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[A Closer Look at Russia's Arctic Muscle Flexing](#)



Joint Strategic Command of Russia's Northern Fleet was created on December 1, 2014. From that moment, there have been a growing number of statements from Russian officials on the expansion of Russia's military presence in the region. A rollout of specific militarising measures has followed, reaching heights unseen since the Cold War. Military facilities are now present on nearly all large islands and archipelagos from the Kola Peninsula to Chukotka.

The recently opened "Northern Clover" and "Arctic Shamrock" military bases (the cost of the latter is [estimated](#) at 4.2 billion roubles) deserve special attention. The desire to maintain a certain mystique around this issue goes hand in hand with a wish to demonstrate engineering prowess in harsh conditions. For example, the Russian Ministry of Defence website has a separate "[sightseeing](#)" section with a fairly detailed 3D model of the abovementioned "Arctic Shamrock".

New air bases to station modern interceptor planes are being built, and old ones refurbished. The "Podsolnukh" (Sunflower) radar station based on the Kola Peninsula will be included in the anti-missile defence system, together with radar stations in the Russian Far East, Siberia, and the Baltic Sea region, to create a single radar fence covering Russia's entire Northern border. Existing weapons are being modified to work in ultra-low temperatures. For example, the TOR-M2DT and Pantsir-SA missile systems paraded in front of the public during this year's Victory Day celebrations. A major batch of frost-resistant equipment is intended for the 80th Mechanised Infantry Brigade, based in the Murmansk region: modified KAMAZ trucks, snowmobiles, hovercraft, waterproof equipment, and much more besides.

The Arctic navy has not been left out of the action. A new generation diesel-electric icebreaker, "Ilya Muromets", the first Russian Navy vessel of its type in several decades, is in its final testing phase. As the Ministry of Defence has repeatedly stated, this new ship is being built mostly for hydrographic surveys, even though the original plans allowed for military capabilities. The Northern Fleet is expected to be reinforced with several new nuclear submarines, a frigate, and a landing craft by 2020. A super-heavy *ekranoplan* transport and assault vehicle, and a nuclear aircraft carrier are planned to be commissioned within the next ten years. Meanwhile, Russia already possesses 40 icebreakers. The "Arktika" nuclear icebreaker (costing [about 122 billion roubles](#)) has been delayed, but is almost ready. It will be the sixth of its type in Russia, and the world's largest. New vessels are also required because the majority of Russian naval ships will be decommissioned in the next 5-7 years. Only the "Sevmorput" LASH carrier has been renovated and recommissioned so far.

Pirates, Gas and Radioactive Waste

The Ministry of Emergency Situations, in turn, is building infrastructure to combat potential emergency situations along the whole Northern Sea Route (NSR) by creating a network of emergency response stations. It is quite possible, though, that pirate ships or oil leaks from passing vessels may not be the only challenges. According to [some data](#), there are tens of thousands of containers of radioactive waste dumped in the Arctic waters, as well as several vessels, submarines, and reactors with spent nuclear fuel. There is no decision yet concerning their reprocessing, and the 1.2 billion roubles allocated by the government for the clean-up operations are currently used only "on the surface".

In interviews, Russian military spokesmen often refer to documents adopted by the executive authorities (such as “the Basics of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic for the period until 2020 and beyond”) to explain their enlarged presence there. As we recall, this document [states](#) that the region is planned to be used as “a strategic resource base”, and the Northern Sea Route – as “a national single transport communication”. Hence, the military personnel are simply doing their job, although remain silent about being given *carte blanche*, hiding behind loosely worded laws.

How far can they go in militarising the Arctic? First of all, it is clear that everything has its limits, due to, for example, financial capacity. However, according to defence minister Shoygu’s [statement](#), the process of creating and arming the entire Arctic forces will already be complete by 2018, and from then on, new technological models will be replacing ageing equipment. It may be assumed that, as the pace of actual rearmament slows, state media will draw even more attention to the Arctic issue because one of the tasks, according to the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Ground Forces, Oleg Salyukov, is precisely to *demonstrate* Russia’s military presence in the region.

Controlling a new Northern Sea Route. But with Financial Constraints

Russia wants to control the Northern Sea Route, and believes that the trade traffic will significantly increase in the years to come, owing to increased shipments from oil rigs, amongst others. For instance, over 4 million tonnes of cargo [were transported](#) along this route in 2015, 6.5 million tonnes in 2016, and that number is expected to [reach 40 million tonnes](#) by 2022. In this context, the main task is to engage partners who can guarantee a turnover; China above all. The Russian experts’ reply to their Western colleagues’ opinions about Beijing’s growing Arctic ambitions is that scientific evidence proves autonomous commercial navigation is impossible in Polar areas, since Russia is the only country with heavy nuclear icebreakers, without which the risk of emergencies increases considerably, even during the open navigation season. Russian delegates at this October’s [Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik](#) pointed this out repeatedly.

Obviously, this situation will only be temporary, especially if [China decides to invest heavily](#) in ship-building. Very recently, from September 11 to 24, the Chinese cargo ship “Tianjian” sailed from a port in China to Denmark, via the Northern Sea Route, saving 15 days and almost four hundred tonnes of fuel, which means that Beijing is certainly inclined to be interested in the Arctic.

For the Russian authorities, one favourable aspect connected to controlling the Northern Sea Route is Article 234 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea from 1982. This gives coastal states the right to adopt and enforce, within the limits of their exclusive economic zone, various non-discriminatory laws and regulations for the prevention of marine pollution from vessels in these waters. In reality, it means that environmental legislation, loosely interpreted, takes precedence over the “free navigation” philosophy supported by the United States.

Thus, Russia is seeking to ensure security in the region. In practice, it means secure investments in the Northern Sea Route: Developed infrastructure would eliminate accidents and prevent financial losses, which is exactly what many potential carriers are currently worried about. In addition, Russian policy makers are not clear whether the climate will really change in the decades to come, or if this warming period will be replaced by another cold cycle.

Meanwhile, the topic of “territorial integrity” and the image of an enemy ready to attack from unprotected Northern borders are both being successfully exploited domestically. Incidentally, the desire of “the USA and its allies to dominate the world’s oceans, including the Arctic” has been openly listed as a national security threat in “The Basic Principles of the Russian Federation’s State Policy in the field of Naval Activity for the period until 2030”. Extracting the supposed 90-100 billion tonnes of oil and gas is also a factor, and, ironically, potentially decisive: the cheaper the energy resources, the lower the chance that Russia will be able to invest money in their extraction, and vice versa. In this scenario of continued low oil prices and perceived high risks and high costs of shipping, militarising the region could become an end in itself, depleting federal budgetary resources for the sake of warding off unconfirmed and theoretically unlikely threats.

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