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Russia's New Arctic Policy 2035: Implications for Great Power Tension Over the Northern Sea Route

Julian R. Meade

Russia's new Arctic policy principles illustrate the significance of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) to Moscow's Arctic national interests and could lead to increased great power tension over the NSR. Russia and other states—including the United States—dispute whether the NSR traverses international waters or Russia's internal waters. This *Research Short* analyzes the policy principles underlying Russia's new 15-year Arctic strategy and its implications for the NSR and great power tension.

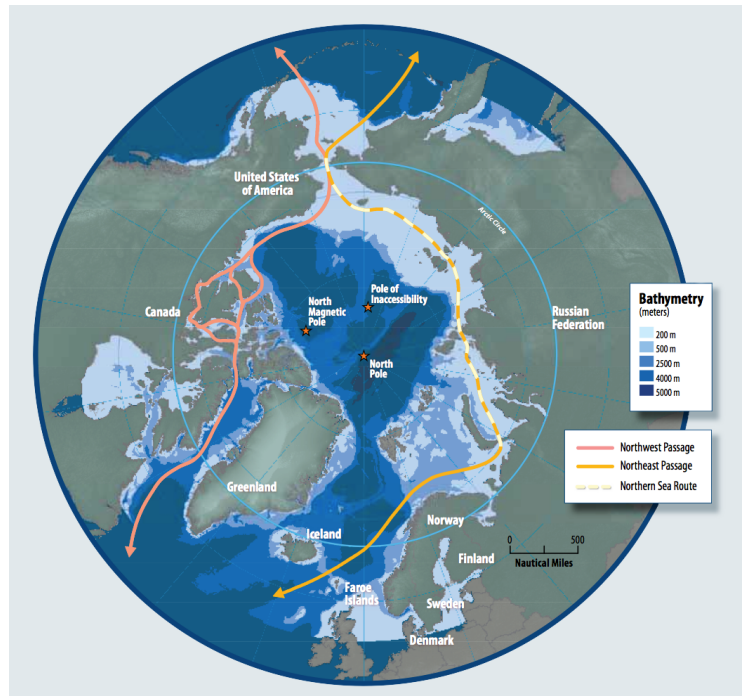
Russia's New Arctic Policy 2035

On March 5, 2020, President Vladimir Putin approved the policy principles in Russia's new, 15-year Arctic strategy, *Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic Zone Until 2035* (referred to as the Arctic Policy 2035 in this *Research Short*).² These policy principles define Moscow's goals and actions for implementing state policy in the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (or Arctic zone) through 2035. Eclipsed by the COVID-19 global pandemic and Putin's announced plans to revamp the Russian constitution, Arctic Policy 2035 has received little attention. The full document was not translated into English, further limiting its exposure.³ Nevertheless, Arctic Policy 2035 provides important insights into Moscow's view of, and plans for, its Arctic zone—and potential implications for the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Running generally parallel to Russia's vast Arctic coastline, the NSR is the strategic backbone of Russia's economic future and vital to Arctic maritime shipping. Moscow published these policy principles "at a time [when] tensions between Russia and its Arctic neighbors are increasing and just ahead of Russia chairing the Arctic Council in 2021."⁴ (See box.)

Arctic Policy 2035 National Interests

The Kremlin identifies six national interests at stake in Arctic Policy 2035. (See table.) This includes two new national interests since Moscow's previous Arctic strategy in 2008. This paper assesses the impact of three of Russia's declared interests that increase the potential for great power tension over the NSR: protecting sovereignty and territorial integrity, developing the Russian Arctic as a strategic resource base, and developing the NSR as a globally competitive national transport corridor.

Figure 1. Arctic Region Showing the Northern Sea Route and Other Arctic Shipping Routes



Source: "Map of the Arctic region showing shipping routes Northeast Passage, Northern Sea Route, and Northwest Passage, and bathymetry" by Susie Harder, 2009, Arctic Council - Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment 2009 Report, https://web.archive.org/web/20141101021336/http://www.arctic.noaa.gov/detect/documents/AMSA_2009_Report_2nd_print.pdf. Wikimedia Commons.

The Arctic Council is the premier intergovernmental forum for promoting cooperation in the Arctic region. It is a policy recommending—not policymaking—entity. It is explicitly prohibited from addressing military security issues.

The council consists of eight member states: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States. It also has a number of nonstate permanent participants who represent the Arctic region's indigenous peoples, as well as several state and nonstate actors who have observer status on the council, including China. The Arctic Council's chairmanship rotates among the eight member states every two years.¹

RUSSIA'S MAIN NATIONAL INTERESTS IN ITS ARCTIC POLICY 2035 (ADOPTED IN 2020)

- **To ensure Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. [NEW]**
- To preserve the Arctic as a world territory, with stable and mutually beneficial partnerships.
- To guarantee high living standards and prosperity for people of the Russian Arctic zone. **[NEW]**
- **To develop the Russian Arctic as a strategic resource base and its rational use to accelerate national economic growth.**
- **To develop the NSR as a competitive national transport line of the Russian Federation in the global market.**
- To protect the Arctic environment, the primordial homeland, and the traditional way of life of the indigenous minorities in the Russian Arctic.

Source: Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic Zone Until 2035, (Arctic Policy 2035), Government of the Russian Federation, March 5, 2020.

Protecting Russia's Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

Russia has a national interest in the Arctic for “*ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation* [emphasis added].”⁵ This is a new Arctic national interest, one that clearly raises the Arctic’s profile as a Russian national priority. This is not surprising because the Kremlin has often emphasized the Arctic’s increasing importance to the state. Nevertheless, Arctic Policy 2035 clearly ties Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity to the Arctic. Responsibility for ensuring Russia’s national sovereignty and territorial integrity falls upon the Russian military. The main military security goals of the new Arctic policy are “prevention of the use of military force against Russia, protection of its sovereignty and territorial integrity,”⁶ along with increasing Russia’s combat fighting capabilities in the Arctic.⁷ This reinforces a continuation of Russia’s Arctic policy development that Moscow has expressed over several years and in numerous actions, such as the ongoing military modernization program along Russia’s Arctic coastline.

Arctic Policy 2035 explicitly introduces the concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity, which align with Russia’s claim that it exercises sovereign control over the NSR, a claim the United States and many other states dispute. Russia has increasingly tightened control over foreign vessel traffic transiting the NSR. Last year Moscow implemented regulations imposing “new limitations for foreign warships transiting the [NSR],”⁸ months after a French Navy supply ship transited the sea route without Russian permission.⁹ The United States opposes such restrictions as contrary to international law and importantly, “the U.S. Navy regularly contests them as part of its broader Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) program.”¹⁰

The Arctic’s security environment is becoming increasingly complex, uncertain, and concerning to the United States. One dynamic contributing to uncertainty in the region is the status of the NSR. The United States considers Russia’s self-proclaimed right to regulate vessels entering and transiting the NSR excessive.¹¹ Washington is also concerned that Moscow has “repeatedly threatened to use force against vessels that fail to abide by Russian regulations”¹² in the NSR. Russia’s claimed sovereignty over the NSR threatens U.S. national

security by turning the Arctic region into “a potential corridor for strategic competition.”¹³ The best way to prevent this is for the United States to guarantee freedom of navigation through the NSR. This is precisely what Washington says it will do. The 2019 DoD Arctic strategy states the United States, “[w]hen necessary and appropriate...will challenge excessive maritime claims in the Arctic.”¹⁴ The time will come when it is necessary and appropriate to ensure the NSR remains an international waterway and not Russia’s internal waters. The ability to conduct FONOPs is an essential element of preserving freedom of the seas, which is a longstanding U.S. national security interest. U.S. interest in ensuring freedom of the seas conflicts with Russia’s stated right to control access to the NSR and could serve as a flashpoint for great power tension between Moscow and Washington.

Figure 2. Russian Northern Fleet submarines and vessels



Source: Wikimedia Commons, Mil.ru, <http://мультимедиа.минобороны.рф/multimedia/photo/gallery.htm?id=59002>

The Russian Arctic as a Strategic Resource Base for National Economic Growth

Arctic Policy 2035 identifies a second Russian Arctic national interest with implications for the NSR: “*development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation as a strategic resource base and its rational use with the objective of accelerating economic growth of the Russian Federation [emphasis added].*”¹⁵ Russia’s ability to promote, foster, and exploit strategic natural resource development in the Arctic is critical to the country’s national security and economic well-being. Russia’s Arctic zone already produces 10 percent of the country’s gross domestic product and 20 percent of its exports.¹⁶ Led by Arctic Policy 2035, Moscow has clearly “enhanced the role of its Arctic areas within both its domestic and foreign policy.”¹⁷ For example, this past February and just prior to releasing its new Arctic policy, the Russian government renamed its Ministry for the Development of the Russia Far East to the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East *and the Arctic*.¹⁸

Russia’s ambitious plans to transform the Arctic into a strategic resource base and economic engine are tempered by the speed and duration of ice melt in the Arctic Ocean and particularly along the NSR. The faster the ice melts throughout the Arctic, presumably the easier it becomes to locate and extract the region’s natural resources and reap the economic benefits.

The rapidly warming Arctic also has significant negative consequences, as recent events indicate. In June 2020, a fuel reservoir in Russia’s Siberia region collapsed, causing one of the worst oil spills ever within the Arctic Circle. Preliminary reports suggest melting permafrost was the primary cause of the disaster.¹⁹ This occurred the same month the Russian Siberian town of Verkhoyansk recorded a temperature of 100 degrees Fahrenheit, an all-time high temperature in the Arctic Circle.²⁰ Rapid warming in the polar north could undermine

Moscow's ability to fully develop the infrastructure to enhance the Russian Arctic zone's strategic resource base, as well as protect the region's environment and traditional ways of life.

The NSR as a Globally Competitive National Transport Corridor

Arctic Policy 2035 lays out a third Russian Arctic national interest important to the NSR: “development of the Northern Sea Route as a competitive national transport line of the Russian Federation in the global market [emphasis added].”²¹ The NSR is the most important entity in the Arctic to Russia. Internally, the NSR serves as the connective tissue between Russia's beleaguered and often neglected Arctic landmass and the economic potential that infrastructure development might bring to this vast northern coast. Although only two million Russians live in the Arctic region, the region makes up approximately one-third of Russia's landmass.²² Externally, the NSR links Russia's economic viability in the Arctic to the rest of the world. Moscow is counting on the NSR to become a competitive international shipping route between East Asia and Europe, drastically reducing transit times.²³ For example, a cargo vessel going from London to Yokohama, Japan, on a southerly route via the Suez Canal travels approximately 11,400 nautical miles; the distance between the same two cities along the NSR would be approximately 7,200 nautical miles—37 percent shorter.²⁴ Russia seeks to benefit economically through a well-developed support infrastructure network strung along its Arctic coastline.

Developing the NSR is so critical to Russia that the Arctic policy principles identify “failure to meet deadlines for the establishment of infrastructure of the Northern Sea Route”²⁵ as one of seven threats to Russian national security in the Arctic. (See Appendix.)

However, the NSR is currently nowhere close to becoming a significant maritime corridor. It handles three categories of shipping traffic: “domestic traffic, resource export traffic, and transit traffic.”²⁶ Most of the NSR's traffic is domestic and resource export traffic that primarily serves Russia's domestic needs. However, transit traffic is the most important traffic type for developing the NSR into a viable global shipping route.²⁷ Until Russia significantly increases NSR transit traffic, Moscow will not be able to successfully “attest to [the route's] utility and value”²⁸ to the international community. Russian President Putin acknowledges this problem and issued a directive in 2018 to increase Arctic shipping to 80 million tons per year by 2024.²⁹ Russia's NSR infrastructure development plan also seeks to address this concern. However, even the figure Putin decrees is still far below what shipping industry analysts say is needed to make Arctic shipping competitive.

Implications for the NSR and Great Power Competition

Moscow considers the United States and its NATO allies a threat to Russia's Arctic plans and interests, including in the NSR. Likewise, the West is increasingly concerned about Russia's intentions in the Arctic region, particularly in the context of rapid climate change that is altering the way militaries operate in the region. As a result, the United States and other NATO states have become more active in the Arctic region.

In March 2020, Norway, a NATO member state that shares a land border with Russia, conducted its COLD RESPONSE multinational exercise near Russia's northern borders. Norway has held this biennial exercise since 2006 "to secure the Norwegian Armed Forces and allies' ability to conduct multinational joint exercises with a high-intensity combat scenario in demanding winter conditions."³⁰ This year's exercise was eventually curtailed due to the COVID-19 global pandemic but was conducted "in cooperation with NATO members and partners, (including the United States)."³¹ There were no indications Russia directly responded to this year's COLD RESPONSE. Although Moscow has criticized the West for conducting military operations near Russia's northern borders, the Russian military did conduct "a live-fire exercise"³² near the Norwegian-Russian border weeks before Norway initiated COLD RESPONSE.

In May 2020, the United States and United Kingdom conducted a joint naval exercise in the Barents Sea near Russian waters.³³ This was no mere joint military exercise. It marked "the first U.S. exercise in the Barents Sea since the mid-1990s"³⁴ and was designed "to assert freedom of navigation and demonstrate seamless integration among allies."³⁵ Washington and London gave Moscow prior notice of the FONOP to prevent any surprises, and Moscow responded by initiating its own naval exercise in the Barents Sea at the conclusion of the U.S.-UK exercise.³⁶ The joint FONOP signifies a "massive statement of intent"³⁷ by Washington and London that the West is committed to policing the Arctic region's international waters.

The U.S.-UK joint exercise raises "a looming question [of] where future Arctic FONOPS might take place, given the stated disagreements between the US and Russia over navigation rights in the NSR."³⁸ One obvious location for future FONOPS in the Arctic is within the NSR. The 2018 French naval supply ship transiting through the NSR establishes a foundation for future Arctic FONOPS. The question now becomes one of timing and risks. First, when would the United States or other NATO member states conduct FONOPS along the NSR? The level of sea ice along the route would be one factor in the timing. Furthermore, what risks would both the United States and other NATO member states and Russia be willing to accept over such operations?

Russia's increased securitization of the Arctic, coupled with the increasing U.S. power projection in the region, could lead to conflicting national security interests and clashes in the near future. The Kremlin indicates that it believes the Arctic can remain a region of cooperation rather than competition; however, Moscow will not hesitate to protect its Arctic national interests. For example, in June 2020, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov warned Russia "will not in any way stay quiet ... if someone ... would try to test our readiness to defend our interests of national security in [the Arctic]."³⁹

Conclusion

Moscow's ability to implement Arctic Policy 2035 and develop the NSR by the middle of the next decade will likewise shape its ability and willingness to defend its self-proclaimed sovereignty over the NSR. Russia can expect further pushback from Washington and its Western allies over the NSR—resistance that is likely to increase if the sea route becomes more

geopolitically viable. Such developments could very well increase great power tension over the Arctic region generally and the NSR specifically.

The more significant the NSR becomes as an international transit route, the more important it becomes to Russia's Arctic strategy and overall national interests. Likewise, an increasingly viable NSR will intensify the debate between Moscow's contention that the NSR is within its internal waters against Washington's contention that it is in international waters.

Julian R. Meade is an NIU assistant professor who is on a one-year NIU Research Fellowship. He is exploring Arctic geopolitical drivers and developing plausible, long-range scenarios on Arctic geopolitics out to 2050. He is a Ph.D. candidate, and his dissertation examines U.S. Arctic national interests and governance engagement.

If you have comments, questions, or a suggestion for a *Research Short* topic or article, please contact the NIU Office of Research at NIU_OOR@dodis.mil.

Appendix

Russia's Identified National Security Threats to Its Arctic Zone

1. Decreasing population in Russia's Arctic zone.
2. Slow social, transport, information, and communication infrastructure development in Russia's Arctic land territory.
3. Slow pace of geological study related to mineral and raw materials in the Russian Arctic.
4. Insufficient state support system for economic development in the Russian Arctic.
5. Failure to meet established deadlines for NSR infrastructure projects, icebreaker construction, and emergency rescue and support fleets.
6. Slow pace for establishing land transportation means and aviation equipment for operating in Arctic climate conditions.
7. Unpreparedness of environment monitoring systems in the Russian Arctic for ecological challenges.

Source: *Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic Zone Until 2035*, (Arctic Policy 2035), Government of the Russian Federation, March 5, 2020.

Endnotes

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