

# Putin's Blurred Arctic Vision

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The Arctic touches deeper feelings in the Russian political mind than just greed for resources or fear of military threat. Beneath typically grandiloquent rhetoric, there is a deep sense of belonging to the vast cold and clean spaces of the Far North, often translated into the desire to own them.

This feeling involves many conflicting aims, which Russia's Arctic Development Strategy 2020, approved by President Vladimir Putin in February this year, seeks to tie together. Unfortunately, it lapses into bureaucratic platitudes.

Russia's Arctic policy is neither a mystery of confidential strategic plans nor an enigma of secret business enterprises. Rather, it is a muddle of inflated goals and eroding capabilities.

There is, however, a key to all of this jumble. It is sovereignty, which is a key notion in Putin's - vision of Russia as both a "great power" and an "emerging power" at the same time. This idea drives the urge to expand the legal boundaries of its continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean by some 1.2 million square kilometers. The most direct translation of the vague concept

of sovereignty is control over natural resources, particularly oil and gas fields.

The Arctic shelf is perceived as a treasure chest of hydrocarbons, and the lack of reliable data only fuels expectations of a further inflow of oil rent. The state-owned gas and oil behemoths Gazprom and Rosneft are in no rush to exploit their shared monopoly on developing these offshore reserves and are keen to transfer the costs of exploration to foreign partners. The collapse of the Shtokman project in the Barents Sea in 2012 because of the withdrawal of Norway's Statoil highlighted the prohibitive cost of drilling in the Arctic seas. Disillusion at the delay in harvesting these oil dividends is still sinking in. But Russia recognizes the need to cultivate ties with its Arctic neighbors.

Another prospect that drives cooperation is the opening up of the Northern Sea Route for commercial navigation. While polar ice is becoming less of a problem each year, the degradation of the supporting infrastructure, with the exception of hugely expensive ice-breakers, is a handicap.

It is difficult to reconcile this professed commitment to cooperation with the determination to advance a massive rearmament program centered on deploying a new generation of Borei-class strategic submarines that would constitute the centerpiece of the Northern Fleet.

Russia opposes NATO activities in the Cold War's old northern flank and deplores the arms race in the High North, but it is the only party that is modernizing its military capabilities inside the Arctic Circle. Russia's northern neighbors are worried not only by the hundreds of nuclear warheads concentrated in the Kola peninsula but by the poor maintenance of submarines and their propensity to technical failure.

It is disconcerting for Moscow that its position of military strength doesn't grant it any political advantage in the Arctic. But even more troubling are the intentions of outsiders. China is showing persistent interest in Arctic affairs and is examining options for navigation in the northern seas while paying only superficial respect to Russia's obsession with sovereignty.

The Kremlin is wary of crossing its mighty neighbor but insists that all regional matters should be managed by the "Arctic Eight" — Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the U.S.

This position would be more convincing were Russia able to keep its part of the Arctic house in better economic order — and less loaded with nuclear risks.

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