

# Strategy, Competition, and Legitimization: Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation

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In late October 2020, President Vladimir Putin approved the “Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Ensuring National Security for the Period through 2035.”<sup>1</sup> Although the casual observer might dismiss this document as yet another Arctic strategy recasting old ideas with fresh rhetoric, the importance of the timing and substance of this Russia strategy is not lost on Arctic observers. The Russian government sequentially released three major Arctic national documents in 2020 that lay out direct requirements and intent across political, military, economic, social, and environmental security sectors. Concurrently, the Kremlin decisively arranged its Arctic political leadership and national advisory groups. Throughout, Russian leadership effectively scripted Arctic national priorities and developed them into narratives, which were synchronized across relevant sectors.

How should Western analysts read the Arctic in Russian domestic and foreign policy discourse under Putin, who has “set the task to restore the development and controllability of Russia’s Arctic territories and raised ... AZRF development to the level of a national project”?<sup>2</sup> French analyst Morgane Fert-Malka has observed that “Russia’s Arctic policy and postures are often misunderstood, overblown, or underrated because they take place in a complex regional context and result from complex internal politics.”<sup>3</sup> Thus one might wonder if Russian motivations, core interests, and strategic priorities changed substantively in the face of newly emergent challenges, or is Russian Arctic policy “evolutionary and largely consistent,” as political scientist Maria Lagutina suggests?<sup>4</sup>

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The three key policy documents in Russia’s updated plan for the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) (see Figure 1), when read together, provide essential insights into Russia’s broader Arctic strategy. In this article, we consider areas of Russian Arctic national priority, contextualize the Kremlin’s latest strategic documents, and provide perspectives on current and near-term opportunities for Russia with respect to Arctic strategic policies and behavior. We observe a continued emphasis on economic development, particularly as tied to the Northern Sea Route (*Sevmorput*), and to improving quality of life for Russians living in the AZRF. These considerations inform dual messaging with respect to its international agenda, which promotes the Arctic as both a region of peace and stability and as a space where Russia must expand its military capabilities to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity, which is frequently read in the West as a sign of Russia’s growing assertiveness and potential danger. Russian strategic interests cannot be explained by a simple “hard power” or “soft power” dichotomy<sup>5</sup> – they are driven by both. We also note that, while Russia seeks to enhance private sector investment in the Arctic, internal and external drivers constrain these plans. Therefore, it would make sense to adopt a balanced approach that avoids extremes when forecasting the practical results of Russia’s current initiatives.

Figure 1. Map of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation



Source (and hi-resolution version): <https://www.uaf.edu/casr/publications/other/>

## Literature review

Russian experts dedicated to the problems of the Russian Arctic and Kremlin’s regional strategy fall into three distinct, yet partially interdependent, schools of thought. The first school, which we

conditionally defined as the “geopolitical school,” is comprised of a broad and diverse group whose opinions do not always converge. These experts are, however, connected in their vision of the Arctic as a “geopolitical battlefield” between great powers. When referring to the region, many of these experts actively employ anti-Western vocabulary, featuring ideas about “conquest”, “great game”, “greatness”, “struggle”, “sovereignty”, “increasing conflict potential”, and “confrontation.” This points to their conceptual vision of the Arctic as an arena for competition, not a platform for inter-governmental dialogue. The fundamental idea that connects members of this school are postulates (clichés) about a “worsening military-political situation” in the region and “growing competition for Arctic resource,” as well as the desire of non-Russian actors to “undermine Russia’s dominating regional position.” Although these authors consider competition in the Arctic as a part of a larger geopolitical game (and despite ongoing militarization of the region), they general concur that regional competition is unlikely to lead to major military conflict. The most prolific writers in this school include Alexander Khramchihin, who sees the Arctic as a potential field of competition between Russia, China, and the US, but who argues that Moscow and Ottawa have many common and few dividing lines in the Arctic.<sup>6</sup> Another noteworthy expert, Valery Zhuravel, the head of the Centre for Arctic Research at the Institute of Europe under the auspices of the Russian Academy of Science, sees the US, China, Japan, and Finland as posing a primary threat to Russia in aiming to internationalize the status of the Northern Sea Route.<sup>7</sup> Other authors – primarily former military officers and military thinkers – believe that military-political competition will grow in the future,<sup>8</sup> with NATO posing the main challenge to Russia and its national interests.<sup>9</sup>

A second, “nationalist” school is understudied in the West. Consequently, their role and influence on the Kremlin is misunderstood. This school is primarily grouped around authors coming from the ultra-conservative nationalistic Izborsk Club. Insisting on Russia’s need to increase Russia’s military buildup in the Arctic, this group includes such prominent conservatives and influential thinkers as Leonid Ivashov, Vladislav Shurygin, and Alexey Podberezkin<sup>10</sup> who draw clear “red lines” for foreign actors seeking to undermine Russia’s sovereignty in the Arctic. Many members of this school of thought also extend their assertion, underscoring not only the strategic but also the *sacred* place of the Arctic region in Russia’s statehood and its fundamental meaning for Russia as the new centre of greater Eurasia, which means that Moscow has to embark on expansionist policies in this region. Alexander Dugin, Alexander Mazharov (deputy governor of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region), Vyacheslav Shtyrov (former Head of the Sakha Republic), and devoted Stalinist Alexander Prokhanov are prominent members of this school,<sup>11</sup> which envisages the Arctic region as “the northernmost part of the Russian World.”<sup>12</sup>

A third school of “institutionalists,” consisting of experts from different political orientations, describes Russia’s Arctic strategy as pragmatic and commensurate with its national interests. They see military buildup and other Russian behaviour – which they acknowledge is sometimes questionable by international standards – as motivated by a combination of internal factors, such as Russia’s political culture and negative experience in dealing with the West in the 1990s, as well as external circumstances. They also argue that, despite what Western commentators interpret as aggressive Russian moves in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria, Russia does not aim to undertake similar actions in the Arctic. Alexander Sergunin, Valery Konyshchev, and Dmitry Trenin<sup>13</sup> are key representatives of this “institutionalist” school.

Foreign writers, experts and thinkers analyzing Russia's Arctic strategy are conditionally divided into two large schools of thought. First, the "neorealists" pursue a hardline approach toward Russia, which they cast as a rogue and increasingly assertive power (alongside China) that seeks to disrupt the existing balance of power in the Arctic, and generally call on the United States and its NATO allies to confront Russia in the region. According to the neorealist school, Moscow's actions in the region are primarily driven by geopolitical competition in a zero-sum game. Therefore, Western allies must confront Russia using all means necessary to prevent it from expanding its control in and over the region. Keir Giles, Pavel Baev, Stephen Blank, and Paul Goble are prominent analysts within this school. In general, these authors – and like-minded experts – do not see room for the West to engage in constructive dialogue with Russia in the Arctic owing to the Kremlin's growing assertiveness and violation of international law as demonstrated in other parts of the world. Similar ideas are expressed by Canadian political scientist Rob Huebert, who argues that "Canada could find itself pushed to the margins in the New Arctic Strategic Triangle Environment (NASTE)" as a result of growing Russian and Chinese assertiveness in the Arctic.<sup>14</sup>

A second school of thought, the "neoliberal institutionalists," recognizes that Russia – by far the largest player in the Arctic – has internationally-recognized sovereign rights and special interests in this region and, therefore, has a right to protect them. These experts also argue that the probability of military conflict emanating from regional disputes is highly unlikely and that Russia, despite investing in re-building its military capabilities in the region after allowing them to degrade substantively in the 1990s, is not likely to violate international law through military coercion in the Arctic. Thus far, these authors observe, Russia has remained a stalwart promoter of an institutionalist approach in the region, adhering to international legal norms through the UN and other major multilateral forums. Furthermore, the Arctic region remains a strategic source of economic dividends for Moscow, which makes the prospect of military escalation highly undesirable. Two of the authors of this article (Troy Bouffard and Whitney Lackenbauer) fall within this school, which also includes Elana Wilson Rowe, Andreas Østhagen, Mathieu Boulègue, Elizabeth Buchanan, Kari Roberts, and Marlène Laruelle, all of whom emphasize that Russia faces significant challenges that constrain its ability to fully dominate the region.

On this basis, Russia is likely to seize opportunities to highlight its Arctic developments and priorities in carefully crafted language during its 2021-23 chairmanship of the Arctic Council, with a goal of expanding and enhancing its self-defined position in the Circumpolar North. It has set the major pieces in place to pursue a *legitimizing* campaign, and international audiences should expect clear messaging that emphasizes the Arctic's importance for Russia and the centrality of Russia in circumpolar affairs. Optimistically, this is part of an overarching strategy that does not seek to revise Arctic governance structures or undermine regional peace but represents Russia's strategic 'center of gravity' for the Arctic, designed to showcase the importance of its northern priorities and interests. Pessimistically, such goals could easily be undermined by a combination of internal factors (such as scarce funds and expanding military expenditures) and heightened competition with the West.<sup>15</sup>

### **Russian Arctic strategy in context: Updating Russia's strategic plan for the AZRF**

Russia has solidified development of its comprehensive strategic plan for the Arctic region over the past year. In March 2020, Putin signed the "The Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation

in the Arctic through 2035”<sup>16</sup> which outlines key goals and Moscow’s Arctic agenda, including a focus on exploitation of natural resources.<sup>17</sup> Following this direction, the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic submitted a draft implementation strategy for the government’s consideration in May 2020.<sup>18</sup> The third document, released on 26 October, outlines the mechanisms to realize the ‘State Policy’ and ‘Socio-Economic Development’ plans in the Arctic. “Most of the challenges tabled in terms of developing the Russian Arctic are indeed domestic in nature,” political scientist Elizabeth Buchanan observes, which is predictable given that the strategic document is dedicated to developing Russia’s Arctic zone.<sup>19</sup> The documents provide both bureaucratic guidance as well as the primary content from which internal actors can develop and deliver consistent narratives.

In an authoritarian state with significantly centralized powers, Putin and the Kremlin face little governmental resistance or social interference when enacting core strategies. Unlike the democratic West, Russia does not need civic buy-in and public deliberation, only the illusion of it. Nor does the illusion of election concerns and consequences matter the same way that they do in liberal democracies. For the West, inclusivity remains the hallmark of a healthy relationship between society and government. Embracing viewpoint diversity and dissent can impede strategic coherence and cohesiveness, however, particularly when multiple strategies must be synchronized across various stakeholder groups to achieve optimal national objectives. By contrast, even when autocratic leaders pursue the wrong course of action, they can publish new strategies to adjust course while their subordinates suffer the brunt of blame. With regard to Russia’s new Arctic strategy, members of Duma (депутаты Госдумы) reportedly were not consulted or given opportunity to deliberate or contribute to development.<sup>20</sup>

In 2019, veteran analyst Pavel Baev of the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) observed that Russia’s two-track Arctic policy pursues “poorly compatible tracks of expanding military activities and committing to international cooperation.” Russian commentators would likely point to similar dynamics in the regional policies of the other Arctic states as well. Similarly, they might apply Baev’s observation that “Russia’s Arctic policy, as it is officially formulated and interpreted in mainstream Russian commentary, [features] an astounding amount of exaggeration and inflated threat assessment.” Baev’s evidence, however, identifies specific hallmarks of Russian narratives that were subsequently reflected in their 2020 strategic documents:

The volume and value of natural resources on the Arctic shelf, particularly hydrocarbons, is grossly overestimated without meaningful Russian data, so that the only reference point even for informed Moscow experts is the appraisal of US Geological Survey from 2008, which is habitually misinterpreted. The appetites of international oil companies are perceived as insatiable, and the struggle for resources, as well as for access to transport routes, is identified in the Foreign Policy Concept (2016) as a key driver for escalation of global tensions. Expeditious growth of international shipping in the Northern Sea Route (Sevmorput) is confidently predicted, despite the minuscule volume of transit traffic in the 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 navigations. The most dramatic of all exaggerations, however, is about the intensity of external military threats to Russia’s interests in the Arctic.<sup>21</sup>

Baev’s nuanced critique also explains why Moscow’s “oscillating” commitment to circumpolar cooperation “should not be taken for a mere camouflage for Russia’s military buildup in the High

North.” Stakeholders such as Gazprom and Rosneft understandably seek to promote Arctic exceptionalism that brackets out regional relationships from resurgent strategic competition between Russia and NATO and brings an end to sanctions hindering cooperation with Western energy companies. Industry also tends to avoid doing business under circumstances that involve unresolved regional and international issues, especially any that include aspects of territorial rights and/or sovereignty. Furthermore, Russian investments to promote the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a major international transportation artery would not benefit from increasing geopolitical uncertainty in the region.<sup>22</sup> Russia’s strategic documents thus reflect two-track messaging promoting both international cooperation and the perceived need for robust national defences.<sup>23</sup>

## Domestic priorities

On 26 October 2020, President Vladimir Putin formally adopted the “Strategy for Developing the Russian Arctic Zone and Ensuring National Security until 2035” which situates the region in the country’s broader socio-economic development and national security goals.<sup>24</sup> Specifying clear development objectives, implementation stages and mechanisms, and expected results, the strategy represents the refined, collective goals developed, pursued, and tested over several years. Explicit goals include a reiteration of Russia’s commitment to comprehensively develop seaport infrastructure and shipping routes in the waters of the NSR and the Barents, White, and Pechora Seas. The policy mentions several significant threats and challenges that create risks for the development the AZRF, including intensive climate change, decreasing birth rates and migration to the region, poor access to public services, and higher risk of diseases.

The strategy is comprised of a series of lists that articulate demographic, economic, social, political, and security priorities and objectives. It begins with a statement of Arctic exceptionalism from a Russian national perspective, emphasizing specific characteristics that demand “special approaches to its socio-economic development” in the AZRF and to “ensure national security in the Arctic”:

- a) extreme natural and climatic conditions, extremely low population density and low development of transport and social infrastructure;
- b) high sensitivity of environmental systems to external influences, especially in the places of residence of the minority Indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation (hereinafter referred to as “Indigenous peoples”);
- c) climate change contributing to the emergence of both new economic opportunities and risks for the economy and the environment;
- d) stable geographic, historical and economic ties with the Northern Sea Route;
- e) uneven industrial and economic development of certain territories of the Arctic Zone, focus of the economy on the extraction of natural resources and their shipment to industrially developed regions of the Russian Federation and export;
- f) high resource intensity of economic activity and essential services for the population, their dependence on the supply of fuel, food and other vital goods from various constituent entities of the Russian Federation;
- g) growing potential for conflict in the Arctic.<sup>25</sup>

This lays the foundation for Russia to build its case for why the AZRF is important for socio-economic development and national security, with a deliberate emphasis on oil and gas resources (both terrestrial and on the continental shelf), expectations of heightened demand for the NSR “as a transport corridor of global importance,” climate change effects on the environment and security, the presence of Indigenous peoples, and Russia’s positioning of strategic deterrent forces in the region.

Most of the actions specified in the 26 October strategy document revolve around the Northern Sea Route (NSR)—which Russia boasts is the shortest, least expensive, and safest way of reaching northern and western Europe from Asia by sea. While this narrative downplays persistent physical environmental constraints, Russia leveraged the *Ever Given* incident (which blocked the Suez Canal in March 2021) to promote the NSR for safety and convenience, especially in contrast to the Indian Ocean and Red Sea. Russia views the NSR simultaneously as a source of income and a means of strengthening its partnership with China.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, the strategy commits to the following measures by 2035:

- Development of general marine infrastructure (seaports and transportation routes/lanes), primarily in strategic junctures of the NSR: the Barents, White and Pechora Seas;
- Establishment of “headquarters on marine/sea operations and management of naval transportation” along the entire NSR;
- Digitalization of services (particularly in the realm of cargo transportation and delivery), although ‘Arctic Connect’ plans have been suspended until further assessment;<sup>27</sup>
- Building of five Project 22220 and three Leader-class icebreakers, in line with Russia’s “Icebreaker Diplomacy,” which seeks to rely on its icebreaker fleet in the Arctic as a means of strengthening Moscow’s regional superiority<sup>28</sup> – a position established and maintained since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century;
- Increasing navigation capabilities via the White Sea–Baltic Canal in general and the basins of the Onega, Northern Dvina, Mezen, Pechora, Ob, Yenisey, Lena and Kolyma rivers in particular. In effect, this draws on yet another aspect of the “Icebreaker Diplomacy” approach specifically concerned with upgrading navigation in Russia’s High North areas (rivers adjacent to the Arctic Ocean).
- Harboring plans on creating/strengthening land-based transportation infrastructure as an addition to the NSR.<sup>29</sup>

Taken together, these measures are expected to enhance the navigability of the NSR and facilitate the rapid transportation/delivery of Russia’s energy resources to Asian markets.<sup>30</sup>

The strategy document also emphasizes that a dramatic improvement in local socio-economic conditions is essential to preserve Russia’s standing in the region and to effectively exploit its natural resources. By creating “a special economic regime, stimulating a transition toward a circular economy,” and paving the way toward economic and ecological sustainability, the Kremlin hopes to curb out-migration and Arctic depopulation trends by attracting human capital to the region.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, the strategy is notable for articulating specific targets for improving social outcomes in the Russian Arctic, beginning with the modernization of health care and education, the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage and Indigenous languages, improved economic opportunities and social security, and the “creation of a state support system for the delivery of fuel, food, and other vital goods to settlements located in remote areas.” This reinforces how the Kremlin considers its northern

population to be vital to its strategic goals, and it has integrated input from a wide range of capable and trusted advisors. Specific sections set out main objectives for infrastructure development (with a heavy focus on the NSR), science and technology, environmental protection and environmental safety, emergency and disaster response, and public safety (including anti-extremism and anti-terrorism, anti-drug enforcement, and crime prevention).<sup>32</sup> With regard to reversing and stabilizing the population decline issue in the Russian Arctic Zone, no unity of opinion exists on a solution. Some propose a form of previous Soviet methods while others argue the need for a seasonal workforce to offset year-round prohibitive costs as well as incentivizing a desire to maintain northern residence through “improved comfortable living standards.”

As the Minister for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic Alexander Kozlov highlighted, this amplification of socio-economic development priorities and deliberate region-specific approach to implementation (in contrast to previous pan-AZRF strategies) distinguishes this strategy from its predecessors.<sup>33</sup> While the Strategy mentions parts of Arkhangelsk Oblast, the Republic Sakha (Yakutia), and Karelia and Komi republics, it assigns a clear priority in the Russian High North to Murmansk Oblast, the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YaNAO), and Nenets Autonomous Okrug.<sup>34</sup> The document ascribes each of these latter four entities a special role in promoting Russia’s ambitions and achieving its specific objectives in the Arctic.

The Strategy continues to invest particular significance in Murmansk Oblast, emphasizing a broad range of complex and multifaceted transformative measures targeting this province.<sup>35</sup> As a result of the relatively warm North Atlantic waters from the Gulf Stream keeping much of the Murmansk maritime area ice-free, the location has always offered a permissive operating environment as well as proximity to urban centers, thus serving as a natural northern strategic epicenter and the Russian Federation’s most prioritized Arctic entity.<sup>36</sup> When Russian writer Konstantin Paustovsky visited Murmansk in May of 1932, he referred to it as “Прима Полярэ (Prima Polare)” which has been translated into modern use as “Столица Арктики (The Capital of the Arctic).” Nine decades later, the Russian Federation passed a resolution officially declaring it the territory of advanced socio-economic development “Capital of the Arctic”,<sup>37</sup> which the Murmansk government promotes on its TOP “Столица Арктики” investment portal website.<sup>38</sup> There is strong rationale for this status in light of traditional hydrocarbon and bio-marine resources, high industry (shipbuilding), and strategic transportation potential in and for this region.<sup>39</sup> Murmansk is also home to three major ports and several key institutes involving the Northern Sea Route, including the Northern Sea Route Administration (NSRA) established in 2013,<sup>40</sup> the Northern Fleet Joint strategic command (Russian military district in force starting on January 2021), and the Northern Sea Route Directorate.<sup>41</sup>

To reverse downward demographic trends in the region, Konstantin Dolgov, a member of the Federation Council (the upper chamber of the Russian parliament) from Murmansk, suggests that the Russian strategy will create 200,000 new jobs by 2035.<sup>42</sup> Multi-modal infrastructure investments seek to transform Murmansk into a complex multi-dimensional transportation hub and a key link along the NSR. The Strategy also underscores a perceived imperative to modernize the oblast’s military and dual-purpose infrastructure for national security reasons. A second set of measures focus on the development of Murmansk’s natural resource potential, particularly hydrocarbons and rare-earth minerals (which are strategically important for both military and civilian applications).<sup>43</sup>

Other regions play a more limited, even supporting role within the Russian Strategy. Article 22 articulates an explicit resource-oriented approach to Chukotka, emphasizing ambitious transit projects including the Pevek seaport and terminals (Chaun Bay), a transportation-logistical hub in the Provideniya port (Bering Sea), and a year-round sea terminal on the Arinay Lagoon (also on the Bering Sea). For the YaNAO (Article 23), a multi-dimensional program outlines the development of an integrated system of sea- and land-based transportation infrastructure, including the port of Sabetta (with supporting facilities) and the canal in the Gulf of Ob. Concurrently, promised facilities related to liquefied natural gas (LNG) and oil production and processing specifically prioritize the gas-endowed Yamal and Gyda peninsulas. The Kremlin also envisages the YaNAO as a major testing ground for Russia's import-substitution strategy in the realm of petroleum-extraction and -processing capabilities. In the oil-endowed Nadym-Pur and Pur-Taz districts, Russia promises to employ the most up-to-date, domestically-produced means of drilling and extraction.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the Strategy calls for a regional recreational cluster connecting the towns of Salekhard, Labytnangi, and Kharp – featuring a world-class ski resort with a developed network of hotels, restaurants and recreational facilities – to generate additional revenue and diversify the local economy.<sup>45</sup> With respect to the neighboring Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Article 21 of the Strategy discusses five major dimensions, including a deepwater port to serve as a hub for Russian commercial exports; modernizing Nenets' energy-related infrastructure and extracting and processing facilities; exploration and production of rare-earth minerals; measures to address local food security concerns; and “the development of tourism and recreation as both a job creation engine and as a means to diversify the local economy away from its heavy natural resource-oriented base.”<sup>46</sup>

Taken as a whole, Russia's October 2020 Arctic development strategy introduces a qualitatively new approach to dealing with the various issues and challenges faced by local populations and economies. Instead of its traditional one-size-fits-all prescriptions, which *de facto* ignored the needs of many parts of the Russian High North, Moscow's implementation of a more region-specific policy allows each Arctic federal entity to use its unique, region-specific competitive advantage to contribute to the development of the Northern Sea Route. It remains to be seen, however, whether Russia carries through on this strategy or ultimately reverts to a simpler policy fixated on non-renewable resource exploitation.<sup>47</sup>

Comparing the Kremlin's stated ambitions in the strategy and the limitations imposed by Russia's long-term socio-economic realities suggest that Russia will encounter difficulties in its practical implementation. In this regard two main concerns should be voiced. First, despite the rhetorical prioritization of the socio-economic component in Arctic development, one might doubt Russia's ability to implement this plan based on its limited economic means to achieve such an ambitious plan, as well as deeply rooted corrupt practices and mismanagement. A second concern relates to the method of implementation. Commentary and analysis from leading Russian experts suggest that, in pursuing this objective, Moscow is likely to rely on the “mobilization” option, which heavily depends on so-called command-administrative (*kommandno-administrativnii*) measures.<sup>48</sup> This method – which was a distinctive feature of the Soviet period – can prove effective in the short term but is unlikely to yield favourable long-term results. For example, Russia's Defence Industry lacks private investment and suffers from huge indebtedness openly recognized and admitted by Russian ruling circles.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, given the public image of the Arctic throughout Russia as a far-flung and disadvantaged region, few Russians may be willing to move to remote regions for employment. Previous models

predicated on significant Soviet fiscal stimuli proved flawed: once the money ran out, locals immediately began pouring out of the region.<sup>50</sup>

Today, it is not apparent that Moscow can or will actually enact policies to dramatically increase, at high cost, the size of the population residing in the High North. In fact, Russia already has the largest share of the population (2.5 million) living near or north of the Arctic Circle, and any hypothetical increases could prove detrimental to the Russian economy. Indeed, several influential Russian experts claim that Russia should follow the example of other Arctic players (such as Canada, the United States, and Norway) that rely on the fly-in/fly-out method for their regional labour forces as a more cost-effective way to exploit natural resources in remote areas.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the seemingly marginal role that militarization and military-related efforts play in the newly adopted Arctic strategy document, these aspects constitute one of the central pillars of Russia's overarching approach to the High North and will be the main recipients of financial outlays from the federal center. The military buildup to protect strategic nuclear assets on the Kola Peninsula, project power in the Barents Sea region, and secure the eastern part of the Russian Arctic fits awkwardly with international messaging that emphasizes circumpolar cooperation and seeks to "bracket out" confrontation between the West and Russia from Arctic affairs (with the desired Russian goal of ending Western sanctions that hinder Arctic development). "The emphasis on countering external threats by expanding military presence in the High North doesn't answer the interests of Russian energy giants *Gazprom* and *Rosneft* focused on developing co-operation with Western oil and service companies, even if those interests are squeezed by the sanctions regime," Baev observes. "Plans for making the *Sevmorput* into an international transportation avenue also fit poorly with the progressive militarization of infrastructure along its route."<sup>52</sup>

Given current economic hardships, we expect that Russia will pursue an approach premised on selective investment in strategic "links" connecting key parts of the NSR, at the same time increasing its military capabilities along the maritime artery – which, in Russian logic, are not two mutually exclusive ideas.

## International orientation

Russia's strategic international orientation reflects a two-track approach that seeks to legitimize its position, status, and definitions of the Arctic through mixed messaging that reinforces themes of peace, cooperation, and stability through multilateral and bilateral relationships while also emphasizing foreign threats to Russian sovereignty over territory and waters that require investments in defensive capabilities. On the one hand, Russian political elites and academics emphasize the benefits of and need for multilateral diplomacy and stable regional and international governance systems to solve myriad environmental and human security challenges. Accordingly, the October 2020 strategy promises to "implement multi-vector foreign policy activities aimed at preserving the Arctic as a territory of peace, stability, and mutually beneficial cooperation" and to "ensure mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral cooperation of the Russian Federation with foreign states, including under international treaties, agreements, and conventions to which it is a party."<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, Russia's great power aspirations and self-perception as the foremost Arctic state, coupled with increasing strategic competition with the West since 2014, have heightened the perceived desire or need for a military build-up to defend against national security challenges. Accordingly, the Kremlin's strategic messaging seeks to project the ideas of Russian superiority over the West, legitimize Russia

as the largest Arctic rightsholder, and reinforce the requirement to defend Russian Arctic territory. Thus, the Arctic development doctrine (including the NSR), icebreaking and construction programs, modernized military infrastructure and capabilities, and reiterations of Russia's adherence to international law, respect for sovereignty, openness to circumpolar dialogue, and readiness to cooperate on common issues with other Arctic and non-Arctic states, are all intertwined.

Given the primacy of economic development and control of regional resources, maritime jurisdiction in the AZRF features prominently in both domestic and international dimensions of Russian policy. Accordingly, Russia's strategies seek to sediment its definition of the NSR (as defined by Russian Federation law) as internal waters which provides Russia complete control over access in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Moscow's ultimate goal – to develop the NSR “as a globally competitive national transport corridor” – remains contingent upon a range of international factors, including global energy prices, Asian demand for resources, the comparative accessibility of well-established international straits, physical environmental constraints, and regional stability to ensure conflict-free operation.<sup>54</sup> Ekatarina Klimenko astutely notes that “while the Russian Government has continuously pushed both private and state companies to develop the Arctic resource projects, the feasibility of their implementation is under question now more than ever,” and the NSR cannot be considered a competitor to other international sea routes when transit traffic does not exceed 500,000 tons annually.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, Russia's extensive Arctic coastline affords it sovereign rights to continental shelf resources in accordance with UNCLOS. While Russian commentators often cite the as-yet-undetermined limits of the shelf as a prime example of alleged Western powers to usurp control over resources on the Arctic seabed, this is a clear example of what Pavel Baev identifies as widespread “exaggeration and inflated threat assessment” in mainstream Russian commentary.<sup>56</sup> By all rational accounts, Russia stands to gain the most if the process of determining the extent of its continental shelf beyond its 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) unfolds in a manner consistent with established international law.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, its Arctic strategy commits to “formalizing the outer boundary of the continental shelf in international legal terms and maintaining interaction with the Arctic states to protect national interests and implement the rights of a coastal state in the Arctic provided for in international acts, including those related to the exploration and development of resources of the continental shelf and the establishment of its external boundaries.”<sup>58</sup> On the sensitive issue of Svalbard, which remains a sovereign territory of Norway under a treaty which allows unique, legal access to the international community, Russia pledges to ensure a “Russian presence in the Svalbard archipelago on the basis of equal and mutually beneficial cooperation with Norway and other states of the Svalbard Treaty of February 9, 1920” – an affirmation of the primacy of the treaty and international law that simultaneously protects Russia's legal position on the archipelago's continental shelf and fisheries protection that deviates strongly from Norway's interpretation.<sup>59</sup>

Russian strategic documents depict the Arctic Council (AC) as “both a centerpiece and cornerstone of the regional governance system,” given that all Arctic states are represented, its multidimensional mandate, and its science-based approach that preserves the autonomous decision-making powers of its members.<sup>60</sup> In March 2021, former Russian Senior Arctic Official and Ambassador to Iceland Anton Vasiliev (one of Putin's key Arctic emissaries) noted:

The Arctic Council turns 25 this year as unquestionably one of the most successful multilateral regional and international bodies of our times. Its success is based on common interests and efforts of the Arctic States, clear agenda and the rules of the game, as well as reasonable flexibility to meet new challenges. Russia intends to build on this success, including the excellent outcome of the current Icelandic Chairmanship which had to overcome unprecedented pandemic-related difficulties, to lead the Council into its second quarter century.

The Russian Chairmanship will also be motivated by the national Arctic Strategy updated in 2020 for the period up to 2035. It provides for a major step forward in development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and welcomes mutually beneficial cooperation of Russia with its Arctic partners and, besides, interested non-regional states.<sup>61</sup>

Accordingly, Russia's Arctic Council chairmanship (2021-23)<sup>62</sup> represents a key opportunity for agenda-setting and for showcasing the country's "Arctic-ness" and circumpolar leadership for domestic and foreign audiences. Its four priorities – "the Arctic inhabitants, including Indigenous peoples; environmental protection and climate change; social and economic growth; and further strengthening the Arctic Council – the key framework of international Arctic cooperation"<sup>63</sup> – connect directly to Russian strategic objectives. Specific lines of effort include enhanced economic cooperation; investments in Arctic urban infrastructure, health care, education, Indigenous welfare; and the "restoration of consensus in the Arctic Council on climate change" (a thinly veiled critique at the Trump Administration's stance at the Council ministerial meeting in 2019). Furthermore, the strong emphasis on the "rational use of natural resources,"<sup>64</sup> presented in the language of stewardship and socio-economic wellbeing, reinforces Russia's strong emphasis on energy resource development.<sup>65</sup> Promoting the NSR as a priority for "safe and beneficial all-season navigation" and the enhancement of search and rescue capacities also dovetail with national priorities. Ultimately, in illustrating "the serious, holistic and constructive approach of Russia to its forthcoming Chairmanship," Vasiliev ended with the declaration that "*Russia bears special responsibility for the state of affairs in the Arctic* and counts on support from its regional partners" (emphasis added).<sup>66</sup>

It is unlikely that Russia will seek to fundamentally revise the Council or its established processes during its chairmanship. Sergunin notes that Moscow will avoid former appeals to "transform the Council from an intergovernmental forum to a full-fledged international organization and bring military security problematique to the Council's agenda," and instead will focus its chairmanship on strengthening the forum's "role in asserting regional stewardship by responding to the challenges of a rapidly changing Arctic and the increasingly more integrated policy frameworks from local to global scales."<sup>67</sup> This maps well with language in the Kremlin's October 2020 strategy that emphasizes Russia's leadership role in "ensuring the effective operation of the Arctic Council ..., including the promotion of joint projects, including those aimed at ensuring sustainable development of the Arctic and preserving the cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples."<sup>68</sup>

The role of Indigenous peoples' organizations as Permanent Participants represents the most innovative feature of the Arctic Council – but also a historic source of concern for Russia's national leaders. Moscow decided in 2012 to suspend the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), the only nation-wide Indigenous peoples' organization in the country which had

criticized the central government for ignoring persistent problems that Indigenous peoples faced in the AZRF, on the arbitrary grounds that the organization was captive to foreign influence. In draconian fashion, the Kremlin imposed new “friendly” RAIPON leadership before allowing the organization to resume operations the following year, thus drawing the ire of Western commentators<sup>69</sup> who likely look with skepticism at Russia’s pledge to:

- i) support in strengthening ties between the Indigenous peoples living in the Arctic Zone and the Indigenous peoples living in the Arctic territories of foreign states and convening relevant international forums;
- j) promoting the well-rounded development of the young generation of Indigenous peoples through educational, humanitarian and cultural exchanges with young people from other Arctic states.<sup>70</sup> [original numbering]

Given the Kremlin’s hyper-sensitivity to Indigenous peoples’ critiques that their rights are largely ignored,<sup>71</sup> these commitments may represent insincere gestures that, in practical terms, are likely to be quashed at the first sign of serious criticism of Russian state practice.

Various non-governmental organizations also have accredited Observer status within the Council. Russia ostensibly supports this involvement – although it also has had uneasy relations with interest groups and NGOs that are critical of the state, and the Putin regime does not welcome critique from civil society actors in the Arctic space any more than it does elsewhere. “Civil society in Russia is still in embryonic form and for this reason its impact on Arctic policy-making is either relatively insignificant or sporadic/chaotic,” Sergunin and Konyshchev explain.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, the Russian strategy sees opportunities for Russian organizations to work with foreign partners to design and implement “professional educational programs related to the development and exploration of the Arctic.” Furthermore, Russia co-chaired the Scientific Cooperation Task Force which produced the text for the third legally-binding agreement negotiated under the auspices of the Arctic Council, signed in 2017. As a prime example of how Russia collaborated with the U.S. to advance a cooperative circumpolar initiative at a time of deteriorating relations between the two countries in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, the strategic commitment to “ensur[e] the implementation of the Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation”<sup>73</sup> serves as a useful basis for scientific diplomacy that promotes Russia’s good circumpolar citizenship.<sup>74</sup>

Given the strong national emphasis on the development of the AZRF, Russia’s strategy seeks to elevate the profile of its activities internationally to build prestige, secure its central position in the circumpolar order, justify and defend its national interests, and promote its definitions of core concepts such as “sustainable development.” Creating and promoting an online “multilingual information resource dedicated to the development of the Arctic Zone and Russia’s activities in the Arctic” (such as the Arctic Russia investment portal at <https://arctic-russia.ru/en/about/>) alongside comprehensive Russian-focused websites featuring diverse experts (exemplified by the Arctic 2035 project at <https://www.arctic2035.ru/>) are key strategic tools to frame and disseminate messages. Other commitments seek to promote Russia’s Arctic economic interests by “strengthening of the role of the Arctic Economic Council as one of the central forums for sustainable development of the Arctic,” “developing general principles for the implementation of investment projects in the Arctic Zone with the participation of foreign capital,” and “organizing events aimed at attracting foreign investors to participate in the implementation of economic (investment) projects in the Arctic Zone.”

While “sustainable development” carries different connotations in Russia and the other Arctic states,<sup>75</sup> all of these lines of effort seek to promote the mutual benefits of economic cooperation and secure foreign investments and technology transfer on terms of favourable to Russia – ideally, in Russia’s view, by enticing the West to end its sanctions.

The list of main objectives for military security, defence, and border protection in the October 2021 Russian strategy is shorter than the list of commitments for international cooperation, but it nevertheless reinforces Russia’s ongoing commitment to increase its military presence and capabilities in the Arctic.<sup>76</sup> Specific provisions commit to “improv[ing] the composition and structure of Armed Forces” in the AZRF, maintaining an appropriate level of combat readiness “in compliance with the actual and forecast military dangers and threats faced by the Russian Federation in the Arctic,” equipping forces with modern weapons and special equipment adapted to Arctic conditions, developing base infrastructure and logistics, and promoting the “use of dual-use technologies and infrastructure to achieve a comprehensive solution to defense objectives in the Arctic Zone.”<sup>77</sup> Given that many of the capabilities have potential offensive as well as defensive applications, Western commentators continue to debate whether the Kremlin’s declared justifications for consistent and systematic investments in an Arctic military buildup since Putin returned to power as president in 2012 can be trusted.<sup>78</sup>

Given established Russian state narratives since 2008, it should come as no surprise that “ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity” sit atop the list of Russia’s national interests in the Arctic. “Whilst this could indicate a continuous securitisation of the region by the Russian Government,” Klimenko observes, “it does not in practice indicate a significant change in ... policy since Russia will continue its long-term enforcement of its sovereignty over Arctic territories and waters.”<sup>79</sup> Other Russian commentators suggest that significant military investments are consistent and compatible with regional stability predicated on respect for Arctic state sovereignty. “Similar to other coastal states, Moscow sees its military presence in the region as an efficient instrument to demonstrate its sovereignty over and protect its national interests in the Arctic,” Sergunin explains. “On the other hand, the Kremlin believes that there are no serious military threats emanating from the Arctic and, for this reason, defense and security issues are put on the bottom of Moscow’s priority list in its strategic documents.” He notes that Russian investments in military capabilities in the region do not represent “a renewed arms race” and that, instead, investments represent “limited modernization and increases or changes in equipment, force levels, and force structure.” Conflating the modernization of strategic nuclear forces based in the Arctic, which are intended to bolster global deterrence, with Arctic issues is problematic. Instead, Sergunin emphasizes that the creation of new cold-weather units, warships, aircraft, and command structures in the AZRF “have little or nothing to do with power projection into the potentially disputed areas (where the Arctic coastal states’ claims overlap) or region at large; rather, they are for the patrolling and protecting of recognized national territories and waters that are becoming more accessible, including for illegal activities, such as overfishing, poaching, smuggling, and uncontrolled migration.” In his assessment, these modernization programs do not inhibit or degrade the prospects of regional cooperation.<sup>80</sup>

While military considerations are subordinated to other priorities in this document, they still “constitute one of the central pillars of Russia’s overarching approach to the High North and will be the main recipients of financial outlays from the federal center.”<sup>81</sup> Russian narratives point to U.S. and NATO aggression in the Arctic as a pretext for investments in robust defences to protect the ANRF,

strategic resources, and people. Accordingly, in an era of resurgent great power competition, Moscow seeks to delegitimize, discredit, and destabilize the Western alliance and continue to promote that the US and NATO – not Russia – is responsible for Arctic “militarization” while using this to justify its own militarization agenda. Conversely, Russian narratives promoting “constructive” and “peaceful” Arctic relations (including calls to resume a military-to-military dialogue on Arctic affairs) seek to normalize relations with the West to solidify a new *status quo* in which Russian aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere becomes a *fait accompli* and Moscow can secure an end to Western sanctions.

### **Implementation plans and leveraging the private sector<sup>82</sup>**

Russia’s October 2020 strategy concluded with a three-stage implementation plan, with specific targets to measure results at each stage. The “unified action plan” would involve coordinated action by “federal government bodies, executive bodies of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, local government bodies, state academies of sciences, other scientific and educational organizations, funds for supporting scientific, technical and innovative activities, nonprofit organizations, state corporations, state companies, joint stock companies with state participation and the business community.” President Putin would oversee “the general management of the implementation of this Strategy,” thus ensuring centralized control.<sup>83</sup>

Towards these ends, Putin reshuffled his government on 9 November 2020 with a strong nod to the Arctic.<sup>84</sup> Minister of Transportation Yevgeny Dietrich was relieved owing to lagging NSR developments. Dmitri Kobylykin was removed as natural resources and the environment minister, likely because of the major fuel spill in Norilsk in May 2020<sup>85</sup> and the marine pollution incident in Kamchatka that October.<sup>86</sup> The Minister of Development of the Far East and Arctic, Alexander Kozlov, replaced Kobylykin as Minister of Natural Resources and Environment,<sup>87</sup> and Alexei Chekunov was advanced to the Minister for the Development of the Far East and Arctic. Later that month, Putin signed a decree to establish the Committee on Russia’s Chairmanship in the Arctic Council in 2021-2023, with Presidential Plenipotentiary, Yury Trutnev, assigned as the committee chair.<sup>88</sup> These political changes represented an attempt by Russia to refresh its Arctic image in the face of recent environmental disasters, growing public discontent in the Far East with Russia’s failure to address local problems, and slow progress on economic improvements in the AZRF. Regional levels also received attention when the Kremlin combined two ministries to establish the Ministry for the Development of the Arctic and Economy for the Murmansk Region – an area that serves as an epicenter of Arctic public- and private-sector interests.<sup>89</sup>

On 15 April 2021, the Russian government approved a single action plan for the implementation of the *Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic until 2035* and the *Strategy for Developing the Russian Arctic Zone and Ensuring National Security until 2035*. This fifty-four-page document lists 268 measures and lead agencies, schedules specific actions for the 2021-22 timeframe (although some, such as development of the icebreakers fleet, are longer-term), and intends to serve as a stable foundation for Russia to realize its strategic development ambitions for the AZRF. The plan does not prioritize military investments, and instead has an explicitly socio-economic orientation. In other words, its primary strategic goal is to improve standards of living for Russia’s Arctic population, with particular emphasis on:

- solving the most acute social problems;
- stimulating industrial production and creating jobs;

- improving the quality of medical services (with the use of up-to-date technologies);
- improving supply chain mechanisms to deliver staples and food to the Russian Arctic and High North; and
- improving local infrastructure (ports and airports) to ensure transportation flows.

Another strategic aspect in the document pertains to Russia's readiness to provide more freedom and opportunities for joint public and private sector investments (such as airport reconstruction in Arkhangelsk). Being firmly integrated in the global economy, and thus attentive to global macroeconomic and financial trends, Russia's leadership clearly understands that failing to engage private capital is archaic and unsustainable in managing large projects.

While the Russian state has always played a central role in nearly all Arctic-related projects, Moscow indicates a growing understanding of the necessity to increase the share of private sector involvement. The Ministry for Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic (*Minvostokrazvitiia*) voiced its first concrete idea on the subject in 2020 when declaring its "serious preferences" and economic stimuli for private companies willing to invest in the Arctic.<sup>90</sup> On 1 February 2021, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed a decree approving the launch of six major state-supported investment projects that allow participation of private companies to promote the comprehensive development of the AZRF. According to the document, Russia expects to attract more than 200 billion rubles (approximately \$2.7 billion) in outside investments aimed at regional economic revitalization, and the state is ready to defray up to 20% of total investment costs for projects of at least 300 million rubles (\$4 million).<sup>91</sup> If this condition is fulfilled, the federal government promises to partially compensate Russian companies for infrastructure-related construction expenditures (transportation, energy, and electricity). This subsidy extends to both completed (operational) projects and those still under development, with available data suggesting that the Russian side is prepared to divert up to 13 billion rubles (\$176 million) for this purpose until 2023. The decree also names six large projects in Murmansk Oblast, the Novaya Zemlya archipelago, and the Taymyr Peninsula that must be completed by 2027.<sup>92</sup> *Minvostokrazvitiia* head Alexei Chekunkov underscored that "private businesses will have to invest ten times more than the Russian government," generating 5,800 new jobs and 42 billion rubles (\$569 million) in tax revenues. He also articulated how "the realization of these [six major projects] solves the strategic goals related to the development of local logistics, the modernization of seaport infrastructure, and safeguarding of transportation along the Northern Sea Route [NSR]."<sup>93</sup>

Various forums assembling representatives of Russian academia, policymakers, the business community, and the public sector have grappled with how to increase the overall share of private sector involvement in Arctic-based projects. For example, the fifth international "Arktika-2020" conference, held in Moscow in February 2020, focused on the development of Russia's continental shelf and the AZRF more broadly. Yuri Vazhenin, a member of the Federation Council, openly stated that "from technological point of view, Russia is still unable to explore resource-endowed Arctic region," noting an ongoing reliance on foreign technologies to explore and exploit resources. The head of Russia's oil and gas producers union, Gannady Shmal, observed that the logic of oil/gas exploration in the Arctic has shifted from a fixation on large deposits toward smaller ones. Given low levels of Russian investment in research and development, however, he expressed skepticism about the country's ability to transition successfully to this new model and adjust to a changing reality. Other speakers highlighted the strategic importance of digital connectivity for public life and industrial development, with lagging technology inhibiting resource exploration and decreasing the region's

attractiveness to professionals who might work there.<sup>94</sup> Inspired by this guidance, Minvostokrazvitia proposed liberalizing access to Russia's Arctic continental shelf, particularly for foreign and domestic companies actively investing in oil and natural gas/liquefied natural gas (LNG) development. The ministry also began to devise flexible and up-to-date leasing mechanisms for the region,<sup>95</sup> which Krutikov explained in November 2020 during the "Days of the Arctic and Antarctic in Moscow" forum.<sup>96</sup>

Nevertheless, Russia's ideas about the private sector's role in Arctic development, while more refined than previously, remain unclear with respect to five major issues. The first relates to the legal framework. Specifically, a new law passed in February 2021 facilitates more rapid transportation of goods via the NSR<sup>97</sup> and draws upon Russia's desire to promote the region as a free economic zone (FEZ), but Russia's recent experience with these zones (particularly in the Kaliningrad Oblast) has proven largely unsuccessful. A second issue relates to lack of clarity about the economic model behind the general implementation plan. While Russian mainstream experts and policymakers accept that economic development requires private sector resources, some commentators (such as Aleksandr Tsybulskii, the head of Arkhangelsk Oblast), insist that the "Arctic territories need to develop as a single macro-region with the help of some sort of a Gosplan [State Planning Committee]."<sup>98</sup> Given Russia's brutal historical experience with a mobilization-type, centrally-planned economy, such ideas are questionable and even unpalatable. It remains unclear how Russia wishes to, or could, combine this economic model with free market principles over the long term.

The third issue concerns the Kremlin placing an increasingly pronounced emphasis on region-specific initiatives for NSR and AZRF development. For example, local authorities in Murmansk are creating a Ministry for the Development of the Arctic and Economics which, according to local governor Andrei Chibis, will "not only boost the leading role of Murmansk oblast ... but also facilitate and streamline the process of attracting investors."<sup>99</sup> This approach was unfathomable in the pre-1991 period of Russian/Soviet history, when the Arctic region was treated as a homogenous entity without due consideration for sub-regional specificities. This positive idea, however, might have one flipside. While prioritizing the development of some regions for intensive growth using both private and state funds, other areas might be used as source of natural resources and raw materials. For now, when these ideas/projects remain at the development stage, this dynamic might not seem worrisome. In the future, however, deciding which regions receive what status could raise questions affecting the long-term cohesiveness of the Russian Federation. The federal center has clearly chosen a handful of "prioritized" regions that will enjoy massive federal support to bolster Arctic development. If the local elites of neighboring regions (less endowed with strategic natural resources or less important for the NSR) feel frustrated at being excluded, economically-driven tensions could transform into political grievances, thus sharpening inter-regional rivalries as well as heightening centrifugal dynamics across the Russian Arctic. Incidentally, deep analysis of Russian-language sources explicitly points to this concern.<sup>100</sup>

A fourth issue arises from a combination of two security-related factors: international sanctions against Russia and militarization of the Arctic region which could turn the Bering Strait into a bottleneck. Both factors could discourage prospective foreign partners from investing in the AZRF or in using the NSR as a transportation route.

Furthermore, it remains uncertain whether private sector partners – especially foreign entities – will be enthusiastic about the massive financial investments required to develop both Russian Arctic-based energy projects and the NSR as a viable international transit route. In light of growing international momentum to reduce dependencies on non-renewable energy, both European and major Asian players (including China) may be dissuaded from investing heavily in Russia’s Arctic initiatives. Several key Russian experts already acknowledge this challenge,<sup>101</sup> which may jeopardize Russia’s ability to fully implement its Arctic strategy.

## Conclusions

Recent Russian strategic documents and implementation plans confirm that development of the AZRF is one of the country’s highest national priorities. “For Russia, the Arctic is not some remote, hard-to-reach territory,” Lagutina notes, “but an actual part of state territory, fully integrated into the socioeconomic and political systems of the Russian Federation.” Accordingly, its domestic and foreign policies reflect core priorities: to ensure sovereignty and territorial integrity, improve standards of living for regional residents, protect the environment, and develop the Russian Arctic “as a strategic resource base.”<sup>102</sup> In effect, the development of the Arctic for Russia represents the central, overarching focus from which to synchronize, align, and assign primary purpose to other related state activities.

Russia must sell this priority to both the domestic and international audience, which involves maintenance and delivery of a dual-narrative: one aspect emphasizing good circumpolar citizenship and the other offering overexaggerated threat assessments. Both serve a purpose consistent with legitimizing goals that seek to shape perspectives and secure advantage from international competition without undermining national interests. “A framework of institutional governance represents the *status quo* in the region, and in many ways this benefits Russia,” political scientist Kari Roberts astutely notes. “There is little real evidence to forewarn of Russian disruption in the Arctic, apart from those who rush to connect its activities elsewhere to its priorities in the North or assume that its Arctic military spending is inherently more offensive than defensive.”<sup>103</sup>

Our analysis also supports Baev’s assessment that “in Russian strategic planning and military preparations, the Arctic occupies a more prominent place than it ‘objectively’ deserves. Whatever the economic dreams about looting the ‘treasure chest’ of natural resources in the High North or the nationalistic ambitions about ‘owning’ and ‘conquering’ the vast Northern spaces, Russia’s interests in the Arctic are not threatened in any practical or symbolic way by its neighbors.”<sup>104</sup> While exaggerated threat assessments of foreign threats to the AZRF inform the latest Russian Arctic and national security strategies, they do not dominate the narrative. After all, Russian experts acknowledge that the military dimension can only play a modest (and perhaps even negligible) role in helping to overcome deep-rooted population and economic stability issues in the region. Nevertheless, Russia is highly unlikely to reduce its Arctic military presence given its strategic deterrence function, symbolism as a form of regional dominance, and practical dual-use benefits that support shipping, resource extraction, and human and environmental security agendas.

As for any Arctic nation, articulating northern goals is one thing; reality often prescribes outcomes that are notably different. The Arctic environment presents significant limitations on the ability to achieve objectives without tremendous burden and cost. The authoritarian nature of the Russian Federation means that the Kremlin is not as forthcoming about difficulties as are its Western

counterparts, where accountability and the ability to question power is more permissible and common. Accordingly, practical difficulties associated with Arctic development should lead Western commentators to avoid overzealous and excessively alarmist rhetoric about Russia's regional goals – most of which are clearly within their sovereign rights and jurisdiction as an Arctic state. Alternatively, more focus should be directed toward analyzing the feasibility of Russia meeting its objectives and its actual developments (rather than its desired or forecasted ones). This article presents several examples of substantive problems that Russia faces in terms of implementing its strategies – including ever-present industrial and market forces that heighten uncertainty, alongside challenges posed by an austere and harsh physical environment in flux owing to global climate change. Even if Russia manages to align and synchronize public- and private-sector actors, its strategic implementation plans for the Arctic will remain highly ambitious – but should encourage investment across political, military, economic, social, and environmental security sectors that advance Russia's multi-track domestic, circumpolar, and international strategies.

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