

The White Whale Chooses Freedom

HARD CHOICES IN OPPOSING RUSSIAN DOMINANCE IN THE ARCTIC

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Russia's claims to "Great Power" status may be overblown and even preposterous, but the country is, without a doubt, a great Arctic power. It has more coastline in the Arctic Ocean than any other state and has a larger population living north of the Arctic Circle than all other seven members of the [Arctic Council](#) combined. It launches energy projects in severe High North weather conditions on a scale that the United States or Canada would classify as economic utopian, and deploys more nuclear warheads on the Kola Peninsula than China has in its entire arsenal. It routinely inflicts devastating damage to the fragile environment and indifferently allows wildfires to destroy millions of hectares of northern forest (*taiga*) while shrugging off the [impact](#) on the global climate. Its utilitarian attitude to Arctic wildlife is illustrated by the case of one lucky Beluga whale that [escaped](#) from a military training program and found a new home in the Norwegian fjords. It became a darling of local environmentalists who christened him [Hvaldimir](#) ("hval" for "whale" plus "Vladimir"), though the Russians never explained the purpose of the trained animal that was wearing a camera harness marked "St. Petersburg." Security comes first in Russia's Arctic policy, and attempts to cultivate cross-border ties often hit the wall of secretive military preparations. China tries to dissuade Russia from prioritizing military build-up in the High North, but in U.S. strategic thinking, China is defined as a major security challenger in the Arctic, on par with Russia.

Preserving the Remnants of Cooperation

Commitment to developing international cooperation in the Arctic is not merely a camouflage of Russian militarization. It makes sense, but a different kind of sense than making this region a better place for inhabitants and preserving its unique value for our planet, the goal that continues to inspire many Western politicians and Russian activists. For Moscow, international relations are first and foremost a means for asserting its

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sovereignty over the vast area of land, islands, and waters beyond the Arctic circle. One of the key issues here is the internationally recognized expansion of the continental shelf between the Lomonosov and Mendeleev underwater ridges, so the diplomatic efforts in the Arctic Council has focused on sorting out the problems of [overlapping claims](#) with [Canada](#) and [Denmark](#), which would make it possible for the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UN CLCS) to make a formal recommendation. Elaborating and tightening the rules of navigation on the [Northern Sea Route](#) (NSR or *Sevmorput'*) also serves the purpose of reinforcing Russia's sovereignty over this international maritime avenue.

Addressing the 2019 International Arctic Forum in St. Petersburg, President Vladimir Putin presented an ambitious plan for upgrading the NSR and [invited](#) foreign investors to partake as minor partners. He did not, however, address most of the concerns of Russia's Arctic neighbors, including the protection of investor's rights, climate change, and restrictions on NGO work. His concerns are clearly focused on the damage from Western sanctions that target specifically joint oil-and-gas projects in the Arctic that brought [off-shore exploration](#) in the Kara Sea to a standstill. While the sanctions regime keeps expanding, there are expectations in Moscow that it can also be fine-tuned so that Arctic cooperation would be exempted. Nevertheless, there are few signs that the Russian authorities aim at stimulating the non-profit directions in this cooperation by, for instance, removing restrictions on scientific interactions or the red tape that impedes ties between universities.

China Enters the Arctic Game

Since the beginning of the new confrontation with the West caused by Russian aggression against Ukraine, Moscow has made great efforts to upgrade its strategic partnership with China. This [quasi-alliance](#) has started to envelop the Arctic. Beijing shows increasing interest in establishing various footprints in the High North, and the Russian leadership feels obliged to accommodate these intentions and overcome reservations about potential challenges to its much-cherished sovereignty. In President Xi Jinping's grand plan for the Belt-and-Road (BRI) initiative, the "[Ice Silk Road](#)" in the Arctic may be only a secondary track, but even just a relatively small amount of Chinese attention makes a big difference in the High North.

Moscow is watching Chinese efforts at building their own fleet of icebreakers with much concern and suspects that the present readiness to comply with Russian rules for navigation on the NSR may change to insistence on independent cruises outside or even inside its territorial waters. The main driver of the increased maritime traffic on this difficult shipping avenue is the development of the Yamal LNG project, in which China has acquired a large stake and which it aims to [further expand](#). The Sabetta LNG terminal makes an [impressive site](#) indeed, unlike the sad desolation in many Soviet-era settlements in the vast Eastern Siberia. The deepening dependency upon the self-interested Chinese

partners may irritate many Russian stakeholders in Arctic projects, but even more frustrating is the proven inability of the government to proceed with a feasible program for developing the neglected Arctic regions. A 2018 Chinese White Paper [confirmed](#) the inclusion of the region into the BRI and elaborated on the country's (limited) ambition of positioning itself as a "[near-Arctic state](#)," but unlike many Russian doctrinal guidelines, it is translated into sound investment plans and targeted joint ventures with many international partners besides Russia.

The United States Rushes in to Catch Up

U.S. chairmanship of the Arctic Council (from mid-2015 to mid-2017) was less than stellar, yet the United States has recently [awakened](#) to the growing security importance of this region. There is neither space nor need here to elaborate on the contents of the new edition of the [Arctic Strategy](#) presented by the U.S. Department of Defense in June 2019, but it is important to emphasize that it is interpreted in Moscow as a [set of guidelines](#) aimed at building capabilities for challenging Russia's interests. There is certainly a good deal of exaggeration in such interpretations that serves the purpose of justifying Russia's own sustained (though not necessarily sustainable) build-up of military assets and infrastructure in the Arctic. There are also real concerns about possible U.S. naval activities directed at [establishing](#) the freedom of navigation principle in the easternmost leg of the NSR, where the Russian military presence is far from foreboding.

What is odd and even incomprehensible in the new U.S. Arctic Strategy from the Russian point of view is the strong emphasis on countering China's activities. The general trend toward escalating global competition between the two powers is [clearly identified](#) and even welcomed in Russian security thinking because it opens opportunities for Russia to remain undefeated in its heavily asymmetric (in terms of economic power) confrontation with the West. Russian experts carefully [monitor](#) the oscillation of tensions in the South China Sea and the High Command tries to maneuver on the margins of this seat of conflict. For instance, Russia staged the first ever [joint patrol](#) (over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea) by two Russian and two Chinese strategic bombers. Russian leadership also knows and makes sure that Chinese [activities](#) in the Arctic remain strictly economic and scientific, so U.S. alarm about those rings distinctly false. It is indeed hard to grasp for the Russian top brass that unless Pentagon planners elaborate on a Chinese threat ([hypothetical](#) as it may be), their requests for budget allocations toward Arctic capabilities have a slim chance of being approved.

In fact, China not only refrains from any demonstrations of military intentions in the High North, but also seeks to impress upon Russia the imperative of cultivating peaceful international cooperation. Excessive [militarization](#) of the NSR is indeed bad for Chinese business, which wants to see an emphasis in Russian resource allocation on transport hubs and logistics and not on military bases. Beijing remains unsupportive for the Russian claim on expanding the continental shelf and would generally prefer to see the Arctic not

divided between the littoral states but rather open for exploration and potential development by all interested parties. If there is a restraining force on the Russian military build-up in the Arctic, it is China.

Russia's Position of Power

The perceived need to protect the NSR with military assets is a new element in a Russian strategy that prescribes a reconfiguration of the Northern Fleet so that it would acquire capabilities for operating in ice-covered waters. Traditionally, this strongest fleet in the Soviet/Russian Navy was built for contesting control over the Northern Atlantic. It was only in 2018 that the first icebreaker (*Project 21180, Ilya Muromets*) joined the Navy's combat order which still features no ice-class surface combatants. Delivering supplies to the new bases strung in a long chain along the 6,000 kilometers of the NSR is a challenging task, particularly because many amphibious ships and auxiliary vessels of the Northern Fleet will soon be over 40 years old. Replacements are slow to come and the Navy has come out as the [biggest loser](#) in the curtailed 2027 Russian State Armament Program (SAP), which will inevitably aggravate the crisis in shipbuilding.

The main priority in the 2027 SAP is on the modernization of strategic nuclear forces and on the construction of *Borei*-class strategic submarines (*Project 955A*, the single most expensive project in it). The Northern Fleet has been duly preparing for deploying these ships, but it now must also prepare for operating the [Poseidon](#) nuclear-propelled unmanned underwater vehicles that has become one of Putin's pet projects on par with hypersonic missiles. The old Soviet nuclear test site on Novaya Zemlya is modernized for testing new types of weapons, as well as for conducting, quite possibly, [extra-low-yield](#) nuclear tests. The [explosion](#) onboard the *AS-31* nuclear submarine (that has the rather cute nickname *Losharik*) was the first reminder of the growing risks of catastrophic accidents in over-worked naval assets and facilities; the [explosion](#) of the *Burevestnik* nuclear-propelled missile became the second; and the [failed launch](#) of a ballistic missile from the old *Ryazan* (*Delta III* class) nuclear submarine during the *Grom-2019* strategic exercise in October became the third.

Despite pressing needs in many strategic theatres, the Russian High Command continues to channel resources to build up a formidable grouping of conventional forces on the Kola Peninsula so that the Northern Fleet command can interplay the advanced air defense system with long-range capabilities for projecting power from the sea to land. NATO has recognized the scope of challenges presented by the new quality of Russian military superiority in the Barents region and directs efforts at countering this threat by upgrading its partnership with Finland and Sweden. Russia seeks to overtake these counter-efforts by demonstrating intolerance to NATO exercises, including the staging of missile tests inside the exercise area and performing [GPS jamming](#). This spiral of a military-security dilemma keeps spinning.

Conclusion

Russia cannot produce a meaningful agenda for advancing international cooperation in the Arctic except for the very costly production of LNG for the Chinese market. Moscow also finds it increasingly hard to rationalize the military build-up in the High North and to harvest any political dividends from the massive investments in various military assets, particularly nuclear. New military bases along the NSR remain mostly idle because there is no threat to navigation on the route with the exception of periodic highly severe weather conditions, which could be better addressed by non-military means. The military units have taken on some tasks in environmental clean-up, such as the removal of graveyards of old metal barrels, but they also generate acute environmental risks, primarily nuclear-oriented. The reinforced combat-ready military grouping on the Kola Peninsula under the Northern Fleet command is correctly perceived by Russia's North European neighbors and NATO as a direct security threat, and every step in containing this threat is decried by Moscow as a provocative challenge. China seeks to restrain Russia's drive to militarize the Arctic, but Moscow is compelled to prove that it can do more with less by riding old Soviet-build ships too hard and testing new capabilities to the extreme limits. Risks of technical failures are aggravated by harsher-than-usual economizing on logistics and maintenance. Thus, the white whale made a wise decision to defect and swim a safe distance away from Russia's recklessly escalating Arctic maneuverings and exploitations.