

What are the intention of the Russian military in the Arctic?

A. Abstract

As the world becomes increasingly more globalized, seemingly obscure global regions have begun to rise as growing platforms for national power. Perhaps one of the most significant, and fast-growing region is the Arctic. The Arctic has become a hub for international activities, it's importance being identified by its expansive natural resources and proximity of nations. There are eight nations that have claimed geographic stake in the Arctic: Canada, The Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States of America. Together these nations form the Arctic Council and have pledged to create international protocol in the Arctic and cooperate with one another.¹ China has also announced it is claiming stake in the fast-changing region as "Near-Arctic State," through a white paper released in early 2018.²

The Arctic is a drastically changing region, facing a rising list of challenges as regional competition increases. While all the Arctic Council member states are increasing their presence and technological modernization in the Arctic region, Russia has demonstrated an exceptional thrust in this direction. Russian military force presence and capabilities in the Arctic has been a major push for the Russian Federation in the last few decades; so much so that Russia's activities have caused alarm to its neighboring Arctic nations for their assertive movements. The purpose of this paper is to provide

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/13/world/europe/13arctic.html>

² <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/14/china-we-are-a-near-arctic-state-and-we-want-a-polar-silk-road.html>

situational analysis of Russian military strategy and capabilities in the Arctic and conclude the intentions of the Russian military in the region.

Various perspectives on the issue of Russian military strategy in the Arctic range from the maintenance of Russian protections in the area for security purposes, to Russia's military modernization initializing aggressive steps towards Russia's increased territorial aspirations and possible international conflict. The uncertainty in Russia's military and strategic intentions increases geopolitical tensions, and actions to reduce such tensions become increasingly difficult as Russia's official policy offers unclear answers and military technology modernization continues. Militarization of Russian Arctic forces may be necessary for proper safety and security of nation's borders in the region, but has also created cause for concern for conflict by other nations.

B. Background and Context:

The Arctic holds a plethora of untapped natural resources, with oil and gas reserves equivalent to 412 billion estimated barrels of oil, about 22 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and gas according to the U.S. Geological Survey. Review of government documents and Russian officials has revealed that Russian military build-up is at an all-time high since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and is part of a push to secure Moscow's dominance in the Arctic.³ Russian policy in the Arctic has changed continuously in the last two decades, with frequent revisions of existing doctrines since the early 2000s.⁴

Echoing past Russian expansion moves in Crimea and Kalingrad, Russia's Arctic strategy has raised much apprehension. With the increase in Russian military modernization and expansion in the Arctic, U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis has described Moscow's Arctic moves as "aggressive steps".⁵

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-arctic-insight/putins-russia-in-biggest-arctic-military-push-since-soviet-fall-idUSKBN15E0W0>

⁴ <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/russias-arctic-military-and-security-part-two/>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-arctic-insight/putins-russia-in-biggest-arctic-military-push-since-soviet-fall-idUSKBN15E0W0>

To address the question of what is Russia's military intentions in the Arctic region and the responding reactions from other nations a focused series of topics must be addressed. Henceforth, the topics of interest covered in the following piece includes situational investigation of the official policy released by various Russian Federation departments, review of select Russian military technologies developed for use in the Arctic, and examination of the effect of Russian military presence in the Arctic on other vested parties.

Russia's military strategy has an impact of geopolitical operations, even more so the precedent of Russia's unsanctioned annexation of Crimea in 2014. If history repeats itself, as often happens, Russia's growing military forces and build-up in the Arctic can lead to a larger geopolitical conflict. In the event of conflict, the United States cannot exclude itself from regional action in the Arctic, as it has direct geographic stake in the area and the nation's security interests are put at risk. With its continuous mission to increase dominance in the region, understanding the extent of Russian military strategy in the Arctic is critical to the United States national security.

C. Method and Analysis Development:

The purpose for analysis is to compile information related to Russia's military strategy in the Arctic and provide various perspectives on the aggression of Russia's actions in the region. To do so information from a wide variety of sources has been gathered to provide a broad and diverse understanding. Sources include military officials from the U.S. Department of Defense, scholars specializing in Arctic affairs, Russian news media, and international news agencies. The intended audience of these sources are educated individuals with an established knowledge of past international affairs. For example, the recent annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation is treated as common knowledge and not explained.

Official strategy released by the Russian Ministry of Defense stresses the importance of national security and is the basis for much of Russia's military activity, while Russian foreign policy and national security papers call for cooperation with foreign nations. Research associate Pavel Devyatkin of the Arctic Institute interprets Russia's newer Arctic strategy papers as focusing on preventing smuggling, terrorism, and illegal immigration and suggests that Russia's aim is to safeguard the Arctic as a strategic resource base. This is not a mutually shared opinion of the Ministry of Defense, which has consistently called for the development of Russian military facilities in the Arctic to meet emerging dangers developing in the Arctic and the 2014 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation mentions the Arctic as a region where the Armed Forces must protect Russia's national interests even during peacetime. The document calls for a general military restoration rather than an increase of offensive capabilities.

Other Russian Arctic policy documents of significance include the 2008 Foundations of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period Until 2020 and Beyond which proposes to maintain the Arctic as a region of peaceful cooperation and protection of Russia's northern border requires a persistent build-up and modernization of military capabilities; the document's objectives, priorities, and means of implementation was expanded upon in 2013. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation contains the idea that Russia has reemerged as a key player in international politics, the Arctic is highlighted for strategic importance to regional foreign policy priorities, and the document's ambitious rhetoric lends some testimony to the idea that Russia's strategy in the Arctic is based on restoring its great power status.⁶

As part of their push in the Arctic, the Russian Federation is modernizing its military capabilities and technologies for Arctic application. Non-nuclear Russian military modernizations include at least two new intercontinental range systems, ballistic, and cruise missiles.⁷ Such developments imply the

⁶ <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/russias-arctic-military-and-security-part-two/>

⁷ <https://www.defensenews.com/space/2018/01/12/russias-nuclear-underwater-drone-is-real-and-in-the-nuclear-posture-review/>

intent of Russian military modernization, and such capabilities in the Arctic, intensify the potential for future regional conflict and Russian aggression. Military infrastructure in the Arctic is also undergoing a major thrust, President Vladimir Putin is rushing to re-open Soviet-era military, air and radar bases on remote Arctic islands and to build new ones. Along with these infrastructure developments, Arctic military troops are frequently photographed in Russian media and new ground-to-air missile and anti-ship missile systems have been moved into the region.⁸

Drones that Russia has published in open media include the “Yunona” autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV) and the prototype “Klavesin-2R-PM” AUV, and completed work related to creation of a remote-controlled undersea geological survey drilling system; designed for Arctic operations at 4,500m. These drones are to be used for both military and research purposes in the Arctic and their existence further establishes Russia as a national power vying for dominance in the Arctic using its military capabilities.⁹

The interpretation of Russian military activities in the Arctic has been interpreted in a range of ways by various sources. The presumed interpretation of the perspective of Russia’s Arctic Strategy: Military and Security (Part II) is that Russia seeks to simultaneously collaborate in civilian and security dimensions, modernize their defense forces, and secure their large territory from potential threats. The author, Pavel Devyatkin, states that there is no pattern of forceful Russian militarization in the Arctic and regional uncertainty is due to political tensions rather than aggressive Russian arctic actions.¹⁰ This is vastly different than the U.S. Department of Defense’s understanding of Russian military and strategic interests in the Arctic. As aforementioned, U.S. Defense Secretary Mattis described Russia as pursuing “aggressive steps” in the Arctic and pledged to prioritize developing a U.S. strategy.

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-arctic-insight/putins-russia-in-biggest-arctic-military-push-since-soviet-fall-idUSKBN15E0W0>

⁹ <https://thebarentsobserver.com/ru/node/958>

¹⁰ Russia’s Arctic Strategy: Military and Security (Part II)

Secretary Mattis is not the only defense official to have identified Russia as a potential source of conflict in the Arctic. Colonel Michael J. Forsyth, the former Chief of Staff of Alaskan NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) Region and Alaskan Command at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, has identified Russia as making a rigorous effort to assert or expand its sovereignty in the globe through its forceful claims in the Arctic.¹¹

D. Implications

The implication of Russian military actions is clear, Russian Arctic military expansion has extensive geopolitical and economic ramifications. The abundance of oil and natural gas increases regional competition for resources, a battle for natural resources between Arctic nations has begun to unfold. The potential for conflict increases as regional tensions are tested with increased competition, and Russia's military modernizations implies aggressive moves for regional power. Russia is also developing platforms that can be armed with either conventional or nuclear payloads, which does not violate the New START treaty. The New START nuclear arms reduction treaty between the United States and Russia excuses platforms that can be used for either conventional or nuclear weapons from breach.¹²

With Russia putting forth the most aggressive Arctic strategy, sources for possible conflict are the increasing human contact and the claims put forth by the various Arctic nations. Alaska is of enormous strategic significance for the United States. Not only does it establish U.S. geographic stake in the arctic, but it forms a physical platform to establish U.S. military credibility in the area.¹³ Russia's actions in the Arctic perpetuate the idea that the Arctic is being a zone of rising conflict and nationals

¹¹ <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/January-February-2018/Why-Alaska-and-the-Arctic-are-Critical-to-the-National-Security-of-the-United-States/>

¹² <https://www.defensenews.com/space/2018/01/12/russias-nuclear-underwater-drone-is-real-and-in-the-nuclear-posture-review/>

¹³ <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/January-February-2018/Why-Alaska-and-the-Arctic-are-Critical-to-the-National-Security-of-the-United-States/>

must prepare for conflict with Russia. Political tensions between Russia and NATO member states as a result of recent events only exacerbate such judgements.¹⁴

E. Conclusions

After a situational analysis it can be inferred that the intent of Russian military in the Arctic is to establish Russian dominance and power in the through military action. The Russian Federation is doing so by modernizing its military capabilities, expanding its military infrastructure in the region, and through initiatives outlines in official Russian defense policy. The response of other Arctic nations has expressed alarm in the aggression of Russian military presence in the region, tensions between nations continues to increase. The intention of the Russian military in the Arctic increases regional competition for natural resources, geopolitical tension, and furthers the potential for international conflict. This conclusion is stated with high-confidence based on open source material. Of course, the true details of Russian military details in the Arctic are unknown and is a gap that must be declared.

¹⁴ <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/russias-arctic-military-and-security-part-two/>