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The Russian Arctic Council Chairmanship: National Security Considerations in the Shadow of Regional Cooperation

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Abstract

From May 2021 to 2023, Russia will hold the chairmanship of the Arctic Council for the second time in the forum's history. As chair, it will lead the collective efforts of the foremost regional deliberative body, comprised of the eight Arctic nations, six permanent participants representing Arctic Indigenous Peoples, six working groups, and thirty-nine observer states, intergovernmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations. This represents a critical opportunity for the host country to orchestrate focused attention on the importance of the Arctic through its particular lens.

Although the Arctic Council conducts itself through consensus decision-making and ultimately speaks with a single voice, the potential to synchronize and leverage opportunities alongside official activities provides a window of opportunity for Russia to solidify its Arctic-related national interests. The forum's charter forbids the discussion of hard security issues under its auspices, thus ensuring that high politics associated with great power competition in the military sphere do not inhibit the Council's ability to address environmental and human security issues. Although inter-state and sub-state cooperation and adherence to established international norms help to mitigate these concerns, increased defense-related activities and strategic competition influence how political actors and policymakers frame regional dynamics.

Anticipating the Russian chairmanship encourages sober reflection on how Russia might seek to advance its national interests in the Circumpolar Arctic over the next two years and the implications of these actions for the other Arctic states and regional rightsholders. Although the members of the forum will generally avoid upsetting protocol and expected conduct during official Arctic Council events, Russia will seek to advance its national interests in non-official activities hosted concurrently. In this short reflection, we discuss ways in which Russia can implicitly and explicitly engage with strategic security issues during its tenure as chair while conforming to the expectations and constraints associated with that formal role.

Fundamental Security Circumstances of the Arctic

In 2007, Russian expeditioners planted a titanium national flag on the seabed at the North Pole, generating excitement about sovereign rights and the enabling role of advanced technology in facilitating access to hitherto inaccessible polar spaces. The following year, the United

States Geological Survey's seminal (if overly optimistic) study estimated undiscovered oil and gas reserves in the Circumpolar Arctic, sparking international excitement about an alleged "race for resources" (even though the lion's share of resources fell within the well-established sovereign jurisdictions of the coastal states). Alongside irrefutable evidence of diminishing sea ice and scientific models predicting greater maritime accessibility to Arctic waters in the future, these developments thrust the circumpolar region into a new era of competition. The prospect of more reliable access, matched with geopolitical motivations to access regional resources and shipping routes, sparked the imagination of both Arctic and non-Arctic states.

Given the United States' "hyperpower" status, Russia's relatively robust and rapid militarization of its Arctic Zone (buoyed by oil and gas revenues in the late 2000s) aroused modest attention. Although Russian adventurism in Georgia and provocative statements by Putin (such as his 2007 Munich speech) suggested that Russia would no longer adhere to the Western rulebook for international affairs, few commentators anticipated that Russia would upset the Arctic order. As the largest Arctic state and one that is heavily economically dependent on regional resources, it had the strongest vested interest in maintaining the regional status quo. Accordingly, Russian remilitarization of the Arctic remained more of a subject of academic debate than of strategic concern for the United States, its NATO allies, or its Partnership for Peace members in Finland and Sweden.

In due course, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, aggressive activities in Eastern Ukraine and Syria, and increasingly belligerent rhetoric toward the West raised new concerns about whether the Arctic region could remain insulated from resurgent strategic competition globally. Fortunately, the Arctic Council's limited mandate ensured that it could continue its work even in the face of Western sanctions on Russia. The Council's

working groups continued their important research; Senior Arctic Official and Ministerial meetings continued unabated.

Military cooperation in the region followed a different course. The United States and its allies suspended military-to-military contact with Russia in the wake of the Crimean invasion, thus removing formal mechanisms for dialogue on Arctic security issues. Prior to sanctions, all of the Arctic states discussed security issues through the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) and regular contact between the Northern Chiefs of Defense (NCHoDs). Such events allowed for transparency and confidence-building, as well as making it possible to establish rules to help manage military interaction and expectations in the region.

The end of formal military contact since 2014 has forced the Arctic states to resort to other forms of strategic communication. Countries such as Canada, typically hesitant to have NATO articulate an explicit Arctic role and thus potentially provoke Russia, have changed their tune. The United States Department of Defense has published a recent suite of Arctic strategies and Congress has directed military-related infrastructure development in Alaska. In 2018, NATO mounted Trident Juncture, the largest military exercise in the Arctic since the Cold War, and in May 2020 three U.S. 6th Fleet warships and a UK Royal Navy frigate operated in the Barents Sea to “conduct maritime security operations” for the first time since the mid-1980s. More exercises of this nature are likely to follow as part of the strategic messaging dance between the Western allies and Russia.

These developments involving the United States and NATO have generated apprehension in Russian circles. Although both Washington and Moscow have repeatedly indicated their respective interest in renewing formal Arctic security dialogue, such activity requires that the U.S. Secretaries of both Defense and State send concurrent notification to Congress for a specific waiver of the sanctions. Lawmakers would then have fifteen days to decide one way or the other. In the meantime, representatives from all the Arctic states except Russia participated in the ASFR in Finland on May 5–6, 2021. Discussing critical Arctic security issues without the involvement of the largest Arctic state, however, has obvious limitations.

The Arctic Council Chairmanship and Russian Security Interests

On March 29, 2021, former Russian Senior Arctic Official Anton Vasiliev outlined the four priorities of the Russian Chairmanship:

- the Arctic inhabitants, including indigenous peoples;
- environmental protection and climate change;
- social and economic growth;

- further strengthening the Arctic Council—the key framework of international Arctic cooperation.

Vasiliev insisted that “the game plan conceived by Russia has many ideas, but no surprises,” given that “the Arctic Council is a collective body operated by consensus. It treats in a balanced way the two designated areas of the Arctic Council mandate—environmental protection and sustainable development.”

That being said, the four Arctic priorities connect directly to Russian strategic objectives: enhanced economic cooperation; investments in Arctic urban infrastructure, health care, education, and Indigenous welfare; and climate change. Furthermore, the strong emphasis on the “rational use of natural resources,” presented in the language of stewardship and socio-economic wellbeing, reinforces Moscow’s strong emphasis on the energy and mining sectors. Broadly speaking, its main domestic Arctic interests center on “Development of the Arctic Zone” and management of the Northern Sea Route (NSR—Sevmorput / CМП—Се́вморпу́ть). Thus, promoting “safe and beneficial all-season navigation” in the NSR and enhancing search-and-rescue capacities dovetails with national priorities.

The absence of any reference to strategic competition or the “growing potential for conflict in the Arctic” (as asserted in its October 2020 strategy) is unsurprising. Opportunities to invoke national security issues as part of Arctic Council deliberations and activities remain implausible—and ultimately counterproductive—for Russia as chair. During official Arctic Council events such as working group, plenary, and executive sessions, members are explicitly barred from discussing matters of military security per the 1996 Ottawa Declaration. Such issues cannot even be introduced to the agenda. Offering an “off-script” intervention involving hard security issues would represent a significant breach of protocol.

Thus, Moscow will avoid directly referencing national security considerations as Arctic Council chair and will emphasize its work to preserve the region as a territory of peace, stability, and constructive international cooperation. Nevertheless, analysts should recognize how Moscow’s position on many Arctic Council-related projects and initiatives intersects with its broader security priorities, both protecting its territories and resources and advancing its strategic deterrence capabilities. Military concerns will not take the form of an agenda item during Arctic Council business, but Russia will continue to find occasions—in events and activities organized in close proximity and timing to Council meetings—to articulate its national security interests and to accuse NATO of militarizing the Arctic and forcing the Kremlin to strengthen its defenses. Senior officials will carefully craft and authorize these statements, which will be synchronized and aligned with Putin’s requirements.

Nikolay Korchunov, the Russian ambassador at large for the Arctic and the leading champion of Russia's northern agenda, has articulated Russia's Arctic interests, strategic plans, and chairmanship priorities since the start of this year. His framing of the official narrative illustrates how Russia can signal its national security interests in apparently benign statements that emphasize sustainable development, improved living conditions for Arctic residents, biodiversity, and economic development. On the one hand, he emphasizes for international audiences that achieving these goals "require[s] the collective efforts of all participants in the Arctic G8." On the other hand, whenever Russian economic development, natural resources, and the NSR are mentioned to domestic audiences, this is backed by reassurances that the Kremlin is vigorously protecting national sovereignty and bolstering its regional military presence. Domestic discussion of relatively neutral topics like the environment or economic development—even in the context of Russia's upcoming Arctic Council chairmanship—is generally linked to Russia's national security interests. As such, Russia will not link Arctic defense and security considerations to its official agenda as chair of the Council, but we must acknowledge that they are never far out of mind.

Conclusion

Russia's updated plan for the AZRF, unveiled in three 2020 strategic policy documents and an April 2021 implementation plan, provides essential insights into its broader Arctic strategy. It suggests that Russia is likely to highlight its Arctic developments and priorities in carefully crafted language during its 2021–23 chairmanship of the Arctic Council, with the goal of expanding

and enhancing its self-defined position in the Circumpolar North. It has set the major pieces in place to pursue a *legitimizing* campaign, and the world can expect consistent themes and messaging that emphasize the Arctic's importance for Russia—and the centrality of Russia in circumpolar affairs. By linking issues that are a normal part of Arctic Council business with ancillary activities, Russia can promote and advance its national security priorities. This is part of an overarching strategy that does not seek to revise Arctic governance structures or undermine regional peace; instead, Moscow seeks to define the region in its preferred terms. The goal is to get other Arctic stakeholders to internalize and repeat the language and narratives that Russia is promoting, particularly Russia's self-perception as the largest, strongest, most developed—and most legitimate—Arctic player.

During its Arctic Council chairmanship, Russia will also explore avenues for how it can use Arctic narratives and relationships to facilitate a "return to normalcy" and frame the dialogue in a manner consistent with its national priorities and interests. Strategic messages intended to encourage further rapprochement with other Arctic countries align with an institutional norm/practice within the Arctic Council that cooperation throughout the region should be buffered from external conflict where possible. They are also crafted to advance national self-interest and solidify frames that position Russia as the most legitimate Arctic rightsholder. How the other Arctic states respond to such framing activities and advance a cooperative agenda while countering narratives prejudicial to their interests and values remains an enduring challenge—and one that we anticipate will become increasingly critical over the next two years.

About the Authors

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