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**RUSSIA'S CONTRADICTORY ARCTIC STRATEGIES:  
COOPERATION, CONFLICT, AND EVERYTHING  
IN-BETWEEN**

by

Jeffrey S. Elmore

December 2021

Thesis Advisor:  
Second Reader:

Aleksandar Matovski  
Carolyn C. Halladay

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**RUSSIA'S CONTRADICTIONARY ARCTIC STRATEGIES: COOPERATION,  
CONFLICT, AND EVERYTHING IN-BETWEEN**

Jeffrey S. Elmore  
Captain, United States Air Force  
BA, University of Alaska Anchorage, 2013

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**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL  
December 2021**

Approved by: Aleksandar Matovski  
Advisor

Carolyn C. Halladay  
Second Reader

Afshon P. Ostovar  
Associate Chair for Research  
Department of National Security Affairs

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## **ABSTRACT**

Arctic lands and waters are continuing to thaw with each passing decade, and the increasing interest in the economic, strategic, and transit potential of the “High North” is shaping the region into an arena of rising competition. This thesis seeks to answer the following question: What do Russia’s ambitious economic ventures, military buildup, and increasingly aggressive posture in the Arctic indicate regarding its intentions in the region? To address this puzzle, the thesis examines three hypotheses, rooted in different interpretations of Russian behavior in the region. The first hypothesis reflects Moscow’s claims that its military buildup is purely defensive and aimed to protect Russian economic and security interests in the Arctic. The second hypothesis asserts that Russia is striving to push out other competitors and become the regional hegemon in the Arctic. The third proposition is that Moscow’s Arctic efforts are primarily geared to gain access to new resource rents and to distract Russia’s population from domestic grievances, advancing the ruling regime’s hold on power. Tracing Russian actions in the region, the thesis finds that its posture in the Arctic is most consistent with the third, regime preservation motive, which may make Moscow’s future behavior particularly volatile.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

A2/AD	anti-access / area-denial
ADIZ	air defense identification zone
AZRF	Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation
CLCS	Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf
CRS	Congressional Research Service
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
GIUK Gap	Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom Gap
GPS	Global Positioning System
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
IMO	International Maritime Organization
LOSC	Law of the Sea Commission
LRA	long-range aviation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NORAD	North American Aerospace Defense Command
NSR	Northern Sea Route
SAR	search and rescue
SLBM	submarine-launched ballistic missile
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
USD	United States dollar

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The enveloping ice in the Arctic has been receding for decades. The natural, frozen barriers—which for all of modern history have acted as a near-unsurpassable strategic buffer between the northern coasts of the Arctic nations of the world—are opening. With the increasing economic and geostrategic potential that accompanies a more accessible Arctic, so rises the prospect of international competition in the inhospitable, yet promising territory. Among the Arctic nations that comprise the Arctic Council,<sup>1</sup> Russia has taken the greatest strides toward staking its claims in the far North by refurbishing Cold War–era bases along its northern coast, fielding military forces and equipment, developing the world’s largest ice-breaker fleet, and adopting an aggressive posture in the region.

This thesis seeks to answer the following question: What do Russia’s economic ventures, Arctic military basing activities, and increasingly aggressive posture indicate regarding Moscow’s intentions in the Arctic? Answering this question requires an analysis of multiple factors, to include how the Arctic fits into Russia’s geopolitical, military, economic interests, national identity and domestic politics, as well as its economic and military capacity to achieve those goals. Ultimately, Russia’s actions in the region will greatly affect not only the future of Arctic trade and cooperation, but also the balance of power in the Arctic and beyond.

### A. SIGNIFICANCE

Russian aggressive actions in the Arctic are of major concern to the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) because Russia is not the only Arctic nation that stands to benefit from the growing economic, strategic, and navigational potential of the increasingly accessible frozen North. The Arctic holds significant strategic and economic potential for the eight nations that comprise the Arctic Council, and whose borders extend north of the Arctic circle. All of them apart from Russia are either members of NATO (United States, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, and Norway) or are active NATO

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<sup>1</sup> Arctic Council Member States: United States, Russia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

partners (Sweden, and Finland).<sup>2</sup> The Arctic contains a significant portion of the world's oil and natural gas sources (~13 percent and ~30 percent respectively), as well as an abundance of precious metals/stones, rare earth metals, minerals, and fishing potential.<sup>3</sup> Heather Conley writes of the economic importance of the region to the United States as an Arctic nation, stressing "Alaska's important domestic economic role providing vital energy, mineral, and fishery resources."<sup>4</sup> She further notes that "the U.S. government has articulated its fundamental interest in the Arctic for more than 40 years in a series of government strategies."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the U.S. Coast Guard's 2019 *Arctic Strategy Outlook* details the economic investment that the United States holds in the Arctic, including, "1,000,000 square miles of territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zone in the Arctic" in addition to the "\$3 billion economic impact of Alaska's Arctic seafood industry."<sup>6</sup>

The Arctic nations' concern for the stability in the region also extends beyond economic interests. Maps rarely project the world with the Arctic at its center, but as is depicted in Figure 1, the close proximity between Russia and the Arctic NATO states becomes much clearer, as do the significant number of military installations situated along the northern coasts of the Arctic States.

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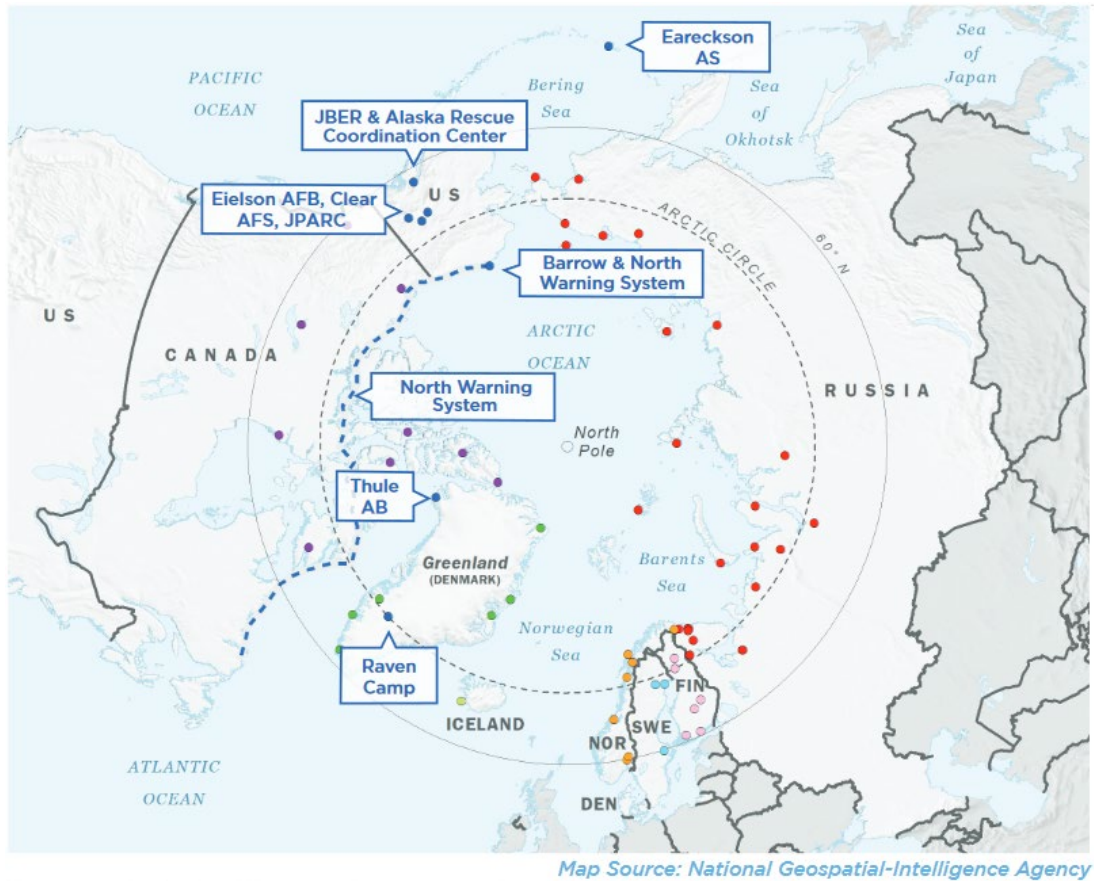
<sup>2</sup> Harri Mikkola, *The Geostrategic Arctic: Hard Security in the High North*, FIIA Briefing Paper 259 (Helsinki, Finland: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2019), 8, [https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/bp259\\_geostrategic\\_arctic.pdf](https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/bp259_geostrategic_arctic.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> "Regaining Arctic Dominance: the U.S. Army in the Arctic," Headquarters, Department of the Army: Chief of Staff Paper #3, 19 January 2021, 16–17, <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2021/03/15/9944046e/regaining-arctic-dominance-us-army-in-the-arctic-19-january-2021-unclassified.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Heather Conley, "The Implications of U.S. Policy Stagnation toward the Arctic Region," Center for Strategic & International Studies. May 3, 2019, 1–2, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/implications-us-policy-stagnation-toward-arctic-region>.

<sup>5</sup> Conley, 1.

<sup>6</sup> "The United States Coast Guard's Vision for the Arctic Region," Headquarters, U.S. Coast Guard, April 2019, 3, [https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo121027/Arctic\\_Strategy\\_Book\\_APR\\_2019.pdf](https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo121027/Arctic_Strategy_Book_APR_2019.pdf).



**SAMPLE OF ARCTIC REGION MILITARY FACILITIES**



Figure 1. Military Installations in the Arctic<sup>7</sup>

With Russia’s ongoing development of advanced weaponry and stand-off capabilities along its northern coast, the United States and its Arctic allies must contend with Russia’s ability to project a significant threat to their homelands from across the Arctic Ocean. Matthew Melino and Heather Conley write: “Most worrisome, Russia has tested new Arctic-based military capabilities such as hypersonic cruise missiles and nuclear-powered undersea drones. Senior U.S. military leaders have expressed growing concern

<sup>7</sup> Source: “Arctic Strategy,” Department of the Air Force, 5, July 2020, <https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/2020SAF/July/ArcticStrategy.pdf>.

about the prevalence of these Russian cruise missiles in the Arctic and their ‘avenue of approach’ to the United States.”<sup>8</sup>

The future of the Arctic is also a significant topic in considering potential shifts in the global balance of power. A May 2021 U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS) report details how the rise of great power competition in the Arctic stands as a potential threat to the “U.S.-led international order that has operated since World War II.”<sup>9</sup> It describes how provocative Russian activity in the Arctic challenges international principles held against using force to settle territorial disputes, as well as principles of “freedom of the seas,” and that “if either of these elements of the U.S.-led international order is weakened or overturned, it could have potentially major implications for the future of the Arctic.”<sup>10</sup> Russia has led the United States and its allies to rethink their defensive strategies and return to Cold-War practices of monitoring Russian threats beyond this revisionist state’s direct periphery in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union. The United States has also had to begin planning for a new contested area that threatens international freedom of movement and trade. Finally, an economic and project-development cooperation is developing in the Arctic between America’s two most formidable adversaries, Russia and China. If this tentative relationship should evolve into a broader political, economic and military alignment—and some sources have suggested that it might<sup>11</sup>—it would present a significant potential threat to the current balance of power in the Arctic, as well as globally.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew Melino and Heather Conley, “The Ice Curtain: Russia’s Arctic Military Presence,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/features/ice-curtain-russias-arctic-military-presence>.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald O’Rourke et al., *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress*, R41153 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2021), 21, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41153.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> O’Rourke et al., 18.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Weitz, “Assessing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises: Past Progress and Future Trends,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, 5, July 9, 2021, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210709\\_Weitz\\_Chinese-Russian\\_Exercises.pdf?sVj9xEhVUrzl\\_Mbf5pOdJqAQwUvn2zq](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210709_Weitz_Chinese-Russian_Exercises.pdf?sVj9xEhVUrzl_Mbf5pOdJqAQwUvn2zq).

## **B. RUSSIA’S INCONSISTENT OFFICIAL RHETORIC AND POLICIES REGARDING THE ARCTIC**

Moscow’s has taken an inconsistent stance on Arctic issues, oscillating between public expressions of desire to cooperate with other Arctic states in the region, and a bellicose stance signaled through its most recent strategy documents, incendiary political rhetoric, as well as efforts to control maritime traffic within the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Thus, on the one hand, before the May 2021 Arctic Council meeting in Reykjavik, Moscow’s senior Arctic Council official, Nikolai Korchunov stated, “It would be important for us to have the constructive spirit of cooperation that is in the Arctic Council ... in the military-political sphere.”<sup>12</sup> Russia’s President, Vladimir Putin, has also claimed throughout his time in office that Russia seeks cooperation in the Arctic. During the first Arctic Forum, which was held in Moscow in 2010, he stated: “We think it is imperative to keep the Arctic as a zone of peace and cooperation...We have head futuristic predictions threatening a battle for the Arctic...the majority of scary scenarios about the Arctic do not have any real basis.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, at another Arctic international forum in March of 2017, held in Arkhangelsk, Putin insisted that “there is no potential for conflict in the Arctic region.”<sup>14</sup>

However, these statements made in the spirit of cooperation stand in contradiction to Russia’s actual policies concerning the region. Russia’s new Arctic strategy, which Russia’s President Vladimir Putin adopted in October of 2020, rather indicates that Russia plans to compete for its economic and security goals in the Arctic. An analysis of this document—titled “Strategy for Developing the Russian Arctic Zone and Ensuring National Security through 2035”—by Kluge and Paul finds: “The strategy does discuss the

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<sup>12</sup> Nikolai Korchunov, quoted in Tom Balmforth and Humeyra Pamuk, “Russia, U.S. Tout Cooperation Ahead of Arctic Council Meeting,” May 18, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/russia-us-tout-cooperation-ahead-arctic-council-meeting-2021-05-18/>.

<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Putin, quoted in Alan K. Henrikson, “The Arctic Peace Projection: From Cold War Fronts to Cooperative Fora,” in *Routledge Handbook of Arctic Security*, ed. Marc Lanteigne, Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv, and Horatio Sam-Aggrey (Taylor and Francis, 2020), 18. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315265797>.

<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Putin, quoted in Henrikson, 18.

possibilities for international cooperation, but more space is devoted to threat scenarios.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Troy Bouffard and P. Whitney Lackenbauer quote Anton Vasiliev, former Russian ambassador to Iceland, as asserting that the same 2020 strategy document “welcomes mutually beneficial cooperation of Russia with its Arctic partners.”<sup>16</sup> But the authors further note that among the national priorities that the documents lists is an acknowledgement of “growing potential for conflict in the Arctic.”<sup>17</sup> Bouffard and Whitney argue that “Russia’s strategic documents thus reflect two-track messaging promoting both international cooperation and the perceived need for robust national defense.”<sup>18</sup>

Not only does Moscow contradict its stated intent for promoting regional peace and cooperation in its current Arctic strategy, but it has also done so through its use of aggressive rhetoric in upholding its claim to sovereignty in the Arctic. The same month that Korchunov preached the importance of cooperation within the Arctic Council, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned western states against trying to stake claims in the Arctic; he is as quoted stating that “It has been absolutely clear for everyone for a long time that this our territory, this is our land...and our waters.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps Lavrov’s statement and Russia’s recently published Arctic strategy documents demonstrate Russia’s real stance on how it will handle international competition in the Arctic?

### C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the literature on Russian revisionist activities in its geographic area is focused on Moscow’s past and present military operations in Georgia, Crimea, and eastern

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<sup>15</sup> Janis Kluge and Michael Paul, “Russia’s Arctic Strategy Through 2035: Grand Plans and Pragmatic Constraints,” German Institute for International Security Affairs, 1, November 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Anton Vasiliev, quoted in Troy Bouffard and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “The Development of the Russian Arctic Council Chairmanship: A Strategic Plan of Preparation and Pursuit, North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network,” NAADSN, 1, March 30, 2021, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Strategic-Perspectives-Russian-Arctic-Council-Chairmanship-TB-PWL-mar-2021.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Bouffard and Lackenbauer, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Bouffard and Lackenbauer, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Sergei Lavrov, quoted in AFP, “Russia Warns West Against Arctic Encroachment Ahead of Talks,” *The Moscow Times*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/05/17/russia-warns-west-against-arctic-encroachment-ahead-of-talks-a73924>.

Ukraine, to name a few. In recent years, however, the literature on Russia's aggressive posture has begun to expand beyond these typical realms of controversial Russian influence to also include the Arctic. The key journalistic and scholarly studies on this increased Russian belligerence attempt to address one core puzzle: to which end is Russia building up its military capabilities in the Arctic? Given Moscow's at times cooperative, at times aggressive posture in the Arctic, what is Russia really intending to achieve in the region? This section reviews what scholars have written concerning Russia's intent in the Arctic: whether Moscow really seeks peace and cooperation, or if is more determined to establish military superiority in a region that it considers to be its territorial domain.

In recent years, many scholars have begun to address the question of whether there is potential for great power competition in the Arctic. Most authors, even those writing following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, have predominantly characterized Moscow's intent in the Arctic region as leaning toward pursuing cooperative, rather than coercive military approaches with its Arctic neighbors. However, it is significant to note that all of the authors acknowledge that this has not stopped Russia from prioritizing security and an increase of its military capabilities in the region; and all (post-2014) analyses stress the impact that the Crimean annexation had on global perceptions of Russia's approach to international relations as well as its willingness, or unwillingness, to operate within the constraints of international law. Furthermore, many of these authors discuss the significant military buildup that Russia has undertaken in the Arctic over the past two decades, highlighting the state's sense of insecurity in relation to its neighbors, and the capabilities it has developed to fend off potential adversaries.

In 2014, Marlene Laruelle published one of few comprehensive scholarly studies concerning Russia's ambitions and intent in the Arctic. There, she suggests that there is always potential for tensions to elevate in the region due to continental shelf claim disputes, intrusion of non-Arctic players who seek to stake a claim in the region (namely China), or resource competition.<sup>20</sup> At the time of this book's publication (pre-Crimean annexation),

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<sup>20</sup> Marlene Laruelle, *Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 109.

Laruelle argues that it was not Russia’s intent to pursue conflict in the region, and that “Moscow sees the Arctic as a new space in which it is possible to express an identity that is more consensual with the international community—the rest of the post-Soviet space is in fact more conflictual in terms of geostrategic influence, whether it be Ukraine, the Caucasus, or Central Asia—and to test out its soft power tools.”<sup>21</sup>

Laruelle backs up her argument by citing the successful resolution of Norwegian-Russian disputes over the Barents Sea in 2010 through “pragmatic cooperation,”<sup>22</sup> and even describes how, in 2012, “Vladimir Putin called for the creation of a joint scientific council with Canada to peacefully discuss potentially overlapping continental shelf claims.”<sup>23</sup> The author explains Russia’s renewed efforts to militarily secure its Arctic coast over the past two decades as the result of ineffective communication amongst Arctic powers. She concludes that, “despite the hope that the Arctic will be de-securitized, geopolitical uncertainty and the lack of institutional channels of discussion on strategic matters are pushing Moscow to act in a preemptive manner.”<sup>24</sup>

Maria Lagutina, a prominent scholar of the Arctic at the St. Petersburg State University, provides a valuable Russian (and post-Crimean annexation) perspective on Moscow’s intentions in the Arctic. Like Laruelle, Lagutina’s arguments focus on Russia’s cooperative efforts in the Arctic. She describes Russia’s military development in the Arctic as “defensively oriented,” citing increased international interest in the Arctic and the commencement of NATO military exercises in the region—beginning in the mid-1990s—as the reason for Russia’s significantly increased military buildup along its northern coast.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Lagutina lists three main drivers for Russia’s ongoing militarization efforts in the Arctic: (1) Russian efforts to secure its northern coast against other state competitors or potential threats in the region; (2) Russia’s need to protect its economic

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<sup>21</sup> Laruelle, 199.

<sup>22</sup> Laruelle, 106.

<sup>23</sup> Laruelle, 108–109.

<sup>24</sup> Laruelle, 128.

<sup>25</sup> Maria Lagutina, *Russia’s Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century: National and International Dimensions* (London: Lexington Books, 2019), 70–73, Kindle.

interests in the Arctic and maintain security of the NSR shipping route; and (3) the Russian military's role in providing environmental and biological safety and preservation, as well as "the removal of waste accumulated during the Soviet time."<sup>26</sup>

Lagutina, notes several times throughout her book that Russia desires peaceful cooperation in the Arctic, rather than conflict, and that "the main objective is to sustain a pragmatic approach to international cooperation among the Arctic countries' regions and to avoid politicizing the process under the influence of the international geopolitical situation."<sup>27</sup> This assertion is interesting, given that Lagutina does not shy away from detailing Russia's impressive fielded military forces in the Arctic, to include its "most powerful" Northern Fleet and its nuclear deterrent capabilities, noting that: "The intention to modernize the nuclear submarine fleet is due to the continuing confrontation of Russia with NATO countries and, above all, the United States."<sup>28</sup> Lagutina writes extensively about Russia's prioritization of cooperation with other Arctic states, but like Laruelle (albeit less directly), she implies that the protentional for conflict in the region cannot be ruled out.

Other Russian scholars, such as Valery Konyshev and Alexander Sergunin, who also notably wrote on the topic of Russia's posture in the Arctic following the Crimean annexation, echo Lagutina's insistence that Russia's military role in the Arctic is predominantly defensive. They deny the assertion that Russia desires an Arctic arms race, and they even go so far as to stress the "dual-use functions" of these deployed forces, for example, Search-and-Rescue operations or protection against over-fishing.<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly, Russian scholars approach the topic of Russia's posture in the Arctic from a defensive position when compared to Western authors, and seem to characterize Russia's militarization of the area as conservative and benign, rather than aggressive and coercive.

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<sup>26</sup> Lagutina, 73.

<sup>27</sup> Lagutina, 176.

<sup>28</sup> Lagutina, 69–70.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Sergunin and Valery Konyshev, "Russian Military Strategies in the Arctic: Change or Continuity," *European Security* 26, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1080/09662839.2017.1318849>.

Katarzyna Zysk provides an analysis of Moscow’s Arctic strategies and addresses Russia’s actions from a post-Crimean annexation perspective, which contrasts to the conclusions of these Russian scholars. While Zysk arrives at a similar conclusion as Laruelle in 2014 that conflict in the Arctic is not likely in the near-term, she notes that the start of a conflict in another region—involving Arctic states— will likely impact international relations in the Arctic. She writes: “For now, the probability of the Arctic becoming a source of a major confrontation between great powers remains low. However, there is a consensus that the possibility of a major crisis or a conflict occurring elsewhere that could affect the Arctic region is relatively high.”<sup>30</sup>

Zysk further challenges the notion suggested by Russian authors, like Lagutina, that Russia’s military buildup in the Arctic since the early 2000s is “merely a moderate and defense-oriented ‘modernization’ needed after the decay of the 1990s, and aimed primarily at strengthening constabulary capability, surveillance, communication, and other means of increasing safety and security in the region.”<sup>31</sup> She also rejects the opposing idea that Russia’s military buildup in the Arctic has “offensive objectives” aimed at “winning a potential future conflict that may ensue as a result of Russia’s expansionist designs for the region.”<sup>32</sup> Rather, Zysk argues that the truth of Russia’s intent in the Arctic lies somewhere between defensive and offensive motivations.

Zysk agrees with Lagutina that Russia’s “push toward the north” is in response to increasing international interest in the region, and that Moscow perceives that an increase in Arctic activity will threaten its northern borders.<sup>33</sup> But Zysk takes her argument a step further, noting how top Russian defense officials are determined to secure Russia’s natural resources in the Arctic. She writes: “in a classic zero-sum game perspective, the assumption is that either Russia solidifies and expands its influence in the Arctic, or other stakeholders

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<sup>30</sup> Katarzyna Zysk, “Russia’s Military Build-Up in the Arctic: to What End?” Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, 7, September 2020, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/IOP-2020-U-027998-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IOP-2020-U-027998-Final.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Zysk, 4–5.

<sup>32</sup> Zysk, 4–5.

<sup>33</sup> Zysk, 6.

are going to drive Russia away from the region.”<sup>34</sup> In this way, Zysk highlights Russia’s “besieged-fortress” mentality, in which Moscow has historically perceived, and propagandized the idea that Russia is threatened from adversaries on all sides, who are determined to see the Russian state fall into ruin.

Like Lagutina, Zdzislaw Sliwa and Nurlan Aliyev argue that Russia is simply placing its military assets where its economic interests are.<sup>35</sup> They argue that “After analyzing both powers’ strategies and military capabilities in the Arctic, the assessment is that a direct conflict is not likely in the mid-term, as it could have implications for both countries and for the rest of the world.”<sup>36</sup> They point to the fact that Russia and the United States are situated in such close proximity to one another (as depicted in Figure 1), both are strong military powers with nuclear weapons, and neither has an option for engaging in proxy conflict in the Arctic.<sup>37</sup> In other words, if the United States and Russia go to war in the Arctic, they each have no option but to engage directly with their enemy, and both perceive the costs of such a conflict to be too high. As result, these authors argue that this reality pushes the two countries to prioritize cooperation over conflict in the region. Yet in spite of this conclusion, Sliwa and Aliyev highlight how Russia is developing area denial capabilities in the Arctic should it go to war with NATO in the future.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the authors conclude that while Russia and the United States are not likely to risk direct conflict in the Arctic, Russia is preparing for just such an occasion.

RAND analysts echo the same hypothesis in multiple reports. Stephanie Pezard et al. suggest that “Russia’s current militarization of its Arctic region does not, in itself, suggest increased potential for conflict, with the exception of accidental escalation,”<sup>39</sup> and

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<sup>34</sup> Zysk, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Zdzislaw Sliwa and Nurlan Aliyev, “Strategic Competition or Possibilities for Cooperation Between the United States and Russia in the Arctic,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 33, no. 2 (July 2020), 216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2020.1763132>.

<sup>36</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, 214.

<sup>37</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, 216.

<sup>38</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, 232.

<sup>39</sup> Stephanie Pezard et al., *Maintaining Arctic Cooperation with Russia: Planning for Regional Change in the Far North*, RR1776 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017), 59, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1731>.

further discuss the same themes covered thus far by other scholars, such as Russian cooperation with other Arctic states, Russia’s potential to ignore UNCLOS, Russia’s perception of NATO as a threat in the Arctic, and Russia’s ability to control Arctic shipping lanes.<sup>40</sup> Black et al. discuss similar themes, but like Zysk, also argued that one of the greatest risks to Arctic stability could originate from conflict between Russia and its adversaries in distant regions, resulting in a breakdown of NATO-Russian relations. They cite such events as the Crimean annexation or the shoot-down of airliner MH17 in Ukraine as examples of the kind of inflammatory crisis that could trigger aggressive actions in the Arctic.<sup>41</sup>

In line with works discussed thus far, Harri Mikkola suggests that there will be continued cooperation in the region in the near future; but he also echoes Black et al.’s conclusion that disputes external to the Arctic, rather than intra-regional disputes, are more likely to lead to conflict in the Arctic. He writes that “the most likely source of a conflict would be extra-Arctic, stemming from political dynamics outside the region.”<sup>42</sup> Like Zysk, Mikkola further suggests that even though the Arctic has been a region for extensive cooperation efforts, “it is also a region of strategic competition...Russia’s geostrategic worldview is based on zero-sum geopolitics and it sees itself as being in long-term strategic competition with the West. This is a problem for the other Arctic states, since Russia defines its security in a way that reduces the security of its neighboring states.”<sup>43</sup>

### **1. How Has Russia’s Annexation of Crimea Altered the Discussion?**

Before 2014, scholars likely would have considered the potential for Russia to take unilateral military action in the Arctic as low. However, when Russia launched a military operation to annex the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, the world was caught by surprise, and scholarly assessments concerning how far Russia was willing to go to secure its interests

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<sup>40</sup> Pezard et al., 59–61.

<sup>41</sup> James Black et al., *Enhancing Deterrence and Defence on Nato’s Northern Flank: Allied Perspectives on Strategic Options for Norway*, RR4381 (Santa Monica, CA and Cambridge, UK: RAND Europe, 2020) 9–11, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR4381>.

<sup>42</sup> Mikkola, *The Geostrategic Arctic*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Mikkola, 8.

had to adapt to new realities. For instance, when Laruelle wrote her book in 2014, she suggested that, even though Russia may disagree with the eventual verdict delivered by the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) concerning its submitted territorial claims, that “a unilateral annexation of the contested areas is very difficult to imagine.”<sup>44</sup> However, since the time of Laruelle’s statement, Russia has taken actions that put doubt on that claim. Furthermore, as a result of the rise in hostilities between Russia and the West in the wake of the conflict in Ukraine, Russia has used the Arctic to exercise and demonstrate its military prowess and nuclear capabilities—highlighting a pivot to the instinct to dominate and exploit the region.

Writing in full—though defensive—acknowledgement of the Crimean annexation in 2014, Lagutina downplays the tensions that arose in 2014 between the West and Moscow following the operation, arguing that “frictions were inevitable” after Russia “returned Crimea in 2014.”<sup>45</sup> She argues that the breakdown in relations amongst Arctic states was temporary, and that by 2016 “the Arctic Council began to come together with realization that Russia objectively is an important player of the Arctic cooperation and without Russia it is impossible to solve a major number of issues in the region.”<sup>46</sup>

In contrast, most Western scholars like Zysk do not downplay the effect that the Crimean crisis of 2014 had on Arctic relations. She notes that, in addition to concerns over Russia’s significant militarization efforts in the Arctic, “Russia’s repeated demonstration of its willingness to use force (or threaten to use force) to achieve foreign policy objectives...has raised questions about Russia’s intentions and end objectives behind its Arctic military buildup.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Sliwa and Aliyev argue that the Crimea annexation cast doubts amongst other Arctic states concerning Russia’s willingness to abide by international law and deliberations on Arctic issues, and describe the uncertainty of other northern nations that “Russia will comply with UNLCOS and the Arctic Council.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Laruelle, *Russia’s Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 109.

<sup>45</sup> Lagutina, *Russia’s Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, 112.

<sup>46</sup> Lagutina, 112.

<sup>47</sup> Zysk, “Russia’s Military Build-Up in the Arctic,” 3.

<sup>48</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, “Strategic Competition or Possibilities for Cooperation,” 235.

Russia has a great deal to gain from its territorial and resource claims in the Arctic; and in light of the unilateral military actions that Russia took in Crimea in 2014, these scholars note the possibility that if Moscow does not perceive that the other Arctic states are giving Russia its fair share, it might take what it wants anyway.

## **2. How Does China, a Non-Arctic State, Influence Russia's Posture in the Arctic?**

According to Jim Townsend and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, a significant threat to U.S. interests in the Arctic is taking shape as a result of the heightened tensions that developed between Russia and the West following the Crimean annexation: the growing relationship between Russia and China in the region. Townsend and Kendall-Taylor describe how, “in the Arctic, Russia and China’s interests are converging around resource extraction projects, the expansion of the Northern Sea Route, and the enhancement of operational awareness and security cooperation.”<sup>49</sup> They further note that, due to significant western sanctions imposed on Russia following its annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has become economically reliant on China to fund its Arctic endeavors, among other projects. Finally, the analysts suggest that Russia’s economic ties to China could pressure Russia to side with China in other areas of international disagreement.

Anthony et al. suggest that “On a political level, cooperation in developing the NSR with Russia might be perceived as Chinese support for Russia’s tightening national regulatory control over the NSR,”<sup>50</sup> which would make sense in consideration of China’s attempts throughout the past decade to control traffic through its self-proclaimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea. Anthony et al. further note, however, that China has doubts concerning its returns on investment in supporting Russia in the Arctic.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Jim Townsend and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, “Partners, Competitors, or a Little of Both?: Russia and China in the Arctic,” March 30, 2021, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/partners-competitors-or-a-little-of-both>.

<sup>50</sup> Ian Anthony et al., “A Strategic Triangle in the Arctic? Implications of China-Russia-United States Power Dynamics for Regional Security,” 10, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2021, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/sipriinsight2103\\_arctic\\_triangle\\_0.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/sipriinsight2103_arctic_triangle_0.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> Anthony et al., 10.

If Russia is indeed interested in monopolizing control over the economic and strategic advantages afforded by the Arctic, it is difficult to say if Russia would be willing to share influence in the region with China. As Townsend and Kendall-Taylor note, “the Arctic is simply more important to Russia than it is to China.”<sup>52</sup> China’s investment in the region, and Russia’s reliance on that investment, will inform the discussion on Russia’s motivations and actions in the Arctic. If Moscow believes that it can depend on China’s support in asserting its claims in the Arctic via military means, will it still feel pressured to abide by international law in its interactions with other Arctic states?

### **3. Is Russia Using the Arctic as a Distraction from Domestic Issues?**

The Crimean annexation in 2014 has been presented in numerous analyses as a campaign that served to boost the legitimacy of the Putin regime by inciting Russian nationalistic pride and distracting the populace from domestic troubles. Indeed, since the Soviet era, scholars have discussed Moscow’s tactic of using international disagreements and conflicts as a means to distract its populace from domestic issues and the realities of autocratic rule. This diversionary tactic also seems to be reflected in the current rising tensions in the Arctic. Laruelle writes that beginning the second half of the 2000s, Moscow took a hard stance on the Arctic, pushing conspiratorial rhetoric to the domestic public that pit the United States and other western, Arctic states against Russia.<sup>53</sup> She writes that, before Russia claimed a more conciliatory public discourse on Arctic cooperation in the 2010s, “the Kremlin first chose to favor a bellicose discourse in which the Arctic was presented as the future site of a new Cold War.”<sup>54</sup> She quotes Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) director, Nikolai Patrushev, as stating in 2009 that “the United States, Norway, Denmark, and Canada are conducting a united and coordinated policy of barring Russia from the riches of the shelf.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Townsend and Kendall-Taylor, “Partners, Competitors, or a Little of Both?”

<sup>53</sup> Laruelle, *Russian Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 10–11.

<sup>54</sup> Laruelle, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Nikolai Patrushev, quoted in Laruelle, 10.

Sliwa and Aliyev similarly account for Russia's at times aggressive political rhetoric concerning the Arctic as a tool for gaining public support for the regime. They write, "One could assume that a large part of the hard talk is for internal purposes and directed to the Russian people as a part of domestic politics claiming historical rights to the area."<sup>56</sup> Zysk discusses not only Russia's use of inflammatory rhetoric to mobilize Russian domestic opinion against western encroachment into Russia's historic territory, but also accounts for its militarization of its Arctic coast as a propaganda tactic to gain support from its population for the Putin regime.<sup>57</sup> She writes that Russia's Arctic endeavors are "resonating well with the more nationalistic oriented sector of the Russian public. Various Russian stakeholders, not least the military industrial complex, have vested interests in continuing the extensive investments."<sup>58</sup>

Moscow's perception of domestic instability as a leading threat to regime legitimacy plays a major role in how it shapes its geopolitical and military strategies in all regions and on all issues, and this certainly includes how Moscow crafts its strategies and messaging with regard to the Arctic. In unpacking what Russia's intent is in the Arctic, Moscow's consideration of domestic issues and nationalistic themes is a key piece of the puzzle, along with its security and economic motivations.

#### **D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

Each of these authors acknowledge the possibility of a future conflict in the region, whether triggered by external incidents or conflicts, or by events within the Arctic theater. The authors also center their assessments of the current tensions in the Arctic around Russia's Arctic ambitions, military posture, and geostrategic track record. This thesis examines those same factors in attempting to make sense of Russia's seemingly duplicitous approach to Arctic issues. Given that Moscow insists that it wishes to pursue a cooperative approach to addressing Arctic issues, why has it assumed such an aggressive diplomatic and military posture in the region?

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<sup>56</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, "Strategic Competition or Possibilities for Cooperation," 235.

<sup>57</sup> Zysk, "Russia's Military Buildup in the Arctic," 3.

<sup>58</sup> Zysk, 33.

This thesis examines three hypotheses concerning Russia's current posture in the Arctic, as derived from considering the various motivations suggested by the authors in the literature review:

1) **“Defensive” Hypothesis: Motivation to Protect Economic and Security Interests.** The first hypothesis is that Russia's aggressive posture and significant militarization of its northern coast is, as some of the scholars discussed in the literature review claim, driven only by its desire to secure Russia's economic, political, and security interests in the region against perceived threats. If this hypothesis is true, it may leave room for the possibility that Russia will prioritize cooperative relationships in the future to further its economic goals in the Arctic.

2) **“Offensive” Hypothesis: Motivation to Assume Regional Dominance.** The second hypothesis is that Russia's aggressive posture and military actions indicate that it intends to establish itself as a regional hegemon in the Arctic, where it believes it has achieved the upper hand militarily and will therefore attempt to enforce the NSR control measures that it has declared will govern navigation and trade in the region. If this hypothesis is true, it may indicate that Russia will be more likely to take unilateral military action to achieve its goals in the Arctic, especially if it believes that it can depend on China for support in breaking with international law in its dealings with other Arctic states.

3) **“Regime preservation/diversionary” Hypothesis—Motivation to Preserve the Ruling Regime's Hold on Power.** The third hypothesis is that the aggressive posture that Russia has assumed in the Arctic, to a significant degree, reflects the Kremlin's two-pronged strategy of (1) maximizing Russian access to energy resources in the Arctic, thereby bolstering the resource rents that Putin's regime heavily relies upon to maintain its patronal system; and (2) redirecting its populace's attention away from such domestic issues as the growing opposition to the regime's patronal system by demonstrating its determination to push back against perceived U.S. and NATO encroachment into what it claims is its territorial land and seas. If this hypothesis is true, it may indicate that Russia's aggressive posture is more for show than an actual strategy for dominating the Arctic.

## **E. OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS**

This thesis analyzes Russia's motives, capabilities, and intent in the Arctic region. Chapter II describes Russia's historical relationship with its Arctic territory, the identity that Russia has developed in the region, as well as the important role that the Arctic has played in Russia's security strategies. It then illustrates how increasing international interest in the Arctic has sparked competition and territorial disputes amongst the Arctic states. Chapter III details why the Arctic is of such great economic, security, and nationalistic importance to Russia, describes the relationship between these imperatives, and analyzes the posture and actions that the Kremlin has taken in the region to further them. Most importantly, the chapter describes how these various priorities conflict with one another, therefore leading Moscow to employ contradictory, and potentially even self-defeating policies in the region. Chapter IV concludes by describing how China fits into Russia's Arctic strategies, discusses how Russia's competing imperatives indicate its intentions with regard to cooperation and competition in the Arctic, as well as suggests potential implications that these assessments may have for the future balance of power in the region.

This thesis relies on burgeoning literature on Russian activities, interests, and strategies in the Arctic to identify the broader arc of Russia's behavior in the region. Sources that address these topics through the lens of Russia's Cold-War era strategies and NATO versus USSR competition during this period are also particularly useful, as they play an important role in determining Russia's potential actions in the region based on historical precedence.

## II. RUSSIA'S ARCTIC LEGACY AND CURRENT TERRITORIAL DISPUTES

This chapter discusses how the Arctic fits into Russia's history and identity, and explores how Russia's engagement on ongoing territorial disputes in the region, with and through a few key Arctic institutions, illuminates the aggressive posture that Moscow has established in the Arctic. This chapter first examines Russia's Arctic legacy, providing historical context in attempting understand how Russia has balanced its varying priorities in the past, and continues to do so today. This chapter then discusses a few key institutions that serve to regulate, or rather attempt to regulate international competition in the Arctic, and it demonstrates that these institutions are largely ineffective in settling security and territorial issues in the region. Finally, this chapter shows how Russia has taken center stage in relation to current international disputes in the Arctic.

### A. RUSSIA'S ARCTIC LEGACY: MEDIEVAL, IMPERIAL, AND SOVIET

Russia's northern border consists of 24,140 kilometers of Arctic coastline, representing 53 percent of the combined coastlines of the Arctic nations.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Russia's territory accounts for about half of the world's land mass north of the Arctic Circle, and Russia's Arctic population (about two million people) accounts for about half the population of the Arctic worldwide.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the Arctic is, and long has been, important to Russia. Russia's history of exploring, conquering, consolidating, and exploiting the resources of the Arctic span more than a thousand years, as far back as the 11th and 12th centuries, when the medieval rulers of the Rus—specifically of the Novgorod Republic—demanded tax payment in the form of valuable furs from indigenous populations as far north as the shores of the Kola Peninsula.<sup>61</sup> In the 18th century, Russia's Peter the Great

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<sup>59</sup> "Russia" The Arctic Institute: Center for Circumpolar Security Studies, last modified June 19, 2020, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/countries/russia/>.

<sup>60</sup> The Arctic Institute.

<sup>61</sup> Lars Ivar Hansen, "The Arctic Dimension of 'Norgesveldet,'" in *The Norwegian Domination and the Norse World c.1100 - c.1400*, ed. Steinar Imsen (Trondheim, Norway: Trondheim Academic Press, 2010), 213–214.

funded exploratory expeditions into far eastern Siberian lands and Arctic waters in search of trade opportunities; it was through this expedition that explorer Vitus Bering discovered the vast resource potential of Alaska, which remained a Russian territory until its purchase by the United States in 1867.<sup>62</sup> Also in the late 19th century, Russian businesses helped fund a Swedish expedition, which, for the first time, successfully navigated the entire length of the NSR, from Sweden to the Pacific Ocean by way of the Bering Strait.<sup>63</sup> Lagutina writes that during this imperial period, and continuing into the 20th century, the Arctic port city of Arkhangelsk “became an important link in the chain of international commerce—the sector that accounted for 60 percent of the state’s revenues.”<sup>64</sup>

During the Tsarist period, the ruling regime first perceived foreign encroachment into Russia’s Arctic territory as threat against its interests. In particular, Swedish attempts to annex Svalbard—an archipelago that sits about 400 miles north of Norway’s northern coast—in the late 19th century were vetoed by the Russian government.<sup>65</sup> Russia claimed discovery of the archipelago, as did the British and Norwegians. In 1899, St. Petersburg sent the *Yermak*, the world’s first icebreaker, to Svalbard in order to assert its claims.<sup>66</sup> Pier Horensma writes that Russia then adopted a more aggressive Arctic policy, believing “certain Arctic areas to be hers by right from time immemorial. Foreign expeditions were thus seen as unlawful intruders.”<sup>67</sup> In 1916, the empire’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs staked Russia’s claim to all Arctic lands and waters from the Russian coast to the North Pole, ending with Russia’s border with Norway in the West and the easternmost border of the Chukchi Peninsula in the East, a claim that it communicated to all foreign powers of the time.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, “Strategic Competition or Possibilities for Cooperation,” 214–215.

<sup>63</sup> Lagutina, *Russia’s Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, 12.

<sup>64</sup> Lagutina, 10.

<sup>65</sup> Pier Horensma, *The Soviet Arctic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 8–9.

<sup>66</sup> Laruelle, *Russia’s Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 25.

<sup>67</sup> Horensma, *The Soviet Arctic*, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Lagutina, *Russia’s Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, 12.

When the Soviet government arrived in the early 1920s, the Bolsheviks put great effort into Arctic development. They worked to centralize control of its diverse population and remote territories and began exploring the potential of the NSR as a key transport artery for state development projects. Laruelle notes that in this time, Soviet icebreaker successes “boosted Moscow’s interest in establishing control over the Northern Sea Route.”<sup>69</sup> The Arctic became a critical source of natural resources for the state during the Communist Party’s collectivization and industrialization efforts under Joseph Stalin, and—through the exploitation of *gulag* labor—the Soviet machine relied heavily on the mineral resources, metals, coal, and fossil fuels in the country’s northernmost reaches.<sup>70</sup>

Just as Tsarist Russia had acted to defend its Arctic claims against Sweden in 1899, so did the Soviets at this time perceive the possibility of western encroachment into the Arctic—this time by Canada and the United States—as a threat to its interests in the region. In 1922, Canada occupied and claimed Wrangel Island<sup>71</sup> as part of Canada.<sup>72</sup> The Bolsheviks responded by converting an icebreaker into a gunboat, the *Krasny Oktyabr*,<sup>73</sup> which it dispatched to Wrangel Island in 1924; the boat’s crew hoisted the Soviet flag on the island and arrested the American and Canadian Inuit occupants.<sup>74</sup> Horensma notes that even though shots were not fired during this incident, “it was the first time that an Arctic conflict about sovereignty had been solved *manu militari*.”<sup>75</sup> To re-assert Russia’s 1916 territorial claims, the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued their decree “On the Proclamation of Lands and Islands Located in the Northern Arctic Ocean as Territory of

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<sup>69</sup> Laruelle, *Russia’s Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 26.

<sup>70</sup> Laruelle, 26.

<sup>71</sup> Wrangel Island is situated between the East Siberian and Chukchi Seas, about 90 miles off of Russia’s northeastern coast.

<sup>72</sup> Horensma, *The Soviet Arctic*, 24.

<sup>73</sup> Russian for “*Red October*.”

<sup>74</sup> Horensma, *The Soviet Arctic*, 25.

<sup>75</sup> Horensma, 25.

the USSR.”<sup>76</sup> Laruelle writes that at this time, “Russia regarded itself as surrounded by capitalist enemies characterized by their ‘imperialism.’”<sup>77</sup>

Throughout the 1930s, daring feats in polar aviation, maritime navigation, as well as Arctic research and discovery transformed the North into a source of national pride and identity for the Soviet Union.<sup>78</sup> For example, in 1937 the Soviets established a weather station on an ice floe near the North Pole, and the meteorological data they collected allowed the Soviet pilots to achieve the world’s first trans-Arctic flight over the North Pole, from Moscow to Vancouver, Washington.<sup>79</sup> Laruelle writes that these Soviet advancements and successful exploits in operating in the far North “gave rise to a central myth of Soviet popular culture, that of the ‘Red Arctic.’”<sup>80</sup> Thus, in this period, Russians began to consider the Arctic a part of their national identity.

## **B. THE ARCTIC’S STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE TO THE USSR**

During World War II, the USSR began to realize not only the economic and national identity importance of the Arctic, but also its strategic importance. The NSR specifically was of importance to the war effort, as it was used for naval transit as well as for shipping critical war supplies such as coal and nickel, which were extracted in the Arctic.<sup>81</sup> Lagutina notes that “during World War II, the Arctic was critical for the Soviet victory over Germany because the Northern Sea Route was used to deliver the lend-lease cargoes from the United States.”<sup>82</sup> The importance of the NSR to Soviet national priorities diminished in the immediate post-war period, although resource transit—such as for timber—continued.<sup>83</sup> However, development of the Arctic remained a priority for the

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<sup>76</sup> Laruelle, *Russian Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 96.

<sup>77</sup> Laruelle, 96.

<sup>78</sup> Horensma, *The Soviet Arctic*, 173.

<sup>79</sup> Horensma, 62.

<sup>80</sup> Laruelle, *Russian Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 27.

<sup>81</sup> Horensma, *The Soviet Arctic*, 69.

<sup>82</sup> Lagutina, *Russia’s Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, 15.

<sup>83</sup> Horensma, *The Soviet Arctic*, 70.

Soviet government. Lagutina notes that in the postwar period, “the overall objective of the state-run organizations in the Soviet period was to build up in the Arctic a powerful academic, industrial, and military presence, which made the USSR the world’s foremost Arctic power.”<sup>84</sup>

During the Cold War, the Arctic assumed exceptional strategic importance for both the United States and the USSR, as it represented “the shortest trajectory for nuclear weapons between the United States and the Soviet Union...making the region essential for the nuclear deterrence of the two superpowers.”<sup>85</sup> The Arctic and the NSR provided the shortest distance of travel, not only for nuclear missiles, but also for submarines (the detection of which is complicated by Arctic maritime conditions), as well as strategic bombers.<sup>86</sup> By the 1960s, both the United States and the USSR had established their respective nuclear triads, consisting of ground-launched (Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles [ICBM]), air-dropped, and submarine-launched (SLBM) weapon delivery systems.<sup>87</sup> Lagutina writes that during the Cold War, “both the USSR and the United States regarded the Arctic as a zone of possible direct clash between them, keeping secret many projects they sponsored in the northern region.”<sup>88</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev describe how the engagement of strategic submarine activity, as well as thousands of air interdictions of Soviet strategic bombers encroaching on North American airspace by Canadian and U.S. fighters, posed “the most probable military conflict scenarios of the Cold War.”<sup>89</sup>

When the Soviet Union fell into decline in the late 1980s, Moscow’s posture in the Arctic shifted, beginning with Communist Party general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev’s 1987 speech in Murmansk, in which he proposed to NATO members that Northern Europe

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<sup>84</sup> Lagutina, *Russia’s Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, 15.

<sup>85</sup> Mikkola, *The Geostrategic Arctic*, 3.

<sup>86</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, “Strategic Competition or Possibilities for Cooperation,” 215.

<sup>87</sup> Amy F. Woolf, *Russia’s Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization*, R45861 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2021), 8, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/R45861.pdf>.

<sup>88</sup> Lagutina, *Russia’s Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, 15.

<sup>89</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, *Strategic Competition or Possibilities for Cooperation*, 215.

should become a “nuclear-free zone,” and further that naval and air force activities in the region should be reduced.<sup>90</sup> He concluded:

What everybody can be absolutely certain of is the Soviet Union’s profound and certain interest in preventing the North of the planet, its Polar and sub-Polar regions and all Northern countries from ever again becoming an arena of war, and in forming there a genuine zone of peace and fruitful cooperation.<sup>91</sup>

Gorbachev’s speech marked a drastic change in Soviet policy in the Arctic that influenced Russian policies in the North following the collapse of the USSR. However, the Soviets did not abandon their strategically critical nuclear forces along its northern coast. Instead, they continued to grow and maintain their Northern Fleet on the Kola Peninsula even near the end of the Cold War, and several years after Gorbachev’s speech that advocated for denuclearization of the region.<sup>92</sup> Gorbachev’s speech perhaps can be seen as an early example of Russia’s contradictory approaches to international engagement in the Arctic. He preached the need for cooperation and demilitarization in the Arctic, while the USSR simultaneously advanced its nuclear capabilities in the region. Putin has pursued the same contradictory policy in Russia’s current approach to Arctic relations. He has advocated for cooperative ventures in the region, while simultaneously building up Russia’s nuclear and conventional capabilities along its northern coast.<sup>93</sup>

In 1990, Holroyd wrote with a focus on U.S. and Canadian options for pursuing cooperative security agreements in light of the growing Soviet threat in the Arctic. There, in analyzing Soviet strategic intent for the region, she wrote, “The potential for Soviet attack against North America has certainly not been lost on either the United States or

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<sup>90</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, “Speech in Murmansk at the Ceremonial Meeting on the Occasion of the Presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star to the City of Murmansk, October 1, 1987” (Novosti Press Agency: Moscow, 1987), 4–5, retrieved on October 26, 2021 from [https://www.barentsinform.fi/docs/Gorbachev\\_speech.pdf](https://www.barentsinform.fi/docs/Gorbachev_speech.pdf).

<sup>91</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, 6.

<sup>92</sup> Suzanne M. Holroyd, *U.S. and Canadian Cooperative Approaches to Arctic Security*, N-3111-RC (Santa Monica, CA: 1990), 6.

<sup>93</sup> Hilde-Gunn Bye, “Plenty of Ground for Cooperation in the Arctic, Putin Says,” *High North News*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/plenty-ground-cooperation-arctic-putin-says>.

Canada.”<sup>94</sup> She then described the USSR’s technological advances and significant fielded forces on the Kola Peninsula.<sup>95</sup>

Holroyd noted that at the time—1990—the Soviet Union was in the process of withdrawing forces from Eastern Europe, and that the USSR and Canada were interested in demilitarizing the Arctic and seeking avenues for cooperation in such non-military areas. Still, Holroyd warned that “Canadians should certainly keep in mind the buildup of Soviet submarine forces before they judge Soviet intentions in the region,” identifying the Kola Peninsula as “one of the last lines of Soviet defense.”<sup>96</sup> In other words, Holroyd advised NATO states to be cautious of Soviet claims to desire cooperation in the Arctic, because it was one of the last regions in which the declining state could still compete militarily. In Russia today, it seems as though the perception has not changed amongst Russian leaders that the Arctic represents the nation’s last defensible fallback position. Laruelle illustrates this point by describing the belief of contemporary Russian military leaders that the Arctic serves as “Russia’s most important ‘reserve of space.’”<sup>97</sup> Holroyd further theorized concerning Russia’s strategy of employing defensive “bastions” in a potential conflict with NATO in order to secure its strategic nuclear forces on the Kola Peninsula.<sup>98</sup>

Following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Russia’s prioritization of Arctic development and defense diminished greatly. Lagutina writes:

After the collapse of the USSR, the Arctic was neglected (decreased population, many cities were deserted, the Northern Sea Route was not actively used, some military bases were abandoned, etc.) The once prosperous region was in the grip of a systemic crisis due to financing cutbacks and a breakdown in the system of state governance.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Holroyd, U.S. and Canadian Cooperative Approaches to Arctic Security, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Holroyd, 6.

<sup>96</sup> Holroyd, 44–45.

<sup>97</sup> Laruelle, Russia’s Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North, 49.

<sup>98</sup> Holroyd, U.S. and Canadian Cooperative Approaches to Arctic Security, 6–8. This concept of Russian “bastion defense” will be a central theme in the following chapter, which will discuss how pivotal Russia’s northern deterrent capabilities are to Russia’s modern security interests and strategies in the Arctic.

<sup>99</sup> Lagutina, Russia’s Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century, 16.

Not until the early 2000s did Putin reignite Russia's interest, investment, and developmental efforts in the Arctic. It has been under his leadership that Moscow re-established the region as a pillar of Russia's economic, security, and great power ambitions; and it was Putin who sought to revive Russian Arctic mythology as a source of domestic control.<sup>100</sup> The fact that the other Arctic states would soon follow Russia in attempting to mark out their claims in the Arctic would eventually lead to territorial disputes in the region, and motivate the ongoing debate concerning how far Russia is willing to go to secure its Arctic interests against foreign competitors.

### **C. A NEW ARENA FOR GLOBAL COMPETITION AMID INEFFECTIVE INTERNATIONAL GOVERNANCE**

The U.S. Army's 2021 Arctic Strategy document notes, "there has been a ~40% reduction in Arctic sea ice index over the last four decades during the warmer months (June-July) and ~10% in the colder months."<sup>101</sup> The rapid warming of the Arctic is creating the conditions for Arctic nations (and China, who claims to be a "near Arctic" nation)<sup>102</sup> to compete for the economic and strategic benefits offered by the increasingly accessible northern lands and seas. This international resurgence of interest in all that the Arctic has to offer has initiated competition amongst the Arctic states, most of which (excluding the United States) have staked out their claims in the region, resulting in the current international disputes that could threaten cooperation and stability in the Arctic. What institutions exist to mediate these disputes, are they effective, and how have Russia's interactions with them demonstrated their intentions for the region?

The most active international institution that supports Arctic state engagement is the Arctic Council, which was established in 1996, and according to its website serves as the "leading intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, Arctic Indigenous peoples and other Arctic inhabitants on

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<sup>100</sup> Melino and Conley, "The Ice Curtain."

<sup>101</sup> U.S. Army HQ, "Regaining Arctic Dominance," 16.

<sup>102</sup> Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen and Vincent Gallucci, "The Return of China, post-Cold War Russia, and the Arctic: Changes on land and at sea," *Marine Policy* 72 (April 2016): 240, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2016.04.034>.

common Arctic issues, in particular on issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in the Arctic.”<sup>103</sup> While, as a forum, the Arctic Council has been at the core of regional successes in multilateral cooperation since its founding, the institution has no ability to enforce agreements made amongst Arctic states, and will not even discuss matters of security, thereby answering the question of whether the Arctic Council is really an effective institution for resolving Arctic territorial disputes. The Council’s web page explicitly states:

The Arctic Council does not and cannot implement or enforce its guidelines, assessments or recommendations. That responsibility belongs to individual Arctic States or international bodies... The Arctic Council’s mandate, as articulated in the Ottawa Declaration, explicitly excludes military security.<sup>104</sup>

If the Arctic Council exists solely for the purpose of pursuing cooperative endeavors, then what international institutions serve to resolve disputes amongst the Arctic states? All states with coasts along the Arctic Ocean (United States, Russian, Canada, Denmark, and Norway) are subject to the United Nations International Maritime Organization (IMO) governance, which is responsible for ensuring “safety and security of shipping” as well as counter-pollution efforts in the marine domains.<sup>105</sup> However, IMO does not serve as the primary source of international governance most applicable to Arctic territorial disputes. In December of 1982, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) treaty, which is also often called the Law of the Sea Convention (LOSC), was signed and—once it went into effect in November of 1994—became the most widely-accepted legal framework for settling maritime delimitation disputes. Four of the five Arctic Ocean-bordering states are among the 167 current signatories of UNCLOS, but the United States never agreed to sign the treaty; however, Østhagen and Schofield note

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<sup>103</sup> “About the Arctic Council,” The Arctic Council, accessed October 29, 2021, <https://arctic-council.org/about/>.

<sup>104</sup> The Arctic Council, “About the Arctic Council.”

<sup>105</sup> “IMO – the International Maritime Organization,” International Maritime Organization, accessed October 29, 2021, <https://www.imo.org/>.

that the United States “generally regards the core principles of UNCLOS as being reflective of customary international law and thus binding on all states.”<sup>106</sup>

To summarize the key governing principles of the UNCLOS treaty that best inform the discussion to follow, detailing current Arctic territorial disputes:<sup>107</sup> states (and for the purpose of this thesis, Arctic states) can exercise sovereign control of all traffic within their 12 miles of territorial waters. Outside of those territorial waters, each state has the exclusive right to exploit all resources within their EEZ out to 200 miles, but foreign maritime vessels and aircraft are free to navigate through the EEZs of other states. A state’s EEZ may be extended out from its coast as far as 350 miles if it can scientifically prove that the continental shelf of the state extends out beyond 200 miles before dropping off in transition to the deeper international seabed.<sup>108</sup> In order to make such a claim, a nation must submit said scientific evidence to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). Finally, national straits may be considered territorial waters, through which states may regulate foreign transit. Østhagen and Schofield provide a useful illustration of these various layers of maritime control with relation to a nation’s coastline, depicted in Figure 2.

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<sup>106</sup> Andreas Østhagen and Clive H. Schofield, “An Ocean Apart? Maritime Boundary Agreements and Disputes in the Arctic Ocean,” *The Polar Journal* (September 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2021.1978234>.

<sup>107</sup> Department of the Air Force, “Arctic Strategy,” 5.

<sup>108</sup> Østhagen and Schofield, “An Ocean Apart?”

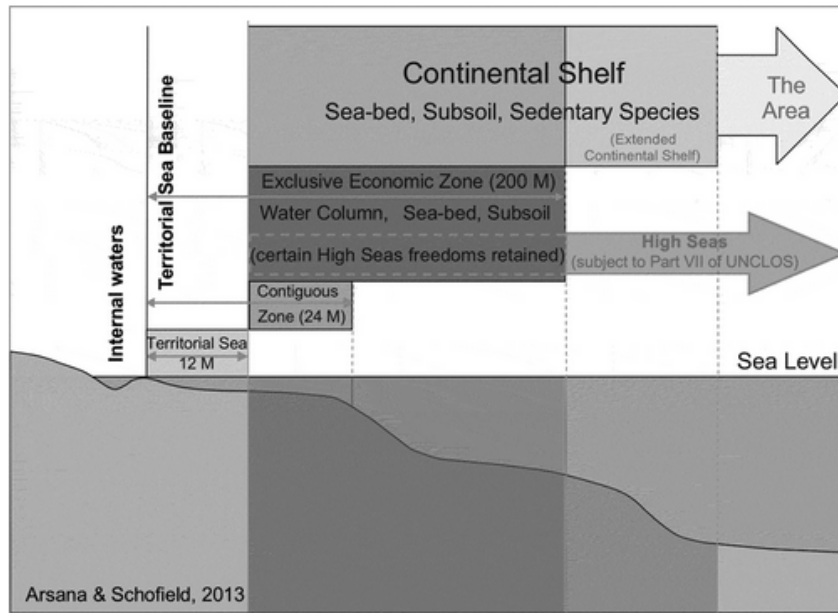


Figure 2. Depiction of UNCLOS Limitations of Territorial Waters<sup>109</sup>

#### D. RUSSIA AT THE CENTER OF ONGOING ARCTIC NATION DISPUTES

Russia has taken advantage of the complex, ill-defined, and largely unenforceable nature of international law in the Arctic to stake vast territorial claims in the region in order to maximize its exclusive access to Arctic resources. Additionally, Russia has formulated its own interpretation of UNCLOS, by which it has enacted controversial control measures under threat of military force, for any foreign vessels seeking to transit the NSR in accordance with freedom-of-navigation principles. These Russian actions have motivated the most significant ongoing Arctic nation disputes, which are: (1) contention over state EEZ delimitations, specifically with regard to the limits of the continental shelves of Arctic states; and (2) disagreements over to what extent a state can regulate traffic through Arctic territorial straights, most notably, Russia's attempts to regulate traffic through the NSR.

<sup>109</sup> Source: Østhagen and Schofield.

## 1. Continental Shelf Claims

In line with the “Defensive” hypothesis, Sliwa and Aliyev write: “Understanding Russia’s economic weaknesses, Moscow is concerned that the West and other powers plan to deprive Russia of the NSR and economic resources of the Arctic,” and further describe how in reaction, Moscow has bolstered its military capabilities along its northern coastline.<sup>110</sup> One leading source of international contention in the region centers around the continental shelf claims submitted by most of the Arctic states, which overlap extensively across the Arctic sea bed. This contested territory is home to the resources that Russia fears may be denied to it by the West, and therefore serves as a leading motivation for the aggressive posture that Russia has staked out in the Arctic. Sliwa and Aliyev highlight the vast resources that are up for grabs in the region, and illustrate why the Arctic states are so determined to claim as much of the Arctic for their EEZs as they can through CLCS submissions:

The Arctic encompasses about 6 percent of the Earth’s surface and contains an estimated 22 percent of the world’s undiscovered fossil fuel resources. Moreover, an estimated 90 billion barrels of oil and 1670 trillion cubic feet (i.e., 48 trillion cubic meters) of natural gas are located in the region’s disputed international waters.<sup>111</sup>

The UN CLCS, a sub-component of UNCLOS established in 1997, is the committee to which nations may make a claim its continental shelf extends at least 200 miles beyond its shoreline, and therefore its rights to the resources within its EEZ should extend to the termination of that continental shelf. All states bordering the Arctic Ocean have submitted CLCS claims, except for the United States because it is not a UNCLOS signatory state. Østhagen and Schofield note that “It appears from these submissions that, should the Commission be in agreement, the vast majority of the seabed of the Arctic Ocean will form part of the outer or extended continental shelf of the coastal states.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, “Strategic Competition or Possibilities for Cooperation,” 235.

<sup>111</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, “Strategic Competition or Possibilities for Cooperation,” 216.

<sup>112</sup> Østhagen and Schofield, “An Ocean Apart?”

Given that Russia's northern coast constitutes more than half of the world's total Arctic coastline, it is no wonder that Russia's territorial claims in the region far-surpass those made by the other Arctic states.<sup>113</sup> Russia has thus been the most assertive of the Arctic states in staking its claim on resource-rich areas in the region, and was the first to submit a claim to the CLCS in 2000, which it further amended in 2015 and 2021.<sup>114</sup> Given Russia's extensive Arctic coastline, its continental shelf claims far surpass the claims submitted by the other Arctic states. As is depicted in the Durham University-produced map in Figure 3, which illustrates the overlapping continental shelf claims as derived from each state's CLCS submissions, Russia's continental shelf claims cover roughly half of the Arctic Ocean.

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<sup>113</sup> The Arctic Institute, "Russia."

<sup>114</sup> "Briefing Notes for IBRU Arctic Map Series," United Nations, CLCS, last updated April 2021, <https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research-/research-centres/ibru-centre-for-borders-research/documents/BriefingNotesArcticMapApril2021.pdf>.

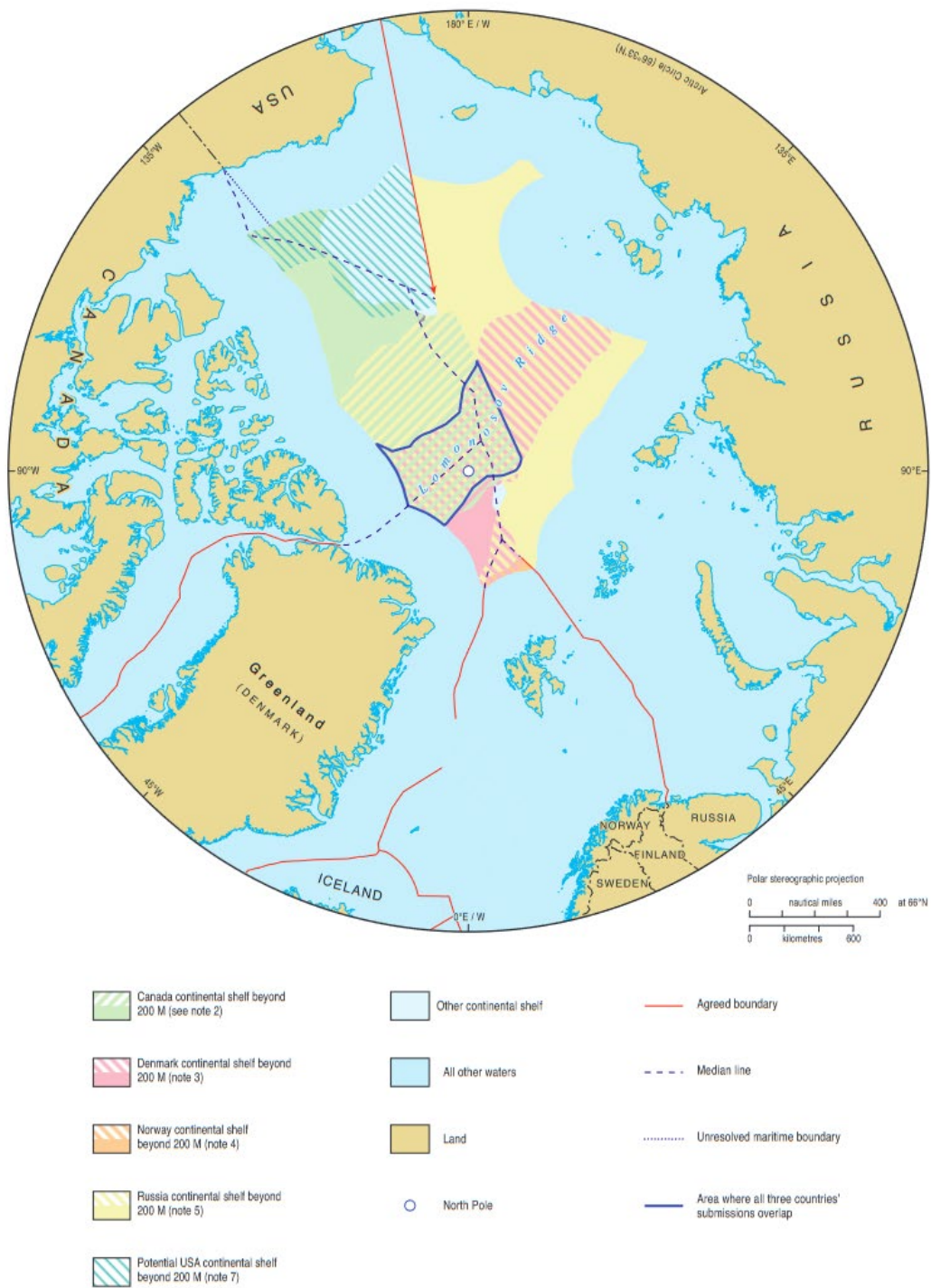


Figure 3. Overlapping Arctic State Continental Shelf Claims<sup>115</sup>

Most importantly, Russia's claims overlap extensively with the claims submitted by other Arctic states, and all of which are still under review.<sup>116</sup> Russia's claims conflict with those submitted by Denmark and Canada by 234,000 square miles and 222,000 square miles, respectively.<sup>117</sup>

A significant factor impacting ongoing disputes over continental shelf claims is the fact that CLCS is not able to settle disagreements with regard to overlapping continental shelf claims unless all states represented by the overlapping claims agree to allow CLCS to arbitrate on their behalf. Therefore, like the Arctic Council, the CLCS is limited in its ability to mediate resolution to Arctic territorial disputes.

Russia has thus far operated within the legal confines of CLCS guidance with regard to its continental shelf claims, and like Canada and Denmark—the nations with which Russia's claims overlap—Russia has stated its intent to negotiate within the confines of the committee's framework.<sup>118</sup> However, much of the doubt among the Arctic states concerning the potential for conflict in the region stems from uncertainty as to whether Russia will accept the arbitration of the CLCS concerning overlapping continental shelf claims. With so much at stake economically in the Arctic, and with Russia's track record of taking unilateral military action to achieve its territorial goals, the possibility cannot be ruled out that if Moscow believes it is getting the short end of the stick in Arctic territorial delimitation, Russia may take matters into its own hands with further aggressive actions.

## **2. NSR Transit Disputes**

The second key source of international dispute in the Arctic concerns whether Russia is legally justified in attempting to control international transit through the NSR.

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<sup>115</sup> Source: "Continental Shelf Submission in the Central Arctic Ocean," Durham University IBRU: Centre for Borders Research, last modified April 2021, [https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research-/research-centres/ibru-centre-for-borders-research/maps-and-databases/arctic-maps-2021/updated-maps-and-notes/Map-2-IBRU-Arctic-map-07-04-21-\(Continental-shelf-submissions-in-the-CAO\).pdf](https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research-/research-centres/ibru-centre-for-borders-research/maps-and-databases/arctic-maps-2021/updated-maps-and-notes/Map-2-IBRU-Arctic-map-07-04-21-(Continental-shelf-submissions-in-the-CAO).pdf).

<sup>116</sup> United Nations, CLCS, "Briefing Notes for IBRU Arctic Map Series."

<sup>117</sup> United Nations, CLCS.

<sup>118</sup> Østhagen and Schofield, "An Ocean Apart?"

Under UNCLOS law, states have the right to control maritime and aviation traffic within the 12 miles of their coastlines, but in the past decade Russia has attempted to assert a level of control beyond that distance and into what it claims are its sovereign straits. One of the principles defined in UNCLOS is that, while all nations may navigate through transit straits, “States bordering the straits can regulate navigational and other aspects of passage.”<sup>119</sup> Laruelle writes that “Canada and Russia consider the Northwest Passage and the Northeast Passage [NSR], respectively, their territorial waters, and therefore claim the right to regulate the traffic of foreign ships, while the other states, especially the United States, consider them international waters.”<sup>120</sup>

During the Cold War, the USSR first attempted to control who could or could not travel through the Arctic route. Horensma notes that in 1949, the Soviet Chief Administration of the Northern Sea Route held a conference called “The undivided and unrestrained sovereignty of the Soviet Union over the Polar Sea,” by which the USSR asserted that the Arctic was Soviet territory and the NSR was composed of its own sovereign straits.<sup>121</sup> Laruelle writes that, in the late 1950s, the United States responded by exercising “its perceived right to freely navigate the oceans” by transiting submarines, not just through Soviet-controlled waters and straits in the Arctic, but even into Soviet territorial waters.<sup>122</sup> Likely as the result of such ventures into Soviet Arctic waters, in 1964 the White House and the Kremlin disagreed over the latter’s insistence that American ships should not transit along the Soviet Union’s northern coast without its permission.<sup>123</sup> This political debate went unresolved, and in 1965 a U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker, the *Northwind*, transited through what the USSR claimed to be its sovereign Vilkitskii Strait, which passes between the Kara and Laptev Seas.<sup>124</sup> Horensma notes that in spite of the

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<sup>119</sup> “United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982: Overview and Full Text.,” United Nations, last modified November 02, 2020, [https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/convention\\_overview\\_convention.htm](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm).

<sup>120</sup> Laruelle, *Russian Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 95.

<sup>121</sup> Horensma, *The Soviet Arctic*, 78.

<sup>122</sup> Laruelle, *Russian Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 97.

<sup>123</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, “Strategic Competition or Possibilities for Cooperation,” 215–216.

<sup>124</sup> Laruelle, *Russia’s Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 171.

Kremlin's claims to sovereignty in the NSR from 1949 to 1965, the Soviets did not try to stop American ships, such as the *Northwind*.<sup>125</sup>

Amid today's great power tensions in the Arctic, the U.S.-Russian debate concerning Arctic freedom of navigation has intensified. At an Arctic Council ministerial meeting in a May 2019, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo stated:

In the Northern Sea Route, Moscow already illegally demands other nations request permission to pass, requires Russian maritime pilots to be aboard foreign ships, and threatens to use military force to sink any that fail to comply with their demands. These provocative actions are part of a pattern of aggressive Russian behavior here in the Arctic. Russia is already leaving snow prints in the form of army boots... Russia is unique. Its actions deserve special attention, special attention of this Council, in part because of their sheer scale. But also because we know Russian territorial ambitions can turn violent.<sup>126</sup>

In line with Pompeo's accusations, each branch of the U.S. armed forces released new Arctic strategies that highlight Russia's attempts to control international activity in the region (except the U.S. Space Force, though its role in achieving U.S. Arctic objectives is noted in the strategies of other branches). The U.S. Army Arctic strategy document states that "Russia seeks to consolidate sovereign claims and control access to the region,"<sup>127</sup> reflecting how Russian activities in the Arctic mirror China's past efforts to exert control over transit, trade, and resources in the South and East China seas. Just as China has spent the past decade pursuing aggressive strategies within its self-proclaimed Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea, so too is Russia attempting to control traffic and trade in the Arctic, specifically within and across the NSR.

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<sup>125</sup> Horensma, *The Soviet Arctic*, 13.

<sup>126</sup> Michael Pompeo, quoted in O'Rourke et al., *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress*, 18–19.

<sup>127</sup> U.S. Army HQ, "Regaining Arctic Dominance," 16.

Similarly, both the U.S. Air Force’s 2020 Arctic strategy and the U.S. Navy’s 2021 *Arctic Blueprint* identify Russia’s attempts to unlawfully control the NSR.<sup>128</sup> Finally, in April 2021, Pentagon spokesman Lt Col. Thomas Campbell described Russia’s attempts to control and manage transit through the NSR, stating that Russia’s efforts to regulate Arctic navigation exceed its rights under international law: “They require any vessel transiting the NSR through international waters to have a Russian pilot onboard to guide the vessel. Russia is also attempting to require foreign vessels to obtain permission before entering the NSR.”<sup>129</sup>

Arild Moe describes Russian reporting in 2019, noting that the Russian military had drafted an initiative that would require foreign warships to provide 45 days’ notice before attempting a transit of the NSR, or they could be “stopped by force if entering without permission. As a last resort, they might be destroyed by the Russian military.”<sup>130</sup> Moe notes that as of June, 2020, the draft regulation had not been published, and there is no evidence that it has been published in 2021, but the fact that the document was drafted could indicate that Russia may have broken away from the Cold War era strategy of leveraging only diplomatic means to speak out against foreign intrusion into the NSR, though only in planning at this point, and not yet in action.

## E. CONCLUSIONS

Russia exploration, development, and mastery of the unforgiving Arctic—from its earliest history to Soviet times—etched the Arctic’s place into the nation’s collective identity. The Soviet era established the ruling Russian regime’s challenge of balancing economic, security, and domestic control priorities in the Arctic, setting the historical

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<sup>128</sup> Department of the Air Force, “Arctic Strategy,” 6 ; and “A Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic,” Department of the Navy, Jan 2021, 7, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/05/2002560338/-1/-1/0/ARCTIC%20BLUEPRINT%202021%20FINAL.PDF/ARCTIC%20BLUEPRINT%202021%20FINAL.PDF>.

<sup>129</sup> Thomas Campbell, quoted in Nick Paton Walsh, “Satellite images show huge Russian military buildup in the Arctic,” *CNN*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/05/europe/russia-arctic-nato-military-intl-cmd/index.html>.

<sup>130</sup> Arild Moe, “A New Russian Policy for the Northern Sea Route? State Interests, Key Stakeholders and Economic Opportunities in Changing Times,” *The Polar Journal* 10, no. 2 (August 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2020.1799611>.

precedence for analyzing how Russia's modern conflicting priorities in the Arctic might impact its posture in the region. In reviewing Russia's interactions with other Arctic states and international governing institutions, such as the Arctic Council and CLCS, the evidence seems to support the "Defensive" hypothesis justification for Russia's military buildup in the Arctic. However, Russia's current policies for controlling transit through the NSR seem to tell a different story. The NSR transit laws that Moscow has enacted during the reign of Vladimir Putin, and the 2019 draft initiative that reportedly threatens military action against foreign military encroachment into the NSR, seem to indicate a shift in strategy from the Soviet Cold War "rhetoric-only" attempts at NSR control, to a new "coercive threat of force" approach. In contrast to Russia's assertion of its CLCS claims, which it has submitted through proper legal channels, Moscow's shift in enacting NSR control measures under threat of military force is more in line with the "Offensive" hypothesis, which could indicate Russia's willingness to pursue its goals in the Arctic by military means, instead of cooperative ones.

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### III. RUSSIA'S ARCTIC AGENDAS TODAY

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how Russia has, like the Soviet Union before it, balanced its economic, security, and domestic control agendas in the Arctic over the past 20 years. This chapter begins by discussing how successive post-Soviet Russian leaders have approached international engagement on Arctic issues. It then describes what Russia's current economic, security, and domestic control interests are relating to the region, how these agendas interact with—and often contradict—one another, and finally analyze how Moscow's attempts to balance these contradictions may provide evidence to support the three hypotheses presented in Chapter I. Ultimately, Russia's actions in the region over the past two decades provide varying degrees of evidence in support of each hypothesis, and indicates that Moscow's employs a reactive, rather than calculated strategic approach to dealing with Arctic issues. This insight paints Russia at best an unpredictable player in the Arctic, and at worst, a dangerous one.

#### A. THE “ROLLERCOASTER” OF RUSSIA'S POST-SOVIET FOREIGN POLICIES ON THE ARCTIC

When the Soviet Union fell, Russia lost its status as a great power on the world stage. In the 1990s, under President Yeltsin and following the dissolution of the USSR, the Kremlin put Arctic development on the back burner. Lagutina describes Russia's actions in the Arctic during the 1990s—and even into the 2000s—as “reactive and unsystematic,” with regions of the Russian Arctic pursuing local, rather than national, economic and political paths.<sup>131</sup>

It was not until 2000s that Moscow began to recentralize control over its Arctic territories. When Putin rose to power in the early 2000s, he returned Moscow's focus to the prioritization of hard-power capabilities, and gradually realigned Russia's grand strategy back to the historically recurring Russian mentality of “geopolitical insecurity that

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<sup>131</sup> Lagutina, *Russia's Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, 16.

informs the realist school of thought.”<sup>132</sup> As evidence of this idea, during Putin’s first two terms as president, the Kremlin focused on the strategic and economic importance of the Arctic, and Russia’s first Arctic Policy, published in 2001, painted the region as an arena for military tension and competition for national influence.<sup>133</sup>

Russia was the first Arctic state to submit a continental shelf claim to the CLCS in 2001,<sup>134</sup> a clear demonstration of its renewed interest in the region. In 2007, Russia further demonstrated its new prioritization of the Arctic by sending two nuclear-powered icebreakers to the North Pole, which then deployed submarines to chart the ocean floor.<sup>135</sup> One of the submarines, the *Mir I*, contained two members of the Russian State Duma, Vladimir Gruzdev and Artur Chilingarov. As directed by Russia’s ruling party, the crew of the *Mir I* used the submarine’s robotic arm to plant a Russian flag on the ocean floor. Though the stunt did not constitute a legitimate territorial claim and prompted an international rebuke, Russia sent a clear message to the other Arctic nations that it intended to compete for territory in the region. It also was a message to the Russian public that the Arctic remained a pillar of Russia’s cultural identity.

When Dmitry Medvedev took over the presidency in 2008, he signed into effect *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, which stated: “In accordance with the international law, Russia intends to establish the boundaries of its continental shelf, thus expanding opportunities for exploration and exploitation of its mineral resources.”<sup>136</sup> However, Russia’s Arctic policies under Medvedev took on a less aggressive tone than those published under Putin’s rule in the early 2000s.<sup>137</sup> The 2009 Russian Arctic Policy

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<sup>132</sup> “Four Myths About Russian Grand Strategy,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, September 22, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/four-myths-about-russian-grand-strategy>.

<sup>133</sup> Laruelle, *Russia’s Northern Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 4–5.

<sup>134</sup> United Nations, CLCS, “Briefing Notes for IBRU Arctic Map Series.”

<sup>135</sup> Jonathan Markowitz, *Perils of Plenty: Arctic Resource Competition and the Return of the Great Game* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 81, Kindle.

<sup>136</sup> Ariel Cohen, “Russia in the Arctic,” ed. Stephen J. Blank, 17, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2011. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12068>.

<sup>137</sup> Laruelle, *Russia’s Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 5.

signed under Medvedev advocated for international cooperation in the region,<sup>138</sup> though Russia's military capabilities along the Arctic coast gradually grew throughout the mid-2000s.<sup>139</sup>

When Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, he once again shifted the Kremlin's posture on Arctic issues to competition, strategic deterrence, and national defense.<sup>140</sup> In the period after 2012, Russia therefore assumed a two-sided and contradictory stance toward the Arctic. On one hand, Putin has championed a position of cooperation with Russia's Arctic neighbors in his public statements targeted at the international community. His statements directed at the Russian populace, on the other hand, have characterized the Arctic as sovereign Russian territory, in which Russia's agenda must be prioritized. In a 2017 "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin" interview, which was broadcasted on Russian state television and radio channels, Putin stated in response to a question concerning Russia's expensive military investments in the Arctic:

The Arctic is an extremely important region, which will ensure the future of our country...I can say with confidence that Russia's power and capabilities will expand as we develop the Arctic region...*it is our territory* [my emphasis]. So, we need to ensure the use of these routes, develop our economic activity in these areas, and ensure our sovereignty over these territories. Let us not forget about the purely military aspect of the matter: it is an extremely important region from the point of view of ensuring our country's defence capability.<sup>141</sup>

What sense can be made of the Russia's real position on Arctic issues through the back-and-forth of the Kremlin's past three decades of changing Arctic posture? The one constant is that the Arctic is a critical component of Russia's current and future plans for advancing its power status on the global stage. The region is central to Russia's economic ambitions, and it is pivotal to Moscow's national and regional security strategies.

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<sup>138</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, "Strategic Competition or Possibilities for Cooperation," 221.

<sup>139</sup> Zysk, "Russia's Military Build-Up in the Arctic," 2.

<sup>140</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, "Strategic Competition or Possibilities for Cooperation," 221.

<sup>141</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin," Kremlin.ru, June 15, 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54790>.

Additionally, the Arctic stands as a pillar of Russian national identity and serves as an important tool for the Kremlin's engagement with, and control of, its domestic population.

## **B. ECONOMIC AMBITIONS**

Russia's economic interests in the Arctic form the core of arguments used in support of the "Defensive" hypothesis about Russia's posture in the region; but Moscow has adopted policies and taken actions in the Arctic that indicate more aggressive motivations are also at play behind its military buildup along its northern coast. This section first discusses Russia's economic goals for the Arctic. It then discusses the limitations and obstacles with which Russia must contend in pursuit of these goals. Finally, this section discusses how competing imperatives and have led Moscow to adopt contradictory policies in the Arctic.

### **1. The Economic Significance**

It is clear that the Arctic's growing economic potential is especially important to Russia, given that it possesses nearly half of the land in the region. According to the U.S. Army's newly published Arctic strategy:

The Arctic accounts for nearly 20 percent of Russia's GDP, 22 percent of its exports, and more than 10 percent of all investment in Russia. Approximately 75 percent of Russia's oil and 95 percent of its natural gas reserves are located in the North. Russia has developed 10 major oil fields, with 2.3-billion metric tons of proven reserves, and 22 gas fields with 35.7-trillion cubic meters of gas."<sup>142</sup>

The 2008 Arctic Strategy of the Russian Federation Through 2020 presents the Arctic as "the main strategic base for Russian natural resources" in this century.<sup>143</sup> The Arctic's significant contributions to Russia's economy result in large part from the decades of industrial development that the Soviet Union invested into its northern territories, particularly with regard to the extraction and transport of the region's abundant natural

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<sup>142</sup> U.S. Army HQ, "Regaining Arctic Dominance," 18.

<sup>143</sup> Laruelle, *Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 4.

resources. In 2017, Putin stated: “the region’s industrial facilities already account for 10% of Russia’s GDP, and their share is growing all the time.”<sup>144</sup>

However, Russia’s economic motivations in the Arctic Russia’s extend beyond the pursuit of economic growth for the state. The significance of the Arctic resources for the patronal system on which Putin’s regime is built on also provides evidence in support of the “Regime preservation/diversionary” hypothesis. Henry Hale writes that “Vladimir Putin has proven to be a master practitioner of patronal politics,” by which he holds on to power by rewarding loyal political allies with economic incentives, resulting in an economic and political system that is fraught with corruption and nepotism.<sup>145</sup> The regime’s patronal system relies heavily on resource rents, which is evidenced by comparing Russia’s reliance on this source of income with that of other Arctic states. Jonathan Markowitz illustrates that while Norway and Russia are about on par in leading the Arctic states in gas and oil exports as a percentage of their respective GDPs, Russia’s reliance on resource rents as a percentage of its GDP is nearly double that of Norway, with the other Arctic states falling far behind in resource rent reliance.<sup>146</sup> Specifically, Markowitz estimates that “roughly 40% of Russia’s central government revenue and 60% to 70% of its export earnings derive from the extraction, production, and export of energy.”<sup>147</sup> Furthermore, Russia has been largely unsuccessful in diversifying its sources of state revenue, and in 2018 energy resources accounted for 65 percent of Russia’s total exports.<sup>148</sup> As a result, both Russia’s macroeconomic stability and—perhaps more importantly to Putin—the stability of the ruling regime’s patronage system, are crucially dependent on energy rents.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Lagutina, *Russia’s Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, 23.

<sup>145</sup> Henry Hale, “Russian Patronal Politics Beyond Putin,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48563058>.

<sup>146</sup> Markowitz, *Perils of Plenty*, 89.

<sup>147</sup> Markowitz, 89.

<sup>148</sup> Zysk, “Russia’s Military Buildup in the Arctic,” 7.

<sup>149</sup> Henry Hale, “Russian Patronal Politics Beyond Putin.”

While the regime prioritizes development in Russia's energy sectors, post-2014 Russian-Western tensions—in particular, Western sanctions—have forced Moscow to pursue development and self-sufficiency in other economic and supply sectors as well.<sup>150</sup> In the past decade, Russia has achieved significant growth in its agricultural production for this reason, and some international observers suggest that the climate change in the Arctic may provide Russia with new economic opportunities in this realm. Russia has made great strides in increasing its agricultural production in order to not only fulfill domestic demand, but also to benefit from export revenues. Abrahm Lustgarten writes:

Since 2015, Russia's wheat exports have jumped 100 percent, to about 44 million tons, surpassing those of the United States and Europe. Russia is now the largest wheat exporter in the world, responsible for nearly a quarter of the global market. Russia's agricultural exports have jumped sixteenfold since 2000 and by 2018 were worth nearly \$30 billion, all by relying largely on Russia's legacy growing regions in its south and west.<sup>151</sup>

Lustgarten further argues that as the northern lands of the world continue to warm, Russia will be able to commit a greater portion of its vast northern lands to agricultural production, which will result in Russia's economic standing in comparison with states that are more likely to experience droughts and agricultural decline due to rising global temperatures. In 2003, Putin discussed the idea that Russia may stand to benefit from a warming of its northern territories due to climate change. He is often quoted as stating that “an increase of two or three degrees wouldn't be so bad for a northern country like Russia. We could spend less on fur coats, and the grain harvest would go up.”<sup>152</sup>

Some scholars take an opposing view concerning Russia's potential to gain from climate change, and Russia's continued Arctic development projects—even in the face of the ill-effects of climate change—provide additional evidence to that fact that the Russian regime is more interested in its own enrichment and survival than in national economic

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<sup>150</sup> Abrahm Lustgarten, “How Russia Wins the Climate Crisis,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/16/magazine/russia-climate-migration-crisis.html>.

<sup>151</sup> Lustgarten.

<sup>152</sup> Vladimir Putin, quoted in Brian Palmer, “The Putin Puzzle: How to Decipher the Russian President's Mystifying Statements on Global Warming,” *National Resources Defense Council*, December 03, 2015, <https://www.nrdc.org/onearth/putin-puzzle>.

growth. For example, Heather Conley states that “Russia is warming 2.5 times faster than the rest of the world;” but rather than focusing on the economic benefits Russia may stand to gain, she argues that climate change in the North has already, and will continue to result in increased wildfires, greenhouse gas emissions, droughts, infrastructure damage due to thawing permafrost, decline in Russia’s critical southern agricultural regions, and ultimately a sustained decline in the nation’s annual GDP.<sup>153</sup>

Either way, Moscow has pressed forward resolutely with its development projects despite the potential negative impact of climate change. Moscow’s apparent disregard for such environmental threats perhaps stem from the fact that it sees no plausible alternative for Russia’s economic future, or perhaps Moscow’s ambitions for Russia’s energy development sector simply trump all climate concerns since the regime’s power is rooted in resource rents. It could be that Moscow’s new environmentally friendly assertions are no more than lip service paid to the international community and Russia’s domestic population, demonstrating the Kremlin’s long-practiced strategy of holding on to power through its claims of adhering to legitimate and moral practices, while clearly taking actions that contradict its stated intentions.

Beyond the Arctic’s resource potential, there is another crucial economic opportunity in the high north: Russia’s exploitation of the Northern Sea Route. Historically, the NSR has been passable for only three to four months a year,<sup>154</sup> but Russia is overcoming this challenge with the world’s largest and most capable fleet of icebreakers.<sup>155</sup> A 2017 U.S. Coast Guard-maintained graphic depiction of the world’s icebreakers points that Russia possesses 46 icebreakers—more than the combined total of

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<sup>153</sup> Heather A. Conley, “Climate Change Will Reshape Russia,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, January 13, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/climate-change-will-reshape-russia>.

<sup>154</sup> L.G., “What is the Northern Sea Route? Russia Hopes it Leads to Arctic Riches,” *The Economist*, Sept. 24, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/09/24/what-is-the-northern-sea-route>.

<sup>155</sup> William Woityra, “Major Icebreakers of the World,” USCG, last modified 1 May 2017, <https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Portals/9/DCO%20Documents/Office%20of%20Waterways%20and%20Ocean%20Policy/20170501%20major%20icebreaker%20chart.pdf?ver=2017-06-08-091723-907>. (Note: This source has not been updated since 2017, but a search of current national icebreaker totals does not reflect a significant change in numbers to those provided by this 2017 source).

the other seven Arctic nations' icebreaking fleets.<sup>156</sup> Additionally, Björn Gunnarsson notes that Russia is currently constructing three nuclear-powered icebreakers with an additional five in planning, all of which will “operate in the more ice-infested eastern part of the NSR, making regular year-round shipping possible along the whole length of the NSR within the next 8–10 years.”<sup>157</sup>

Put simply, Russia's icebreaker fleet makes it possible for large cargo and transport ships to navigate previously impassable, frozen seas. An icebreaker blazes a trail through thick ice, and large trade vessels can follow behind. The capabilities of Russia's growing icebreaker therefore present a significant opportunity, a new high-traffic international trade route. Numerous sources suggest that Russia's development of the NSR shipping lane could cut down transit time between Europe and Asia by one third to one half compared to the time required for shipments to transit the Suez Canal route.<sup>158</sup> Elizabeth Buchanan notes the economic potential available to Russia with the melting of the Arctic Sea ice, which makes the NSR “viable to use as a transport artery,” suggesting that Russian exploitation of the route “might yet transform global shipping, and with it the movements of 90+ percent of all goods globally.”<sup>159</sup> The NSR presents an opportunity on which Putin intends to capitalize on. Thus, in 2018 he decreed that NSR shipments need to reach 80 million tons by 2024, double the transit totals that were achieved in 2020.<sup>160</sup>

The NSR is also a source of economic potential that Russia is determined to control. In 2018 Russia began working to restrict the transit of foreign military vessels through the NSR, and according to Sliwa and Aliyev, “Russia's deputy prime minister stated that the government is also considering allowing transportation of hydrocarbons along the NSR on

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<sup>156</sup> Woityra.

<sup>157</sup> Björn Gunnarsson, “Recent Ship Traffic and Developing Shipping Trends on the Northern Sea Route—Policy Implications for Future Arctic Shipping,” *Marine Policy* 124 (2021): 104369,6, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104369>.

<sup>158</sup> Walsh, “Satellite Images Show Huge Russian Military Buildup in the Arctic.”

<sup>159</sup> Elizabeth Buchanan, quoted in Walsh.

<sup>160</sup> Atle Staalesen, “Shipping on the Northern Sea Route has Course for 35 Million Tons in 2021,” *The Independent Barents Observer*, October 19, 2021, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2021/10/shipping-northern-sea-route-has-course-35-million-tons-2021>.

Russian ships only.”<sup>161</sup> If this attempt at Russia military-backed gatekeeping in the NSR comes true, it would also mean that other Arctic nations are either excluded from benefiting from being able to navigate these routes freely—as is allowed per UNCLOS—or at the least forced to pay Russia for the right of passage.

## **2. Obstacles to Russia’s Economic Plans in the Arctic**

After more than a decade of applying minimal attention to Arctic development, Moscow’s renewed economic endeavors in the region have presented it with unique financial, technological, and diplomatic challenges. Russia has remained a leading global exporter of fossil fuels, along with countries like Saudi Arabia and the United States,<sup>162</sup> and this revenue source has been critical to Russia’s economy.<sup>163</sup> However, Russia’s global economic status sits far below the other great powers with which it strives to compete in the Arctic. In terms of nominal gross domestic product (GDP) statistics, the United States and China hold the first and second spots for top world economies, respectively, (based on 2020 World Bank estimates).<sup>164</sup> In contrast, Russia sits in eleventh place, standing at only a fraction of GDP earning compared with its competitors. Additionally, as is illustrated in Figure 4, Russia’s economy has never fully recovered since the global economic crisis in 2008.

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<sup>161</sup> Sliwa and Aliyev, “Strategic Competition or Possibilities for Cooperation,” 218.

<sup>162</sup> “Crude Petroleum: Exports,” The Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed November 26, 2021, <https://oec.world/en/profile/hs92/crude-petroleum>.

<sup>163</sup> Zysk, “Russia’s Military Buildup in the Arctic,” 7.

<sup>164</sup> Caleb Silver, “The Top 25 Economies in the World: Ranking the Richest Countries in the World,” Investopedia, December 24, 2020, <https://www.investopedia.com/insights/worlds-top-economies/>.

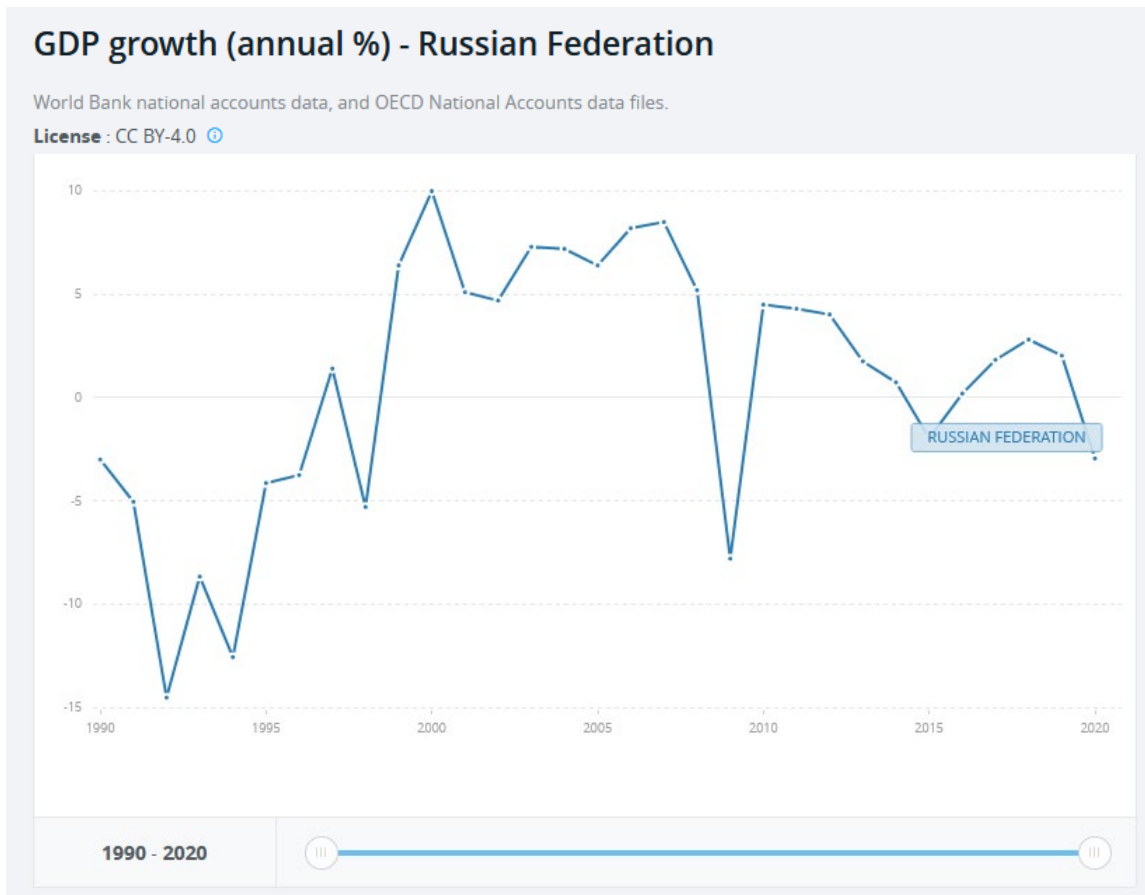


Figure 4. Russian Economic Stagnation and Decline<sup>165</sup>

Periodic drops in Russia’s annual GDP growth appear to correspond first with the imposition of western sanctions in response to revisionary actions taken by Moscow in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014, and even after a brief recovery have returned to a state of stagnation and decline in the past two years.

These economic limitations have not stopped Russia from investing in the Arctic development, but a close look at the numbers illustrates that Russia is limited in how much money it can commit to projects in its northern territories. In 2016 the Russian Ministry of Economic Development reportedly documented 145 ongoing investment projects in its Arctic territories—adding up to a total investment of 4.8 trillion rubles (\$66.9 billion).

<sup>165</sup> Source: “GDP Growth (Annual %) – Russian Federation,” World Bank, accessed October 29, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=RU>.

Many were focused on the resource extraction and processing, but others on progressing the fishing, agricultural, and tourism industries, to name a few.<sup>166</sup>

According to one source that cites Russian plans, “Allocations for the state program Socioeconomic Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation [AZRF] will amount to over 21.4 billion rubles [~\$300mil USD], with spending in 2022–2023 to be increased by 4.3 billion rubles [~\$60mil USD].”<sup>167</sup> The source further notes that budget increases are required to further Russia’s liquid natural gas (LNG) port development along the NSR, at the Utrenny LNG port of Sabetta, and that upon completion of the port project funds will be re-allocated to further nuclear-powered icebreaker production. However, when compared with Russia’s national developmental budget allocations, the sums dedicated to AZRF development are underwhelming, only representing about half of one percent of its total national developmental goals.<sup>168</sup>

Russia’s northern trade route goals come with their own obstacles. To promote the NSR, in March of 2021, Rosatom, leading Russian nuclear power company and government-appointed NSR management authority,<sup>169</sup> released posts on public media making fun of a traffic jam in the Suez Canal and suggesting that the NSR should be considered “as a viable alternative.”<sup>170</sup> In reality, however, Moscow’s plans for establishing the NSR as a transit corridor for international trade have fallen short of their objectives. An analysis of Arctic transit data by Gunnarsson, which appears in Table 1, shows that the vast majority of NSR voyages are Russian domestic voyages (Russian port to Russian port), with destination voyages (Russian port to non-Russian port or vice versa)

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<sup>166</sup> Lagutina, *Russia’s Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, 82.

<sup>167</sup> “Arctic Development Budget for 2022–2023 to be Increased,” Arctic.ru, September 22, 2021, <https://arctic.ru/economics/20210922/996778.html>.

<sup>168</sup> Anton Siluanov, “Government Meeting Transcript,” Government.ru, September 21, 2021, <http://government.ru/en/news/43307/#siluanov>.

<sup>169</sup> Atle Staalesen, “Rosatom Will Manage Russia’s Northern Sea Route: The Nuclear Power Company Will Oversee Russia’s Arctic Shipping Routes,” *Arctic Today*, January 2, 2019, <https://www.arctictoday.com/rosatom-will-manage-russias-northern-sea-route/>.

<sup>170</sup> Thomas Nilsen, “Making Fun of Suez Traffic Jam, Rosatom Promotes Russia’s Arctic Route as an Alternative,” *The Independent Barents Observer*, March 25, 2021, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2021/03/making-fun-suez-traffic-jam-rosatom-promotes-northern-sea-route>.

and international voyages (non-Russian port to non-Russian port via the NSR) barely reaching the double digits per annum.<sup>171</sup> Thus, while Russian officials struggle to meet Putin’s 2024 goal of transporting 80 million tons of cargo by way of the NSR, the Malacca Strait, Suez Canal, and Panama Canal measure their annual shipments in hundreds of millions of tons.<sup>172</sup>

Table 1. NSR Ship Traffic Totals: 2016–2019<sup>173</sup>

Ship traffic activity (number of voyages) on the NSR in 2016–2019.

Departure and arrival destinations	2016	2017	2018	2019
From NSR to Russian ports	599	591	564	646
From western Russian ports to NSR	576	537	537	609
From eastern Russian ports to NSR	46	30	33	44
Between NSR ports	263	580	563	736
From NSR to European ports	78	62	144	287
From European ports to NSR	65	63	137	272
From NSR to NE Asian ports	15	4	4	21
From NE Asian ports to NSR	36	9	10	25
Transits via NSR (total)	18	28	27	37
Domestic transits <sup>a</sup>	5	12	8	15
Destination transits <sup>b</sup>	5	4	2	8
International transits	8	12	17	14
Other departure/arrival destinations	9	4	3	17
Total number of voyages	1705	1908	2022	2694
Total number of different vessels	297	283	227	278
Total number of shipping companies	129	121	90	119
Total number of sailing permits (NSRA)	718	644	792	799

<sup>a</sup> Domestic transits are transit voyages on the NSR between two Russian ports.

<sup>b</sup> Destination transits are transit voyages on the NSR between a Russian port and a non-Russian port.

Why has the NSR failed to become an international transit corridor and a significant source of Russian transit tariff collection? For one, Moscow’s own NSR-control strategies have contradicted Russia’s priorities of promoting trade in the NSR by forcing ship

<sup>171</sup> Björn Gunnarsson, “Recent Ship Traffic and Developing Shipping Trends on the Northern Sea Route,” 3.

<sup>172</sup> V.P. Federov et al., *The Northern Sea Route: Problems and Prospects of Development of Transport Route in the Arctic*, IOP Conference Series: Earth Environmental Science 434–012007 (Bristol, UK: IOP Publishing, 2020), 4, <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1755-1315/434/1/012007/pdf>.

<sup>173</sup> Source: Björn Gunnarsson, “Recent Ship Traffic and Developing Shipping Trends on the Northern Sea Route,” 3.

captains to navigate a complicated bureaucratic process—which favors Russian companies—to apply for a permit to transit through the NSR or to secure icebreaker services in order to enable trips during the portions of the year when the NSR is covered in ice.<sup>174</sup> Additionally, while shipping along the NSR requires vessels to travel a much shorter distance than if they elected to transit through the Suez Canal, the costs associated with NSR transit are high due to Russian transit tariffs, associated storage and delivery costs, and costs incurred from being assigned icebreaker services on certain routes and at certain times of the year.<sup>175</sup> Similarly, Russia’s aggressive military posture and deployed anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities along its Arctic coast act as a deterrent for foreign shipping and investment—making risk-averse commercial shipping companies and investors wary to commit to a volatile region. Finally, climate change in the Arctic is a double-edged sword. While ice decline in the Arctic Ocean offers the potential for increased maritime navigational opportunities, climate change has also created unpredictable weather conditions in the Arctic, and shipping corporations do not seem ready to risk utilizing a transit route with so many unknowns attached.

Regardless of how climate change in Earth’s northern latitudes may impact Russia’s future economic prospects in the agricultural, natural resource, and shipping sectors, for the time being Russia faces a number of immediate structural obstacles to its economic projects and goals in the Arctic. Russia’s stagnant economy cannot support its ambitious developmental goals in the region, and yet, it does not seem likely that Russia can rely on Western partners to support its economic ambitions in the Arctic, given the ongoing Arctic disputes, as well as the lingering tensions that resulted from Russia’s revisionist actions in 2014.

### **3. Russia’s Contradictory Economic Imperatives in the Arctic**

While Russia’s military development of its northern coast does serve as protection for Russia’s interests in the region, a great deal of evidence seems to indicate that the

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<sup>174</sup> Carter Boone, “What is Holding Back the Northern Sea route?” Russian International Affairs Council, June 28, 2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/carter-boone/what-is-holding-back-the-northern-sea-route/>.

<sup>175</sup> Lagutina, *Russia’s Arctic Policy in the Twenty-First Century*, 62.

“Defensive” hypothesis cannot fully explain all of Moscow’s actions in pursuit of its economic aims in the Arctic. If Putin wanted the Russian nation to reap the economic benefits in the Arctic, would he not abandon the confrontational state to encourage maximum international trade and cooperation in the NSR? Instead, the regime’s aggressive military posture and the prioritization of the energy sector development, which it relies on to prop up its corrupt patronal system indicates that the “Regime preservation/diversionary” hypothesis may better explain aspects of Russia’s economic activities in the Arctic. The Kremlin’s prioritization of military and resource development in the Arctic suggests that its true motives remain focused on regime survival through increasing resource rents and staging confrontations with the West, rather than economic progress for the benefit of Russia’s population.

### **C. SECURITY PRIORITIES**

Russia’s security priorities for the region, at first glance, also would seem to support the “Defensive” hypothesis presented in Chapter I. Many scholars, like Lagutina, have suggested that the leading motivation behind Russia’s military buildup in the Arctic over the past two decades has been to protect its economic interests in the region, and that cooperation remains Russia’s priority for the Arctic’s future.<sup>176</sup> However, Russia has contradicted its cooperative rhetoric with an increasingly aggressive posture in the Arctic by fielding extensive area denial weapon systems, flaunting its military deterrent capabilities in the region, and taking non-kinetic military actions against other Arctic states. In other words, while Russia’s rhetoric in favor of Arctic cooperation seem to support the “Defensive” hypothesis, its actions suggest that Russia has posture in the Arctic is more in line with: (1) the “Offensive” hypothesis, in that Russia’s has shaped its military posture in the region not only in such a way as to protect its interests, but also to deny other Arctic states access to the resources and transit routes of the region; as well as (2) the “Regime preservation/Diversionsary” hypothesis, in that Russia’s demonstrations of its military capabilities in the Arctic have been publicized in such a way as to garner Russian domestic

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<sup>176</sup> Lagutina, 73.

support in opposition to perceived threats against Russia, emanating from U.S. and NATO activity in the region.

### **1. Russia's Strategic Deterrence and "Bastion Defense" Strategies**

Moscow's current security strategies in the Arctic are driven by perceived threats and a sense of insecurity. CSIS analysts write that "Russia's strategic worldview is driven by a deep sense of insecurity and a threat of encirclement rather than the ideology of its current leaders."<sup>177</sup> In particular, Russia perceives NATO's growing involvement in the Arctic—such as in the alliance's regular military training with Norway or its increasing support of Sweden and Finland—as a threat to its national security. Pezard writes: "Keeping NATO at bay is a solid, and permanent, tenet" of the Kremlin's Arctic policy.<sup>178</sup>

The Arctic, in this sense, has been at the core of Russia's nuclear deterrence. Many of its strategic nuclear assets are centered on the Kola Peninsula, where Russia maintains nuclear-capable submarine forces as well as bases along the Arctic coastline that serve as forward operating locations for Russia's nuclear-capable Long-Range Aviation (LRA) assets.<sup>179</sup> Russia's growing focus on nuclear deterrence as a balance against the West could be a reflection of Russia's inability to compete in conventional terms with potential adversaries, likely due to the same economic limitations discussed in the previous section. This reliance on nuclear deterrence capabilities has prompted Moscow's return to its Cold War bastion defense strategy, by which, according to Melino and Conley, it "secures strategic territory to ensure its freedom of operation."<sup>180</sup> Harri Mikkola provides a succinct description of this strategy:

The bastion strategy is a Russian defence concept from the Cold War era. It aims to ensure the survival of strategic ballistic missile submarines—as well as the related infrastructure—in their enclosed and well-defended maritime areas, or "bastions." In addition to relying on geographical cover (e.g., the ice sheet), this is achieved by establishing a layered defence system with

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<sup>177</sup> Center for Strategic & International Studies, "Four Myths about Russian Grand Strategy."

<sup>178</sup> Pezard et al., *Maintaining Arctic Cooperation with Russia*, 61.

<sup>179</sup> Black et al., *Enhancing Deterrence and Defence on Nato's Northern Flank*, 8.

<sup>180</sup> Melino and Conley, "The Ice Curtain."

various capabilities, such as sensors, mines, coastal and surface-to-air missiles (SAM), as well as maritime and air capabilities.<sup>181</sup>

The centrality of the nuclear deterrent, of which the Bastion system in the Arctic is a key foundation, in preserving Russia's great power status after the Cold War, was also highlighted by Moscow's decision in 1993 to abandon the "no-first-use" pledge of the Soviet Union.<sup>182</sup> Furthermore, in 1999 Russian forces began to embrace pre-emptive nuclear strikes in exercises in doctrine and training as means to deter and de-escalate conflict with adversaries, even in conventional wars.<sup>183</sup> In 2009, Russian Secretary of the Russian National Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev stated that Russian nuclear policy could allow for first-strike nuclear options against an adversary, even in regional or local conflicts. Patrushev stated, "In situations critical to national security, options including a preventative nuclear strike on the aggressor are not excluded."<sup>184</sup> Finally, in 2014, at the height of Russian-western tensions over the Crimean annexation, Putin stated:

Our partners, regardless of the situations in their countries or their foreign policies, should always keep in mind that Russia is not to be messed with. I want to remind you that Russia is one of the largest nuclear powers. This is reality, not just words; moreover, we are strengthening our nuclear deterrence forces.<sup>185</sup>

Russia has also beefed up its conventional capabilities in the Arctic along with its deployed nuclear forces, to deny the United States and its allies access to the Arctic region in the event of a conflict, and to monopolize control of the NSR. Melino et al. note that between 2014 and 2019, Russia gradually upgraded its Northern Fleet air defense capabilities to incorporate S-300 and S-400 advance SAMs, as well as supporting electric

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<sup>181</sup> Mikkola, *The Geostrategic Arctic*, 4.

<sup>182</sup> Woolf, *Russia's Nuclear Weapons*, 3

<sup>183</sup> Woolf, 7.

<sup>184</sup> Nikolai Patrushev, quoted in Mark B. Schneider, "Russian Nuclear 'De-Escalation' of Future War," *Comparative Strategy* 37, no. 5 (2018), <https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1080/01495933.2018.1526558>.

<sup>185</sup> Vladimir Putin, quoted in Alexey Arbatov, "Understanding the US-Russia Nuclear Schism," *Global Politics and Strategy* 59, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1080/00396338.2017.1302189>.

warfare and radar equipment.<sup>186</sup> They further note that Russia has deployed advanced detection, tracking, and engagement systems in the Arctic—such as the Bastion-P coastal defense missile system—that create “a complex, layered coastal defense arrangement that secures territory deeper into the central Arctic. Such capabilities bolster Russia’s ability to deny aerial, maritime, or land access to NATO or U.S. forces.”<sup>187</sup> Similarly, Russia’s has begun to utilize advanced Sopka-2 radar systems on Wrangel Island to increase its awareness of foreign threats in the Arctic.<sup>188</sup> Ryan Tice states that the radar poses no threat on its own, but contends that when “potentially employed as a part of an integrated network of Russian land-based antiship cruise missiles, electronic warfare systems, and ground-based mobile air defense systems in the Bering Strait— [it] would pose a formidable obstacle to the United States and its allies’ ability to access the Arctic.”<sup>189</sup>

It is clear that Russia has invested heavily in its development of A2/AD capabilities along its northern coast and established a military posture that seems specially designed to allow Russia to exert absolute control over the region in the event of a conflict: evidence still arguably in support of the “Defensive” hypothesis. However, Russia has not limited its aggressive posture only to its modernization and deployment of weapon systems and military forces in the Arctic. The more telling aspect of Russia’s posture is in its demonstration of the A2/AD capabilities that it has fielded.

## **2. Russian Demonstrations of Military Capability and Resolve in the Arctic**

Russia has demonstrated that it is prepared to employ military force to protect its interests in the Arctic—or perhaps even to deny foreign competitors access to the region—through the strategic exercises, and resultant strategic messaging, which it has undertaken in response to NATO activity in northern Europe. For example, a 2015 NATO report

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<sup>186</sup> Melino and Conley, “The Ice Curtain.”

<sup>187</sup> Melino and Conley.

<sup>188</sup> Ryan Tice, “The Bering Strait: An Arena for Great Power Competition,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 16, 1<sup>st</sup> Qtr 2020 (Feb 2020): 60, [https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-96/JFQ-96\\_58-63\\_Tice.pdf?ver=2020-02-07-150502-163](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-96/JFQ-96_58-63_Tice.pdf?ver=2020-02-07-150502-163).

<sup>189</sup> Tice, 60.

details how Russia initiated a snap exercise in the high North that deliberately coincided with a Norwegian JOINT VIKING exercise and the U.S. DRAGOON RIDE exercise to demonstrate Russia's ability for rapid deployment, using "Coercion through threat or use of force"<sup>190</sup> to achieve its international political objectives. Similarly, Anthony et al. write that, in August of 2020, Russia carried out its strategic OCEAN SHIELD exercise, "the largest military exercise at sea since the Soviet period," and that it "included activities inside the USA's Exclusive Economic Zone."<sup>191</sup>

In March of 2021, the Russian Defense Ministry also published footage of three of Russia's nuclear ballistic missile submarines breaking through the Arctic ice near Franz Josef Land Archipelago, a strategic message to its international competitors in the region.<sup>192</sup> Putin described the submarine operation as having "no analogues in the Soviet and the modern history of Russia."<sup>193</sup> Some sources estimate that the three subs alone represented a nuclear compliment of 48 missiles, or more than 200 total warheads.<sup>194</sup> Through this operation, Russia demonstrated that in addition to Russia's development of offensive cyber capabilities, hypersonic weapons, coastal defense upgrades, and Arctic military basing efforts, it is also prepared to project its military power in the Arctic in opposition to any adversaries who may seek to threaten Russia's interests in the region.

Russia has also upped the ante in their utilization of Long Rang Aviation (LRA) assets to demonstrate its military capabilities against the U.S. and its allies in the Arctic. According to an *Air Force Magazine* article in January of 2021, Russia's incursions into

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<sup>190</sup> "Hybrid Threats: A Strategic Communications Perspective," NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, April 2019, 48–49, <https://cle.nps.edu/access/content/group/1c2f5f35-b6e4-4edf-9053-5166eb9d699a/2S.%20SC%20Perspective%20-%20COE.pdf>.

<sup>191</sup> Anthony et al., "A Strategic Triangle in the Arctic?" 13.

<sup>192</sup> "Three Russian Submarines Surface and Break Arctic Ice During Drills," *Reuters*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-military-arctic/three-russian-submarines-surface-and-break-arctic-ice-during-drills-idUSKBN2BI2RZ>.

<sup>193</sup> Vladimir Putin, quoted in *Reuters*, "Three Russian Submarines Surface and Break Arctic Ice During Drills."

<sup>194</sup> Thomas Nilsen, "Three Nuclear Ballistic Missile Subs Surfaced Simultaneously Through the Ice in Complex Russian Arctic Exercise," *The Independent Barents Observer*, March 26, 2021, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2021/03/three-russian-nuclear-ballistic-missile-subs-broke-through-ice-north-pole>.

both the U.S. and Canada's Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ) have ramped up considerably in recent years: "since resuming long-range bomber flights within North American striking range in 2007, Russia had triggered an average of six or seven NORAD scrambles a year—through 2019. But in 2020, Russia increased its sorties dramatically,"<sup>195</sup> effectively doubling its number of annual sorties into American and Canadian identification zones. According to the same article, LRA activity has also become more threatening and more sophisticated in execution, given Russia's development of long-range air-launched cruise missiles, as well as the addition of advanced fighter escorts to (Su-35 FLANKERS) and airborne C2 support for (A-50 MAINSTAYS) the strategic bomber missions. As result, the article notes that then- Commander of USNORTHCOM and NORAD stated, "The strategic threat to the homeland has entered a new era."<sup>196</sup> Furthermore, former Pentagon chief technology officer, Mike Griffin, stated that due to "[p]roliferation of enemy weapon systems with global reach dictate that the United States can no longer presume domestic sanctuary."<sup>197</sup>

Additionally, Russia has employed hybrid warfare tactics to attack other Arctic states. In November of 2018, both Norway and Finland reported experiencing Global Positioning System (GPS) jamming effects that they believed to be deliberate and of Russian execution.<sup>198</sup> Norway is a NATO member while Finland is not; but when the jamming reportedly took place, Finland was participating in NATO military exercises in Scandinavia. BBC writes that it was "NATO's biggest military exercise since the Cold War, codenamed Trident Juncture, rehearsed how the US-led alliance would respond to the invasion of an ally."<sup>199</sup> In another article from October of 2020, BBC discusses Norway's accusation against Russian cyber-attacks on its parliamentary officials and email system. The article notes: "Norway's allegation comes during a time of increasingly strained

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<sup>195</sup> Jason Sherman, "Forging a SHIELD for the Homeland," *Air Force Magazine*, Jan 25, 2021, <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/forging-a-shield-for-the-homeland/>.

<sup>196</sup> Terrence O'Shaughnessy, quoted in Jason Sherman, "Forging a SHIELD for the Homeland."

<sup>197</sup> Mike Griffin, quoted in Jason Sherman, "Forging a SHIELD for the Homeland."

<sup>198</sup> "Russia Suspected of Jamming GPS Signal in Finland," BBC, Nov 12, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46178940>.

<sup>199</sup> BBC.

relations with Russia. Both countries share an Arctic border, and Norway is a member of NATO.”<sup>200</sup>

Based on Russia’s aggressive posture in the Arctic, Anthony et al. conclude that the major military exercises that Russia has conducted in and through the Arctic in recent years reflect its intent to establish military dominance in the region in order to: (1) defend its Arctic-based naval nuclear deterrent elements, and its land- and sea-based resources in the Arctic; as well as to (3) “challenge the free use of ocean spaces by the USA and its allies,” especially in the event of a military crisis.<sup>201</sup> This assessment, as well the evidence that motivated it, support the idea that Russia’s military demonstrations, and hybrid attacks on NATO forces in the Arctic, may indicate that Russian motivations are more in line with the “Offensive” hypothesis rather than the “Defensive” hypothesis. Russia has gone beyond positioning forces in preparation for a future attack on its interests and has taken active measures geared toward deterring NATO activity in the region during peacetime.

Along the same lines, in the event of an open conflict with NATO, it is deemed likely by many sources that Russia will also attempt to deny its opponents access to its protective buffer between the Greenland, Iceland, UK (GIUK) Gap in order to provide a territorial buffer for its strategic forces in the Arctic.<sup>202</sup> This application of Russia’s bastion strategy is evidence in support of the “Defensive” hypothesis, but only if Moscow reserves such a strategy for a wartime scenario. Given Russia’s demonstrated A2/AD capabilities for achieving and maintaining control of the Arctic region, coupled with the NSR transit policies that it has instituted under potential use of military force, it may not be too great a leap to imagine Russia employing such a strategy outside of a wartime scenario. If other nations neglect Russia’s control measure in the NSR, or if Moscow perceives that Russia is being pushed out of a position of influence in the Arctic, Russia could elect to shift its already fielded defensive capabilities to an offensive posture.

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<sup>200</sup> “Norway Blames Russia for Cyber-Attack on Parliament,” BBC, Oct 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54518106>.

<sup>201</sup> Anthony et al., “A Strategic Triangle in the Arctic?” 13.

<sup>202</sup> Zysk, “Russia’s Military Build-Up in the Arctic,” 11.

In either case, this assertive military posture in the Arctic is likely a leading obstacle to Moscow's economic ambitions for the region, and therefore stands as evidence against the "Defensive" hypothesis. The rationale is simple: which international commercial shipping companies would want to risk using the NSR shipping routes amidst this Russian military buildup and aggressive posturing centered around denial of access?

### **3. Limits of Russian Military Capabilities in the Arctic**

Several key challenges may prevent Russia from achieving its security priorities, whether defensive or offensive, in the Arctic. It is clear that Russia has led the charge globally on securing its interests in the Arctic through its deployment and demonstration of its advanced military capabilities, but Moscow may be punching above its weight in the region and prematurely marketing its status as a regional and great power. Many authors stress that Russia's current forces in the Arctic are far fewer compared to the USSR's during the Cold War.<sup>203</sup> One example in support of this assertion can be found by comparing the order of battle totals for the USSR's Northern Fleet to the modern order of battle for Russia's Northern Fleet. In 1990, the Northern Fleet consisted of 155 submarines of varying purposes and capabilities;<sup>204</sup> today, the Northern Fleet only consists of 42 military submarines.<sup>205</sup> Similarly, while Russia's Northern Fleet fielded seventy surface warfare vessels before the fall of the USSR, the Russian Northern Fleet consists of only forty-three surface combatants today.<sup>206</sup> Ultimately it seems possible that Russia's military bark may be worse than its bite with regard to the Arctic. Laruelle details the "gap between rhetoric and reality" concerning Moscow's at-times aggressive posture in the Arctic,<sup>207</sup> and further suggests that "Russia's declared power projections are far removed from the actual capacity to act."<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Laruelle, *Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 128.

<sup>204</sup> Holroyd, *U.S. and Canadian Cooperative Approaches to Arctic Security*, 6.

<sup>205</sup> "Russian Navy 2021: List of Active Russian Navy Ships and Submarines," *RussianShips.info*, last modified October 29, 2021, <http://russianships.info/eng/today/>.

<sup>206</sup> Holroyd, *U.S. and Canadian Cooperative Approaches to Arctic Security*, 6; and *RussianShips.info*.

<sup>207</sup> Laruelle, *Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 113.

<sup>208</sup> Laruelle, 128.

It is also evident that Russia's play for regional power projection and influence has only increased U.S. and NATO interest in the Arctic, and motivated other Arctic states to work toward countering Russia's grab for power in the North. For example, the Department of Defense's most recently published Arctic Strategy (2019), identifies the imperative of "maintaining flexibility for global power projection, including by ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight; and limiting the ability of China and Russia to leverage the region as a corridor for competition that advances their strategic objectives through malign or coercive behavior."<sup>209</sup> Zysk suggests that the Kremlin has begun to recognize the fact that its military buildup in the Arctic has motivated a response by the other Arctic states, and has therefore determined it necessary to "keep tensions low in the region and insulate Arctic affairs from other disputes" because if it postures itself too aggressively it could risk triggering a security dilemma in the region.<sup>210</sup> Russia objects to NATO encroachment into the Arctic territory, but Moscow understands that the more aggressively it acts, the more the United States and NATO will invest in building up their own deterrent and power-projection capabilities in the region.

Thus, Russia's offensive posture in the Arctic has had a contradictory effect: Moscow's attempts to establish military superiority and dominance in the region have backfired by awakening other Arctic states, and particularly the United States, to counter Russia's influence in the region. Furthermore, the Kremlin aggressive posture to secure regional sovereignty and hegemony has undermined its desire to achieve economic growth. Here, in an analysis for Congress detailing the rising strategic significance of the Arctic, Department of Defense analysts write:

On the one hand, the United States, Canada, and the Nordic countries continue to cooperate with Russia on a range of issues in the Arctic, including, for example, search and rescue (SAR)...On the other hand...a significant increase in Russian military capabilities and operations in the Arctic in recent years has prompted growing concerns among U.S., Canadian, and Nordic observers that the Arctic might once again become a

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<sup>209</sup> "Report to Congress: Department of Defense Arctic Strategy," United States Department of Defense, 5, June 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF>.

<sup>210</sup> Zysk, "Russia's Military Build-Up in the Arctic," 5.

region of military tension and competition, as well as concerns about whether the United States, Canada, and the Nordic countries are adequately prepared militarily to defend their interests in the region.<sup>211</sup>

#### **4. Russia's Contradictory Security Strategy in the Arctic**

Russia's stated motivation for boosting its military capabilities in the Arctic, a motivation that has been espoused by some scholars, corresponds with the "Defensive" hypothesis, which suggests that Russia's military buildup is only intended to protect the state's economic interests in the region. However, the aggressive posture that Russia has taken in the region, coupled with Russia's deliberate strategic-messaging demonstrations of its A2/AD capabilities in opposition to NATO activities in the Arctic, are more in line with the "Offensive" hypothesis, which suggests that Russia's intends to establish itself as a regional hegemon in the Arctic.

Other contradictions in Russia's Arctic posture cast doubt on the explanatory power of both the "Defensive" and "Offensive" hypotheses. They suggest that there is a "Regime preservation/diversionary" element at work in the Arctic as well, and Russia's military buildup and hybrid-attacks against NATO states in the Arctic could perhaps be best analyzed through the lens of the ruling Russian regime's attempts to secure the economic base for its survival, and to distract its population from domestic issues by demonstrating its ability to push back militarily against Western threats and containment efforts.

#### **D. REGIME STABILITY**

The domestic control motivations behind Moscow's militarization in the Arctic form the foundation for the "Regime preservation/diversionary" hypothesis explored in this thesis, which suggests that the regime led by Vladimir Putin has invested in Arctic development and militarization in order to secure the rent-driven economic basis for its survival and to distract its population from its internal grievances. This section describes how Russia has utilized this tactic historically, as well as discusses the challenges that stand in the way of Russia's domestic control imperatives, resulting in its adoption of contradictory policies and actions.

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<sup>211</sup> O'Rourke et al., *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress*, 25–26.

## 1. The Arctic as a National Symbol

Moscow's use of Arctic competition as a tool of domestic politics is certainly not a new Russia strategy, as it has historically used the Arctic as an object of nationalistic legitimation and a propagandistic distraction. Laruelle writes that in the early 20th century:

Stalin himself considered Arctic literature as a central propaganda tool. The Arctic came to be presented as the forepost of Soviet civilization, an authentic *tabula rasa* on which to build socialism. This made it possible to celebrate the Stalinist values of patriotism,...heroism, human and technological prowess, and to underscore the extraordinary industrial capacities of socialism, as it conquered one of the world's most extreme natural environments.<sup>212</sup>

In much the same vein, Nicole Bayat Grajewski translates public statements from Putin in 2017, attesting to the “symbolic importance” of the Arctic region to Russia, and suggesting that “mastering of the Arctic (*osvoenie Arktiki*) can become one of the locomotives of the country's economic growth.”<sup>213</sup> In May 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov echoed the same sentiment, though in a more categorical tone: “It has been absolutely clear for everyone for a long time that this our territory, this is our land...and our waters.”<sup>214</sup>

Why has Moscow chosen in the 21st century to reinstate the Arctic as a national symbol? One potential explanation is that in attempting to counter the weakening in the domestic support for the authoritarianism established by Vladimir Putin, the ruling regime is inciting nationalist fervor in the face of perceived external threats to the state, and perhaps more importantly, in the presence of perceived internal threats to the regime. Oscar Jonsson asserts that Moscow considers an internal uprising against the ruling Russian

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<sup>212</sup> Laruelle, *Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 27.

<sup>213</sup> Nicole Bayat Grajewski, “Russia's Great Power Assertion: Status-Seeking in the Arctic,” *St. Antony's International Review* 13, no. 1 (May 2017): 151, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26229126>.

<sup>214</sup> Sergei Lavrov, quoted in AFP, “Russia Warns West Against Arctic Encroachment Ahead of Talks.”

regime to be one of the greatest threats to the nation's security.<sup>215</sup> He writes that “the threat from Western nonmilitary means—sanctions, political and economic support to democracy promotion in Russia, and diplomatic measures—are ongoing threats to the legitimacy of Russian leaders.”<sup>216</sup>

Because of this imperative, some scholars claim that Russia's revisionary actions in various theaters serve no strategic purpose apart from exploiting issues with nationalist mobilization potential, like the Arctic, to bolster its authoritarian regime. They argue that Moscow's aggressive strategies in Georgia, Crimea, Ukraine, and elsewhere only serve as a means by which the political regime in Russia can distract its populace from domestic issues—turning attention to foreign threats posed by U.S. and NATO influence. In presenting one of the most highly visible and extreme examples, Hale points to the annexation of Crimea—a favorite area of Russian “romantic” nationalism—to illustrate this mechanism: “The surge in Vladimir Putin's popularity following his country's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 is an excellent example of a single event having a game-changing impact on authoritarian public opinion and, arguably, regime behavior.”<sup>217</sup> Jacquelyn Chorush argues that competition in the Arctic also serves as a source of regime propaganda and Putin attempts to maintain control in Russia. She writes:

In order for Putin to stay in power, the Russian people must believe that the Kremlin can maintain control and that Russia can successfully compete with the West. The narrative of the Arctic as a sacred space endowed with the power to revive Russian greatness has become central to upholding this belief.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Oscar Jonnson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 156.

<sup>216</sup> Jonnson, 156.

<sup>217</sup> Henry Hale, “How Crimea Pays: Media, Rallying ‘Round the Flag, and Authoritarian Support,” *Comparative Politics* 50, no. 3 (Apr 2018): 369, <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041518822704953>.

<sup>218</sup> Jacquelyn Chorush, “Domestic Pressures Put Arctic Policy at Odds with Narratives of Russian National Identity,” *High North News*, last modified January 08, 2020, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/putins-geopolitical-policy-paradox-arctic>.

These diversionary tactics to counter the threat posed by western influence and domestic unrest have become a key staple of the Kremlin's playbook in other realms before spreading to the Arctic. As Stoner and McFaul describe, they have emerged as response to popular discontent with both the economy, and with Putin's intent to run for a third presidential term in 2012. In the wake of the largest popular protest during Putin's reign, his regime employed a strategy of demobilizing this popular unrest by directing attention towards an external threat from the West. The authors write:

To counter this new wave of social mobilization, Putin revived an old Soviet-era argument as his new source of legitimacy—defense of the motherland against the evil West, and especially the imperial, conniving, threatening United States. In particular, Putin argued that the United States was seeking to topple his regime. Like the old days, the United States was interfering in Russia's internal affairs.<sup>219</sup>

Some scholars suggest that beyond the need for Russia's ruling regime to provide a distraction from domestic issues, Russian aggression can also be explained by fact that Moscow considers itself in a state of undeclared war with the United States and NATO. As evidence to this assessment: in 2013, the Chief of Russia's General Staff, Valery Gerasimov gave a speech that proposed ideas reminiscent of those espoused by Soviet leaders during the Cold War—that Western powers, and specifically the United States, seek to unseat the ruling Russian regime.<sup>220</sup> However, while during the Cold War, the Soviet feared Western containment through military means, Gerasimov argued attacks on Russian sovereignty in the 21st century would take the form of Western employment of subversive, non-military means to overthrow the Russian regime from within.<sup>221</sup>

In the same vein, Oscar Jonsson writes that, while western powers believe that the sanctions for Russia for its actions in Ukraine and elsewhere are de-escalatory efforts, they are viewed as non-violent acts of war by the Russian political and military leadership, and that already “believes itself to be in a war with the West, albeit, for now, a non-military

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<sup>219</sup> Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, “Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin,” *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (July 2015): 177, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1064716>.

<sup>220</sup> Jonnson, *The Russian Understanding of War*, 73.

<sup>221</sup> Jonnson, 73–74.

one.”<sup>222</sup> From this standpoint, Russia’s aggressive posture in the Arctic might be interpreted as a way to deter Western attempts at forcing Russian containment or overthrowing Putin’s regime—not just through traditional military means, but also through the application of diplomatic, economic, and informational pressure.

Polina Beliakova argues that Moscow also utilizes diversionary tactics by pursuing confrontations below the threshold of military conflict across various regions and realms; and what region is more fitting for employing such a tactic than one so closely tied to Russian identity as the Arctic? She writes: “Low public approval does not limit the Kremlin’s ability to advance its foreign policy objectives using *nonviolent* means. Thus, Russia observers can likely expect covert and cyber operations as well as bold diplomatic moves that will divert the public’s attention at cost lower than the use of force.”<sup>223</sup> Kathleen Hicks writes that “a significant number of [Russia’s] tactics fall in the space between routine statecraft and direct and open warfare, a space sometimes referred to as the gray zone.”<sup>224</sup> She suggests that while most are familiar with Russia’s election meddling efforts and the subversive tactics it employed in Eastern Ukraine beginning in 2014, few are familiar with other subversive tactics that Russia employs across the globe.<sup>225</sup> One such area where it could be argued that Russia is employing political, economic, and informational tools to challenge NATO below the threshold of conventional warfare is in the Arctic, as evidenced by the cyber and electronic warfare tactics that Russia has employed against Arctic NATO states in recent years, as well as the aggressive military posture that it has assumed in the region.

Dobbins et al., acknowledge that Russia’s employment of these hybrid tactics does pose a central threat to U.S. and NATO security and interests, but argue that unlike China, “Russia can be contained, employing updated versions of defense, deterrence, information

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<sup>222</sup> Jonnson, 6.

<sup>223</sup> Polina Beliakova, “How Does the Kremlin Kick When It’s Down?” *War on the Rocks*, August 13, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/08/how-does-the-kremlin-kick-when-its-down/>.

<sup>224</sup> Kathleen Hicks, “Russia in the Gray Zone,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, July 25, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-gray-zone>.

<sup>225</sup> Hicks, “Russia in the Gray Zone.”

operations, and alliance relationships that held the Soviet Union at bay for half a century,” citing Russia’s decreasing population and significant economic challenges.<sup>226</sup> For this reason, the study identifies Russia as a “rogue” state, “employing overt and covert means to sow dissension within and among Western nations” as a way to compensate for its weakness.<sup>227</sup> It could be argued that from this perspective, the Arctic represents a major avenue for enabling Russia’s attempts to break away from Western containment efforts—or to apply pressure for their removal.

In sum, Russia has multiple motivations for aggressively reasserting the Arctic as a pillar of Russian nationalism. First, Moscow hopes that by recalling Russia’s long history in the Arctic, it can maintain a level of plausible legitimacy in asserting its territorial claims in the region, as was demonstrated by Lavrov’s statement in May of 2021. Second, Moscow hopes that it can incite national support for the ruling regime by painting the United States and NATO as a threatening force that seeks to encroach on Russia’s territory and strip the nation of its resources. However, as was the case with Moscow’s economic and security plans for the Arctic, the regime has a number of obstacles that threaten its domestic control ambitions in the Arctic as well.

## **2. Limits to Kremlin’s use of the Arctic as a Diversionary Tool**

One such obstacle is the fact that the Russian public is increasingly rejecting Putin’s revisionist military escapades. In this sense, Håvard Bækken writes that on one hand, “The legitimacy of the Russian political system has largely been derived from the popularity of Vladimir Putin as a father-of-the-nation figure,” and notes that based upon the results of a 2018 countrywide survey, Putin’s militaristic policies are still supported by the majority of Russians.

On the other hand, Bækken writes that survey results also indicate that popular support for the regime is in decline, and younger generations of Russians, as well as

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<sup>226</sup> James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, Ali Wyne, “Russia is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China is a Peer, Not a Rogue,” RAND Corporation, October 2018, 2, <https://cle.nps.edu/access/content/group/e94afe37-d124-4ef8-866a-52de5ee0729b/READINGS/17.%20CHINA/Dobbins2018%20-%20Russia%20Is%20a%20Rogue%2C%20Not%20a%20Peer-%20China%20Is%20a%20Peer%2C%20Not%20a%20Rogue.pdf>.

<sup>227</sup> Dobbins et al., 9.

populations of major cities, are much less fond of Russian militaristic policies when compared with other Russian demographics.<sup>228</sup> Put simply, Moscow's old tricks for distracting the Russian population from its discontent by inciting public outrage at western injustices may not continue to work as well as it used to. If the Russian population determines that taking an aggressive posture in the Arctic and elsewhere is counterproductive to promoting economic opportunity through cooperation in the region, then Russia's aggressive posture in the Arctic could backfire against the regime.

Another obstacle that stands in the way of Moscow's attempts to garner domestic support, by attempting to incite public outrage at the incursion of NATO forces into the Arctic, is the fact that the Russian public is not as invested in Russian Arctic mythology as the regime would like it to be, rendering Moscow's distractive tactics ineffective. Some scholars, such as Zysk, suggest that, in addition to deterring potential adversaries in the Arctic, Russia's aggressive military posture and capability demonstrations in the region also provide Russia "with an excellent opportunity to score 'national pride' points with the domestic public."<sup>229</sup> Others suggest, in contrast, that Russia's domestic population has too much on their plates to be interested in Moscow's Arctic exploits. Pavel Baev writes:

A new surge of activity of opposition forces on the background of falling incomes and social unrest would constitute a grave threat to the existence of the quasi-democratic and deeply corrupt regime; and while it is unclear whether such risk would materialize, it focuses political attention on the immediate matters. Every project for the High North or initiative on Arctic cooperation has to have a time span measured in many years or even decades, which in the current political turmoil in Moscow is entirely beyond the horizon of feasible.<sup>230</sup>

It seems apparent that Moscow's attempts at showcasing its Arctic endeavors to gain public support for its authoritarian regime are likely to pay diminishing returns considering that Russia's populace remains dissatisfied with the economic decline that the

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<sup>228</sup> Håvard Bækken, "Patriotic Disunity: Limits to Popular Support for Militaristic Policy in Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 37, no. 3 (March 2021), <https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1080/1060586X.2021.1905417>.

<sup>229</sup> Zysk, "Russia's Military Build-Up in the Arctic," 30.

<sup>230</sup> Pavel Baev, "Sovereignty is the Key to Russia's Arctic Policy," *Strategic Analysis* 37, no. 4 (August 2013): 492, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2013.802523>.

regime has been unsuccessful in reversing. Regardless, the current regime seems content to maintain their diversionary and extractive approach in contested areas like the Arctic for lack of better options, and in the hope that this will enable them to demobilize some of the domestic opposition and offset some the negative economic prospects by tapping into new resource rents, at least in the short- to mid-term.

### **3. Summary of Russia's Regime Preservation Imperatives in the Arctic**

Putin has revived the Soviet-era tactic of calling on the Arctic's place in Russia's historical identity as a means to legitimize Russia's territorial claims in the region. Furthermore, he has adopted the other Soviet regime tactic of citing territorial and research competition with the other Arctic states as an attempt by the West to strip Russia of its access to Arctic resources and transit corridors. He has professed this "us-vs-them" propaganda in the hopes that he can garner public support for his regime; but it is apparent that this old trick for maintaining domestic control will likely prove to be less effective if the Russian populations grievances continue to mount. In other words, the Russian public may be less and less likely to fall for Putin's diversionary tactics.

Russia faces a number of obstacles to its diversionary tactics for the Arctic. First, it has contradicted its targeted domestic message that the West stands as a threat against Russia's interests by simultaneously stating for international audiences that it desires cooperative engagement in the Arctic. Second, by establishing such an aggressive posture in the Arctic, Russia has threatened the potential for it to benefit economically from the region through international partnerships, which could be perceived as unacceptable by the Russian population. However, these obstacles aside, it would seem as though Moscow has not enacted many policies in contradiction to the "Regime preservation/diversionary" hypothesis.

One apparent contradiction that Russia has created is in its maintenance of a two-faced position on its plans to cooperate in the Arctic. In March of 2017, Putin championed the need for international cooperation in the region for international audiences,<sup>231</sup> then

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<sup>231</sup> Henrikson, "The Arctic Peace Projection," 18.

three months later he warned the Russian public, in his “Direct Line” interview, of the need to protect Russia’s sovereignty over the Arctic, insisting that it is Russian territory.<sup>232</sup> Is this really a true contradiction of Russia’s domestic control imperatives though, or rather does it reflect Moscow’s calculated strategy to: (1) tout cooperation in order to tell the other Arctic nations, and the international community as a whole, what they want to hear, thereby prolonging its extractive practices in the region and strengthening the regime’s patronal system; and (2) paint the West as a threat to Russia’s interests in the Arctic in order to rally domestic support for both the ruling regime, as well as Russia’s military and developmental efforts in the Arctic. In other words, the domestic stability of the Putin regime motivation permeates all aspects of Russia’s policies, posture, and actions in the Arctic, providing significant evidence in support of the “Regime preservation/diversionary” hypothesis as an explanation for Russia’s aggressive Arctic posture.

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<sup>232</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin.”

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## **IV. ANALYSIS, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS**

The evidence explored in this thesis has demonstrated that by attempting to balance its contradictory economic, security, and domestic imperatives in the Arctic, Moscow has failed to effectively advance most of these ambitions. It is clear that Russia has invested heavily in Arctic development, and has also amassed significant military capabilities in the region; but to revisit the question presented at the beginning of this thesis: what do Russia's economic ventures, Arctic military basing activities, and increasing aggressive posture indicate regarding Moscow's intentions in the region? What is Russia really trying to achieve in the Arctic? The analysis presented in the previous chapters seems to indicate that Moscow's posture in the Arctic is best explained by the "Regime-preservation/diversionary" hypothesis. To detail how this conclusion was reached, this final chapter first explores a key factor that has been influencing Moscow's Arctic posture: Russia's growing economic reliance on China. This chapter then concludes by reviewing the key findings that have been unearthed by testing the three hypotheses proposed in Chapter I. Finally, it discusses the potential implications of Russia's posture in the Arctic in light of these conclusions.

### **A. CHINA'S IMPACT ON RUSSIA'S ARCTIC CALCULUS**

Many of the existing trends in Russia's posture in the Arctic have been amplified by an additional key factor, emphasized throughout recent literature: the growing cooperation between Russia and China in the region. Because Moscow cannot rely on Western support for its Arctic ambitions, largely due to post-2014 tensions and sanctions, it has increasingly relied on its estranged Cold War neighbor, China—a pattern that might intensify in the future. This growing cooperation in the Arctic region between the United States' two greatest adversaries begs the question: is a revisionist Russia in the Arctic really the greatest threat, or is it a potential security alliance between two authoritarian governments, which could completely tip the scales of power balance in the region and beyond?

## 1. Russia's Growing Economic Reliance on China in the Arctic

Historically, Moscow has been: (1) wary of allowing foreign investment in its territorial projects;<sup>233</sup> and (2) against China's efforts to include the Arctic in its global economic strategies, not initially accepting China's discussion of its "Cold Silk Road"<sup>234</sup> ambitions in the Arctic.<sup>235</sup> Russia's has maintained a long-standing policy of keeping China at an arm's length. Nonetheless, in the wake of the post-Crimea sanctions and the exodus of western developmental investment after 2014, China has become Russia's biggest investor in the Arctic, and Russia's economic ambitions for the region have become increasingly reliant on Chinese technology and funding. For example, the Yamal Peninsula is the source of Russia's largest natural gas reserves, and services Russia's LNG buyers in Europe via pipeline.<sup>236</sup> In 2016, Chinese banks signed \$12 billion USD worth of loan deals with Russia to fund its key Yamal LNG complex,<sup>237</sup> and in total China has in total invested an estimated 60 percent of the capital needed to fund the Yamal LNG project.<sup>238</sup> Additionally, China has been integral in supporting Russia's efforts to improve the prospects of shaping the NSR into an international shipping route.<sup>239</sup> In particular, China has itself tested the viability of shipping via the NSR. Atle Staalesen writes:

In 2012 the icebreaker *Snow Dragon* was the first Chinese vessel to successfully navigate the NSR to the Barents Sea, returning to the Bering Strait via the North Pole, and in 2013 the first commercial shipping under the Chinese flag, the 19,000 tonne cargo vessel *Eternal Life*, owned and

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<sup>233</sup> Laruelle, *Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, 148.

<sup>234</sup> Also referred to in many sources as 'Polar Silk Road.'

<sup>235</sup> Camilla T. N. Sørensen and Ekaterina Klimenko, "Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic: Possibilities and Constrains," 21, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 2017, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/emerging-chinese-russian-cooperation-arctic.pdf>.

<sup>236</sup> Pat Davis Szymczak, "Russian LNG Aims High, Leveraging Big Reserves and Logistical Advantages," *Journal of Petroleum Technology*, September 1, 2021, <https://jpt.spe.org/russian-lng-aims-high-leveraging-big-reserves-and-logistical-advantages>.

<sup>237</sup> Vladimir Soldatkin and Olesya Astakhova, "Update 2-Russia's Yamal LNG Gets Round Sanctions With \$12 Bln Chinese Loan Deal," *Reuters*, April 29, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-china-yamal-idUSL5N17W2G8/>.

<sup>238</sup> Sørensen and Klimenko, "Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic," 32

<sup>239</sup> Adam Perry MacDonald, "China-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic: A Cause for Concern for the Western Arctic States?" *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 27, no. 2 (July 2021), <https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1080/11926422.2021.1936098>.

operated by COSCO, sailed from Dalian to Rotterdam—the 15,000 km journey took 33 days, one and a half times faster than through the Suez Canal.<sup>240</sup>

After multiple experimental voyages into the Arctic by China's *Snow Dragon* icebreaker, its second icebreaker, the *Snow Dragon 2*, has embarked on voyages to the NSR as well.<sup>241</sup> China asserts that this voyage is for scientific exploration and environmental protection, but there can be little doubt that the ship's Arctic experimentation is geared in part at achieving progress towards Beijing's Polar Silk Road trade ambitions.

Given Russia's inability to fund its own developmental endeavors in the Arctic has made it reliant on China, placing Moscow in a difficult position. On one hand, Moscow wants to stake out its sovereign claims in the Arctic, but on the other, it cannot achieve those aims without foreign technological and financial aid. Russia seeks to compete for privileged, if not exclusive rights to resources and trade opportunities in the region, yet it simultaneously has placed China in a prominent vested position in the region that may undermine Moscow's own sovereignty. The Russian government sees the Arctic as the future of Russian economic self-sustainability,<sup>242</sup> and yet to achieve its developmental aims in the frozen North it must entangle itself with another powerful player in the region. Against this backdrop, it could be argued that the tough stance that the West has taken against Russia's increasing authoritarianism and international aggressiveness since 2014, has forced the Kremlin to turn to another authoritarian regime for support.

## **2. Could Russia and China Enter into a Security Alliance in the Arctic?**

China also enters into Russia's calculations with regard to its security strategies in the Arctic. Anthony et. al writes that there exists "little evidence of current Chinese military engagement in the Arctic region," but acknowledges that Russia and China have, in recent

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<sup>240</sup> Sørensen and Klimenko, "Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic," 32.

<sup>241</sup> Atle Staalesen, "Chinese Icebreaker Sails to North Pole, Explores Remote Arctic Ridge," *The Independent Barents Observer*, August 11, 2021, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2021/08/chinese-icebreaker-sails-north-pole-explores-remote-arctic-ridge>.

<sup>242</sup> Laruelle, *Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North*, xxii.

years, engaged in joint military exercises in other regions.<sup>243</sup> China recognizes great economic value in the Arctic, given the Russian development projects in which it has invested in the region, as well as in consideration of the icebreakers that it has been testing. Thus, the post-2014 tensions with the West that pushed Russia to rely on China as an economic partner in the Arctic, raise concern that Moscow may pursue security alignment with Beijing in the region.

In this vein, Alexander Korolev and Vladimir Portyakov suggest that while Russia and China currently approach cooperative ventures reluctantly due to “differing economic models and negative historical memories,” the governments of both states have felt pressured to overcome these differences in the interest of countering the common threat to their respective spheres of influence: the United States.<sup>244</sup> The authors further suggest that “More pressure from the United States is likely to accelerate the China–Russia alignment, as increasing pressure will cause both China’s and Russia’s states to not only enhance military cooperation but also work on fundamentally improving their relations.” Other scholars, such as Adam MacDonald, are more skeptical, suggesting that while Western tensions with both Russia and China have pushed the two states to align economically in the Arctic, the same cannot yet be said for security alignment in the region, concluding that “[f]or the time being, Russia and China should continue to be understood and treated as posing unique regional challenges.”<sup>245</sup>

However, Richard Weitz suggests that due to the economic alignment that Russia and China have established in the Arctic, Russia may invite China to participate in military exercises in the region.<sup>246</sup> Given that Russia has not yet aligned with China along security lines in the Arctic, it would seem that for now, Russia has not yet contradicted its security priorities in the Arctic in the same way that it contradicted its aims at achieving privileged

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<sup>243</sup> Anthony et al., “A Strategic Triangle in the Arctic?” 8.

<sup>244</sup> Alexander Korolev and Vladimir Portyakov, “Reluctant Allies: System-Unit Dynamics and China-Russia Relations,” *International Relations* 33, no. 1 (November 2018), <https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1177%2F0047117818812561>.

<sup>245</sup> Adam Perry MacDonald, “China-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic.”

<sup>246</sup> Richard Weitz, “Assessing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises,” 5.

or exclusive economic rights in the region by allowing China to gain a vested foothold in Russia's Arctic development projects. However, it could be argued that the foothold that Russia has helped China gain in the region may negate the need for China to wait for Russia's invitation to involve itself militarily in the region.

### **3. Russia-China Cooperation and Moscow's Arctic Imperatives**

Russia's economic dependence in the Arctic, as well as its potential security alignment with China in the region, stand in contradiction to both the "Defensive" and "Offensive" hypotheses about Russia's posture in the region. If Russia's primary motive for its Arctic exploits and military buildup is to defend its economic and territorial interests in the region against the encroachment of other nations, then allowing China to gain an economic foothold in the region counters this by adding another potential competitor in the Arctic arena. Similarly, if Russia's goal is to establish itself as a regional hegemon in the Arctic, allowing China to gain influence in the region adds a powerful military player to the regional security mix, likely introducing a significant threat to Russia's great-power ambitions. The only hypothesis that does not seem to be contradicted by growing Russia-China cooperation in the Arctic is the "Regime preservation/diversionary" hypothesis. China's presence in the Arctic may potentially threaten Russia's economic and great-power ambitions in the region, but its financial investments in Russia's Arctic energy sector projects have helped to support the patronal system holding up Putin's regime—and may continue to do so in the future.

## **B. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The evidence presented in the previous chapters supports the following conclusion: Russia has been pursuing contradictory imperatives in the Arctic, and has therefore taken reactive and inconsistent actions in the region. Moscow has claimed, at least for international audiences, that its military buildup in the Arctic is for the sole purpose of protecting its economic and security interests in the region, in line with the "Defensive" hypothesis of this thesis. However, Moscow has also orchestrated a major military buildup, showcased its significant A2/AD capabilities in the region, and enacted coercive policies in the Arctic that demonstrate that it is preparing for a potential conflict in the Arctic,

whether it desires one or not. This aggressive posture is, at first glance, consistent with the “Offensive” hypothesis, arguing that Russia seeks to become a regional hegemon in the Arctic, and has motivated extensive scholarly and strategic discourse concerning whether the region is shaping into a future theater of war. However, most of the evidence suggests that Moscow’s primary ambition for establishing an aggressive posture in the Arctic is to promote the survival of the Putin regime, in line with the “Regime preservation/diversionary” hypothesis. The following review of this thesis’ three hypotheses demonstrates that Putin regime’s attempts to hold on to power are the primary driver for Russia’s posture in the Arctic

**1) “Defensive” Hypothesis: Motivation to Protect Economic and Security Interests:** Russia’s aggressive posture and significant militarization of its northern coast is, as some analysts and Moscow itself claim, driven primarily by its desire to secure Russia’s economic, political, and security interests in the region against perceived threats.

It is true that Russia’s has invested extensively in Arctic exploration and developmental projects, given that its economy is heavily reliant on the abundant resources present in the region. It is also true that Moscow perceives that its economic interests in the Arctic are threatened by growing interest in the region amongst the other Arctic states, as well as non-Arctic states such as China. At first glance, therefore, this hypothesis seems to hold a fair amount of explanatory power. But upon closer inspection, it is clear that the “Defensive” hypothesis cannot be Moscow’s leading ambition for the Arctic, as it has taken too many actions in direct contradiction to this imperative. These include:

- Contradicting its claims for pursuing greater cooperation in the region through its at-times inflammatory political rhetoric (both for domestic and international audiences)
- Fielding and demonstrating significant military capabilities in the Arctic, specifically configured for denying access to other players in the region, thereby discouraging investment and development of the NSR and Arctic resource wealth

- Issuing complex, expensive, and prohibitive NSR transit control measures that further limit access and discourage international interest in the NSR
- Relying heavily on Chinese investment in its Arctic development projects, thereby introducing an additional extractive threat to the resources that Russia seeks to seize in the already contested region

Ultimately, the aggressive military posture that Russia has established in the Arctic is not conducive to building the trade relationships and cooperative financial undertakings that could lead to Russia's economic growth. Furthermore, Russia's military buildup has prompted the United States and NATO to increase their own military presence in the Arctic, thereby initiating an arms race of sorts in the region—a trend that directly contradicts Russia's economic development goals in the region.

**2) “Offensive” Hypothesis: Motivation to Assume Regional Dominance.**

According to this interpretation, Russia's aggressive posture and military actions indicate that it intends to establish itself as a regional hegemon in the Arctic.

Evidence in support of this hypothesis can be found in Russia's deployment of extensive A2/AD capabilities along its Arctic coastline, as well as in the coercive NSR transit control measures that it has enacted or threatened to enact (especially threatening military force against foreign military vessels transiting the NSR without permission). Additionally, Russia has demonstrated its desire to gain the upper hand in the competition for Arctic resources through the extensive continental shelf claims that it has submitted the UN CLCS, essentially staking its claim to roughly half of the Arctic seabed. Finally, Russia has developed the world's largest fleet of icebreakers, and has sought to harness the Arctic as a means to achieve “great power” status in the international arena. However, a fair amount of evidence stands in direct contradiction to this hypothesis as well, to include:

- Russia's lack of economic and military capacity to establish itself as a regional hegemon

- Russia’s financial reliance on China, which presence in the Arctic stands as an additional threat to Russia’s influence in the region
- The pushback from other major powers triggered by Russia’s aggressive military posture, which, as discussed in the previous section, has motivated the United States and NATO to begin developing their own military strategies and Arctic capabilities in order to counter Russia’s military actions in the Arctic

Putin’s regime has asserted, at least for domestic audiences, that the Arctic is the sovereign territory of Russia based upon historical precedence. The reality is that in spite of its aggressive posture, inflammatory rhetoric and capability demonstrations, Russia does not possess the means to dominate the Arctic. Furthermore, any attempt to do so would likely lead to, at best, additional Western sanctions on Russia’s already stagnant economy, and at worst, a military response by the United States and NATO and unwarranted conflict in a region that is vital for Russia’s economic interests.

**3) “Regime preservation/diversionary” Hypothesis—Motivation to Preserve the Ruling Regime’s Hold on Power:** The third hypothesis is that the aggressive posture that Russia has assumed in the Arctic, to a significant degree, reflects the Kremlin’s two-pronged strategy of (1) maximizing Russian access to energy resources in the Arctic, thereby bolstering the rents that Putin’s regime heavily relies upon to maintain its patrimonial system; and (2) redirecting its populace’s attention away from domestic issues, such as contempt for the regime’s corrupt, crony-based system, by demonstrating its determination to push back against perceived U.S. and NATO encroachment into what it claims is its territorial land and seas.

This hypothesis is supported by a great deal of the evidence explored in the previous chapters. In fact, only in consideration of this hypothesis can one make sense of Russia’s contradictory policies and actions in relation to the Arctic. Each of the contradictions found in the previous two hypotheses can be explained through the lens of regime survival imperatives. Russia has contradicted its economic ambitions in the Arctic by assuming an aggressive posture in the region. However, with China’s support, it has prioritized its

developments in the energy sector, with the objective to bolster Vladimir Putin's autocratic and corrupt patronal system, which is highly dependent on resource rents, thereby strengthening the regime's hold on power. Moscow has allowed China to gain a vested position in Russia's Arctic projects, which contradicts both the "Defensive" and "Offensive" hypothesis but does not contradict the "Regime preservation/diversionary" hypothesis. While China's presence in the Arctic would threaten Russian ambitions for achieving economic or military hegemony in the region, it would not represent a threat to Russia's ruling regime, given that Beijing does not protest (and actually supports) Russia's autocratic policies.

Furthermore, Moscow has adopted a two-faced approach to addressing Arctic competition, touting the importance of cooperation for international audiences while conveying to domestic audiences that the West stands as a threat to Russia's sovereignty and interests in the region. It could be argued, however, that from the standpoint of the narrow interests of the Putin's regime, this is not a contradictory approach, but rather a calculated effort to push back against Western pressures while also rallying domestic Russian support for the regime. Similarly, Russia's aggressive posture in the Arctic has motivated growing U.S. and NATO interest in countering Russia's military stance in the region, but this only provides Moscow with more fuel to incite public support for the regime in the face of "external threats" to Russia's interests.

### **C. IMPLICATIONS**

In light of the conclusion that the "Regime preservation/diversionary" hypothesis seems to be best supported by the evidence explored, it would seem as though Russia has taken a more reactive than calculated approach to its Arctic strategies. If Russia's strategies in the region are indeed motivated primarily by regime survival and enrichment, as well as imperatives to maintain domestic stability, does it mean that Russia's posture in the Arctic is less dangerous than if Russia was seeking to achieve regional hegemony?

It could be argued that an Arctic strategy that is driven by an autocratic regime desperately working to maintain its hold on power, may indeed be more dangerous than a strategy motivated by regional hegemonic ambitions, and certainly more dangerous than a

strategy simply motivated by defense of Russia's interests. Russia does not seem to possess the economic or military means to achieve great-power status in the Arctic, but Moscow demonstrated in 2014 that it is willing to take risky and widely-condemned military actions in order to rally domestic support for the regime, as well as to push back against perceived western threats to its domestic stability and regime interests. Given the declining legitimacy of the Putin regime at home, Russia is certainly postured to do the same, and more, in the Arctic, and has already responded to U.S. and NATO activity in the region with demonstrations of its northern military capabilities.

However, the Kremlin is playing a dangerous game in the Arctic. Putin has staked his domestic credibility in an aggressive military posture in the region, and likely could not save face if he backed down from his hard stance and conceded on any of its territorial claims, such as in the event that the UNCLOS CLCS denied its continental shelf claims in favor of another Arctic state, or if foreign military vessels elected to cross into the NSR without abiding by Russia's restrictive transit guidelines. How would Russia respond to such events? Its A2/AD forces are already fielded. Russia has practiced employment of its bastion defense strategies to push threats out of the Arctic. If Moscow perceives that it is challenged by the West, whether in the Arctic or elsewhere, the Arctic could provide the stage for the Kremlin for a diversion through military escalation. And if Putin's regime believes that it could not win such a conflict on its own, it might feel compelled to pursue a closer military alignment with China.

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