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POLICY BRIEF

THE BEAR BENEATH THE ICE: RUSSIA'S AMBITIONS IN THE ARCTIC

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SUMMARY

- Over the past decade, the Arctic has emerged as a strategic priority for Russia, second only to relations with post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine.
- Russia's policy agenda in the Arctic is shaped by insecurities over its economic and military position in the region.
- This agenda forms a "policy iceberg". The Kremlin's massive economic investment is the visible tip; its attempts to create a northern sea trade route buoy at the waterline with both visible economic and murkier military aims; while its militarisation in the Arctic is submerged from view—and the most threatening to Western interests.
- On the world stage, Russia's Arctic policy is fragmented and tactical. It cherry-picks from international law, clumsily balances relations with big powers, and flirts with alternative Arctic institutions.
- Europeans need to situate Russia's growing ambitions in the region within Moscow's broader strategic aims, especially in Ukraine, and respond by rethinking their Arctic policy through closer international engagement.

Putin's icy focus

On April 13th 2022, just two months into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin was far from the front lines. He was convening a high-profile public meeting on Russia's Arctic policy—even when most other government meetings were cancelled or postponed. Opening the session, Putin rejected any "delays in Arctic projects due to sanctions or external pressure" and called for "maximum acceleration" of Russia's economic and military activities in the region.

Putin's rhetoric on the Arctic intensified in months that followed. By September 2022, he declared "the Far East and the Arctic are the regions where Russia's future lies". The Kremlin then began using the term *"osvoenie"*, meaning "development" or "mastery", to frame its Arctic ambitions, echoing the narratives of imperial and Soviet expansion. By this point, Putin's obsession with the high north had been brewing for quite some time. According to a source from a Russian state agency involved in Arctic policy, who agreed to speak to us anonymously, the Russian leader "caught the Arctic bug" back in 2020. [1]

Words soon became policy. Russia's Foreign Policy Concept, renewed in 2023, elevated the Arctic to second place among Moscow's strategic priorities, outranked only by relations with post-Soviet states (which includes Ukraine). It was a striking pivot. In the 1990s and 2000s, Arctic affairs weren't even listed as a priority in its foreign policy agenda. Now, even amid economic, military and political pressures brought by the Ukraine war, it is integral to Putin's strategic vision.

The Kremlin's Arctic ambitions have grown further this year, partly in response to signals from Washington. US president Donald Trump's sights on Greenland were interpreted in Moscow as a sign of growing geopolitical competition in the region. America's position validated the long-held idea that the Arctic is "the next frontier for great power competition", reinforcing Russia's self-perception as a key player on the world stage. Russian officials have since reiterated that the Arctic is a "zone of national and strategic interest" for the country.

In some ways, the Kremlin's focus has paid off. Unlike in other geopolitical arenas where Moscow faces economic and military constraints, Russia now enjoys significant advantages in the Arctic. It has the world's largest fleet of icebreaker ships, maintains a strong military presence in the region and controls more than half of the Arctic coastline.

But Moscow also has significant economic and military insecurities in the region. Efforts by Western countries in 2022 to isolate Russia from Arctic cooperation, as well as a more

ambitious US, have only fuelled these anxieties. In response, the Kremlin has doubled down on its Arctic strategy in both visible and opaque ways, forming what this paper will call a "policy iceberg". Russia's massive economic investment is the visible tip; its attempts to create a northern sea trade route buoy at the waterline with both clear economic and murkier military aims; while its attempts to militarise in the Arctic are submerged from view—and the most threatening to Western interests.

In time, Moscow hopes the Arctic can become part of its leverage to help renegotiate a "new world order". This strategy involves asserting itself in the Arctic not only through economic investment and military displays but also via overt cooperation with China. Meanwhile, Moscow aims to use symbolic concessions in the Arctic (such as arms control deals, a revived Arctic Council or limits on non-Arctic state involvement) as bargaining chips for strategic gains elsewhere, particularly in Ukraine. This year's negotiations with the US showed signs of this, with Russia using Arctic cooperation on offshore resources as a lure to reopen broader talks with the West.

With Putin personally invested in strengthening Russian control over the Arctic and Trump signalling a prioritisation of the region, the next major point of European confrontation could be in the Barents or Baltic seas—not in eastern or central Europe.

In this paper, we examine the new phase of Russia's Arctic policy, focusing on domestic shifts and external positioning. It seeks to distinguish the Kremlin's actual priorities from the image it projects to pressure the West into renewed negotiations over Arctic governance and Russia's broader geopolitical standing. To do so, we examine how two core insecurities shape Russia's Arctic policy, analyse their implementation and explore how they are projected internationally through legal, diplomatic and bilateral instruments. This paper concludes with four key recommendations for European policymakers to mitigate Russia's economic and military ambitions and to avoid getting squeezed out of an increasingly strategic region.

The cold hotspot

For a long time, European Arctic states were determined to see the region as a "peaceful zone of cooperation". Before 2022, the main Arctic issues for Europe were climate change, the environment and sustainable development. Also on the agenda were new economic opportunities in shipping routes, energy reserves and rare minerals. But these were not a priority.

That era has ended. The Arctic is no longer a peripheral concern for European security and strategy—it is rapidly becoming a central theatre in the emerging global order. Europe is

caught between Russia, which sees the Arctic as part of its broader confrontation with the West; and the US, which under Trump is a more hostile and transactional Arctic actor. Now Russia's strategic interests directly challenge the EU's foreign policy objectives in the Arctic. Climate policy, defence issues, multilateral governance and energy security all converge in this one theatre.

Despite these shifts, the EU's Arctic policy is based on a strategic document that dates back to 2021. This focuses on developing a "peaceful, sustainable, and prosperous Arctic" and prioritises environmental issues and scientific cooperation over defence and protecting the security interests of member states. The lag, in turn, hampers Europeans' ability to respond to what is fast becoming a geopolitical hotspot.

Meanwhile, non-Arctic states, especially China, are seeking a stake in the region through partnerships with Russia and long-term infrastructure investments. This is part of a broader attempt led by Russia to shape an alternative, illiberal Arctic order that stands in direct contrast to Europeans' vision. EU and NATO member states control swathes of Arctic territory, and some have begun developing their military capabilities. But unless the European Union's tactics change, it still risks being politically marginalised and strategically outflanked.

Russia's Arctic insecurities

Moscow often frames its foreign and domestic policies as defensive responses to perceived threats, aiming to protect its national interests and legitimate its assertiveness. As such, the Kremlin's actions provide a window into its insecurities. These are particularly acute in the Arctic, where concerns over nuclear military vulnerabilities and the capacity to extract Arctic resources have massively influenced Russia's policy rationale.

Military insecurity

Russia's relations with Western countries in the Arctic have been entangled in a "security dilemma" for over a decade: actions taken by one state to enhance its security often lead to countermeasures by others, fuelling a cycle of tension and militarisation.

While the EU has focused more on a peaceful agenda related to climate and Indigenous issues, the US and some NATO member states have been developing their military capabilities in the Arctic in response to similar actions by the Kremlin. For example, since 2022, the US expanded NATO military exercises and infrastructure upgrades in Alaska, while Norway has undertaken comparable efforts to bolster its Arctic defence posture using its own military

base. Such Western actions have only increased Russia's perceived military insecurities.

In particular, Russia's main military insecurityin the Arctic stems from the Kremlin's nuclear deterrence strategy. A significant share of Russia's nuclear arsenal is deployed on Arctic-based submarines, which form the core of its second-strike capability. Russia's ability to deploy these submarines in the northern seas while remaining undetected by foreign forces is key to its nuclear deterrence strategy. As a result, the Kremlin views Western reconnaissance, research and patrols as potential threats aimed at detecting these assets.

The alarming rate of Arctic ice melt in recent years has further fuelled Russia's anxious reactions. The reduction in ice cover along with the development of modern acoustic and radar methods can help reveal previously hidden Russian submarines, increasing their vulnerability. Ice melt also brings broader security concerns for the Kremlin. As navigation becomes easier, Russia's vast northern coastline is losing its natural defence barrier. Moscow increasingly fears this may weaken its Northern Fleet's ability to deter a conventional Western attack from the north, prompting further militarisation of the region.

Economic insecurity

The second insecurity shaping Russia's Arctic policy is over the perceived threat to its ability to safely and effectively extract oil and gas. Russian officials frequently cite that around 80% of the country's natural gas and 17% of its oil reserves are located within the Russian Arctic zone. The Kremlin has even dubbed the Arctic as its "resource base of the 21st century". However, over two-thirds of these reserves—particularly those located offshore—are hard-to-cover and inaccessible due to technological limitations. At the same time, fields with more accessible extraction—mostly located in other regions of Russia—are gradually being depleted.

For a country that relies on oil and gas for 20% of its GDP, this is an existential issue. In response, Russian state companies actively sought partnerships with international firms to develop Arctic projects—fully aware of their dependence on foreign technology and despite tightening regulations on foreign investment in the Arctic. One frequently highlighted success story was the cooperation between Rosneft and ExxonMobil in the Kara Sea, which gave Russia access to technologies for deepwater drilling. This collaboration was widely publicised in Russia, along with Putin's personal involvement, as a major strategic win.

That trajectory changed dramatically in 2014 when the US and the EU imposed sanctions on Russia after its illegal annexation of Crimea. These included restrictions on the export of technologies and equipment critical for Arctic resource development, effectively stopping or delaying parts of Russian Arctic projects and shutting down joint ventures like the one with ExxonMobil.

The sanctions were a targeted blow to Russia's ability to develop energy reserves, a move which the Kremlin saw as "clearly aggressive". In the aftermath, a sense of strategic vulnerability and paranoia intensified among Russian officials, built on the idea that the West is pursuing a policy of taking Russia's natural resources.

Having a meltdown

The Kremlin's growing insecurities about Russia's military and resource capabilities have deepened significantly since the invasion of Ukraine. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has left Russia effectively "encircled" by the alliance's members in the Arctic. This intensified its feelings of vulnerability, as did the 2022 sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines. Although Russia had already halted gas deliveries through the pipelines, the attack exposed its inability to secure critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. In 2024, a successful Ukrainian drone strike on the Olenya airbase—located above the Arctic Circle and home to Russia's strategic bomber aircraft—dealt another blow to Kremlin confidence.

In parallel, Western sanctions targeting Russia's Arctic projects have intensified since 2022, with the 17th EU package adopted in May 2025. They have largely focused on a deep insecurity for Russia: liquefied natural gas (LNG). But the Kremlin has little room for manoeuvre against these measures. It has promoted projects like Arctic LNG 2 as replacements for lost pipeline gas exports to Europe. But Western countries have imposed successive sanctions aimed at undermining the project's viability including blacklisting the operating company, restricting access to LNG ice-class tankers and targeting tanker operators. As a result, despite reported efforts by Russia to circumvent some of these restrictions on Western equipment, the timeline for Arctic LNG 2 has repeatedly been delayed.

These events have hastened the security dilemma in the Arctic. Russian officials now interpret nearly all NATO activity in the region as threatening and a "potential prelude to direct confrontation" while they widely perceive America's Arctic strategy as overtly "confrontational" and Western sanctions as a targeted offensive.

By early 2024, Putin had announced plans to strengthen its "military grouping" in Russia's north-west.

The "iceberg" of Russia's Arctic policies

Much of the rationale behind Russia's domestic Arctic policies can be traced to the Kremlin's underlying economic and military insecurities. But the nature of its concerns has resulted in a

somewhat contradictory approach to the region.

Back in 2014, political scientist Marlène Laruelle observed that Russia's Arctic strategy was shaped by a "competition between military and economic agendas". The military logic pushed the Kremlin towards significant defence investments and a revival of the Soviet-style approach to the Arctic as an exclusive region resistant to involvement from foreign states and companies. Meanwhile, the economic agenda emphasised civilian infrastructure and improved living standards alongside an openness to foreign investment and international cooperation in the Arctic.

In recent years, however, the Kremlin has increasingly reframed the economic agenda as a national security issue. Russian strategic documents now describe the Arctic as both a guarantor of the country's "sovereignty and territorial integrity" and a "strategic resource base," while challenges like depopulation and infrastructure gaps are redefined as security risks. In 2023, Putin echoed this logic by labelling Arctic development as essential for energy expansion, logistics and national defence.

Despite this, tensions persist between the two logics and those responsible for implementing them. As one of our respondents, involved in implementing Russian Arctic policy since 2015, explained "the two teams still work separately". [2] And this reference to "teams" is important.

Russian policymaking functions through informal patronal networks rather than formal institutions, meaning the major policy directions are typically "assigned" by Putin to trusted allies. In some spheres, the president encourages these elites to compete in framing issues as security threats to gain resources and influence; a process Russian political sociologist Simon Kordonsky has aptly termed a "market of threats."

Despite the complex ecosystem of competing stakeholders, Russia's Arctic policy has crystallised around two core agendas, each rooted in a distinct Kremlin insecurity and advanced by a separate elite "team" operating under Putin's mandate. The economic agenda—focused on economic development and resource extraction—is overseen by Yury Trutnev, deputy prime minister and longtime presidential envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District. The military agenda—centred on security and naval power projection—is handled by Nikolay Patrushev, former secretary of the security council and now chair of the maritime collegium under the president.

The two teams compete not just for resources and influence but for ideological dominance: the pro-economic logic requires international trade and cooperation, while the militaristic side is protective and inherently anti-Western. In a Darwinian-like struggle, the results of this competition form the full-scope of Russia's Arctic strategy, which we will term its "policy iceberg".

Trutnev's economic agenda forms the visible tip of the iceberg. It is highly publicised by state media and Russian officials to project the appearance of a cooperative, development-driven strategy. Patrushev's security-oriented and military agenda, by contrast, is the submerged part of the iceberg. It is barely perceptible beyond officials fear-mongering, imperialist statements but crucial to Moscow's geopolitical ambitions in the region. And, as the wrecks that litter the Arctic seabed attest, it is the ice beneath the surface that poses the greatest threat.

The tip of the iceberg

Trutnev has played a central role in the economic aspects of Russia's Arctic policy. A powerful bureaucrat close to Putin, his mandate as head of the state commission expanded in 2019 to include Arctic affairs, and again when he became head of the state commission for Arctic development. Trutnev has applied to the Arctic the same investment-heavy model he used in the Far East, centred on large-scale state spending to accelerate mineral extraction and expand industrial, transport and civilian infrastructure. Since 2019, several strategic documents have been reframed to align with his agenda and more than 10 federal laws related to Arctic development have been adopted, introducing new economic and social policy tools for the region.

Investing in population growth

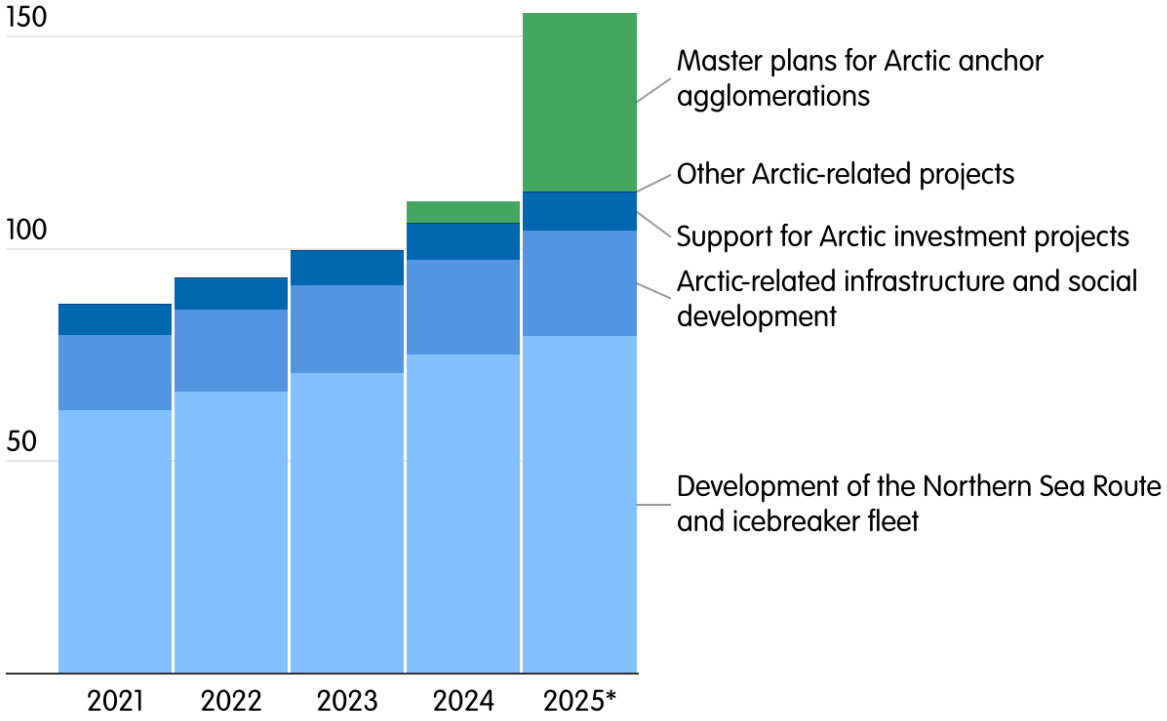
Most of these policies were aimed at countering depopulation. Russia's Arctic region is home to around 2.4 million people—a decline of 15% since 2010 and by roughly one-third since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The primary drivers of depopulation include the harsh climate, the deterioration of basic social infrastructure and an overall poor quality of life across much of the region.

This trend is concerning for the Kremlin. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has increasingly framed demographics as a matter of national power—linking its geopolitical strength not only to military capacity or economic output, but also to population size. In this context, Arctic depopulation has been recast as a national security issue; officials, including Putin, promote the "mastering" as part of Russia's "state-civilisation" mission—a view reinforced by senior figures who portray population as fundamental to building the economy and securing the north. Without labourers, especially to work in resource extraction, Russia's economic development of the Arctic stands little chance.

But while the Kremlin has attempted to reverse Arctic depopulation since the late 2000s, its efforts have yielded limited success. In response, the Kremlin has ramped up efforts, introducing a series of flagship measures in 2022 under Trutnev's development agenda. These include a state-subsidised low mortgage scheme; a free land grant programme for private housing or small business; large-scale territorial reorganisation for 16 "anchoring" (*opornye*) cities and agglomerations with massive investment in the transport and social infrastructure; and targeted government spending on housing and building repairs for 17,000 service members, sailors and their families living in small Arctic military settlements.

A dedicated federal programme allocated around 19bn roubles (around €50m) annually to Arctic socio-economic development between 2021 and 2024. But total spending is spread across multiple budget lines and is expected to reach 155bn roubles (around €1.5bn) in 2025—an 80% increase from 2021 with an inflation adjustment. This is substantial, especially considering that total federal spending on social issues in real terms has stagnated or declined since 2022.

Russian state budget spent on Arctic territories. CPI-adjusted 2021 prices, in bn roubles



*2025 shows planned expenditures

Source: author's calculations based on the analysis of the Russian Accounts Chamber's reports on the performance of the federal budget and detailed plans of state programmes included in the consolidated budget of Russia.
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Most of the 2025 funding increase will support the master plans for "anchoring" territories, with total costs projected at 3.7trn roubles (around €3.7bn) by 2035—1.5trn from public funds and the rest from Kremlin-linked private firms. For example, Norilsk Nickel is covering 68% of Norilsk's plan, reflecting the state's reliance on politically connected businesses.

Officials interviewed for this research confirmed the rise in Arctic funding but stressed that the region remains chronically underfunded—especially compared to the Far East—after a decade of stagnation. Government-backed research in 2025 echoed this: public satisfaction is growing, yet nearly a third of Arctic residents still plan to leave.

Softening the securitisation of Arctic resources

In recent years, the Kremlin has slowly demonstrated more openness to foreign private investment, or at least Russian private investment, in the Arctic. It hopes this will bolster economic development, even if it brings security concerns. Trutnev first urged Putin in 2019 to open the Arctic shelf to foreign companies, challenging the monopoly held by Gazprom and Rosneft since 2012, which had only drilled 5 of the 86 wells required as per their government licence between 2012 and 2019 (there are no data after this). Trutnev argued that this lag undermined broader Arctic development plans and threatened long-term resource extraction capacity.

Gazprom and Rosneft successfully defended their exclusive rights, citing national security concerns. Nonetheless, Trutnev's position was partially accommodated. In 2021, Novatek—a formally private but state-aligned company—was granted access to offshore operations in the Arctic. By then, Novatek had already completed the challenging Yamal LNG project and launched Arctic LNG 2. The latter was one of the most technically complex projects in the Russian Arctic, requiring advanced precision engineering and maritime logistics. In 2019, Arctic LNG 2 finalised its shareholder structure, with 40% held by foreign companies including Total (France), CNODC and CNOOC (China), and Japanese investors. The last investment agreement was signed in the presence of both Putin and Shinzo Abe.

Arctic LNG 2 was meant to serve as a model of how Russia's military and economic agendas in the Arctic could be aligned, balancing foreign investment with national security. However, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and ensuing sanctions derailed the plan. Novatek struggled to access critical technologies, faced financing and logistical challenges, and lost involvement from foreign partners. From October 2024 to March 2025, the operation of the already launched Arctic LNG 2 production lines was probably suspended. Despite setbacks, Putin praised Novatek's leadership during his visit to Arctic LNG in 2023 and mentioned the company's earlier success with Yamal LNG. This suggests that,despite security concerns, the Kremlin remains inclined to prioritise Arctic resource development.

However, this approach now depends on the easing of Western sanctions and at least a partial return of European and American firms to Russia's Arctic ventures. This explains the Kremlin's consistent interest in including Arctic cooperation and broader economic engagement in its negotiations with the US over a resolution to the war in Ukraine. Trump's coveting of Greenland has likely raised these hopes. This strategy also underpins the plans for the creation of a new Arctic investment fund, set up under Kirill Dmitriev who is a key figure in the US-Russia peace talks. The fund is designed to attract "foreign, including Western"

capital, but under full Russian control, with the stated aim of "protecting the national resource base". Even if a direct agreement with the US on Arctic cooperation proves elusive, the Kremlin hopes to at least secure temporary sanctions relief—enough to provide breathing room for companies like Novatek and to accelerate Arctic resource development.

The ice at the waterline

The Kremlin is largely focused on the economic arguments for keeping people in the Arctic and taking resources out. The arguments for the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), however, are far more contested between economic and military concerns. On the one hand, the economic logic favours opening the route to foreign transit, attracting investment in infrastructure, and developing the corridor as a global trade route. It would also help the Kremlin deal with one insecurity: a functioning and developed NSR would provide opportunities for more efficient export of the Arctic natural resources.

On the other hand, the security logic demands strict control over foreign vessels, driven by fears of dual-use capabilities and the risk of exposing sensitive elements of Russia's military and nuclear infrastructure—the Kremlin's other big insecurity. Unlike the economic areas of Arctic policy which make up the visible part of the iceberg, the NSR buoys at water level, with a tendency to sink towards more opaque securitisation.

Arctic transport routes

☐ Current minimum and ▒ maximum ice extent

Source: National Snow and Ice Data Center; National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.
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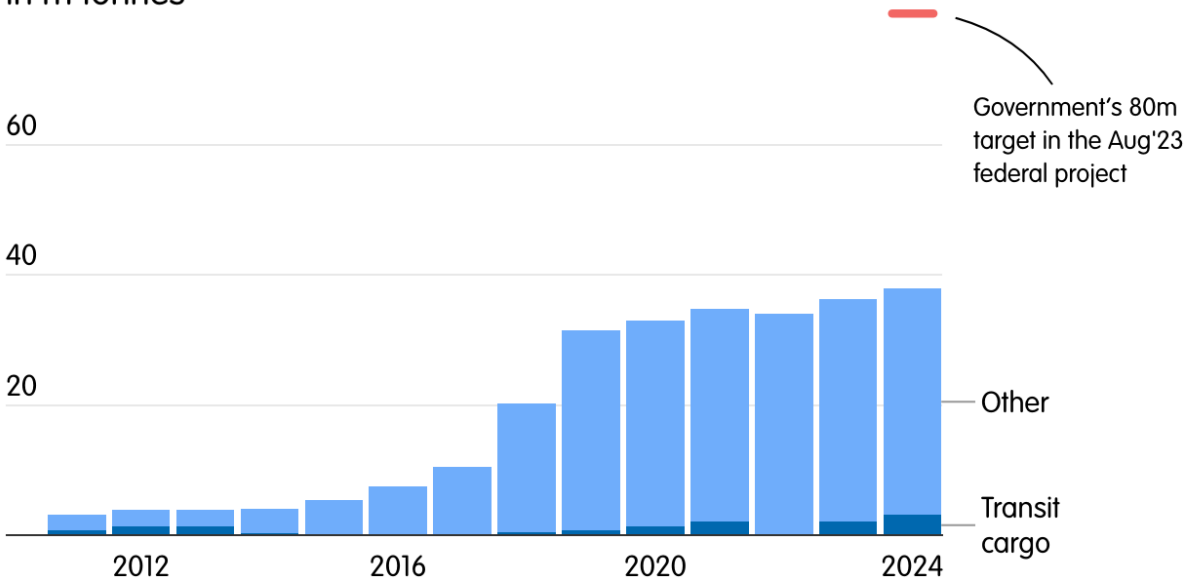
In 2018 Russian state-owned cooperation Rosatom was appointed as the NSR's sole operator, gaining control over infrastructure, the nuclear icebreaker fleet and all vessel traffic permits. For example, Rosatom mandated transiting ships use icebreakers, framing it as a safety measure (so ships do not get stuck in the ice), while the move established Russia's exclusive control over the corridor.

In September 2019, the French naval vessel Rhône became the first ship of a NATO member state to transit the NSR without an icebreaker escort. This triggered a sharp reaction from Moscow and intensified its long-standing insecurities around foreign presence in Arctic waters. The Kremlin responded with new regulations, which have created a highly restrictive regime. Experts have criticised this as contrary to international maritime law, and it has complicated the promotion of NSR as the global transit corridor. In 2022 Rosatom's powers were further expanded to tighten NSR regulation.

Planning documents indicate the Russian government has allocated 1.8trn roubles (around €180m) to the NSR until 2035. This will go towards the development of port terminals energy exports, dredging, seven nuclear and four non-nuclear icebreakers, a 46-vessel search-and-rescue fleet, new navigation satellites and digital infrastructure. Officially, the aim is to turn the NSR into a "global international transport corridor". The Kremlin views control over such a route as a marker of great power status. Especially as global warming continues to open Arctic waters, the hope is that it could rival the Suez or Panama Canals.

But the sanctions and international isolation that followed Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has made this vision for the NSR increasingly unrealistic. In 2022, for the first time in two decades, total cargo traffic along the NSR dropped to 35m tonnes, with international transit cargo falling from 2.03m tonnes to just 0.041m. By 2024, overall volume had recovered slightly to 38m tonnes (against the government's 80m initial target), but only 3.1m tonnes were classified as transit, primarily between China and Russia. Not a single non-Russian international transit shipment was recorded along the NSR from 2022 to 2024.

Total cargo shipping through NSR, including transit cargo. 2011-2024, in m tonnes



Source: CHNL; Rosatomflot; Mintrans.
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The Kremlin's growing awareness of the NSR's limited viability as a global trade route has reinforced its securitisation. Half of the Russian officials we interviewed for this brief highlighted the NSR as a "national", not international, transport artery. [3] While Trutnev continues to speak of the NSR's international significance, Patrushev has stressed its "national" function. To reconcile the securitised status of the NSR with the Kremlin's global ambitions, Patrushev has proposed the creation of a longer "Greater Northern Sea Route"—stretching from Murmansk to Vladivostok—framing it as an internal axis of national power projection.

This shift suggests that investments in the NSR will continue or even grow. But the economic team of the Russian government is likely to lose control of the project's spendings to the military team. The ministry of defence and the FSB, Russia's security service, have already announced that they will control the few foreign vessels which enter NSR waters. Going forward, new investments in the NSR will likely serve more military or at least dual-use purposes on top of their economic ones.

The submerged agenda

The military aims of Russia's Arctic policy are far less clear than the economic. It is the part of

the iceberg under the surface—and it poses the greatest risk to Western interests. In an interview for this research, Ilya Shumanov, director of the independent think-tank Arctida, noted that the coming years will see the "Patrushevisation of the Russian Arctic", citing Patrushev's sharp rise in influence on Arctic policy. [4] Most Russian officials interviewed for this research echoed this assessment, noting heightened security service involvement in previously civilian Arctic projects since mid-2024. [5] Indeed, his role in charge of a new department and the re-established Maritime Collegium—reporting directly to the president—and renewal of the Maritime Doctrine have made Arctic policy his key domain.

Patrushev has a powerful platform to push for further securitisation of Arctic policy thanks to his new formal authority over the Russian navy. He also has extensive ties with the security services and the military and has deep familiarity with national security policymaking. This has allowed him to gain control and expand securitisation into areas previously managed by the civilian side of the government, as illustrated by Patrushev's calls earlier in 2025 to revise one of the civilian documents on Arctic policy.

In particular, Patrushev proposed prioritising "national, food, and environmental security" in the Russian Arctic, which would lead to a redistribution of budget spending away from economic objectives. And as the Kremlin's stance continues to harden under Patrushev—a longtime architect of Russia's aggressive, anti-Western foreign policy—any remaining chance for engagement with the West on Arctic issues grows slimmer by the day.

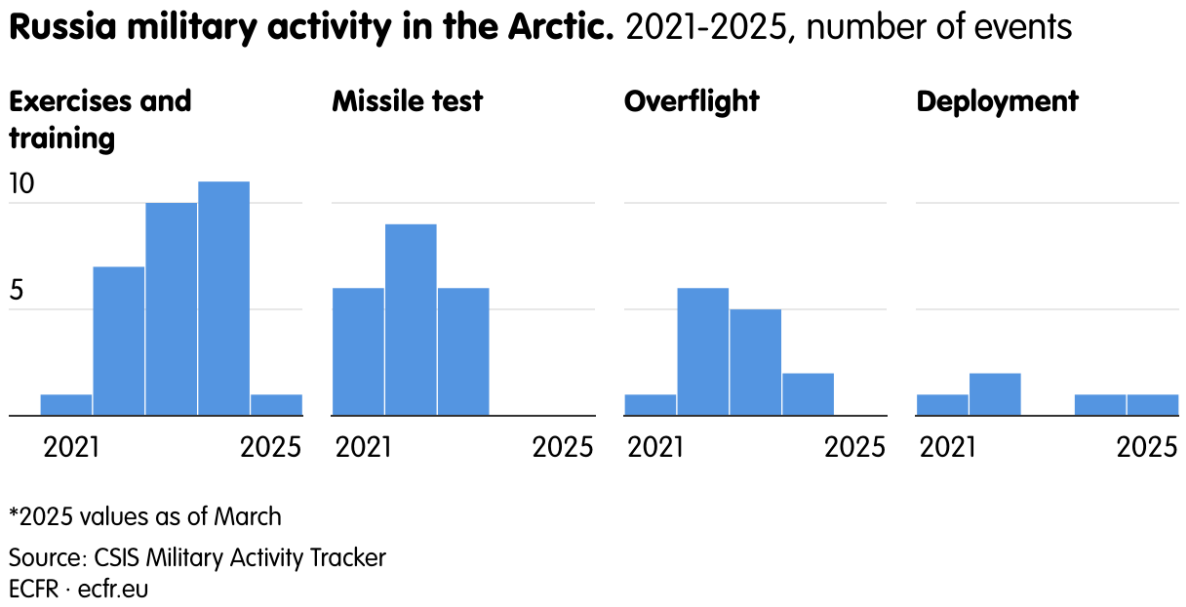
Militarising the Arctic

As discussed, one of the Kremlin's key insecurities in the Arctic is the safety and longevity of its nuclear deterrent, particularly the second-strike capability ensured by its submarine-based arsenal. As such, Russia is seeking to enhance its naval power in the region and increase its ground forces to protect its nuclear capacity and deter any ground invasion.

Russia began the remilitarisation of the Arctic coastline in 2014, reactivating over 50 former Soviet military facilities on the Kola Peninsula, Franz Josef Land, the New Siberian Islands, and parts of Chukotka and Taimyr. Notable sites include the Nagurskoye airbase, upgraded with a 3.5km runway, and the Kotelny Island base, both critical for air defence and the monitoring of the NSR. By 2024, however, this expansion appears to have slowed, with the Kremlin shifting focus to maintaining existing infrastructure under growing fiscal pressure from the war in Ukraine.

Alongside this, Arctic-based military operations have sharply increased. In 2021, Russia conducted nine activities in the region; in 2022–2023, that number rose to over 20, most of

them large-scale joint exercises involving multiple service branches. While the overall number of military operations dropped in 2024, September of that year saw the largest naval drills in over three decades, featuring the participation of Chinese forces for the first time.



Russia has also implemented the "Bastion" concept, a cold-war-era doctrine that was formally adopted in 1998 but activated from the mid-2010s. It aims to fortify key zones like the Barents Sea and Kola Peninsula with layered air, coastal and maritime defences to create an anti-access/area denial zone protecting the nuclear submarine fleet. While its actual impact on nuclear survivability is debated, the concept serves as a tool of strategic control and dominance amid limited resources.

Russia is also building up two classes its submarine fleet in the Arctic, including seven with ballistic missiles already deployed and three more under construction; and five with cruise missiles already operational, with more on the way. Similarly, it is expanding its fleet of icebreakers for both civilian and military use: four are operational and equipped for escort, towing, air defence, and support in harsh conditions. Two more patrol icebreakers, able to carry artillery and Kalibr missiles, are under construction. These vessels enhance flexibility, protect infrastructure, and visibly reinforce Russia's strategic presence along the NSR.

However, battlefield attrition in Ukraine is likely limiting Russia's Arctic militarisation. While no official data exist, independent investigations have documented losses among key Arctic-based units, such as the 61st Separate Kirkenes Marine Brigade and the 155th Marine Brigade. These manpower losses may weigh on the effectiveness of Russia's Arctic forces, despite continued infrastructure and equipment investments.

Even though some Western analysts devote significant attention to Russia's military capabilities in the Arctic, many of the Kremlin's decisions in this domain remain opaque—forming the submerged and most dangerous part of the iceberg. No detailed data are available on troop numbers and the actual, rather than declared, combat readiness of restored military bases and the Northern Fleet.

Even public decisions are often difficult to interpret. For instance, in 2021, Russia confirmed the Northern Fleet's status, granted in 2013, as a separate military district. This move increased its resources and shortened its command chain for authorising a second-strike nuclear response. Also in 2021, Russian media reported the possibility of a separate Arctic fleet that would mean even more resources and a further growth in status. Yet in 2024, the Northern Fleet was stripped of its independent status and reintegrated into the overall structure of the Russian Navy. The rationale behind this reversal and its implications for operational command and nuclear deterrence remains unclear.

Russia's militarisation of the Arctic is likely to grow in both scale and ambition under Patrushev's leadership. On one level, Russia may continue performative shows of force, like the 2021 submarine surfacing through Arctic ice. These demonstrations will likely serve to intimidate NATO by brandishing Russia's nuclear capabilities while widening the ambiguity on what Russia's actual military capabilities are (much as the Kremlin has done at critical moments during the war in Ukraine to deter Western interference).

At the same time, likely under Patrushev's supervision, the Kremlin might develop new ways to signal its threats and red lines in the Arctic. This could involve deliberately exposing more of the submerged part of the iceberg to amplify Western fear while advancing undisclosed capabilities below the surface.

In this handout photo taken from a footage released by Russian Defense Ministry Press Service on March 26, 2021, a Russian nuclear submarine breaks through the Arctic ice during military drills at an unspecified location. © picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Uncredited

Making hybrid threats

The second component of Russia's military agenda in the Arctic is the expanded use of covert hybrid operations targeting Western states in the region, which have intensified since Finland and Sweden's NATO accession. Even if some undersea cable incidents in the Baltic are blamed on "human error" by Russia-linked vessels, the pattern suggests broader tactical intent. Beyond infrastructure sabotage, researchers have documented a widening toolkit including GPS and satellite signal jamming in northern Norway and Finland, drone flights over military and energy sites, and probing activity near sensitive areas like Svalbard, Norway's northern archipelago.

These operations aim both to test NATO's thresholds and to generate anxiety and uncertainty among targeted societies, allowing Moscow to apply pressure without direct confrontation. This approach thrives in regions with deep cross-border ties to Russia, such as Norway's Finnmark, and could easily be extended to other NATO-adjacent states like the Baltics and

Poland. Indeed, Patrushev's security background, and role as a key architect of anti-Western strategy, will likely mean a more assertive and risk-tolerant approach to hybrid operations in the Arctic with wider geographic and strategic scope.

Weaponising environmental and Indigenous issues

A third and growing component of Russia's hybrid military agenda in the Arctic is the subtle weaponisation of environmental issues and civil diplomacy related to Indigenous communities.

Prior to 2020 the Kremlin took an ambivalent position on these topics. It included references to environmental protection and Indigenous issues in strategic documents and participated in international forums to meet Western expectations, likely aimed at bettering its diplomatic relations with the West in other areas like shipping. Domestically, however, the Kremlin made minimal investments in actually addressing these challenges. Since the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin has reframed both areas to advance its anti-Western agenda amid growing international isolation.

In 2022, Russia began suspending environmental information exchange with Western countries and international organisations in response to sanctions and diplomatic exclusion. Moscow withdrew from the INTERACT Arctic monitoring network and shut down independent environmental NGOs operating in the Far North. Its invasion of Ukraine also triggered the suspension of the Arctic Council and with it important environment-related projects and data sharing stopped. These steps created major gaps in international climate data, especially permafrost monitoring, and signalled that global efforts to combat Arctic climate change cannot succeed without Russian participation. Environmental cooperation thus became a Kremlin bargaining chip.

In parallel, the Kremlin has intensified its manipulation of the Indigenous peoples' agenda. After 2022, RAIPON, the Russian Indigenous representative body, endorsed the Kremlin's position on the war, triggering a break with transnational groups like the Saami Council and halting international cooperation. For Moscow, this allowed greater control over Indigenous issues and enabled Russian government-organised NGOs to advance its narratives in international forums, including the UN and BRICS+. Moreover, the Kremlin continued to repress independent NGOs defending the rights of indigenous peoples, both those remaining in Russia and those operating from exile. Patrushev, who partly spent his early career in ethnic and regional security, is likely to reinforce this trend. In particularly, his focus on "historical memory" and his warning of Western attempts to "destabilise Russia" with ethnic fragmentation does not bode well for the future securitisation of identity politics in the Arctic.

Russia's foreign policy on the Arctic

Russia's foreign policy on the Arctic has long reflected the same insecurities and dual agendas—economic and military—that shape its domestic approach to the region. Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin sought to balance its militarisation and resource ambitions with a cooperative image among Arctic states. At the same time, it tried to attract Western companies to invest in the Russian Arctic, but at a safe level, avoiding any possibility of losing control.

After the invasion this logic eroded. In the Kremlin's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, Arctic cooperation was reframed as acceptable only if it "serves Russia's internal priorities". Similarly, the updated "State policy foundations for the Arctic" dropped earlier references to "good-neighbourly relations with Arctic states" and now supports only "multilateral structures that reflect Russia's national interests."

As Russia's Arctic diplomacy becomes focused solely on serving national priorities, strong international involvement has dimmed. But a light still flickers: from 2015 Nikolai Korchunov played a key role in the implementation of Arctic foreign policy at the Russian ministry of foreign affairs. In 2024, he became Russia's ambassador to Norway, likely reflecting the Kremlin's cautious endorsement of Norway's efforts to maintain limited Arctic Council cooperation by placing him at the helm to of this narrow diplomatic channel.

Meanwhile, Trutnev, Patrushev, Dmitriev and others have assumed ad hoc roles, further blurring the contours of Russia's Arctic foreign policy among different ideologies and mandates. Despite the fragmentation of these efforts, there are three main pillars of Russia's foreign policy in the Arctic.

Legal opportunism

The first pillar of Russia's Arctic foreign policy is its cherry picking of international law to advance territorial claims and consolidate control over the NSR. Put simply, Moscow leverages legal mechanisms when they serve its interests, while threatening to abandon or undermine them when they do not.

For example, Russia's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1997 benefitted Moscow. In 2001, it became the first country to submit a claim to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) for extended control of the Arctic shelf beyond the standard 200 nautical miles. (UNCLOS allows such an extension up to 350 nautical miles if a country can prove a geological connection between its continental shelf and the seabed.) In 2007, Moscow staged a widely publicised expedition to plant a Russian flag on the seabed beneath the North Pole—drawing criticism from other Arctic states—as part of its effort to substantiate this claim, which is still unresolved.

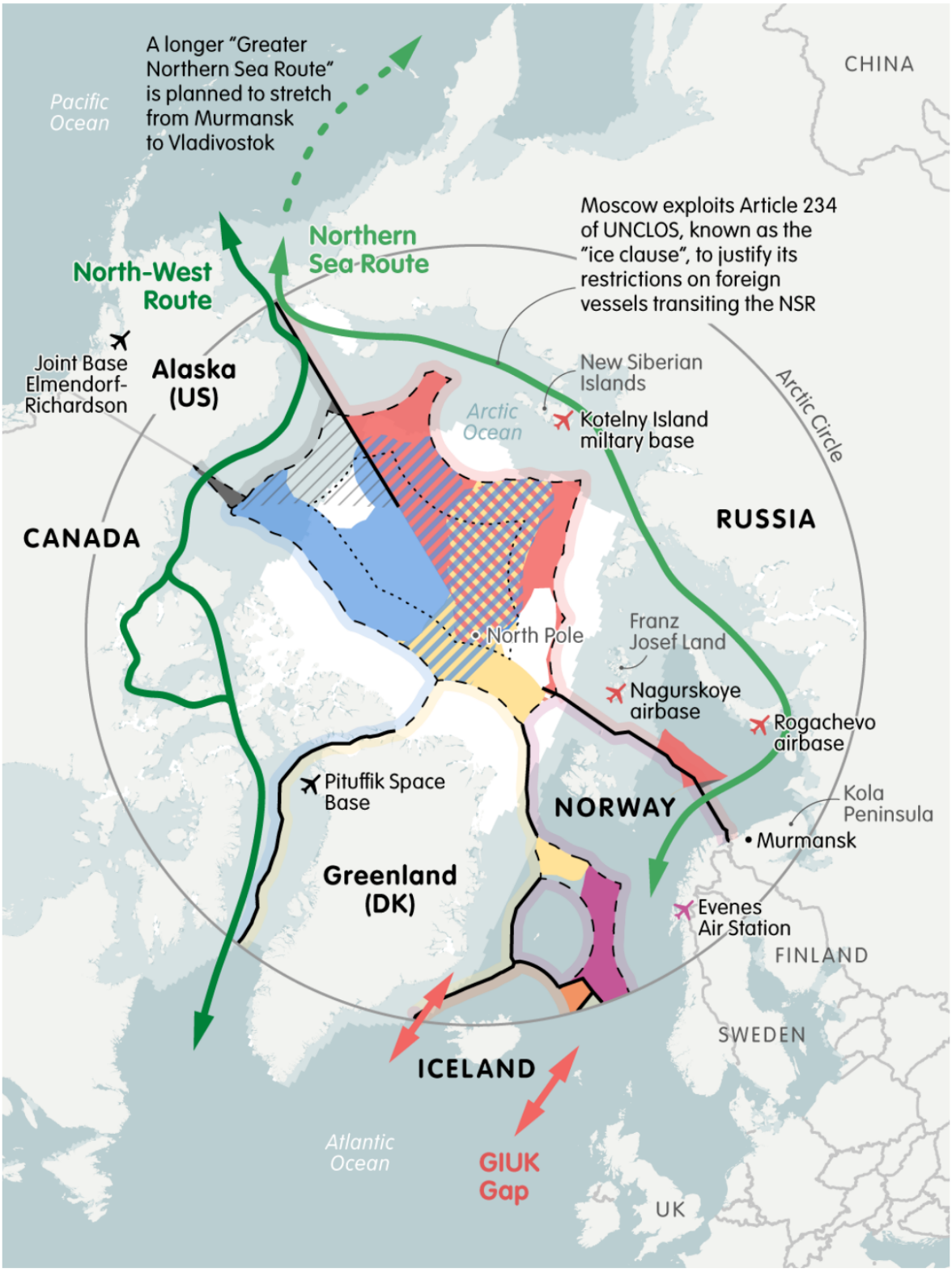
An operator of Russian mini-submarine plants a titanium capsule with the Russian flag during a record dive in the Arctic Ocean under the ice at the North Pole, in this image made from Russian television broadcast on Friday, Aug. 3, 2007. © picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | TV

Since then, Russia has submitted other claims, which increasingly overlap with those of Denmark (via Greenland) and potentially Canada. The 2022 revision of Russia's Maritime Doctrine—drafted under Patrushev—openly prioritises expanding the continental shelf "beyond the 200-mile limit", suggesting more disputes are likely.

And, as international experts point out, Moscow exploits Article 234 of UNCLOS, known as the "ice clause", to justify its restrictions on foreign vessels transiting the NSR. This clause gives coastal states the right to regulate navigation in ice-covered waters to prevent marine pollution. Russia has interpreted this broadly, using it to assert de facto sovereignty over the NSR. However the clause only applies within a country's exclusive economic zone and only where ice persists for most of the year, criteria that are becoming less applicable due to climate change.

Arctic territorial claims

Continental shelf claims beyond 200 nautical miles limit: Russia Canada Denmark Iceland Norway Potential US continental shelf*



Agreed boundaries, 200 nautical mile and 350 nautical mile limit from baselines

Special areas and overlapping EEZs Current minimum and maximum ice extent

*US has not ratified UNCLOS and cannot make claims for the continental shelf

Source: IBRU; UN; National Snow and Ice Data Center; National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.
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At the same time,Russia is quick to threaten withdrawal from UNCLOS or to disregard international law when it suits its interests. A recent example came in late 2023, when the US unilaterally announced its own extended continental shelf boundaries. Although the US claim does not overlap with Russia's, the Russian ministry of foreign affairs issued a strong rebuke, accusing Washington of "double standards" and hinting at a possible Russian withdrawal from UNCLOS. These warnings echo similar threats issued in 2007, 2015 and 2021 during previous legal disputes.

Despite its talk, Russia has never seriously moved to exit UNCLOS. As Andrey Todorov, an Artica expert and former legal adviser at the Russian ministry of foreign affairs, noted in an interview for this research such statements are performative—aimed at justifying domestic mobilisation and creating foreign pressure rather than legal rupture.[6] UNCLOS membership gives the Kremlin a framework for legitimising territorial claims and reinforcing control over the Arctic.Legal threats thus complement, rather than contradict, Russia's broader strategy of lawfare in the Arctic. In this regard, and considering that Russia could receive approval from the CLCS for its continental shelf claims, the Kremlin will likely remain a member of UNCLOS, regardless of how relations with Western countries deteriorate.

Potemkin-style international cooperation

The second pillar of Russia's Arctic foreign policy is its creation of alternative international cooperation platforms—notably with BRICS+ countries— aimed at pressuring the West into restoring Russia's participation in existing Arctic institutions, according to two Russian official respondents.[7]

Russia's chairship of the Arctic Council, which began in 2021 with high hopes, came to an abrupt halt after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In 2022, the seven Western member states suspended cooperation with Russia over which Moscow has expressed repeated frustration. Nonetheless, in 2023, Russia peacefully handed the chairship over to Norway, which resumed minimal, technical-level engagement with Moscow. In early 2024, however, Russia suspended its financial contributions to the Arctic Council and hinted at a possible withdrawal, if the council "become an unfriendly structure", referring to Moscow's list of "unfriendly states".

According to several Russian officials interviewed for this brief, such gestures stemmed from internal discussions starting in 2022 about forming an alternative international Arctic institution led by the Kremlin.[8] In April 2023, state-affiliated think-tanks started publicly promoting this idea, which was also non-publicly discussed in government bodies, including the ministry of emergency situations and the presidential administration. The proposed format involved announcing, during the 2024 BRICS+ summit in Kazan, a "group for closer

cooperation" on Arctic climate, resource and scientific issues, which could eventually evolve into a "Polar Council" with formal membership.

The term "polar" was deliberately chosen to broaden the scope beyond the Arctic to include the Antarctic. This allowed Russia to pitch participation to countries like Brazil and South Africa, in addition to China and India, while avoiding direct competition and deflecting procedural challenges from the Arctic Council.

Despite Moscow's public emphasis on BRICS+ interest in Arctic cooperation between 2023 and 2024, neither the Polar Council nor the smaller coordination group appeared in the final outcome documents of the Kazan summit. The final declaration made no mention of the Arctic and the newly established platforms on climate issues were framed in the most neutral terms possible. The only initiative that continued to develop was the "BRICS+ Working Group on Cooperation in the Oceanic and Polar Research Zones", which had been created prior to 2022.

One Russian official interviewed for this brief attributed the lack of progress to a "refusal" of support from the Russian ministry of foreign affairs.[9] According to him, ministry officials feared that the announcement of a new institution "could trigger a broader unravelling of key Arctic cooperation frameworks". Another respondent, Andrey Todorov, formerly of the ministry's legal department, explained[10] that Russia benefits from multilateral agreements brokered within the Arctic Council, including the 2011 search-and-rescue accord and the 2013 agreement on oil-spill response. These frameworks, he noted, Russia would really hate to lose.

For now, the Kremlin appears to have shelved the "Potemkin-style" idea of a new Polar Council. Instead, it is using symbolic acts of disengagement—such as withholding dues and threatening to withdraw from the Arctic Council—as leverage, while publicly exaggerating its bilateral Arctic cooperation with BRICS+ states. But if this strategy proves insufficient to pressure Western actors into re-engagement, a new Polar Council may well return, especially as some Russian actors remain keen.

Balancing between China and India

Finally, Russia's foreign policy on the Arctic is aimed at developing an alternative to the West's bilateral interaction on Arctic issues with China and India. While economic ties between Moscow and Beijing have deepened since 2022, analysts—both Western and Russian—agree that Arctic cooperation remains modest in scope. A key sticking point is the status of the NSR: China's 2018 Arctic White Paper defends freedom of navigation, while Russia insists it is a national waterway. China seeks to integrate the NSR into its Polar Silk Road, which

would support Russia's economic aims, but would require regulatory loosening odds with its military-first agenda.

Despite numerous agreements and memorandums, only Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG 2 feature substantial Chinese investment. The main obstacle is diverging expectations: Russia insists on limited, tightly controlled participation, while Beijing demands greater transparency and influence. As China expert Atul Kumar noted in an interview, "Russia would like China to be a junior partner in the Arctic, but the Chinese disagree to be a junior partner anywhere". [11] Mistrust is also fuelled by Russian suspicions of military aims behind China's scientific and commercial activity, similar to Russia's own practices. Two Russian officials interviewed for this research voiced these concerns, especially over China's growing fleet of polar icebreakers, which can serve both military and trade purposes. [12]

Still, despite mistrust and apprehension regarding Beijing's Arctic initiatives, publicly the Kremlin is trying to send the West a clear message of mutual understanding and growing cooperation with China in the Arctic. First, Russia has increasingly involved China in joint Arctic military exercises—including air patrols and naval manoeuvres near the US exclusive economic zone.

Second, since 2022, Putin has also used his state visits to Beijing to highlight Arctic coordination, accompanied by a series of bilateral agreements and the creation of new (though largely symbolic) dialogue mechanisms. One such initiative, initially envisioned as a separate mechanism to address strategic contradictions regarding NSR, turned into a joint body as a part of the previously existing Russo-Chinese intergovernmental commission. This body met for the first—and so far only—time in November 2024, with no tangible outcomes.

As Russia does not want to be left alone with China in the Arctic, it has also tried to deepen its ties with India. For New Delhi, the motivation is familiar—it often follows Chinese engagement in strategic regions to maintain balance and avoid being sidelined. As a result, Russia–India relations in the Arctic have begun to mirror those between Russia and China, both in structure and content. In 2024, India signed a memorandum with Russia on Arctic cooperation covering research, logistics and joint expeditions. India has also expressed interest in resource and infrastructure projects, and discussions are underway on co-producing icebreakers. A bilateral working group on NSR development held its first meeting in New Delhi in October 2024, echoing the Russo-Chinese format.

Despite surface-level similarities, Arctic cooperation with India is less geopolitically sensitive for Moscow. Russia's relationship with India rests on a more historically stable ground, based on strong defence and energy ties, along with a shared emphasis on strategic autonomy.

Meanwhile, India's Arctic policy is newer and more cautious, focused on sustainability, science and climate impacts on the Himalayas and south Asia more broadly.

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The Kremlin's foreign policy in the Arctic walks a clumsy tightrope. It uses international law when convenient, courts China and India as symbolic partners, and flirts with building "alternative" institutions, all while fearing Beijing and quietly hoping for the West to resume cooperation. Unlike its more coherent economic and military Arctic strategies, its diplomatic approach is piecemeal and opportunistic—less a roadmap and more a toolkit for tactical improvisation.

Still, it serves a purpose: to keep the door ajar for reintegration into international cooperation on the Arctic, while building leverage to demand it on Moscow's terms. At the same time, its ambiguity on issues such as China allows Russia to remain open to unexpected opportunities for a full reset of Arctic geopolitics. Should negotiations with the US succeed Russia could leverage a commitment to reducing its (exaggerated) cooperation with China and India, for example, for tangible gains elsewhere—most notably in Ukraine.

How Europe can freeze Russia's ambitions

Despite the pressure of international sanctions and the war in Ukraine, Russia has not abandoned its Arctic ambitions. On the contrary, the Kremlin has made the region a geopolitical priority. As this paper has laid out, it is directing significant political attention and financial resources to Arctic development that will yield results in years to come. Even if these efforts remain plagued by structural inefficiencies, corruption, intra-elite rivalries and the inherent difficulties of operating in extreme climates, they will nonetheless expand Russia's presence and capabilities in ways that directly threaten Western security interests.

Russia's Arctic posture under Patrushev, combined with America's assertiveness, may create a new theatre of competition in a region where Europe risks being sidelined or worse, caught in the middle. To avoid being squeezed between two more aggressive actors, Europe's Arctic states cannot afford to go it alone. Rather they must work together with the EU and other member states to anticipate this shift and develop contingency strategies now. This should include strengthening cooperation with like-minded Arctic and non-Arctic states and situating the Kremlin's approach within its wider geopolitical strategy, most notably in Ukraine.

Strengthen cooperation with like-minded Arctic states

The EU and European governments should pursue greater collaboration with Canada—a close ally that shares European interests in sustainability and rules-based governance. Such collaboration could be especially useful in reinforcing Europeans' voice and agency in Arctic diplomacy. To make this new cooperation more impactful, the EU and its member states should broaden their traditional agenda with Ottawa beyond climate and Indigenous issues to include more defence policy. The new Canadian government which is more focused on Europe provides strong momentum.

One way to deepen collaboration would be for the members of Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO)—a framework that currently includes Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden—to push for Canada's partial inclusion. Or, at minimum, they could develop structured defence dialogues with Ottawa focused on northern security, including more frequent joint patrols of Arctic waters. Europeans should also consider publicly backing Canada's legal position in its shelf demarcation dispute with America, following Washington's unilateral claim in 2023. A coordinated EU–Canada approach could prevent both sides being sidelined in the event of a US–Russia potential deal over the region's future. Such a deal might see Washington and Moscow renew trade cooperation in the Arctic and support each other's non-conflicting claims to the Arctic shelf, which would ignore both European and Canadian interests.

In this context, EU member states should deepen defence cooperation with Greenland and Iceland, focusing on Arctic security through frameworks like NORDEFCO, rather than relying solely on NATO, whose cohesion is increasingly uncertain. Moreover, countries in the GIUK gap (Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom) together with EU partners should strengthen their joint capabilities, especially because the corridor is used for detecting Russian naval and submarine movements, and monitoring undersea infrastructure. To do so, a portion of the EU's proposed €800bn defence package should be earmarked for Arctic-specific initiatives, including infrastructure and surveillance systems. Enhanced European engagement in the GIUK gap might also entice the US as the area serves as a critical buffer against Russian maritime activity.

Maintain limited and structured engagement with Russia in the Arctic Council

Despite the rupture in relations following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including

the near collapse of the Arctic Council, it remains in Europeans' interest to preserve a functional channel of communication with Russia through the council to help prevent its withdrawal. With the Kingdom of Denmark taking over the chairship in May 2025, it should aim to replicate Norway's cautious strategy: keeping Russia engaged in selected formats without full normalisation until the war in Ukraine is over. And, given Moscow's appointment of Nikolai Korchunov as its ambassador in Oslo, Norway is well placed to play an intermediary role between Russia and Europe on Arctic policy.

More importantly, some engagement with Russia in the Arctic Council may dissuade Washington from establishing a parallel bilateral Arctic track with Moscow or allowing a temporary US-Russia thaw under Trump to take institutional form. If such a channel materialised, it could strengthen Moscow's efforts to build a real "Polar Council" that includes non-Western states and the US and excludes European countries and Canada, turning a Potemkin construct into a viable alternative. Such a deal—driven by the imperial ambitions of both Washington and Moscow—would further erode Europe's influence in the region and undermine the cohesion of Western Arctic strategy.

Counterbalance Sino-Russian posturing by engaging non-Arctic states

Although Russia frequently showcases its alignment with China on Arctic issues, the cooperation is shallow and hampered by deep strategic mistrust. Russia treats the Arctic as a national-security-dominated space and offers China only tightly controlled access to projects. In contrast, Beijing seeks a more open framework aligned with its own Arctic interests of economic dominance and expanded global influence.

To avoid being boxed in, Moscow is now deliberately courting India as a balancing partner. Europeans should do the same, using their developing cooperation with India, both at the EU level and through the effective bilateral relations between Delhi and Paris and Delhi and Berlin. These efforts should focus on expanding cooperation with India in scientific research, Arctic logistics and green development could serve as a strategic hedge against Chinese and Russian ambitions and help stabilise the emerging multipolar Arctic order.

The European Commission and EU member states should also build stronger ties with other Indo-Pacific actors, particularly Japan and South Korea. These countries have advanced capabilities in Arctic science, shipping and climate resilience, which makes them valuable partners in safeguarding a rules-based Arctic governance model.

Understand the Arctic as a bargaining chip in the Kremlin's wider geopolitical strategy

Moscow is increasingly linking its Arctic diplomacy to its broader war-and-peace calculus on Ukraine. Early signs of US attempts to broker a political resolution to the war have reignited the Kremlin's hopes for a "grand bargain", in which symbolic Arctic concessions—such as downplaying Chinese involvement or reengaging with Western formats—could be exchanged for more substantive gains in Ukraine and beyond.

Europeans must be ready for this tactic and avoid mistaking performative gestures for real policy shifts. In particular, the Kremlin is likely to court Western—especially American—interest in selective Arctic cooperation, using promises of investment access to seek sanctions relief. Even if Washington engages, European leaders should remain firm and sceptical of such overtures and remind Trump that illusions of Russia's flexibility in the Arctic could be used to obscure continued intransigence elsewhere.

Even though Europeans have so far had little say in the Ukraine negotiation process compared to the US, they still hold some sway in their own right. Europeans should use this to distinguish between genuine strategic threats and the Kremlin's performative signals intended to pressure the West into restoring cooperation. Despite its rhetoric, Russia is unlikely to withdraw from multilateral Arctic frameworks or abandon UNCLOS mechanisms—particularly its shelf extension claims—unless Western countries move to politicise these processes, for example by stalling Russia's submissions due to sanctions.

Moscow's underlying objective is likely to restore pre-2022 formats of Arctic cooperation, particularly within the Arctic Council, and thus rehabilitate its international standing without altering its behaviour in Ukraine. Europeans must therefore be clear that no return to "business as usual" in Arctic governance is acceptable without a ceasefire or durable settlement to the conflict.

On thin ice

The Kremlin is investing heavily in the Arctic and will continue to do so. In the dreams of Russia's leaders, they will sit down with the West—mostly with the US—and renegotiate the world order in their favour. They will likely try to sell illusory concessions in the Arctic, among others, while sacrificing nothing of principle in order to gain in Ukraine. Europeans must not underestimate Russia's continued military build-up in the Arctic, which—despite

pressures elsewhere—remains a long-term Kremlin priority. Instead, they must track these developments and prepare a coherent NATO-based response, independent of shifting US leadership and Moscow's thin veil of concessions.

Methodology

This research is based on our analysis of official Russian documents, public statements, academic research and interviews with officials on Arctic issues. This includes six semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Russian officials who recently worked or are still working on different aspects of Arctic policy. So they could speak freely, they have been kept anonymous. Four additional interviews with experts specialising in Russia's Arctic policy, as well as China's and India's interests in the region were also used. The interviews were conducted between November 2024 and January 2025. A list of those interviewed is below.

- Public official serving in the Murmansk Oblast Governor's Office, including on the matters of the Russian State Council subcommittee on the Northern Sea Route and the Arctic (anonymous, December 2024)
- Public official working in the Russian Government Apparatus on the Arctic issues (anonymous, January 2025)
- Former public official of the Russian Far East Presidential Envoy Office, who worked with Yuri Trutnev (anonymous, December 2024)
- Employee of a government-affiliated think-tank on Arctic issues (anonymous, November 2024)
- Former high-ranking official of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic (anonymous, November 2024)
- Employee working in a subordinated organisation of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic (anonymous, November 2024)
- Ilya Shumanov, head of the independent Russian think tank Arctida (November, 2024)
- Andrey Todorov, former Russian Foreign Ministry official, researcher at the Netherlands Institute for the Law of the Sea (NILOS) at Utrecht University (December 2024)
- Manish Kumar Singh, research officer Rashtriya Raksha University (January 2025)

- Atul Kumar, fellow at Strategic Studies Programme at the Observer Research Foundation (January 2025)

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Mikhail Komin is a visiting fellow at ECFR's Wider Europe programme. He regularly provides analytical comments for media outlets such as TVRain, *Forbes*, Carnegie, *Novaya Gazeta*, and Radio Liberty. Since 2022, Mikhail has been an editor at *Novaya Gazeta Europe*.

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All opinions and any remaining errors are the sole responsibility of the authors.

[1] Author's interview with former public official of the Russian Far East Presidential Envoy Office, December 2024, online.

[2] Author's interview with public official working in the Russian Government Apparatus on the Arctic issues, January 2025, online.

[3] Author's interviews with a public official working in the Russian Government Apparatus on Arctic issues, January 2025, online; a former high-ranking official of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic, November 2024, online; and a public official serving in the Murmansk Oblast Governor's Office, including on the matters of the Russian State Council subcommittee on the Northern Sea Route and the Arctic, December 2024, online.

[4] Author's interviews with Ilya Shumanov, head of the independent Russian think-tank Arctida, November 2024, Dubrovnik, Croatia.

[5] Author's interviews with a public official serving in the Murmansk Oblast Governor's Office, including on the matters of the Russian State Council subcommittee on the Northern Sea Route and the Arctic, December 2024, online; an employee working in a subordinated organisation of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic, November 2024, online; an employee of a government-affiliated think-tank on Arctic issues, November 2024, online; and a former public official of the Russian Far East Presidential Envoy Office, who worked with Yuri Trutnev, December 2024, online.

[6] Author's interviews with Andrey Todorov, former Russian Foreign Ministry legal advisor, researcher at the Netherlands Institute for the Law of the Sea (NILOS) at Utrecht University, December 2024, online.

[7] Author's interviews with: an employee of a government-affiliated think-tank on Arctic issues, November 2024, online; and a former high-ranking official of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic, November 2024, online.

[8] Author's interviews with an employee of a government-affiliated think-tank on Arctic issues, November 2024, online; a former high-ranking official of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic, November 2024, online; and a public official working in the Russian Government Apparatus on the Arctic issues, January 2025, online.

[9] Author's interview with former high-ranking official of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic, November 2024, online.

[10] Author's interview with Andrey Todorov, former Russian Foreign Ministry legal advisor, researcher at the Netherlands Institute for the Law of the Sea (NILOS) at Utrecht University, December 2024, online.

[11] Author's interview with Atul Kumar, fellow at Strategic Studies Programme at the Observer Research Foundation, January 2025, online.

[12] Author's interviews with an employee of a government-affiliated think-tank on Arctic issues, November 2024, online; a former high-ranking official of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic, November 2024, online.

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