



# ***DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY***

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## **The Conflicted Arctic Military Postures of Old Cold War Rivals**

***Military developments in the Arctic have come to more prominent public attention in recent weeks and months in the wake of a series of Russian defence ministry announcements and the Pentagon's new Arctic Strategy document. While all Arctic States, collectively and individually, now acknowledge that bilateral and regional disputes are clearly not to be adjudicated by military means, current Russian and American military initiatives and policy declarations suggest these two enduring rivals remain burdened by a kind of strategic schizophrenia. On the one hand, the two defence establishments profess and in some measure reflect the same spirit of cooperation that characterizes the work of the Arctic Council; on the other hand, neither the Russians nor the Americans seem able to avoid bringing to the Arctic elements of the rhetoric, rationales, and deployments that characterized their Cold War rivalry.***

Military expansion in the Arctic is clearly underway. Whether it fosters security cooperation or rivalry depends entirely on the extent to which it aids civil authorities in meeting their responsibilities in the face of rapidly changing conditions – ensuring compliance with environmental and transportation regulations as activities intensify, meeting law enforcement challenges as the region becomes more accessible, building credible emergency response mechanisms. Military aid to civil authorities is intended to be a last resort, but as one senior Canadian defence official put it, in much of the Arctic the time lag between first responders and the last resort is about 30 seconds.

That there is a current and projected need for military forces to assist in the delivery of public safety in the Arctic is clear, but it should be just as clear that when we focus on military roles, as this briefing and assignment does, we are addressing but one small element of the security challenges facing the people of the Arctic. Human security<sup>1</sup> in the Arctic, the condition of the daily lives and livelihoods of its people, is facing unprecedented vulnerabilities, none of which will be mitigated in the least by “the great game” strategic military initiatives and deployments that still drive the major powers and that they still import into the Arctic. There is no question that the welfare of Arctic populations can be served and improved by military developments aimed at bolstering key civilian operations, but for that to become the core objective, the major military powers are going to have to get over some old preoccupations.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's conflicted northern military posture was on full display when he told a student gathering that it is America's nuclear-strategic military capabilities above the Arctic Circle that are driving Russia to maintain high levels of nuclear and conventional military presence there, and then proceeded to disavow all thoughts of military conflict.<sup>2</sup> "Experts know quite well," said one side of Mr. Putin's strategic personality, "that it takes US missiles 15 to 16 minutes to reach Moscow from the Barents Sea."<sup>3</sup> His tough talk and Cold War rationales are what got the attention of the media, but he also added what all Arctic states now routinely add to their tough talk and announcements of military expansion – he said to the same students, "I proceed from the assumption that we will never engage in a global conflict, particularly with a country like the United States." His Jekyll side went on to talk about the imperative of cooperation before the Hyde in him broke through again: "But the submarines are there, and they do carry missiles."<sup>4</sup>

It is undeniably true that missiles with nuclear warheads launched from submarines in the Arctic could reach Russia within a very few minutes, but Mr. Putin could just as well have added that those US missiles could, in the same or even less time, reach Russian territory if launched from the Pacific Ocean, or that Russian missiles could reach the US in just as few minutes from the Pacific, the Atlantic, or Arctic Oceans. He could also have explained to his student audience that once American or Russian ballistic missiles were in flight, whether launched from the Arctic or any other ocean, or from Russian or American homelands for that matter, and whether for flights of 15 minutes or 45, there would be absolutely nothing that either side could do about it, notwithstanding Russia's expanding military presence in the Arctic.

The Americans now operate nuclear armed and attack submarines in the Arctic Ocean mainly to transit between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, but every few years they are sent on an "Ice-Exercise," with one planned for 2014 – although the planned exercise is reported to be in some doubt due to Pentagon budget restraints.<sup>5</sup> Cancelling an exercise would obviously not undermine any American objectives for Arctic stability, and proceeding with it would do nothing to promote the kind of infrastructure and marine capacity that would actually address the pressing needs of the north. But the Hyde side of the Pentagon's Arctic Strategy remains front and centre, the Pentagon strategy's opening claim being that strategic deterrence remains at the core of its security interests in the Arctic.

The Russian nuclear deterrent is of course concentrated in the Arctic and the Russians are unambiguous in their insistence that it is central to countering America's global conventional superiority. The Russian Deputy Prime Minister, Dmitry Rogozin, recently called Russian nuclear forces the "great equalizer,"<sup>6</sup> and the NATO-Russia Council and declarations of Arctic cooperation notwithstanding, Russian nuclear forces continue to figure prominently in Russia's security calculations generally and in the Arctic.

Of course, the United States and Russia are neither global nor Arctic equals. At the global level, Russia can't begin to match America's economic, political, and military influence; at the regional level in the Arctic, the United States can't begin to match Russia's economic, political, and military dominance.

The Russian conventional military presence is active and steadily expanding in the Arctic, while an American conventional military presence remains largely, according to the Pentagon itself, in the contemplation stage. The US Navy's task force on climate change says, for example, the US will have to accelerate its planning if it hopes to be able to routinely operate ships, other than nuclear missile and attack submarines, and aircraft in the Arctic by 2025.<sup>7</sup>

Russia's military plans and initiatives for the Arctic are, as the following partial list suggests, ambitious and warrant all the attention they garner – especially because it is not entirely clear how much those initiatives concentrate on aiding civilian authorities in their governance and public safety roles, or how much they focus on developing combat capabilities for the military conflict that Mr. Putin says won't ever come to the region:

- In 2013 a navy taskforce of 12 surface vessels, including research and support vessels, undertook major operations in the region, including the re-establishment of the base and airfield on the New Siberian Island of Kotelnoy.<sup>8</sup> The arrival of the naval taskforce at the New Siberian Islands signaled, said a Russian Defence Minister spokesperson, “the return of a permanent Russian military presence in the Arctic Region.” Putin described the re-opening of the base with characteristic bravado, stating that it would allow Russia to “secure control of that strategic region.” But he also situated the base within the context of managing the northern sea route. Russia, he said, “will not only reinstate the military base in this area, but will also restore the airfield and allow for collaborative work with representatives of the Emergency Situations Ministry, hydrologists and climate experts to ensure security and efficient operation of the Northern Sea Route.”<sup>9</sup>
- The Russian navy has announced that it will make the Arctic a priority in 2014.<sup>10</sup> It already seemed to be that in 2013, but in 2014 “the Northern Fleet will conduct sailing and diving expeditions in the Arctic” and decide<sup>11</sup> whether to “develop a series of ice-class patrol ships to protect the country's interest in the region,” said Captain Vadim Serga, a spokesman for the fleet's Western Military District.<sup>12</sup> The navy intends to form a squadron of ice-breaking war ships (and expects a decision in 2014),<sup>13</sup> and the Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, said the ships would provide additional capacity for cargo transportation in the Arctic, support for other ships, and support for infantry forces in the region.<sup>14</sup>
- The coast guard division of the Federal Security Service (essentially the Russian homeland security department) is to deploy four new warships for the Arctic zone by 2020;<sup>15</sup>
- Still with the navy, the cruiser, the Pyotr Veliky (Peter the Great), undertook an Arctic mission in 2013 as a part of exercises carried out at the New Siberian Islands. The Russian news agency RIA Novosti describes the Pyotr Veliky as “the only Russian warship with sufficient capability to thwart large-scale attacks by cruise and ballistic missiles. The ship is armed with medium-range surface-to-air missiles (with an effective range of up to 200 km), short-range SAMs, gun/missile systems. Its radars are capable of detecting and tracking aerial targets at an altitude of 30 km and a range of 300 km.”<sup>16</sup>

- Regular air patrols of the Arctic are now also conducted by the navy's maritime reconnaissance and anti-submarine aircraft from bases in the Murmansk and Vologda regions. They fly over international Arctic waters and the northern sea route, monitoring pack ice near the sea route and assisting civilian ships, according to Russia's Defence Ministry.<sup>17</sup>
- New Arctic Air Force capacities are also planned, including new aircraft (SU-30, SU-34, SU-35, Yak-130 fighter aircraft, and the An-148 regional transport jets) and upgraded airports at the Vorkuta, Naryan-Mar, and Tiksi (three of a dozen naval bases on Russia's northern coast), as well as the New Siberian Islands, Franz Josef Land, and the Island of Schmidt.<sup>18</sup>
- Since August 2007 Russian Tu-95 (Bear) and Tu-160 (Blackjack) Strategic Bombers have been flying an average of 50 patrols annually over the Pacific, Atlantic, and Arctic Ocean.<sup>19</sup>
- Infantry forces are to receive new equipment to support combat operations in the north and new combat training exercises and scouting missions are planned for "remote areas of the north."<sup>20</sup> In October 2013 Russian army special forces reconnaissance units carried out training missions on the Kola Peninsula, "simulating combat in the polar regions' mountainous terrain," and according to the Russian military, two arctic brigades will be deployed in Russia's extreme north over the next few years."<sup>21</sup>
- Airborne assault forces and military transportation aviation units conducted Arctic exercises in late October to demonstrate, according to the First Deputy Defence Minister, Arkady Bakhin, that "Russian armed forces are ready to provide assistance to Arctic expeditions, civilians and military units deployed in [the Arctic]."<sup>22</sup>
- Plans are under way for Russia to deploy combined military, border, and coast guard units in the north by 2020.<sup>23</sup> Russia is taking measures to enhance both domain awareness (see references to radars below) and border patrols with plans to build eleven border protection facilities and automated surveillance systems in the Arctic for the Russian Federation State Border Protection program.<sup>24</sup>
- "Russia has started the deployment of aerospace defense units in the Arctic and construction of an early missile warning radar in the country's extreme north," according to a *RIA Novosti* report. It quotes Maj. Gen. Alexander Golovko, the commander of Aerospace Defense Forces: "The expansion of [missile early warning] radar coverage is one of the key areas of our work, especially when it comes to [Russia's] extreme north – we have already started the deployment of electronic warfare units in the Arctic." Construction of an advanced early missile warning radar site is reported as having begun near the town of Vorkuta, situated just north of the Arctic Circle. The missile early warning network of mobile radars is slated for completion in 2018.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of all these developments, a November 2013 report by the Russian Regional Development Ministry said the country is unprepared for war in the Arctic and is ill-prepared to respond quickly to an attack along its long Arctic border. RIA Novosti's report says "Russia's northern border checkpoints are underequipped, and servicemen lack proper training for fighting in the harsh climate."<sup>26</sup> What the report doesn't address is the question of what threats might arise to require advanced capacity for "fighting in the harsh climate" of the Arctic. A year ago, Yevgeny Lukyanov, a deputy secretary of the Russian Security Council, suggested to a conference in Tromso, Norway that aid to civilian authorities would make the larger demand on Russian forces. "Climate change has increased the transport accessibility of the Arctic region," he said, and "growing maritime traffic is likely to bring about more attempts at smuggling, illegal migration, drug trafficking... and other types of organized crime." So that is why, he concluded, "Russia needs to cooperate with other Arctic states in strengthening and defending its Arctic borders and in monitoring transportation routes."<sup>27</sup>

As a rationale for building up northern military capacity these are rather more relevant factors than are American missile submarines, and the spirit of cooperation conveyed by Mr. Lukyanov seems to be shared by the Russian population. In a recent survey by a Kremlin-backed polling organization, the Public Opinion Foundation, some 69 percent of those surveyed said that the Arctic "territories should remain neutral and outside the boundaries of any country." Only 17 percent said the Arctic should be divided among states of the region.<sup>28</sup>

The new US Pentagon Report<sup>29</sup> on its Arctic strategy, while avoiding the kind of tough talk indulged in by Putin, reflects the same conflicted posture that afflicts Moscow – assuming an Arctic that will continue to be a platform for strategic competition, while still being supportive of the Arctic as a region of international cooperation.<sup>30</sup>

National security interests are described at the outset of the Pentagon's *Arctic Strategy* document in competitive strategic terms, with a focus on missile defense and early warning, strategic sealift, and strategic deterrence – those sea-launched warheads within 15 minutes of travelling time to Moscow that Mr. Putin was talking about. "Preserving freedom of the seas" is given prominence as an Arctic strategic objective, although that point, as is widely understood, has less to do with the Arctic than with American strategic interests in other oceans. The Arctic Strategy is unambiguous about the American view of the Northwest Passage and the waters of the Canadian archipelago, the point of which is to support the exercise of these "rights, freedoms, and uses of the sea and airspace throughout the world, including through strategic straits" (p. 3).

The US Arctic strategy then links American policy and activity in the Arctic to three key elements. The first is the advancement of US security interests – the strategic interests as just defined. That is followed by a reference to the pursuit of the responsible stewardship of the Arctic, and the third element is a stated commitment to strengthening international cooperation in the region (pp. 3-4). The goal of the Arctic strategy is thus defined as "an Arctic region that is stable and free of conflict, where nations act responsibly in a spirit of trust and cooperation, and where economic and energy resources are developed in a sustainable manner that also respects the

fragile environment and the interests and cultures of indigenous peoples.”<sup>31</sup> The Pentagon acknowledges a “relatively low level of military threat in a region bounded by nation States that have not only publicly committed to working within a common framework of international law and diplomatic engagement, but have also demonstrated the ability and commitment to do so.” (p.4)

The report then identifies eight ways in which the Pentagon will pursue the end-state of a secure and stable Arctic characterized by multilateral cooperation:

- Exercise sovereignty and protect the homeland;
- Engage public and private sector partners to improve domain awareness in the Arctic;
- Preserve freedom of the seas in the Arctic;
- Evolve Arctic infrastructure and capabilities consistent with changing conditions;
- Support existing agreements with allies and partners while pursuing new ones to build confidence with key regional partners;
- Provide support to civil authorities, as directed;
- Partner with other departments and agencies and nations to support human and environmental safety; and
- Support the development of the Arctic Council and other international institutions that promote regional cooperation and the rule of law.

Significant attention is given to the improvement of domain awareness: “Adequate domain awareness is an essential component of protecting maritime commerce, critical infrastructure, and key resources” (p. 9). The Canada-US North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) is described as the primary vehicle for maintaining air tracking capabilities, but makes no reference to NORAD in the context of maritime surveillance, even though “maritime warning” became part of its mandate when it was indefinitely renewed in 2006. The strategy says that “where possible, [the Department of Defense] will also collaborate with international partners to employ, acquire, share, or develop the means required to improve sensing, data collection and fusion, analysis, and information-sharing to enhance domain awareness appropriately in the Arctic.”

The cooperation the strategy promises is welcome and at this point also a matter of necessity since the infrastructure developments envisioned by the US are largely that, envisioned. While the US also has stated objectives for expanding things like Arctic communications facilities, building heavy ice-breakers, and building up search and rescue capacity off of its northern coast, it has to date established neither firm plans nor clear cost estimates.<sup>32</sup>

Acknowledging the centrality of Russia to any pan-Arctic initiatives (and implicitly acknowledging American limitations), a senior US State Department official on oceans and fisheries recently spoke to a Russian conference audience about the importance of US-Russian cooperation in science, fisheries regulations, and environmental issues. “Russia is the biggest country in the Arctic,” he said, “and nothing can be done in the Arctic without Russian participation and cooperation.”<sup>33</sup>

The Pentagon strategy includes an interesting warning that if the US is “too aggressive” in response to future security risks, it could generate the kind of mistrust and miscommunication that would actually increase the risks: “There is some risk that the perception that the Arctic is being militarized may lead to an ‘arms race’ mentality that could lead to a breakdown of existing cooperative approaches to shared challenges.” It is a caution Mr. Putin might also want to consider. The Pentagon goes on to say that this risk will be mitigated by a focus on “collaborative security approaches” and by supporting other government departments (aid to civil authorities) with leadership roles. “Building trust through transparency about the intent of our military activities and participation in bilateral and multilateral exercises and other engagements that facilitate information-sharing will be a key means of addressing this risk.” (p. 13)

The Pentagon’s *Arctic Strategy* document thus includes a welcome emphasis on “enhancing the region’s capability and capacity for multilateral security collaboration” (p. 5), but it does beg the wider question of the appropriate institutions and mechanisms through which to accomplish such cooperation. In the section on the Arctic Council and “other international institutions,” the only reference is to the International Maritime Organization, while implying that others are also relevant. The institutional question is an important one inasmuch as there is still some considerable distance to go to consistently get over the old habits and assumptions of the strategic rivalry nurtured by “the big game” framework. The absence of an inclusive institutional security framework within the region, through which to mediate and moderate regional differences and to respond cooperatively to shared threats, represents an ongoing security gap in the Arctic. Without that framework the tendency to revert to the familiar rhetoric and divisions of strategic rivalry will continue.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The human security imperatives of Arctic development are helpfully addressed in a recent Open Canada posting: Wilfrid Greaves, "When the Ice is Gone," 11 December 2013. <http://opencanada.org/features/the-think-tank/essays/when-the-ice-is-gone/>

<sup>2</sup> Alexei Anishchuk, "Russia needs Arctic presence to guard against U.S. threat: Putin," *Reuters*, 03 December 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/03/us-al-russia-putin-arctic-idUSBRE9B20VT20131203>

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<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Bluit "Cold, Cold War: Putin Talks Tough Over US Arctic Rivalry, *ABC News*, 05 December 2013. <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/cold-cold-war-putin-talks-tough-us-artic/story?id=21110178>

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia needs to beef up in Arctic because of US Navy, Putin says," *Stars and Stripes*, 03 December 2013. <http://www.stripes.com/news/europe/russia-needs-to-beef-up-in-arctic-because-of-us-navy-putin-says-1.255773>

<sup>5</sup> Trude Pettersen, "US Navy Arctic exercises threatened by budget constraints," *Barents Observer*, 13 November 2013. <http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/2013/11/us-navy-arctic-exercises-threatened-budget-constraints-13-11>

<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia May answer Conventional Attack with Nukes," *ABC News*, 11 December 2013. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/russia-answer-conventional-attack-nukes-21176837?singlePage=true>

<sup>7</sup> "US military set to increase presence in 'melting Arctic,'" RT.Com, 22 November 2013. <http://rt.com/usa/us-wants-arctic-resources-154/>

<sup>8</sup> Atle Staalesen, "New ice-protected patrol vessels for Russian Arctic," *Barents Observer*, 07 November 2013. <http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/2013/11/new-ice-protected-patrol-vessels-russian-arctic-07-11>

<sup>9</sup> "Russia Reopens Military Base to Control Key Part of Arctic – Putin," RIA Novosti, 16 September 2013. <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20130916/183501749.html>

<sup>10</sup> Atle Staalesen, "In Russian Arctic, fly high – dive deep," *Barents Observer*, 02 December 2013. <http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/2013/12/russian-arctic-fly-high-dive-deep-02-12>

<sup>11</sup> A firm decision is to be made in 2014. Atle Staalesen, "New ice-protected patrol vessels for Russian Arctic," *Barents Observer*, 07 November 2013. <http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/2013/11/new-ice-protected-patrol-vessels-russian-arctic-07-11>

<sup>12</sup> "Arctic Made Priority for Russian Navy in 2014," RIA Novosti, 02 December 2013. <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20131202/185208917/Arctic-Made-Priority-for-Russian-Navy-in-2014.html>

<sup>13</sup> J. Michael Cole, "Militaryization of the Arctic Heats Up, Russia Takes the Lead," 06 December 2013. <http://thediplomat.com/2013/12/militarization-of-the-arctic-heats-up-russia-takes-the-lead/>

<sup>14</sup> "Russia to Deploy Arctic Escort Squadron by 2014 – Minister," RIA Novosti, 06 November 2013. [http://en.ria.ru/military\\_news/20131106/184550182.html](http://en.ria.ru/military_news/20131106/184550182.html)



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- <sup>16</sup> “Russian Nuclear Cruiser Departs on Atlantic Mission,” *RIA Novosti*, 22 October 2013. [http://en.ria.ru/military\\_news/20131022/184294285/Russian-Nuclear-Cruiser-Departs-on-Atlantic-Mission.html](http://en.ria.ru/military_news/20131022/184294285/Russian-Nuclear-Cruiser-Departs-on-Atlantic-Mission.html)
- <sup>17</sup> “Russian Navy Warplanes Start Arctic Patrols,” *RIA Novosti*, 12 February 2013. [http://en.ria.ru/military\\_news/20130214/179466119.html](http://en.ria.ru/military_news/20130214/179466119.html)
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<sup>31</sup> Excerpted from President Obama's May 2013 *National Strategy for the Arctic Region*. [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/nat\\_arctic\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/nat_arctic_strategy.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> "US military set to increase presence in 'melting Arctic,'" RT.Com, 22 November 2013. <http://rt.com/usa/us-wants-arctic-resources-154/>

<sup>33</sup> "Utilising the Arctic: Putin promises further exploration," RT.Com, 04 December 2013. <http://rt.com/news/russia-arctic-putin-us-666/>