



## RUSKÉ ZÁUJMY A MILITARIZÁCIA ARKTÍDY RUSSIA'S INTERESTS AND MILITARIZATION OF THE ARCTIC

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Rusko na medzinárodných fórach intenzívne tlačí svoju agendu ekonomických a územných nárokov na odôvodnenie svojej rastúcej vojenskej prítomnosti v Arktíde. Arktické ambície a ich napĺňanie sú založené predovšetkým na ruských ekonomických záujmoch v tomto regióne a vzrastajúcich bezpečnostných obavách. Ruské plány na militarizáciu Arktídy stavajú na posilnení odstrašujúcich spôsobilostí (deterrence) nedávno zriadeného Arktického veliteľstva a na rekonštrukcii alebo modernizácii bývalých sovietskych vojenských základní. V krátkodobom horizonte je v regióne možné očakávať vykonávanie rozsiahlych vojenských cvičení a nasadenie moderných ruských vojenských prostriedkov ako súčasť štátneho naratívu na podporu Arktickej stratégie.

Kľúčové slová: Rusko, Arktída, militarizácia, bezpečnosť, hrozby.

Russia is intensively pushing its economic and territorial claims agenda in international fora in order to justify its increasing military presence in the Arctic. The Arctic ambitions and actions are based primarily on Russia's economic interests in the region and the security concerns to which they give rise. Russian militarization plans for the Arctic are founded on enhancing the deterrence capabilities of the recently established Arctic Command and on the reconstruction or upgrading of former Soviet military bases. Large-scale military exercises and the deployment of advanced Russian military assets in the North are expected in the short term as part of the state narrative in support of the Kremlin's Arctic strategy.

Key words: Russia, Arctic, militarisation, security, threats.

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

Russia's "Arctic strategy" confirms previous declarations of Russian politicians in terms of defining the Arctic as a key area for future economic, social and political development of the country. Primarily, it should be the expected incomes from

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natural resources and Arctic maritime transport development that will reinstall and then maintain Russia's superpower status. In this perception, the Arctic is perceived not only as a state's treasury, but mainly as an area of Russia's power projection. The aim of Russia is, therefore, at first maximizing the efficient use of natural resources and strengthening its position in the area, thus confirming the status of a leading power.

The fundamental problem of Russia's approach to the Arctic is its ambiguity. On one hand, Russian leaders claim to respect the existing international law principles and regimes and the interest to deepen the existing international cooperation. On the other hand, we can often witness Russia's one-sided actions that rather imply conflict-oriented approach.

Moscow has repeatedly stated that the reconstruction and build-up of military installations in the Arctic are not aimed against any external adversary and are supposed to secure the country internally, helping to fight illegal migration and terrorism. At the same time, Russia has renewed its strategic bombers' flights over the region, regular submarines patrols and other provocative actions that negate those statements.

In strong statements we cannot only see the calculus of politicians. In Russia still persists strongly negative "cold war" perception of other actors in the Arctic region. For a large part of the Russian political, military and academic elite is therefore still characteristic a sceptical view of the world that builds on the premise of mutually exclusive and divergent interests and which highlights the issue of power and "hard security".

This results in a significant distrust on any activity of the remaining actors in the region, insecurity and the perception of "Western countries'" interests as an attempt to limit Russia's interests and rights. Assertive rhetoric and efforts to restore Russia's military potentials is then not a purely rational calculus but also a projection of existing concerns and sustaining sense of vulnerability.

Russia consistently acts as a "schizophrenic" actor whose next step is difficult to estimate. Its approach in the Arctic is clearly pragmatic and envisages the development of cooperation and the stabilization of the region. The Arctic also serves as a tool for building national awareness and international prestige. It must not be forgotten that Russia is currently the most important actor in the Arctic region. It has the longest polar frontier, the most powerful economy (in terms of volume), with the most numerous population living behind the Arctic Circle, with the most developed Arctic infrastructure, etc. Russia also has the most significant concentration of military units in the area and the most numerous fleet of icebreakers. Therefore, Russia's political-driven and military activities regarding the Arctic can be seen as a crucial for further development in the region. (Chrástanský 2011, p.12)

## **2 RUSSIA'S NATIONAL INTERESTS**

Russia has the largest civil and military presence in the Arctic. The region occupies a significant place in political and public debate in Russia. This reflects the fact that the Russians do not perceive their country only as a great power, but also as an Arctic superpower. This self-knowledge has a broad base in public and in the political and military leadership and is an essential part of national identity. It helps Russia's leadership give high priority to Arctic issues.

The Russian government adopted an Arctic policy document in September 2008. The document, entitled "The fundamentals of state policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic in the period up to 2020 and beyond", was published in the end of March 2009. The fundamentals of Russia's Arctic policy were designed under the auspices of the influential Security Council of the Russian Federation. The importance of the Arctic to Russia lies primarily in its rich energy deposits and strategically important metals and minerals. The strategy clearly emphasizes the region's importance to the national economy as a major source of revenue, mainly from energy production and profitable maritime transport; the ultimate objective of the state policy is to transform the Arctic into "Russia's foremost strategic base for natural resources" by 2020. One of the main goals of the Arctic policy is to increase extraction of the natural resources in the region. In the long-term perspective, the policy aims at preserving Russia's role as a "leading Arctic power". (Zysk 2009)

Of particular importance are the defence of the riches of the Exclusive Economic Zone and the continental shelf, ensuring free access of the Russian fleet to the Arctic, the decisive role of the Northern fleet for defence, as well as the increasing significance of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) for sustainable development of the Russian Federation. (Padrtova 2012)

To meet the requirements of increased economic activity and ensure restructuring of the volume of maritime freight, Russia recognises the need to develop modern infrastructure and a system of management of communications for the NSR to secure the transit. (Zysk 2009)

The Arctic is vital from a military perspective because the area is essential for Russia's missile defence and some strategic submarines are based there. This creates an inner contradiction as Russia on the one hand wishes to open up the region in order to realise its potential, but on the other hand wants to keep it under close control due to its military importance. (Granhholm-Carlsson 2013, p.4)

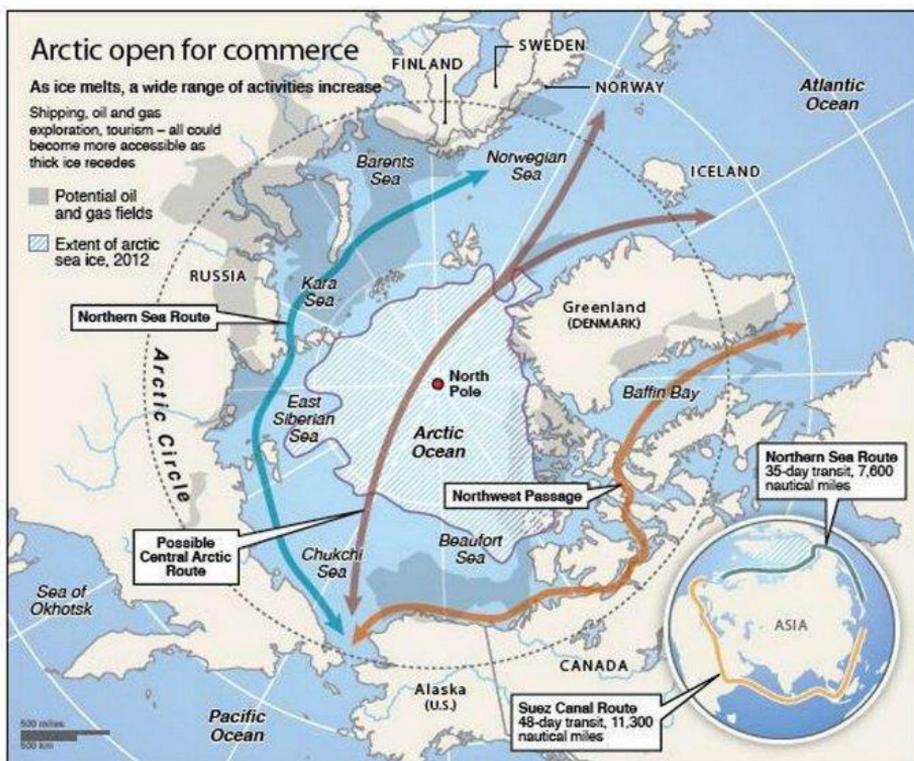
Russian President Putin used to proudly proclaim Russia's abiding interest in Arctic cooperation, but even the most pro-engagement Arctic partners cannot fail to see that Russia's interest is clearly slackening. This is partly due to the disappearing attractiveness of exploration of the Arctic resources, since the estimated production costs of the off-shore platforms go far beyond the expected returns on the current level of oil prices. A further reason is Russia's recognition that the much trumpeted (and still

not submitted) claim for expanding its “ownership” over the Arctic shelf cannot be legally approved. (Baev 2015)

### 3 ECONOMIC INTERESTS AND CONSTRAINTS

The US Geological Survey report estimates that 30% of the world’s undiscovered natural gas and 13% of undiscovered oil reserves could lie under the Arctic Ocean. Regarding Russian territories in the Arctic, it is estimated that 90% of its gas and 60% of its oil can be found there. The Russian leadership clearly emphasises the strategic importance of the Arctic as a major source of revenue, mainly in energy

Picture 1: Arctic open for commerce



Source: Bender 2015

production. Russian legislation allows the government to allocate strategic oil and gas deposits on the continental shelf without auctions. Thereby the law enables participation only of companies with five years of experience and in which the government owns at least a 50% stake – thus effectively allowing only state-controlled Gazprom and Rosneft to participate. (Padrtova 2012)

Many of the Siberian oil and gas fields operated by Russia are approaching the end of their natural life, and Arctic resources will form a key part of future extraction strategy. The political ambition is to increase the extraction of oil and gas and to make the NSR an international shipping channel. Natural resources are seen as the foundation for Russia's future economic and social development.

However, the exploitation of the continental shelf involves high risks and will require major investment, and Russia lacks the necessary technology and is dependent on international cooperation. The absence of infrastructure constitutes a challenge to the development of the Arctic. The NSR and the improvement of infrastructure on land – for example, deep-sea ports – are two essential components to overcome this. In order to open the Route for extensive shipping, Russia needs a modernised ice-breaker fleet and border and rescue stations. But the construction of ports and border stations has encountered problems and it is an open question whether or not the ice-breaker fleet is being renewed at such a pace that Russia can promote economic activity in the area after 2020 when the majority of the ice-breakers will be decommissioned. (Granholm-Carlsson 2013, p.4)

Regardless of any agreement or, more likely, lack of agreement on the ownership of the Arctic's resources, Russia will be unable to meet its long-term goal of extraction of natural resources from the Arctic without a normalisation of relations with the West, which will re-open access to Western technology.

The current Western sanctions framework closes off access to this technology, and the policy of import substitution is unlikely to provide Russia with the know-how or technology required. Western sanctions on Russia are restricting the Arctic shipping route along its north coast to domestic cargoes and energy exports, with many foreign firms staying away.

#### **4 THE ARCTIC AND THE CHANGING RUSSIAN THREAT PERCEPTION**

The Soviet Union during the Cold War had built up a chain of military installations in the Arctic region and maintained there a formidable presence, basically composed of airbases for long-range aviation (strategic bombers), radar stations as part of the early warning system and also other air defence assets, such as batteries dedicated to countering a potential US/NATO air incursion from the North.

The end of the Cold War and the internal economic difficulties forced Russia to moderate its previous Arctic ambitions, reduce its military presence and close numerous bases there, leaving tons of scrap metal, a polluted environment and abandoned military facilities. Several closed cities of the region were largely abandoned and the once robust strategic submarine fleet of the Northern Fleet fell to current 8 operational strategic nuclear-powered and 18 general-purpose nuclear-powered submarines. (IHS 2016)

The relative economic prosperity due to the high oil prices in the first decade of the 21st century, together with a growing frustration produced by the “colour” revolutions in its perceived traditional sphere of influence led Russia to rethink its security policy that includes the Arctic.

The Arctic is set to become a geopolitical battleground in the future. The worsening political situation with the West, the expected increase of economic value of the NSR and the fact that control of the Arctic regions may also give control over 30% of the world’s undiscovered natural gas and 13% of its undiscovered oil led Russia to elaborate its plan of actions to enhance its presence there. (Wilson Center [no date], p.3) This included reopening the closed or abandoned military bases, upgrading the obsolete surface vessels and submarines of the Northern Fleet and deploying up-to-date weapons capable of defending Russian political and economic interests in the region.

On 18 September 2008 President Medvedev approved “The realization of the Russian Federation’s State Policy in the Arctic until 2020 and beyond” (Osnovy 2009) as a basic document concerning the Arctic and part of subsequently released strategic documents, such as the Military Doctrine from December 2014 (Military Doctrine 2014), Maritime Doctrine from July 2015 (Maritime Doctrine [no date]), or National Security Strategy from December 2015 (National Security Strategy [no date]) and reflected in the Energy Strategy adopted in 2009. (Energy Strategy 2010)

Each strategic document articulates Russia’s ambition to take a leading role in exploring the Arctic, an ambition driven by economic assumptions. They also mention re-establishing military infrastructures there as a tool for ensuring the defence of national interests.

In March 2015 Prime Minister Medvedev signed a decree establishing a state commission on Arctic development and appointed Deputy Prime Minister Rogozin as its head. The Commission coordinates the Arctic activity of the ministries and the Security Council of the Russian Federation. (Eilertsen 2015)

In the Commission there are delegates from the oil and gas industry, the Federal Security Service, the Ministry of Defence, the Presidential Administration and the regional governors (eight federal subjects are involved in the Arctic region).

In parallel with the prospects of militarization of the North, Russia also works to legally justify its claim to vast parts of the Arctic: in 2001 submitted to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf an application to expand its Arctic borders beyond the 200-mile zone. (CLCS 2001)

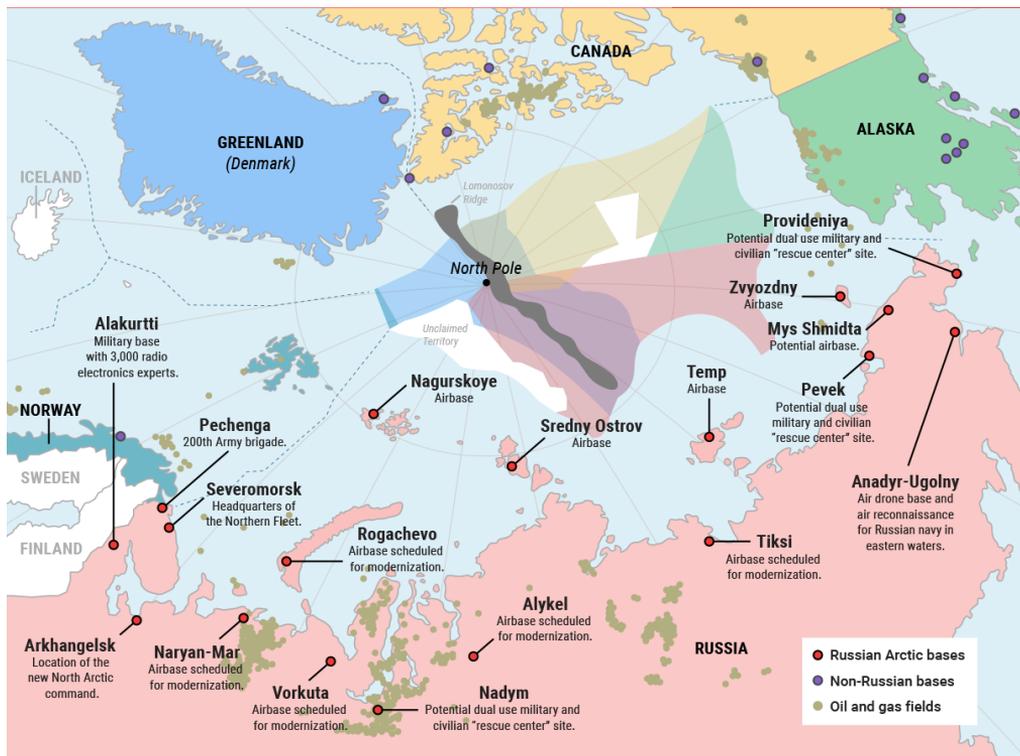
The application was rejected. In August 2015 Russia presented its revised “Submission in respect of the Arctic Ocean” (CLCS 2015), basing its claims on the results of ten years of geological and geophysical researches carried out by Russian scientists and expeditions in the region. Russia’s claims included 1,2 mil. km<sup>2</sup> of

territory on the seabed and the rights to conduct explorations for the hydrocarbons there. At least four other countries (Denmark, Norway, Canada and the USA) are seeking also to expand their continental shelves in the Arctic, and their claims partially coincide with Russia's.

## 5 RUSSIAN MILITARIZATION OF THE ARCTIC

In 2007 Russia took a symbolic step toward a territorial claim when it sent a mini-submarine to the North Pole and displayed a flag there. (BBC 2007) In September 2013 Russian President Putin issued a decree expanding the focus to the Arctic region and revealed plans to reconstruct military bases in the North. Since Russia's new military doctrine was signed into effect in 2015, the Arctic has been one of three

Picture 2: Russia's militarization of the Arctic



Source: Bender 2015

geopolitical arenas deemed by Moscow as vital to national security. Because of the new importance placed upon the region, Russia has undertaken a series of measures to militarize the Arctic ranging from building a military base on the Finnish border to developing a new military command to respond to threats. (Bender 2015) Since then

Russia has started setting up military bases on Kotelny Island (on the New Siberian Islands), Alexandra Land (Franz Josef Land), Sredniy Island (Severnaya Zemlya), in Rogachevo (Novaya Zemlya), Cape Schmidt and Wrangel Island. (Staalesen 2016)

According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, by the end of 2016 around 40 military objects should have been completed in the Arctic. (RT 2016) In 2017 reconstruction of the airfields is due to be completed. (RT 2015)

However, apart from the negative effect of Western sanctions on the Russian economy, the overstretched state budget, and the expected cuts in defence spending, Russian ambitions for a fast military build-up in the Arctic region are also hampered by the harsh climatic conditions. Deliveries of construction material have to come by ship when the sea routes are navigable, and reconstruction works are predominantly also only possible during the short summer period.

Following the territorial claims, and announcements of grandiose and financially overambitious plans in December 2014 a new operational-strategic command, the Arctic Command, was inaugurated. (Globalsecurity [no date]) It was intended to demonstrate that Russia is ready to build up its military capabilities in the Far North against a perceived NATO encirclement and to defend Russia's interests by any means, including military ones, if necessary. This involves the danger of a militarization of the Arctic.

The Arctic Command became operational on December 1, 2014. It is currently one of five Strategic Commands that divide up the Russian Federation into military regions. The Arctic Command was established to facilitate the development of polar capabilities for the Russian Armed Forces, while simultaneously developing civil infrastructure for economic and search and rescue (SAR) purposes. It is comprised of Russian ground, naval, and air forces and its headquarters are located in Arkhangelsk. Russia's military activities in the Arctic can be, in general, sorted into five categories: building of airbases, deep-water ports, and SAR stations; deploying of air defence systems; force modernization; and military exercises. Since 2014, these activities have significantly intensified. (Korpela 2016)

The militarization of the Arctic — and by extension, the construction of new bases or the repurposing of old Soviet facilities — will remain one of the Russian military's top priorities in the coming years. It is likely that part of the Northern Fleet, Moscow's principal naval force and a major component of Russian nuclear deterrence, will also be based on the New Siberian Island chain, which is ideally positioned for military operations in the Arctic. Northern Fleet's activities will likely include submarine operations, anti-submarine warfare and aerial interdiction of enemy anti-submarine efforts. These operations would be geared primarily toward monitoring and possibly checking the moves of other military powers in the region. Meanwhile, Russia will continue to loudly broadcast its plans to bulk up its Arctic presence. And as the

Arctic continues to militarize, the bases (especially at Alexandra Land and Kotelnny Island) will play a key role in securing Russia's strategic position in the region. (Stratfor 2015a)

However, the potential for Russia to deploy combat-capable forces to the area in case of crisis cannot be ruled out. Ground combat forces would make little sense on the islands; any military conflict in the Arctic would be heavily focused on maritime and aerial capabilities, but nonetheless, Russia has been deploying forces to the area to familiarize them with operations in the harsh Arctic climate. Russian forces conducting exercises in the Arctic already use equipment geared specifically toward operations in these specific climate conditions. In times of crisis, the Arctic bases could play a much more critical role as staging points for bomber or interceptor aircraft and perhaps even as supply points for maritime task forces. (Stratfor 2015b)

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Russia's activity in the Arctic is driven by multiple vectors: economic, security and governance interests are determining the Kremlin's policy in the region. Moscow, relying on its traditional presence and accumulated experience in the exploration of Arctic resources, naval transport in harsh climatic conditions and sustainment of a significant military presence, remains the most determined actor in the Arctic.

Russia continues to use international forums to assert its territorial and economic claims in the Arctic Ocean in order to secure its legal base in case of future political disputes with other regional actors.

Arctic off-shore projects are risky, capital-intensive and sometimes spanning decades. The Kremlin, at least in the medium term, cannot count on coming back with Western partners to "business as usual", so instead of promoting cooperation it focuses on defence-related issues (in line with the ongoing internal political narrative of the state) in order to create a "fait accompli": a chain of Russian military installations in the North can be used as a weighty argument for recognising Moscow's claims there.

The control over the NSR and turning it to a successful business enterprise remains an ambitious vision due to the lack or deficiency of its infrastructure, and the delays stemming from growing budgetary restrictions.

Despite the optimistic forecasts of the Russian Ministry of Transport - it estimates the volumes of transport via the NSR to be up to 64 million tons in 2020, and 85 million tons in 2030. (Zysk 2014, p.31) While in 2013 it was only 1,3 million tons. (Barber-Jones-Koch, 2016) The NSR can compete with the present warm sea routes only in the long term, but building up the chain of military installations at important choke points may provide Russia with strategic control over the sea traffic.

As the large Arctic region cannot be covered by traditional forces, the nuclear deterrence capabilities of the Northern Fleet, in concert with a symbolic presence or mixed presence (of military bases and scientific research stations) and frequent large

inter-branch exercises, will remain the main tools to demonstrate Russia's determination there.

Russian ambitions in the Arctic could still be considered rather far from being fully realised. Moscow's northward turn faces considerable external challenges. Sanctions have not only hurt the Russian economy and restricted the flow of foreign financing, they have also made it more difficult to access the Western technological know-how and equipment necessary to undertake demanding Arctic projects. For the time being, many previous planned Arctic projects seem to be economically infeasible. Though, in a long-term perspective, the future of the Russian economy may depend heavily on the Arctic. What the development of the Arctic will mean for the global economy, and for Russia's place within it remains uncertain at this stage.

In strategic terms, Russia has demonstrated its seriousness and willingness to assert itself in safeguarding its core interest in the Arctic by the inauguration of the Arctic Command. The projection against flanking in the north meets Russia's threat perception in view of encirclement by NATO. Russia reacts absolutely to ship movements of possible rivals in the Far North. Overlapping territorial claims fan Moscow's concerns about claimed rights to the use of the Arctic resources.

Moreover, due to the currently increasing tensions between Russia and the West, Russia's Arctic forces are growing in importance as they have traditionally played a central role in Russia's nuclear deterrence strategy against NATO and the USA. At the same time, it would be an exaggeration to consider Russia's military activities in the region and security rhetoric as a signal of its intentions to re-draw borders or spur conflict in the Arctic.

However, since Russia's military policy in the Arctic is a part of its broader foreign and security policy, military expansion and the future of cooperation in the region will be, to a great extent, determined not only by Russia's relations with its Arctic neighbours, but also by the global geopolitical situation. It is becoming more and more difficult to insulate the Arctic from broader security problems between Russia and the West.

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