

## NORTHWARD MARCH: THE MILITARIZATION OF THE ARCTIC BY RUSSIA

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### Key Takeaways

**1 Russia's Arctic Strategy:** Russia views the Arctic region as a critical strategic zone, rich in resources like oil, gas, and rare earth metals. It has been heavily militarizing the area, building and modernizing military infrastructure to secure its interests, especially along the Northern Sea Route.

**2 Militarization vs. Modernization:** Russia's activities in the Arctic are a blend of modernization and militarization. This includes upgrading military capabilities, expanding infrastructure, and conducting large-scale military exercises, all while maintaining a strategic presence to assert control over the region.

**3 Impact of the Ukraine War:** The war in Ukraine has severely impacted Russia's Arctic military forces, leading to significant losses in specialized Arctic troops. This has weakened Russia's ability to maintain a robust military presence in the region.

**4 Strategic Priorities:** Russia's primary goals in the Arctic include controlling the circumpolar region, protecting the Northern Sea Route, and expanding its military infrastructure to secure its strategic interests and contest foreign military access.

**5 India's Arctic Policy:** India launched its Arctic Policy in 2022, focusing on six key pillars including science and research, climate protection, and economic development. India recognizes the strategic importance of the Arctic and aims to collaborate with Russia on environmental protection and energy cooperation.

**6 India-Russia Relations in the Arctic:** The Arctic region represents a new frontier in India-Russia relations, with potential for collaboration in areas like environmental protection and energy exploration. Despite pressure from Western nations, India sees value in maintaining strong ties with Russia in the Arctic context.

**A**s long as the major powers are engaged in geopolitical rivalry in the Arctic, basing agreements will inevitably figure into their overall strategy. The United States, Russia, and China all want their sovereign rights and interests to be protected, as well as assured freedom of movement, as the world temperature rises and more people have access to the Arctic Ocean and its natural resources. The United States and other major nations in the Arctic will need to establish strategic alliances in addition to domestic investments to enable advantageous agreements and access rights to bases, particularly for dual-use and civil-military operations. (Varguils, 2013)

## THE ARCTIC IMPORTANCE AND RUSSIA

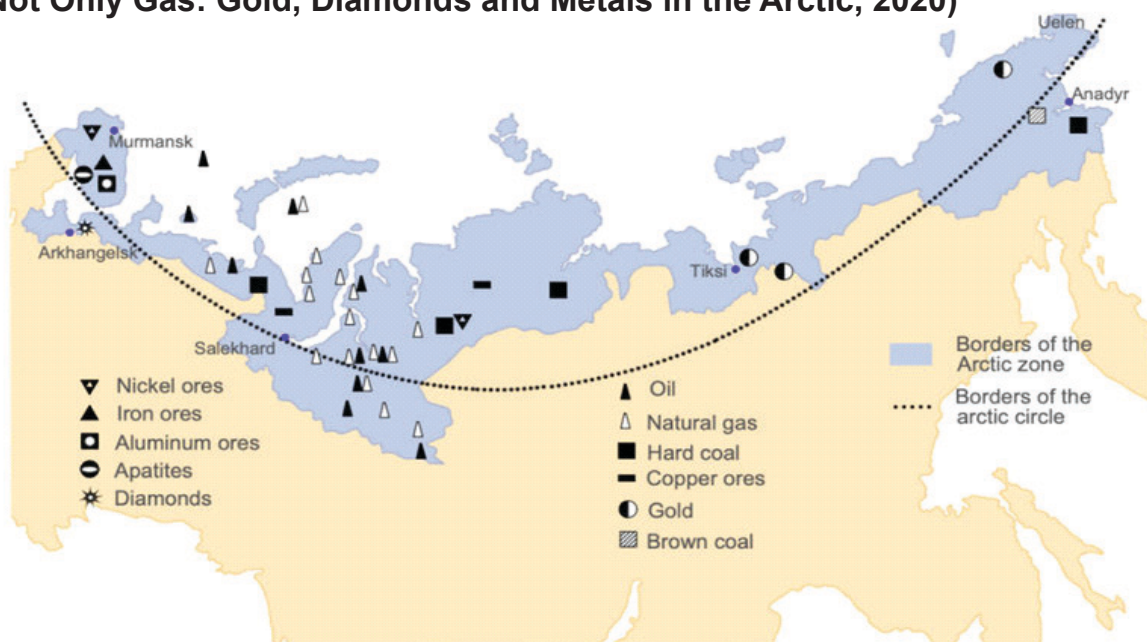
According to data released by the Institute of Geology of Ore Deposits, Petrography, Mineralogy and Geochemistry of the

Russian Academy of Sciences (IGEM RAS), Russia is the world leader in solid minerals mining in the Arctic, accounting for nearly 40% of the world's output of copper, nickel, and diamonds.

There are special mineral reserves in the Norilsk ore district. Along with coal, oil, and gas reserves, the Norilsk ore district in the north of the Krasnoyarsk Region is home to a group of globally significant sulphide copper and nickel deposits, known as Norilsk I, Norilsk II, Talnakh, and Oktyabrskoe. 3.3% of the world's cobalt output comes from active reserves, whereas 5.8% of the world's cobalt is produced in Russia's Arctic Zone, particularly in the Norilsk region. During the process of producing Cu and Ni, cobalt is collected as a byproduct. Reserves for mining are given for a period of 50 years. (Lobanov et al., n.d.)

For many years, the development of the Arctic's abundant mineral resources

(Not Only Gas: Gold, Diamonds and Metals in the Arctic, 2020)



### Mineral Deposits in the Arctic

Image Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/figure/mineral-deposits>

has piqued attention throughout the world. Canada, the United States, Russia, Norway, and Denmark are the five nations with coastal access to the Arctic seas, and they have long looked for opportunities to explore and use these resources to extract or increase their exclusive rights. The depletion of known natural resources in conventional mining locations has piqued the interest of corporate and scientific organizations worldwide, including Russia, in the development of the Arctic.

Since 30–40% of Russia's budget is derived from oil and gas earnings, the resource is the most alluring for exploration and production in the Arctic zone. Without the steady replenishment of proven oil and gas reserves, the nation cannot support itself. The Arctic region has reserves and resources of platinum metals, nickel and cobalt, copper, oil and gas, and other minerals in addition to hydrocarbons. (Nikulina et al., 2021)

Russia regards Arctic land as a critical strategic importance. As a result, Russia has been strengthening its military presence in the region. Russia 2022 developed a new "Arctic command" and four new Arctic brigades, as well as renovated regional airfields and deep-water ports. In September 2022, Russia organized a large-scale military drill known as UMKA-2022 in the Chukchi Sea, an eastern section of the Arctic Ocean that between Russia and the United States' Alaska territory. In this exercise, Russian nuclear-powered submarines, the Omsk and Novosibirsk, proved their capabilities by firing anti-ship guided missiles from the Chukchi Sea, hitting targets 400 kilometers (250 miles) away. (Kumari, 2023)



#### **Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF)**

The "Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) and National Security for the Period up to 2035" identifies the development of rare earth metal sources (specifically, the Lovozero deposit) as one of the Arctic's top priorities. (Mehdiyeva, 2021)

Many outside observers remain perplexed by Russia's rising military capabilities and the rapid increase in activities of its armed forces in the Arctic. Many outside observers remain perplexed by Russia's rising military capabilities and the rapid increase in activities of its armed forces in the Arctic. This is evidenced in several ways, including modernized weapons and technology, an expanded military infrastructure, improved strategic mobility and ability to conduct complex joint operations, shorter reaction times, and a consolidated command and control structure with the addition of the Joint Strategic Command North.

In terms of Russia's policy toward the Arctic area, the manner Moscow is expanding its presence raises the question of whether the development is "modernization" or "militarization". The explanation is that Moscow is modernizing by militarizing the Arctic region, which began in 2010, when Russia increasingly focused on

constructing its military infrastructure in the central and eastern regions of the Arctic.

. Nonetheless, the High North, or the European (or Western) Arctic, has remained the primary focus of its military activities and modernization, with the Northern Fleet and Russia's greatest strategic submarine fleet at its center. The growth in the Western Arctic, which shares borders with NATO countries and has Russia's most promising natural resources, is of acute concern. (Zysk, 2020)

## THE IMPACT OF THE WAR ON RUSSIA'S ARCTIC PRESENCE AND DEPLOYMENTS

Russia's Arctic infrastructure and capabilities could be considered 'double dual' in nature. They are inherently dual-use, meaning they can be employed for both civilian and military purposes and missions—the most revealing example being continuing discussions concerning "combat icebreakers." Infrastructure and capabilities also serve a dual purpose: the Kremlin's strategy entirely blurs the distinctions between aggressive aim and defensive purposes—it is both at once and plausibly perceived as "assertive defense."

Despite efforts to alleviate tensions in the Arctic Zone for the Russian Federation (AZRF), the 'double dual' logic is exacerbated by the fact that Moscow is planning for all contingencies in the Arctic, including military actions. Indeed, the Kremlin has been actively remilitarizing the AZRF since the late 2000s, rebuilding regional infrastructure

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

**Strategic priorities of Russia are:**

- **Russia's strategic aims include exerting control over the circumpolar region by disrupting and contesting foreign military access.**
- **Denial aims to expand interdiction capabilities outside the AZRF and reduce tensions in the Russian Arctic.**
- **Protecting the Northern Sea Route and Russia's disputed understanding of "internal waters."**

and (re)investing in Arctic-capable military weapons.

## LOSSES IN THE ARCTIC

The war against Ukraine has destroyed Russian ground forces stationed in the European Arctic. Indeed, Arctic-related soldiers in Ukraine sustained significant losses, particularly the 76th Guards Air Assault Division, the 61st 'Red Banner' Independent Naval Infantry Brigade (Pechenga, 14th Army Corps), and the 40th Separate Guards Marine Brigade (Pacific Fleet). Kola peninsula naval infantry and special forces have also sustained serious fatalities in Ukraine, including members of the 140th Special Purpose Detachment (Northern Fleet, special underwater troops). The Arctic Brigade likewise suffered significant losses in Ukraine.

The 200th Separate Motor Rifle

Brigade is the most prominent example of losses in Ukraine, having reportedly lost thousands of troops in numerous ambushes in the Kharkiv region. Local media sources highlight the bad situation of Russian ground forces in Pechenga. Furthermore, it was stated that Colonel Denis Kurilo, commander of the 200th Brigade, and General Aleksandr Zavadsky, deputy commander of the 14th Army Corps, were murdered in Ukraine.



### **Finland and Sweden joining NATO**

Until 2022, the Arctic Brigade and other troops in the European Arctic were promoted as Arctic-capable, combat-ready, and well-equipped forces. However, they, like many others, were unprepared for the realities of the battlefield in Ukraine. Russia is now paying the price for sending highly specialized Arctic troops to murder, since it will take years to regenerate troops, train them, and keep the cadre of senior officers. To deal with the Arctic Brigade's depletion and prepare for Finland and Sweden's entry into NATO, the Kremlin decided to integrate both Brigades into divisions and transform the 14th Army Corps into a combined weapons army.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE AND PRIORITIES**

Russia's Arctic ambitions are embodied in the (re)construction of a massive but diverse network of forward bases, outposts, and airfields scattered along the AZRF and the Northern Sea Route. To expedite the reappropriation of a region left to rot in the 1990s, the Kremlin adopted a 'build cheap, build fast' approach to Arctic infrastructure: the majority of the military facility has been both refurbished from legacy Soviet territories or built off the shelf and shared with the coast guard and border guard infrastructure in control of searches and rescues and constabulary missions. This enhances Russia's 'double-dual' strategy to the Arctic, which includes dual-use infrastructure and dual-purpose operations.

Russia's ongoing modernization plan for its Arctic military infrastructure appears to favor completion and maintenance above expansion. As a result of the war, the development of new infrastructure is slowing—not least due to economic constraints and the cost of combating the effects of climate change.

## **THREE KEY PRIORITIES IN ARCTIC INFRASTRUCTURE**

- Ensure the 'Bastionization' of nuclear deterrent architecture on each side of Russia's Arctic. Kola peninsula infrastructure is given top priority in terms of modernization, as evidenced by the ongoing renovations at the Severomorsk 1 and 2 and Gadzhiyevo bases, the modernization of Murmansk oblast military towns beginning in 2022, and the modernization of the

Tiksi port facilities on the Laptev Sea coast scheduled for 2025.

- Bases will be maintained near major NSR chokepoints to enforce Russia's interpretation of 'domestic' waters along the AZRF and defend regional nuclear infrastructure. The Kara Strait (Rogachevo on Novaya Zemlya and Nagurskoye on Franz Josef Land), the Laptev and Sannikov Straits, the East Siberian Islands (Temp airbase and Kotelny Island installations), and the strait south of the Wrangel Islands have all contributed to the expansion of the network of land bases and airfields.
- Modernize airstrips and runway extensions along the AZRF to accommodate attack and reconnaissance aircraft (MiG-29K, MiG-31, MiG-31BM, Su-24, Su-33), transport and support aircraft (mainly Il-76 and Il-78 refueling tankers, Il-38 surveillance aircraft), and strategic bombers (primarily Tu-160, Tu-95, Tu-22). The 2022 infrastructure plan includes the building of two airfields at Nagurskoye and Temp, as well as the renovation of seven airfields and runway expansions by 2030 (Severomorsk-1, Severomorsk-2, Severomorsk-3, Rogachevo, Talagi, Kipelovo, and the Safonovo seaplane facility). (Boulègue, 2024)

## INDIA'S STRATEGIC INTEREST & WAY FORWARD

The Arctic region has been seen as the next frontier in the India-Russia relations as the relationship between Russia and the Western countries are soaring due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war which



**India's arctic region**

has sparked major concerns across the globe. As far as the foreign policy of India is concerned, Arctic region is not on an immediate priority for India but as far as Climate change or the environment angle is concerned then it is a high priority. (Sharma & Viakhireva, 2024)

This is because in 2022, India launched its Arctic Policy, which consists of six pillars: science and research, climate and environmental protection, economic and human development, transportation and connectivity, governance and international cooperation, and national capacity building. (INDIA'S ARCTIC POLICY: Building a Partnership for Successful Development, n.d.). India and Russia have a great relationship which the US led Western Nations pressurize India to cut ties with Russia whereas on the other hand Moscow is aiming at "Easternization" of Arctic in which India has a big role to play. India recognizes Russia's importance in the Arctic because it has the greatest coastline, population, and natural resources in the region. As a result, the

Arctic represents the upcoming frontier in India's relations with Russia. (Sharma & Viakhireva, 2024)

## CONCLUSION

Russia is feeling exposed in a strategic 'backyard' where the Kremlin formerly assumed it had complete control and sovereignty. Russia's grip is slipping as a result of the war in Ukraine, including the loss of conventional capabilities and Finland and Sweden joining NATO. However, the Arctic region is strategically essential for Russia because of the rare earth minerals, which will generate significant cash and can be used by

Russia for military purposes, as well as for long-term sustenance during the war with Ukraine.

As far as Arctic is concerned India seeks interest in collaborating with Russia to contribute towards environmental protection and other parameters mentioned in the India's Arctic Policy. New Delhi also seeks Energy cooperation in the Arctic as the region is home to various undiscovered natural resources. Keeping all the aspects into consideration indeed we can predict that Arctic is the upcoming frontier in India-Russia's relations.

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