



Planetary Security  
INITIATIVE



Clingendael

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## Polar connections

Exploring the potential for Indigenous contributions to a secure Arctic



Source: A view of the E69 road, on the road for Nordkapp (North Cape) in Norway / Reuters

The Arctic is a region of increasing concern. The area has become a geopolitical hotspot because glaciers and sea ice are melting at record speed due to climate change, uncovering mineral resources and opening up alternative sea routes. The land under the Arctic Sea is claimed by Russia and NATO allies, who are at loggerheads since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. New military investments and expanded scientific explorations reflect the interest in the vast resources of the region and in the new and shorter sea lanes that are becoming available between east and west. Even China

now has an [Arctic strategy](#) and an enhanced presence in the region.

This view of the Arctic as a geopolitical chessboard means it is easy to forget that the Arctic is not just about nuclear-powered submarines, polar bears and resources. It is the region of millions of inhabitants who are confronted on a daily basis with the changes to the climate, the search for critical raw materials including oil and gas, as well as an enhanced military build-up. Many of the Arctic's residents, such as Indigenous groups, often have their

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own perspectives on how the Arctic should be governed, which contrast with those of the Arctic states themselves. This Alert discusses how an enhanced engagement of the people living in the Arctic can help to rebuild relations between Russia and the NATO allies once the general political situation allows for it. It points to the need to invest in restoring old channels of communication to avoid misunderstandings with possibly devastating effects.

### Climate hitting hard

The onset of human-induced climate change has already led to significant changes in the Arctic. Melting sea ice will allow [greater access](#) to previously inaccessible resources such as fossil fuels, minerals, and fishing stocks, which have begun to [migrate](#) further north with the rising temperatures. Some of these resources are found in the Arctic Sea, on which different territorial claims have been made. [Sea lanes](#) have begun to open for longer periods throughout the year, allowing for more rapid access between the Atlantic and East Asia. Climate change has also put [increased pressure](#) on species such as seals and polar bears who play a critical role in maintaining the fragile ecosystem and act as an important food source and cultural touchstone for the Indigenous peoples residing there.

These climactic shifts have a significant impact on the region's residents. The Arctic is home to roughly 4 million residents across national boundaries, of whom 11% are Indigenous peoples. The residents of the Arctic must now contend with threats to their livelihoods and previously dependable weather patterns, as natural phenomena become more erratic with the onset of climate change. A prominent example of this threat to livelihoods and traditions is the migration of fishing stocks further north towards cooler waters, with potential consequences for those who are dependent on fishing as a source of income and the wider global market for seafood.

These shifts do not only impact the region economically, they also challenge established cultural norms and practices. Residents and

Indigenous peoples are often deeply connected with their immediate environment and place great importance on natural phenomena in their communities. Indigenous peoples also offer a different view of the Arctic that places the environment as the centre-piece. For many Indigenous communities, their livelihoods are dependent upon the environment, and their culture is also deeply connected to the land that they inhabit. The emphasis for many Arctic states is therefore on how to provide a greater degree of human security for the region's inhabitants, ensuring that there is adequate infrastructure and economic potential to support its residents.

### Geopolitics kicking in

In addition, recent political and military developments have resulted in increased attention for the region, where NATO allies border Russia. The ongoing military build-up of naval and land-based assets in the region from both sides, coupled with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have put [added pressure](#) on Arctic institutions. The [increased presence](#) of China in the region has also raised concerns. Chinese banks and firms are showing interest in investing in extraction industries in places such as Greenland and have already made significant investments in port infrastructure in Russia. China considers itself to be a near-Arctic state, has acquired observer status in the Arctic Council, and has set out a [Polar Silk Road](#) strategy as part of its Belt and Road Initiative.

These wider developments pose a challenge not just for the state institutions charged with regulating Arctic affairs, notably the Arctic Council. They also entail risks for the livelihoods and well-being of millions of Arctic residents and Indigenous peoples who have been severely affected by these shifting realities. New mining operations, the movement of fishing stocks and an increased military presence will have the greatest impact. Indeed, Arctic residents contribute to the security of their region with their knowledge and expertise, for example by serving in forces such as the [Canadian Rangers](#), which support community resilience in remote Canadian areas, including the Arctic.

Indigenous peoples can also help to offer a degree of nuance into the region's cross-border relations. For instance, the [Sámi](#) are spread across the Northern regions of Norway in particular, but also live in Sweden, Finland and Russia. Their shared cultural heritage can at times be stronger than their sense of nationality. For this reason, communities in the Northern European Arctic historically had stronger and less confrontational ties with their counterparts in Russia. They have collaborated through institutions and networks, although these engagements have become limited after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which some Russian Indigenous peoples have publicly supported. In the coming years, such links may be very useful to correctly communicate intentions and ensure that tensions in the region do not escalate beyond control.

### Multilateralism on thin ice?

Multilateral efforts to foster collaboration in the Arctic have recently stalled. Before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Arctic Council was a remarkably successful example of regional cooperation and an area of close coordination between NATO Arctic states and Russia. Climate change research in the Arctic used to be a core aspect of cooperation and dialogue with Russia, but this has changed drastically since 2022. Ministerial meetings have not taken place since then, with no resumption in sight and thus no engagement on the political level. However, on the operational level, the Arctic Council's working groups comprised of lower-ranking government officials and scientists are still meeting virtually. Russia also continues to share research with the organization where it is legally bound to do so, but otherwise it opts to withhold information.

NATO has a Regional Defence Plan for the High North and has begun to dedicate more political capital to strengthening links between Arctic NATO states. The recent inclusion of Finland and Sweden into the Alliance gives it a stronger presence in the region. These developments are indicative of the wider security dilemma that is emerging between NATO and Russia as both

parties grow increasingly concerned about their respective intentions.

In practice, the Arctic states that are part of NATO stick to the organization's commitment not to reach out to Russia until the conflict in Ukraine is brought to a halt. Therefore, the only contacts that currently survive within this context are the people-to-people relationships that were formed during periods in which geopolitical dynamics were less tense, but which offer no lasting alternative for more institutionalised efforts. Many of the researchers who have previously collaborated with their Russian counterparts and institutions now express hesitation in continuing their work. This is often due to concerns regarding the safety of staff in Russia, or the fear that their engagement with Russian institutions would legitimize their actions in other domains. There is a pervasive lack of trust between groups that makes re-establishing contacts exceedingly difficult.

### Back to the people

Despite the rising tensions in the region and among global superpowers, it still remains unlikely that a major escalation will emerge in the Arctic in the coming decades. Rather, it is events occurring outside of the region that will be a factor in fuelling tensions, along with the increased accessibility of the region. Enhanced access induced by climate change will lead to more activity, both economic and military, which can increase the risk of misunderstandings among actors, accidents in naval shipping from increased ship traffic and thus escalation, be it intended or accidental. It is these unknown factors that pose the greater risk for the region in the coming decades.

People-to-people connections can help to reduce the chances of escalation and to ensure that cooperation and communication can resume when the political situation allows for this. The current stalling of the Arctic Council and a lack of other forums for dialogue with Russia do not offer opportunities to address and reduce tensions in ways that were previously

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of use. This places a great deal of stress on the peoples living in the Arctic and can negatively impact their sense of security and well-being. To proactively manage these emerging trends, Arctic states could reconsider which benefits the existing institutional formats could have for their set interests in the Arctic. They could investigate how to reform these forums to better incorporate the perspectives of Arctic and indigenous communities, as well as to ensure better dialogue among all regional stakeholders.



Roundtable hosted by Clingendael on the changing regional dynamics of the Arctic in collaboration with the Embassies of Canada and Denmark, June 2024

### About the Planetary Security Initiative

The Planetary Security Initiative sets out best practice, strategic entry points and new approaches to reducing climate-related risks to conflict and stability, thus promoting sustainable peace in a changing climate. The PSI is operated by the Clingendael Institute in partnership with Free Press Unlimited and The Hague Center for Strategic Studies.

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### About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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### About this alert

The Clingendael Institute recently hosted a Roundtable on the changing regional dynamics of the Arctic, the outcomes of which have informed this Alert. The Institute extends its gratitude to Global Affairs Canada and the Embassy of Canada to the Netherlands for supporting the organization of the roundtable, to the participants, and to the Embassy of Denmark in the Netherlands for providing additional support.