

Russia's Perception of the Arctic

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For a long period of time, the Arctic was viewed by Soviet leadership first and foremost through the lens of a military dimension only. During the Cold War era the Arctic was the most militarized region in the world¹ which required the creation of a special arms control regime. Only the famous Murmansk Speech made in 1987 by the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev provided for a new perspective for the Arctic.

After the collapse of the USSR, it might seem that the Arctic temporarily lost its strategic importance and became of marginal importance for the Kremlin. The situation has changed under Vladimir Putin who has invented two novelties in Russian foreign policy with regards to the Arctic. First, his modernization strategy for Russia was based on the use of vast energy resources, primarily oil and natural gas. Second, a new type of identity of the country as an 'energy superpower' with appropriate responsibilities towards the outside world required reevaluation of Russia's regional priorities, putting the Arctic once again on a list of priorities of the Russian leadership.

This article aims at evaluation of recent developments in Russia's policy towards the Arctic with main emphasis on statements and laws regarding the Arctic signed by President Medvedev in 2008. What is Russia's perception of the Arctic? What is continuity and change in its perception under Putin/Medvedev leadership?

A bulk of publications regarding Russia's Arctic race in 2007, associated with the widely televised Russian expedition to the North Pole, underscored the fact that Russian Maritime Doctrine of 2001 already made clear what Russia intended to do in terms of its Arctic policy, and how. Indeed, the Maritime Doctrine of Russia emphasised four points vital for both economic and military interests of the country: The first goal was about guaranteeing free access to the Atlantic for the Russian commercial fleet. Though this issue was hypothetical rather than practical, the authors of the doctrine decided to put it in first place taking into account potential shipping of Russian goods (mainly, oil and coal) through the Baltic Sea on to world markets. The second, and probably even more important task, was to provide an access to vast natural resources in an exclusive economic zone and on a continental shelf yet to be established. Indeed, the Russian state-controlled company

Gazprom has approximately 11 trillion cubic feet of gas already under development in the fields it owns in the Barents Sea. The Russian Ministry of Natural Resources calculates that the territory claimed by Moscow in the Arctic could contain as much as 586 billion barrels of oil – although these deposits are unproven. By comparison, all of Saudi Arabia’s current proven oil reserves amount to only 260 billion barrels. The third priority was quite a traditional one and associated with the strategic role of the Russian Northern Fleet as a key element of Russia’s national security. And, finally, an old idea of the Northern Sea Route as an important tool for sustainable development of the Russian Federation has found new life in the document. According to some estimates, the shipping shortcuts of the Northern Sea Route over Eurasia and the Northwest Passage over North America would cut existing oceanic transit times by days, saving shipping companies thousands of miles of travel. The NSR would reduce the sailing distance between Rotterdam and Yokohama from 11,200 nautical miles - via the current route – to only 6,500 nautical miles, savings of more than 40 percent. Arctic routes would also allow commercial and military vessels to avoid sailing through politically unstable Middle Eastern waters and the pirate-infested South-China Sea. Thus, the melting Arctic holds great promise but it also poses grave dangers. Vast reserves of oil and other mineral resources are thought to lie under Arctic waters, and may become more accessible as global warming continues. It seems that the Arctic was constantly on Putin’s mind. The situation in the Russian economy by July 2008 allowed the Russian leaders to dream about vast Arctic reserves. To this end, Russia began the Arctic race by arguing that the Lomonosov Ridge is a natural extension of the Eurasian landmass and that therefore approximately half of the Arctic Ocean is its rightful inheritance.²

Not surprisingly, in 2001 and a bit later there was almost no reaction to the Maritime doctrine of Russia abroad. It seemed nobody took seriously Russia’s claims, and for good reasons – Russia was still too weak after the financial crisis of 1998 and too deeply involved in her conflict with Chechen rebels to pose any challenges to the status quo in the Arctic. Nevertheless, by 2007 the situation had radically changed. Due to generally high prices of hydrocarbons Russia re-emerged as an energy superpower and wanted to project its might in the Arctic. It would be fair to say that by that time not only Russia but also some other Arctic states had changed their perceptions of the region.

In August 2007, Russian scientists led an underwater geological investigation that tested soil samples and determined that a mountain range in the Arctic Ocean could be considered Russian territory. The surrounding area is thought to contain some 25 percent of the world’s undiscovered oil

and gas resources. A later expedition found that the range was connected to the Russian continental shelf, and planted a Russian flag underneath the North Pole. The first-in-history submarine travel to the Arctic Ocean floor at the North Pole had successfully ended. A manned submersible planted a Russian flag on the seabed at the North Pole on Thursday August 2nd, and returned from a depth of over 4,000 meters with samples of water and ocean floor. Both submarines from the USA and the former Soviet Union had been sailing under the ice of the North Pole in recent history, but the Russian submersible is the first to reach the bottom.

Russia says that the reason for the expedition was based on the theory that the Lomonosov Ridge, extending from the New Siberian Islands in the East of the Laptev Sea towards the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, is a submerged geological extension of the Siberian platform and, consequently, is part of Russia.

After the 2007 Russian expedition in the Arctic, the entire mood in the world had suddenly changed dramatically. Russia became a target of criticism from Brussels, Washington D.C., Ottawa, Oslo, London and some other capitals. A recent report by the European Union experts has suggested that Russia will clash with Europe over Arctic resources in the near future. Analysts from the United States, meanwhile, testified before Congress that the US is falling behind Russia in the “Arctic race.”³ But this criticism did not stop the elaboration of a new proactive Foreign Policy of Russia under President Dmitri Medvedev. Shortly after his inauguration, he endorsed a new Foreign Policy Concept as well as new law related to exploration of natural resources in the Arctic. This law, approved beforehand by the State Duma on July 4th and the Federation Council on July 11th, empowers the government to hand-pick companies to develop resource extraction on the continental shelf. Permits to develop plots of the continental shelf will be handed out directly by the government without auctions or tenders.

The law underlines three principal points. First, ‘the continental shelf is our national heritage’, second, development of the Arctic will be left to Russian state-run companies; third, the law provides for ensuring ‘rational use of this national wealth’.

The new Foreign Policy Concept made it clear that Russia’s claims in the Arctic are more than symbolic. The whole document rests upon the idea that Russia has finally recovered as one of key actors in world politics. Moreover, as a political pole, Russia will not hide its intentions of fighting

for the geographic pole. The topic of developing natural resources in the Arctic is mentioned three times in the concept, and in the most unexpected contexts. At the same time, the document stresses the role of ‘economic interdependence of states’ that will be one of the key factors of support for international stability. Moreover, according to the document, Russia “will use all the economic leverage and resources at its disposal, and specific advantages, for the protection of its national interests.” The new Foreign Policy Concept differs from all previous (Yeltsin, 1993; Putin, 2000) in that bravura. In 2000, Russian diplomacy protested bitterly that “certain considerations connected with the formation of new equitable, mutually-beneficial relations between Russia and the surrounding world is unjustified.” There are no such complaints now, for the hated unipolar world has practically been done away with. The phrase “great power” is no longer used. Eight years ago, it sounded a little plaintive and nostalgic, since it was interspersed between claims of intrigues by enemies and imbalance in the world. There is no more of that either.⁴

Another new phrase in the concept is “energy resources.” Eight years ago, the use of energy for leverage to resolve foreign policy problems was not mentioned at all. The second chapter (“The Modern World and Russian Foreign Policy”) begins with a direct statement to that effect: “The new Russia, standing on the firm ground of national interests, has taken a valid place in global affairs.” The authors of the document have invented dozens of phrases synonymous with that one. In their opinion, “Russia exerts substantial influence on the formation of the new architecture of international relations”, “Russia has real potential to occupy a worthy place in the world”, “Russia brings a notable contribution to providing stability to the global economy and finances”, and even “Russia will use its potential as a donor to carry out an active and focused policy in the sphere of cooperating in international development.”

The new Foreign Policy Concept identifies the Arctic as a region of strategic importance. In doing so, Russia has been developing onward practical interaction with Nordic countries, including implementation within the framework of multi-lateral mechanisms of joint cooperation projects in the Barents/Euro-Arctic region, and the Arctic as a whole with account of the interests of indigenous peoples.

Further development of Russia’s policy towards the Arctic was formulated in the National Security Council Guidelines of September 17th, 2008. The document identified three main priorities regarding the region. First, it is important for active extraction of natural resources; second, its role

will grow through building of transport, telecommunication and border infrastructure; and last but not least, the Arctic should become a core of strategic resource base of Russia. All the above mentioned priorities are not new ones. The idea of the stabilization of Russia's northern frontiers is quite traditional for Russian security thinking. Another goal of bridging the gap in socio-economic disparities between Russian Arctic sub-regions and the rest of the country also goes back to the Soviet time with its 'affirmative action empire'⁵ policy aiming at special attention to indigenous populations and sustainable development of non-Russian regions. Russia's Security Council also identified essential tools in order to achieve these goals. Among them are such instruments as bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the most promising areas that can provide relatively fast payoffs and strengthen national security; inclusiveness of all relevant federal ministries, regional authorities and academia into strategic planning towards the Arctic; and "appropriate financing" through Federal development programs.

Many Russians, and perhaps most of them, have first thought of the Arctic as truly a 'political grandstand play' to capitalize on the sudden, unexpected economic success associated with high prices on oil. But by September 2008, the opinions became more specified. According to All-Russian Center of Public Opinion, the Russians believe that the state should be firm in its struggle for Russia's sector in the Arctic. More than 70 percent of respondents are well aware of Russian participation in the Arctic race including recent expeditions, Medvedev's statements about the Arctic, and diplomatic efforts to expand Russia's continental shelf through the appropriate UN Commission. Meanwhile, opinions split into three more or less equal groups regarding motives of Russia's new policy in the region. One group believes that the primary interest is a political play while another puts economic motives above all. It is not surprising that the third group sees the growing interests of the Kremlin in its willingness to re-establish itself as a scientific leader in the Arctic exploration.⁶

A key question, however, is how Russia is going to achieve these new ambitious goals, especially in the area of exploration of energy resources in the Arctic and the revival of the Northern Sea Route; whether the Kremlin is going to act unilaterally or prefers to build various sorts of condominiums? Our analysis of official documents led to mixed results. On the one hand, the new Foreign Policy Concept stipulates that "If partners are not prepared for joint action, Russia will be forced to act independently for the protection of national interests, but always based on international law." That sentence is almost a direct quotation of the speeches of U.S. President George W. Bush from 2002-

2003 in the run-up to the war in Iraq. The Bush American administration, which has acted independently numerous times, expressed similar loyalty to international law. On the other hand, Russia has been trying to define the extent of Russia's continental shelf under the UNCLOS and for many reasons cannot go for unilateralism. The Ministry of Natural Resources of Russia, in its draft paper about national strategy for the development of oil and gas on the continental shelf for the period up to 2020, listed a number of challenges that Russia has been facing which practically prescribe multilateralism as the only option. Namely, the Ministry stipulates the following problems: first, inadequate geological research of the Arctic continental shelf and high risks for investments; second, high costs of exploration due to unfavorable location of oil and gas deposits; third, poor transport infrastructure; fourth, technological backwardness.⁷

Now it is obvious that years of slashing Arctic expenditures, as a means to balance the budget, had taken a heavy toll. With the policy of 'cutting the fat' at the Ministry of Defense and the Navy, along with the 'fat' a great deal of bone and muscle had been cut. The country is quite unprepared for a new Arctic race. What Russia can commit to the Arctic, given the dangers of economic crises, is an open question.

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Notes

¹ For appropriate themes see three essays published in Encyclopedia of the Arctic. Three volume Set. Ed. by Mark Nutall, Routledge. (2004)

² Scott Borgerson argues that due to global warming, The Arctic icecap is rapidly melting, opening up access to massive natural resources and creating shipping shortcuts that could save billions of dollars a year (2008: 68-71)

³ The EU, United States, Canada, Denmark, and later Norway responded to the Russian claims quite nervously. In addition, mass media in the West took the Russian move in the spirit of the old Cold War.

⁴ The central idea of the new Foreign Policy Concept is that Russia has finally recovered. It has risen from its knees and is ready for the next stage – to act proactively on all directions. That claim is repeated no less than ten times in different variations throughout the text of the concept.

⁵ This term was used by the Harvard University professor Terry Martin in his book about early period of the national politics in the USSR

⁶ Public opinion surveys in Russia regarding the Arctic as region are very sporadic and do not have any coverage in academic literature (see, for instance, William Zimmerman, 2002)

⁷ Russian Federation Strategy for search and exploration of oil and gas resources for the period up to 2020 is available in Russian on the web site of the Ministry of Natural Resources («Государственная стратегия изучения и освоения нефтегазового потенциала континентального шельфа Российской Федерации на период до 2020 года» (2006), Министерство природных ресурсов РФ)