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# Will Ukraine Scupper Russia's Arctic Plans?

By Elizabeth Buchanan

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Last year saw Putin's Russia cement itself as an increasingly assertive international power. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its sustained aggression toward Ukraine resulted in an array of Western sanctions.

Oil prices slid and a wounded Russia entered 2015 in economic crisis. For now, it is difficult to predict what, if any, effect these events will have on Russia's Arctic strategy. It is, however, crucial to safeguard the Arctic from increasing tensions between Russia and the West.

Sanctions are not solely responsible for Russia's current economic crisis. Most of the responsibility sits squarely with the 2014 oil price dive. The oil dive exposed Russia's continued failure to diversify its economy away from an over-reliance on windfalls from oil and natural gas exports.

Russia's crisis is compounded by a system riddled with corruption. Despite the bleak outlook, Putin maintains high approval ratings, evidently the result of a population resilient

to economic hardship inculcated by Kremlin propaganda.

Meanwhile, U.S. sanctions on Arctic joint venture exploration have slowed Russia's Arctic production schedule. The Kremlin's claims that Russia can go it alone in the Arctic is deceptive — in reality Russia lacks both the cash and technology for sole operation.

The Arctic is not a short-term issue. It's still a long way from the top of the international agenda, attracting bursts of "new Cold War" rhetoric from time to time when a flag is planted.

Russia did just that in 2007, planting its flag on the Arctic seabed. For many that was a symbolic starting point for the Arctic scramble. For Russia, the Arctic represents a conduit for international prestige and perhaps more significantly — international relevance.

It is vital to understand the central drivers of Russia's Arctic ambitions, it is not simply a quest to expand Russian territory. Russian Arctic strategy is driven largely by normative factors such as the necessity to secure its vast Arctic border.

In fact, the Arctic represents a blueprint for U.S. engagement and cooperation with Russia. It is crucial the Arctic is safeguarded from souring U.S.-Russian relations. Both countries must hone in on areas of mutual interest in the Arctic.

The U.S. must engage Russia as an equal Arctic power and push for partnership. As the U.S. takes the helm of the Arctic Council — a high-level intergovernmental forum that addresses issues faced by the Arctic governments — a key objective must be to keep the window for cooperation with Russia open.

Potential conflicts are stirring as all five Arctic rim powers gather the scientific evidence to back their individual territorial claims — most of which are overlapping. Allowing existing U.S.-Russian tensions over Ukraine to spill into the Arctic arena will further isolate Russia.

During its 2015 Arctic Council chairmanship, the United States has the potential to develop a blueprint for cooperation with Russia and in doing so reset the reset. As the Arctic warms, perhaps the U.S.-Russian relationship will too.

Allowing U.S.-Russian relations to sour further and the failure to safeguard the Arctic from the fallout will further isolate the wounded bear. In doing so it will set the combative tone for our global Arctic future.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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