

Commentary

An Arctic Forum for Security Co-Operation?

Benjamin Schaller

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Arctic Council, which probably became the most important multilateral forum for Arctic policymaking and a most interesting case study for scholars of international relations. For two decades, it has served as a cooperative and constructive forum covering various issues of economic, environmental and human security, explicitly excluding the military security dimension.

Today, 20 years after the founding of the Arctic Council, one has to acknowledge that the international security environment has significantly changed. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and increasing show of force toward its neighbours have destroyed a significant amount of the trust that was carefully built up after the end of the Cold War. This is, unfortunately, also true for Russia's relations with its Arctic neighbours. Nevertheless, there is still considerable reluctance to touch upon the issue of military security in the High North. For the moment, the Arctic might still just be content with its rather 'selective security approach'. However, the continuous deterioration of Western-Russian relations calls into question the hope that negative spillover effects will not affect the good regional co-operation too much.

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It appears that this has also sound the bell for another round in the ongoing debate among scholars and policymakers over the need for an Arctic forum addressing issues of military security. What strikes one in this debate is that those in support of such a forum seem trapped in a recurring logic of geopolitical games over power and influence, while their opponents (usually arguing from a more regional perspective) seem to follow the line of 'don't fix what isn't broken'.

As both sides focus too strongly on rebutting each other's arguments, they miss out on how both perspectives could actually complement each other, overlooking that they are more or less two sides of the same coin.

An alternative could be to draw from the 40 years of experience of the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE). At the end of the Cold War, the OSCE's comprehensive security approach (politico-military, economic and environmental, human security), was able to overcome the military block-to-block-confrontation by increasing mutual transparency and trust as well as by establishing co-operative understanding of European security. This is not to argue for a duplication of the structure or discussions at the OSCE, but for a critical reflection on its comprehensive security approach. From it, at least two important lessons for the discussion over an Arctic security forum can be drawn:

The first one is that stability and good co-operation in multilateral forums is not so much a question of whether the forum has a comprehensive or selective approach to security, but much more a question of the overall political climate.

So far, one of the main arguments of those opposed to an Arctic security forum has been that because the work of the Arctic Council only focuses on non-military issues of mutual interest, the Arctic states have little appetite for spoiling the existing co-operation in the region by discussing controversial issues of military security.

Drawing from the example of e.g. the NATO-Russia Council, they continue their argument by stating that forums dedicated to dealing with military security are usually the first ones that are suspended after a crisis has emerged. Thus they argue that by keeping the Arctic Council free from issues of military security, the regional good co-operation can be preserved and the Council can even serve as a platform for a substantial dialogue to overcome the dividing lines of the crisis.

As appealing as this might sound, it disregards two important things:

First, while one might admit that forums solely focusing on non-military issues seem indeed less prone to paralysis or even suspension, they also rarely serve as a platform for those decision makers primarily involved with the handling or resolution of this crisis. In contrast, organizations with a comprehensive security approach, like the OSCE, bring exactly these people together. In times of crisis, they might indeed seem more paralyzed when looking only at their actual policy output, but they continue to provide a valuable platform for frank and open dialogue, an extremely important component for reducing the risk of dangerous misperceptions and unintended escalation dynamics in crisis.

Second, it would also be wrong to overestimate the impact that co-operation on non-military security can have on tensions in the military security realm (and to be fair, also not vice versa). For example, looking at the outcomes of the last OSCE Ministerial Council meetings, it becomes evident that as soon as military tensions grow too strong, they start to overshadow other policy fields and any (even very close) co-operation in other areas will come under significant stress. Whether or not co-operation prevails will be more a question of whether mutual interest is strong enough (e.g. strong economic interests) or not in the main focus of political attention.

The second and probably most important lesson to be taken from the experiences of the OSCE is that addressing issues of military security does not always have to be a sign of increasing military tensions or weakness, but can just as well be a means to reinforce good and close co-operation between states in times of political and military détente.

Another argument that is regularly articulated by opponents of an Arctic security forum is that there is simply no need to discuss issues of military security in the High North (and will not be for decades to come). One can easily sign up to the argument that, despite contrary reports (in particular by mainstream media), the levels of militarization in the Arctic are still far below that of other regions and that there is also little potential for the outbreak of armed conflict in the harsh Arctic environment.

However, it would also be wrong to conclude that the Arctic is entirely immune to geopolitical spillover effects. Let us take the example of the deterioration of NATO-Russia relations. Over the last years, the intensity of air and submarine patrols in the Arctic has again reached Cold War levels and the frequency and scale of military exercises in the region has increased considerably. While this is part of the generally increasing military tit-for-tat and nothing exceptional for the Arctic, it still seems reasonable that these issues should also be addressed from a regional perspective.

The problem is that those who typically call for an Arctic security forum are often too quick to jump over the question of what specific issues should be on its agenda and that simply duplicating discussions elsewhere, ignoring the specific regional security environment, does not seem to provide significant added-value to the debate. Let us take the example of the increasing amount of air and submarine patrols. While these activities undoubtedly carry a potential risk of military incidents and unintended escalation, it is difficult to discern what makes those in the Arctic different or more dangerous from those in, for example, the Baltic Sea region so that they should be addressed from a regional instead of a supra-regional angle. Thus, it is one thing to meet the increasing military activities in the Arctic with scepticism and to recognize the lack of a dedicated forum to address these issues.

What is, however, more challenging is to identify those issues that are so crucial for regional security that they should not solely be addressed in supra-regional fora which include much more international actors and are often criticised for being paralyzed or suspended when a crisis has emerged. It would, for example, be quite useful, if all Arctic states held regular meetings on how the level of transparency over larger military

exercises, military planning and troop deployments to the region could be increased. Such discussions would not only complement those under the auspices of the OSCE, but also help prevent dangerous misinterpretations and by doing so contribute to reinforcing the good level of regional co-operation in the Arctic.

To conclude, instead of mainly focusing on rebutting each other's arguments – for and against an Arctic security forum – it might be worthwhile to join forces and to explore whether there is the chance for a more co-operative approach to military security in the High North.

As long as spillover effects remain manageable, co-operation in other policy areas continue and the issues discussed are tailored to the regional needs and requirements of the Arctic, an Arctic Forum for Security Co-Operation could be useful for preserving regional co-operation and potentially contribute to restoring generally stressed political and military relations.