

# Russia's Ambitions in the Arctic Towards 2035

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In this brief report, two publicly available Russian policy documents are examined to explain the official aims, motives, perception of obstacles and opportunities, and so on, of Russia's Arctic agenda towards 2035.



Figure 1: Map of the Russian Federation, with the "Arctic zone" most darkly shaded.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This brief report examines two publicly available Russian government documents to explain the following questions about Russia's Arctic agenda towards 2035:

- What are the aims of Russia's policy in the High North?
- What are the motives?
- What obstacles and opportunities for policy success do Russian policymakers perceive?
- What are the most important results so far?

These questions are answered, primarily, in Sections Three and Four. Section Five puts the contemporary Arctic agenda in historical perspective. The report has three key takeaways: first, that natural resources are an explicit driver of the Russian Arctic agenda. Second, that the so-called Northern Sea Route (NSR, *Severnyi morskoi put*) is highly important to Russia, both from a commercial and national-security perspective. Finally, a factor often overlooked by Western analysts, and which goes beyond what the Russian documents explicitly say, is that

<sup>1</sup> Source: Per Wikström, FOI. Author's comment: It should be noted that the definitions of the terms Northeast Passage and Northern Sea Route overlap, but that the latter is shorter (Novaiia zemliia to Bering Strait, as indicated on the map) and is defined by Russian law. This means that the Northern Sea Route does not reach the Atlantic. The Northeast Passage, on the other hand, stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, but is an international maritime term.

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socioeconomic development of Russia's High North is important for Russia's military posture and operations in the area, in both war and peace.

At present, in the early 2020s, the circumpolar North is in the international spotlight. A root cause is global warming. According to the Arctic Report Card 2020, the average annual land-surface air temperature in the Arctic<sup>2</sup> for October 2019 to September 2020 was the second highest since about 1900; and the record-warm temperatures in the Eurasian Arctic, which is comprised mainly of Russia, correlated with extreme conditions in the ocean and on land. The trend towards "a warmer, less frozen, biologically changed" Arctic remains (NOAA Arctic Programme, 2020). In recent years, the melting of the Arctic sea ice has prompted nations such as Russia, Canada, and the United States to re-assess their interests and commitments in the region (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). In the decade before 2021, Russia became 0.51 degrees warmer, while for the rest of the world the figure was 0.18 degrees. In fact, Russia's northern regions are warming five times faster than the rest of the world (RBK Obshestvo, 2021).

As argued above, the spotlight on the circumpolar North and the Russian so-called Arctic zone, or AZ (*Arkticheskaja zona*, Figure 1), is ultimately caused by climate change. Climate change means melting sea ice, which, in turn, enables the exploitation of the rich oil, gas, and mineral deposits in the region. Another opportunity it creates is the gradual opening of the Northern Sea Route (see Figure 1), or NSR, known in Russian as *Servernii morskoi put*. Eventually, the NSR will offer year-round shipping without the use of ice-breakers. Although not yet commercially viable, the NSR promises to offer a time-efficient alternative for cargo transport from Asia to Europe. To illustrate its importance, it is worth mentioning that the NSR is managed by a separate governmental agency called the Federal State Budgetary Institution Northern Sea Route<sup>3</sup> (*Federalnoe biudzhethnoe uchrezhdenie severnyi morskoi put*). Because of such emerging opportunities, a recent interest in the broader socioeconomic development of the Arctic is also evident.

In the AZ, the Russian government has invested extensively in a range of projects to develop the local economies, scientific research, and transport networks. One grand project, planned for completion in 2026, is the fibre-optical underwater cable between Murmansk and Vladivostok,

which will create a cyber-highway of internet access in the AZ (RBK Tekhnologii i media, 2021). On land, construction of the Northern Latitude Railway, or NLR (*Severnii shirotnyi khod*), in the Yamal-Nenets autonomous territory, is underway, and will greatly enhance the rail network in the AZ by providing access to the northern port of Sabetta and, thus, connect economic nodes in Western Siberia to the NSR (RBK Poslanie Putina Federalnomu sobraniuu, 2021; Adamchuk, 2018).

The above-mentioned developments mean that the view of the circumpolar North as an exceptional and secluded area of the world is outdated. Rather, it is a region among others, with its own security issues (PBS Newshour Weekend, 2020). Thus, a new arena of international competition has emerged due to the melting Arctic sea ice. At the centre of this process is the pursuit of rich oil, gas, and mineral deposits, which in turn is prompting the military presence of both Western powers and Russia in the area. A consequence of the military presence is the emergence of a classic security dilemma in which both sides perceive a growing threat, despite the absence of concrete hostile actions.

An implication of the above, often overlooked by Western analysts, is that the Russian investments in the socioeconomic development of the Arctic zone are not merely a means for increasing the well-being of its citizens, which is a stated purpose in the policies examined in this paper (see below). It is also a means for supporting the claim that Russia is a true Arctic power with an Arctic population. In addition, socioeconomic development means that military operations will be easier to sustain when the civilian infrastructure, such as dual-use ports, airfields, and roads, is maintained and expanded.

NATO asserts that, since the end of the Cold War, Russia's military posture in the Arctic is stronger than ever. Old Soviet bases are being re-opened and modernised, and new ones are being built (RIA Novosti, 2021). In Russia, the Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, has stated that the competition for economic resources and military-strategic positions in the circumpolar North increases the risk of armed conflict. In a colourful quip, to underline Russia's perception of its having a relative advantage in military power in the region, as well as the perception of Russia's status as an archetypal Arctic power, the First Parliamentary Undersecretary of Defence, Ruslan Tsalikov, has called

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2 Here defined as north of 60° N (NOAA Arctic Programme, 2020). There is no consensus on the definition of the circumpolar North.

3 Their website: <http://www.nsr.ru/>.

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the Russian army an “Arctic world civilisation” (*mirovaia arkticheskaia tsivilizatsiia*), due to its expanding system of permanent bases in the Arctic (Nikanorov, 2020).

However, Russia is pursuing a wide range of goals, not just those that are military and security-related, in the Arctic. An illustration of this is the recent attempts to make Arctic tourism, in particular ecological tourism, into a worldwide brand. In the wider perspective, in May 2021 Russia assumed its turn as chair of the Arctic Council and will hold it until 2023 (Russian Geographical Society, 2020). It remains to be seen how Russia intends to use the role as a platform and instrument of its Arctic policy.

## 2. RUSSIA’S ARCTIC ZONE

Russia tries to shape international legal discourse about what states should be considered as “Arctic” in order to promote its own agenda and status as an Arctic power. The Arctic policy established by a presidential decision in 2008 and made public in 2009 defines the circumpolar Arctic North as:

“...the Northern areas of the Earth including the deep-water Arctic basin, shallow marginal seas with islands and adjoining parts of the continental land of Europe, Asia and Northern America. The Arctic encompasses five sub-Arctic states – Russia, Canada, United States of America, Norway and Denmark that have an exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean” (Russia’s Arctic Policy until 2020, 2008).

This definition focuses on geopolitical entities, states, and tries to stress that membership in the proverbial Arctic club requires “an exclusive economic zone” and a “continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean.” Not all states that desire to gain access to the club fit this description – China is a notable example.

It is also worth noting that while there are only “five sub-Arctic states” in Russia’s definition, the Ottawa Declaration’s definition, which Russia has signed, is more inclusive: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States are defined as the eight “Arctic states”. The northernmost counties of Sweden, *Norrbottnen* and *Västerbottnen*, are examples of “Arctic provinces” with a mostly sub-Arctic climate (The Arctic Council, 2021). See also (in Swedish), *Sweden’s national strategy for the Arctic region* (Swedish Government, 2020).

Russia’s vast AZ consists of both Arctic and sub-Arctic areas. It is defined in Russia’s 2008 Arctic policy, the full definition of which is quoted below. This definition was repeated in a presidential decree from 2014.<sup>4</sup> Its stated purpose is to serve Russia’s Arctic policy towards 2020 and beyond:

“... the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation means a part of the Arctic that includes, in full or in part, the territories of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Murmansk and Arkhangelsk regions, Krasnoyarsk territory, Nenets, Yamal-Nenets and Chukchi autonomous districts, established by the decision of the State Commission of the Council of Ministers of the USSR on Arctic Affairs of April 22, 1989, and also areas and islands specified in the Decision of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR of April 15, 1926, ‘On the announcement of areas and islands located in the Arctic Ocean as the territory of the USSR’, and the internal maritime waters, territorial sea, exclusive economic zone and continental shelf of the Russian Federation adjoining to such territories, areas and islands, within which Russia enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction under international law” (Russia’s Arctic Policy until 2020, 2008).

It should be evident that a historical perspective on Russia’s present-day Arctic policy is warranted, since the contemporary Russian definition of the AZ is based on decisions taken by Soviet-era governmental bodies as far back as 1926. As is well known, the Bolshevik coup that laid the foundations of the Soviet Union was orchestrated in 1917, and the Union itself came into being in 1922. Although Arctic exploration and development was high on the Soviet agenda, it is notable that this programme began several hundred years earlier, in the Tsarist era. Thus, the Soviet Arctic agenda, according to Russian historians, was a continuation of the Tsarist agenda (Komleva, et al., 2017).

## 3. WHAT DOES RUSSIA EXPRESS IN OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS?

Clearly, the Arctic is definitional for Russia’s self-image and identity. This is reflected in two Arctic policy documents that look towards 2020 and 2035, respectively. See Table 1, below. Russia’s Arctic Policy towards 2020 and the more recent one towards 2035 are publicly available documents and contain information about Russia’s stated intentions in the AZ. There are of course other important policy

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<sup>4</sup> An identical definition was reconfirmed by the Presidential Decree, No 296, 2 May 2014, On the territories in the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (Russian Presidential Decree, 2014).

**Table 1:** Basic Russian government documents on the Arctic

Title in Russian	Osnovy gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiiskoi federatsii v Arktike na period do 2020 i dalneishuiu perspektivu	Ob Osnovakh gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiiskoi federatsii v Arktike na period do 2035
Title in English (Translated by author)	Principles of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic in the years towards 2020 and beyond	On the Principles of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic in the years towards 2035
Short title (here)	2020 Policy	2035 Policy
Presidential decision	18 September, 2008	5 March, 2020
Web source:	<a href="https://web.archive.org/web/20111121193331/http://rg.ru/2009/03/30/arktika-osnovy-dok.html">https://web.archive.org/web/20111121193331/http://rg.ru/2009/03/30/arktika-osnovy-dok.html</a>	<a href="http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/f8ZpjhpAaQoWB1zjyWNo4Og-Kil1mAvaM.pdf">http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/f8ZpjhpAaQoWB1zjyWNo4Og-Kil1mAvaM.pdf</a>

documents. In 2021, a significant update of Russia's national security strategy was made public. While the strategy outlines, among other things, the country's basic national interests, the Arctic is explicitly mentioned only four times (Staalesen, 2021). This reinforces the fact that the two documents examined in this report are the key to knowing the details of Russia's Arctic agenda.

Given that this report uses official and basic Russian policy documents, the following is a description and analysis of the official Russian position, unless otherwise stated.

### Aims

The 2020 and 2035 policies have much in common. Both policies state that the following aims should be achieved:

- Maintain mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral agreements with the sub-Arctic states.
- Develop the resource base and increase the economic growth of the AZ and its share of Russia's total GDP.
- Protect Russia's borders and interests in the spheres of security and economy.

Some of the notable differences between 2020 and 2035 include the fact that, in the 2020 policy, information technology and communication, as well as science and technology, are mentioned as aims. In the 2035 policy, they are no longer present in the list of aims. It is worth mentioning that goals for socioeconomic development receive individual treatment in the 2035 policy, but not in the one for 2020. An overall impression of the 2035 policy is that, in comparison to its predecessor, it tends towards an increasing securitisation and militarisation of the AZ.

### Motives

Again, the policies of 2020 and 2035 have much in common. They both state that Russia's motives and national interests in the Arctic are as follows:

- Natural resources.
- Socioeconomic development of the AZ.
- Environmental protection.
- Peace and stability.
- NSR as a national transportation lane.

Natural resources, such as oil, gas, mineral deposits, but also, timber and fisheries, remain a key economic and national-security asset for Russia. Social and economic development of the Arctic zone is a perennial interest of the Russian state, which may at first seem secondary but, in fact, provides the basis for retaining and expanding the population in the area. Still today, a thriving population in the Arctic provides a supporting argument for the claim that Russia is an Arctic power to reckon with. In addition, a populated High North with a thriving economy is a vital part of the infrastructure that underpins Russia's military presence in the area. Thus, while not explicitly stated in the policy documents, economic and social factors are a part of what enables Russia's effective military power.

Environmental protection is stressed in both the 2020 and 2035 policies, but some doubts remain regarding the effectiveness of policy in this area. International cooperation with the sub-Arctic states (not just with any state that wishes to have a piece of the Arctic cake) is a key interest. Here, Russia seems to, proverbially, speak softly ('peaceful co-operation') and carry a big stick ('military power').

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On 17 May, 2021, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov stated that the Arctic belongs to Russia (and that Russia's military activities in the region are legitimate). Three days later, President Vladimir Putin added that Russia will "knock the teeth out" of anyone who tries to "take a piece" of Russia (Interfaks - V Rossii, 2021; TASS, 2021). These announcements coincided with Russia's taking its turn as chair of the Arctic Council, a platform for international co-operation in the Arctic. It is worth mentioning that the Arctic Council is not a forum for discussions about military security.

Finally, it is evident that Russians attach a great economic and military significance to the NSR. The importance of the NSR as a national transportation lane is underlined in both policies. In December 2019, the Chief of the General Staff, Valeryi Gerasimov, said that Russia is against all foreign naval presence on the NSR. Gerasimov called the NSR "a historic national transport lane" (Interfaks – V Rossii, 2021).

### Opportunities and obstacles

It is obvious that the natural resources of the Arctic play a prominent role for Russian policymakers. Oil, gas, minerals, fisheries, and timber are assets that any state would be tempted to exploit. Both the 2020 and 2035 policies treat this set of opportunities as central to unlocking the future of the AZ and, by extension, Russia.

While the opportunities perceived in the two policies overlap, the obstacles they mention differ in some key ways. The 2035 policy is more focussed on obstacles and challenges in the form of military security threats, which will be discussed below.

In the 2020 policy, the following 'special conditions', or basic obstacles, of the AZ are mentioned:

- Climate and nature.
- Demography and economy.
- Isolation from other Russian regions.
- Sensitive ecological systems.

Climate and nature are obvious obstacles to the development of the AZ; the region is characterised by extreme natural conditions, such as permanent ice cover and drifting sea ice.

Nowadays, thawing permafrost and the increasing frequency and severity of forest fires also add to these obstacles. The point about demography and the economy implies low population density and few industrial centres. The AZ is isolated from other Russian regions and depends on them for fuel, foodstuffs, and other commodities. Finally, the AZ has sensitive ecological systems that may even determine the biological balance of the entire planet.

In the 2035 policy, the following obstacles (in Russian, 'threats', *ugrozy*) are mentioned:

1. Decreasing population in the AZ.
2. Underdeveloped social, transportation, and information-technology spheres in the territories of the AZ.
3. Inefficient geological prospecting for mineral deposits.
4. A lack of state subsidies for businesses that would decrease the costs and risks of economic projects in the AZ.
5. Slow completion of the infrastructure of the NSR and of construction of ships for the icebreaker and search-and-rescue fleets.
6. Slow creation of the means for land and air transportation for use in Arctic conditions, as well as of the domestic technologies necessary for the development of the Arctic.
7. Unpreparedness of the systems for monitoring the environment in the AZ.

While the above-mentioned obstacles threaten the fulfilment of many policy goals, the growing concern with security is reflected separately in the 2035 policy. The document mentions the following 'challenges', or obstacles to the creation of security in the Arctic:

1. Attempts by foreign governments to reconsider the basic international treaties that regulate business and other activities in the circumpolar North.
2. Incompleteness of international legal delimitations of the seas in the Arctic.
3. Debarment by foreign governments or international associations of the Russian Federation's creation of legal business or other activities in the Arctic.
4. Foreign military forces in the Arctic.

**Table 2:** Socioeconomic Arctic programme budget 2021–2024.<sup>5</sup>

	2021	2022	2023	2024	Sum of financing
Bn. RUR	3.4	6.0	5.2	4.9	19.5
M. USD per 8 June 2021	46.9	82.8	71.8	67.6	269.1

A notable example of the “foreign military forces” mentioned in the 2035 policy is the 2020 recommencement, for the first time since the 1980s, of the so-called Barents Sea Patrol by the navies of the US and UK (Eckstein, 2020). See the map in Figure 1 (above) for the location of the Barents Sea.

#### 4. ACHIEVEMENTS

This section briefly departs from discussion of policy documents and instead focusses on evidence of policy success. Russia’s most eye-catching result in the Arctic zone so far is the increased military presence in the region, which has led NATO to declare that, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia is today stronger in the Arctic than ever. For instance, nearly twenty new airfields have been opened in recent years (Interfaks – V Rossii, 2021). While Russian forces in the High North are still inferior in many parameters to those of their opponents, the US and NATO fleets, they can still cause considerable military obstructions for the Allies in the case of a major conflict. They are also well-positioned to act fast in grey-zone conflicts in the Arctic.

A tell-tale sign of the military importance that Russia assigns to the High North is that on 1 January 2021, after first being detached from the Western Military District in 2014, the Northern Fleet in Severomorsk was upgraded to the status of Military District (Interfaks – V Rossii, 2021; Russian Presidential Decree, 2020). The Northern Fleet, which includes ground forces, is responsible for the defence of Russia’s Arctic coastline. As mentioned above, a Russian official, Ruslan Tsalikov, calls the Russian army an “Arctic world civilisation”, due to its expanding system of permanent bases in the region. (For an in-depth and nuanced discussion of the Northern Fleet’s status and evolution, see Kjellén (2021))

As history tells us, however, military might, without a supporting society and economy, may crumble more quickly than expected, and it therefore behoves us to take seriously the attempts to develop the High North.

The Russian government has poured funding into the Arctic zone, but these economic resources tend to go to a select number of regions only (Sukhankin, 2021). And recently, the plans had to be reconsidered due to economic difficulties. A new, more modest, socioeconomic Arctic programme, with a budget of 19.5 bn RUR, was approved in April 2021 (see Table 2, above).

The current 19.5 bln RUR programme, however, assumes that the share of private investments in the AZ until 2024 increases dramatically (Kriuchkova, 2020; Kriuchkova, 2021). Due to the notoriously shaky relations between the Russian state and the private sector, doubts remain about whether an increase in private investments is possible to achieve on a strictly voluntary basis.

Another problem Russia has encountered in the Arctic is the lack of modern technologies for the exploitation of oil and gas on the continental shelf. The lack of modern technologies threatens to delay the development of natural resources by at least fifteen years. The older technologies at hand simply do not allow for commercially viable operations in hard-to-extract projects (Podlinova, 2021). The reason for the lack of modern technologies is the US sanctions put in place after the 2014 occupation and subsequent annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the ongoing Russian-led war in eastern Ukraine. This has resulted in a discontinued collaboration between Western and Russian oil and gas companies in hard-to-extract projects in the AZ (Financial Times: Oil & Gas, 2019).

Finally, the official reality, as it is expressed in the official planning documents, is sometimes undermined by actions or inactions by people on the ground. That Soviet planning expressed an official reality that often did not correspond to what was actually going on in the economy is a well-accepted fact among social scientists and historians. It is still true to a degree in today’s Russia. One example is that regulations overseeing the disposal of drilling waste in oil fields are routinely ignored. Bribes are paid to inspectors who fly in from Moscow and look the other way (RFE/RL Investigation, 2021). This, of course, damages the 2020 as

<sup>5</sup> Source: Kriuchkova (2020, 2021). Abbreviations: billion, Bn; Million, M.

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well as the 2035 policies, which state that protecting the sensitive Arctic ecology is a key policy motive. While the failure to dispose of drilling waste is regrettable, it is not surprising given Russia's endemic corruption.

## 5. WITH HISTORY IN THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR

Russia's Arctic agenda can be traced to the Soviet and Tsarist eras. Given the above analysis of the 2020 and 2035 policies, it might be enlightening to scrutinise what was proposed by Soviet policymakers almost ninety years ago, in vastly different economic and political circumstances. In 1932, Group North of the State Planning Committee (*Gosplan*) prepared a "concept for socialistic development of the North", which contained five bullet points (Komleva, et al., 2017) that resemble the policies of 2020 and 2035:

- **Control:** The development of the North must be completely subordinated to the development of the national economy of the Soviet Union.
- **Obstacles:** At the time being, the development process shall be limited by the difficulties associated with advancement in the northern regions and the high cost of projects there. It is necessary to only build those corporations that are most important for the economy and cannot be built and run more efficiently in other regions.
- **Technology:** The North must be developed with the help of the most advanced technologies only, in order to create real hotbeds of a socialist economy as a basis for further development of the North.
- **Diffusion of knowledge & resources:** The basis for the development of the North must take into account older industrial regions, that not only will contribute machinery but workers, which in the North is in short supply.
- **AZ is diverse:** Apart from the above, there must be a differentiated approach to the development of each district of the North, since the North is not a unified area. The problems of the North can only be concretely resolved by each individual economic unit.

One might say that today Russia's AZ remains the same, but also different. Although Russia of the 2020s is not a socialist planned economy, co-ordination takes place via state policies, strategies, and programmes. Today, the idea of control is expressed through the notion of "territorial

unity", which explains why the Russian government pursues development of the AZ as a part of the Russian Federation. Some obstacles to the development of the AZ remain similar to those of the Soviet era, such as the high cost associated with projects, due to the extreme natural conditions. The insight that cutting-edge technology is key to Arctic development remains the same, as does the insight that the AZ is a diverse geographical, demographic, and economic area that is difficult to develop evenly. Some of the obvious differences are the market-based economic system in contemporary Russia, the digitalised world, and the absence of an official Russian state ideology similar to the Soviet Marxist-Leninist ideology and the mechanisms that were in place to enforce it.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Apart from the observation that global warming is a root cause for the increasing international attention to the circumpolar North, the Russian preoccupation with military security in the Arctic seems to have grown between the publication of the 2020 and 2035 policies.

Given this report's descriptions of, and reflections about, Russia's publicly stated motives and aims and so on, its three key takeaways are as follows:

- **Natural resources**, especially, oil and gas, are a driver of the Russian Arctic agenda towards 2035. Such assets are perceived as vitally important for the development of the AZ, and of Russia as a whole and therefore have a strong national-security-related significance.
- Likewise, in Russia, **the Northern Sea Route** has strong economic and security-related meaning attached to it. While Russia historically, or at least before the 20th century, was not threatened by anyone from the north, today global warming creates new military opportunities for both Russia and foreign powers.
- Finally, the security-policy importance of **socioeconomic development** should not be underestimated, as it has both 1) a role in supporting the Russian claim to being a major Arctic power by retaining a population in the area, and 2) a direct relevance for a sustainable build-up of a military presence in the area. It is only harsh economic realities that forced the Russian government to propose a more modest budget than originally planned. This is a factor worth keeping track of. ■

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