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## Literature Review on Russia's Strategic Intentions Since 2015

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The military buildup by Russia in the Arctic has been a dominant theme in newspaper headlines about the region in recent years. The Russian government often acts provocatively and assertively in the area. At the same time, it frequently acts co-operatively in the Arctic. It continues to participate fully in the Arctic Council, despite the breakdown in the relationship between it and the United States. What does academic literature say about Russia's military buildup, and its greater strategic intention in the Arctic?

There are four main explanations for Russia's behaviour given in recent academic literature: 1) Russia seeks to act provocatively in the Arctic to regain its great power status; 2) President Vladimir Putin's provocative action in the Arctic and beyond increases his domestic popularity; 3) Russia seeks to act co-operatively in the Arctic to maximize potential economic gains, and; 4) the basic facts of the Arctic region encourage co-operation in general, which explains Russia's congenial behaviour contrasted to other regions.

### Russian Great Power Status

A dominant theme in academic literature since the end of the Cold War is that a desire to re-assert Russia as a great power drives government foreign policy (Kolesnikov, 2015; Trenin, 2016). As political

scientist Elias Götz (2016) writes, "One group of observers argues that Russia is a revisionist state bent on overturning the post-Cold War order in Europe" (251). According to a report from the RAND Corporation (2017), annexing Crimea in 2014 was a long-term goal of Russia and political upheaval in Ukraine presented a moment of opportunity (19).

An assumption in this literature is that governments seek to expand their national power. Russia lost much of its power following the collapse of the Soviet Union and so the recent investment in Arctic bases, military equipment and capabilities could be an attempt to reclaim some of its power. In this interpretation, the intention of new military spending is not to respond to a threat or launch an attack, per se, but rather to assert regional power and enhance global status.

The desire of the Russian government to re-assert the country as a great power could also explain moments of co-operation. Political scientist Marlene Laruelle (2020) writes, "Russia sees the Arctic region as a place to reassert its prestige and status as a great power, declaring that it prefers dialogue and international co-operation to confrontation" (5). Arctic activity promotes Russia's greater strategic ambition.

## Putin's Domestic Popularity

Scholars argue that appeals to Russian nationalism explain Russia's foreign policy actions; the invasion of Crimea and other provocative actions have been moves by Putin to increase his domestic support (Kolstø, 2016; Sherlock, 2020). The Russian media and general discourse supports Putin's version of events (Pasitselska, 2017; Teper, 2016). Its Arctic action could fall into the same pattern.

Leon Aron from the American Enterprise Institute (2017) writes that Putin has "sharply shifted the basis of his popularity—and thus his regime's legitimacy—from economic growth to patriotic mobilization" (77). Political scientist Andrei Piontkovsky (2015) writes, "Putin has created a long-term ideological system he can use to justify his role forever, because it is a very long-term program" (8).

However, it is difficult to prove personal intention. Political scientist Tor Bukkvoll (2016) notes limits to this hypothesis:

Putin's desire to thwart the downward trend of his popular approval rating may also have played a role. This argument is consistent with the timing of events, and it involves the substantial issue of the content of the Russian social contract. Nevertheless, firm evidence in support of this argument demands an insight into Putin's thinking not yet available (280).

The argument is logically convincing, but difficult to support with empirical evidence (for example, Laruelle, 2015).

## Russian Economic Gains

A third dominant theme in academic literature explains that there is a lot of co-operation in the Arctic between Russia and the West, despite its

military buildup and issues such as the Crimea annexation and election meddling. This co-operation persists for economic reasons (Lanteigne, 2019; Laruelle, 2020: 5-6).

Russia suffered a monumental economic collapse in the late 1990s. The Arctic, with its billions of barrels of oil and shortest shipping routes between Asia and North America, is a potential economic driver of the future. Political scientist Mark Lanteigne (2019) writes, "Russia under President Vladimir Putin has moved to develop the Arctic as a major component of efforts to boost the Russian economy."

The economic potential of the Arctic region is a major reason that Russia has co-operated in the Arctic Council. Russia has used the Council as a body to build economic infrastructure for the region. Examples are the 2011 Arctic Council agreement on search and rescue co-operation, along with the 2013 Arctic Council agreement on response to oil spills, which partly came about to assuage concerns that plans to respond to emergencies were lacking (see Chater, 2015).

## Arctic Co-operation

A common explanation for Arctic foreign policy posits that the exceptional nature of the region demands co-operation, as the issues present (such as environmental protection, infrastructure provision, research coordination and continental shelf exploration) are largely technical in nature. This technocratic situation compels all Arctic states, including Russia, to co-operate (Chater, 2016; Roberts, 2015).

An assumption is that co-operation is more likely when dealing with "low politics," or policy areas that do not involve vital state concerns and survival. Co-operation is more likely on policy areas such as search and rescue or environmental protection

(that deal with negative externalities), rather than military security, where co-operation inherently means a loss of autonomy.

Political scientist Michael Byers (2019) compares the co-operation between the West and Russia in the Arctic to Outer Space. For example, scientific collaboration and Russian ferrying of American astronauts to the International Space Station has continued in recent years, just as Russia's participation in the Arctic Council did not decrease in the wake of the Crimea annexation (Chater, 2016). Byers provides eight reasons for Arctic co-operation:

The Arctic and Space are remote and extreme environments [that necessitate co-operation]; (2) the Arctic and Space are militarised but not substantially weaponised; (3) the Arctic and Space both suffer from 'tragedies of the commons'; (4) Arctic and Space-faring states engage in risk management through international rule-making; (5) Arctic and Space relations rely on consensus decision-making; (6) Arctic and Space relations rely on soft law; (7) Arctic states and Space-faring states interact within a situation of 'complex interdependence'; and (8) Russia and the United States are resisting greater Chinese involvement in the Arctic and Space (33).

What about the recent global COVID-19 crisis? The Chair of the Senior Arctic Officials, Einar Gunnarsson of Iceland, has said that the work of the institution will continue during this time of uncertainty; he also has pointed to work the Council does sharing information on human health (Gunnarsson, 2020). Currently, there are cases in every part of the Arctic, and each Arctic jurisdiction has put into place social distancing plans and states of emergency (Daniels and Menezes, 2020). This case demonstrates the highly technocratic nature of many governance areas in the Arctic region. It

could lead to even greater collaboration on human health.

## Conclusion

All four explanations likely have some validity, which demonstrates that Russia's Arctic strategy operates on multiple levels. Russia has increased its international provocation in a bid to re-establish itself as a great power, or even superpower, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It appeals to Russian seeking a renewed national power. Its Arctic military procurement is part of this larger strategy.

At the same time, Russia needs the Arctic region to become more important economically as part of its financial recovery following the depression of the 1990s. International co-operation, in the Arctic Council and beyond, provides resources to help make this aspiration a reality. Provocation has damaged Russia's economic standing with the West, but co-operation can still enhance potential investment in the region (from, for example, China).

A related reason for co-operation in the Arctic region is the very technocratic nature of the issues. The vast majority of the work of the Arctic Council, for example, is scientific and environmental in nature. The institution carries low burdens of membership. There is no compelling reason for Russia, or any other state, to leave the institution; it does not address issues that affect international standing or power, in a realist sense.

In future years, Russia could increase its Arctic provocations. However, co-operation is likely to continue in the Arctic Council, on environmental and economic matters. Health is an emerging area. Military buildup could eventually make economic co-operation impossible, just as economic rationales could lead to improvement in relations.

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