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Russia Builds Up Arctic Forces as Resource Fight Intensifies

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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Vladimir Putin shaking hands with Valery Gerasimov during a meeting about the military in the Arctic on Dec. 10. **Mikhail Klimentyev**

As nations around the world begin to clamor for territory in the resource-rich Arctic, Russia is rapidly building up its military presence in the region, seeking to defend its national interests and match the more established Arctic forces of other countries.

With up to 15 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and up to 30 percent of undiscovered gas, the Arctic is becoming an object of competition between not only nations with Arctic territories but also non-Arctic countries, such as China, Brazil and Great Britain, which have all announced their interest in the area's energy reserves.

President Vladimir Putin said earlier this month that Russia needed to ramp up its military capabilities in the region for defense reasons given the presence of the U.S. Navy there.

"Russia is more actively exploring this prospective region, is coming back to it and must have all the mechanisms for protection of its security and national interests here," Putin said at a meeting with Defense Ministry officials on Dec. 10.

Following Putin's statement, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu ordered the General Staff to produce a plan by Dec. 25 for regulating army deployment in the Arctic and improving military facilities in the region.

Russia's Arctic zone is the largest among all Arctic nations, occupying 21.6 percent of the country, with 2.3 million residents. All Arctic countries besides Russia have limited the business activity of oil companies in their polar territories, but that has not prevented some of them from staking claims to additional land in the Arctic.

Russia is seeking to secure rights to more territory as well. Early next year, the government intends to submit an application to the United Nations Shelf Commission, asking to extend the outer limits of Russia's continental shelf and recognize its sovereignty over an additional 1.2 million square kilometers in the Arctic Ocean. It will be Russia's second application since 2001, when the UN commission said there was not enough scientific evidence to support the claim that an additional part of the Arctic Ocean shelf should belong to Russia.

Putin's recent push to increase Russia's military presence in the Arctic has been seen by some observers as a response to Canada's intention to expand its boundaries in the Arctic Ocean. Canada said on Dec. 9 that it had sent a preliminary application to the UN Shelf Commission, several days after Russia said it had prepared a draft of its application. Denmark also made an application to the UN commission, in November.

Having conducted extensive research, Russian authorities anticipate a positive response from the UN next year, and meanwhile, asserting that the Arctic is one of the country's main strategic regions, they are taking seriously any perceived attempt to encroach on Russian territory.

Earlier in December, the Regional Development Ministry said there were a number of possible military risks in the Russian Arctic, including easy opportunities to cross the Russian border, a lack of military experience in Arctic conditions among Russian personnel, insufficient materiel, and the inability to react immediately to external aggression.

The ministry recommended measures to eliminate these threats, among them improving the monitoring of airspace and waterways, as well as "providing strategic deterrence in case of an armed conflict by repulsing the act of aggression and halting military action on terms that meet the interests of Russia."

The need to improve military equipment is precipitated by the rising possibility of conflict in the Arctic, the ministry said in the state program for Arctic development through 2020.

Konstantin Simonov, head of the National Energy Security Fund, a Russia-based think tank and consulting firm for oil and gas companies, said Russia's concerns were legitimate, noting that Russia is behind other countries in establishing its military in the Arctic.

"Russia has a rather poor military presence in the Arctic," Simonov said. "The whole process

has just been started but will be very fast, although some may not like it."

He said the U.S. has more than 30 military facilities in Alaska and that the U.S. currently has the strongest military presence in the Arctic.

The U.S. currently has some 27,000 military personnel in Alaska, with transport planes and nuclear submarines constantly patrolling the polar region, The New York Times reported on Nov. 22.

In November, the U.S. released its first Arctic strategy designed to guarantee its security interests and protection of the Arctic environment.

"A flood of interest in energy exploration has the potential to heighten tensions over other issues," Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said at the time, adding that the U.S. naval fleet and other capabilities in the region would be reshaped.

Not everyone is convinced that the U.S. strategy is so formidable compared to Russia's plans. Alexander Khramchikhin, a military analyst at the Institute for Political and Military Analysis, said the U.S. Arctic program was "no more than a piece of paper" and that the military efforts of other Arctic countries were relatively insignificant.

But Russian observers have also raised concerns about the possibility of NATO strengthening its forces in the Arctic, since four Arctic nations are members of the alliance.

Norway has asked NATO to work more closely with the country's military forces to improve the alliance's expertise in the Arctic, but NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said in May that despite increasing concerns about Russia's military programs, there would be no change in NATO's strategic position in the Arctic.

"At this present time, NATO has no intention of raising its presence and activities in the High North," Rasmussen said.

Khramchikhin downplayed the possibility of a military conflict in the region despite the interest of many countries in its resources. Simonov, of the National Energy Security Fund, said the possibility of conflict between Arctic nations was much lower than the potential of conflict with non-Arctic countries that are making claims on the region's resources, with China intending to create its own military facilities in the Arctic.

"It is more likely that all Arctic nations will cooperate more closely soon in the military sphere so that they can defend their territories in the Arctic from other countries," Simonov said.

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