



# Russian Strategic Intentions

A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper

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**Chapter 15: Mr. Pavel Devyatkin** writes that Russia's activities in the Arctic have included more multilateral cooperation, and have been focused on securing access for northern shipping routes and energy extraction. The formation of the Arctic Council between Russia and other Arctic countries has enabled cooperation on resolution of territorial claims, as well as oil spill and search-and-rescue operations. Strategically, the Arctic region plays a significant role in Russia's energy, economic, and defense priorities, as evidenced by the size and activities of the Northern Fleet, as well as frequent mention in Russian published doctrine.

## Chapter 15. Russia and the Arctic

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### Abstract

Russia has important socio-economic and security interests in the Arctic. This paper analyzes Russia's interests and recent activities in the region. It is argued that Russia's Arctic strategy is generally oriented towards expanding upon domestic economic projects (e.g. energy and shipping), working with Arctic states towards circumpolar cooperation, and using the military to secure their interests. Russia's actions are consistent with their official interests and objectives, and are pragmatic considering the region's economic and strategic significance.

### Russian Interests and Objectives in the Arctic

The Russian Federation's strategy in the Arctic is a contested topic in academia, media, and policymaking. Russia is often portrayed as the foremost instigator of conflict in the region. It is true that the Russian government has declared that all activity in the Arctic should be tied to the interests of "defense and security to the maximum degree" (President of the Russian Federation, 2001). However, Russia's policies are generally more focused on domestic security and economic projects rather than outward expansion.

When analysts talk of the "scramble for the Arctic" and Russia's "plan to dominate the Arctic," we risk the emergence of a security dilemma (Hosa, 2018; Peck, 2018). A 2013 Department of Defense report warned, "There is some risk that the perception that the Arctic is being militarized may lead to an arms race mentality" (United States Department of Defense, 2013). The portrayal of Russia as a threatening rival in the Arctic distorts our understanding of the Kremlin's strategy in the region.

US-Russia tensions in other regions of the world have contributed to suspicion surrounding Russia's activities in the freezing and faraway North. However, over the past two decades, Russia has been a cooperative actor in Arctic governance and has focused on domestic development issues. Russia's dependence on natural resources and the degradation of Soviet-era infrastructure have made Russia increasingly oriented towards remedying its internal issues in the Russian controlled Arctic region. By partnering with foreign actors in economic projects, Russia is also partially internationalizing its energy extraction, natural resources, and maritime shipping.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Arctic has been an exemplar of constructive interstate diplomacy. Perhaps the greatest example of circumpolar cooperation is the Arctic Council (AC), an intergovernmental forum that acts by consensus between the eight Arctic states – the US, Russia, Canada, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland. Although the AC does not discuss military and security issues, it has successfully enabled the negotiation of legally binding agreements on

search and rescue (SAR) operations and oil-spill response, as well as the resolution of competing territorial claims between Russia and Norway in the Barents Sea.

Moscow also has an interest in maintaining a comprehensive sea, air and land presence in the Russian Arctic. After close examination of Russia's military and security policies in the Arctic, it is reasonable to say that Russia seeks to defend its sovereign interests in a region that has been of strategic and cultural importance to Russia for centuries. The mythical status of the Arctic has been significant throughout Russian history. The northward expansions of Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great were fundamental to the growth of the Russian Empire. The faraway northern regions were also the settings for the brutal gulag camps under Stalin.

### State Development Policy

Russia's official Arctic strategy and interests are best understood by examining the government publications put forward by the various bodies of the Russian state. In September 2008, the *Foundations of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period Until 2020 and Beyond* was adopted by then President Dmitry Medvedev. The document presents the Russian Federation's national interests and basic objectives for state policy in the Arctic region. Russia's objectives can be summarized as follows:

- to actively work with Arctic states on the basis of international law,
- to create a standardized SAR system to prevent accidents such as drowning and oil spills,
- to strengthen Russia's relationships with multilateral forums such as the AC,
- to effectively manage the Northern Sea Route maritime shipping lanes,
- to improve state management of economic development,
- to support scientific research,
- to improve the quality of life of indigenous peoples, and
- to develop the Arctic's natural resource base.

Russia's interests in the Arctic are evidently complex but generally oriented towards internal economic and social development, along with international cooperation through existing legal and multilateral regimes. In 2013, President Putin approved the *Development Strategy of the Russian Arctic and the Provision of National Security for the Period Until 2020*. The strategy, a revision of the 2008 document, provides a more comprehensive description of Russia's objectives, priorities, and means of implementation. The document mentions economic and environmental priorities more often than it discusses defense aims. Further objectives include "developing the Russian icebreaker fleet, modernizing the air service and airport network, and establishing modern information and telecommunication infrastructure" (President of the Russian Federation, 2013). Throughout the strategy document, these measures are tied to economic interests. For example, surveillance of the

Russian Arctic's maritime areas is necessary since the region's harsh climate hinders economic development, without an adequate monitoring system.

### Security Interests

Russian military presence in the Arctic has three goals: to protect national sovereignty in the region, to secure economic interests, and to demonstrate that Russia remains a great power with first-rate military capabilities (Heininen, Sergunin & Yarovoy, 2014). In contrast to the Soviet era, when the state's military posturing was oriented towards confrontation, the contemporary Russian military in the Arctic is not focused on parity with NATO. These themes can too be found in the following government documents.

The *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* states that the Arctic is a region where Russia must "promote peace, stability and constructive international cooperation." Russia also proclaims that the state will "be firm in countering any attempts to introduce elements of political or military confrontation in the Arctic." The *National Security Strategy to 2020* (NSS) outlines Russia's position that the "development of equal and mutually beneficial international cooperation in the Arctic" must be prioritized.

The *Development Strategy of the Russian Arctic* and NSS contain a much less assertive tone compared to the documents' earlier versions (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, 2009; President of the Russian Federation, 2008). The newer Arctic strategy papers focus on combating socio-economic issues such as "smuggling, terrorism, and illegal immigration" instead of balancing military power with other states. The 2008 and 2013 editions of the *Development Strategy* do not mention the military activities of other nations.

Russia's Ministry of Defense has consistently called for the development of Russian military facilities in the Arctic to meet "emerging threats" (Fomichev, 2015). The 2014 *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation* declares that armed forces must be present in the Russian Arctic to secure national interests even during peacetime. However, the document calls for a general military renovation to replace old icebreakers and other decrepit units.

### Energy and Natural Resource Interests

The 2013 Development Policy highlights Russia's interest in expanding large-scale economic projects involving energy extraction. One of Russia's main priorities is to satisfy Russia's need for "hydrocarbon resources, water bio-resources and other types of strategic raw materials." The document characterizes the Arctic as a major source of natural resources (President of the Russian Federation, 2013).

Two thirds of all Russian oil and gas is estimated to be found in Russia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Arctic (Claes & Moe, 2014). As much as twenty percent of Russia's gross domestic product (GDP) is generated within Russian territories in the Arctic (Laruelle, 2014). Accordingly, exploitation of the Arctic's resources is considered essential for Russia's social and economic development. Former President Medvedev declared that the state's "first and main task is to turn the Arctic into a resource base for Russia" (Klare, 2013).

In the *Energy Strategy for Russia up to 2030*, the Arctic is described as a key region for increasing “geological exploration, private investments, and state participation in the development of new territories and waters.” This document also proclaims the Russian state’s hopes to enhance Russian energy companies’ positions abroad and provide an environment for efficient international cooperation for sophisticated energy projects in the Arctic.

### Maritime Shipping Interests

The fading sea ice in the Arctic has led analysts and policymakers to herald the development of a new maritime shipping lane, the Northern Sea Route (NSR). The route may become a shorter lane for shipping between the major ports of East Asia and Western Europe. The NSR is within Russia’s EEZ, meaning that Russia has jurisdiction over the route. As a result, the NSR receives great attention in the *Development Strategy* and *Transport Strategy of the Russian Federation up to 2030*. Russia aims to develop the NSR by commissioning nuclear icebreakers, improving the ports along the lane and creating a monitoring system. Furthermore, it is a high priority for Russia to build an effective border control service to monitor the route and enforce regulations.

Moscow also has a partial interest in internationalizing access to the NSR, but is so far oriented toward regulating the route for national economic development. For instance, recent legislation excluded foreign vessels from transporting Russian natural resources along the NSR (TASS, 2017). However, the caution of allowing foreign ships into the Russian EEZ is understandable considering its location on Russia’s northern border.

Admiral Robert Papp, the State Department’s Special Representative to the Arctic under President Obama, stated, “Russia is doing those things we would be doing ourselves if there was an increase in traffic above our coast” (Jopson & Milne, 2015). A large component of Russia’s military in the Arctic has been designated to secure the NSR. The Ministry of Defense has prioritized security measures to combat oil and waste spills, smuggling, poaching, and to provide SAR services necessary in the high seas.

### Recent Russian Actions, Short of Armed Conflict, in the Arctic

Russia’s actions in the Arctic demonstrate a commitment to realizing their economic, security, and developmental objectives. Russia has partially focused on offshore drilling, mineral extraction and maritime shipping. On the other hand, Moscow is acting defensively during a time of heightened tensions with neighboring countries and as a result, is building its security in the region. The Kremlin is committed to confronting any emerging threats to its Arctic territory, maritime transport ventures and energy projects. Russia has opened or reopened military facilities, conducted military drills, and maintained a comprehensive armed presence. Russia’s security interests can be described as realist and pragmatic. Russia aims to maintain control over the region while at the same time cooperating with other Arctic states’ through military drills and SAR operations.

## Security Activities

Russia's security actions in the Arctic reflect a commitment to upholding national sovereignty, securing ongoing economic interests, and asserting Russia as a first-class military power in the twenty-first century. Since the 2007 polar expedition when Russian scientists planted their flag on the North Pole's seabed, many Western journalists and politicians have cast Russian actions in the Arctic as expansionist, aggressive and threatening. Popular perceptions of Russia's Arctic actions have also turned negative after the Ukrainian Crisis.

It was expected in the wake of the crisis that the Kremlin would ramp up and accelerate its military activities in the Far North. However, there was no paradigmatic shift of Moscow's vision of the military's role in the Arctic. Russian military activities in the Arctic remain comparable to those of other Arctic states protecting their sovereignty and economic interests (Sergunin & Konyshchev, 2015). Although Russia's military projection in the Arctic is mostly aerial and naval, there are garrisons of Russian ground troops and security services throughout the Russian Arctic.

The Northern Fleet is perhaps the most important aspect of the Russian military in the region. Since the 1950s, it has had the greatest number of icebreakers and submarines of the Soviet/Russian naval fleets. Several ships are under construction due to need for coastal ships to conduct rapid operations, but they have been afflicted by delays. Alarmist media and politicians declare that Russia is dramatically increasing its naval presence. In reality, Russia has fewer naval units in the Arctic than the Soviet Union had during the 1980s. Russia is rebuilding its navy after a virtual absence during the nineties (Heininen, Sergunin & Yarovoy, 2014).

Russia's only aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, is part of the Northern Fleet. It hosts twenty fighter jets and ten helicopters. In addition, the recently repaired destroyer, the *Vice-Admiral Kulakov*, was introduced into the Northern Fleet in 2011. Naval aviation includes 200 combat aircraft and fifty helicopters (Lasserre & Tetu, 2016).

The Northern Fleet includes around forty surface ships and forty submarines, most of which are rundown Cold War era units. The sea-based nuclear deterrence capability makes the Northern Fleet a fundamental part of Russia's military. Consequently, Russia has since 2007 expanded naval patrols near Norwegian and Danish territories, increased the operational radius of the Fleet's submarines, and commenced below-ice training for submarines (Klimenko, 2016). However, Russian submarines are in the process of re-equipping and modernizing rather than striving for superiority or parity. The Russian navy aims to deploy new ballistic missile nuclear submarines (SSBNs) but they cannot compare to US conventional-strike capabilities. US Atlantic naval presence vastly outnumbers the Russian Arctic presence (English & Thvedt, 2018).

In 2007, Russian strategic bombers started flying over the Arctic for the first time since the end of the Cold War. These flights are criticized by journalists, but authoritative military experts recognize that the resumption of bomber flights is more about the Kremlin's desire to not lose capacity and for domestic approval rather than outward aggression (Lasserre & Tetu, 2016). Close encounters between NATO and Russian fighter and bomber pilots in the air above the Arctic have drawn media criticism, but NATO officials say these practices are "perfectly legal" and "welcome" (Posey, 2016). Russia does not have any fifth-generation fighters deployed at all nor an advanced airborne warning



system that can compare to the US' multiple F-22 and F-35 squadrons in Alaska and unmatched airborne warning system (English & Thvedt, 2018).

Russia has a large fleet of icebreaking vessels, but they are for escorting commercial shipping and supplying research stations and remote communities. They have minimal military utility and serve a similar purpose as the US icebreakers do in supporting the Coast Guard. The Russian Arctic border guard was established in 1994 to monitor ships and illegal fishing. Nowadays, this force implements the 2011 Arctic Council agreement on the maintenance of a Maritime and Aeronautical SAR System.

These measures can be interpreted as "soft security" actions that do not sway the regional military balance, but instead focus on monitoring. The Russian Coast Guard concentrates on monitoring shipping, fishing, and extraction in the Arctic waters, conducting SAR operations, as well as protecting against oil and waste pollution. This is in line with the activities of other Arctic states' coast guards. The coast guards of the eight Arctic states established the Arctic Coast Guard Forum in 2015. The forum was established for the coast guards to combine emergency response operations in the northern seas (Grant, 2017).

After the end of the Cold War, the regional military presence severely deteriorated and is now in need of modernization. Given the economic and strategic significance of the region, it is understandable that Russia aims to build its military forces in the region to meet emerging dangers and security issues. Furthermore, Russian military practices should not be cast as a threat since their capabilities are not comparable to US superior military presence.

### Economic Activities

The Arctic has long been a significant source of energy and resources for Russia. During the Soviet era, the coal, minerals, and oil of the Far North played key roles in the nation's industrialization. Currently, there are a number of hydrocarbon companies operating in the Arctic. Sanctions on Russian oil and gas executives, low oil prices, and the difficulties of extraction in the hostile environment have been obstacles to Russia procuring the benefits of its Arctic resources. Despite these challenges, Russia has made efforts to develop its Arctic energy projects as well as collaborate with foreign partners, since unilateral extraction can be expensive and complicated.

In 2018, Russia's Minister of Natural Resources Dmitry Kobylkin announced a major five year plan to invest in infrastructure and resource development. For the period until 2024, the sum of \$83 million will cover investments in railways, sea ports, and hydrocarbon and coal fields. This sum is comparable to what the Russian government invests in healthcare and education combined (Staalesen, 2018). Offshore commercial production is only underway at the Prirazlomnoye field. This field was discovered in the Pechora Sea in 1989. It is estimated to hold 70 million tons of oil. Oil production operations at Prirazlomnoye began in 2013 under the license of Gazprom. It is the only Russian hydrocarbon production project being implemented on the Arctic shelf because of a 2008 ban prohibiting private companies from access to offshore fields (Gazprom 2019).

Yamal LNG (liquefied natural gas) is another significant energy project in Russia's North. Launched in 2013, Yamal LNG is one of the largest and most complex LNG projects in the world. It is a joint venture between Russia's largest independent gas company Novatek, French gas company Total, the

China National Petroleum Corporation, and the Chinese Silk Road Fund. Largely due to Western sanctions and Russian countersanctions, Russia has pivoted eastwards and fostered relationships with Asian countries, especially China. As a heavily industrialized country, China has a growing interest in securing their energy supply, and is looking to the Arctic for hydrocarbons and minerals.

Yamal LNG is pivotal to the maritime economy of the Arctic as it is one of the major sources of cargo from the Arctic to China. In 2018, icebreaking LNG carriers made landmark voyages across the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Novatek has used the NSR since 2010, but 2018 marked the first time it has sent an LNG carrier from Yamal to China and to Northern Europe (G-Captain, 2018). This marks a new period for the gas industry and economic growth for Russia's northern regions. Novatek plans to build a second LNG project called Arctic LNG-2. It is set to be completed by 2023. Saudi Arabia is also set to invest \$5 billion in Novatek's future LNG project. The combined LNG projects are predicted to rival the world's leader Qatar in gas production (Daiss, 2018).

In May 2018, President Putin set an ambitious target for the NSR. Putin announced that shipping on the NSR should reach 80 million tons by 2024. This is a stark increase from the Russian Ministry of Natural Resources' initial estimate of 72 million tons by 2030 (Staalesen, 2018). These objectives are not impossible since the Yamal LNG project accounts for shipping millions of tons of LNG. Putin's announcement was part of a collection of government objectives that aim to reduce national poverty and eventually make Russia into one of the world's five biggest economies. To support this objective, it was announced in November 2018 that Russia will invest over \$4 billion to build an Arctic port along the NSR (TASS, 2018).

There are also ongoing projects for the extraction of natural resources such as palladium, gold, nickel, and platinum in the Murmansk region. In 2018, Russia unveiled the first sea-based floating nuclear power plant. The 21,000 ton station is scheduled to be towed to the Arctic in the summer of 2019. Greenpeace has nicknamed it "floating Chernobyl" (Wootson, 2018). Russian ambitions for the maritime economy are ambitious and it shows in the breadth of collaborations and investments.

To conclude, Russian interests and activities in the Arctic are generally oriented towards achieving domestic economic and social development. Russia's major economic ambitions involve energy extraction and maritime shipping. Considering these projects' economic significance and the geographical location of the Arctic, Russia has a military interest to secure this region. Russia is adamant about securing its territory as well as asserting its sovereignty.

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