

# Russian Strategic Interest in Arctic Heats Up as Ice Melts

COLONEL (COL) ROBERT A. McVEY, JR



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## The Author

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“This region [the Arctic] has traditionally been and remains in the sphere of our special interests. Practically all aspects of national security are concentrated here: military-political, economic, technological, environmental, and resource.”

—Vladimir Putin<sup>1</sup>

**A**lthough Russian President Vladimir Putin now repeatedly highlights the Arctic’s strategic importance, Russia largely ignored the region for almost 16 years following the Soviet Union’s collapse. In 2008, 2013, and 2020, Russia issued national Arctic strategies. Despite its dramatic February 2022 escalation of its invasion of Ukraine, Russia continues to commit significant military and fiscal resources to successfully execute its national Arctic strategy. In 2007, Russian politicians and explorers even dramatically used a submarine to plant a titanium Russian flag on the Arctic seabed under the North Pole.<sup>2</sup> Why did Russia’s Arctic approach change so dramatically?

Acknowledging the difficulties of judging Russian actions—which Sir Winston Churchill described as a “riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma”—he concluded that an understanding of Russian national interest is paramount.<sup>3</sup> The goal for this analysis is to highlight why the Arctic region is strategically important for Russia, especially its economy. Additionally, this paper will

describe the diplomatic, information, legal, and military tools of national power that Russia is employing to pursue, promote, and protect its Arctic strategic interests. Finally, and most importantly, this analysis will provide options and analysis for the future direction of U.S. Army security cooperation initiatives with Russia and the other Arctic states. The author hopes to persuade the transatlantic policy community of the importance of considering Russian strategic interests and views in formulating and implementing the U.S. Army’s Arctic strategy. It will be argued that the U.S. Army’s security cooperation in the region should continue to expand, not only through bilateral programs with the respective allied and partner Arctic countries, but also through multilateral programs that may, in the future, include Russia.

To achieve its goals, this analysis necessarily simplifies the complex reality of national strategy development and implementation. It acknowledges that economic objectives are not the only (nor at times, the most important) inputs to

Russian national strategy formulation. Russian-American relations are not always the highest priority for Russian or U.S. policymakers. Moreover, these relations are not developed in a vacuum; they are affected by relations with other states. In addition, the Arctic is often not the focus of either Russian or American national strategy. However, Russian-U.S. relations in the Arctic have a significant impact on both countries' national security, their strategies in other regions, and by implication, will inevitably also have implications for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

## **Importance for the U.S. of Understanding Russian Arctic Strategic Interests**

Understanding Russian strategic interests in the Arctic is important to U.S. policymakers because significant international threats to U.S. national security still emanate from Russia. With respect to the threat Russia poses to U.S. national security, Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, leading American analysts of U.S.-Russian relations, conclude that:

Compared with China, Russia also poses a more significant danger to the U.S. homeland. For one thing, it remains the United States' preeminent nuclear threat, despite China's growing arsenal of strategic weapons.

The same goes for Russia's ability to reach the continental United States with long-range conventional missiles. Russia also has more troops stationed abroad than does China, with bases in the Caucasus, Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, putting its military in regular proximity to U.S. and NATO forces. When it comes to indirect warfare, Moscow's record of election interference and hacking demonstrates that it can and will employ emerging technologies against the United States and its allies. It is also worth underscoring that the Kremlin can endanger U.S. interests on the cheap. Russia's military interventions in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya have been limited and inexpensive. So, too, are its cyberattacks and disinformation efforts.<sup>4</sup>

Although some U.S. policymakers and analysts would prefer to characterise Russia as simply a declining regional power, with limited global consequence, in order to justify dramatically shifting U.S. national security efforts to focus solely on China as a rising power, this approach is unlikely to be successful.<sup>5</sup> Rather, U.S. policymakers should not only acknowledge the long-term perspective of Russia "not as a declining power but as a persistent one, willing and able to threaten U.S.

national security interests” globally, and specifically within the Arctic, but also should develop proper authorities and allocate sufficient resources to appropriately deal with Russia’s malign activities.<sup>6</sup>

While the region contains only approximately six percent of the Earth’s land mass and a relatively insignificant portion of the global population, the Arctic wields a “disproportionate impact on global security due to its economic potential and strategic location.”<sup>7</sup>

Rising temperatures and melting ice resulting from global warming have permitted increased economic and military activity in the long-frozen and largely inaccessible Arctic region. Some analysts contend that Russia will continue “to be interested in cooperating in the Arctic region on matters of mutual interest to advance its regional leadership and economic agenda.”<sup>8</sup> Less optimistic commentators predict that the Arctic region “could slide into a new era featuring jurisdictional conflicts, increasingly severe clashes over the extraction of natural resources, and the emergence of a new ‘great game’ among the global powers.”<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of potential cooperation or competition, the possibility of conflict between great powers remains ever present. Heightened Russian economic and military activity in the Arctic increases the probability

of a miscalculation escalating into unintentional armed conflict. Economic interests have catapulted the Arctic region to the forefront of Russian strategic importance. By not understanding and taking into account Russian national strategic interests, U.S. policymakers risk further damaging U.S.-Russian relations, failing to achieve U.S. national strategic objectives, and also making the world more unstable, unpredictable, and dangerous. To assuage fears of the unknown and thereby make the world safer, Western observers must attempt to understand the destination towards which Russia is steering its Arctic strategy.

## **Russian Economic Interests in the Arctic**

Russia clearly views the Arctic as strategically important for promoting, pursuing, and protecting its economic interests. Russia’s Arctic region will be critical for its economic survival over the next 30 years. The Arctic accounts for nearly 20 percent of Russia’s GDP, 22 percent of its exports, and more than 10 percent of all investment in Russia.<sup>10</sup> With respect to the Arctic, Russia is aggressively pursuing strategic economic objectives in three important sectors: energy resources and minerals, transportation, and food security.

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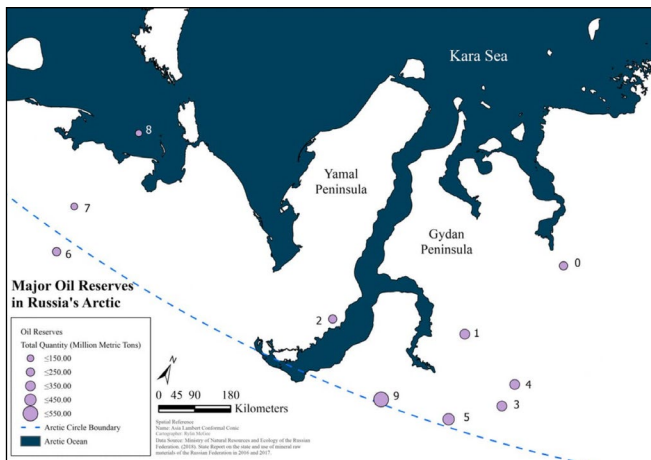
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### **Energy**

Russia's energy industry is the largest single economic stakeholder pursuing Arctic regional development. Russia's economic security is inextricably linked to its energy industry with “oil and gas accounting for as much 60 percent of Russia's export revenues and upward of 30 percent of its federal budget.”<sup>11</sup> Failed efforts to diversify its economy have forced Russia to double down on the extraction of oil and natural gas resources. In 2008, U.S. Geological Survey scientists estimated the Arctic contains “90 billion barrels of oil, 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids” that may remain to be discovered, of which “approximately 84 percent is expected to occur in offshore areas.”<sup>12</sup> Experts estimate that the Russian Arctic may contain more than 85.1 trillion cubic meters of natural gas and 17.3 billion tons of oil including gas condensate.<sup>13</sup> While most current Russian crude oil production revolves around the West Siberia and Urals-Volga regions, the Russian Arctic will play a critical role in the country's future production, as it contains the greatest portion of Russia's undiscovered oil and natural gas resources.<sup>14</sup> Arctic development could potentially increase Russia's known oil deposit reserves by another half and could account for more than 20 percent of Russia's total oil output by 2030.<sup>15</sup> The potential benefits are so critical to its economic security and great power status that Russia is not dissuaded by the technological challenges and projected high costs of discovering, extracting, and bringing to market Arctic offshore oil and natural gas resources.<sup>16</sup> Besides oil and natural gas, the Russian Arctic is an important source of rare earth metals (dysprosium, neodymium, and praseodymium) that are key components of advanced and emerging technologies.<sup>17</sup>

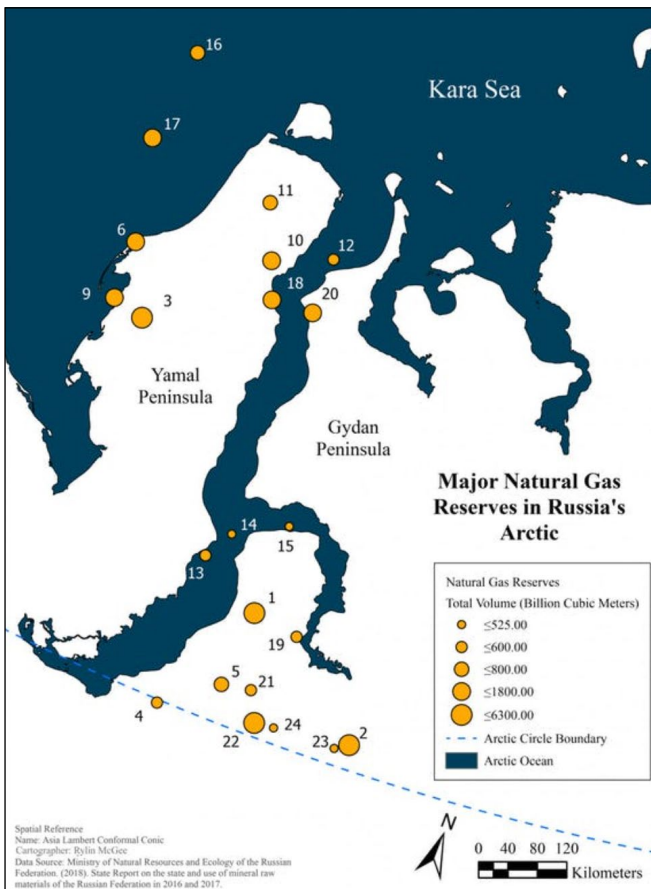


Figure 1. Major Oil Reserves in Russia's Arctic<sup>18</sup>



Map by Rylin McGee. Reprinted with permission from [The Arctic Institute](http://TheArcticInstitute.org)

Figure 2. Major Natural Gas Reserves in Russia's Arctic<sup>19</sup>



Map by Rylin McGee. Reprinted with permission from [The Arctic Institute](http://TheArcticInstitute.org)

### **Transportation**

Although oil and natural gas extraction is by far the leading driver, Russia is pursuing strategic economic interests in the Arctic, not only by exploiting energy resources and minerals but also by increasing utilisation of the strategically important Northern Sea Route (NSR). Rapidly melting Arctic ice has some analysts touting the NSR's commercial viability because shipping route distances could be reduced by as much as 40 percent.<sup>20</sup> This would greatly reduce both shipping times and costs. Other experts question the NSR's commercial importance due to naturally occurring draft limitations, as well as Russian imposed transit fees and strict regulations.<sup>21</sup> Undeterred by less optimistic predictions, Putin officially established the goal of increasing NSR shipments from 31.5 million tons in 2019 to 130 million tons in 2035.<sup>22</sup> While unlikely to fully achieve this lofty goal, increased NSR shipping will bring considerable economic benefits to Russia's Arctic and will allow Russia to exert significant influence over one of the leading global economic drivers: international shipping.

### **Food**

In addition to energy resources, minerals, and transportation, the Arctic's melting ice provides Russia with an important opportunity to improve its food security through food source diversification. An already critical food source, Russia's Arctic waters currently account for

nearly 33 percent of its annual fish harvest.<sup>23</sup> Russia anticipates that changing climate conditions will permit increased commercial fishing in its Arctic waters.<sup>24</sup> Possible increased fishing harvests from the Arctic could not only reduce Russian reliance on food imports but also increase Russian fish exports that would then be transported abroad via the NSR.

## **Why Russia Has Failed to Become Less Reliant on Oil and Natural Gas**

Although transportation and food security are strategically important economic interests that Russia is promoting, pursuing, and protecting within the Arctic, its energy industry is by far the leading driver of Russian Arctic regional development, due to its vitally significant contribution to Russia's federal budget and ability to apply resources to the security sector. While oil has long been central to the prosperity and security of all nations, the discovery of West Siberian fields, the 1973 Oil Crisis, and the construction of pipelines to Western Europe made oil and natural gas crucial for the Russian economy starting in the 1970s.<sup>25</sup> Some scholars claim to have found evidence supporting a natural resource curse hypothesis, which refers to the "tendency of natural resource exporting countries to underperform economically, have nondemocratic governments as well

as poor governance, and a higher propensity for involvement in conflicts.”<sup>26</sup> One potential explanation for the natural resource curse phenomenon is known as the “Dutch Disease”, whereby the discovery of oil and natural gas resources makes a country’s energy and services sectors more attractive and its currency appreciation makes its manufactured goods more expensive. This, in turn, contributes to a “de-industrialisation process that makes the economy extremely dependent on the resource sector and may reduce the [economic] growth potential.”<sup>27</sup> Sceptics have challenged the natural resource curse theory by highlighting examples of natural resource exporting countries that are thriving economically and politically.<sup>28</sup> While Nigeria is often recognised as a prominent example of an oil-rich state stuck in the natural resource curse’s “vicious circle of conflicts, inefficiency, and corruption”, Russia’s fellow Arctic states—Norway and Canada—are often heralded as shining examples of oil and gas rich states that have managed to use their natural resource abundance as the “basis for their long-term stable prosperity.”<sup>29</sup> Russia’s failure to diversify its economy to become less reliant on oil and natural gas is clearly a result of deliberate policy choices and not a natural resource curse or “Dutch disease.”

The 1980s witnessed the collapse of oil prices while production decreased, and the move from Baku to fields in Urals-Volga and West Siberia made both extracting and bringing oil and natural gas to market more costly.<sup>30</sup> These Soviet era legacies defined the challenges that Russian reformers faced in the 1990s, when leaders sought to carry out the following radical reforms: price liberalisation and financial stabilisation, privatisation, and creation of new institutions.<sup>31</sup> The IMF and World Bank worked closely with Russia in the hopes that economic reforms

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complementing political reforms would transform Russia into a benign and stable nation.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, Russian reformers took a “shortcut to capitalism, creating a market economy without the underlying institutions, and institutions without the underlying infrastructure.”<sup>33</sup> By the late 1990s the Russian economy was in freefall, with gross national product decreasing by 50 percent, output dropping by 40 percent, male life expectancy and real incomes significantly declining, and 55 percent of the population living in absolute deprivation.<sup>34</sup>

Putin’s economic policies are a response to the perceived failures of the 1990s reforms. After Putin took office, Russian gross domestic product grew by 94 percent and per capita gross domestic product doubled from 1999-2008 because of high oil prices, the Herman Gref reforms, the reallocation process of labour and capital to market uses, and a demographic dividend.<sup>35</sup> Russia largely funded this transformation using rents collected from the oil and natural gas sectors of the economy. This transformation period coincided with skyrocketing oil and natural gas prices in the early 2000s that resulted in extremely high oil and natural gas rents from 2006-2008. Some observers note that the “pie is shrinking and internal conflicts between different factions are

rising.”<sup>36</sup> The Russian Arctic provides Putin with a potential new oil and natural gas source to simultaneously increase the size of the “pie” and delay internal conflicts. Following the 2008 global financial crisis, Russia abandoned the Gref reform plan—with estimates of only 30 percent of the reforms successfully completed—and entered a period of economic stagnation fuelled by declining oil and natural gas prices, war in Ukraine, and growing isolation from the global economy.<sup>37</sup>

Following several incomplete reform efforts under his regime, Putin claims that Russia is starting to recover from its “oil and gas needle” addiction; however, the regime’s policy choices demonstrate Russia’s decision to impede economic diversification and remain strongly committed to oil and natural gas extraction.<sup>38</sup> Although it would make economic sense to diversify so as not to be as dependent on volatile oil and natural gas prices, Russian leaders have chosen not to diversify beyond the extraction of oil and natural gas because its return on investment is significantly greater than in any other sector. Russia has failed to diversify its economy and is forced to double down on oil and natural gas extraction because of state capitalism, corruption, and weak institutions.

**State Capitalism**

The rise of Russian state capitalism under Putin started following the 2003 arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and subsequent seizure of his oil company, Yukos, by the Rosneft state owned enterprise.<sup>39</sup> Russian state capitalism is especially inefficient and dysfunctional as it forgoes “competition, investment, technological development, and entrepreneurship” in pursuit of “political control, social mitigation, and personal enrichment” of Putin and his cronies.<sup>40</sup> Russian oil and natural gas state owned enterprises have expanded because Putin has used economic and legal institutions to facilitate corporate raiding and asset grabbing that seized private enterprises with illegal assistance from law enforcement agencies.<sup>41</sup> The purpose of Russian state capitalism is to consolidate power rather than to further economic efficiency.

**Corruption**

Russia’s multiple economic reform efforts have failed to diversify its economy, not only because of the ideology of state capitalism but also due to continued rampant and ever increasingly centralised grand corruption. Some observers highlight that although state capitalism is Russia’s stated ideology, the regime’s true goals are “personal enrichment and power.”<sup>42</sup> Historians describe Russia’s current economic strategy as primarily focused on strengthening

central authority and ensuring that Putin and his cronies have the power and money to enforce their will while simultaneously preventing popular discontent, relying on private industries to spearhead economic growth as long as it does not interfere with other priorities.<sup>43</sup> Other Russia experts note that Putin and his cronies are “committed to a life of looting without parallel.”<sup>44</sup>

Table 1. The Crony-Capitalism Index<sup>45</sup>

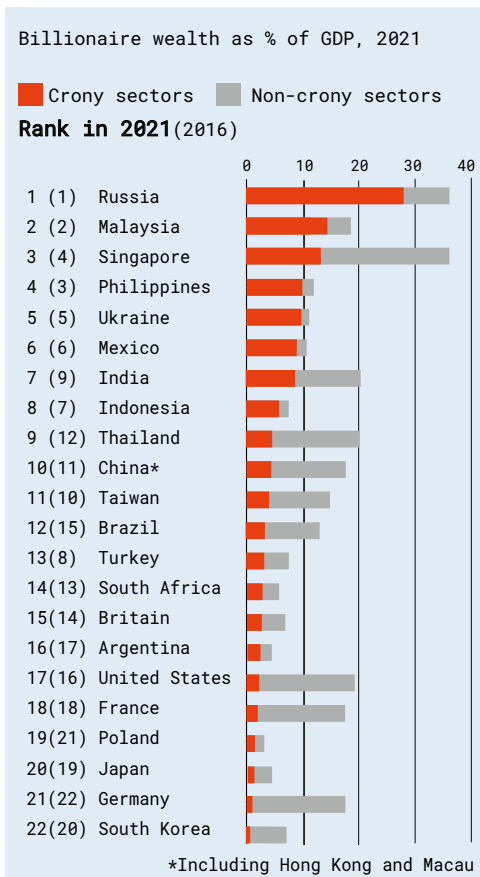


Table copied from Crony Capitalism Index. (The Economist, 2022)

### **Weak Institutions**

In addition to state capitalism and corruption, Russia's repeated economic reform efforts have failed to diversify its economy due to weak institutions. Poor institutional quality plays a central role in preventing capital investment, technology, and human capital from adequately contributing to Russian economic growth.<sup>46</sup> Clearly highlighting the weakness of Russian institutions, the World Bank research program's 2020 Worldwide Governance Indicators rank Russia at 19.81 percentile in Voice and Accountability, 36.06 percentile in Regulatory Quality, and 22.60 percentile in Rule of Law.<sup>47</sup> The most problematically weak institution in Russia for the rule of law and the economic business environment is the court system. The lack of fair, impartial, and independent courts allows for illegal corporate raiding and asset grabbing because neither property rights can be protected nor contracts enforced.<sup>48</sup> Russia's immense oil and natural gas resources reinforce the elites' preference for rent-extraction industries while simultaneously incentivizing Russian elites into hampering efforts to improve and strengthen the institutional performance of the nation's court system.<sup>49</sup> Russian institutions are unlikely to be strengthened by the government because their weakness is an important structural factor that allows Putin and his cronies to more efficiently consolidate power and further their personal enrichment. This is especially true while

Putin and his cronies have alternative means to protect their personal wealth, such as the ability to transfer their money outside of Russia.

### **Russia's New Approach to the Arctic**

Russia's energy industry, which is inextricably linked to that nation's economic security, is the largest single economic stakeholder pursuing Arctic regional development. However, challenges exist to Russia's ability to achieve its strategic objectives in the Arctic. In order to overcome these challenges, Russia is employing its diplomatic, information, legal, and military tools of national power in a new approach to pursue, promote, and protect its Arctic strategic interests.

### **Diplomatic**

Russia's primary international forum to exercise its diplomatic tool of national power is the Arctic Council. Founded in 1996, the Arctic Council—consisting of the eight Arctic States, six Indigenous peoples' organisations with Permanent Participant status, six Working Groups, and 38 non-Arctic States and international organisations with Observer status—has become the leading high-level platform and mechanism to address common challenges among the Arctic States, with particular emphasis on environmental protection and sustainable development.<sup>50</sup> The

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Arctic Council’s founding document—the 1996 Ottawa Declaration—purposely excluded military and security matters from the organisation’s mandate.<sup>51</sup> The Arctic Council chairmanship rotates every two years.

In May 2021, Russia assumed the Arctic Council’s chairmanship and prioritized the promotion of multinational cooperation in four areas: Arctic people, including indigenous peoples of the North; environmental protection, including climate change; socio-economic development in the region; and strengthening the Arctic Council.<sup>52</sup> Russia’s demonstrated history of environmental protection and regional socio-economic development in the Arctic is, at best, questionable.<sup>53</sup> While Russia has long been an advocate for making the Arctic Council a formal international organisation, and possibly expanding the Council’s mandate to include security issues, Russia has dramatically softened its support for strengthening the Arctic Council since 2014.<sup>54</sup> If Russia’s commitment to its stated priorities is questionable, what did Russia hope to achieve during its Arctic Council chairmanship?

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the seven other Arctic States temporarily paused participation in all Arctic Council activities in March 2022. As the cornerstone of regional governance, the Arctic Council continues to play a critical role in Russia’s Arctic strategy.<sup>55</sup> The Arctic Council chairmanship would have provided Russia with an important opportunity to promote its Arctic strategic interests. Russia would have likely employed its Arctic Council chairmanship as part of its grand legitimization strategy to promote its self-image as the “largest, strongest, most developed—and most legitimate—Arctic player.”<sup>56</sup> The Arctic Council chair’s key power is agenda-setting and Russia would have used this two-year opportunity to sequence, steer, and dominate the conversation to its advantage.<sup>57</sup>

### **Information**

Russia employs not only diplomatic, but also information tools of national power to protect and promote its Arctic strategic interests. Since 2007, Russia has executed a coordinated information campaign to highlight the Arctic's historical significance. For centuries, humankind has been fascinated by the vast, inhospitable Arctic terrain, and often, Russia has been at the leading edge of this fascination. During the Russian Empire's Second Kamchatka Expedition, explorers surveyed the entire Arctic coastline and discovered the Northern Sea Route (NSR) while searching for a maritime route to North America and Japan.<sup>58</sup>

While the Russian Empire clearly established Russia's status as a leading Arctic nation, the Russian Soviet Republic sought to rapidly industrialize the Arctic and proudly demonstrate Soviet man's ability to overcome nature. Soviet scientists and engineers further developed the NSR, constructed hydroelectric power stations, and established entirely new cities, at significant environmental cost, on the "heroic" Soviet path of Arctic conquest.<sup>59</sup> In 1937, Soviet pilots completed non-stop, long-distance flights across the North Pole that superseded the previous American world flight record.<sup>60</sup> The Arctic had become a zone of pride and competition for Russia.

Emphasizing both Imperial Russian exploration and Soviet achievements, Putin "personally identifies with Russia's Arctic ambitions and seeks to exploit the Arctic narrative of man conquering nature as a distinctive feature of modern Russian nationalism."<sup>61</sup> Senior Russian officials take high-profile photo opportunities in the region and host well-publicized international gatherings on the Arctic. Rosneft and Gazprom—leading state-owned enterprises—bring attention to the region by co-sponsoring the Arctic Territorial Dialogue/ International Arctic Forum.<sup>62</sup> Highlighting the region's historical significance is a critical component of Putin's legitimizing campaign, to both domestic and foreign audiences, that Russia has been, is, and always will be a great power.

### **Legal**

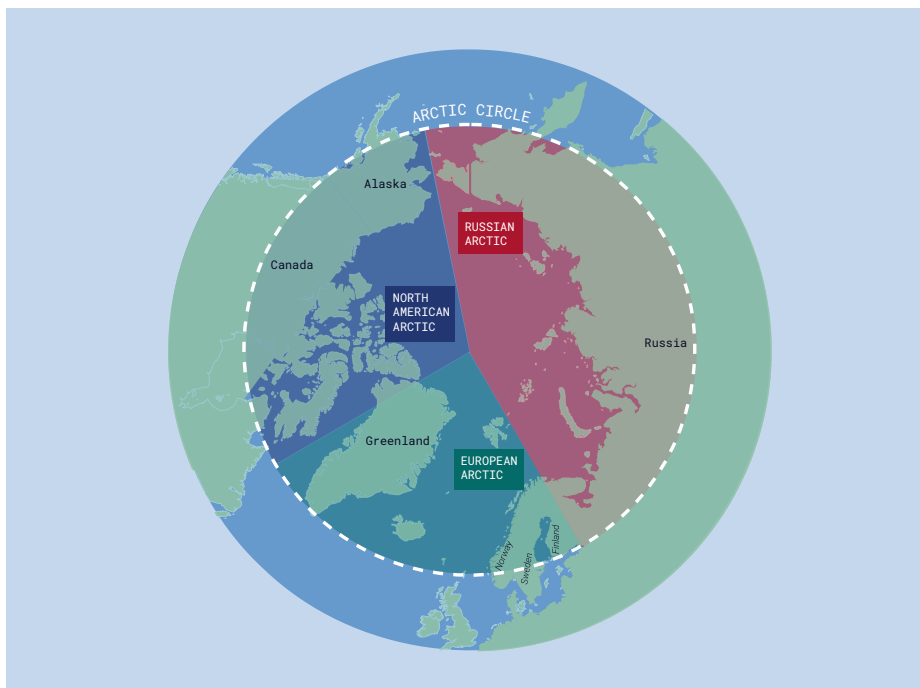
In addition to diplomatic and information tools of national power, Russia is also using legal tools to pursue its Arctic strategic interests. A signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Russia seeks to extend its continental shelf claim in the Arctic. Every Arctic coastal state except the United States, which is not a signatory to the treaty, has submitted claims in accordance with UNCLOS for continental shelf extensions beyond 200 nautical miles.<sup>63</sup>



In 2001, Russia was the first country to submit a continental shelf extension claim to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS).<sup>64</sup> After the UN rejected its initial claim, Russia conducted further scientific research and submitted another claim in 2015.<sup>65</sup> In 2021, Russia submitted two additional claims to the CLCS that enlarged its continental shelf extension

by nearly 705,000 square kilometres, covering almost 70 percent of the central Arctic Ocean seabed, which significantly increased the overlap with Canadian and Danish claims.<sup>66</sup> When submitting its additional claims and delimiting overlapping claims, Russia is following the processes outlined in Article 8 of Annex II and Article 83 of the Convention respectively.<sup>67</sup>

Figure 3. Relative Area of Arctic Claims<sup>68</sup>



Map copied from the Report 'America's Arctic Moment' report from [CSIS | Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program](#), 2020

Russia's adherence to this international law framework highlights both its willingness to cooperate and its ability to compete in the Arctic. While some experts are concerned that Russia's continental shelf extension claims will allow it to grab additional natural resources, this is unlikely with respect to oil and natural gas resources, as most of the undiscovered technically recoverable resources are expected to be within Russia's undisputed Exclusive Economic Zone.<sup>69</sup> Russia's commitment to working through UNCLOS demonstrates its skilful employment of the legal tool of national power to protect and promote its Arctic strategic interests through a broader legitimization strategy.

### **Military**

In concert with the diplomatic, information, and legal tools of national power utilized, Russia is also craftily employing its military tools of national power in pursuit of its Arctic strategy. Protecting and promoting its growing strategic economic interests has led Russia to significantly increase its Arctic military presence and to aggressively address perceived security concerns by simultaneously improving its defensive and offensive operational capabilities in the region. While Russia may have initially recognized its strategic military importance during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, the Arctic also witnessed occupying military forces and destruction throughout the Second World War. During the Cold War, the Arctic

served as a "dangerous battleground, albeit primarily under water" between the superpowers.<sup>70</sup> The Arctic has long been viewed as the preferred intercontinental ballistic missile attack route and as an excellent location to test new military equipment unobserved, due to its vast terrain and wide-open sea space. Despite this, Russia did not begin investing heavily in improving its Arctic military presence until 2007. In 2020, Russia clearly emphasized improving its regional military presence when it first introduced the principle of "ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity" as its top national interest, with respect to the Arctic.<sup>71</sup>

In its eastern Arctic, Russia has prioritized renovating airfields, investing in search and rescue capabilities, and building radar stations to improve air and maritime domain awareness. Russia's Wrangel Island and Cape Schmidt Sopka-2 radar system deployments serve a dual-purpose facilitating military command and control, while also controlling civilian air traffic and providing meteorological data to ships in the region.<sup>72</sup> These developments are particularly important to Russia's ability to detect, track, and coordinate air and maritime activity, as well as respond appropriately to emergency situations.

In sharp contrast to the eastern Arctic, Russia's military presence in its western Arctic region consists of the nation's most advanced defensive and potential

Figure 4. Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic<sup>73</sup>

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offensive capabilities. In 2017, Russia announced the completed construction of an Arctic Trefoil military base on Alexandra Land Island, a presence of strategic importance to national defence dating back to the Cold War's early days.<sup>74</sup> Western Arctic defences are focused on protecting the Severomorsk-based Northern Fleet, which commands Russian nuclear second-strike capabilities and secures Russia's northern coastline.<sup>75</sup> Simultaneously with improving its defences, Russia is developing, deploying, and exercising its most advanced offensive capabilities in the western Russian Arctic region. Recent

Russian tests of hypersonic cruise missiles, nuclear-powered undersea drones, and long-range precision munitions have resulted in some NATO allies calling for the development of a comprehensive strategy to address Russian activities.<sup>76</sup> The U.S. Army's new Arctic strategy concludes that "Russian military developments in the region are by far the most advanced driver of great power competition."<sup>77</sup> Although concerns remain about Russia's ability to project power and to restrict U.S. and NATO regional access, increased Russian Arctic military presence is pursued largely to protect Russia's growing strategic economic interests in the region.

## Implications for U.S. Army Security Cooperation<sup>78</sup>

Acknowledging Russia's growing strategic economic interests in the Arctic, the aggressive development of its military presence, and its role as the leading driver of diplomatic, information, and legal tools of national power in the region, U.S. policymakers should consider that the Arctic will never be as important to the U.S. as it is to Russia. Russian leaders will likely pursue an Arctic strategy that promotes and protects Russia's strategic economic interests in the region according to Lenin's maxim: "Probe with bayonets. If you encounter mush, proceed; if you encounter steel, withdraw."<sup>79</sup> As a result, U.S. policymakers should strive to develop and implement an U.S. Army Arctic strategy that credibly demonstrates a willingness and ability to act—in concert with NATO—effectively and decisively if U.S. strategic interests in the region are at risk, while simultaneously preventing a dangerous Arctic arms race.

While the U.S. has global national interests, the U.S. Army cannot be equally active everywhere in the globe simultaneously. Simultaneously, the Arctic is not always the highest priority for U.S. policymakers either, who must take into consideration that the U.S. is not the biggest, nor often the most important, Arctic state.<sup>80</sup> The U.S. Army may not always be the priority

U.S. military service for protecting U.S. strategic interests in the Arctic, but it undoubtedly plays an important convening role in organising allies and partners to ensure that the Arctic is maintained as a free and open commons, and to reduce the risk of conflict in the region.

The Department of Defence's 2019 Arctic Strategy directed the U.S. Army to "defend the homeland, compete to maintain favourable regional balances of power, and ensure common domains remain free and open"; this directive was drawn up in order to pursue the strategic objective of an Arctic that is a "secure and stable region in which U.S. national interests are safeguarded, the U.S. homeland is defended, and nations work cooperatively to address shared challenges."<sup>81</sup> To pursue these Department of Defence objectives, U.S. Army leadership determined that the U.S. Army must be "able to rapidly generate and project Multi-Domain forces globally that are specifically trained, equipped, and sustained to fight, win and survive in extreme cold weather and rugged mountainous conditions over extended periods."<sup>82</sup> In order to build readiness to operate and compete in the Arctic, the U.S. Army will conduct activities along the following five lines of effort: improve Arctic capability; compete in the Arctic and globally; defend the far North in crisis and conflict; build Arctic multi-domain operations; and project power across the Arctic in crisis and conflict.<sup>83</sup>

Table 2. U.S. Army Arctic Strategy Lines of Effort<sup>84</sup>

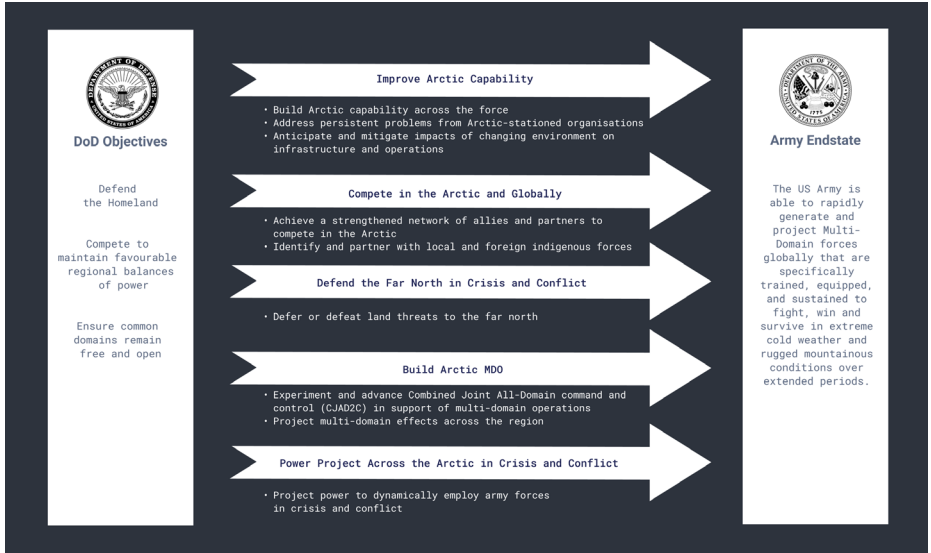


Table copied from 'Regaining Arctic Dominance'. ([U.S. Army Chief of Staff Paper #3](#), 2021)

Many of the activities that the U.S. Army will need to undertake in order to achieve its desired end state are internally focused on developing doctrine, organisation, training, material, leadership and education, personal, and facility solutions. With that in mind, this essay will provide recommendations for U.S. Army security cooperation activities within two specific lines of effort—compete in the Arctic and globally, and project power across the Arctic in crisis and conflict—as these particular lines of effort require further developing relationships with NATO allies and partners, as well as, possibly Russia. Chief of Staff of the Army, General James C. McConville, highlighted the criticality of allies and partners, noting

that “together...we have many more options collectively than we do as individual nations to maintain strength and readiness” and pointing out that “a strong military comes from strong relationships.”<sup>85</sup>

The U.S. Army plays an important role in building strong relationships with allies and partners by fostering trust through presence. Over the years, numerous senior U.S. military leaders have stressed in various forms that “virtual presence is actual absence and that you can’t surge trust.”<sup>86</sup> While it should not prioritise the Arctic at all times, the U.S. Army cannot afford to be absent from the region. Instead, the U.S. Army should work diligently with NATO allies and partners

to maintain and improve its access and influence in the Arctic region. Given that Russia's Arctic strategy is primarily driven by its economic interests, the U.S. Army can strengthen its relationships with allies and partners, while simultaneously economising force, by focusing on the following five security cooperation programs: (1) military exercises; (2) key leader engagements; (3) foreign military sales; (4) international military education and training; and (5) the National Guard's State Partnership Program.

### **Military Exercises**

In September 2021, U.S. Army Europe and Africa leadership highlighted the importance of the Thunder Cloud military exercise, in that "operating in the High North gives us [the U.S. Army] a great opportunity to exercise with our allies, partners, and other services."<sup>87</sup> The U.S. Army should look to incorporate an Arctic element into every iteration of the Defender, Pacific Pathways, Swift Response, Arctic Warrior, Arctic Edge, and other such military exercise series. This would not only inform U.S. Army leadership about possible organisational changes or investments that could be required to expand and sustain its operational reach, but since these military exercise series either are or can be multinational, it would also present the U.S. Army with outstanding opportunities to build readiness while also fostering trust with our allies and partners through presence.

### **Key Leader Engagements**

The U.S. Army can improve trust amongst allies and partners with presence not only through the conduct of military exercises, but also by further increasing the number of key leader engagements focused on the Arctic region. While U.S. Army senior leaders already "engage with their counterparts to build relationships and share information," opportunities exist to improve this program of activities in both multinational and bilateral formats. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley observed that the Conference of European Armies—an annual United States Army Europe and Africa initiative with the participation of senior land force leaders from over 40 countries—allows "our allies and partners to come together to strengthen relationships and candidly discuss strategies and our unified priorities."<sup>88</sup> Although the premier event of its type, the Conference of European Armies' number of participants and range of focus topics is too great to effectively address Arctic issues. The U.S. Army should encourage the creation of a separate conference of senior land force leaders from the Arctic states, and possibly Russia, that focuses exclusively on Arctic security challenges. On a bilateral basis, the U.S. Army should conduct annual Headquarters, Department of the Army-led Army Staff Talks with all of the Arctic states. These Army Staff Talks should include

U.S. Army North and U.S. Army Europe and Africa participation, as well as working groups specifically focused on Arctic security challenges. In addition, key leader engagement schedules should be synchronised to ensure that at least one senior U.S. Army leader from the Army Staff, U.S. Army North, or U.S. Army Europe and Africa meets their counterparts in each of the Arctic states quarterly during a visit primarily focused on Arctic issues.

### **Foreign Military Sales**

Military exercises and key leader engagements strengthen relationships with NATO allies and partners by building trust through presence; however, improving interoperability is also crucial. Since 2007, U.S. major arms sales to the Arctic states executed by the U.S. Army Security Assistance Command have focused on CH-47 Chinook helicopters, M777 155mm howitzers, Javelin anti-tank missiles, Patriot missile defence systems, and M270 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems.<sup>89</sup> The U.S. Army Security Assistance Command should identify material solutions required for land forces to operate in extreme cold weather environments and should encourage sales to the Arctic states to promote technical interoperability with allies and partners.

### **International Military Education and Training**

While technical and equipment solutions are an important component of interoperability amongst allies and partners, developing human capital and ensuring that allies and partners understand how they each approach and think about a problem is also key to the ability to operate together successfully. The U.S. Army's dual-tracked expanded security cooperation plan to encourage increased allied and partner participation in individual training courses—at the U.S. Army's Northern Warfare Training Center and Army Mountain Warfare School—while simultaneously seeking increased participation of U.S. Army soldiers at allied and partner Arctic-focused schools is important, but insufficient.<sup>90</sup>

“

U.S. policy-makers should consider that the Arctic will never be as important to the U.S. as it is to Russia.

”

While this training will improve tactical interoperability, increased participation by U.S. Army and NATO allies and partners at each other's Command and General Staff College and War College equivalent levels of professional military education is necessary to further greater appreciation of the Arctic at the operational and strategic levels of warfare.

### **National Guard's State**

#### **Partnership Program**

For over 25 years, the National Guard has used the State Partnership Program's 85 partnerships with 93 nations to conduct "military-to-military engagements in support of defence security goals", and leverage "whole-of-society relationships and capabilities to facilitate broader interagency and corollary engagements spanning military, government, economic and social spheres."<sup>91</sup> At this time, the National Guard's State Partnership Program does not have an established partnership with any of the Arctic states. The U.S. Army should encourage the Army National Guard to establish partnerships with the Arctic states. This would improve the value of military exercises, foreign military sales, key leader engagements, and international military education and training, because it would help foster consistent long-term relationships that lead not only to increased presence but also improved trust.

## **Conclusion**

In 2007, Russia dramatically changed its national Arctic strategy and began committing significant military and fiscal resources to successfully pursue, promote, and protect its national objectives in the region. Having determined that the Arctic region will be critical for its economic survival over the next few decades, Russia is aggressively pursuing strategic economic objectives in three important sectors: energy resources and minerals, transportation, and food security. Russia's energy industry is the largest and most important single driver of the country's aggressive Arctic strategy because Russia's economic security is inextricably linked to its energy industry and its failure to diversify its economy have forced Russia to double down on the extraction of oil and natural gas resources. Since 2007, Russia has expertly wielded its diplomatic, information, and legal tools of national power. Russia has also aggressively increased its Arctic military presence, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in accordance with the country's coordinated Arctic strategy to pursue, promote, and protect its growing strategic economic interests in the region.

The possibility of conflict between great powers remains ever present regardless of the potential for cooperation or



competition. The probability of a miscalculation escalating into unintentional armed conflict is greater due to increased Russian economic and military activity in the Arctic region. Russian economic interests have highlighted the Arctic region's dramatically increased strategic importance. U.S. policymakers risk damaging U.S.-Russian relations, failing to achieve U.S. national strategic objectives, and also making the world more unstable, unpredictable, and dangerous by failing to explore and contemplate Russia's national strategic interests. To lessen concerns about the unknown and thereby make the world safer, U.S. policymakers and our allies must attempt to understand the objectives towards which Russia is driving its Arctic strategy. ■

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## Russian Strategic Interest in Arctic Heats Up as Ice Melts

**COLONEL (COL) ROBERT A. McVEY, JR**

In this latest Strategic Update, COL Robert A. McVey, Jr addresses why Russia has dramatically changed its Arctic strategy since 2007, committing significant military and fiscal resources to the region. McVey additionally describes the diplomatic, information, legal, and military tools of national power that Russia is craftily employing to pursue, promote, and protect its growing strategic economic interests in the Arctic, finding that the possibility of conflict between great powers remains ever present, regardless of the potential for cooperation or competition. Given that Russia's Arctic strategy is primarily driven by economic interests, this paper makes five key recommendations for U.S. policymakers and military leaders, focusing on security cooperation programmes with NATO allies and the Arctic states.

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