

# Russian Approach Towards the Arctic Region

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**Keywords:** Arctic region, national interests, natural resources, Russian policy, security, nuclear deterrence

## Abstract:

The Arctic is clearly vital to Russia's relevance in world affairs. Natural resources are one of the major forces driving Russian policy as they are viewed as a basis for the economic development and determine its geopolitical influence. Moreover, the Arctic has always played a significant role from the perspective of Russian Navy. Russia is the only country in the world with a nuclear icebreaker fleet. On the geopolitical level, the most important for Moscow is maintaining of nuclear deterrence by securing the open access of submarines to world's seas. As the forecast promises an ice-free Arctic by 2040, Russia has a well-developed commercial and transport infrastructure to take advantage of opportunities offered by the retreating icecap. The importance of the Arctic to Russia on the one hand, and growing international interest on the other, has fueled Russia's determination to make its role as a central Arctic nation eminently clear by political, economic, and military means. As part of its effort to create a comprehensive presence in the Arctic, Russia has been steadily expanding its military component there since 2007. Any foreign interest in the area, government, commercial or environmental, is seen as hostile intent. Naturally, Russian national interests will be challenged by other Arctic states – all NATO members – who can theoretically speak with one voice against Russia. Thus the Arctic region is likely to become a region of geo-political competition.

## Introduction

The Arctic is one of the most peaceful regions on the world map, as well as one of Russia's most stable borderlands. Simultaneously, it is a resource-rich region with the potential to become a new strategically important channel of a maritime transit passageway. Both challenges and opportunities from the rapidly changing climatic conditions in the region have contributed to giving the Arctic a place high on the domestic and foreign policy agenda. The area's economic

and commercial significance adds to its pre-existing strategic importance for the Russian Federation. Natural resources are one of the major forces driving Russian policy as they are viewed as a basis for the economic development and determine the country's geo-political influence. The importance of the Arctic to Russia on the one hand, and the growing international interest in the region on the other, has fueled Russia's determination to make its role as a central Arctic nation eminently clear by political, economic, and military means. Moscow's objective is to strengthen Russia's role as a "leading Arctic power."

As part of its effort to establish a comprehensive presence in the Arctic, Russian armed forces undertook several actions to demonstrate the ambitions to control the region. The aim of this paper is to analyze Russian presence in the Arctic and to examine the geo-political context of the Russian Arctic policy, its plans for the region in terms of economic policy and military issues. Subsequently, it addresses claims and strategic priorities, as well as clashes of interest with other Arctic states.

### **Russian national interests and strategic priorities in the Arctic**

Russian Arctic policy is mainly determined by two key documents – "The fundamentals of state policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the period up to 2020 and beyond" (Osnovy 2008) and "Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2020" (Morskaya doktrina 2001). *Osnovy 2008* outlines the country's strategy in the region and indicates Russia's role as a "leading Arctic power" (Osnovy 2008). The documents were written under the auspices of the influential Russian Security Council, whose permanent members include the most important centers of power, such as the president, prime minister, ministers of interior, foreign affairs, and defense, and the directors of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (Federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii, or FSB) and the Foreign Intelligence Service (Zysk 2010).

National interests are based on two key elements – natural resources and maritime transport (Osnovy 2008). According to *Osnovy 2008*, Russia's ultimate objective is to transform the Arctic into "leading strategic base for natural resources" by 2020 (Osnovy 2008). Consequently, one of the main goals of the Russian Arctic policy is to increase extraction of the natural resources in the region and develop infrastructure and communication management of the Northern Sea Route.

The particular importance is the defence of the riches of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)<sup>1</sup> and the continental shelf, ensuring free access of the Russian fleet to the Atlantic, the decisive role of the Northern Fleet for defence, as well as the increasing importance of the Northern Sea Route for sustainable development of the Russian Federation (Morskaya doktrina 2001).

The Arctic is clearly vital to Russia's relevance in world affairs. The role of energy reserves in strengthening the country's position and influence on the international stage is also emphasized in the National Security Strategy, adopted in May 2009. Moreover, the recent activity indicates a serious and growing Russian interest in the Arctic. At a meeting of the State Council in Murmansk in May 2007, President Vladimir Putin proposed setting up a National Arctic Council to coordinate national policy and strengthen Russia's interests in the region (Putin 2007). Furthermore, in August 2007 the Regional Development Minister, Vladimir Yakovlev issued instructions for the creation of an inter-departmental working group to address the development of the Arctic zone (RIA Novosti 2007).

### **Challenges of economic development**

The United States Geological Survey report estimates that 30 percent of the world's undiscovered natural gas and 13 percent of undiscovered oil reserves could lie under the Arctic Ocean (USGS 2008). However, it is important to note that it has not yet been proven. It is also believed that there are potential deposits of diamonds, platinum, nickel, tin and gold. Regarding Russian territories in the Arctic, it is estimated, that 90 percent of her gas and 60 percent of her oil can be found there. Moreover, there is up to 90 percent of the hydrocarbon reserves, as well as nickel, cobalt, copper and platinum metals (Osnovy 2008).<sup>2</sup>

The Russian leadership clearly emphasizes the strategic importance of the Arctic "to the country's wealth and competitiveness in global markets" as a major source of revenue, mainly in

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<sup>1</sup> Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is established by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) which determines that coastal states have sovereign rights over natural resources in a 200-nautical mile (370-kilometre) calculated from the baselines, and including territorial waters. Here, the coastal states have sovereign rights over natural resources on and in the continental shelf, and can decide how these resources can be managed and used. Coastal states also have obligations to manage resources sustainably and to cooperate with other countries to this end. UNCLOS, 1982, [http://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/closindx.htm](http://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/closindx.htm).

<sup>2</sup> See in particular an analysis by: Borgerson, S., G., 2008, *Arctic Meltdown, The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming*, Foreign Affairs, March/April 2008, vol. 87, no. 2., pp. 63–77.; Krajick, Kevin, 2007, *Race to Plumb the Frigid Depths*, Science, Vol. 315, No. 5818, 16 March 2007, pp. 1525–1528, <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/315/5818/1525.full.pdf>, 18.8.2012.

energy production. The region represents one of the least populated areas of the world with four million people (3 percent the Russian population) and accounts for around 20 percent of Russia's gross domestic product, and 22 percent of the total Russian exports" (Medvedev 2008, Arctic Centre 2012). Moreover, shortly after the release of the *Osnovy 2008*, President Medvedev signed into force a law that allows "the government to allocate strategic oil and gas deposits on the continental shelf without auctions" (RIA Novosti 2008). Thereby the law enables participation only of companies with five years' experience and in which the government owns at least a 50 percent stake – thus effectively allowing only state-controlled Gazprom and Rosneft to participate (Cohen 2011).

Since the 1930s Russia undertook several expeditions aimed at possible exploration. The interest in the region became more pronounced in June 2007, with the statement by Russian geologists that the Lomonosov ridge, an underwater shelf in the Arctic Ocean, was linked to the Russian territory. Two Russian mini-submersibles made a symbolic dive beneath the North Pole as part of a scientific expedition, to bolster the country's claim and planted a Russian flag on the seabed (Lenta 2007). Despite it being a clever publicity stunt, there is not much more than that to it. The North Pole region is beyond country's EEZ and it is considered international territory by international law, administered by the International Seabed Authority. For Russia, or any other country to expand its territory in the region, it must prove that the disputed territories are linked to the mainland and are an extension of the same continental shelf. If Moscow proves this, it would gain control of about 460,000 square miles (an area about the size of Western Europe), which would be about half of the Arctic seabed.<sup>3</sup> However, any potential Russian claim will naturally not be accepted by any other of the Arctic states.

According to numerous scientific analyses, the forecasts predict an ice-free Arctic by 2040. Summer ice cover shrinkage over the last 30 years is quoted at 15-20 per cent.<sup>4</sup> Russia has a well-developed commercial and transport infrastructure to take advantage of these opportunities

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<sup>3</sup> In December 2001, the Russian Federation submitted a claim to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf that the Lomonosov Ridge belonged to Russia. This claim was rejected in 2002 on the grounds that there was insufficient evidence to support it. Commission On Limits of Continental Shelf Receives Its First Submission, Russian Federation First To Move To Establish Outer Limits of Its Extended Continental Shelf, 21.12.2001, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2001/seal729.doc.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> For more detailed analyzes about the Arctic Sea Extend see: National Snow & Ice Data Center, *Arctic Sea Ice News & Analysis*, <http://nsidc.org/arcticseaicenews/>; Focus North, 2006, *Arctic Climate Change*, Ocean Futures Focus North, No. 3/2006, <http://www.atlanterhavskomiteen.no/files/atlanterhavskomiteen.no/Publikasjoner/Internett-tekster/Arkiv/2006/R-FN-3%20Arctic%20Climate%20Change.pdf>.

offered by the retreating icecap, in contrast to other littoral states. Any foreign interest in the area, government, commercial or environmental, is seen as hostile intent (Smith 2007). The United States, Canada, Norway and Denmark, as well as Russia all claim overlapping areas of the Polar region. Therefore, the Arctic region is set to become a region of geo-political competition. In regard to extraction, the climate changes have had little effect on Russia's plans, which have been driven by global prices of oil and gas.

The Arctic Ocean has two main sea routes that are open to shipping for about 5 months per year with the help of icebreakers – the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage (runs through Canada's Arctic archipelago).<sup>5</sup> The importance of the Northern Sea Route (NSR, also called the Northeast Passage) has been highlighted in a range of recently adopted strategic documents. *Osnovy 2008* addresses the NSR as one of the key national interests. By 2015, Moscow aims to establish and develop infrastructure and system of management of communications for the NSR to secure Euro-Asiatic transit (Osnovy 2008). The route, which goes along the Russian Arctic shoreline, has virtually always been closed to navigation, at least since 1553. Since 2005, however, it has been open each summer (Kaufman 2009).

It is expected that both of the High North shipping shortcuts would reduce the sailing distance considerably (NSR by more than 40 percent). Thereby, the routes are attractive for commercial shipping as they are more stable than waters in the South facing challenges connected to piracy. Even though various studies show that the Arctic routes may be shorter, but this does not necessarily mean faster. The high costs of operations in Arctic seas, expensive ice-capable ships and a range of limitations and uncertainties such as slower sailing speed may outweigh the potential benefits, limiting the Arctic's commercial shipping potential (Borgeson 2008).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the route would be navigable only for a few weeks a year during the summer. Therefore we probably cannot expect a direct challenge of this route like of a new Panama or Suez Canal.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information about High North' sea routes see: Padrtová, Barbora, 2011, *Emerging importance of the Arctic region*, In: Majer, M. – Ondrejcsák, R. – Tarasovič, V. – Valášek, T. (eds.): *Panorama of Global Security Environment 2011*. Bratislava: CENAA, pp. 641-659.

<sup>6</sup> Compare with analysis by: Lasserre, Frédéric, 2009, *High North Shipping: Myths and Realities*, Holtsmark, Sven, G., Smith-Windsor, Brooke, A., eds., *Security Prospects in the High North: Geostrategic Thaw or Freeze?* Forum Paper No. 7, May 2009, Rome, Italy: NATO Defense College, pp. 179–199; Mejlænder-Larsen, Morten – Espeland, Øyvind, 2009, *Arctic Container Project*, Det Norske Veritas, September 1, 2009, <http://www.dnv.com/industry/maritime/publicationsanddownloads/publications/dnvcontainershipupdate/2009/02/arc on.asp>.

In connection to NSR, Moscow has been facing pressure from other Arctic countries to change its legal status to an international transit corridor. Russian interest is naturally to keep it as a “national transportation route” under Russia’s jurisdiction, as stated in *Osnovy 2008*. Any attempts by other countries to change the NSR’s legal status would be in conflict with Russia’s national interest (Zysk 2010). Despite considerable significance of the NSR, Russian Arctic transport system is not as fully dependent on it as is portrayed. Russia has an intensively developed river transport, which serves the main north-south arteries.

### **Cooperation or clashes of interests**

The Russian aggressive rhetoric has lowered the threshold of sensitivity of other polar states toward Russia and raised the question of their own military presence and preparedness vis-à-vis its moves in the hard security sphere. Furthermore, Russia defines among the external military dangers NATO’s military approximation to Russian borders (Doctrina 2010). But the outcome in the region has been quite the opposite. Such mutually reinforcing dynamics may in the longer term lead to a stronger militarization of the region, potentially creating new sources of tensions. On the other hand, if Kremlin refines its rhetoric, it may provide better grounds for closer cooperation and facilitate diplomatic progress (Zysk 2010).

NATO-Russia relations in the context of territorial disputes and overlapping claims were described by Admiral James Stavridis, Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, as follows: “This is something we are starting to spend more time looking at. I look at the High North and I think it could either be a zone of conflict, I hope not, a zone of competition, probably. It could also be cooperative [...] and as an alliance we should make this as cooperative as we possibly can.” He added that the Russian “assertive conduct in the Arctic and a muscle-flexing” were among the factors “grabbing the attention of increasingly wary NATO leaders” (The Times 2009).

All Arctic states are NATO members and can theoretically speak with one voice against Russia; however NATO’s role in the Arctic is uncertain and unfocused. In the least, the Alliance could go a long way toward reducing tensions and building trust in the Arctic by promoting cooperation. One of the areas where international cooperation is welcomed is marine safety, search and rescue, and crisis management. This is so given that none of the Arctic countries has the complete spectrum of assets needed to cover the whole geographic area and respond on their own to asymmetrical security challenges (Zysk 2010).

## Increased military activity in the High North

The Arctic has always played a significant role from the perspective of Russian Navy. Although Russia is the only country in the world with a nuclear icebreaker fleet (Rosatomflot), limited maintenance and construction capacity has caused general deterioration since the 1990s. At present, Rosatomflot possesses 18 icebreakers, of which six are active nuclear-powered ones. However, they are aging quickly and will be decommissioned by 2020. Viacheslav Ruksha, head of Atomflot (which operates the fleet), warned that Russia will face a “collapse” of these capacities in 2016-2017 (Kovalenko 2012). Moscow already emphasized the priority of the acquisition of new nuclear-powered icebreakers in *Osnovy 2008*. In July 2012 Rosatom (state-run corporation) signed a deal to begin construction of a multi-purpose new-generation nuclear icebreaker budgeted at 1.1 billion US dollars. The new icebreaker will be launched in 2017. In addition, in the next few years, Kremlin plans to build another three third-generation icebreakers to maintain the country’s potential in the Arctic (Kovalenko 2012).<sup>7</sup>

The National Security Strategy and *Osnovy 2008*, include plans to establish special Arctic military formations in order to “protect the county’s national interests and to guarantee military security in different military and political situations.” The future competition for energy near Russian borders “might be resolved by a decision to use military power. The existing balance of forces on the borders can be changed” (*Osnovy 2008*, *Strategia 2009*). Russia has the world’s longest Arctic border, which stretches more than 10,000 miles (16,000 kilometres). To protect critical lines of transportation such as the NSR and to secure north borders, Russia already announced plans to create two special army brigades to be based in the Arctic (in the cities Murmansk and Arkhangelsk), as stated by Russian Defence Minister Serdyukov (BBC News 2011).

On the strategic level, the Arctic is particularly important for the maintenance of Russia’s maritime nuclear deterrent forces. The defence significance is underlined by the fact that only through the Arctic, Russia has full open access to the world’s oceans and the possibility of broad operational manoeuvre for the Navy’s submarine forces (unlike the ports on the Black Sea or the

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<sup>7</sup> For further information, see the analysis by: Bukharin, Oleg, 2006, *Russia’s Nuclear Icebreaker Fleet*, Science and Global Security, No. 14/2006, pp. 25–31, <http://scienceandglobalsecurity.org/archive/sgs14bukharin.pdf>; Rosatom, 2012, *Atomnyi ledokol’nyi flot*, <http://www.rosatom.ru/aboutcorporation/activity/nuclearicebreakerfleet/>.

Baltic). Russia's most powerful Northern Fleet with nuclear triad, is based close to Murmansk in the north of the Kola Peninsula at Severomorsk.<sup>8</sup>

The nuclear deterrent has maintained the key role in Russia's military strategy, highlighted even more by its weakness in conventional forces. Kremlin is hankering to regain status as a world naval power (Strategia 2009). The deterrent's continued importance has been affirmed by the priority given to modernization of the Russian nuclear arsenals, including the building of Russia's first multi-purpose nuclear submarine – Yasen class, which will officially start service by the end of 2012, according to Chief Commander Viktor Chirkov. Additional eight fourth-generation ballistic missile submarines – Borei-class are planned to be completed by 2015 (Staalesen 2012).

Canada, Norway, and Russia have conducted military and naval operations in the region to showcase their capabilities and demonstrate their sovereignty. The United States has been more modest in this regard as the Arctic policy is on the third-tier status in the US national priority. Moreover, even though the US Navy is as large as the next 17 navies in the world combined, US Coast Guard owns only three icebreakers (Cohen 2011).

Russia regularly conducts large-scale military training in the region. In parallel with the overall increased training activity of the Russian Armed Forces, July 2007 saw the Northern Fleet exercise on what was described as a larger scale than has been possible for some years, including live firing from major surface vessels, fleet aviation and marine infantry.<sup>9</sup> The intensification of military training in the High Arctic includes the Northern Fleet's "unique work to restore the skills of navigation tasks in the Arctic" and the particular requirements of missile launches under polar conditions. The under-ice training for submariners is essential for ensuring that "in case of the threat of nuclear conflict, strategic submarines are ready to launch a retaliatory strike with ballistic missiles," said the then Commander-in-chief of the Russian Navy Admiral Masorin (Gavrilenko 2006). According to Northern Fleet commander Admiral Vladimir Vysotskiy "a wide range of threats, which may negatively affect Russian economic interests are concentrated in the Arctic" (RIA Novosti 2011).

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<sup>8</sup> Russia has a total of five fleets: Pacific Fleet, Baltic Fleet, Black Sea Fleet, Caspian Fleet and Northern Fleet. For more detailed information about Russian navy see particular analyses: *State of the Russian Navy*, <http://warfare.ru/db/catid/243/linkid/1720/>; *The Arctic Nuclear Challenge*, Oslo, Norway: Bellona Foundation, 2001, p. 39, [bellona.org/filearchive/fil\\_The\\_Arctic\\_Nuclear\\_Challenge.pdf](http://bellona.org/filearchive/fil_The_Arctic_Nuclear_Challenge.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> For more information about military exercises see: Blank, Stephen, J., ed., 2011, *Russia in the Arctic*, Strategic Studies Institute, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/PUB1073.pdf>.

Despite the clearly stepped-up military activity and improved combat potential of the armed forces, these developments should be seen against the backdrop of a still weak military. The pace of modernization has been slow, despite a radical military reforms being implemented. Much of these plans will depend on the performance of the Russian economy and the leadership's ability to transform and modernize it (Zysk 2010).

## **Conclusion**

Russian ambitions in the Arctic are quite real, but they are still far from being fully realized. There are traditional gaps between rhetoric (power projection) and reality (actual capabilities). On the geo-political level, the most important objective for Moscow is maintaining nuclear deterrence by securing open access of its submarines to world's seas. From the perspective of economic development, of fundamental importance is extraction of natural resources and maritime transport. Moscow stresses the significance of the Northern Sea Route as the shortest route for Euro-Asian transit, but the shipping costs still exceed the benefits. Russian national interests will be certainly challenged by other Arctic states (all NATO members), but Russia does not yet have sufficient capability to dominate the region on its own. It has become obvious that Russian military potential in the Arctic is much lower than the united potential of the NATO countries.

In a long-term perspective, with ongoing climate changes, the Arctic is opening for exploration of new deposits and development of economic and industrial activity. This means that the resources will be linked to global markets more closely, playing an increasingly important role in the world economy. However, the undiscovered reserves will not be a fundamental game-changer for Arctic states, most of which are already major producers of oil, gas, and minerals. Arguably, the countries that stand to be most greedy are not in the Arctic at all – they are emerging, resource-hungry economies such as China and India whose future development is likely to be fueled by the exports from the far north.

These considerations together with Moscow's continued reliance on the nuclear deterrent, along with its focus on enhancing naval power projection capabilities indicates that the military presence in the Arctic will remain high on its agenda for the foreseeable future.

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