Bypassing NATO Enlargement: Explaining Russian Naval Power Projection through the Arctic

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Since a Russian titanium flag was planted in the Arctic Ocean in 2007, Western academic circles have grown more interested in the Kremlin's position in the circumpolar North, sparking an ongoing debate about its regional interests. Traditionally, discourse has been divided between neorealist and neoliberal paradigms that either suggest Moscow aims to militarily dominate the region, or is a cooperative actor despite behaving aggressively elsewhere, respectively. However, new perspectives have emerged that offer a middle ground, and explore Moscow's use of its military to project power outside the Arctic, particularly towards the GIUK Gap. Despite this shift in the literature, it has not yet discussed how the North fits within Russia's wider geopolitical ambitions, and why it is interested in projecting naval power against the West. Consequently, this paper argues that, as demonstrated by the Kremlin's response to the mere mention of NATO enlargement, its core interests are not in the Arctic, but in maintaining its great power status, which it believes is being threatened in Europe. This does not dismiss the region's geostrategic value, because it will play an important supporting role in bypassing the strategic encirclement if NATO-Russian tensions escalate to war. Russian strategic documents also reveal that while the literature has correctly identified the Kremlin's intention to disrupt NATO operations by contesting control over the GIUK Gap, another likely objective is to conduct precision strikes on Western military and economic infrastructure to support ground operations in Europe.

Introduction

Since a Russian titanium flag was planted in the Arctic Ocean's seabed in 2007 (Buchanan, 2023: vii), Moscow's activity in the circumpolar North has attracted attention in the West, which has only increased with the return of great power politics. This enduring curiosity has informed an ongoing debate about the Kremlin's intentions in the region, which is split between neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists that either insist Moscow aims to dominate the Arctic, or affirm that it is a positive regional actor that abides by international law, respectively (Sukhankin, Bouffard & Lackenbauer, 2021: 4; Buchanan, 2023: 7-8). However, new perspectives are emerging that offer a middle ground (Bouffard, Charron & Fergusson, 2019: 64), and explore the potential and actual

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use of the Russian military to project power outside the Arctic (Regehr, 2021; Huebert, 2021; Mikkola, 2019; Boulègue, 2019; Dean, 2023).

Despite this shift, two gaps remain. First, the conflict-cooperation debate has not yet considered how the Arctic fits within Russia's wider geopolitical ambitions, because of a regional lens applied by both paradigms, which excludes the North's place in the international system, and leads to conclusions that either exaggerates or downplays hard security threats. Second, while the literature has acknowledged the use of the Arctic by Russia to project power elsewhere, it has not yet fully explored how its security competition with the West informs these activities. Consequently, this paper fills these gaps by addressing the following research questions: how does the circumpolar North fit within Moscow's broader geopolitical ambitions; and why is it interested in projecting naval power from the Arctic into the GIUK Gap?

By drawing from John Mearsheimer's offensive realism and Alfred Thayer Mahan's theory of sea power for its framework, this paper contends that Russia's core interests are not vested in the Arctic. This is because Moscow's top priority is maintaining its great power status, which it believes NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe is undermining. However, this does not dismiss the Arctic's geostrategic value. Since it provides the most direct route to the North Atlantic Ocean (Mikkola, 2019: 4), it will allow Russia to bypass what it perceives as encirclement, if tensions escalate to armed conflict, and bolster land operations in Eastern Europe.

This paper is structured as follows. First, it argues in favour of a different theoretical approach for examining Arctic geopolitics that breaks from the traditional use of a regional lens, which excludes important context that informs Moscow's activity in the Arctic and constrains neorealism's explanatory power, since it is designed to explain how the wider international system functions. Second, it describes Russia's great power ambitions, along with its opposition and aggressive response to NATO enlargement, to demonstrate that it believes its core interests are being threatened in Europe. Third, it describes the Arctic's geostrategic value that allows Russia to bypass NATO enlargement and, in wartime, disrupt NATO's sea lines of communication, as identified by the literature (Regehr, 2021: 1, 3; Mikkola, 2019: 4; Boulègue, 2019: 10; Dean, 2023: 20), and attack ground-based Western military and economic infrastructure. Finally, it explains Russia's geostrategic constraints that will hinder its ability to project naval power from the Arctic, and argues in favour of a proportionate response by NATO.

Literature review

Traditionally, the scholarship has been split into two schools of thought. The first, described by Sergey Sukhankin, Troy Bouffard, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer as the neorealist school, attest that Russia intends to strategically dominate the Arctic, leaving little room for the West to cooperate with Moscow and must instead prevent its expanding control in the region (Sukhankin, Bouffard & Lackenbauer, 2021: 4). Academics supporting this perspective include Aurel Braun and Stephen J. Blank, who argue that the Kremlin has aggressively claimed large portions of the region, and suggest it could act unilaterally if its submitted claim over the Mendeleev and Lomonosov Ridges to the United Nations is rejected (2020: 11). Conversely, the neoliberal institutionalist school posits that the likelihood of conflict in the region because of local disputes is low, and despite Russia's regional military buildup, it remains a positive actor. It also asserts that since the Arctic has crucial economic value, military confrontation is undesirable (Sukhankin, Bouffard & Lackenbauer, 2021:

4). A prominent proponent of this perspective is Elizabeth Buchanan, who argues that in spite of its revisionist ambitions elsewhere, Russia is a cooperative player in the region, whose Arctic strategy abides by international law (2023: 7-8). She also contends that because the North provides a substantial resource base for Moscow's economy, military conflict is not in its interests (78).

This divide also impacts discourse about Russian Arctic militarization, where it is portrayed as either provocative or defensive in nature. Braun and Blank argue that Moscow's military activities demonstrate that their "assertions of Arctic military exceptionalism are entirely false," pointing to its 2018 mock attack on one of Norway's radar stations, deployment of the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system in 2019, construction of military bases, and confrontations with U.S. and Canadian fighter jets near North America (2020: 10-11). Danielle Cherpako explains further that it "has often used large-scale bastion defence, anti-sub, and air denial exercises as a way of communicating displeasure with NATO activities, and demonstrating their ability to block NATO access to the Baltic, North, and Norwegian Seas" (2020: 5). In contrast, Lincoln Flake attests that Russian efforts are best viewed as a correction of the vast demilitarization that occurred during the 1990s and 2000s, arguing that deploying the S-300 anti-air system, Bastion coastal defence missiles, Rubezh anti-ship systems, MiG-31BM interceptors, and surveillance drones are protective measures (2017: 20, 21-22). Additionally, Michael Petersen and Rebecca Pincus state that Arctic military investments are intended to safeguard resource development and transportation infrastructure, and key components of their strategic nuclear force, from an American attack meant to cripple Moscow militarily and economically (2021: 490, 506-507, 504).

This theoretical divide, however, is blurring with the emergence of a middle ground that highlights the importance of circumpolar cooperation, while acknowledging the Kremlin's revisionist foreign policy. Bouffard, Andrea Charron, and James Fergusson argue that the West should encourage positive regional actions from Russia, while defending itself against aggressive Russian behaviour (2019: 64). They also attest that Moscow's involvement with the Arctic Council is important for engagement, since the forum's discussions prioritize shared concerns and avoid military issues (64-65). Simultaneously, considering deteriorating West-Russia relations, Bouffard, Charron, and Fergusson assert that NORAD will have an increased role in dealing with Russia's revisionist ambitions by defending North American airspace and providing warning of maritime threats. NATO would also play a role in guarding the North Atlantic's maritime approaches (66).

Also appearing are considerations about the potential and actual use of the Russian military to project power outside the Arctic. In his assessment about the possible spillover effects of a conventional war in Europe into the region, Ernie Regehr suggests that Moscow would aim to protect its economic infrastructure and military forces by preventing conflict from impacting the Arctic, incentivizing the Kremlin to disrupt NATO operations in the North Atlantic. This would also grant the Russian Northern Fleet access to the GIUK Gap, which is crucial for the Alliance's "defence and deterrence strategy" (Regehr, 2021: 1, 3). Furthermore, Rob Huebert notes how Moscow's expanded Arctic forces allow it to project power abroad, pointing to elements of the Northern Fleet being sent to Syria, and the use of its air force and navy to posture against Western Arctic states after the 2014 Ukraine crisis. Consequently, he argues that this makes Russia a regional hegemon in the circumpolar North (Huebert, 2021: 431).

Emphasis is also being placed on Russian threats to NATO's sea lines of communication (SLOC). Harri Mikkola explains that the Arctic Ocean provides Moscow with the easiest route to the

Atlantic Ocean, and since the North Atlantic SLOC is crucial for transporting troops from North America to Europe, Russia would be interested in disrupting it to delay or prevent reinforcements. This requires that its submarines and surface vessels pass through the GIUK Gap, making it necessary for NATO to maintain control over this region (Mikkola, 2019: 4). Mathieu Boulègue also asserts that Russian operations in the Gap would negatively impact the Alliance's SLOC, which are necessary for North American forces to reinforce and resupply Europe (2019: 10). Ryan Dean goes further by attesting that Russia intends to hold it "at risk with long-range naval, air, and missile systems deployed through the Norwegian Arctic and the GIUK Gap to the west," and is heavily investing in new launcher platforms (2023: 20).

Addressing gaps through a new theoretical approach

Despite this shift in the literature, two prominent gaps remain. The first is the conflict-cooperation debate's lack of consideration about how the Arctic fits within Russia's wider geopolitical ambitions. This is because both sides utilize a regional lens, largely excluding the circumpolar North's place within the international system, which either exaggerates or severely downplays hard security threats. Suggesting that the Arctic will experience conflict over resources or boundary disputes inflates the region's importance in the security competition between the West and Russia. Moscow's core interests are not in the North, but in maintaining its great power status as a guarantee of its security, which it believes is threatened by NATO enlargement in Europe. Because of geography, it is also interested in protecting its Pacific coast. This does not suggest that the Arctic has no role in achieving these aims, considering its geostrategic and economic value, but the region is not the Kremlin's top priority, and unrealistic expectations of a resource war provide a limited understanding about how it will be dragged into great power competition (Giboi, 2024: 16-17). As Huebert explains, this is not about conflict over the region, but how it is used by great powers (2021: 463).

Downplaying the potential for conflict in favour of cooperation is equally problematic (Giboi, 2024: 17). As demonstrated by the pause in Arctic Council activities and Russia's withdrawal from the Barents-Euro Arctic Council after its invasion of Ukraine (Lackenbauer & Dean, 2022: 3; Edvardsen, 2023), the Arctic is not insulated from external international affairs (Giboi, 2024: 16). Contrary to Flake's argument that the United States, Canada, Denmark, and Norway should disassociate Russian engagements in the region from their "overall relations with Moscow" (Flake, 2017: 18, 28), artificially isolating the circumpolar North leaves out important context for the Kremlin's activity in the region. Flake himself demonstrates how Arctic security analyses are more nuanced when placed in a wider environment by arguing that Russia's military buildup in the region since 2012 was the result of its 2008 military reforms, not preparations for an inevitable confrontation in the North (Flake, 2017: 20).

This lack of context leads to the second gap. Although part of the literature acknowledged Russia's use of the Arctic to project power elsewhere, it has not fully explored its motivations for doing so. Other than Huebert (2021: 430), assessments about Russian power projection from the Arctic have not acknowledged how NATO enlargement informs Moscow's military activity in the region. This has resulted in little discussion about the Arctic Ocean's strategic value for Russia in avoiding strategic encirclement by the Alliance, especially in the currently unlikely possibility of tensions with the West escalating to war.

To fill these gaps, this paper explores how the circumpolar North fits within Russia's broader geopolitical ambitions, and why Moscow is interested in projecting naval power from the Arctic into the GIUK Gap, by combining Mearsheimer's offensive realism and Mahan's theory of sea power for its framework. The former is a variant of neorealism, a subset of realist theory that assumes the structure of the international system – in other words the distribution of power – causes states to seek their own security (Mearsheimer, 2014: 19, 337). However, it breaks from the defensive realist argument that states want to maintain their current position (Mearsheimer, 2014: 20-21; Waltz, 2010: 126), positing instead that states, particularly great powers, are incentivized to maximize their power[1] to ensure security (Mearsheimer, 2014: 5, 29). Great powers also pay attention to the balance of power, and seek opportunities to alter it at their adversaries' expense (34). It also states that since achieving global hegemony, the domination of the international system, is virtually impossible, great powers seek to dominate their region in the world, also known as regional hegemony (40-41, 138), which is why they act aggressively when they believe their sphere of influence is being infringed upon (Mearsheimer, 2014: 82).

This approach is not a reiteration of the type of neorealism described by Sukhankin, Bouffard, and Lackenbauer, which constrains its explanatory power. Instead of accounting for the Arctic through a regional lens, offensive realism is better suited to explain how the region fits within the international system, and how states intend to use it in support of their core interests. As Kenneth Waltz demonstrates, neorealism, as a theory of international politics, is designed to describe international structures, which are defined by "the primary political units" – which are nation states in our era – "emerge from the coexistence of states," and "are formed by" state interactions (Waltz, 2010: 91). Applying this approach to Russia illustrates that it cannot only account for its Arctic neighbours as it navigates the international system, but must instead prioritize NATO's presence near its European borders. Consequently, examining its activities in the Arctic through only a regional context sets offensive realism up for failure.

Additionally, this paper utilizes Mahan's theory of seapower to illustrate the Arctic's geopolitical value. He posited that a place's strategic importance depended on three conditions: its geographic position, military strength, and resources (Mahan, 1911: 132). This paper, however, only prioritizes the first two because emphasizing resources is more appropriate for discussing Russia's ambitions to develop the Northern Sea Route, and offers little theoretical explanation for why Moscow uses the Arctic to project naval power. While Mahan largely emphasized a place's position in the context of trade, pointing to narrow crossroads like the Strait of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal as highways for commerce (134-135),[2] he also highlighted its military utility. By showcasing Bermuda, and, to a greater extent, Hawaii as examples, he illustrates that a region's geographic situation provides advantages for engaging in offensive operations (135, 138). Furthermore, Mahan believed that offensive military strength depended on whether a seaport can gather and host a large force, safely launch it into open waters, and continuously support it throughout a campaign (153). When applied to the Arctic's role in Russia's pursuit of its core interests, it is clear that the region provides Moscow with a strategic position to avoid encirclement, especially if tensions with NATO escalate to war, and conduct offensive operations, which is in line with Russian naval strategy. Alongside offensive realism, Mahan's insights are also useful to identify serious constraints that prevent Russia from using the Arctic to become a fully fledged maritime power.

Situating the Arctic within Russia's aims

Contrary to what the literature suggests, the Arctic does not comprise Russia's core interests. Instead, it is concerned about maintaining its great power status, which it believes is being undermined by NATO enlargement. Even though the circumpolar North has geostrategic value, Moscow has, and will continue to, prioritize its geopolitical position in Europe relative to that of the Alliance, and, to a lesser extent, in the Pacific relative to that of China. Consequently, its role, while important, will most likely be in support of the Kremlin's goal of bypassing what it perceives as encirclement, Europe, rather than obtain gains in the region. However, Russia's ability to project power from the Arctic into the North Atlantic will be limited because of its geographic situation.

Russia's Core Interests

The goal of attaining regional hegemony, as described by offensive realism, is characteristic of Russia's status and ambitions. Even though it is much weaker than the U.S., Moscow is also a great power (Mearsheimer, 2014: 360). It is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, possesses the largest nuclear arsenal of approximately 4,380 warheads, is the largest state by territory (Sakwa, 2017: 74; Kristensen et al., 2024: 118), and can project power and influence abroad. This is demonstrated by its 2016 naval deployments in Syria (Bodner, 2018), military assistance to Latin American countries like Nicaragua and Venezuela (Brands & Berg, 2021: 12), growing presence in the African Sahel though Wagner and the Africa Corps (Stronski, 2023; Banchereau & Donati, 2024), and the recent arrival of Russian ships to Cuba and Venezuela for naval exercises in the Caribbean Sea (Crowther, 2024; Associated Press, 2024).

Additionally, President Vladimir Putin wants Russia's great power status to be recognized on the international stage, and its perceived sphere of influence to be respected by other great powers (Doris & Graham, 2022: 76). Putin does not solely have these views, as explained by Andrew Doris and Thomas Graham, since Moscow's great power assertions were also present during Boris Yeltsin's presidency (2022: 76; Sakwa, 2017, 33). Indeed, as Suzanne Loftus identifies, during its economic decline in the 1990s, the political leadership believed that its foreign policy objective should be reversing it "to become a serious actor on the international stage" (2021: 203). They also "universally agreed to pursue economic, political, and military cooperation with the Commonwealth of Independent States to ensure Russia's 'sphere of influence'" (203). Former president Dmitry Medvedev concurred with these objectives, calling Moscow's "near abroad" a "sphere of privileged interests" in August 2008 (Loftus, 2021: 203; Sakwa, 2023: 243).

For this reason, Russia is antagonistic to NATO and believes it is a tool of American hegemony. Its 2023 *Foreign Policy Concept* implies that the Alliance is really a network of U.S satellite states, whose goal is to weaken "Russia in every possible way, including at undermining its constructive civilizational role, power, economic, and technological capabilities, limiting its sovereignty in foreign and domestic policy, [and] violating its territorial integrity" (Russian Federation, 2023: sec. 13). Additionally, Moscow's 2021 *National Security Strategy* claims that the buildup of NATO military infrastructure near its borders intensifies military threats to Russia (Russian Federation 2021: 11). The 2022 *Maritime Doctrine* delivers similar rhetoric, asserting that part of the main threats facing Russian national security and development at sea is the Alliance's "expansion of military infrastructure," and "the increase in the number of exercises conducted in the waters of the seas adjacent to the territory of the Russian Federation" (Russian Federation, 2022: 6). Finally, the 2014

Military Doctrine classifies NATO's increasing power potential as an external military risk (Russian Federation, 2014: sec. 12a).

Consequently, Russia has explicitly expressed severe disapproval over its "near abroad" engaging with the West. Its opposition to NATO enlargement, which the Kremlin perceives as a threat (Russian Federation, 2014: sec. 12a), dates to the 1990s, as illustrated by former foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov's comments that the Alliance's incorporation of former Warsaw Pact countries would worsen the geopolitical situation and place Russia within striking distance of strategic missiles and tactical aircraft (Götz, 2016: 308-309). Despite the strong protests of Russian policymakers, however, little happened because of internal political and economic turmoil, but that changed in the 2000s after Moscow recovered (309-310).

After NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit, where it was announced that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually join the Alliance (Mearsheimer, 2014: 78-79), despite not providing either country with a Membership Action Plan, Putin objected on the grounds that it directly threatened Russia's security (Götz, 2016: 311; Karagiannis, 2013: 86-87). Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated his position, stating that Moscow would take any possible action to prevent Kyiv and Tbilisi from joining the Alliance (Götz, 2016: 311). That materialized in its 2008 war with Georgia, annexation of Crimea in 2014, after Viktor Yanukovych's pro-Russian government was toppled, and support of Donbass separatists (Götz, 2016: 311, 314-316; Mearsheimer, 2014: 79, 80-82; Sakwa, 2017: 88-89, 133, 156, 157). Finally, in February 2022, after Putin's speech claiming "that Russia's enemies were using Ukraine as a platform to threaten the country's existence," and his recognition of the breakaway states of Donetsk and Lugansk, Moscow directly invaded Kyiv to "demilitarize" and "denazify" the country (Sakwa, 2023: 263-264).

Russia's aggressive actions after the mere suggestion of its neighbours joining the Western bloc demonstrate that its core interests are in preventing NATO from undermining its great power status. Nowhere in its objections to the Alliance's enlargement is the Arctic mentioned. It is true that arguments to the contrary have been made that Moscow's core security considerations are indeed in the North, since the Northern Fleet possesses much of its sea-based nuclear deterrent (Huebert, 2021: 431). Additionally, because the region accounts "for roughly 10 percent of Russia's gross domestic product (GDP) and 20 percent of all Russian exports," it can hardly be called a peripheral pursuit (Buchanan, 2023: 51).

These arguments, however, have two problems. First, the need to protect its sea-based nuclear weapons is not tied to the Arctic. If its ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) were redeployed into the Sea of Okhotsk near the Pacific Ocean, Russia's core security interests would be vested in that region instead. Its war in Ukraine also forced Moscow to redeploy its Arctic brigades, which suffered immense casualties (Wall & Wegge, 2023: 6; Staalesen, 2023; Nilsen, 2022), showcasing that its "near abroad" is a higher priority than its North. Second, Russian fears about the West using Ukraine to threaten its existence overrode the need to attract Western commercial investment for Arctic offshore projects,[3] as sanctions following the invasion negatively affected their economic ambitions (Sukhankin, 2022: 5-8), demonstrating that security concerns frequently trump considerations about prosperity (Mearsheimer, 2014: 408). Instead, Russia's use of its Arctic forces to project power elsewhere strongly indicates that their role is to support its interests in Europe.

The Arctic's Role

This does not suggest that the Arctic is entirely irrelevant. On the contrary, in accordance with Mahan's theory, the region is strategically valuable because of its geographic position, which permits Russia to project naval power abroad in support of its core interests. Since Moscow has no powerful allies in Europe to buck-pass[4] responsibility to, it will need to balance against NATO itself. Thus, the Arctic Ocean is crucial for Russia to avoid strategic encirclement by the Alliance, especially if tensions escalate to war.

For Moscow, the region is not merely a base for its nuclear deterrent, but also "a thoroughfare to project power" (Lackenbauer & Dean, 2021: 152). Unlike the Baltic and Black Sea Fleets, which have historically faced geopolitical constraints in projecting naval power (Afonin, 2008: 575-577), the Northern Fleet in the Arctic has access to the least obstructed passage into the Atlantic Ocean (Mikkola, 2019: 4). Consequently, this geographic position allows Russia to compete with American and European navies in the Atlantic (Regehr, 2024: 26) by demonstrating NATO enlargement has not contained them, and can project naval power abroad when it pleases. As explained earlier, it has achieved this by sending Northern Fleet vessels to Syria, the GIUK Gap, and the Caribbean, likely from its headquarters in Severomorsk, located near the Barents Sea coast of the Kola Peninsula. This illustrates the Arctic's role as a "staging area for Russia's global strategic presence" (Regehr, 2024: 26).

The Northern Fleet also has the material capacity to attempt naval offensives. Analysts Colin Wall and Njord Wegge identify that despite losses in Ukraine (2023: 6), Russia can still threaten the West with its naval capabilities (8). Furthermore, the Northern Fleet possesses around sixteen active combat submarines, which are reportedly armed with land attack and anti-ship cruise missiles, most notably the Kalibr, a high-end long-range precision missile capable of striking targets from 1,500 to 2,500 kilometers (4). It also officially owns thirty-seven surface vessels as of 2019, which are armed with a variety of surface-to-air, anti-ship, and land attack missiles, including the Kalibr (4). Additionally, its submarines and surface vessels can be equipped with Tsirkon hypersonic anti-ship missiles (5).[5] Finally, it is supported by forty-six icebreakers (Regehr, 2024: 25; Wall & Wegge, 2023: 4), which have granted it de facto strategic and operational superiority in the Arctic Ocean, considering the lack of Western icebreakers.

The potential for conducting offensive operations is also consistent with Russian naval strategy. Official strategic documents point to the necessity of maintaining access to the World Ocean, which is considered important for maintaining Moscow's interests in national security and sustainable development (Russian Federation, 2022: 3; Russian Federation, 2017: 2-3). According to the 2022 Maritime Doctrine, the Russian Arctic, including the Northern Sea Route (NSR), is considered one of many vital areas of national interest required to ensure Russian interests at sea (Russian Federation, 2022: 5). They are considered crucial for national defence and socio-economic development to the point that losing control of them risks jeopardizing Russian security (5). While it is true that the Arctic's importance stems from its economic value, considering that Russia sees the NSR as a promising shipping route (Buchanan, 2023: 56), there is also a crucial military component. Since, alongside ensuring the survivability of its SSBNs, Moscow's goals in the Arctic also include ensuring "freedom of access to other oceans" (Kofman, 2023: 104), which suggests that Moscow also sees the North as a gateway to the Atlantic Ocean.

In the currently unlikely event that tensions with the West escalates to war, such a geographic gateway will allow Russia to engage in a strategy of active defence. As described by the Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, which envisions a pre-emptive response to national security threats, as described by (2019: 4). As Michael Kofman explains, while it has a defensive character, it also consists of offensive operations, rather than "a strategy premised on area-denial, or anti-access capabilities" (2023: 100-101). The defensive aspect comes from the expectation that the Kremlin's military would conduct defensive manoeuvres and persistent counterattacks from their own territory. However, the active component consists of engagements through constant long-range conventional strikes against crucial infrastructure. Active defence also utilizes "attrition via fires" (101). As indicated by Russian strategy, the active aspect is the more likely operational conduct for Moscow's naval forces, which will consist of contesting command over the sea, and attacking military and economic targets in Europe.

One potential objective is threatening NATO's SLOC, which was correctly identified by the literature (Regehr, 2021: 1, 3; Mikkola, 2019: 4; Boulègue, 2019: 10; Dean, 2023: 20), and is in line with Russia's naval tasks (Kofman, 2023: 111-112). The *Maritime Doctrine* states that one of its strategic goals is "improving operational (combat) capabilities of the Russian Navy to ensure the national security of the Russian Federation and defense of its national interests in the World Ocean," which include the full employment of military force in strategic maritime locations (Russian Federation, 2022: 8, 39). The 2017 *Fundamentals* more explicitly lists the "control over operations within the [SLOC] on the World Ocean" as primary objectives for naval operations, as well as ensuring a "sufficient naval presence of the Russian Federation in strategically important areas of the World Ocean" (Russian Federation, 2017: 6-7, 9). In the event of war, this doctrine will inevitably set the Russian Northern Fleet against NATO's naval forces in the Norwegian Sea.

Threatening NATO's SLOC will strategically benefit another objective: conducting long-range precision strikes against Western land-based infrastructure, for the purposes of either "warfighting or escalation management" (Kofman, 2023: 95). Contrary to Regehr's assessment, however, Russia is more likely to attack targets in Europe with conventional weapons, compared to those in North America (2021: 1), since it is more operationally feasible, and will better support land operations in Eastern Europe. According to the 2017 *Fundamentals*, priority areas of naval operations include developing and maintaining the ability to attack a potential enemy's ground targets with either conventional or nuclear weapons (Russian Federation, 2017: 11). It also explicitly states that:

> With the development of high-precision weapons, the Navy faces a qualitatively new objective: [the] destruction of [the] enemy's military and economic potential by striking its vital facilities from the sea (12).

Operational plans also encompass long-range attritional strikes to prevent adversaries from attacking Russian soil. Since intercepting an incoming barrage would be cost-prohibitive at best, and impossible at the worst, the "Navy's value is in destroying the launchers or platforms that carry long-range strike capabilities" (Kofman, 2023: 109-110). This is reinforced by Moscow's ambitions to primarily arm its naval forces with long-range cruise missiles through 2025, and hypersonic missiles and underwater drones after 2025. It also aims to possess powerful fleets by 2030, with coastal forces and naval aviation vested with high-precision capabilities (Russian Federation, 2017: 15). These plans will provide the navy with an unprecedented ability to carry out conventional and non-strategic nuclear strikes on ground-based targets, which the Soviet fleet never had (Connolly, 2019).

Geostrategic Constraints and a Proportionate Response

Upon first glance, these developments suggest that the Arctic is pushing Russia towards becoming a maritime power (Antrim, 2010: 1). However, Moscow's naval power projection capabilities will be plagued by two geostrategic constraints. The first is that Russia is a continental state, which renders its self-perception as a maritime *and* land power (Russian Federation, 2022: 39; Russian Federation, 2017: 16) problematic. According to Mahan, nations surrounded by water have an advantage over their continental counterparts (1890: 29), but unlike the United States, Russia is not a maritime power that can only be invaded through water (see Mearsheimer, 2014: 126-127), and needs to prioritize land forces to balance against NATO's military. As Mearsheimer explains, armies are the most important forces "in warfare because they are the main military instrument" to conquer and control land (2014: 86).

Moscow understands this, having historically experienced land invasions by the Mongols in the 13th century (Galeotti, 2020: 53-55), fought wars against Sweden and Poland during the 18th century (Galeotti, 2020: 98; Fuller, 1992: 38, 40-44), and withstood additional incursions by Napoleonic France in 1812 (Galeotti, 2020: 140-142; Fuller, 1992: 197-203; Mearsheimer, 2014: 127), and Germany during the First and Second World Wars (Galeotti, 2020: 169-170, 179-181; Mearsheimer, 2014: 127). This was exemplified in military debates between proponents of landpower and seapower during the *perestroika* – or tumultuous change – years from 1985 to 1991, which the former won, considering the drastic decline of the Russian Navy, with shipbuilding efforts halted, and the deterioration of naval infrastructure and readiness (Cigar, 2009: 459, 479). Consequently, Moscow will consistently prioritize its land forces, because focusing on its navy at the expense of its army will leave it vulnerable to ground attacks, a possibility the Kremlin wants to avoid.

The second limitation comes from Russia's coastline. Mahan also explains that a country's "geographical position may be such as of itself to promote a concentration, or to necessitate a dispersion, of the naval forces" (1890: 29). Because Moscow has a long coastline, stretching from the Barents Sea to the Pacific Ocean, it will have to disperse its navy. Another area of importance for the Kremlin is the Pacific (Russian Federation, 2022: 16), where it must not only balance against the United States, as illustrated by its joint naval exercise with China near Alaska on August 2023 (Yang, 2023), but also Beijing. Despite their "no-limits" partnership, as further demonstrated by Putin and Xi Jinping's proclamation of a "new era" of collaboration in opposition to the United States (Orr, Faulconbridge, Osborn, 2024), this is a transactional relationship (Lajeunesse & Choi, 2022: 1059-1060), and Russia is suspicious of China's interest in the Arctic (Boulègue, 2022: 36). Boulègue explains that alongside Beijing's potential intention to turn the region into a "global commons," which directly clashes against Russian national interests, Moscow has negative perceptions about their partner's military interests in the North, which includes a fleet of nuclear-powered icebreakers being constructed for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) (36-37). China could also use these vessels to support naval transit in the North, and submarines "conducting nuclear-deterrence operations" against American SSBNs (37).

Since a Chinese military presence in the Arctic would challenge Russia's strategic position (Pincus, 2020: 57-58), Moscow will strongly object against the PLAN operating in its northern waters.

Pincus explains that the Russian military is hawkish on Beijing, and Russians in the Far East perceive Chinese influence "as a potential threat" (53). Additionally, Adam Lajeunesse and Timothy Choi state that China would strategically benefit from a military presence in the North if it was at war with Russia (2022: 1060). They explain that even one nuclear submarine in the Kara or Barents Seas could hold regional shipping hostage, and a small fleet of submarines can tie down a significant portion of the Russian navy in the Arctic Ocean, and restrict access to the Pacific. Chinese cruise missiles could also damage Russia's economy by striking critical infrastructure (1060-1061). Furthermore, Chinese SSBNs in the region would enable them to threaten a nuclear strike on Russian territory from Moscow's own waters, which would be unacceptable for the Kremlin, considering the Soviet Union's hostile response to American nuclear weapon deployments in Turkey during the 1960s, triggering the Cuban Missile Crisis (Crandall, 2023: 143-144, 146-149).

While NATO should deter Russia from attacking its SLOC and ground-based military and economic infrastructure, its response should be proportionate to Moscow's geostrategic constraints. Operations at the level of Exercise Strikeback in 1957, for instance, which consisted of over 100 vessels operating in the Norwegian Sea (Baldwin, 1957), should currently be avoided. As identified by Monaghan, some Russian observers suggest that Moscow's naval strength is hampered by its need to divide resources among four fleets spread out in the Arctic and Pacific Oceans, and the Baltic and Black Seas, along with a flotilla in the Caspian Sea (2023: 13-14, 3, 10, 4-5, 16, 9), rendering the Kremlin's navy locally weaker than that of Turkey (14). This dispersion greatly diminishes the Russian Northern Fleet's power projection capabilities, which will make a large and costly NATO naval presence unnecessary.

Instead, the Alliance should consider a more moderate approach by continuing to participate in Exercise Dynamic Mongoose, which is an annual naval exercise by NATO Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) that focuses on anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare (NATO, 2024), and expand its mandate to address existing challenges posed by the Russian Navy. To counteract Moscow's precision-strike capabilities, future exercises should focus on neutralizing Russian naval launch platforms, instead of intercepting incoming missiles. If priority is given to attacking the "arrows" instead of the "archers",[6] the Kremlin would eventually develop countermeasures, considering its development of hypersonic missiles to defeat ballistic missile defences (President of Russia, 2018). Another focus should be on aerial and anti-aircraft warfare. As explained earlier, Russia's strategy includes the use of naval aviation equipped with high-precision missiles (Russian Federation, 2017: 15). Monaghan also identifies that:

> [Russian] officials and analysts…point to the introduction of new and upgraded naval aviation, the looming introduction of an automated command system to improve the navy's ability to create 'continuous zones of destruction with an area of hundreds, even thousands of kilometres' (Monaghan, 2023: 12).

Consequently, ensuring NATO's operational capability to neutralize Russian naval aviation capabilities with Western aircraft and anti-aircraft will be essential to prevent the Northern Fleet from striking valuable ground targets in Europe.

Conclusion

As Ernie Regehr would argue, this is not an Arctic-specific issue (see Regehr, 2021: 3-4). Instead, Russian naval power projection through the region is only part of Moscow's wider rivalry with the West. As demonstrated by its response to the mere mention of NATO enlargement into its "near abroad," Russia's core interests are not in the North, but in maintaining its great power status, which it believes is being threatened in Europe. This does not dismiss the region's geostrategic value, however, because it will play an important supporting role in bypassing what Moscow perceives as containment, if tensions with the Alliance escalate to war. Its strategic documents also reveal that while the literature has correctly identified the Kremlin's intention to disrupt NATO operations by contesting control over the GIUK Gap, another objective is to conduct long-range, precision strikes on Western military and economic infrastructure to support ground operations in Europe. The Arctic is indeed an important region, but not exceptionally important.

This approach illustrates the importance of examining geopolitical activity in the region through the context of the international system, which neorealism excels in explaining and fosters considerations about how the circumpolar North contributes to a great power's core interests. Constraining analysis to a regional lens removes this wider understanding, leading to conclusions that either exaggerate, or severely downplay, the affects of great power competition in the North. Contrary to what the Arctic conflict paradigm suggests, Russia will unlikely start a resource war in the region, because it will draw resources away from its top priority of preventing NATO from undermining its great power status. Since it is also much weaker than the United States, the costs of sparking conflict in the North outweigh the benefits.

Simultaneously, trying to separate Russia's behaviour in the Arctic from its actions elsewhere is equally problematic. The assumption that the region comprises its core interests, because of its economic value, does not account for why the Kremlin persists in its war against Ukraine despite Western sanctions that hinder its northern development projects (see Sukhankin, 2022: 5-8). Using a regional lens to demonstrate that Russia's aims in the Arctic are genuinely peaceful, without considering how its economic gains would be used in its security competition against the West – such as translating it into sufficient military power to challenge NATO in Europe – also ignores how the international system grows more dangerous as it shifts to multipolarity. Any region with strategic value is subject to "the tragedy of great power politics" (Mearsheimer, 2014), and the Arctic is unfortunately no exception.

Notes

1. In the realist tradition, power is grounded on a state's material capabilities, especially military power (Mearsheimer, 2014: 55).
2. While Mahan believed sea power depended on commerce, he also argued that military maritime control was needed to protect it (1911: 139).
3. See (Buchanan, 2023: 124-128) for Russian attempts to secure partnerships with Western energy firms.
4. Buck-passing is a strategy where a state gets another state to bear the responsibility of deterring, or fighting, an adversary (Mearsheimer, 2014: 157-158).
5. It should be mentioned, however, that despite Putin's claims that it "has no analogs in the world" (Nilsen, 2023), Tsirkon missiles have allegedly been intercepted by Ukrainian forces (Defense Express, 2024).

6. The "arrows" refer to missiles, while "archers" refer to launch platforms (Charron & Fergusson, 2022: 107).

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