

Russia's Security Intentions in a Melting Arctic

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As the only non-NATO littoral state in the Arctic, Russia's policies have great relevance for the region's security environment. A series of military deployments and announced upgrades to infrastructure and weapon systems since 2007 have led to speculations that Moscow seeks to re-militarize its Arctic sector in anticipation of a warmer climate in the region. Using strategy documents and policy pronouncements since 2008 as instruments of analysis, this paper considers Moscow's security intentions in a climatically changing Arctic. The findings reveal that Russia is not on course to reconstitute its prior military strength in the Arctic and is generally disinclined to initiate an arms race. Instead of supporting a "Great Game" confrontation, Russia's military footprint in the Arctic is increasingly linked with the Kremlin's controversial jurisdictional assertions.

Keywords: Russia, Arctic, military, climate change, maritime jurisdiction, militarization, state strategies

Introduction

Since the record-breaking 2007 summer ice melt, two narratives have dominated analyses of Russia's Arctic strategy. The first to take root was based on a zero-sum, confrontational approach, according to which

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Russia acts unilaterally to achieve its expansionist strategic interests. The theatrical planting of a Russian flag on the North Pole seabed and provocative bomber flights along NATO's Arctic frontier in 2007 were two early data points for this pessimistic appraisal of Russian motives. The second narrative has developed more recently and argues that the Kremlin appreciates that its own interests are best served through bilateral and multilateral compromise. Evidence in support of this argument has been plentiful recently and includes the 2010 Russia-Norway maritime delineation agreement on the Barents Sea and the Arctic Council's first binding treaties, on search-and-rescue in 2011 and oil-spill response in 2013.

Concurrent with these narratives are differing assessments of Russia's military intentions in the Arctic. As climate change opens up a more accessible theater of operations in the Arctic for the world's navies, littoral states are increasing the tempo of military maneuvers in the region. Russian activity is especially pronounced, out-pacing all other Arctic nations in terms of military forces operating in both the air and maritime realms. Some commentators have noted the risk of instability and the potential for an arms race between the four NATO rim states and Russia as a result of numerous interstate disputes, most of which involve lucrative economic opportunities such as fishing, energy extraction, and transportation.¹ In 2010, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, US Admiral James Stavridis, cautioned that the struggle for Arctic resources could ignite a new "cold war" in the region.² Other commentators have downplayed the threat of conflict and the risk of militarization by emphasizing that security enhancements since 2007 constitute logical and peaceful preparations for a more navigable Arctic.³

The competing narratives have come about largely as a result of Russia's erratic Arctic policies following the 2007 ice melt. Belligerent rhetoric by Putin and other Russian officials contrasted with conciliatory moves at the bilateral level and in the multilateral forum of the eight-member Arctic Council. To some extent, this pattern continues as evidenced by Vladimir Putin's comments to the Russian Defense Ministry Board in February 2013 in which he accused the West of methodical attempts to alter the strategic balance and warned of a militarized Arctic.⁴ In spite of such rhetoric, in the past two years the Kremlin has issued a wealth of policy statements, investment decisions, and military commitments related to the Arctic,

providing ample data to separate bluster from intent. Russia's security intentions are no longer shrouded in secrecy or obscured in mix messages.

This article addresses the question of Russia's military objectives in the Arctic in order to gauge not only the likelihood of a regional arms race but also to draw broader conclusions concerning the trajectory of Moscow's security policy in the Arctic.

Contextualization

Before evaluating recent developments, it is necessary to put Russian military advances in the Arctic since 2007 into perspective. At first glance, Russian activity appears disconcerting. In August 2007, Russia resumed strategic bomber flights by Long Range Aviation assets over the Arctic after a 15-year respite. This was followed by a decision to form two specialized Arctic brigades, and more recently to base MiG-31 long-range interceptors at Rogachyovo Air Base, near Belushya Guba on the Novaya Zemlya archipelago. In February 2013, the Northern Fleet's Naval Aviation began flying patrol missions on a permanent basis in the Arctic latitudes of the northern ice ocean. In addition to ambitious ship modernization plans, including deployment of Borei-class submarines and a French-built Mistral class amphibious assault ship, the Fleet will expand the zone of combat patrols of strategic submarines in the Arctic beginning in 2014.⁵ Recently, in September 2013, Vladimir Putin announced plans to reopen Soviet-era military bases in the Arctic.⁶

Notwithstanding the flurry of announcements related to the Arctic in recent years, when these security moves are viewed through various contexts, they appear much less ominous. First, contemporary activities need to be judged against historical patterns of fluctuating military readiness and capabilities in the Arctic. Prior to World War II, the Arctic had very little strategic military utility, with Czarist, and then Soviet planners only gradually gaining an appreciation for the security opportunities and threats the Arctic presented. The Soviets established the Northern Flotilla in 1933, upgrading it to fleet status in 1937, but maintained a faint military footprint in the immediate post-World War II period.⁷ It was not until the nuclear arms race that the region became a priority in military planning, as Soviet submarines roamed the Arctic under cover of ice as a virtually unassailable strategic force. Consequently, the late Soviet-era witnessed an enormous shift of capacity to the Northern Fleet, with bases operating out

of the Murmansk-Kola area. The fleet surpassed the Baltic and Black Sea Fleets, and by 1981, 57 percent of all Soviet submarines and 52 percent of its strategic submarines were stationed in the North.⁸ By 1988, the strike power of Northern Fleet strategic and attack submarines was estimated to be greater than the other three fleets combined.⁹ Similar increases in aviation, non-strategic naval capacity, and surveillance competency occurred from the 1960s to the mid 1980s along the Soviet Arctic coastline.

In the 1990s, the pendulum swung back dramatically as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which left "Russia's massive Arctic military infrastructure to decay and rot."¹⁰ Capabilities in radar coverage, aviation, and naval patrol were gutted. The situation on the ground did not change noticeably with the departure of Boris Yeltsin and the arrival of Vladimir Putin in 1999. From 1993 to 2003, the Air Force did not receive a single strategic bomber and only received three between 2004 and 2009.¹¹ Katarzyna Zysk points out that as late as 2006, capacity was still being drained from the Arctic for the sake of more urgent strategic problems, as evidenced in the disbandment of the Vorkuta-based Independent Arctic Border Detachment and the transfer of its human and material resources to the North Caucasus region.¹² The atrophy of the Soviet military presence during the 1990s and early 2000s acted to essentially demilitarize the region. A comparison of the fleet's order of battle in 1986 and 2013 illustrates the extent of the deterioration (table 1).¹³

Table 1. Northern Fleet Order of Battle, 1986 and 2013

	Surface Vessels	Submarines	Naval Aviation
1986	100	170	400
2013	41	43	119
Combat ready	12-29	8	57

Notwithstanding recent moves, the Northern Fleet remains a shell of its Soviet strength. A 2013 Russian analysis of the Northern Fleet capabilities surmised that the fleet is only 25-30 percent capable of supporting Russia's peacetime obligations and could only assemble a surface strike group of two or three small missile ships in the event of combat with enemy surface forces in the littoral zone.¹⁴ The current state of Russia's military infrastructure and radar monitoring of its Arctic coastline is not much

better. Contemporary improvements to the Northern Fleet, therefore, commenced from a very dismal starting point. Even if all ambitious targets are met, which is highly improbable in light of post-Soviet precedents and current budgetary constraints, the outcome would likely be to merely arrest the further deterioration of capabilities.

Second, when Russia's security moves in the Arctic are placed in the context of the nation's larger trend to reform and modernize its armed forces, they appear less grandiose. In 2008, Russia embarked on one of the most ambitious military reforms, reorganization, and equipment modernization programs in its history, in which the Arctic is but one component. The plans call for more than 20 trillion rubles (\$650 billion) by 2020 to completely overhaul its military hardware so that "by 2015, the proportion of the new generation of weapons should be 30 percent, and by 2020 reach 70-100 percent."¹⁵ In contrast to other post-Soviet efforts, the current program has considerable political will behind it as evidenced by overall military spending in 2012 increasing by 24 percent – a jump of nearly \$90 billion or 113 percent from 2003 military expenditures.¹⁶ Military spending is envisioned to jump 18 percent in 2014 and 60 percent from 2014-2016. The defense budget portion of the Russian GDP is envisioned to grow from 3.1 percent in 2012 to 3.9 percent in 2016.

The impact of this reform program on the Arctic has been surprisingly subtle. Reorganizations and increased training tempo in the Arctic have occurred in line with overall efforts in the Russian military since 2008, and the nominal improvement in Russia's Arctic military footprint is largely proportional to the overall increase in military spending in recent years. However, by some measurements, the Northern Fleet has actually trailed the other fleets. For instance, the overall tonnage of the Russian fleet dropped from its 1990 peak of 2.6 million tons (Mt) to 1 Mt by 2008, before increasing slightly to 1.07 Mt by 2012. Correspondingly, the number of vessels dropped from 406 to a low of 119, and by 2012 only recovered to 131.¹⁷ Yet the Northern Fleet tonnage continued to drop from 2008 to 2012 from 583,000 to 545,000 tons as well as its ship total.¹⁸ In addition, the Northern Fleet suffers from the same missed deadlines and inefficiencies as the other fleets, which hamper modernization efforts. In a meeting on July 29, 2013 on state orders for the navy, Vladimir Putin admitted that State Armament Program-2020 (SAP-2020) objectives would not be met as ships set for commission after 2015 have to be determined by SAP-2025.¹⁹

Despite discussion of a strategic re-orientation to the Arctic in some Russian security circles, the Northern strategic direction does not appear to be receiving significantly more attention at present than the other three strategic directions. While Russia's first two next-generation ballistic missile submarines, the *Yury Dolgoruky* and *Alexander Nevsky*, were recently given to the Northern Fleet instead of the Pacific Fleet as originally planned, the first two French-built Mistral-class amphibious assault ships will be sent to the Pacific Fleet. Furthermore, it is important to consider that the modernization that is occurring is not a harbinger of malevolent Arctic intent. The mission of the Northern Fleet, particularly during the Soviet era, was not exclusively tied to achieving naval superiority in the Arctic, but rather with maintaining unobstructed access to the Atlantic and viable nuclear deterrence. The prospect of seasonally ice-free Arctic waters will undoubtedly result in a more Arctic-centric mission for the Fleet, but the potential for Arctic conflict is unlikely to be affected as a result of the moderate improvements envisaged for the Northern Fleet.

Finally, Russia's moves appear less exceptional when placed in the context of overall circumpolar security upgrades. Russia's Arctic neighbors are also augmenting their security presence in the Arctic as a result of climate change exposing their once inaccessible coastlines to human activity. While these improvements occur in tandem with Russian force upgrades, there is little evidence that they are occurring because of Russian decision making. Canada has announced plans to launch a new fleet of up to eight Arctic off-shore patrol ships and establish an Arctic training base in Resolute Bay and a deep-water berthing and refueling facility at Nanisivik. It also intends to create a 500-strong army unit comprising four companies of 120 troops apiece for Far North operations, and hold its largest-ever military exercise in the region.²⁰ Norway and Denmark have followed suit with their own realignments and equipment upgrades. Even so, in 2012, Frederic Lasserre et al. conducted a quantitative analysis of the Arctic coastal states' navies and concluded that "the overall picture of Arctic military evolution is one of limited modernization, limited increases or change in equipment."²¹

Clarity of Strategic Goals

With these perspectives as a backdrop, the military aspects of Russia's Arctic strategy can be better appreciated. Fortunately, the fog around

Russian security intentions in the Arctic has gradually lifted in recent years. The nationalist messaging and provocative gestures that permeated Russia's Arctic policy during Putin's second presidential term (2004-2008) have given way to a more thoughtful approach. Gestures such as the resumption of strategic bomber flights from the 37th Air Army, which were likely motivated by non-strategic rationale, have lost utility. For instance, the formation of the two Arctic specific brigades as well as the redeployment of an aviation group of MiG-31 interceptors to the Soviet-built Rogachevo airfield have recently both been pushed back, with the initial announcements labeled as "politically-motivated" and detached from real needs by Russian media.²² More recent activity has had less to do with international optics and much more to do with supporting strategic goals.

Climate change, and in particular the realization that its long Arctic coastline could be fully exposed to ice-free summers, appears to be the primary driver of change in Kremlin policy. Russian activities, in the security, economic, political, and legal realms, have increased in unison with reduction in sea ice. Strategy documents as well as official rhetoric since 2007 have been infused with an explicit sense of urgency linked to the ice melt. This stands in contrast to the 1990s and early 2000s when the climate change factor was only tangentially addressed in official political discourse related to the Arctic. The growing prospect of ice-free conditions has focused Moscow's attention. Apart from the drastic seasonal reduction in sea ice cover, the ice that remains is mostly younger, thinner ice sufficiently porous to allow penetration by sunlight, thus "further accelerating the melting of the entire sea ice area."

Moscow's preoccupation with the Arctic is understandable as the region is much more significant for Russia's present and future economic vitality than it is for any other Arctic nation. The Arctic accounts for approximately 20 percent of Russia's GDP and 22 percent of total Russian exports. Over 90 percent of its nickel and cobalt, 60 percent of its copper, and 96 percent of its platinoids come from Arctic mines. The melting ice exposes the vast amount of hydrocarbon wealth of the Arctic basin. According to figures published by the Institute of Oil and Gas Problems, Russia will be pumping up to 30 million tons of oil and 130 billion m³ of natural gas out of its Arctic shelf by 2030.²³ In addition to hydrocarbon wealth, the Arctic offers lucrative transportation routes. The Northern Sea Route (NSR) extends

across the Arctic Ocean seas (Kara, Laptev, East Siberian, and Chukchi) off the Russian Arctic coast and is the shortest route from Europe to the Far East. Furthermore, receding ice exposes Russia's largely unmanned and unmonitored 17,500 kilometer coastline to piracy, illegal fishing, and smuggling.

The shift away from nationalist-tinged talk of militarization toward a more practical emphasis on preparing for increased human and economic activity in the Arctic is best illustrated by comparing the *2000 National Security Concept*, *2001 Maritime Doctrine*, and *2001 Basics of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic Region* with the *2008 Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic in the Period up to 2020 and Beyond* and the *2009 National Security Strategy*. The content and tone of the documents are distinctly different. The former documents contained abrasive rhetoric focused on activities linked to Russia's military security, Cold War concepts of strategic balance, NATO rivalry, and zero sum competition in the Arctic. The 2001 Arctic Policy paper maintained that "all types of activity in the Arctic are tied to the interests of defense and security to the maximum degree." In contrast, the latter two focused on the prevention of smuggling, terrorism, and illegal immigration through enhanced constabulary competence. Their content centered primarily on increased human activity and resulting economic development and avoided suggesting that Russia harbors ambitions to re-militarize the Arctic region.²⁴ Indeed, military security is not mentioned among the urgent priorities in stark contrast to the 2001 Arctic strategy in which military strength pervaded.²⁵ Instead, emphasis is placed on preparing the Arctic to be a "national strategic resource base" and the NSR to be an "international maritime navigation [passage] within the jurisdiction of Russian Federation." The differences between the two sets of strategy papers are also found in their applications. While the former papers had little practical bearing on security developments in the ensuing seven years as ambition did not translate into capability, the 2008 Arctic Strategy has been a fairly reliable blueprint for Russia's Arctic policies to date.

Enhancement of border security infrastructure, not military capability, has been the focus of Russian attention since the release of the 2008 Arctic Strategy. Particular emphasis is placed on coordination of effort across multiple federal entities, with the Federal Security Service (FSB) and its border guard branch taking the lead and with Northern Fleet units

in a subordinate role. In 2009, Moscow re-established units within the Arkhangelsk and Murmansk border guard to patrol the NSR in step with the 2008 Arctic Strategy plan for a comprehensive Arctic coastal defense infrastructure by 2020. A number of “dual use” facilities in the Arctic are being constructed to host commercial craft as well as vessels of both the Northern Fleet and the FSB’s border service.²⁶ Eleven facilities will be deployed in the Arctic before 2020, and will be co-located with new “emergency-rescue centers” currently being built across northern Russia at Murmansk, Archangelsk, Naryan-Mar, Vorkuta, Nadym, Dudinka, Tiksi, Pevek, Provideniya, and Andyr.²⁷ In late 2013, Russia announced that these sites, as well as several other former Soviet military bases in the Arctic, will have their airfields reconstructed as part of a larger military infrastructure renewal program in the Arctic.

This infrastructure enhancement aligns with plans to deploy a combined-arms force by 2020 that will include military, border, and coastal guard units to protect Russia’s economic and political interests in the Arctic.²⁸ Plans also call for the expansion of aerial and satellite border monitoring capabilities, centered primarily on the perennially-delayed Arktika space surveillance system, which when fully complete, will comprise four meteorological, communication, and radar satellites.²⁹ Expansion of the FSB’s unmanned aerial vehicles and new ice-class patrol boats are also in development.³⁰ While these plans will likely encounter delays and budget difficulties as is common in Russia, there can be little doubt that Moscow is genuinely interested in an integrated approach to protecting what Russian academics increasingly refer to as the Arctic Zone of Russia (AZR).

Russian Arctic Interests after the Ice

While Russia’s operational commitments have become increasingly clear of late, its motives remain more obscure. Some insist recent moves reveal designs “not on a military confrontation with Arctic riparian countries, but on control of illegal trafficking, terrorism, poaching, and environmental threats.”³¹ Yet ascribing only benign motives to Russia’s security machinations in the Arctic may be too unassuming. After all, Russian officials routinely state that security advances are needed to protect against future foreign designs on Russian interests in the Arctic. In July 2013, outspoken nationalist and Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin

listed the Arctic as one of five possible conflict scenarios in Russia's future, but did not mention the source of future tensions.³² This type of rhetoric and the substantial efforts currently being exerted to enhance constabulary capabilities are unlikely motivated exclusively by the prospects of piracy or illegal fishing.

The moves are also unlikely to be tied to many other circumpolar disputes which affect, to some degree, Russian interests. Take for instance the issue of access to the emerging fishing stocks in the Arctic. Recent developments suggest that the matter has little bearing on Russia's security posture. Russia already has exclusive and undisputed rights to all living organisms in the water column to 200 nautical miles (337 km) of its shoreline. Furthermore, the dispute concerning fishing in the international waters in the Central Arctic region is on course for resolution. In early 2013, Russia moved its objection to circumpolar negotiations on the issue. These negotiations are ongoing and promising. Similarly, Russia's maritime territorial issues have either been resolved, as with the Barents Sea deal with Norway in 2010, or they have entered a permanent dormant state, as in the case of the maritime boundary with the US in the Bering Sea.

The issue most cited by Russian nationalists to justify enhanced security presence is the threat of foreign claims on Russia's Arctic energy reserves. Yet such a scenario seems highly improbable. As with fishing, Russia has undisputed claim to all seabed resources in its immense Arctic economic exclusion zone (EEZ). Indeed, by some accounts, 80-95 percent of the potential resources are found in undisputed jurisdiction, with Russia's EEZ accounting for the 80 percent of the region's natural gas.³³ The international order would have to become quite anarchic for Russia's rights to these reserves to be seriously threatened. Nationalists, such as Rogozin, may have in mind perceived rights to the disputed seabed of the Central Arctic Region, but even on that subject, conflict is becoming increasingly remote. First, there is not much to fight over. Pavel Baev notes, "The top of the globe does not promise much in the way of oil and gas, even if the entire icecap were to melt. Extracting oil from the [Central Arctic Region] is not possible since there is no oil to extract."³⁴ Second, Moscow's commitment to work within UN procedures has been unequivocal, and most recently enshrined in the Arctic Council's 2008 Ilulissat Declaration in which all the Arctic states agreed to "the orderly settlement of any possible overlapping claims."³⁵ Finally, Russia's concessions to Norway in the 2010 Barents Sea

maritime agreement, recent conciliatory comments by Putin on the issue, and the simple fact that the vast majority of seabed claims do not overlap but at the North Pole, further suggests the issue is unlikely to escalate.

Defending the Northern Sea Route

The dispute that appears most associated with Russian activity since 2008 involves maritime jurisdiction over the 3,000 nautical mile-long (5,560 km) Northern Sea Route (NSR). Even as Russia has become more constructive and predicable on other disputes, it has continued to pursue a unilateral approach on the issue of navigation. Disagreement over the contested waterways off Russia's Arctic coastline lacks a clear path to resolution. The route cuts 40 percent off sailing times between Asia and Europe and is an attractive transport corridor for Asian exporting nations and sea line of communication (SLOC) for the world's navies. Yet Russia claims extra-jurisdictional control over two geographical domains in the Arctic: straits and the EEZ. Starting closer to the shoreline, Moscow insists that all key straits along the NSR are internal waters and therefore exempt from innocent passage regime. National legislation to this effect was codified by the Soviets in 1985 and endorsed by the present regime. Extending further out, Russia also asserts the privileges to regulate traffic in its 200 nautical mile EEZ, which would typically be considered high seas and outside the purview of coastal states' national legislations. It cites Article 234 of the 1982 UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) which grants extra-jurisdictional rights to coastal states in ice-covered waters "for the prevention, reduction and control of marine pollution from vessels in ice-covered areas within the limits of the exclusive economic zone."³⁶ Both assertions rest on controversial readings of international law, with many nations, including the US, holding opposing opinions.

Taken together, these claims require foreign vessels to receive Moscow's permission and comply with burdensome and costly regulations including pilotage and ice-breaker escort, as well as specific design, equipment, and manning standards.³⁷ The impetus behind recent activity in the Arctic appears to be concerns over navigational rights. Russia recently moved to reaffirm these requirements in a new federal law, adopted on July 3, 2012, which defined the NSR as: "the water area adjacent to the Northern coast of the Russian Federation, comprising the internal sea waters, the territorial sea, the adjacent zone and the exclusive economic zone of the

Russian Federation and confined in the East with the Line of Maritime Demarcation with the United States of America.”³⁸ On January 17, 2013, the Ministry of Transport issued the first updated rules on NSR regulations since 1990 and a new NSR administrative body was established shortly thereafter to oversee the rules.³⁹ Of particular note among the changes from the previous iteration of NSR laws issued in the early 1990s is the expanding geographic understanding of the NSR in Russian thought from a number of sea routes to its entire Arctic EEZ, encompassing nearly a fifth of the Arctic Ocean. The timing of legislative and regulatory moves with plans to enhance border patrol suggests a degree of policy synchronization. Another factor suggesting Russia’s Arctic military posture is increasingly centered on the NSR, is the fact that the ice melt will have a greater impact on this dispute than any other precisely because climate change drastically affects the legal foundation of navigational claims. Greater accessibility to Arctic energy may peak coastal states’ interests to acquire seabed access, but it does nothing to alter the well-established and respected laws, procedures, and mediating process. Yet concerning navigation, ice reduction undermines Russia’s Article 234 argument that rests on the presence of ice to justify control. Reduction in sea ice in 2007, and again in 2012, portends a more navigable Arctic Ocean in the coming decades and with it, potential challenges to Russia’s draconian regulations.

Indeed, Russian fears have been somewhat validated during the 2013 shipping season. With more favorable ice conditions, applications for NSR sailing permits have risen from a handful a few years ago to over 400 in 2013. Moscow is pleased with this development but has also had its regulatory regime challenged for the first time in nearly 20 years. In August, the Greenpeace icebreaker, *Arctic Sunrise*, was denied permission to sail the NSR three times, before proceeding without approval into the Kara Sea.⁴⁰ A day after entering Russia’s Arctic EEZ, the vessel was boarded by a Russian coast guard vessel and forced to retreat out of “Russian waters.” It is noteworthy that Russia rejected Greenpeace’s request for transit three times on technicalities as the non-discriminatory clause of Article 234 prohibits Russia from refusing entry for arbitrary reasons, such as *Arctic Sunrise*’s stated purpose to protest Russia’s energy exploration efforts in the Arctic. The incident is reminiscent of the Soviet maritime stand-off with US Coast Guard vessels attempting to traverse the NSR in the 1960s.

Both episodes, along with the tone of Russia's historic and contemporary policies on navigation along its Arctic coastline, undermine optimistic assessments. For instance, Michael Becker's 2010 assessment that the issue of NSR access will likely be resolved by negotiations and not escalate "if the ultimate interest is safe and clean commercial shipping,"⁴¹ appears to be based on dubious appraisal of Russian interests. He cited Professor James Kraska of the US Naval War College 2007 upbeat assessment of the Northwest Passage navigation dispute. Kraska's line of reasoning may be suitable for Canada, where environmental protection concerns are likely at the forefront, but Russian motives are more intertwined with a desire to control a geo-strategic space it considers exclusively Russian.

NATO Exclusion Zone

Moscow's anxiety is not restricted solely to environmentalists, but also to foreign military vessels. Moscow's objections to Western intrusion into its Arctic sector stretch back to the 1960s and a series of mini naval standoffs with US Coast Guard vessels seeking to circumnavigate the Arctic. Russia is concerned that a more navigable Arctic will attract NATO warships to the Arctic Basin, as well as naval vessels of any flag into its EEZ. Since 2009, Kremlin officials have been outspoken in opposing NATO in the Arctic. In 2009, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov rejected the presence of outside "military-political alliances" in the region, while Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Makarov warned a NATO audience in Iceland that the presence of Alliance warships in the Arctic would necessitate changes to Russian defense planning.⁴² At the June 2013 Barents Summit in Norway, Russia's Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev warned:

Any expansion of NATO to include Sweden and Finland would upset the balance of power and force Russia to respond... In the 1990s after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact Organization NATO openly broke its promise not to spread military infrastructure closer to Russia's borders. Today independent experts are concerned that NATO may use emergency and disaster preparedness measures to cover its indirect attempts to militarize the Arctic.⁴³

Medvedev's decision to link the Arctic with Russia's feeling of being wronged in the former Soviet space is especially intriguing, as Kremlin policymakers likely view both regions in similar terms. Russia's

preoccupation with peripheral buffer zones goes back centuries, with the post-Soviet struggle for influence in its self-proclaimed “near abroad” being the most recent manifestation. In 2006, Russian military commentator O. Litkova went so far as to argue that “the Arctic could significantly compensate Russia for the losses she suffered as a result of the collapse of the USSR.”⁴⁴ The Arctic, like the near abroad, is viewed in terms of sectorial divisions in which Russia believes that history and geography afford it exclusive right of influence. In the case of the Arctic, this belief stretches back at least to the Soviet’s 1926 decree in which all territories within the extreme meridians of Russia’s eastern and western borders running to the North Pole were claimed as Russian.

Russia fears that the ice melt will do to the Arctic what the fall of communism did in Eastern Europe, that is, usher in a period of NATO encroachment into their traditional space. In 2011, two leading academic voices in Russia opined:

Officials and experts agree that NATO continues on a course toward enhancing its activity in the Arctic. What consequence will this have on Russia? In all aspects – negative.... With regard to the fierce competition for Arctic resources, NATO will squeeze Russia out, just as it squeezes Russia in other regions of Europe in the sphere of security. It is obvious that the USA, which is not party to [UNCLOS] will use NATO to strengthen its position in the region....Therefore, Russia should prepare for a difficult and long battle for the settling of its interest and legal rights.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Russia’s preparations are ongoing and clearly have a military component. Even so, Russia is not prioritizing the Arctic in its defense planning. It appears more concerned with the legal ramifications of the changing Arctic environment than with grand strategic questions of nuclear deterrence and naval force parity in the region. Consequently, security measures in the Arctic will remain closely tied to supporting specific national interests as outlined in strategy documents, most notably control over surface traffic in Russia’s Arctic waters. The changing remit of the Northern Fleet is meant to augment efforts in other spheres, such as the modernization of maritime legislations and regulations, with the ultimate goal of establishing

irreversible precedent of control in anticipation of greater Arctic surface traffic. This highly nuanced security machination has been overshadowed by the more spectacular, yet less strategically significant, acts of military bluster in the Arctic since 2007.

Russia's course of action defies the competing narratives presented in the introduction of either an alarming return to Soviet-era Arctic militarization or a measured and rational response to climate change. Moscow's designs are neither entirely benign nor entirely belligerent. While moderate improvements to naval capability are occurring, current developments do not amount to a reconstitution of anything approaching Soviet-era strength. Military spending in the Arctic has suffered and benefited from the same economic swings of boom and bust that has affected the readiness of the rest of Russia's armed forces since 1991. Even with the altering deployment characteristic of the Arctic Ocean, there is no indication that this correlation will change or that Russia harbors malicious intent in the region.

At the same time, the Kremlin's perception that the region falls within its sphere of influence remains at odds with Western perception. Subsequently, Russia's cooperative attitude of late in the Arctic should not be extrapolated to all circumpolar disputes. When it comes to navigational rights, Russia's interests are not aligned with those of most Western nations. The divide between the two sides will only widen as a result of climate change. If Western nations and NATO are counting on Russia's obsession over its Arctic waters to fade away with the ice, they are likely to be disappointed.

Notes

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