

Book Review

Red Arctic: Russian Strategy Under Putin. By Elizabeth Buchanan. Brookings Institution Press, 2023. 248 pp.

Reviewed by Andrew Chater

In *Red Arctic: Russian Strategy Under Putin*, Elizabeth Buchanan argues that international relations in the Arctic are largely co-operative despite the tensions found in other regions because “Russia largely requires a cooperative Arctic environment to achieve its strategic objectives and deliver on Moscow’s critical economic interests” (viii). Methodologically, the book is rigorous, drawing on a thorough review of primary documents and an unspecified number of interviews with government officials. It makes a convincing case that, despite neo-imperialist rhetoric, Russia’s policy makers have long sought peace in the Arctic not out of global altruism, but rather as a tool to achieve foreign policy aims.

The first two chapters argue that co-operation best serves Russia’s Arctic interest. The first chapter concludes that a common academic and media frame is that a Great Power conflict is playing out in the Arctic region, though in reality, mechanisms such as the Law of the Sea stably govern the region. The second chapter shows that Russia seeks to re-establish its great power status, funded by oil and natural gas; Russian president Vladimir Putin has likewise centralized the Russian state and reigned in the power of oligarchs. The Arctic is where future oil and natural gas resources lie. Co-operation is necessary to develop these resources (not to mention the tantalizing economic benefits of increasing shipping through the Northern Sea Route).

The next two chapters turn to strategy. The third chapter argues that, for domestic Russian audiences, a bold Arctic policy is a nostalgic throwback to Soviet superpower days. A look at Russia’s Arctic policies shows that economics, resource wealth, and shipping figure heavily into these visions. Russian policy makers want the rest of the world community to accept its control of Arctic resources and the Northern Sea Route. The fourth chapter puts forward that Russia is quite often the villain in Western narratives about the Arctic region, but it quite reasonably seeks shipping and hydrocarbon resources. It pursues things such as the delineation of its extended continental shelf in much the same way as other Arctic actors. That

tensions do sometimes result is a product of the complexity of politics; overall, co-operation prevails.

The following two chapters seek to contrast Russia's Arctic behaviour with popular narratives in the West. The fifth chapter shows that Russia has behaved co-operatively in the Arctic region, seen in two case studies. In 2010, Norway and Russia negotiated an end to their maritime boundary dispute in the Barents Sea due to a mutual desire to explore hydrocarbon resources in the region. Russia also has sought partnerships with Western energy companies in the Arctic region. The sixth chapter concludes that the notion that the Arctic is a region of conflict is a troublesome intellectual legacy of the World Wars and the Cold War.

The final two chapters assess the future of the region. The seventh chapter says that armed conflict is unlikely in the Arctic because states lack the will and means to go to war. If conflict results, it will be from misreading Russia's intentions, or misunderstanding governance in the region. The afterword acknowledges that conflict in the region seems more likely now in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The book arrives at a deeply conflictual time in Russian–Western relations. Clearly the bulk was written before the war in Ukraine, which Buchanan does not think affects her major conclusion: “While co-operation via [the Arctic Council] has indeed been curtailed, conflict has not replaced it nor should we expect it to” (xi). She calls the “new cold war” narrative in Arctic security “a rather prickly work of fiction” (2). Yet, there is good reason to be pessimistic about the peaceful nature of the Arctic; Buchanan seems less optimistic, too, in the book's afterword. The seven Arctic states suspended their work with the Arctic Council in 2022, before restarting without Russia. Russia has withdrawn from the Barents–Euro Arctic Council. Yet, as of September 2023, relations have moved forward as Russian officials have had discussions about the Arctic Council with current chair Norway, so perhaps Arctic co-operation will return sooner than one might assume (Edwardsen, 2023).

In places, Buchanan seems to blame the West for the breakdown of relations in the Arctic region: “Today, Washington's Cold War anxieties have indeed returned to the region” while “Russia's Arctic strategy remains geared toward cooperation, meaning foreign investment, partners, and indeed foreign clients and markets” (162). She says, “The Arctic's status quo, preserved rather effectively under the Arctic Council for decades, needs to be rediscovered. Fast” (163).

Buchanan labels Russia's Arctic strategy as pragmatic (8), which begs further questions. Pragmatism involves making decisions using reason and common sense, akin to rationality. A pragmatic foreign policy can result in conflict. There is a pragmatic explanation for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but it is one mired in miscalculations, such as that Russia's military could overwhelm Ukraine, that

the country would fall quickly, that Ukraine's leaders were not up to the task of wartime command, and that the Western allies would splinter into disunity over their response. Buchanan's conclusions beg the question: why has Russian pragmatism succeeded in the Arctic but so far failed in Ukraine? If we accept Buchanan's conclusion that co-operation serves Russian Arctic interest, it follows that if Arctic war best suited Russia's national interest or was a pragmatic means to an end, war would occur. Russia has already made this miscalculation in Ukraine. Could this miscalculation occur in the Arctic, too?

An omission is that Russia's policy towards Indigenous Peoples is largely absent from Buchanan's analysis. In fairness, Buchanan's interest is foreign policy, while policy towards Indigenous Peoples would fall under the umbrella of domestic policy. However, Russia's Indigenous Peoples play an important role in Russia's Arctic policy as the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) is an international actor as one of the six permanent participants to the Arctic Council. Over the last ten years, the Kremlin has undertaken a campaign to bring RAIPON under its control by ensuring Putin loyalists lead the organization (iCIPR and ADC, 2023, p. 8). An organization that once stood up for Indigenous land rights in the face of hydrocarbon development became, according to the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia, a body for “rubber-stamping government decisions” (9). If Russia pursues peaceful Arctic international relations to further economic development for the benefit of the broader Russian state, it suppresses the rights of those with different interests for the same reason. Russia has behaved in a peaceful manner in its Arctic international relations, but policy on the home front is not so peaceful, with the arrest of Indigenous critics of state policy (6–7).

Overall, Buchanan makes a contribution in *Red Arctic*. She shows that co-operation is an important part of the story of Russia's Arctic policy and of Arctic governance more broadly. The book demands a second edition once the implications of the Russo–Ukrainian War are clear.

Sources

- Edwardsen, A. (2023, September 12). Light at the end of the tunnel for the the Arctic Council. *High North News*. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/light-end-tunnel-arctic-council>
- International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia (iCIPR) and the Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial (ADC). (2023, February 23). *Influence of Putin's aggression against Ukraine on Indigenous Peoples of Russia*. Second Ed. Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial.

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