Polar Record

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Russia's Arctic policy: Upcoming change?

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Research Article

Cite this article: Staun J. Russia's Arctic policy: Upcoming change? *Polar Record* **59**(e31): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247423000220

Received: 15 December 2021
Revised: 1 August 2023
Accepted: 16 August 2023

Keywords:
Arctic; Russia; sovereignty; strategic culture; resource base

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Abstract

Russia's Arctic policy since 2008 has been influenced by two competing foreign policy lines (discourses): the "Arctic as a resource base" and the "sovereignty discourse". The "Arctic as a resource base" has been the dominant one since the first Russian Arctic Strategy in 2008. It is primarily about exploiting the vast oil and gas resources estimated to be located there, as well as turn the Northern Sea Route into a "global transport corridor". In Russia's Arctic Strategy of 2020, however, there is enhanced emphasis on sovereignty and power balancing in Russian Arctic policy. And the focus on sovereignty was heightened with the amendments to Russia's Arctic Strategy in March 2023. This increased emphasis on sovereignty, territorial defence and balance of power in Russian Arctic policy is likely to be further reinforced by the growing great-power competition between the USA and Russia, which has gained new momentum following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Introduction

Russia's Arctic policy is displaying emerging signs of a shift towards an increased emphasis on securing sovereignty and territorial integrity. Most likely, this is happening due to increasing great-power competition in the Arctic, rooted in growing mutual distrust and uncertainty between Russia and the USA, exacerbated by the fall-out over Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Indeed, the USA has in the last few years been building up its military capabilities in the Arctic, citing "aggressive" behaviour by Russia (and China) in the Arctic and referring to several years of Russian military build-up in the region (Johnson, 2019). Russia, for its part, has declared that it will not sit idly by and watch other countries, above all the US and NATO member states, militarise the Arctic. Moreover, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 there were already signs that the Russian elite believed that increased militarisation characterised the most likely trajectory for the region. After the invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing enhanced great-power competition (or proxy war) between Russia and the West, this view seems to affect the Russian policy in the Arctic and enhance the risk that Russia and the USA will be caught in an Arctic security dilemma (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978), in which mutual distrust and uncertainty will further sharpen the great-power competition between the two countries.

Since 2008, Russia's Arctic policy has been guided by two competing policy lines (discourses): the "Arctic as a resource base" and the "sovereignty discourse" (Staun, 2017, 2021). The "Arctic as a resource base" has been the dominant one since the first Russian Arctic Strategy in 2008 (President of the Russian Federation, 2009a, 2013). This discourse is mainly about exploiting the vast oil and gas resources projected to be located in the Arctic (Åtland, 2009; Staun, 2017). However, in the Russian Arctic Strategy 2020 (President of the Russian Federation, 2020a) the "sovereignty discourse" with its weight on national interests, territorial defence and power balancing has taken first place. This did not herald an outright policy change in itself, as safeguarding Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity has always been a central part of its Arctic strategies, but the security agenda moved up a notch. With the amendments to the strategy in March 2023, the weight on sovereignty and national interests was enhanced further. In the original 2020 Arctic Strategy, Russia emphasised strengthening cooperation within multilateral forums such as the Arctic Council, the Arctic Coast Guard Forum and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. In the amended version, this was replaced by a focus on "developing relations with foreign states on a bilateral basis", "taking into account the national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic" (President of the Russian Federation, 2023).

This discourse on sovereignty is underpinned by a sense of vulnerability and a wish to be a great power militarily by the Russian political and military elite. Thus, throughout Putin's term of office, Russia has harboured the ambition to become a great military power again, not least in the Arctic.

How should we understand this "two-sided" Russian policy in the Arctic and this gradual shift, which we may expect to be furthered by the heightened great-power competition between Russia and the West? The present article attempts to answer this question by using an IR-constructivist reading of Russian strategic culture as a model to interpret Russia's Arctic policy. Thus, this introduction is followed by a literature review and a short section on a constructivist reading of Russian strategic culture. What is used here is a kind of inside-out-

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247423000220 Published online by Cambridge University Press

driven foreign policy model: Russian foreign and security policy is here seen, at least in the short and medium term, as a result of processes within Russia (the Russian elite) and as a result of Russia's encounter with the outside world. The analysis then addresses the first two fundamental and relatively fixed discourses in Russian strategic culture that deal with Russia: the "great-power ambition" and the "sense of vulnerability". Next, the analysis focuses on two Arctic-specific discourses that are slightly more in flux and mutually competitive, namely the "Arctic as a resource base" and the "sovereignty discourse". After this, a short section on how the invasion of Ukraine has affected the discussion on the Arctic followed by a conclusion.

Literature review

There exists a vast and growing body of literature on Russia's Arctic policies. Firstly, a large part of the literature focuses on Russia's military build-up in the Arctic and how to deal with it (see, for example, Åtland, 2018; Boulègue, 2019; Kjellén, 2022; Melino & Conley, 2020; Odgaard, 2022; Zysk, 2020) and the question of whether Russia is a status-quo or a revisionist power in the region (see, for example, Grajewski, 2017; Konyshev & Sergunin, 2014). Some of the studies focus on whether there is a security dilemma building in the Arctic (see Åtland, 2014; Kjaergaard, 2018; Wilhelmsen & Hjermann, 2022; Wither, 2021). For detailed studies on the nuclear weapons of Russia's Northern Fleet, see (Zysk, 2015). For studies of the strategic significance of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), see (Kruglov & Lopatin, 2020). For studies on Russia's national or regional security interests in the Arctic, see (Gavrilov, 2019; Sidnyayev, 2017). For studies in how Russia views forthcoming Arctic threats, see (Khomkin, 2020) or on how Russia plans to defend the "choke points" along it, see (Auerswald, 2019). Parts of the literature focus on whether or not there is an "Arctic Exemption" – the question of whether or not the Arctic region is and can remain a region of peace and cooperation (a question which was most vigorously discussed after the first war in Ukraine in 2014) (see, for example, Byers, 2017; Konyshev et al., 2017; Kristensen & Sakstrup, 2016; Rahbek-Clemmensen, 2015). We are starting to see literature on the consequences of Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine on the Arctic (see (Kendall-Taylor et al., 2022; Koivurova & Shibata, 2023; Wall & Wegge, 2023). Another part of the literature focuses on how to stay engaged with Russia and secure a cooperative or non-conflictual Arctic (Pezard et al., 2017). Some studies interpret Russia's national interests in the Arctic (Gavrilov, 2019). There are some studies on Russia's decision-making processes when it comes to Arctic policies (see Berzina, 2015; Boulègue & Kertysova, 2020; Sergunin & Konyshev, 2019) and some works on what role Russian identity and discourse have on its policies in the High North (see Godzimirski & Sergunin, 2020; Laruelle, 2014; Sørensen & Staun, 2023; Staun, 2017). But there is an obvious lack of studies on how Russian strategic culture affects its policies in the Arctic. This article will partly seek to remedy this.

IR constructivism and Russian strategic culture

Social constructivism is a philosophical movement that spread to the social sciences, including the study of international relations, during the 1980s and onwards. IR constructivism believes that we should take culture, ideas, values and language seriously when studying international relations. Indeed, national interests are not natural, nor are they constructed out of thin air. Instead, they are shaped by the self-perception of the state – or state elite – and its view of the world, which – in the case of Russia – is shaped by the Russian elite's experience of Russia's encounter with the world. Moreover, this self-perception shapes the scope of a country's foreign policy (Larsen, 2017, pp. 170–177; Wæver, 2005).

One way to use IR constructivism to analyse a country's foreign policy is through the concept of strategic culture. This concept originates with Jack Snyder, who used it to study Soviet nuclear strategy during the Cold War (Snyder, 1977). However, the concept is not limited to this. In another influential work in the strategic culture literature – which seems inspired by IR constructivism – Alastair Iain Johnston argues that most proponents of strategic culture would agree that elites socialised in different strategic cultures will make different choices when placed in comparable situations. Since cultures are "attributes of and vary across states, similar strategic realities will be interpreted differently" (Johnston, 1995, p. 35). In this article, strategic culture is defined as authoritative discourses regarding strategy across different, key power elites. For a similar approach, see Libel (2018) and Lock (2018). Here, we focus only on power elites within the same state, Russia. The word strategy is understood broadly as relating to matters of high importance to the state. The state's "key discourses on strategy" concerning Russia's foreign and security policy and its policy in the Arctic can be studied by systematically reading the main documents in this order of precedence: The National Security Strategy, the Military Doctrine and the Foreign Policy Concept, as well as documents and laws translating these into policy. Also, when it comes to Russia's interests in the Arctic, one should consult the Russian Arctic Strategies, which – even more than the above strategies – are characterised by extensive compromises between a wide range of ministries and agencies, with the Presidential Administration and the Security Council (including, in particular, the Arctic Commission of the Security Council) as the main ones (Sergunin & Konyshev, 2019, p. 9), regional authorities, parliamentarians, etc. Also, further down the line, there are speeches from key politicians. We do not have access to what the key politicians say in closed meetings, but we do have access to what they say in public. Moreover, constructivism assumes that over time there cannot be significant inconsistencies between the positions politicians take and the concepts they use in closed meetings and the ones used in public speeches; not without it sooner or later becoming noticeable to the attentive analyst. Here, then, we follow an assumption of Wittgenstein about the impossibility of private language (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp. 243–313). In general, a discourse analytic approach is non-individualistic. Discourses are social meaning systems that individuals (who are linguistic actors) must draw on in order to communicate at all (and be understood by others) (Larsen, 2017, p. 71).

The principal politicians concerning its Arctic policies in today's Russia are President Vladimir Putin, head of the National Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. When it comes to developments in the Arctic, former Prime Minister (and interim President) Dmitry Medvedev, as head of the Arctic Commission under the National Security Council, should also be included. Other voices, such as the head of the Russian State Commission for the Development of the Arctic, First Deputy Prime Minister and Presidential Envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District, Yury Trutnev, and the Minister for the Development of the Far East and Arctic, Alexei Chekunkov, should also be included. At the bottom of the ranking are speeches by less important people – for example parliamentarians, defence analysts or polar scientists, who

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247423000220 Published online by Cambridge University Press

participate in the debate on Arctic affairs and are listened to by the elite. In the following, we first review two basic and relatively fixed discourses that apply to Russia in its entirety – the "great-power ambition" and the "sense of vulnerability". We then review two Arctic-specific discourses – "the Arctic as a resource base" and "the sovereignty discourse" – which are more in flux, subject to intense competition among power elites, and therefore not nearly as fixed. Thus, the article does not contain a "broad" content analysis of Russia's strategic documents but only follows the development of a select (but important) set of discourses and how they affect Russia's Arctic policy: Namely, the "great-power ambition" and the "sense of vulnerability", followed by two Arctic-specific discourses, the "Arctic as a resource base" and the "sovereignty discourse". Following this, Russian Arctic policy interests and concrete practices resulting from these two discourses are examined. Thus, the work here is based on the assumption that discursive structures can be analysed as discursive layers, where some discourses are more fundamental (and more stable), while other (less rooted) discourses change more frequently through political struggles.

Analysis: The Russian great power narrative and the Arctic

The great-power ambition and the Russian sense of vulnerability

If there is one consistent Russian narrative of what Russia is and should be, which has remained constant over the years under the leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin, it is the notion that Russia is, or should again be, a significant great power in the international system (Neumann, 2008; Poulsen & Staun, 2018; Tsygankov, 2008). This narrative has been present in all major Russian strategy papers over the years, where the ambition has evolved from being little more than a regional "great power" to being "a leading world power". Thus, Russia's Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 refers to Russia as a "great power, as one of the most influential centres of the modern world" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000). The 2008 Foreign Policy Concept states that Russia's "increased role" in international affairs and "increased responsibility for global developments" make it necessary to "rethink the priorities of Russian foreign policy" (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008). The 2009 National Security Strategy refers to Russia as a "world power" (President of the Russian Federation, 2009b). The 2015 National Security Strategy states that Russia aspires to be "a leading world power" (President of the Russian Federation, 2015). The 2021 National Security Concept refers to Russia as "one of the most influential centres in the modern world" (The President of the Russian Federation, 2021).

Furthermore, the great power discourse can be seen in a number of Putin's speeches and in the speeches of other members of the Moscow elite, for example, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. For further examples, see Lavrov (2016), Patrushev (2014, 2015), Putin (1999, 2007, 2014) and Shoigu (2018a). Moreover, the notion is widely shared not only by the elite but also by large segments of the population (Levada Centre, 2019). To the great power discourse belongs a whole set of conceptions of how the world works, and how one should understand international politics. Thus, the Russian elite to a significant extent hold a "Hobbesian view of the world", as Robert Legvold (2007) has put it. They see the world as a dangerous place and the international system as anarchic, where each state must look after itself or perish. This also makes the Russian elite pay great attention to the relative distribution of power in the system, especially the power distribution between the major powers.

Russia is highly critical of the unipolar world order, in which the USA and the rest of the West have been the dominant actors in the last decades. The Moscow elite believe that the world already is or is becoming multipolar, that is with several great powers, where Russia is one of the major powers. At the same time, they believe that the most stable order is one in which the major powers dominate in their own regions, which the other major powers must keep out of – not unlike the American Monroe Doctrine. Implicit in the great-power ambition is a demand for recognition, particularly from the West, which many in the elite believe Russia has only begun to receive in recent years, following its military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and in the Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. Until then, the elite believe the West never took Russia's protests seriously, for example, when NATO expanded eastwards in 1999 and 2004; or when NATO intervened in Kosovo in 1999, or when the US and a 'coalition of the willing' states, went into Iraq in 2003. Both times without a mandate from the UN Security Council.

Another important parameter in the portrayal of Russian strategic culture is Russia's basic sense or feeling of insecurity. According to Stephen V. Covington (2016, p. 13), the Russian political and military leadership share a basic feeling of geostrategic and technological vulnerability. The vast Russian territory – over 17 million km^2, a land border of just under 20,000 km and a coastline of over 37,000 km, much of it in the Arctic – is in Russian strategic thinking seen as almost impossible to defend everywhere, at any one time. The sense of vulnerability is probably also a result of historical lessons learned from the two wars of existence in modern times in which Russia (and the Soviet Union) has been involved. In both cases, the enemy came from the West across the Ukrainian and Belarusian plains: Napoleon (1803–1815) and Hitler (1941–1945). Furthermore, during the Cold War, the threat from the West was also the dominant one. Covington (2016, p. 13) argues that this has become entrenched as a perception of Russia as strategically vulnerable. For a similar view, see McNab (2019). For a classic viewpoint on the subject of Russian (Soviet) insecurity, see Kennan (1947). This perception is further fuelled by a fundamental fear of being technologically inferior to the West, not least concerning weapons technology. In the military doctrines, the fear of US and NATO technological superiority primarily concerns threats to Russia's nuclear retaliation capabilities, not least from the US Prompt Global Strike concept and from US and NATO anti-ballistic missile shield plans. The 2000 Doctrine thus identifies "disrupting the functioning of strategic nuclear forces, missile-attack early warning, antimissile defense, and space monitoring systems" as an "external threat (ugrosy)" (President of the Russian Federation, 2000, p. #5). The 2010 doctrine identifies "the creation and deployment of strategic missile defence systems", "the militarisation of outer space' and "the deployment of strategic nonnuclear precision weapons systems" as "external dangers (opasnosti)" (President of the Russian Federation, 2010, p. #8d). In the 2014 doctrine, these formulations are repeated and supplemented with a specific designation of "the implementation of the 'global strike' concept" (President of the Russian Federation, 2014, p. #12d). The nuclear doctrine has similar formulations (President of the Russian Federation, 2020b). This reflects a growing concern among the Russian political and military elite about the strategic effect of non-nuclear-tipped long-distance missiles (Alyoshin et al., 2016, p. 16; Gareev, 2013; Kartapolov, 2015). Thus, the sense of vulnerability is also about a perception that Russia lags behind in its

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ability to wage conventional war against an adversary like the USA and NATO due to perceived technological backwardness on the Russian side. For further examples on this debate, see Chekinov & Bogdanov (2012, p. 22) and Kartapolov (2015).

Key Russian discourses on the Arctic

The Arctic has historically played a significant role for Russia's identity, whereas Greenland is geographically separate from Denmark, as Alaska is from mainland USA; where the Arctic for many years has played only a marginal role in both Danish and American politics, the Arctic is an integral part of Siberia and a central part of Russian identity. Furthermore, just as the discovery and conquest of Siberia have played a central role in Russian state identity over the centuries – the Ural Mountains were crossed in 1582, the Pacific Ocean was reached in 1680, Alaska came under the Russian Tsar in 1741 (and sold to the USA in 1867) – so have the great voyages of discovery in the Arctic had an impact on Russian and Soviet identity. For example, the Soviet popular culture myth of the "Red Arctic", where Arctic mining towns were hailed as outposts of Soviet civilisation that had "cleared the table" and built society from scratch. Polar explorers were regarded as, and named, heroes by the Soviet Union. Although much of the Soviet myth collapsed with the Soviet Union, the Russian right, in particular, has held on to the myth of the Arctic as an original, unspoiled region (including racially) (Laruelle, 2012). For examples on this, see Dugin (2015) and Prokhanov (2007). Moreover, key players in the Kremlin regularly hail the importance of the geographical expanse of the Russian Arctic. As Putin has put it, "When we say big, a big country – size matters, of course . . . If there is no size, there is no influence, no significance" (Putin quoted from Laruelle (2014, p. 24)). In the best heroic style, the Russian press regularly reports on Arctic expeditions, anniversaries, on the development of new military bases in the Arctic or on the testing of new weapons systems specially designed and developed for the difficult Arctic conditions (Izvestia, 2021; Karnozov, 2020).

The essence of these debates is that the Arctic plays a special identity role for Russia in two ways: 1) The Arctic is seen as the place where Russia can recover from the 1990s derailment and secure its greatness and great power position by exploiting the expected enormous resources of the subsoil. As Putin has argued: "the Far East and the Arctic are the regions in which Russia's future lies" (President of the Russian Federation, 2022b). 2) In recent years, sovereignty has become a priority when discussing the Arctic, and the risk of losing control of the Russian Arctic is being talked about as if this would constitute losing control of a central part of Russia or Russia itself. For some years there was some debate, particularly in military circles, concerning whether or not Russia risks fighting for resources in the Arctic, including militarily (Gerasimov, 2013; President of the Russian Federation, 2009b, pp. 11–12), a notion which is also specified in the National Security Strategies 2015 and (to a lesser extent) 2021 (President of the Russian Federation, 2015, p. #13; The President of the Russian Federation, 2021, p. #16).

The Arctic as a resource base

The notion of Russia's role in the Arctic has for several years been shaped by the idea of the Arctic as a kind of economic "bonanza" just waiting to be found and developed. An area where Russia can ensure the continued financing of the state's economic policy – and thereby also support its great power dream – even as Siberia's oil and gas fields are slowly but surely depleted. Thus, for many years, the main Russian interest in the Arctic has been to use the Arctic as a "resource base" for the Russian state economy (President of the Russian Federation, 2009a, p. #4, 2013, p. #11) – essentially underpinning its great power claim. This discourse can also be found in the Arctic Strategy of 2020, only ranked slightly lower (President of the Russian Federation, 2020a, p. #5d). The discourse of the "Arctic as a resource base" is primarily about ensuring the development and support of the Russian state economy through the extraction of oil and gas in the Russian Arctic regions, as well as the extraction of minerals and metals and the capture of fish. There are of course other policy priorities in the Arctic Strategy, such as securing the fragile Arctic ecosystem and improving the quality of life of the people living in the Russian Arctic zone, but they are ranked lower. To support the economic development of the Russian Arctic, and to promote international shipping in the Arctic, Russia wants to see the development of the NSR for civilian shipping. Putin originally would like to see the tonnage carried from Asia to Europe and back again via the NSR increase tenfold to 80 million tons by 2025 (Putin, 2018), something Russia has had much difficulty bringing about, but which is being worked on diligently by the authorities. In 2022, the target was increased 200 million tons a year by 2035 if all the companies involved "manage to fulfil their plans", as Presidential Envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District Yury Trutnev told the president at an Arctic meeting (President of the Russian Federation, 2022b). This goal seems to be too optimistic, especially in light of the renewed Western sanctions after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Russia also wants parts of the route to be recognised as national waters – partly so the Russian state can better tax it, but mainly so Russia can better control who uses the shipping route, something the USA strongly opposes and says it will challenge at some point (Humpert, 2019; Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, 2019). After the French naval vessel *Rhône* in September 2019 managed to transit the NSR from Tromsø in Norway to Dutch Harbour in Alaska without an icebreaker escort, somewhat surprisingly and without prior warning to the Russian authorities, Russia subsequently adopted the rules regulating shipping traffic along the sea route – the main ones being the Merchant Shipping Code and the Rules of Navigation in the NSR (Todorov, 2022, p. 2). According to the rules, foreign vessels must obtain permission from the Russian authorities before entering the NSR. Civilian ships must notify the Russian authorities 45 days before the transit and accept a Russian pilot on board (Staalesen, 2019). There is some debate as to whether or not these rules apply to warships. Russian expert Vylegzhanin argues that "so far, Russia has applied its NSR regime to all ships" (Todorov, 2022, p. 2). Todorov argues that the Russian rules only apply to civilian vessels, the reason being that the Russian rules are based on The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) article 234, and that this only applies to civilian ships (Todorov, 2022, p. 2). During most of 2021 and again in July 2022, the Russian defence ministry advocated for a law specifying a notice of first 45 days and then 90 days prior to transit in Russian territorial waters for foreign military vessels, including rules under which the Russian authorities may suspend such transit (RIA-Novosti, 2022). Todorov argues that this underlines the Russian understanding that UNCLOS art. 234 only applies to civilian ships. Otherwise, there would be no need for such legislation.

Lastly, but no less important, Russia wants its claims to the area beyond the 200 nautical mile limit recognised – which constitutes a significant overlap with the claims of the Kingdom of Denmark.

In the discourse of the "Arctic as resource base", the Russian Arctic is described as an area of economic growth, trade and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247423000220 Published online by Cambridge University Press

international shipping, and the debate contains some of the same optimism about the future that characterised the Soviet myths of the Arctic as "tabula rasa". The whole Arctic is described as an area where the UNCLOS applies and where states follow the international rules of the game. One of those who has notably subscribed to this discourse is Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov: at a meeting of the Arctic Council in May 2013, Lavrov, almost paraphrasing the 2013 Arctic Strategy, said that he was "pleased" to note that all the Arctic strategies of the Arctic littoral states, which are anchored in the Arctic Council, could only be realised "through close cooperation with partners in the region". He then stressed the Russian view that all the issues and questions regarding the Arctic region that have not yet been addressed "will be resolved by the Arctic countries based on the existing and rather sufficient international and legal basis and, of course, good will" (Lavrov, 2013). This policy line makes perfect sense when you look at how Russia's elite describes its economic interests in the Arctic. Thus, the notion of the "Arctic as a resource base" gives Russia a strong interest in securing the Arctic as an area for cooperation and trade in peace and harmony. On the one hand, resource extraction in the Arctic requires long-term investment, which requires financial stability. Moreover, many known oil and gas fields are located in hard-to-reach offshore areas, which initially led Russia to invite Western energy companies to participate in the development of the fields (President of the Russian Federation, 2013). However, after the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, which prompted the first set of Western sanctions, there have been restrictions on what Western companies may participate in, and many of the previous cooperation agreements have been scrapped. For example, since July 2014, there have been restrictions on the transfer of technology and equipment for drilling in deep water, depths exceeding 150–152 m, and Western energy companies have been banned from participating in the development of oil fields on continental shelf reefs in the Arctic. Western banks have also been closed to loans of more than 100 days, significantly increasing interest rate pressure (Klimenko & Sørensen, 2017). Instead, the Russian policy line has been to replace Western companies with Chinese energy companies and companies from other East Asian countries. Nevertheless, as interest rates on Chinese loans traditionally are substantially higher than loans in Western banks, and as the price of oil within a few years fell from over $100 a barrel of Brent oil to less than the half, there was little progress in developing especially the more difficult to access offshore fields. The renewed war in Ukraine in 2022 affected an energy price hike for some time, only for the prices to fall again due to lack of demand as Europe stopped buying Russian oil. Gas prices also plummeted as the surge in US shale gas supply flooded the market, which is why some of the optimism about offshore fields, which characterised the Arctic strategies in 2008 and 2013, was toned down. Instead, Russia initially concentrated on developing the known and more accessible onshore fields, above all on the Yamal Peninsula. In 2020 Gazprom, the Russian state gas conglomerate held 32 licences in the Yamal area, containing an estimated 26.5 trillion m^3 of natural gas (Staalesen, 2020a). Rosneft, the other Russian state energy company with a licence for offshore operations in the Russian Arctic zone (but which focuses on oil), has a majority stake in 28 offshore licences in the Russian Arctic and, in 2022, discovered a huge oil deposit in the Pechora Sea (Wenger, 2022). And if the energy prices stay high – at the time of writing a barrel of Brent oil costs $85 – and if Russia can find new consumers to substitute for the loss of European demand, we may expect the growth in activity to continue. The 2020 Arctic Development Strategy estimates a total of 85.1 billion m^3 of gas and 17.3 million tonnes of oil (President of the Russian Federation, 2020c, p. #5c). All in all, the notion of the Arctic as a "resource base" for the Russian state gives it a clear interest in ensuring peace and stability and cooperation among states in the region.

The discourse of sovereignty

The Arctic plays a significant role for Russia's great power identity since, in the Arctic, Russia is the strongest military power, measured by the capabilities deployed in the region. Whereas the idea of the "Arctic as a resource base" for the Russian economy was ranked first in the 2008 and 2013 strategies, it takes second place in the 2020 strategy. Here, safeguarding Russia's "sovereignty and territorial integrity" (President of the Russian Federation, 2020c, p. #5a) – which has always featured in the Arctic strategies, only ranked lower – has been given higher priority and now occupies the first place. The focus on national interests and sovereignty gained additional weight when Russia in March 2023 amended its Arctic Strategy. In the 2020 strategy, Russia emphasised strengthening cooperation within multilateral forums such as the Arctic Council, the Arctic Coast Guard Forum and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. In the revised version, this was replaced by a focus on "development of relations with foreign states on a bilateral basis" ... "taking into account the national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic" (President of the Russian Federation, 2023).

By all accounts, the increased focus on national interests and sovereignty seem to have materialised because of the increased great-power competition that has also affected the Arctic. At least this affected the threat perception of the political and military elite. Thus, in August 2020, Putin by decree created an Arctic Commission under the National Security Council, chaired by former Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. This was done in order to secure greater governmental control over the often divergent initiatives in the Russian Arctic. Furthermore, as Medvedev put it at the first meeting, "some NATO member states, including the U.S., are trying to persist in limiting Russia's activities in the Arctic. The methods range from increasing military activity near our borders to pressure from sanctions. All of that, of course, poses direct threats (ugrosy) to our national security" (Medvedev, 2020). It is also clear that in recent years the Arctic has become even more strategically important for Russian defence, reflected in the fact that in December 2014, the Northern Fleet was given the status of Joint Strategic Command. As Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu put it in 2015: "A broad spectrum of potential challenges and threats to our national security is now being formed in the Arctic" (Bender, 2015). Moreover, as of 1 January 2021, the Northern Fleet acquired the status of a full-fledged administrative, military district, in line with the other four districts (Western, Eastern, Southern, Central). The Northern Fleet was also given territorial responsibility for the Komi, Arkhangelsk and Murmansk regions and the Nenets Autonomous District. The changes are likely made in order to strengthen military command in the Arctic, including the ability to control the waters and airspace around the length of the NSR. For some time, there was even talk of creating a distinct Arctic Fleet (TASS, 2021). Thus, dividing the tasks of the Northern Fleet – where the duties of parts of the fleet in a crisis or war situation is to move out of the Arctic and into the North Sea and the North Atlantic – and the Arctic Fleet, which were to receive the task of defending the NSR and support the defence of the Northern shores. However, since the brief debacle in the autumn of 2021, the debate died out. Still, in 2018, Shoigu said: "Today, the Arctic has become

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247423000220 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an object of territorial, resource and military-strategic interests of a number of states. This may lead to an increase in the conflict potential in this region" (Shoigu, 2018b). All of this testifies to an increased perception of threat in the Arctic within the Russian elite.

The perception of threat relates especially to Russia's ability for nuclear retaliation. Thus, the Russian Arctic has for many years been of particular importance to the Russian military. First, the Arctic serves as a staging area for the Russian strategic air force, which in a crisis situation is presumed to deploy some of its bombers to bases along the Russian north coast to be closer to the USA. The Arctic is also the route the intercontinental ballistic missiles would fly in a major war, so Russia needs to ensure at least some kind of surveillance and early warning along its northern coastline – an enormous task given the fact that Russia's Arctic coastline stretches over 24.150 km.

Arctic waters are also home to a large part of the Russian sea-based nuclear missiles. Thus, around 60% of Russia's sea-based nuclear weapons are believed to be under the command of the Northern Fleet (Åtland, 2014, 2018). However, the Russian inventory of submarines is, safe to say, not at the same level as the Soviet. In 1986, the Northern Fleet thus consisted of approximately 180 nuclear submarines of various classes, whereas today it has only 41 (Kjellén, 2022; Laruelle, 2011). The same goes for surface vessels.

The Barents Sea, the gateway to the White Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, is vital for Russia, as the Golf Stream ensures that the waters can be navigated all year round. Note also that only a few of the Northern Fleet's vessels are classified to ICE CLASS Standard. Their task has traditionally been not so much to sail in the Arctic but to get out of the Arctic and into the North Atlantic. However, this seems to be changing as the sea ice melts, and more of the Northern Fleet's operations and exercises are about securing Arctic waters and controlling the NSR. The Arctic Strategy 2013, which is the first time the military tasks in the Arctic are described in an overall public strategy, reads as follows: The Russian Armed Forces must build and maintain a "comprehensive combat and mobilization readiness level" sufficient to defend Russia and its allies against aggression, safeguard Russia's "sovereign rights" in the Arctic, ensure "strategic deterrence" and, in the event of armed conflict, "repel aggression" and ensure "cessation of hostilities on terms that meet the interests of the Russian Federation" (President of the Russian Federation, 2013, p. #18b). One of the problems with the sea ice melting, from the point of view of the Russian navy, is that it makes it more difficult for Russian submarines to hide under the sea ice. Another problem is that as Arctic waters become increasingly navigable year-round, this means that the Russian northern flank becomes more vulnerable – both of these feed into the Russian sense of vulnerability. The Russian navy is particularly concerned that US warships or naval vessels from other NATO countries will be able to operate close to land along Russia's northern coast, especially in the Barents Sea – threatening Russia's ability to retaliate a nuclear first strike. The expansion of the US and NATO missile shield, including its deployment in the Arctic, is also a concern for the Russian elite (Khomkin, 2020). For they believe that the missile shield – along with, for example, the Prompt Global Strike concept and US and NATO technological superiority – threatens Russia's nuclear retaliation capability in the long term and gives the USA the incentive to launch a surprise attack. This is why the military elite are also quite concerned about the increasing US exercise activity in the northern parts of the Norwegian Sea and in the Barents Sea, especially when it involves naval units that are part of the NATO or US missile defence system, such as the US Arleigh Burke-class destroyers (UK Ministry of Defence, 2020). In the long term, Russia is also concerned that it will be possible to move naval forces between the Atlantic and the Pacific via Arctic waters, and that the USA will seek to dominate Arctic waters. As a key 2017 naval document puts it, there is an "aspiration" among a range of states, "primarily the United States of America (USA) and its allies, to dominate on the World Ocean, including the Arctic, and to achieve overwhelming superiority of their naval forces" (President of the Russian Federation, 2017). A position, which is reiterated in the latest naval doctrine from 2022, with the addition that "the desire of the US and its allies to limit the access of the Russian Federation to the resources of the world's oceans and vital sea transport communications" is a challenge or threat to Russia (President of the Russian Federation, 2022c, p. #22). All of these are elements essentially feed into the Russian sense of vulnerability.

The threats to Russian sovereignty and to its feeling of vulnerability outlined above are in the Arctic countered by Russia in two main ways. First, for several years now, Russia has been reopening former Soviet military bases and establishing a number of new bases along the northern shores, which has largely been an open flank since the fall of the Soviet Union. These bases are equipped with various types of air defence systems, radar stations and, in many cases, military airstrips (Boulègue, 2019). The base expansion feeds identity-wise into the notion of the Russian Arctic as a place where the state can rebuild its former greatness and initiate economic reconstruction, while safeguarding Russia's sovereignty. At the same time, the build-up bears the hallmark that Russia – because of its great-power ambition and sense of vulnerability – seeks to build up its sea control capability (Speller, 2019, pp. 115–118); that is, the ability to control the Russian Arctic waters in selected parts of the Barents Sea and along segments of the NSR. Or, if that fails, at least to be able to prevent foreign powers' naval forces from operating freely. The build-up is notably centred around strategically placed islands or groups of islands and along some of the passages that inherently narrow the waters in the defender's favour, for example, the Kara Strait south of Novaya Zemlya Island, the Sannikov and Dmitry Laptev Straits south of Kotelny Island, and the Strait south of the Wrangel Islands (Auerswald, 2019). In addition, base construction seeks to ensure air defences along the most likely aircraft and missile routes in the event of a major conflict, particularly in the western Russian Arctic (Auerswald, 2019). At the same time, Russia seeks to improve its capacity to disrupt NATO's ability to gain sea control over the so-called GIUK gap – the Greenland–Iceland–UK gap – in order to prevent or disrupt NATO lines of communication across the North Atlantic. A key Russian base in this context is the Nagurskoye air base on Alexandra Land. Here, the Russian military has built a 3,500-m runway with a hard surface so that it can accommodate even the very largest aircraft (Forsvarets Efterretningstjeneste, 2019, 2020). Officially, the Russian military's top brass have long talked about stationing four MiG 31K fighters here – so far, they have not followed through on this (Staalesen, 2020b). The MiG 31K can be equipped with the hypersonic Kinzhal missile, which can reach speeds of up to Mach 10 and is therefore difficult to defend against. From the Nagurskoye base, if Russia wanted to, MiG aircraft could launch a surprise attack on the US Thule base in Greenland or on NATO's lines of communication in the North Atlantic (Forsvarets Efterretningstjeneste, 2020).

The second measure taken by the Russian armed forces is that they have started to equip their smaller naval vessels (corvettes and frigates) on a large scale with long-range strike missiles – primarily the so-called Kalibr missiles, which against land targets officially

have a range of between 1,500 and 2,500 km in their current versions. After several years of testing, Russia is also planning to place the hypersonic Tsirkon cruise missile on several Russian naval vessels (TASS, 2022c). These new missile types increasingly make the Russian navy a more long-range and more offensive tool, which can disrupt NATO's ability to operate freely in the North Atlantic. In recent years, the Russian navy has mostly been described as a coastal fleet that could not operate too far from Russian bases on land. Indeed, they have experienced problems building new vessels in the large ocean-going classes, as Ukraine supplied the gas turbines for these until 2014, a supply chain which was disrupted due to the war in eastern Ukraine. In public communication, the Kremlin uses the advanced missile types to highlight Russia's great power role and utilise the Arctic as an area where Russia can achieve "revenge" for the humiliating years after the fall of the Soviet Union. In a 2018 speech, Putin presented the new, huge and highly lethal Sarmat nuclear missile, which supposedly can bypass the US missile shield; then he presented a nuclear underwater drone (Poseidon) that can lay waste to US coastal cities and then he presented the new hypersonic Kinzhal missile. After this he said that none of the Western powers bothered to listen to Russia back in 2004 when it was still weak: "So listen now" (Putin, 2018). The frustration of the years when Russia was not recognised as a great power by the West is palpable.

The Russian debate on the Arctic after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022

After the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the overall Russian–Western rhetoric has been sharpened. In his speech on 21 February 2022 on the edge of war, where Russia formally recognised the independence of the Ukraine regions of Luhansk and Donetsk, Putin argued that Russia was under threat because of NATO's "rapid build-up of the NATO military group on Ukrainian territory", arguing that Ukraine had developed into a "bridgehead" for NATO operations against Russia (Putin, 2022a). And in his speech on 24 February, the day Russia invaded Ukraine anew, Putin made clear that he saw the war being the result of an irresponsible expansionist policy of the West: "[T]he fundamental threats which irresponsible Western politicians created for Russia consistently, rudely and unceremoniously from year to year. I am referring to the eastward expansion of NATO, which is moving its military infrastructure ever closer to the Russian border" (Putin, 2022b). Also foreign minister Sergei Lavrov argued that the Ukraine war in reality is a war between Russia and the West. Thus, on 27 May he stated that "The West has declared a total war on us, on the Russian World" (TASS, 2022b).

The tension between Russia and the West over the war in Ukraine has also affected the debate on the Arctic. Of great concern to Russia is that Finland and (most likely) Sweden, two Arctic states, have become members of the NATO alliance – an (presumably) unintended consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On 15 April 2022, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said that the purpose of expanding the alliance was "to keep building up the military potential and geographic expansion and to create another stronghold for threatening Russia" (TASS, 2022a). On 17 April 2022, the Foreign Ministry warned against the risk of "unintended incidents" due to NATO's supposedly increased military activity in the Arctic (Reuters, 2022a). On 16 June 2022, Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesperson, argued that Finnish and Swedish membership would "add additional tension" (Egorova, 2022), and later he claimed that "if Finland and Sweden joined NATO then Russia would have to 'rebalance the situation' with its own measures" (Reuters, 2022b). And when NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg on 24 August 2022 announced that NATO will increase its "presence and vigilance" in the Arctic (NATO, 2022), Peskov soon after replied that "we interpret such statements as an intention to confront Russia and Russia's interests in the Arctic. Russia will safeguard its interests in an appropriate way" (TASS, 2022d). Nikolai Patrushev, general secretary of the National Security Council, also regards the prospect of Swedish and Finish membership of NATO as a possible threat and argued that "additional measures are needed on the streamlining of forces and equipment for the protection of the state border" (Staalesen, 2022). Since then, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov has spoken of creating a new "army corps in Karelia", which borders Finland (and used to be Finnish), as well as creating a new military district in Moscow and one in the Leningrad region (Sokirko, 2023). In other words, important parts of the elite push for a greater Russian focus on securing Russian sovereignty and on balancing what is seen as an increasingly hostile and threatening US/NATO, also in the Arctic. It is, however, somewhat unclear where (and how) they will find the resources for these tasks.

On the other hand, the "Arctic as a resource base" discourse is also still present in the Russian debate. Thus, the building-up of Arctic infrastructure "remains a priority", despite the war in Ukraine, Putin stated at a meeting on Arctic Zone development on 13 April 2022. "[C]onsidering all kinds of external restrictions and sanctions pressure, we need to focus on all projects and plans linked with the Arctic. We must not shelve or delay them; on the contrary, we must expedite our work on current and long-term tasks to the greatest possible extent" (President of the Russian Federation, 2022a). Deputy prime minister and Chairman of the State Commission for Arctic Development, Yury Trutnev, announced at the same meeting that more than 460 projects in the Arctic are being implemented with state help (officially at the cost of 1.3 trillion roubles), creating an estimated 30,000 jobs (President of the Russian Federation, 2022a). The "Arctic as a resource base" discourse is also underpinned in the new naval doctrine from August 2022. Thus, it is stated that Russia's goal is the "development of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation as a strategic resource base and its rational use, including full-scale development of the continental shelf of the Russian Federation beyond the 200-mile exclusive economic zone of the Russian Federation after its external border has been fixed in accordance with Article 76 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea" (President of the Russian Federation, 2022c, p. #9).

All in all, the two main discourses are still very much in play in the Russian elite debate on the Arctic, also after the renewed war in Ukraine. None of them are of yet dominating the debate, even if the discourse on sovereignty seems to be strongest.

Conclusion

The basic discourses of the Russian strategic culture, which are relevant for the Russian Arctic policy, are the "great-power ambition" and the "sense of vulnerability". These two discourses have permeated all major public strategy documents – the national security strategies, the military doctrines and the foreign policy concepts – since, but also before, Putin's accession to the presidency in 2000. Based on these two discourses, we find two subordinate, competing discourses governing the implementation of Russian policy in the Arctic: the "Arctic as a resource base" and the "sovereignty discourse". Whereas in the Arctic strategies of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247423000220 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2008 and 2013, the economic interests in the "Arctic as a resource base" were given priority; in recent years, the "sovereignty discourse", rooted primarily in the "sense of vulnerability" and in the military side of the "great-power ambition", has gained increased weight, presumably as a result of Russian concerns about increasing great-power competition in the Arctic. The shift in emphasis of discourse, from the "Arctic as a resource base" to the "sovereignty discourse", does not herald a fundamentally new policy, but it does represent a new emphasis on sovereignty, national interests and power balancing in Russian Arctic policy. With the amendments to the 2020 Arctic strategy in March 2023, the weight on sovereignty and national interests has been further enhanced.

Overall, it can be said that the Russian military build-up in the Arctic on the one hand is largely defensively motivated because Russia feels vulnerable to a military technologically superior US and NATO. On the other hand, the Russian build-up in the Arctic is part of the overall Russian military build-up, which is largely motivated by the desire to be a significant major power in the world as well as in the Arctic. Whatever the underlying motivation, the problem for the US and NATO is that the base policy and the policy of equipping naval vessels with long-range strike missiles also lead to an increased offensive capability in the Arctic. This makes the US Thule base and NATO's lines of communication across the North Atlantic more vulnerable. Furthermore, this means that NATO and the USA will increasingly feel compelled to counter this with further force build-up and increased exercise activity. If that happens, the Russian government stated in the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016) that they will counter this. In other words, the US/NATO and Russia risk getting caught in a security dilemma leading to further military build-up and tension.

Russia's sense of vulnerability and ambition to be a military great power seems to be slowly pushing back the line of cooperation, a policy line that had been Russia's top priority concerning the Arctic. The enhanced great-power competition following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as well as Russian concerns about an expected US military build-up in the Arctic and more significant US naval exercise activity, particularly in the vicinity of the Barents and White Seas, seem to have enhanced the position of those parts of the elite, particularly the Russian military elite, who wanted a tougher line, including in the Arctic. The NATO membership of Finland (and most likely) Sweden, two Arctic nations, has also affected the Russian debate in the direction of more weight on sovereignty and power balancing. This has put pressure on the "Arctic as a resource base" discourse, since the great power discourse and the sense of vulnerability of the Russian elite – and the notion of international politics as a dangerous place – have made it more important to counter infringements on Russian security in the short and medium term rather than securing long-term economic interests.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

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