

**Arctic**

## Arctic chill: western nations fear China and Russia will exploit regional tensions

Arctic Council severed ties with Moscow after it invaded Ukraine, increasing risk of a polar region 'with no rules'



A helicopter lands on the deck of a Royal Navy warship during a Nato training exercise off the coast of Norway in March © Danielle Bochove/Bloomberg

**Richard Milne**, Nordic and Baltic Correspondent YESTERDAY

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Western countries are worried that China and Russia could try to exploit growing geopolitical tensions in the Arctic to increase their influence over the region and its abundant natural resources.

In a series of interviews with the Financial Times, senior western policymakers expressed fears that the era of Arctic exceptionalism — when the polar region was insulated from tensions elsewhere — was over.

The seven western members of the Arctic Council, the main regional body, [stopped co-operating](#) with Russia on everything from protecting the environment to discussing the rights of indigenous people after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year.

“It can’t be business as usual,” said Jonas Gahr Støre, prime minister of Norway, which took over as chair of the Arctic Council from Russia last month.

Finnish foreign minister Pekka Haavisto said he was concerned that the resulting gridlock might create “an Arctic with no rules, or an Arctic area with no common goal for climate change. It would be free for everyone to use for shipping routes, for raw materials.”



A senior policymaker from another Arctic state added: “The worry is if Russia and China make their own kind of Arctic Council.”

At the end of his tenure as chair of the Arctic Council’s senior officials committee in May, [Russia](#)’s Nikolai Korchunov said Moscow could withdraw from the organisation if it was not invited to participate in events during the Norwegian presidency.

“Not inviting Russia’s representatives to the Arctic Council events would mean a violation of its rights as a member country, and in this case it would hardly be possible for our country to continue participating in the activities of this organisation,” Korchunov said in an interview with state news agency Tass.

He said in light of the council’s “weakening role”, which he blamed on western members, Russia was reaching out to other countries and organisations and “already conducting an active dialogue on the Arctic agenda” with them.

Russia’s relations with [China](#) over the Arctic have traditionally been tense. But since the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine that appears to be changing. During a visit by Chinese leader Xi Jinping to Moscow in March the two sides announced the creation of a joint working body for the development of the Northern Sea Route, a shipping route and Russia’s flagship Arctic development project.

The Arctic is the most rapidly warming region of the world and this is leading countries both close and far away to eye its abundant raw materials, from oil and gas to rare earths.

Members of the Arctic Council had tried to keep geopolitical frictions out of the region, often using the slogan of “high north, low tensions” to underscore how issues around the environment, shipping and mineral exploitation in the polar area could only be solved jointly. But Russia has in recent years significantly increased its military presence in the Arctic, leading [others such as Denmark](#) and Norway to respond by building up new defence installations in the high north.

China, which is one of several non-Arctic countries with [observer status](#) at the Arctic Council, launched plans for a “[Polar Silk Road](#)” in 2018 and has steadily tried to increase its influence in what is one of the last frontiers for exploration on the planet.

Attempts by Chinese state-owned companies to build airports in Greenland, an autonomous part of Denmark, were stopped in 2019 after the US urged Copenhagen to counter the plans.

Mette Frederiksen, the Danish prime minister, who will visit Greenland next week after meeting US President Joe Biden at the White House, said: “Let us not be naive. We can’t be naive about Ukraine and we can’t be naive about the Arctic region.

“Will things just go back to the normal way of doing things in the Arctic Council? I don’t think so when it comes to Russia. Is China playing a role in the Arctic region? Yes they are. Should we be aware of this? Yes.”

Haavisto said he was worried Arctic exceptionalism was over. “There are also many other countries that see the use of the Arctic and its raw materials as a tempting issue . . . We have a very strong common interest to work together.”

Norway is fighting to keep the Arctic Council going by doing as much as it can with the other members — the US, Canada, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland — while keeping Russia in the cold.

“The Arctic Council is here to stay,” said Støre. “There is so much in common — in terms of challenges and opportunities — that it would be completely irresponsible to look away from the [organisation].”

But diplomats concede that Russia’s de facto exclusion from the council creates a “clear dilemma”. The senior Arctic policymaker added: “On the one hand, the agenda

we want to promote in the Arctic doesn't make much sense without Russia. It makes up 40 per cent of the Arctic. On the other hand, we can't co-operate with Russia right now. This is what we're struggling with."

*Additional reporting by Polina Ivanova in Berlin*

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