

Russia Starts Building Military Bases in the Arctic

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Set on restoring the once formidable Soviet military presence in the highly contested and resource-rich Arctic, the Russian military has begun building new military bases in the region, a Defense Ministry spokesperson said Monday.

"On Wrangel Island and Cape Schmidt, block-modules have been unloaded for the construction of military camps. The complex is being erected in the form of a star," Colonel Alexander Gordeyev, a spokesperson for the Eastern Military District, was quoted as saying by RIA Novosti.

Russia has been talking about militarizing the Arctic for years as part of its greater strategy to explore and industrialize the pristine region, which is wealthy in oil and gas and offers

a strategic trade route capable of rerouting the global trade flows.

The locations named by Gordeyev are deep into the Arctic circle in the Chukchi Sea, close to Alaska.

President Vladimir Putin in April stepped up his commitment to the region, calling for the creation of a unified command structure to coordinate military operations in the Arctic and create a new government entity to execute Russia's policy in the region.

Putin sees control of the Arctic as a matter of serious strategic concern for Moscow. Below the Arctic lies vast stockpiles of largely untapped natural resource reserves; estimates vary, but the more optimistic ones put the undiscovered reserves of oil and gas in the Arctic at 13 and 30 percent of the world's total, respectively.

Russia is vying for control of the region's oil, gas and rare metals with the other "polar nations" — Canada, Denmark, Norway and the U.S. — leading many observers to point at the region as one of the world's most volatile flashpoints.

The construction of the new Arctic bases, which will be the first new facilities established in the area since the Soviets abandoned their Arctic positions in the waning years of the Cold War, marks a milestone in Russia's militarization of the region.

Wrangel Island is classified by the Russian government as a nature reserve and was never used by the Soviets as a military base. In late August, the Russian navy carried out an expedition to the island and planted a flag, which Pacific Fleet spokesperson Captain First Rank Roman Martov said "heralded the stationing of the first ever naval base on [Wrangel Island]."

Cape Schmidt, on the other hand, saw use during the Cold War as a base for long-range strategic bombers. The Soviet government established airbases throughout the Arctic for its bomber fleet, as this was the closest geographic point to the United States.

The two sets of 34 prefabricated modules being installed on Wrangel Island and Cape Schmidt will contribute to Putin's aspirations by giving Russia's Arctic forces a comfortable home in an unforgiving environment. The base will consist of residential, commercial, administrative and recreational units, RIA Novosti reported.

Roman Filimonov, director of the Defense Ministry's department for state procurement of capital construction said in July that it intends to establish six such compounds in the Arctic "to further develop the stationing of ground forces in the Arctic ... They will be contemporary military communities. We will call them 'The North Star' since the shape of the community resembles a star."

Militarization

Meanwhile, Russia's Northern Fleet, which is based out of Murmansk, in the western part of Russia's vast Arctic territory, is being reinforced with Russia's newest nuclear attack submarines — the Yasen-class. The first Yasen, called the Severodvinsk, joined the Northern Fleet in June. With three additional vessels slated to follow her, the Yasen-type submarines

will phase out the older Soviet-era Akula and Alfa-class attack submarines. This will leave Russia with a formidable underwater force to complement the already hard-hitting capabilities of the Northern Fleet.

Such developments have alarmed the other members of the so-called Arctic Council, a group of nations that share borders in the region. In late August, Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird raised the alarm on Russia's military buildup in the region, vowing that it would not hesitate to defend Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic.

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By 2015, Russia hopes to restore the entirety of its former-Soviet defense infrastructure in the region, RIA Novosti said.

Resource War

Russian state companies Gazprom and Rosneft, which have a monopoly on Arctic oil and gas exploration, have worked since 2011 to begin production in the region.

Gazprom's Prirazlomnaya offshore platform in the northern Pechora Sea shipped the first tanker with 70,000 tons of Arctic-grade oil in April.

But further exploration has come into question due to U.S. and EU sanctions that have curbed sales of equipment for oil and gas exploration in the Arctic to Russia as part of penalties imposed over Moscow's alleged meddling in war-torn Ukraine.

Gazprom and Rosneft lack the technologies for offshore drilling in freezing seas, which led the former to partner with Royal Dutch Shell and the latter with ExxonMobil and Statoil on their Arctic projects.

Arctic oil exploration is vehemently contested by environmentalists, who say it is unprofitable — with production costs estimated at from \$115 up to \$700 per barrel — and hazardous for the Arctic's fragile ecosystem, given the absence of technologies to efficiently clean oil in freezing seas.

Greenpeace stormed the Prirazlomnaya twice, in 2012 and 2013, to protest its operations. However, Russian security services detained the activists at gunpoint during the non-violent protest last year and charged them with piracy and later hooliganism, a criminal offense. They were released on amnesty after several months in prison in what Greenpeace called an intimidation campaign.

Adding insult to injury, Wrangel Island is a UNESCO World Heritage site, where any construction, let alone massive military deployment, is forbidden.

The Defense Ministry did not comment on the island's protected status on Monday.

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