

# Russia's Clashing Ambitions: Arctic Status Quo and World-Order Revision

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## Abstract

Moscow explicitly challenges what it depicts as a Western-led world order amid shifts in the global balance of power. However, while Russia has emerged as a fundamentally revisionist power in the global system, it has sought to maintain the status quo in Arctic regional governance, that is, to preserve the institutions and arrangements that have cemented its status as a great regional power on top of the world. This study, challenging the notions of Arctic exceptionalism and a distinct Arctic regional order, points out an obvious inconsistency in Russia's approach. It argues that Moscow's attempt at dismantling the world order while maintaining the status quo in the Arctic seems bound to fail simply because the current rules-based, liberal international order has also been the order of the Arctic. In conclusion, this study finds that Russia so far has been more successful in diminishing its own Arctic status and isolating itself from formal as well as informal arrangements than revising them.

## Keywords

Arctic Council; Arctic exceptionalism; Arctic governance; liberal international order; regimes; Russia

## 1. Introduction

Emboldened by profound shifts in the global balance of power, Moscow has set out to demolish a world order it depicts as Western-led and disadvantageous to Russia. The Kremlin would rather pursue a multi-order world, which includes a new and more favorable Greater Eurasian order (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022). “The formation of a more equitable multipolar world is underway,” states Russia's president-approved 2023 foreign policy concept (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023, para. 7), which establishes Russia as one of the “powerful and independent centers of the modern world” (para. 16, line 3).

Amid the US relative decline, Russia has violated the 1945 UN Charter's prohibition against the use of force and other fundamental tenets of the rules-based order by invading Ukraine, first by its annexation of Crimea and attack on Eastern Ukraine in 2014 and later by the full-scale invasion of its neighbor in February 2022.

This study examines how Russia's violent break with the world order affects a regional part of the establishment, namely the institutions and arrangements that can be conceptualized as Arctic regional governance (e.g., Heininen et al., 2015; Wilson Rowe, 2020) or an Arctic regime complex (Young, 2012). These concepts comprise treaties, inter-governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, non-state actors, transnational networks, ad hoc arrangements, and/or informal arenas for regional interaction.

While Moscow may regard the prevailing world order—still widely referred to as the liberal international order—as unfavorable, Russia has shown strong support for a rules-based order in the Arctic region. Developments in the law of the sea from 1945 through the 1970s added vast maritime areas to the jurisdiction of the coastal state. The legal concepts of a 200 nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the continental shelf, which in Russia's case extends far into the Central Arctic Ocean, put an unimaginable wealth of natural resources exclusively in Russian hands. The 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea further allows the Kremlin to regulate international shipping through ice-covered seas inside Russia's EEZ, that is, most of the Northeast Passage (UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, Art. 234). In its 2022 maritime doctrine, Moscow concluded that maritime sovereign rights, obtained through gradual developments in the law of the sea, had become vital to Russia's security and its very existence (Russia Maritime Studies Institute, 2022).

In addition to legal developments, Russia has played a defining role in exclusive forums that have set the regional agenda and shaped Arctic governance (Pedersen, 2012). These include the Arctic Council (the Arctic Eight), established as the preeminent forum for international cooperation in the region, and the even more exclusive ad hoc constellation of states littoral to the Arctic Ocean (the Arctic Five, i.e., Russia together with the US, Canada, Denmark, and Norway; Pedersen, 2012). In Ilulissat in 2008, the Arctic Five solemnly proclaimed they had a unique and special stewardship role that derived from their "sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction in large parts of the Arctic Ocean" (Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008, p. 1). Other regional arrangements, equally favorable to Russia, have included formal and informal arrangements with other Arctic states pertaining to issues such as fisheries, search and rescue, socio-economic development, and nuclear proliferation.

While Russia is a self-declared revisionist state in the global system, scholars assert that Russia is a status quo advocate in an Arctic regional sub-system (e.g., Exner-Pirot & Murray, 2017, p. 59). Summarized by Konyshov and Sergunin (2014), most Russian experts argue that:

Moscow does not pursue a revisionist policy in the Arctic. On the contrary, Russia is a status quo power which wants to solve all disputes in this region by peaceful means, with the help of international law and international organizations. (p. 324)

This study finds that Russia's seemingly incompatible mix of revisionist and status quo ambitions may prove to be just that—incompatible. Data for the following analysis has been drawn from governmental strategies and policies, Arctic Council archive documents, member states' chairmanship programs, academic publications, reports, new articles, and commentaries.

## 2. Theoretical Concepts

Some key concepts in this study (system, structure, and order) have primarily been developed and emphasized by scholars commonly referred to as structural or neo-realists. Waltz asserted that the system level of analysis reveals the permissive causes of war and conflict. The distribution of power in the system, i.e., the structure, defines the constraints that confine all states (Waltz, 1979).

The order of a system is usually established and maintained by its dominant power(s) (Gilpin, 1981; Keohane, 1984; Mearsheimer, 2019). Order refers to various institutions and arrangements, including regimes, rules, and values, which facilitate and govern interaction among the units of the system. During the last few decades of US hegemony, the prevailing—or perhaps crumbling—world order has been referred to as rules-based, US-led, Western, or liberal. The components of this (hereinafter) liberal international order range from the definite and treaty-based UN Security Council to a more indefinite “civic identity” (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999).

One of the fundamental questions in international relations theory is whether an order can outlive the structural conditions under which it was created. Some scholars have suggested that the liberal international order may indeed survive the end of US hegemony (e.g., Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999; Ikenberry, 2018; Keohane, 1984). Their reasoning runs parallel to propositions found in international institutionalism and regime theory, where scholars maintain that an institution (a regime) may “take on a life of its own” and shape, as much as they reflect, their founders’ interests (Jervis, 1999, p. 59). Another point of relevance is the argument that institutions can erode the power of those who play the dominant role in establishing them by giving voice, legitimacy, and forms of influence to new or weak actors (Jervis, 1999, p. 61).

Others—notably Modelski—have proposed that all historic world orders (which Modelski referred to as “international political systems”) have been advanced by corresponding world powers. As world powers rise and fall, orders are destined to a cyclic pattern, each usually lasting a little over a century (Modelski, 1978). Mearsheimer asserts that the world order at any given time must reflect the system’s structure, whether unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar (Mearsheimer, 2019), a line of thinking he seems to share with the Kremlin.

States that seek to change the order are commonly referred to as revisionists, while those who wish to preserve it are labeled status-quo powers. The status quo–revisionist dichotomy, evolving from Carr’s (1939) conception of satisfied as opposed to unsatisfied powers in the world system, was initially linked to powers that seek self-preservation versus those that seek self-extension (Wolfers, 1962). “Because self-extension almost invariably calls for additional power, countries that seek self-extension tend to be the initiators of power competition and the resort to violence,” Wolfers writes (1962, p. 96). Organski and Kugler suggest that the dominant power will likely be the most satisfied with the order it advances and maintains, while smaller powers will be more dissatisfied. When dissatisfied nations grow powerful and surpass the dominant power, they become contenders and challengers; thus, the conditions for war follow (Organski & Kugler, 1980). While the status quo–revisionist conceptual dichotomy has been subject to debate and critique, it serves to illustrate Russia’s fundamentally different ambitions in, and approaches to, the global system and the Arctic region.

Russian revisionism is not the only challenge to the liberal international order, whose state of health is widely debated. Ikenberry suggests the liberal international order is in a crisis, temporary or permanent

(Ikenberry, 2018), while Mearsheimer asserts that, by 2019, the order was crumbling and had been destined to fail from the start (Mearsheimer, 2019). Indeed, the liberal international order had been undermined amid a surge of Islamic fundamentalism, the rise of a more ambitious China, anti-globalization movements, as well as challenges from within, such as right-wing populism, nationalism, and authoritarian governments in the US and Europe (Börzel & Zürn, 2021, p. 283). Thus, exogenous as well as endogenous factors threaten the order (Börzel & Zürn, 2021, p. 285). Russia has exploited some of these internal grievances, and some populists and far-right groups in the West have found the Russian-promoted alternative to the liberal international order attractive (Adler-Nilsen & Zarakol, 2021, pp. 625–626).

One part of the liberal international order—the Arctic governance system—has been uncontested and stable (Heininen, 2018). Components of that system include formalized, permanent arrangements, such as the Arctic Council, the Arctic Economic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers, and several treaties and agreements on or relevant to the Arctic region. In addition, it comprises informal constellations and venues, such as the ad hoc Arctic Five, Arctic conferences, seminars, and workshops, where state and non-state representatives intermittently convene. These arrangements can also be conceptualized as Arctic regional governance or an Arctic regime complex. A regime complex is defined as “a network of three or more international regimes that relate to a common subject matter; exhibit overlapping membership; and generate substantive, normative, or operative interactions recognized as potentially problematic whether or not they are managed effectively” (Orsini et al., 2013, p. 29).

### 3. Russia in Arctic Governance Prior to 2022

Since Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987 envisioned a heavily militarized Arctic turn “zone of peace,” some scholars have anticipated a region that could emerge as a “territory of dialogue” (e.g., Exner-Pirot & Murray, 2017; Young, 2011) that would be subject to “innovative governance arrangements capable of ensuring the future of the Arctic as a zone of peace” (Young, 2011, p. 193), and remain governed by a strong and dynamic governance framework (Stokke, 2011). In the Arctic, Russia indeed observed agreed-upon principles, norms, and rules that governed the interactions of actors within the region (Levy et al., 1995, p. 274).

The most prominent forum for regional cooperation, the Arctic Council, boosted Russia’s legitimacy and great-power status in the region. The exclusive club became an arena for Russia to promote its interests and gain insight into other Arctic states’ policies and decision-making processes. From the mid-1990s, Russia’s engagement in formalized forums for cooperation in the Arctic region allowed Moscow to pursue its Arctic policy along two tracks. The first track was to express commitment to environmental protection, addressing the impacts of climate change, and promoting sustainable economic and social development (e.g., Lavelle, 2022; Sergunin, 2021). The second track was the pursuit of economic opportunities that follow from climate change while attracting investment and promoting business and innovation in the region (Lavrov, 2019).

As a member of the even more exclusive and ad hoc Arctic Five, Russia explicitly embraced the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. It emphasized the sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction that coastal states were provided under international law (Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008). Russia, having ratified the Law of the Sea Convention, became the first coastal state to make a submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, an expert group that, according to international law, needs to be consulted before a coastal state can establish final and binding continental shelf limits beyond

its EEZ. Along with the other Arctic coastal states, Russia repeatedly affirmed the role of the law of the sea in staking out maritime claims in the Arctic. Russia's aim to develop the Northern Sea Route into a new global shipping route, as envisioned by, for instance, its *Arctic Strategy Through 2035*, published in 2020, was founded on its interpretation of international law and aimed at some level of foreign acceptance as well as partners and investment (Kluge & Paul, 2020). Preserving the rule of law, notably the law of the sea, became urgent to Russia amid China's rapid rise and the US' and the European Union's increased interest in the Arctic region (Moe et al., 2011, p. 156).

As Russia assumed its two-year chairmanship of the Arctic Council in 2021, "responsible governance for a sustainable Arctic" became an overall theme, while four priority areas were named: The people of the Arctic, including indigenous peoples; environmental protection, including climate change; socio-economic development; and the strengthening of the Arctic Council (Arctic Council, n.d.). The program explicitly stated that "the Russian chairmanship will seek to secure continuity of the policies pursued by the previous Arctic Council chairmanships in the spirit of maintaining peace, stability and constructive cooperation in the Arctic" (Arctic Council, n.d., p. 31).

Russia played a key role even in informal venues for circumpolar collaboration. From the mid-2000s, Arctic conferences proliferated, adding new arenas for interaction, dialogue, norm-setting, and information sharing among Arctic and non-Arctic states as well as non-state actors (Steinveg, 2023). Arguably, conferences contributed to reducing potential East–West tensions and barriers within the Arctic regime complex. Illustratively, Russian inclusion was a key objective of the annual Arctic Frontiers in Tromsø, Norway. The organizers worked persistently with the Russian embassy in Norway to attract Russian participants and were rewarded with significant attendance by Russian governmental and business representatives, scholars, and students (Steinveg, 2023).

The consensus at the Arctic conferences was far more liberal and optimistic than the popular conflict narrative of a "new cold war," "race for resources," and "battle for the Arctic" following Russia's extensive military build-up in the Russian Arctic and flag-planting expedition to the North Pole in 2007 (Griffiths et al., 2011), much to Russia's satisfaction. At conferences, Moscow found arenas for promoting and legitimizing its Arctic policy and advocating its commitment to international cooperation in the region. Russia's own International Arctic Forum, which meets its policy objectives and addresses issues such as oil, gas, and shipping, was attended by government representatives from all the Arctic states. At the 2017 meeting in Arkhangelsk, Putin suggested that "the Arctic is no place for political games or military alliances" (Baev, 2019, p. 26).

Arctic governance did not change radically with Russia's annexation of Crimea and attack on Eastern Ukraine in 2014. At the time, Moscow did not explicitly challenge or reject the liberal international order, and Western diplomats were eager to preserve the good Arctic relations that had been painstakingly developed over decades. Economic sanctions were imposed, particularly after the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 over Eastern Ukraine, and military cooperation between Russia and the Western states was reduced. Still, the approximation to regional business as usual gave rise to the notion of "Arctic exceptionalism" to describe the successful efforts to maintain regional cooperation and stability (e.g., Exner-Pirot & Murray, 2017). The Arctic maintained some unique preconditions for international cooperation, some argued, including no outstanding territorial disputes among Arctic states, a high degree of international legal certainty—including the law of the sea—, and an Arctic Council that did not deal with high politics or military security (Heininen,

2018, p. 175). It was widely suggested that key aspects of Arctic governance could proceed largely unaffected by Russian aggression in Ukraine (e.g., Byers, 2017; Østhagen, 2021) or that 2014 merely represented a temporary disruption of Arctic cooperative dynamics (Wilson Rowe, 2020). In February 2022, however, it became evident that Arctic regional governance would change.

#### 4. Russia in Arctic Governance After 2022

Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine in 2022 affected Arctic governance in various ways. Even though the war was being waged outside the Arctic region, it debunked the notion of "Arctic exceptionalism." North American and European states, including the Arctic ones, responded resolutely to Russia's war (Koivurova & Shibata, 2023). Its actions were condemned by all Western Arctic states. US President Joe Biden stated on 24 February 2023 that there is a "complete rupture right now in US–Russian relations" (Wilson Centre, 2022), which would also affect the Arctic. Similarly, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated that:

Canada condemns in the strongest possible terms Russia's egregious attack on Ukraine. These unprovoked actions are a clear further violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. They are also in violation of Russia's obligations under international law and the Charter of the United Nations. (Wilson Centre, 2022)

The Norwegian prime minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, asserted that "Norway condemns Russia's military attack on Ukraine in the strongest possible terms. This attack is a serious violation of international law and will have dramatic consequences for the people of Ukraine" (Norwegian Government, 2022). NATO's unity and resolve were boosted (The White House, 2022), perhaps to Russia's surprise, and the European Union was mobilized to act. Both European states and the US gave Ukraine massive military and financial support. Western economic sanctions, aimed at crippling Russia's war machine, immediately hampered development projects in the Russian Arctic (Nilsen, 2023).

Awkwardly, Russia held the Arctic Council chairmanship (2021–2023) at the time of the full-scale attack on Ukraine. On 3 March 2022, the seven Western member states of the Arctic Council proclaimed that their representatives would not visit Russia for meetings. Further, they would pause all meetings of the Arctic Council and its subsidiary bodies (US Department of State, 2022a). On 8 June 2022, the Arctic Seven announced that they intended to implement only a limited resumption of work in projects that did not involve the participation of Russia (US Department of State, 2022b). Similarly, the non-Russian members of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Nordic states, and the European Commission "suspended activities involving Russia" on 9 March 2022 (Koivurova & Shibata, 2023, p. 2). Thus, Russia's attack on Ukraine and the world order undermined its role in the regional institutions it aimed to preserve.

The Arctic Council chairmanship was finally transferred from Russia to Norway—in an online session—on 11 May 2023 (Staalesen, 2023b). The event was interpreted as the Western states' interest in keeping the Arctic Council operative and even keeping the door ajar for Russian participation sometime in the future (Rottem & Andreeva, 2023). The session was followed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's claim that "the expulsion of Russia from the [Arctic] Council had been made on an absolutely false pretext" and that the "situation in Ukraine was provoked by Western countries themselves" (Staalesen, 2023b). After the chairmanship transfer, Russia's Senior Arctic Official Nikolay Korchunov asserted that the future of the

Arctic Council lay in the hands of Norway, adding that Russia was willing to collaborate (Jonassen, 2023b). The diplomat added that “there is a willingness to keep and maintain the Arctic Council. But whether it will be possible to come back to full-fledged cooperation is difficult to say” (Jonassen, 2023b). Russia seemed eager to maintain business as usual in the Arctic, arguing that “dialogue is the key to keeping the Arctic a region of peace, stability, and international cooperation” (Jonassen, 2023b). At the same time, in April 2023, Russia’s newly revised foreign policy framework no longer emphasized international cooperative structures in the Arctic, such as the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (Staalesen, 2023a).

Even Russia’s access to informal venues for dialogue on the Arctic and regional cooperation was restrained. Illustratively, at the 2023 Arctic Frontiers in Tromsø, Russia’s war, as well as geopolitical tensions, dominated the plenary discussions (Edvardsen, 2023a; Jonassen, 2023a). The number of Russian delegates admitted to the conference was significantly reduced. At the 2022 Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik, Iceland, international delegates discussed whether the Arctic Council could continue without Russia. Curiously, China’s Arctic Special Envoy Feng Gao stated that China could not recognize the Arctic Council without Russia’s participation (Jonassen, 2022). By the time of the High North Dialogue Conference in Bodø, Norway, in April 2023, however, China expressed support for Norway’s Arctic Council chairmanship. “Geopolitical competition and confrontation should not hinder international cooperation in the region,” said Minister Counsellor at the Chinese Embassy in Norway Pan Zejun, adding that China “hopes that Norway can efficiently restore the [Arctic] Council’s functions and cooperation between all parties. China is willing to play a constructive role in this” (Edvardsen, 2023b).

Arguably, the very purpose of the Arctic Council and other Barents and Arctic inter-governmental venues was to include and engage Russia in collaboration with the Western states on issues pertaining to sustainable development, environmental protection, indigenous peoples’ issues, science, and research (e.g., Hønneland, 2020). Without Russian participation, these inter-governmental arenas become less significant, as the Western Arctic allies share several alternative arenas for dialogue and cooperation. On the other hand, China and non-Arctic states maintain an interest in the formal as well as informal venues on Arctic issues (Steinveg, 2023) and may continue to explore the potential of these regimes in their pursuit of national interests in the region, including economic development (Fravel et al., 2021). Either way, Russia now plays a significantly diminished role in Arctic governance.

## 5. Discussion: Russia’s Impossible Split

“You cannot have your cake and eat it, too.” The proverb sums up Moscow’s quest to break up the liberal international order while at the same time preserving parts of that same rules-based order in the Arctic region. In the international system, Russia is a revisionist power that seeks to challenge an order it depicts as Western-led. In the Arctic, Russia has manifested itself as a regional status quo power, even after 2022.

This study finds that Russia’s attempted split between global radicalism and regional conservatism has been quite unsuccessful. While core tenets of a rules-based, liberal international order, including treaty-based Arctic governance, have survived the assault, the empirical evidence above suggests that Russia has succeeded in reducing its influence on regional institutions and arrangements rather than reforming the order to its advantage.

With its war on Ukraine, Russia violated not only the UN Charter's prohibition against the use of force. It also explicitly challenged how states should interact and implicitly advocated that "might makes right"—the antithesis of a rules-based order. As this study finds, Russia's policies and actions in recent years have affected Arctic regional governance only to Russia's disadvantage.

In the Arctic, Russia's break with the rules-based order has brought about the concept of the Arctic Seven and the realization that there is "no return to the pre-war reality" (Quinn, 2022). In the formalized arrangements in the region, most notably the Arctic Council, Russia became a pariah state shortly after February 2022. Arctic governance proceeded without Russian participation (Kirchner, 2023), at least temporarily. While the Arctic Seven and Russia have agreed to guidelines for resuming activities in the Arctic Council's working and expert groups (Edvardsen, 2023c), the likelihood of Russia being readmitted into the club may diminish with the brutalities committed in Ukraine and Moscow's hostile rhetoric ("Putin speaks at Victory Day," 2022; Russia's Presidential Executive Office, 2023).

Further, Russia has become isolated from informal arrangements of inter-governmental interaction. While Russian and Western government representatives interacted as equals at various Arctic venues before 2022, Russian diplomats were suddenly treated as outcasts by their colleagues. The function of conferences as bridging entities between Russia and the West within the Arctic regime complex diminished accordingly. Russia's assault harmed informal interactions, science diplomacy, and people-to-people cooperation, bringing East-West relations closer to the Cold War fault line and prompting the rise of the Arctic Seven, ideologically and governmentally separated from Russia (Zellen, 2022).

This study has demonstrated that Arctic inter-governmental arrangements, whether formal or informal, are not insensitive to changes in world politics, great-power rivalries, or a full-scale war. As for Arctic regional governance, the findings challenge the notion of "Arctic exceptionalism" (Exner-Pirot & Murray, 2017) as well as the "High North, low tension" mantra (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006; Østhagen, 2021). Scholars have previously suggested that state interaction in and about the Arctic region could proceed largely unaffected by great-power tension mounting elsewhere. For instance, after the annexation of Crimea and the attack on Eastern Ukraine in 2014, Byers found that Russian-Western relations in the region could remain largely intact (Byers, 2017). He proposed that "the pre-existence of complex interdependence can help preserve cooperation in some issue areas, and thus reduce the impact of a crisis" (Byers, 2017, p. 395). However, as Russia's irreversible break from the rules-based, liberal international order became explicit in February 2022, Arctic exceptionalism, too, became more deceptive.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

This study finds that Russia's attack on the liberal international order backfired on Russia—in its own backyard. Russia, eager to preserve the status quo in the Arctic region, was pushed into the Arctic cold. This finding suggests there is little sense in referring to an autonomous "Arctic order," even if the region has separate institutions and arrangements that can be conceptualized as a regional regime complex or governance system. The rules-based, liberal international order has also been the order of the Arctic. Hence, Russia's assault on the liberal international order, with the prohibition against the use of force at its core, was inevitably, but apparently unintentionally, also an attack on the formal and informal arrangements that consolidated Russia as an Arctic superpower.



Evidently, Russia was more successful in diminishing its Arctic status and isolating itself from the global and regional arrangements than revising them. Moscow's failures may not be permanent, and the worst may be yet to come. Regionally, Russia is encouraging more involvement from the non-Western BRICS group in Arctic affairs (see, e.g., Edvardsen, 2023d) and finds cautious support in China, which may have its own ambitions in a China-led "Belt and Road order" (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022, p. 471). Globally, the rules-based international order is in a deep and perhaps irreversible crisis. International relations theory, as well as somber historical lessons, warn that the profound structural changes in the world may well result in an entirely new world order—or, to Russia's liking, in multiple orders.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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