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Positioning Russia in the Circumpolar Arctic: Narrative, (De)Legitimizing Discourses, and a Framing Environment

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Russia will assume the chair of the Arctic Council for a two-year term beginning on 20 May 2021. The importance of the event for Russia cannot be overemphasized. Russia has been purposefully preparing for this opportunity to showcase its dominating “Arctic-ness.” Last year alone, Russia has published a suite of Arctic strategies and regulations. The country has recalibrated and reorganized Arctic-focused political leadership and governance at the federal and regional levels, and realigned Arctic-related public- and private-sector actors with Russian national priorities. Moreover, the Russian apparatus has consistently and authoritatively delivered a clear and crafted Arctic narrative, and its upcoming chairmanship provides significant opportunities to promote its messaging, influence agenda setting, and command attention toward the Arctic on its terms.

On 15 January 2021, *Kommersant* (Коммерсантъ, or *The Businessman*) – a liberal business-oriented Russian media outlet - [published an interview with Russian Senior Arctic Official \(SAO\) Nikolay Korchunov](#). As SAO, Ambassador Korchunov serves as the member-State Russian Head of Delegation to the Arctic Council. The question and answer session provides revealing insights, headlined with the reassuring declaration that “there are no problems in the Arctic that require a military solution.” In this context, the senior official uses “Arctic” to refer to the circumpolar world – as Russia has unquestionably invested in its Arctic military capabilities over the last decade and has promoted these efforts extensively in terms of both dual civilian-military benefits and broader Russian deterrence and national defence missions.

The other Arctic states should welcome parts of this message. The overall tenor is positive, reiterating Russia's commitment to the Arctic Council as the top international forum for Arctic issues not related to military or "hard" security. Korchunov notes that Russia's chairmanship priorities for 2021-23 will focus on sustainable development, including:

"The need to improve the living conditions of the people of the Arctic region, adapt life at high latitudes to climate change, conserve biodiversity, as well as the economic development of the Arctic, accompanied by large-scale projects for the extraction and processing of natural resources, intensification of freight traffic along the Northern Sea Route, the growth of tourism and trade, require the collective efforts of all participants in the Arctic G8."

This is an expected blending of both specific Russian national interests (promoting shipping along its Northern Sea Route) with efforts of common regional interest appropriate to the circumpolar forum. Furthermore, detailed discussion of environmental imperatives, Indigenous rights (economic, cultural, and linguistic), and science are both self-promoting as well as consistent with a broader cooperative circumpolar vision and agenda.

The Russian ambassador also confirms Russia's position – which the Arctic coastal states (the "Arctic 5") collectively espoused in the [2008 Ilulissat Declaration](#) – that "we do not see the need for any separate universal international treaty on the Arctic," given that "the current international legal framework is sufficient to regulate international relations in the region." The Declaration, which the Arctic 5 have subsequently reaffirmed, unequivocally rejects the need for an Antarctic-like treaty or similar sovereignty-related instrument (a position that recent [Russian strategy documents](#) maintain). Instead, Russia is open to the prospect of "sector- or industry-specific agreements ... which would formalize cooperation on, say, environmental, transport, telecommunications, scientific activities, financing of infrastructure and socio-economic development, responding to potential emergencies, or providing contacts between people." Korchunov's statement is also reserved and pragmatic, not committing to produce any binding international agreements under Russia's chairmanship (given that "we have already gone through a period of intensive formation of the treaty and legal framework for multilateral cooperation in the Arctic region") while remaining open and "ready to organize a comprehensive discussion of possible proposals in this regard if they are received." This is an astute approach, hedging against over-promising when broader international dynamics may preclude some other Arctic states from giving Russia what might be perceived as easy "wins" during its chairmanship.

The official Russian narrative also continues to promote language introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in his landmark [1987 Murmansk Speech](#) calling for "a genuine zone of peace and fruitful cooperation" in the Arctic. In response to questions about Arctic militarization, the Russian SAO insists that "Russia will strive to strengthen Arctic cooperation and preserve the Arctic as a zone of peace and constructive cooperation, for which contacts at the highest level are certainly useful." This is consistent with Russia's official messaging over the last two decades, which seeks to parse Arctic cooperation from competition and even conflict with the West in other regions. Russia's actions in the Arctic have also matched Korchunov's statement that "our country firmly adheres to the line of diplomatic resolution of all controversial issues, including territorial and other differences, as recorded by the 'five' coastal Arctic states in the Ilulissat Declaration of 2008, and has been repeatedly

emphasized in subsequent statements.” Accordingly, there is no reason to doubt his statement that Russia sees “no point in raising the issue of militarization separately” within its chairmanship of the Arctic Council, given that it is “a civil forum for cooperation” mandated with the primary task of “sustainable development of the Arctic region” – and that the 1996 Ottawa Declaration that established the council explicitly [excludes military security](#) issues from its agenda.

While the ambassador repeatedly emphasizes that “we assume that there are no problems in the Arctic that need to be solved militarily,” he also uses the statement to call for a resumption of military-to-military dialogue on Arctic security issues. In recent years, Russia has signalled its interest in an Arctic collective security forum that bridges the divide between Russia and the West has invited discussion and debate. While some commentators believe that NATO (an alliance that Russia despises) should be the default lead for such efforts, others consider that traditional mechanisms like the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) and the Northern Chiefs of Defense (NCHoDs), which have been cancelled or in which Russia has not participated since 2014, offer a natural path forward. Unfortunately, [Western bias pervades many of the proposals](#) emanating from outside Russia, leading to a potential mismatch in expectations. In this case, Korchunov suggests that:

Russia, in order to prevent the degradation of the military and political situation in the Arctic, supports the resumption of the annual meetings held until 2014 by the Chiefs of General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Arctic States. This would be an effective measure to build confidence and security in the region. As a first step to the restoration of this format, it would be possible to consider the possibility of organizing a dialogue at the level of military experts of the member countries of the Arctic Council, which could discuss such issues as establishing operational cooperation to prevent incidents in areas outside the territorial sea, joint search and rescue operations at sea, the elimination of the consequences of natural disasters and man-made accidents, the creation of direct lines of communication with the commands of the armed forces of the Arctic States to prevent the military activities, the participation of observers in operational and combat training activities.

What the ambassador avoids is why military-to-military relations are frozen, namely Russian aggression and illegal behaviour in Ukraine and elsewhere. By calling for renewed military-to-military dialogue with the West, Korchunov can claim both that Russia is seeking military confidence-building in the Arctic – an admirable goal – and, implicitly, that the West’s hardline against Russia’s behaviour elsewhere (including its sanctions) should be replaced by a “return to normalcy” in the Arctic. In our reading, this reflects a carefully crafted Russian strategy to use Arctic regional relations as a wedge to stabilize a new status quo where Russia’s revisionist behaviour elsewhere in the world is isolated from Arctic relations (which would illegitimize Western sanctions) or where “normal” Arctic relations suggest that the other Arctic states are implicitly accepting of this international behaviour. The other Arctic states’ responses to Russian overtures require sophisticated, nuanced narratives that promote stable, peaceful Arctic relations but do not excuse or legitimize unacceptable Russian behaviour elsewhere.

Unsurprising, but telling, is the senior official’s response to the question: “From Moscow’s point of view, who is primarily responsible for the growth of conflict potential in the Arctic?” The answer begins with the idea that

“as the ice melts and the region is more accessible, there has been an increase in military presence and activity in both the Arctic and non-Arctic NATO member states. As a result, the potential for conflict is really growing in the Arctic.” This is a more dire assessment of the regional situation than the ambassador offered previously, allowing him to cast blame on NATO and other non-Arctic states that are allegedly “militarizing” the region and provoking Russia. “Over the past five years, NATO countries are estimated to have doubled the number of military exercises and other high-latitude combat training,” Korchunov highlights. “The armed forces of non-Arctic NATO member states, as well as non-North Atlantic States, are increasingly involved,” and “there is a build-up of foreign contingents stationed in the territories of the countries belonging to this military and political bloc.” He selectively omits any reference to Russia’s own military exercises, creation of new Arctic combat units, investments in defence infrastructure, and training and weapon testing/showcasing activities.

Accusing NATO of fomenting Arctic militarization and destabilizing regional security are common themes in Russian media and social media. While NATO frames its growing Arctic interest in terms of the need to meet a growing Russian military footprint in the region and resurgent great power competition more broadly, Russian sources typically adopts the opposite lens and suggest that the Western alliance is seeking to intimidate Russia. Korchunov cites a “NATO strike group, consisting of American and British ships” in the Barents Sea in May 2020 as a “clearly provocative” act under what he intimates is a false “pretext of ‘ensuring the security of trade and freedom of navigation.’” There is no reference whatsoever to Russian air and military patrols near Norwegian territory and maritime areas, which have increased in scope and intensity in recent years. Instead, since 2014, Russian official sources typically frame countries such as Norway as mere extensions of NATO and the United States rather than as independent Arctic actors with their own security concerns. Alongside suggestions that a US-dominated NATO covets Russian Arctic resources, does not respect Russia’s sovereignty and sovereign rights in the region, and has shown a consistent tendency since the end of Cold War to expand into former Soviet space, this provides a compelling justification for Russia to enhance its Arctic defences. Articulating narratives critical of NATO also serve core Russian goals to secure popular support for strategic military investments that serve broader deterrence missions and to undermine alliance cohesion.

When asked about Russia’s increasing Arctic military presence, Korchunov paints a purely benign and defensive portrait:

The measures taken by the Russian Federation in the Arctic are conditioned by the importance of this region for the national security and economy of our country, because in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation more than 10% of GDP and 20% of Russian exports are produced. At the same time, our goal is to ensure security and stability for the implementation of large-scale economic projects and to ensure the socio-economic development of the Arctic zone in the face of increasing interest in the region from a number of states, including non-Arctic ones. Russia’s military activity in the Arctic does not violate any international obligations, is not directed against any of the countries of the Arctic region and does not pose a threat to their national security.

The narrative insists that Russia has legitimate economic and social reasons to defend its Arctic, while implying that the other Arctic states do not enjoy the same legitimacy. This is an important underlying current in Russian messaging suggesting that its Arctic interests are foremost in the circumpolar world, and that it bears a

responsibility to defend its sovereign interests while the other Arctic states have no reasonable need or grounds to do so.

When the Russian journalist interviewing the ambassador pushed back with the logical retort that “I am sure that NATO explains its actions and plans in the same words,” Korchunov intimates that Russia alone has been the most predictable and credible Arctic actor. “Unlike a number of other countries” (which he leaves unspecified), he insists that:

Russia has consistently advocated the formation of a system of strict adherence to international law in the Arctic region, strictly adheres to the spirit and letter of the relevant conventions, expresses interest in preserving the region as a zone of peace, stability and constructive cooperation, as reflected in the Ottawa Declaration, as well as a joint final statement of ministers signed at the ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council in Rovaniemi on May 6, 2019.

A senior official reiterating Russia’s strict adherence to and respect for international law and existing governance mechanisms is welcome and reassuring. The suggestion that the Russian position is long-established, while failing to acknowledge how other Arctic states also articulate similar positions predicated on international law and the defence of the national interests, is less so. In short, instead of framing Circumpolar [Arctic militarization as a security dilemma](#), Korchunov blames NATO and other Arctic and non-Arctic states by invoking equivocation as a formal fallacy. In his messaging, Russia bears no responsibility for heightening the risk of conflict in the Arctic. This is disconcerting logic, serving a narrative that seeks to discredit the other Arctic states (and particularly those in NATO) while placing Russia as the responsible, predictable, law-abiding Arctic actor.

Our intent with this careful reading of the interview in *Kommersant* – in which we applaud the journalist for asking probing questions that could be directed to many Arctic states and stakeholders – is not to cast derision or to point fingers at Korchunov or the Russian government and their Arctic efforts. Instead, it illustrates the imperative to carefully analyze narratives and strategic communications that affect and shape the information domain in the Arctic. During its Arctic chairmanship, Russia is likely exploring avenues of how it can use Arctic narratives and relationships to facilitate a “return to normalcy” and frame the dialogue in a manner consistent with its national priorities and interests. Strategic messages intended to encourage further rapprochement with other Arctic countries align with an institutional norm/practice within the Arctic Council that regional cooperation in the region should be buffered from external conflict where possible. They are also crafted to advance national self-interest and solidify frames that position Russian as the *most* legitimate Arctic rights-holder. How the other Arctic states respond to such framing activities and advance a cooperative agenda while countering narratives that are prejudicial to their interests and values remains an enduring challenge – and one that we anticipate will become increasingly critical over the next two years.