

# Background Guide



WAMUNC XXVI

ARCTIC COUNCIL



## Letter from the Chair

Dear Delegates,

Hello and welcome to the Arctic Council at WAMUNC 2024! My name is Walker Szczecina, and I am extremely excited to be chairing this committee. I hope to find you all embodying your positions and finding creative yet realistic solutions to the many issues facing the Arctic. I am a first-year student at GW, currently planning to major in Political Science and Data Science. I'm from a town in northern New Jersey, where I participated in Model UN throughout high school *and* middle school. I am also on the MUN travel team here at GW (I can never escape...). Model UN is important to me because productive debate gets us thinking about real-world issues. That being said, in order to ensure productive debate in this committee, we must acknowledge and respect the historic hardships of indigenous populations in the Arctic when discussing policy in our committee. In my senior year of high school, I attended WAMUNC as a delegate. Being one of my favorite conferences of all time, I hope each and every one of you enjoys it just as much as I did!

Sincerely,

Walker Szczecina



## Topic A: Sustainable Trade and Development Across the Arctic

As it became clear to explorers that the presence of the American continent proved an issue for an efficient sea route to Asia, the last hope for many was the possibility of a “Northwest Passage”, an ice-free waterway through the Arctic region of what is now the nation of Canada. Starting in the 16th century and continuing for hundreds of years, numerous possible routes were found, but the abundant ice in the region blocked all expeditions.<sup>1</sup> This made trade through the Northwest Passage impossible for centuries.

Still, exploration and hunting in the Arctic blossomed, leading many animal species to go extinct. Especially prevalent was the whaling industry, extracting whale oil for use during the Industrial Revolution. A large concentration of whales off the coast of Alaska was a prime motivator for the United States’ purchase of the land in 1867, and the 1890s gold rush in Alaska and the Canadian territory of Yukon further expanded Arctic exploration and settlement.

It was not until August 2007 that a route through the Northwest Passage was navigable without the assistance of an icebreaker<sup>2</sup>, making the route much more practical for international shipping. The 2004 Arctic Climate Impact Assessment discovered that ice across the Arctic had significantly melted throughout the latter half of the 20th century, and tied the phenomenon to climate change.<sup>3</sup> The effects of climate change continue to melt and thin the previously debilitating ice across the Northwest Passage, and a future in which the routes are consistently traversable is what current trends point towards.

In the Eastern hemisphere, a similar situation exists regarding the Northern Sea Route along the north coast of Russia. Inaccessible due to ice for centuries, the first ship crossed the route without an icebreaker in 2017. All in all, studies have shown an increase in commercial shipping across the Arctic by about 75% in the past decade.<sup>4</sup> This newfound accessibility of multiple Arctic shipping routes has raised new questions about efficiency, safety, environmental impact, and sovereignty.

### *Climate Change*

The impact of Arctic shipping routes on the environment is controversial and highly debated. On the one hand, groups such as the World Wildlife Fund express concern over the impact of shipping-related pollution on the Arctic ecosystem. Black carbon and oil spills have already begun to cause adverse effects for species in the region. Furthermore, more crowded shipping lanes increase noise pollution and the potential for boats to strike animals such as North Atlantic right whales, which are a critically endangered species.<sup>5</sup> Environmental advocates stress that the Arctic ecosystem is much too delicate to support high levels of international shipping.

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<sup>1</sup> New Internationalist Team, “The Arctic: A History”. <https://newint.org/features/2009/07/01/arctic-history>.

<sup>2</sup> The Guardian, “North-West Passage is now plain sailing”. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2007/aug/28/climatechange.internationalnews>.

<sup>3</sup> “Arctic Climate Impact Assessment”. <https://acia.amap.no/>.

<sup>4</sup> Jackie Dawson, et. al., “Temporal and Spatial Patterns of Ship Traffic in the Canadian Arctic from 1990 to 2015”. <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/arctic/article/view/67736>.

<sup>5</sup> World Wildlife Fund, “Shipping”. <https://www.arcticwwf.org/threats/shipping/>.

The issue of climate change is particularly interesting concerning Arctic shipping since global warming itself has allowed for the practice to be feasible in the first place. Proponents of Arctic shipping argue that utilizing the Northwest Passages and NSR results in much faster shipping routes, therefore reducing overall CO2 emissions and fuel pollution. One study found that ships utilizing Arctic routes could reduce their overall carbon footprint by as much as 24% while also saving time and money.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Indigenous Groups***

Indigenous groups such as the Inuit and Sami people have inhabited the Arctic region for centuries, and make up a large minority of residents in most regions. The indigenous population in the Arctic totals around 400,000, and in general, the lifestyle of these groups is importantly connected to the climate of the Arctic. Climate change and non-indigenous settlements have begun to impact how Indigenous peoples trade, hunt, and traverse their homes. As permafrost begins to melt, many settlements have been damaged. Indigenous hunters and fishers commonly travel dozens of miles to reach prime grounds, and melting ice has made forms of transit such as sledding increasingly more difficult. Changes in weather and temperature patterns have impacted hunters such as Reindeer herders extensively.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to understand that Indigenous peoples are not stuck in the past. For hundreds of years, indigenous groups have become increasingly integrated with non-indigenous society, and in the modern day, most Arctic indigenous people rely on trade and wage employment. Because the increase in Arctic shipping requires extensive infrastructure development, there is potential to create more job opportunities for indigenous populations, many of whom rely on unsustainable resource extraction jobs. One success story is the Canadian government's Inshore Rescue Boat Station in Nunavut. Opened in 2018, the station is largely staffed by indigenous peoples, who in turn have helped to educate the Coast Guard in respecting the region's environment.<sup>8</sup> While industrialization of the Arctic poses massive challenges for indigenous lifestyles, there is a possibility that, with heavy input from indigenous groups, increased Arctic infrastructure can be beneficial.

### ***Existing Policies***

Perhaps the largest disagreement in the emergence of Arctic trade channels is who ought to control these routes. Canada strongly believes that it has a right to control the Northwest Passage which passes through its territory, and therefore restrict which vessels can pass through it. Other states such as the United States contest these claims, arguing that the passage should be considered international waters. The disagreement is further complicated by the fact that the Inuit Circumpolar Council has also claimed the Northwest Passages as part of their territory. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea defines "straits which are used for international navigation" as international territory, reinforcing the American position. Currently,

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<sup>6</sup> Brown University, "Melting Arctic ice could transform international shipping routes, study finds". <https://www.brown.edu/news/2022-06-22/arctic>.

<sup>7</sup> World Wildlife Fund, "Arctic Communities". <https://www.arcticwwf.org/our-priorities/arctic-communities/>.

<sup>8</sup> John Downing, "An evaluation of the impact of shipping on Arctic Indigenous Peoples". <https://jsis.washington.edu/news/an-evaluation-of-the-impact-of-shipping-on-arctic-indigenous-peoples/>.



the United States and Canada operate under a 1988 agreement that American ships will ask permission to use the passage, and so far, Canada has not restricted travel.<sup>9</sup> However, it is reasonable to predict that increasing sea traffic may change this uneasy agreement, and the Arctic would benefit from a more specific regulatory treaty.

Russia more exclusively controls the NSR and has publicly expressed plans to use the route to bolster the nation's influence in international trade. This important connection would provide an alternative route to the Suez Canal, shifting billions of dollars of trade through Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone. Working with China, Russia has committed to creating the infrastructure to make the route viable for shipping, which is forecasted to occur by 2030.

The Arctic Council has thus far been unable to pass any agreements directly concerning trade. Related, though, is the 2011 Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement. With traffic on the rise, experts have become concerned that a lack of infrastructure would make states unable to respond in the case of an accident in the Arctic. In hopes of combatting this issue, member states of the Arctic Council have agreed to collaborate in Search and Rescue missions. Still, it remains true that lack of infrastructure creates a significant danger for Arctic ships.

## Questions to Consider

1. Is shipping throughout the Arctic an effective and sustainable type of transportation that should be expanded?
2. How can the negative environmental effects of Arctic shipping be offset?
3. Should Arctic nations such as Canada and Russia control the sea routes within their maritime borders, or should the channels be considered international waters?
4. How can new trade policy regarding the Arctic respect, involve, and benefit indigenous groups?
5. What new infrastructure is needed to reduce the danger of Arctic travel, and how can this infrastructure be created sustainably?

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Herrmann, "Shipping Through the Northwest Passage: A Policy Brief".  
<https://jsis.washington.edu/news/shipping-through-the-northwest-passage-a-policy-brief/>.

## Topic B: Security Issues and Representation in the Arctic Council

Since its founding in 1996, the Arctic Council has approved and taken on dozens of projects, ranging from scientific and statistical research to legally binding international treaties on topics such as search and rescue cooperation and oil spill response. For example, the Good Practices for Impact Assessments and Engagement project ensures infrastructure is created in an environmentally friendly manner in the delicate region, with input from indigenous groups. The 2017 Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation is the backbone allowing for many of these international projects.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 threw into question the work of the Arctic Council entirely.

Complicated by the fact that Russia chaired the Arctic Council from 2021 to 2023, a March 2022 statement by the seven permanent members of the Arctic Council other than Russia condemned the invasion and announced that they would not participate in any Arctic Council meetings or projects indefinitely. However, the statement also clarified, “We remain convinced of the enduring value of the Arctic Council for circumpolar cooperation and reiterate our support for this institution and its work. We hold a responsibility to the people of the Arctic, including the indigenous peoples, who contribute to and benefit from the important work undertaken in the Council.”<sup>11</sup>

Russia strongly condemned these actions, arguing that the Arctic should be a region for peaceful cooperation. After the boycott, Russia continued its chairmanship of the council by focusing on its own domestic Arctic issues, such as economic development. By June 2022, the seven states agreed to resume cooperation in a limited capacity, on projects not involving Russia.<sup>12</sup> In May 2023, Norway became the chair of the Arctic Council as scheduled. Still, many important projects remain on hold or greatly incomplete as the rest of the council continues their refusal to work with Russia. Important projects regarding biosecurity, clean energy investments, and indigenous cultural prevention are led by Russia and find their status in question.

### *The Arctic Council and Security Issues*

Thus far, the Arctic Council has been purely a group for international cooperation in science, development, and sustainability. However, it is undeniable that several security issues face the Arctic, and some believe that the region, as well as the population within it, would benefit from the Arctic Council negotiating treaties on topics such as military development.

A large majority of people in Arctic states say they would support the Arctic Council tackling peace-building issues, including establishing a nuclear-free zone. However, others have pointed

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<sup>10</sup> Arctic Council, “Projects”. <https://arctic-council.org/projects/>.

<sup>11</sup> “Joint Statement on Arctic Council Cooperation following Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine”. <https://via.ritzau.dk/pressemeddelelse/13645015/joint-statement-on-arctic-council-cooperation-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine?publisherId=2012662>.

<sup>12</sup> “Joint statement on limited resumption of Arctic Council cooperation”. <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2022/06/joint-statement-on-limited-resumption-of-arctic-council-cooperation.html>.

out that this could take focus and funding away from important scientific and resource projects, lowering the effectiveness of these important Arctic initiatives.

### ***An Arctic Nuclear Weapons Free Zone***

A Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) is an international agreement that mandates “the non-possession, non-deployment and non-use of nuclear weapons within the zone.” Multiple proposals for an NWFZ in the Arctic exist, dating back to at least the 1980s. These proposals explain the specific importance of an Arctic NWFZ, noting the historical effects of American and Russian nuclear weapons tests in the regions. Many states greatly overlooked the effects their military development had on the region’s environment and indigenous populations.<sup>13</sup>

In general, there is international support among citizens of Arctic states for the establishment of the Arctic as an NWFZ. Expectedly, this support is slightly lower, but still a majority, in the Nuclear Weapons States of Russia and the United States.<sup>14</sup> Regardless, the question remains of whether or not the Arctic Council is the proper body to take on the massive effort of negotiating a Nuclear Weapons treaty, especially considering the already tumultuous times existing Arctic Council agreements find themselves in due to international tension.

### ***Representation of Indigenous Groups***

The boycott of the Arctic Council in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was controversial among the six indigenous permanent participants in the Arctic Council, who were not consulted or informed of the plans by any of the seven member states. This was also the case when the member states began limited resumption of Arctic Council cooperation. The President of the Inuit Circumpolar Council stated, “We don’t like it that we weren’t consulted prior to things being decided,”<sup>15</sup> clearly feeling as though indigenous groups were left out of a highly consequential decision.

In general, the Arctic Council attempts to ensure that development in the Arctic occurs in a way that is beneficial to Indigenous peoples. Considering this goal, it is worth discussing whether or not Indigenous groups have adequate power in the council to ensure their voices are truly heard. One way to accomplish this is to grant Indigenous councils an identical status to member states of the Arctic Council, but this would further complicate questions of sovereignty in the Arctic. With countries such as Canada greatly valuing their control of Arctic territory for economic reasons, any successful solution must balance the interests of all groups.

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas S. Axworthy, “A Proposal for an Arctic Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone”.

<https://www.interactioncouncil.org/publications/proposal-arctic-nuclear-weapon-free-zone>.

<sup>14</sup> Ekos Research Associates, inc., “Rethinking the Top of the World: Arctic Security Public Opinion Survey”.

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<sup>15</sup> Melody Schreiber, “Arctic Council nations to resume limited cooperation — without Russia”.

<https://www.arctictoday.com/arctic-council-nations-to-resume-limited-cooperation-without-russia/>.

## Questions to Consider

1. How can the Arctic Council ensure it remains effective as tension grows between the West and Russia?
2. Is there any way to resolve tensions and disagreements in order to resume Russian-led Arctic Council projects?
3. Should the Arctic Council debate issues of security such as military presence in the Arctic, or should these topics be left to the United Nations?
4. To what extent, if any, is the Arctic an appropriate place for nuclear technology?
5. How can Indigenous groups be incorporated into the Arctic Council in a way that ensures they have appropriate influence?





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