

The Arctic Cooperation

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The Arctic region was considered a remote and inhospitable one which later turned into an important military theatre during the cold war, and today it is seen as a resource-rich region. The region had come a full circle from being classified as a cold isolated region to a region that is currently at the center of global interest due to the impacts of climate change and melting of the sea ice. Climate change has resulted in the opening out of the region which provides opportunities for resource exploration, fishing, and shipping through the Arctic region.

To avoid the continuation of the great power rivalry of the cold war era in a region that is resource-rich, there was a need felt to set up regional governance in the Arctic region. The Arctic Council was established through the Ottawa Declaration on 19th Sep 1996. The Arctic Council (AC) is an intergovernmental forum that facilitates cooperation among the eight Arctic states, permanent participants (Indigenous people), and observers to promote science and policy collaboration in supporting the regional governance of the Arctic region. The Arctic Council was a result of Mikhail Gorbachev's Speech in 1987 which called for the Arctic to be a 'Zone of Peace', as part of his reform programs of Perestroika (restructuring) and Glasnost (Openness) in the erstwhile USSR. Finland, Canada, and the Indigenous People of the Arctic played a significant role in facilitating the creation of the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council has also expanded its reach beyond just environmental governance and sustainable development but also into the areas of economic, social, and cultural issues that concern the region. The matters related to military security are consciously excluded from the purview of the Arctic Council which finds a clear mention in the footnotes of the Ottawa Declaration. However, the issues of human security play an important factor in the Arctic Council and its working group projects.

Even though Arctic Council is only a soft law creation, the success that has been achieved since its creation cannot be underplayed. Arctic Council has also been the venue for the creation of three multilateral treaties (Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic, 2011, Agreement on Cooperation on Marine oil pollution preparedness and

Response in the Arctic, 2013, Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Science Cooperation, 2017) in helping to establish circumpolar governance mechanisms the Arctic and it also has significantly influenced global policy regarding climate change and Environmental protection. The Arctic Council has played a vital role in bringing different stakeholders of the region (including the Indigenous People) under a single umbrella and creating an environment to interact and engage in more of an informal setting has been quite successful until recently.

Arctic exceptionalism has long been the normative concept that prescribes the Arctic as a unique region with a set of unwritten rules, beliefs, and history that has given it a level of immunity to many of the world's geopolitical problems. The Arctic Council continued to function even during the annexation of Crimea in 2014, however, the Arctic Council is on a 'Pause' since 2022 putting an end to the concept of Arctic Exceptionalism. Russia has recently amended its Arctic policy which emphasizes self-reliance and building its strength to protect its economic interest in energy and shipping in the Arctic. Russia is also looking at establishing a scientific base in Svalbard along with BRICS Nations in Barentsburg, where the Russian state-owned coal mining company Artikugol trust holds around 251 sq Km of land in which a scientific and educational complex is planned to be built on the model of 'Snezhinka' meaning little snowflake. On the other hand, the US is concerned not just concerned about the increase in activities by Russia but also about the increased role of non-regional actors such as China. The US Arctic Strategy report states that 'The People's Republic of China (PRC) seeks to increase its influence in the Arctic through an expanded slate of economic, diplomatic, scientific, and military activities' and is raised an important alarming factor in the corridors of Power in the US. Also, the Canadian standing committee report on National Defense has discussed in detail the newer threats that are emanating due to the increase in Russian presence in the Arctic, and Russia-China's 'no limit partnership' is seen as an increasing threat to the stability of the region.

The Pausing of Arctic Cooperation meant that there is no political engagement at a circumpolar level between the Arctic 7 and Russia, and no scientific research cooperation with Russia. It also means a major platform that was available to the Indigenous People in the Arctic to voice out their concerns is no longer functioning. However, the pausing of regional cooperation does not mean that the region completely lacks any sort of cooperation or governance regimes.

For Eg., The law of the sea including UNCLOS, and other bilateral and multilateral treaties such as the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement continue to apply in the region.