



DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY

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Close Encounters with the Russian Military: Implications for Arctic Security Cooperation?

What does the recent burst of Russian military activity or brinkmanship, as some have characterized it,¹ mean for the Arctic? While current Russia-NATO strategic posturing may accurately reflect the sorry depths to which relations between Russia and most of the Western world have sunk,² a new SIPRI report on “Russia’s Evolving Arctic Strategy”³ is among some timely antidotes to the return-of-the-cold-war-in-the-Arctic narrative.

Close encounters with the Russian military do seem to be on the rise. Russian bombers have been on more frequent flights over the Barents, Norwegian, and Baltic Seas, as well as along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts of North America. Further south there has been a Russian air presence over NATO vessels in the Black Sea, and ships of the Russian navy sailed near Australia’s northern exclusive economic zone in a not fully appreciated military accompaniment to the G-20 summit.

There have been test missile launches and ongoing announcements of troop commitments and military facilities upgrades in the Arctic. There was even a claimed Russian land annexation – at least that’s how an overly excited blogger⁴ characterized the emergence of a tiny, 500 square meter island in the Russian Arctic, all of one meter above the Ocean level. The previously unidentified sand island, named the Yaya Island, is situated roughly midway between the Russian town of Sagastyr in the archipelago at the mouth of the Lena River and the New Siberian Islands. Given that the island is essentially a sand bar well within Russia’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ), sovereignty over it is neither in doubt nor controversial – in other words, this is not an audacious Russian land grab. It might conceivably extend Russia’s EEZ, but the idea, suggested by some,⁵ that the Russians could, or would, deploy armed forces there is not to be taken seriously.

The European Leadership Network,⁶ however, has produced a serious Policy Brief⁷ identifying what it calls “close military encounters between Russia and the West” during the first eight months of 2014. Of the almost 40 incidents reported, a few were in the Arctic. There were incidents of largely routine Russian long-range bombers and related aircraft entering US and Canadian air identification zones in international airspace above the Beaufort Sea. Two specific incidents are noted, along with more general references to other flights. In each of these cases cited, American and/or Canadian aircraft responded. The report notes Russia’s detention of a Lithuanian civilian vessel in international waters in the Barents Sea above Norway and the Kola Peninsula. The vessel was towed to Murmansk. The only other Arctic incident reported is the Russian claim that it expelled an American submarine from the same area of the Barents Sea, but the Americans insist it didn’t happen, that there were no US subs there at the time.

The two reported incidents over the Beaufort Sea have also been reported by NORAD, the Canada-US North American Aerospace Defence command. On September 18 two Canadian CF-18s intercepted two Russian TU-95 long-range (Bear) bombers “about 75 kilometres off Canada’s Arctic coast.” The Russians were flying “a course in ‘the western reaches’ of Canada’s Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the Beaufort Sea.” NORAD made it clear that “the Russian bombers never entered Canada’s sovereign airspace,” which extends 12 nautical miles from the coast. Six hours earlier the US scrambled F-22 fighter jets to intercept what was described as a group of Russian aircraft (two MiG-31 fighters, two long-range bombers, and two refuelling tankers). NORAD said at the time that it had “dispatched fighter jets to make contact with Russian long-range bombers ‘in excess of 50 times’ in the last five years.” In June Canadian fighter aircraft were scrambled twice when Russian bombers flew over the Arctic near North American airspace. Government sources told the *Globe and Mail* that in one case the Russian bombers turned back when the Canadian aircraft reached them, and in the other instance the Russians had already veered away before the CF-18s arrived.⁸ It is not clear that these encounters have necessarily become a lot more frequent. In 2010 the Canadian defence minister told CBC News that Canadian military aircraft intercept between 12 and 18 Russian bombers⁹ annually.”¹⁰

At the end of October, in a 72 hour period, the Russians tested an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), a submarine-launched missile (SLBM), and strategic bomber flights in the Arctic region – testing an element of each of the three legs of its land-sea-air strategic nuclear triad. The ICBM launch site was in the north but below the Arctic Circle at Plesetsk, which is nevertheless part of the Arkhangelsk Oblast that extends into the Arctic. The SLBM launch was the first operational test of a Bulava missile fired from a new Borey-class submarine. It was fired by the Yury Dolgoruky from a submerged position in the Barents Sea. The strategic bombers were intercepted when Norwegian fighter aircraft were scrambled for the second time in a week to meet four Tu-95 bombers and four refuelling tankers over the Barents Sea. Earlier in the week four bombers and four tankers flew over the Barents and Norwegian Seas, six returning to Russia immediately and two flying south to Portugal before returning. In the latter case, British fighters were also scrambled. NATO issued a statement saying such flights, which do not file flight plans or keep in touch with civilian air traffic authorities, pose a risk to civil aviation.¹¹

Far from the Arctic on September 7, three Russian aircraft “buzzed” the Canadian frigate *HMCS Toronto* which was on a training exercise with Ukrainian and American naval forces in the Black Sea. Aside from its reflection on Ukraine-based tensions, the report of the incident was interesting inasmuch as it noted that “Canadian and American fighters have intercepted about 50 Russian aircraft in the last five years”¹² (most of these will have been in the Arctic).

Russia has announced that the Northern Fleet nuclear powered battle cruiser, the *Admiral Nakhimov*, is to be refurbished. Reputed to be the largest surface warship in the world, along with one other Soviet-era Kirov class battleship, it has been mothballed since 1999 and is expected to be operational again in 2018.¹³ A new cold weather tank, the “Armata” is under development, a chief feature of which is new lightweight armor that remains fully effective in extremely low temperatures.¹⁴

The head of the Russian National Defense Management Center recently repeated an earlier announcement that Russia is “planning to build 13 airfields, an air-ground firing range, as well as ten radar and vectoring posts” in the Russian Arctic. Deployments of military units all along the Arctic Circle are to be completed in 2014. The Defense Minister was reported to have said that Russia has “set quite a pace in our foray into the Arctic,” and that in 2014 “a large number of units [will be] deployed along the Arctic Circle, practically from Murmansk to Chukotka.”¹⁵ Thus, construction is reported to be underway at various locations, including Cape Schmidt and Wrangel Island along the eastern coast, at Novaya Zemlya

and Franz Josef Land in the central western region of the Arctic, and Kotelny Island in the central eastern region, and other locations along the Arctic coast.¹⁶ The Bering Sea coastal town of Anadyr, 400 miles from the coast of Alaska, is to host a drone base for military reconnaissance.¹⁷ Moscow has indicated plans for a permanent Arctic Force of 6,000.¹⁸

The strategic and international security implication of these developments is not so obvious. Is this really all evidence that “the North Pole could become the world’s next battlefield,” as a headline of *Foreign Policy in Focus* recently put it?¹⁹ Or was President Putin, whose credibility in Europe and North America is at a decidedly low ebb these days (unlike in Russia where Putin’s approval rating is at all-time high – in the 80s²⁰), closer to the mark when he said in 2012 that, apart from the basic objective of maintaining global parity, modernization of the Russian Navy was dictated by the navy’s special role in supporting national economic interest in the energy-rich Arctic region where Russia is out to expand its exclusive zone of economic title.”²¹

The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), a relatively new, basically mainstream, group of senior policy experts, maintains a strong call for ongoing security cooperation in the Arctic and sees military developments largely in that light. A 2012 report proposing a roadmap for Arctic cooperation²² makes the point that while Russian and American strategic forces continue to operate in the Arctic, though at a much reduced scale, none of the Arctic coastal states has deployed combat units or assets in the region that are capable of long-range or region-wide military operations. RIAC goes on to say that current military modernization or build-up in the region are aimed at meeting “new challenges and threats” that are emerging not due to global strategic tension but due to climate change and increased economic activity – e.g. maritime safety, oil spill prevention, cross-border crime. To meet these challenges, says RIAC, requires improved ice-breaker fleets, enhanced Coast Guard services, state-of-the-art situational awareness capability, air and naval surveillance, and augmented emergency response capabilities. The report adds that “most if not all of these problems are easier to solve through bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the region.”

RIAC’s Alexander Shaparov draws a distinction between “negative” and “positive” security approaches in the Arctic: the former focusing on risks and threats to be mitigated largely by military means, and the latter focusing on international cooperation designed to settle conflicts by non-military means and promoting “mutually accepted standards, regulations and procedures.” In the Arctic, he says, the negative security option would generate increased militarization and reduced reliance on cooperative institutions such as Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) and the Arctic Council. A positive security model will obviously expand cooperation and develop a region, but for that to happen, military issues need to be resolved and existing regional bodies cannot continue to keep security off their agendas.”²³

To that end, he says, “Russia has repeatedly declared that it sees no need for any presence of military-political blocs in the Arctic,” and that “there are no problems in the Arctic region that could require application of military force.” Shaparov concludes with an interesting take on NATO in the Arctic – NATO not now being an Arctic actor, but still present through its Arctic member states. He says Russia and NATO will have to work together for constructive cooperation, using “existing structures,” as well as building new ones. He welcomes joint military exercises – citing the RUKUS/FRUKUS (the Russia, UK, US annual military exercises which began in 1988, and which added France in 1993) and Northern Eagle exercises. While he says it is not clear whether NATO engagement will incline the Arctic more toward negative or positive security postures, he calls for NATO and Russia to cooperate, seeing NATO “as a mechanism of communication between positions of member countries...and those outside the Alliance.”²⁴

Of course, it will take more than analysis from a Russian academic council to assuage mutual concerns. In responding to the September interception of Russian bombers in international airspace off the coast of Canada in the Beaufort Sea area, Canada's Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Defence characterized the incident as reinforcing "the narrative of a Putin regime that's more aggressive not just in Crimea, not just in Ukraine, but indeed testing their neighbour in their entire region."²⁵ The Canadian Defence Minister insisted, in response to a similar flight in June, that the Russian military activity in the North demonstrates "the need for ongoing vigilance," and that "the Canadian Armed Forces remain ready and able to respond."²⁶ The former Foreign Minister of Norway, Thorvald Stoltenberg, also voiced concerns about what he called Russia's "offensive demonstration policy," but rather than proclaim a military readiness to respond, he urged closer cooperation and dialogue among the Nordic States and Russia. "We have a tradition of dialogue in the Nordic Region which we must continue with the Russians." Stoltenberg was the architect of Barents region cooperation in the 1990s.²⁷

The new SIPRI report, "Russia's Evolving Arctic Strategy,"²⁸ in fact sees cooperation rather than belligerence as being Russia's continuing and primary posture in the Arctic. To begin with, the report reinforces the centrality of the Arctic to Russia's sense of its own future. It recalls President Vladimir Putin's portrayal of the Arctic as "a concentration of practically all aspects of national security – military, political, economic, technological, environmental and that of resources,"²⁹ energy being especially important. In support of its intense identification of its strategic posture with the Arctic, Russia has given priority attention to reinforcing its sovereignty in the region and to expanding its jurisdiction – with the latter expansion effort pursued entirely within the processes and rules of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Within that basic framework, Russia has also clearly made the practical decision to pursue Arctic governance and regulation through regional structures and cooperation, especially through the Arctic Council.

The SIPRI report surveys the oil and gas potential for Russia within the region, making the important point that Russia has gradually come to the realization that its beneficial exploitation of its Arctic resources will ultimately depend not only on its unambiguous ownership of those resources, but especially on its ability to find reliable markets for them. "In the future Russia's management of interdependence, rather than its assertion of sovereignty in the Arctic, is likely to determine the prospects for development of the Russian Arctic."³⁰ In other words, the military assertiveness or 'brinkmanship' that worries the European Leadership Network has little utility for advancing Russia's evolving Arctic strategy.

Russia's primary interest in its management of the Northern Sea Route, according to SIPRI, is to develop it as a *national* waterway, making regulatory and local military assertiveness rather more relevant. "One of Russia's main strategic goals in the Arctic is to use 'the Northern Sea Route as a national integrated transport-communication system of the Russian Federation in the Arctic'. As the fastest maritime route to connect the eastern and western parts of Russia, the NSR has played an important role in the course of Russian history."³¹ And while Russia is also interested in developing the NSR as a prominent global shipping route, the national importance attached to it means that Russia will continue to regard the entire route as under strict Russian jurisdiction, just as the Northwest Passage route is unambiguously within Canadian jurisdiction. In both cases, that means an interest in demonstrating military patrol capacity, but with a focus on the real operational requirement that comes with managing a major maritime corridor, and that is the development of credible emergency search and rescue capacity.

The development of the Russian NSR has been significantly slower than expected, with Russia lagging in its effort to build the essential infrastructure. "One of the main obstacles to development of the NSR," says SIPRI, "is the underdeveloped commercial transport infrastructure, including both its maritime (e.g. rescue and refuelling bases, seaports and equipment for response to oil spills) and land components (e.g. the realization of several large-scale railway projects in the North)."³² But it is not only the lack of infrastructure that is slowing the NSR's development as an international route. SIPRI points out that developments in international shipping do not, in fact, point strongly towards greater exploitation of the NSR. New ultra-large containers ships which are being developed for economies of scale are said not to be particularly suited to the NSR. The relatively shallow waters of the NSR undermines its competitiveness with other routes.³³

Through all of this, the SIPRI report acknowledges Russia's commitment to adherence to international laws and norms in the Arctic. "Russia has repeatedly stressed that it adheres to UNCLOS and views the convention as the means to resolve disputes about borders and the limits of the Arctic continental shelf. On several occasions, Putin has mentioned that Russia will act strictly 'in line with international law'.³⁴ Similarly, Russia has repeatedly asserted the importance of the Arctic Five, the five littoral Arctic states on the Arctic Ocean, in maintaining the Arctic as a zone of cooperation and as the context in which Arctic rules of the game are developed. Similarly, Russia has been active in, and supportive of, the Arctic Council.

Of course, events in Ukraine have shaken confidence in Russia's commitment to cooperation, but, to be fair, events in Ukraine have also shaken Russian confidence in the West's commitment to cooperation and mutual security. The question of NATO's steady expansion toward the East, as well as the West's early and untroubled support for the overthrow of the elected government in Ukraine, while contentious and still the subject of debate,³⁵ have obviously also done much to undermine relations with Russia. Russia, besides its unhelpful turns to dramatic military symbolism (e.g. the presence of a Russian fleet just north of Australia during the time of the summit there), has thus turned to Plan B in the Arctic. If Plan A focused on partnerships with Western companies for both investment and technical expertise, Plan B looks to other states, notably China, for enduring partnerships and, especially, markets. It's obviously not a matter of making a wholesale switch. Russia still needs Western capital and experience in the Arctic, and while China has investment capacity along with a keen interest and some hard commitments,³⁶ it has little experience in exploiting resources in the Arctic. Furthermore, says the SIPRI report, Russia remains wary of the rise of China as a major power and will remain reluctant to promote significant Chinese ownership of resource extraction capacity in the Arctic.

The upshot of all this is thus likely to be Russia's continued, if more cautious, security cooperation in the Arctic, with its military developments there focused, not so much on defence of what is Russian in the Arctic against hostile threats, but on developing the infrastructure to enable what is Russian in the Arctic to be exploited and marketed internationally.

Notes

¹ "Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014," European Leadership Network, Policy Brief, November 2014. <http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/medialibrary/2014/11/05/3b2f357f/Dangerous%20Brinkmanship.pdf>

² "Former Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev has warned that tensions between the US and Russia over Ukraine is bringing the world closer to the brink of a new Cold War. 'The world is on the brink of a new Cold War. Some are even saying that it's already begun'," he said. "Former Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev Warns of New Cold War," *International Business Times*, 8 November 2014. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/>

³ Ekaterina Klimenko, "Russia's Evolving Arctic Strategy: Drivers, challenges and Opportunities," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Policy Paper 42, September 2014. www.sipri.org

⁴ Tyler Rogoway, "Russia Annexes and Deploys Forces to Tiny but Strategic Arctic Island," <http://foxtrotalpha.jalopnik.com>

⁵ Tyler Rogoway, "Russia Annexes and Deploys Forces to Tiny but Strategic Arctic Island," Foxtrot Alpha blog, n.d. "Yaya Island will now be home to Russian forces and part of Russian territory..." <http://foxtrotalpha.jalopnik.com>

⁶ A network of former military and civilian leaders devoted to promoting European cooperation and addressing security challenges.

⁷ "Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014," European Leadership Network, Policy Brief, November 2014. <http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/medialibrary/2014/11/05/3b2f357f/Dangerous%20Brinkmanship.pdf>

⁸ Steven Chase, "Russia's Arctic flybys a – strategic message," Globe and Mail, 19 June 2014. www.theglobeandmail.com/news/

⁹ The inconsistency of these numbers is notable. Twelve to 18 intercepts by Canada alone works out to a lot more than 50 over five years.

¹⁰ "Canadian fighter jets intercept Russian bombers in Arctic," CBC News, 19 September 2014. www.cbc.ca/news/.

¹¹ Thomas Nilsen, "Russia plays nuclear war-games in Barents Region," Barents Observer, <http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/>

¹² Steven Chase, "Russian military jets flew within 100 kilometres of Canadian mainland," *Globe and Mail*, 19 September 2014. www.theglobeandmail.com/news/.

¹³ Trude Pettersen, "Soviet nuclear battle cruiser to be relaunched," Barents Observer, 31 October 2014. <http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/>

¹⁴ "Secret new Russian tank could be deployed to Arctic zones," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, 14 November 2014. <http://rbth.co.uk>

¹⁵ Thomas Nilsen, "Arms the Arctic with 13 new airfields," Barents Observer, 29 October 2014. <http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/>

¹⁶ Matthew Bodner, "Russia Starts Building Military Bases in the Arctic," *The Moscow Times*, 08 September 2014. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com>

¹⁷ Damien Sharkov, "Russia to Open Arctic Military Drone Base 420 Miles off the Alaskan Coast," *Newsweek*, 13 November 2014. <http://www.newsweek.com>

¹⁸ "Putin's cold war in the Arctic," *The Sunday times*, 26 October 2014. <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/>

¹⁹ Conn Hallinan, "How the North Pole Could Become the World's Next Battlefield," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 14 November 2014. www.thenation.com

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- ²⁰ Mark Adomanis, "Vladimir Putin's Approval Rate Is Still Near An All-Time High," *Forbes*, 06 October 2014. <http://www.forbes.com>
- ²¹ Notes taken from Alexander Shaparov, "NATO and a New Agenda for the Arctic," Russian International Affairs Council, 24 September 2013. <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/>
- ²² A.V. Zagorsky, D.K. Bekyashev, A.I. Glubokov, P.V. Savaskov, and E.N. Khmelyova, "The Arctic: Proposals for the International Cooperation Roadmap," The Russian International Affairs Council, 2012 (No. 7/2012), 35 pp.
- ²³ Shaparov, "NATO and a New Agenda for the Arctic." *Russian International Affairs Council*, 24 September 2014. <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/>
- ²⁴ Shaparov, "NATO and a New Agenda for the Arctic."
- ²⁵ "Canadian fighter jets intercept Russian bombers in Arctic," CBC News, 19 September 2014. www.cbc.ca/news/.
- ²⁶ Steven Chase, "Russia's Arctic flybys a – strategic message," *Globe and Mail*, 19 June 2014. www.theglobeandmail.com/news/
- ²⁷ Thomas Nilsen, "Thorvald wants Nordic defence and security commission," *Barents Observer*, 30 October 2014. <http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/>
- ²⁸ Ekaterina Klimenko, "Russia's Evolving Arctic Strategy: Drivers, challenges and Opportunities," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Policy Paper 42, September 2014. www.sipri.org
- ²⁹ At a meeting of the Russian Security Council on state policy in the Arctic, 22 April 2014, p. 1 of "Russia's Evolving Arctic Strategy."
- ³⁰ "Russia's Evolving Arctic Strategy," p. 1.
- ³¹ "Russia's Evolving Arctic Strategy," p. 9.
- ³² "Russia's Evolving Arctic Strategy," p. 11.
- ³³ "Russia's Evolving Arctic Strategy," p. 11.
- ³⁴ "Russia's Evolving Arctic Strategy," p. 12.
- ³⁵ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "Put it in Writing: How the West Broke its Promise to Moscow," *Foreign Affairs*, October 29, 2014. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com>
- ³⁶ Atle Staalesen, "In Russia-China alliance, an Arctic dimension," *Barents Observer*, 14 November 2014. <http://barentsobserver.com>