

The Far North has become one of the key regions “where the confrontation of the world’s leading states is unfolding,” the commander-in chief of Russia’s navy said at a forum late last year held in St. Petersburg.

For decades, regional cooperation among the eight nations with territory in the Arctic had dominated the agenda.

Search and rescue, global positioning system stabilization, wide-band and satellite communications, mineral and energy exploration, fisheries management, coastal erosion, and the like.

The eight-nation Arctic Council intentionally sidestepped larger security issues.

Slide – Putin and Moiseev

Adm. Aleksandr Moiseev, who took command of the navy a year ago, said, “In addition to political and economic measures to contain Russia in the Arctic, unfriendly states are increasing their military presence in the region.”

In Russian and western news accounts , he specifically mentioned the United States’ re-establishing the Second Fleet in 2018 and the 2021 creation of NATO’s Joint Force Command in Norfolk as raising tensions.

[<https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/confrontation-is-unfolding-in-the-arctic-says-navy-commander/422094>]

In the English translation of the news agency’s Tass’ account,

Moissev said one reason for the rise in tensions has been Moscow's suspension from the eight-member Arctic Council.

That followed the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the placing of new economic sanctions on Russian financial institutions, businesses, shipping, and individuals.

He added that updated Arctic strategies, including the United States' unveiled in the last months of the Biden administration, “enshrine an anti-Russian focus

and also allow for the thesis that the nationalization of the Northern Sea Route by the Russian Federation is inadmissible.

Also, unfriendly states are increasing their military presence in the region.”

The other seven nations in the Arctic Forum are NATO members.

[<https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/22651299>]

Where this suspension stands today and the future of sanctions in moves led by the United States and the European Union is unknown and certainly being debated.

While the future of the Arctic certainly wasn't visibly on the table at the cease-fire talks in the war in Ukraine between Washington and Moscow in Riyadh earlier this year or in the phone conversations between Presidents Trump and Putin, the implications of closer cooperation between Russia and the United States would have a dramatic and immediate impact on the High North.

For example, Steve Witkoff, the special envoy in the Ukraine war negotiations, said, "President Trump, in a short eight weeks, has spoken to President Putin twice - very, very positive and constructive conversations,"

Tass reported a "normalization of relations" with the State Department, Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency.

[<https://tass.com/world/1930907>]

Let's not get ahead of ourselves on peace breaking out either on the Black Sea or harmony sweeping across the Arctic.

I am first going to talk about what Russia has at stake in the region and how it intends to protect it.

I have to say – upfront, Moscow isn't quote "guilty" of incursions. Russia occupies the greatest territory there.

Slide Post Horizontal

But they are certainly being very high-handed over what's theirs and what's international waterway when it comes to the Northern Sea Route.

The Chinese, on the other hand, are a different story – claiming to be a near Arctic state.

I'll look at Beijing later.

If we have time and you want to ask questions about U.S. maritime and/if naval presence, icebreaking, or shipbuilding, let's have at it

Moissev, who previously commanded Russia's Northern and Black Sea Fleets, did not mention in his remarks the Kremlin's military build-up in the Arctic over the last two decades.

The most recent report from the Center for European Policy Analysis entitled "Up North" detailed many of those initiatives and offered recommendations on what NATO could do now.

[<https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/up-north-confronting-arctic-insecurity-implications-for-the-united-states-and-nato/>]

Left unchecked, Russia "wants to claim the Arctic as theirs," Adm. Daryle Caudle, America's Fleet Forces commander, said during a recent online Navy League event.

He and Moiseev were reflecting on the changed dynamics in the region particularly over the last three years.

Examples of widespread change include Canada, the nation with the second largest territorial stake in the Arctic.

Ottawa is back in the icebreaking building business – with orders for two. It is also buying eight to 12 submarines to work its three oceans

Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic.

It will be years before any of these are delivered. A builder has yet to be selected.

As mentioned, China has shown increasing economic and military interest in the region

and new Scandinavian allies – Sweden and Finland -- repeatedly remind NATO look north.

Let's look at what the Kremlin is doing there – in the maritime sphere.

Slide ballistic missile subs

Moissev's Baliwick – the Northern Fleet alone

32 surface warships – plus auxiliaries;

33 submarines – ballistic missile, cruise missile and attack.

Let's follow gCaptain on what to expect in this fleet by 2030.

[<https://gcaptain.com/russias-northern-fleet-to-launch-multiple-new-nuclear-submarines/>]

Remember we build 1.3 submarines per year.

Before the end of the decade three additional Borei-class nuclear submarines will join the country's Northern Fleet.

The 170 meter-long and 13.5 meter-wide vessels [can be equipped with up to 16 Bulava ballistic missiles](#), forming part of Russia's strategic deterrent and second-strike capability.

Russia also stations many of its long-range strategic bombers on the Kola Peninsula as well.

The class was first commissioned in 2013, with [seven vessels currently in service](#).

The expansion plans will also add another three nuclear-powered fast attack Yasen-class vessels.

Constructed after the fall of the Soviet Union, the first vessel of the type entered into service in 2013. They can carry a complement of Onyx, Caliber, and Zircon cruise missiles, some of which are nuclear capable, and travel up to 28 knots in silent running.

Now to the surface fleet at Severomorsk headquarters on the Barents Sea. It's about 16 miles from Murmansk.

Murmansk has great importance to Russia since it is the largest port on the Northern Sea Route

and it too is on the Kola Peninsula.

Elements of the surface fleet are “showing the flag” in the Caribbean – Cuba and Venezuela.

The surface combatants and submarines all entered the North Atlantic through the Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom gap.

The surface combatants were easily spotted by satellite, radar, and eye.

Its submarines use the same route – not very visible and very quiet to sonar.

On to Russia’s “Two Arctics”

Slide Wrangle Island

Russia's military capabilities are regionalized between the eastern and western halves of its Arctic territory. In Russia's eastern Arctic, international vessels travel from the Asia-Pacific region through the narrow Bering Straits to enter the Northern Sea Route.

Russia has refurbished airfields, invested in search and rescue, and built radar stations to improve awareness in the air and maritime domains.

The deployment of Sopka-2 radar systems on Wrangel Island (300 miles from Alaska) and Cape Schmidt has been essential to improving operational awareness.

Systems in the eastern Arctic create a "protective dome," securing Russia's vast Arctic coastline and improving its overall ability to detect and track vessels and aircraft.

Sopka-2 radars also control civilian air traffic and provide meteorological data to better inform mariners traversing the Northern Sea Route.

These systems fulfill President Putin's ambition of significantly enhancing maritime traffic along the route while also enhancing Russia's military presence.

Russia's military footprint changes as one moves into the central Arctic region. There, Russia has deployed more sophisticated equipment to defend its air and maritime domains. For example, Kotelny Island and Novaya Zemlya are equipped with air defense systems, such as the Bastion-P and Pantsir-S1 systems.

These systems create a complex, layered coastal defense arrangement that secures territory deeper into the central Arctic. Such capabilities

bolster Russia's ability to deny aerial, maritime, or land access to NATO or U.S. forces.

In fact, Russia calls this defense "Bastion."

Slide – Military on NSR

Let's look more closely at the Kola Peninsula,

The Northern Fleet's frigates are among the newest and most modern in the Russian surface navy. Each vessel is armed with 16 launchers for Kalibr, Oniks and Tsirkon cruise missiles and 32 surface-to-air missiles. It can also carry anti-submarine torpedoes.

Slide – Kirov battle class

For now, the Northern Fleet based on the Kola Peninsula has three frigates of the class, and four more are under construction and have planned deliveries from 2026 to 2029.

The Northern Fleet's naval forces based on the coast to the Barents Sea have been little affected by the war in Ukraine. Exercises, training and deliveries of new vessels and weapons systems continue despite the war in Ukraine.

What is not true in this assessment is: the fleet's Naval Infantry units took extremely heavy casualties in the first months of the war with Ukraine.

[<https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-arctic-threat-consequences-ukraine->

war#:~:text=%5B89%5D%20Fourth%2C%20there%20are,been%20de
riorated%2C%20especially%20gr]

Slide – Nautilus at North Pole

Back at the Navy League, Caudle, speaking as the component commander for Northern Command, said, “my goal is for the Navy to have a footprint there” with the capabilities to operate in a region where navigation systems are under stress and communications difficult.

For the U.S. Navy, “we want to do things on the surface,” not just with submarines in the Arctic and northern waters. Caudle

added, “I’m all behind” the recently signed memorandum of understanding between the United States, Canada and Finland to build icebreakers.

Called ICE Pact, “what I would like to see is them delivered” to demonstrate year-round presence.

[<https://www.dhs.gov/news/2024/11/13/joint-statement-signing-ice-pact-mou-between-united-states-canada-and-finland>]

Likewise, at the Senate Armed Services Committee, the need for urgency in building these vessels surfaced. Air Force Gen.

Gregory Guillot, who leads U.S. Northern Command, testified:

“We are in a woeful situation with icebreakers. ... [A]t this time, we are completely outnumbered with icebreakers.”

Using U.S. definitions of heavy and medium icebreakers, Washington has two actually working and one in the wings. There are eight smaller icebreakers to work the Great Lakes in the winter and Alaska ports.

Russia has 40 or so, eight are nuclear-powered. Some of these larger vessels are armed like warships. Twenty more or so smaller icebreakers are available for ports.

So real U.S. year-round maritime and naval presence in the Arctic is decades away.

Which nation has the most at stake in the Arctic?

Economically and Militarily

Russia.

The Northern Sea Route

So what do the Russians mean by the Northern Sea Route?

It's a 3,500 mile waterway in the Arctic Ocean – stretching from the Bering Strait off the Pacific to Barents Sea leading to the Atlantic that is now open to most shipping four months out of the year.

[<https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/geopolitical-implications-arctic-shipping-lanes/>]

Slide 2 routes

Pevek is the closest port of any size on the Bering Strait side and Murmansk in the Barents Sea.

By contrast, the Northwest Passage, legendary in Western histories, lies closest to Canada and the United States' share of the Arctic.

It is about 200 nautical miles longer, and its channels, particularly close to the Atlantic regarded as more treacherous.

More importantly to shippers in Shanghai or Yokohama or Rotterdam, Hamburg, and Antwerp, cargo traveling distances are cut

from more than 10,500 nautical miles using the Suez Canal to about 8,500.

In travel times for tankers and container ships that's about a week.

This past summer two Chinese Panamax container ships transited the Arctic in record time [connecting St. Petersburg and Shanghai](#) in just 21 days.

The use of the Northern Sea Route also enables China to diversify shipping routes away from the strategic Strait of Malacca,” the most recent DoD report to Congress on the Arctic concludes.

Better yet, Houthis are NOT, repeat NOT, sending kamikaze drones or cruise missiles at your ship and Somali pirates are thousands of miles away.

But remember the sailing season is short.

There are other concerns.

Among the reasons, the Russians are demanding they escort vessels is charting is not 100 percent reliable with water levels rising annually affecting known shipping channels.

At the same time, as mentioned several times, Global Positioning Systems and other satellite guidance systems at those latitudes are both lacking and often unreliable.

Not every ship owner wants to pay heavily to constantly update maritime guidance systems,

and they don't.

Think of your car or truck and does it constantly refresh with new GPS data. No. For a time it does, but not forever.

For the cargo's safety, the vessel needs special reinforcement – ill-defined “ice capable” is the term builders use.

High treacherous winds in the long transit can wreak havoc on a stacked container ship's stability. At the same time, the question has to be asked can the cargo withstand prolonged low temperatures?

Although the Arctic as a whole is warming faster than the rest of the northern hemisphere, Russia has an advantage here.

Siberian rivers are accelerating the ice melting closest to Russia.

This means the Northern Sea Route's shipping season is expected to grow over time.

The Russians look on the Northern Sea Route as theirs – the “Golden Waterway,” under the control of Rosatom, its nuclear agency.

Since Moscow claims the waters as its territory, it requires a 45-day-notice to Rosatom and most usually a Russian escort.

On to China

The Center for European Policy Analysis' "Up North" report, as others have noted, stress the Chinese have "dual-purpose" reasons for an Arctic presence.

Primarily commercial and then military.

But like other nations, there is also tourism and scientific research on China's agenda when it comes to expanding its presence in the region.

I'm not going to go into those areas or fishing. About 800 Chinese long-distant fishing vessels work the Arctic.

Slide—Russian nuclear-powered icebreaker

You could say Russia is clearing the ice path for China through the Arctic.

Let's look first at Intra-Arctic commercial traffic.

For almost 10 years, China has referred to its investments in Russia's Arctic – energy exploration on land and in the ocean, mines, highways, and ports as part of its “Polar Silk Road” strategy.

I stress energy and then underline it as absolutely critical to China's present and future as a power.

While I used Shanghai earlier and possible trade with Europe, the great bulk of its maritime commerce in the Arctic involves shipping crude oil and iron ore from Russia.

Just under 20 percent of Chinese oil needs come from Russia.

Moscow and Riyadh are Beijing's two largest suppliers of petroleum.

Even if relations with the United States improve, Moscow's immediate goal is to boost petroleum sales to China in exchange for more advanced dual-use technologies, to rebuild its non-military industrial base, and hard currency.

[<https://www.spglobal.com/commodity-insights/en/news-research/latest-news/crude-oil/121324-russia-to-increase-oil-gas-exports-to-china-in-2025-to-sustain-income-tsinghua>]

Containerized cargo moves both ways.

Slide – oil to China

Chinese tankers, however, most often run empty to Arctic ports.

Here's where “dual use” research comes into play.

Slide – Chinese arctic research

“(S)uspicious arise that scientific research presence feeds intelligence and domain awareness — not least to bridge China’s learning curve in cold weather operations.

Looking at last summer, Beijing had three research vessels operating in the Arctic.

The United States for a time last year had none.

The Coast Guard’s *Healy* suffered an electrical fire and returned to Seattle for repairs.

China is also managing a fleet of polar-specific satellites [and] plans to deploy a large-scale network of dual-use listening devices in the Arctic Ocean as part of the Underwater Great Wall,” the CEPA report said.

This is extremely valuable for submarines.

Also for the first time this summer the Chinese Coast Guard was reported operating that far north. Why would they come so far up the Pacific Coast?

[<https://news.usni.org/2024/10/03/china-coast-guard-now-operating-in-the-bering-sea>]

China in the Arctic

China is, by no means, an Arctic nation. But Chinese leaders see the region as a new crossroads of the world, a new source of raw materials and new avenues for manifesting its growing power.

China is working closely with Russia in its attempt to be seen as an Arctic power.

"[China] is one of the newer entrants on the scene," Iris Ferguson, the Pentagon's Arctic specialist in the Biden administration, said. "Over time, the strategic interests that they have in the region are ... giving us pause. How their long-term vision for the region could affect our interests, is [also] giving us pause."

Even more disturbing is the increasing levels of collaboration between Russia and China especially in the constabulary and military domain.

Russia and China exercised together in the Bering Strait in summer of 2023. "Just this past summer, right after we released our department [Arctic] [strategy](#), we saw a joint bomber patrol off of the coast of Alaska."

Slide –Russian Chinese joint patrol

There has also been increasing cooperation between the Chinese and Russian coast guards in the region. "This kind of increasing levels of military cooperation is new," she said.

"Certainly, it's new within and around Alaska."

Russian-Chinese military cooperation in Arctic

China continues to expand its ice-capable vessels and support ships and has made rapid progress in designing and constructing icebreakers. Its original icebreaker, Ukrainian-built *Xue Long 1*, has been supplemented with a host of new polar vessels. In 2019 *Xue Long 2* became the first domestically built polar icebreaker.

In the five years since, the country has launched or placed into service two additional icebreaking ships and converted a commercial one. *Ji Di*, a 5,600 tonne Polar Class 6 research

vessel, operated by the Ministry of Natural Resources entered into service in August 2024.

Slide Chinese latest deep sea

A second much larger Polar Class 4 research icebreaker, *Tan Suo San Hao*, followed in December 2024.

As I said earlier, last summer we saw three Chinese icebreaking vessels operate in the Arctic simultaneously for the first time, while the *Healy* was being repaired.

“Presence is power,” says Elizabeth Buchanan, a polar geopolitics expert at Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

Slide – Russian Chinese flotilla

Especially noteworthy is the two countries' [first joint patrol above the Arctic Circle](#) in October 2024. A four vessel flotilla crisscrossed the Bering Sea and into the Chukchi Sea passing just miles from the Alaskan mainland.

[<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-arctic-russia/>]

China's Arctic future

Likely: China becomes a forefront player in Arctic development

China's current Arctic operations focus on two main methods:

Eurasian transit of bulk cargo transport through the Northeast Passage and direct shipments to ports along Russia's Northern Sea Route.

When new routes become navigable, Beijing will be perfectly positioned to expand its activities. China plans to launch tourist cruises to the Arctic on a large scale in 2025.

Slide Post vertical

Likely: Arctic cooperation between Russia and China intensifies

All of China's activities in the Arctic are only possible thanks to Moscow's facilitation. A commercially viable shipping route along Russia's Arctic coast could soon become a reality.

That would be economically beneficial for both Moscow and Beijing. A joint [venture](#) between Russia's Rosatom and China's Hainan Yangpu Xinxin Shipping Company is set to construct the necessary infrastructure and polar-class container ships to operate these Arctic routes year-round.

This development will likely increase Russian economic dependence on China, but Putin has few options until the war in Ukraine end.

Beijing seeks to ensure the Northern Sea Route remains free of Western interference through its cooperation with Russia.

Let's look at that joint patrol with the Chinese Coast Guard and Russian Border Guards through a slightly different lens.

With that patrol, it is conceivable that Russia will grant China more influence in Arctic development moving forward.

Two developments are possible.

If tensions between Russia and the West remain high due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is likely that Russia's joint ventures with China in the Arctic by China will expand dramatically.

However, if the Trump administration encourages Ukraine to cede land to Russia and returns confiscated Russian assets, then

perhaps American and European companies will begin to engage with Russian Arctic projects again.

Meanwhile, China will try to maintain a facade of diplomatic engagement with other Arctic states.

Thank you.

