



Chapter 4

Russia in the Arctic: High Ambitions, Modernized Capabilities, and Risky Setbacks

By Pavel K. Baev

Introduction

The Arctic region for Russia is crucial in strategic perspective, hugely important economically, and heavily loaded with symbolism as far as the state identity is concerned. Official discourse typically describes this importance in general and exaggerated terms but often mixes various types of interests together, skips significant regional differences, and ignores entirely the aspirations of native peoples. In reality, Russia's strategic interests are heavily concentrated on the Kola peninsula, its most profitable economic assets are located on the Yamal peninsula, the historically most significant center of human capital is Arkhangelsk (just outside the Arctic circle), while many territories and settlements are in a sad neglect. Moscow tends to set ambitious goals for its Arctic policy, which is designed to exemplify Russia's global reach, but the execution of its security, foreign policy, economic and environmental guidelines is under-resourced, poorly coordinated and often works at cross-purposes.¹

The most profound disagreement exists between Russia's sustained military build-up in the High North and Moscow's efforts at developing international cooperation in the Arctic, and while in the first half of the 2010s it was possible to proceed along both policy tracks, during the second half of the past decade cooperation was seriously derailed, while buildup received a further boost.² Curtailing of international cooperation was caused not only by the enforcement of U.S. and Western sanctions, some of which targeted specifically joint projects in the Arctic, but also by the increased awareness in the Nordic states and other potential partners that Russian militarization of the Arctic constitutes a growing security challenge, which needs to be contained and effectively precludes the development of meaningful cross-border ties. The withdrawal of many Western stakeholders, for instance Exxon Mobil, from the project with Rosneft on oil exploration in the Kara Sea has left China as the main partner for developing hydrocarbon resources in the Russian Arctic.³

¹ Useful analysis of these diverse goals is Heather A. Conley, "The New Ice Curtain: Russia's Strategic Reach to the Arctic," CSIS Report, August 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-ice-curtain>; more academic research can be found in Marlene Laruelle, *Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015).

² My examination of this dynamics is Pavel K. Baev, "Threat Assessments and Strategic Objectives in Russia's Arctic Policy," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 32, no. 1, (2019): 25-40.

³ Christopher Helman, "With a world of options, end of Russia venture is no big loss for ExxonMobil," *Forbes*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christopherhelman/2018/03/01/with-a-world-of-options-end-of-rosneft-venture-is-no-big-loss-for-exxonmobil/#599787ea26d5>.

The flagship joint venture Yamal LNG has indeed progressed fast and is set to increase further the volumes of gas delivered to the Chinese and European markets; yet, Moscow remains wary of China's plans for expanding its economic activities in the Arctic and seeks to ensure its sovereign control over resources and the maritime domain.⁴

What adds priority to Russia's objectives in the Arctic is the particular personal attention by President Vladimir Putin to this region, which he sees as not only strategically pivotal but also as loaded with symbolism. There is an influential lobby in the Russian leadership, which includes key figures such as Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Secretary of Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, which advocates resource allocation toward the Arctic projects and exploits Putin's interest. Putin's favorite idea presently is to boost the maritime traffic along the Northern Sea Route (*Sevmorput*),⁵ and lobbyists demand more funding for military bases that are supposed to protect this transport corridor. Shortage of resources, however, will determine serious downsizing of Russia's Arctic ambitions, and the prevalence of military-security demands will be detrimental for economic and environmental development needs.

Capabilities, Activities, and Interactions

Russia is able to deploy a wide range of assets and capabilities toward the achievement of its Arctic policy goals, but control over these instruments is fragmented, and so their use is typically uncoordinated both in regional directions and between the civilian and military bureaucracies. The management of the Northern Sea Route was, for example, granted in 2019 to the *Rosatom* state corporation, which tends to put its parochial nuclear-related interests first in the requests for allocation of money from the state budget.⁶ The Defense Ministry announced the creation of the Arctic Command in 2015, but in fact, the new military district on the basis of the Northern Fleet will become functional only in 2021.⁷ Each agency and command seeks to gain attention and greater share of resources by advertising its pet projects, while the growing needs in modernizing the basic infrastructure are neglected, as the catastrophic leak of diesel fuel in the Norilsk region demonstrated.⁸

The most impactful and valued instrument for Russia's security policy is the triad of land- air- and sea-based strategic nuclear weapons, and the crucial importance of the Kola peninsula is determined by its role as the main base for strategic nuclear submarines. Facing the need to retire and utilize dozens of submarines built in the 1970s, Russia embarked in the late 1990s on the program of building the *Borei*-class nuclear submarines (Project 955) armed with *Bulava* intercontinental missiles. The program was prioritized in the 2020 State Armament Program approved in 2011, and in 2013-2014, three submarines were commissioned, and the

⁴ Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, "The Emergence of a Sino-Russian Economic Partnership in the Arctic?" *Commentary*, The Arctic Institute, May 19, 2020, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/emergence-sino-russian-economic-partnership-arctic/>.

⁵ Charles Digges, "Putin unveils more plans to boost Northern Sea Route," *Maritime Executive*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/putin-unveils-more-plans-to-boost-northern-sea-route>.

⁶ On the over-ambitious plans, see Atle Staalesen, "'We want to change the course of history,' says Northern Sea Route operator," *Barents Observer*, July 10, 2019, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2019/07/we-want-change-course-history-says-northern-sea-route-operator>.

⁷ Dmitry Litovkin, "Arctic fleet will become an independent military-administrative unit," *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (in Russian), June 8, 2020, https://www.ng.ru/armies/2020-06-08/8_7881_north.html.

⁸ Daria Shapovalova, "Oil spill in Siberia: Are we prepared for permafrost thaw?" *Commentary*, The Arctic Institute, June 11, 2020, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/oil-spill-siberia-prepared-permafrost-thaw/>.

fourth one of the modernized *Borei-A* class joined the Northern Fleet in June 2020.⁹ Four more submarines are in various stages of construction, and two more keels are due to be laid. The top priority granted to this program (which was upset by the problems with the *Bulava* missile) caused underfunding and delays with advancing the parallel program for building *Yasen*-class nuclear cruise missile submarines, so that the second ship is due to be commissioned in 2020, the third is undergoing sea trials, and four more are in different stages of construction.¹⁰

Russian command places great emphasis on the task of protecting its strategic assets, and instead of establishing a Soviet-style “naval bastion,” for which the Northern Fleet doesn’t have enough combat ships, it now aims at gaining command over the air by building a multi-layer system of air defense. The deployment of the S-400 surface-to-air missile systems at such forward locations as Novaya Zemlya and modernization of such forward airfields as Nagurskoe on the Franz Josef Land enables the newly-created 45th Air Force/Air Defense army to control the airspace over the Eastern part of the Barents Sea and over Eastern Scandinavia as well.¹¹ This defense-enhancement is supplemented by the upgrade of the power-projecting capabilities of the Northern Fleet, particularly on-shore projection with the deployment of *Kalibr* (SS-N-30A) cruise missiles on smaller naval platforms, as well as by strengthening the 61st naval infantry brigade and the newly-created Arctic brigade.¹² This sustained multi-purpose military build-up has secured Russia a position of effective dominance over and beyond the Eastern Part of the Barents region.

The command of the Northern Fleet has set the pattern of a steady increase of the scale and intensity of exercises of its submarines and surface combatants as well as the army and air force units transferred under its command, while the naval infantry has also gained some combat experience in Donbass and Syria. Testing new weapon systems in harsh climate conditions is a key part of these exercises, but their plans often include anti-submarine and amphibious operations as well as mock attacks on military infrastructure in Norway, particularly the U.S. *Globus*-III radar at Vardø.¹³ Russia has also made it a matter of principle to interfere with NATO exercises in the region, not only by close monitoring, but also by staging missile launches inside the exercise area and by jamming GPS signals.¹⁴

A more demanding task for the Northern Fleet, which has traditionally oriented its activities westward, is the protection of the Northern Sea Route, along which several new bases have been constructed. It is not entirely clear what sort of threats these bases are prepared to

⁹ Maxim Starchak, “The Borei-A SSBN: How effective is Russia’s new nuclear submarine?” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, June 16, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-borei-a-ssbn-how-effective-is-russias-new-nuclear-submarine/>.

¹⁰ Atle Staalesen, “Navy confirms 5 new attack submarines will sail for Northern Fleet,” *Barents Observer*, April 3, 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2020/04/navy-confirms-5-new-attack-submarines-will-sail-northern-fleet>.

¹¹ Heather A. Conley, Joseph S. Bermudez, Matthew Melino, “Ice Curtain: S-400 Deployments and Enhanced Defense of Russia’s Western Arctic,” *CSIS Brief*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ice-curtain-s-400-deployments-and-enhanced-defense-russias-western-arctic-rogachevo-air>.

¹² Useful assessment can be found in Mathieu Boulegue, “Russia’s Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a ‘Low Tension’ Environment,” *Chatham House Research Paper*, June 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russia-s-military-posture-arctic-managing-hard-power-low-tension-environment>.

¹³ Tom O’Connor, “Russia will ‘take measures’ against US radar near its border, thought to be part of missile defense,” *Newsweek*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-us-radar-norway-defense-1434756>.

¹⁴ The first such cyber-attack was registered in 2018; see Brooks Tinger, “Electronic jamming between Russia and NATO is par for the course in the future, but it has its risky limits,” *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, November 15, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/electronic-jamming-between-russia-and-nato-is-par-for-the-course-in-the-future-but-it-has-its-risky-limits/>.

counter, and the once a year cruise along this transport corridor is a challenge because none of the combat ships are designed to perform missions in ice-covered waters. The Northern Fleet now has one diesel-electric icebreaker, *Ilya Muromets*, and a second one of smaller size (Project 21180M) is under construction, but its operations eastward from the ice-free Barents Sea require support from civilian nuclear icebreakers owned by the *Rosatomflot* company.¹⁵ There is plenty of official bragging regarding the expansion of the fleet of nuclear icebreakers, but in fact, the construction of *Arktika* (Project 22220) in St. Petersburg is bedeviled by delays and technical failures, while the plan for building the futuristic *Lider* (Project 10510) at the *Zvezda* shipyard near Vladivostok is at best far-fetched.¹⁶

The build-up of military infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route not only makes it possible for Moscow to enforce rules and regulations for external parties interested in using it for commercial purposes (including China) but also to demonstrate power behind its claim for extension of its continental shelf in the Arctic. This claim for some 1.2 million square kilometers of seabed between the Lomonosov and Mendeleev underwater ridges goes all the way to, but not beyond, the North Pole; it was first submitted to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UN CLCS) in 2001, but without success because of insufficient scientific evidence. The substantiation of the claim had continued until February 2016, and the UN CLCS started the review of re-submission in August 2016, while making it clear that it would not be able to produce a recommendation as long as there was an overlap with the claims submitted by Denmark (in December 2014) and Canada (in May 2019).¹⁷ Russian political discourse places strong emphasis on the expected expansion of the continental shelf, presenting it as a major consolidation of Russia's sovereignty over the Arctic, but it is far from certain that demonstrations of military might are helpful for the deliberations in the UN CLCS, which most probably will abstain from making any decision on this controversial issue.¹⁸

Russia has not taken any steps toward negotiating a compromise shelf deal with Denmark and Canada, as the international norms established by the Convention on the Law of the Sea prescribe, and the problem of the claim is bracketed out of its diplomatic activity in the Arctic region, which has been traditionally active, but increasingly encounters setbacks. Moscow has advocated the proposition that matters pertaining to the Arctic ocean are primarily the responsibility of the five littoral states, but cannot reconcile this stance with the plain fact that four other parties to this "Arctic five" (as well as Iceland) happen to be NATO member-states, since a fundamental principle in its regional policy is that the expansion of NATO activity constitutes a major security threat.¹⁹ These tensions with Arctic neighbors increasingly complicate

¹⁵ "One year ago, icebreaker Ilya Muromets joined the Northern Fleet," Press service of the Northern Fleet (in Russian), January 7, 2019, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12211088@egNews.

¹⁶ On the former, see Anastasiya Vedeneeva, "Arktika will be ready by the winter," *Kommersant* (in Russian), June 15, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4378535>; on the latter, see Charles Digges, "Russian official confirms plans for behemoth icebreaker," *Maritime Executive*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/russian-official-confirms-plans-for-behemoth-icebreaker>.

¹⁷ Russian stance is examined in Jakub Godzimirski and Alexander Sergunin, "Russian formal and practical geopolitics in the Arctic: change and continuity," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 11 (2020), <https://arcticreview.no/index.php/arctic/article/view/1350>; on the Canadian claim, see Alina Bykova, "Canada makes substantial step in Arctic territory delimitation, submits claim which includes North Pole," *High North News*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/submits-claim-which-includes-north-pole>.

¹⁸ Alexei Mikhailov, "Northern enlargement: Russian Arctic becomes larger by 1.2 million square kilometers," *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* (in Russian), October 22, 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/10/22/reg-szfo/rossijskaia-arktika-stala-bolshe-na-12-milliona-kvadratnyh-kilometrov.html>.

¹⁹ Vladimir Muhin, "NATO prepares to attack Russia from the Arctic," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (in Russian), June 7, 2020, https://www.ng.ru/armies/2020-06-07/2_7880_nato.html.

the proceedings in the Arctic Council, which has carefully steered its work away from the military-security matters, but presently finds it difficult to preserve the pattern of cooperation, particularly as Russia is due to assume the rotating chairmanship for 2021-2023.²⁰ Russian diplomacy tries to connect with the Nordic politicians and activists, who are objecting to the deformation and reduction of the cooperative agenda because of escalation of tensions between the U.S. and Russia in the Arctic.²¹ At the same time, even Moscow experts admit that the main driver and owner of Russian Arctic policy is the army.²²

Overall, the extensive and diverse set of assets that Moscow has at its disposal for executing the Arctic policy is significantly incoherent, so much so that the over-development of some military capabilities aggravates the shortage and degradation of many crucial elements of civilian infrastructure. The prioritized military build-up is unhelpful for Russian Arctic diplomacy and hampers the implementation of cooperative economic and human development initiatives. Having invested so many resources in strengthening its military capabilities, Moscow has yet to find a way to make them useful instruments of policy, as options for projecting power in the High North are limited and high-risk. The question of harvesting tangible dividends from sustained investments is particularly acute for the strategic nuclear forces and other heavy-maintenance nuclear assets concentrated on the Kola Peninsula, which require serious efforts for protecting and securing, but give little benefit for reaching the goals of Arctic policy.

Challenges and Opportunities

The Russian leadership is keen to set ambitious goals for its Arctic policy assuming that the discourse on asserting sovereignty over this symbolically important region resonates positively with the public opinion. The priority of these goals was not significantly diminished in the second half of the 2010s, when the aggression against Ukraine and the intervention in Syria came to dominate Russia's geopolitical agenda. The resource allocation, however, was insufficient in the relatively prosperous years before the recession of 2015-2017, and remained below basic needs during the ensuing stagnation, and presently is set to suffer from deep cuts necessitated by the unfolding economic crisis. Whatever propaganda spin is put on the "Basic Principles of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic to 2035" approved by President Putin on March 5, 2020, the reality of severe and increasing lack of funding will undercut all initiatives designed for acting on these principles.²³

The main opportunity for boosting the development of the Russian Arctic is presently seen in the transport capacity of the Northern Sea Route, while at the start of the 2010s, it was the richness in natural resources, first of all hydrocarbons, that was perceived as the pivotal source of economic development and a major driver of geopolitical competition.²⁴ Those perceptions are crudely disproven by the deep shift in the global energy markets to renewable

²⁰ A useful summary of these issues is Brian L. Sittlow, "What's at stake with the rising competition in the Arctic?" Council on Foreign Relations, May 1, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/whats-stake-rising-competition-arctic>.

²¹ A typical example of this discontent is Timo Koivurova, "Is this the end of the Arctic Council and Arctic governance as we know it?" *The Polar Connection*, December 11, 2019, <http://polarconnection.org/arctic-council-governance-timo-koivurova/>.

²² Sergei Nikanorov, "Russian army as the Arctic civilization," *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (in Russian), March 17, 2020, https://www.ng.ru/armies/2020-03-17/100_arctic170320.html.

²³ The document is available at the Kremlin website, <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/62947>; an example of the expert effort to justify these ambitions is Valery Zhuravel, "Hot spots in the Arctic," *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (in Russian), June 28, 2020, https://www.ng.ru/dipkurer/2020-06-28/9_7896_arctic.html.

²⁴ That perspective is examined in Jonathan N. Markowitz, *Perils of Plenty: Arctic Resource Competition and the Return of the Great Game* (Oxford: OUP, 2020).

sources, even if some remnants of the illusions about the “treasure chest” of available petro-reserves are still discernible in Russian political discourse; the expectations related to the profitability and impact of the *Sevmorput* will quite probably also become disappointing in the very near future. Its presumed attractiveness as a shorter connection between North-Eastern Asia and Europe comparing with the traditional leg across the Indian Ocean is already shown to be non-existent because of the unpredictable navigation conditions and much improved capacity of the Suez Canal.²⁵ What produces a significant increase of traffic on the *Sevmorput* is the beginning of export shipment (primarily to the European market) of natural gas from the Sabetta terminal of the *Yamal-LNG* project, completed by the privately-owned *Novatek* company with the help of large-scale Chinese investments.²⁶ The operations require so much additional financing, including the fleet of ice-class LNG tankers, that for the Russian state budget this “strategic” project is a net liability, and the decline of global energy prices guarantees further losses in the years to come.²⁷

The lack of infrastructure along the *Sevmorput* cannot be compensated by the new military bases, which have no capacity for search-and-rescue and are difficult to supply, as the interruption of schedules caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic has proven.²⁸ The Northern Fleet performs only one late-summer cruise along this waterway, and in the new organizational structure, the bases as far east as the New Siberian islands (“Northern Shamrock” on the Kotelny island) are its responsibility, which causes a permanent logistical stretch. The delays in constructing new icebreakers mean that the ships built in the 1980s are kept in service beyond their retirement age and are pushed extra-hard to service the increasing maritime traffic.

Much of the Soviet-era infrastructure in the Russian High North is in a bad state of disrepair, and the collapse of a railway bridge in the Murmansk region has shown that incidents could result in complete breakdown of supply chains for major regions.²⁹ The military infrastructure also has multiple critical vulnerabilities, and the sinking of the PD-50 floating dock in late 2018 has left the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*, as well as other aging major surface combatants, without proper repairs, while the construction of a new dock is plagued by business conflicts.³⁰ By far, the greatest source of risk are the accidents involving nuclear weapon systems, and the frequency of such disasters grows as the demands for acceleration of new high-profile projects come on top of the orders to demonstrate the readiness of old assets. Two major accidents happened in summer 2019: in the first, an explosion and fire took place on board the nuclear submersible AS-31 (*Lozharik*) during docking with the carrier-submarine BS-136 *Orenburg* (converted *Delta-III* class), fortunately, the reactors were safely shut down, so no

²⁵ Steven Stashwick, “Russia’s Northern Sea Route faces setbacks, low interest,” *The Diplomat*, October 24, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/russias-northern-sea-route-faces-setbacks-low-interest/>.

²⁶ Malte Humpert, “As Arctic ice melts Russia conducts record-breaking delivery of LNG to China,” *High North News*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-ice-melts-russia-conducts-record-breaking-delivery-lng-china>.

²⁷ Atle Staalsen, “Companies build Arctic mega-projects, get billions in tax cuts,” *Barents Observer*, August 29, 2019, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic-industry-and-energy/2019/08/companies-build-arctic-mega-projects-get-billions-tax-cuts>.

²⁸ Atle Staalsen, “Virus outbreak troubles delivery to Arctic bases,” *Barents Observer*, June 26, 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/life-and-public/2020/06/virus-outbreak-troubles-delivery-arctic-bases>.

²⁹ Natalya Skorlygina and Olga Mordyushenko, “Murmansk is cut from the net,” *Kommersant* (in Russian), June 2, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4364852>.

³⁰ Alina Fadeeva, “Contractor building the dock for Admiral Kuznetsov has complained to the State Prosecution,” *RBC* (in Russian), May 21, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/business/21/05/2020/5ec285979a794788db079940>.

radiation leaks occurred.³¹ In the second instance, an explosion of a prototype nuclear-propelled 9M730 *Burevestnik* cruise missile at the Nyonoksa test range near Severodvinsk revealed serious flaws in the high-profile project, but President Putin promised to continue tests no matter what.³²

Russian command assumes that its readiness to accept and operate with far higher limits of risk constitutes an important advantage over the risk-averse West, and this assumption involves not only technical accidents but also the character of exercises and the plans for projecting power. Provocative maneuvering at sea and dangerous air intercepts are now routine features of combat training, which also include spectacular but entirely unnecessary performances, such as a high-altitude jump of a group of paratroopers on the Franz Josef Land.³³ Reckless tactical behavior is intended not only to make NATO forces extra cautious during their exercises but also to convey the impression that Moscow may execute equally bold strategic moves. The Svalbard archipelago, which is a sovereign Norwegian territory but has a special status according to the Spitsbergen Treaty (1920), is used by Moscow as a useful pressure point in aggressive diplomatic campaigns.³⁴ Russia keeps the Barentsburg settlement on the Svalbard, which can serve as a bridgehead for a swift amphibious operation aimed at capturing the nearby Norwegian city Longyearbyen, which is defenseless because the treaty prohibits deployment and basing of troops on the archipelago.³⁵

Overall, the infrastructure and environmental problems in the Russian High North are worsening and the strenuously built position of power in the Barents region is eroding, so Moscow needs to make a move soon in order to capitalize on the advantages it still has.

Prospects and Implications

The arrival of a complex crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has distorted many political plans and strategic assessments in Moscow, and it is in the High North that cuts in funding could expose and aggravate many vulnerabilities in Russia's posture. The Kremlin knows that the particular public attention to the Arctic, which it has deliberately cultivated for years, amplifies the impact of any disaster, as illustrated by the resonance from the diesel fuel spill near Norilsk. For many problems, such as anthrax outbreaks caused by the melting permafrost, international cooperation could have been the best answer, but many useful cross-border ties, particularly involving NGO activities, have been deliberately cut. Strategy-makers in Moscow have scant knowledge about new guidelines for U.S. Arctic policy set by the Biden administration, but they expect stronger commitment to joint efforts with NATO allies and greater resolve to counter Russia's attempts at projecting power.

The only resourceful partner for Russian development projects in the Arctic is China, but Moscow is consistently and increasingly reluctant to let Beijing to establish its own foothold in

³¹ Despite pledges to rehabilitate the unique submarine, it is probably damaged beyond repair; see Pavel Felgengauer, "Losharik submersible disaster handicaps Russian naval operations," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 11, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/losharik-submersible-disaster-handicaps-russian-naval-operations/>.

³² Many ugly details were revealed by journalist investigations; see Sergei Dobrynin and Mark Krutov, "It was a real panic: Continuation of the Nyonoksa investigation," *Svoboda.org* (in Russian), September 3, 2019, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30144456.html>.

³³ Jan Bratsky, "Historic jump over the Arctic," *TV-Zvezda* (in Russian), April 26, 2020, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/2020426555-NKFML.html>.

³⁴ Andrei Todorov, "The Spitsbergen Treaty: Colorful mosaic of interpretations," Russian International Affairs Council (in Russian), February 14, 2020, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/dogovor-o-shpitsbergene-yarkaya-mozaika-interpretatsiy/>.

³⁵ Pavel K. Baev, "Russia plays hard ball in the High North," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 10, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-plays-hard-ball-in-the-high-north/>.

the vast littoral of the Northern seas. Chinese companies comply with the rigid rules for the use of *Sevmorput* enforced by its administration in Moscow, but they are keen to explore every opportunity for expanding their presence. Beijing takes a long term view on the Arctic seeing it as presently unprofitable but a potentially important space for economic activity, complementing the Belt-and-Road initiative, which currently encounters various setbacks. It prefers to define the Arctic as a “global common” rather than an area of exclusive responsibility of the five littoral states and is not interested in securitization and militarization of regional affairs. This position is significantly different from the Russian stance, in which security comes first, and China effectively is the main force checking and restraining Moscow’s military activities.³⁶

The strategic situation around Russia’s borders could become dangerously unstable in the course and aftermath of the current crisis, but what makes the Arctic theater unique is that there is no external challenges (except imagined) to Russia’s national interests, while the High Command has at its disposal many combat-ready means of countering such challenges, which can be turned into means of projecting power. Domestic political discontent may produce strong incentives for experimenting with forceful actions, around which popular support can be mobilized. In the absence of the UN CLCS recommendation concerning the claims on expanding the continental shelf, Moscow may resort to a unilateral declaration of its rights, but this will not require any enforcement because the Arctic seabed will remain off-limits, while the navigation is not affected by such stance. What could constitute a more forceful move is a deployment of military forces or para-military units (such as *Rosgvardiya*) on the Spitsbergen, perhaps following a series of deliberately provoked incidents involving fishing and the expansion of settlements. The main goal of such aggressive moves would be to test the NATO resolve (particularly since the Norwegian position on asserting its sovereignty over Svalbard is not universally recognized) in the area where Russia has a significant conventional military superiority.³⁷

The most dangerous implications could emerge from Russia’s attempts at increasing the political applicability and strategic impacts of its modernized nuclear arsenal. The option with a first nuclear strike in a spasm of hostilities, as envisaged by the “escalate-to-deescalate” scenario, remains theoretical,³⁸ but such a crisis could develop from a situation with a catastrophic incident on a Russian nuclear submarine, which Moscow would be inclined to blame on a hostile act from the United States or NATO. New test of nuclear-propelled cruise missiles or underwater drones could involve disintegration of nuclear reactors, and Russian high command may find it necessary to cover up such accidents by blaming NATO and provoking a dangerous crisis. Every reasonable risk assessment and evaluation of consequences would rule out such blame game, but policy choices in Russian high command are shaped by rationale incomprehensible for Western counter-parts. Moscow may also opt for a resumption of nuclear testing on the Novaya Zemlya test site referring to the U.S. (as well as China’s) failure to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (1996) and presenting its act as pre-emption of U.S. preparations.

³⁶ Cautious but still useful analysis of these differences can be found in Dmitri Trenin, “Russia and China in the Arctic: Cooperation, Competition, and Consequences,” Carnegie Moscow Center, March 31, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81407>.

³⁷ James K. Wither, “NATO’s Arctic ‘Achilles’ Heel,” *The RUSI Journal*, 163, no. 5 (December 2018), 28-37 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2018.1552453?src=recsys&journalCode=rusi20>.

³⁸ Thorough evaluation of such options can be found in Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, Jeffrey Edmonds, et. al, “Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts,” *CNA Report*, April 2020, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf.

International security agenda is profoundly reshaped by the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but Russia is interested in re-focusing political and public attention on the Arctic matters, assuming that it has a position of power in this region, particularly in the Barents area. This position could acquire the quality of “antifragility,” as it becomes stronger and more operable in the situation of escalating tensions, so that Russia gains more opportunities for proactive moves, intended to assert its role as a pivotal global power.³⁹

Recommendations

Russia’s interest in sustaining and expanding international cooperation in the Arctic is not merely a camouflage for its military build-up, and it can be encouraged for containing its propensity to rely more on military, and particularly nuclear, instruments of policy. Some initiatives on expanding confidence-building measures can be advanced in order to make it possible for Moscow to see its forthcoming chairmanship in the Arctic Council as a success.

Even on the background of general escalation of competition between the United States and China, it is possible to explore common interests in the Arctic, which could include constraining Russia’s military ambitions. Beijing’s pronounced emphasis on economic enterprises and research projects fits well with initiatives on reducing and preventing further militarization of the Arctic. The EU can engage in joint endeavors with China in navigation in the Arctic seas seeking to circumvent Russian restrictive regulations on the maritime traffic on the Northern Sea Route. Limited U.S. Freedom-of-Navigation operations to the west of the Bering Strait might reinforce the common benefit from denying Russia the exclusive control over this maritime route.

Russia’s positions in the vast Arctic theater is very unbalanced, and it is essential to focus on neutralizing its possible pro-active moves in the directions, where it has a position of strength, while putting pressure on weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Among the latter, the unprotected base of strategic nuclear submarines on the Kamchatka Peninsula (which strictly speaking, is not a part of the Arctic theater, but is closely connected with it) is an obvious target. Russia is not able to organize anything resembling a “naval bastion” or an A2/AD “bubble” in the Sea of Okhotsk, so periodic appearances there of U.S. naval and air platforms would send a convincing signal.

In the Barents region, asymmetric and smart containment of Russia’s options for exploiting its dominance must be based on deeper U.S. cooperation with NATO partners (first of all, Norway, which takes the threat very seriously), as well as Sweden and Finland. It is impossible to build in this remote Northern flank a grouping of forces comparable with the forces available for the Russian Arctic command, but capabilities for monitoring and intelligence gathering can be combined with capabilities for rapid deployment and exercised frequently in various non-threatening formats. It is essential to demonstrate strategic resolve and readiness without aggravating tensions and unleashing the whirl of an Arctic version of the security dilemma.

³⁹ This rare quality is explored in Nassim N. Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (NY: Random House, 2014). I am grateful to Graeme Herd for suggesting this interpretation.

About The Author

Dr. Pavel K. Baev is a Research Professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). He is also a Senior Non-Resident Scholar at the Brookings Institutions (Washington, DC) and a Senior Research Associate with the French International Affairs Institute (IFRI, Paris). Pavel specializes in Russian military reform; Russian conflict management in the Caucasus and Central Asia; energy interests in Russia's foreign policy; and Russian relations with Europe and NATO.

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