The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Is Using Extortion in the Arctic

By Mark Galeotti

December 02, 2014



Russia's new Northern Command became operational on Monday, as the country's claims to an expansive share of the Arctic — and its potential economic benefits — become increasingly militarized. First Deputy Defense Minister Arkady Bakhin spoke for the government as a whole last year when he said that "we have come [to the Arctic], and we'll stay there forever. This is the beginning of a big journey."

But despite Russia's expansion and modernization of its forces in the region, it is impossible to meaningfully occupy a shrinking ice cap. Instead, this is one more expression of Russia's new strategy: asserting leverage in the modern world by being the global extortionist.

Even before Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency and the more assertive nationalism that he has brought to the Kremlin, the High North was becoming something of a strategic priority. This reflects not just its potential reserves of oil and gas, but also the commercial polar shipping lanes that are being opened up by the retreat of the ice cap.

Already, the Arctic directly or indirectly accounts for 20 percent of Russia's GDP and as the economy comes under pressure from external forces, the incentive to develop new

opportunities will only grow.

Now, according to some reports, the Kremlin is considering setting up a new ministry for Arctic development, following Putin's call earlier this year for "a unified center of accountability for the implementation of Arctic policy."

Moscow has long claimed large portions of the Arctic, claiming that the underwater Lomonosov and Mendeleyev ridges demonstrate that Russia's continental shelf extends far beyond its current 320-kilometer territorial waters. The proposed change would bring an extra 1.2 million square kilometers into Russia's grip with, according to Natural Resources Minister Sergei Donskoi, at least 5 billion tons of new oil and gas reserves.

This all remains in question, but in 2007 the Arktika expedition both demonstratively planted a Russian flag on the seabed at the North Pole and claimed to have found proof of these claims.

However, the Kremlin is not just relying on scientific reports and legal claims. Instead, there is an increasingly strong military dimension to Russia's presence.

The new Northern Command responsible for the Arctic will subsume the Northern Fleet, and there is a growing naval presence in the region. Last year the nuclear-powered missile cruiser Peter the Great led a squadron of 10 warships and four nuclear-powered ice breakers to the New Siberian Islands.

Indeed, Russia's icebreaker fleet is a particular "ice-power" asset: It is the world's largest and includes the massive nuclear-powered vessel 50 Years of Victory. Beyond that, Russia is constructing a chain of 10 Arctic search-and-rescue stations that, along with its 16 deepwater ports, are intended to consolidate Russia's authority over the Northern Sea Route, which Putin has said may prove even more important than the Suez Canal in shaping global shipping flows.

Long-range air patrols have also been stepped up, and a new, year-round airbase is being built in the New Siberian Islands Archipelago between the Laptev and East Siberian seas to support an even greater presence. This is only one of the 13 new airfields and bases being built, as well as 10 air-defense radar stations.

All this will also permit the use of larger and more modern bombers. By 2025, the Arctic waters are to be patrolled by a squadron of next-generation stealthy PAK DA bombers, but even now cruise missile-armed Tu-95MS and Tu-160 bombers can cover the polar region.

Nor are ground forces being neglected. A commando detachment from the Second Independent Special Purpose Brigade is being trained for Arctic warfare, along with elements from the 420th Independent Naval Special Purpose Point.

The 200th Brigade of the army, based at Pechenga near the Norwegian border, will by the end of 2015 have been converted to a specialized "polar" brigade once new snow-mobile armored vehicles have been delivered to replace the sturdy but dated Vityaz DT-30Ps currently used. A second Arctic-warfare brigade will join it by 2017.

This is all very impressive, but it begs the question of just what these forces are meant to do.

Bombers cannot dig for oil, infantry cannot collect taxes from passing Chinese container ships.

But they can board and occupy oil rigs, seize cargo ships and threaten any forces that seek to challenge Moscow's right to do this. After all, it may be impossible to "occupy" the Arctic, but Russia is developing assets that could deny it to anyone else.

This is, after all, simply an extension of its policies elsewhere, from Ukraine to Syria or Iraq: Cause the West problems, then offer to resolve those problems, in return for an appropriate "consideration." This may look like an ingenious approach for a country without the political authority, economic muscle or allies to be able to get what it wants. But there is also another word for it: extortion.

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