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## **Russia's Ambivalent Status-Quo/Revisionist Policies in the Arctic**

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### **Abstract**

Russia has been following an Arctic policy that is highly heterogeneous, combining efforts at preserving cooperation with Western neighbors with commitment to building up its own strength. Three distinct policy modes can be identified: realist/militaristic, institutional/cooperative, and diplomatic management. Each mode is based on a particular interpretation of Russia's various interests in the High North/Arctic: nuclear/strategic, geopolitical, economic/energy-related, and symbolic. Examination of policy modes and interests shows that each combination contains some elements that focus on preserving the status quo in the Arctic, while other elements push for changes in Russia's favor. This article finds that revisionist elements have been gaining in strength, but that current policy still attaches high value to sustaining traditional patterns, even if they demand more resources and provide fewer advantages and revenues.

**Keywords:** *Russia; Arctic; security; militarization; revisionism; geopolitics; energy cooperation; Northern Sea Route; status quo policies*

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## 1. Introduction

The Arctic constitutes a unique—and uniquely controversial—political and geographic component in Russia's foreign policy. The essence of the controversy lies in the combination of two dubiously compatible guidelines: the commitment to developing international cooperation, and the heavy investment in militarization of the Russian High North. Artur Chilingarov's flag-planting expedition to the North Pole in summer 2007 spurred disproportionately heavy global reactions alerting the Russian leadership to the growing attention in the West to the Arctic region. That awareness translated into perceptions of escalating geopolitical competition, in turn motivating the Kremlin to strengthen Russia's military reach in the High North in order to secure its own interests. This reliance on military instruments of policy has been further strengthened with the emergence of a new confrontation between Russia and the West, caused by the explosion of the Ukraine crisis in spring 2014.<sup>1</sup> That being said, declarations of readiness to sustain international cooperation are not mere camouflage for military activities: they reflect a real preference in the Russian leadership for cultivating institutional and political ties with the Arctic neighbors.

This dualism was clearly illustrated in President Vladimir Putin's March 2018 address to the Federal Assembly, a speech which consisted of two logically and stylistically unconnected parts: economic acceleration, and missile deployment. The Arctic was peripheral to Putin's economic narrative, mentioned only in a brief passage concerning the development of infrastructure and

maritime transport.<sup>2</sup> In the second part of the address, the Arctic was not mentioned directly, except to note that a new nuclear-propelled cruise missile had been tested in late 2017 at the Central Test Site on the Novaya Zemlya archipelago.<sup>3</sup> One striking aspect of this address was that the two parts worked at cross-purposes: an acceleration of the arms race is detrimental to economic development—but cannot take place without it. That is exactly the problem with the two avenues of Russia’s Arctic policy. Their divergence was recognized in Moscow already at the start of the current decade, and political work on establishing a middle ground has continued ever since.

Efforts at bridging the gap between cooperative initiatives and militarization programs should not be dismissed as merely bureaucratic maneuvering. It could be analytically productive to distinguish three patterns (or policy modes) in the Kremlin’s Arctic policy.<sup>4</sup> The first one is based on the premise that military power is the main means of advancing Russia’s interests in the Arctic, and can be defined as “realist/militaristic.” The second policy mode aims at developing Russia’s ties with its Arctic neighbors, and is aptly described as “cooperative/institutional.” The third policy mode is the most fluid, combining building power capabilities with attempts at preserving cooperative ties, which amount to making the Arctic an exception in the evolving confrontation between Russia and the West; this can be described as “diplomatic management mode.” All three policy modes are evolving in a rapidly shifting international environment, with Russia sometimes seeking to preserve its positions and sometimes to advance them, demonstrating behavior typical of status-quo and revisionist powers simultaneously. This intersection of policy modes and dynamic shifts can be presented as a matrix, as indicated in Table 1.

*Table 1.* Policy modes and political behavior

<b>Status-quo</b>	<b>Revisionist</b>
<b>Realist/militaristic</b>	
<b>Institutional/cooperative</b>	
<b>Diplomatic management</b>	

This article aims at filling the blanks in the matrix by assessing the prevalence of status-quo and revisionist behavior within the three policy modes mentioned above. These types of behavior are generally self-explanatory: a status-quo policy aims at preserving and sustaining the existing order of international interactions, whereas a revisionist policy aims at a significant advancement of Russia’s positions in the Arctic vis-à-vis its neighbors. The analysis starts by identifying four key interest areas driving Russia’s policy in the Arctic, and then examines the mix of status-quo

and revisionist drivers in each of these policy areas. The result is a complex matrix of 24 parameters, in turn inviting some conclusions.

## 2. Russia's divergent interests in the Arctic

Russia has significant and far-reaching interests in the vast Arctic region, but their content is open to many interpretations, and even the entirely material aspects may be variously understood. Moreover, these interests are also divergent: some of them underpin efforts aimed at building cooperation; others sustain the course of confrontation, whereas the policy mode referred to here as “diplomatic management” may draw on elements of most interests.<sup>5</sup> The interests, which can be grouped into nuclear/strategic, geopolitical, economic/energy-related, and symbolic, interact in many disharmonious combinations. Of key significance for the analysis here is that, within each category of interests, there are certain elements that promote the status-quo policy, and counter-elements that encourage revisionist tendencies. This article explores how shifts in the content of these interests act to tilt the balance between status-quo and revisionist policies.

Russia's *nuclear/strategic* interests are shaped by the fact that the Kola Peninsula is the main base for the country's strategic submarines (SSBNs)—which, provided that the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), signed in 2010, is formally extended or at least observed, will carry the main share of nuclear warheads on their *Sineva* (SS-N-23) and *Bulava* (SS-N-32) intercontinental missiles in the 2020s.<sup>6</sup> Another parameter of these interests is determined by the geo-strategic fact that the shortest trajectory for a hypothetical missile exchange between Russia and the USA goes across the North Pole, making the High North crucially important for deploying the early warning and missile defense systems of both sides. It has been argued that these major components of Russia's deterrence structure are merely *located* in the Arctic, not necessarily *aimed* at operations in that region.<sup>7</sup> However, these assets need solid protection against potential “disarming” strikes—which in turn involves developing a grouping of conventional forces that is, to all intents and purposes, designed for operations in the Arctic region.

The *geopolitical* interests center on Russia's competitive interactions with states that seek to expand their stake in the Arctic by undermining the primacy of sovereignty as the main principle of governing the region.<sup>8</sup> Deeply opposed to the idea of turning the Arctic into a “global

commons,” Moscow acknowledges the imperative of strengthening the shared position of the five littoral powers in order to limit the influence of various “outsiders.” On the other hand, there is no way around the fact that Russia’s four Arctic neighbors are NATO member-states and, in a situation of a developing confrontation, would be intrinsically hostile to the Kremlin’s positions.<sup>9</sup> Although Moscow presents itself as an upholder of international law, it remains a firm believer in the ultimate importance of military force in interstate relations. Its commitment to strengthening international institutions governing the Arctic is therefore counter-balanced with the determination to rely on own power in protecting its rich possessions.

The *economic/energy-related* interests are linked primarily to the oil and natural gas reserves in the wetlands of Western Siberia and offshore. Although the former have been investigated rather thoroughly (but there is still much exploration to be done in Eastern Siberia), the latter are essentially an unknown. This leaves room for all sorts of wild exaggerations, for which the only—and far from solid—reference point is the 2008 appraisal of the US Geological Survey.<sup>10</sup> These data have been grossly misinterpreted, and conclusions about an inevitable fierce struggle of Western oil majors for this “treasure trove” are taken for granted, particularly since the 2016 Russian Foreign Policy Concept identified this struggle as a key driver of escalation of global tensions.<sup>11</sup> The desire to assert control over these assumed natural riches clashes with the reluctant recognition that the offshore resources can only be developed in cooperation with Western companies, which possess the technology and know-how.

The *symbolic* interests are strongly pronounced, but hard to define precisely. The Arctic occupies a very special place in the collective psyche of many Russians, and the political leadership has mastered propaganda methods for stimulating and targeting these vague feelings.<sup>12</sup> In order to mobilize public support for various and often costly enterprises in the High North, notions of “conquering” (*pokorenie*) and “owning” (*vladenie*) are systematically emphasized in the mainstream discourse on Arctic matters. One key manifestation of Russia’s “ownership” over the Arctic seas is the sustained effort at upgrading the Northern Sea Route (*Sevmorput*): Putin’s March 2018 address to the Federal Assembly highlighted the spectacular prospects of expanding this maritime corridor once again.<sup>13</sup> Also playing on nationalistic perceptions is the propaganda spin put on Russia’s claim for extending the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles, re-submitted to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UN CLCS) in August 2015.<sup>14</sup>

Russia's interests in the Arctic are far from coherent or even complementary, and the lobby groups that pursue them—from the Northern Fleet command to oil companies and the Russian Geographical Society—are often at odds with one another, making the Kremlin the ultimate arbiter. The sum total of these interests and the cumulative influence of the lobbying is strong enough to make the region a priority in Russia's foreign and security policy—and to keep President Putin interested in the Arctic agenda.

### 3. Strategic balance and nuclear revisionism

Maintaining the strategic balance with the USA is a fundamental imperative in Russian security thinking, which views numerical equality as a crucial condition for global stability and a foundation of the existing world order. Maintaining the capacity to inflict devastating damage in a retaliatory strike (as envisaged by the “Mutual Assured Destruction” doctrine) is a necessary but not sufficient element of this posture. Russia insists on maintaining equality in the number of warheads and delivery vehicles, and the USA has accepted the inviolability of that equation, originally established in the arms control process with the Soviet Union back in the late 1960s and reinforced by the 2010 New START. Despite all the acrimony of the new confrontation, both sides have so far adhered meticulously to the provisions of the Treaty. They reported achieving the prescribed limits at the start of 2018, and may yet agree to extend it beyond 2021, when the current ten-year period expires.<sup>15</sup> Preservation of this balance is the central premise of the status-quo nuclear policy. However, US President Trump's decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty,<sup>16</sup> as well as new technological developments (particularly in missile defense), challenge this stability. In the longer run, Moscow may come to see its status-quo policy as unsustainable.

Russia's nuclear modernization programs executed in the Arctic tend to fit the pattern of preserving the strategic balance. The single most expensive item in the recently approved 2027 State Armament Program (as in the previous 2020 State Armament Program) is the deployment of a new generation of strategic submarines (*Borei*-class, or Project 955). Three of these submarines are already operational, five are in various stages of construction, and six more are planned.<sup>17</sup> This investment is necessary in order to ensure that the naval leg of the strategic triad remains firm: the *Delta*-III (*Kalmar*-class) submarines will be decommissioned and the *Delta*-IV (*Dolphin*-class) submarines can, with necessary overhauls, be retained in combat order through the next decade, but no longer.<sup>18</sup> The main problem with this plan is that the *Bulava* missile,

which is the main weapon system for the *Borei*-class submarines, has a checkered record. It was test-fired only once in 2016 and once in 2017, and the successful four-missile salvo launched in May 2018 did not erase all concerns.<sup>19</sup> Any new setback would deliver a heavy blow to the reliability of Russia's deterrence—quite possibly prompting President Putin in his 2018 address to elaborate on the entirely fanciful idea of extra-long-range nuclear-propelled underwater drones (more pretentiously re-branded as *Poseidon*, from the stodgy *Status-6*), rather than admit that Russia had made deep cuts in its shipbuilding program.<sup>20</sup>

The modernization of the early warning system, including the construction of a new Voronezh-DM radar in Olenegorsk (Murmansk region), also fits in with the status-quo policy, particularly since Russia has encountered massive problems in deploying a reliable grouping of intelligence satellites.<sup>21</sup> What the Russian High Command sees as the main threat to the stability of the strategic balance is the continually modified US plan for developing a missile defense system. However, that same logic is not applied to Russia's own work on modernizing its missile defense capabilities, a process which Russian sources have described as highly advanced.<sup>22</sup> Putin's April 2018 presentation of "wonder-missiles" was intended to prove the utter futility of the US plan—but, besides such declarations, Russia has also been preparing for potential direct action against US missile defense assets, for instance through a simulated air strike on the Globus 3 radar in Vardø, Norway.<sup>23</sup> Such counter-measures against an over-estimated threat go beyond the parameters of a purely status-quo-oriented policy and become elements of revisionism.

The main driver of a revisionist course, however, comes from the increasingly acute need to achieve political dividends from Russia's huge investments in nuclear modernization. In a situation of evolving and deeply asymmetric confrontation, the Kremlin cannot afford to let these expensive strategic assets remain idle, and must find a way to bring its most powerful instrument into political play. Putin's unexpected video-show about the super-missiles was one step in this direction—although far from successful, according to many Russian experts.<sup>24</sup> To let the New START expire would constitute a strongly revisionist move. The consequences of such a move could be further amplified by the imminent destruction of the INF Treaty as well as a future transfer of non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons from permanent storages to the combat units, including the ships and submarines of the Northern Fleet.<sup>25</sup> The most radical step would be to resume nuclear testing on the Novaya Zemlya test site.<sup>26</sup> Such an act would not involve a major breach of international obligations, as Moscow could argue that the Comprehensive Nuclear Test

Ban Treaty (CTBT, adopted 1996) never entered into force, as the USA (and China) failed to ratify it.

On the whole, with the massive and sustained modernization of its nuclear arsenal, Russia has made a shift from a status-quo policy of maintaining strategic balance with the USA to a revisionist policy of active political use of nuclear instruments entirely feasible.

#### **4. Geopolitical interplay and underwater revisionism**

Geopolitical perceptions and propositions are remarkably influential in Russian political thinking. They tend to be fairly crude and unsophisticated, asserting the inevitability of competition and clashes between various state powers in the emerging “multipolar world.”<sup>27</sup> In the Arctic region, this competition is perceived as driven by the “rush for resources”—something that is hard to identify in real interstate interactions, but is nevertheless presumed to exist and expected to acquire a more forceful character. The new confrontation with the West caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine has reinforced these geopolitical propositions. What matters most in the Kremlin’s current geopolitical perspective is that all of Russia’s four neighbors sharing the Arctic littoral happen to be NATO member-states: that determines the central role of military instruments in securing Russia’s positions in the fast-evolving confrontation.

Strategic nuclear forces, primarily the submarines, are of little relevance for this regional competition, but the conventional forces that are intended to provide protection for the strategic assets may double up as capabilities for projecting power in the Arctic theater. The severe deterioration of the Northern Fleet during the first two post-Soviet decades has rendered it incapable of performing the traditional mission of establishing a “naval bastion” in the Barents Sea.<sup>28</sup> What is now defined as the key mission is gaining effective air dominance in that area. Russian military strategy does not have a systematic proposition resembling the “Anti-Access/Area Denial” (A2/AD) concept, but the deployment of new long-range air defense systems in combination with anti-ship missiles serves essentially the same purpose.<sup>29</sup> Today, the 1st Air Defense Division, located on the Kola Peninsula, deploys the state-of-the-art S-400 *Triumph* surface-to-air missiles (modified for the conditions of extreme cold), while one regiment with S-300 missiles is now based on Novaya Zemlya.<sup>30</sup> An extension of this protective “bubble” over the Western part of the Barents Sea effectively grants Russia a position of military



superiority far above and beyond what could possibly be needed for defending its positions against any hostile challenges.

Despite the shortage of resources, cuts in the shipbuilding program, and the demands from other theaters more exposed to direct threats, Moscow has been investing considerable efforts in upgrading this dominant position even further. The Arctic Command (created in 2015 on the basis of the Northern Fleet HQ) integrates units of all branches of the Armed Forces in joint operational planning—a major improvement in command structure. The main emphasis in exercising combat readiness is placed on amphibious operations supported by missile strikes from naval platforms. Several such exercises were closely coordinated with the strategic *Zapad-2017* exercise in September 2017.<sup>31</sup> These military preparations alarm Russia's Nordic neighbors, which have been increasing their defense budgets and expanding cooperation, as demonstrated by the *Arctic Challenge 2017* and the *Trident Juncture 2018* exercises in Norway.<sup>32</sup> Russia, in turn, has consistently sought to counter every such exercise with its own, on a larger scale. It has also issued sharp warnings to Norway against inviting more US Marines and letting them train on a rotation basis in the Inner Troms region in the Arctic, rather than in central Norway, where they have been training since 2017.<sup>33</sup>

The prospect that worries Moscow the most is that its military activities in the High North may be compelling Finland and Sweden to add more content to their partnership with NATO, so that the issue of fully joining the alliance gains traction in public debates. Moscow has repeatedly applied political pressure on Finland in order to emphasize that such accession is absolutely unacceptable for Russia, but Helsinki has not been responding to this heavy-handed diplomacy with its traditional deference.<sup>34</sup> In Sweden, growing concerns about Russian interference and threats, particularly toward the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, have led to a shift in public opinion in favor of joining NATO.<sup>35</sup> In principle, Russian efforts at blocking such a development fits into the pattern of a status-quo policy, as such an expansion of the Atlantic alliance—as seen from Moscow—would amount to a major shift in the military balance in the Arctic theater.<sup>36</sup> However, the methods that Russia employs in pursuing this policy have been so crude and aggressive that the Nordic counter-measures, including recent establishment in Helsinki of a European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats,<sup>37</sup> seem well-justified.

Where Russia's policy distances itself even further from status-quo preservation is the much-politicized issue of expanding “ownership” of the continental shelf—which makes no difference for navigation or for fisheries, but is nevertheless presented as a matter of major importance.

Russia was the first Arctic state to file a claim with the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UN CLCS) in accordance with the Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS): in 2001, it presented a claim for some 1.2 million square kilometers between the Lomonosov and Mendeleev underwater ridges, territory stretching all the way up to the North Pole—only to see the claim returned for further substantiation. It took 13 years to collect scientific data to back Russia’s claim concerning where to draw the outer limits of the continental shelf, and in August 2015 the claim was re-submitted. In Moscow, considerable anxiety now attends the CLCS deliberations on a verdict.<sup>38</sup> In fact, the only recommendation the Commission can issue is to sort out the conflict between the Russian and the Danish claims, as well as with a Canadian claim, which might be submitted by the end of 2018.<sup>39</sup> This uncertainty does not sit well with Russia’s inordinate assertiveness. Although Moscow is currently well served by the UNCLOS, it might in the future resort to unilateral steps. In seeking to justify such a departure from international law, Russia might argue that the CLCS has been deliberately procrastinating, or by referring to the US failure to ratify the UNCLOS.

Overall, Russia has been preparing for a spike in geopolitical confrontation in the Arctic. Its position of military dominance in the Barents region constitutes a threat to the Nordic neighbors, who feel compelled to step up their own defense preparations. These dynamics, resembling the classical security dilemma model, might prompt Moscow to shift from the status-quo policy of maintaining its position of strength, to a revisionist policy of actually *using* that strength.

## **5. Economic disappointments and Chinese revisionism**

The regions of the High North have far greater economic significance for Russia than for any other Arctic states. Indeed, the world’s two major urban centers within the Arctic Circle, Murmansk and Norilsk (with some 300,000 and 180,000 residents, respectively), are both located in Russia. However, much of this development is the heritage of the massive Soviet thrust at “conquering” the Arctic, which was planned and executed without proper economic rationale.<sup>40</sup> In the modern Russian economy, which is stagnating as not-quite-market and not-entirely-state-controlled, the real economic interests are difficult to ascertain. What is clear, however, is that—despite Putin’s declaration that the Russians have not just returned to the Arctic but have “settled there anew and firmly”—the depopulation of Russia’s High North has continued.<sup>41</sup>

The modern economy of the Russian Arctic is shaped primarily by extraction industries, with the development of hydrocarbon resources widely seen as the main mid-term economic driver. In 2010, when visiting a research station in Yakutia, Putin stated: “the reserves discovered to date are worth approximately \$5 trillion, including oil, natural gas, coal, gold and diamonds.”<sup>42</sup> One major recent development is the start-up of producing natural gas from the huge resources on the Yamal Peninsula. However, the fields in Western Siberia, exploited since the mid-1970, are now in rapid decline. The next big shift would be to go offshore, where reserves are poorly explored but are expected to be tremendously rich.

The first offshore project developed by Gazprom in the Pechora Sea (to the south of Novaya Zemlya) started production from the stationary Prirazlomnaya platform in late 2013, but the delays and cost overruns with this relatively simple project showed that the envisaged offshore shift would be hard to achieve.<sup>43</sup> This experience reinforced the lessons from the collapse of the Shtokman project. The development of that huge and well-explored gas-field in the ice-free Barents Sea had been personally supervised by Putin; but in 2012, because of the withdrawal of Statoil from the joint venture set up to develop Shtokman as well as the negative cost-efficiency estimates, the project was shelved.<sup>44</sup> The shifts underway in the global gas market since then have made it impossible to re-launch the project.

Moscow has nevertheless persisted with offshore exploration. In September 2014, Rosneft announced, with tremendous fanfare, that its joint venture with ExxonMobil had discovered a significant oilfield in the Kara Sea.<sup>45</sup> However, further exploration was curtailed due to the enforcement of Western sanctions specifically targeting Russia’s energy sector and its Arctic projects, and in February 2018, ExxonMobil announced its withdrawal from all joint ventures in Russia.<sup>46</sup> Moscow cannot hope for a meaningful relaxation of the sanctions regime in the near future. In fact, however, the main problem with plans for tapping into the presumably abundant resources of the Arctic shelf is that, at current price levels, the costs of off-shore projects are prohibitive.<sup>47</sup>

In this situation, a status-quo policy becomes impossible because it is based on the premise of pragmatic cooperation with the Western energy majors. In principle, such cooperation could be exempted from the general pattern of confrontation, as is Russia’s gas export to Europe. In the latter case, a controversial project like the Nord Stream 2, set to increase Russian gas supplies to Europe through a new pipeline across the Baltic Sea, has been making progress despite the sanctions regime. In the Arctic, however, such ties have been effectively broken, and Moscow

must explore alternatives. The most promising of these is increased cooperation with China, which Russia has previously been reluctant to pursue, even objecting to granting China observer status in the Arctic Council. The arguments for keeping China away from the Arctic were dropped in April 2016, when Beijing came to the rescue of the troubled Yamal-LNG project, which had been developed by the privately-owned Novatek.<sup>48</sup> The motivations for this very timely generosity had little to do with Chinese demand for LNG, and much to do with making Gennadii Timchenko, an oligarch of Putin's inner circle, indebted to China—and getting Putin himself more positively disposed to China's advances.<sup>49</sup> The main volumes of gas from Yamal continue to go to Europe by pipeline.

In January 2018, China presented its Arctic ambitions in a White Paper.<sup>50</sup> Beijing opted to go public with this declaration of interests, confident that Moscow would not raise objections.<sup>51</sup> This Russian position could be described as revisionism by default: it signifies consent to China's creeping revisionism, which in turn might profoundly shift the traditional balance of interests between the Arctic states and distort the pattern of their cooperation. Russia's own ability to alter the economic status quo, with its high costs and diminishing returns, is set to remain limited.

## **6. Revival of the Northern Sea Route and symbolic revisionism**

Russia's Arctic policy is heavily laden with symbolism. In order to sustain public support for the heavy-maintenance and low-profit initiatives, it is crucial to connect them with the abstract but strong perceptions of "ownership" of the vast inhospitable spaces of the High North. These perceptions are often mutually incompatible and in conflict with reality—for instance, the vision of pristine frozen lands and seas that co-exists with the greed for harvesting the anticipated enormous riches of natural resources. They also clash with the fact of devastating pollution around the Norilsk industrial cluster in Western Siberia and the Nickel plant on the Kola Peninsula.<sup>52</sup> In this complex multi-component blend, there is a distinct and vociferous trend of asserting and demonstrating to hostile "others" (the four other littoral states in particular) that the Arctic, including the symbolically important North Pole, belongs to Russia. That amounts to a pronounced revisionism of the course toward strengthening the institutions of international governance of this "global commons."

Putin is highly attentive to this "patriotic" discourse; he also seems to have developed a personal attachment to the unique Arctic frontier. While he is committed to executing projects aimed at

removing the accumulated wastes around the old Soviet settlements, his state-centric approach to environmentalism is aimed at limiting the activities of environmentalist NGOs: Greenpeace is treated as an outright security challenge.<sup>53</sup> However, his main commitment is to the revival of the Northern Sea Route (*Sevmorput*)—and in this policy we see more of a desire to recycle the Soviet-era pseudo-romantic appeal of “conquering” the Arctic than sober economic rationale and cost-efficiency calculations.

The idea of turning the Northern Sea Route into a major international maritime transit avenue was much advocated at the start of this decade, but failed to gain practical traction. Over the last few navigation seasons, international shipping companies have attempted some experimental voyages, but their conclusions have stressed the unpredictable conditions, high costs, and under-developed infrastructure. While destination shipping has been stimulated by the Yamal-LNG project, with the new Sabetta terminal now set to become a major and privileged operator in the gradually thawing but still very challenging Northern Sea Route, the recent forceful eradication of the piracy threat in the Indian Ocean and the opening of the second lane of the Suez Canal have diminished the attractiveness of the challenging Arctic Ocean route.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time, Russia has introduced changes into its policy on commercial shipping in the northern seas, becoming less friendly to international partners and more restrictive. For instance, new legal provisions adopted in late 2017 prescribe that shipments of oil and natural gas may be conducted only on tankers registered in Russia.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, administrative control of the development of the Northern Sea Route and the supporting infrastructure have been transferred to Rosatom, the state-owned corporation that operates Russia’s nuclear icebreaker fleet.<sup>56</sup>

This nuclearization goes hand in hand with militarization of the eastern part of Russia’s Arctic littoral, which now features several newly-built military bases. The Northern Fleet, which had never performed tasks to the east of the Barents Sea and still does not have in its combat order a single ice-class surface vessel, has in recent years sailed toward the restored Temp naval base on Kotelnny Island (located between the Laptev Sea and the East Siberian Sea) and even to Chukotka in the *Vostok-2018* exercises, and has finally received its first diesel icebreaker, *Ilya Muromets*.<sup>57</sup>

This combination of militarization and nuclearization amounts to a shift in Russia’s strategy for the eastern part of its Arctic expanses that is more in tune with “symbolic revisionism.”<sup>58</sup> The sustainability of this expensive prioritization of geopolitical ambitions is very uncertain. The Defense Ministry has announced that the construction of Arctic bases has been completed, with

no further investments earmarked for the expansion of this chain of footholds.<sup>59</sup> Russian securitization of the Northern Sea Route does not sit well with China, which prefers to emphasize the commercial character of its Arctic aspirations and seeks to free its own explorations from the restraints of Russian control.<sup>60</sup> This revisionism is costly and serves no useful purpose, apart from catering to illusory desires.

## 7. Conclusions

Russia's policy in the Arctic remains incoherent, uncoordinated, and mismanaged. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, it features conflicting elements of preserving the status quo as well as revisionism. Elements of the latter type have been gaining in strength; and, although the direct security risks involved in setting a revisionist course in the High North may be lower than in most other regions of Russia's neighborhood, the costs of a forceful advancement of Russian interests at the expense of the Arctic neighbors would be so high that, in a rational decision-making environment, they would be recognized as untenable. Moreover, as Moscow becomes increasingly disappointed with *cooperative/institutional* approaches, its *realist* inclinations may become more pronounced, particularly as regards reliance on military power. The third policy mode, which we have termed *diplomatic management*, remains relevant, but is executed in combination with unilateral actions aimed at advancing Russia's interests at the expense of those of its neighbors.

Today Moscow gives greater priority to the Arctic than the actual scope of material and ideational interests or the level of threat would justify. Reinforcing this priority would inevitably mean fewer resources available for protecting Russian interests in other regions, where instability and the risk of violent conflicts are higher. However, the Kremlin's cost/benefit calculations are fluid, shifting with fluctuations in the evolving conflict with the West—something which makes the developing pattern of confrontation significantly different from the rigid confrontation of the Cold War era.<sup>61</sup>

*Table 2.* Features of Russian status-quo policy

*Table 3.* Features of Russian revisionist

policy

Engaging in the new confrontation, Moscow has been experimenting with a range of “hybrid” means and instruments, but their applicability in the Arctic is in fact quite limited. Western corporate actors have been treading very carefully, while the Russian special services are unable to connect with two actors increasingly important in Arctic affairs: environmentalist NGOs and organizations representing indigenous peoples. Most of the work on clearing the Russian Arctic of industrial wastes has been delegated to the Defense Ministry, which tends to treat Western NGOs as hostile entities. The political agenda of ensuring the rights of indigenous peoples to land and natural resources, which has been prominent in the work of the Arctic Council, remains entirely foreign to Russia. Russia’s cyber and propaganda vehicles have scant purchase in Arctic debates, even on such geopolitically crucial matters as NATO accession for Finland and Sweden.

Therefore, Moscow tends to rely on traditional military instruments in building and upgrading a position of power, first of all in the Barents region. Gaining such a position, as well as proceeding with the militarization of the Northern Sea Route, may offer some psychological reassurance, but has failed to provide the Russian leadership with any tangible political advantages. The need to score new victories, as well as the desire to demonstrate to the “hostile” West that Russia has no intentions of accepting the role of designated loser in the confrontation, may prompt the Kremlin to take new pro-active steps. Here the available position of power in the Barents region could offer a useful opportunity for such activism. That, however, would signify a departure from the pattern of combining cooperation with the build-up of military capabilities, and a deliberate break with the evolving political status-quo.

What makes such a turn to revisionism more probable is the gradual erosion of the attractiveness and profitability of maintaining the status-quo. Many important cooperative ties with Western partners, not least in oil and gas development, have already been disrupted. Domestic restraints and limitations on the use of military instruments for political purposes are in practice non-existent. Western stakeholders in Arctic security must therefore be prepared for possible Russian experiments with projecting power. Updating deterrence mechanisms, as with the NATO *Trident Juncture* 2018 exercise, would seem a logical way to proceed.

## NOTES

- [1.](#) One useful examination of this impact is Thomas E. Rotnem, “Putin’s Arctic Strategy: Collaboration or Conflict after Ukraine,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 65 (1) (2018): 1–17.

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