



The Mitchell Forum

The Arctic Intersection: Site of the Next Collision with Russia?

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Introduction

Billy Mitchell told the U.S. Congress in the run-up to World War II, "I believe that in the future, whoever holds Alaska will hold the world."¹ Former Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson and then-Chief of Staff General David Goldfein agreed in a 2019 article that Mitchell's prophetic words foretold the role of airpower in the Arctic region.² Additionally, they stated that in the time since Mitchell's statement on Alaska's strategic value, "The Arctic has become even more important to the nation." Simply put, the Arctic region is both a northern approach to the United States as well as a critical location for projecting American power. Wilson and Goldfein concluded that the Arctic region's "geostrategic significance is difficult to overstate."³

Of course, it is not only the United States that realizes the strategic and geopolitical importance of the High North. Northward expansion has been a historical pursuit of Russia's leaders, and the



The Coast Guard Cutter HEALY breaking ice near Nome, Alaska in 2012.

Source: U.S. Coast Guard photo

modern strategic environment has made it an important target for the Putin regime. Modern Armenian-Russian Arctic explorer Artur Chilingarov leaves no doubt of the reasoning behind Russia's current moves northward, declaring that the Arctic is a Russian possession and a goal of his is to specifically provide whatever proof necessary to back Russia's claim over Arctic resources.⁴

There are many reasons the Arctic is now becoming a strategic focal point. In 2021, NOAA reported that the decline in the extent of Arctic sea ice since 1979 is substantial—an iconic indicator of climate change. NOAA added that the Summer of 2021 recorded the second-lowest accumulated amount of older, multi-year ice since 1985. Furthermore, the post-winter sea ice volume recorded in April 2021 was the lowest since 2010. All of these indicators mean that once too-difficult-to-navigate Arctic waters are now increasingly accessible.⁵

Shane Tayloe, a national security policy analyst, assessed that “the thaw makes way for new sea routes, expansive, untouched fishing grounds, and provides unprecedented access to deposits of oil, gas, and minerals—most of which are concentrated within U.S. and Russian territory.”⁶ Continuing reduction in ice throughout the High North has led to several predictions of the very real possibility of ice-free seas in late summer by the 2040s or 2050s.⁷ However, even when admitting the commercial advantages of climate change, the most significant developments are likely to be geopolitical.

A noted expert on the Law of the Sea, Caitlyn Antrim, remarked that 21st-century geopolitics will be different from those of 19th and 20th-century empires and conflicts. She noted that a vested interest in Arctic energy and mineral resources, fisheries, and shortened sea routes, as well as Russia's access to rivers

flowing northward into the Arctic seas, all explain Russia's push to increase its presence in and influence over the Arctic.⁸

Russia's Military Buildup in the Arctic —

Russian national interests in the Arctic are highlighted as a priority of the Russian military in *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation of 2014*. And in late October 2020, Putin approved the *Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Ensuring National Security for the Period through 2035*. This and other Russian policy documents identify the Arctic as a region where Russia must expand its military capabilities to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Many in the West view this position as a strong indication of the potential danger of Russia's growing assertiveness.⁹

Military upgrades and reorganization aimed at “Arctic security” mark Russian actions given from the viewpoint of current strategy and policy. The Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command, formed in December 2014 to coordinate Russia's revived Arctic emphasis, exemplifies one of these actions.¹⁰ New Arctic units, refurbished airfields, and improved and new bases are other examples. DOD notes that air superiority goals are evident in Russian efforts establishing an air defense network, coastal missile systems, early warning radars, a variety of other sensors, and rescue centers.¹¹

Russia expert Dr. Richard Connolly suggests that Russia's 2017 Naval Policy likely represents a much more deliberate and considered expression of Russian strategic thinking than some critics have suggested.¹² One of the most impressive and telling Russian attributes in the High North is its array of both nuclear and conventional icebreakers. A simple exercise of arithmetic



This armed icebreaker patrol ship, the *Ivan Papanin*, is the first product of Russia's 23550 design project.

Source: [Public Domain](#)

reveals that Russia possesses more military-ready icebreaking vessels than all those of the other Arctic countries combined. Moreover, some of these icebreakers are armed. These icebreaker assets alone strongly tip the scales in Russia's favor. The advantage to Russian commerce in the High North is obviously boosted by their strong icebreaker fleet, but the military advantage afforded is truly significant.

Fleet modernization has included several ships retrofitted with S-400 and other missiles, Antei-II-class and Yasen-M-class attack submarines, and other acquisitions and upgrades underway.¹³ However impressive Russia's emphasis on capital shipping upgrades, military equipment, and technology, perhaps the most significant change from a Western security standpoint is the strategic shift in Russian deployment of its navy. What we are witnessing is a move from a defense-oriented posture—sea denial thinking—toward a much more offensive and joint interoperative posture.

Connolly feels that Russia's ability to employ force via non-strategic nuclear weapons combined with their development

of, and desire to develop, naval force task groups with very capable non-nuclear missions represent a significant departure from pre-2017 Russian naval policy.¹⁴ This strategic redirection is initially most observable in the High North.

While Russia's primary policy driver, whether it is economy, domestic politics, or security (expressed as military employment), may remain debatable, there can be no doubt that Russia has turned up the volume on its policies toward military development in the High North.

Drivers of Russia's Arctic Policy

Well-known Russian observer Marlène Laruelle believes that Russia's High North strategy is based on three major objectives.¹⁵

- Russia sees a chance to regain prestige and great power status by exerting greater influence in the High North.
- Russia desires to reassert territorial sovereignty along the 2013 borders of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and protect the Northern Sea Route and other commercial sea lanes.

- Russia wishes to cement unity across the entire length and breadth of the country through interdependent economic development, improved links between its Siberian territory, its European territory, and the distant eastern elements of the country.

In 2019, DOD reported to Congress that “Russia views itself as a polar great power and is the largest Arctic nation by landmass, population, and military presence above the Arctic Circle.”¹⁶ Supporting Russia’s perception of itself in the Arctic, Tayloe and Russia observers point out the revival of competition between the West and Russia over the Arctic and other territories, suggesting that Russians have demanded, “a restoration of the greatness of the Soviet era.”¹⁷ According to many scholars, Russia’s attempt to restore its great power status is an emphatic objective of Russian foreign policy in the High North. Likewise, the size and global reach the Soviet Navy once wielded are no doubt prodding current Russian desires for an operational return to a time of genuine major power status.

Ultra-conservative nationalistic Russian thinkers share a desire for increasing Russian military presence in the Arctic. They view the Arctic Region as sacred and understand its extremely high strategic value. This metaphysical emphasis on geography is little studied in the West, but members of this school of thought, many of them prominent in Russia, envisage the Arctic region as “the northernmost part of the Russian World.”¹⁸ In addition to Eurasian regional dominance in a multipolar world, they openly advocate for an imperialist policy in the Arctic. To them, Russia’s entire being is purposed to its expansion, and this includes the Arctic as a piece of Russian territory by right.¹⁹

The Long History of Invasion as a Driver

Geopolitical author Robert Kaplan has suggested that “insecurity is the quintessential Russian national emotion.”²⁰ Likewise, defense academic Paul Dibb has explained that the vastness of Russian territory lacks topographical demarcation of its borders except for the Pacific and Arctic Oceans. This openness has accounted for repeated waves of invasion and also accounts for Russia’s historical teleocratic reliance on expanding its land-based empire.²¹ More recently, Russia’s 2017 Naval Policy reveals its long-standing feelings of maritime encirclement. It identifies, as a main “threat to the national security of the Russian Federation on the World Ocean . . . the aspiration of a range of states, primarily the United States of America (USA) and its allies, to dominate on the World Ocean, including the Arctic, and to achieve overwhelming superiority of their naval forces.”²²

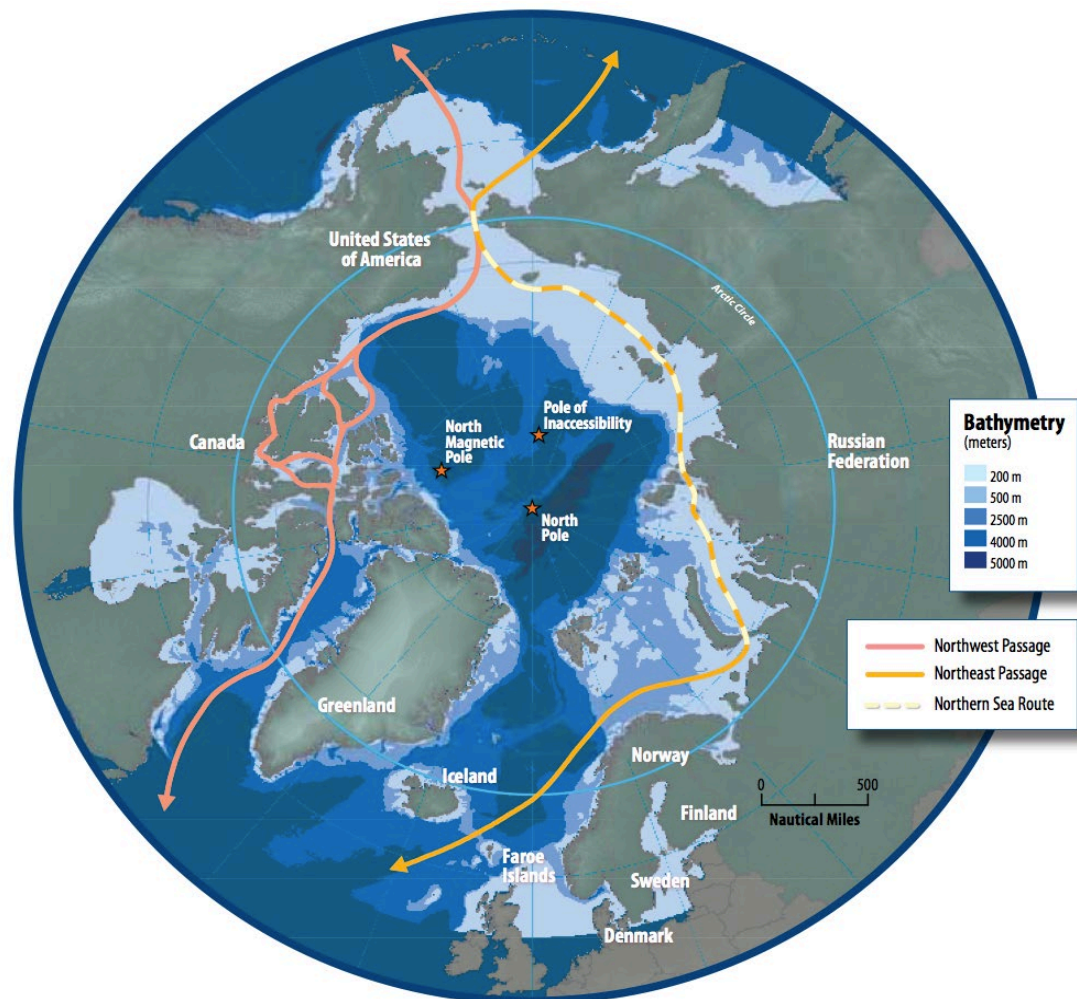
Halford J. Mackinder’s views on the importance of the core of Eurasia still resonates. Neither has Albert Thayer Mahan’s theory on control of the oceans disappeared. Climate change and technology have not altered these theories fundamentally, only evolved them, and both theories are evident in contemporary Russian geopolitics. The Mahanian theory of rule of the ocean may prove to be an emerging driver of Russia’s Arctic advancements. The Mackinderian theory presents a paradox and a two-edged sword, however. Opponents of the possessor of the Eurasian heartland can deny world rule to the occupant if it can be confined within the very area that bestows it with such awesome power.

The West—that is, NATO, in current circumstances—has, for decades, been guided by the George F. Kennan policy that contained the Soviet genie largely within its own heartland lamp. Russia likely feels

that dynamic expansion in the High North offers an escape from the constant chafe of Cold War-era containment policy. The current strife in Ukraine is evidence of the viability of Mackinder’s Heartland Theory at work. However, as northward expansion progresses, some believe that Russia will no longer be as susceptible to geographic isolation or encirclement as in the past. Thus, Russia may hope for future success within the Mahanian rubric along with that of Mackinder—with the Arctic Ocean opening the door to regional hegemony.

I believe that Russian reliance upon geographic strategic depth is a rational response to compensate for its geographic vulnerability. As Tayloe put it, “Russian action in the Arctic thus must be understood

in the context of the wider pursuit of strategic depth—a rational response to structural realities that have been present for centuries.”²³ Tayloe correctly observed that the geographical elements within containment policy that the West employed for decades concentrated on the western, southern, and eastern peripheries of Russia. This worked during the Cold War, when geography and climate combined to close any Russian movement northward, but what was true in the past may no longer be so. Indeed, climate change may prove to be a significant strategic benefactor in Russia’s breakout from the West’s long-time containment efforts. Climate appears no longer able to provide the northern wall.



Depiction of Arctic navigation and shipping routes.

Source: Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment, *Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment, 2009 Report* (Iceland and Norway: The Arctic Council, 2009).

Geopolitical Stress in the Arctic _____

The false non-aggressive narrative preceding Russia's invasion of Ukraine may also be a prelude in the High North, where geopolitical stress is currently a defining characteristic of the international interplay. Several of the Arctic states claim chunks of territory there. Canada and the United States were early claimants.

In 1907, Canadian Senator Pascal Poirier attempted to gain his government's approval of a claim to a huge piece of the High North. His attempt was rejected. On April 6, 1909, the Robert Peary expedition planted the U.S. flag at the North Pole—at least over it, as it was struck in the floating ice above the Pole. In hindsight, Peary technically failed to claim the solid earth below the flag. In 2007, the Russians did not repeat American and Canadian mistakes when they sent a pair of submersible vessels—one with Artur Chilingarov onboard—to the seabed below the pole to plant a Russian flag.²⁴ Russia's action was roundly criticized and even dismissed as a stunt. Stunt or not, the Russians are serious about their Arctic claims, and they are equally serious about enforcing them.

Taylor relates that in 2001 Russia, under the UN Convention of The Law of the Sea, submitted a claim accounting for territory equaling nearly half the Arctic.²⁵ The claim was subsequently rejected by the UN. This rejection has not stopped Russia from attempting *de facto* control, and the United States has called out Russia's actions in this regard, characterizing Russian attempts to regulate maritime operations in the North Sea Route and their threats of force against vessels not abiding by Russian regulations as being against international law.

The U.S. Department of Defense notes that, in addition to its own, the United States does not recognize any other claims to the Arctic by any state other than Canada,

the Kingdom of Denmark (including Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden. Of these seven, the United States maintains strong defense relationships with six, four are NATO allies, and two (Finland and Sweden) are NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partners.²⁶

All the Arctic countries express policies in specific national interest contexts. For example, in August 2010, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated that there is “quite frankly, non-negotiable priority in northern sovereignty, and that is the protection and the promotion of what is our North, the Canadian North.”²⁷ Canada considers the waters of the Northwest Passage to be internal waters, subject to Canadian sovereignty. Notably, the U.S. DOD is concerned with both the Russian and Canadian claims regarding the right to regulate Arctic waters, claiming that both are outside the authority permitted under international law.

While conflicting claims of sovereignty may remain passive in the near term, this is rarely the case in the long term. Current events tell us that they can suddenly become active. Preparation for action is witnessed in the ongoing military exercises Russia and NATO conduct in the High North. Trident Juncture, which was the largest NATO exercise since the 1980s, mobilized some 50,000 troops in Norway along the Norwegian coastline during October and November of 2018. Russian observers have also reported that Russia, for its part, also conducts large-scale exercises, including Su-34 and MiG-31 training in the very High North.²⁸ Other sources reported that Lt Gen Mikhail Mizintsev announced a major expansion in Russian military capability, including 13 airfields, in the Arctic region in October 2014.²⁹

The ultimate goals of Russia and other Arctic nations and how the United States and other Arctic nations might respond to



Depiction of military facilities in the Arctic

Source: U.S. Air Force, *Department of the Air Force: Arctic Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Air Force, July 2020).

one another as competition in the High North progresses are the big questions. Arctic Council members are increasing their military influence, armaments, and infrastructure in the region. Indeed, some non-Arctic states, such as China, are now even portraying themselves as being *near-Arctic* nations, thus assuming more involvement in exploiting Arctic resources.³⁰

Countering Russia's Military Buildup in the Arctic

The *2019 DOD Arctic Strategy* acknowledges that “geographically, the Arctic comprises the northern approaches of the United States and represents a potential vector both for attacks on the homeland and for U.S. power projection.”³¹ It also highlights two major strategically important maritime corridors that involve the Arctic Ocean on both the east and west sides of

the United States—the Bering Strait and the Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom–Norwegian (GIUK–N) gap. Even a glance at a map of the Northern Hemisphere will reveal the obvious strategic prominence of these Arctic corridors. Restricted flow of U.S. assets, surface or air, within these two corridors will have serious implications for the security of the United States.

National Security Presidential Directive 66 (NSPD–66)/ Homeland Security Presidential Directive 25 (HSPD–25): Arctic Region Policy was released by the Bush Administration in 2009. NSPD–66/HSPD–25 highlighted “broad and fundamental national security interests” in the Arctic: missile defense and early warning; deployment of sea and air systems for strategic sealift, strategic deterrence, maritime presence, and maritime security operations; and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight.³²

Fundamental Homeland Security interests emphasized preventing terrorist attacks and “mitigating those criminal or hostile acts that could increase the United States vulnerability to terrorism in the Arctic region.”³³

The U.S. Combatant Command structure was consolidated in 2011 to reflect the Arctic region’s increased geostrategic importance. In 2013, the Obama Administration released the *National Strategy for the Arctic Region*, which stated that the United States “will enable our vessels and aircraft to operate, consistent with international law, through, under, and over the airspace and waters of the Arctic, support lawful commerce, achieve a greater awareness of activity in the region, and intelligently evolve our Arctic infrastructure and capabilities, including ice-capable platforms as needed.”³⁴

Countering Russian actions in the High North will not only require U.S. will and adequate asset allocation but the corresponding will and assets of our allies and partners as a critical force multiplier. Here I offer the brief example of Norway: The Expert Commission on Norwegian Security and Defense Policy has emphatically stated that “The High North constitutes Norway’s most important strategic area of responsibility.”³⁵ While this is understandable given that some 80 percent of Norway’s sea territory is located north of the Arctic Circle, the implications for NATO are critical.

Tone Skogen, State Secretary of the Norwegian Defense Ministry, reported that the Royal Norwegian Air Force is “undergoing the most profound modernization since its formation in Great Britain during the Second World War.”³⁶ Monitoring High North ocean traffic with the Norwegian P-3 aircraft will be enhanced when five new P-8 maritime patrol aircraft come into the inventory and the F-16 fighters that the Royal Norwegian Air Force has flown since the 1980s are phased out and replaced with F-35s.

The Department of Defense believes that countering Russia’s military buildup in the Arctic largely depends on “the network of U.S. allies and partners with shared national interests in this rules-based order,” and this network is “the United States’ greatest strategic advantage in the Arctic region, and thus the cornerstone of DoD’s Arctic strategy.”³⁷

Conclusions

In response to those who argue that Russia’s Arctic ambitions are aggressive, Russian supporters will claim that there is a viable narrative that Russia’s intentions in the Arctic are legitimate and fall within the boundaries of international law. As an example, St. Petersburg State University Professor Valery Konyshev and his colleague, Alexander Sergunin, believe that Russia’s Arctic policies are “not oriented towards military confrontation.”³⁸

Yet, Moscow’s Arctic flexing, when viewed as a security measure, appears to be a nationalistic rather than an economically motivated action. In academia, Russia’s attempted conquest of the Arctic has been characterized as a kind of Stalinist *realpolitik*, recognizing the domestic element emphasizing patriotism as well as the attempt to foster a great power persona abroad.³⁹ Of course, it is possible, as some have, to ascribe multipurpose motives to Russia’s objectives in the High North, both to secure transport routes that accompany this new frontier and to prepare for potential threats to its sovereignty from a place of geostrategic advantage.

One way of thinking about Russian Arctic policies and actions is that they cannot be contained within a “hard power” or “soft power” dichotomy. Given this identified duality of Russian motives, future dealings with the Russian Federation should attempt to balance the approach with engagement that carefully considers both elements of Russian national interests. Of course, taking a balanced

approach is difficult in light of Russia's current display of hard power in Ukraine.

Addressing deterrence in its Arctic strategy, DOD correctly stated that it "must be able to quickly identify threats in the region, respond promptly and effectively to these threats, and shape the security environment to reduce or mitigate the prospects of these threats manifesting in the future."⁴⁰ However, in a somewhat conflicting statement, the strategy also says that "determinations will be made on the basis of U.S. interests, goals and priorities, DOD's Arctic objectives, and emerging threats in the Arctic and other key theaters of competition, rather than by a parity-based approach that seeks to approximate competitors' capabilities and numbers of units, systems, or bases."⁴¹ U.S. strategic policy in the High North must be clarified in order to direct acquisitions, plans, and deployments correctly. Parity may be achieved in ways other than a one-for-one material anthesis, but ignoring parity, however it may be achieved at a minimum, is a risky and dangerous endeavor.

Not addressed here, in my brief consideration of High North geopolitics, is the China card. In-depth discussion of this

facet of the increasingly complex situation in the Arctic is imperative. DOD's Arctic strategy frames this need accurately: "Despite having no territorial claims in the region, China is seeking a role in Arctic governance."⁴² Moreover, any actions indicating Sino-Russian cooperation, coordination, or collusion in the High North must be thoroughly scrutinized.

To correctly assess the future of the High North, the United States must consider its growing importance and reflect on the prescience of Billy Mitchell. Of Alaska, he said, "I think it is the most important strategic place in the world."⁴³ Concerning the region's strategic value, Secretary Wilson and Gen Goldfein wrote in 2019, "By 2022 Alaska will be home to more advanced fighter jets than any place on Earth," and they noted that we have key defensive assets throughout the region. Arctic locations base fighters, tankers, space-tracking systems, and radar sites critical for aircraft and missile detection using polar trajectories. To paraphrase, both as a northern approach to the United States, as well as a critical location for projecting American power, the geostrategic significance of the High North is, indeed, difficult to overstate.⁴⁴ ★

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