



Drilling rig in Arctic Far North owned by Russian state oil company Rosneft

AP Images (Mikhail Japandze)

Russia's Arctic Strategy

AMBITIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

By KATARZYNA ZYSK

In recent years, the Arctic region has emerged as an issue in world affairs, and its strategic importance is growing swiftly. Both challenges and opportunities from rapidly changing climatic conditions in the region have contributed to give the Arctic a place high on the domestic and foreign policy agendas of many key countries and organizations.

Russia stands out as one of the most determined Arctic players. A focus on the region features increasingly in Russian domestic and foreign policy discourse, particularly since Vladimir Putin's second presidential term. The importance of the Arctic to Russia on the one hand, and growing international interest on the other, has fueled Russia's determination to make its role as a central Arctic nation eminently clear by political, economic, and military means. In September 2008, Moscow endorsed the "fundamentals of state policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the period up to 2020 and beyond," which was aimed at preserving Russia's role as a "leading

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Arctic power.”¹ The adoption of the document has further highlighted the country’s increased interest in the region. The policy paper, to date available only in Russian, has not received much analytical attention, unlike other key Russian documents.

This article addresses elements of Russia’s plans for the Arctic in terms of economic policy and legal and military issues and devotes particular attention to the differences between the current Russian approach to security in the region and the attitudes presented in the previous Arctic strategy adopted in 2001.² Subsequently, it examines the geopolitical context of the Russian Arctic policy and sheds light on the country’s foreign policy rhetoric and its impact on the regional security environment. Finally, it assesses prospects for implementation of the Russian

policy objectives and draws implications of the findings for regional security.

Background

The Arctic policy document was published in March 2009, 6 months after it was signed. In contrast with the widespread media coverage that Russian activity in the Arctic was getting only a few months before, the document was posted by the authorities without further notice and publicity, and it was immediately filed in the archives section of the Russian Security Council Web site. Unlike the previous Arctic policy document of 2001, it refers sparingly to Russia’s hard security interests and plans in the region. It also abstains from the assertive, belligerent rhetoric frequently used by Moscow in recent years.

The Russian authorities have ambitions to address one of the biggest challenges in the country’s approach toward the vast northern regions—the lack of a coherent strategy. Despite attempts to revive the state

the version of the document presented to the public reflects areas of particular interest and aspirations rather than presenting a consistent strategy to pursue objectives consciously and systematically over time

policy, its objectives, formulated in 2001, were not carried out with sufficient assiduity, something Russian politicians admit themselves.³ Can the newly designed document make a difference?

The fundamentals of the Arctic policy were designed under the auspices of the influential Russian Security Council, whose permanent members include the most important centers of power, such as the president, prime minister, ministers of interior, foreign affairs, and defense, and the directors of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (*Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, or FSB) and the Foreign Intelligence Service. In drafting the document, most of the ministries and other parts of the executive and legislative branch responsible for various aspects of the Arctic policy have been involved, supported by leading experts and academics. The version of the document presented to the public sheds light on how the Russian authorities think about the Arctic and reflects areas of particular interest and aspirations rather than presenting a consistent strategy to pursue objectives consciously and systematically over time.

The document gives certain general policy guidelines. The final shape of the Russian Arctic policy, however, will depend on detailed programs formulated in the appropriate ministries and governmental agencies on the basis of the document and subsequently on their implementation—or lack thereof. As experience with the previous ambitious plans shows, achieving the goals may take longer than scheduled, if they are achieved at all.

Economic Development

The Russian leadership clearly emphasizes the importance of the Arctic to the coun-



try's wealth and competitiveness on global markets as a major source of revenue, mainly from production of energy. As much as 20 percent of Russia's gross domestic product (GDP) and 22 percent of the total Russian export is generated north of the Arctic Circle.⁴ The region's economic promise lies primarily in its rich natural resources and its potential as an attractive maritime transit passageway. The ultimate objective of the state policy is to transform the Arctic into "Russia's foremost strategic base for natural resources" by 2020.⁵

The Arctic is clearly vital to Russia's relevance in world affairs as well. The role of energy reserves in strengthening the country's position and influence on the international stage has been emphasized in the national security strategy up to 2020 that was adopted in May 2009. According to Russian sources, up to 90 percent of the hydrocarbon reserves found on the entire Russian continental shelf is in the Arctic, with 66.5 percent located in the Western part, in the Barents and Kara Seas.⁶ The project for Russia's energy strategy up to 2030 points out that resources located in the Arctic seas and in the Russian northern regions could compensate for dwindling deposits in existing fields based in Western Siberia, where a sharp decline in oil and gas production is expected in the next 20 years.⁷ Consequently, one of the main goals of the Arctic policy is to increase extraction of the natural resources in the region.⁸

In September 2008, the Russian Security Council gave assurances that the government had earmarked "serious economic support" for implementation of the Arctic policy. However, prospects for developing the region under current economic circumstances are poor.⁹ The Russian Ministry of Economic Development and Trade announced that the Russian GDP dropped 10.1 percent in the first 6 months of 2009. The World Bank assessed that Russia experienced in 2009 "larger-than-expected losses in output and employment, and a sharp rise in poverty." Although the Russian economy might grow 3.2 percent in 2010, experts warn that long-term sustainable growth can be achieved only with the introduction of comprehensive structural reforms, including diversification of the economy.¹⁰

The financial downturn and relatively low energy prices have affected investments in the Arctic and will slow the pace of development of the petroleum industry in the region. The Shtokman gas field in the Barents Sea and Prirazlomnoe oil field in the Pechora Sea

will be Russia's first Arctic offshore fields in production. Due to a dramatic drop in exports and revenues, Gazprom suffered serious losses and accordingly cut its investment plans for 2010 by about 50 percent. In July 2009, the company officially confirmed that it was delaying the launch of Shtokman, one of the biggest offshore gas fields in the world and a major driving force for future Russian economic activity in the Arctic. Gazprom's partner in this project, French Total, stated in October 2009 that Shtokman would not be profitable with the current gas prices.¹¹ With relatively low oil prices, the Russian government may encounter similar problems in other onshore gas fields in the gas-rich Yamal Peninsula, which are to be developed first.

One of Russia's fundamental goals in the Arctic is the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a wholly integrated transportation link and a central element in maritime

connections between Europe and Asia. The importance of the NSR has been highlighted in a range of recently adopted strategic documents, which point to a "sharply increasing role" of the NSR in connection with growing extraction of the Arctic's natural reserves. Moscow perceives this shipping channel as the sole means of transportation for the important industries located in Russian coastal and insular Arctic regions.

By 2015, Russia aims to have established and developed an infrastructure and system of management of communications for the NSR to secure Euro-Asiatic transit. The expected increase in Russian petroleum activity will lead to a sharp boost in the level of shipping through the NSR westward, mainly from the Barents and Kara Seas. Some Russian forecasts expect that the cargo flowing through the NSR may reach a volume of 5 to 6 million tons, and increase to 13 to 15 million tons by 2015. For

Sailor inspects *USS Texas* near North Pole



U.S. Navy

comparison, at its peak in 1987, the transport volume through the NSR reached 7 million tons, while in the 1990s it diminished gradually to a relatively stable 1.5 to 2 million tons.

To meet the requirements of the increased economic activity in the Arctic and to ensure restructuring of the volume of maritime freight, Russia recognizes as a prerequisite the development of modern harbors with appropriate infrastructures and the acquisition of new nuclear-powered icebreakers together with assets for an air support and rescue fleet.¹² Although Russia still has the world's largest and most powerful icebreaker fleet, limited maintenance and construction capacity has caused general deterioration since the 1990s. The seven active (and world's only) nuclear-powered icebreakers constructed in the 1970s and 1980s are aging quickly, and all except one will be decommissioned by 2020.¹³ Viacheslav Ruksha, head of Atomflot, which manages the icebreakers, warned that Russia will face a "collapse" of these capacities in 2016–2017 if a new generation nuclear-powered icebreaker is not ready by that time.¹⁴

The Russian authorities have taken steps to address the problem and charged the State

Nuclear Energy Corporation (Rosatom) with development of a long-term plan for construction of new vessels. Rosatom's director, Sergei Kirienko, argues that Russia has to build at least three to four third-generation icebreakers in the next few years to maintain the country's potential in the Arctic. The first was due to be launched in 2010. Nevertheless, the economic downturn has left its mark on this project. In November 2009, it was reported that funding for the new vessel will only figure in the state budget for 2011. Given that construction of one icebreaker takes 5 to 6 years, with the current pace of rejuvenating the fleet, Russia's capacity to support its economic activities in the region is likely to be substantially reduced by 2020, making implementation of the Arctic strategy less realistic.

Legal Questions

Closely intertwined with the importance of the Arctic to Russia are the country's efforts to settle the outer limits of the continental shelf in the region beyond 200 nautical miles, noted in the Arctic document as a top priority to be accomplished in the period 2011 to 2015.¹⁵ In this context, the government is clear that the partition of the Arctic will be carried

out entirely within the framework of international law.

Russia filed its first request with the United Nations (UN) Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in 2001, but the board demanded more evidence. Consequently, Moscow attaches importance to scientific research in the region (geological, geophysical, cartographical, hydrographical, and other) since the results will play a decisive role in the accomplishment of the legal process.¹⁶ On the basis of the research, Russia intends to develop a competitive economic activity within extraction and transportation of energy resources in the region.

Unlike the 2001 strategy, the Russian government highlights in the new Arctic document its longstanding position on the legal status of the NSR, thus reflecting its expected increasing significance. The document states

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Prime Minister Putin speaks with foreign investors about developing untapped gas region in Yamal Peninsula

AP Images (RIA-Novosti, Alexei Druzhinin)

that the NSR is a “national transportation route” under Russia’s jurisdiction. Navigation via this sailing channel is to be carried out in compliance with Russian laws and the country’s international agreements. In the federal statute of July 31, 1998, the NSR is defined as “a historically existing national unified transport route of the Russian Federation in the Arctic.” It includes navigation via straits within and between the Russian Arctic archipelagos, including the Vilkitski, Shokalski, Dmitri Laptev, and Sannikov Straits. Russia labels these straits as part of its internal waters.

The Russian claim to jurisdiction over the NSR is based on article 234 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The article “gives coastal states the right to unilaterally adopt and enforce non-discriminatory laws and environmental regulations in their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) where ice coverage and particularly severe climate conditions cause exceptional hazards to navigation, and where pollution could cause major harm to the ecological balance.”¹⁷ According to the Russian regulations, all vessels intending to enter the NSR should give advance notification to Russian authorities and submit an application for guiding, which implies paying a fee for using the route.

The question of the legal status of the NSR complicates the fact that it is not a single shipping channel, but a series of different shipping lanes stretching between 2,200 and 2,900 nautical miles, depending on ice conditions.¹⁸ According to Russian experts, “the integral nature of the NSR as a transport route is not affected by the fact that individual portions of it, at one time or another, may pass outside boundaries of internal waters, territorial waters and EEZ, i.e., it may pass into the high seas.”¹⁹ The NSR may thus include sea lanes running beyond Russia’s EEZ as long as part of the voyage includes waters under undisputed Russian jurisdiction.

Other important actors in the region may regard the Russian interpretation as somewhat controversial—particularly the United States, which considers the straits of the NSR as international and thus subject to the right of transit passage. This position was recently confirmed in the U.S. Arctic region policy document adopted in January 2009.²⁰ On different occasions, Russia has warned that attempts by other countries to change the NSR’s legal status and transform it into an international transit corridor would be in conflict with Russia’s national interests. As

the importance and value of this transport channel are likely to increase in the future, the question of its legal status may become a matter of contention.

Military Issues

The Russian authorities highlight the need to make necessary preparations for the security challenges that may derive from the expected increase in economic and other activities in the Arctic. Hence, they devote much attention to development of search and

to protect the country’s national interests “in various military and political situations.”²³ The Russian authorities, however, underscore that the main purpose of such military preparations is to combat terrorism at sea, smuggling, illegal migration, and unsustainable use of aquatic biological resources. Hence, the FSB is to play a central role in protecting national security interests in the region. A strong emphasis has been put on the development of a coastal defense infrastructure and advanced technological capabilities, including satel-

Canadian Forces sovereignty patrol, 500 miles north of Arctic Circle, receives fuel



U.S. Army (Leonardo Torres)

rescue capabilities, surveillance, and navigation systems to provide safety for and control of the economic, military, and ecological activities.²¹ One of the goals of the Russian policy is the creation of a comprehensive security system by 2015, including early warning, prevention, and crisis management capabilities. Russia also emphasizes a need for cooperation with other Arctic countries and defines strengthening efforts to establish a unified regional search and rescue system as a strategic priority.²²

Russia stresses the importance of a continued military presence as essential for securing national interests in the Arctic, although Russia’s defense policy in the region is discussed in the Arctic document only in vestigial form. The document vaguely states that Russia needs to maintain a “necessary combat potential” in the North and reveals plans to establish special Arctic military formations

lites and radars. In September 2009, the FSB announced that Arctic formations were established in border guard units in Arkhangelsk and Murmansk and were patrolling along the NSR for the first time in many years.

The document has thus to some extent confirmed information released by representatives of the Russian Ministry of Defense in mid-2008 concerning adjustments being made to the combat plans and military organization of the three military districts bordering the Arctic: Leningrad, Siberian, and Far Eastern. They announced also that an Arctic *spetsnaz* (special purpose forces) would be formed to support Russia’s northern policy. Russian military and political leaders have argued that defense of national interests from the northwest strategic direction has become more relevant and pointed also at other existing motivations behind such military preparations. They have noted the international

attention to the military potential and energy resources of the Arctic as factors calling for an immediate strengthening of Russia's positions in order to secure the region.

Russia's approach to Arctic affairs has been of two minds and thus sometimes confusing and difficult to interpret. Self-assertive and occasionally aggressive rhetoric has alternated with more conciliatory signals and practical compliance with international law. The tone of the Arctic document is moderate and stands in contrast to the harsh language previously used by Russia concerning various activities in the region, in particular in the military field. It not only refrains from belligerent language, but it also omits issues that could be contentious or alarming. Apart from the few vague indications concerning military plans, references to the hard security sphere in the region are absent. The Russian authorities clearly highlight the importance of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the region and the need to strengthen good relations with neighboring countries, in particular the "Arctic five."²⁴

retained its special importance to Russia in a more traditional definition of security.

The military strategic importance of the Northwest with its direct and easy access to the world's oceans has paradoxically been strengthened since the Cold War due to the geopolitical changes that limited Russia's access to the Baltic and the Black Seas. The Arctic is still an important home base and a suitable operational area for the Russian navy, in particular for its most powerful part, the Northern Fleet and the sea-based component of the Russian nuclear triad. The nuclear deterrent has maintained the key role in Russia's military strategy, strengthened by its weakness in conventional forces. Its continued importance has been corroborated by the priority given to modernization of the Russian nuclear arsenals, including the building of eight fourth-generation *Borei*-class ballistic missile submarines planned to be completed by 2015.

Russia's intensifying of naval and air activity in the Arctic has taken place simultaneously with its increased and global focus

potential for an increase in rivalry over energy resources is particularly high. A conviction that the contest for natural reserves may in the future pose a threat to Russia has been widespread in military circles. The General Staff in June 2009 described the "struggle for energy resources in the Arctic" as one of the most important challenges and argued that the region should be included in the new revised European security architecture.

Although Russian military activity in the Arctic has received less publicity and attention in the official rhetoric in 2009 than in preceding years, it has not become less important. The number of flights of strategic bombers along the Norwegian coast, despite the economic hardship, has been kept at a similar level as in 2008.²⁷ Russia has also continued to conduct large-scale military drills in the region, such as Ladoga-2009, which involved all units of the Leningrad Military District and some units of the Siberian Military District, interior troops, border guards, and the Northern and Baltic fleets. In compliance with the Russian threat perception, one of the training scenarios included protection of oil and gas installations in northwest Russia.

Among Moscow's military plans, which once realized could increase its striking power in the Arctic, is a major naval build-up aimed at strengthening blue-water capabilities, including, among others, 5 to 6 aircraft carrier squadrons, 20 new multipurpose corvettes (*Steregushchii* class), and 20 frigates (*Admiral S. Gorshkov* class). With few exceptions, however, these plans so far are only ambitions. Despite the clearly increased military activity and improved combat potential of the armed forces, these developments should be seen against the background of a still weak military. The pace of modernization has been slow, although a radical characteristic of military reforms being implemented, aimed at moving away from a mass mobilization army to a permanent readiness brigade model, reveals a new quality in the Russian approach. Much of these plans will depend on development in the Russian economy and the leadership's ability to transform and modernize it.

Geopolitics

As the example of the Russian Arctic security policy discourse has shown in recent years, the manner in which communication transpires matters and has the force to shape the reality. The sometimes tough Russian talk and behavior, including not only verbal

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The difference in approach to hard security in the Arctic is striking in comparison with the 2001 Arctic document, where issues of military security were understood in terms of zero-sum game and classical Realpolitik, assuming that states, particularly great powers, are in principle mutually hostile and competitive. The document stated that "all kinds of activity in the northern regions are in the highest degree connected to providing of national security." It urged steps to "actively counter strengthening of military infrastructure and enlargement of military activities" in the region by other countries and actors.²⁵ The document underlined the military strategic importance of the region to Russia's defense and pointed out that almost 20,000 kilometers of the state border were in the Arctic Ocean and its protection and defense imposed particular problems.²⁶

Security of the border remains prominent in the new Arctic document. However, it approaches these issues in relation to soft security challenges, with the discussion of the hard security sphere being nearly absent. Despite this change of tone, the region has

on the region's energy potential. At the same time, in particular since the end of President Putin's second term, the military has been given an enhanced role in efforts to return to the world stage as a great power. The resumption of strategic bomber flights along the Norwegian coast and in the Pacific in 2007 and the presence of the Northern Fleet in the Arctic on a regular basis in 2008 have been visible expressions of this recent trend. The increased activity has been a result of the normalization of Russian military training after a long period of stagnation. However, Russian authorities have at least initially connected symbolic and political significance to the intensified military activity, which was accompanied by an assertive rhetoric.

In the Russian assessment, there is no imminent threat of direct aggression against Russian territory or a large-scale military confrontation in the region. Nonetheless, Moscow does not rule out the possibility of competition for hydrocarbon reserves developing into small-scale tensions involving use of military power. Its security strategy states that the continental shelf in the Barents Sea and other parts of the Arctic are among regions where a

statements but also military posturing, have attained one of its goals and reminded the world that Russia remains a key factor for political developments in the region. On the other hand, responses from the world have shown that this strategy has had the potential to harm rather than promote Russia's interests abroad.

One of the outcomes of the Russian policy has been to strengthen the international focus on military security in the Arctic. The occasionally aggressive rhetoric has lowered the threshold of sensitivity in other states toward Russia's moves in the hard security sphere and has raised, particularly in polar states, the question of their own military presence and preparedness—an outcome that Russia can hardly see as being in its interest. The perception of Russia as a potentially unpredictable player and security concern has been strengthened by the experience of the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008, which triggered security assessments in a range of countries. One example is that even the few modest sentences in the Arctic policy document concerning Russia's military plans immediately spurred speculation about “militarization” of the region. Russian authorities

have repeatedly rebuffed such accusations and given assurances that Moscow would regulate Arctic issues through negotiations and with respect for the rules of international law.

Canada has been among the most vocal states in articulating its intentions to upgrade its military capabilities with regard to tasks in the Arctic. Commenting on the ground-sea-air joint Operation *Nanook*, Defence Minister Peter MacKay stated that the operation was

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intended “to very clearly send a message, and to announce with authority, that we intend to use the Arctic . . . and that our presence there is going to continue to expand.”²⁸ The intention to strengthen military capabilities in the Arctic has also been signalled in Denmark. A defense plan for the period 2010–2014 approved in June 2009 envisages establishment of an Arctic military command structure and task force.

One of Russia's major foreign policy objectives in recent years has aimed at limiting the presence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the proximity of Russia's borders, included in the Arctic. But the outcome in the region has been quite the opposite. As stated in October 2009 by NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe Admiral James Stavridis, the Russian “assertive conduct in the Arctic and a muscle-flexing”

were among the factors “grabbing the attention of increasingly wary NATO leaders.”²⁹ He described the High North as an area of growing strategic concern.

The sometimes assertive responses from the other Arctic states stimulate Russia's counterresponses and strengthen the rationale for an increased military presence. Such mutually reinforcing dynamics may in the longer term lead to a stronger militarization

Diver from University of Washington prepares to recover torpedo during U.S. Navy Ice Exercise 2009



U.S. Navy (Tiffini M. Jones)

of the region, potentially creating new sources of tensions. Russian authorities have repeatedly expressed their discontent with the focus on hard security in the Arctic and warned against its militarization, indicating measures it might take to address the challenges implied by such developments. According to Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Makarov, those measures would be reflected in assignments given to the Northern and Pacific Fleets and the sea-based strategic nuclear deterrent.

The apparent adjustments in the Russian Arctic rhetoric—less publicity for the military posturing and stronger emphasis on conciliatory positions—may provide better ground for closer cooperation and facilitate diplomatic progress. Focus on common interests and areas where parties involved need each other can be a way of improving international relations in the region. One of the areas where international cooperation is welcomed by Russia (and is unavoidable in order to address challenges emerging in the simultaneously hostile and highly vulnerable environment) is marine safety, search and rescue, and crisis management. None of the Arctic countries has the complete spectrum of assets needed to cover the whole geographic area and respond on their own to asymmetrical and soft security challenges. Apart from being necessary, such cooperation has a strong confidence-building potential, still in shortage in the region as the recent military and security dynamics have shown.

Tentative Conclusions

While it is still too early to assess whether the increased Russian focus on the Arctic translates into a more coherent approach and what chance the Arctic policy objectives have of being implemented, it has become clear that the already announced delays, mainly due to financial constraints, will make it difficult if not impossible to achieve the strategic goals in the indicated timeframe.

In a long-term perspective, the widely expected growing global demand for gas and oil, combined with dwindling reserves in existing fields, will argue for exploration of new deposits in the North and offshore. Climate change will most probably continue, opening the Arctic to increased economic and industrial activity. Together with their geopolitical implications, these developments argue for Russia's continued efforts to strengthen its presence, in accordance with reasoning expressed by Deputy Prime Minister Sergei

Ivanov: "If we do not develop the Arctic, it will be developed without us."³⁰ Nonetheless, expecting the vision of the Russian Arctic as a thriving economic hub for energy production and transpolar maritime transit to come true by 2020 may be too optimistic.

The Arctic document has confirmed what Russian leaders have reiterated with increasing intensity: the region's importance, first and foremost in economic and security dimensions. One conclusion to be drawn from the ambitious economic projects is that Russia, for purely material reasons, has an interest in maintaining the region as an area of international cooperation and in preserving its most important asset as the country's future economic engine—its stability.

At the same time, the growing importance of the Arctic both to Russia and the world is generating new driving forces for the Russian military presence. As economic activities increase, Russia will need to protect the significant assets that it is placing in the region. Thus, its military presence is likely to increase further in the future. Moscow's continued reliance on the nuclear deterrent, together with the focus on enhancing global naval power projection capabilities, indicates that the military strategic importance of the Arctic to Russia will remain high for the foreseeable future. **JFQ**

NOTES

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