

# Russia in the Arctic

## What to Expect and How to Respond

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### Executive Summary

This report is a short examination of Russia’s perception of Arctic security. It focuses on its fears and posturing, with recommendations for Canada on dealing with Moscow in the region, both now and in the longer-term. This analysis is a condensed version of the longer CMSN report on the same subject: *The “Fourth Battle” for the Arctic* (March 2025).

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has had a mixed impact on the Arctic and on the Western community’s perception of the region. Regretfully, much of the progress on international cooperation achieved since 1987, starting with the emergence of the so-called “Murmansk Initiative” that heralded advent of major changes in the Soviet political mindset, has likely been forfeited. The Arctic has effectively turned into a zone of disagreements and brewing confrontation between Moscow and its Western peers.

Despite this, the worsening geopolitical landscape in the Arctic has had one positive result. The West has finally awoken to the fact that Russia’s actual policies in the “Big Arctic” – and not the rhetoric frequently used by Russian diplomats to conceal the country’s true intentions – have never been about promoting a peaceful dialogue and equal partnership. Russia sees the macro-region as a zone of its exclusive and privileged interests backed by its military might and superiority. As one Russian historian aptly noted, the battle for the Arctic between Russia and the West never stopped, it only died down temporarily. Neither were Russia’s actions in the Arctic about sustainability, as Moscow likes to claim. On top of enormous ecological damage caused by both the USSR and Russia, indigenous populations suffered, and continue to suffer, various forms of abuse and discrimination.

This reality has set in and led to seismic geopolitical shifts. Finland and Sweden finally decided to join NATO, strengthening its northern flank and committing to critical multilateral initiatives such as the collaborative ICE Pact involving the United States, Canada, and Finland. Across the democratic Arctic, meanwhile, foreign and defence policies are doubling down on great power conflict.

As Arctic states wake up to these realities, understanding Russia's real intentions in the Arctic is critical. This report examines Russia's perception of the Arctic, and how it has evolved since February 2022. It also seeks to extrapolate Moscow's actions in the region over the short-to-mid-term. Finally, this paper offers recommendations for how Canadian policymakers can respond to Russia in the post war world, with a particular emphasis on pitfalls to avoid, lest Canada and the West fall into the same traps we experienced post-1991.

## **Masks are Off: Russia after February 2022.**

In the Arctic Russia's behavior has traditionally been two-fold. On the one hand, Russian Arctic-related civilian officials (diplomats, scientists, businesses) use peaceful rhetoric, attempting to create a veneer of openness to joint projects and initiatives, while espousing a commitment to the principles of sustainability. Yet, the position of the Russian military-political and security establishments differs drastically, constantly blaming the West for turning the Arctic into a region with "growing conflict potential." Ironically it was the Russian side which started re-militarization of the "Big Arctic" in 1999, markedly intensifying this process after 2014 with numerous violations of international law in Europe and the MENA region.

Before 2022, a large part of Western Arctic-focused intellectuals and policymakers fell for Russia's deceptive narratives about its commitment to the principles of openness and sustainability, at the same time ignoring obvious facts. Today, however, not only Russia's military elite but also its top diplomats and key Arctic-related figures are openly talking about the possibility of an armed conflict in the Arctic, and many declare Russia's readiness to protect its regional interests with all means available, including militarily. This said, the real questions are would Russia be able to match its bellicose rhetoric with practical steps aimed at strengthening its military presence in the Arctic; if so, in which domains should we expect these moves to occur; and what are the main concerns Russian planners and policymakers share when it comes to Russia's posture in the Arctic.

Despite its saber rattling and threats, Russia's resources are actually very limited. A bloody and financially costly war with Ukraine has led Russia to prioritize two main areas. The Arctic is one of these. Given Russia's strategic and economic dependence on the Arctic, the main goal in the region is to secure the ability to extract and transport natural resources (oil, pipeline gas, and LNG) essential for the Russian economy. Thus, securing control over the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and related infrastructure will constitute first order priorities. Analysis of both pre- and post-2022 writings by Russian security experts demonstrates one common feature: Russia's main concern related to a potential Arctic conflict is not the danger of large-scale military confrontation with NATO. Rather, Russian experts and planners express concern over a potential need to confront so-called "hybrid threats" to these critical vulnerabilities.

Given the uniqueness of the local geographic, climactic, and demographic landscape, the heaviest damage to be incurred during a potential conflict in the Arctic would stem from sabotage against critical infrastructure; the disabling of communication systems (through spoofing and cyber-attacks); the rapid deployment of small groups of special forces – special Arctic-trained forces and members of Private Military Companies (PMCs) – capable of rapid takeovers of critical objects and infrastructure; information-psychological operations that could increase the risk of error among members of Arctic-deployed military contingents, as well as long-term propaganda

campaigns that could turn opinion of the local population against Moscow, making them unwilling to stand for Russia in case of a regional confrontation.

Despite its limited resources, Russia has pushed back against these perceived threats and created a facade of strength. Russia will certainly continue to maintain an active information campaign and harass other Arctic nations. In particular, it will conspicuously flash “non-analogous types of military equipment” – clearly designed for Western audience – ready to use to be used by Moscow at any time to protect its position in the Arctic. Yet, until the war in Ukraine is over, Russia’s ability to dedicate the resources to drastically upgrade its military presence in the Arctic (both qualitatively and quantitatively) is questionable. For the short term, these acts are little more than a frozen Potemkin village.

Second, with only pariah- and near failed state actors acting as Russia’s close allies, Moscow will certainly concentrate on PR- and information campaigns aiming to demonstrate that Russia’s isolation is illusory. The Arctic region – rich in natural resources, critical for transportation and indispensable for science – is, perhaps, the best venue for Moscow to demonstrate this. Here, it is relevant that many leading economies of the non-Western world, including China, India, Singapore, Brazil, South Korea, and the Gulf region are interested in expanding their presence in Russia’s Arctic.

Some Russian experts – such as a former Putin advisor (and still one of the most influential conservative intellectuals) Sergey Karaganov – hope that Russia’s vast geography (the longest shoreline in the Arctic among Arctic nations) and abundance of natural resources could become a factor in accomplishing Russia’s strategic reorientation from the “decadent” West to resurgent markets of India-Pacific region. Yet, the leading actors of the Indo-Pacific region have taken a very cautious approach, refusing to rush into the Russian Arctic to explore opportunities that emerged after February 2022, when many Western companies left Russia.

Connected to this diversification is the “China factor.” Analysis of the pre-2021 academic and policy publications produced by Russian academics and members of the defense and security community, clearly point to a sense of incredulity and suspicion regarding China’s interests. In fact, some notable experts vaguely (but unmistakably) referred to China’s plans as a challenge for Russia. Russia’s strategic weakening vis-à-vis China – economically, demographically, militarily, and diplomatically – has become starker after February 2022 and the Russian sense of inferiority to China is common amongst Russian intellectuals. While there are no studies to confirm or dismiss this assumption, three aspects should be noted. Despite voices pushing for alternative institution of Arctic governance (such as the Arctic Council) with a greater presence of non-Western players (primarily, China), the Russian side has never moved forward with this initiative. Leading Russian experts have also been suggesting that, in its Arctic policies, Russia must not become overly reliant on a limited number of partners, but should balance with as many non-Western actors as possible to avoid a dependency on a single center of power. Finally, despite continuous chatter about a nascent Sino-Russian military alliance, the Russian side has exercised a great deal of caution to make sure the Chinese military is not given access to the Arctic in any meaningful sense.

What all this means is that, despite its rhetorical bravado and vocal threats, Russia’s invincibility and unconditional superiority in the Arctic is a myth. Russia’s is very conscious of and concerned

by its own weaknesses. It is likewise aware of very real threats reflected not only in China's rapid growth but also the solidification of NATO and increasing Western presence in the North.

## Canada's Role, and How to Avoid New Traps

As Russia becomes a pariah state, Canada has an opportunity to assume a greater share of circumpolar leadership. Not surprisingly, Canada's decision to take a more proactive approach in the Arctic – such through the new ICE Pact – has generated a visible sense of unease among Russian policymakers and military planners. Generating that unease is a good thing and Canada should strive to push the Russia's further. In so doing, there are also traps to avoid.

First, in terms of any potential reengagement with Russia on Arctic-related issues, the West must make it abundantly clear that the dialogue on the Arctic will be closely tied to Russia's behavior and actions in other theaters. It would be a major mistake to treat the Arctic (and cooperation therein) separately from other areas. In fact, this is what Moscow successfully did before 2022, when its multiple violations of international law elsewhere had no repercussions for its Arctic posture.

Furthermore, Ottawa should be very cautious when relaunching dialogue with Russia's Indigenous groups. It is now an open secret that Moscow employed Indigenous voices and organizations (such as RAIPON) to promote its agendas in Arctic-related issues and collect intelligence on Western countries. It is therefore critical that, in relaunched dialogue, all Indigenous voices (including those critical of Moscow and its policies) should be heard and consulted. The same applies to science, culture and inter-university dialogue, especially given Russia's prioritization of science diplomacy and its presence in Arctic-related international forums and organizations that, according to military experts and policymakers, should provide Moscow with an opportunity to convey its agendas and confront the West.

Canada will also have to focus on countering the Russian military over the long term. This is a full-spectrum threat that will require focus from a middle-power like Canada. To make full use of its limited resources, Canada should focus on four key areas. The first is Network-Centric Military Capability, with special attention paid to command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities. Given Russia's concern (even paranoia) over "hybrid threats", Western capabilities in the domains of cyberwar, EW, and, above all, training and preparing special forces capable of operating in the Arctic's challenging environment should be strengthened.

Similarly, the West must maintain pressure on Russia by making sure that Moscow's continuous violations of the rights of its own Indigenous populations do not go unnoticed. Canada should make it a priority to highlight this, both for the international community as well as for Russia's domestic audience. Moscow's environmental nihilism, resource profiteering, and barbaric use of ethnically non-Russian populations in its war of aggression against Ukraine (and in the military thereafter) should also be continually highlighted by Canada and its allies.

Canada should also develop new, high-tech battlefield capabilities. Russian military experts boast of Russia's reported superiority in precision strike capabilities – even if the validity of such

statements have been undermined by the results of the Russo-Ukrainian war. In turn, the West should focus on three counters: precision strike capabilities (including hypersonic weapons) and the means of delivery; electronic warfare (EW); AI-powered unmanned aerial Vehicles (UAV), and uncrewed combat aerial vehicles (UCAV) that are less susceptible to Russia's means of EW and anti-missile/aircraft complexes.

More dramatically, Canada should double down on icebreakers, an area where Russia enjoys superiority over the West. Here, Canada and the West should add military icebreakers – multifunctional vessels that can perform various missions in the Arctic ranging from search and rescue to delivering precision strikes – to Russian Arctic naval capabilities. At the same time, a general upgrade of icebreakers' capabilities is critical for the economic development of the region. As rightfully noted by Russian military planners and security experts, the party that can navigate and develop the region's resources will have a broader advantage in the developing great power competition.

Finally, Canada should focus on alliance building and maintenance. It should be a strategic priority for all Western allies to avoid any (publicly visible) rifts and confrontations in the issues related to the Arctic. Clearly, such developments – such as President Donald Trump's rhetoric vis-à-vis Canada and Denmark; Greenland-Denmark rifts; and excessive focus on negative chapters of historical memory visible among Western countries – provide Russia and other authoritarian regimes with prolific material to attack Western countries in international organizations and platforms, undermining actual progress and achievements at the same time as allowing genuinely authoritarian regimes to mask their activities.

Conversely, priority should be placed on finding and exploiting fissures and disagreements between Russia and its non-Western partners in Arctic-related issues. Those could include the lack of mutual trust between Russia and China and differences in visions towards the Arctic region and its governance. It could also be Russia's violation of ecological sustainability and concerns among those countries to whom climactic changes could pose serious problems. It would also make sense for the Western alliance to consider creating of alternative to the Arctic Council forums and platforms related to the Arctic governance, that could include non-Western countries to derail Russia's unconstructive agenda. Canada, as the second largest Arctic nation is ideally positioned to assume leadership in this process.

## Conclusion

On many occasions Russia's historical path has twisted and changed in the most dramatic, unexpected, and even illogical ways. Perhaps, the war in Ukraine will result in a regime change and Russia's democratization, putting the country in the camp of free and democratic partners. This scenario remains, however, very improbable. Most likely, even the end of Putin will not result in the end of Putinism and Russia's genuine democratic transformation. Thus, it would make sense for the Western alliance to prepare to confront Russia everywhere, including in the Arctic. For this purpose, decisive consolidated steps aimed at improving and upgrading para/military, technological, and economic foundations underpinning Canadian security.

This paper is not a long-telegram, seeking the containment of Russia. Instead, it advocates active push back. It makes sense to act in a more pre-emptive manner to exploit Russia's weaknesses, capitalize on its fears, and distract its attention. Canada and its allies should keep pressure on Moscow, compelling it to waste resources in non-critical theatres, while hastening the day that some unexpected turn may lead to real change.



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