

## On Thin Ice? (Mis)interpreting Russian Policy in the High North

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*Climate change in the Arctic is expected to make the region a lot busier as new strategic resources become available. The Russian Federation is a key player in this context, having put forth a comprehensive Arctic strategy. Russian policy towards the so-called High North, however, is oftentimes not seen in its entirety and has received a plethora of criticism in the Western media and foreign policy community. This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of Russian actions in the High North by providing a succinct overview of Russian policies in the region and identifying the fundamental rationale behind them. The paper concludes that Russia's Arctic policy is not only a lot more nuanced but also not very different from the policies conducted by other riparian states.*

### Introduction

The failure to clinch a legally-binding deal in Copenhagen that limits global warming to two degrees Celsius does not bode well for environmental stability. This holds particularly true for the High North.

Global warming is changing the Arctic region at a dramatic pace. The Arctic is, according to numerous studies, expecting temperature increases of between four and seven degrees Celsius by the end of this century.<sup>1</sup> While previous climate models have predicted an ice-free Arctic during the summertime by 2030, recently published research suggests that the summer ice cap may already vanish by 2015. This should come as no surprise; in summer 2008, the Arctic region was already 65% ice-free and the years 2007-2009 saw the greatest decreases on record, with

<sup>1</sup> 2004 Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA).

the ice cap dwindling to a record-low minimum extent of 4.3 million square km in September 2007.<sup>2</sup>

These developments open up an array of intractable challenges, including threats to biodiversity and the traditional way of life of autochthon communities in the Arctic region. Of particular danger to global environmental stability, however, is the threat to low-lying coastal regions posed by rising sea levels. This would not only have immense political, environmental and social consequences; the economic effects would also be tremendous. According to Allianz financial services, a rise of half a metre by the middle of this century could put at risk more than 28 trillion dollars' worth of assets in the world's largest coastal cities.<sup>3</sup> In addition, increasing temperatures in this volatile region are triggering strong feedback mechanisms such as the release of methane due to melting permafrost and the ice-albedo feedback loop,<sup>4</sup> which accelerate global warming and thereby further upset global environmental stability.

At the same time, the melting of the Arctic is unlocking a wide range of opportunities, with the dwindling ice cap allowing increased access to the region's large resource base. Besides valuable fishing stocks and both base and precious metals, the Arctic

<sup>2</sup> *Melting Snow and Ice*, Centre for Ice, Climate and Ecosystems, Norwegian Polar Institute, 14 December 2009. A report commissioned by Al Gore and Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jonas Gahr Støre ([http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/UD/Vedlegg/klima/melting\\_ice\\_report.pdf](http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/UD/Vedlegg/klima/melting_ice_report.pdf)).

<sup>3</sup> "Sea level rise could cost port cities \$28 trillion", *CNN*, 23 November 2009 (<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/TECH/science/11/23/climate.report.wwf.allianz/index.html>).

<sup>4</sup> The 'ice-albedo feedback loop' is the process whereby retreating sea ice exposes darker and less reflective seawater, which absorbs more heat and in turn causes more ice to melt.

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region is also rich in hydrocarbons. According to the US Geological Survey, the High North could be home to 13% of the world's undiscovered oil, 30% of undiscovered natural gas and 20% of undiscovered natural gas liquids.<sup>5</sup> This is especially relevant in the context of resource depletion in existing fields and is illustrated by Norway's Petroleum Directorate bi-annual resource report,<sup>6</sup> which state that Norway would have to go deeper into the Arctic in order to maintain its oil production capacity.

Ice-free summers by 2015 would also make new strategic sea lanes accessible, notably the Northwest Passage (sovereignty asserted by Canada) and the Northern Sea Route (sovereignty asserted by Russia). These routes would shorten the distances between Europe and East Asia, leading to lower shipping costs and thereby benefiting global trade.

A panoply of countries aims to gain a hold over these strategic resources. Foremost among these are the 'Arctic 5': the riparian states of Canada, Norway, Denmark/Greenland, the United States and the Russian Federation.<sup>7</sup> However, the A5 are not alone in maintaining an interest in the Arctic Region. A host of new players is emerging in the High North. The European Union is currently promoting its Arctic Communication, and Commissioners Piebalgs and Borg have both stressed the EU's interest in the High North.<sup>8</sup> China, meanwhile, is undertaking extensive research in this region with its 21,000-tonne icebreaker *Xue Long* (Snow Dragon), while both South Korea and Japan are building polar-class shipping tankers in order to prepare themselves for the shorter sea lanes that are gradually opening up. Most recently, NATO's new Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, also declared his intention to increase the alliance's role in the Arctic.

The strategic sealanes and resources the region holds, together with the confluence of major Arctic powers, risk the emergence of, at best, political tensions, and at worst a new 'great game'. All circumpolar states are keen to increase their sovereignty over Arctic waters by extending their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and there are currently a variety of sovereignty disputes over territory. In addition, all parties have announced increases in their Arctic military capacities and exchanged fiery rhetoric. Whether the patchy legal and institutional frameworks

covering this region are sufficient to prevent a descent into chaos remains to be seen. The region's main institution, the Arctic Council, is primarily a soft law body with no binding decision-making powers, permanent secretariat, dedicated staff or fixed budget, inspiring little confidence in its ability to do so.

One major player that has received particular attention from the foreign policy community is the Russian Federation. With the longest Arctic border, Russia is staking significant claims to the region which, if accepted, would provide it with roughly 45% of the High North. Understandably, the Arctic features prominently in Russian political discourse and policy. President Medvedev has identified the Arctic as national heritage, stating that "we must ensure reliable protection in the long-term for Russia's national interests in the Arctic".<sup>9</sup> Correspondingly, Russia's *Strategy for National Security until 2020* has upgraded the High North to one of its priorities, identifying it as prone to future military conflict, particularly over its resource wealth.<sup>10</sup>

Foreign governments, experts and the wider media have decried Russian manoeuvres in the region as jingoistic, if not belligerent. These statements and analyses, however, in tending to focus primarily on the military aspect of Russia's Arctic policy, fail to take into account its finer nuances and intricacies. In fact, Russia's approach towards this region is rather more complex and multi-dimensional, reflecting not only the numerous different Russian interests in the region but also the influence of intangibles such as ideas and identity on Russian policy-making.

In addition, the Kremlin has many towers and should not be treated as a monolith; there are many different actors in Moscow with competing influences and official as well as personal agendas towards the Arctic. This needs to be acknowledged in any objective analysis. Last but not least, Russian policy should also be seen in the context of the policies conducted by the other riparian states. Moscow's Arctic approach, viewed in the context of the recent Russia-Georgia war, is often demonised, while in actual fact Russian policy towards the High North does not greatly differ from those of its counterparts.

This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of Russian actions in the High North by providing a succinct overview of Russian policies in the region and identifying the fundamental rationale behind them.

<sup>5</sup> *Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle*, US Geological Survey, 2008 (<http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2008/3049/>).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.npd.no/no/Publikasjoner/Ressursrapporter/2009/>.

<sup>7</sup> A map showing the disputes among the circumpolar states, as well as the strategic resources, can be found in the annex.

<sup>8</sup> Roderick Kefferputz & Claude Weinber, "Safeguarding Arctic Resources", *European Voice*, 8 January 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Speech of President Medvedev at a meeting of the Russian Security Council on Protecting Russia's National Interests in the Arctic, Moscow, 17 September 2008 ([http://eng.kremlin.ru/text/speeches/2008/09/17/1945\\_type82912type82913\\_206564.shtml](http://eng.kremlin.ru/text/speeches/2008/09/17/1945_type82912type82913_206564.shtml)).

<sup>10</sup> *Strategy for National Security until 2020* (Strategiya natsionalnoy bezopasnosti Rossiiskoy Federatsii do 2020 goda), No. 537, 12 May 2009 (<http://www.scrf.gov.ru>).

This is relevant to the extent that Russia, as a main actor in this fragile region, will together with the other Arctic states define the region's future development and the levels of co-operation and/or confrontation. Failing to understand or misinterpreting Russian policy and *raison d'être* in the region could therefore lead to the wrong policy responses. This could have detrimental consequences, putting the overall strategic objective of maintaining stability and peace in the region at risk.

The paper is structured as follows: The first section provides an overview of Russia's relationship and claim to the Arctic, with the second identifying its main interests in the region. The third section examines Russian policy towards the High North and identifies some of the different actors and agendas within those policies. Section four concludes.

## Russia and its Arctic claim

The Arctic naturally plays an important role for Russia, as more than one-third of Russian territory lies north of the Arctic Circle. Russia began expressing a concrete interest in the region as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in 1910 sent its navy to explore and map the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which runs along the north coast of Russia. The region was also significant during Soviet times, when several expeditions to the Arctic lands were undertaken in order to set up permanent polar stations and exercise sovereignty. Numerous flags were planted during this period, including on the westernmost area of Arctic territory in the Soviet sector, Victoria Island, on 29 August 1932, and on the North Pole itself on 21 May 1937 by the Papanin expedition.<sup>11</sup> In 1926, the Soviet leadership took the unilateral decision to establish new state borders in the Arctic, declaring 5,842 square kilometres of territory between the North Pole, the Bering Strait and the Kola Peninsula as part of the Soviet Union. During Stalin's industrialisation drive, the Soviet regime was also quick to capitalise on the Arctic's resources by opening up mines at Vorkuta and Norilsk in the 1930s, while industrial fishing in the region took place later in the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps most importantly, the High North was also a focal point during the Cold War due to its strategic proximity between the US and the Russian Federation, which led to high submarine activity because of technical

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<sup>11</sup> Other notable expeditions included journeys to Wrangel Island in 1926, Franz Josef Land in 1929 and Severnaya Zemlya in 1930. For more information on a history of the Arctic Region during Imperial Russian and Soviet times see: Zhukov, Yuri. "The Russian Flag in the Arctic", *Zhurnal Neft' Rossii*, No. 4, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Marlène Laruelle, "Russia's Arctic Ambitions: Transforming the 'Cost of Cold'", Policy Brief, No. 7, Institute for Security & Development Policy, 9 June 2009.

difficulties with detection under the Arctic ice. For the Soviet Union it was also particularly important in this context as it provided the only year-round access to the Atlantic from the ice-free ports on the Kola Peninsula through the Barents and Norwegian seas. Attempts at improving relations in the High North and decreasing militarisation in this field, whether genuine or not, were articulated as early as 1958 by the Soviets when Premier Nikolai Bulganin proposed a zone in northern Europe "free of atomic and hydrogen weapons". Real steps towards better relations in the North, however, only came to fruition with Mikhail Gorbachev who launched the "Murmansk Initiative" in 1987, calling for an Arctic "zone of peace".<sup>13</sup> This initiative, in conjunction with Finnish efforts, helped pave the way for the creation of the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS), a non-binding multilateral agreement among Arctic states aimed at environmental protection, which was absorbed into the Arctic Council in 1996.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the High North became less of a priority as the new Russian Federation sought to re-arrange its relationship with the West and the former Soviet bloc countries. Only in the late 1990s, particularly with the accession of Vladimir Putin to power, did the Arctic gain a greater strategic importance. After having ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)<sup>14</sup> in 1997, Moscow made its first legal Arctic claim in 2001 with a submission to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), which is empowered to take decisions on extensions of the continental shelf, to extend its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) beyond the 200-mile radius. In this submission it argued that about 1.2 million square km of underwater terrain should be added to the Russian EEZ as this area lies between the Lomonosov and Mendeleev ridges, which it claims are a continuation of the Siberian shelf. If this application were to be accepted, Russia would be able to claim up to 45% of the Arctic. Russia's request, however, was put on ice, as it were, by the CLCS in 2002 due to insufficient scientific data.

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<sup>13</sup> See Dan Hayward, "Gorbachev's Murmansk Initiative: New Prospects for Arms Control in the Arctic?", *Northern Perspectives*, Canadian Arctic Resources Committee, Vol. 16, No. 4, July-August 1988 and Kristian Atland, "Mikhail Gorbachev, the Murmansk Initiative, and the Desecuritization of Interstate Relations in the Arctic", *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> UNCLOS covers all segments of the ocean space and regulates the area on a large number of issues such as the delimitation of the continental shelf boundaries. The Law of the Sea grants countries an economic zone of 200 nautical miles beyond their land borders, which can be extended if the country in question can prove that the structure of the continental shelf is akin to the geological structure within its territory.



Moscow therefore redoubled its efforts, using its Arctic capacity to explore the High North. Several expeditions were dispatched in order to collect further geological data. One particularly noteworthy expedition, *Arktika 2007*, took place in summer 2007, when Russia sent out its the research vessel *Akademik Fedorov*, reinforced by the nuclear ice-breaker *Rossiya*, in order to strengthen its claim with more scientific evidence. During this expedition, headed by Artur Chilingarov, Vice-Speaker of the Russian Duma and famous polar explorer, two mini-submarines (*Mir-1* and *Mir-2*) descended over 4,200 meters to the ocean seabed at the North Pole and planted a titanium Russian flag. The expedition cost the Kremlin around €45 million and Mr Chilingarov was subsequently made Presidential Envoy to the Arctic. This Arctic stunt not only raised national sentiments back in Moscow but was widely reported in the foreign press with a media frenzy that, particularly in the context of Putin's Munich speech in February 2007, led to alarmism and increasing Western defiance. Former Canadian Foreign Minister Peter MacKay, for example, criticised the mission stating that "this isn't the 15<sup>th</sup> century [...] you can't go around the world and just plant flags and say 'We are claiming this territory'".<sup>15</sup> Little did he know that two years previously, his compatriot Bill Graham, the then Defence Minister, had planted the Canadian flag on Hans Island, which is disputed by Canada and Denmark.

The Russian flag-planting exercise, however, was just a sideshow taking place alongside the gathering of crucial geological information. According to statements from Russia's Natural Resources Ministry, the *Arktika 2007* expedition can be considered a success as the supposed results of the "analysis of the earth crust model examined [...] confirmed that the crust structure of the Lomonosov Ridge corresponds to the world analogues of the continental crust, and [...] is therefore part of the Russian Federation's adjacent continental shelf".<sup>16</sup>

Russia is determined to push for increased sovereignty in the High North under the international legal framework. This is particularly the case as it stands to gain immensely from the Arctic resources.

## Russian interests in the Arctic

As stated by President Medvedev at a meeting of the Russian Security Council in September 2008, the Arctic region already "accounts for around 20% of

<sup>15</sup> "Russia plants flag under North Pole", *BBC News*, 2 August 2007 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6927395.stm>).

<sup>16</sup> "Lomonosov Ridge, Mendeleev elevation part of Russia's shelf – report", *Interfax*, Moscow, 20 September 2007.

Russia's gross domestic product (GDP) and 22% of national exports".<sup>17</sup>

The region therefore holds tremendous economic benefits for Russia. The following aspects are of particular interest:

- *Oil and gas:* The Arctic contains 80% of Russia's discovered natural gas reserves and is home to giant offshore and onshore hydrocarbon deposits such as Shtokman and Yamal. The region is also the world's largest untouched oil and gas reserve, according to assessments conducted by the US Geological Survey and Statoil. These are of great interest to the national gas industry as it seeks to replace dwindling production from legacy fields.

The rising interest in these reserves has, among others, led to the development of new technologies abroad in order to tap those resources. The US offshore drilling giant Transocean, for example, has announced that it is close to sealing a long-term contract, possibly with ExxonMobil, which would lead to the construction of a new Arctic Class drilling rig, going at a minimum daily rate of \$700,000, as well as ice-class drillships.<sup>18</sup> Norwegian offshore drilling contractor, Aker Drilling, has recently completed the construction of two semi-submersible drilling rigs capable of ultra-deep water drilling and operating in harsh environments. These top-of-the-class sixth generation rigs, which are the largest in the world, are practically designed for Arctic conditions.<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, Shell is also planning to build seaworthy liquefied natural gas (LNG) plants that can operate in remote and environmentally-sensitive areas, such as the Arctic. The Russian Federation is particularly interested in these developments. Gazprom's subsidiary Sevmorneftegaz, for example, is already working on a rig that will be capable of operating in temperatures as low as minus 50 degrees Celsius and which will be able to withstand the impact of ice packs. This rig, the Prirazlomnaya platform, will be one of Russia's first Arctic offshore oil fields in production.

In spite of this, however, the Russian oil and gas industry still needs to catch up with its Western competitors in terms of technology and expertise, explaining Gazprom's decision to partner up with

<sup>17</sup> Speech of President Medvedev at a meeting of the Russian Security Council on Protecting Russia's National Interests in the Arctic, Moscow, 17 September 2008 ([http://eng.kremlin.ru/text/speeches/2008/09/17/1945\\_type82912type82913\\_206564.shtml](http://eng.kremlin.ru/text/speeches/2008/09/17/1945_type82912type82913_206564.shtml)).

<sup>18</sup> "Arctic drilling", *Upstream*, 15 November 2009.

<sup>19</sup> "New drilling rigs for Arctic climate", *Barents Observer*, June 2009.

Statoil and Total in developing the massive Shtokman field. This is particularly the case when it comes to Russia's exploration companies, which lag behind their Western counterparts in providing seismic and other appraisal services. In this context, Russia's Natural Resource Ministry may oversee an amalgamation of 49 state-owned geological companies into a single entity called 'Rosgeologiya'.<sup>20</sup> But private companies are also affected. Lukoil, for example, might find it difficult to invest millions in acquiring new seismic technologies and drilling appraisal wells without having state guarantees that it will obtain a development licence in the event of a discovery.

Another factor possibly impeding the development of Arctic hydrocarbon resources, besides the relative costs and technology, is legislation that only allows state-controlled oil company Rosneft and gas giant Gazprom to work in Russian offshore zones in the far North. Natural Resources Minister, Yuri Trutnev, has raised concerns regarding this government decision as it could prevent investment in these fields; Gazprom and Rosneft would perhaps be better served to secure competitive fields before tapping those reserves to which only they have access.

Besides, oil and gas, the Arctic region contains many other economic benefits for the Russian Federation:

- *Base and precious metals:* The High North is particularly rich in strategically important nonferrous and precious metals, hosting large high-grade copper, zinc, diamonds, tin, gold, silver and nickel deposits. The Noril'sk industrial area of Taymyr, for instance, provides up to 20% of the world's nickel production.<sup>21</sup>
- *Fishing stocks:* The Arctic is also home to important bio-marine resources. Cod in the Barents Sea and pollock in the Russian Far East of the Arctic represent roughly 25% of the global catch of whitefish.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, polar invertebrates represent a valuable resource for the chemical and pharmaceutical sectors as they are used in the production of analgesics and other types of medication, as well as for food and drink preservation. As such, with decreasing fish stocks

in traditional waters, commercial fishing in the Arctic region will become increasingly attractive.

- *New shipping lanes:* By 2015, or perhaps even earlier, the melting of ice in the High North could make new strategic summer sea lanes within the Northwest Passage (sovereignty asserted by Canada but called into question by the US and EU) and the Northern Sea Route (sovereignty asserted by Russia, but open to international commercial navigation) even more accessible.<sup>23</sup> Operating an Arctic route currently requires icebreakers and is therefore very costly; the melting of Arctic ice, however, would eliminate this obstacle. The Northern Sea Route could significantly reduce transportation costs, as well as carbon dioxide emissions, as it may cut the length of the Europe - East Asia route by 40%. The traditional Suez Canal route between Hamburg and Yokohama (18,350 km), for example, would be reduced to 11,100 km using the Northern Sea Route.<sup>24</sup> Such new commercial sea lanes could relieve congestion at bottlenecks such as the Suez and Panama Canals as well as the Strait of Malacca. In addition, they would avoid the politically volatile Middle East and piracy at the Horn of Africa. However, the attractiveness of a summer ice-free sea also re-opens discussions on sovereignty over new routes and the presence of third countries' warships. In addition, heavier maritime traffic in the Arctic region increases the likelihood of accidents, as well as of invasive species entering the eco-system through ballast waters.

Russia's Northern Sea Route (NSR) is currently open to limited international commercial navigation. In fact, in September last year, two German merchant vessels managed to pass through the formerly impenetrable passage with assistance of Russian icebreakers. However, NSR's shallow straight passages with a maximum depth of only 17 metres, in addition to the lack of port infrastructure, considerably constrain its commercial navigation potential. In this context, investments in port infrastructure in the High North have been greatly debated in the Russian Duma, particularly the region of Murmansk.

A future point of contention as regards the NSR may be the charging of transit fees by Russia to foreign vessels. The European Union, with the world's largest merchant fleet, is particularly concerned over arbitrary transit charges on its vessels. This issue is reminiscent of the Siberian

<sup>20</sup> "Russia calls for state takeover", *Upstream*, 11 December 2009.

<sup>21</sup> I.Y. Frolov, V.Y. Alexandrov, Ye.U. Mironov, A.G. Gorshkovsky, N.G. Babich and V.G. Smirnov, "Afterword", in *Remote Sensing of Sea Ice in the Northern Sea Route: Studies and Applications*, Berlin: Springer Praxis Books, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> *Illegal Fishing in Arctic Waters*, WWF International Arctic Programme, April 2008.

<sup>23</sup> In summer 2008 both sea lanes were practically ice-free simultaneously for the first time in history.

<sup>24</sup> Roderick Kefferputz and Danila Bochkarev, *Expanding the EU's Institutional Capacities in the Arctic Region*, Heinrich Boell Foundation, 2008.

over-flight payments that cost Asia-bound EU airlines flying over Russian territory over €300 million a year.<sup>25</sup>

Last but not least, there are also clear military interests in the High North. The Kola Peninsula, for example, hosts Russian Northern Fleet bases and the North Pole remains a favourite location for U.S. and Russian nuclear submarines due to its strategic proximity to both nations' territories, as well as the technical difficulties of detecting passing submarines.

However, it is clear that besides those tangible benefits, intangible ideational factors also play an important role for Russia in the Arctic. After suffering the collapse of the Soviet Union and losing influence in its neighbourhood, many policy-makers in Russia consider gaining vast swathes of Arctic territory as just compensation.<sup>26</sup> In addition, 'mastering' the inhospitable High North could be a useful identity-building project, serving as a platform from which to reinforce a 'derzhava' (great power) mentality and mobilise domestic constituencies.<sup>27</sup> The latter is particularly relevant in the light of calls in Russia's Arctic strategy for greater dissemination in the mass media of Russia's national interests in the Arctic region, with the aim of 'formulating a positive image of Russia'.<sup>28</sup>

## Russian strategy and policy towards the Arctic Region

Much is at stake for Russia in the High North. This has naturally led to a very proactive policy towards the region. Part of this stems from the belief that moving fast will in itself constitute an advantage as it will allow Russia to establish a firm position in the Arctic to the detriment of its more cautious competitors. According to Pavel Baev of Norway's International Peace Research Institute (PRIO), this is a part of Russia's general political behaviour as "the status quo is often seen as too restrictive for [Russia's] newly

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<sup>25</sup> "Russia agrees to scrap over-flight charges for EU carriers by 2014", *Ria.Novosti*, 24 November 2006 (<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20061124/55956999.html>).

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Blunden, "The New Problem of Arctic Stability", *Survival*, Vol. 51, No. 5, October-November 2009, pp. 121-142.

<sup>27</sup> This is, as noted by Pavel Baev, parallel with Stalin's triumphalist propaganda campaign of 'conquering the North' launched in 1936-1939.

<sup>28</sup> "Osnovy gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2020 goda i dal'neishnuyu perspektivu" (The Russian Federation's main state policy in the Arctic until 2020 and beyond), 18 September 2008, quote '...v tselyakh formirovaniya pozitivnogo imidzha Rossii' (<http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/98.html>).

consolidated power".<sup>29</sup> This pro-active approach in the Arctic is also confirmed by Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council, who has pointed out that "if we do not become active now, we will simply be forced out".<sup>30</sup>

The relative speed at which Russia's Arctic policy is advancing has not been at the expense of a multi-dimensional strategy towards the region, integrating military, economic, environmental, social and political aspects. This is particularly demonstrated in its main "Strategy towards the Arctic until 2020 and beyond", which was ratified on 18 September 2008.<sup>31</sup> This strategy aims to transform the region into Russia's future resource base by providing greater investments, protecting Russian borders and safeguarding territory, ensuring environmental safety, promoting science and research, and contributing to international stability.

The strategy until 2020 is divided into three main stages. The first stage (2008-2010) was designed to substantiate Russia's Arctic claim and put it on a sound footing by providing extensive scientific evidence, in addition to expanding the possibilities for international co-operation and establishing a framework for the development of port infrastructure, high-tech industrial clusters and special economic zones in Russia's northern regions. This phase has been relatively successful. Russia has not only conducted many scientific missions during this period; the Russian Duma has also discussed Northern port infrastructure and is soon expected to adopt legislation facilitating port investments. In addition, Russia was a signatory to the Ilulissat Declaration on 29 May 2008 in co-operation with the other circumpolar states. This declaration, however, was primarily designed to reaffirm the sovereignty of the A5 in the High North, thus insulating the region from other interested actors.

The second stage (2011-2015) is supposed to lead to international legal recognition of Russia's external borders in the Arctic and expand Russia's competitive advantages in the extraction and transportation of resources. In this context, the development of infrastructure and communication systems, particularly with regards to shipping in the Northern Sea Route, is foreseen.

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<sup>29</sup> Pavel Baev, *Russia's Race for the Arctic and the New Geopolitics of the North Pole*, The Jamestown Foundation, October 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Matthias Schepp and Gerald Traufetter, "Russia Unveils Aggressive Arctic Plans", *Der Spiegel*, 29 January 2009 (<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,604338,00.html>).

<sup>31</sup> *The Russian Federation's main state policy in the Arctic until 2020 and beyond* (Osnovy gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2020 goda i dal'neishnuyu perspektivu), 18 September 2008 (<http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/98.html>).



Finally, the third stage (2016-2020) envisions the transformation of the High North into the leading strategic resource base of the Russian Federation.

Russia intends to use all of the means at its disposal to realise this strategy and protect its interests in the Arctic region. As such, it is operating on several levels. First and foremost, as mentioned above, it is strengthening the scientific evidence to substantiate its claims to the Commission on the Limitation of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). Second, it is working to insulate the region from non-Arctic actors by signing the Ilulissat Declaration and blocking the European Union's bid to join the Arctic Council. Third, it is investigating the possibility of bilateral co-operation with certain Arctic states to the detriment of the others. In 2009, for example, Canadian and Russian diplomats met informally in Moscow to discuss a common approach towards the region. At this meeting, legal advisors from both states mulled over the possibility of making a joint submission to the CLCS, possibly in co-operation with Denmark. Fourth, Moscow aims to dramatically expand its capacities in the High North in order to increase its operational scope. Russia already boasts significant seafaring capacity; it owns not only a large fleet of polar-class nuclear-powered icebreakers, including the world's biggest vessel of this class '50 Years of Victory' (*Pyatdesyat Let Pobedy*), but also a large fleet of non-nuclear and nuclear-powered commercial and scientific vessels. Increased funding for the construction of new nuclear icebreakers is expected, with roughly \$150 million planned for 2010-2011. Russia thereby holds a strategic advantage as its polar fleet far surpasses those of its counterparts, in performance as well as in size.

Finally, Moscow aims to guarantee its interests in the High North by increasing its military and security presence in the region. On an institutional level, for example, Nikolai Patrushev, while still Director of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), created a special Arctic Directorate at the FSB in 2004, while in March 2009 the Security Council called for the establishment of a military unit, in line with the Arctic Strategy, that will safeguard the security of Russian territory in the Arctic Ocean in any military and political environment. In this context, the Security Council has also stipulated that the FSB should control the Russian border in the High North.

Russia is also bolstering its military capacity on an operational level. For example, Lt.-Gen. Vladimir Shamanov, head of the Russian military's combat training directorate, announced plans to increase the operational radius of Russia's northern submarine fleet and reinforce the army's combat readiness along the Arctic coast. Russia has also started conducting numerous exercises in the region, including paratroop drops on the North Pole. Furthermore, in July 2008, Moscow announced it would patrol Arctic waters with

its northern fleet, while in August 2007, the Russian Air Force, acting on a directive from Putin, resumed long-range bomber flights over the Arctic. Both actions had previously been suspended after the end of the Cold War. These long-range strategic bomber patrols have been deemed particularly controversial by Western experts as these flights have supposedly included a mock bombing run against Norway's northern command centre at Bodo.<sup>32</sup>

In this context, Western literature (mass media and expert commentaries) has been particularly alarmist, referring only to Russian military exercises and the Kremlin *Strategy for National Security until 2020*<sup>33</sup>, which identified the Arctic region as prone to future military conflict, especially over its energy resources. It has failed to look past Russia's security policy towards the Arctic and has not taken into account the multi-dimensional nature of Russian policy. There is more co-operation than meets the eye; after all, the Kremlin has had active discussions with the Canadians on the Arctic and has conducted many exercises with the other riparian states on civilian protection such as search and rescue. In addition, Russian military manoeuvres in the region should not be treated as something extraordinary. The Norwegians themselves have stated that Russia's activities are rather "a return to a more normal level of activity for a major power with legitimate interests in the region".<sup>34</sup> While mock-bombing other states' installations might be a breach of etiquette, regular patrolling is the norm for an important global actor.

Furthermore, the other riparian states have not acted very differently to Russia. Ottawa's Northern Strategy,<sup>35</sup> for example, is at times reminiscent of Moscow's Arctic Strategy, and Canada is also planning to expand its Arctic military capabilities with the construction of eight armed icebreakers, a deepwater port near Iqualuit for civilian and military purposes, as well as new electronic systems designed to detect submarines passing the Northwest Passage.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> "The Arctic contest heats up", *The Economist*, 09 October 2008.

<sup>33</sup> *Strategy for National Security until 2020* (Strategiya natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiiskoy Federatsii do 2020 goda), No. 537, 12 May 2009 (<http://www.scrf.gov.ru>).

<sup>34</sup> Statement at NATO Seminar by Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jonas Gahr Støre, "Current Strategic Challenges in the High North", 29 January 2009 (<http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/ud/about.mfa/minister-of-foreign-affairs-jonas-gahr-s/Speeches>).

<sup>35</sup> Meeting with Dr Michael Byers from the University of British Columbia, 24 July 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Although, it has to be noted that the financial and economic crisis threw a spanner into some of these plans with past promises having been repackaged and the construction of new icebreakers put on hold. I am grateful to Dr Michael Byers for bringing this point to my attention.

Ottawa is also holding regular massive integrated navy, air force, and army manoeuvres in the Arctic under operation 'Nanook',<sup>37</sup> which are designed to prepare the country for any future challenge to its sovereignty, and while Russia's flag-planting caused a furore in the West, Canada's flag-planting (although slightly different as it was limited to a barren inhabitable knoll called Hans Island rather than the Arctic seabed) gained little attention. Denmark has also recently put forth a defence plan for the period 2010-2014, which includes, similar to Russian plans, the establishment of an Arctic military command structure and task force ready to operate all over the Arctic region. Norway, on the other hand is investigating the possibility of a joint Nordic military structure,<sup>38</sup> while the 2009 US Presidential Directive noted the potential vulnerability of the United States to terrorist and criminal acts in the Arctic and inherently proposed the boosting of US Arctic capacities.

In addition, the fact that Russia has many different interests in the Arctic and that there are different rationales is also not taken fully on board. The panoply of interests means there is a divergent array of Russian actors with multiple agendas and designs for the region and particularly themselves. Arctic militarisation, for example, is to a large extent driven by the security and defence establishments, who naturally wish to expand their operational scope, responsibilities and budgets. In this context, they have spoken of new emerging threats in the Arctic. Their professionalism, however, should not be called into doubt. After all, it is the Armed Forces' duty to analyse and predict future threats and it is clear that future confrontation in the High North cannot be ruled out. But what it does mean is that their own immediate interests of greater budgets and expanded operations should not be ignored. The military-industrial complex, for example, has only been too keen to paint a dramatic picture in the High North, lobbying for Russia's interests in the Arctic in the hope of receiving more lucrative contracts.

Simultaneously, military chest-thumping and sovereignty exercises in the region can provide politicians with increased popularity amongst the electorate. Artur Chilingarov's trip to the Arctic and flag-planting exercise, for example, was primarily geared towards the Russian home audience. As Dr Michael Byers from the University of British Columbia aptly notes: "Russian politicians, just like politicians in Denmark and Canada, are sometimes

focused on domestic politics when they engage in international relations concerning the Arctic."<sup>39</sup> The Ministry of Economic Development and Trade (MEDT), on the other hand, as well as northern regions such as Murmansk, are instead probably primarily concerned with painting a stable and peaceful picture of the region in order attract foreign investment.

As such, Russian policy towards the Arctic is not only far more nuanced than often depicted in Western discourse; it is, in fact, at times not that different from other states' policies. It is a very proactive approach that is classically Russian in nature to the extent that it is comprehensive, oscillating between competition and co-operation, and involves an array of actors with different agendas. Moscow demonstrates its military prowess in the region with mock bombardments and military exercises and elbows aside possible competitors such as the European Union, whose bid at the Arctic Council was also blocked by Ottawa, while simultaneously exploring the possibility of a joint claim with Canada, co-operating with the European Union in the Arctic through the Northern Dimension (ND) Programme, and actively participating in Arctic governance. Regrettably, the more heavy-handed approach has by far received most of the attention.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, as has been stated above, Russia's Arctic policy is multi-dimensional and cannot be simply reduced to its security dimension. Failing to take this into account could lead to the formulation of inadequate policies that would endanger the stability of the High North. For example, placing too great an emphasis on Russia's *Sturm und Drang* approach and failing to more broadly contextualise Russian policies could lead to greater collective action by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to the detriment of Russia. NATO has already signalled an interest in expanding its scope into the Arctic Region and has recently conducted the *Cold Response* military exercise in 2009, in which more than 7,000 soldiers from 13 nations participated.<sup>40</sup> Naturally, this exercise was not well-received in Moscow and many Russian military experts claim that while Russia is keeping within the international legal framework, NATO is using allegations of Russian aggression to justify its own military ambitions in the region.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Operation Nanook constitutes one of three major sovereignty operations that are conducted each year in the High North by the Canadian Forces.

<sup>38</sup> See the report by former Norwegian Foreign Minister, Mr Thorvald Stoltenberg entitled *Nordic Co-operation on Foreign and Security Policy*, Oslo, 09 February 2009 ([http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ud/pressecenter/pressemeldinger/2009/nordisk\\_rapport.html?id=544763](http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ud/pressecenter/pressemeldinger/2009/nordisk_rapport.html?id=544763)).

<sup>39</sup> Bruce Champion-Smith, "Cold War posturing often mainly intended for domestic politics", *Toronto Star*, 15 August 2009.

<sup>40</sup> "Stronger NATO presence in the Arctic", *Barents Observer*, 21 August 2009.

<sup>41</sup> See for example, Viktor Ruchkin, "Barabany b'yut v Arktike" (The drums are beating in the Arctic), *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 09 September 2009.



Russia has great sensitivities surrounding the Arctic and its proactive approach is not only a result of wanting to gain a favourable position to secure its national interests but is also related to constructivist factors. More and more actors are keen to play a role in the Arctic and understandably Russia therefore fears a loss of influence. The fact that Russia partially uses the region as an identity-building project tends to complicate matters as Moscow invests a lot of pride and prestige in the High North.

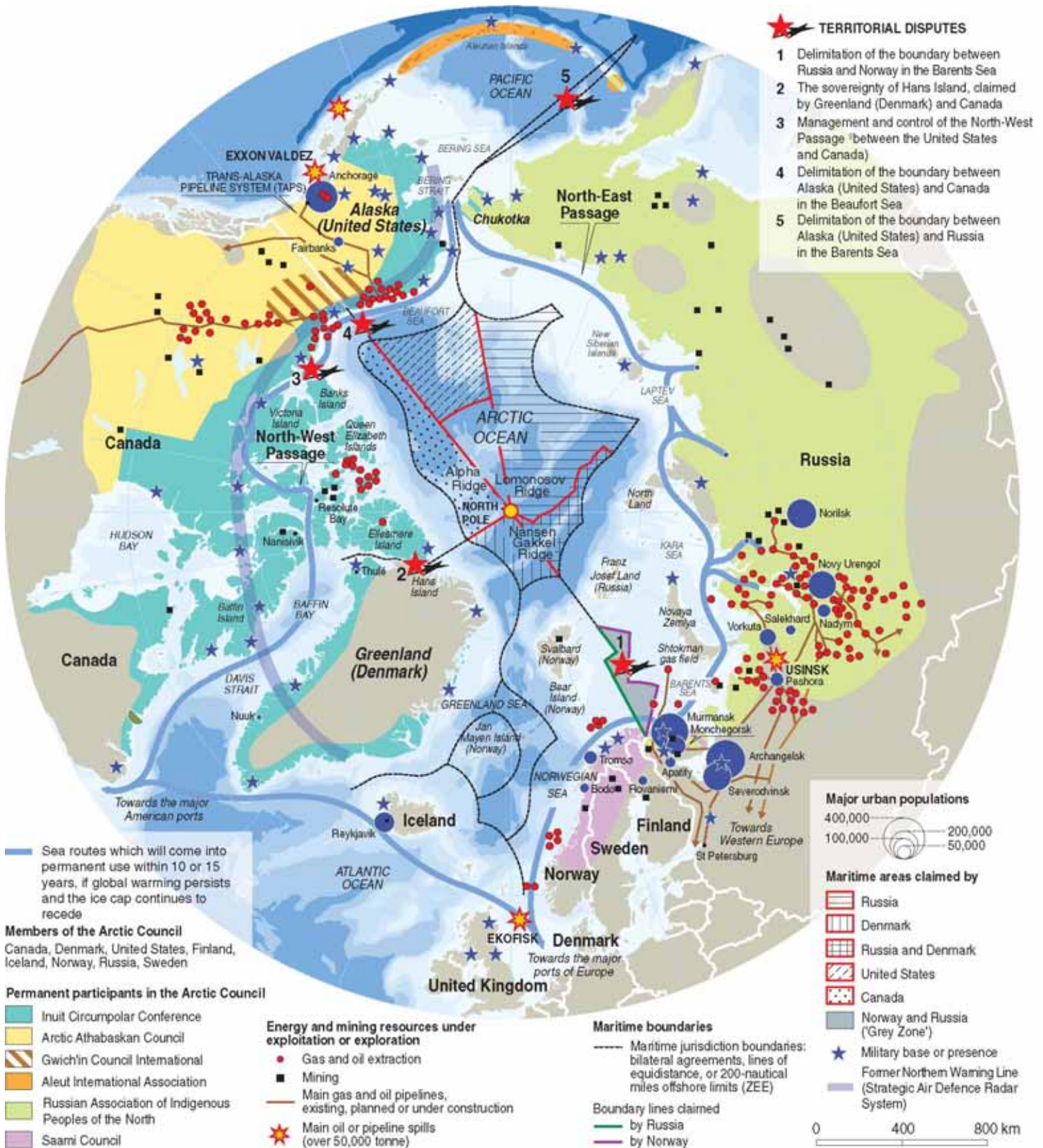
Western<sup>42</sup> policy towards the region must take these realities into account, in addition to realising that Russia views the other riparian states' policies as not so different from its own. Enhancing NATO's role in the region without acknowledging and trying to integrate Russian interests will reinforce Russia's sense of strategic isolation and aggravate the security dilemma in the region. This does not mean Western policy should be held hostage by Russian sensitivities; it does, however, mean that Russia must be included when formulating a policy for the Arctic.

This will undoubtedly be an incredibly difficult balance to strike. Failure to do so however, could have detrimental consequences; putting the overall strategic objective of maintaining stability and peace in the region at risk.

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<sup>42</sup> The term 'Western' is used here to represent the other riparian states and the European Union although it is quite clear that the so-called 'West' itself is quite divided with regards to the Arctic.

## Annex. Map of the Arctic region



PHILIPPE REKACEWICZ

Source: "Geopolitique de l'Arctique: la course pour les ressources", 19 October 2007, by Philippe Rekacewicz, *Monde Diplomatique*.