Simulating sovereignty

The role of the Arctic in constructing Russian post-imperial identity

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Introduction: sovereign performances

On August 2, 2007, the Russian expedition Arktika 2007, led by a famous Russian Polar explorer and State Duma deputy Artur Chilingarov, planted a titanium flag of Russia on the seabed at the North Pole, descending more than 2 miles under the ice cap in a pair of submersible vessels (de Beauvais 2015). This was part of the Russian scientific expedition seeking to find evidence to substantiate Russia's extended continental shelf claim. The high-profile submersion received wide media coverage, and was televised on national channels in a large PR campaign promoting Russian sovereignty and Arctic legacy. Upon examination, seabed samples were reported to be similar to those found on Russia's continental shelf, allowing Russia to claim that the Lomonosov Ridge, originating in Russian territory, reaches the North Pole, legitimating the Russian claim to that seabed.

The United States and Canada dismissed the flag planting as purely symbolic and legally meaningless. To that, the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, retorted, "I was amazed by my Canadian counterpart's statement that we are planting flags around. We are not throwing flags around. We just do what other discoverers did. The purpose of the expedition is not to stake whatever claims of Russia, but to prove that our shelf extends to the North Pole. By the way, on the Moon, it was the same" (Gabuev 2007).

Another symbolic display of Russian sovereignty in the Arctic occurred on October 19, 2013, when the unprecedented Olympic torch relay ahead of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, lasting 123 days and covering over 65,000 kilometers, reached the North Pole by a special trip of the Russian atomic-powered icebreaker (the first ever to make it to the North Pole during the polar night). In the entire relay, there were two episodes when the Olympic torch was carried outside of Russian state territory proper— one was taking it to the International Space Station by a Russian spaceship, and another was carrying it to the North Pole. Although the symbolic run at the North Pole included representatives of all Arctic nations, the very fact of taking it there further reinforced Russia's sovereignty claim in the Arctic.

In the same days, as the Russian atomic-powered icebreaker 50 Years of Victory was making its way through the polar night and the Arctic ice to the North Pole, carrying the Olympic torch, a court hearing was under way in Murmansk, in which 30 Greenpeace members were charged with piracy. A month earlier, the Greenpeace boat, the Arctic Sunrise, approached the Russian oil platform Priazomomaya in Russia's 200-mile exclusive economic zone in the Pechora Sea, and two activists tried to board it, in a protest against oil drilling in the Arctic that entailed significant environmental risks. Russia responded in a war-like manner: the Arctic Sunrise was boarded, searched, and captured in an airborne operation by the FSB Special Forces, all members of the crew arrested, and the ship convoyed to the Port of Murmansk, where the members of the crew were charged with piracy (the charge was later changed to hooliganism). All those detained were released by Christmas 2013, and later amnestied, and the ship was released in June 2014. In August 2015, the permanent court of arbitration in The Hague then ordered Russia to pay damages for that harsh arrest (BBC, 2015a). This war-like episode, in which the state used all its security and law enforcement mechanisms to protect an oil platform against an unarmed group of environmentalists, was yet another conspicuous display of sovereignty.

The three episodes cited—planting a titanium flag, carrying the Olympic torch at the North Pole, and the armed assault on the Greenpeace boat—were important performative acts, exemplary displays of sovereignty in contested Arctic waters that highlighted Russia's territorial ambitions in the Arctic. Indeed, in the past decade, Russia has launched a diplomatic and symbolic offensive in the Arctic, supported by increased military activity, megalomaniac economic plans, and regular displays of sovereignty. The Arctic is increasingly seen as the new frontier of a re-emerging Russia, "standing up from her knees," as the popular propagandist meme has it. What are the origins, elements, and, most importantly, the limitations of Russia's new Arctic ambitions? What is its practical versus its symbolic significance?

This paper seeks to answer these questions by looking at the history of Russia's expansion in the Arctic and analyzing the changes in the country's policies in the region over the last decades. The research will draw upon the constructivist paradigm in international relations, focusing on the significance of the Arctic for a national identity and the state's attempts to project its power in the international arena. It will study the image of the Arctic in mass consciousness and among political elites, using the methods of text and discourse analysis. For the majority of Russia's population, the Arctic is a distant region, which, however, has always been one of the top political priorities for the government. The Arctic is cold, but resource-rich; mysterious, but attractive. Thus, it is a perfect object for political speculations, and in interpreting Russia's actions in the region one has to take into consideration the identity factor. As put by Alexander Wendt, identities are relatively stable, role-specific understandings about self that are acquired by participating in collective reasoning about certain objects (Wendt 1992). Russia's growing interest in the Arctic is driven by national memories and myths, among different political and economic factors. However, the more Russia claims its sovereignty in the Arctic, the more it reinforces its imperial and post-imperial identity, generating new symbols and discourses.
A symbolic legacy

Russia's quest into the Arctic has lasted since the early explorations in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, as hunters and prospectors moved along the great Siberian rivers to the Arctic coast, and the Cossacks, in their narrow boats (strugi), made the first explorations of the coastline — to the geographic discoveries of Vitus Bering, Semyon Cheluskin, Grigory Shelikhov, Ferdinand Wrangel, Boris Vilkitski, Georgi Sedov, and other explorers of the eighteenth—twentieth centuries.

The Arctic has become an essential part of Russia’s identity, premised on the idea of large territory (one-sixth of the world’s landmass, as proudly claimed in the Soviet propaganda) and of inexhaustible resources. Territoriality as such plays a major role in the construction of Russia’s political community that it is sacralized in the political discourse and serves as one of the key markers of “Russian-ness” (Medvedev 1997). In the Russian case, territoriality has become the key marker of statehood, and in some cases — a substitute for statehood.

The symbolic significance of the Arctic has far prevailed over its practical nature: in fact, Russia took pride in possessing one immense emptiness. Different from the colonial projects of other European empires of the Age of Modernity, for a long time, Russia could not extract substantial material benefit from possessing these lands. Different from Siberia, rich in fur — the prime Russian commodity traded on the world markets, the Russian “oil and gas” of the sixteenth—nineteenth centuries, and a major source of export revenue (Etkind 2011) — the Arctic could not provide any typical colonial wealth, like gold, fur, agricultural produce, or slaves. True, there was fish, whale, and walrus, furs, and other commodities typical of the Northern Seas, as exemplified by the Pomor trade of the eighteenth—twentieth centuries; still, it was more of a regional, rather than a national, significance. In this sense, the Arctic was mostly a symbolic asset, important for Russian sovereignty and security, and for the territorial construction of the political community.

Indeed, there is a certain non-referential semiotic in the idea of the North. The Arctic is humanity’s last remaining frontier; the East and West are explored and loaded with political meaning, and the South, too, represents an overpopulated Third World in the political discourse, while the North appears as a symbolic domain, a semiotic project, a constructed identity. The North is more often communicated than experienced, imagined rather than embodied. The North is an emptiness we are fill with our imaginations, narratives, and texts — a hollow signifier without the signified (Medvedev 2000).

In this sense, over the centuries, the Arctic has been a promise and a symbolic project for Russia, rather than a material possession. There were the great geographic discoveries, on a par with those of Columbus and Magellan, revealing an unexplored continent to humanity; there were the stories of courage and sacrifice there were the military and trading outposts of civilization — in short, this was a heroic myth rather than an economic asset. The only major attempt to convert a symbolic resource into a territorial development program was undertaken by the Soviet Union in the 1920s—1960s, inspired by the modernist zeal for the Soviet project (“filling in the blank spots in the compleat mappa mundi,” as Zygmunt Bauman eloquently puts it, explaining the spirit of modernity [Bauman 2000]). In 1926, the Soviet Government announced all lands and islands in the Arctic Ocean between 32°4'35"E and 168°49'30"W and up to the North Pole to be Soviet territory. In 1932, a special ministry was established for the Northern Sea Route (Sevmorput’), and in the same year, the Soviet polar explorer Otto Solmutid was the first to traverse it by an icebreaker in one season (in 65 days). In 1937, the Soviet pilots Valery Chkalov and Mikhail Gromov were the first to fly over the North Pole from Moscow to the United States, and the first Soviet drifting ice stations were established.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Arctic ports of Igarka, Dikson, Pevek, and Tiksi were built, as well as the cities of Norilsk and Vorkuta, built around the nickel and coal mines, while hundreds of labor camps were established in the Kolyma River basin around the gold mines. In the Stalin period, most of the Arctic development was done by the slave labor of millions of GULAG prisoners, working in gruesome conditions, dying of cold, famine, and exhaustion. In the 1960s and 1970s, a large-scale oil and gas exploration and development started, with the biggest oil fields of Urengoy discovered in 1966 and Yambug in 1969. Likewise, a large military infrastructure was built during the Cold War, including submarine bases, airfields, and radar stations to provide a strategic balance with the United States.

However, the latter years of the USSR, and especially the post-Soviet period, have seen a dramatic decline in the significance and scope of Arctic development. In fact, after the end of the Cold War and of the strategic Soviet-American standoff in the Arctic, the region started losing its military and strategic significance, which resulted in a drastic cut in funding and support for the Arctic infrastructure in Russia. Military installations and mining facilities were abandoned, towns and villages were decaying, and, by the turn of the twenty-first century, the Russian Arctic has turned into a giant frozen monument of failed Soviet attempts at modernization. As Clifford Gaddy and Fiona Hill have shown in their book The Siberian Curse: How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold, over the course of the twentieth century, Russia’s temperature per capita (TPC, a population-weighted measure of mean January temperatures) has dropped to the lowest in the world, since millions of people and hundreds of industrial facilities were (mostly forcefully) moved into Siberia and the Arctic in a perverse version of “manifest destiny.” Today, the authors argue, tens of millions of people and thousands of large-scale industrial enterprises languish in the cold and distant places that Communist planners put them — not where market forces or free choice would have placed them. As a result, the country is burdened by ever-increasing costs of subsidizing economic activity in some of the most forbidding places on the planet (Hill and Gaddy 2003).

Territorial claims

An upsurge in interest in the Russian Arctic has occurred in the new millennium, in the presidency of Vladimir Putin. This time, it is not about geographic discoveries.
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and expanding the realm of the crown, as was the case in the imperial period, nor is it the Soviet modernist zeal of inhabiting and cultivating a barren land. This time, it is about Russia “standing up from its knees,” the restoration of great power status — derzhavnost' (Roi 2010: 558), and coping with an overwhelming post-imperial resentment (Medvedev 2014). Putin’s revisionist project is about re-playing the end of the Cold War and healing the wounds of the Soviet breakup (which he regards as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century” [Putin 2005]), and re-establishing Russia’s geopolitical greatness lost in the woes of transition in the 1990s. The entire Russian foreign and security policy of the past 15 years should be seen in this light, from the early attempts at allying with the West following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, to accusations of the West of fueling the anti-Russian “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine and other post-Soviet states in 2004–05, to the hard-line Munich speech by Vladimir Putin in 2007 (Putin 2007), the war in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the proxy war in East Ukraine in 2014–15, and, lastly, to the Russian engagement in the civil war in Syria in 2015–16.

It is in this lineup of post-imperial strategies and maneuvers that Russia’s Arctic policy should be interpreted. The Kremlin sees the Arctic as a key arena for brandishing its great power status (Geber 2015). As Marlene Laruelle has observed, Moscow’s narrative for domestic public audiences implies a more aggressive role for Russia in the Arctic, while the narrative for international audiences positions the Kremlin as an actor on par with other great powers, and open to cooperation (Laruelle 2014:3).

Russia issued a comprehensive Arctic strategy in September 2008 under then-president Dmitri Medvedev (Rossiiskaya gazeta 2009). Since then, several other relevant strategy documents have been published, which further confirm Moscow’s prioritization of the region. Foremost among them is the National Security Strategy (2009), which emphasizes energy resources as an important political factor, affecting Russia’s status in the international arena (Security Council 2009), and the February 2013 “Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone up to 2020,” which outlines a vision for the development of these resources (Government of Russia 2013). As put in the National Security Strategy (2009), “In the long term, the attention of international politics will be focused on ownership of energy resources, including in . . . the Barents Sea shelf and other parts of the Arctic.” Finally, in December 2014, the Kremlin released a revised military doctrine, which tasked its armed forces with “ensuring the national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic” (Rossiiskaya gazeta 2009), the Kremlin’s links between the Arctic, energy, and security seem clear (Geber 2015).

The key to Russia’s new Arctic strategy is the legal claim concerning demarcation of exclusive economic zone boundaries, the delimitation of the continental shelf, and vessel transit in the Arctic. Moscow’s claim, submitted in 2001 and revised in August 2015, includes the Lomonosov and Mendeleev Ridges, which run toward the North Pole, the Sea of Okhotsk, and parts of the Barents and Bering Seas — roughly 1.2 million square kilometers (Cohen 2011:7). Citing lack of sufficient data, the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UN CLCS) rejected the claim. Since then, Russia has prioritized gathering academic and scientific evidence to support its claims to both an extended EEZ in the Arctic Ocean and the Northern Sea Route (Carlsson and Granholm 2013). Currently, Russia’s claims to an extended EEZ overlap with claims made by Denmark and Canada, meaning that for certain claims — the Lomonosov/Mendeleev Ridge claim in particular — resolution may be many years away.

Russia recently scored its first major victory on an extension of its EEZ in the Sea of Okhotsk, off Russia’s southeastern coast. In March 2014, the UN CLCS adopted Russia’s claim to the 52,000-square-kilometer sea north of Japan (United Nations 2014) which Russian authorities described as “a real Ali Baba’s cave” (Zakharchenko 2014). Although not officially part of the Arctic (the Sea of Okhotsk falls just below the official Arctic administrative boundary), the recognition is likely to boost Russia’s efforts in support of its Arctic claims.

The reasons for Russia’s claim are manifold. First, Russia views the Arctic as a potential resource base for the twenty-first century. It is intent on developing new oil fields on the continental shelf, and the Prirazlomnaya oil platform targeted by Greenpeace in 2013 was supposed to be a showcase. Second, as global warming proceeds and the Arctic ice melts, there are serious hopes in Russia to develop the Northern Sea Route (Sevmorput*) as an alternative shipping route between East Asia and Europe, cutting the traditional route through the Suez by almost two weeks. Third, largely promoted by top security officials like Secretary Nikolai Patrushev of the Security Council of Russia (Patrushev 2013) and Chief Alexander Bortnikov of the FSB, there is a strong belief in the Russian leadership that the Arctic will be stage of a major competition for resources and a site of terrorist attacks (Bortnikov 2015), hence the idea of increasing the Russian military presence in the Arctic, building new military bases, and preparing to deploy the newly created Arctic Brigade to any desolate shore in the Northern Seas. By 2018, new military bases will be built on Cape Schmidt, in East Chukotka, and on the Kuril Islands, to support the already-existing base on the island of Kotelnuy, whereas the military contingent on the archipelago of Novaya Zemlya will be doubled (Pronedra 2015). All these installations will form the infrastructure of the future Arctic Group of Forces. Meanwhile, a revised Maritime Doctrine that Putin approved in July 2015 places heavy emphasis on protecting Russia’s interests in the Arctic (Office of the President 2015).

Underlying these three interests is a fourth, and probably the major, one – Russia’s Arctic policy as a symbolic resource, supporting the territorial ambition of a resurgent Russian power, challenging the United States on the Arctic Front, flexing its military muscle, and putting Russia back on the “Grand Chessboard” of geopolitics.
Conclusion: simulating sovereignty

By the late 2015, Moscow’s plans for the Arctic were largely rebuffed, as aptly observed by the Arctic security analyst Pavel Baev (Baev 2015). First came the setback from the oil sector. The double blow of US and EU sanctions, imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea and war in Ukraine, and lower oil prices mean that Russia now has neither the technology or know-how for Arctic oil drilling, nor the economic rationale — at the current (and supposedly long-term) price level of around $50 per barrel, oil production in the Arctic is unprofitable. In a symbolic move, in late September 2015, Royal Dutch Shell announced its withdrawal from the Arctic projects, following a similar move by Exxon Mobil, Chevron, and BP (BBC 2015b). Russian oil companies are left alone in the Arctic, with little available credit, no technology, and dim economic prospects.

Likewise, the Northern Sea Route has also turned out to be commercially unviable (Inozemtsev 2011). The problem is that the old Soviet infrastructure along the Severnoprut’ is so obsolete that navigation in the difficult northern waters remains too risky. Egypt, in the meantime, has swiftly constructed the New Suez Canal, which offers a far more reliable route for tanker and container traffic (Economist 2015). Finally, as mentioned above, the Russian claim for expansion of its continental shelf, revised and re-submitted on August 3, 2015, faces an overlapping claim from Denmark, and Canada is finalizing its own, while the UN CLCS cannot make a recommendation on the competing claims unless all parties agree on a compromise.

This leaves Russia with the sole rationale — or rather, instinct — for its Arctic diplomatic offensive and show of military force: this is a purely symbolic activity, promoting patriotism at home and Great Power appearances abroad. Once again, as so often in the past, the Arctic appears as an empty space for a symbolic exercise of sovereignty.

From a constructivist perspective, state sovereignty is not a given, but a discursive practice. In her seminal work Simulating Sovereignty, Cynthia Weber noted that sovereignty marks not the location of the foundational entity of international relations, theory, but the site of a political struggle. This struggle is the struggle to fix the meaning of sovereignty in such a way as to constitute a particular state — to write the state — with particular boundaries, competencies and legitimacies available to it. (Weber 1995:3)

The Arctic for Russia has been this site of “writing” the Russian state on the discursive and geographical maps, a locus of identity construction and territorialization of a national myth. Evoking the Arctic as a figure of speech positions the speaker in a heroic and security-oriented domain, employing the myths of sacrifice and national greatness. Russia’s leadership, in its imperial restoration project, skillfully utilizes this traditional rhetorical figure for national consolidation and power projection, for writing and representing Russia’s sovereignty. As once noted by Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister Dmitrii Rogozin, “If Russia did not protect its interests in the Arctic, it would lose its sovereignty and independence” (RBK, 2012).

However, Cynthia Weber raises a follow-up question. It is no longer sufficient to ask, “How is sovereignty represented?” International relations scholars must move on to another question: “How is sovereignty simulated?” (Weber 1995: 9). Using the terms of Jean Baudrillard, she goes on to examine the “simulations of sovereignty” by the United States in its invasions in Panama and Grenada. Likewise, we can trace simulations of sovereignty by Vladimir Putin in his actions in Ukraine and Syria, trying to bolster national sovereignty through symbolic interventions (a proxy war in Ukraine in which Russian involvement was never officially acknowledged by Moscow, and a hi-tech sanitized air war in Syria, much like Baudrillard’s Gulf War that “never took place” [Baudrillard 2012]).

Russia’s rhetorical expansion in the Arctic is yet another “simulation of sovereignty,” a symbolic exercise in diplomatic activity, territorial claims, and a military buildup to fend off a non-existent enemy, except a few dozen Greenpeace activists. Once again, the “fight for the Arctic” turns out to be an empty signifier without the signified, a discursive decoy, yet another “Potemkin village” for which Russia is so famous.

References


