

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES



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The Development of the Russian Arctic Council Chairmanship: A Strategic Plan of Preparation and Pursuit

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The Arctic Council turns 25 this year as unquestionably one of the most successful multilateral regional and international bodies of our times. Its success is based on common interests and efforts of the Arctic States, clear agenda and the rules of the game, as well as reasonable flexibility to meet new challenges. Russia intends to build on this success, including the excellent outcome of the current Icelandic Chairmanship which had to overcome unprecedented pandemic-related difficulties, to lead the Council into its second quarter century.

The Russian Chairmanship will also be motivated by the national Arctic Strategy updated in 2020 for the period up to 2035. It provides for a major step forward in development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and welcomes mutually beneficial cooperation of Russia with its Arctic partners and, besides, interested non-regional states.

Anton Vasiliev, "Priorities of the Russian Chairmanship of the Arctic Council 2021-2023," 29 March 2021¹

The Arctic has changed considerably since the last Russian chairmanship of the Arctic Council 16 years ago. As strategic competition intensifies, leadership opportunities take on heightened salience as a way to realize northern ambitions. The two-year chair of the premier forum for regional dialogue and cooperation opens a window for a country to highlight and promote its Arctic interests and accomplishments.

The Russian Federation's preparations for the chairmanship of the Arctic Council in May 2021 are revealing. In late October 2020, President Vladimir Putin approved the "Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Ensuring National Security for the Period through 2035."² Although the casual observer might dismiss this document as yet another Arctic strategy recasting old ideas with fresh rhetoric, the importance of the timing and substance of this Russia strategy is not lost on Arctic expert stakeholders. The

Russian government sequentially released three major Arctic national documents in 2020 that lay out direct requirements and intent across political, military, economic, social, and environmental security sectors. Concurrently, the Kremlin decisively arranged its Arctic political leadership and national advisory groups. Throughout, Russian leadership effectively scripted Arctic national priorities and developed them into narratives, which were synchronized across relevant sectors. With the major players and pieces in place, Russia has positioned itself to make the most of the leadership opportunity afforded by its upcoming Arctic Council chairmanship. What are potential implications for the geopolitics of the Arctic region? Do circumstances indicate a deviation from the course of “competitive coexistence”³ that has traditionally guided Russian-Western relations?

In this *Strategic Perspectives*, we consider areas of Russian Arctic national priority, contextualize the latest strategic documents, and provide perspectives on current and near-term opportunities for Russia with respect to Arctic strategic policies and behavior. The three key policy documents in Russia's updated plan for the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF), when read together, provide essential insights into Russia's broader Arctic strategy. On this basis, we anticipate how Russia is likely to seize opportunities to highlight its Arctic developments and priorities in carefully crafted language during its 2021-23 chairmanship of the Arctic Council, with a goal of expanding and enhancing its self-defined position in the Circumpolar North. It has set the major pieces in place to pursue a *legitimizing* campaign, and the world can expect clear, consistent themes and messaging that emphasize the Arctic's importance for Russia – and the centrality of Russia in regional affairs. Russia will likely link issues that are a normal part of Arctic Council business with ancillary activities to promote its national security priorities. This is part of an overarching strategy that does not seek to revise Arctic governance structures or undermine regional peace but represents Russia's strategic ‘center of gravity’ for the Arctic, designed to showcase the importance of its northern priorities and interests. We recommend that other stakeholders continue to refine their understanding of Russia's ambitions under these circumstances and further develop potential responses as needed. In so doing, Western nations can better manage Russia's strategic narrative goals that seek to leverage its comparative advantage as the largest Arctic actor and the primary host of the Arctic Council for two years.

Russian Arctic Strategy in Context: Updating Russia's Strategic Plan for the AZRF

Russia has solidified development of its comprehensive strategic plan for the Arctic region over the past year. In March 2020, Putin signed the "The Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic through 2035"⁴ which outlines key goals and Moscow's Arctic agenda, including a focus on exploitation of natural resources.⁵ Following this direction, the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic submitted a draft implementation strategy for the government's consideration in May 2020.⁶ The third document, released on 26 October, outlines the mechanisms to realize the ‘State Policy’ and ‘Socio-Economic Development’ plans in the Arctic. “Most of the challenges tabled in terms of developing the Russian Arctic are indeed domestic in nature,” political scientist Elizabeth Buchanan observes, which is predictable given that the

strategic document is dedicated to developing Russia's Arctic zone.⁷ The documents provide both bureaucratic guidance as well as the primary content from which internal actors can develop and deliver consistent narratives.

In 2019, veteran analyst Pavel Baev of the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) observed that Russia's two-track Arctic policy pursues "poorly compatible tracks of expanding military activities and committing to international cooperation." Russian commentators would likely point to similar dynamics in the regional policies of the other Arctic states as well. Similarly, they might apply Baev's observation that "Russia's Arctic policy, as it is officially formulated and interpreted in mainstream Russian commentary, [features] an astounding amount of exaggeration and inflated threat assessment." Baev's evidence, however, identifies specific hallmarks of Russian narratives that were subsequently reflected in their 2020 strategic documents:

The volume and value of natural resources on the Arctic shelf, particularly hydrocarbons, is grossly overestimated without meaningful Russian data, so that the only reference point even for informed Moscow experts is the appraisal of US Geological Survey from 2008, which is habitually misinterpreted. The appetites of international oil companies are perceived as insatiable, and the struggle for resources, as well as for access to transport routes, is identified in the Foreign Policy Concept (2016) as a key driver for escalation of global tensions. Expeditious growth of international shipping in the Northern Sea Route (Sevmorput) is confidently predicted, despite the miniscule volume of transit traffic in the 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 navigations. The most dramatic of all exaggerations, however, is about the intensity of external military threats to Russia's interests in the Arctic.⁸

Baev's nuanced critique also explains why Moscow's "oscillating" commitment to circumpolar cooperation "should not be taken for a mere camouflage for Russia's military buildup in the High North." Stakeholders such as Gazprom and Rosneft understandably seek to promote Arctic exceptionalism that brackets out regional relationships from resurgent strategic competition between Russia and NATO and brings an end to sanctions hindering cooperation with Western energy companies. Furthermore, Russian investments to promote the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a major international transportation artery would not benefit from increasing geopolitical uncertainty in the region.⁹ Russia's strategic documents thus reflect two-track messaging promoting both international cooperation and the perceived need for robust national defences.

Domestic priorities

The October 2020 "Strategy for Developing the Russian Arctic Zone and Ensuring National Security until 2035" situates the region in the country's broader socio-economic development and national security goals. It specifies objectives for development, implementation stages and mechanisms, and expected results. Explicit goals include a reiteration of Russia's commitment to comprehensively develop seaport infrastructure and shipping routes in the waters of the NSR and the Barents, White, and Pechora Seas. The policy mentions several significant threats and challenges that create risks for the development the AZRF, including intensive climate change, decreasing birth rates and migration to the region, poor access to public services, and higher risk of diseases.

The strategy is comprised of a series of lists that articulate economic, social, political, and security priorities and objectives. It begins with a statement of Arctic exceptionalism from a Russian national perspective, emphasizing specific characteristics that demand “special approaches to its socio-economic development” in the AZRF and to “ensure national security in the Arctic”:

- a) extreme natural and climatic conditions, extremely low population density and low development of transport and social infrastructure;
- b) high sensitivity of environmental systems to external influences, especially in the places of residence of the minority Indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation (hereinafter referred to as "Indigenous peoples");
- c) climate change contributing to the emergence of both new economic opportunities and risks for the economy and the environment;
- d) stable geographic, historical and economic ties with the Northern Sea Route;
- e) uneven industrial and economic development of certain territories of the Arctic Zone, focus of the economy on the extraction of natural resources and their shipment to industrially developed regions of the Russian Federation and export;
- f) high resource intensity of economic activity and essential services for the population, their dependence on the supply of fuel, food and other vital goods from various constituent entities of the Russian Federation;
- g) growing potential for conflict in the Arctic.¹⁰

This lays the foundation for Russia to build its case for why the AZRF is important for socio-economic development and national security, with a deliberate emphasis on oil and gas resources (both terrestrial and on the continental shelf), expectations of heightened demand for the NSR “as a transport corridor of global importance,” climate change effects on the environment and security, the presence of Indigenous peoples, and Russia’s positioning of strategic deterrent forces in the region.

The strategy is notable for articulating specific targets for improving social outcomes in the Russian Arctic, beginning with the modernization of health care and education, the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage and Indigenous languages, improved economic opportunities and social security, and the “creation of a state support system for the delivery of fuel, food, and other vital goods to settlements located in remote areas.” This reinforces how the Kremlin considers its northern population to be vital to its strategic goals, and has integrated input from a wide range of capable and trusted advisors. Specific sections then set out main objectives for infrastructure development (with a heavy focus on the NSR), science and technology, environmental protection and environmental safety, emergency and disaster response, and public safety (including anti-extremism and anti-terrorism, anti-drug enforcement, and crime prevention).¹¹ As the Minister for the Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic Alexander Kozlov highlighted, this amplification of socio-economic development priorities and deliberate region-specific approach to implementation (in contrast to previous pan-AZRF strategies) distinguishes this strategy from its predecessors.¹²

The strategy provides a detailed list of main objectives to develop international cooperation, which are worth reproducing in light of Russia's upcoming Arctic Council chairmanship:

- a) implementation of multi-vector foreign policy activities aimed at preserving the Arctic as a territory of peace, stability, and mutually beneficial cooperation;
- b) ensuring mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral cooperation of the Russian Federation with foreign states, including under international treaties, agreements, and conventions to which it is a party;
- c) formalizing the outer boundary of the continental shelf in international legal terms and maintaining interaction with the Arctic states to protect national interests and implement the rights of a coastal state in the Arctic provided for in international acts, including those related to the exploration and development of resources of the continental shelf and the establishment of its external boundaries;
- d) ensuring Russian presence in the Svalbard archipelago on the basis of equal and mutually beneficial cooperation with Norway and other states of the Svalbard Treaty of February 9, 1920;
- e) assisting with enhanced efforts by the Arctic states to create a unified regional search and rescue system, prevent anthropogenic disasters and manage their consequences, coordinate the activities of rescue forces, and ensure interaction of the Arctic states within the framework of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum;
- f) developing and implementing programs for economic and humanitarian cooperation of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation whose territories belong to the land territories of the Arctic Zone with the regions of the Arctic states;
- g) supporting the active participation of Russian state and nonprofit organizations in the work of the Arctic Council and other international forums dedicated to Arctic issues;
- h) ensuring the effective operation of the Arctic Council under the chairmanship of the Russian Federation in 2021-2023, including the promotion of joint projects, including those aimed at ensuring sustainable development of the Arctic and preserving the cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples;
- i) support in strengthening ties between the Indigenous peoples living in the Arctic Zone and the Indigenous peoples living in the Arctic territories of foreign states and convening relevant international forums;
- j) promoting the well-rounded development of the young generation of Indigenous peoples through educational, humanitarian and cultural exchanges with young people from other Arctic states;
- k) developing general principles for the implementation of investment projects in the Arctic Zone with the participation of foreign capital;
- l) organizing events aimed at attracting foreign investors to participate in the implementation of economic (investment) projects in the Arctic Zone;
- m) contributing to the strengthening of the role of the Arctic Economic Council as one of the central forums for sustainable development of the Arctic;

- n) developing and implementing, by Russian organizations together with foreign partners, of basic and additional professional educational programs related to the development and exploration of the Arctic;
- o) ensuring the implementation of the Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation; and
- p) creation and promotion on the Internet of a multilingual information resource dedicated to the development of the Arctic Zone and Russia's activities in the Arctic.¹³

In contrast, the list of main objectives for military security, defence, and border protection is shorter, committing to “improve the composition and structure of Armed Forces” in the AZRF, maintaining an appropriate level of combat readiness “in compliance with the actual and forecast military dangers and threats faced by the Russian Federation in the Arctic,” equipping forces with modern weapons and special equipment adapted to Arctic conditions, developing base infrastructure and logistics, and promoting the “use of dual-use technologies and infrastructure to achieve a comprehensive solution to defense objectives in the Arctic Zone.”¹⁴ While military considerations are subordinated to other priorities in this document, Sergey Sukhankin reminds that they still “constitute one of the central pillars of Russia’s overarching approach to the High North and will be the main recipients of financial outlays from the federal center.”¹⁵

The strategy concludes with a detailed three-stage implementation plan, with specific targets to measure results at each stage. The “unified action plan” would involve coordinated action by “federal government bodies, executive bodies of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, local government bodies, state academies of sciences, other scientific and educational organizations, funds for supporting scientific, technical and innovative activities, nonprofit organizations, state corporations, state companies, joint stock companies with state participation and the business community.” President Putin will oversee “the general management of the implementation of this Strategy,” thus ensuring centralized control.¹⁶

To implement the strategy, Putin reshuffled his government on 9 November 2020 with a strong nod to the Arctic.¹⁷ Minister of Transportation Yevgeny Dietrich was relieved owing to lagging NSR developments. Dmitri Kobylkin was relieved from natural resources and the environment ministry, likely because of the major fuel spill in Norilsk in May 2020¹⁸ and the marine pollution incident in Kamchatka that October.¹⁹ The Minister of Development of the Far East and Arctic, Alexander Kozlov, replaced Kobylkin as Minister of Natural Resources and Environment,²⁰ and Alexei Chekunov was advanced to the Minister for the Development of the Far East and Arctic. On 25 November 2020, Putin signed a decree to establish the Committee on Russia’s Chairmanship in the Arctic Council in 2021-2023, with Presidential Plenipotentiary, Yury Trutnev, assigned as the committee chair.²¹

These political changes represented an attempt by Russia to refresh its Arctic image. Recent environmental disasters in the AZRF have undermined Putin’s longstanding efforts to promote a pristine Arctic environment over which his government promised effective stewardship. Putin accordingly used the government shuffle to signal that Russia’s Arctic aspirations are serious Kremlin objectives. Anyone internally or externally who

undermines and/or interferes with Russian Arctic goals should be prepared to face severe consequences. Not all changes in the Arctic-related government structure seemed as deliberate, such as First Minister Alexander Krutikov's sudden resignation from the federal Ministry for the Development of the Far East and Arctic (where he was expected to have a prominent role as part of the Russian leadership of the Arctic Council).²² In addition to national efforts, regional levels also received attention when the Kremlin combined two ministries to establish the Ministry for the Development of the Arctic and Economy for the Murmansk Region – an area that serves as an epicenter of Arctic public- and private-sector interests.²³

Showcasing Russian Policy Efficiency

Russia's recent strategies are about more than preparing for its Arctic Council chairmanship. Moscow understands that policy does not need to be perfectly clear in order to be effective – indeed, deliberate ambiguity is a normal part of high-level policies. National policies often need to factor in international implications and objectives, which helps explain why policies take considerable time to develop and approve. Thinking in terms of national interests can reveal the rationale behind the use of particular language in strategies. What is *not* stated or is unclear in strategies and policies can be even more disclosing than what is included. Strategy is “at least as much about choosing what not to do as it is about choosing what to do.”²⁴ Russia is exceptionally deft at using nuanced language and intent. For example, the meaning of ‘escalate-to-deescalate’ in Russia's nuclear policy²⁵ has confounded Western scholars and authorities for years, with implications for their strategic advice and planning.²⁶

In an authoritarian state with significantly centralized powers, Putin and the Kremlin face little governmental resistance or social interference when enacting core strategies. Unlike the democratic West, Russia does not need civic buy-in and public deliberation. Nor do election concerns and consequences matter the same way that they do in liberal democracies. For the West, inclusivity remains the hallmark of a healthy relationship between society and government. Embracing viewpoint diversity and dissent, however, can impede strategic coherence and cohesiveness, particularly when multiple strategies must be synchronized across various stakeholder groups to achieve optimal national objectives. By contrast, even when autocratic leaders pursue the wrong course of action, they can publish new strategies to adjust course while their subordinates suffer the brunt of blame. With regard to Russia's new Arctic strategy, members of Duma (депутаты Госдумы) reportedly were not consulted or given opportunity to deliberate or contribute to development.²⁷

Two-Track Messaging: National Security and Regional Development Narratives

In mid-October 2020, the Russian Deputy Chairman of the Security Council, former Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, read a carefully prepared statement regarding Russia's national security interests of the Arctic.²⁸ The Western media quickly confused and conflated the language, indicating that Russia would make national security a core part of its Arctic Council agenda during its chairmanship.²⁹ At no point in the prepared statement read by Medvedev, however, did the Deputy Chairman state that Russia would bring up national security issues

as part of Arctic Council business. Instead, the timing and vocabulary used by Medvedev offers the key to understanding the meaning and expectations of the statement.

The content in Medvedev's statement meets the definition of securitized overtures, explained by international relations scholar Rens van Munster as when an actor: 1) claims that a referent object is existentially threatened, 2) demands the right to take extraordinary countermeasures to deal with that the threat, and 3) convinces an audience that rule-breaking behavior to counter the threat is justified.³⁰ Medvedev's statement was intended for a particular audience, namely high-level decision makers and diplomats with Arctic responsibilities, and reinforces how Russian strategic messaging follows a Kremlin-approved plan. Medvedev's statement was also a reminder of Russia's national priorities leading up to its Arctic Council chairmanship.³¹ The statement demonstrates how to use proximity to the Arctic Council efficaciously.

Russia's recent Arctic behavior should be analyzed as part of a grand *legitimizing strategy*. Like all of the Arctic states, it seeks to define the region in its preferred terms. It does so by publishing the definitions, conditions, and circumstances that facilitate Russia's national interests as a norm- and condition-establishing venture.³² The goal is to get other Arctic stakeholders to internalize and repeat the language and narratives that Russia is promoting, particularly Russia's self-perception as the largest, strongest, most developed – and most legitimate – Arctic player.

Simply calling all Russian messaging 'propaganda' would be a mistake. For Russia, engaging both domestic and foreign audiences with information usually fits one of two purposes: 1) пропаганда (propaganda), or 2) агитация (agitation), which translates as "campaigning" (the typical political activity normally associated with domestic politics).³³ Whereas propaganda is understood in the traditional sense (when the information involved can and should be questioned), агитация represents a less pernicious use of information. In this sense, the West should conceptualize Russia's Arctic Council chairmanship akin to a two-year long campaigning effort in a surge attempt to convince domestic and foreign audiences to support Russia's position in the Arctic. Accordingly, Western analysts should expect Russia to engage effectively in the information domain, no matter how different the perspective from that of Western states.

Russia's Upcoming Arctic Council Chairmanship

Russia's upcoming Arctic Council chairmanship³⁴ offers a key opportunity for agenda-setting. The chair's power over the agenda allows that country to sequence and steer discussions to their advantage. Because the Arctic Council is a consensus organization, all member states must consent to the agenda as well as other outputs where the Arctic Council first speaks with one voice. Nonetheless, the Arctic Council chairmanship represents a two-year massive public relations opportunity, during which the chairing state can showcase its "Arctic-ness." At the same time, the chair's messaging and narratives present opportunities to reach deeper into domestic as well as foreign audience in attempts to dominate the conversation.

On 29 March 2021, former Russian Senior Arctic Official and Ambassador to Iceland Anton Vasiliev outlined the four priorities of the Russian Chairmanship:

- the Arctic inhabitants, including Indigenous peoples;
- environmental protection and climate change;
- social and economic growth;
- further strengthening the Arctic Council – the key framework of international Arctic cooperation.

Vasiliev insists that “the game plan conceived by Russia has many ideas, but no surprises,” given that “the Arctic Council is a collective body operated by consensus. It treats in a balanced way the two designated areas of the Arctic Council mandate – environmental protection and sustainable development.”³⁵

The elaboration of the four Arctic priorities connects directly to Russian strategic objectives, particularly enhanced economic cooperation; investments in Arctic urban infrastructure, health care, education, Indigenous welfare; and the “restoration of consensus in the Arctic Council on climate change” – a thinly veiled critique at the Trump Administration’s stance during the last ministerial meeting in Finland in 2019. Furthermore, the strong emphasis on the “rational use of natural resources,”³⁶ presented in the language of stewardship and socio-economic wellbeing, reinforces Russia’s strong emphasis on further energy resource development (as Vasiliev discussed early this year).³⁷ Promoting the NSR as a priority for “safe and beneficial all-season navigation” and enhancing search and rescue capacities also dovetail with national priorities. Ultimately, in illustrating “the serious, holistic and constructive approach of Russia to its forthcoming Chairmanship,” Vasiliev ends with the declaration that “*Russia bears special responsibility for the state of affairs in the Arctic* and counts on support from its regional partners” (emphasis added).³⁸

The absence of any reference to strategic competition or the “growing potential for conflict in the Arctic” (as asserted in its October 2020 strategy) is unsurprising. Opportunities to invoke national security issues as part of Arctic Council deliberations and activities remain implausible – and ultimately counterproductive – for Russia as chair. During official Arctic Council events such as working group, plenary, and executive sessions, members are explicitly not permitted to discuss matters of military security as per the 1996 *Ottawa Declaration*. Such issues cannot even be introduced to the agenda and offering an ‘off-script’ intervention involving hard security issues would represent a significant breach in protocol.

Instead, we expect that Russia will use its leadership role to schedule Arctic-related events before, during, and after Arctic Council-proper activities. At a minimum, the chair can host the Sustainable Development Working Group meetings as well as the Senior Arctic Officials meetings on its home soil. It is common practice to take a high-visibility event and leverage the opportunity to further engage with visiting officials and expand the audience. For example, during the Arctic Council Ministerial meeting in Fairbanks in 2017, other major international events like Arctic Science Summit Week (ASSW) and Arctic Observing Summit (AOS) were held at the same time.³⁹ Such activities are often misreported or implied as Arctic Council-affiliated in order to gain attraction. However, ministers are not beholden to the Arctic Council mandates and protocols, thus allowing them to deliver comments however they wish. The most recent bold example was Secretary of State Michael

Pompeo's decision to deliver surprising remarks at the Arctic Council ministerial meeting in Finland in May 2019, stating that "China's pattern of aggressive behavior elsewhere will inform how it treats the Arctic" and Moscow's claim over the NSR and its efforts to expand its military presence in the Arctic served as justifications for "fortifying America's security and diplomatic presence" in the region, including with new military exercises and icebreakers.⁴⁰ It is reasonable to anticipate that Russia will propose non-Arctic Council events, co-located and co-timed with formal Arctic Council gatherings, which it will use to highlight its interests and achievements, as well as strategically communicating its national priorities in the Arctic.

The process begins with backwards planning (to borrow a concept from military planning), which the Kremlin's recent strategy publications indicate is well under way. If we subscribe to the idea that Russia is seeking to affirm and enhance its *legitimacy* as a primary objective, backwards planning helps to unpack the process.⁴¹ For Russia, the 'ends' is to entrench international legitimacy for its national Arctic priorities. The chairmanship offers the 'ways.' The 'means' include not only official messaging associated from Russia as chair, but also extra-curricular agenda items co-located and co-timed with Arctic Council-proper events. Looking out to May 2023, when the Arctic Council ministers will sign their final statement at the end of Russia's chairmanship, represents the 'time on target.' Discerning Russia's desired end state for that moment, when it will seek to showcase how Russia has demonstrated its "special responsibility for the state of affairs in the Arctic" (to borrow Vasiliev's quote) over the previous two years, provides us with a benchmark to effectively prepare for and, when necessary, counter Russian narratives as that country pursues its national and international Arctic ambitions.

Notes

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