

# SECURITY INSIGHTS



## *Shifts in Russian Military Build-Up in the Arctic Driven by the Interactions with China*

*By Pavel K. Baev*

### *Executive Summary*

China is seen by the Russian political leadership as a crucially important strategic partner and the Arctic is perceived as a potentially major direction for developing and upgrading this partnership. At the same time, China's fast-progressing military modernization is a matter of growing concern for the Russian high command and Beijing's ambitions in the Arctic are recognized as a challenge to Russia's interest. Moscow seeks to counter this challenge without arousing any suspicions in Beijing. Russian military activities in the High North are altered accordingly:

- The infrastructure supporting the basing of strategic nuclear submarines on the Kamchatka peninsula is upgraded.
- The chain of military bases along the Northern Sea Route (NSR) is consolidated, with particular attention to its eastern leg.
- The intensity of military exercises in the High North is increased, with a strengthened emphasis on mobility in the eastern direction.
- These preparations are presented as pre-emptive response to expected increase of U.S. military activities in the Arctic, particularly regarding the freedom of navigation exercises by the U.S. Navy.

### *Introduction*

The Russian leadership spares no effort in presenting its partnership with China as uniquely close and progressing ever-further in the security area, while not reaching the quality of an alliance. President Vladimir Putin and President Xi Jinping keep trying to find new definitions for the maturity of this partnership and sincerity of their personal relations. The Arctic is increasingly presented as the region where this partnership could develop and yield tangible economic results.

At the same time, there is plenty of hidden tension in the real content of the much-advertised "friendship" and the economic ties are lagging far behind the political promises. Russia is worried about the consequences of the apparently unstoppable growth of China's power and is

aware of the increasing channeling of resources toward the modernization of the People's Liberation Army. China is perfectly aware of the progressive weakness of Russian economy and understands, maybe even better than Putin's court, the trajectory of this degradation.

The Arctic is still a region of secondary importance for China. However, the steady increase of its power, including the military outreach, makes it possible to achieve a significant impact on the geopolitical "power play" in the High North by devoting a relatively insignificant share of resources and attention to this region. The White Paper "China's Arctic Policy," released in January 2018 speaks about moderate ambitions, which nevertheless, have made a deep impression on the Russian policy-makers.<sup>1</sup> Moscow seeks both to increase its value for China as a potential partner and to pre-empt any curtailing of its sovereignty over the vast parts of the Arctic. The most reliable means of asserting this sovereignty is military instruments of various kinds, from strategic to border guards to "hybrid," so the Russian leadership has invested significant resources in building up the military infrastructure in the High North. What complicates and undermines this strategy is the shrinking of available resources due to protracted economic stagnation. The Kremlin has to—but cannot quite—decide on the priorities in allocating resources, and China is a key consideration.

### *China in Evolving Russian Perceptions of the Arctic*

The Arctic occupies a hugely important place in Russian strategic thinking, perhaps above and beyond its real importance in shaping the security environment for the country, which faces NATO in the Western theater, a wide variety of instabilities in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and the increasingly tough competition between rising powers in East Asia. Various factors—from historical traditions to Putin's personal preferences—have contributed to the exaggerated vision of crucial role of the Arctic in the global trends, but one relatively new factor is the arrival of China to the High North.<sup>2</sup>

For most of the 2000s, Moscow considered it possible to discourage and check China's encroachments on Russian extended sovereignty over the vast and potentially even larger (given the claim for expanding Russia's control over the Arctic continental shelf submitted to the UN *Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf*) part of the inhospitable northern territories and seas. The escalation of confrontation with the West triggered by Russian annexation of Crimea and aggression against Ukraine changed that position and made it imperative for Moscow to upgrade the partnership with China to a new strategic level and to accommodate China's intentions to expand its activities and influence in the Arctic.<sup>3</sup>

This shift coincided with the change of views in Moscow on the real "value" of the Arctic in material terms. From the mid-2000s, and particularly since the famous flag-planting expedition to the North Pole in 2007, the dominant view was that the vast and essentially unknown

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<sup>1</sup> Useful interpretation of this document can be found in the analysis published by China Institute of International Studies, [http://www.ciiis.org.cn/english/2018-07/09/content\\_40413210.htm](http://www.ciiis.org.cn/english/2018-07/09/content_40413210.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Marc Lanteigne and Mingming Shi, "China Stakes Its Claim to the Arctic," *The Diplomat*, January 29, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/china-stakes-its-claim-to-the-arctic>.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations after the Ukraine Crisis," *Briefing Paper*, Carnegie Moscow Center, June 25, 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/06/29/friends-with-benefits-russian-chinese-relations-after-ukraine-crisis-pub-63953>.

resources of hydrocarbons would be the main driver of the presumed geopolitical competition for the Arctic. The gradual and generally unfavorable for Russia transformation of the global energy market, in which the “shale revolution” in the U.S. was a major driver, resulted in the re-evaluation of feasibility and, first of all, cost efficiency of most off-shore projects in the Arctic. The enforcement of sanctions, which specifically targeted the oil and gas enterprises in the Arctic, added to the understanding in the Kremlin that the imaginary “treasure chest” could not possibly be accessed in the near future.

The new perspective on the Arctic has placed the main emphasis on the NSR as a major international transport “corridor,” over which Russia can exercise effective and profitable control.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, the NSR is not exactly a new phenomenon, and in the Soviet times, the *Sevmorput* was a large-scale enterprise. What makes it into a different story is the possible interest from China in using this transit route.<sup>5</sup> This interest inevitably constitutes a challenge for Russia, which is firmly set on asserting its sovereignty over the NSR rather than allowing it to become an element in the Chinese Belt and Road initiative. The rules for navigation on the *Sevmorput* were tightened several times, culminating in the law that prescribed the transportation of hydrocarbons only on ships under the Russian flag.<sup>6</sup> China makes no objection against these rules, but the Russian leadership is certain that its ability to act as a rule-maker depends upon the capacity to enforce them, which necessitates the acquisition of enforcement capabilities—namely, military forces.

### *The Simple Matter of Sustainability*

The restoration of the old Soviet base on the Kotelný Island (the New Siberian archipelago) in summer 2013 marked the start of a new effort at building a chain of modern bases along the *Sevmorput*.<sup>7</sup> Odd as it may seem, the Northern Fleet had never dealt with missions east of the Barents Sea (except for submarine operations) and until recently has not had a single ice-class ship in its combat order. Its flagship *Petr Velikiy* had to be accompanied by no less than four icebreakers, and the first naval icebreaker *Ilya Muromets* (Project 21180) was only commissioned in late 2017.<sup>8</sup> Construction of bases encountered supply problems, the usual embezzlement, and even labor strikes, but at the end of 2017, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that the military construction plan in the High North was completed.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A good examination of this proposition can be found in Chapter 8 of Marlene Laruelle, *Russia’s Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*. (Armonk NY & London: M.E. Sharpe, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Matt Schrader, “Is China Changing the Game in Trans-Polar Shipping?,” *China Brief*, April 30, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/is-china-changing-the-game-in-trans-polar-shipping>.

<sup>6</sup> “Госдума запретила возить углеводороды по Севморпути судам под чужими флагами” [The State Duma Banned Transportation of Hydrocarbons in the Sevmorput in Ships under Foreign Flags], *Vedomosti*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/news/2017/12/20/745972-neft-sevmorputi>.

<sup>7</sup> Atle Staalsen, “In remotest Russian Arctic, a new Navy base,” *Barents Observer*, September 17, 2013, <http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/2013/09/remotest-russian-arctic-new-navy-base-17-09>.

<sup>8</sup> Damien Sharkov, “New 6,000 Ton Icebreaker Joins Russian Navy to Bolster Putin’s Arctic Ambitions,” *Newsweek*, November 30, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/new-6000-tonne-icebreaker-joins-russian-navy-bolster-arctic-ambitions-726763>.

<sup>9</sup> “Шойгу отчитался о строительстве военных объектов в Арктике” [Shoigu reported on construction of military bases in the Arctic], *RIA-Novosti*, December 25, 2017, [https://ria.ru/defense\\_safety/20171225/1511695359.html](https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20171225/1511695359.html). “On the investigation of embezzlement, Musa Muradov,” “Арктическое дело не вписалось в УПК Материалы о хищениях при строительстве военных объектов на Новой Земле вернули генпрокурору” [The Arctic case doesn’t fit the criminal code], *Kommersant*, March 21, 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3579133>.

This achievement still leaves open the question about the purpose of these bases. Their capacity to control maritime traffic along the *Sevmorput* is quite limited because no patrol crafts or aircrafts are permanently based there. Actually, the first patrol craft in the *Ivan Papanin* series (Project 23550) was only started in St. Petersburg shipyard in spring 2017, and the second one was postponed, with no further contracts signed.<sup>10</sup> Moscow often asserts the usefulness of these bases for providing search and rescue, but the new Cape Schmidt base could not perform any such mission to help a convoy trapped by floating ice in early 2017.<sup>11</sup> There is much concern in the U.S. about the so-called “icebreaker gap,” but in fact, the construction of the new generation nuclear icebreaker *Arktika* is proceeding with recurrent setbacks, while the new series of armed nuclear icebreakers *Lider* (Project 10510) exists only as a technical design.<sup>12</sup>

Most of the real tasks in supporting navigation along the *Sevmorput* could have been far better performed by civilian agencies, but this infrastructure remains underfunded. Even the hard job of removing mountains of garbage left by the Soviet projects in the Arctic is entrusted to the Northern Fleet, which reports some success, but is not really equipped for that.<sup>13</sup> China is also not thrilled about the militarization of the eastern part of the Russian Arctic, and it is probable that signals from Beijing caused the quiet discarding in Moscow of the plan for deploying yet another Arctic brigade on the Yamal peninsula. Overall, while the upgrades for ports and other infrastructure in the Russian Arctic are necessary, the new chain of bases, which was hard to build and no less hard to support, is a strategic luxury that Moscow can ill afford.

### ***Conclusions: Troubled Waters are in the Forecast***

Russia appears to be—and seeks to project the impression of being—fully in control of the security situation along its Northern frontier, from the border with Norway to the short stretch of water separating the Bid Diomedes and the U.S.-owned Little Diomedes Islands in the Bering Strait. In fact, the prospects of breakdowns of familiar settings may be determined by developments over which Moscow has no control whatsoever. Most fundamentally, the possibility of allocating sufficient resources for upholding the status of “Great Arctic Power” depends upon the need to respond to security challenges in other theaters, from Donbass to Syria, where Russia is exposed to direct hits in on-going violent conflicts. Providing no new conflicts emerge in such potentially explosive areas as Central Asia, Moscow will still need to make difficult choices on resource allocation due to the protracted stagnation of its economy, so that the completion of some half-accomplished programs (first of all the *Borei*-class strategic submarines) would necessitate postponement of other programs such as the *Yasen*-class nuclear attack submarines.

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<sup>10</sup> “Арктический стражник: каким будет новый боевой ледокол России” [Arctic watchman: What the new Russian combat ice-breaker will look like], *TASS*, April 19, 2017, <http://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/4191985>.

<sup>11</sup> Atle Staalsen, “100 sailors trapped in ice near Arctic outpost,” *Barents Observer*, February 7, 2017, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2017/02/100-sailors-trapped-ice-near-arctic-outpost>.

<sup>12</sup> Elena Bolshakova and German Kostrinsky, “‘Арктика’ ложится на левый борт” [Arktika tilts to the left], *Kommersant*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3553777>; “Технический проект атомного ледокола ‘Лидер’ уже готов, заявил Рогозин” [Technical design for the new nuclear icebreaker Lider is ready, says Rogozin], *RIA-Novosti*, December 27, 2017, [https://ria.ru/defense\\_safety/20171227/1511835218.html](https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20171227/1511835218.html).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Nielsen, “Navy cleans off 5,000 waste-drums from Arctic island,” *Barents Observer*, May 14, 2018, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2018/05/navy-cleans-5000-waste-drums-arctic-island>.

This painful setting of priorities is certain to be distorted by new emerging challenges, even in the relatively stable Arctic theater. For that matter, the Russian high command was hard pressed in autumn 2018 to respond to NATO's unprecedented *Trident Juncture* exercises and resorted to such provocative measures as missile tests and GPS jamming.<sup>14</sup> The recognized need to respond better to new challenges of these kind of clashes with the intention to proceed with constructing new bases in the eastern part of the Arctic theater. What could add urgency to these intentions is the desire to respond with overwhelming force to any increase of U.S. military activity in this region.<sup>15</sup> The main focus of Russian concerns is the possibility of U.S. naval demonstrations aimed at establishing the freedom of navigation principle in the Arctic, particularly in the waters that Moscow defines as parts of the NSR.<sup>16</sup>

These U.S.-centered concerns in the Russian top brass overlap and interplay with worries about the Chinese intentions and plans. In a peculiar way, the U.S. freedom of navigation exercises in the South China Sea and in the Arctic can create new tensions between Russia and China. Much the same way as Russia prefers to remain neutral in the disputes around Chinese artificial "islands" in the South China Sea, China might opt to abstain from backing Russia in a possible naval incident near the Wrangel Island. In principle, China is interested in establishing a freedom of navigation in the Arctic seas and the build-up of its fleet of icebreakers (which is still experimental, but may quickly proceed to a full-blown program, surpassing Russian slow-moving projects) can reinforce this interest. For now, Beijing is content with operating in the Arctic according to Russian rules, but Moscow cannot take this attitude for granted – and cannot afford to upgrade its largely symbolic bases along the eastern half (or rather, three quarters) of the NSR into the infrastructure supporting a meaningful military presence. The significant and sustained contraction of resources available for the military build-up makes it necessary for Moscow to choose between maintaining the position of power in the Barents region and further increasing its capabilities in the eastern part of the Arctic theater.

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<sup>14</sup> Brooks Tinger, "Russian GPS Jamming at NATO's Trident Juncture Exercise," *RealClear Defense*, November 16, 2018, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/11/16/russian\\_gps\\_jamming\\_at\\_natos\\_trident\\_juncture\\_exercise\\_113960.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/11/16/russian_gps_jamming_at_natos_trident_juncture_exercise_113960.html).

<sup>15</sup> Stephanie Pezard, "How not to Compete in the Arctic: The Blurry Lines between Friend and Foe," *War on the Rocks*, February 27, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/02/how-not-to-compete-in-the-arctic-the-blurry-lines-between-friend-and-foe>.

<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Pincus, "Rushing Navy Ships into the Arctic for a FONOP is Dangerous," *Proceedings*, U.S. Naval Institute, January 2019, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2019/january/rushing-navy-ships-arctic-fonop-dangerous>.



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