The Guardian*, September 20, 2024.

and has bombed rail lines in the Russian Far East used for ferrying troops and war material, targeting the Severomuysky Tunnel and the nearby Chertov Most (Devil's Bridge) in northwestern Buryatia on the Baikal Amur Mainline (BAM), just north of Mongolia and over 5,883 km from the Russia-Ukraine border – bringing war into the Arctic region for the first time since World War II, and risking further instability in both the Nordic region and Northeast Asia.¹³¹

As improbable as it may have seemed in 2022, the ingredients for an escalation to expand the war to the Nordic region are now in place, as they are for Northeast Asia as well. NATO's alliance structure and famous commitment to collective defense brings the entire Nordic region a worrisome step closer to war, just as war finds its way to the very doorstep of the Nordic region in the Kola Peninsula. Moreover, Arctic Indigenous peoples are increasingly caught in the middle of this

¹³¹ See: Jordyn Dahl, "[Ukraine Drones Reportedly Hit Russian Airfield in Arctic](#)," *Politico*, July 28, 2024; Tom Balmforth, "[Ukraine Conducts New Attack on Russian Railway Deep in Siberia](#)," *Reuters*, December 1, 2023; and Aliaksandr Kudrytski and Daryna Krasnolutska, "[Ukraine Behind Rail Explosion in Russian Far East, Official Says](#)," *Bloomberg*, November 30, 2023.

cauldron of conflict, their homelands divided by what increasingly appears to be a new Arctic Cold War. Reconciliation in this environment will not be easy. But NATO is, first and foremost, an alliance of democracies bound by shared values and inclusive political cultures. At the same time, the Arctic NATO member States share their own, dark histories of colonization and Indigenous displacement, a tragedy of collective history of northward State expansion that has in recent decades been increasingly addressed – with much progress made (reflected in the emergence and empowerment of Arctic Indigenous organizations and their leaders, as illustrated by Governor General of Canada Mary Simon, who is a former ICC chair, and Denmark’s Arctic Ambassador and chair of the Arctic Council Kenneth Hoegh, who is a Greenlandic diplomat and former head of Greenland’s representation to the United States in Washington).

Efforts to transcend this long history, empower marginalized voices, and to build a cooperative and peaceful Arctic together, where Indigenous and State collaboratively govern, have been a great accomplishment since the last Cold War – providing the world with an alternative model for

reconciliation overcoming deep asymmetries of power and traumas of history. What was achieved in the 1990s can (and many hope will) be achieved again – with renewed boldness of effort and inclusivity of vision across our long-open, but rapidly closing, Arctic borders.

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