



DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY

Briefing papers by Ernie Regehr, O.C., Senior Fellow in Arctic Security

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Security: The View from the “Top of the World”

Ever since the late 2013 escalation of conflict in the Ukraine and the similarly escalated souring of relations with Russia, Arctic watchers have been asking about consequences for relations in the Arctic. A new EKOS Research survey ([“Rethinking the Top of the World”](#)), commissioned by the Gordon Foundation, is thus especially welcome for offering a window onto the views of Arctic populations on security and much more.¹ It’s a mixed picture, but it’s clear that most people living in the Arctic do not want what is an essentially southern conflict to spill over into their region.

Deteriorating relations between Russia and the West² have already impacted the Arctic and slim majorities in Finland, Iceland, and Russia (51, 58, and 50 percent respectively) told EKOS Research that the threat of military conflict in the Arctic had increased over the past year. But in the Canadian North and Alaska, majorities (64 and 55 percent) said the threat had either stayed the same or declined over the same period. The US outside of Alaska and Denmark were least inclined to think that the threat had increased (24 and 29 percent), and in both cases just over 40 percent thought the threat had stayed the same or declined, but in both cases about a third (34 percent in the US and 29 percent in Denmark) had no views on the matter. In Sweden and Norway feelings were evenly divided – that is, roughly a third thought the threat had increased, a third thought it had stayed the same or declined, and a third had no views on the matter.

In other words, while in a minority of Arctic state populations see the threat of conflict growing, in others views are mixed and in North America most do not see a rising threat of military conflict.

Perhaps more important, in none of the Arctic states does the majority favor ending cooperation with Russia in response to the conflict in Ukraine. In Finland, though the majority saw an increase in the threat of armed conflict, only 22 percent favored suspending cooperation with Russia, compared with Iceland and Sweden where over 40 percent favored suspending cooperation with Russia. In the Canadian North and Alaska 36 and 37 percent favored suspending cooperation, while in the Canadian and American South, the figures were 38 and 32 percent respectively. In other words, significant majorities rejected the idea that suspending cooperation with Russia in the Arctic would be an appropriate response to Russia’s role in the conflict in the Ukraine.

The survey findings are not broken down between indigenous and non-indigenous populations, but indigenous leaders have just made a strong appeal, at the most recent Arctic Council meeting (in Nunavut in April 2015), not to allow geopolitical tensions with Russia to intrude into Arctic affairs and the work of the Arctic Council (all eight states with territory above the Arctic Circle are members, and of course Russia with its 7,000 kilometers of Arctic coastline and an expansive continental shelf is the most prominent). A representative of Saami populations³ in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia⁴ told the Council that indigenous people are the first to be negatively affected by discord and that cooperation within the Arctic Council and among Arctic states had to be “safeguarded.” And a representative of Athabaskan indigenous communities⁵ told the same meeting that international cooperation is important to northerners and that the Arctic Council and its individual members “should shield our cooperation from broader political and geopolitical rivalries.”⁶

The Canadian government has developed a reputation for advocating a strong line against Russia, calling its boycott of an Arctic Council meeting in Moscow a “principled stand against Russia.” Canada’s Minister for the Environment and for the Arctic Council, Leona Aglukkaq, promised, to the displeasure of other participants, to use the Nunavut meeting to berate Russia for its actions in the Ukraine, and Foreign Minister Rob Nicholson is reported to have pointedly omitted Russia from his list of acknowledgements of Arctic Council states.⁷

The survey indicates relatively strong support in Canada and the United States for increased military presence in the Arctic, not altogether surprising given that the conventional wisdom in both countries supports a narrative of an Arctic that is under-defended and in need of military infrastructure improvements. In Alaska and the Canadian north, 52 and 45 percent of the population respectively favor “strengthening” military presence in the Arctic. In the American and Canadian south the respective numbers are 45 and 49 percent. For Canada, perhaps the more interesting result is that in the north support for increased military presence dropped from 52 percent in 2010 to 45 percent in 2015, and in the Canadian south it dropped from 60 percent in 2010 to 45 percent.

There has been an understanding in the Arctic Council from its beginning in 1996 that it “should not deal with matters related to military security,”⁸ but the possibility of including security matters continues to be encouraged by some. The EKOS survey asked, both in 2010 and in 2015, whether the Council “should also cover areas like military security in the Arctic.” Russians are certainly most supportive of security issues being on the agenda (79 percent in 2015, down slightly from 81 percent in 2010). Finland and Denmark were next highest at 71 and 63 percent respectively, and up sharply from 39 and 48 percent respectively in 2010). Icelanders were least supportive of the idea, at 44 percent in both 2015 and 2010. Norway was at 46 percent, and all others were between 50 and 60 percent supportive (with northern Canadians at 57 percent and southerners at 55 percent; 56 percent of Alaskans supported the idea, as did 50 percent of Americans outside of Alaska).

One other question explicitly related to security was on support for the Arctic becoming a zone free of nuclear weapons. Alaskans were the least supportive at 46 percent, the only jurisdiction in which support was below 50 percent. Americans outside of Alaska and Russians were equally, and significantly supportive of the idea (67 and 68 percent respectively. In both cases support had risen since 2010. It is particularly noteworthy that populations in both countries are as supportive as they are, given the huge implications such a prohibition would have on Russia (Russia has significant arsenals of nuclear weapons based in the Arctic, while the Americans have no weapons based there, although their nuclear armed submarines and aircraft can and do conduct patrols in the region). Support for an Arctic Nuclear Weapons Free Zone is very high in all other Arctic states: Northern Canada (79 percent); southern Canada (81); Denmark (83); Finland (88); Iceland (88); Norway (83); and Sweden (90).

Rethinking the Top of the World: Arctic Public Opinion Survey, Vol. 2 makes an important contribution to our understanding of Arctic security and cooperation. In addition to the security-related questions highlighted here, the survey addresses a variety of other issues, including approaches to border disputes, the status of the Northwest Passage, and the Arctic Council. The full results are available at www.gordonfoundation.ca.

Notes

¹ “Rethinking the Top of the World: Arctic Public Opinion Survey, Vol. 2, EKOS Research Associates Inc, Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Program, released April 22, 2015. www.gordonfoundation.ca

² The “West” is not a particularly salient post-Cold War term, but it remains a convenient way to refer to Europe and North America and is used here in that sense.

³ Six indigenous peoples’ organizations are Permanent Participants in Council, making them part of the political and consultative process in the Council, but they do not have voting rights: Arctic Athabaskan Council (AAC); Aleut International Association (AIA); Gwich'in Council International (GCI); Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC); Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON); and Saami Council (SC).

⁴ Aile Javo, president of the Saami Council.

⁵ Michael Stickman, chair of the Arctic Athabaskan Council.

⁶ Heather Exner-Pirot, “Arctic Council Ministerial – winners and losers,” Eye on the Arctic, *Alaska Dispatch News*, 29 April 2015. <http://www.adn.com>

⁷ Eillis Quinn, “Eye on the Arctic,” *Alaska Dispatch News*, 27 April 2015. <http://www.adn.com> and Heather Exner-Pirot, “Arctic Council Ministerial – winners and losers,” Eye on the Arctic, *Alaska Dispatch News*, 29 April 2015. <http://www.adn.com>

⁸ This exclusion is contained in a footnote, added at the behest of the United States, to the founding document’s reference to the “common Arctic issues” that would be part of the Council’s work.