



Arctic: A Reimagined Strategic Resource Base for Russia

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Abstract: Russia's Arctic ambitions are gaining attention as global warming provides Russia with an opportunity to access the untapped energy reservoirs lying in the seabed of the Arctic. Russia's new Arctic strategy aims to utilize the Arctic as a 'strategic resource base' to fulfill its socio-economic needs. Moreover, the interrelated projects of Yamal LNG and the opening of the Northern Sea Route as a global shipping route show the Russian interplay of geo-economics and geopolitics. Similarly, the Russian strategies of the Northern Fleet's revival, Sino-Russian cooperation, regional diplomacy, informational campaigns, and international law show Russia's efforts to highlight its ambitions in the region. This paper argues that the melting ice in the Arctic coupled with evolving regional dynamics will enhance the Kremlin's position in the region.

The melting Arctic is gaining attention as climate change acts as a catalyst for disrupting the peaceful pace of the region. The melting of the Arctic ice has enabled Russia to access the untapped energy reservoirs lying in the seabed of the Arctic. The resource-rich region accounts for a significant amount of undiscovered reserves of hydrocarbons. Russia's geography means that it is well-positioned to benefit from the recent changes in the region. The Kremlin's eagerness towards resource nationalism and the historic role of the Arctic in defining Russia's global standing has changed the Russian strategic calculus in the region.

Russian Arctic strategy aims to utilize the untapped energy reservoirs of the region to fulfill the socio-economic needs of the country.¹ Moreover, the correlated projects of Yamal LNG and the opening of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) show the significance of the Arctic in Moscow's strategic designs. At the same time, Russia faces challenges from the United States (US) and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies in the Arctic. In response, Russia is refurbishing the Soviet-era bases to secure its oil and gas terminals and to reinforce itself as a dominant maritime power in the region.

The growing Russian and Chinese actions in the region have alarmed the US and its NATO allies to discourage Russian territorial claims and the Arctic's militarization. The US is building its icebreaker fleet and stationing its airpower in Alaska to enhance its hard power against Russia. Meanwhile, Russia has used legal, economic, informational, and military tools to determine its objectives and standing in the region. Russia claims a large portion of the Arctic seabed as its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Subsequently, Russia is using the Northern Fleet to secure its oil

¹ Nazrin Mehdiyeva, "Russia's Arctic Papers: The Evolution of Strategic Thinking on the High North," NATO Defense College, November 19, 2018, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=567>.

and gas terminals, assert its power, and deter the US and its NATO allies as they are a threat to Russian interests in the region.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section discusses Russia's Arctic policy and the interrelated projects of Yamal LNG, and the opening of the NSR. The second section examines Russian military interests and Russian presence in the region. Meanwhile, the third section examines the strategies pursued by Russia to achieve its aims in the Arctic. The fourth section concludes the study by describing the challenges posed to Russia in the region.

Russia's Arctic Policy

The Russian Arctic policy is based on its historical experience of developing its northern territories. The resource-rich nature of the region and crucial military and strategic points are the key drivers of Russian policy in the Arctic. Russian activities in the Arctic show that the region is among the foremost priorities of the Kremlin. These activities can be seen in developing the NSR as a global shipping route, the revival of the Northern Sea Fleet, and developing the infrastructure of the oil and gas terminals, notably Yamal and Shtokman. Similarly, Russia is attempting to expand its EEZ by seeking approval from the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).²

Russia's declining economy and energy reserves increases the relevance of the Arctic in its strategic designs. Therefore, the infrastructure developments coupled with preserving national security and territorial integrity show the significance of the region in the Kremlin's strategic

² Dmitri Trenin and Pavel K. Baev, "The Arctic: A View from Moscow," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/arctic_cooperation.pdf.

calculus. Russia's increasing activities show that it is utilizing the region as a 'strategic resource base' according to the announced strategy of 2020-2035.³

Russia's Arctic Policy 2020-2035

There are many similarities between the Russian Arctic strategy of 2020 and 2035. Both policy frameworks revolve around protecting Russia's national interests. The Russian Arctic policy of 2008-2020 aimed to utilize the Arctic as a 'strategic resource base' to fulfill the socio-economic needs of the country.⁴ Moreover, it aimed to use the NSR as a national shipping route. Similarly, it is also concerned with the preservation of the unique ecosystems and maintaining peace and cooperation in the region.

Strategy for developing the Russian Arctic Zone and Ensuring National Security until 2035 centers on preserving Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity. It also aims to use the NSR as a globally competitive national transport corridor. While dealing with the preservation of national security, the Kremlin desires a favourable operating regime incorporating the Army and other military formations. Therefore, the Kremlin is reviving the Northern Sea Fleet, which houses the Ballistic Missiles Submarine (SSBN) Force of Russia. The Northern Fleet is crucial for safeguarding the oil and gas terminals and reinforcing the Russian naval position in the Arctic. Furthermore, Russia desires to increase the exports of its LNG products to 80-140 million

³ Anna Davis and Ryan Vest, "Foundations of the Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic for the Period up to 2035," *Russian Maritime Studies Institute* | *US Naval War College*, March 5, (2020), https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/rmsi_research/5, 4.

⁴ See note above.

tonnes by 2035.⁵ In this regard, the Yamal and Shtokman projects hold an important role in developing the Kremlin's energy reserves and fulfilling the socio-economic needs of the country.

Additionally, the Russian plan to use the NSR as a global shipping route shows the NSR's significance in the Russian strategic calculations. The route will enable Russia to access the East Asian markets, which are the primary consumers of the Russian LNG products. However, the functioning of the NSR is dependent on the successful development of the hydrocarbon reserves.

Yamal LNG

The Arctic has emerged as a strategically important region for the Kremlin as it has provided Russia with the opportunity to maintain the Kremlin's position as a regional energy superpower. The Kremlin has used gas as a geopolitical weapon, particularly with the European Union, for several decades, which has benefited the Russian economy. Moreover, during the era of the Soviet Union, gas served as an instrument for integration, enabling Russia to exercise its influence over Eastern European countries. Russian plans to enlarge the LNG exports to Asian markets reflects the Kremlin's strategic plan of building alliances against the US and Europe.⁶ In this regard, a 27 billion USD project,⁷ Yamal LNG serves as a major economic and successful project in the Arctic in recent decades.⁸

⁵ Vitaly Yermakov and Jack Sharples, "A Phantom Menace: Is Russian LNG a Threat to Russia's Pipeline Gas in Europe?," Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, July 8, 2021, <https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Is-Russian-LNG-a-Threat-to-Russias-Pipeline-Gas-in-Europe-NG-171.pdf>

⁶ Tatiana Mitrova, "The Geopolitics of Natural Gas," Harvard University's Belfer Center and Rice University's Baker Institute Center for Energy Studies, February 21, 2014, 7, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/CES-pub-GeoGasRussia-022114.pdf>

⁷ George Soroka, "The Political Economy of Russia's Reimagined Arctic," Arctic Yearbook (Iceland: Arctic Portal, 2016), <https://gsoroka.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Political-Economy-of-Russias-Reimagined-Arctic-1.pdf>, 364.

⁸ James Henderson and Vitaly Yermakov, "Russian LNG: Becoming a Global Force," Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, November 22, 2019, <https://www.oxfordenergy.org/publications/russian-lng-becoming-a-global-force/>, 14.

The construction of the project began in 2012 with the intent to recover 926 billion cubic meters of natural gas.⁹ The initial success of the project can be seen in its securing the international consortium for finances including the French company, Total, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), and the Silk Road Fund. Moreover, the efficiency of the project can be seen in its successes while securing various deals in Europe, South Asia, and Asia-Pacific.

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Yamal LNG is a significant leap forward for the energy projects for Russia in the Arctic.¹¹ This is evident from the Kremlin's support for the project, recently exemplified by the tax exemptions on the first 250 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas and 20 million tonnes (mt) of condensate, as well as the exemption of property tax under the Mineral Resource Extraction Tax (MRET) regime for 12 years.¹²

Russia and China are the biggest financiers and recipients of the Yamal LNG Project. However, the success of the project depends upon the mutual consensus of both countries. Russia needs Chinese approval to access the East Asian markets, which will reduce its reliance on the European markets, the primary consumers of the Russian LNG products.¹³ Russia is planning to

⁹ "NOVATEK and the Silk Road Fund conclude framework agreement on acquisition of stake in Yamal LNG," NOVATEK.RU, September 3, 2015, https://www.novatek.ru/en/press/releases/printable.php?print=1&id_4=984

¹⁰ Michel Rose, "Update 1-Russia's Yamal LNG in Flurry of Sale Deals Ahead of Financing," Reuters (Thomson Reuters, June 4, 2015), <https://www.reuters.com/article/novatek-gunvor-lng-idUSL5N0YO2XO20150604>.

¹¹ Atle Staalesen, "Grand Railway Deal for Yamal," The Independent Barents Observer, October 2016, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2016/10/grand-railway-deal-yamal>.

¹² Lars Petter Lunden and Daniel Fjaertoft, "Government Support to Upstream Oil & Gas in Russia," Siga Group, July 2014, https://www.iisd.org/gsi/sites/default/files/ffs_awc_russia_yamalprirazlomnoe_en.pdf, 20.

¹³ Aurélie Bros and Tatiana A. Mitrova, "Yamal LNG: an economic project under political pressure," *Fondation Pour La Recherche Stratégique* No 17, (August 2016), <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/yamal-lng-economic-project-under-political-pressure-2016>, 31.

increase its gas exports to China to 43 bcm by 2025 and 46 Bcm by 2035,¹⁴ which shows the significance of the East Asian markets in the Kremlin's strategic designs. Similarly, China needs Russian support and approval to carry out expeditions in the Arctic. However, this situation provides Russia with an opportunity for greater investment, which will enhance Russia's geo-economics position and determine its significance for the Kremlin's strategic calculations.

Opening of the Northern Sea Route

The NSR allows Russian LNG products to reach the East Asian market more quickly than via the Suez Canal route.¹⁵ The NSR connects Europe to Asia by providing a shortcut from Yamal to Asia. The route enhances Russian maritime power as it runs from the Russian coast of Novaya Zemlya in the west to the Bering Strait in the east. The Russian Arctic Strategy 2008-2020 signals the significance of the NSR as national unitary transport communication.¹⁶ Furthermore, the 2008 strategy also highlights the emerging role of the NSR in the policy of the Russian Federation, which was neglected after the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁷

The opening of the Northern Sea Route has allowed Russia to reinforce its position as a maritime power in the Arctic. The melting of the ice sheet is a prelude for Russia to overcome the geographical limitations on its sea power.¹⁸ Earlier, Russian forces had to face the sea power of Nordic states in the Gulf of Finland and the Danish Strait from the Baltic front. Although the

¹⁴ Xu Yihe, "Russia Targets Significant Hike in Gas Exports to China," Upstream Online | Latest oil and gas news, January 29, 2021,

<https://www.upstreamonline.com/production/russia-targets-significant-hike-in-gas-exports-to-china/2-1-953577>.

¹⁵ James Henderson and Vitaly Yermakov, "Russian LNG," 23.

¹⁶ Philip Burgess, "Foundations of the Russian Federation's State Policy in the Arctic until 2020 and Beyond," Reindeer Portal, March 27, 2009,

https://icr.arcticportal.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1791%253.

¹⁷ Arild Moe, "A New Russian Policy for the Northern Sea Route? State Interests, Key Stakeholders and Economic Opportunities in Changing Times," *The Polar Journal* 10, no. 2 (February 2020): pp. 209-227, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896x.2020.1799611>, 211.

¹⁸ Caitlyn L. Antrim, "The Russian Arctic in the Twenty-First Century," *Arctic Security in an Age of Climate Change* 63, no. 3 (2010): pp. 107-128, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511994784.008>, 116.

Vladivostok Port in the far east of Russia provides access to the open sea, it faces the challenge of the Japanese maritime power. However, if Russia is able to utilize the NSR as a global shipping route, then it will enable Russia to overcome the limitations on its sea power.

The Kremlin has desired to meet the goal of 80 million tonnes of traffic per year by 2024 along the NSR.¹⁹ From 2016-2019, the route has seen a significant 58 percent increase in transportation traffic.²⁰ The success of the energy projects will make the NSR a key trading route by 2030, accounting for a transport volume of 100 million tonnes per annum.²¹ Thus, the economic potential of the region is dependent on the NSR because Yamal LNG depends on the interplay of geo-economic and geopolitical interests of the Kremlin. Therefore, the opening of the NSR will strengthen Russian influence in the Arctic, but it is necessary for the Kremlin to maintain jurisdiction over the NSR to reap the benefits from the region although the international community does not accept Russia's claim over the NSR.²²

Russian Military Interests in the Arctic

The Russian Arctic strategy defines the objectives of developing the oil and gas terminals, restoring the NSR, and preserving Russian national security and territorial integrity. These objectives are intertwined with the Russian matter of prestige, which is ultimately shaped

¹⁹ "Russia Eyes Annual Traffic of 80 Mn Tons Via NSR by 2024," Port News, September 2019, <https://portnews.ru/digest/21244/>

²⁰ Bjørn Gunnarsson, "Recent ship traffic and developing shipping trends on the Northern Sea Route—Policy implications for future arctic shipping," *Marine Policy* 124 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104369>, 3.

²¹ Bjørn Gunnarsson, "Future Development of the Northern Sea Route," *The Maritime Executive* (The Maritime Executive, February 18, 2016), <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/future-development-of-the-northern-sea-route>.

²² D. F. Skripnuk, I. O. Iliyushchenko, Sergey Kulik, and M. M. Stepanova, "Analysis of the current state of the Northern Sea Route and the potential development of the icebreaker fleet," *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/539/1/012129>, 2.

by relying on military might. Hence, the Northern Fleet is central in maintaining Russian military might in the Northern theatre.

Russia has three main military interests in the region. Firstly, to secure the second-strike capability of its ballistic missile submarines stationed on the Kola Peninsula.²³ The security of these assets accounts for the Russian urge to enhance its anti-access or area-denial systems, as well as its monitoring and surveillance capabilities. In addition, Russia also aims to increase the pace of military exercises and patrolling of long-range bombers and anti-submarine warfare aircraft to support the operations in the region.²⁴ Secondly, in case of any conflict with NATO, Russia aims to protect its ability to operate in the North Atlantic and Arctic. Thus, the Northern Fleet in the Kola Peninsula can access the Barents Sea, the Norwegian Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean directly.²⁵ Similarly, the Russian Mig-33 fighter jets stationed on the Northern Fleet are equipped with air-launched ballistic Kh-47M2 Kinzhal hypersonic missiles, which enables Russia to project its power in the Arctic and beyond.²⁶ Thirdly, Russia is concerned with the safety of its infrastructure in the region. The development of oil and gas terminals, and increase in economic and commercial activities requires constant surveillance and monitoring. Similarly, the vast territory of the region, the open borders, harsh climatic conditions, and poor

²³ Second strike capability is the country's ability to respond to a nuclear attack with a massive nuclear retaliation.

²⁴ Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, "Russia in the Arctic-A Critical Examination," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 29, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/03/29/russia-in-arctic-critical-examination-pub-84181>.

²⁵ Christopher Woody, "Russian and NATO Militaries Are Getting More Active in the Arctic, but Neither Is Sure about What the Other Is Doing," Business Insider (Business Insider, July 21, 2020), <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-nato-increasing-military-activity-in-the-arctic-2020-7>.

²⁶ Malte Humpert, "The U.S. Navy Ups Its Arctic Engagement, Sending Ships North and Establishing a Temporary Presence in Iceland," High North News, October 3, 2019, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/us-navy-ups-its-arctic-engagement-sending-ships-north-and-establishing-temporary-presence-iceland>.

communications systems increases the risk of maritime shipping, nuclear and environmental accidents.

Russian Military Presence in the Arctic

Russian military interests are entangled with the matter of prestige and securing its infrastructure in the Arctic. The region remains essential for Russia's future economic and military vitality. Therefore, Russian military and economic activities have increased in the Arctic during the past decade.

In the Eastern Arctic, international vessels travel from the Pacific and pass through the Bering Straits to enter the NSR. Russia has revamped its Soviet-era bases, enhanced its search and rescue capabilities, and has established radar stations to improve Russian surveillance in the maritime and air domains.²⁷ Russia has refurbished 50 Soviet-era military posts, which include 13 air bases, 10 radar stations, 20 border outposts, and 10 emergency rescue stations. Russian Special Forces from the 61st 'Red Banner' Naval Infantry Brigade are also an integral part of the Russian Arctic Brigade.²⁸ Additionally, the deployment of the Sopka-2 Radar on Wrangel Island and Cep Schmidt will enhance the operational capabilities of Russia in the Arctic. The military infrastructure present on the eastern front enables Russia to detect and track the traffic along the NSR and maintain its foothold in the region.²⁹

²⁷ Heather A. Conley and Matthew Melino, "America's Arctic Moment Great Power Competition in the Arctic to 2050," CSIS Europe Program, March 2020, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Conley_ArcticMoment_layout_WEB%20FINAL.pdf?EkVudAIPZnRPLwEdAIPO.GlpyEnNzINx, 2.

²⁸ Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic," Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, December 15, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/06/russias-military-posture-arctic>, 16.

²⁹ Matthew Melino and Heather A. Conley, "The Ice Curtain: Russia's Arctic Military Presence," The Ice Curtain: Russia's Arctic Military Presence | Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 26, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/features/ice-curtain-russias-arctic-military-presence>.

In the Central Arctic region, Russia has stationed even more sophisticated military infrastructure to counter air or maritime threats. Russia has installed Bastion-P and Pantsir-S1 air defense systems in the Novaya Zemlya and Kotelnny Islands.³⁰ These systems create a multilayered defense system that enhances Russia's ability to deny any aerial, maritime, or land access by US or NATO forces in the region.

Russia's western Arctic territory houses the advanced defensive and offensive capabilities of the Kremlin. Alexandra Island houses the air, ground, and naval capabilities, which are crucial to reinforce the Kremlin's maritime and air power in the region.³¹ These defenses aim to safeguard the Russian nuclear arsenal and second-strike capabilities held by the Submersible Ship Ballistic Missile Nuclear (SSBN) force commanded by the Northern Fleet. Moreover, Russia has also tested its hypersonic cruise missiles and nuclear-powered under-sea drones as a part of Arctic military capabilities; a point of significant concern for the US, Canada, and NATO partners.³²

The Russian Northern Fleet is central when it comes to Arctic security. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated, "it has been absolutely clear for everyone for a long time that this is our territory, this is our land." He further asserted that, "we are responsible for ensuring our Arctic coast is safe."³³ Surface and sub-surface assets of the fleet ensure the strong presence of Russia in its western Arctic territory. It also secures the Northern coastline and enables Russia to project its power beyond the Arctic. The Northern Fleet protects the military infrastructure on the

³⁰ See note 24.

³¹ See note 26.

³² See note 24.

³³ Maxime Popov, "Russia Warns West Against Arctic Encroachment Ahead Of Talks," *The Moscow Times*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/05/17/russia-warns-west-against-arctic-encroachment-ahead-of-talks-a7392>

Kola Peninsula, and it provides Russia the ability to conduct strategic operations in the region.³⁴ The Kola Peninsula also enhances the Russian naval capabilities by granting it access to critical chokepoints in Greenland, Iceland, the UK, and Norway. This access can allow Russia to disrupt NATO's sea-bound communication between Europe and North America. The Northern Fleet not only enables Russian access to the Arctic, North Atlantic, and GIUK-N gap, but it also allows Russia to monitor the traffic along the NSR.³⁵ Hence, the sole guarantor of Russian Arctic Security is the Northern Fleet.

Russian Strategies to Achieve its aims

Russia has pursued diplomatic, economic, military, and informational strategies to achieve its aims in the region.

United Nations Convention on the Law of Seas (UNCLOS)

Russia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which the US has never ratified. UNCLOS is an international agreement which establishes the legal framework regarding marine and maritime activities. Russia claims a large portion of the Arctic seabed as part of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), hence Russia argues that UNCLOS supports its claim on the continental shelf of the Arctic as its EEZ.³⁶ Russia's initial claim was rejected by the UN in 2002; Russia submitted a new proposal in 2015.³⁷ Russian claims on the Arctic conflict with those of Denmark and Canada, so Russia is trying to negotiate

³⁴ See note 26.

³⁵ Mathieu Boulègue, "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic," 41.

³⁶ Timo Koivurova, Juha Käpylä, and Harri Mikkola, "Continental Shelf Claims in the Arctic: Will Legal Procedure Survive the Growing Uncertainty?," FIIA, August 2015, <https://www.fia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/bp178.pdf>.

³⁷ Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia Presents Revised Claim of Arctic Territory to the United Nations," The New York Times (The New York Times, February 10, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/10/world/europe/russia-to-present-revised-claim-of-arctic-territory-to-the-united-nations.html>.

bilaterally with both states to reach a settlement that will benefit all parties rather than wait for the issue to be resolved under UNCLOS. Russia was the first to submit its claim and has been cooperative throughout the entire process, while the US has been unwilling to participate in the process. Hence, the settlement of UNCLOS in the Arctic is conducive for Russian interests, as the geostrategic and economic considerations play a vital role in Russian strategic calculus in the region.

Russian Regional Diplomacy

The Arctic Council is the main forum to promote cooperation, coordination, and interaction among the Arctic states, as well as work to boost regional diplomacy. The Arctic Council acts to connect the eight Arctic States, Indigenous Peoples, Observer States, and several International Organizations. However, the Arctic Council's founding mandate of the Ottawa Declaration in 1996 limits the scope of the organization to environmental issues, scientific research, and sustainable development.

As chairman of the Arctic Council from 2021-2023, Russia will pursue a comprehensive approach for regional cooperation which includes initiatives on reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, attracting foreign investment, and improving the well-being of Indigenous communities in the Arctic. Russia will also focus on the biological security of the region by supporting projects aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, which will mitigate the impact of climate change on the region.³⁸ To improve the socio-economic situation in the Arctic, Russia has claimed it will also take into account regional proposals and will focus on sustainable development. Furthermore, Russia desires the Arctic to be a place attracting foreign investments.

³⁸ "Experts Speak about the Upcoming Program of Russia's Arctic Council Chairmanship," the Arctic, November 25, 2020, <https://arctic.ru/international/20201125/988468.html>.

Russia's absence in other diplomatic forums such as the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable is challenging to its diplomatic aims. The reconvening of this dialogue on the strategic-military level will strengthen the mutual trust to mitigate the security challenges in the region.³⁹ Hence, to regain its lost great power status, Russia is eager to project its soft power image abroad regarding the Arctic issues through the tool of regional diplomacy.

Informational Campaigns

Informational campaigns are tools used by the Russian Federation to spotlight its achievements and ambitions in the Arctic. In August 2007, a Russian expedition planted a corrosion-proof Russian flag on the Lomonosov Ridge located between the New Siberian Islands and Ellesmere Islands of the Canadian Arctic, which is claimed by Moscow as connected to its continental shelf. It does not mean that Russia owns the North Pole, instead, it was a powerful symbol reminiscent of the US Apollo 11's flag fluttering on the moon. This move was criticized by the US and Canada. The US claimed the Russian act was legally meaningless, while the Canadian foreign minister termed it "just a show."⁴⁰

The Russian Security Council has established a commission to promote its interests in the High North.⁴¹ The commission aims to ensure national security and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation in the Arctic. It also aims at socio-economic development coupled with coordination of the governmental bodies and organizations in the region.

³⁹ Hilde-Gunn Bye, "Russia Should Be Invited Back to Arctic Security Forums, New Report Suggests," High North News, January 27, 2021, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-should-be-invited-back-arctic-security-forums-new-report-suggests>.

⁴⁰ "Russia Defends North Pole Flag-Planting," NBCNews.com (NBCUniversal News Group, August 8, 2007), <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna20169307>.

⁴¹ "The Interdepartmental Commission of the Security Council of Russia was formed to ensure the national interests of Russia in the Arctic," Security Council of the Russian Federation, August 25, 2020, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/2825/>

In 2016, Russia also invited the representatives of the Arctic Council on an icebreaker tour along the easternmost coast of the Russian coast ranging from Anadyr to Pevek. According to the Deputy Leader of the Russian Security Council Yevgeny Lukyanov, this step shows that Russia is trying to promote international cooperation in the region.⁴² Similarly, major companies including Gazprom, Rosneft, and Norilsk Nickel have co-sponsored the International Arctic Forum, which has convened periodically in St. Petersburg since 2010.⁴³ These informational campaigns depict Russia's efforts to project its soft power image and highlight its ambitions in the Arctic region.

Sino-Russian Cooperation

Sino-Russian cooperation is shaped by the increasing need for the Kremlin to engage with world markets by making favorable opportunities for these world markets in the Arctic. Chinese involvement for economic gains is aimed at collaborating with Russian Yamal LNG in the Arctic, which provides economic incentives for both sides and helps the Kremlin to enhance its rule-based order.⁴⁴

The Yamal LNG project, with major Chinese investment, provides a collaborative front for both sides to strengthen their existing billion-dollar trade relationship.⁴⁵ The Sila Sibiri

⁴²Atle Staalesen, "Welcome to Pevek. Russia Invites Arctic Council to Icebreaker Tour," *The Independent Barents Observer*, June 22, 2016, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2016/06/welcome-pevek-russia-invites-arctic-council-icebreaker-tour>.

⁴³D. F. Skripnuk, I. O. Iliyushchenko, Sergey Kulik, and M. M. Stepanova, "Analysis of the current state of the Northern Sea Route and the potential development of the icebreaker fleet," 2. Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Paul Stronski, "Russia in the Arctic-A Critical Examination," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 29, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/03/29/russia-in-arctic-critical-examination-pub-84181>.

⁴⁴Camilla Sørensen and Ekaterina Klimenko, "Emerging Chinese-Russian cooperation in the Arctic: possibilities and constraints," *SIPRI Policy Paper* 46 (2017), <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/emerging-chinese-russian-cooperation-arctic.pdf>, 26-39.

⁴⁵Jack Durkee, "China: The New 'near-Arctic State,'" *Wilson Center*, February 6, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/china-the-new-near-arctic-state>. Reid Standish, "China, Russia Deepen Their Ties Amid Pandemic, Conflicts With The West," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 1, 2020,

(Power of Siberia) pipeline,⁴⁶ the harbor in Arkhangelsk, the construction of a railway from Solikamsk to Arkhangelsk, and the Belkomur railway are a few of the important economic investments China has contributed to in order to support bilateral cooperation in the region.⁴⁷ These efforts will eventually allow Russia to expand its economic activities, which could work to counteract US interests in the region.⁴⁸

China's aspiration to expand the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Arctic region to develop a "Polar Silk Road"⁴⁹ provides China with a desire to expand its cooperation with Russia.⁵⁰ This demonstrates China's increasing dependence on Russia's strong economic, military, and diplomatic positions vis à vis other actors. In 2017, both states issued a joint statement in which they aimed for deepening the comprehensive partnership and increasing maritime shipping via the NSR through the collaboration of the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)⁵¹ These collaborations further provide the prelude to pursuing their mutual agenda along the NSR.⁵²

<https://www.rferl.org/a/china-russia-deepen-their-ties-amid-pandemic-conflicts-with-west/30814684.html>

⁴⁶ Zachary Keck, "China and Russia Sign Massive Natural Gas Deal," *The Diplomat*, May 21, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/05/china-and-russia-sign-massive-natural-gas-deal/>

⁴⁷ Camilla Sørensen and Ekaterina Klimenko, "Emerging Chinese-Russian cooperation," 35-36.

⁴⁸ "Joint Statement by the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the Development of Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Interaction Relations Entering a New Era," Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, 2019, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/en/Bo3RF3JzGDvMAPjHBOAuSemVPWTEvb3c.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Zhang Chun, "China's 'Arctic Silk Road,'" *The Maritime Executive* (The Maritime Executive, January 10, 2020), <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/china-s-arctic-silk-road>.

⁵⁰ Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen and Vincent Gallucci, "The Return of China, Post-Cold War Russia, and the Arctic: Changes on Land and at Sea," *Marine Policy* 72 (2016): pp. 240-245, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2016.04.034>.

⁵¹ "Joint Statement by the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on Further Deepening the Relations of Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Interaction," Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, 2017.

⁵² Marc Lanteigne, "One of Three Roads: The Role of the Northern Sea Route in Evolving Sino-Russian Strategic Relations." Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07969>, 3.

Despite the cooperation, China views Russia as a “gatekeeper” to non-Arctic states. China knew of the Russian hesitation regarding the inclusion of non-Arctic states in Arctic governance. Therefore, China has toned down its political and strategic ambitions by stressing a focus on economic and scientific collaborations. China is also trying to benefit from the Russian geostrategic and geo-economic vulnerabilities and its dependence on China as a partner to develop the Russian Arctic. Chinese experts view the Sino-Russian cooperation as a window of opportunity because the Russian economy is crippled due to the Western sanctions. Moreover, the increase in demand for energy has encouraged China to explore the potential in Russia’s far East. Chinese cooperation in Yamal LNG is also a result of the energy interests of China. Likewise, China does not desire US-Russian tensions because it will be counterproductive to Chinese interests in the region.⁵³

Despite the dissatisfaction, both sides cannot deviate from their mutually agreed positions as the Chinese position as a “near-Arctic state” requires Russian approval, while Russia requires Chinese investments to develop its Arctic territory. Moreover, China requires Russia’s goodwill and support to consolidate its presence in the region. Hence the joint vision for economic and diplomatic cooperation enhances the prospects for cooperation while improving Russia’s position in the region.

Challenges

The emergence of Russia as a dominant power is challenging for the US, Canada, and other NATO countries in the Arctic. Former American Secretary of State Mike Pompeo

⁵³ Camilla Sørensen and Ekaterina Klimenko, "Emerging Chinese-Russian cooperation," 11-12.

described this situation as an arena of global power and competition.⁵⁴ The opening of the new channels to access the untapped energy reserves and the emergence of new sea routes has alarmed the Pentagon.⁵⁵ The resource-rich region is believed to account for 13 percent of undiscovered oil and 30 percent of undiscovered gas coupled with uranium, rare earth minerals, gold, and diamonds.⁵⁶ The continental shelf of the US Arctic Coast in Alaska accounts for almost 31 percent of undiscovered oil reserves in the Arctic.⁵⁷

Based on the 2019 US Arctic Strategy, three threats to US national interests exist in the region. Firstly, the threat of a possible attack on the US is expected due to the increased Sino-Russian Cooperation in the region.⁵⁸ Secondly, the challenge to the rule-based order, due to the use of the NSR by Russia and China, and the possibility of use of force against the foreign vessels operating contrary to the Russian regulations. Thirdly, a strategic spillover is expected in case of any rise in the tensions, because the success of the Russian Arctic strategy depends on the immunity of the region from the conflict. Despite the US's weakened maritime position due to its much smaller icebreaking fleet, the role of US coast guard and airpower still pose a threat to

⁵⁴ Somini Sengupta, "United States Rattles Arctic Talks with a Sharp Warning to China and Russia," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, May 6, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/climate/pompeo-arctic-china-russia.html>.

⁵⁵ Dan Lamothe, "New Coast Guard Strategy for the Arctic Calls for 'Projecting Sovereignty' to Contest China and Russia," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, April 22, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2019/04/22/new-coast-guard-strategy-arctic-highlights-projecting-sovereignty-china-russia-look-north/>.

⁵⁶ Carol Morello, "Pompeo warns of the dangers of Russian and Chinese activities in the Arctic," *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pompeo-warns-of-dangers-of-russian-and-chinese-activities-in-the-arctic/2019/05/06/e2e99690-7001-11e9-9eb4-0828f5389013_story.html

⁵⁷ Lassi Heininen, Alexander Sergunin and Gleb Yarovoy, "RUSSIAN STRATEGIES IN THE ARCTIC: AVOIDING A NEW COLD WAR," *Valdai Discussion Club Grantees Report*, September 2014, https://www.uarctic.org/media/857300/arctic_eng.pdf

⁵⁸ "The United States' Hardening Stance on Arctic Security," *Over the Circle*, May 5, 2019, <https://overthecircle.com/2019/05/05/the-united-states-hardening-stance-on-arctic-security/>

Russia.⁵⁹ The US will station its F-35A squadrons along with the already present F22 Raptors in Alaska by 2022 to meet security challenges in the region.

The US Arctic strategy will move along three lines of actions in the Arctic. Firstly, the US will enhance the capabilities of the Coast Guard in the region, which can be seen in the US's efforts to use International Maritime Organizations (IMOs) to implement international code for the ships operating in the polar seas to counter the Russian activities in the region.⁶⁰ Secondly, the US, in the interim, is likely to cooperate with its NATO allies due to President Biden's faith in alliances and his talks on US-Canadian defense cooperation.⁶¹ Additionally, considerable improvement to the airpower structure, air detection, and warning systems is expected in the American and Canadian Arctic. Finally, keeping in view President Biden's faith in multilateralism, the US is likely to strengthen its relations with its allies by using the Arctic Council to promote prosperity in the region.⁶²

Despite the military superiority of Russia in the Arctic, US actions cannot be overlooked. The USS Harry Truman aircraft carrier sailed above the Arctic and was the first unit to do so since the Cold War.⁶³ The action reflects Washington's strategic interest, which is to intensify its "Great Game" in the Arctic. Similarly, the US also has a military presence in the Thule Airbase

⁵⁹ "THE NORTHERN BORDER: HOMELAND SECURITY PRIORITIES IN THE ARCTIC, PART II," the U.S. Government Publishing Office, Serial No. 116-59, FEBRUARY 5, 2020, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-116hrg41304/html/CHRG-116hrg41304.htm>

⁶⁰ Rebecca Pincus, "Rushing Navy Ships into the Arctic for a Fonop Is Dangerous," U.S. Naval Institute, February 21, 2019, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2019/january/rushing-navy-ships-arctic-fonop-dangerous>.

⁶¹ "Prime Minister Justin Trudeau Speaks with the President of the United States of America Joe Biden," Prime Minister of Canada, January 22, 2021, <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/readouts/2021/01/22/prime-minister-justin-trudeau-speaks-president-united-states-america-joe>

⁶² Alina Bykova, "Biden versus Trump: How a New President Will Affect the Arctic," High North News, November 2, 2020, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/biden-versus-trump-how-new-president-will-affect-arctic>.

⁶³ "USS Harry S. Truman first US carrier to operate in Arctic Circle in 27 years," Naval Today, October 19, 2018, <https://www.navaltoday.com/2018/10/19/uss-harry-s-truman-first-us-carrier-to-operate-in-arctic-circle-in-27-years/>.

in Greenland, where a radar system capable of detecting nuclear missiles launched towards the United States is housed.⁶⁴ Though the US lacks deep-rooted military strength in the Arctic, these actions increase American influence in the region. The American airforce does not face the same challenges as the American Navy's current limitations in icebreaking capabilities as it is currently working to deploy two fighter squadrons of F-35 A's in Alaska by 2022.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the US may deploy a nuclear submarine force coupled with sea-based Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) systems to bridge the gap of military disproportions.⁶⁶ Finally, the US will enhance its ability to intercept the Russian Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and retaliate through ICBMs, Submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and cruise missiles irrespective of their conventional or nuclear nature.⁶⁷

Russia's strong military position, coupled with intensified Sino-Russian cooperation and the weak US military position, acts as a prelude for the US to strengthen its military foothold in the region. The US aims to utilize its economic, strategic, and diplomatic ties with Arctic states, especially Canada and Denmark, and to add strategic depth against Russia, as evidenced by President Biden's faith in alliances. Moreover, the US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) has increased its cooperation with NATO and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). General Glen D. VanHerck gave a statement, in which he considered the Russian

⁶⁴ Valerie Insinna, "Watch the skies: How a US base in Greenland tracks ballistic missiles," Defence News, August 5, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/a-modern-nato/2019/08/05/watch-the-skies-how-a-us-base-in-greenland-tracks-ballistic-missiles/>

⁶⁵ Jamie Hunter, "F-35s Nest In Big New Alaskan Facility Marking Strategic Shift For Critical Region," The War Zone, July 23, 2020, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/35062/f-35s-nest-in-massive-new-alaskan-facilities-marking-strategic-shift-for-critical-region>

⁶⁶ Valery Konyshov and Alexander Sergunin, "Is Russia a Revisionist Military Power in the Arctic?," *Defense & Security Analysis* 30, no. 4 (2014): pp. 323-335, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2014.948276>.

⁶⁷ Matthias Finger et al., "The Changing Role of Military Power in the Arctic," in *The Global Arctic Handbook* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018), pp. 171-195.

military reach as a “potential strike” on the US. VanHerck also raised his concerns on the Russian naval exercise Ocean Shield as an attempt to control access to the Arctic through the Bering Strait.⁶⁸ Similarly, the presence of NATO members in areas that are potential chokepoints adds to the existing challenges for the Russian Northern Fleet’s maneuverability.⁶⁹

Russian Arctic ambitions have also conflicted with Canadian interests in the region. The Northwest Passage runs along Canada’s northern territory, which is an important route in the current age of strategic engagement. The militarization of Arctic and Russian bombers’ sorties in the region has compelled Canada to flex its military muscles.⁷⁰ This includes increased surveillance patrols and monitoring of its northern air space under the auspices of NORAD.⁷¹ Moreover, Russia has also filed a submission to the UN regarding the extension in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). The new submission will push Russia over the Canadian EEZ. Hence, the claims of Russia conflict with Canada and Denmark. At this moment, action is expected from Canada to exercise its sovereignty and preserve its identity in the Arctic. Although these challenges are developing, changing dynamics could alter the Russian position if it is unable to reap the benefits both in the strategic and economic spheres. For now, major economic investment in Russia has come from Chinese investors, so if Russia is unable to balance out its economic cooperation between China and other players it would further raise challenges for

⁶⁸ Statement of General Glen VanHerck, United States Air Force Commander United States Northern Command North American Aerospace Defense Command, *Senate Armed Services Committee*, 16 March, 2021, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/VanHerck_03-16-21.pdf, 3-4.

⁶⁹ Kristian Søyby Kristensen and Henrik Breitenbauch, “Military and Environmental Challenges in the Arctic - New Perspectives on Shared Security: NATO's next 70 Years,” Carnegie Europe, November 28, 2019, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/11/28/military-and-environmental-challenges-in-arctic-pub-80424>.

⁷⁰ Nick J. Sciullo, “Cooperation, Conflict, and Canadian Identity in the Interpretation of the Arctic Region,” *Crossroads*, September 4, 2008, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1232662.

⁷¹ “CDA Institute Analysis – ‘The Canadian Armed Forces and the Arctic: Maintaining a Suitable and Sustainable Role,’” CDA Institute, May 26, 2016, <https://cdainstitute.ca/cda-institute-analysis-the-canadian-armed-forces-and-the-arctic-maintaining-a-suitable-and-sustainable-role/>.

Russian influence in the Arctic. Therefore, Russia needs to diversify its economic partnerships in the Arctic by engaging with European states for joint economic ventures. This is evident because China has not provided a long-term strategic vision. Therefore, to materialize the untapped energy reservoirs in the region, diversification of the capital pool is important for Russia.

In addition, collaboration with EU members will strengthen Russia's diplomatic clout in the Arctic Council, which will prevent the escalation of conflict.⁷² Russia's main aim in the Arctic is geo-economic and it can only be materialized if the chances of conflict are reduced. Hence, Russia needs a two-way strategy in which, Russia must utilize its economic partnership with China and secondly, use the regional platforms to prevent Arctic states from challenging Russian actions in the region.

Conclusion

The Arctic has gained prominence on the Russian international agenda. The recent Russian Arctic strategy revolves around protecting Russian national security, developing hydrocarbon reserves, and using the newly emerging Northern Sea Route as a global shipping artery. Moreover, the role of the Northern Fleet cannot be ignored when it comes to the security of the NSR and its oil and gas terminals. Russia is using the projects of Yamal and Shtokman as a means to maintain its status as an energy superpower. Similarly, Russia is utilizing the regional platform of the Arctic Council, the UNCLOS convention, ongoing Sino-Russian cooperation, and informational campaigns to highlight its achievements and ambitions in the region.

However, there exists the challenge of the US, Canada, and other NATO allies as geopolitical contestants eager to discourage Russia's territorial claims and Arctic militarization.

⁷² K. Voronov, "EU, China, Russia and the Arctic: Strategic Imperatives", *RIAC*, 5 October 2018, <https://russiancouncil.ru/blogs/arctic/es-kitay-rossiya-i-arktika-strategicheskie-imperativy/>.

Despite the US lacking sufficient hard power, its recent moves of stationing the F-35A in Alaska and installing the radar systems in Greenland show that it is dissatisfied with the growing Russian and Chinese presence in the region. The growing age of strategic engagement shows Russia should carefully examine American decisions, knowing the US will likely collaborate with its NATO allies to counter Russia's territorial claims in the Arctic. The changing dynamics of the region show Russia is trying to outpace the rest of the globe in the Arctic with China's help to utilize the Arctic as its strategic resource base.

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