



THE “FOURTH BATTLE” FOR THE ARCTIC

RUSSIA’S CAPABILITIES,
STRATEGIC THINKING, AND
GAME PLAN

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Executive Summary

Russia’s progressively evident anti-Western course (traceable to 1999) has turned the Arctic region into a zone of confrontation – not a region of peace and partnership. Russia’s relationship with the West is unlikely to improve, too, given Russia’s growing isolationism, course on militarization, and petrification of the current political architecture, in which the so-called “siloviki” faction is enjoying a privileged position. Indeed, if Russia achieves its goals in Ukraine, the model of “Putinism” will outlive President Vladimir Putin and the current political elite in power. At this juncture, new areas of tension and Russia-engineered local conflicts are likely to emerge. Russia will use conflicts and confrontation with the West to achieve both domestic and foreign policy goals and objectives.

In addition to the Black and Baltic Sea regions, the Arctic might become an area where Moscow could try to provoke Western allies. If this materializes, Russia is unlikely to push for an all-out war that could lead to an open armed conflict with NATO. This said, Russia’s behaviour will be contingent on the position of the US and, under certain circumstances, key EU members. As such, Russia will instead pursue a strategy it successfully used in Ukraine in 2014. Russia is most likely to combine informational confrontation, subversive actions (spoofing and GPS jamming), provocations against critical infrastructure (cables), artificially created “migrant crises,” and, in some circumstances, potentially its shadow formations (members of irregular paramilitary groups) to destabilize the situation.

From a military point of view, Russia currently dominates the Arctic region. Its post-2014 efforts aimed at achieving quantitative and qualitative superiority over Western countries in the Arctic have brought success. In certain areas, such as military icebreakers and military infrastructure, Russia’s capabilities are clearly towering above NATO as a whole, much less its individual member states. However, post-2022 developments have clearly weakened Russia, diminishing its economy and armed forces and worsening its already negative demographic picture. These developments, in addition to Russia’s now reduced access to Western technologies, could shift that balance of power, provided that the Western alliance pursues consolidated actions aimed at constraining Russia’s militaristic effort.




Russia's main concerns over Western efforts to regain initiative in the Arctic are related to the development of anti-missile/aircraft capabilities, strengthening of cyber- and space-based operational capabilities, accretion of power in the domain of combat aviation, and development of special forces capable of operating in the Arctic.


In terms of non-conventional (“hybrid”) confrontation – and should a conflict in the Arctic take place, it is mostly likely to take this form – Russia has multiple weaknesses. Unlike in the West, the Arctic plays a key economic role for the Russian state. Furthermore, given its long history of mistreating the local population (which worsened after 2022), Moscow does not fully trust the Russian Arctic's Indigenous population and its loyalty to Russia. If one is to look for Russia's weak spots in the Arctic, and in the High North in general, the domain of “hybrid threats” may be viewed as Russia's Achilles heel.

Introduction

Despite blaming the West for the deterioration of the security environment in the Arctic region, it was Russia that initiated the remilitarization of the so-called “Big Arctic”¹ in 1999 with the launch of the large-scale Zapad-99 strategic-operational exercise.² However, starting in 2014 – marked by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the Russian-engineered military conflict in the Donbass region – developments in the Arctic started to take a visibly alarming turn, attracting the attention of the West. Despite the West's numerous attempts to engage Russia in a peaceful and economically beneficial collaboration in the Arctic,³ Moscow opted for a confrontational approach. The key problem was that Russia has never really seen the Arctic as a territory of peace. As one Russian historian has argued, “the battle for the Arctic has never ended. It merely died down for a while to continue later from one century to another.”⁴ Russia's uncooperativeness and true intentions in the Arctic were ultimately fully uncovered after the outbreak of the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. Now, the Russian Ministry of Defence (MOD) openly claims that war in Europe (including in parts of the Arctic) could erupt between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the next decade.⁵ Moreover, Russia's top diplomats – who used to employ reconciliatory and highly deceptive rhetoric to mask Russia's true intentions under the guise of diplomatic language – are openly talking about Russia's readiness to “defend its interests [in the Arctic] militarily, politically and from the standpoint of defense technologies.”⁶ The same is true for Russia's top key Arctic-related figures who used to be hailed in the West, such as Nikolay Korchunov (currently Russia's envoy to Norway), who started using the language of the Russian MOD when commenting on the situation in the Arctic.⁷

Indeed, it is hard to disagree with Thomas Nilsen, the editor of the *Barents Observer*, that the “High North, Low Tensions” era that was “naively proclaimed by Norway's foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre in the late 2000s” is finally gone.⁸ Despite the existence of an apparent consensus – in both the West and Russia – that the prospect of an open military engagement between NATO and Russia in the Arctic is extremely low, one should not dismiss such an escalatory scenario at all. For instance, the Russian side has been actively promoting the idea that the Arctic has already emerged as one of the theatres (*teatr voennykh deistvii*) of the “global hybrid war” (*mirovaya*





gibridnaya vojna) waged by the collective West against Russia. This rhetoric is ominous and should be taken into account, especially in light of the post-2014 experience. Namely, Russia's obsession with the "hybrid war" (*gibridnaya vojna*) concept resulted in its practical experimentation with such hybrid warfare in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and, to an extent, the Balkans and elsewhere. While Russia's current overtly aggressive rhetoric about the Arctic might merely be one of the many information-psychological operations that Russia has carried out in the past, an escalatory scenario – not necessarily an open military escalation leading to a NATO–Russia war – should not be ruled out either. Russian society, including its economy, military-industrial complex, ideology, and – in a way – legitimacy of the ruling elite, is now tightly bound with the state of militarization and mobilization. This makes the state of war essential for the functioning of the country as such. Many experts have argued that transitioning to a peaceful state might become, perhaps, even a greater problem for Russia than living in conditions of stress and continuing mobilization.⁹ On the other hand, for Russia's "power ministries" (*silovyje ministerstva*), turning the Arctic into another theatre of confrontation (not necessarily outward military) with the West, by exaggerating security threats and channeling more financial means into the militarization of the region, would be of great benefit as well.


Thus, the security environment in the Arctic region is indeed bound to deteriorate, and Russia's economic weakness and large casualties in Ukraine will most likely not hinder Moscow from acting in an assertive and even reckless way in this region. To understand the logic of Russia's aging elite today, one should recall lessons from the Soviet history that is, incidentally, openly adored by the current regime. Specifically, following the devastating Great Patriotic War (1941–45), which claimed the lives of tens of millions of Soviet citizens and devastated the Soviet economy, the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin had already entertained the idea of a great war with the West,¹⁰ as a means of internal mobilization and the legitimization of his unconditional power mixed with Soviet imperialist ambitions. Those plans were only hindered by his death.


Depending on the situation inside and outside of Russia, for Russia's current political regime, an escalation in the Arctic could become a way to address domestic challenges and strengthen internal public mobilization.

The Arctic Region Through Russia's Lens: A Territory of Peace?

This part of the report will primarily address three aspects. First, I will briefly outline why the Arctic holds such a special place for Russia and why its importance should not be confined to its economic or geopolitical value. Second, I will talk about Russia's evolving perception of the Arctic region, considering the so-called "global hybrid war" and the actors that constitute a danger to Russia's strategic interests in the region. Third, based on a combination of Russia's strategic regional interests and the changing global geopolitical environment, I will provide a classification of the threats that preoccupy the minds of Russia's military-political circles. These three aspects, combined, will lay the foundation for a more detailed description of the responses that Russia may be considering confronting its adversaries, based on local conditions.

Russia's prioritization of the Arctic region is premised on four main factors. First, geoeconomic considerations drive Russia's prioritization of the region. In addition to the Arctic's huge direct input into the Russian economy – the region contributes up to 20% of Russia's GDP – the region





also has (for now) indirect meaning. Specifically, Russia seeks to attract non-Western actors by offering the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a substitute to existing transportation and trade routes. Prospectively, this could become one of the key factors in Russia's economic growth and elevate the country to a new status as Eurasia's key transportational hub.¹¹

Second, Russia's preoccupation with the region also stems from diplomatic and political considerations. Russia's status as the largest Arctic power has played the key role in its inclusion and presence in the most influential international forums and platforms related to the Arctic, such as the Arctic Council (AC), even despite its multiple and repeated violations of international law. Importantly, despite its full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine and uncontrollable militarization of the Arctic, some influential voices in the West still see value in engaging with Russia in the Arctic. Thus, with failures on other fronts, Russia aims to use the Arctic and its indispensability therein – including its scientific diplomacy,¹² its presence in Arctic-related international organizations,¹³ and the rights of its Indigenous population¹⁴ – as a means to maintain its status as a great power.


Third, the military-strategic considerations of the Arctic for Russia are a factor that will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent parts of the paper.


Fourth, Russia's prioritization of the Arctic is influenced by ideological considerations that boil down to the aspirations of ultraconservative circles to recreate Russia's identity, given its failed experiments with partnership with the West and the lack of clarity with its "Eurasian" identity due to, for instance, Russians' overtly negative stance on Central Asia. This desire to reconstruct Russia's identity is leading it to pivot to the Arctic region and the North in general. Such claims go as far as to seek to deny other countries like Canada the status of an Arctic nation, on the basis of the fact that its citizens – unlike the Russians – have always been drawn to areas with milder climates (namely, the US–Canadian border areas), rather than the North.¹⁵

Russia's View of the Arctic in Light of Intensifying Geopolitical Competition

Russia's expert community – especially its (ultra)conservative part, which, given internal processes, is rapidly becoming mainstream – increasingly perceives foreign actors in the Arctic as a threat to Russia and its national interests. At this juncture, two very important concepts should be mentioned.

First is the "global hybrid war" and its application to the Arctic. Russian authors started to actively exploit the narrative that "the West launched an anti-Russian hybrid war in the Arctic" in 2018.¹⁶ Those ideas stemmed from earlier writings on the subject that construed the Arctic region as an integral part of the "system of the arches of instability" (*sistema dug nestabilnosti*). According to Professor Vladimir Kolotov, the "system is forming the geopolitical 'climate', which is fully assisting in the implementation of the regional destabilization of uncontrolled subjects of geopolitics." The eight main dimensions – East European, Middle Eastern, South- and East-Asian, North African, Arctic, Caucasian, and Central Asian – exert destabilization based on the presence (or absence) of necessary conditions and factors.¹⁷ In 2022, the Russian expert community adjusted those ideas to the new reality, which resulted in the emergence of the term "global hybrid war," defined as a "multilayered inter-civilizational armed conflict during which the sides are







deliberately using adaptive military forms of confrontation that include, among others, economic strangulation of the opponent and the use of information and cyber technologies.”¹⁸ This signified the emergence of a very important shift in Russia’s earlier perception of hybrid war and its application to the Arctic region. Specifically, the Russian expert community perceives economic superiority – which, as it will be argued further in this paper, adds prominence to icebreakers as a tool of both military and economic confrontation¹⁹ – as one of the key features that is to secure success in a potential confrontation in the Arctic.

The second important concept is the “circles of competition” in the Arctic. In this regard, it is important to turn to an article published in the specialized military journal *Arsenal Otechestva*, which discusses the struggle for Arctic resources and Russia’s place in the Arctic. According to the authors, competition in the Arctic includes five “circles” of countries and international organizations:²⁰

- The so-called “Arctic countries,” including Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark, and Norway, which have direct access to the Arctic and have advantages in competing for Arctic resources. The main struggle for Arctic resources will, at least initially, primarily involve these actors.
- Near-Arctic states, including Iceland, Sweden, and Finland. These states are not to take a direct part in the struggle for Arctic resources but will assist their allies in performing certain functions. For instance, other Russian sources state that Sweden and Finland will play a very important role in adding their technological skills to the Western attempt to challenge Russia in the Arctic.²¹
- International organizations consisting of Western countries (NATO, the European Union, and Nordic organizations) that have recently become stakeholders in Arctic affairs. Russian authors assume that, having initiated the paralysis of the AC by “cancelling” Russia, Western powers are likely to form alternative regional forums and organizations – such as an emerging Canadian initiative to build a “new Arctic coalition.”²² These would, in effect, act on behalf of NATO and its Arctic ambitions, which, according to the head of Russian diplomacy, Sergey Lavrov, entail NATO’s desire to “globalize, legitimize, and prove itself as the global policeman.”²³ As stated by Andrey Klimov (a senator from Perm Krai and Deputy Chairman of the Russian Federation Council Foreign Affairs Committee), “Today the US and NATO are openly transforming the Arctic into yet another theater of armed conflict [...] They are doing their utmost to secure full dominance in the Arctic Council.”²⁴
- The United Nations and specialized subcommittees, including the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, the United Nations Environment Programme, the International Maritime Organization, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), that are not directly involved in Arctic affairs but that serve as arbiters in the region.
- Non-Arctic states represented by (unspecified) East Asian states – most likely, primarily China, although other regional actors also have Arctic ambitions – and some European countries, which, while also unidentified, likely include Germany, France, and Poland.

This complex system of geopolitical rivalry for the Arctic resources discussed in the paper draws on two very important features in Russian Arctic-related thinking. On the one hand, as already argued in this report, Russia does not see developments in the Arctic through the lens of partnership






and collaboration; rather, Russian experts perceive Arctic developments through the lens of rivalry and confrontation. Among other things, this owes to Russia's perception of the Arctic as being its own exclusive zone of interest, based on Russia's geography, population (having the largest Arctic population among other Arctic countries), and history of Arctic exploration. The second important feature is related to the fact that Russia is likely to perceive any party with Arctic ambitions – likely non-Arctic players especially – as a threat to Russian national interests. This means that Russia's actual perceptions of China and its Arctic ambitions may, in fact, be very different (as will be discussed later in this report) than is rhetorically claimed by Russian officials.


Russia's Taxonomy of "Foreign Threats" in the Arctic and Means to Confront Them

While Russian experts commonly referred to a broad range of threats and challenges to Russia's dominant position in the Arctic in earlier writings, the tone of analysis and the nature of challenges changed dramatically following 2022. For instance, the most recent analyses heavily draw on claims that "threats to Russian national security [in the Arctic] have real and easily distinguishable Anglo-Saxon characteristics," thus presenting confrontation in the Arctic through the lens of "civilizational" and cultural dimensions.²⁵ In general, Russian specialized literature (produced both prior to and after 2022) distinguishes two macro types of threats faced by Russia in the Arctic.

The first macro type of threat is military and security threats, consisting of two sub-elements.

A. *Conventional* military threats:²⁶


- Conventional military buildup and accretion of military capabilities by NATO and the US in the Arctic region, primarily translating to the completion of new infrastructural projects (including attempts to create military infrastructure on drifting ice), increasing icebreakers potential,²⁷ the modernization of fleets, and the improvement of means of communication and data/intelligence collection.
 - Improvement of the capabilities of NATO's early warning system, including, among others, the use of space-based capabilities.²⁸
 - Expansion of the military activities of NATO members in the Arctic Ocean aimed at reducing Russia's ability to deploy and use strategic offensive weapons. The Russian side is concerned that the US and its allies could try to "trap" Russian forces by blocking (denying) their movement in/out of the Arctic by blocking the Bering Strait and employing measures that would transform Greenland into a choke point for Russia.²⁹
 - Building capabilities in the realm of strategic aviation that is capable of delivering precision strikes from the Arctic region.
 - Deployment of early warning systems as well as anti-aircraft/missile complexes (including systems mounted on vessels) in the Norwegian and Greenland Seas, as well as in the western part of the Barents and Beaufort Seas.
 - Growing presence of and intelligence gathering by foreign countries in the Arctic.
 - Creation of "Arctic special forces" (*arkticheskii spetsnaz*). For instance, the Russian military expert community shares concerns over Canada's increasing use of its Canadian Ranger forces (primarily consisting of Indigenous peoples) that possess special skills and knowledge in survival and operations in Arctic conditions.³⁰
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In addition to the above-mentioned aspects, Russian military experts and commentators, as well as the political leadership, have expressed particular concern over NATO's growing ability to destroy Russia's military potential in the Arctic region by delivering a non-nuclear Prompt Global Strike (PGS).³¹ Particularly, Russia's concern regarding NATO's ability to deliver a PGS is related to the development of three main types of weaponry. The first type of weaponry is the longer-range precision weapons that include, among others, various types of military drones and guided bombs. This concern – absolutely valid for Russia prior to 2022 – may have been partially mitigated by the experience of the Russo-Ukrainian war, which has demonstrated that Russian jamming is capable of reducing the effectiveness of some types of this weaponry.³² Second, NATO's (and America's) accelerated buildup of arsenal ships capable of carrying hundreds of long-range missiles are elevating Russia's concern. Yet, based on the specificities of the Arctic environment (especially in the heavily iced eastern part of the Arctic), the reported lack of this type of ship among key NATO countries like the UK, and those ships' high level of susceptibility to electronic warfare (EW),³³ it is unclear whether this issue is of major concern for Russian military planners. Third, the integrated use of ship- and space-based means of anti-aircraft/missile systems that are capable of disabling Russian missiles is potentially of concern for Russia. Given NATO's technological superiority and emphasis on space (as a separate operational area), this may indeed be seen as a major concern for the Russian side.

B. Another type of threat that is articulated by Russian military experts is the so-called *hybrid threat*, the assessment of which is premised on a definition offered by the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Valery Gerasimov.³⁴ Despite its vast track record of conducting hybrid operations, Russia (and its historical predecessor, the USSR) has a deep historical fear of hybrid operations being used against it, due to the country's diverse ethnographic landscape, its complex history, and the limitations of its economic model. In the context of the Arctic region, Russia's perception of so-called hybrid threats is dominated by three factors: the unique local geographic-climatic specificities, the importance of the region to the Russian economy, and the predominantly sparse and ethnically non-Russian population. Thus, Russian professional literature identifies several main types of hybrid threats. The first threat is the internationalization of the Arctic region and, specifically, attempts to provide the NSR with the status of an "international transportation artery," which would likely be used in the future to not only expand economic presence but also to supply troops, materiel, and armaments in case of an armed conflict in the region. For this purpose, in 2019, Russia passed a law "shutting" the NSR for all foreign vessels (especially military/navy).³⁵ Interestingly, Russia's concentration on its sovereign rights over the NSR puts it in conflict not only with its traditional rivals, such as the US, but countries that view the Arctic as a shared space of the entire world and not an area of someone's exclusive sovereign rights, such as China and India.

The second type of hybrid threat identified in Russian professional literature is informational campaigns and information-psychological operations conducted by Western media and information outlets, as well as universities and think tanks, which aim to discredit Russia and its reported commitment to ecological and social sustainability. Given Russia's environmental nihilism and complete disregard for ecological sustainability as such, conducting such "operations" is not an onerous task. To prevent the West from collecting information about Russia's transgressions in the Arctic (and elsewhere) in the domain of environmental sustainability, the country has de facto outlawed all international ecological forums and organizations, including, among others, Greenpeace International.³⁶ Similarly, to conceal its mistreatment of its local






(Indigenous) population from foreign observers, Russia has extensively invested in pro-Kremlin voices among its Indigenous population. Following the outbreak of Russia's aggression against Ukraine (with mounting casualties suffered by ethnically non-Russian soldiers), it also criminalized participation in Arctic-related organizations whose position differs from the one imposed by Moscow.³⁷


The third hybrid threat is the role of Norway, as one of the most avid anti-Russian Arctic actors, in promoting its own interests and also assisting the US (and NATO in general) in its attempts to reduce Russia's role in the Arctic. Russian commentators refer to Norway's constant desire to "squeeze Russia" from its traditional fisheries areas and extend its sovereignty over the entire Svalbard archipelago – which the large part of Russia's expert community still refers to as a "gray zone" from the legal point of view³⁸ – to facilitate NATO's penetration into the Arctic region.

A fourth hybrid threat identified as a concern in Russian professional literature is the readiness of foreign countries to conduct sabotage and subversive operations aiming to inflict irreparable damage on Russia's critical (economic) infrastructure. These operations are performed by terrorist and criminal formations, as well as members of private military companies (PMCs) that employ, for instance, uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) and "killer drones." The fifth threat involves the attempts of countries from the Indo-Pacific region to expand their presence in the Arctic by acquiring (for a fee) or renting parts of the territories of other Arctic nations. Clearly, the reference being made here is to China and its modus operandi in the Arctic. While the Russian media and expert community have been noticeably very quiet about this aspect after 2021/22, China and its ambitious plans were frequently mentioned in Russian scholarship prior to this period as one example of the threats to Russia's national interests in the Arctic.³⁹ Interestingly, prior to Russia's open diplomatic and political breakup with the West in 2022, some prominent Russian experts named, as an example of the hybrid threats to Russia's national interests in the Arctic, the "formation of ad hoc coalitions between countries whose relationships are complex and contain fictitious points."⁴⁰ While no countries were mentioned, one could assume that the Russian expert community might have anticipated anti-Russian alliances formed by such actors as China in conjunction with their strategic adversaries (such as, for instance, the US) to gain access to Russia's natural resources.

The final hybrid threat identified in Russian literature is the so-called "social threat," primarily referencing the "growing foreign influence" among Russia's Indigenous population, which poses the risk of growing self-awareness, anti-Moscow moods, and, ultimately, separatism.⁴¹ Throughout Russian history – both post-1991 as well as pre-1917 – ethnically non-Russian regions, especially at times of economic crisis or other negative developments, have frequently demonstrated their highly flammable potential.

Given the diverse nature of challenges and threats to Russian national security, it would make sense to (very) briefly outline – without delving too much into details, since this will be explored in the next section of the report – the key ideas expressed by Russia's expert community regarding the minimization and neutralization of those challenges and threats. Prior to 2022, Russian experts argued that one of the ways to minimize the threats to Russian national interests in the Arctic was coalition building, thereby avoiding an overreliance on relations with one actor (or group of actors). This coalition building was reflected in "attracting Japan, South Korea and some other actors to joint economic projects and initiatives in Siberia and the Arctic region."⁴² After 2022,





such ideas stopped circulating among the Russian expert community. Instead, a clear priority has been given to the need to form “active offensive strategies” that would include the following measures:⁴³

- The creation of the “active adaptation strategy,” enabling the swift adaption of existing legislation to wartime conditions.
- A new strategy toward international regional partnership that will include the establishment of close ties with non-Arctic states that do not take an anti-Russian position, and offering those actors lucrative projects in the Arctic on more favourable conditions.
- A new “logistical strategy” concerning transportation along the NSR.
- A new Arctic strategy regarding telecommunication and satellite services in the Arctic.
- The introduction of an Arctic Military Strategy that would include, among others, the creation of an additional military district in the northwestern part of the country, the qualitative and quantitative strengthening of the military capabilities of the Northern Fleet, and the strengthening of the Arctic part of the Eastern and Central Military Districts.


Importantly, in planning to confront NATO in the Arctic, Russian experts call for reliance on the principles of asymmetry, avoiding an open arms race with the West (as used to be the case during the USSR) in favour of concentrating on integrating new types of weaponry that qualitatively surpass Western analogues and thereby gain a competitive edge for Russia.⁴⁴


The Arctic as a Battlefield: The Russian Perspective

This segment of the report will discuss Russia’s vision of the Arctic as a potential battlefield. Specifically, three aspects will be discussed. First, the report will review how Arctic geographic and climactic conditions, coupled with NATO weaknesses, could shape the nature of the conflict and which tools (means of war) Russia could rely on to gain superiority. Second, it will explore the specific measures that Russia may take in select operational domains and areas of confrontation to reduce NATO’s quantitative military and economic superiority. Third, the report will discuss tentative scenarios – solely based on Russian-language sources – of a potential escalation in the Arctic.

Geographically, Russian military and special literature defines the Arctic theatre of war as an area (both surface and space) lying above the 66° 33’ northern latitude of the Arctic Circle. Given the unique features of this region, Russian military experts identify three macro factors that would play a critical role during a conflict in the Arctic:⁴⁵

The first macro factor is climate and geography, shaped by the following characteristics:

- Extreme weather conditions.
 - The very large coastal line and the “focal” (*ochagovyyi*) nature of defence.
 - The low radiation balance of the Earth’s surface.
 - Hard precipitation during most times of the year.
 - The very complex terrain (permafrost) and geological landscape.
 - The long periods of ice coverage (9–10 months per year) in the Arctic Ocean.
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These as well as other factors play a crucial role in determining the types of military and special equipment that can be used in the Arctic, as well as in planning the transportation and manoeuvres of manpower during a conflict. Thus, the ability to operate in these conditions is stipulated by the presence (or absence) of Arctic-designed specialized equipment, combat equipment (for manpower), as well as adequate all-weather year-round logistical support.

Second, the very complex ethnographic conditions that are stipulated by a combination of several features would play a key role in an Arctic conflict. For example, the Arctic region does not have a unified industrial-economic complex, due to the region's geographic detachment from main industrial and agricultural centres. This makes Russia's Arctic territories directly dependent on the delivery of goods and products from the mainland, exposing logistical ties, increasing costs, and making local populations (and especially military contingents) strategically dependent on externally delivered supplies. Another aspect is related to a combination of the local ethno-national composition and the very low population density. As argued by Russian military experts, the fact that the macro-region is primarily composed of an ethnically non-Russian population (whose history of relations with ethnic Russians has never been easy), as well as geographically and (more importantly) culturally, linguistically, and ethnically detached Russians, could create a challenge in the event of a regional crisis. Finally, Russian authors have referred to the factor of "indigeneity," where the course of a potential regional conflict may be heavily influenced by the stance of the Indigenous groups. Russian experts acknowledge that relationships between local Indigenous groups and Moscow "have remained complex and unsteady." Moreover, as many Russian experts argue, the situation has likely stagnated due to "developments in Ukraine and economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU." The authors suggest that the state (and its armed forces) should pay more attention to learning from the Indigenous population in terms of survivability in Arctic conditions for the Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Special Forces (SF). Yet, Russian military experts do not suggest forming separate military formations consisting of the local Indigenous population. This may be due either to the lack of confidence in the loyalty of the local Indigenous formations or to the very high losses already suffered by the local Indigenous population in Ukraine.

The third macro factor that Russian military experts suggest would play a crucial role in an Arctic conflict is the critical role of special engineering equipment and engineer troops.⁴⁶ The normal functioning of the NSR and land-based infrastructure, as well as the capacity to hinder an adversary's ability to penetrate the territory and conduct manoeuvres inside it, depends on the system of fortifications created by engineer troops with the support of special Arctic-tailored engineering equipment. Therefore, special emphasis should be placed on refurbishing (or building) the fortifications of defensive positions and launching sites; preparing aerodromes, pantones, and key routes through which troops will be moving and conducting the main manoeuvres; setting up various types of non-explosive engineering barriers (barrages) suitable for the Arctic region and its conditions,⁴⁷ and fortifying water and food supply routes and sources.

In addition to the previously mentioned factors and characteristics, Russian authors emphasize other specificities of the Arctic theatre of war,⁴⁸ including the extremely stressful operational environment, which contributes to a high risk of mistakes and the ease with which information-psychological operations (or cyber operations compromising the means of communication) could spread chaos and confusion. Another factor underscored by Russian experts is related to the







presence of the so-called “cascade amplification mechanism” (*kaskadnyje mekhanizmy usilenija*), in which a small mistake (or development) could result in major breakdowns within the entire system of command and control (C2). Given the relatively weak connectivity in and the vast geographic scope of the region, a single event in one part of the Arctic could have a rapidly cascading impact on the whole system, leading to the disruption of the C2 system, chaos, and other mistakes.

While Russian analysts acknowledge the existence of structural weaknesses and vulnerabilities in the Arctic, the majority of them still consider Russia’s military positions to be superior vis-à-vis both NATO collectively and its individual members. According to Russian authors, in the event of a military confrontation, Russia should capitalize on several strategic weaknesses of NATO, which, according to Russian analysts, will not be overcome in the short to medium term. First, they argue that Russia should capitalize on NATO’s lack of icebreaker capabilities, which (in case of a regional conflict) would bar NATO from supplying its troops and fortifying existing military formations. However, the F-35 Lightning II supersonic stealth strike fighters could become a serious obstacle for Russia and could potentially neutralize Russia’s competitive edge in icebreakers. The second factor identified by Russian experts is the perceived gap in hypersonic weapon systems, where, according to Russian experts, Russia has an undisputed advantage.⁴⁹ Russian military expert Dmitry Litovkin argued that Russia’s use of the Kh-47M2 Kinzhal hypersonic air-launched ballistic missiles and the K-300P Bastion-P mobile coastal defence missile systems (equipped with the P-800 Oniks supersonic anti-ship missiles) could pose an insurmountable challenge for NATO aircraft carriers and frigates.⁵⁰

This said, Russian experts concede that, at least in the short to medium term, the main danger to Russia in the Arctic is unlikely to stem from NATO’s military capabilities. Rather, Russian experts argue that the main threats come from network-centric operations that NATO members will conduct. Russian military experts and planners believe that NATO will take a complex, multifaceted approach aiming to destabilize the six main domains that play a critical role in Russia’s ability to preserve full control over the Arctic. These steps will include the destabilization of the political, military, economic, social, infrastructural, and informational domains, causing a “strategic paralysis” of Russia’s C2 system. This “destabilization,” according to Russian experts, will not take a direct form aimed at achieving immediate situational objectives. Rather, these actions will be implemented in three sets of measures:⁵¹

- The promotion of the “democratic agenda,” reflected in the infiltration and promotion of pro-Western individuals, political forces, and groups. For instance, as mentioned earlier in the report, the Russian side has profoundly tightened its grip over organizations and individuals who are keen to promote local (Indigenous) languages, cultures, and traditions, especially if these groups and/or individuals postulate ideas that do not comply with the Kremlin’s agenda. Russia has also sought to tighten its grip on organizations and individuals who touch on the history of the repression of specific groups under the USSR.
 - “Indirect (para)military actions” that aim to achieve the destabilization of the country via social-political and terrorist measures and man-made catastrophes. These events would result in the takeover of political control in the country by pro-Western forces and the “invitation” of peacekeeping forces of the US and NATO for the “stabilization” of the situation. While Russian military experts do not provide any elaboration on the geographic
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area(s) that are at the highest risk of destabilization, one could speculate that the Russian side is primarily concerned about (a) key infrastructural and transportation knots in the Arctic and High North, such as the Sakhalin liquefied natural gas (LNG) and Yamal LNG projects; (b) the economically depressed and predominantly ethnically non-Russian areas, like Sakha/Yakutia, Tuva, and Chukotka; and (c) the so-called “choke points” (such as the Bering Strait or Murmansk) that, if compromised, could effectively stall the transportation of the critical natural resources that fuel the Russian economy.


- “Direct military actions” as the final accord.⁵²

The Domains of Conventional Confrontation

Having decoded Russia’s perception of the threats in the Arctic, the strengths and weaknesses of its strategic adversary (NATO), and the main specificities of local conditions (climatic-geographic and ethnographic), it will be important to delve deeper into the traditional operational domains (“battlefields”) to which Russian military experts and specialized literature accord the most attention, as well as to examine how Russia plans to confront its opponents.⁵³ It is very important to underscore the fact that, in the conditions of the Arctic theatre of war, at least three domains – land, navy, and air – will be very tightly connected, and a breakdown in any element could result in a massive cascading breakdown.

A. Land. This domain has traditionally played one of the central roles in Russian (and Soviet) military science, which has been traditionally related to the Russian command’s willingness to sacrifice large numbers of personnel to achieve a specific objective on the battlefield. The course of the Russo-Ukrainian war has once again demonstrated the validity of this military tradition.⁵⁴ Given the unique conditions of the Arctic region, which are very different from traditional operational theatres, Russia is unlikely to be able to rely on its traditional method of sending large human waves (*miasnyje shturmy*) to overwhelm the adversary and achieve the objective, whatever the cost. Instead, on the land, Russia is likely to rely on a combination of offensive and defensive operations.

Offensively, Russia is most certain to rely on its historically proven competitive edge – the ability to perform swift military operations by bringing to the theatre small groups of elite personnel (the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV), Special Operations Forces (SOF), Spetsnaz) to overwhelm the opponent and paralyze its actions. Such actions were conducted by both the USSR (Afghanistan, the Zapad-1981 strategic-operational exercise)⁵⁵ and the Russian Federation. Russia’s use of this approach was best demonstrated during the incident at the Pristina airport⁵⁶ (June 12, 1999)⁵⁷ and during Russia’s attempt to overthrow the Ukrainian government in February 2022 during the Battle of Hostomel (February 25–April 1, 2022). In effect, in 2014, the Russian MOD carried out unprecedented military exercises, bringing paratroopers from the military aerodrome at Borneo to Franz Josef Land and then via the Murmansk-based “Olenya” air base to the “Ivanovo Severny” military aerodrome. During these manoeuvres, the paratroopers from the 98th Guards Airborne Division conducted a 300-kilometre forced march through Arctic terrain.⁵⁸ In 2019, *AldriMer*, a Norwegian information outlet specializing in military affairs, claimed that, according to its sources, “members of the Russian special services without any insignia and dressed as civilians were spotted on Svalbard [Spitsbergen] Island” and on Norwegian continental territory. As noted by the media site, forces deployed to Norway were “militarized mercenary formations, whose



activities have been very well known starting from the annexation of Crimea” – in other words, members of Russian private military companies.⁵⁹

On a similar note, Russian conservative military experts like Alexander Perendzhiev have urged Russia to act much more assertively in the Arctic and conduct “a Special Military Operation in Alaska,” based on the experience of other similar operations (Crimea and the Donbass). In his opinion, the US would not dare to use nuclear weapons against Russia (or against an irregular formation acting on behalf of Russia), but it would surely suffer a defeat since the US has never waged a defensive war on its territory, and the fighting qualities of its personnel are inferior to those demonstrated by Russia.⁶⁰ At this juncture, speaking about land-based operations in the Arctic, one should not forget the military experience of the USSR during the Great Patriotic War (1941–45), when the Soviet military leadership – to facilitate the transportation and delivery of cargoes to the least accessible areas – ordered the mobilization of hundreds of Indigenous people (and thousands of reindeers) on the Krel front.⁶¹

To conduct (supporting) offensive military operations on the ground in the Arctic region, the Russian Armed Forces might employ several types of weaponry.⁶²

Type of weaponry	Functions	Pertinence to operations in the Arctic
Amphibious all-terrain vehicle “Ruslan” (TTM 4902 PS)⁶³	Designed to carry operating personnel and repair teams in off-road terrain, including in virgin snow (without limiting the depth of snow cover), loose sands, and all types of swamps, designed to overcome small water obstacles.	Can transport small groups of military personnel across inhospitable conditions, such as the Arctic or the deep Taiga.
Snow and swamp vehicle GAZ-3344-20 “Aleut”⁶⁴	The main task of the army GAZ-3344-20 is the transportation of personnel in difficult terrain.	Can work effectively in the difficult conditions of the Arctic, Siberia, or the Far East.
Amphibious all-terrain vehicle DT-10PM “Vityaz”⁶⁵	A two-section tracked carrier vehicle offering high cross-country capabilities and manoeuvrability in swamp and snow terrain.	Are specifically designed to operate in difficult terrain and obstacles like ditches and walls and come out of water onto an unprepared bank, ice, or peat. Could be used in all parts of the Arctic and Siberia.
The Mil Mi-8 medium twin-turbine helicopters⁶⁶	Designed to perform civilian, reconnaissance, and military operations.	Designed for missions in the Arctic due to its ability to operate in temperatures of -60°C (Celsius).

The DT-30PM amphibious all-terrain tracked carrier vehicle	Designed to carry personnel, equipment, and military hardware in the most challenging road and climate conditions, without prior reconnaissance and route reinforcement, as well as for mounting weapons and military hardware. ⁶⁷	Ambient temperature at which the engine can be started ranges from -40°C to +50°C, ⁶⁸ which makes this type of equipment suitable for operations in many parts of Siberia and the High North.
Main battle tank T-80BVM	A highly mobile and versatile tank, capable of engaging in various combat scenarios, from urban to rural warfare. This tank is equipped with advanced armament, protection, and mobility systems, making it a formidable force on the battlefield. It is a third-generation main battle tank, featuring a low-profile turret and a well-sloped armoured hull, offering enhanced protection against various types of projectiles. ⁶⁹	The main “Arctic” advantages of the T-80BVM are related to the power plant used. In the engine compartment of the tank is a GTD-1250 gas turbine engine with a capacity of 1,250 horsepower. Such an engine provides high power density and mobility. In addition, in comparison with the piston, it is easier to operate at low temperatures. It is known that starting a diesel engine at negative air temperatures (and the corresponding cooling of the structure) is a very complex and lengthy process. Preheating is required, and then long-term heating is required during operation, inlet air preparation, etc. All these procedures, depending on the temperature and condition of the engine, can take half an hour or more. ⁷⁰

As of now, it is impossible to accurately assess Russia’s actual offensive military capabilities (given the likely transfer of some equipment to the frontline), nor – given the discrepancy between capabilities and the reality on the ground, based on the lessons of the Russo-Ukrainian war – the genuine quality of these capabilities and their reported compatibility with Arctic conditions.

Defensively, Russia is mostly likely to rely on three main components. First, it will presumably depend on its system of military bases and infrastructure. Among these, special attention should be paid to the unique “Arctic Trefoil” (*Arkticheskii Trilistnik*) military base, composed of three interconnected buildings and erected thanks to the application of the unique building technologies


required for the extreme environment.⁷¹ Russian sources claim that this military base can perform such functions as the anti-missile defence of Russian territory; the protection of the NSR (both in peacetime and during a potential military escalation in the region); general security for regional maritime shipping, which de facto places international shipping through the Arctic under Russian control; and meteorological research, which (via its system of Earth observational satellites) could be used by the Russian military for intelligence-related purposes.⁷² Another military base located in the Arctic is the Northern Clover military base on Kotelny Island, which aims to protect certain parts of the NSR.⁷³ The Northern Clover base also includes the Temp military air base (established in 2013), which secures its all-year-round functioning.

Second, Russia’s defence will likely revolve around its anti-aircraft/missile defence systems, which include the following pieces specifically designed for operations in the Arctic:

Type of weaponry	Key characteristics	Pertinence to operations in the Arctic
“Arctic” Tor-M2DT	All-weather, low- to medium-altitude, short-range surface-to-air missile systems. Designed for destroying airplanes, helicopters, cruise missiles, UAVs, and short-range ballistic threats.	Designed to be used for the Arctic region at temperatures of up to -50°C, which makes it capable of operating in nearly all parts of the Arctic region. ⁷⁴
Pantsir-SA	The Pantsir air-defence system incorporates anti-aircraft guns and missiles to intercept tactical aircraft, precision-guided munitions (PGMs), and UAVs. Using its solid-state search radar, the Pantsir can track up to 20 tactical aircraft-sized targets at a range of 32–36 kilometres. ⁷⁵	Due to its ability to operate in extreme temperatures, Russian sources claim that this type of weaponry has demonstrated (during military drills) a high level of effectiveness in Arctic conditions. ⁷⁶

At this juncture, it is important to highlight that Russian military experts identify three key objectives to ensure the security of the Russian Arctic and transportation along the NSR. The first objective is the protection of the Kola Peninsula, which, given both the Russian superiority in equipment and manpower, may be viewed as the most secure and best protected part of the Arctic. The second objective entails the protection of the eastern part of the Arctic, where, despite some pre-2022 efforts aimed at restoring its pre-1991 military potential,⁷⁷ remains relatively weak. Finally, the third objective is ensuring the protection of the Central Arctic, where the role of the Yamal Peninsula and Taimyr are the main strategic priorities. Russian experts have urged for the need to construct a multi-layered defence system (which would include the S-400–Pantsir “Tandem”⁷⁸), with additional S-400 and S-500 complexes to be deployed in the area as a protective measure against potential enemy attempts to target locally based oil and gas facilities. For this, three interconnected land-based circles of defence should be strengthened:

- External (Kola Peninsula – Franz Josef Land – Severnaya Zemlya).

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- Middle (Ukhta – Novaya Zemlya – Dikson).
 - Internal (Yamal and surrounding areas), whose defence should be done in coordination between land-based installations and naval forces, primarily military icebreakers.


However, two important aspects should be highlighted. On the one hand, the use of the above-mentioned systems in conditions of real-time combat has proven to be controversial: in Ukraine (with its limited offensive capabilities), all the above-mentioned types of systems have been targeted and successfully destroyed by the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF), as has been proven on many occasions in both images and videos.⁷⁹ Russia's ability to replenish these losses remains unclear. Furthermore, claims made prior to 2022⁸⁰ denying the effectiveness of the S-400 systems may not be as ungrounded as they appeared at the time.


The third component on which Russia's defence will likely rely is electronic warfare (EW), which has proven to be quite effective during the Russo-Ukrainian war. While it is unclear which types of EW systems could be used in the Arctic region, Russia is likely to rely on the following means of EW in case of an armed conflict in the region:⁸¹

- The RB-341V Leer-3 complex, the R-330Zh Zhitel automated jamming station, and the RB-301V Borisoglebsk-1 and Borisoglebsk-2, as well as the Lava-PR radar- and radio-jamming machines.
- The R-149AKSh-1 armoured utility car, which allows for the securing of a steady connection with land- and air-based objects up to 1,000 kilometres away and for the maintenance of a connection through closed Internet channels. The R-149AKSh-1 can also make an automatic determination of its location coordinates using various satellite systems.
- The R-439MD2 satellite radio station, which secures telephone connections in the field.
- The R-441LM satellite modem, which allows for the maintenance of phone and telegraph connections with the mainland and for direct communications with Moscow.

In fact, following the outbreak of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the Russian side has been covertly testing spoofing and jamming technologies as a "below the threshold of war" means of attack.⁸² As noted by Rob Huebert, "[J]amming in the Arctic would represent an escalation from what's been seen thus far and should be a major concern for Canada given commercial aviation. GPS is an important navigation tool for airlines. The satellite-based system has replaced expensive ground devices that would transmit radio beams to guide planes toward their destination."⁸³ Arguably, Russia's abilities in the realm of EW – given NATO's plans to rely on its air forces, "smart" bombs, and UAVs – could become one of the most serious competitive edges of the Russian side.

Another important task identified by the Russian expert community is increasing the radar coverage via the GLONASS system⁸⁴ and adding more radar installations in the coastal areas of the Russian Arctic. As of now, Russia's main capabilities in the Arctic (in terms of radars) are offered by two types of radars:

- The Rezonans-N radar complexes (see below for the 2019 deployment), which are designed for the long-range detection of enemy aircraft, missiles (including hypersonic), and various types of drones. Rezonans-N radar provides over-the-horizon capabilities and
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can spot targets up to a distance of between 600–1,200 kilometres and up to a height of 100 kilometres. Rezonans-N radar is reportedly capable of tracking the F-35 jets.⁸⁵

- The Sopka-2 radar, which is reportedly capable of detecting objects up to 450 kilometres, can be operated remotely, requiring only a single operator and thus making it especially suitable for operation in the Arctic.⁸⁶ Sopka-2 radars have been installed at the Temp Air Base, the Nagurskoye Air Base, and Rogachevo Air Base.


Akin to the anti-aircraft/missile-defence complexes, the genuine capabilities of Russian radars remain unknown and warrant additional research. With the successful attacks of Ukrainian kamikaze drones against Russian critical infrastructure (see below for some examples),⁸⁷ it remains unclear whether the above-mentioned radars would be able to detect sophisticated types of Western weaponry and military equipment in case of an armed conflict in Arctic conditions.


It has been argued that while Russia's reliance on the civilian (American) satellite communication system Iridium is overarching,⁸⁸ the integration of the *Meridian-M* communications satellite by its Arctic-based military formations will not only decrease dependence on foreign technologies but also improve the level of communication in the region.⁸⁹ It should also improve – thanks to the use of *Arktika-M* weather satellites – naval navigation in the Arctic.⁹⁰

B. Sea. Based on Russia's military organization, the Arctic region could be conditionally divided into three large segments, with the western part clearly dominating the other parts, in terms of equipment and fortification.

The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation (2022) pays high attention to the Arctic region as an area of Russia's strategic interests.⁹¹ The doctrine also looks to the Arctic with a focus on maintaining global leadership in the construction and operation of nuclear icebreakers, an area where the United States is already playing catch-up.⁹² More recent Russian works have rephrased a famous statement by Halford Mackinder into “Who rules logistical hubs in the Eurasian Arctic commands the fate of the world,” which intensifies geopolitical rivalry and makes the risk of regional conflicts more palpable than before.⁹³ Thus, the Arctic region itself, as well as the so-called choke points that control navigation into and from the Arctic, is emerging as a zone of potential military confrontation between NATO (or its individual members) and Russia. Reflecting on a pretext for a conflict in the Arctic, one Russian source described the following situation, which would be extremely precarious for Russia: “The US sends a group [of] military ships along the NSR. The Americans would justify this move by the principle of the open seas [...] How would Russia respond to this incident? For now, there is no clear answer.”⁹⁴


Russia's plans regarding a potential military conflict in the Arctic in the maritime domain should be looked at through the lens of the 2014 reform that introduced a Joint Strategic Command (JSC) on the basis of the Northern Fleet headquarters. This elevated the status of this military district (MD) from operational-strategic to a strategic formation, and it included the following main implications:⁹⁵


1. The former MD headquarters became joint forces commands, as all four Navy fleets were subordinated to the new JSCs.
 2. Contrary to the old MDs, which were destined to transform into fronts in wartime, the JSCs were designed to facilitate a seamless transition from peace to war.
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3. The JSCs were tasked with improved discretion in coordinating military planning and operations with regional non-military uniformed forces and civilian organizations. This included achieving strengthened competence by temporarily subordinating other units, including units belonging to other parts of the Armed Forces, as well as forces belonging to the FSB border troops (in addition to the MOD, one of the key procurers of icebreakers) and the National Guard.

Given the specificities of the Arctic environment, the use of certain types of naval warfare may be restricted. Thus, in its operations in the Arctic conditions, Russia is likely to primarily rely on three elements.

First, Russia will rely on the submarines that played the key role in the Soviet Arctic-related strategic thinking during the Cold War,⁹⁶ when the Soviet Northern Fleet put a special emphasis on nuclear-powered submarines armed with nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles (SSBNs). Thanks to technological advances (namely, increased missile ranges and the SSBNs' ability to deliver strikes on targets from near-home waters), the Soviet naval strategy later switched to the so-called "bastion"⁹⁷ concept. According to this concept, Soviet submarines were able to stay closer to the Soviet part of the Arctic, benefitting from the full protection of the USSR's air defence, naval, and air forces.⁹⁸ Importantly, the collapse of the USSR did not result in the demise of the "bastion" concept. Instead, the concept was entertained in the 1990s under the "Northern Strategic Bastion" name, although economic crisis and other factors hindered the practical implementation of the idea, which would have seen the Northern Fleet securing "strategic nuclear deterrence" while simultaneously providing the "necessary support for Russia to be able to secure its interests in the World Ocean."⁹⁹ As of 2022–23, the Northern Fleet has the following capabilities in the submarine domain:

- Eight SSBNs of the Delta IV and Borei classes that are to maintain Russia's retaliatory nuclear-strike capability.¹⁰⁰ According to Russian sources, the Delta IV submarines can carry 16 SS-N-23 Sineva submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and (reportedly) the SS-N-15 Starfish anti-submarine missile. Meanwhile, the Borei submarines can carry 16 SS-N-32 Bulava SLBMs.¹⁰¹ The Russian side also claimed that by 2028, the Northern Fleet will receive three submarines of the Borei-A class ("*Knyaz Pozharsky*").¹⁰² According to some Western experts, Borei-class submarines represent a formidable advancement in nuclear-powered submarine technology. Equipped with the Irtysch-Amphora-B-055 sonar system, these submarines surpass the sonar capabilities of the U.S. Navy's Ohio- and Virginia-class submarines, offering unparalleled situational awareness.¹⁰³
 - Another 16 active combat submarines, including six nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) of the Akula, Victor III, and Sierra II classes, five nuclear-powered guided missile submarines (SSGNs) of the Severodvinsk and Oscar I/II classes, and five Kilo-class diesel submarines (SSKs). The upgraded Akula-class submarine will reportedly be armed with some variant of the Kalibr missile. The Severodvinsk submarines carry two variants of the Kalibr – both the land-attack missile (SS-N-30) and the anti-ship variant (SS-N-27). The Oscar II class is armed with SS-N-19 Shipwreck and SS-N-16 Stallion anti-ship missiles. Victor III and Sierra II submarines are armed with the SS-N-21 Sampson cruise missile.¹⁰⁴
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Overall, akin to the Cold War period, Russia's submarine capabilities represent, perhaps, the greatest threat to NATO.¹⁰⁵ However, two aspects should be noted. On the one hand, as clearly demonstrated by the course of the Russo-Ukrainian war, Russia likely has a limited stockpile of the most up-to-date missiles (such as the Kalibr), and its production capabilities may be limited due to stricter access to foreign technologies.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, the Ukrainian side (and Western experts) has repeatedly claimed successful cases of intercepting Russia's advanced missiles,¹⁰⁷ which may decrease (at least to an extent) the formidability of this type of weaponry given the West's technological capability. Also, it is not fully clear to what extent Russia's reported capabilities correspond with their real (actual) characteristics.


Second, Russia's Arctic operations will undoubtedly rely on its icebreakers, a field in which Russia has been developing its capabilities since 1897, when construction on the first modern icebreaker, *Yermak*, commenced under the supervision of Vice-Admiral S.O. Makarov.¹⁰⁸ During the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet icebreakers played an important role in securing navigation along the NSR and maintaining the Allied supplies to the USSR.¹⁰⁹ Undoubtedly, today, with Russia's declared economic goal to transform the NSR into a world-class transportation artery and a direct competitor of the Suez Canal,¹¹⁰ and given the growing perceived conviction of the inevitability of a conflict (or escalation) in the Arctic, the use of icebreakers acquires special importance. In addition to civilian¹¹¹ and geoeconomic objectives,¹¹² Russia aims to rely on its competitive advantage in the so-called "military icebreakers." The first episode of using such icebreakers occurred during the Soviet era, in 1941, when the icebreaker *Stalin* was equipped with ten artillery pieces and machine guns. Additionally, from the late 1960s onward, Ivan Susanin-class patrol ships (eight vessels in total, produced between 1973 and 1981) were primarily designed for use by KGB units of the Soviet coast guard,¹¹³ which perform both civilian (search-and-rescue) and military functions.

For instance, the Project 23550 icebreakers (such as *Ivan Papanin*) were reported to have the following capabilities and equipment:¹¹⁴

- Two Project 03160 (Raptor) patrol boats.
- A Kamov Ka-27 military helicopter, designed for anti-ship protection.
- One air-cushion vehicle (the Manul Project).
- A 100-millimetre universal A-190 artillery gun.
- An AK-176 naval gun (mounted in an enclosed turret), designed to target sea-, coastal-, and aerial-based targets (including low-flying anti-ship missiles), which is said to have more advanced characteristics than its previous versions.
- The Club-K container-housed missile complex, designed to defeat sea-surface and ground targets at a range of up to 300 kilometres. As modified versions of the Kalibr sea-launched cruise missile, missiles of this type are capable of flying at extra-low altitudes, making them difficult to spot and target.

The introduction of this new type of military icebreaker should strengthen Russia's military posture in the Arctic. Adding sea-launched Kalibr cruise missiles (with a maximum range of 2,600 kilometres)¹¹⁵ to its arsenal allows Russia to target large parts of the Arctic region and effectively protect key sectors of the NSR. Furthermore, adding amphibious capabilities and shorter-range weaponry to the icebreakers' arsenal enables them to conduct various types of offensive operations






in the Arctic. In general, the Ivan Papanin–class Arctic patrol vessels are ideal for missions such as monitoring and protecting Russian Arctic waters, conducting rescues, escorting ships in polar waters, transporting special equipment, towing ships in the port of detention, and maintaining and supporting service vessels. The ships can also be used to offer protection for vessels operating in polar waters from air, sea, and coastal targets.¹¹⁶


Furthermore, in the next several years, two Project 23550 Arktika icebreakers, as well as one Yermak icebreaker, will enter service, the latter being specifically commissioned by the Russian State Security Service (FSB) coast guard. These icebreakers will be equipped with the following types of weaponry and munitions:¹¹⁷

- AK-176 76-millimetre naval guns.
- 9K38 Iгла man-portable infrared homing surface-to-air missile systems.
- Various types of heavy machine guns.
- Platforms for Kalibr and Uran missiles. While the technical characteristics and capabilities of the Kalibr missiles (as well as the damage they could inflict) have already been explained, it makes sense to briefly mention the advantages of integrating the latter type of weaponry. According to Russian sources, the Uran-E shipborne anti-ship missile (ASM) system is designed to destroy missile/torpedo/gun boats, surface ships displacing up to 5,000 tonnes, and seagoing transports.¹¹⁸ This modern subsonic anti-ship missile has a maximum operational range of 130–260 kilometres.¹¹⁹ Russian sources have claimed that the use of Uran missiles expands Russia’s strike and defensive abilities in the maritime domain.¹²⁰

Despite the formidable image and Russia’s actual superiority over NATO in the realm of icebreakers (both quantitatively and qualitatively speaking), Western and some Russian experts express cautious concerns and doubts about whether this superiority will be durable and could become a gamechanger. On the one hand, very few Northern Fleet ships have ice-reinforced hulls,¹²¹ which limits their ability to navigate through the western part of the Arctic to the summer and autumn.¹²² On the other hand, having effectively lost Finland after 2022 as a key partner in designing and constructing icebreakers, Russia’s icebreaker-building capabilities may have been reduced. However, this reduction in capability can only be ascertained with necessary precision over time.

Third, Russia’s Arctic military operations would depend on elements of anti-ship warfare, where Russia is most likely to rely on the following types of missiles:

- P-800 Oniks (the SS-N-26 “Strobile”), which can be ground-launched using two variants of the Bastion launch system: the stationary Bastion-S and the transportable Bastion-P.¹²³ More recent reports have claimed that this type of missile can be launched from “submarines, ships, aircraft, and more.” Since this missile has a radar-guided warhead, it can be jammed using electronic warfare (EW) measures. That is why some of these missiles fail to reach their targets and active countermeasures are employed. Thus, it is more effective to deal with them not in the air but by destroying the launch platforms, which may become a challenge in the Arctic conditions.¹²⁴ For now, this type of missile has posed
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serious challenges for the Ukrainian air-defence system, which consists of a blend of Soviet and Western elements.¹²⁵


- The Kalibr cruise missiles (described earlier in this report).
- The Zvezda Kh-35 Soviet turbojet subsonic cruise anti-ship missile. According to Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Oleksandr Syrskyi, only 1/15 (6.7%) of Kh-35s were intercepted by Ukraine's air defence.¹²⁶
- The 3M22 Zircon scramjet-powered, nuclear-capable hypersonic cruise missile. According to the Ukrainian side, Patriot and SAMP/T systems are capable of destroying the Zircon missiles,¹²⁷ while the Russian side dismissed this information. According to Sidharth Kaushal, a naval warfare expert at the Royal United Services Institute (a British defence think tank), “[T]he operational deployment of the Zircon is an important development, but one whose significance should not be exaggerated.”¹²⁸
- The “Zmeevik” anti-ship land-based hypersonic long-range missile (dubbed an “aircraft killer”).¹²⁹ For now, information about this type of missile, its characteristics, and its capabilities is very limited.


The fact that Russia has added these types of weaponry to the Northern Fleet undoubtedly strengthens both its offensive and defensive potential in the Arctic. Furthermore, the fact that some types of weaponry have posed a challenge for Ukraine's air-defence system (which partially consists of Western types of weaponry) should be seen as a matter of concern for NATO. However, neither the number of stockpiles at Russia's disposal nor the ability of the Russian side to launch a mass production of these types of weaponry are known. Based on the regularity of attacks on Ukraine's critical infrastructure and the high level of selectivity in the use of these weapons, Russia is unlikely to have large quantities of these weapons. Thus, its ability to effectively confront the US (or NATO) using these weapons as a gamechanger is disputable.

C. The **air** domain plays a very important – yet to some extent overlooked in the West – role in Russia's Arctic-related military plans and calculations. The Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) are to be tasked with several key macro-operational functions:

- Missions performed by the Military Transport Aviation, which include the rapid deployment of personnel and equipment in the Arctic, which is of critical importance for the deployment of Airborne Troops units.
- Missions performed by long-range aviation – the Tu-22M3 heavy bombers and the Tu-95MS and Tu-160 aircrafts – from the Severomorsk-1, Vorkuta, Tiksi, and Nagurskoye (Franz Josef Land) air bases, as well as from the Anadyr airport.¹³⁰ Following the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the UAF managed to penetrate the anti-missile/aircraft systems of some of these bases, delivering strikes by kamikaze drones. The most recent of such episodes occurred on December 19, 2024, at Severomorsk-1.¹³¹
- The dual-use missions combining civilian and military tasks and missions.

According to Russian experts, due to the local climactic and geographic conditions, the VKS would play the key role in defeating “aggressive plans of the opponent in the Arctic.” This is primarily stipulated by a very broad range of tasks that the VKS can perform, ranging from monitoring the environment and developments on the ground to targeting enemy missiles and their means of delivery.¹³²





According to a study by RUSI (2022), Russia's air capabilities in the Arctic include, among others.¹³³


- At Severomorsk, the 279th Shipborne Fighter Regiment, with approximately 24 Su-33 fighter jets, and the 100th Shipborne Fighter Regiment, with 24 MiG-29K fighters.
- At Monchegorsk, the 98th Mixed Air Regiment has an estimated 12 MiG-31BMs, 12 Su-24Ms, and an indeterminate number of Su-24MR reconnaissance crafts.


Given Russia's high rate of aircraft losses in Ukraine, and the ongoing withdrawal of its military assets from Syria,¹³⁴ it is impossible to provide an accurate estimate of Russia's current aerial forces in the Arctic.

Hybrid Confrontation: Deceive, Disrupt, Surprise

With the prospect of an open armed conflict in the Arctic being quite unlikely, a regional confrontation would most likely take a hybrid form. As stated by one prominent Russian military expert, “in hybrid war, based on a non-linear strategy, small actions could secure accretion of very significant results.”¹³⁵ Given Russia's vast and multifaceted experience in conducting hybrid operations, a hybrid conflict in the Arctic – which may already be underway, if referring to “confrontation” rather than conflict – could involve Russia's use of three main components.

First, Russia would utilize information-psychological operations. For some time now, the Russian side has been actively promoting the issue of “neocolonialism.” In addition to the so-called Global South,¹³⁶ where Russia has been utilizing anti-Western disinformation narratives for some time now, the Arctic region and the High North have also become targets of Russian disinformation. In his 2010 book, “Battle for the Arctic,” a prominent ultraconservative Russian writer, Artur Indzhiev, argued that “Greenland and the Faroe Islands could scramble the West's plans in its struggle for Arctic resources... This could be used by Russia to obtain possession of Arctic treasures and deliver a blow to the unity of NATO [of which Denmark is a member].” Specifically, he recommended that “Russia has to use the mounting tensions [between Denmark and its Arctic possessions] for its [Moscow's] own benefit ... [by weakening] the Danish claims. Second, we will pay them [the West] back in kind for their anti-Russian policy and support of the Chechen separatists [*sic*].” He also stated in that book that “[w]hen the population of Greenland starts pursuing a more independent policy, it will rid itself of American military bases... What we need to do, is to help them in their struggle for independence ... which could trigger similar sentiments in Alaska and Canada. Russia should understand one thing—the fight against NATO's expansion should not be fought on our borders, but on the territory of the Alliance.”¹³⁷ In dealing with Greenland, Russian information operations (IOs) are even more elaborate, targeting not only Denmark but US–Danish relations as well. The main argument put forward by Russian media is that the US presence in Greenland (and Copenhagen's acquiescence to it) is ruining the local economy and environment.¹³⁸ In pursuit of its disinformation, the Russian side actively refers to the friction points between Indigenous and other groups, as well as trying to play on anti-US and -EU moods, thereby activating the “neocolonialism” narrative.¹³⁹ Unfortunately, on some occasions, Russia's efforts to amplify frictions within Western societies have been greatly facilitated by certain processes within the Western societies themselves, which are used by authoritarian regimes (including China) to their own benefit. Meanwhile, in places like Alaska,






Russian authorities are actively conducting policies to engender the sense that some foreign territories still belong to Russia – akin to what the Kremlin had done for years with Crimea¹⁴⁰ – by the right of history. This is a very dangerous trend, since it could be viewed as a preparatory stage for the mobilization of public support for much more decisive measures.


Second, a hybrid conflict in the Arctic would entail Russia's use of sabotage and subversive operations. In addition to multiple (and proven) examples of spoofing in the Arctic and the Baltic Sea region, which could have catastrophic consequences,¹⁴¹ a series of other incidents has sparked controversy. Specifically, in 2022, one of the fibre-optic cables that connects the Svalbard archipelago with the Norwegian mainland was damaged,¹⁴² while in 2023, the Balticconnector pipeline was broken by the Chinese-Russian vessel *Newnew Polar Bear*.¹⁴³ Most recently, two underwater cables in the Baltic Sea – including the 1,173-kilometre-long C-Lion1 cable between Finland and Germany – were damaged.¹⁴⁴ Given the strategic dependence of some Arctic countries, like Norway, on these kinds of cables (primarily in terms of communication),¹⁴⁵ Russia could conduct these operations not necessarily in case of an escalation but, as warned by NATO officials, as a means to “disrupt Western life, [and] to gain leverage against those nations that are providing security to Ukraine.”¹⁴⁶

Third, Russia would deploy provocations with the use of irregular formations in a hybrid Arctic conflict. Since 2013 – the year of Russia's first recorded use of private military companies (PMCs) in offensive (para)military operations¹⁴⁷ – Russia has transformed PMCs and mercenary formations into a tool of power politics. As stated in this report, members of these formations may have been used by Russia in the Arctic in the past in military drills, although this information was never officially confirmed (at that time, however, Russia denied the existence of PMCs as such). In the case of a hybrid conflict in the Arctic, Russia could potentially use members of its mercenary formations in many parts of the macro-region, including, as offered by some Russian ultraconservative experts, the US (Alaska). However, the likeliest target, should this materialize, would be Svalbard, whose status is presented in Russian media, information outlets, and academia – despite international agreements – as “one of the conflict zones where interests of many countries have collided [...] That is why for the Russian side in the unravelling ‘battle for the Arctic’ this archipelago has a geopolitical meaning.”¹⁴⁸ Western experts have already written about scenarios of how Russia could escalate in Svalbard.¹⁴⁹ However, in our view, the escalation could take a slightly different form. Most likely, at stage one (the preparatory stage), Russia would intensify disinformation campaigns aimed at both domestic (mobilization effect) and foreign (legitimization) audiences. Subsequently, Russia would, as noted by the majority of foreign experts, stage an “incident” with either Russian “fishermen” or “scientists” to cause an international scandal. In case of escalation, this could be followed by the above-mentioned subversion operations and instances of “unrest” or some other provocations on Svalbard, utilizing members of PMC mercenary formations. Depending on the international perception of the “incident” and the response to it from NATO (or individual NATO members), Russia's further actions could vary accordingly.¹⁵⁰

Scenarios of a Conflict and Future Developments in the Arctic: Russian Views

A. The year 2011 holds special place in the history of Russia's military planning and strategic thinking, owing to two events that were, according to the Russian side, “orchestrated” by the West. These events were the outbreak of the Arab Spring – which led to the civil wars in Syria and Libya







– and the so-called “Snow Revolution” in Russia, a series of protests that were levelled against Russia’s ruling elite.¹⁵¹ In this regard, it would make sense to turn to 2011 and review what Russia’s leading security experts wrote about a potential conflict in the Arctic at that time. In 2011, Russian experts contributed to a large project titled “Battle for the Arctic.”¹⁵² Below are the reflections of prominent Russian military expert Alexander Khramchikhin regarding the scenarios of a potential armed conflict in the Arctic. Unlike some other papers from the project, which were filled with neo-imperialistic rhetoric and conspiracy theories, the work by Khramchikhin presented an interesting and sober-minded analysis of the balance of powers in the Arctic (as of 2011) in the case of a potential armed conflict between Russia and the US (NATO).

Scenario #1. Russia vs. other Arctic states. The author argued that under this scenario, the actual fighting – given the extreme military weakness of the Canadian, Norwegian, and Danish armed forces – might take place between Russia and the US. The US Armed Forces would likely easily capture the strategic locations of Chukotka,¹⁵³ given the fact that the Russian Armed Forces were virtually absent in the area (data from 2011). Meanwhile, Russia would not be able to rapidly deploy armed forces – in sufficient quantities and with adequate equipment – due to the large distance, the prospect of a blockage of the Bering Strait by the US Armed Forces, and the fact that the nearest motorized rifle brigade is deployed in Khabarovsk Krai and Primorye.¹⁵⁴ Following the capture of strategic locations in Chukotka, the US could – in the most serious threat, for the author – deliver a massive non-nuclear strike with BGM-109 Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAM) against Russian strategic forces, thus avoiding a global ecological catastrophe and enabling the US to preserve its strategic nuclear potential. At the same time, even if the Russian Armed Forces managed to deliver a backstroke, the US would likely be able to ward off this strike with naval forces, equipped with the RIM-161 Standard Missile 3 (SM-3) – a ship-based surface-to-air missile, as well as other means of EW. In fact, as argued by Khramchikhin, a military engagement of this type would benefit the US for two main reasons: (1) the Tomahawks can strike a large part of the Russian Federation from the Arctic (including locations with strategic weapons), and (2) in the case of Russia’s strike, US radars and naval forces are beneficially situated (based on the prospective trajectory of Russian missiles). Furthermore, as argued by Khramchikhin, due to the effect of the PGS, Russian strategic and conventional forces could be weakened to such an extent that the Russian military-political leadership would be destabilized and disheartened, resulting in Russia not conducting its strike.

This said, Khramchikhin argued that this scenario has several risks and constraints. For instance, he stated that, to succeed, the PGS would need to be a single action bringing complete and unconditional success, because if the strike was unsuccessful or partially successful, Russia would most certainly conduct a massive nuclear strike. This would result in the US employing the full offensive military potential of both its navy and air force. The obstacle, however, is that the US Navy would have to approach Russian coastal areas as closely as possible, which would not go unnoticed by the Russian coast guard and other services.¹⁵⁵ Also, given the stage of military technology and US Armed Forces equipment in 2011, the author contended that solving offensive (delivering the PGS with Tomahawks) and defensive (targeting potential Russian responses by downing its missiles with Standard Missiles) objectives could become problematic due to the fact that both the Tomahawks and the Standards were located in the same segments onboard American destroyers, and it would thus be up to the US command how to balance these two features, whether in favour of offensive or defensive capabilities. Finally, he suggested that, since some divisions of





the Strategic Missile Forces of the Russian Federation (RVSN RF) are deployed deep into Siberia (that is, outside the reach of the Tomahawks, even if they were fired from the Arctic), delivering a decisive blow against these forces would be nearly undoable for the US.


Therefore, this scenario is accomplishable only if three conditions are fulfilled. First, it would necessitate the full collapse and degradation of the key branches of the Russian Armed Forces: the RVSN, VKS (the current name), PVO-PRO, naval forces, radars, and means of detection. Second, this scenario would require the qualitative and quantitative strengthening of the US Armed Forces (as of 2011, Khranchikhin noted that the existing potential might not have sufficed for the task of overwhelming the Russian Armed Forces). This would require massive financial investments, which were allegedly an issue in 2011 and could still be a challenge now and in the future. Third, political ties between the US and Russia would need to plunge to such an extent that either party comes to the conclusion that war is the only solution and all accompanying risks must be accepted. Speaking from the perspective of 2025, it is still safe to say that relations between the two countries have not reached such a low.


Scenario #2. Conflict over natural resources on the Arctic continental shelf. Interestingly, in Khranchikhin's perspective, the possibility of such conflict was "low." In his opinion, despite the lack of regulation on the status of the continental shelf – which warrants the use of armed convoys and thus drastically increases the cost of transportation – the West is unlikely to start an armed conflict with Russia over such an issue. In his opinion, the examples of the Russo-Georgian war and the Pristina incident (mentioned earlier in this report) clearly demonstrated that neither NATO nor its individual members would consider engaging in an armed conflict with Russia over issues that do not have existential meaning. He argued that, for an armed conflict to spark over natural resources, Russian military capabilities would have to "degrade to even greater extent than now [2011]." Compared with 2011, three new trends have taken place that might increase the probability of this scenario.

First, the situation in the Arctic region has stagnated markedly since 2014 and plummeted further after 2022. In addition to Russia's controversial new edition of the Maritime Doctrine, the US Department of State made its move and released the "Announcement of US Extended Continental Shelf Outer Limits," which has extended the outer limits of the US continental shelf in the Arctic by approximately one million square kilometres.¹⁵⁶ While Russia is unlikely to take a more assertive approach at this time, given the development of the Russo-Ukrainian war,¹⁵⁷ this scenario should not be excluded in the future.

Second, as argued above, Russia has made a unilateral step toward closing the NSR to foreign (military) vessels. Yet, given the remaining legal uncertainty, any incident involving foreign military vessels could spark a conflict in the Arctic. Furthermore, Russia could start escorting ships of its "shadow fleet" tankers going through the Danish straits with military vessels,¹⁵⁸ which would drastically increase the prospect of an escalation in the so-called "Big Arctic."

Third, part of the Russian expert and policymaking community – presented by the conservative and military circles, which are rapidly gaining mainstream status – is actively suggesting that a "big war in the Arctic [and in the future, the Antarctic] between Russia and the US, Canada, Norway, Finland and Sweden on the other side is just a matter of time."¹⁵⁹ While this may be just a part of the information-psychological pressure on the West, these information campaigns may





suggest that there is a clear trend toward nurturing anti-Western sentiments in Russian society and launching a new stage in the internal mobilization of public opinion for a potential conflict.


Scenario 3. Khranchikhin assumed that, based on publications in the Chinese academia and policymaking circles,¹⁶⁰ the resource-hungry China could try to take control of Arctic resources by a variety of means, including through the application of force. Yet, as he noted, China had not formally claimed the Arctic shelf, nor was its navy powerful enough to back Beijing's geoeconomic ambitions through power. Since the time of publication, China's posture has not changed. However, unlike in the 2009–11 interim, Russia has become much more dependent on China. In contrast, Beijing has taken a very cautious position, opting for purchasing underpriced Russian resources while choosing not to provoke Russia through any controversial statements or moves in the Arctic.


In the final analysis, Khranchikhin argued that while changing conditions in the Arctic region (e.g., the melting of ice) were creating a theoretical potential for the emergence of armed conflicts, any of these scenarios (at least, in the short-term prospect) appear to be unthinkable. He implied, however, that in case of Russia's strategic weakening – which is exactly the case in 2024, when Russia's military and demographic potential are being eroded in Ukraine – the probability of a conflict might be higher.

B. The year 2017 was marked by a deepening crisis between Russia and the West. There were numerous conflicts and friction points, including Russia's growing presence in Syria (including through the use of mercenaries, which violates international law) and the US's growing accusations of Russia's interference in the US elections. From a military point of view, the year 2017 was marked by military exercises under the code name Zapad-2017, conducted on NATO's eastern borders in Russia's Western Military District and in the territory of Belarus from September 14–20. At this juncture, NATO experts noted that while these exercises might not have been as impressive, in terms of scope and the manpower involved, as other exercises, “[E]xercise activity in the Northern Fleet (Arctic) Military District was particularly intense.”¹⁶¹ With the security situation in the Arctic heating up, it would be important to look through another analysis by a Russian expert discussing potential confrontation in the region that dates back to 2017.

This work provided a brief analysis of four scenarios of such a conflict, where, according to the author, the Russian VKS would have to perform several roles and functions, as discussed below.¹⁶²

Scenario #1. Spillover from a small-scale economic conflict into a local armed conflict without further escalation. If an Arctic conflict was to develop along this scenario, the VKS would have to perform several functions:

- Continue monitoring the aerial and space domains through the joint use of the VKS and advanced radars.
 - Perform an interjection of the enemy's aircrafts, mandating them to land at specialized aerodromes. In exceptional cases, targets (with personnel) should be destroyed.
 - Ensure the continued intensified defence – to be assigned to anti-aircraft/missile defence systems – of critical infrastructure affected by an armed conflict.
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- Destroy the enemy's objects and infrastructure – to be done by forces of attack aviation and bombers – on the territory affected by the armed conflict, in case the conflict advances to a different stage of complexity.

Scenario #2. Spillover from a small-scale economic conflict into a local armed conflict, with further escalation and the breakout of a large-scale military confrontation.

- Application of all measures from Scenarios 1–4.
- Securing the coverage and protection of all key objects and critical infrastructure under the purview of the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command (NFJSC).
- The coordinated effort of all armed forces (with the key role played by the VKS) within the area of the NFJSC, based on a single strategic plan.
- The prioritization of the security of sea-based means of nuclear deterrence.

Scenario #3. An unanticipated large-scale aggression with the use of conventional arms and weaponry.

- The VKS would have to track and defeat the enemy's plans at the initial stage of the attack.
- The VKS would be charged with the task of warding off a large-scale attack of the enemy's aerial forces on Russia's critical infrastructure, based on the strategic plan of the General Staff.


Scenario #4. An unanticipated large-scale aggression with the use of nuclear weapons.


- The application of all measures from Scenarios 1–3.
- The VKS would have to ensure the safety of the means of the sea-based strategic nuclear forces during the time before those means could be used against the enemy.
- The participation of the VKS in the post-nuclear stage of war until its finalization.

According to these scenarios, the VKS were viewed by Russian military planners and security experts as a key factor in both defensive and offensive military operations in the Arctic and, as it would be argued in later articles, a central link securing the successful operations of other types/branches of the Russian Armed Forces.¹⁶³ In fact, ideas of the use and importance of the VKS for Russia's military strategy, including in the Arctic, that were spelled out in 2017 would be refined and developed in future studies. For instance, a study published in 2021 clearly stated that in the conditions of an armed conflict, the main roles of the VKS would boil down to “delivering an intolerable level of damage” that could not be sustained by an adversary and “participation in shutting off the most critical continental [maritime] areas [zones] and aerial space above them.”¹⁶⁴ That clearly relates to the NSR and key parts of the Arctic.

Conclusion

Despite the general consensus that the probability of an armed conflict in the Arctic is low, the Russian expert community and high-level politicians no longer see such an outcome as unrealistic. Furthermore, voices arguing the opposite are becoming louder and clearer. In this regard, four final remarks should be made.





First, most recent articles produced by Russia’s military experts and strategists clearly point to the fact that in case an armed conflict should erupt, it will most likely be triggered by developments in the maritime domain and will be caused by adverse activities by the US/NATO aimed at acquiring control over the NSR. Russian military experts argue that the role of the “spear” might be allocated to the fleet of the UK, which could try to conduct an announced raid through the NSR with the purpose of provoking Russia. Thus, the Russian expert community is urging for the consolidation of efforts between the forces of the Northern Fleet and the FSB, as well as the strengthening of Russia’s control over the NSR and the islands along it.¹⁶⁵


Second, while Russia sees the Arctic (in general) as a zone of growing geopolitical competition and even confrontation between various countries, a division between the two groups of actors – the so-called “circle of contenders” and “circle of rivals” – should be made. The “circle of contenders” includes a very broad array of actors, including, among others, Belgium, Ireland, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, and Germany. These countries are unlikely to take a direct part in the “struggle for the Arctic,” but they would likely play certain roles on the side of the anti-Russian coalition. Meanwhile, the “circle of rivals” primarily consists of the US, Canada, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. Among these countries, Norway receives particular attention as a malign actor acting both as (a) a facilitator of US advancements in the Arctic region and (b) an actor pursuing its own political, economic, and military interests.¹⁶⁶ While both groups take an adverse stance on Russia, it is the second group that may be expected to perform offensive military actions against Russia, while the first group would provide support.

Third, China’s Arctic ambitions – much more long-term and strategic in nature than those of any other actors with clearly identified Arctic interests – are expanding. While these ambitions do not present any immediate challenge to Russia, they may be fertile ground for Sino-Russian disagreements in the Arctic. While voices critical of China’s Arctic ambitions were silenced after 2022, it is clear that the Russian side (its military community and conservative circles) may still harbour incredulity and a sense of fear given the balance of power, which is clearly evolving in China’s favour.

Fourth, given the nature of the challenges faced by Russia in the Arctic, Russian experts suggest that the implementation of the following measures would strengthen Russia’s stance in the region in the event that a conflict of the “new type” erupts:¹⁶⁷

- Invest heavily in the modernization of Arctic infrastructure, both “purely” military as well as dual use.
- Put special emphasis on the creation of specialized military formations capable of conducting operations in the challenging conditions of the Arctic.
- Develop and swiftly adopt the most up-to-date types of special military equipment designed for conditions of warfare in the Arctic and the NSR in particular.
- Integrate new types of special munitions and clothing that will allow operations in open air (over the span of several hours) throughout the year.

On top of that, Russian experts argue that to be able to effectively confront existing threats, the Russian side needs to employ “preventive measures” and “offensive strategy.” These ominous



claims should be paid special attention, especially in light of Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine in 2022, which the Russian side continues to present as a preventive defensive measure.¹⁶⁸

This said, the West should ignore neither Russia’s rhetoric nor its actions (reflected in the growing militarization of the Arctic). Based on the examples of Georgia and Ukraine (in both 2014 and 2022), Russia’s growing accusations against NATO as an organization and against its individual members (such as Norway) may be seen as an ominous sign of a covert preparation for escalation. Again, one should recall Russia’s well-calibrated information-psychological campaign against Ukraine, launched on the verge of the 2022 invasion, which aimed to portray Ukraine as “anti-Russia”¹⁶⁹ and a preparatory ground for NATO’s aggression. This served to engender more hatred inside Russia and legitimize its aggression against a sovereign European state. As argued earlier in this report, the West should not be deceived by the fact that Russia has suffered serious losses in Ukraine and that its economy is being hit hard by economic sanctions. In a way, the end of the war and the return of mobilized soldiers to civil life – as well as the need to restructure the economy – might become a more serious challenge for Russia than its current state, with all the challenges faced by the country, its society, and its economy. Therefore, the West should not fall for the notion of the Arctic being a “territory of peace” and “dialogue” – a notion that has been deliberately created by Russian diplomats as well as members of its academia and policy world. Moscow sees the Arctic in these capacities only if the West sees the region as a zone of Russia’s privileged interests, which, given Russia’s behaviour and growing assertiveness, is a highly dangerous reality. Therefore, in their Arctic-related policies, Western allies and likeminded partners should elaborate a joint set of measures that contrasts with Russia’s aggressive and reckless behaviour in the Arctic, as well as renewing contacts in the region, contingent on Russia’s behaviour in other theatres of the world, including East Central Europe, the MENA region (the Middle East and North Africa), and Sub-Saharan Africa. In the meantime, the emphasis must be placed on constraining Russia in the Arctic and building Western powers’ military capabilities in the region, particularly in areas where Russia has a perceived competitive advantage. On top of that, given Russia’s clear concern over the Western and domestic (Indigenous) populations gaining knowledge of Russia’s multiple transgressions of ecological and social sustainability, the Western community should search for these facts and make them publicly available, both in the West and in Russia.



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