

# Back to the Czarist Era: Russia's Aspirations, Buildup, and Military Activity in the Arctic Region

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The importance of the Arctic area has increased significantly over the past decade, due particularly to geological changes in the region stemming from global warming. According to different estimates, melting polar icecaps have created not only significant dangers for coastal countries and cities but also opportunities and possibilities such as new trade routes and access to oil and gas resources.<sup>1</sup>

The dissolution of the Soviet Union was followed by a change regarding the Arctic region, as it evolved from an arena of military wrestling between the world's two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, to an area symbolizing cooperation and reconciliation through the construction of stability between Russia and the West. With Vladimir Putin's rise to power, however, Moscow's policy toward the region became more belligerent and aggressive, with the aim of projecting military and political power and restoring Russia's image as a world power.

From Moscow's perspective, the Arctic region holds great significance, stemming from political benefits in the realms of economics, diplomacy, and security. Accordingly, Russia has military interests in the region, reflected in the establishment, usage, reinforcement, and upgrading of strategic assets there. Russia maintains that its strengthened military presence in the Arctic region is designed to protect revenues and economic interests. However, different scholars and public leaders have expressed doubts about these claims and regard Moscow's behavior as an integral element of Russia's overall strategy of raising its level of belligerence toward the West,

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as reflected in the war in Georgia, the conquest of the Crimean Peninsula, and Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine.<sup>2</sup>

### **Russia's Aspirations and Interests in the Arctic Region**

More than half of the Arctic coast and 40 percent of the land lying beyond the Arctic Circle, areas that are home to 42 percent of the region's overall population, are part of Russian territory.<sup>3</sup> A sense of belonging to the region, given its own geographical location and the region's geopolitical position in general, has led Russia to view the area as a strategic region of great national importance.

Russia's national interests in the Arctic region stem from three primary factors: the search for new sources of energy to preserve the country's status as a global energy power; control over territory, some of which has a historical connection to the Soviet Union or the Czarist empire, out of a desire to overcome the trauma of the collapse of the Soviet Union; and a desire for international recognition as a world power.<sup>4</sup>

According to Russia's strategy from 2008 regarding the Arctic region, Russia seeks "to maintain the role of a leading Arctic power" and as such, has a number of multidimensional national interests in the region.<sup>5</sup> Russian aspirations in the Arctic region are focused on national political sovereignty, economics, and the military, and are based primarily on a number of strategic documents that have been formulated by the Russian government.

#### *Political-Security Aspirations*

The Russian Arctic region has been allotted a special place in Russian security strategy. Since the 1950s, industries and infrastructure elements related to Russian nuclear deterrence have operated in the region, primarily for the facilities on the Kola Peninsula. In addition, the Russian Arctic region ensures access to the Atlantic Ocean and is therefore essential to the Russian navy for its international missions. This aspect has been especially significant since Russia lost a number of ports in the Baltic Sea (Paldiski in Estonia) and the Black Sea (Sevastopol) as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, Russia has managed to restore its control of the Black Sea following its conquest of the Crimean Peninsula.<sup>6</sup>

In April 2000, Putin delivered a speech on the deck of the icebreaker in Murmansk in which he said that Russia was in need of "a state navigation policy" and that the areas in the north constituted Russian resource reserves and were therefore "an important factor for ensuring the state's

security.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the shrinking of the North Pole and the melting of the polar icecaps in the Arctic region have enabled Russia to acquire new maritime transportation routes. The North Sea and the western routes provide Russia with an opportunity to control the shorter route between North America, Europe, and Asia.<sup>8</sup> In addition to new shipping routes to make strategically important areas in the region and the world more accessible and shorten the time it takes to reach them, Russia intends on using the new shipping routes for internal political purposes, such as connecting the eastern and western parts of the Federation and decreasing the distance between them.<sup>9</sup> Russia has also announced its intention to plan an air route in the region.

Above all else, the strategic importance of the Arctic region for Russia stems from its maritime nuclear bases that are located there. Russia’s nuclear deterrence remains an important element of its security policy and is also a symbol of Russia’s status as a major power.<sup>10</sup>

### *Economic Aspirations*

Russia regards the Arctic coast as an important source of natural resources, a vast potential trade route, a significant fishing area, and a future facilitator of income growth through exhaustive use of oil and other resources; tax revenues produced by the passage fees for maritime transportation along the North Sea route; and the provision of infrastructure and services along the route.<sup>11</sup>

According to the assessments of the United States Geological Survey, the Arctic region contains gas deposits that are equivalent to 412 billion barrels, constituting 22 percent of the world’s remaining oil and gas reserves.<sup>12</sup> In addition to oil and gas, the Arctic region also contains significant reserves of precious stones and metals, such as gold, silver, copper, iron, lead, magnesium, nickel, platinum, and diamonds.<sup>13</sup> While the ice in the Arctic region is currently retreating, Russia’s economic aspirations are coming to rely increasingly on mineral and natural resources in the region. Russia already enjoys economic advantages in the Arctic region, with 20 percent of its GDP and its exports being produced north of the Arctic Circle.<sup>14</sup>

The Russian Arctic region currently produces most of Russia’s gas and oil resources (95 and 70 percent, respectively), and Russian geologists have discovered approximately 200 gas and oil deposits in the Russian Arctic region. Large deposits located in the Barents and Kara Seas have been designated for future development. The Russian Arctic region is also

currently the site of 99 percent of all diamond production in the Russian Federation, 98 percent of all platinum production, more than 80 percent of all nickel production, and 90 percent of all magnesium production.<sup>15</sup>

### *Historic Aspirations*

Russia has been an active player in the Arctic region since the fifteenth century, and the present competition with other coastal nations in the region is a reemergence of past rivalry. During most of Russia's existence as a state, and especially during the twentieth century, the Arctic region was important in Russian national policy.<sup>16</sup> It is thus a significant element in Russia's reassertion of national identity and pride, as well as its leading role in the world.

The Arctic territories constitute 25 percent of Russia's land area and contain a disproportionately large share of the state's natural resources. They held strategic importance during the Cold War, when the Arctic region was the closest point between the Soviet Union and the United States.<sup>17</sup> In the Soviet era, an industrial base was established in the Russian Arctic region, including gas and oil production, pipe systems, electrical power plants, nuclear power plants, and extensive transportation infrastructure (train tracks, roads, air strips, and ports).<sup>18</sup>

The region also commands a significant presence in Russian culture. Russian North Pole researchers, particularly groundbreaking Soviet scholars from the 1930s who led the research on this region, were well respected and received significant public acclaim in Russia, unlike in other countries in the world. Since the seventeenth century, Russian researchers have set out to navigate the northern coasts of their country. The Northern Russian Delegation of the early eighteenth century was one of the largest scientific delegations of the period in scope and in number.<sup>19</sup>

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Russia's subsequent weakness, the 1990s and 2000s witnessed the onset of a significant decline in Russia's military presence and assets in the Arctic region. Even today, after its military buildup and the upgrading and establishment of new military assets in the region, Russia is still currently at a lower stage than it was during the Soviet era.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Doctrinization of Russian Aspirations**

Russia was one of the first Arctic countries to formulate a strategic document for the region, and its national policy in the region is based primarily on

two documents produced by the Russian Federation since the beginning of the millennium. On June 14, 2001, the Russian cabinet authorized a draft document titled “Foundations of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic,” which described Russia’s major national and strategic interests in the region. Seven years later, Russia completed its development of a strategic document that was approved on September 18, 2008 by then-President Dmitry Medvedev as a roadmap for the years 2008-2020. Unlike the draft of the Russian policy document for the Arctic region released in 2001 that focused on military issues, the final document approved in 2008 contained more flexible and pragmatic sections and expanded on most of the civil national issues.<sup>21</sup>

The goals of Russian policy in the Arctic region derived from national interests. These goals include:

- a. Fulfillment of Russia’s need for strategic resources; defense and preservation of state borders in Russia’s Arctic region; achievement of more comfortable operational conditions in the region, including assistance by means of important warfare capabilities of the Russian armed forces.
- b. Preservation and protection of the natural environment of the Arctic region.
- c. Establishment of a united information space in the Arctic region.
- d. Implementation of scientific research for the accumulation of knowledge.
- e. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation between Russia and the countries bordering on the Arctic region, based on international conventions and treaties to which Russia is a party.<sup>22</sup>

On February 20, 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved the Arctic Region Development Strategy of the Soviet Union – an update of the strategy document that was published in 2008. The new document focuses on the Russian Arctic region, whereas the 2008 document focused on the Arctic region as a whole. In practice, the new document attests to the fact that Russia failed in the task it took upon itself for the years 2008 through 2010 in the previous document and that it needs to identify more realistic goals for the future.<sup>23</sup>

The latter document relates to international dimensions – such as Moscow’s intention to demarcate the borders of the Arctic region through legislation and the submission of a new petition to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf – as well as Russia’s emphasis on the need for international cooperation in areas such as the

survey and exploitation of natural resources, environmental protection, and preservation of the culture of indigenous populations. However, like its predecessor, the strategic document of 2013 emphasizes Russian sovereignty over the Russian Arctic region and the northern shipping routes, and calls for safeguarding the state's national interests in the region. In addition to the changes reflected in the new document, Russia acknowledges its lack of the resources and technology required to exploit the natural resources in the Russian Arctic region and its need for foreign investment and technological assistance for the purpose of development.<sup>24</sup>

## **Implementation of Russia's Arctic Doctrine**

### *Diplomatic and Political Activity*

To achieve its aspirations in the Arctic region, Russia has taken significant action in recent years in the civil and diplomatic realms. In 2011, Moscow applied to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf based on scientific claims, with the aim of extending its exclusive economic zone from 200 nautical miles to 350 nautical miles (approximately 648 kilometers). Although by doing so Russia was the first country to submit information to the Commission, the Commission rejected the request after finding it to be invalid and asked Russia to beef-up its scientific and geological claims. Russia continued to attempt to convey its legal claims in the Arctic region, including using established channels such as the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea and the International Maritime Organization. In an effort to extend its exclusive economic zone, Russia submitted a revised application on August 4, 2015.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to its need to complete the submission of its claims to the Commission, Russia has at its disposal another diplomatic option: the submission of claims to the Court of Maritime Law. This claims process, however, can last 10-15 years, raising the concern that Russia will ultimately lose patience, deviate from its responsible maritime policy, and begin taking unilateral measures.

### *Military Actions and Exercises*

On August 2, 2007, Russia responded to the decision by the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to reject its application to extend its area of control in the Arctic region. A research task force, consisting of a nuclear icebreaker accompanied by two submarines, was sent to the Arctic region to collect a soil sample from the Lomonosov Ridge – an area

that is the subject of territorial claims on the part of Russia, Denmark, and Canada. The sample was intended to prove that the ridge was actually part of Euro-Asia. During this undertaking, which was the subject of extensive media coverage, the task force planted the Russian flag on the ocean floor in the Ridge region. On the same occasion, Arthur Chilingarov, who was then deputy speaker of the lower house of the Russian parliament and a former well known Soviet polar researcher, declared that “the Arctic is ours, and we should demonstrate our presence.”<sup>26</sup>

This event reflected the significance in Russian eyes of the Arctic region, which has become a major region of advancement for the Russian military. According to Russian military doctrine from 2014, the Russian army is committed to the defense of Russian national interests in the Arctic region.<sup>27</sup> In order to achieve these aims, Moscow attributes great importance to evaluating and upgrading the military capabilities of the Russian navy and the Russian air force. The series of extensive military exercises over the past few years appears to have been intended for this purpose.

In early March 2014, the Russian army conducted an exercise that involved the dropping of hundreds of Russian paratroopers over Kotelný Island in Northern Siberia in what was described as the largest paratrooper drop ever carried out in the region by the Russian military.<sup>28</sup> Two months later, in May 8, 2014, Moscow conducted its largest military exercise since the demise of the Soviet Union. The exercise included a simulated nuclear attack using submarines, bombers, and surface-to-surface missiles and was supervised by Putin from Russian Defense Ministry headquarters in Moscow. In the course of the exercise, intercontinental ballistic missiles were launched from the Barents Sea.<sup>29</sup>

In March 2015, Russia carried out an extensive military exercise in the Arctic region. The exercise lasted five days and involved the participation of 80,000 troops, 220 fighter planes, 41 ships, and 15 submarines.<sup>30</sup> On June 2, 2015, the Russian navy conducted an exercise involving nuclear forces in international waters beneath the North Pole. The exercise focused on “hazard and threat detection” but also included the launching of missiles, submarines, navigation maneuvers, and ice patrols.<sup>31</sup> In November 2015, it was reported that Russia had conducted a successful test launching of two ballistic missiles by submarines in the White Sea off of Russia’s northwestern coastline.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to these military exercises, the Russian air force has flown a number of sorties close to the countries of the Arctic coast. In 2014, Norway

intercepted 74 Russian fighter planes along its coastline, reflecting a 27 percent increase from 2013. In March 2015, Russia conducted a military air exercise over the Barents Sea that lasted a number of weeks and included simulations of the destruction of enemy missiles and aircraft. The Russian sorties were typically flown adjacent to the coastline of North America and remained in international airspace, without entering the airspace of Canada or the United States. In addition, the number of Russian flights adjacent to the Arctic islands of North America and the eastern and western shores of the northern Pacific and Atlantic has been less than the number of flights made by NATO forces adjacent to the Russian Arctic region or to Russia's borders in Europe.<sup>33</sup>

Most of the photographs taken during the interceptions of the strategic Russian bombers by American and Canadian planes indicate that the Russian planes were flying at an altitude that did not allow concealment of their identity or activity. The photos indicated that the Russian bombers were not armed. With the exception of a few instances, the Russian bombers were also not escorted by fighter planes, making them easy targets for interception by the United States and Canada.<sup>34</sup>

This information offers a different perspective on Russian activity and suggests that Russia is neither interested in confrontation nor a policy of aggression, but is rather using airspace for the purpose of mutual deterrence, the conveyance of messages to countries of the region, and maintaining the capabilities of the Russian air force.

### **Building the Russian Force in the Arctic Context**

On March 28, 2014, shortly after the Russian invasion of the Crimean Peninsula, Putin delivered a speech at the Kremlin before senior Russian security officials, and stated: "Next is the further development of the combat personnel of our armed forces, including in the Arctic."<sup>35</sup> On April 7, 2014, Putin met with Russia's Federal Security Service personnel and urged them to "continue the development of border infrastructure in the Arctic region."<sup>36</sup>

In recent years, Russia has been working toward military buildup in general, and the Arctic region has not been the only area where it has projected aggression. The number of Russia's deployed nuclear warheads and launchers has increased significantly since 2013, as has the number of deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles, ballistic submarine missiles, and heavy bombers.<sup>37</sup> In addition, Russia is building three icebreakers,



one of which will be the largest in the world, with the aim of filling out its fleet of icebreakers.

Russia has also restored and rebuilt six military facilities in the Arctic region, including its Arctic Trefoil base on the island of Alexandra Land, which is intended to be used for personal survival training for a period of one and a half years. Moscow's largest base in the Arctic region is North Shamrock, located on Kotelny Island in the eastern Siberian Sea, which holds 250 soldiers equipped with air defense systems. Russia is renovating air strips and radar stations on four other islands in the Arctic region, and is moving new surface-to-air missile systems and anti-ship missile systems into the region. It has established two special brigades in the Arctic region, which is something that even the Soviet Union did not do, and is already planning to establish a division with the aim of defending the Arctic coastline.<sup>38</sup>

An important factor is the Northern Fleet, whose four missions were defined by the defense minister as: defending the strategic forces of the Russian fleet; defending economic interests in Russia's northern regions; defending the safety of shipping; and pursuing the interests of Russian foreign policy.<sup>39</sup> The Northern Fleet is the strongest of the four fleets of the Russian military. It has been allocated most of Russia's submarines, including some capable of carrying ballistic missiles and armed with cruise missiles. It has also been allocated Russia's largest aircraft carrier, *Adpatrol miral Kuznetsov*, and its largest battlecruiser, *Pyotr Velikiy*.<sup>40</sup>

Since 2011, Russia has implemented a plan for the upgrading and modernization of the Russian fleet. This modernization effort follows years of Russian neglect of its naval buildup, and Moscow is planning to build 100 warships. This joins the rehabilitation and improvement of existing ships, with an aim of extending their use.<sup>41</sup> In December 2014, Russia inaugurated a new military headquarters designed to coordinate all the Russian military forces operating in the Arctic region.<sup>42</sup> Russia has increased the number of marines assigned to the Northern Fleet by a third, to bring it up to the size of the other brigades.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Russia has established an Arctic Joint Strategic Command with the aim of coordinating operations among all Russian military forces operating in the region.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusions

Since Vladimir Putin's rise to power in Russia, the Russian Federation has made the Arctic a region of national priority. This process has been

conducted as part of Putin's efforts to restore Russia's status as a world power and the country's historic role associated with Czarist Russia and Soviet power during the Cold War. Russia also seeks to take advantage of the region's vast natural resources and geopolitical positioning, as well as the opportunity to significantly improve its access to shipping routes and communications media and to bring the country's eastern and western regions closer together.

Prioritization of the Arctic region has led Moscow to pursue, in addition to bilateral and multilateral diplomatic cooperation with the countries of the Arctic region, undertaking a broad civilian and military buildup and increasing the special military activities along its northern borders and in the Arctic Ocean. Russia's military buildup, activity, and provocation of its Arctic neighbors, in addition to Moscow's determination in recent decades to employ military means when the need arises, indicates that Russia seeks to achieve as extensive control as possible of the Arctic region, even if at the expense of other coastal states in the region that are advancing similar claims.

## Notes

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