

Global Agenda Council on the Arctic

Five Arctic Myths

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The Arctic continues to become more relevant to today's society and is perhaps the most visible manifestation of climate change. As the region's transformations accelerate, receiving more attention from international media and the global populous, Members of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on the Arctic highlight five particularly pervasive myths. By discounting certain claims, the Council intends to focus attention and efforts on the persistent challenges facing the region.

Myth #1: The Arctic is an uninhabited, unclaimed frontier with no regulation or governance

IN FACT the region is home to some 4 million people and a ~US\$ 230 billion/year economy, all under the jurisdiction of eight countries (Russia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Greenland/Denmark, Canada and the United States) with virtually no territorial border disputes between them. Even offshore in the Arctic Ocean, most coastal waters fall within existing Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) with further seafloor sovereignty extensions pending or likely under Article 76 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In Canada, Greenland and the US, local control by aboriginal communities and regional business corporations can be substantial. In short, the Arctic is neither an unclaimed, contested place nor a closed military zone, and is governed under existing national structures and international frameworks similar to other areas of the world.



Myth #2: The region's natural resource wealth is readily available for development

IN FACT many technological, infrastructural, economic and environmental challenges impede natural resource development in the Arctic. Extracting resources is never a simple operation in polar environments, and resource development will require high levels of investment, including development of specialized technologies. Furthermore, the region is not homogeneous with regard to development potential. Strong distinctions exist between onshore and offshore environments, and between different regions and countries with regard to existing levels of infrastructure, population, environmental sensitivity and accessibility.



Myth #3: The Arctic will be immediately accessible as sea ice continues to disappear

IN FACT the opposite is true on land, owing to shorter winter road seasons and destabilized ground due to thawing permafrost. Even in the Arctic Ocean, sea ice is not the sole obstacle to shipping and maritime structures (such as drilling platforms). Other challenges include polar darkness, poor charts, lack of critical infrastructure and navigation control systems, low search-and-rescue capability, high insurance/escort costs, and other non-climatic factors. The related myth that climate change will create an ice-free Arctic Ocean year-round is also false, as sea ice will always reform during winter and ice properties and coverage will vary greatly within the region.



Myth #4: The Arctic is tense with geopolitical disputes and the next flashpoint for conflict

IN FACT the Arctic region is a powerful example of international collaboration, with the Arctic countries largely conforming to standard international treaties (e.g. UNCLOS), regional forums (e.g. The Arctic Council) and regular diplomatic channels to resolve their differences. The widely publicized sovereignty extension petitions now underway for the Arctic Ocean seafloor, for example, are science-based and not particularly controversial, with the relevant parties following the same UN procedure used to settle other continental shelf disputes around the globe.



Myth #5: Climate changes in the Arctic are solely of local and regional importance

IN FACT the effects of global climate change being felt by the Arctic have globally relevant repercussions, with numerous impacts flowing back to the rest of the world. These include: a faster sea level rise owing to greater ice loss from the Greenland ice sheet; altered weather patterns due to perturbation of jet streams; altered planetary energy balance as a result of lower light-reflectivity of formerly snow/ice covered surfaces; increasing greenhouse gas emissions from thawing permafrost soils and methane hydrates; and the psychological loss of globally iconic species such as the polar bear and others. Within Arctic countries, especially Canada, Russia and the US, reduced winter road access over frozen water and ground presents non-trivial socioeconomic costs to Arctic populations, transportation networks and global commodity markets.



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