

# Arctic Council Topic B Update Paper



The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine and sanctions placed on Russia by many Western nations will complicate efforts to unite on the issues facing Arctic indigenous peoples. The conflict in Ukraine and the diplomatic fallout has made it so Russia and western countries are unable to focus on other issues when negotiating, with the conflict hampering negotiations over Iran's nuclear program.

Additionally, because the conflict and sanctions have reduced the supply of oil and rare earth minerals located in Russia, there are increasingly calls in Canada and the United States for the exploitation of resources located in the Arctic.<sup>1</sup> The longer the conflict continues it becomes more likely that global supply chains will be disrupted, making calls grow louder for resource extraction in the Arctic. Resource extraction done sustainably and including indigenous communities in the economic benefits can have a positive impact on Arctic peoples; but too often indigenous communities see few of the lasting economic benefits and pay all of the negative environmental and health costs associated with these industries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an additional threat facing Arctic indigenous communities. Many Arctic communities have few, if any, health facilities and have limited transit links to other, larger communities that might offer better medical care. This means that sick individuals often have to take boats or airplanes, which are expensive and unreliable due to unpredictable and difficult weather conditions.<sup>2</sup> From the start of the pandemic in February 2020 until August 2021, there were 580,000 confirmed infections and 11,000 deaths across the Arctic region.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, pandemics are not new to the Arctic, with indigenous groups passing down stories and tips from the 1919 Spanish flu and earlier pandemics—allowing some Arctic indigenous peoples to respond proactively in the earliest stages of the pandemic with more stringent social distancing and masking policies.<sup>4</sup> Despite these measures, the region's lack of health facilities and the high cost of fresh foods has left its people with commodities, such as diabetes, that make COVID-19 deadlier.

Despite these twin challenges, efforts to preserve and promote indigenous Arctic cultures continues. In Canada, Inuit leaders have grown increasingly vocal in asking for Inuktitut to be made an official language in Canada and allow for students to be educated in it rather than in English or French.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.adn.com/politics/2022/03/09/president-biden-banned-the-importation-of-russian-crude-what-does-that-mean-for-alaska/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://arctic-council.org/news/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-indigenous-peoples-in-the-arctic/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-021-01473-9>

<sup>4</sup> <https://arctic-council.org/news/historical-context-influenza-and-other-epidemic-infectious-diseases-in-the-arctic/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://nationalpost.com/pmnl/news-pmnl/canada-must-accommodate-indigenous-and-minority-languages-to-be-truly-multicultural>