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The Arctic. Between Conflict and Cooperation

From Zone of Peace to Hotbed of Conflict?

The Geopolitical Importance of the Arctic

Michael Däumer

The Arctic is increasingly becoming the focus of geopolitical interests. When Mikhail Gorbachev declared the Arctic a "zone of peace" in Murmansk in 1987, it was a sign of hope for constructive cooperation between the Arctic states, but today – especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in violation of international law – a grim picture is emerging of power struggles, mistrust and militarisation.

The "battle for the North Pole"[1] is on everyone's lips, with global climate change considered to be a major factor. On the one hand, the warming of the Arctic is leading to dramatic changes in climate with global consequences. On the other hand, valuable raw materials are thought to exist on the Arctic seabed in particular, coveted not only by the Arctic littoral states themselves. Thawing ice is opening up the possibility of new sea and trade routes that provide more direct access to raw materials and key markets. While the multilateral agenda of Arctic governance previously focused on protecting the region as a global climate regulator, this concern is now losing political weight, while the importance of geostrategic as well as economic interests is increasing.

The Arctic and Its Terrestrial Areas

There is as yet no internationally agreed and universal, legally binding definition of the Arctic.[2] A frequently used definition is that of the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP). According to this definition, the Arctic comprises the land and sea areas north of the Arctic Circle (66°32'N), north of the 62nd parallel in Asia and north of the 60th parallel in North America, respectively. In some zones, other criteria such as political boundaries and the extent of permafrost are also taken into account.[3] The eight Arctic states ("Arctic 8") are Denmark (with Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Canada, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States. Of these, five countries – Denmark, Canada, Norway, Russia and the United States – are Arctic coastal states (the "Arctic 5"). Iceland lies just south of the Arctic Circle and is therefore not counted as one of the direct littoral states of the Arctic Ocean.

At the centre of the Arctic lies the Arctic Ocean, which up until now has been frozen all year round. The Arctic has a surface area of around 16.5 million square kilometres – about eight per cent of the Earth's surface. Three trans-Arctic routes cross the Arctic Ocean:

- the Northwest Passage (NWP), which passes through Canadian waters,
- the Transpolar Sea Route, which extends directly across the central Arctic Ocean (i.e. international waters),
- the Northeast Passage (NEP), which runs north of the Russian and Norwegian coasts.

The Russian-administered[4] Northern Sea Route (NSR), which runs along the coast of Russia and through its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), is considered part of the NEP.

Covering a surface area of some five million square kilometres, the Russian Arctic stretches along 24,140 kilometres of coastline from the Barents Sea in the western part of Russia to the Bering Strait in the east, bordering the US state of Alaska. With more than half of the entire Arctic coastline[5] in its territory, Russia can be considered as the "Arctic hegemon".[6] In terms of population too, it accounts for the largest share – 70 per cent – of the region's four million inhabitants, around ten per cent of whom are indigenous.

Fig. 1: Arctic Circle and Arctic Transport Routes with "Arctic 5" and "Arctic 8" States

Source: own illustration based on Paul 2020, n. 28, p. 8. Map: © Peter Hermes Furian, AdobeStock.

Governance of the Arctic

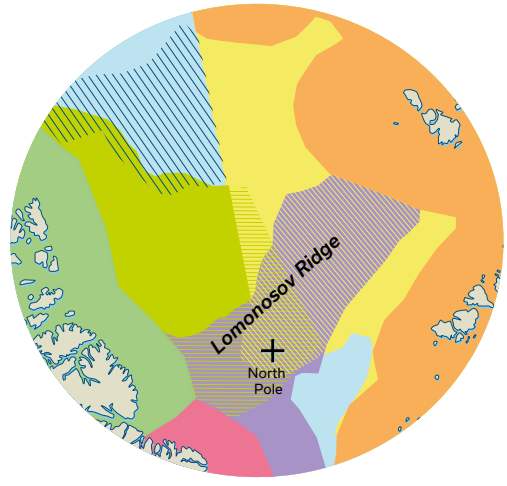
Unlike the Antarctic, there is no general international treaty governing the Arctic due to its geographical complexity. Arctic governance structures are based on various national laws and regulations of the Arctic states, international treaties and customary international law.[7] The majority of these regulations relate to Arctic climate protection and environmental conservation, procedures for clarifying territorial claims, and the cooperation and conduct of the Arctic states in the areas of research, science and business. The most important regulatory structures include the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), adopted in 1982, and the Arctic Council, established in 1996.

In order to prevent non-Arctic states from pursuing their interests unilaterally in the region, the Arctic Council has invited them as observers.

UNCLOS provides the overarching international legal framework for the Arctic. The United States is the only Arctic country not to have ratified the agreement to date because of a dispute with Canada over the status of the Northwest Passage, which Canada considers to be its territory. UNCLOS stipulates the boundaries of the respective territorial waters and the EEZs, which extend 200 nautical miles from the coastal strip into the sea.[8] In EEZs, the respective coastal state has exclusive rights on the use of raw materials. Among the most important provisions of UNCLOS is Article 76 (definition of the continental shelf), which gives the five Arctic coastal states the right to extend their EEZs if they can provide scientific data demonstrating that submarine geological formations are a "natural extension of the continental shelf".[9] Applications to this effect are decided on by the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). A coastal state is thus able to exercise sovereign rights over the continental shelf for the purpose of exploring it and exploiting its natural resources (Article 77 UNCLOS). The prospect of claims to valuable raw materials in the Arctic Ocean has prompted a number of Arctic states to submit applications to the CLCS. Russia's claim to the 1,800-kilometre Lomonosov Ridge, which runs from the New Siberian Islands across the central part of the Arctic Ocean under the North Pole to near Greenland, is currently being examined. Numerous natural resources are believed to be found there, including oil and gas, as well as rare earths, platinum, diamonds, copper and zinc. Due to the limited extent of geological exploration in the Arctic Ocean, however, estimates of potential resource types and quantities to date are largely unconfirmed.[10]

The most important intergovernmental forum for Arctic governance is the Arctic Council, whose members include the six NATO countries United States, Canada, Iceland, Norway,

Fig. 2: Overlapping Territorial Claims at the Lomonosov Ridge



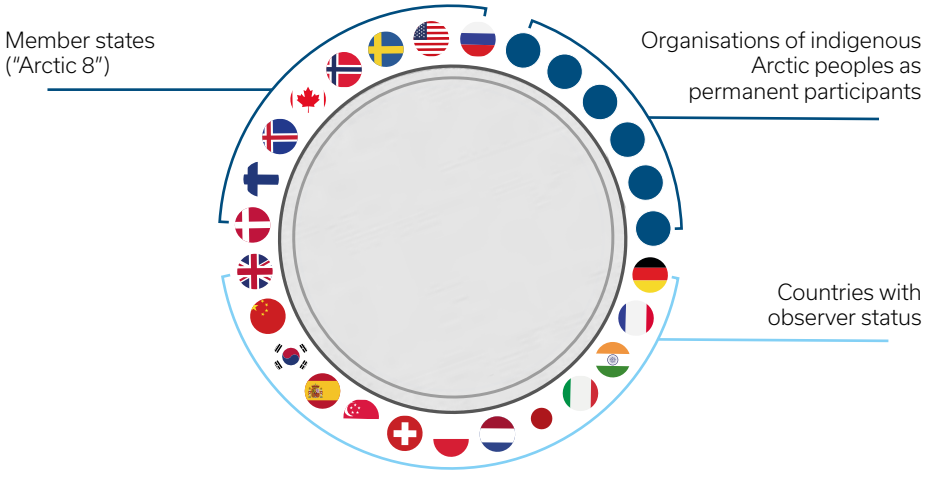
EEZ Canada | Continental shelf Canada (> 200 nmi) | EEZ Russia | Continental shelf Russia (> 200 nmi) | Continental shelf USA (> 200 nmi) | EEZ Denmark | Continental shelf Denmark (> 200 nmi) | Unclaimend areas.
Source: own illustration based on IBRU Centre for Borders Research, Durham University, here in: Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden 2020: Sweden's strategy for the Arctic region, p. 13, in: https://bit.ly/3UTD3hs [13 Dec 2022].

Finland and Denmark with Greenland, the likely future NATO country Sweden, along with Russia. There are also six so-called Permanent Participants representing indigenous peoples. The Council was set up with the intention of leaving the governance of the Arctic predominantly in the hands of the Arctic states.

Initially, the Arctic Council considered the region primarily as a scientific research area. In the beginning, the Council was "less a political body and more a scientific forum",[11] with ministers rarely attending meetings. With the global impact of climate change, however, international interest in the Arctic has increased. In order to prevent non-Arctic states from pursuing their interests unilaterally in the Arctic states' polar backyard, they were invited to participate in the Arctic Council as observers. In addition to Germany (since 1998), twelve other states are admitted as observers.[12] The admission of China, India, Japan, Singapore and South Korea in 2013 was geopolitically significant. The Asian states had been pushing for this for a long time – especially China, which regards itself as being a "Near-Arctic State"[13] in geographical terms. By admitting these states, the Arctic Council has sought to integrate them into its structures. As a major Arctic player, the EU participates in Council meetings without observer status. Most observer countries and the EU have published their own Arctic strategies in recent years,[14] including Germany (2013/2019), China (2018) and India (2022).

By establishing the Arctic Council, the Arctic states aimed to bring about a peaceful and constructive reconciliation of interests both among themselves and with the indigenous peoples. In order to ensure the smooth running of the Council's work, it deliberately refrained from dealing with security and military policy issues. In this way, the region was to be kept largely free of conflict even in times of political crises – something that is generally referred to as "Arctic exceptionalism".[15] Accordingly, the Council's work was able to focus on climate protection and environmental conservation, Arctic economic development and scientific cooperation. For example, the Arctic Council has created legally binding agreements on cooperation in search and rescue (2011) and marine oil pollution response (2013) as well as on improving international scientific cooperation (2017).

Fig. 3: Structure of the Arctic Council



The six organisations of indigenous Arctic peoples include the Inuit Circumpolar Council, the Saami Council, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), the Aleut International Association (AIA), the Arctic Athabaskan Council and the Gwich'in Council International. Source: own illustration.

Remilitarisation of a region: The crew of the Russian nuclear submarine Yekaterinburg in the port of Murmansk. After a period of relative calm, Russia is not the only country that has returned to increased military presence in the Far North. Photo: © Roustem Adagamov, AP, picture alliance.

In order to close the gap in security policy[16] that resulted from the structuring of the Arctic Council, the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable was established in 2010 by Norway and the United States, also involving Germany, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom in addition to the Arctic states, while the Arctic Chiefs of Defence Staff was established in 2012 by the Arctic states as a dialogue forum for security policy, albeit on a non-binding basis. In addition, NATO invited Russia to engage in dialogue in the NATO-Russia Council on issues relating to military security in the Arctic region too. However, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 in violation of international law led to the suspension of cooperation with Russia in all security policy forums.

As the ice melts, Moscow sees its security dwindling in the High North.

Climate Change and the "Geopoliticisation" of the Arctic

The Arctic is of global significance as an "indicator of change within the climate system as a whole".[17] Up until a few decades ago, the climatic conditions in the Arctic meant that this inhospitable region was by and large geopolitically protected. This changed dramatically with the advent of climate change and the rapid warming of the Arctic. Germany's Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research predicts that, due to rising temperatures, large parts of the Arctic Ocean and land masses "will very likely be ice free before 2050, at least temporally".[18] The resulting global rise in sea level and the thawing of permafrost soils and glaciers will have severe consequences for infrastructures and ecosystems.[19] These developments are already clearly visible in Alaska, Canada and especially in Siberia. Entire villages are at risk of collapse, transport routes are falling apart and supply networks such as oil and gas pipelines are becoming unstable. This in turn is causing the disruption of production and supply chains, as well as food and water shortages.

Climate change creates not only environmental problems but also security ones. This concerns Russia, for example: as the ice melts on Russia's northern coast, Moscow sees its security dwindling in the High North, since the sea ice has provided natural protection from access to Russia's northern border for centuries. This "loss of security" reinforces its "traditional siege mentality".[20] As such, the Russian interpretation of climate change as a threat to national security is politically relevant; from Moscow's perspective, it justifies the (re)militarisation of the Arctic region.

What is more, the "geopoliticisation" of the Arctic is largely driven by new economic and trade opportunities. Climate change is making the Arctic more accessible while at the same time exposing valuable resources, although there is still very little precise knowledge about the types and quantities of raw materials to be found there. New sea and trade routes are emerging or might emerge along the Russian and Norwegian coasts (Northeast Passage), through the islands of Canada (Northwest Passage) and across the still frozen North Pole in the Arctic Ocean (Transpolar Sea Route), making the distances between important markets considerably shorter, but also playing an increasingly important role for intra-Arctic traffic in connection with resource extraction.[21] In this way, the Arctic states stand to gain influence over future Arctic maritime and commercial traffic. Not only is this a major challenge facing the Arctic states themselves, it is also attracting new players such as China, India and Japan. These countries' interests are both economic and political. Numerous states are positioning themselves strategically in the Arctic by setting up their own Arctic research stations and undertaking marine expeditions in international waters in the Arctic Ocean.

The Arctic is considered the largest largely unexplored area for raw material extraction on earth. Huge energy resources such as oil and gas are thought to be located in the region, 85 per cent of them in shelf areas,[22] along with large quantities of mineral resources (such as

gold, diamonds, zinc, copper and platinum, as well as rare earths).[23] Evidence of mineral resources has only been found on land in the Arctic to date. While it is considered likely that there are mineral resources in the seabed of the Arctic Ocean, for example in continental fragments such as the Lomonosov Ridge, mining them is uneconomical in the long term and technologically difficult.[24] Fuelled by numerous studies on raw materials potential dating back to the 2000s, including those undertaken by the US Geological Survey (USGS),[25] a veritable hype began to emerge around Arctic raw materials. Given the high level of global demand for raw materials, international interest in their exploration and extraction has increased significantly.[26] The Arctic countries are observing these developments in their northern backyard with great scepticism. Russia in particular fears a race for raw materials outside its EEZ, which is why Moscow is making territorial claims through the CLCS that go beyond its current EEZ. Russia regards the Arctic as an "integral, geostrategically and economically significant part"[27] of its territory.

Nationalisation of a large part of the hitherto international Arctic waters is opposed not only by the United States and the EU, but also by China.

As already mentioned, Russia lays claim to the 1,800-kilometre Lomonosov Ridge, a point it strongly affirms in its 2020 Arctic Strategy. The country already symbolically raised its territorial claims there in 2007 by planting a Russian flag made of titanium. However, these claims overlap with those of Denmark and Canada, potentially leading to conflict if the CLCS does not decide in Russia's favour. While a decision on this is not expected for several years, it is already becoming apparent that Russia is increasingly failing to respect decisions made under international law. Should the CLCS decide in Russia's favour, it remains to be seen how other countries with interests in the Arctic will position themselves vis-à-vis Russia.

Nationalisation of a large part of the hitherto international Arctic waters under Russian control would not only lead to uncontrollable and unsustainable extraction of raw materials and mineral resources, it would also severely impede free navigation in the Northeast Passage. The United States and the EU are opposed to this in particular, as they see considerable potential for conflict and coercion by Russia. There would also be a conflict of interest between Russia and the self-proclaimed "near-Arctic" neighbour China, which is expanding its power base in the High North with a view to playing a role in determining the governance arrangements for the Arctic. This is because the Arctic Ocean is also of strategic importance to Beijing as a shipping route. For example, China's strategic economic project of a Polar Silk Road aims to "diversify transport routes and increase its own security of supply".[28] Growing Chinese naval activity is to be expected in the Arctic Ocean, particularly in the event of conflict, with the aim of securing key supply routes by military means.

Another issue that might cause tensions is the legal status of the Northwest Passage through northern Canada, which has not yet been recognised internationally as being Canadian. Canada regards the waterways of the Northwest Passage as being its national territory, which the United States and the EU reject as a matter of principle. For example, Canada considers the archipelago in the Far North as a zone over which it claims the right to exert sovereign and administrative control. The United States and the EU insist that these are international waters that link the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans and are thus open to ships for transit.[29] The guidelines of Germany's Arctic policy state that the current navigation and transit rights are to be preserved, for example. The aim is to "counter existing geopolitical tensions in the region and prevent conflicts (of interest) and potential crises in the Arctic".[30]

This means that the increasingly navigable routes might become subject to conflicts of interest. At the Arctic Council meeting in May 2019, then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo highlighted the importance of the new shipping routes as they "could become the 21st century Suez and Panama Canals",[31] at the same time issuing warnings to Beijing that its efforts to expand infrastructure in the region and work with Russia to develop sea routes risked turning the Arctic into another area of competing territorial claims, similar to the South China Sea.[32]

Security in the Arctic

The Arctic Council and the security policy forums were designed to help keep the Arctic free of conflict. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, security dialogue with Russia was suspended. Already in the early 2000s, tensions had risen as a result of Russian military modernisation programmes in the Arctic, but the West and NATO wanted to give the then fledgling Arctic Council a chance to exert a positive influence on Russia's Arctic policy.

Since Russian foreign policy's reflex is to prioritise security policy in the Arctic too,[33] the consequences of climate change for its national security and the deterioration of its relations with the West since 2014 prompted Moscow to secure its interests in the Arctic by military means.

On Russia's northern coast, for example, numerous military bases dating back to the Cold War era have been reactivated, expanded and equipped with state-of-the-art weapons technology, also with nuclear capability, including S-400 medium-range missiles capable of reaching NATO territory.[34] President Vladimir Putin paid particular attention to modernising his Northern Fleet of strategic nuclear submarines on the Kola Peninsula near Murmansk, which could pose a threat to NATO as the sea ice recedes. The Northern Fleet would have easier access to the North Atlantic as a result, especially in the area of the naval choke point between Greenland, Iceland and the northern end of the United Kingdom. In times of crises, Russia could not only impede maritime traffic between Europe and North America in this area, known as the GIUK gap, it could also severely or even permanently disrupt the critical infrastructure (especially communication lines) that lies at the bottom of the Atlantic.

Fig. 4: Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap (GIUK Gap) and North Atlantic Undersea Cables

Source: own illustration based on Hermann, Rudolf 2018: Die Nato will den "Flugzeugträger Island" wieder mehr nutzen, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 13 Feb 2018, in: https://nzz.ch/ld.1356585 [27 Feb 2023]; TeleGeography 2023: Submarine Cable Map, in: https://submarinecablemap.com [27 Feb 2023].

The West – especially the United States and NATO – has responded more resolutely to the ongoing militarisation of the Arctic by Russia than it previously used to do. European Arctic states such as Sweden and Finland are increasingly complaining of Russian military activity in the Arctic and reacted to the Russian invasion of Ukraine by heralding a change in security policy. With the (expected) accession of these countries to NATO, for example, seven out of the eight Arctic states will be NATO members, potentially resulting in restrictions on the freedom of movement of Russian naval units in the Arctic region. Since spring 2021, Norway has

The Arctic as an "arena of global power and competition": Then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at a 2019 Arctic Council ministerial meeting in Finland. Photo: © Mandel Ngan, AP, picture alliance.

hosted a US B-1 bomber squadron at its Ørland base. The United States is also accelerating the military aspects of its Arctic programme with the aim of building defensive military capacity in the US Arctic region. The service branches of the US Armed Forces and the US Coast Guard have each developed their own Arctic strategies. NATO is also positioning itself more emphatically as an "antipole to Russia (and China)".[35] In its Strategic Concept published a few months after the onset of the war in Ukraine, the Alliance describes Russia's capability to "disrupt Allied reinforcements and freedom of navigation across the North Atlantic" as a "strategic challenge to the Alliance".[36] By the same token, NATO is warning against China, which it says is using political, economic and military means to increase its power projection and seeking to undermine the rules-based international order. The EU takes a similar view in its Arctic Strategy published in 2021: here, the Arctic is placed in a geostrategic context in which China, Russia and the United States vie for influence in the region. For this reason, the EU sees its extensive engagement in Arctic affairs as a geopolitical necessity.

The "geopoliticisation" of the Arctic reached the Arctic Council long before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the Arctic Council ministerial meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland, in May 2019, for example, then US Secretary of State Pompeo described the Arctic as an "arena of global power and competition".[37] According to Pompeo, this marks the beginning of a "new age of strategic engagement [...] with new threats to Arctic interests and its real estate".[38] In this way, the Trump administration ascribed a geopolitical importance to the Arctic that would complicate constructive negotiations. The Biden administration still relies on the Arctic Council even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but geopolitical conflicts of interest continue to block cooperation with Russia.

Outlook

Tension in the Arctic is higher than it was just a few years ago – and might increase even more. As long as the war in Ukraine continues, no improvement can be expected. Since March 2022, policy work on the Arctic Council, which is currently chaired by Russia, has been suspended. Norway is due to take over the Chairmanship in May 2023.

Washington is aware that excluding Russia from the Arctic Council in the long term could also entail strategic drawbacks.

Meanwhile, China's intention of playing an active and dominant role in the Arctic is not helping to alleviate tensions. With its late entry as a security and regulatory actor in the High North – having long been a reluctant Arctic state – the United States is now seeking to position itself to "effectively compete and manage tensions" within the framework of Washington's new ten-year Arctic strategy.[39] This new strategy comprises four pillars: security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, and international cooperation and governance. In the area of security, Washington relies on military deterrence, a presence in the Arctic, and joint security with allies and partners so as to reduce the risk of unintended escalation.[40] The new superpower policy being pursued by Russia and China harbours potential for conflict in the long term, not least between these two countries.

In view of the current challenges to Arctic cooperation, the US advocates further support for Arctic institutions, including the Arctic Council, with the aim of positioning them to be able to manage the impact of increased activity in the region. In doing so, it focuses above all on compliance with international rules, norms and standards in the Arctic.[41]

Washington is aware that excluding Russia from the Arctic Council in the long term could also entail strategic drawbacks for the United States. On the one hand, both the civil and the military infrastructure in Alaska is weak. This is partly due to the lack of icebreakers, which are urgently needed to expand infrastructure, secure coasts, explore raw materials potential on the seabed and conduct research into climate developments. For example, the United States (like China) has only two icebreakers, while Russia has around 50.[42] Even India has six smaller icebreakers in operation. On the other hand, it is important for the United States to re-integrate Russia into the governance framework of the Arctic Council. The aim is to prevent Russia from unilaterally establishing a competing Arctic organisation in which non-Arctic countries such as China and India are represented as full members. Since the start of the Russian war against Ukraine, Arctic cooperation between Russia, China and India has intensified. It is certainly true to say that many states are currently actively working to capitalise on the breakdown of Arctic cooperation between Russia and the West.[43] On the one hand, as in the case of China, it is a matter of permanently securing access rights in the Northern Sea Route and thereby exerting influence in the Arctic region in the long term. On the other hand, it is in the interest of the emerging countries in particular to come to an agreement with Russia on access to raw materials in the Arctic, especially since these countries still rely heavily on fossil energy sources. In return, Moscow hopes to attract major investments and above all technological cooperation in view of Western sanctions.

The seven Western Arctic states agree that Arctic cooperation makes little sense without Russia as the largest Arctic country, especially since weather services, coastguard operations, and search and rescue services depend to varying degrees on cooperation with Russia. The same applies to globally significant polar climate research programmes and sea ice monitoring.[44] In June 2022, some research projects were resumed under the Arctic Council that are able to continue without Russia's participation.

At present, the "Arctic 7" states can only discuss Arctic issues with Russia in international organisations responsible for the Arctic such as the United Nations. The Western Arctic states will deliberately avoid provoking Moscow by establishing a new institution without Russia or by appropriating the Arctic Council and permanently excluding Russia.

The Arctic Council is currently experiencing what is probably its most serious crisis to date. A return to constructive Arctic cooperation is urgently needed in view of the climate challenges facing humanity, but this is virtually impossible at the present time. The outcome of the war in Ukraine will be a key factor here. Should Russia win the war, the rules-based international order would be permanently disrupted and cooperation with the Western Arctic states would be rendered impossible on a lasting basis. A defeat of Russia with the restoration of Ukraine's full sovereignty would allow for cooperation in the Arctic Council, but on the condition that Moscow commits to respecting the rules-based international order. This would require regime change in Moscow as much as anything, which is currently not foreseeable.

Ultimately, Moscow is also aware that multilateral cooperation in the Arctic is necessary for Russia too. However, the Russian leadership completely underestimated the reaction of the West after the invasion of Ukraine, and assumed that the Western Arctic states would continue negotiations in the Arctic Council as they did after the annexation of Crimea. It is ultimately to be expected that Russia will attempt to implement its Arctic strategy even without the Arctic Council, relying on support from China in particular.

– translated from German –

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