

RUSSIA'S INTERESTS IN THE ARCTIC: FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

In the last two decades, the Arctic is attracting more and more attention from regional as well as non-regional countries. This is primarily due to the fact that with the global warming, the natural resources and transport routes of the region become more and more accessible.

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In the last two decades, the Arctic is attracting more and more attention from regional as well as non-regional countries. This is primarily due to the fact that with the global warming, the natural resources and transport routes of the region become more and more accessible. Besides, in the Russian history, the North has always played a significant role in the cultural, economic, social and military spheres. Starting with the history of exploration and development of the Arctic region by the Russian state, this article is devoted to understand Russia's interests and policy towards the region, as well as the main challenges that the Russian Federation has been facing.

The History of Russia in the Arctic Region

The North Pole has always attracted the attention of travellers and explorers from different countries. Since ancient times, despite the incredible difficulties, these people have explored the cold Arctic and completed the world map with new discoveries. The Russian explorers and scientists played a significant role in the study and development of the Arctic. In order to understand Russia's current interests in the region, it is important to briefly look through the past.

The North has always played a special role in the Russian history. Six main periods in the exploration of Arctic by the Russian state can be distinguished. Although little known, the first attempts to reach the coast of the Arctic Ocean were made by Russian sailors back in the 11th century. The Nikon Chronicle¹ contains a record that the Novgorod mayor (Ru. *posadnik*) Uleb made a sea

voyage from the Northern Dvina to the "Iron Gate," though it is unknown whether it was the Strait of Kara Gates located between the islands of Vaygach and Novaya Zemlya or the Strait of Yugorsky Shar, which separates the island of Vaygach from the mainland. Later, in the 12th and 13th centuries, the Pomors, who are a sub-ethnos of the Russian people in the White Sea in the North of present-day Russia, mastered the territory of Vaygach Island and Novaya Zemlya, and at the end of the 15th century - the islands of the Spitsbergen archipelago and the Bear Island in the Barents Sea. In 1499, the first Russian polar city of Pustozersk was founded,² and later in 1584 the city Arkhangelsk, which was the main Russian Northern port until the 20th century, was founded by the decree of Ivan the Terrible. The name of the city comes from the nearby Archangel Michael Monastery, the history of which goes back to the 14th century. While on the subject, it should also be pointed out that the North played an important spiritual role in the Russian history, thus in 1429 the famous Solovetsky Monastery was founded and in 1533 the Pechenega Monastery was built.

The second period of the development of the Arctic was the 16th-17th centuries, when Russian merchants and the Cossacks mastered the Mangazeya sea route - from the Northern Dvina to Ob - which is a section of the modern Northern Sea Route. In 1601, by the Tsarist decree, the city of Mangazeya, which was a trade and military outpost of the Russian state in the Arctic, was built on the Taz River. At the same time, artisanal oil production began in coastal pits and on the surface of the water.

The third period, 17th-18th centuries, can be marked as a time of important historic discoveries. In 1648, the



Cossack Ataman Semen Dezhnev undertook a voyage along the coast of Chukotka, during which he discovered the strait between Asia and America. Later in 1728, during the First Kamchatka Expedition (1728-1729) organized by the decree of Emperor Peter I, Vitus Bering, an officer of the Russian fleet confirmed the presence of a strait dividing Chukotka and Alaska. In 1733-1743, the Russian Arctic was explored by the Great Northern Expedition of Vitus Bering, brothers Dmitry and Khariton Laptev, Stepan Malygin, Semyon Chelyuskin and others. Its participants, during sea and land voyage mapped almost the entire Russian coast of the Arctic Ocean, as well as the shores of the Okhotsk and Bering seas.³ In 1765, according to the plan developed by the Russian scientist Mikhail Lomonosov, the Arctic expedition of Vasily Chichagov was organized. The purpose of the voyage was to find a sea passage from Spitsbergen to Kamchatka through the waters close to the North Pole. Despite the failure, related documents of the expedition significantly enriched national science.

19th century and the beginning of 20th century can be highlighted as the fourth period in the exploration of Arctic by the Russian state. In 1820-1824, an expedition led by Ferdinand Wrangel and Fyodor Matyushkin surveyed the coast of the Arctic Ocean from the mouth of the Kolyma River to the Kolyuchinskaya Bay in Chukotka. In the same years, the polar explorer Fyodor Litke made a map of the Novaya Zemlya archipelago and described the shores of the White Sea. In 1826, Litke set off on the

“Senyavin” sloop on a voyage around the world that lasted three years. This expedition turned out to be one of the most successful in the 19th century, since a number of new islands were discovered, and the shores of Kamchatka were explored and described. In this period, other countries that had access to the northern seas were also active in an effort to explore and develop the North, which alarmed the Russian government. As a result, from the end of the 19th century, not only the programs for the scientific development of the North and the Arctic, but also for the resettlement of a larger number of residents there began. At the same time, important steps were taken to build up the military presence in the Arctic. In 1898, the first military port of Aleksandrovskiy was established in the Kola Bay of the Barents Sea, which today is the largest base for the Northern Fleet of Russia. In 1916, the city of Romanov-on-Murman was founded, which is now called Murmansk - the largest city in the world, located above the Arctic Circle.⁴ In 1900-1902, the Imperial Academy of Sciences organized the Russian Polar Expedition led by Baron Eduard Toll and Fleet Lieutenant Alexander Kolchak, during which a study of the New Siberian Islands was carried out. As a result, about two hundred new geographical names were put on the Arctic map. In 1913-1915, Boris Vilkitzky led a hydrographic expedition, where he discovered the Severnaya Zemlya archipelago, and then made the first ever voyage by the Northern Sea Route from Vladivostok to Arkhangelsk. On 25 April 25 1919, the government of Admiral Alexander Kolchak established the Committee for the

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the economic situation forced Russia to stop all activities in the Arctic region. From 1991 to 2001, there was not a single functioning Russian drifting station in the Arctic (the Soviet station North Pole 31 was closed in July 1991) and not a single expedition was made. There were no scientific research, either.

Northern Sea Route - the first state institution created to organize sea transportation in the Arctic.

During the Soviet period, there had been an active institutionalization of the research and development of the Far North. On 15 April 1926, a resolution was adopted by the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, according to which all lands and islands located in the Arctic Ocean north of the coast of the USSR and up to the North Pole belonged to USSR. This resolution was considered as a response to Canada's claim to the territory between its mainland and the North Pole made in 1925.⁵

In fact until 1982 the entire Arctic was divided between only five states - the USSR, Norway, Denmark, the United States and Canada - into sectors, the peaks of which were the North Pole, the bases were the northern borders of these states facing the pole, and the lateral sides were the geographical longitudes. After demarcating and legitimizing its territory in the Arctic, the USSR began rapidly populating and industrializing the region. By 1925, the Research Institute for the Study of the North was established, the task of which was to coordinate all research work in the Arctic. Later in 1958, the Institute was transformed into the Research Institute for the Study of the Arctic and Antarctic. In 1932, under the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR, the Main Directorate of the Northern Sea Route was created with the mandate of not only the economic development of the Arctic and ensuring navigation along the Northern Sea Route from the White Sea to the Bering Strait, but also of carrying out geological work and exploring useful fossils in the Arctic.

It is important to note that the Northern Sea Route played a special role during the World War II. It was a kind of 'road of life' for the Soviet Union, which received coal, non-ferrous metals, shells, transport, and food from the allies through the northern routes. In the post-war period, the government of the Soviet Union continued to

develop this region and its transport arteries, allocating significant financial and human resources. This was largely facilitated by the construction of a new generation of icebreakers powered by atomic energy. The first voyage of the nuclear submarine *Leninsky Komsomol* and the nuclear icebreaker *Arktika* were implemented in 1962 and 1977 respectively.⁶

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New period of Russian Arctic policy began in 1997 with the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982, according to which the territory of the state includes only the shelf, while the offshore zone is declared international. Article 76 of the Convention automatically sets the shelf boundaries at 200 nautical miles, but gives the state the right to claim a shelf extending beyond this boundary.⁸ With the advent of the new government in 2000, the revival of the Russian Arctic policy began. The work of drifting stations was resumed and the problems of the Arctic zone began to be actively discussed. New polar expeditions with the participation of international partners began to be carried out. Large research institutes were re-established, new roads, modern settlements, and meteorological stations were built.

In December 2001, Russia was the first country to apply to the UN Commission to expand the outer border of its Arctic shelf. The Russian Federation claimed that the underwater Mendeleev and Lomonosov ridges, located in the central part of the Arctic Ocean, are an integral part of the Eurasian continental platform, i.e. Russian. However, the UN Commission stated that, firstly, the map of the relief was drawn up insufficiently accurately and in detail, and secondly, that the Russia's substantiation of the continental nature of the ridges and, accordingly, their belonging to the Siberian shelf was not entirely convincing, for these reasons it rejected the application.

If the ridges are proven to be an extension of the mainland, then Russia would be able to own almost half of the Arctic Ocean, including the North Pole, which means 1.2 million square km of hydrocarbon-rich marine

sediments, the reserves of which are estimated at five billion tons of fuel equivalent.⁹

However, the rejection of the Russian application by the UN Commission did not lessen the attention to the Arctic and its problems, on the opposite the “Marine Doctrine of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2020” was approved by the President of the Russian Federation in July 2001, where the Arctic regional direction is singled out as one of the main regional directions of the Russian maritime policy. It is worth noting that in 2015 Russia applied to the UN Commission one more time but again could not obtain the desirable results.

Why Arctic Becomes Even More Important for the Russian Federation?

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Arctic, with its economic, geopolitical and geostrategic potential, has become a region of interests not only for the Arctic, but also for non-Arctic countries. The expiration in 2020 of a number of documents including the regulatory framework for the development of the Russian Arctic, launched a new wave of strategic planning. The plan for the development of the infrastructure of the Northern Sea Route for the period until 2035 was approved at the end of 2019. This was followed, in March 2020, by the approval of the –“Fundamentals of Public Policy of Russia in Arctic” for the period up to 2035. In October 2020, strategy for the development of the Arctic zone of the

Russian Federation and ensuring national security for the period up to 2035 was adopted. One of the main tasks outlined in these documents are “ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity,” “preserving the Arctic as a territory of peace, stable and mutually beneficial cooperation,”¹⁰ development and modernization of the armed forces and its infrastructure, creation of new and modernization of existing industrial production, and the development of science-intensive and high-tech industries.¹¹

So, what are the reasons of the importance of the Arctic region for Russia? Arguably, there are two main reasons, the first one is economic and the second one is military-strategic. It is well known that by reserves of the natural resources the Arctic is one of the richest regions in the world. The US Geological Survey reveals that the Arctic region contains at least 13% of the world's oil reserves, at least 30% of natural gas, as well as deposits of gold, diamonds, copper, nickel, coal and a long list of other resources, including scarce rare earth elements,¹² approximately half of which is on the Russian territory. Thus, the Arctic produces 80% of all natural gas and 17% of Russian oil, 90% of Russian nickel and cobalt, 60% of copper and almost 100% diamonds, rare and rare earth metals. The region accounts for about 10% of Russian GDP and 20% of total exports country,¹³ though only 1.95 million people live here - about 1.4% of the population of the entire country. As it was mentioned above since 2001 Russia has been trying to convince the UN Commission that Lomonosov and Mendeleev Ridges are



the continuation of the mainland, the reason of this struggle lays in the fact that the 1.2 million square kilometres area is rich in hydrocarbon. For a country, economy of which is highly dependent on the export of natural resources, primarily hydrocarbons, the fight for this territory is highly understandable.

Moreover, in the case of further ice melting, Russia can derive considerable economic benefits from the development and operation of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). According to the experts, by 2030 the waterways of the NSR will be free of ice for six months of the year. In the more distant future, between 2035 and 2050, the NSR will be fully navigable most of the year or even all year round without the compulsory accompaniment of icebreakers.¹⁴ The growth in the cargo volume can already be taken note of, thus in 2013 the traffic consisted of 2.8 million tons¹⁵, whereas in 2020 it was 33 million tons.¹⁶ Thus, in the future, the NSR will be able not only to ensure the functioning of the transport infrastructure of the Russian state connecting the European and Far Eastern parts of the country, but also become an alternative for the delivery of goods from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region in a much shorter route compared to traditional ones through the Suez Canal.

The next reason for Russia's increased interest in the region is the military-strategic importance of the Arctic region for the country's defence capability, which is determined by the fact that it is the shortest air route between North America and the strategic regions of Central Russia. In case of a confrontation between the West and Russia, the Arctic zone may become one of the main theatres of military operations. The declaration of the Arctic Ocean as neutral international waters, even taking into account the 200-mile exclusive economic zone, actually opens the Russian northern coastline for strikes by cruise and hypersonic missiles from ships and submarines of the NATO countries. It should be noted that over the past 10 years there has been a significant strengthening of the military presence of the Russian Federation in the Arctic. Thus, an important institutional measure in matters of providing military security of the Russian Federation in the Arctic was the creation of the united strategic command *Sever* (North) in 2014 based on the existing Northern Fleet. The purpose of the new command, which includes units of the naval and ground forces, naval aviation, as well as air defence forces, is to ensure the safety of the Russian Arctic. Moreover, the goal of its establishment was to create military camps and build airfields in strategically important areas of the Russian Arctic, namely, the Island Wrangel, Alexandra Land (part of the Franz Josef Land archipelago), Severnaya Zemlya, as well as Novaya Zemlya. In addition to establishing a new military infrastructure and modernizing the existing one, there is the creation of Arctic troops numbering in 10-12

thousand servicemen, the core of which will be the regiment of the naval infantry in Murmansk and a motorized infantry brigade in Pechenga. Together with the border units already deployed in the Arctic, number of which is 6.000 people, as well as 45-50.000 military personnel of Northern Fleet, the aggregate military potential will be a powerful argument in the event of a crisis in the region.¹⁷ It is worth noting that the increase in the military presence in the Arctic is considered by Russia not only as a tool to ensure the defence of its mainland from the possible attacks but also as a means to protect its dominance in the region in terms of extracting natural resources.

The Challenges for Russia in the Arctic Region?

It cannot be ignored that the Arctic region has the same importance for other Arctic countries, as well. In the context of the increasing geopolitical status of the Arctic, there has been a dangerous tendency towards the militarization of the region. This is manifested in the strengthening of the military presence of individual Arctic states, thus, for example, Norway is systematically increasing its military presence in the northern regions of the country, which includes the regrouping of individual units, and also an increase in tracking operations by submarine forces.¹⁸ Moreover, in the last three years the United States published three military strategies, in which the Arctic region has been declared as one of the most preferential theatres for building up the American military presence. This confrontation is quite challenging, since Russia needs to protect its Arctic territories in order not only to ensure its national security, but also in order to be able to defend its rights on territories rich in natural resources.

Secondly, with the ice melting, the region has already started attracting the non-Arctic countries that want not only to participate in economic and transport projects, but also to have a right to control and manage the region. Thus, for promotion of common interests in ensuring access to the resources of the Arctic, as well as the right to free use of the Northern Sea Route, the Asian Polar Research Forum with the participation of China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand and Malaysia was founded in 2004. China that has already been creating its own icebreaker fleet has fixed its eyes on the resources of the Arctic. The confrontation between the US, NATO, Russia and China seems to be a possibility in the new region.

Thirdly, deepening interests and involvement of non-Arctic countries in the region jeopardizes the status of the Northern Sea Route, which is currently fully regulated by Russia. Russia uses Article 234 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982, which allows the coastal states to establish national laws and regulations for navigation



in ice-covered areas within its exclusive economic zone to prevent or control environmental pollution. However, most foreign states are in favour of giving the NSR international status, i.e., removing it from the national jurisdiction of Russia and opening it to free navigation.

Fourthly, the unsettled nature of the Arctic maritime borders continues to be a serious source of international conflicts in this region and an obstacle to cooperation between different countries. All Arctic countries try to extract as much benefit as it can in terms of delimitations of the region leading to confrontation between the countries rather than facilitating cooperation. For example, the United States is trying to benefit from the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which it did not ratify while Norway and Denmark use this Convention to extend their maritime borders.

Finally, until 2014 Russian energy companies actively cooperated with Western companies for the joint development of energy resources in the Russian North. However, sanctions, which were introduced by the Western countries as a response to the Russia's annexation of Crimea and destabilization of the situation in Ukraine, forced foreign companies to leave joint projects with Russia. This created a number of serious technological prob-

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lems that affect not only the country's technological independence, but also the economic security of Russia. These are the main and the most important challenges, which Russia faces. It is also worth noting that the realization of the objectives in the region is inhibited by shrinking population in the Russian Arctic Zone, lagging quality of life, high occupational risk, low transport infrastructure and so on.

Conclusion

For centuries Russia has been playing an important role in the development and exploration of the Arctic region and now, in some cases, try to preserve its unique status in the region. In a world where limited resources

are the most important factor in ensuring the economic development of the states, with the melting of ice, the Arctic region became a subject for new disputes and confrontations between the main geopolitical actors. Especially, this region rich with natural resources has significant importance for countries, economies of which are dominantly dependent on these resources. Despite the fact that the official representatives claim that Russian economy is getting off the 'oil needle,' the economic development of the Russian Federation is still determined by gas and oil exports and their prices.

With its increasing importance, militarization of the region is also happening at a rapid pace. For Russia, the Arctic has military-strategic significance, as well. As it was

mentioned above, it is the shortest distance from the USA to the strategic political and economic regions of Central Russia. Thus, to be able to confront any possible attack and to ensure its sovereignty, Russia is interested in the development of its military forces and infrastructure in the North.

Due to the economic and military-defense importance of the region, Russia will continue its presence in the Arctic, despite all challenges it is facing with. Due to its capabilities it seems that soon the Arctic region can become a dominant factor in the policies of different countries, which will make Russia even more assertive in its actions in the region.

Endnotes

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