Arctic: The New Front

Sovereignty is the Key to Russia’s Arctic Policy

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Introduction

It was the privately-sponsored Russian expedition to the North Pole in August 2007 that opened a new competitive era in Arctic geopolitics, and the technologically elegant PR-trick with planting the flag into the crisscross point of meridians on the depth of 4,261 m produced a resonance that distorted strategic thinking about, and political interactions in the Arctic region. Six years later, the dust of over-excited forecasts of unregulated confrontation across the Northern frontier has mostly settled down and the atmosphere of cooperation has become prevalent, but Russian Arctic policy is in new disarray. With its large population centres (like Murmansk or Norilsk) beyond the Polar circle and huge resource-extraction industry, Russia is objectively the Arctic superpower, and the high concentration of strategic forces on the Kola Peninsula adds a heavy military dimension to this status, but Moscow is nervous about protecting its interests against encroachments of ambiguous neighbours and ambitious newcomers.¹ The discourse of ‘conquering’ and ‘owning’ the High North is organic to the Russian state identity, incoherent as it is, and is often exploited as political expediency dictates, which increases the sensitivity of public opinion to setbacks and accidents that tend to bedevil many Arctic projects. There is a rich tradition of exploring and developing the vast inhospitable territories and seas, but the attention to environmental issues and to the rights of indigenous peoples is strikingly low. This article focuses on the crucial importance of issues pertaining to sovereignty in Russian policy-making, while starting with examining the revised evaluations of Arctic resources and continuing with assessing the usefulness of military build-up.

Disillusionment in energy bonanza

Imaginary hydrocarbon riches have been the key driver of Russia’s Arctic policy to far greater degree than in the US, or Canada, or even Norway, where environmental activism has been a major constraint on energy greed. Inflated estimates of ‘undiscovered’ resources are multiplied by the highest imaginary prices on oil and the resulting figures are routinely presented as established scientific facts. Visiting a scientific station in Yakutia in August 2010, Prime Minister (now certainly President) Vladimir Putin informed Russian and German climatologists that the value of mineral resources in the High North was estimated at $US 5 trillion.² Russian oceanographers and glaciologists are often eager to underpin their research proposals with such mind-boggling

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references knowing from experience that funding might not be forthcoming otherwise. It was the shocking collapse in mid 2012 of the joint (Gazprom-Total-Statoil) off-shore Shtokman project, which had been personally monitored and highly praised by Putin for years, that revealed the futility of wide-spread expectations of forthcoming inflow of new petro-revenues from the underwater ‘green-fields’.

The conditions of this project (no production-sharing was agreed upon) looked quite attractive for international majors in the mid 2000s, but the fast-moving changes on the global energy markets since the start of 2010s have convinced Statoil and Total against committing to an investment decision. The case cannot be treated as an exception because it pertains to the trend of re-evaluating the costs and benefits of potential enterprises in the Arctic on the background of fast growth of production of ‘unconventional’ hydrocarbons, including shale gas. Far-sighted international players, such as Shell or Statoil, are still interested in signing deals with Rosneft on exclusive rights for exploring vast sectors of Arctic shelf, but they are ready to put money only in projects targeting ‘brown’ fields, where production of tight oil is clearly profitable because technology has become and infrastructure is available. Shell’s decision to stop drilling in the Alaska shelf is also an element of the ‘go-extra-slow’ trend that prevailed over the alleged ‘mad rush’ for the Arctic resources.

There is, nevertheless, one recent success story in Russia’s energy policy in the High North—the start in October 2012 of commercial production from the huge Bovanenkovskoe gas-filed on the Yamal Peninsular, which reminds that for Russian companies on-shore rather than off-shore remains the Arctic strategy of choice. Gazprom, which has invested heavily into the strategically important Bovanenkovo project, remains ambivalent about the off-shore Prirazlomnoe project in the Kara Sea, which is supposed to be its ‘laboratory’ for conducting experiments with new technologies but has brought mostly discouraging results. The horizon of tapping into the poorly explored reserves in the Arctic is shifting from mid- to long-term, but the dynamics of changes in the global energy market in the short-term has acquired such intensity that business plans for the Arctic projects are moving from the category of ‘far-fetched’ to indefinitely postponed.

Irrelevance of military instruments

A month after Chilingarov’s flag-planting expedition President Putin ordered to resume monthly patrols of strategic aviation over the Arctic seas, and that coincidence illustrated the heavy tilt to military security in Russian political thinking about the Northern matters. Russia has more combat ships and battalions deployed in the High North than its four Arctic neighbours (who all happen to be NATO members) taken together, and the Kola Peninsula is still the most nuclearised region in the world, so it is tempting to use this superiority in ‘hard power’ for gaining political advantage. The problem is that Moscow has been discovering again and again the counter-productivity of applying military instruments to its security concerns.

The gigantic rearmament programme, which constitutes one of the main features of, and a heavy burden for Putin’s new presidency, has direct consequences for the security climate in the North, particularly since several top priority elements of this programme envisage modernisation of the Russian Navy. The neighbours have few reasons to worry about the planned increase of strike and power-projecting capabilities of the Northern Fleet, but they harbour grave worries about the propensity to technical failures of the new generation of strategic submarines (Borey-class armed with...
Bulava missiles). It was the fire that badly damaged the ballistic missiles submarine (SSBN) Yekaterinburg (K-84), which was undergoing minor repairs in the Roslyakovskiy dry dock (some 6 km north-east from Murmansk) with full complement of missiles and torpedoes, that illuminated the risks stemming from the typically cavalier attitude to nuclear safety. Moscow’s unilateral decision to discontinue the Nunn–Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Programme adds to the neighbours’ anxiety and undermines their trust in Russia’s commitment to Arctic cooperation. Russia’s poor economic performance determines the high probability, if not certainty, of cuts and delays in the implementation of rearmament programme, and this could lead to social unrest at the enterprises, like the gigantic Severodvinsk shipyard, that are dependent upon defence orders; the possibility of strikes triggering mutinies at the naval bases turns Murmansk and Arkhangelsk regions into potentially most dangerous ‘hot spots’ in the evolving Russian political crisis.

Uncertainty of territorial claims

Russia’s greatest ambition in the Arctic is the expansion of its exclusive rights over the continental shelf in the wide triangle between the Mendeleev and Lomonosov underwater ridges (total size 1.2 million km²), which can only be legitimised by the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UN CLCS). The claim submitted to this Commission in late 2001 was prepared so sloppily that in the matter of a few months it was returned for substantiation, and since the Chilingarov’s expedition this issue has acquired extraordinary political priority. Thus, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin argued passionately on the need to define the Northern perimeter of Russian national interests: ‘If we don’t do that we will lose the battle for resources and therefore will lose the big battle for the right to have our own sovereignty and independence’. This discourse exemplifies the connection between the control over resources and the assertion of sovereignty in the Russian political thinking and reveals the urgency of the task of establishing the sovereign rights created by the delays in developing the under-explored resources.

It is highly significant that despite all the political passions, Moscow has not as yet re-submitted the claim to the UNCLOS understanding perfectly well that the outcome depends not only, and even not that much on the amassed scientific evidence (which can never be conclusive) but on the consent of Arctic neighbours. Demonstrations of military might are entirely counter-productive for obtaining such consent, so in parallel with implementing the rearmament programme Russia has been keen to demonstrate its best cooperative behaviour, particularly in the framework of the Arctic Council. One decisive and difficult step in proving its readiness to build meaningful cooperation was the signing and ratification of the treaty on maritime border with Norway, which had been a contentious issue for many decades and could have remained open for years without generating any real tensions. By agreeing on a solution on the basis of simplest ‘50–50’ compromise (which is far from popular domestically) Moscow signalled to the neighbours that competition was senseless and that they should reconcile their claims and divide the Arctic swiftly. One obstacle for this plan is the fact that the US is still not party to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); and Moscow is far more inclined to look for evil intentions than accept that the delay with ratification is a consequence of bitter partisan deadlock in the US Senate.

One particular Arctic matter, which Moscow has expected to make into a source of strength but now discovers as a concern, is the opening of commercial maritime
traffic on the Northern Sea Route (or *SevMorPut*). Unlike the Canadian North-Western Passage, the *SevMorPut* has a long record of successful work, so the experiments in summers of 2011 and 2012 with organising convoys of tankers and cargo ships accompanied by ice-breakers appeared to be a prologue to resumption of its Soviet-times exploitation. Russian authorities have failed to take into consideration the dynamics of Arctic ice melting, which might make it possible in only a few years for the Asian, and first of all Chinese customers to cross directly to Iceland without calling to any Russian ports or asking for expensive ice-breaker escort. This prospect challenges Russia’s sovereignty over the potentially high-volume sea route, which Moscow used to take for granted but presently finds necessary to re-confirm, while not being able to invest in upgrading the infrastructure in its most dangerous bottle-necks.

The desire to establish incontestable sovereignty over largest possible segments of Arctic shelf and waters is justified primarily in terms of taking control over high-value resources, but in fact, this urge is not reducible to greed because it is driven by deeper (and often imaginary) convictions in Russia’s belonging in the North (as compared, for instance, with entirely pragmatic alliance-building with the Brazil–Russia–India–China–South Africa (BRICS) partners), which shapes its core identity.

**Conclusions**

Since the late 2000s, Vladimir Putin appeared to develop a particular affection for the Arctic and to embrace the environmentalist cause visiting scientific outposts, panning polar bears (severely sedated), flying with migrating storks and presiding over the reconstituted Geographic society. Since the start of his new presidency, however, this devotion has visibly dissipated, and presently Putin shows greater interest in Russian history seeking to forge a canonical version that would be ‘free of contradictions’. Political expediency dictates the ‘patriotic’ content of these historic experiments, but it is the geopolitical rise of Asia-Pacific that dictates the shift of political attention eastwards, including creating a special federal ministry (and possibly also a state corporation) for the development of the Far East. The Arctic is reduced to a second priority, only slightly above the neglect where it had been prior to mid 2007.

This de-prioritisation is determined not so much by external impacts (like the reconfiguration of the global hydrocarbons market) but mostly by the development of complex domestic crisis. The sharp escalation of political protests in late 2011—mid 2012 caught the Kremlin unprepared, and large segments of the elites do not share the assumption that the current decline of street actions signifies a stabilisation of Putin’s regime. Characteristically, the explosion of protests was out of sync with economic troubles, but by early 2013, the slowdown had become unmistakable, and every minor tremor (like the financial spasm in Cyprus in March 2013) threatens to push the economy into protracted recession. A new surge of activity of opposition forces on the background of falling incomes and social unrest would constitute a grave threat to the existence of the quasi-democratic and deeply corrupt regime; and while it is unclear whether such risk would materialise, it focuses political attention on the immediate matters. Every project for the High North or initiative on Arctic cooperation has to have a time span measured in many years or even decades, which in the current political turmoil in Moscow is entirely beyond the horizon of feasible. This leaves Russia incapable of undertaking the necessary efforts in sustaining the development of its vast Northern periphery, but vulnerable to technological accidents spinning out of control to catastrophes and breakdowns of social order. The deeply felt need in being strong
makes Moscow nervous about showing its weakness to competitors, who are suspected in cherishing expansionist ambitions in the Arctic detrimental to Russia’s sovereignty.

Notes


2. He also promised to undertake a massive environmental cleansing of the Russian settlements in such unique ecosystems as the Franz Josef Land or Novaya Zemlya, which is yet to happen; see Christoph Seidler, ‘Spring Cleaning in the Arctic: Putin’s Environmental Action Plan for the Far North’, *Der Spiegel*, September 24, 2010.


15. This author touched upon this tendency in Pavel K. Baev, ‘Russia’s History is Too Tragic and Its Society Too Complex to Fit into Putin’s Worldview’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 20, 2013.