



BULLETIN

No. 53 (785), 26 May 2015 © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) • Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz • Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk • Artur Gradziuk • Dariusz Kafan
Piotr Kościński • Sebastian Płociennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Marcin Terlikowski

Arctic Cooperation in the Shadow of Russian Bombers

Wojciech Lorenz

Russia is quickly strengthening its military infrastructure and capabilities in the Arctic. Although some of its upgrades can be explained by the strategic importance of the region, recent moves also enhance Russia's ability to conduct offensive scenarios. Western countries should maintain practical cooperation with Russia in the Arctic but they will also have to enhance their deterrence and defence posture.

Russia's spending on its Arctic programme is intended to strengthen its defences, particularly the strategic submarine fleet, which forms the backbone of the country's nuclear deterrence. However, the tactically offensive nature of some of these upgrades and new capabilities enhance Russia's ability to confront NATO and the U.S. over the new security architecture in Europe. Hence, Arctic states will have to invest in their defences to deter potential threats and to neutralise Russian political and military pressure. At the same time, it is crucial to maintain different forms of Arctic cooperation with Russia to limit the risk of an unintentional escalation that could extend beyond the region.

Militarisation of the Arctic. Recent tensions between Russia and the West have already been felt in the Arctic, which since the end of the Cold War until now has been perceived as an area of cooperation. In April 2015, for the first time in the 20-year history of the Arctic Council Russia's foreign minister skipped the bi-annual ministerial meeting of the organisation, which is the main framework for regional cooperation between Russia, the U.S., Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Just a few days later, the deputy prime minister and chief of the Russian Arctic Commission, Dmitri Rogozin, dismissed the sanctions imposed on him by Norway and visited Svalbard anyway, taking advantage of the complicated legal status of the archipelago to challenge Norwegian sovereignty there.

At the same time, Russia has quickly developed civilian-military infrastructure and has strengthened its capabilities above the Arctic Circle along its 6,200 km-long coastal zone. In the last 12 months, Russian troops have trained for deployment to the country's most remote areas close to the North Pole and tested rapid mobilisation. In March 2015, almost 40,000 troops, 100 aircraft and more than 50 ships (including 15 submarines) participated in snap exercises. Russia also reactivated the Cold War-era military base at Alakurtti, some 50 kilometres from the Finnish border, and has already put in place the first of two planned arctic brigades. The overall ability for Russia to conduct military operations in the region is to be improved by its newly established Arctic Joint Strategic Command. Regional defences in the Kola peninsula and Barents Sea region have been strengthened by air and missile defence systems (Pantsir, S400) and infrastructure for long-range Mig-31/BM (Foxhound) interceptor-fighters. A network of early warning radar is planned to cover the whole northern border of Russia by the end of 2015. Across the Arctic, ports and airfields are being modernised (Rogachevo, Severomorsk-1, Temp, Tiksi, Naryan-Mar, Alykel, Anadyr, Amderma, Nagurskoye), and new bases have been established (Wrangel Island, Cape Schmidt). When these are completed, Russia's northern frontier will be augmented by 10 search-and-rescue stations, 16 ports, 13 airfields—some of them adapted for strategic aircraft.

Offensive Capabilities under a Nuclear Umbrella. Militarisation of the Arctic reflects the growing strategic importance of the region for Russia, which views NATO as a major threat. During the Cold War, the region provided the Soviet Union and the U.S. with the shortest route over the North Pole to attack each other with their nuclear triads (nuclear-powered submarines armed with ballistic missiles; strategic bombers; intercontinental ballistic missiles). Additionally, the ice-free port of Murmansk offered the Soviet Northern Fleet (the strongest Russian naval force

stationed on the Kola peninsula) and strategic nuclear submarines free access to the Atlantic, the ability to attack NATO and U.S. territories and to cut off sea lines of communication crucial for the defences of Western Europe. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia was unable to fund its Arctic capabilities and the risk of conflict and the strategic importance of the region declined, which gave boost to regional cooperation. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin, using resources gained through country's rapid economic growth because of high oil and gas prices, began rebuilding Russia's strategic and operational capabilities in the region. In 2007, Russian strategic bombers resumed patrol flights over the Arctic. The following year, regular patrols were resumed by surface combatant ships and by submarines, which extended their areas of operation. Priority was also given to modernisation of six Delta IV strategic nuclear submarines and the introduction of eight new Borei class vessels (six for the Northern Fleet), armed with Bulava (SLBM) missiles. Three ships have already been transferred to the military and another three are under construction.

Although some of the modernisation plans have been delayed or encountered further problems due to international sanctions and budgetary pressure, Russia has been steadily regaining its ability to operate on various levels of potential escalation in the Arctic. With the modernisation of the strategic submarines, Russia apparently wants to achieve parity with the U.S., which plans to replace its fleet of strategic submarines with 12 new vessels. At the same time, the significance of submarines in Russia's nuclear triad will grow because the modernised fleet will be able to carry the majority of Russia's strategic warheads allowed by the New START treaty (about 800 out of 1,550). New investments in air defence capabilities will augment the protection of bases fundamental for nuclear deterrent and will strengthen the relatively weak Russian defence perimeter along the northern border. An additional benefit comes with increased tactical operational range over the Kola peninsula and Barents Sea, which provides Russia with the ability of denying Western aircraft access to northern Scandinavia. Together with the ability for rapid mobilisation of large forces, the increased level of snap exercises, which can serve as a disguise for an offensive operation, regular testing of Western countries' air defences, and the reopening of the Alakurtti base (which had been part of Soviet plans to attack NATO's Northern Flank), Russia has enhanced its offensive capabilities in the High North. This ability can be used to intimidate the U.S., NATO and EU and to push forward with Russia's idea for the new security architecture in Europe. It is likely that from the Russian perspective this framework should rule out further NATO enlargement (including to Finland and Sweden) and deny the Alliance the ability to project power into Russian territory. If Russian hard security interests are not met, it cannot be excluded that its Arctic capabilities could be used in offensive scenarios extending to the Baltic Sea region, that is, in an attempt to tie down troops from Nordic states and limit their capacity to defend the Baltic States.

Defending Economic Interests During Peace and War Alike. For Russia, the strategic significance of the Arctic is also related to the region's economic potential. Today, as much as 20% of Russian GDP and 22% of its exports, primarily natural resources, originate in the Arctic. In the future, less sea ice will facilitate access to new deposits, crucial for stimulating the nation's economic growth. The upgrades will help exploit the potential of the region during peace-time and can secure production and transport corridors in the event of a military crisis. In the longer term, Russia looks to facilitate commercial use of a transport route along its northern frontier to Asia and Europe (the Northern Sea Route), which is becoming more accessible as ice recedes. Control of the new route will be necessary if it is to fend off international pressure to recognise the ice-free area as international waters open for free passage. At the same time, extending Russia's presence and ability to operate further to the north may support Russian legal claims in the UN for an extension of its Exclusive Economic Zone.

Prospects for Cooperation in the Arctic. Almost two decades of *détente* between Russia and the West facilitated Arctic cooperation in environmental protection, border control, crisis response and sustainable development. However, Russia's perception of NATO and the EU as geopolitical rivals may have a negative influence on cooperation in such key Arctic organisations as the Arctic Council and Barents Euro-Arctic Council. With the tensions growing it may be tempting for Russia to use cooperation as a bargaining chip to divide NATO and EU states. Nuclear safety and environmental protection are the most obvious areas that can be effectively used to pressure Finland, Sweden and Norway, which are interested in monitoring and securing Russian nuclear installations and radioactive dump sites in the Kola and Barents.

However, the growing strategic importance of the Arctic, rising political tensions, and Russian military activity increase the risk of accidentally triggering a military escalation that may extend beyond the region. Hence, it is fundamental for European security to maintain a broad spectrum of Arctic cooperation with Russia to build confidence and assess its intentions. At the same time, the Nordic countries will have to boost their regional defence architecture through closer cooperation between Sweden and Finland, strengthened by NORDEFCO (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) and a credible U.S. ability to deploy troops to Norway supported by prepositioned equipment. Despite challenges to NATO emanating from its south and east, the Alliance will also have to update plans for collective defence operations above the Arctic Circle. Since political and budgetary realities will seriously restrain and delay investments in high-cost Arctic capabilities, it will be crucial for Western states to exploit their technological advantages and introduce a cost-effective early warning system based on sensors enhancing situational awareness under water, as well as on the surface and in the air.