Geopolitical Features, Common Interests and the Climate Crisis: The Case of the Arctic

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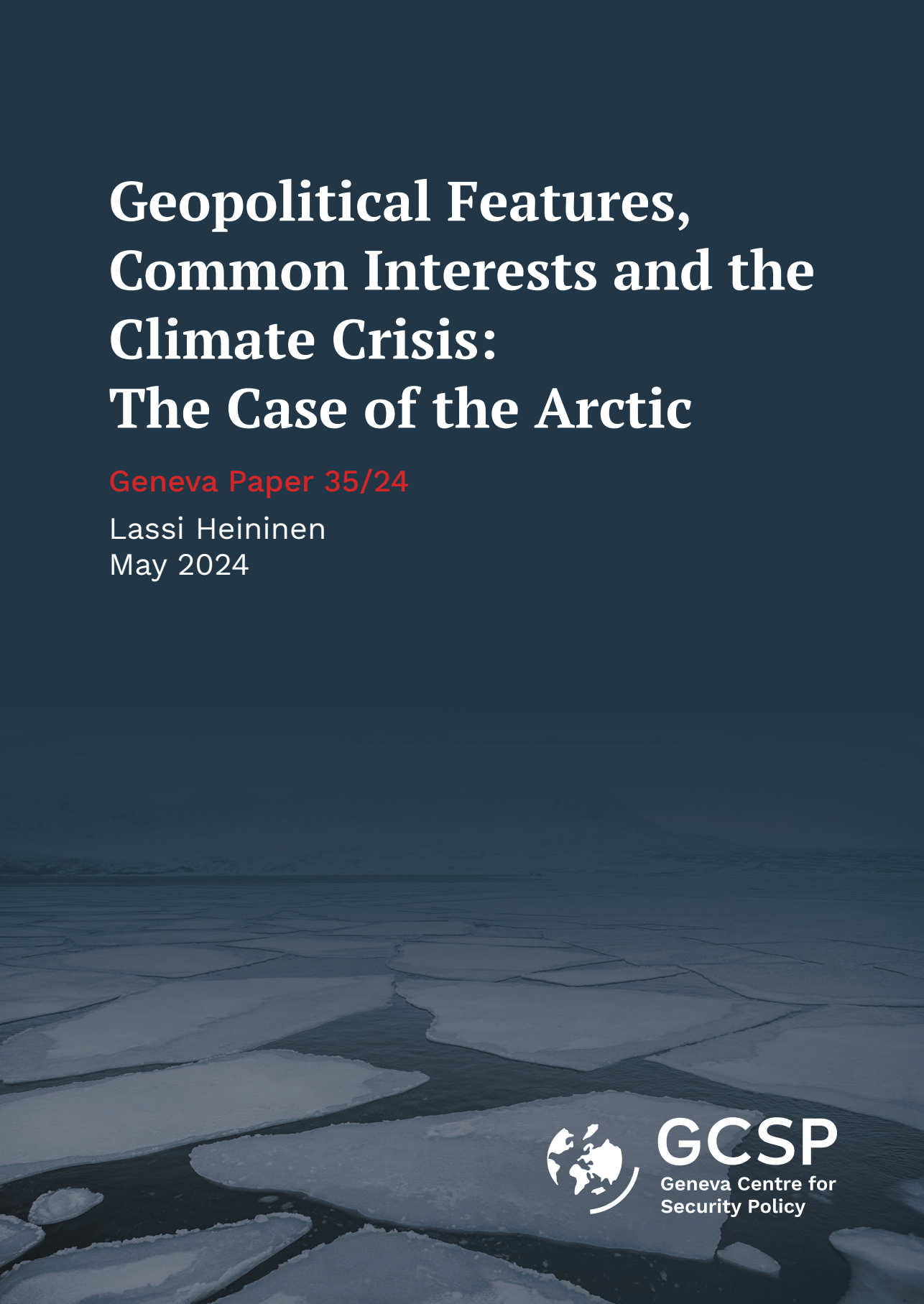

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Executive summary

In the 1990s an inspiring sense of a "new North" became apparent in Arctic-related ideas and innovations that indicated the end of the Cold War period. This included arms control initiatives, cross-border cooperation and sustainability "to decrease military tension and increase political stability", an emerging environmental awakening among peoples and societies, knowledge-building by indigenous peoples and the scientific community, and new forums for opening up discussions on regional development. The Arctic seemed to be in a state of constant transformation (geo)politically, economically, culturally and environmentally. Some of the outcomes of these processes were impressive, transforming the Arctic from a site of military tension to one reflecting geopolitical stability. When analysing this transformation and the ways in which the Arctic states reconstructed their geopolitical reality prior to 24 February 2022, the main conclusion is that this would not have been possible without key features of Arctic geopolitics, security and governance creating suitable conditions for cross-border cooperation, which correspondingly increased stability. In the same way, cooperation, mostly in terms of fields of low political interest, was made possible because the eight Arctic states shared similar interests.

But now this transformation, which is also called the "Arctic model", is threatened by a new transformation from a state of high geopolitical stability to one characterised by the uncertainties of the climate crisis and new East-West tensions, resulting in a pause in pan-Arctic cooperation during which the Arctic Council has not been able to return to business as usual.

The focus of this Geneva Paper, based on the author's previous studies and personal observations after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, is this new transformation and its influences on cooperation. The aim is to assess whether the fundamentals of the previously applicable common interests are still valued, and to what extent they could be used as the means for confidence-building in the region. Similarly, if the fundamentals of the special features of Arctic geopolitics, security and governance are in place, the question then becomes to what extent they could be interpreted as prerequisites for more widespread cooperation and geopolitical stability. Finally, if the search for stability that was the original ultimate aim of the Arctic states and Arctic indigenous peoples were still valued, would it motivate the Arctic states' governments to more effectively align their policies when facing the climate crisis. This could be done by integrating cooperation on environmental protection, climate change mitigation, and science into their climate and foreign policies. Much is clearly at stake, for if we lose the region's human-made peace dividend that was consciously built during the 35 years before February 2022, then the multiple crises and world disorder that are looming and threatening the entire world community would be much more difficult to resolve.

I. Introduction

In the 1990s an inspiring sense of a "new North" became apparent in terms of Arctic-related ideas and innovations that indicated the end of the Cold War. This included arms control, disarmament, and sustainability initiatives; transboundary cooperation; plans to decrease military tension and increase political stability in terms of the ideological, economic, political, and military competition of the two Cold War blocs; emerging environmental awakening due to pollution triggered by people, societies, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs); immaterial issues, such as new geopolitical factors put forward by indigenous peoples and the scientific community; and new forums for opening up discussions and building knowledge. Some of the outcomes of these initiatives are impressive: the Arctic was transformed from a site of military tension to one reflecting geopolitical stability based on functional cooperation on environmental protection and scientific research. As a result, regional stability building and related confidence-building between the former rivals that in turn led to knowledge building within the region became success stories.[1]

At the time, the Arctic region seemed to be "in constant transformation, (geo) politically, economically, culturally and indeed geologically",[2] and "these rapid transformations … [were] affecting the entire Earth system".[3] The first transformation, from the military tension of the Cold War to geopolitical stability based on transborder cooperation on environmental protection and scientific research in the 1990s, would not have been possible without growing concern for the environment among indigenous peoples and other non-state actors, and their efforts to push the eight Arctic states[4] to consider multilateral cooperation on environmental protection.[5] This led to the first ministerial meeting of the Arctic states to sign the Arctic Environmental Strategy (AEPS) in 1991 and to establish the Arctic Council (AC). All this caused a shift in the security premises of the Arctic states, which would not have been possible without key features of Arctic geopolitics and security. Briefly, then, the Arctic states effectively reconstructed their geopolitical reality.

Recognised as a distinctive cooperative region, the Arctic became globalised by the growing awareness of key environmental challenges, in particular rapid global warming, and global economic interests, in particular the mass-scale utilisation of hydrocarbons. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Arctic is facing the effect of great-power rivalries and new East-West tensions characterised by tit-for-tat warmongering and the related hot/proxy wars that are causing new uncertainties. A severe consequence was the decision by seven Arctic European Union (EU)/North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states to "temporarily paus[e] participation in all meetings of the Arctic Council and its subsidiary bodies"[6] and put the AC's joint projects with direct Russian involvement on hold.[7]

This was followed by the similar steps of a few other intergovernmental institutions dealing with Arctic affairs, such as the Coast Guard Forum, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), the Arctic Economic Council and the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC). However, the University of the Arctic – a non-governmental body – stated that collaboration between individual researchers and students' educational activities would continue. Interestingly, in an Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement meeting that South Korea hosted in November 2022, related issues were discussed by all the parties, including Russia.

Since February 2022, "questions about 'future Arctic cooperation' and how to maintain peace and stability in the Arctic have been asked and discussed" by individual members of Arctic thematic networks and IASC working groups, and by ad-hoc groups like the annual Calotte Academy and the Arctic Security Seminar organised by the University of South California.[8] They were also more systematically discussed at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy's High North Talks[9] and in the related online expert-to-expert group. Even though these modest actions have not yet produced a miracle (which none expected anyway), they remind stakeholders and interested parties of the importance of inclusive discussions among researchers, other experts and policymakers, as well as of the basic principle of the freedom of science and the independence of the scientific community.

The transfer of the AC chairmanship from Russia to Norway in May 2023 caused great interest among Arctic experts and policymakers, because on this occasion the previously used routine was not followed. The fact that the transfer went smoothly and that both Russia, as the former chair, and Norway, the new one, behaved constructively[10] shows that the Council's work is valued by its eight member states. Interestingly, a few months later the member states, in consultation with the six permanent participants, agreed on new guidelines that allowed the AC working groups to resume their activities.[11]

This indicates that the AC, which was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2016, still seems to be able to function, although it has not yet been able to return to business as usual. Furthermore, it shows that the Arctic states, including Russia and the United States, both of which have revised their Arctic policies to focus on national interests and geopolitical rivalries, and indigenous peoples' organisations are committed to continue the Council's work. It further indicates that Russia is neither aiming to withdraw from the AC, unlike from the BEAC,[12] nor to establish an alternative council on Arctic affairs with China, India and the other so-called BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa).

The fact that the unique pan-Arctic mode of cooperation has not been jeopardised by current geopolitical tensions is an important precondition for the stability of the region, as well as for the establishment of a firm principle of state sovereignty and a high degree of international legal certainty. This could be interpreted to be based on two types of factors: firstly, common interests,

which the Arctic states and Arctic indigenous peoples share; and, secondly, the special features of Arctic geopolitics, security and governance. These factors have not only played an important role in enhancing cross-border cooperation, but still have great potential to motivate the Arctic states to differentiate to a certain extent their foreign and security policies by allowing cooperation to continue on the issues of environmental protection, climate change mitigation and the furthering of scientific research.

In my previous studies on geopolitics and security, I have discussed and analysed the Arctic region's high levels of geopolitical stability based on functional cooperation and as an applicable means of stability building, and the related common interests shared by the Arctic states, as well as special features of Arctic geopolitics, security and governance that act as indicators to measure the current state of cross-border cooperation.[13] Here the focus is on the latest transformation of the Arctic, which has changed from high levels of stability and cooperation to the uncertainties of the climate crisis and new East-West tensions, as reflected by the temporary pause of the AC's work.

The aim of the present paper is to assess whether the fundamentals of common interests are still valued, and to what extent they could be used as a means for confidence-building. Similarly, if the fundamentals of the special features of Arctic geopolitics, security and governance are in place, it is worth examining the extent to which they could be interpreted as prerequisites for cooperation and geopolitical stability. Finally, it is worth assessing whether the "search for stability" that was the original ultimate aim of the Arctic states and indigenous peoples could still motivate these states to differentiate their policies when facing the climate crisis by integrating cooperation on environmental protection, climate change mitigation, and reflected scientific research into their climate and foreign policies. Much is at stake, for it would be a tragedy to lose the region's human-made peace dividend that was consciously built during the 35 years preceding February 2022, when multiple crises and world disorder are looming and threatening the entire world community.

The motivation behind this paper is to go into basics instead of speculating about structures, procedures and policies; i.e. the motivations of Arctic indigenous peoples when they alarmed governments by sounding a warning on the (first) environmental challenge (i.e. long-range pollution), and of the eight Arctic states when they gathered for the first time for a ministerial meeting and adopted a joint strategy for environmental protection.

The hypothesis of this study is twofold: firstly, in spite of great power rivalries and regional wars, pan-Arctic cross-border cooperation on these key issues continues to be in the interests of the states and indigenous peoples of the Arctic region, not least because these states are committed to make such a commitment by legally binding agreements. Secondly, in spite of rivalries and the attractions of and speculations about new alliances and cooperative structures for the Arctic (e.g. in the context of NATO, the Sino-Russian rapprochement or

BRICS), the question becomes whether the established structures of the AC with its working groups are more resilient and efficient. Consequently, despite emotionally and politically difficult decisions, the Arctic states might be willing to reconsider their growing animosities in other areas by differentiating their foreign and security policies to allow cooperation in the fields of environmental protection and scientific research.

After the introduction, the paper will first review the relevant literature and discuss the main theories and principles behind cooperation and common interests. Secondly, it will examine the state and relevance of the common interests that might still positively affect Arctic cooperation after the events of February 2022. Finally, the paper will conclude by discussing which common interests are still valued and applicable and which special features are still in place, and speculate if the importance of cooperation on environmental protection, scientific research and search-and-rescue activities would be enough for the Arctic states to remain committed to cooperation on the Arctic.

II. Review of the literature and theoretical background

The fact that the AC's work was paused in early 2022 by seven Arctic states (Canada, Finland, Iceland, the Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and the United States) is being interpreted as indicating that either the era of "Arctic exceptionalism" is over, or that a debate is needed about what is actually meant by the term; i.e. whether the region holds an exceptional position in world politics and international relations, or whether the Arctic and Arctic governance are unique by having different images and multiple features.[14] Another interpretation is that the Arctic is again becoming a strategically significant area, and that this strategic position is added to the already full agenda of global politics.[15] A more holistic approach is that due to different cultures, values and security policies among the Arctic states, and the lack of fruitful interrelations between them and indigenous peoples and between Western science and indigenous knowledge,[16] there is less enthusiasm among governments either to deepen environmental protection or implement sustainable development in the region.

Exceptional or not, the current state of Arctic geopolitics and governance, based on cross-border cooperation and knowledge building, is a unique case, a kind of workshop of cooperation and governance in world politics and international relations.[17] Theoretically, this "Arctic model" (which is also called a "Zone of Peace") is a fascinating, if not exceptional, achievement: within two decades the region was transformed from being the battleground of two major nuclear-armed powers and the site of related military tensions to a site of high geopolitical stability based on constructive cooperation across borders. Shared interests among the Arctic states and indigenous peoples were transformed into common interests among the states, with certain (special) features of Arctic geopolitics, security and governance creating suitable conditions for this transformation. The outcome of the transformation was that the post-Cold War Arctic became dominated by cooperative governance structures and high levels of geopolitical stability.

No wonder that, in addition to monitoring and assessing Arctic ecosystems,[18] Arctic geopolitics, governance and development have been extensively discussed, described and analysed by scholars. The so-called first wave of publications included, among others, Armstrong et al. (1975), Osherenko and Young (1989), and Heininen et al. (1995),[19] and the second wave the Arctic Human Development Reports, the Arctic Yearbook (since 2012), Powell and Dodds (2024), Steinberg et al. (2015), the Global Arctic Handbook I and II, and Heininen and Exner-Pirot (2020).[20] Although this might indicate that the issue has been studied thoroughly, it can be said that the roles of common interests and special geopolitical features are rarely studied in political science literature. Among exceptions are Byers (2017), who examined interrelations between international crises and cooperation through an Arctic case study; Zagorski (2017), who described

relevant factors behind an "Arctic Consensus"; Devyatkin (2022), who argued for the restoration of pan-Arctic cooperation; and Heininen (2018), who focused on the state of Arctic-related common interests and special features.[21]

History matters, and lessons learned are signposts pointing towards the future. Nonetheless, sometimes those lessons are not fully integrated into policy, like for example the lessons from the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and those of the 1980s Euromissile crisis. These lessons "were ignored as anachronisms when NATO embarked on its eastward expansion on the assumption that it would no longer need to worry … [as,] after all, Russia was permanently weakened. When Russia proved otherwise, the alliance was caught by surprise".[22] This statement is useful to remember as a background for the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the related US, NATO and EU member states' sanctions on Russia and military support to Ukraine. On the other hand, it makes us wonder why militarisation, warmongering and a fear of images of "the enemy" are widely spread in EU member states' societies, and why such images are transferred onto a particular "enemy" (whoever or whatever that may be).[23]

According to the theory of political realism (i.e. one of the mainstream international relations theories), closer relations between states looking for safety, such as an alliance or bloc, are more often driven by a shared fear than shared interests. This is mostly explained by the perceived anarchy of the international system[24] and the basic antagonism between great powers and blocs with conflicting interests. The domination of state centrism and great-power rivalry in the Westphalian state system sounds sensible and logical when states emphasise their role and power. In foreign and security policies, "the electoral mandate is to advance a country's core interests of peace, security, and welfare by cooperating with others and, when necessary, asserting them against others". Consisting of interests and values, foreign policy faces the challenge of how to deal with conflicting objectives, because "there is no hierarchy between values and interests … [that] face up to moral dilemmas and trade-offs of interests".[25]

One of these factors is competitive and conflicting interests between foreign and security policy goals and the reality of domestic politics, as exemplified by the following statement regarding the United States: "The most urgent and significant threat to American security and stability stems … from within … [when] deep political divisions make it difficult – or even impossible – to design and implement a steady foreign policy".[26]

In the post-colonial age of globalism, with grand environmental challenges and the growth of interest in indigenous peoples' knowledge systems, state-centrism that results in the neglect of other (non-state) actors is no longer enough. It is neither holistic or inclusive, nor the most feasible way to effectively manage global environmental challenges.[27] Foreign and security policies, world politics, and international relations are about people and civil societies (consisting of active citizens, civil society organisations and their activities), democracy and

freedom of expression, and increasingly about the environment. If a state wishes to be counted as a legitimate actor in world politics, it cannot only be driven by its own concerns and take care of its national interests, but must be involved in cooperation on environmental protection and climate change mitigation.

"Fear, rather than courage, still dominates among Western leaders"[28] and plays an important role when anyone's human security is threatened, e.g. indigenous peoples in the Arctic trying to protect their food sovereignty. No wonder that war and conflict are more often studied in international relations than (cross-border) cooperation. Whereas the new realism argues that "anarchy is what states make of it", major powers also cooperate with each other and with smaller states if they have shared interests and if cooperation does not damage their position in the global power balance.[29] Consequently, in international relations, instead of "fear", "cooperation" becomes a motivating factor, indicating that constructive action is an intangible basis for human existence and capability.

Cooperation in international politics would not be possible without the willingness to cooperate across borders and a joint understanding of its benefits, such as an achieved state of trust and confidence among parties. To identify a shared/common interest (here a "shared interest" is interpreted as the starting point of the process of entering into a state of "common interest" that promotes "interdependence") between two or more states or other parties is neither automatic nor pre-determined (particularly if the parties are asymmetric, such as a small state and a major power), but the outcome of a process that attempts to achieve mutual benefit for all parties concerned.

A constructivist approach argues that the "forces of power go beyond material; they also can be ideational of discursive",[30] indicating that transferring words into a speech act could make "power based on knowledge" parallel to "power based on force", i.e. "knowledge is power, power means politics".[31] Nonetheless, this would not happen without decreasing rivalry and increasing cooperation and interdependence as the goals of the age of globalism.[32] Great powers/states that used to be rivals, such as the Soviet Union and the United States in the Cold War period, and China and the United States in the early 21st century, are required to be open minded and willing to cooperate in certain fields of low political value instead of resorting to coercion. For this to happen, special means and methods are needed if the aim is to rebuild confidence between the parties after a rivalry/conflict is over and to resolve disagreements.

The most efficient means for this is considered to be "functional cooperation" in the fields of low politics, based on the theory of functionalism.[33] Sport, culture, science and environmental protection are such fields, which are not sensitive, unlike national security and military policy, which are fields of "high politics". If successful cooperation is achieved in one field, it would be possible to expand cooperation step by step into other fields. The main aim is to (re)build confidence between former rivals and bring back mutual trust. There are a few successful examples of functional cooperation in the Cold War

period, such as the Soviet Red Army Chorus concerts in the United States, the so-called US "Ping-Pong Diplomacy" towards the Peoples' Republic of China, and European economic cooperation. Among recent examples are the "Winter Olympic Games Diplomacy" between the North and South Korea in 2018, and the mitigation of climate change as a common concern between China and the United States despite Sino-US great-power rivalry.

The idea of this spillover effect is to "become more embedded in an integration process, the benefits of cooperation and the costs of withdrawing from cooperative ventures increase".[34] Similarly, mutual trust – either based on cooperation or confidence-building measures – must be earned by deeds and slowly implemented, and then functional cooperation would be allowed to function as a means for stability and peace building. Nonetheless, this is neither pre-determined nor immediate, because it requires the parties to be willing to differentiate out fields of low politics as having more potential for cooperation than those of high politics, resulting in "practical cooperative arrangements [which] can be achieved by 'agreeing to disagree' and not to reach a consensus on ultimate truth claims".[35]

To search for a common ground for cooperation on certain issues, such as arms control, instead of isolating or letting a former rival/enemy isolate itself was a lesson that the West learned regarding the question of how to treat Russia after the split-up of the Soviet Union. Even in the middle of great-power rivalry and due to several parallel crises, the mantra of the Age of Globalism is called to mind (rather than widely implemented) that parties must "co-operate where we can, disagree where we must", as Australia's prime minister Anthony Albanese has put it.[36]

Following on from this, the Arctic states, supported by indigenous peoples and civil societies, managed to create a new geopolitical reality that transformed the state of Arctic geopolitics and security from one characterised by (military) tension to one of geopolitical stability and peace building, much according to the principle of functionalism. Consequently, this guided the Arctic states' governments to prefer cooperation instead of fear in order to keep Arctic affairs out of the world of crises and great-power competition. Hence, it is valid to state that the Arctic states reconstructed their geopolitical reality for the future[37] even while strengthening their states' sovereignty and security according to the dictates of their respective foreign and security policies. This process has also been mutually beneficial both locally and regionally for the region's inhabitants and their well-being, and globally for the entire planet. But currently this reality faces real challenges for the first time because of the events in Ukraine of late February 2022.

III. Common interests of Arctic states in the 2020s

In the Arctic, the most vivid example of cross-border cooperation is efforts to protect the environment. Due to increased environmental awareness and pressure by indigenous peoples and NGOs, the environment became an agenda item of the Arctic states when the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy was signed in 1991.[38] As a result, environmental protection became both the first common interest among these states and a stabilising factor in Arctic geopolitics and security, allowing the first conscious step toward political stability to be taken. As a successful narrative, this supports the main assertion of the theory of functionalism by increasing the political stability of the region, if not yet achieving mutual confidence between the parties via cross-border cooperation.

So far, the process has been cumulative as more common interests appeared and were developed further by the priorities of the Arctic states' national policies, such as good governance, economic activities and international cooperation. It has also been resilient, bypassing several challenges that constituted tests of its resilience, such as the following ones:

- The Russian expedition to the shelves of the Arctic Ocean in 2007 to collect sediments required by the rules of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) was interpreted by Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark as an act of provocation aiming to conquer new territories.

- Following that was the splitting up of the "Arctic Eight" into the "Arctic Five" by the Ilulissat Ministerial in 2008, when the eight Arctic states were divided into two groups: the five littoral states of the Arctic Ocean according to the original geographical definition of the Arctic – Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States – which were looking for a combination of geopolitical stability and national interests, and agreed that there is no need for an Arctic treaty,[39] and the three remaining states – Finland, Iceland and Sweden – which were not invited because they were not littoral states. Indigenous peoples' organisations that formed the AC's permanent participants were also not invited, which raised suspicions among them as to the real motives of the Arctic Five.[40]

- The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, which caused the cancellation of two AC working groups meetings, can be seen as the third test.

- The fourth one was the failure to issue a substantial AC joint declaration in May 2019, due to US opposition to attempts to include the concept of "global warming" in the text. Instead, a short Rovaniemi Declaration and more substantial Rovaniemi Statement by the chair that included language on climate change mitigation were adopted.[41]

- In contrast, the resilience of the AC was finally undermined by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which caused seven member states to temporarily pause the Council's work.

Interestingly, some emerging signs of hesitation were seen in the policies of the Arctic states even before February 2022 in response to AC suggestions to agree on stricter environmental regulations and deepen mutual cooperation on tackling climate change. This started at the Arctic Five's summits (in 2008 in Ilulissat, Greenland, and in 2009 in Chelsea, Canada), and continued in the Arctic states' political inability to make the hard decisions needed to mitigate climate change. Behind the hesitation is an ambivalence with regard to or the paradox of Arctic development in the Arctic states' policies when "searching for a balance between environmental protection and economic activities". This has become one of the recent trends of Arctic states' approaches based on a comprehensive analysis of coded national policies.[42]

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this paper is to assess whether the Arctic states still value the fundamentals of common interests after February 2022, and to what extent these common interests could be used as means for confidence-building, on the one hand and, on the other hand, whether the fundamentals for the special features of Arctic geopolitics, security and governance are still in place. We will start with the issue of common interests.[43]

A. Decrease military tension, increase political stability

In terms of the constructivist approach, [44] and with the watchword "decrease military tension and increase political stability" as the ultimate aim, the Arctic states were consciously searching for stability and reshaping their geopolitical reality after the Cold War period. This effort became a success story, and is interpreted here as reflecting the most fundamental common interest of the Arctic states, which is also shared by indigenous peoples and civil societies.

Obviously, after February 2022 this aim is no longer shared by all eight Arctic states, because it would require mutual confidence and a joint agreement among all of them. The current situation is the opposite of this aim, because the Russian invasion of Ukraine caused an energy crisis in Europe (many EU member states depended heavily on Russia for their energy needs) and radically increased mistrust between Russia and the other seven Arctic states, all of whom were members either of the EU or NATO or both organisations, which imposed sanctions on Russia and give financial and military aid to Ukraine.

To exclude this interest from the list of common interests would in the longer run mean a significant shift in the Arctic states' security premises – regionally, nationally and internationally – and that an "Arctic model" would lose its backbone. Globally, this would mean one more uncertainty, in addition to the growing arms race and expired arms control agreements.

B. Transborder cooperation on environmental protection

At the end of the 1980s, Arctic indigenous peoples, civil societies, NGOs, and a few scientists and scholar became concerned over the state of the Arctic ecosystem due to long-range air and water pollution, in particular radioactivity after the Chernobyl nuclear accident and the sinking of nuclear-powered submarines.[45] This northern dimension of global "environmental awakening" started a unique political process among the Arctic states and these non-state actors to protect the Arctic environment.[46] Based on the coordinated Finnish initiative on Arctic environmental protection and Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev's well known Murmansk speech,[47] which proposed an initiative to establish "a system to monitor the state of the natural environment and radiation safety" in cooperation with the Nordic countries, the eight Arctic states gathered in a ministerial for the first time in 1991 to sign the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS).[48]

As a result, cross-border cooperation on environmental protection became the first officially recognised shared interest among the Arctic states, and between them and indigenous peoples, civil societies and NGOs. Furthermore, based on the AEPS and its working groups, in particular the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP), the AC was established in 1996, with environmental protection and sustainable development as the main pillars of its work.[49]

Similarly, "nuclear safety" became a metaphor for pan-Arctic cooperation when Norway, Russia and the United States established the less well-known Arctic Military Environmental Cooperation (AMEC) in 1996 as "a forum for dialogue and joint activities among U.S., Russian, and Norwegian military and environmental officials … [which] addresses Arctic environmental issues that are related to our militaries' unique capabilities and activities", covering issues such as radioactive and other hazardous waste management, nuclear safety, and monitoring technologies.[50] This was followed by the Marine Biodiversity Agreement, which was signed by the Arctic states in 2023 and included language on "the removal of radioactive waste from the Arctic Ocean", which was one of the focuses of the Russian AC chairmanship.[51]

Correspondingly, as parties of the United Nations Framework for Climate Change, the Arctic states are committed to the main target of the Paris Agreement in 2015 to keep the rise of global average temperature below 1.5 degrees Celsius (although it is widely accepted that this will not be achieved) and to the decisions of the later conferences of the parties. Because on average the Arctic region is warming three to four times faster than the globe[52] and large land areas of it, in particular Siberia, are covered with permafrost, it is very important to collect data measured on the ground on climate-induced ecosystem changes and CO2 emissions, and share it so that proper climate modelling can be done.[53]

Finally, if (long-range) pollution was the main reason that convinced governments to act and nuclear safety the trigger, the climate crisis could be an urgent motivation for the necessity to act both locally and globally and cooperate on environmental protection, particularly amid the ever-increasing numbers of ecological catastrophes such as the rapid melting of glaciers, sea ice and permafrost; the outbreak of large and widespread wildfires; and the spread of radioactive waste. It could also be a potential way to rebuild confidence between Russia and the EU and NATO Arctic states. Interestingly, bilateral cooperation on the environment (e.g. water) continues between Finland and Russia, and Norway and Russia. Nonetheless, the Arctic states seem neither to be ready to adopt strict environmental regulations governing the utilisation of Arctic resources, nor to deepen cooperation on climate change mitigation, nor to put stricter regulations in place to limit the mass-scale utilisation of resources such as offshore oil and gas.

C. Search-and-rescue capabilities and marine oil-spill preparedness

Because the Arctic region mostly consists of the Arctic Ocean and its sub-seas, which are shipping routes and sites of oil and gas drilling, search-and-rescue capacity and oil-spill preparedness are crucial for these ecosystems and their inhabitants. Following on from this, cooperation in these fields is clearly a common interest that the Arctic states all share, as the Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue (signed in 2011) and Marine Oil Spill Preparedness and Response (signed in 2013) indicate.

Since the signing of these agreements there is even greater need for search-and-rescue capacity in these sparsely populated areas, as well as for marine-pollution preparedness in vast sea areas as a result of two major phenomena. On the one hand, there is increasing off-shore oil and gas drilling (in the Norwegian part of the Barents Sea) and on-shore gas drilling (on the Yamal Peninsula), while also of concern is the related sea traffic on northern sea routes, such as tankers carrying liquified natural gas from the Yamal Peninsula[54] and cruise ships carrying tourists into the Arctic seas, as well as aviation above the Arctic Ocean (Western airlines are increasingly using the North Pole routes due to the sanctions imposed on Russia). On the other hand, the Arctic region is facing the growing frequency of unpredictable storms and other extreme weather conditions due to global warming.

Because so far none of the Arctic states has withdrawn from two agreements (AMEC and AMAP) that are currently in force, the parties are committed to abiding by their requirements. More importantly (cross-border) cooperation on search-and-rescue capacity is a reality in the Bering Strait and Barents Sea areas,[55] where the authorities of all signatory states are prepared, committed and obliged to do their best when their services are needed, if necessary in cooperation with one another.

D. International cooperation on scientific research

Science is another forerunner of transborder Arctic cooperation and one of the Murmansk speech's initiatives, which recognised scientific research as a common interest "to improv[e] governance and avoid … conflict in Arctic regions".[56] In the spirit of this speech, the Arctic states negotiated and adopted the legally binding Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation in 2017.[57]

The AC ministerials usually result in language that states the "importance of strengthening and sustaining Arctic scientific research and long-term observations and … that scientific data together with traditional knowledge … will continue to provide the basis for informed decision making".[58] Correspondingly, in October 2018 the Second Arctic Science Ministerial expressed the need to strengthen, integrate, and sustain Arctic observations, facilitate access to Arctic data, and share Arctic research infrastructure. Finally, the International Arctic Science Committee described scientific cooperation as a success story and that it has "always been the common interest of the Arctic states in protecting the Arctic environment and in facilitating the sustainable development of the region".[59]

Similarly, indigenous researchers, as members of the epistemic community, have played an important role in fact finding and applying knowledge for decisions-making, e.g. in the successful negotiations on the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants.[60] Indigenous knowledge of the Arctic environment, which is used by indigenous peoples across the entire region, has shown its strengths by inspiring "transdisciplinarity" in Western science.[61]

Due to the pause of the work of the AC and its working groups, official cooperation with Russian research institutions is not allowed whereas individual researchers are allowed to cooperate, which has made it very difficult to share and process data among members of the pan-Arctic research community.[62] The consequences of this are dire, such as "opportunity cost of immense proportions … [and the] waste of intellectual resources".[63] A break of two years caused by the political obstacles put in place by Western governments means less joint monitoring and assessment are carried out by international research teams, and a lack of data on the impacts of climate change on permafrost, in particular in Siberia, and other Arctic ecosystems, and on the health and well-being of indigenous peoples who live in the polar north.[64]

According to the 2017 agreement on scientific cooperation (which was not negotiated under the auspices of the AC), each party is committed to the "Entry and exit of persons, equipment, and material …. Access to research infrastructure and facilities …. Access to research areas [and] … Access to data". But possibly more significantly in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it does not "provide an explicit provision for its termination, withdrawal or suspension because of armed conflict or heightened political tensions".[65]

Therefore, because none of the parties has withdrawn from the agreement, the pause in cooperation in other areas should not impact scientific cooperation.[66] Finally, for the Arctic states the 2017 agreement would be the easiest way to use science as "an entry point" to restart pan-Arctic cooperation,[67] and, correspondingly, Arctic research would continue to support geopolitical stability.[68]

E. Region building

In terms of modern region building with states as major actors, the Arctic states have successfully built up the post-Cold War perception of the Arctic as a distinctive region through the establishment of new regional organisations and forums. Together with environmental and scientific cooperation, region building has been a useful way for these states to maintain firm state sovereignty over their parts of the region, take back control of their northernmost regions and respond to uncertainties.[69]

No wonder, therefore, that, according to the *Arctic Human Development Report*,[70] region building became one of the main trends of post-Cold War Arctic international relations and geopolitics in the early 21st century and an important foundation of the "Arctic model". This hegemonic state approach was continued by the five littoral states to the Arctic Ocean and its resources, even though it created – implicitly if not explicitly – a dividing line between some of the Arctic states, and between them and the Arctic indigenous peoples.

The current state of a firm state sovereignty, legitimised by UNCLOS and the various related legally binding agreements, dominates Arctic geopolitics and the region's security situation and plays "a crucial role in controlling the region" (but not according to the indigenous peoples' expressed interests).[71] As a result, the Arctic states no longer feel that they need to implement region building, which was once a prevailing policy. Interestingly, this conclusion could have already been reached a few years ago when the Arctic states' mission was to take back control of their Arctic territories. Instead, the pause in pan-Arctic cooperation gives more space for (non-Arctic) European and Asian powers to use their observer position at the AC, which also strengthens state centrism in the region.

F. Circumpolar cooperation among non-state actors

Indigenous peoples, environmental NGOs and civil societies intensified their awareness of the developing environmental crisis and turned it into a motivation for circumpolar cooperation, which became another trend of the early 21st century and another important element of the "Arctic model". This was in addition to Nordic cooperation across the North Atlantic and the development of regionalisation, in particular in the Barents Sea and Bering Strait areas. Parallel to this, several sub-national governments are increasingly cooperating, e.g. Akureyri, Alaska, Greenland, Lapland and the Sakha Republic.[72]

It might be hard to recall now how indigenous peoples and multiple civil societies that were increasingly concerned about their environment and interested in people-to-people cooperation once managed to press the Arctic states' governments to make a conscious paradigm shift on the issue of security.[73]

After February 2022, this kind of uncontrollable non-state cooperation or paradiplomacy is no longer among the Arctic states' common interests, unlike the region's non-state actors who, after experiencing the benefits of cooperation and stability, still value circumpolar cooperation, in particular due to the urgent need for climate change mitigation.

G. Economic activities and sustainable business

In order to develop the regional infrastructure of the post-Cold War Arctic and transform traditional livelihoods to allow them to participate in mass-scale resource utilisation and transport, cooperation on economic and business activity and trade was considered a shared interest among Arctic states and was prioritised in their national Arctic policies. As a result, the Arctic Economic Council was established in 2014 "to enhance and develop sustainable, long-term business relations and economic activities".

As a result, increasing numbers of related stakeholders appeared such as business actors (state-owned enterprises, transnational corporations), the related sovereign wealth funds (e.g. Government Pension Fund of Norway, National Welfare Fund of Russia) and platforms for greater business relations (e.g. Arctic Circle, Arctic Frontiers). These mostly benefit export and business elites and national economies, particularly because of the growing need for energy, mostly from hydrocarbons, due to the post-COVID-19 reopening and the energy crisis in Europe caused by the war in Ukraine.

Global warming, habitat degradation, community well-being and sustainable development increasingly became factors in a growing consciousness of the dangers of the warming planet, resulting in growing pressure to ban offshore oil drilling. In the same way, the trend that stressed the environment and better social governance encouraged the production of clean technology for the green transition, even though it requires the establishment of new mines (both in the Arctic and elsewhere on the planet) to produce the strategic minerals needed to manufacture zero-emission technology. Along these lines, the UN Climate Change Conference COP28 could be interpreted as a success for multilateralism, after delegates agreed "to move away from using fossil fuels in energy systems" and eliminate the methane emissions associated with fossil fuels production, indicating a commitment to make slow progress towards emissions cuts and ultimately a state of zero emissions.[74]

Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine that either the United States or Russia, which are among the three biggest oil producers, would decrease oil and gas drilling or that Norway would stop offshore oil drilling in the service of climate

change mitigation. The hesitation of Arctic oil states to make hard decisions on climate change mitigation would mean that CO2 emissions would continue to accelerate global warming and cause more melting of sea ice, glaciers, etc. Essentially, what became known as the "Arctic paradox" was in the making.[75] Unless the Arctic states are willing to adopt strict environmental regulations for mass-scale utilisation and decide to prioritise environmental protection and climate change mitigation in their policies, oil and gas drilling will continue, resulting in the high costs of global warming, extreme weather conditions, environmental risks and worsening community health. In contrast, the green transition would be a perfectly viable option for the Arctic states, because plenty of wind, hydro and solar power is available during Arctic summers.

Even though economic activities and business will continue to comprise one of the largest interests of the Arctic states, this would not necessarily mean more economic cooperation among them, nor that economic cooperation would be used as a means to increase interdependence, even though geopolitical stability is widely seen to be good for business.

IV. State of special features of Arctic geopolitics, security and governance in the 2020s

Five of the most important special features of the post-Cold War Arctic's geopolitics, security and governance are discussed here.[76] These features have acted as prerequisites for the transformation of relationships among the Arctic states from being characterised by military tension to widespread links reflecting political stability and cross-border cooperation, and later, together with common interests, formed a solid platform on which to maintain geopolitical stability and extend cooperation into new fields.

This did not yet mean that a paradigm shift had occurred in the military-based national security of the Arctic states, or that the Arctic could be defined as a "security community" based on the traditional concept explored by Deutsch et al.[77] But it did mean the adoption of a broader list of security premises among these states, moving their perceptions of security from ones based on the importance of "unilateral, competitive, national military security"[78] to a mutually held perception based on the concept of "comprehensive security" that included cross-border cooperation and environmental protections as key security-building factors.[79] Furthermore, there was a potential to move perceptions of the Arctic as a cooperative region characterised by geopolitical stability towards becoming a regional security complex if the new security premises were adopted into national security paradigms.[80]

In the 2020s, although the Arctic attracts more strategic attention and military presence is increasing, the region is a sideshow of great-power rivalries, such as the one between China and the United States and the new East-West conflict. Similarly, there is no direct connection to the hot wars currently under way in Ukraine and Gaza, as there was with the US involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 21st century. More importantly, the Arctic is one of the main fronts of the climate crisis and the ongoing ecological catastrophe caused by pollution, global warming and loss of biodiversity. Based on this reality, the following sub-sections will assess whether the fundamentals of the five special Arctic features are still in place after February 2022, and if so, to what extent they could be interpreted as prerequisites for cooperation and geopolitical stability as they used to be, and if not, whether this is mostly due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine or other factors.

A. Military presence and nuclear weapons in the Arctic

The original nature of the Cold War-era great-power confrontation was characterised mainly by the deployment of nuclear weapons systems by the Soviet Union/Russian Federation and the United States. These heavyweight military

systems, which had – and still have – more or less the same basic structure, elements and mission, as well as the same potential environmental and societal impacts,[81] were constructed during the Cold War as a result of the principle of global "nuclear deterrence", i.e. the capability of carrying out a second strike in retaliation for an initial nuclear attack. This gave the two major nuclear weapons powers the capability to attack all strategic targets in the Northern Hemisphere in a nuclear strike.

This had (and still has) major consequences for the Arctic region because of its geographical location at the top of the globe, which made it the region over which the shortest aerial distance between Eurasia and North America ran. Equally, the Arctic Ocean, with its multi-year sea-ice covering, constituted a hiding place for strategic nuclear submarines carrying ballistic missiles. All this made the Arctic geostrategically and militarily important for the two Arctic nuclear weapons states.[82]

Whereas the concepts of cooperation, high geopolitical stability and environmental challenges dominate current political and security statements, there has been a notable scarcity of nuclear disarmament and arms control talks and measures. Hence, extremely powerful nuclear weapons systems are still deployed in the region, nuclear-power submarines carrying nuclear-armed ballistic missiles are constantly patrolling under the surface and sea ice of the Arctic Ocean, and nuclear-armed bombers are to be found in the air space of the vast region.[83] Once Russia and the United States/NATO had increased their military presence globally and modernised their weapons systems, the Arctic reverted to being a "strategically significant region",[84] not least due to the deployed nuclear weapons systems. The wider context of this status was an increase of national economic interests and activities in the region, partly due to the melting of the sea ice (which opened up new and shorter trade routes), the Sino-US great-power rivalry, and growing East-West tensions, partly due to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

Following from this, the nature of the Arctic military presence is much the same as in the Cold War past, because global nuclear deterrence is still the main premise of the nuclear weapons system. This situation could get worse if one of the major nuclear weapon states attempted to obtain technological superiority over its rival(s) by trying to eliminate or make ineffective their retaliatory/second strike capability.

B. Neither armed conflicts nor disputes over sovereignty

Another special feature is that there are neither armed conflicts nor serious disputes over state sovereignty/national borders between the Arctic states. Despite questionable (or even rash) interpretations of serious maritime disputes, with a risk of them being escalated, this has been the geopolitical reality since the Second World War. Most of the disputes over the legal status of maritime

Arctic borders have been resolved by finalised or tentative agreements on delimitation arrangements between the Arctic littoral states, except the dispute over the Beaufort Sea between Canada and the United States and over the northern sea route between the United States and Russia.[85]

After February 2022, the situation is much the same. Final decisions have not yet been made about the submissions of Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark and the Russian Federation to UNCLOS on the Arctic Ocean basin shelves outside the applicants' exclusive economic zones.[86] But the long-term dispute over the Hans Island and Lincoln Sea between Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark was resolved by the agreement signed in 2022.

Nevertheless, there are two conditional reservations. We should start with great-power rivalry and regional hot wars occurring outside the Arctic region, which could have consequences in the Arctic if they spread geographically, as has been discussed for decades. If the nuclear weapons deployed in the Arctic were to be used, as is their mission, or to manifest their capabilities for global deterrence, it would mean that a military escalation will be extended into the Arctic region.[87] The second reservation is the possibility of asymmetric environmental conflicts, e.g. between a state and an indigenous people or NGO activists, over how to use the region's land and waters, and who is allowed to utilise its rich natural resources.[88] This kind of conflict could be accelerated by the climate crisis and the mass-scale utilisation of Arctic resources, rather than by the war in Ukraine or one in, for example, the Middle East.

All in all, neither armed conflicts nor disputes over state sovereignty are to be found in the Arctic, even after February 2022, and most disputes between the Arctic states have been resolved. Hence, the region has, so far, "remained largely insulated from wider geopolitical issues".[89]

C. A high degree of international legal certainty

Closely related to the previous factor, a high degree of international legal certainty in the Arctic is based on three developments. The first is the agreed parameters of state sovereignty and the legal status of the entire region that are now in place, and that the Arctic states constantly reaffirm in ministerial declarations/statements[90] their commitment to the AC's role in establishing "peace, stability, [and] constructive cooperation in the Arctic". The second is the increasing recognition of indigenous peoples' (human) rights by international frameworks, in particular the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP),[91] as well as in general.[92] The third is that, as a consequence of the two preceding factors, there is "no need to develop a new comprehensive international legal regime to govern" the Arctic.[93]

UNCLOS, which all the Arctic states except the United States have ratified, governs maritime sovereignty and the utilisation of marine resources.[94] Equally, two other global agreements on the use of the Arctic seas – the Fisheries

Agreement on the Central Arctic Ocean, which was signed in 2018, and the High Seas Treaty to preserve marine biodiversity, which was signed in 2023 – together with the three legally binding agreements signed by the Arctic states mentioned above, which are in force, constitute solid grounds for maintaining geopolitical stability and enhancing cross-border connections and cooperation. They, together with the Norwegian and Russian agreement over the Barents Sea, which is one of the world's most resilient fisheries co-management agreements,[95] could also guarantee a high degree of international legal certainty in the Arctic after February 2022.

D. Self-government, devolution and soft forms of governance

An important transformation of the indigenous peoples' position from self-determination towards one of self-government, such as the Home Rule Government of Greenland, has made soft forms of governance a special feature of Arctic governance.[96] Self-government has played an important role in materialising and enhancing shared interests between the Arctic states and Arctic indigenous peoples. As the *Arctic Human Development Report* has formulated, the value of this lies in the "development of innovative political and legal arrangements that meet the needs of the residents of the circumpolar North without rupturing the larger political systems in which the region is embedded".[97]

After February 2022 this feature is still among the tools of Arctic governance, and thus still valid. Interestingly, Finland and Sweden are still hesitating to ratify the International Labour Organization's Convention 169, which Norway has done; and the legal self-governing status of Greenland is being tested as an "ambiguous action space" between the United States and the Kingdom of Denmark due to the growing US interests in this special entity.[98] None of these issues has anything to do with the war in Ukraine or interrelations between Russia and the other Arctic states.

E. Flexible agenda setting

The famous footnote of the Ottawa Declaration states that "The Arctic Council should not deal with matters related to military security",[99] which means that the Arctic states had consciously separated sensitive areas or fields of high politics from those of low politics. By doing so, those fields became "less affected by tensions or breakdowns in other areas", and agendas could be set based on common interests and shared problems.[100]

Once the AC's work was paused after February 2022, this was not relevant, whereas when the Council's work is restarted, this kind of procedure can potentially be used. It allows the Arctic states to deepen cooperation and broaden the AC's scope into new areas of interest when necessary.

V. Discussion

This Geneva Paper's main aim is to assess whether specific common interests of Arctic states are still valued and applicable; and whether the fundamentals of the special features of Arctic geopolitics, security and governance are still in place and can be recognised as potential prerequisites for transborder cooperation and stability. Correspondingly, the paper's hypothesis is that, in spite of great-power rivalries and the war in Ukraine, cross-border Arctic cooperation in certain fields and in the AC's work will be continued. Finally, the paper assesses whether, due to the mutual benefits of cooperation on environmental protection, scientific research and search-and-rescue capabilities, the Arctic states might differentiate their foreign and climate policies by allowing this state of affairs to continue.

The most important shared interest appeared when the Arctic states determined their ultimate aim to be that of transforming the Arctic from a military theatre of the Cold War into a zone of peace using cross-border cooperation as the main means. Interestingly, the states recognised the importance of knowledge in this process, much according to the principles of constructivism, and went beyond state-centrism by recognising indigenous peoples and NGOs as relevant stakeholders when they negotiated the AEPS and when indigenous peoples' organisations were given the status of permanent participants of the AC. Since then, cooperation on environmental protection and scientific research has been dominating the state of the post-Cold War Arctic, and mutual confidence is being built among the Arctic states, including the former rivals of the Russian Federation and the United States. Consequently, these states, indigenous peoples and civil societies have been enjoying – and still enjoy – the benefits of constructive cooperation and the related geopolitical stability that results. In this way the Arctic states are successfully combining national interests and values such as environmental protection and knowledge building in their foreign and security policies.

This would not be possible without identified common interests that these states share and special geopolitical features that together comprise what is known as the "Arctic model". Indeed, if we analyse this transformation, it is obvious that the shift has been facilitated by and built on cross-border cooperation on environmental protection and scientific research, which in turn indicates shared/common interests among the Arctic states, and between them and Arctic indigenous peoples. Furthermore, cooperation between the eight states, including former rivals, was possible due to certain geostrategic and political features of the Arctic as a suitable site for transborder cooperation, which correspondingly increased the related regional (and even geopolitical) stability and supported regional development.[101] The process has been both cumulative, as more shared interests appeared and were developed further, and resilient by passing several tests, as discussed earlier.

However, the process is not finally and fully determined, because there are possible risks that could potentially jeopardise it. The multiple global crises – ranging from the growing ecological catastrophe and great-power rivalries to pandemics, new East-West tensions and hot/proxy wars – are appearing slowly but surely in, and influencing, Arctic affairs. The transformation towards a more strategically contested Arctic was already under way prior to February 2022. Since then, an arms race and militarisation, warmongering, and new East-West tensions generating tit-for-tat responses and sanctions have dominated the political and security discourses world-wide, and increasingly there is neither tolerance nor patience for talks on cooperation, confidence-building, disarmament and peace.

Following on from this, it would seem that the Arctic states have changed their policy and security premises in terms of Arctic geopolitics and security, and that they no longer acknowledge shared interests as they used to do. Hence, the ultimate aim of *decreasing military tension and increasing political stability* as the first common interest is no longer valued by these states. Similarly, two other interests – *region building and circumpolar cooperation* – are no longer valued, because the Arctic states seem no longer to need them, while indigenous peoples, NGOs and civil societies have limited resources to continue the latter one by themselves.

The interest of *economic activities* is a tricky one. If the conventional wisdom that holds that trade and business build interdependence and increase stability is no longer valid, then business cooperation is neither valued nor widely used by the Arctic states. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean less economic activity in the Arctic region or that it would not be one of the most important interests of the Arctic states. However, at the same time the Arctic states still seem to have shared interests in certain fields. The most obvious is *search-and-rescue capability and oil-spill preparedness,* which are duties that authorities are generally willing to undertake when they are needed.

Another valued common interest is *cooperation on environmental protection,* not least because the Arctic states are committed to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change process and the COP summits' goals.

However, it is difficult to imagine that climate change mitigation would play the same important role in the Arctic states' policies as nuclear safety did in the 1990s and early 2000s. Similarly, the Arctic states do not seem to be ready for more strict environmental regulations on resource utilisation, which is not due to the Ukrainian war, but to the paradox of Arctic development.

International cooperation on scientific research as a forerunner of Arctic cooperation is still valued, although not broadly implemented, and the Arctic states are committed to the Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation. Furthermore, it is also risky for them to leave the task to a few brave Arctic researchers who regularly communicate across the borders of the

opposing blocs, because updated data and analyses on Arctic ecosystems are also needed for regional, national and global decision-shaping and -making.

Conversely, the five special features of Arctic geopolitics, security and governance can be said to be in place: *the original nature of Arctic military confrontation,* which aimed at achieving global nuclear deterrence is still the same. Despite new East-West tensions and hot/proxy wars, *neither armed conflicts nor serious disputes over state sovereignty* are present in the Arctic region. Most such disputes are being resolved, and there is an established and internationally recognised procedure for settling potential disputes that might arise due to, for example, the melting of sea ice and the resultant opening up of new trade routes. Similarly, a *high degree of international legal certainty* also still prevails in the region, because state sovereignty is firmly established, the various legally binding agreements are in force, and the UNCLOS rules are followed by the parties. Also, *self-government and soft forms of governance* are among tools of governance used in the northernmost regions of North America and Europe. Finally, while *flexible agenda setting* is not relevant while the AC's work is paused, it will be in place again once the Council is able to return to its normal ways of functioning.

All in all, a two-fold but partly controversial conclusion can be drawn about Arctic-related matters after February 2022. On the one hand, the Arctic states seem to be changing the premises on which their activities were based, particularly in terms of the previous ultimate aim, which was to search for stability, and hesitate to continue/restart cross-border cooperation, even on environmental protection and scientific research, the original cores of pan-Arctic cooperation. As was discussed earlier, this is because of various key changes and developments in world politics, not only the war in Ukraine. While acknowledging that the Arctic is not exceptional in international politics, the new geopolitical paradigm requires a more holistic approach to the global Arctic and deeper analysis of the cooperative, competitive and conflicting interests of major Arctic stakeholders.

On the other hand, despite this, and the alarming developments in East-West tensions and great-power rivalries, the eight states seem to highly value the work of the AC and its working groups, and are keen not to destroy the existing structure and lose the expertise that has been built up. Behind this lies the fact that 35 years of cooperation and confidence-building has exercised a strong influence by showing the benefits for the Arctic states, societies and region. And the smooth transfer of the AC chairmanship from Russia to Norway, with the priorities of the environment, climate, sustainable development and oceans,[102] and the new guidelines for the Council's working groups that allow them to resume their activities, did restore the AC's decision-making ability, even it is not yet able to return to business as usual. Interestingly, several AC observer states have paused neither their activities nor their cooperation, and are searching for more room for their participation in Arctic research and

other issues, like those related to the Fisheries Agreement, and having their own meetings, such as the North Pacific Arctic Community Meeting in Japan.[103]

Following from this, it is possible to tentatively state, despite great-power rivalries, pressure to build state power and regional wars, that there are no real obstacles to the Arctic states differentiating their foreign and climate policies to allow functional cooperation in areas seen as being confined to low politics, according to the principles of functionalism. In Arctic geopolitics and governance, these include environmental protection, climate change mitigation and scientific research. Further, it is always more challenging to resume activities the longer they have been paused. Conversely, if the Arctic states are neither willing nor able to differentiate their policies in this way due to the war of attrition under way in Ukraine and the related sanctions imposed on Russia, such an approach would be interpreted either as war hysteria or the inability to make the necessary difficult political decisions, after calculating the benefits of economic activities over those of environmental protection.

To speculate, one wonders if the pause of the Council's work was thoroughly thought through in the first place in terms of its inevitable and unavoidable consequences for Arctic inhabitants and communities if updated data on Arctic ecosystems is not shared, in particular on the impacts of climate change. While seven of the Arctic states might share the belief that "Russia is no reliable partner anymore – neither for business, nor for peace",[104] the issue is whether they and Russia actually realise how much is at stake regionally, nationally and globally if the achieved benefits of cooperation and stability are lost, and previously abandoned conflicts are opened up once more, even to the extent where a new conflict front is opened up in the Arctic.[105] It is to be hoped that they will become increasingly aware that armaments, weapons, arms races, and wars supported by military-industrial complexes are always more expensive than cooperation and stability, and a military approach to ensuring a country's security is ultimately not sustainable.

Whereas clearly there is a lot to gain from reverting to an approach based on cooperation rather than conflict. No doubt that this would need, as the significant transformation of the Arctic from a site of military tension to that of cooperation showed, the necessary political will and ability to make the hard decisions and implement them that would be to the benefit of all concerned. Ultimately, if the Arctic states would like to restart pan-Arctic cooperation and rebuild mutual confidence, the easiest way is through shared, common, cooperative work on environmental protection and scientific research.

VI. Conclusions

The Arctic region seems to be always in a state of constant and rapid transformation that affects the entire Earth. The first significant transformation, from the military tensions of the Cold War to geopolitical stability based on cross-border cooperation, would not have been possible without growing concern among indigenous peoples, non-governmental organisations and scientists over the state of the region's environment. This led to the establishment of cooperative structures on environmental protection among the Arctic states and caused a shift in their security premises.

An efficient way of rebuilding confidence between former rivals is functional cooperation in the field of low politics. In terms of the Arctic, the most vivid example is cooperation to protect the environment from long-range air and water pollution, which became a shared interest and stabilising factor in Arctic geopolitics and security. As a result, the Arctic states, supported by indigenous peoples and civil societies, reconstructed their geopolitical reality based on their vision of a cooperative future.

When analysing the transformation and reconstruction that has taken place in the region, the main conclusion is twofold: on the one hand, the change was built on cross-border cooperation, which indicates the presence of shared/common interests among the Arctic states, and between them and Arctic indigenous peoples; and on the other hand, that certain specific features of Arctic geopolitics, security and governance were needed to form suitable conditions for cooperation, which correspondingly increases stability and supports regional development.

Recognised as a distinctive, cooperative region, the Arctic became globalised by major environmental challenges and global economic interests, in particular the mass-scale utilisation of hydrocarbons. After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Arctic started to reflect the patterns of great-power rivalries and new East-West tensions, as the temporary pause of the Arctic Council and its working groups indicates.

The preceding section has shown that most of the shared interests and special features of Arctic governance and cooperation are still in place or can easily be revived, given the necessary political will.

Ultimately, while seven (NATO-aligned) Arctic states might share the thinking that Russia is no longer a reliable partner, they nevertheless still share with Russia the undeniable knowledge that the benefits of cooperation and stability are much, much greater than those of conflict and confrontation, and that there is a great deal more to gain for all of them, including Russia, if they go back to a situation where Arctic cooperation is a key part of their foreign and security policies. The present study reveals that there are no real obstacles to the Arctic states rediscovering the huge benefits of cooperation – except a potentially catastrophic failure of the necessary political will to do so.

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