

## "Reducing tensions, managing risks, rebuilding trust" – Report from the Roundtable on Arctic Security in Helsinki

With growing great power presence in the Arctic, there is plenty of reason to discuss risks and opportunities for regional cooperation in the High North. On May 7, the Munich Security Conference (MSC) – in cooperation with the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) and with the support of the Finnish government – organized a Roundtable on Arctic Security in Helsinki, Finland. The event assembled a select group of around 40 key decision-makers and experts to discuss the current state of cooperation in the Arctic, alternate models of governance, and intelligence activities in the region.

The Arctic is undergoing a profound transformation that turns it into an ever more important geopolitical arena. Yet, in managing the chances and challenges for cooperation posed by growing great power presence, there have been only few efforts to exchange best practices between the Arctic and other (maritime) regions. With its Roundtable on Arctic Security in Helsinki, Finland – organized in parallel to the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in the Finnish city of Rovaniemi – the MSC sought to break this pattern. It gathered high-level representatives of governments, militaries, the intelligence community, business, and academia to engage in a two-tiered discussion: On the one hand, the Roundtable sought to identify models of cooperation practiced elsewhere in the world that can help manage sources of tension in the Arctic; on the other, it aimed at detecting patterns of collaboration that have flourished in the Arctic and might improve governance of other (maritime) regions. Participants in the Roundtable included Sauli Niinistö, President of Finland, Timo Soini, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Finland, Clive Johnstone, Commander of NATO's Allied Maritime Command, Sergey Kislyak, Member of the Federation Council of the Russian Parliament and former Ambassador to the United States, and select members of the international intelligence community.

Participants highlighted that the Arctic could indeed serve as a role model for cooperation elsewhere in the world. The constructive manner in which Arctic dialogue has been conducted so far – first and foremost in the framework of the Arctic Council – was described as exemplary and a welcome contrast to the breakdown of communication and cooperation in other ambits of the world. Arctic nations, including the US and Russia, have established solid patterns of cooperation on a multitude of matters, including maritime safety, environmental protection, meteorology and education – patterns of cooperation and communication channels that persist despite disagreement on many other fronts. In this regard, the Arctic shows that taking small cooperative steps is an ever more important endeavour that may help build the necessary trust to manage an era of great power rivalry.

While participants agreed that dialogue in the framework of the Arctic Council constitutes a best practice of multilateral cooperation, some expressed worries about the fact that hard security issues are currently excluded from the Council's agenda. With great power rivalry having reached the Arctic sea, some saw the urgent need to create a forum in which tensions and misunderstandings can be addressed early on. In this regard, President Niinistö reminded participants that his offer to organize an "Arctic Summit" – an Arctic Dialogue Forum at the level of heads of state and government – still stands. He argued that "simply excluding these issues from the Arctic Council's agenda will not make them go away".

Participants also emphasized the need to protect freedom of navigation in the Arctic. One issue discussed in this context was the challenge of balancing freedom of navigation with states' sovereign rights – and whether the High North could address this challenge by building on best practices from other regions of the world.

Another reason that freedom of navigation was a topic of concern among some participants was Moscow's growing military footprint in the region. Russia, they worried, might someday use its military presence for access denial. To avoid this scenario, NATO needs to pay closer attention to the Arctic and ensure that its strategic posture in the region reflects the new geopolitical dynamics in the High North. In this regard, participants suggested to pay heed to the strategic connections between different maritime theatres and the tensions that grow within each of them.

In sum, discussions highlighted what President Niinistö had emphasized upfront: Continuing to pay close attention to the Arctic is necessary because "what happens in the Arctic has direct consequences for the rest of the world."