

**Advanced Research
and Assessment Group**

Russian Series

07/26



**Russia and the Arctic:
The "Last Dash North"**

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September 2007

Defence Academy of the United Kingdom

The Last Dash North

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Key Points

- * The belief that the North Pole region could contain large quantities of oil and gas is one of the major forces driving Russian policy. The North Pole expedition of July-August 2007 is laying the ground for submitting a claim to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf that the Lomonosov Ridge belongs to Russia.
- * Russia's claims will be challenged by Canada, the USA and Denmark. The Arctic region is likely to become a region of geopolitical competition later in the 21st century as the ice cap melts.
- * There is a widespread view in Russia that its claim to Arctic territory is not speculative, but rightful compensation for territorial losses in Europe.
- * Any foreign interest in the area, government, commercial or environmental, is seen as hostile intent.
- * Armed action by NATO to contest Russia's Arctic claims is discussed as a serious possibility.
- * Reports of the death of the Russian North are greatly exaggerated, as they take no account of commercial rebirth based on the oil industry.
- * Russia has a well-developed commercial and transport infrastructure to take advantage of opportunities offered by the retreating icecap, in contrast to other littoral states.
- * Naval re-armament and increased military activity mean the same applies to capacity for military action.



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<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/polar.html#arctic>

Russia and the Arctic: The New Great Game¹

Dr Mark A Smith

*Who possesses the Arctic, possesses the entire world.*²

At a meeting of the State Council in Murmansk in May 2007, Vladimir Putin proposed setting up a National Arctic Council to coordinate national policy and strengthen Russia's interests in the Arctic region.³ In August 2007 the Regional Development Minister Vladimir Yakovlev issued instructions for the creation of an interdepartmental working group to deal with the development of the Arctic zone.⁴ These moves are indicative of a serious and growing Russian interest in the Arctic. Vladimir Putin has described the north as Russia's strategic reserve in the development of its statehood.⁵

Russia's northern regions are an important source of natural resources. In June 2007, the commander of the Northern Fleet, Admiral Vladimir Vysotskiy, noted that Russia obtained 90 per cent of her gas, 60 per cent of her oil, more than 90 per cent of her nickel and cobalt, about 60 per cent of her copper and 98 per cent of her platinum metals from her Arctic regions.⁶ 8 per cent of the population live in the Russian North, and they produce about 20 per cent of the national income and account for two-thirds of hard currency earnings.⁷

Russian interest in the Arctic became more pronounced in 2007, with the statement by Russian geologists in June 2007 that the Lomonosov ridge, an underwater shelf in the Arctic Ocean, was linked to the Russian Federation. On 21 June, Duma deputy speaker Artur Chilingarov said that Russia intended to stand up for its lawful rights to the Arctic Ocean shelf.

In July 2007, as part of the Arctic-2007 expedition, a mini-submarine containing two Duma deputies, Artur Chilingarov and Vladimir Gruzdev travelled to the North Pole and placed a titanium Russian flag directly on the pole. Three years earlier, FSB Director Nikolay Patrushev had flown to the North Pole and placed the Russian flag there. The Arctic-2007 expedition's aim was to make a symbolic claim to the pole and large portions of Arctic territory for Russia. Chilingarov said that "the Arctic is Russian... We must prove the North Pole is an extension of the Russian coastal shelf."⁸ On 7 August, he was even more emphatic, stating: "I do not care about what all those foreign public figures are saying about this matter. The Arctic region has always been Russian, since it has been the north, and it will be Russian today. This is Russia, this is the Arctic region, we are together."⁹

If Russian claims are ever realised, then Russia would control about 460,000 square miles, an area about the size of western Europe, which would be about half of the Arctic seabed. The United States Geological Survey World Petroleum Assessment 2000 estimated that 25 per cent of the world's undiscovered oil and gas reserves could lie under the Arctic Ocean.¹⁰ This is equivalent to 375 billion barrels of oil (Saudi Arabia is estimated to have reserves of 261 billion barrels).¹¹ These possible Arctic resources are thought to be gas-prone petroleum systems which

should balance the oil and natural gas endowment of the world. It is also believed that there are potential deposits of diamonds, platinum, nickel, tin and gold.

Russian Legal Claims¹²

Russian claims in the Arctic go back at least as far as April 1926, when the Soviet government staked a claim to the region. The claim was as follows:

All lands and islands, both discovered and which may be discovered in the future, which do not comprise at the time of publication of the present decree the territory of any foreign state recognized by the Government of the USSR, located in the northern Arctic Ocean, north of the shores of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics up to the North Pole between the meridian 32°04'35" E. long. from Greenwich, running along the eastern side of Vaida Bay through the triangular marker on Cape Kekurskii, and the meridian 168°49' 30" W. long. from Greenwich, bisecting the strait separating the Ratmanov and Krusenstern Islands, of the Diomede group in the Bering Sea, are proclaimed to be territory of the USSR.¹³

Soviet interest in Arctic exploration expanded in the 1930s, when several expeditions were undertaken, including a major expedition in 1937.¹⁴ During the period 1937-1991, 88 Soviet polar crews occupied the ice floes for a total of 29,726 drift days, while drifting a distance of 169,654 km. In spring 2003, after a 12-year break, a Russian station known as "North Pole-32" was set up in the Arctic.

The 1926 Soviet claim was not accepted by any other state, and was effectively dropped by the Russian Federation. In August 1995 it was referred to disparagingly in an article in *Izvestiya* as the "famous funny paper".¹⁵ The 1926 claim would legally have been dropped when the Russian Federation signed up to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in March 1997.

Under UNCLOS Article 76, a state can claim a 200 nautical mile exclusive zone and beyond that up to 150 nautical miles of rights on the seabed. The baseline from which these distances are measured depends on where the continental shelf ends. The North Pole region is considered international territory in international law and is administered by the International Seabed Authority.

For Russia, or any other country, to expand its territory in the region, it must prove that the disputed territories are linked to the mainland as part of the same continental shelf. In December 2001, the Russian Federation submitted a claim to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf that the Lomonosov Ridge belonged to Russia.¹⁶ This claim was rejected in 2002 on the grounds that there was insufficient evidence to support the claim. Since then Russian scientists have been engaged in research in the Arctic region to provide further geological evidence to support Moscow's claims. In 2005 the research ship *Akademik Fyodorov* sailed to the North Pole to gather evidence. The expedition in July-August 2007 was also part of this process. Moscow intends to re-submit its claim to the UN in 2009.

Although the planting of a flag underneath the North Pole is not an official claim, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made clear that the planting of the flag should be seen in light of Russian territorial claims. On 2 August 2007 he stated:

The aim of this expedition is not to stake Russia's claim, but to prove that our shelf extends to the North Pole. There are specific scientific methods for doing

this. I think the expedition, including the submersible's dive to the bottom of the Arctic Ocean in the North Pole area, will provide additional scientific evidence for what we are planning to achieve.¹⁷

Lavrov argued that Russia would base its claim on international law. This has been echoed by other Russian officials. Vasiliy Guzulyak, a doctor of law specializing in maritime law, stated:

There could be no question of unilateral steps, including on Russia's part, no way. Certainly, one should reach agreements. But in order to sound convincing, one needs evidence, not just words. Therefore, I believe the goal of the Arctic expedition is to put weighty evidence on the table.¹⁸

Russian officials have also been at pains to point out that the planting of the flag is not an official claim. Yevgeniy Zagaynov, deputy director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's legal department, stated:

The purpose of the expedition to the North Pole is not to stake a claim to certain maritime territories. The symbolic gesture of fixing the Russian flag on the bed of the Arctic Ocean should not confuse anyone. However, there is the tradition of mounting state flags on mountain tops, for instance, or on celestial bodies and this has hardly ever upset anyone.¹⁹

This was echoed by aide to the minister for economic development and trade Boris Morgunov, who stated:

Russia has all the chances to claim additional territory on the Arctic continental shelf and the only question is whether this area should be 1.2m sq km, as was stated in the Russian request submitted to the UN commission, or a smaller territory. Of course, in many ways this would depend on how the findings of this expedition are interpreted. Naturally, the placing of the Russian flag on the continental shelf cannot in itself serve as a proof of the Russian Federation's right to claim this additional territory.²⁰

It has been argued that Russian oil production may peak around 2010, and then decline.²¹ This increases the importance of off-shore oil production for Russia,²² and the possibility that the Arctic may contain large reserves of oil and gas explains Russia's increased interest in this region, particularly as the revival of Russian power in the Putin era is largely, if not exclusively, based on her role as an energy producer.

Obviously, increased interest is not confined to Russia alone. The likelihood that the Arctic icecap will melt further over the next few decades will make the region and its potential natural resources more accessible to all the Arctic powers.²³ In addition, the possibility that world oil supplies may peak early in the 21st century increases the importance of the region as a possible source of fossil fuels, particularly if the Middle East remains unstable, or becomes more so. This therefore means that the Arctic is likely to become an arena of geopolitical competition.

The potential for geopolitical rivalry in the Arctic has been observed by Duma deputy Andrey Kokoshin, who is chairman of the Duma committee on the CIS and relations with compatriots. On 1 August 2007 he made the following statement on the Arctic:

At the moment there is a new surge of interest in discussing this subject. It arose against a background of, among other things, rising prices for hydrocarbons. For this reason, we will have to stand up, I think, for our interests in an active fashion, especially in the Arctic. We have to bolster our economic position there. There are things to work on and think about in the military sphere, too... We need to reinforce our Northern Fleet and our border guards and build airfields so that we can ensure full control over the situation.²⁴

However, any potential Russian claim will not be accepted by any other of the Arctic powers (the USA, Canada, Norway, Denmark and Greenland).

Canada

Canada has long argued that large parts of the Arctic belong to her.²⁵ In 1946 the then Canadian Ambassador to the USA, Lester B. Pearson stated:

A large part of the world's total Arctic area is Canadian. One should know exactly what this part comprises. It includes not only Canada's northern mainland but the islands and the frozen sea north of the mainland between the meridians of its east and west boundaries, extending to the North Pole.²⁶

Ottawa has thus objected strongly to Russia's recent moves. Canadian foreign minister Peter Mackay said that:

There is no question over Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic... We've established a long time ago that these are Canadian waters and this is Canadian property. You can't go around the world these days dropping a flag somewhere. This isn't the 14th or 15th century. I think you are going to see very quickly that the law of the sea, protocols of which both Russia and Canada are signatories at the UN, would immediately kick in were there to be any dispute. And there is no dispute. This is Canadian territory, plain and simple... The question of Arctic sovereignty is not a question. It's clear. It's our country. It's our water. ... It's the "True North strong and free" and they are fooling themselves if they think dropping a flag on the ocean floor is going to change anything.²⁷

In July 2007, about three weeks before the Russian expedition, Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper affirmed Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic.

Canada has a choice when it comes to defending our sovereignty over the Arctic. We either use it or lose it. And make no mistake, this Government intends to use it. Because Canada's Arctic is central to our national identity as a northern nation. It is part of our history. And it represents the tremendous potential of our future... In defending our nation's sovereignty, nothing is as fundamental as protecting Canada's territorial integrity; our borders, our airspace and our waters... More and more, as global commerce routes chart a path to Canada's North and as the oil, gas and minerals of this frontier become more valuable, northern resource development will grow ever more critical to our country.

At this time Harper announced the construction of up to eight Polar Class 5 Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships and the establishment of a deep water port in the far North. In August he stated a cold-weather army training base would be set up at Resolute

Bay and an existing port at a former mine at Nanisivik would be refurbished to supply Arctic patrol vessels.²⁸

Canadian interest in Arctic security had been growing well before Russia's Arctic-2007 expedition. In 2002 the Canadian Armed Forces held their first joint exercise in the Arctic in over twenty years.²⁹ In spring 2005, the Canadian government issued an International Policy Statement, which acknowledged that Arctic security should become a higher priority for Ottawa. The defence section of this international policy statement calls for an increase in air and sea patrols, and notes that "the demands of sovereignty and security for the government could become even more pressing as activity in the North continues to rise".³⁰ In 2006, Canadian forces held three exercises in the Arctic, and have held four in 2007.³¹

USA

US State Department lawyer John Bellinger has said that the USA is not going to watch indifferently while other countries are dividing the Arctic shelf and its natural resources.³² A US Coast Guard vessel departed on a four week North Pole expedition on 6 August 2007, in the wake of the Russian expedition. In July, Bellinger said that once the USA ratifies the UNCLOS, then the United States could submit a claim to seabed up to 600 miles off the coast of Alaska.³³ Some claim the United States could petition for a swathe of Arctic seabed larger than California.³⁴ However, if the US Senate does not ratify the Law of the Sea, then Washington may not be able to present its claims. Ratification of the Law has been blocked by a small group of Republican senators who say that the treaty would infringe on American sovereignty.³⁵

The US Navy has discussed the implications of an ice-free Arctic for naval operations in symposia in April 2001 and July 2007.³⁶ The US Navy spent \$25 million annually on polar research in the 1990s, but funding was sharply reduced in the wake of 9-11. The April 2001 symposium warned that US weapons and ships were not designed to operate in the Arctic. The USA currently only has three ships designed for polar missions, whereas Russia has 18 icebreakers.³⁷ Gazprom and LUKoil have also announced plans to build nuclear-powered icebreakers.³⁸ In July 2007, Rear-Admiral Timothy McGee, head of the US naval meteorology and oceanographic command, called for an expanded US naval presence in the Arctic as part of an international coalition.³⁹

Denmark

In June 2005, Denmark and Canada announced that they would conduct a joint surveying project of uncharted parts of the Arctic Ocean near their coasts. Denmark desires to prove that the Lomonosov Ridge is linked geologically to Greenland, which is semiautonomous Danish territory. If it finds such a link, Copenhagen could make a case that the North Pole belongs to it.⁴⁰ Denmark allocated \$25 million in 2004 in an attempt to prove that the Lomonosov Ridge was connected to Greenland. A Danish expedition also embarked to the North Pole in August 2007 to conduct research in the Lomonosov Ridge. Helge Sander, Denmark's minister of science, technology and innovation has said that "the preliminary investigations done so far are very promising. There are things suggesting that Denmark could be given the North Pole."⁴¹

Potential Disputes

In addition to the potential disagreements over the North Pole, there are disputes over other parts of the Arctic between the various Arctic powers.

Northwest Passage

Canada claims sovereignty over the waters of the Northwest Passage which connect the Atlantic with the Pacific. This claim is accepted by no other nation. In April 2006, Canada's Joint Task Force North declared that the Canadian military will no longer refer to the region as the Northwest Passage, but as the Canadian Internal Waters. The declaration came after the successful completion of Operation Nunalivut, which was an expedition into the region by five military patrols.⁴² Arctic thawing means that the passage will become more accessible to shipping, and the issue of sovereignty will therefore become more salient.

Hans Island

This island lies between Ellesmere Island and northern Greenland. The ownership is disputed between Canada and Denmark. The possible presence of oil deposits in the region increases the importance of the territorial dispute.

Barents Sea

Parts of the Barents Sea have been disputed between Norway and Russia. There is a boundary dispute between Norway and Russia, with the Norwegians favouring the median line and the Russians favouring a meridian based sector. The discovery of oil in the Barents Sea has again raised the importance of the territorial dispute.⁴³ However a partial agreement was achieved in June 2007. Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg and his Russian counterpart, Mikhail Fradkov, reached agreement on a demarcation deal for the Varangerfjord area in the Barents Sea. In 1957 Norway and Russia concluded an agreement on the sea frontier in the Varangerfjord. The new agreement updates and clarifies certain points established in the 1957 agreement. It also determines a delimitation line for the territorial sea, the exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf between Norway and Russia further north outside the mouth of the Varangerfjord.⁴⁴

Spitsbergen

There have also been problems between Russia and Norway over Spitsbergen, which is part of the Svalbard archipelago. Under the Svalbard Treaty of 1920, the archipelago is recognised as part of Norway. All signatories to the treaty have the right to engage in commercial activities in Svalbard, but only Russia and Norway do so. Some Russian observers argue that Norway is seeking to remove the Russian presence from Spitsbergen.⁴⁵

Bering Straits

There is a potential dispute between the USA and Russia over this region. A treaty demarcating the maritime boundary in the Bering Straits was signed by the USA and the USSR in June 1990, but has not so far been ratified by either signatory. There is considerable hostility towards the agreement amongst the Russian political establishment, as it is felt that this agreement conceded too much to the USA.

Conclusions

In addition to Russia, Canada and Denmark will also submit claims to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. Under UNCLOS, Canada has until 2013 to submit a claim, and Denmark until 2014. In 2006 the Canadian government estimated the country's potential Arctic and Atlantic Ocean seabed claims amounted to 1.09 million square miles.⁴⁶ The Arctic issue may force the USA to consider more urgently its attitude both towards the Law of the Sea, and towards reinforcing its military presence in the Arctic region.

The legal regime for the Arctic is unlike that of the Antarctic, which is covered by a treaty for the entire region which does not permit any territorial claims.⁴⁷ Russia's highly publicised expedition to the North Pole may be said to symbolise the beginning of a geopolitical competition over the next few decades.

This is a competition in which Russia may have certain advantages. As Eric Posner states:

At some point, Russia, the US and other countries will carve up the Arctic into mutually exclusive economic zones. Russia is positioning itself to take the lion's share. Russia has major advantages over Canada and the US in the battle over the Arctic. Control over the seas is determined by two things: power and propinquity. With respect to the Arctic, Russia has both. The US has power but not, for the most part, propinquity; Canada has propinquity but not power.⁴⁸

The desire to ensure Russian great power status is a major factor driving Russia's Arctic policy, and will be an enduring feature of Russian foreign policy over the next few decades.

Russia, having embarked on a gradual geo-strategic re-orientation to the north and east, can not only compensate for the consequences of negative changes in the European part of the country, but can reveal the prospects of a new economic upsurge. In essence this is a unique historical opportunity for stable development, which could guarantee the future of all Russia as a great power.⁴⁹

Endnotes

¹ This is taken from a comment by Christopher Weafer, energy analyst at Alfa Bank, who described the interest of Russia and other major powers in the Arctic, as "the Great Game in a cold climate."

² This is the title of an article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, by Pavel Zaydfudim, 29 July 2000.

³ http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2007/05/02/2344_type63378_126519.shtml

⁴ BBC Monitoring: RIA Novosti, Moscow, in Russian 1149 gmt 22 August 2007.

⁵ Yu.G. Barsegov, V.A.Korzun, I.M.Mogilevsky et al, *Arktika: interesy Rossii i mezhdunarodnye uslovia ikh realizatsii*, Moscow, Nauka, 2002, p.4.

⁶ Commander of the Northern Fleet, Admiral Vladimir Vysotsky, 'We secure Russia's security in the most important strategic direction,' *Orientir*, 6, June 2007.

⁷ Barsegov et al, *ibid*,

⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/6925853.stm>

⁹ BBC Monitoring: Ekho Moskvyy radio, Moscow, in Russian 1200 gmt 7 August 2007

¹⁰ <http://pubs.usgs.gov/dds/dds-060/> ; Thomas Ahlbrandt, World Energy Project Chief, U.S. Geological Survey, Global Overview of Petroleum Resources, in Trends in Oil Supply and Demand, Potential for Peaking of Conventional Oil Production, and Possible Mitigation Options: A Summary Report of the Workshop (2006) Board on Energy and Environmental Systems (BEES); http://books.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=11585&page=31. Note that it is believed that the Arctic **may** contain oil and gas reserves. It has not yet been proven.

¹¹ The Battle for the North Pole, *The Week Magazine*, 5 December 2006

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http://www.who.edu/beaufortgyre/history/history_russian1819.html See also T.

Armstrong, *The Russians in the Arctic*, Methuen and Co., London, 1958.

¹⁵ G.Bocharov, 'An assignment of the President. How and for what the sky of Russia will be open.' *Izvestiya*, 17 August 1995.

¹⁶ <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2001/sea1729.doc.htm>

¹⁷ BBC Monitoring: RTR Rossiya, Moscow, in Russian 1000 gmt 2 August 2007;

¹⁸ BBC Monitoring: Vesti TV news channel, Moscow, in Russian 0902 gmt 2 August 2007

¹⁹ BBC Monitoring: RTR Planeta TV, Moscow, in Russian 1600 gmt 3 August 2007

²⁰ BBC Monitoring: Ekho Moskvyy radio, Moscow, in Russian 1000 gmt 3 August 2007

²¹ C. J. Campbell, 'The Status of Oil and Gas Depletion in Russia,' *Energy Bulletin*, 13

December 2004 <http://www.energybulletin.net/3600.html>

²² See Julia Nanay, Russian Offshore: Prospects for Investment, Whither Russia's Oil? Conference American Enterprise Institute, 19 May 2006

<http://www.aei.org/events/filter.all,eventID.1314/transcript.asp>

²³ Clifford Krauss, Steven Lee Myers from Russia, Andrew C. Revkin, Simon Romero, 'As Polar Ice Turns to Water, Dreams of Treasure Abound,' *New York Times*, 10 October 2005.

<http://zfacts.com/metaPage/lib/NYT-10-10-05-Arctic-land-rush.pdf>

²⁴ <http://www.interfax.com/3/298375/news.aspx>

²⁵ For a discussion of Canadian sovereignty claims, see Robert S. Reid, 'The Canadian Claim to Sovereignty over the Waters of the Arctic,' *Canadian Year Book of International Law*, Vol.12, 1974, pp.111-136, University of British Columbia Press, 1975; Donat Pharamond, *Canada's Arctic waters in international law*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988; Donald McRae, 'Arctic Sovereignty? What is at stake?' *Behind the Headlines*, Vol.64, no.1, January 2007, Canadian Institute of International Affairs; Matthew Carnaghan, Alison Goody, *Canadian Arctic Sovereignty*, PRB 05-61E, Canadian Parliamentary Information and Research Service, 26 January 2006

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²⁷ Gloria Galloway and Alan Freeman, 'Ottawa assails Moscow's Arctic ambition,' *Globe and Mail*, 3 August 2007,

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20070803.wtoriesarctic03/BNStory/Science/home>

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³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.25.

³¹ 'War exercises fill Arctic full of lead,' *The Star*, 19 August 2007;

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- ³⁸ Victor Yasmann, Russia: Race to the North Pole, 27 July 2007. <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/07/a77e4113-9695-4dfe-bcf5-3466ffe65b1f.html>
- ³⁹ <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601082&sid=aK9JSBhBiJMg&refer=canada>
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- ⁴¹ Ben Leapman, 'Denmark joins race to claim North Pole' Daily Telegraph, 12 August 2007; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/08/12/wpole112.xml>
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- ⁴³ Randi Laegreid, The Dispute Over the Barents Sea, November 2003. <http://www.american.edu/TED/ice/barents.htm>
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- ⁴⁶ Randy Boswell, Canada draws line in the ice over Arctic seabed,' CanWest News Service, 30 June 2007; <http://www.canada.com/topics/news/national/story.html?id=a3822b19-7c35-41ae-86f8-bcd882b2df8b&k=88331>
- ⁴⁷ Article 4, paragraph 2 of the 1959 Antarctic treaty states: No acts or activities taking place while the present Treaty is in force shall constitute a basis for asserting, supporting or denying a claim to territorial sovereignty in Antarctica. No new claim, or enlargement of an existing claim, to territorial sovereignty shall be asserted while the present Treaty is in force. <http://www.nsf.gov/od/opp/antarct/anttrty.jsp> . For a discussion of Arctic legal issues, see Natalia Loukacheva, 'Legal Challenges in the Arctic,' A Position Paper presented for the 4th Northern Research Forum Open Meeting, 5-8 October 2006 http://nrf.is/Open%20Meetings/Oulu%20Lulea%202006/Position%20Papers/Leukacheva_4th%20NRF%20PP.pdf
- ⁴⁸ Eric Posner, 'The New Race for the Arctic,' Wall Street Journal 3 August 2007. <http://uchicagolaw.typepad.com/faculty/2007/08/the-new-race-fo.html> Posner is a professor of international law at Chicago University.
- ⁴⁹ Barsegov et al, op cit, p.13.

Looking North

Keir Giles

As well as rehearsing more or less rational legal arguments for expansion of Russian territory in the Arctic, Russian commentators in the military and civil press are also in the habit of presenting northwards expansion as the means by which a historical wrong can be righted. A common theme is the Arctic as rightful compensation for hegemony over eastern Europe, lost with the fall of the Soviet Union:

Looking at Russia's geo-economic situation, it has to be noted that in the 1990s, following the collapse of the USSR's geopolitical status, extremely unfortunate spatial deformations took place on [former Soviet] territory, which radically affected the structure and direction of Russia's national interests... [These are] gradually re-orienting towards the sea areas of the European Arctic... In size and geographical situation, the Arctic could significantly compensate Russia for the losses she suffered as a result of the collapse of the USSR... This would be not only compensation for losses, but the strategic winning and retaining of a competitive advantage for the country in conditions of advancing globalisation and the expansion of world powers.⁵⁰

The notion that Russian expansion into the Arctic could “attenuate the consequences of territorial losses in the European part of the country” is a recurring theme.⁵¹ But in addition to this, “development of the Arctic by Russia is directly linked to providing national security for Russia, both economic and military”.⁵² According to Northern Fleet commander Adm Vladimir Vysotskiy, “the basis for Russia's future and Russia's socioeconomic stability and security is now being laid down in developing the resources and spaces of the Arctic”.⁵³ This is particularly the case for the maintenance of Russia's maritime nuclear deterrent forces: “the defence significance of the North is underlined by the fact that at present it is only through the Arctic seas that Russia has full open access to the high seas and the possibility of broad operational manoeuvre for the Navy's submarine forces”.⁵⁴

This attitude towards the military importance of the Northern axis contrasts sharply with the North American approach. Canadian moves to deal with the realisation that the true North may be strong and free, but is presently naked and unguarded in the face of increased foreign activity, have been documented in the accompanying paper by Dr Mark A Smith; but it remains the case that, as expressed by Adm Don Pilling, former US Vice Chief of Naval Operations, “the Arctic means you have another side of this continent exposed. Between the Canadians and us, there are a handful of ships oriented for the northernmost latitudes. But there is not much flexibility or depth there.”⁵⁵

Infrastructure

The different defence approaches are paralleled in the patterns of infrastructure and development on opposite sides of the Arctic Ocean. Leaving aside the indigenous peoples, Russia had a long history of settlement and economic activity in the most unlikely parts of the European Far North, to all appearances totally unsuitable for human habitation – even before the deliberate Soviet development of the North at enormous material and human cost, maintained during the later

Soviet period by huge subsidies and inflated wages only nominally compensated for by deviations from standard state tariffs and prices.

Naturally enough, the post-Soviet period has seen radical change following the collapse of state subsidies and state-sponsored development. The population of Chukotka, for example, has halved since 1989 as inhabitants return to the "mainland" of southern or European Russia after their state jobs disappear.⁵⁶ This population flight from Siberia and the Far East as a whole is, of course, an additional strategic concern for Russia, although despite regular frightening forecasts, reliable assessments vary on the extent to which the original population is being replaced by Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese immigration.⁵⁷

But the net result today is that despite this massive contraction, areas of the Russian Arctic coast have a full infrastructure in place ready for future economic development - in sharp contrast to the Canadian North. Suggestions that Churchill, with its rail line running south, could be developed as Canada's Arctic outlet, as a kind of Canadian Murmansk, need to be placed in context. Churchill has a permanent population of just over 1,000 people, and its main industry is currently polar bear tourism. Murmansk has a population of 325,000,⁵⁸ and its developed infrastructure and transport links have made it the main base area for oil development in the Barents Sea and beyond.

The Russian Arctic's transport system in particular is not as fully dependent on the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as is sometimes portrayed. Most areas show the characteristically Russian absence of anything even remotely resembling a road net, but intensively-developed river transport serves the main north-south arteries: the alternative to the NSR is transfer from the southern east-west railway lines at major river ports on successive north-flowing rivers, like those at Omsk, Novosibirsk and Krasnoyarsk on the Irtysh, Ob and Yenisey respectively, thus providing the main means of transport across the northern regions with the exception of the (relatively) well-developed White Sea coastline and Kola peninsula with its road and rail links. Statistics for river transport show a sharp fall in vessel numbers and freight tonnage since the 1990s, but this reflects not only the contraction in state industries but also the move to commercial (and, it has to be assumed, generally more efficient) operation of transport lines.

The Northern Sea Route

State subsidy did not evaporate immediately with the disappearance of the USSR, and in some areas has been very slow to retreat. This is particularly the case in those areas with a strong emotional resonance in Russia, like the operation of the Northern Sea Route which was officially subsidised until 2003.

The NSR was originally the key supply route for the development of the Russian Far North: but to the end of the Soviet Union and beyond it played a vital role in the "*severnnyy zavoz*", the annual delivery of essentials like fuel and food to uninhabitable but populated areas of the North. Cargo carried in 1987 on the NSR alone, not counting the vital inland waterways, totalled 6.6m tonnes. By 2005 this had shrunk, in parallel with state-backed activity in general, to approximately 2m tonnes.

This latter figure, and others like it, is habitually presented in Russian sources as evidence of the catastrophic collapse of the North. But once again the headline

figures omit other factors which give a different picture: over the same period oil exports using the route grew to just over 1m tonnes (or 7.2m tonnes if White Sea ports are to be included).⁵⁹ This is symptomatic of a lingering perception that activity in the North in general, and the NSR in particular, are the business of the Russian state and not commercial operators. So the figures indicating collapse of the NSR as a viable transport route often omit increased oil-related commercial traffic in the area.

There is a similar blind spot in assessments of the state of Russia's northern ports. With very rare exceptions, breast-beating over the non-viability of ports along the NSR makes no mention of whether these ports have any relevance or use now that the populations, industries or raw material extraction they used to support have in some cases vanished. The exception that proves the rule is Norilsk Nickel, which now owns the ports of Dudinka and Port Dikson, and has modernised them and runs them at a profit, while the port of Igarka is similarly now owned by the local forestry company.⁶⁰ Norilsk Nickel also benefits from effectively the only railway line in the Asian North, between Norilsk and Dudinka. Also, seaport activity can hardly be said to be moribund when new ports have been established where there is a commercial reason for them to exist, such as the Vitino or Varandey oil terminals.

Russian writing about the availability of icebreakers once again tends to paint a worst case scenario for state-owned assets while omitting to mention new commercial activity. Of the Soviet fleet of 16 icebreakers servicing the NSR at the end of the 1980s, eight of them nuclear, three are projected to remain in service in 2015 - even counting the entry into service of the 50 let Pobedy⁶¹ (the name, 50 Years of Victory, i.e. 1995, gives an indication of how long this vessel has been "under construction").⁶² This looks bad: but it takes no account of commercial icebreaker use by Gazprom and Lukoil,⁶³ and the icebreakers and river-sea and ice-capable tankers which were built for Lukoil subsidiary Lukoil Arctic Tanker. The NSR itself is effectively run by two shipping companies, the Murmansk Maritime Shipping (MMP) and Far Eastern Maritime Shipping (DMP). Both have long ago left state control, and MMP in particular has gone through various permutations of ownership, most of them leading back to Lukoil.⁶⁴ But the Russian mindset persists in viewing what is effectively an open market arena as being by rights a state enterprise. Other symptoms of the same mismatch between perception and reality include the Russian Auxiliary Fleet in the Far North and elsewhere being financed up until 2005 almost entirely by means of the additional commercial services it provided.⁶⁵

NSR enthusiasts therefore expect the forecast increase in oil and gas tanker transport to lead on to an early revival of general cargo transport: "the strategic development of maritime cargo shipments in the Arctic in the immediate future and in the period to 2020 is linked primarily with development of the continental shelf and the transport of hydrocarbons. Container shipments can be expected [shortly] to appear."⁶⁶

This presents the prospect of a direct export route from western Siberia to foreign markets, as well as for imports from the Far East - Japanese ambassador Yasuo Saito visited Murmansk in early July with direct trade high on the agenda.⁶⁷ Going north is also being touted as an alternative transit route to Suez or Panama: the NSR is quoted as cutting 23 per cent of the distance from Rotterdam to Shanghai, 22 per cent from Rotterdam to Vancouver, and 34 per cent from Rotterdam to Yokohama.⁶⁸ The commercial viability of the NSR as an alternative route was backed by studies by the International Northern Sea Route Programme (INSROP), with the important proviso of Russia agreeing only to charge "reasonable" transit fees.⁶⁹

The competitiveness of the NSR will of course increase commensurate with the retreat of the Arctic ice. Staying with the example of Rotterdam, an ice-free Arctic would allow a straight course from the Hook to the Bering Strait. Even in the short term, reduced ice cover allows larger, deeper-draft vessels to sail further away from shore, increasing the cost-effectiveness of the route.

The option of Siberian trade routes heading north to North America could also appear, but once again the Canadian experience is radically different: there, “the melting of seasonal ice has enabled harder, perennial ice to infiltrate the Canadian archipelago. This continues to restrict the types of ships that can be used in this region.”⁷⁰

Ice

There is little or no consensus on just how rapidly the Arctic ice is shrinking, but the most recent reports at the time of writing suggested it had retreated further than ever before in August 2007, and the most pessimistic forecasts suggest an ice-free Arctic by 2040.⁷¹ Summer ice cover shrinkage over the last 30 years is quoted at 15-20 per cent.⁷²

Local effects on individual port facilities can be dramatic. The port of Vitino, in a northern arm of the traditionally icebound White Sea, now officially considers itself to be navigable year-round⁷³ - but as recently as 1996 a US military report on the Northern Sea Route described Kandalaksha, four miles away across the bay, as “normally frozen over from early November to late May”.⁷⁴

But the retreat of ice coverage is not a steady and straightforward process. In the short term, there are additional dangers for shipping caused by unstable and unpredictable ice movements even in relatively southerly sea routes.⁷⁵ Movement in ice boundaries also sets unpredictable problems for fisheries – not only the movement of traditional fishing grounds as the ice cap retreats, but also the threat posed to plankton forming the basis of marine food chains in the Barents Sea and elsewhere by increased acidity of the ocean waters. The consequent inability to predict sustainable fishing patterns long term provides an additional potential source, as if any were needed, of instability and border friction.

Oil Expansion

Naturally enough, the main impetus for resolving border disputes lies in rights to exploit mineral deposits, as documented above. Common interest leads to close cooperation and synergies: the Zvezdochka shipyard is engaged in construction of drilling rigs specifically for the Arctic, which it says are intended both for the purposes of developing mineral deposits, and for proving the Russian continental shelf claim to the Lomonosov Ridge: construction of ice-class tankers and gas tankers is to follow.⁷⁶

For the oil industry as well, the geographical fact that Murmansk, unlike ports on the Black Sea or the Baltic, gives European Russia direct access to the high seas not involving passage through vulnerable straits is seen as vital.⁷⁷ Petrochemical export infrastructure is being developed at Primorsk in Leningrad Region on the Baltic, but strong emphasis on regaining control over the export of “strategic energy

sources”, and in particular moving away from the use of ports in Latvia and Estonia, is a key driver for development on the less vulnerable north coast.

The sharp increase in activity in the area since the mid-1990s has been driven by tanker traffic, resulting in construction of tanker terminals at Vitino and Severodvinsk both for transshipping and for loading of oil products delivered by railway from the interior.⁷⁸ At present, the permanently ice-free ports in the European Arctic are transshipment points for oil from smaller ice-class tankers to larger vessels for exports to the USA and Europe: given local summer conditions, the light tankers might be just as deserving of the nickname “mosquito fleet” as their Venezuelan equivalent. The continuing cost-effectiveness of this approach will depend in large part on the rate and extent of the future retreat of Arctic ice coverage.

NATO’s Knavish Tricks

The view from Europe might be that development of the Arctic is impossible without close cooperation between the littoral states,⁷⁹ but there is no doubt in the Russian civil and military press that any activity in the Arctic by foreign powers has hostile intent and must be pre-empted or resisted. This is not a preoccupation only of military experts - the following is from a leading economic journal:

Active infiltration into the Arctic by Norway and other NATO countries can be seen both in the constant increase in intensity of the Alliance’s combat training, and in its content. Large-scale NATO naval exercises in direct proximity to Russia’s borders have become an annual event... The challenge from NATO is one of the most serious for Russia. It is difficult to predict how events will develop, but it is entirely clear that the main aim of the militarisation of the Arctic is to support political negotiations with Russia with force. In this context Russia’s main task is to prevent the opposition forming a united front. Russia must take advantage of the differences that exist [between NATO states].⁸⁰

As well as demonstrating the implicit common assumption that the Arctic is Russia’s by right, the issue of foreign interest in the area gives free rein to some of Russia’s most cherished paranoid delusions. Border negotiations are presented as “concentrated striving by Russia’s effective neighbour countries (Norway, Denmark (Greenland), Canada and the USA) where possible to redefine traditional maritime state borders to the detriment of the allegedly ‘pregnant Russian Arctic’”.⁸¹ Ecological concerns mask darker motives: “foreign governments pay more attention to ecological security in the Arctic, but in a number of cases this is just a cover for addressing economic and even political aims.”⁸² Similarly, any foreign research projects must of necessity be directed against Russia:

Foreign research centres have divided up a number of Russian territories into zones of interest between them. The Norwegian Polar Institute studies the Barents and Kara Seas... The Arctic Ocean [has been allocated to] the Scott Polar Institute... The aim of this research is to weaken Russia’s position in the North, including by proposing that certain regions should be declared nature reserves and banning any industrial or economic activity there.⁸³

Consideration is given to how best to repel NATO as a bloc from “areas of Russian interest”, with NATO invasion of northern Russia presented as a likely scenario.⁸⁴ This kind of discussion points out that the Russian Far North is more accessible for

foreign forces than it may appear. In doing so, naturally enough, the references are not to examples of cooperation from the Second World War such as the Arctic Convoys or RAF operations in the Kola Peninsula, but to the demonised "intervention" by Allied forces in the same area in 1919.

Interestingly, Russian attention seems focussed exclusively on the "NATO threat" to the Arctic, with no account taken of potential destabilising factors from elsewhere. Barry Zellen of the US Naval Postgraduate School thinks that threats to the security of a more active Arctic could come from further afield: "there might be efforts by a future Chinese navy or Islamic trading entity to test claims to the Arctic, perhaps to divert American and trans-polar military resources from other theatres of conflict".⁸⁵ Although the border dispute with Norway was rendered considerably more simple by the erasing from the map in 1945 of the Finnish Arctic coast at Petsamo, now Pechenga, there are other unexpected directions from which complications might arise as a result of entirely legitimate claims, such as the large number of other countries with rights to economic activity arising from the Treaty on Spitsbergen.⁸⁶

The Russian Navy in particular expresses no doubts at all as to NATO's hostile intent:

*One of the key elements of the concept of a unipolar world (globalisation) is the joint efforts of countries on the Atlantic periphery in a military-political union (NATO) to establish control over the world's sea communications, to win and maintain dominance at sea, and to expand maritime threats to, primarily, Russia, China and India... Hence NATO's emphasis on naval power as a counterweight to the enormous land power of the Eurasian states... Even if the likelihood of a major war is now small, the possibility of a series of local maritime conflicts aimed at gaining access to and control over Russian maritime resources, primarily hydrocarbons, is entirely likely.*⁸⁷

The same article in the Navy's *Morskoy Sbornik* journal complained bitterly that post-Soviet contraction and emphasis on deterrent forces had reduced Russia to a coastal power with incidental naval nuclear weapons, comparing the devastation wrought on the Navy with the effects of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905. All of this lends context to the recent rapid intensification of Russian naval and air activity in the Arctic Ocean.

Increased Military Activity

In parallel with the overall increased training activity of the Russian Armed Forces, July 2007 saw the Northern Fleet exercise on what was described as a larger scale than has been possible for some years, including live firing from major surface vessels, fleet aviation and marine infantry.⁸⁸ Aviation units involved in Arctic training included not only the regular visitors from Long-Range Aviation, but Su-24 regiments deployed from the European north-west.⁸⁹ The much-trumpeted resumption of regular strategic aviation patrols by the Russian Air Force in August 2008 implies much more intensive use of airbases in the Far North like Tiksi, Vorkuta and Anadyr.⁹⁰ For naval aviation, the increase in the intensity of training has included the resumption of flight operations from the Admiral Kuznetsov carrier after an 18-month break: "an important stage in the training of carrier aviation pilots has been completed," Northern Fleet Commander Adm Vladimir Vysotskiy said.⁹¹

Adm Vysotskiy paints a relatively upbeat picture of fleet reductions in the 1990s, saying that the Fleet retained its most modern and capable assets.⁹² The intensification of military training in the High Arctic⁹³ includes the Northern Fleet's "unique work to restore the skills of navigation tasks in the Arctic" and the particular requirements of missile launches under polar conditions.⁹⁴ With the resumption of submarine missile launches from the "near-Polar region" in September 2006 after an 11-year gap, Adm Masorin said under-ice training for submariners was now a "priority task" for the Navy.⁹⁵

Maritime Doctrine

Russian naval commentary in open sources shows a striking shift in naval preoccupations over the past two to three years. Debate over Russia's role in blue water, and hankering to regain status as a world naval power have faded into the background in favour of a constant and insistent rehearsal of how best to use the Navy to secure and defend the Arctic. This has given impetus and focus to the naval elements of Russia's overall rearmament programme.

Protection of Russian economic interests ranks high on any list of key tasks for the Russian Navy. In this context it is significant that Russia has not a naval doctrine but a maritime doctrine, encompassing merchant shipping, the fishing fleet and research vessels in a holistic approach to exploitation of the sea.⁹⁶

The Russian annual seafood catch fell from 7.8m tonnes in 1990 to 3.2m tonnes in 2005. Once again the headline figures paint a picture of collapse and cause much agonising in Russia, but do not give the complete story. Not all of the slump was driven by the deterioration of the fishing fleet or exhaustion of fish stocks: the Russian diet has also changed, with domestic tinned and preserved fish consumption plummeting since the 1990s. It is tempting to deduce that the availability of imported alternative foodstuffs simply removed all possible demand for the more grisly and repellent varieties of Soviet tinned seafood: in any case, the change represents a reaction to market forces similar to that undergone in many other post-Soviet industries. Regardless of past history, potential new Arctic fishing grounds and new food resources will automatically be, in the Russian view, a strategic resource which must be protected from any foreign interest or influence.⁹⁷

Other offshore resources need protection as well as fisheries. A closed meeting of the Maritime Board in October 2005 heard a report from Sergey Ivanov on defence of offshore oil and gas resources, including extraction facilities already in place:⁹⁸ "Russia now needs to think not only about diplomatic, but also about forceful means to safeguard its economic interests,"⁹⁹ and the Defence Ministry should be in charge of "ensuring military security for offshore operations, and supplying special services during the development and operation of offshore shelf deposits... and also providing navigational security for general seafaring".¹⁰⁰

This need to refocus on resource protection has been most clearly stated in plans for the protection of the Arctic: "under the conditions of global warming in the Arctic as predicted by scientists, economic activity in the region will increase. As the situation develops, naval activities aimed at protecting Russia's economic interests and ensuring its military security will acquire increasing significance."¹⁰¹

Russia is also preparing to face non-military threats from the north on land. Border Service chief Vladimir Pronichev visited northern regions in April 2006: as well as promising restoration of the Northern Sea Route, he said that:

Modern defensive infrastructure will be installed along the NSR. This will include observation points, including space and ground surveillance, and measures connected with operational search activities... to prevent all possible modern threats: terrorism, smuggling of narcotics, illegal migration, arms smuggling and the activities of international crime.¹⁰²

Already by this stage the Federal Security Service had established a new Arctic Directorate in 2004, and new Border Guard Service stations have since been set up on Franz Josef Land and Severnaya Zemlya.¹⁰³

But it is at sea that the most dramatic results of looking north for expansion and development can be seen, with access to the Arctic providing an important driver for naval reconstruction. As Isabelle Facon has pointed out:

Russian strategic thought has not traditionally given the maritime dimension an important role. This state of affairs derives from the fact that being a naval power was not a vital necessity for the Russians since their country, a continent in itself between Europe and Asia, maintained relations and trade primarily with its continental neighbours. Russia had no imperial need of the sea for its trade and for food security. But now the objective of food independence and the impetus of the offshore petroleum industry and of international maritime trade provide sufficient stimuli for a profound shift in this traditional vision.¹⁰⁴

Russian naval writing is less optimistic about a long-term change in the attitude that treats maritime and particularly naval activities as peripheral to what happens on land, but is in no doubt that change is afoot:

In a country with continental traditions the Navy is usually seen as a temporary measure, and accordingly it is given temporary tasks, at the end of which there is no further need for maritime power until the next time. This is what caused defeat in the Crimean War in 1853-1856, Tsushima, the inability to escort convoys in the North during the Second World War, and the loss of the fleet in the 1990s. Russia's latest attempt at naval reincarnation is now under way.¹⁰⁵

“Naval Reincarnation”

Russian Navy C-in-C Adm Vladimir Masorin says that the Navy's current building programme should result in it being the world's second largest by 2027: 25 per cent of the massively increased Russian procurement budget is for building new ships.¹⁰⁶ The plans are slow and progressive, concentrating on smaller vessels in early stages, but aggregating, according to Masorin, to a programme of intensive shipbuilding lasting “20-30 years”.¹⁰⁷

As part of the culmination of this programme, after a long period of debate and uncertainty, specific plans for construction of a new generation of aircraft carriers for the Russian Navy have now been announced. Masorin has said construction will begin in 2015, with the eventual aim of two carrier battle groups, each of three carriers, one each in the North and the Far East.¹⁰⁸ In mid-2006 it was considered that the only shipyard capable of building aircraft carriers was Baltiyskiy Zavod in St Petersburg,¹⁰⁹ but the possibility has been put forward that the new construction

dock at the Zvezdochka yard in Severodvinsk, intended for building gas tankers and to replace the Nikolayev yard in Ukraine, could also be used for the carrier construction programme.¹¹⁰

The Northern Fleet must compete with other areas of naval reconstruction, like the relocation of the Black Sea Fleet to Novorossiysk, the expansion of facilities at Tartus in Syria, and the succession of new small warships being provided to the Caspian Flotilla: but all of these have set deadlines for completion before the building of capital ships for the Northern Fleet is scheduled to begin. The construction programme for the main elements of Novorossiysk, for example, is scheduled to run to 2012,¹¹¹ but the Northern Fleet development programme has much longer horizons; the same year 2012 has been pinpointed by Northern Fleet Commander Adm Vladimir Vysotskiy as “the first milestone” in development of “ships, aircraft and submarines [as] a component in a regulated system capable of performing any missions”.¹¹² Meanwhile the “permanent presence in the Mediterranean” of the Russian Navy promised by Adm Masorin gives the appearance of consisting, for the time being at least, of the frigate Ladny on its way to and from taking part in exercise Active Endeavour.¹¹³

The prospect of an ice-free summer Arctic is still several decades away, and the mooted “new Mediterranean” is still further. But Russia could well afford to take the long view: inherited infrastructure, new commercial development, and funds and long-term planning invested in the Russian Navy, would add up to a sizeable head start both in military and economic terms over any other state wishing to take the opportunities of the new Arctic.

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ISBN 978-1-905962-23-5

Published By:

**Defence Academy of the
United Kingdom**

Advanced Research and Assessment Group

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Block D, JSCSC
Shrivenham
SN6 8TS
England

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ISBN 978-1-905962-23-5