

The Arctic Icebreaker: Russia's Security Policy in the Far North



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SOURCE: INTERFAX.RU

- Whilst the Arctic is a geographical zone that could be labelled as “*an area of potential competition between global superpowers*”, this alone does not provide full insight into what is really taking place there. One could notice that solely Russia sees it as a key priority while comparing potentials of some of the region’s players, as well as the Arctic’s place on their respective political agendas.
- Hence, in the Arctic, it is actually something more like a “one-man performance”, especially if any security-related issues are on the table – considering that authentic competition occurs only when a few actors, thus participants that boast somewhat comparable potentials, carry out mutually intertwined activities.
- Russian ambitions by no means arise from the country’s geographical preconditions. At stake are robust social, historical, and cultural factors that have for decades made Russia’s strategic culture orbital around having a dominant place in the Arctic. Whether it be in the Soviet Union or in present-day Russia, anything referring to the Arctic - like the nation’s coming to terms with the region, exploiting its resources or building infrastructure – has morphed into a vital component of social and political consensus. For decades, the Arctic served as a background for the Soviet-NATO rivalry. Today, Moscow’s matchup against the West has yet again surged as one of the driving forces for Russian politics, building up the Arctic’s importance for the Kremlin to an even larger extent than ever before. The term “ice curtain” was even coined to describe the phenomenon.

- In recent years, China and the United States have begun to place increasing importance on the Arctic, finally acknowledging its vitality. Washington is wary of Russian activities in the Arctic as it lies just off North America while notching up its past negligence of not drawing the region into the list of priority of US foreign policy. Beijing, in turn, knows that it comes as an attractive partner for Russia – the partner that boasts enough potential to go ahead with massive energy and resource-related deals. Thus, what adds to the very *raison d’être* of the Northern Sea Route is the shipping of raw materials to China. On the flip side, Moscow cannot scorn any concerns over China’s burgeoning role in the region. Anything that Beijing does would be a driving force for Moscow’s feats as well.
- For the time being, it is challenging to forecast the plausible and noticeable impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on how events in the Arctic could unfold. Yet both the pandemic and the global recession are likely to serve as a catalyst for any changes to occur around the globe. This would be tantamount to a further increase in Russia’s involvement in the Arctic alongside an urging need to come up with a new model for policy towards China as it is becoming worryingly mightier as ever. Such a scenario is equivalent to Russia’s military build-up in the Arctic – a region that is yet again emerging as a notable factor in the country’s role worldwide.

INTRODUCTION

Launched back in 1972, the nuclear-powered icebreaker ‘*Arktika*’ grew into a symbol of Russian presence throughout the Arctic. In 1977, she became the first surface vessel to reach the North Pole to mark the 60th anniversary of the October Revolution – while allowing the Soviet Union to flex its muscles in the Far North. The *Arktika*’s operational lifetime ended in 2008. However, history came full circle with Russia’s most powerful nuclear-powered vessels – in 2016, Russia commissioned a new nuclear ice-breaking ship at the Baltic Shipyard in Saint Petersburg – but named after the earlier vessel. The original *Arktika* vessel sought to seal the Soviet interest in the Arctic and serve somewhat as proof of Moscow’s serious intentions. The country’s brand-new ship, alongside similar-class ice-breaking vessels Russia is now building, is deemed to perform an akin role of the one in the

past – demonstrate Moscow’s might in the Arctic. Yet Russia’s newest and most powerful nuclear icebreaker suffered from damages – which is why Rosatom, Russia’s state-run nuclear power company, has not placed the ship into service¹.

Over the past few years, the Arctic has increasingly been regarded as a new area of both cooperation and competition, notably between Russia and the United States. As it turns out, these spheres where Washington and Moscow ensure cooperative links, including ecology, combatting climate change, maritime rescue service, or research, intertwine with where one is facing competition from another – like access to raw materials, including energy resources – or even rivalry in security policy. Retired US Navy Admiral James Stavridis has labelled the Arctic as an area full of promises and perils². Rivalry in the

1. Vedeneeva A., Usov I.; „Teriajet moszcznost <Arktika>”, Kommersant, February 19, 2020

2. Stavridis, J.; 2017; Sea Power. The History and Geopolitics of the World’s Oceans; Penguin, NY, pp. 237 - 249

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Arctic³ is widely discussed by both Western and Russian⁴ scholars, though the latter focus on Moscow's defensive security policy that is restrained to the country's response to heightened threats. In this text, the author focuses first and foremost on the area of security, while briefly discussing others – yet with no intention of neglecting any remaining issues, but to refer to them insofar as they touch upon any issues that hold a reference to security policies.

The main thesis of this paper is that the Arctic rivalry is somewhat an inaccurate and misleading concept. In the area of security policy, there does indeed seem to be a sole player that acts as the screenwriter, director, and leading actor. This is Russia. How Russia eyes security matters in the Arctic – and this materializes through the country's military build-up – comes as a synergy of two groups of factors. The first group encompasses some domestic components that are linked to a peculiar place of the Arctic in the Russian political understanding.

These trace back to the 18th century, amid Peter the Great's sweeping reforms aimed at modernizing Russia. Yet this particularity evolved over decades and centuries, it retained its very essence to this day. The first determinant is the very image of the Far North – with the sea as such – as where the state could exhibit its might. While deeply anchored in Russia's eighteen-century political thought, this concept has by no means faded over time. The second factor is the Soviet legacy that today serves as a rich source of inspiration for Russia's top officials, like is the case with the Arctic. The second group encompasses a range of international factors, with the United States, or Russia's chief competitor – and its activity in the Arctic – or its lack thereof. A new albeit still mighty player is China, whose footprint in the Arctic intrinsically affects Moscow's political calculus.

A more thorough insight into these factors is provided below – while its analysis will attest to Russia's security-related loneliness across the Arctic. Firmly grounded at the internal political level, the country's dominance is likely to manifest itself through a slew of unilateral actions that might pose tough challenges from the West's point of view – as time goes by and favourable circumstance emerge.



SOURCE: IZ.RU

RUSSIAN MILITARY ACTIVITY IN THE ARCTIC

The 21st century has brought an apparent hike in Russian interest in the Arctic – where Moscow can flex its military muscles. The need to intensify efforts to strengthen Russian military capabilities in the Arctic found their reflection in the country's key papers on foreign and defence policy. In general, Moscow's Arctic overtures orbited around the chief axis that encapsulated the urge to shield Russia's core security interests through a military infrastructure build-up in the Arctic, and its right to exploit natural resources there. These overlap one with another, especially if to take into account the international context. In Paragraph 13 of Russia's National Security Strategy, signed into law on 31 December, 2015, the Arctic was referred to as an area of struggle between countries that seek to acquire particular significance in the race to gain access to its resources⁵. In May 2015, Russia passed an updated maritime doctrine that put a focus on reinforced

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3. E.g. Staun, J.; 2015; "Russia's Strategy in the Arctic"; Report of Royal Danish Defense College; available at https://pure.fak.dk/ws/files/7120599/Russias_Strategy_in_the_Arctic.pdf; Aliyev, N.; 2019; "Russia's Military Capabilities in the Arctic", International Center for Defence and Security; June 25, 2019, available at <https://icds.ee/russias-military-capabilities-in-the-arctic/>; Boulege, M.; 2019; "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic. Managing Hard Power in a 'Low Tension' Environment"; Chatham House Research Paper; June 2019

4. E.g. Khramchikhin A. A.; 2015; "Znachenie Arktiki dla nacionalnoj bezopasnosti Rossii", Arktika i Sever, no. 21/2015, pp. 88-97; Heininen L, Sergunin A., Yarovoy G; "Russian strategies in the Arctic: Avoiding a new Cold War", Valdai Discussion Club, 2014

5. Strategiya Natsionalnoy Bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii; ukaz Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii, December 31, 2015, available at <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391/page/1>

security in the Arctic⁶. Yet last but not least, Russian state officials added the need to develop military infrastructure in the Arctic in *Fundamentals of Russian Federation Policy in the Sphere of Naval Activity* (2017⁷), a paper that reiterated the belligerent policy pursued by both the United States and its allies as these seek to step in the world's major sea waters, including those of the Arctic.

any foundations it lays upon. The whole process encompasses a slew of elements – first, a new reorganisation of the country's armed forces. The Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command was established on 15 December 2014, as a new Russian military district. It consists of the Northern Fleet that has in its stockpile surface vessels and submarines, including the country's biggest nuclear-powered cruiser submarines, alongside its coastal forces – the 45th Air Force and Air Defence Forces. Also, a new unit, officially named the 80th Motorized Rifle Brigade, was formally opened in the town of Alakurti in the Kola Peninsula. Along with the 200th Independent Motor Rifle Brigade, located in Pechenga close to the border to Norway, it will head their military activities toward Norway and Finland. With its new units in the Arctic, Moscow seeks to enhance coordination between its various formations on land, at sea, and in the air⁸. Russia could make use of them mainly in the western Arctic, allowing them to exhibit the country's might through what is labelled as the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap that enables access for the Russian Navy from the Barents Area to the broader Atlantic. A naval choke point allows Russia to severely disrupt vital sea line of communication between North America and Europe.

Secondly, Moscow has an appetite to place new weapons as well as is carrying out a number of⁹ war games. The country's Northern Fleet is the apple of the eye for Russian senior officials. Borei-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, like the Knyaz Vladimir, or Yasen-class attack submarines are now undergoing sea trials. In 2018, the Project 22350 lead frigate Admiral Gorshkov

entered service with the Northern Fleet, while the trials of the same-class Admiral Kasatonov are underway. In 2019, the Admiral Gorshkov vessel made an around-the-globe voyage, covering 35,000 nautical miles while passing through the Suez Canal and the Panama Canal. Northern Fleet warships could be armed with Tsirkon and Kalibr supersonic cruise missiles. The head of the Northern Fleet, Vice-Admiral Alexander Moiseyev, said that the last ones – capable of traveling at speeds of up to Mach 9 – would enter sea trials in Russia's Northern Fleet later this year¹⁰. According to rear admiral Vsevolod Khmyrov, Russia's new hypersonic Tsirkon missiles can pierce any air defence systems or missile shields – whether they be onboard surface or submarine vessels – are able to reach key command targets on US territory in five minutes¹¹. Also, Russia has deployed its S-400 air defence systems to the Novaya Zemlya archipelago. Throughout 2019, as many as 53 Northern Fleet's surface and underwater vessels carried out roughly 190 combat tasks and over 150 test firings, also those of cutting-edge long-range missiles. The Yuri Dolgorukiy nuclear-powered cruise submarine launched the Bulava SLBM that hit its designated target on the Kura missile test range on the Kamchatka peninsula¹². The share of new technology and weaponry dispatched to the Northern Fleet accounts for around 60 percent of its military production, according to Vice-Admiral Alexander Moiseyev¹³. Yet from time to time, the world notes new reports on incidents that tend to occur in Russian military facilities throughout the Arctic. In August 2019, there was a massive explosion and blast at a Russian nuclear testing site near the village of Nyonoksa in the Arkhangelsk region –

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along with heightened radiation levels recorded in the area. Nonetheless, what could be assumed is that works are underway to create new military hardware while the Northern Fleet has a priority in receiving cutting-edge equipment.

Thirdly, Russia is going ahead with new military infrastructure – by both rebuilding old Soviet-time facilities and creating completely new ones on a large scale. US military experts say Moscow is planning to refurbish 50 Soviet-era military posts, including 13 airbases¹⁴. Russia's Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said a few months ago that since 2014 Russia had built a total of 500 military facilities spanning in the Arctic's Koteln Island, Alexandra Land, Wrangel Island, and Cape Schmidt¹⁵. Examples include a base on Koteln Island, the biggest in the New Siberian

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Russia is making consistent efforts to bring its policy papers into life. The big breakthrough came back in 2014 while Moscow's increasingly strained ties with the West added a fresh impetus to the country's military build-up in the Arctic. The Kremlin is pressing on with further attempts, and this is likely to follow in the not-to-distant future – if to take into account the emerging trends in the global order and

6. Morskaya Doktrina Rossiyskoy Federacii, ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federacii, July 26, 2015, available at <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/555631869>

7. Osnovy gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federacii v oblasti voenno-morskoy deyatel'nosti na period do 2030 goda, ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federacii, June 20, 2017, available at <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&firstDoc=1&lastDoc=1&nd=102438738>

8. Learn more about the Northern Fleet's activities between 2018 and 2019 in an extensive interview with Vice-Admiral A. Moiseyev: „Obespechenie bezopasnosti gosudarstva v svoey operacionnoy zone dlya severomorcev – zadacha nomer odin”; Krasnaya zvezda; December 9, 2019, available at: <http://redstar.ru/flot-nadyozhno-zashhishhaet-arktiku/?attempt=1>

9. Read more: Melino M., Conley H.; „The ice curtain. Russia's Arctic military presence”, CSIS, March 26, 2020, available at <https://www.csis.org/features/ice-curtain-russias-arctic-military-presence>

10. Interfax „Siewernyj flot Rossii ispytywajet giperzwukowoje oruzije s podlodok”, March 20, 2020 <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/700046>

11. Za: Mukhin V.; „Zaszczitu Arktiki obespiechat giperzwukowym oruzijem”; Nezawisimaja gazieta; December 1, 2019, available at: http://www.ng.ru/politics/2019-12-01/2_7740_arctic.html

12. Tsygankova S.; „Podlodki sewiernogo flota razszirili geografiju bojewych dezustw”; Russkoje Oruzije; March 16, 2020, available at <https://rg.ru/2020/03/16/reg-szfo/podlodki-severnogo-flota-rasshirili-geografiu-boevyh-dezhurstv.html>

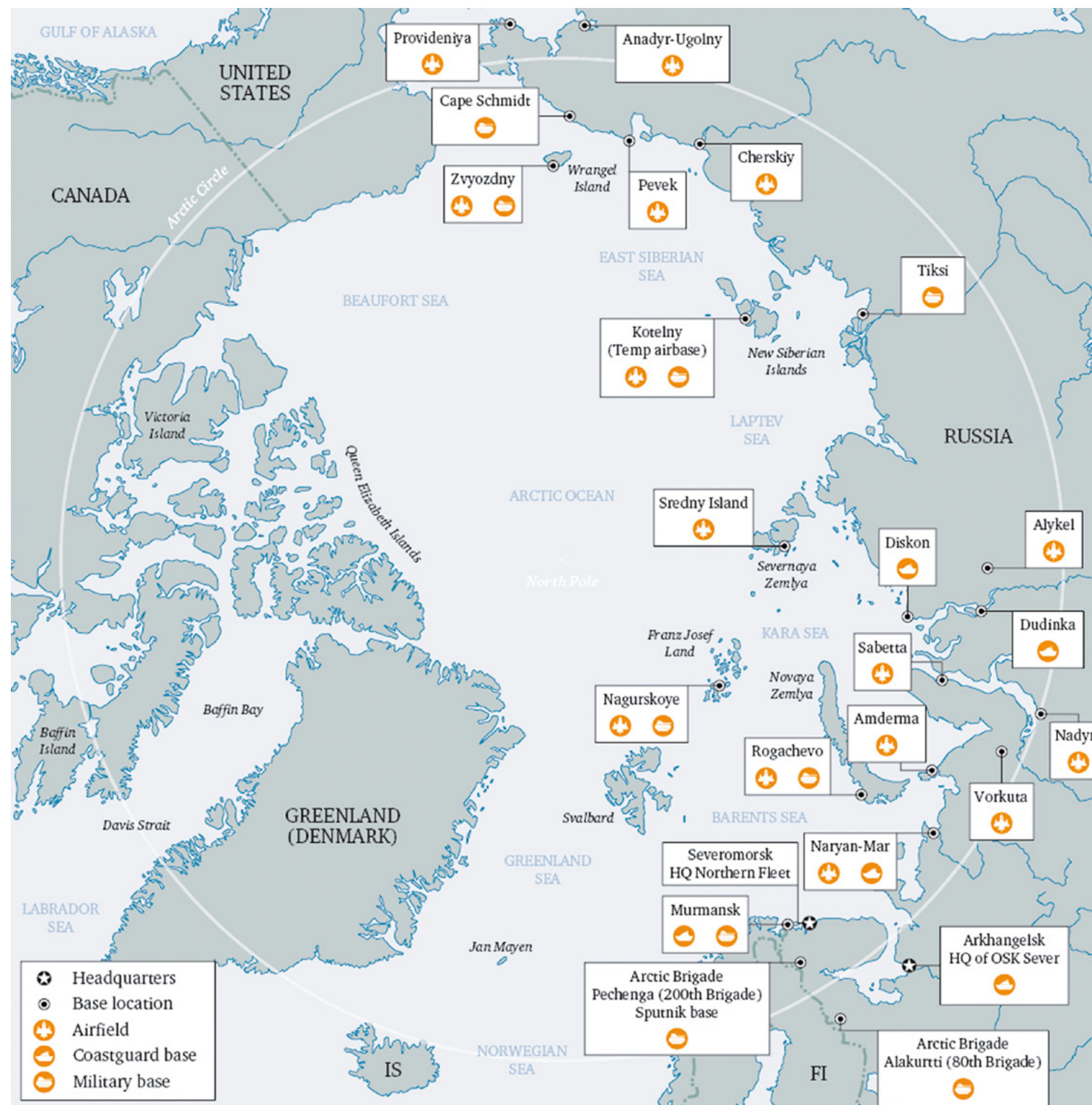
13. Interfax „Sewiernyj flot osnashczionnowoj technikoj i wooruzenijami bolee czem na 60%”; January 5, 2020; <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/northwest/main/severnnyy-flot-osnashchen-novoy-tehnikoy-i-vooruzheniyami-bolee-chem-na-60>

14. Melino M., Conley H.; „The ice curtain. Russia's Arctic military presence”, CSIS, March 26, 2020, available at <https://www.csis.org/features/ice-curtain-russias-arctic-military-presence>

15. Aliyev N.; Op. cit.

Islands archipelago. Dubbed Severny Klever (Northern Clover), it is home to the 99th *Tactic Arctic* Group. It permanently houses up to 250 military personnel as well as the Bastion and Pantsir missile systems¹⁶. Nagurskoye airbase on Alexandra Land, located on¹⁷ the archipelago of Franz Josef Land, will boast a 3,500-metre landing strip allowing any type of Russian aircraft, including the long-range nuclear-tipped Tu-160 bombers, to operate all year round. Worth some 4.2 billion roubles¹⁸, the base now features a fleet of Su-34 aircraft¹⁹. Amderma-2, Russia's third Arctic and Soviet-inherited military facility, is²⁰ located on the southern island of the Novaya Zemlya archipelago. A new military garrison is being built in the village of Tiksi on the coast of the Arctic Ocean. It will house air defence units²¹. These facilities, alongside a slew of others – in the Novaya Zemlya archipelago, the Kola peninsula, and harbors like Dixon and Pevek along the northern shores of Russia – encompass a dense network of bases that allow the country's military to take reins of the Arctic

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SOURCE: BOULEGE M., OP. CIT., P. 16

and give the go-ahead for offensive operations. Although Russia has not yet built some of the military facilities while construction of others is still at an initial stage – like in Tiksi, an airfield in Cape Schmidt in Chukotka or other airports in Wrangel Island²²), the country's existing infrastructure makes it a player that has gained undisputed dominance in the Arctic, both at sea and in the air.

Fourthly, Moscow is unfolding its fleet of nuclear-powered icebreakers that are vital to its efforts to go ahead with operational capabilities both for civilian and military purposes. The first nuclear powered Soviet ship was the icebreaker Lenin – commissioned in 1959. Since then, the Soviet Union and then Russia expanded the fleet of icebreakers in service. Russia today has a total of four nuclear-powered icebreakers in operation: Yamal, 50 Let Pobedy, Taymyr, and Vaigash. A fleet comprises also the nuclear-powered container carrier Sevmorput. The Artika vessel alongside two more Project 22220 icebreakers – the Sibir and the Ural – all belong to a brand-new generation of Russian ice-breaking ships. The world's largest vessels of that kind will have a capability to break through 3-metre thick ice²³. Despite some delays for the Project 22220, Russia's monopoly on icebreaker operations has largely gone unchallenged. Since 2008, Russia's ice-breaking vessels have been managed by Rosatomflot, a subsidiary of Rosatom. These are indispensable for civilian shipping along the Northern Sea Route²⁴. Besides, the fleet has a crucial military significance as ice-breaking ships enable year-round deliveries to the country's newly built facilities farther in the north – and thus these can operate independently from weather conditions. Also, the vessels can carry both goods and cargo loads in a move that facilitates the construction of new military infrastructure in the Far North.

16. Yelkov I., „Czisto klewer”, Rossijskaja gazeta, April 11, 2019, available at <https://rg.ru/2019/04/11/kak-ustroena-baza-minoborony-severnyj-klever-v-arktike.html>

17. See a multimedia presentation on the website of the Russian Defense Ministry: <http://mil.ru/files/files/arctic/Arctic.html>

18. Kramnik I., „Wysokoszrotnoje protivostojanie”, Rossijskij Sowiet Mieżdunarodnych Dieł, January 20, 2020, available at <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/vysokoshirotnoe-protivostojanie/>

19. Stepanov A., „Siewiernyj ottok”, Versia.ru, January 13, 2020, available at: <https://versia.ru/ayerodromy-v-zapolyare-obxodyatsya-v-milliardy-rublej>

20. Also referred to as Rogachevo.

21. See: https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12259265@egNews

22. Conley H., Bermudez J., „Ice Curtain. Tiksi airbase. Many Russian announcements, little equipment”; CSIS' March 26, 2020; <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ice-curtain-tiksi-airbase%E2%80%94many-russian-announcements-little-equipment>

23. See: <http://www.rosatomflot.ru/flot/universalnyy-atomnyy-ledokol-proekta-22220/>

24. Read more: Ruksha V., Smirnov A., Kashka M., Babich N., „Atomnyj ledokolnyj fern of Rossia and prospects of razvitija Severny Morskogo Puti”; Arktika. Ekologia i Ekonomika; No. 1/2011, pp. 52-62



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

THE ARCTIC IN THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING

The Arctic holds a special place in Russian political thinking because it symbolises the country's global might and its significance worldwide. Perhaps like no other, this geographical area comes as Moscow's efforts to harness a perception of the state whose interests and activities reach far beyond – thus globally. The Arctic displays the continuity of Russian interests – regardless of the ideology and form it took in the past – from an array of systematic actions in the late 19th century and the early 20th century to present-day times. The Arctic remained high on the agenda of senior politicians – as evidenced by what the Russian President once said.

"This region has traditionally been a sphere of our special interest," Putin declared, adding that the Arctic is *"a concentration of practically all aspects of national security"*²⁵. For his part, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu stated that *"a permanent military presence in the Arctic is considered as part of Russia's national security policy"*²⁶. For a wider audience, Russian attempts to "retrieve the Arctic" materialise themselves through an array of expeditions of paramilitary or youth groups – like that in April 2015, when Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin headed to the North Pole.

A special place of the Far North has undergone some changes throughout the history of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, then the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, until the present-day Russian Federation. Even though the focus was placed differently back then, one thing remained unchanged – with the North being subject to somewhat colonisation, whether it be military, economic, or social while creating a staging ground to project the country's power. For Russia, the Far North is a life-giving space. A lot of room was devoted to it in Russian culture – with the region holding links to the deed, heroism, and pride. Dmitry Likhachev, an outstanding Russian intellectual and literary historian, once wrote that the country's tie with the North depends on what he named as *podvig*, an untranslatable Russian word referring to extraordinary feats, heroism, and fame, all of them stretching within a definite area²⁷. The Arctic is where Moscow seeks to convey the all-inclusive idea invested in the world *podvig* – a mighty source of pride and a symbol of power.

Three Far North cities – Arkhangelsk, Murmansk, and Norilsk – are vital to Russian expansion in the Arctic.

The Far North had not emerged in Russian politics until the late 16th century when Arkhangelsk first appeared on world maps. Between 1583 and 1584, thus in the twilight of his reign, Ivan the Terrible founded the city once he had suffered a defeat in wars for a Baltic foothold. Long controlled solely by the Russians, Arkhangelsk was slated to occupy the role of Russia's window on the world. Though it initially had attracted groups of English and Dutch merchants, once the Time of Troubles took a firm grip on the country, following by the country's self-isolation from the world throughout the 17th century, Arkhangelsk never had a chance to play any

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bigger role in trade²⁸. From the early 18th century onwards, Russia shifted its trade to Baltic ports while a century later – to the Black Sea. Arkhangelsk morphed into a starting point for any expedition that the Russian state bankrolled eagerly since the time of Peter the Great and that aimed to explore the Arctic – as a proof of his effective reign over the country. Not only did Russian Northern expeditions throughout the 18th and 19th century bring fresh knowledge of the Far North, they grew the awareness among the Russian elites of their country's role in the Arctic – a special mission it²⁹ of sorts needed to accomplish there.

Just as a side note, it is worth recalling here the figure of Jan Nagórski, a rather forgotten Polish aviator, the first person to fly an airplane in the Arctic back in 1914. Nagórski made flights over the coasts of Novaya Zemlya and the Barents Sea in the search for the Sedov, Brusilov, and Rusanov expeditions. Yet as the war broke out back then, the world did not get

25. Excerpt from the speech of Vladimir Putin at the meeting of the Security Council of the Russian Federation on state policy in the Arctic, April 22, 2014, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20845>

26. Excerpt from the speech of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu at the Defense Ministry Board meeting, February 25, 2015, available at: <https://ria.ru/20150225/1049600202.html>

27. See: Likhachev, D.S.; "Zamietki o russkom", Moscow 2017, pp. 15–16.

28. See: Veluwenkamp, J. W.; "The Murman Coast and the Northern Dvina Delta as English and Dutch Commercial Destinations in the 16th and 17th Century", Arctic, vol. 48, No. 3, 1995, pp. 257–266

29. See e.g. a foreword by W. G. Ostrowski, in Vrangeli F. P. "Puteshestviye po Sibiri i Ledovitomu moriu", Moscow 2010

not enough information about Nagórski's feat – and therefore it is crucial to recall what he did and who³⁰ he was. The remote Nagurskoye base was even named after the Polish pilot.

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Russia's interest in the Far North took a whole new meaning in the early 20th century. With a worldwide conundrum, the country's senior officials in St. Petersburg had to get a closer look at Russian exports whose vast majority arrived further in the world through either the Baltic or Black Sea ports. Had any hindrances emerged back then, the authorities in Berlin or Istanbul – both hostile to Russia in their policies – could have blocked any shipping through the Danish or Turkish straits. In consequence, Russian civilian and military shipments might have been obstructed – and while the country's borders stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea were

those with states that belong to the opposite political and military bloc – the situation grew dire in some ways. Therefore, it was decided to build a new port on the northern coast of the Kola peninsula, able to accommodate sea traffic year-round. The ice-free port of Murmansk would be connected by railroad with St. Petersburg, according to memoirs of Sergei Witte.³¹ Construction of the Romanov-on-Murman (now Murmansk) port had yet not begun until 1914. It boasted its significance during World War II when it received US military deliveries to the Soviet Union. Today, Murmansk is by far the biggest port in the Arctic.

As time went by, the Arctic's further "mooring" in the Russian political understanding was then tainted with some specific Soviet-like features. What comes as the third biggest symbol of the Russian Arctic – just after Arkhangelsk and Murmansk – is Norilsk, known as one of the world's northernmost town. Since 1937, it has been home to the copper-nickel mining centre. Throughout the late 1920s and the early 1930s, the area grew bigger when Gulag labour camp inmates were forced to work there. Besides Norilsk, the prisoners dug the vast mineral resources of Vorkuta and Kolyma, built the city of Magadan, as well as the seaports of Dudinka, Igarka, or Dixon. Added to them were road links and railways, including the infamous Kolyma Highway, meant to move both prisoners themselves and the fruits of their work³². Yet in Soviet party propaganda, the Arctic's dark side gave way to heroic deeds of the "Soviet man", a hero who made successful efforts to harness the Far North. In 1934, the whole country watched with bated breath the rescue of the crew of steam ship Chelyuskin. The courageous Chelyuskintsy, as the crew members were named, emerged as an example of the Soviet strength and capabilities in the fight against harsh climate. Those

who took part in the rescue operation were made Heroes of the Soviet Union, a new distinction awarded for heroic feats in service to the Soviet state and society³³. In the 1930s, cargo ships used for the first time to sail along the Northern Sea Route. In 1932, the icebreaker Sibiriakov set off on a voyage, making the first successful crossing of the Northern Sea Route in a single navigation. The Arctic turned into a magical area where the determination of the "Soviet man" – working under the enlightened leadership of the communist party – could overcome all obstacles while proving limitless possibilities of Soviet science and technology.

Both World War II and the decades-long Cold War that followed grew into further factors that shifted and somewhat complemented the Arctic's image in Russian political thought. Their impact is still being felt. What emerged back then was the huge military significance of the Arctic that grew simultaneously as new military developments saw the light of day. While during World War II its strategic role (apart from its raw material base) was to supply allied equipment through the port of Murmansk, the ensuing decades brought a steady increase in the importance of the Arctic, first and foremost as one of the arenas for Russian-US struggles. The Arctic began to serve a role it is occupying to this day – that of the main arena of global struggle with the United States. This yet did not come out of nowhere, with an air corridor stretching over the North Pole being the shortest route from the Soviet Union to the United States³⁴. Strenuous efforts were made to extend military infrastructure, including airfields and ports along the Northern Sea Route – devised as the core of the present-day refurbishments in the Arctic.

The Northern Fleet, or the fleet of the Russian Navy in the Arctic, took on a profound significance as a tool for rivalry. In its very origins, the Russian Navy was founded by Peter the Great on the basis of foreign patterns, and it conveyed the very idea of Russian imperial power far stronger than ground forces. The Tsar saw the fleet as a key tool for upgrading the state. While competing with the army for the funding throughout the whole 19th century, the Russian Navy cherished in the country's top officials a sense of belonging to the elite club of the world's maritime superpowers – though doubts arose around its combat capabilities (the Russo-Japanese war) or even restrained strategic importance (as during whole World War I)³⁵. With the Cold War, came the need to dust off old imperial-like ideas and patterns, yet in a brand-new packaging. Headquartered just off Murmansk, the Northern Fleet turned into the leading part of the Soviet Navy. Just like the Imperial Navy under Peter the Great or Nicholas II, it offered the leadership of the Communist Party a sense of belonging to an elite, two-member club of the world's biggest decision-makers. Hence, the Northern Fleet held a prominent place in the Russian Armed Force, with the Arctic being somewhat privileged amongst other theatres. In 1958, the Northern Fleet raised the Soviet Navy ensign over the first Soviet nuclear submarine, *Leninskiy Komsomol*. Due to its peculiarities, the Arctic offered optimum conditions for air operations, allowing Russian aircraft to intercept incoming enemy strategic bombers, as well as naval ones, chiefly in participation with submarines. By 1990, Novaya Zemlya had surged as the site for approximately 130 tests, of which a total of 39 were conducted atmospherically³⁶. Thus, the Arctic became the key tool for sustaining the Soviet-US rivalry – right until the demise of the Soviet Union.

30. See: Sawiński T.: "Pierwszy pilot polarny Jan Nagórski" [Jan Nagórski – the first polar aviator], *Biuletyn Polarny*, No. 19–20, pp. 62–64, available at http://www.geol.agh.edu.pl/~bipo/BiPo_0019/0019_15.pdf; see more: Karpus, Z.; Kubiak, W. (eds); „Z Włocławka nad Arktykę. Jan Nagórski – w 100. rocznicę pierwszych lotów nad Arktyką” [From Włocławek to the Arctic. The centenary of the first flights in the Arctic], Włocławek 2016,

31. Witte S., "Wspominania", Moscow, 2010, pp. 305–307.

32. See: Zubov A.B. (ed.); "Istorija Rossii. XX wiek, 1894 – 1939", Moscow, 2009, pp. 902–903

33. Ibidem, pp. 908–910.

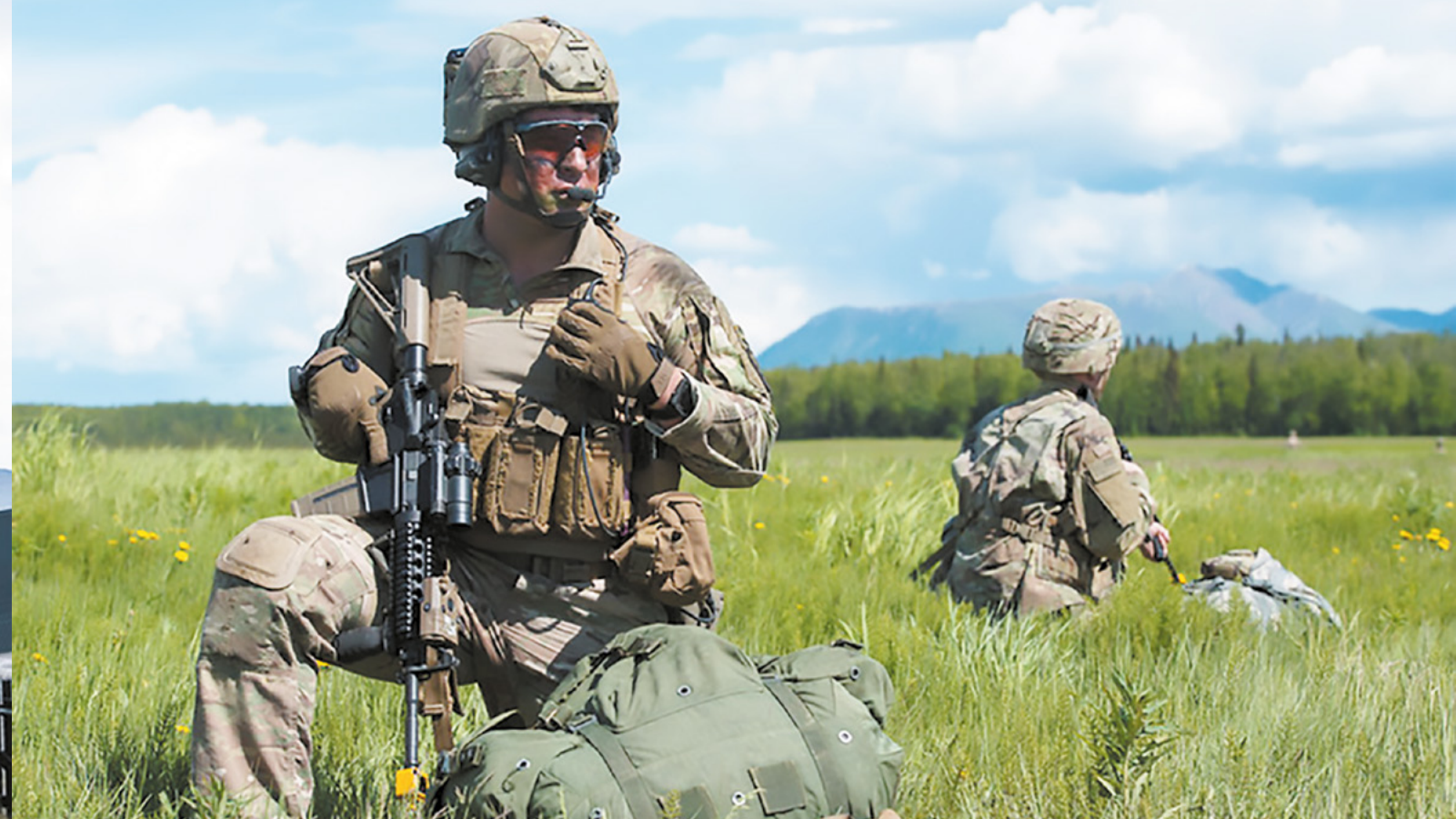
34. Khramchikhin A. A.; "Znachenie Arktiki dlya nacyonalnoj bezopasnosti Rossii", *Arktika i Sever*, no. 21/2015, pp. 88–90

35. See: Lieven D., "Towards the Flame. Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia," Warsaw 2018, 255–261.

36. Aliyev N., op. cit.



SOURCE: FLICKR.COM



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WHO ELSE IN THE ARCTIC?

As written above, Russian dominance in the Arctic sees an internally rooted justification. With international policies, Moscow enjoys quite comfortable room for manoeuvre in the Arctic, though amidst arising challenges, Russian senior officials feel compelled to devise some answers in both medium and long term.

From a military point of view, there are now just two states able to play a pivotal role in the Arctic. These are Russia and the United States. Other Arctic littoral nations, like Canada, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland, focus on environmental and economic aspects instead. Their security-related activities are restrained locally – thus as part of NATO operations as all of them belong to the military bloc.

Russia now sees the United States as its chief rival. Since the Soviet era, the Arctic has brought in an

immense potential for the Russian military might whose top goal is to combat any threats to Moscow's interests – mainly those having links to the United States. A hot rivalry between their military units – whether they be armed forces or proxies, like Russia's PMC Wagner Group – is taking place in an array of hotspots around the globe, with the Middle East at the helm. On the flip side, the Arctic is not as high on the US policy agenda.

In June 2019, the US Department of Defense passed its new Arctic Strategy, or the state's top policy document³⁷. In its strategy, US defence officials identified the current state of affairs in the Arctic as “an era of strategic competition.” The paper placed a special emphasis on how the international environment affected the Arctic in many areas, including security. Further in the document, the US Department of Defense noticed Russia's heightened

military presence above the Arctic Circle while signalling China's growing interest in the region. Aware of the ever-growing importance of the Arctic, the paper outlined three strategic ways in support of the desired Arctic end-state: building Arctic awareness, enhancing Arctic operations, and strengthening the rules-based order in the Arctic. With this approach to the Arctic, Washington displays two major things. First, the US awareness of how crucial the region is lags somewhere in the background. Secondly, the scale of US operations throughout the Arctic – be it operations or new military facilities – is restrained, especially if compared to Russia. What comes to the fore as a top explanation are distinct perceptions of the Arctic, both in the US and Russia. The region is essential to Moscow's vitality – an area of its decades-long interests to be traced back much earlier than just the Cold War era. This is the region that boasts a well-grounded position in the awareness of Russian top decision-makers.

US scholars say Russia and the United States yet reveal asymmetric interests in the Arctic – as indicated in a collection of captivating papers from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a renowned Washington-based think-tank. The main message there is an urge for decision-makers to take firm action in the Arctic – if Washington has no intention of permanently reducing its defence capabilities across the region. The US last-decade performance in the Arctic could be summarised as “the lost decade”. It is vital to quickly rebuild assets that encompass military presence, diplomatic activities, research programs, or analysis of possibilities that the thawing of the Arctic could bring for the US economy under the “presence equals influence” approach³⁸. Washington's activities in the Arctic are in effect preparatory. Last year's Trident Juncture exercise and a US Navy aircraft carrier operating north of the Arctic Circle for the first time in many decades serve as very first steps toward US military presence in the Arctic, through which Washington grows aware both of

37. Department of Defense Arctic Strategy; 2019; available at <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF>

38. Conley H., Melino M., Tsafos N., Williams I.; “America's Arctic Moment: Great Power Competition in the Arctic to 2050”, report CSIS, April 30, 2020, available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/americas-arctic-moment-great-power-competition-arctic-2050>



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The US last-decade performance in the Arctic could be summarised as “the lost decade”.

how critical the region is and what challenges might³⁹ follow. The United States seems to have notched up the importance of the Arctic, as illustrated by the fact it had re-established the US Second Fleet, responsible for the Arctic and the North Atlantic between 1950 and 2011. US Air Force General Terrence O’Shaughnessy, who helms US Northern Command, said that “*the Arctic is the first line of defence*⁴⁰.”

China has in recent years pressed for a greater role in Arctic affairs, too. It first set its foot in the region in the early years of the 21st century. Since then, it went a long pathway from modest scientific and research expeditions, through active participation in the exploitation of natural resources, including energy ones, up to the creation of the Polar Silk Road, bringing it under the broader Belt and Road Initiative umbrella. In 2018, China issued its first-ever Arctic white paper titled “*China’s Arctic Policy*” outlining its priorities in the Arctic and calling itself a “*near-Arctic state*”. In the document, the Chinese government labelled the Arctic as a region of mounting global significance, a common good of all humans around the world – with the region’s resources to be exploited under the basic principles of respect or cooperation⁴¹. This approach stands in stark contrast to the Russian one as the latter relies upon an exclusive right to exploit the resource-rich Arctic. Chinese experts have come up with narratives upon what they named as “*justified interests*⁴².” Moreover, they are notching up

a potential Chinese tilt towards more active and assertive actions in the Arctic⁴³. With an expected surge in Beijing’s significance in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, these processes might only speed up.

For the time being, economic and energy issues are at the heart of Chinese regional interests. These are also an area of mutually beneficial Sino-Russian cooperation, at least so far. Chinese companies have stepped to purchase a 29.9 percent stake in Yamal LNG and a further 20 percent in the Arctic LNG 2 deal. This, on the one hand, paves China’s way to energy resources – an attempt to diversify its supplies – while, on the other, Russia is getting funds to go ahead with new Arctic projects it would not reap from anywhere amid Western sanctions. Yet a notable increase in Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic has seen a slew of constraints⁴⁴ that will only grow in the aftermath of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The demand for raw materials will not jump in the not-too-distant future, nor will their prices worldwide. Challenging Arctic projects will be the first ones to drop out from the agenda or at least see serious curbs.

While China’s participation in new economic projects may slow down, it should be assumed that Beijing will be eager to maintain and expand other assets, including those related to the Northern Sea Route – as China has become its main beneficiary in recent years.

While China’s participation in new economic projects may slow down, it should be assumed that Beijing will be eager to maintain and expand other assets, including those related to the Northern Sea Route – as China has become its main beneficiary in recent years. For instance, China is pressing on with plans to build a fleet of ice-breaking vessels,

39. See: Humpert M.; “The U.S. Navy ups its Arctic engagement, sending ships north and establishing a temporary presence in Iceland”, Arctic Today, October 1, 2019, <https://www.arctictoday.com/the-u-s-navy-steps-up-its-arctic-engagement-sending-ships-to-iceland/>

40. Rempfer K., „NORTHCOM: Arctic now America’s ‘first line of defense’”, DefenseNews; May 6, 2019; <https://www.defensenews.com/news/your-military/2019/05/06/northcom-arctic-now-americas-first-line-of-defense/>

41. China’s Arctic Policy; White paper; January 26, 2018; English version available at http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm

42. Xinmin, M.; “China’s Arctic Policy on the basis of international law: Identification, goals, principles and positions”; Marine Policy; No. 100/2019, pp. 265–276

43. Havnes H., Seland J. M.; “The Increasing Security Focus in China’s Arctic Policy”; The Arctic Institute; July 16, 2019; available at <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/increasing-security-focus-china-arctic-policy/>

44. See: Weidacher Hsiung, Ch; “China and Arctic Energy: Drivers and Limitations”; The Polar Journal; vol. 6, No. 2/2016; pp. 243–258.

From Russia's perspective, China comes as a far bigger challenge in the Arctic than the United States.

including nuclear-powered⁴⁵ ones. In 2018, Beijing placed into operation some non-nuclear icebreakers while works are underway to create what would be the country's first nuclear vessels with parameters comparable to those of Russia's Project 22220 ships. Though few details are known about the progress of construction works, these are likely to span throughout the next few years. While the container shipping from China and Eastern Asia in general via the North Sea to Europe looks like a distant future, Chinese mounting economic presence in the Arctic is already a fact.

From Russia's perspective, China comes as a far bigger challenge in the Arctic than the United States. Washington has clear-cut goals in the region, and its NATO-based strategy seems clear to Moscow, too.

What yet remains the big unknown is to what extent Washington is eager to take the reins in the Arctic – but this appears quite modest, at least for now. China is operating in line with other models, avoiding areas like strategy or security, while emphasizing an interest in one-fits-all solutions, mounted on the foundation of the already existing strategic links between Moscow and Beijing. Yet these two's financial resources differ substantially. Until now, both Moscow and Beijing have carefully avoided touching plausible points of contention in the region, but have focused on mutual benefits. For the time being, everything seems to work out correctly, as Dmitri Trenin, a Russian political scientist, wrote in an article that *"there is no reason to believe that this cooperation will acquire a military component in the foreseeable future"*⁴⁶. Seeking to retain the existing tendency, Russian officials are pushing for developing domestic potential in the Arctic, whether it be military, economic or infrastructure-related. They are aware that the more Russia exhibits its readiness to engage in the Arctic – the region of its privileged interests – the more it is likely to shape cooperation with China upon a Moscow-friendly strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

The *"Arctic rivalry between the powers"* is a framework that depicts a situation where a period of calm is followed by a heightened interest in the region, mainly from Russia, but also from the United States and China. But this could be somewhat simplistic, thus running the risk of omitting some aspects of the complex situation. Although both the United States and China recognise the importance of the Arctic, their activities there remain relatively modest. US constraints touch upon the country's lack of readiness to open yet another theatre of competition amid high financial and political costs. The unfavourable climate is likely to intensify as a consequence of the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese curbs arise from how Beijing sees its global role that – in remote many areas, it encompasses a dense network of economic, or sometimes political ties. Meanwhile, Russia has no similar restraints. Its strongly centralized political system – plunged in stagnation and economic isolation – derives its legitimacy from the sense of being a global power, offered both to the country's citizens and, first and foremost, its decision-makers.

In the Arctic, a favourable international environment comes hand in hand with a number of positive internal conditions. These tend to differ in nature, varying from historical to sheerly military qualities. What can be agreed is that if the international order continues to be unstable, Moscow's unilateral actions may gain momentum⁴⁷. In February this year, Russia gave a glimpse at what it was capable of doing while undertaking either political (Dmitry Rogozin's visit) or military (Spetsnaz drills) activities in Svalbard that it had not earlier agreed upon with Norway.

It is yet unknown how international policies will unfold in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to monitor Russia's further steps in the Arctic. Sometimes the term *"ice curtain"* is⁴⁸ used to describe Russia's attempts to separate from the north. Though seemingly distant, this may exert an increasingly important role in shaping security policy worldwide, including for NATO countries.

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45. Humpert M.; "China Reveals Details of Newly Designed Heavy Icebreaker"; High North News, December 16, 2019; available at <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-reveals-details-newly-designed-heavy-icebreaker>; see: Trym A. E.; "Checking in on China's Nuclear Icebreaker"; The Diplomat; September 5, 2019; <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/checking-in-on-chinas-nuclear-icebreaker/>

46. Trenin D.; „Rossija i Kitaj w Arktike. Sotrudnicestwo, soperniczestwo i posledstwija dla jevrazijskoj bezopasnosti”, Carnegie.ru; March 30, 2020; available at <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81384>

47. See: "Russian Policy Toward the Arctic", The Warsaw Institute, December 18, 2018; <https://warsawinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Rosja-wobec-Arktyki-Raport-Specjalny-Warsaw-Institute-1.pdf>

48. See also: Center for Strategic and International Studies reports available at <https://www.csis.org/regions/arctic>

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