

# The Evolution of Russia's Arctic Strategy after the War in Ukraine

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*Several recent studies view the Arctic as a focal point of a new Cold War, characterized by intense competition and confrontation. These studies tend to project Russia's assertiveness elsewhere to Moscow's future stance in the North. However, a competing narrative among some scholars suggests that, despite an increasingly assertive Russia, Moscow continued to cooperate and observe international agreements related to the Arctic. To assess these competing claims, this paper addresses the following question: How does geopolitical tension shape Russia's strategic approach to the Arctic? How has the war in Ukraine and the imposition of international sanctions influenced Russia's Arctic policy? Can Russia's assertive posture in the Ukraine conflict coexist with its pursuit of peaceful cooperation in the Arctic region? To answer these questions, this article highlights the intersection of Russia's state military security perspectives and its economic security. The paper examines the evolution of Russia's Arctic strategy over time, tracing the country's shifting perceptions of security threats and increasing assertiveness in the Arctic. By examining Russia's posture in the region over time, its investment in regional projects, and its cooperation with China, the paper demonstrates that, in response to intensified competition, Russia has adopted a two-pronged Arctic strategy that combines economic and military security. The country is focused on modernizing and strengthening its Arctic-based armed forces, aiming to bolster its security posture and readiness to address potential regional threats. Meanwhile, Moscow uses its military security to protect its economic interests. A critical review of Russia's strategy in the Arctic is essential, as much of the existing scholarship is shaped by Western interpretations of Russia's actions. By neglecting Russia's perspective, analyses of the Arctic risk misrepresenting its behavior and generate policy responses that are ineffective, short-sighted, and at times even dangerous. Russia's policy in the Arctic cannot be viewed in isolation from the actions of the Western powers in the region. Furthermore, by overlooking Russia's willingness to cooperate on specific issues while exaggerating security threats, some research on Russia's Arctic policy reinforces the dynamics of the security dilemma and heightens the likelihood of escalation. This paper seeks to address this imbalance in research on the Arctic by analyzing Russia's strategy over time and by trying to establish the true causes of Russia's actions in the region.*

## Introduction

Since the 1990s, a dominant perspective has held that the Arctic represented a zone of peace, an exception from power dynamics in other parts of the world. The Arctic's unique geography and the post-Cold War environment reduced the likelihood of military or 'hard power' developments. Analysts generally believed that conflicts from other parts of the world were unlikely to extend into the Arctic. The political, environmental, and socio-economic dynamics of the region were seen as promoting cooperation over rivalry, even between major Arctic powers like the United States and Russia, due to the high costs and low benefits of conflict. Consequently, the Arctic was frequently perceived as a region where conventional security concerns were either minimal or

largely irrelevant to local decision-makers. In the words of Wæver (1998), the Arctic was viewed for some time as a region of ‘asecurity,’ since Arctic security discourse centered more on human-level concerns, such as public health, education, gender equality, and particularly environmental challenges, including climate change and the shrinking polar ice cap.

Some analysts have maintained that the Arctic would continue to be a ‘zone of peace and cooperation,’ as it had been for many years – a perspective often described as ‘Arctic exceptionalism.’ ‘Arctic exceptionalism’ became possible due to several factors. First, the impossibility for any single state to develop the Arctic relying solely on its resources; the intensification of global problems, including climate change and environmental degradation; the need to preserve the traditional way of life of the Indigenous Peoples of the Far North; the remoteness of the Arctic from industrial centers and major communication routes; the absence of irreconcilable territorial disputes among the Arctic coastal states; and the difficulties of conducting large-scale military operations under harsh weather and geomagnetic conditions (Bertelsen, 2019; Borozna, 2024; Konyshov & Sergunin, 2024). However, academic and policy circles have long contested the durability of the concept of ‘Arctic exceptionalism’ (Exner-Perot & Murray, 2017; Huebert, 2019; Kornhuber et al., 2023).

Beginning in the mid-2000s, the perception of the Arctic as a unique zone of peace and cooperation began to shift. This change was driven by studies highlighting the region’s growing strategic significance. A 2007 NASA report predicting ice-free Arctic summers by 2030 sparked debates about the region’s potential as a new maritime corridor. The following year, research revealed that the Arctic may hold around 22% of the world’s untapped oil and gas reserves, further fueling concerns over emerging competition for access to resources and shipping routes, prompting comparisons to a new geopolitical “great game” (Bird et al., 2008; Borgerson, 2009). Although international cooperation in the Arctic – particularly through the Arctic Council – has deepened, a body of research has emerged portraying the region as a potential stage for a renewed Cold War, marked by rivalry and possible conflict. These analyses often extrapolate Russia’s assertive behavior in other regions to anticipate a similarly confrontational posture in the Arctic (Blunden, 2009; Emmerson, 2010; Kraska, 2011; Mièrè & Mazo, 2013; Mikkola et al., 2023).

Some analysts observed a growing assertiveness in the country’s foreign policy dating back to 2008 (Borozna, 2022). This shift to an independent and assertive foreign policy course had fueled a dominant Western interpretation of Russia as a revisionist and neo-imperial power (Herpen, 2015; Kolsto & Blakkisrud, 2016; Orban, 2008; Sagrarnoso, 2020). According to this view, Russia’s goal in the Arctic is to achieve regional hegemony (Mikkola et al., 2023). Russia’s “Special Military Operation” (SMO) – the country’s term for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – only intensified this discourse, warning of a ‘spillover effect’ in the Arctic. Some experts highlight several factors contributing the area’s latent potential for conflict: intensifying competition for Arctic natural resources in the context of global resource scarcity; disparities in the legal standing of actors involved in Arctic governance, particularly between Arctic and non-Arctic nations; geopolitical tensions among Arctic states, especially the division along NATO lines that places Russia in a position of strategic isolation; growing concerns over the region’s militarization; and the persistence of nuclear deterrence dynamics between Russia and the United States, a legacy of the Cold War era (Sinchuk & Zhuravel, 2017; Konyshov & Sergunin, 2018).

Other analysts argue that geopolitical tensions surrounding the Arctic region predate the 2014 coup in Ukraine and the Russian SMO in 2022 (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2024). These analysts argue that the tension is constructed through media and think tanks as part of the Western hybrid war against Russia, which consists of perpetuating a negative image of Russia as a “threatening” and “aggressive” state that has to be contained. In this view, the deterioration of cooperation with Russia in the Arctic became an inevitable consequence of the broader crisis in the international system, linked to the decline of U.S. influence. The reunification of Crimea with the Russian Federation in 2014 and the Special Military Operation in 2022 merely served as “accelerators” of a process of relationship degradation that the West had initiated as a response to Russia’s independent foreign policy course. In the language of security studies, the Arctic had been securitized by the Western elite through a discourse aimed at the Western public by perpetuating an image of “aggressive Russia” and “threat from Russia” long before Russia intervened in Georgia or Ukraine. Consistent with this perspective, following Russia’s intervention in Syria in 2011 and its annexation of Crimea in 2014, some Western analysts expected Moscow to intensify its military activities and presence in the Arctic (Lakshmi, 2015; Stratfor, 2015; Tayloe, 2015).

To bridge these contrasting viewpoints, this paper undertakes a comparative examination of Russia’s evolving security outlook regarding the Arctic, focusing on the period preceding and following the onset of the war in Ukraine. The analysis examines the strategic importance of the Arctic in Russia’s state policy, highlighting how Moscow perceives risks and challenges in the region both before and after the war in Ukraine. It situates Russia’s behavior within the context of broader geopolitical developments, taking into account Moscow’s interpretations of Western intentions and actions in the Arctic. It demonstrates the growing interlink between economic and military dimensions of Arctic policy, arguing that Russia’s approach to regional security is shaped by an inseparable fusion of these two areas. The interconnection between these two dimensions is evident in Russia’s evolving partnership with China, which serves as both a strategic response to Western pressure and a mechanism for advancing Moscow’s economic and military objectives in the Arctic.

### **Russia’s view of threats to its security in the Arctic before 2022**

Russia’s perception of the Arctic is influenced by several key factors, including its position as the largest Arctic nation – with roughly 40% of the region falling within its borders – as well as its longstanding presence in the region, dating back to the 12th century (Trenin, 2020). Additionally, the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) comprises approximately 18% of the country’s total landmass (Lagutina, 2019, p. 21). Russia holds 53% of the Arctic Ocean’s coastline (over 24,140 kilometers), which is home to 2.5 million people, including 40 Indigenous communities (Arctic Council, n.d.).

Russia’s increased military attention to the Arctic region began around 2007 and was closely tied to broader defense reforms initiated by Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov. The 2008 Arctic Strategy (“Arctic Strategy Until 2020”) emphasized asserting territorial claims and exploiting resources (Medvedev, 2008). In essence, the 2008 Arctic Strategy aimed to reassert Russia’s presence and sovereignty in the High North after a decade of post-Soviet neglect. It framed the Arctic as a “strategic resource base,” a national transport corridor, and a security frontier, reflecting the Kremlin’s intent to transform the Arctic into a pillar of Russia’s economic revival and great-power status. Since the release of this document, one of Russia’s primary objectives in its buildup

in the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) has been protecting the Kola Peninsula, a critical area for safeguarding the country's second-strike nuclear capabilities. This strategy is embodied in the so-called 'Bastion' defense concept, which focuses on creating a layered system of sea denial and interdiction (Boulègue, 2019). Russia's Unified Strategic Command "Sever" (Obedinonnoye Strategicheskoye Komandovaniye) became operational on December 1, 2014. Its establishment was intended to enhance the security of Russia's extensive Arctic frontier and safeguard the country's expanding strategic and economic interests in the region. Since the establishment of OSK Sever, Russia has gradually reorganized its Arctic military command structure (Wade, 2014). The emphasis has been on enhancing air and naval capabilities, with the broader goal of developing a unified, multi-branch military presence in the region. OSK Sever became a military district in 2021.<sup>1</sup>

Russia's actions in the Arctic should be understood within the broader geopolitical context of evolving relations among other Arctic states and the expanding role of NATO in the region. From Moscow's perspective, Western states began pursuing military advancement in the Arctic long before the onset of Russia's SMO, as evidenced by a series of bilateral defense arrangements. In 2016, Sweden reestablished a military presence on Gotland, highlighting the island's strategic importance in the context of the Baltic Sea region as a unified strategic zone. Sweden, before it joined NATO, was worried that if a conflict or crisis arose between Russia and NATO, Russia might seize control of Gotland (Gotkowska & Szymański, 2016). Partially due to the fears generated by these simulations, Sweden has initiated close cooperation with the US. In 2020, the Nordic states (Norway, Sweden, and Finland) embarked on "total defense" and "comprehensive security" strategies with a specific goal of strengthening resilience against Russian hybrid threats and supporting a broader regional deterrence approach (Saxi, Sundelius, & Swaney, 2020). Another prominent example is the ten-year Defense Cooperation Agreement signed between the United States and Norway in June 2021, with provisions for renewal (Defense Cooperation, 2021). The deal granted the U.S. access to Evenes, Sola, Rygge, and Ramsund bases and allowed broad discretion to develop military infrastructure, deploy personnel, and equipment. The agreement also enabled NATO training exercises, U.S. troop movements across Norwegian territory, aircraft refueling, and access to ports. The deal expanded NATO's operational reach along Russia's northwest border and enhanced Western surveillance and rapid-response capabilities in the Barents Sea. The Russian Northern Fleet and its nuclear deterrent situated on the Kola Peninsula were directly threatened by this expansion, which Moscow views as part of a larger pattern of NATO encirclement. In response, Russia has increased military action in the High North, strengthened coastal defenses, and presented the SDCA as proof of NATO's militarization of the region.

In 2013, Russia updated its Arctic strategy (from the 2008 version) to include infrastructure modernization, environmental protection, scientific research, and improved living conditions for Arctic residents, while maintaining security as a key pillar (the 2013 version is titled "Development Strategy of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and National Security until 2020"). This shift marked Russia's transition from viewing the Arctic mainly as a strategic frontier to treating it as a multidimensional region of sustainable national development. The strategy issued in 2020 ("Arctic Strategy Until 2035") reflected a further shift toward balancing security with infrastructure development, climate adaptation, and improved living conditions for Arctic communities (Kremlin, 2020).

**Table 1.** Russia's Arctic strategy before the war in Ukraine: 2008, 2013, and 2020

|                                          | <b>2008 – Foundations of State Policy</b>                                                       | <b>2013 – Development Strategy</b>                                                           | <b>2020 – Strategy to 2035</b>                                                               |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Context</b>                           | Post-Soviet recovery; energy boom; Russia reasserting global role.                              | Implementation of the 2008 goals; period of relative cooperation with the West.              | Post-Crimea sanctions: focus on resilience, modernization, and long-term planning.           |
| <b>Core Goal</b>                         | Reestablish sovereignty, secure territory, and exploit Arctic resources.                        | Develop the Arctic economy and infrastructure; improve living standards.                     | Integrate economic, social, and defense priorities to ensure sustainable Arctic development. |
| <b>Strategic Focus</b>                   | Sovereignty, territorial control, and military restoration.                                     | Economic development, infrastructure expansion, and regional integration.                    | Comprehensive approach linking defense, economy, technology, and environment.                |
| <b>Economy &amp; NSR</b>                 | Arctic as “resource base of the 21st century”; Northern Sea Route (NSR) under national control. | Expand NSR, ports, and shipping; attract investment in energy and transport.                 | NSR as a global trade artery; promote innovation and private-sector participation.           |
| <b>Security &amp; Defense</b>            | Restore Arctic bases and border defense; assert military presence.                              | Maintain stability and readiness; develop dual-use (civil-military) infrastructure.          | Strengthen Arctic Command and Northern Fleet; focus on the security of Arctic energy assets. |
| <b>International Cooperation</b>         | Arctic as a “zone of peace and cooperation”; active in the Arctic Council.                      | Emphasis on bilateral and regional partnerships (e.g., the Norway maritime agreement, 2010). | Selective cooperation with non-Western partners (China, India) amid Western sanctions.       |
| <b>Social &amp; Environmental Policy</b> | Limited attention to social or environmental issues.                                            | Introduced social development and indigenous welfare goals.                                  | Integrated environmental protection, climate adaptation, and sustainable growth.             |
| <b>Technology &amp; Governance</b>       | Reliance on Western technology and investment.                                                  | Start of domestic technological development and the establishment of Arctic innovation hubs. | Promote import substitution, technological independence, and digital infrastructure.         |
| <b>Overall Stance</b>                    | Assertive and sovereignty-driven.                                                               | Developmental and cooperative.                                                               | Integrated and resilient.                                                                    |

## Russia's view of threats to its security in the Arctic after 2022

Russia's view of its security situation in the Arctic deteriorated shortly after Russia's SMO in Ukraine began in February 2022. In response to Russia's aggression, the seven Arctic Council members, excluding Russia, announced on March 3, 2022, that they would temporarily suspend their involvement in all Council activities (U.S. Department of State, 2022a). Later, on June 8, 2022, these countries issued a joint statement indicating that they would resume work on specific Arctic Council projects – those that do not involve Russian participation (U.S. Department of State, 2022b).

Despite Russia's involvement in the military operation in Ukraine, only two months later, on April 13, 2022, President Vladimir Putin turned his attention away from the warfront to focus on the Arctic. He chaired a meeting dedicated to Arctic policy. During his opening remarks, Putin insisted that sanctions and external pressures should not slow down Arctic development and called for the rapid expansion of Russia's economic and military activities in the region (Kremlin, 2022b). Over the following months, his statements about the Arctic became notably more forceful and nationalistic, underscoring the region's growing importance in Russia's strategic agenda.

Another key development was the release of the updated U.S. Arctic Strategy in October 2022, which underscored the expectation of a prolonged downturn in U.S.-Russia relations. The strategy outlines Washington's intent to incrementally bring the Arctic under NATO's strategic purview and establish a sustained military presence in the region. This ambition is reflected in several policy shifts, including the revived plan to construct six icebreakers – an initiative that had faced repeated delays; the adaptation of the 11th Airborne Division for Arctic-specific missions; a major restructuring of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), which remains inadequately equipped to counter hypersonic and advanced cruise missile threats; and the modernization of the submarine detection network along the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom (GIUK) corridor, a route used by Russian submarines to access the North Atlantic. Additionally, the strategy identifies both Russia and China as the primary security challenges in the Arctic (Konyshov & Sergunin, 2023).

Furthermore, Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO marked a significant shift in the Arctic's military and political landscape, prompting Russia to reassess its national security approach amid the altered strategic environment. With this round of NATO expansion, Russia's northwestern flank transformed from a zone of relative neutrality to a potential militarized frontier associated with a military alliance that Moscow perceives as hostile. Following Finland's accession to NATO, Russia now shares an additional 1,000 kilometers of direct border with the alliance, thereby heightening threats to Russia's strategic nuclear forces, two-thirds of which are based on the Kola Peninsula, as well as to critical industrial infrastructure in the Murmansk and Leningrad regions. This round of NATO expansion has contributed to greater operational integration between the United States and its allies, creating a unified strategic space that links the Arctic and Baltic regions through military planning and command structures. The development of rapid deployment forces or other joint NATO formations focused on the Arctic has become more feasible (Tarociński, 2024). One example is the announced establishment of a joint air group composed of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, which could be directed toward both the Kola Peninsula and the Northern Sea Route. This group will include 250 fighter aircraft operating under NATO's joint operations framework (Pohjanpalo & Rolander, 2023; Dangwal, 2024).

Among these states Norway plays a special role as NATO's principal stronghold in the Arctic due to both its strategic location – bordering the Arctic Ocean, close to Russia's nuclear assets on the Kola Peninsula, and offering logistical advantages for rapid force deployment – and its possession of well-equipped Arctic military units, such as the North brigade (Carberry, 2024). Since 2022, the United States has actively contributed to strengthening Norway's Arctic capabilities by deploying personnel for joint training and operational experience in Arctic conditions. In 2024, the U.S.–Norway defense agreement was revised to expand American military access to an additional eight sites in Norway and to give U.S. forces and contractors unimpeded access to 12 designated Norwegian regions (Agreement to Amend, 2024; Nilsen, 2024).

The United States signed defense agreements with Finland, Sweden, and Denmark in 2023. These agreements grant the U.S. extensive access to a wide range of military facilities, including seventeen sites in Sweden and fifteen in Finland, as well as three air bases in Denmark. These facilities encompass storage depots, training areas, military airfields, ports, and exercise grounds (Tarociński, 2024). While the texts of the Danish and Norwegian agreements explicitly prohibit the deployment of nuclear weapons on their territory, the agreements with Sweden and Finland make no mention of this issue. Finnish President Alexander Stubb ruled out a deployment of nuclear weapons in Finland, but acknowledged the potential transit of nuclear weapons through Finnish territory (Dincer, 2024; Habtom, 2024). Finland's existing network of airfields is twice as extensive as the combined number in Russia's Karelia, Leningrad, and Murmansk regions. The planned delivery of the F-35A aircraft (planned to be supplied to Finland by the US) is capable of carrying the B61 nuclear gravity bomb. This development lays the groundwork for a potential joint nuclear-sharing arrangement between Washington and Helsinki (Konyshev and Sergunin, 2024: 142). The U.S. and Finland further cemented Arctic cooperation by signing an agreement on building Arctic Security Cutters (ASCs) in Finland. In October 2025, to address U.S. national security concerns in the Arctic, President Trump signed a Presidential Memorandum authorizing the construction of up to 4 Arctic Security Cutters (ASCs) in Finland. This is a continuation of President Trump's first-term approach to the Arctic, which included initiating the U.S. icebreaker program. As a result, the U.S. Coast Guard added an ASC to its fleet in August 2025 for the first time in 25 years. Building several heavy, medium, and light ASCs will cost around \$9 billion under President Trump's "One Big Beautiful Bill" (The White House, 2025). Overall, the United States views the Arctic as "a strategic priority," as evidenced by the 2025 Annual Threat Assessment, which mentions the region 14 times (2025 Annual Threat, 2025). Russian and Chinese actions and cooperation in the Arctic are highlighted as the main dangers to regional stability in official papers, such as the 2024 Pentagon *Arctic Strategy* (2024 Arctic Strategy, 2024).

Despite the military's primary focus on Ukraine in 2022 and the avalanche of Western sanctions imposed on Russia, Putin warned his generals not to overlook the Arctic, highlighting the region's strategic importance (Kremlin, 2022b). NATO's latest round of expansion, which incorporated Finland and Sweden, has heightened Russia's sense of military vulnerability in the region and reinforced Moscow's determination to assert complete control over the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF). Russian military analysts acknowledge that, in the near to medium term, NATO's conventional military power is not the primary threat to Russia in the Arctic. Instead, they emphasize the risks posed by NATO's reliance on network-centric strategies. According to Russian military thinkers, NATO is expected to pursue a sophisticated, multidimensional campaign designed to undermine Russia's control over the Arctic by targeting six key areas:

political, military, economic, social, infrastructural, and informational spheres. This form of pressure, they argue, could lead to a “strategic paralysis” of Russia’s command and control systems. Importantly, Russian experts do not foresee these efforts as direct, tactical assaults but rather as part of a broader strategy carried out through three coordinated sets of measures (Lukin & Musienko, 2024).

The publication of the U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR) in 2022, followed by the Department of Defense’s Arctic Strategy in 2024 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024), has been criticized by some in Russia as attempts to shape the Arctic’s future through military means or to provoke conflict (Viahireva, 2024). The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO reinforces Moscow’s view that the non-Russian Arctic is now effectively under NATO control. This perspective contributes to a “NATO 7 versus Russia” narrative in Russia, increasingly framing Arctic matters through a security lens. As a result, Russian policy is now more than ever focused on preparing for a range of scenarios, including the possibility of direct military confrontation in the region.

Even long before the onset of the SMO in Ukraine, NATO exercises in the Arctic were viewed in Russia as a shift toward preparations for offensive operations. The incorporation of Finland and Sweden into NATO, along with the increasing frequency of NATO military drills in the Arctic, only heightens Russia’s sense of vulnerability in the region. Russia’s response to a military buildup near its borders can heighten the risk of misjudgments and unintended escalation in the Arctic.

These security concerns are reflected in the 2023 revision of Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept, which promoted the Arctic to second place on Moscow’s list of strategic priorities – surpassed only by its relations with other post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine (*Foreign Policy Concept of the RF*, 2023). This marks a significant shift: during the 1990s and early 2000s, Arctic issues were absent from Russia’s foreign policy priorities altogether. After 2022, despite the economic, military, and political strains caused by the war in Ukraine, the Arctic has become a central pillar of Putin’s long-term strategic outlook. Russia’s increased perceptions of vulnerability in the Arctic are also reflected in the updated nuclear doctrine (*Fundamentals of State Policy*, 2024). Furthermore, on February 27, 2023, President Vladimir Putin authorized changes to Russia’s 2020-adopted Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone and the Provision of National Security until 2035 (Kremlin, 2023). The revised version places greater emphasis on Arctic national security and sovereignty. It highlights the need for increased self-reliance through enhanced home manufacturing and technological independence in shipbuilding – a change prompted by Western sanctions. The reduction or removal of references to international cooperation frameworks, such as the Arctic Council, the Arctic Five, and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, in the Strategy’s amendments could be interpreted as Russia’s move away from multilateralism toward greater self-reliance. A comparison of the two strategies with the original version of the document reveals that Russia has shifted from a cooperative stance to a more strategic and defensive posture, signaling its intention to safeguard national interests amid rising geopolitical competition in the region. The summary of these threats is listed in Table 2.



**Table 2. Russia's view of military threats to Russia in the Arctic**

| Category                                        | Description of Threats in Russia's Strategic Documents                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Military Buildup Near Borders</b>            | Accumulation of general-purpose forces, including nuclear delivery systems, near Russia and its allies, or in nearby maritime zones, along with supporting infrastructure. |
| <b>Space-Based Threats</b>                      | Development and deployment of missile defense, anti-satellite systems, and offensive space weapons by a potential adversary.                                               |
| <b>Nuclear Deployment in Non-Nuclear States</b> | Stationing of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems in countries that are officially non-nuclear.                                                                     |
| <b>Expansion of Military Alliances</b>          | Creation or enlargement of military blocs that bring foreign military infrastructure closer to Russia's borders.                                                           |
| <b>Isolation of Russian Territory</b>           | Efforts to cut off parts of Russia, primarily by blocking access to vital transport corridors.                                                                             |
| <b>Attacks on Sensitive Infrastructure</b>      | Attempts to damage ecologically or technologically hazardous sites in Russia, risking environmental or social disasters.                                                   |
| <b>Military Exercises Near Russia</b>           | Conduct of large-scale military drills by a potential adversary close to Russian borders.                                                                                  |

The Russian area of the Arctic encompasses a wide range of capabilities – from strategic nuclear forces deployed at sea to ground troops operating in Arctic conditions, including the use of snowmobiles for enhanced mobility. While the facilities outside the Kola Peninsula do not include major air bases, many are equipped to accommodate fighter jets and bombers temporarily deployed from Kola, and some are equipped with air defense systems (Regehr & Gallagher, 2024). Since traditional forms of warfare are not feasible in the Arctic, maintaining strategic capabilities is critically important for Russia. This includes developing the full infrastructure of the Northern Sea Route, including key facilities and ports, as well as ensuring their protection from aerial threats. Russia has developed air defense systems adapted explicitly for Arctic conditions, capable of operating in extreme cold and rugged terrain. One example is the Tor-M2DT surface-to-air missile system (Dahlgren, 2019). Additionally, Russia is actively expanding and reinforcing the capabilities of its Northern Fleet, including the deployment of new multipurpose submarines and military icebreakers. The revival in 2024 of the Leningrad Military District, which absorbed the Northern Fleet, as a “military-technical measure,” signals that, based on assessments of the strategic and military-political landscape, Russian authorities anticipate the potential for a land-based conflict in the Northwestern direction beginning in the 2030s (*On the Military-Administrative*, 2024). The way the military districts are structured reveals Russia's perception of security threats and its projections about the evolving nature of warfare.

After the war in Ukraine, the number of Russia's ground forces in the region has decreased (Edwardsen, 2024; Limon & Limon, 2024). Some reports indicate that these units have been redeployed from the Arctic to Ukraine. Nevertheless, even with this shift, Russia's military presence in the Arctic remains substantial (Kaushal et al, 2022). Around two-thirds of the country's

nuclear-powered naval vessels – including submarines armed with nuclear warheads and intercontinental ballistic missiles – are assigned to the Northern Fleet (a part of the Leningrad military district since 2024) and are based on the Kola Peninsula (*On the Military-Administrative*, 2024).

Russia's assertiveness in the Arctic partly stems from a growing strategic vulnerability caused by melting sea ice, which reduces the natural concealment for its submarines. This loss of cover heightens their exposure to anti-submarine operations and satellite detection, threatening the survivability of Russia's sea-based nuclear deterrent, particularly its ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) (Boulègue, 2019). At the same time, in analyzing U.S. missile defense policy (2016), Konyshov et al (2016) concluded that while “none of the US BMD subsystems (Aegis, THAAD, GBI, Patriot-3) can intercept Russian missiles with separable warheads, capable of maneuvering[or] interfering with electronic equipment,” the “real threat to Russia's military security lies in the interception of Russian ICBMs before the separation of warheads in the boost or ascent phase” (Konyshov, et al, 2016, p. 39).<sup>2</sup> The report further stated that the US BMD's information component, which includes radar, communication, and command systems, poses the biggest threat to Russia's security. The highly developed US satellite communication system, which serves not only BMD but also other precision-guided bombs, poses a significant risk. The northern hemisphere is already fully covered by early warning radars in the United States. It implies that BMD's information systems will be set up to intercept ballistic missiles that travel via the Arctic. Data on ballistic missiles launched on a territory extending from Plesetsk to Kamchatka can be obtained solely using the US Globus II radar. Other reports corroborated these findings even before worsening relations between Russia and the West in the wake of the 2014 coup in Ukraine (Arbatov, 2014; Lyovkin & Shatskaya, 2012; Hramchihin, 2011).

In response to its assessment of vulnerabilities, Russia has focused on strengthening its defenses by developing enhanced anti-access and area-denial systems, upgrading surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, and conducting regular military drills (see Table 3), including bomber patrols and anti-submarine missions (Borozna, 2024). Ongoing efforts to modernize Arctic military infrastructure further support these initiatives. Russia's strategic goal is to ensure that NATO does not hinder the Northern Fleet's ability to move south (Regehr, 2025).

**Table 3.** Military exercises and drills in the Arctic region.

| Year              | Russia's military drills | Western military drills |
|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 2021              | 12                       | 22                      |
| 2022              | 7                        | 10                      |
| 2023              | 10                       | 13                      |
| 2024              | 12                       | 11                      |
| 2025 <sup>3</sup> | 15                       | 18                      |

Sources: Calculated by the author based on the data from Arctic Military Activity Tracker, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (n.d.), <https://arcticmilitarytracker.csis.org/>. The table does not include bomber overflights, deployments, or missile tests.

In a crisis, Moscow would likely aim to secure a defensive presence in the GIUK Gap and near Norwegian waters to prevent U.S. submarines and naval forces from advancing north. Moscow

has little motivation to escalate a European conflict into the Arctic; instead, it seeks to protect its Arctic territories from attack and to preserve its northern military and economic assets to support operations further south. This explains its significant investment in enhancing defensive infrastructure, such as the Nagurskoye base on Franz Josef Land, which extends Russia's anti-access and area denial capabilities from the Barents Sea into the Norwegian Sea and toward the broader North Atlantic region (Regehr, 2025).

Overall, Moscow's position in the region is marked by significant vulnerabilities, particularly concerning the maintenance, safety, and modernization of its nuclear-powered naval fleet. Despite its extensive Arctic coastline and formidable icebreaker and submarine capabilities, Russia faces mounting challenges in sustaining these assets amid economic sanctions, aging infrastructure, and technological isolation. These weaknesses complicate Moscow's ability to project consistent power in the Arctic and highlight that Russia's actions in the region are driven as much by defensive concerns and strategic insecurity as by ambitions for dominance. The Ukrainian drone attack on one of the Russian bases in the Arctic in June 2025 (Humpert, 2025) demonstrated that these vulnerabilities are real.

### **Economic Security as an extension of military security**

It is challenging to separate Russia's economic security concerns from its military activities in the Arctic, as the region's military assets and infrastructure often serve both defense-related and socioeconomic purposes for the state (Borozna, 2024). Russia's evolving perspective on the Arctic aligns with its broader shift toward a geoeconomic approach, leveraging key sectors such as energy and defense to exert geopolitical influence (Borozna, 2022). The Arctic plays a vital role in Russia's economic and energy security, contributing 7.5% of national GDP (Humpert, 2025) and nearly one-fifth of its exports. It is particularly crucial for energy production, providing 80% of Russia's natural gas and 17% of its oil (Anthony et al., 2021; Duncombe, 2021). The region is also believed to hold approximately 13% of the world's oil and around 30% of global natural gas reserves, much of which lies within Russian territory (Perez, 2022). Moreover, around 65% of Russia's land area is situated within the permafrost zone (Staalesen, 2021).

The 5,000-kilometer (3107 miles) Northern Sea Route (NSR), which runs along the Russian Arctic coast and connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, could become a faster alternative to the Suez Canal, potentially cutting shipping times between Europe and Asia by up to 15 days. Although it remains impassable to regular vessels for much of the year, climate change and melting Arctic ice are gradually increasing its accessibility and opening up new economic possibilities. The shipping volumes through NSR reached an all-time high of 37.9 million tons in 2024 (*Moscow Times*, 2025). However, this figure falls significantly short of previous goals. President Vladimir Putin had earlier projected that cargo volumes on the NSR would climb to 80 million tons by 2024 (Kremlin, 2018). Russia's *Arctic Strategy*, introduced in 2020, sets an even more ambitious target of 130 million tons by 2035 (Kremlin, 2020). Although the 2024 target was not met, Rosatom – responsible for managing the NSR – emphasized other notable achievements, including a record-setting 92 voyages and a 100% approval rate for all 1,312 shipping applications submitted in 2024 (*Moscow Times*, 2025).

Over the past decade, cargo traffic along the NSR – from the Kara Gates to the Bering Strait – has increased tenfold. In 2014, only 4 million tons of cargo were transported along this route; by

2024, that figure had reached nearly 38 million tons. That is five times more than the Soviet-era record. It is expected that by 2030, this volume will range from 70 to 100 million tons (Kremlin, 2025, March 27). Russia leverages its control of the NSR by imposing escort fees for its icebreaker services, effectively monetizing access to this strategic Arctic passage. These fees can range from approximately \$300,000 to \$700,000 per escort, depending on factors such as the vessel's size, the route length, and the time of year (Humpert, 2025). In 2024, Atomflot facilitated escorts for 976 ships. A typical LNG shipment from the Yamal LNG terminal incurs icebreaking charges of around \$400,000. Of the 287 shipments made in 2024, at least 120 required icebreaker support during the winter and spring months (December through May), likely generating over \$50 million in revenue for Atomflot (Humpert, 2025).

Russia possesses the largest and most powerful fleet of icebreakers globally, comprising over 40 ships. The latest of them, produced in 2024, Chukotka. This class of icebreakers can independently guide vessels, including large cargo ships, throughout the year in the Western Arctic. Russia is the only state that has nuclear-powered icebreakers. Four of the newest Project 22220 nuclear icebreakers are already operating in the Arctic (Kremlin, 2025). Nuclear-powered icebreakers can operate continuously for years without requiring refueling. Since they do not need to store fuel onboard, more space is available for carrying essential supplies, which extends the vessel's operational range and duration, often for more than a year without needing to dock. These ships can also break through ice as thick as 2.8 meters, far surpassing the performance limits of diesel-powered counterparts (Ministry of Transportation, 2024). Among Russian expert circles, economic dominance is viewed as a critical factor in shaping the outcome of any future Arctic confrontation (Sukhankin, 2024). This perspective underscores the strategic importance of icebreakers, which are regarded as vital tools for achieving both military and economic objectives in the region.

### **The Northern Sea Route (NSR): Military Security Meets Economic Security**

Beginning in 2008, with the release of its Arctic strategy, which declared plans to assert control over the Northern Sea Route (NSR), Moscow adopted a more assertive and engaged stance toward the region. Russia, as the largest Arctic nation, has consistently asserted its sovereign claims over extensive portions of the Arctic Ocean seabed and emphasized its authority over the NSR. In contrast, the United States maintains that both the Northeast and Northwest Passages should be treated as international straits open to global transit. The European Union also expressed its preference for internationalizing the Arctic in its 2021 Arctic Policy, which stated in its opening that "The European Union (EU) is in the Arctic" (European Commission, 2021). While the EU's Arctic Policy did not receive significant attention from Russia, Russia's *Naval Doctrine*, issued in 2022, singled out the U.S.'s quest for global maritime dominance as a threat to Russia's national interests. Specifically, the document mentioned U.S. economic and political pressure on Moscow to loosen its control over the NSR (Kremlin, 2022a). Following the deterioration of Russia–Western relations due to the war in Ukraine, legal tensions concerning the NSR have intensified. A heightened foreign military presence in the Arctic, particularly the growing frequency of NATO exercises, is stated as a threat in the *Arctic Doctrine*, and calls for enhanced oversight and stricter regulations on the movement of foreign naval vessels within the NSR. A further shift in Russia's Arctic policy was reflected in the 2023 *Foreign Policy Concept*, which prioritizes the formal legal consolidation of Russia's continental shelf boundaries, the defense of its sovereign rights over that

shelf, and resistance to the region's ongoing militarization (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Although many countries comply with Russian domestic regulations governing navigation along the Northern Sea Route (NSR), the United States continues to reject their legitimacy. As a result, legal disputes over the NSR's regulatory framework remain unresolved among international legal scholars (Todorov, 2023).

Russia perceives the conduct of overflights and naval transits by NATO countries through contested segments of the Northern Sea Route (the Kara Gate, Vilkitsky Strait, Shokalsky Strait, Sannikov Strait, and Laptev Strait) as provocative and destabilizing to the Arctic security environment. The tension stems from disagreement over the status of these straits. While Russia considers these straits to be internal waters, requiring prior authorization for passage, the United States regards them as international waters subject to the principle of freedom of navigation. To assert this legal stance, the United States employs its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP) program (Department of Defense, 2024). At its core, a FONOP is a deliberate assertion of navigational rights intended to oppose what are deemed excessive maritime claims by coastal states. In practice, the U.S. conducts such operations through naval deployments that engage in activities (ranging from transits to exercises and surveys) that the coastal state prohibits under its domestic laws, thereby asserting a legal right supported by military presence. Some commentators in the United States have long advocated for the FONOP to challenge Russia's maritime claims in the Arctic (Humpert, 2019; Eckstein, 2019). However, the legal logic of a FONOP relies on the existence of specific local laws that apply to warships. This legal foundation has historically been absent in the Russian Arctic context. Although Russia and the United States have long disagreed over the interpretation of international maritime law in the region, Russian regulations concerning the Northern Sea Route (NSR) – which spans from Novaya Zemlya to the Bering Strait – have never explicitly applied to foreign warships (Overfield, 2022). While the U.S. has raised diplomatic objections to Russian controls over the NSR, often citing ice coverage as a factor, Washington has not had grounds to challenge those rules through FONOPs, given the absence of legal restrictions on naval vessels in Russian legislation.

### **Russia-China Cooperation in the Arctic**

Russia-China collaboration in the Arctic dates back to the 2008 financial crisis. When Russian energy companies Rosneft and Transneft faced difficulties funding the East Siberia–Pacific Ocean (ESPO) pipeline, they sought financial assistance from China. In response, the China Development Bank issued a \$25 billion loan, but under specific conditions – most notably, the construction of a dedicated pipeline spur to China and a 20-year agreement to deliver 15 million tons of oil annually (Chabarovskaya, 2025). Later, Beijing used the threat of pulling its financial backing to negotiate further price reductions. In 2014, shortly after Western sanctions were imposed, Russia signed a \$400 billion gas deal with China that required the construction of the “Power of Siberia” pipeline to supply the Chinese market. Although portrayed as a diplomatic win for Moscow, the deal revealed China's stronger bargaining power. Unlike past deals with Central Asian states, Beijing refused to offer Russia favorable financing. By 2021, Gazprom was selling gas to China at just \$150.20 per 1,000 cubic meters – the lowest price among all of China's suppliers, highlighting the economic imbalance in the relationship (Yu, 2025). Following the imposition of Western sanctions after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine – and even more so after the 2022 full-scale invasion – China replicated this strategy, positioning itself

as an indispensable trade partner. In return, it gained favorable access to Russian energy, minerals, and agricultural goods at discounted rates, capitalizing on Moscow's growing economic dependence.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and amid sweeping Western sanctions, its partnership with China has grown stronger (Borozna & Kochtcheeva, 2024). Moscow's strategic relationship with Beijing is rooted in over a decade of intentional economic and political rapprochement. Their complementary economies, shared geopolitical ambitions, and mutual skepticism toward Western influence drive this cooperation. As Moscow's global options have narrowed following sanctions, its reliance on China – both economically and strategically – has increased. While Beijing holds more leverage in these evolving relations, both sides continue to benefit: Russia gains an outlet for its energy exports and access to essential goods and technology. At the same time, China enjoys favorable terms on Russian resources and the advantage of having a strategic ally that challenges the US-led global order.

While Russia and China increased their cooperation in the Arctic, their approaches to the region differ. Russia pursues a strategy focused on exploiting the Arctic's economic resources and strengthening its military presence. Russia favors projects with limited foreign involvement, viewing key routes, such as the Northern Sea Route, as strictly domestic. While China promotes open access and sees the Arctic as part of its Polar Silk Road initiative, Russia resists internationalization, preferring strategic independence. This mismatch in approaches has limited Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic to the energy sector, where China has made significant investments. Attempts to expand collaboration into infrastructure – such as the failed deep-sea port project in Arkhangelsk – have faltered due to differing priorities. During the 2010s, the two nations collaborated extensively in this sector, with China providing significant financial backing, support that Russia especially appreciated following the imposition of Western sanctions in 2014. For instance, in 2016, China's state-owned Poly Group signed a memorandum with the Arkhangelsk regional government to develop a deep-water port, and planned to link it to the proposed Belkomur railway (Nilsen, 2020). Despite initial enthusiasm, the project stalled.

China initially maintained its commitment to economic collaboration with Russia, particularly in energy and infrastructure projects, but this approach shifted once it became unsustainable. A telling example is the Arctic LNG 2 venture. In April 2019, two major Chinese oil firms secured a combined 20% ownership in the project, making China its largest investor (Soldatkin, 2023). However, by December 2023, both CNPC and CNOOC withdrew due to the escalation of U.S. sanctions. From 2022 to 2023, Novatek – the Russian company leading the Arctic LNG 2 project – sourced gas turbines and other technological components from China (Dagaev, 2025). Despite growing Western pressure, Beijing continued these deliveries until January 2025, when new sanctions enacted during the final days of President Biden's term forced operations to stop.

One of the key obstacles to joint infrastructure efforts is the differing strategic perspectives: Russia approaches such projects from a national security standpoint, whereas China sees them as integral components of its broader Polar Silk Road strategy – a vision rooted in multilateral connectivity that often provokes Russian suspicion. Despite growing economic ties and high-level commitments to Arctic cooperation, fundamental disagreements persist. Even after the war in Ukraine and Russia's isolation from the Arctic Council, China has maintained a neutral position –

neither supporting nor rejecting Russia – while suspending its participation as an Observer in the Council rather than excluding Moscow.

Besides economic cooperation, there has been an increase in Russia-China military cooperation, as evidenced by the growing number and scale of joint military exercises, including large-scale drills such as Vostok, Zapad, and Joint Sea. These operations serve distinct strategic purposes for both sides: for Russia, they demonstrate resilience against Western isolation, while for China, they strengthen military ties with a key partner and improve operational coordination. The exercises increasingly showcase the interoperability of Russian and Chinese forces, particularly in naval and air operations. These joint drills provide China with an opportunity to enhance its combat readiness, gain insights into Russian tactics and equipment, and rehearse military coordination in practical scenarios. Additionally, they serve as a geopolitical signal of growing military alignment, especially in contested or strategically significant regions like the South China Sea, the Pacific, and the Arctic – areas where both Moscow and Beijing aim to push back against Western influence. In the summer of 2023, Russian and Chinese forces held joint military exercises in the Bering Strait, a strategically significant passage between Russia and Alaska. These drills were complemented by coordinated air operations and coast guard patrols, underscoring the deepening security cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. In July 2024, China and Russia conducted their first-ever joint air patrol near Alaska and over the northern Pacific, marking a significant development in their military cooperation. Notably, this was also the first instance in which Chinese and Russian bombers launched from the same Russian air base, highlighting the growing operational integration between the two countries. Although the aircraft remained in international airspace, they entered Alaska's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), an area where foreign aircraft are required to report their identity for national security purposes. The patrol, which brought the bombers within 200 miles of Alaska's coastline (Bingen, 2024), raised strategic concerns in Washington, signaling an increasingly assertive posture by the two powers in the U.S. sphere of influence.

## Conclusion

Russia's changing posture in the Arctic can be traced in the evolving character of its primary document related to the region, *the Arctic Strategy*, *the Foreign Policy Concept*, and several other strategic documents. Between 2008 and 2020, Russia's Arctic strategy evolved from a narrow focus on sovereignty and hydrocarbon extraction to a more comprehensive, long-term vision that integrates economic diversification, military and security concerns, environmental sustainability, and human development. The 2008 strategy ("Arctic Strategy Until 2020") emphasized asserting territorial claims and exploiting resources (Medvedev, 2008), while the strategy issued in 2020 ("Arctic Strategy Until 2035") reflects a shift toward balancing security with infrastructure development, climate adaptation, and improved living conditions for Arctic communities (Kremlin, 2020).

In the post-2022 environment, Russia's strategic documents, combined with Russia's actions in the Arctic, demonstrate movement toward a more strategic and defensive approach, underscored by increased emphasis on national security, sovereignty, and technological self-reliance, particularly in shipbuilding and industrial production – adjustments primarily driven by the constraints of Western sanctions. At the same time, the removal or downgrading of references to multilateral institutions in strategic documents such as the Arctic Council, the Arctic Five, and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council reflects Moscow's growing departure from international collaboration toward

self-sufficiency and unilateral control. Overall, these changes illustrate Russia's increased sense of vulnerability in the region and an intent to fortify its position to safeguard national interests. The evolution of Russia's Arctic strategy is summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Comparing different phases of Russia's posture in the Arctic

| Period                                                              | Context & Geopolitical Environment                                                                             | Key Policy Documents / Events                                                                                                                                                                                    | Main Strategic Priorities                                                                                                                                                         | International Orientation                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1991–2000<br>( <i>Post-Soviet Transition</i> )                      | Collapse of the USSR, economic crisis, weak state capacity, and neglect of Arctic bases and infrastructure.    | – <i>Concept of National Security</i> (1997)<br>– Early Arctic policy drafts (non-binding)                                                                                                                       | – Basic stabilization and survival.<br>– Reopening of northern ports.<br>– Maintaining minimal Arctic presence.                                                                   | Cooperative and low-profile.<br>Focus on environmental and scientific cooperation (esp. via Arctic Council, est. 1996).                 |
| 2000–2008<br>( <i>Putin's First Terms &amp; Economic Recovery</i> ) | Rising oil/gas prices, renewed state control, resurgence of "Great Power" identity.                            | – <i>Russian Federation National Security Concept</i> (2000)<br>– <i>Marine Doctrine</i> (2001)<br>– <i>Energy Strategy to 2020</i>                                                                              | – Reassert sovereignty over the Arctic shelf and resources.<br>– Integrate Arctic into energy security strategy.<br>– Modernize Northern Fleet bases.                             | Selective cooperation. Russia reengages with the Arctic Council but prioritizes sovereignty.                                            |
| 2008–2013<br>( <i>Resurgence and Territorial Ambition</i> )         | Renewed nationalism was symbolized by the 2007 flag-planting at the North Pole. Increased oil/gas exploration. | – <i>Foundations of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic until 2020</i> (2008)<br>– <i>National Security Strategy</i> (2009)                                                                            | – Define Arctic as a strategic resource base.<br>– Expand energy production and transport (Northern Sea Route).<br>– Strengthen defense infrastructure.                           | Cooperative but assertive. Works through the UN Commission on the Continental Shelf while expanding its military presence.              |
| 2014–2020<br>( <i>Post-Crimea Realignment</i> )                     | Annexation of Crimea and Western sanctions; Arctic gains strategic value as Western ties collapse.             | – <i>Arctic Strategy / Development Strategy to 2020</i> (2013 update)<br>– <i>Arctic Zone Development Strategy to 2035</i> (approved 2020)<br>– <i>State Commission on Arctic Development</i> established (2015) | – Combine economic development with militarization.<br>– Build nuclear icebreakers and Arctic infrastructure.<br>– Expand NSR shipping and LNG exports (Yamal LNG, Arctic LNG-2). | Limited cooperation. Dialogue with Western Arctic states continued via the Arctic Council until 2022. Increased partnership with China. |
| 2021–2022<br>( <i>Pre-Invasion Transition</i> )                     | Putin's 2020 constitutional reforms consolidate power. The Arctic is central to Russia's climate,              | – <i>2035 Arctic Strategy implementation decrees</i> (2021)<br>– <i>2022 Arctic development meetings chaired by Putin</i>                                                                                        | – Deepen the Arctic as "territory of development and sovereignty."<br>– Speed up energy and infrastructure                                                                        | Still publicly cooperative, but increasingly securitized. Focus on controlling NSR and claiming seabed extensions.                      |



|                                                   |                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                   | energy, and security agendas.                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                              | projects.<br>– Arctic diplomacy framed as “peaceful cooperation.”                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                          |
| 2022–2023<br>( <i>War and Strategic Pivot</i> )   | Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine → rupture with the West. Arctic Council suspends cooperation with Russia. Severe sanctions impact Arctic projects. | – <i>Amendments to Arctic Strategy 2035</i> (Feb 27, 2023)<br>– <i>Foreign Policy Concept (2023)</i>                                                         | – Shift from development to security and sovereignty.<br>– Emphasize “import substitution” in shipbuilding and energy tech.<br>– Remove references to multilateral cooperation.<br>– Defend Arctic waters and NSR as internal jurisdiction. | Isolation from Western institutions.<br>Pivot toward Asia (esp. China and India).                        |
| 2024–Present<br>( <i>Post-Realignment Phase</i> ) | Continuing war, sanctions, and NATO’s enlargement (Finland & Sweden). Russia’s Arctic role is increasingly inward-focused.                                 | Implementation of <i>2023 Arctic amendments</i> .<br>– Ongoing construction of “Leader-class” super icebreakers.<br>– Intensified Northern Fleet operations. | – Consolidate control over Arctic transport and resource zones.<br>– Sustain domestic shipbuilding and NSR traffic despite sanctions.<br>– Maintain military readiness and nuclear deterrence.                                              | Minimal international engagement; bilateral cooperation limited to China and some Global South partners. |

Overall, the evolving dynamics in the Arctic underscore the complex intersection of geopolitical competition, national interests, and strategic partnerships. Given that Russia’s northern territories make up roughly half of the entire Arctic region – and that its Arctic population and economy surpass those of all other Arctic Council members combined – Moscow’s behavior in the region reflects both the opportunities created by melting sea ice and the pressures stemming from NATO’s presence and broader geoeconomic shifts. Considering the size of Russia’s Arctic territory, it is not surprising that Russia views the Arctic region as a symbol of national sovereignty and a critical axis of its geoeconomic and military posture. In the wake of Western sanctions and growing isolation, Moscow has become increasingly reliant on its partnership with China. However, this alignment remains constrained by differing long-term visions for the region—Russia’s desire for control and strategic autonomy contrasts with China’s emphasis on open access and multilateral connectivity. The Arctic thus remains a zone of both opportunity and friction, shaped as much by environmental change as by the geopolitical realignments unfolding far beyond the polar circle.

While Russia’s increased activity in the Arctic is viewed in the West as a sign of aggressive militarization and foreboding potential conflict, such interpretations overlook Russia’s insecurities and do not accurately reflect Moscow’s intentions. The tendency to project Russia’s assertiveness in Ukraine to other regions can be misleading and contribute to the security dilemma. Russia’s

actions in the region are best understood as defensive and sovereignty-oriented, rather than offensive or expansionist. Most of Russia's Arctic military developments – such as the modernization of bases, expansion of icebreaker fleets, and reinforcement of border defenses – are consistent with efforts to protect economic infrastructure, secure national borders, and assert jurisdiction over its extensive Arctic coastline. These activities are rational responses to environmental change and the region's economic importance to the country. At the same time, the increasing frequency and scale of Western military exercises in the Arctic have amplified Russia's long-standing insecurities about NATO's strategic intentions in the High North. These insecurities – rooted in Moscow's perception of NATO's encroachment on its borders – were a critical factor underlying the escalation of tensions that ultimately culminated in the war in Ukraine. If the same scenario plays out in the Arctic, where a defensive action by one party is misinterpreted by the other as a threat, the region could experience the same security dilemma, in which a tradition of cooperation that has characterized Arctic governance for generations gives way to mutual distrust and militarization. By interpreting Russia's actions within its Arctic sovereign borders as aggressive, Western narratives risk creating the very security dilemma they claim to warn against – where mutual suspicion and alarmist rhetoric drive countermeasures and militarization on both sides. In this sense, the current Western narrative of Russia's Arctic assertiveness exaggerates the threat. It highlights Russia's willingness to continue institutional cooperation among Arctic states, which existed before the Arctic Council paused it. Rather than responding with escalation – manifested in intensified military exercises – the West should seek opportunities for pragmatic cooperation with Russia on shared regional interests and restart cooperation and dialogue within the Arctic Council.

## Notes

1. In 2024, OSK Sever was dissolved, and the Leningrad and Moscow Military Districts were reinstated, with adjustments made to reflect the country's current security landscape, and the Northern Fleet became a part of the Leningrad District.
2. A similar consensus is also reached in: Arbatov (2014); Lyovkin, I.M., & Shatskaya, V.I. (2012); Hramchihin, A. (2011).
3. As of October 10, 2025.

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