The combination of growing global competition and international military presence in the Arctic resulting from anticipated increases in navigability and access to natural resources has caused Russia to expand its military presence in the Arctic for the first time since the Cold War, resulting in an increased potential for conflict. In response, United States policy makers should reemphasize support for NATO and back away from the perceived exclusive focus on the Asia-Pacific region.
FUTURE WAR PAPER

RUSSIA IN THE ARCTIC: THE RISE OF NEW COMPETITION OR CONFLICT?

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF OPERATIONAL STUDIES

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AY 2013-14

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Date: 22 May 2014
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper considers the implications of an increased Russian military presence in the Arctic region resulting from increased accessibility to natural resources and potential maritime navigation routes due to climate change. Although there are conflicting interpretations of weather patterns over the past few decades, there is certainly an increasingly intense geopolitical and economic focus on the Arctic region resulting from a rapid decline in seasonal ice cover over the past three decades. Both circumpolar nations and other countries with economic interests in new trans-Arctic navigability opportunities and increased access to natural resources are moving quickly to stake sovereignty claims in the region. Russia, in particular, appears to be leaning forward in increasing the focus of its national security strategy on protecting its interests in the Arctic. The combination of growing global competition and international military presence in the Arctic resulting from anticipated increases in navigability and access to natural resources has caused Russia to expand its military presence in the Arctic for the first time since the Cold War; resulting in an increased potential for conflict.

The Arctic region represents an opportunity for Russia to break free of longstanding geopolitical obstacles to pursue significant maritime interests for the first time in history. To Russia, the arctic represents economic, political, and military-security opportunities. Stated Russian Arctic policies continue to waiver between predominantly hard-line and cooperative approaches to deal with anticipated international competition for Arctic resources and potential navigation routes.

Meanwhile, the United States mixes statements about ongoing Arctic concerns with renewed emphasis on shifting foreign policy and military capability focus to the Asia-
Pacific. Long standing NATO allies such as Norway are left to pursue their own Arctic interests with new doubts about the strength of NATO.
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The topic of "climate change" is a contentious issue. On one side, environmentalists argue that human impacts such as pollution and resource mismanagement cause catastrophic effects on the climate. On the other side, critics believe that recent fluctuations in weather patterns are part of naturally occurring cycles. However, in spite of the conflicting interpretations of weather patterns over the past few decades, there is certainly an increasingly intense geopolitical and economic focus on the Arctic region resulting from a rapid decline in seasonal ice cover over the past three decades. Both circumpolar nations and other countries with economic interests in new trans-Arctic navigability opportunities and increased access to natural resources are moving quickly to stake sovereignty claims in the region. Russia, in particular, appears to be leaning forward in increasing the focus of its national security strategy on protecting its interests in the Arctic. The combination of growing global competition and international military presence in the Arctic resulting from anticipated increases in navigability and access to natural resources has caused Russia to expand its military presence in the Arctic for the first time since the Cold War; resulting in an increased potential for conflict. In response, United States policy makers should reemphasize support for NATO and back away from the perceived exclusive focus on the Asia-Pacific region.

BACKGROUND OF RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICS

Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Problem of Asia*, published in 1900, provided a geopolitical view of Russia that endured for over one hundred years. Mahan described Russia as a landpower, limited in its ability to challenge Western powers because it lacked access to either its own ports or to overland routes to foreign ports. Contrastingly,
Western powers such as the British Empire and the United States could use maritime power to maintain dominance along the Asian coast. According to Mahan, geographical barriers blocked Russia's access to the sea. From St. Petersburg, access through the Baltic Sea required overcoming the sea power of Nordic states in the Gulf of Finland and the Danish straits. Similarly, from the Black Sea Russia faced the narrows of the Dardanelles, the Strait of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal. Although the Far Eastern port of Vladivostock provided direct access to the sea, it was far from the centers of Russian economic, political, and military power. Additionally, Japan was a rising maritime power that impeded Russian prospects for challenging Western maritime dominance from Vladivostock. Russia was effectively surrounded on three sides. On the fourth side, was the Arctic, a natural barrier that limited Russia's access to the north-flowing rivers emptying into the Arctic coast.

Based on Russia's perception of climate trends over the past several decades, accessibility to the Arctic is increasing, and the fourth barrier is beginning to disappear. Coincidently, on the other side of that disappearing barrier are vast natural resources and emerging commercial transportation routes.

The melting of the Arctic and the resulting accessibility to new sea routes, natural resource deposits, and north-flowing Russian river systems, are causing Russia to transform from a predominantly land-based power to a maritime state. The Arctic is a focal point for Russian national security strategy and Russia continues to invest in the expansion of both commercial and military maritime capabilities in the region. However, Russia is not alone in moving to stake sovereignty claims in the region. One interpretation of increased Russian militarization of a region with disputed sovereignty claims is that
conditions are ripe for conflict. One can imagine a scenario in which the Russian navy is used to protect Russian strategic interests in the Arctic through force.

**RUSSIAN POLICY FOR THE ARCTIC**

In 2001, Russia published the first of two comprehensive Arctic strategy documents. These strategy documents are useful to understand how Russia views opportunities and threats in the Arctic. The 2001 version outlined Russian national interests in the Arctic under the headings of economy, ecology, defense, research, and geopolitics. However, security interests clearly dominated 2001 Arctic policy. It called for a strong military presence and articulated the requirement for the Russian Navy to maintain “reliable functioning” of strategic sea-based nuclear forces in the Arctic to deter “the threats of aggression against the Russian Federation and its allies.” The 2001 Arctic policy also emphasized the need to secure Russia’s Arctic borders and to use “all means available” to defend Russian national interests.iv

Russia’s basic national interests in the Arctic were re-articulated in 2008 by the Security Council of the Russian Federation in the *Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period up to 2020 and Beyond*. This document represented a change in approach to security for Russian Arctic policy. The previous Arctic Strategy, adopted in 2001, focused on a more hard line approach to security in the region. The 2008 Arctic policy emphasized the need for international cooperation, rather than unilateral force demonstrations to avoid conflict. The key policy provisions of the 2008 document can be grouped into four categories: geopolitics, military issues, economic development, and transportation and maritime policy.v
Geopolitics

The Russian Arctic Policy describes an intent to build the Arctic “as a zone of peace and cooperation” among Arctic states. In accordance with this intention, Russia has a stated policy objective to support regional collaboration through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and “commitment to UNCLOS and multinational organizations and approaches, including the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the Arctic Council, and the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration.” The IMO is the agency of the United Nations responsible for the regulation of maritime safety and the mitigation of pollution from international shipping. The Arctic Council is a non-decision making body established to be the forum for discussion of issues pertaining to environment and development issues for the Arctic. The Ilulissat Declaration constitutes an agreement between Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States to “resolve disputes peacefully in line with the law of the sea” through existing bodies such as the Arctic Council and the IMO.

Military Security

Russian Arctic policy places emphasis on the necessity of maintaining a strong military presence in order to secure national interests. The 2008 Arctic policy requires the “necessary combat potential” and the establishment of special Arctic military formations that could be used to protect interests “in various military and political situations.” The Russian Arctic policy primarily focuses on the defense and protection of borders and area of the Russian Arctic zone, and addresses three primary military-security issues for the Arctic. The first is the creation of a Russian Arctic Coast Guard which can interact with the coast guards of other coastal states to combat terrorism at sea, smuggling, illegal
immigration, and unsustainable use of aquatic biological resources. The second is the development/reorganization of border infrastructure and the border guard force to protect the northern Russian coastline. The third issue is the “implementation of an integrated system for the monitoring of surface activities and oversight of fishing activities in the Russian Arctic.”

There are however, other military security concerns inherent to a more accessible Arctic region that are not articulated in the 2008 Russian Arctic policy. First, is the protection of Russia’s ballistic missile submarine fleet, which makes use of the icy Arctic waters in times of tension from a base in the Kola Peninsula. Second is the protection of trade routes along the Arctic and from the Arctic to outside international ports. Third is movement of Russian naval warships between the Atlantic and the Pacific.

Economic Development

Economic development represents the core of Russian strategic interest in the Arctic. The economic promise of the Arctic rests primarily in its rich natural resources and potential to become an attractive maritime trade corridor as sea ice continues to recede. According to the 2008 Russian Arctic policy, by 2020, the Arctic will be Russia’s “foremost strategic base for natural resources.” By Russian estimates, around 90 percent of the hydrocarbon reserves found on the entire Russian continental shelf are located in the Arctic. This has the potential to compensate for sharp reductions in oil and gas production expected from Siberia over the next 20 years. However, Russia must still overcome domestic economic barriers which have slowed the development of Arctic petroleum industry capacity in the region.
Connected to, but separate from Russia’s planned Arctic resource extraction efforts, is the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a “wholly integrated transportation link and a central element in maritime connections between Europe and Asia.” In order to support the increased economic activity along the NSR, Russia is developing modern harbors and infrastructure, a new nuclear-powered icebreaker fleet, and an air support and rescue fleet. However, the recent economic downturn has delayed acquisitions and it appears that Russia’s vision for 2020 will be delayed for a few years.xi

**Transportation and Maritime Policy**

The latest Russian Arctic Strategy document reflects an increased significance of Russia’s position on the legal status of the NSR. According to the 2008 document, Russia views the NSR as a “national transportation route,” subject to the jurisdiction of Russia. According to a Russian federal statute from 1998, Russia defines the NSR as “a historically existing national unified transport route of the Russian Federation in the Arctic.” The NSR includes navigation via the Russian Vilkitski, Shokalski, Dmitri Laptev, and Sannikov Straits. In Russia’s view, since these straits are Russian territory, Article 234 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) supports the Russian claim to jurisdiction of the NSR. Article 234 provides for the enforcement of “non-discriminatory laws and environmental regulations in their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) where ice coverage and particularly severe climate conditions cause exceptional hazards to navigation, and where pollution could cause major harm to the ecological balance.” In the context of Article 234, Russian regulations require any vessels that use the NSR to submit an application for guiding in advance. The implication is that there would be a fee payable to the Russian government for using the NSR.xii
It is worth noting however, that Russia's interpretation of the legal status of the NSR in view of Article 234 is controversial. Russia is attempting to use Article 234 of UNCLOS to extend its jurisdiction beyond the EEZ to include the entire NSR, rather than the portions that pass through Russian territory. The Russian position on jurisdiction is that the NSR “may thus include sea lanes running beyond Russia’s EEZ as long as part of the voyage includes waters under undisputed Russian jurisdiction.”xiii The United States however, views the straits of the NSR as international waters subject to the unimpeded right of passage.xiv These conflicting positions are worrisome in consideration of repeated warnings from Russia “that attempts by other countries to change the NSR’s legal status and transform it into an international transit corridor would be in conflict with Russia’s national interests.”xv Consequently, the legal status of the NSR remains an unresolved matter of contention.

Figure 1. Transportation Routes in the Arcticxvi
Figure 2. Port Distances Along Alternative Sea Routes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Route</th>
<th>Panama Canal</th>
<th>Northwest Passage</th>
<th>Northeast Passage</th>
<th>Suez and Malacca</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London - Yokohama</td>
<td>23,500</td>
<td>15.930</td>
<td>13.841</td>
<td>21.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marseilles - Yokohama</td>
<td>24.030</td>
<td>16.720</td>
<td>17.954</td>
<td>17.800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marseilles - Singapore</td>
<td>29.484</td>
<td>21.600</td>
<td>23.672</td>
<td>12.420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotterdam - Singapore</td>
<td>28.994</td>
<td>19.900</td>
<td>19.641</td>
<td>15.750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotterdam - Shanghai</td>
<td>25.588</td>
<td>17.570</td>
<td>15.793</td>
<td>19.550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamburg - Seattle</td>
<td>17.110</td>
<td>15.270</td>
<td>13.459</td>
<td>29.780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotterdam - Los Angeles</td>
<td>14.490</td>
<td>15.790</td>
<td>15.252</td>
<td>25.750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goteborg (Italy) - Hongkong</td>
<td>25.934</td>
<td>24.071</td>
<td>21.556</td>
<td>14.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barcelona - Hongkong</td>
<td>25.044</td>
<td>23.179</td>
<td>20.686</td>
<td>14.693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York - Shanghai</td>
<td>20.880</td>
<td>17.030</td>
<td>19.893</td>
<td>22.930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York - Singapore</td>
<td>23.580</td>
<td>20.310</td>
<td>23.121</td>
<td>18.770</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marginal longer route  Shortest route

All numbers calculated by Frédéric Lasserre in SIG Mapinfo, except the numbers for the Northeast Passage through the Kara Strait, south of Novaya Zemlya which have been calculated in Google Earth by Svend Aage Christensen.

De Facto Russian Policy for the Arctic

The published 2001 and 2008 Russian Arctic policy documents are useful to begin to understand how Russia views its national interests in the Arctic. However, more information is necessary to begin to understand the true implications of how Russia will pursue its interests. Russia is at the dawn of a new geopolitical environment. For over one hundred years, Russia was the object of containment by Western powers that feared Russia
as a land power. Finally, Russia sees an opportunity to pursue maritime interests on its formerly inaccessible northern coast.

In July 2012, Russia’s Arctic Brigades were described as having the primary purpose of preventing “other countries from taking hold of rich Arctic offshore oil and gas fields that Russia lays claim to.” The source of this description was the Russian Land Forces commander in chief, Col. Gen. Vladimir Chirkin. Chirkin referred to the threat posed to Russian oil interests by “[n]ot only Arctic states but also the U.S. and China and other countries” who “were eying Arctic oil and gas fields “that Russia claims to be its own.”xviii Five months later Chirkin’s comments were echoed by Russian Deputy Prime Minister, Dmitry Rogozin, who said in an interview for a Moscow paper, that “Russia might lose its sovereignty by the middle of the 21st century if it fails to clearly outline its national interests in the Arctic region today.” Rogozin made the point that if Russia did not stake out its claim to resources in the Arctic today, it would “lose the battle for resources, and...will lose an even greater battle for...sovereignty and independence.” He predicted that by the mid-21st century, competition for natural resources will “assume uncivilized forms.”xix This ominous statement is indicative of the strategic importance Russia places on the Arctic. Further, the perceived threat to Russian sovereignty supports the argument that in spite of claims to the contrary, Russia anticipates more contentious international relations in the Arctic than are currently described in Russian Arctic policy.

Another important development shaping Russian strategy occurred in 2012. This development was the return of Vladimir Putin as president of Russia. His return marked the end of hopes for a Russian transition to a more liberal strategy under President Medvedev.xx During his presidential campaign, Putin referred to a “large-scale re-
armament of the Russian military [that] was partly motivated by the other countries’ policies in the Arctic:

We aim to restore a blue-water (in the full sense of the word) navy, primarily in Russia’s North and Far East. The activities of the world’s leading military powers in and around the Arctic are forcing Russia to defend its own interests in the region.\textsuperscript{x\text{"}}

Putin went on to list military hardware that would be procured over the next ten years. The list included more than 400 land- and sea-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, 8 ballistic missile submarines, 20 multi-purpose submarines, and more than 50 new surface vessels that will primarily be deployed with Russia’s Northern Fleet. This hardware would go a long way to shifting the balance of military power in the Arctic away from the U.S. It remains to be seen whether this is just political rhetoric or a departure from previous indications from Russia that it is not interested in “provoking rising tension in the Arctic.”\textsuperscript{xxii}

In December 2013, Russian Federation Council International Affairs Committee Chairman, Mikhail Margelov, said that although military conflict is not the aim of Russia, “it is necessary to maintain the combat potential of the troops stationed” in the Arctic zone. He cited “potential legal, geopolitical and geo-economic rivalries” emerging in the Arctic due to global warming. Margelov described Western politicians’ proclivity to “apply double standards” to international sharing of natural resources. According to Margelov, the Western political mentality is that natural resources should be “shared by all of humanity” instead of belonging to concrete states. However, Margelov contends that in fact, Western countries “seek to develop the resources [of the Arctic shelf] on their own rather than transfer them to international control.” With regard to the United States, Margelov views American Arctic regional policy as following the declaration of former President, George W.
Bush, that the United States holds fundamental interests in the Arctic and should protect them with “measures including the U.S. Navy, Air Force, missile defense, nuclear deterrence, and a maritime presence.”xxiii

MIXED MESSAGING FROM THE UNITED STATES

Concerns in the Arctic Region

In the 2008 Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower, the U.S. recognized that “[c]limate change is gradually opening up the waters of the Arctic not only to new resource development, but also to new shipping routes that may reshape the global transport system.” xxiv Further, it declared that the U.S. would “not permit conditions under which [US] maritime forces would be impeded from freedom of maneuver and freedom of access...” Additionally, the U.S. stated that it would not “permit an adversary to disrupt the global supply chain by attempting to block vital sea-lines of communication and commerce.” To this end, the 2008 Cooperative Strategy stated the requirement for the capability to impose sea control wherever necessary, either with “friends and allies” or unilaterally if necessary.xxv

The Shift to the Asia-Pacific

In November 2013, Susan Rice, President Obama’s national security advisor, re-emphasized the importance of the U.S. shift to the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time that the U.S. military is scaling back both size and budget, the U.S. is choosing to focus on the Asia-Pacific region, because as Rice has stated, the region remains a foreign policy
priority for the Obama administration. This shift has met with mixed reactions not only in the Asia-Pacific region, but also among U.S. NATO allies in Europe.

Specifically, the Asia-Pacific shift is of concern for Norway, a U.S. ally whose security policy depends on NATO. Stale Ulriksen’s May 2013 paper raises the question of “whether the NATO security guarantee is still credible in practical military terms” when the U.S. shift in foreign policy priorities is taken into account. In the same paper, Ulriksen refers to growing common Norwegian interests with Russia as the reason for a developing cooperative relationship with Russia in the Arctic. Since its inception, NATO has stood to dissuade provocative Soviet/Russian actions against member nations. Even a perceived, if not actual weakening of the NATO alliance could shape the implications of increased Russian military presence in the Arctic region. The unintended strategic message of the U.S. shift to the Asia-Pacific is that the U.S. is poised to be less willing and/or less able to respond to emerging issues in other theaters. Unfortunately, the Asia-Pacific is not the only theater in which U.S. interests could be challenged in the foreseeable future.

**LIKELY OUTCOMES**

As Russia builds up military infrastructure and capabilities in the Arctic, the United States is making drastic reductions in forces and reprioritizing what remains to the Asia-Pacific. In seeming contrast to Russia’s stated vision for the Arctic for 2020, Susan Rice predicted that in 2020, “60 percent of [the U.S.] fleet will be based in the Pacific and...Pacific Command will gain more of our most cutting-edge capabilities.” On one hand, the focus on countering instability in the Asia-Pacific avoids a costly and potentially dangerous arms race with Russia in the Arctic. On the other hand, Russia will continue to
build up military power in the Arctic as newly re-elected President Putin continues to issue anti-Western rhetoric among Arctic neighbors who will be left to find their own solutions to national security interests.

It is possible that Russian anti-Western rhetoric is simply that, meant only for domestic Russian politics. In such a case, it is possible that Russia would pursue the kind of Arctic policy published in 2008, which focused on cooperative strategies to support international use of the Arctic region for resources and commercial maritime purposes. Common international interests in the Arctic would draw Russia and the other Arctic nations closer together, and all would benefit.

However, the placement of President Vladimir Putin back at the top of Russian politics makes this latter scenario unlikely. More likely is a scenario where the status quo is maintained for a time. During this time, Russia and other Arctic states would continue marginally cooperative strategies with lingering unresolved national interest issues. This would continue until the kind of “uncivilized resource competition” predicted by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin. By then, the die for the balance of power in the Arctic would be cast, and Russian military dominance in the Arctic would be difficult to overcome.

A build up of Russian military power in the Arctic does not represent a global threat. Although the Russian navy might eventually enjoy greater ease at joining its Northern and Pacific Fleets, it will not constitute an immediate path toward global dominance of the seas. It will however, allow Russia to assume a progressively more dominant role in dictating Arctic issues for the international community. On the surface, Russia seems poised to pursue cooperative strategies through international forums such as the Arctic Council, until strategic conditions or necessities require more forceful methods.
However, the Russian invasions of Georgia in 2008, and the Ukraine in 2014 demonstrate a disturbing trend for Russia to pursue less cooperative strategies for protecting regional interests. At the time this paper was written, the U.S. Administration faces the dilemma of how to respond to the most recent invasion, which followed direct warnings issued from the U.S. to prevent the Russian military incursion. Clearly, Russian decision makers considered U.S. warnings to be hollow, and ultimately disregarded them. With regard to the increased potential for conflict in the Arctic, the U.S. must not allow itself to be perceived as disinterested or unable to respond to escalatory acts of aggression. The U.S. must reemphasize its commitment to NATO and back away from the perception of single-focus on the Asia-Pacific.

CONCLUSION

From the Russian perspective, a build up of military power in the Arctic is a requirement to protect critical strategic interests in the region. The new accessibility to vast natural resources and potential international trans-Arctic shipping routes represents substantial geopolitical and economic opportunities for Russia. The implications of increased Russian military presence in the Arctic will be determined by the international interactions that take place over the foreseeable future. At present, the U.S. is both the most dominant military competitor with Russia and the least Arctic-focused nation among its Arctic neighbors. The U.S. shift to the Asia-Pacific will draw U.S. strategic investments away from other regions. The door is open for Russia to establish itself as the preeminent maritime power in the Arctic. At least for the time being, it is in Russia's interest to pursue Arctic interests through cooperative means. However, Russia's interpretation of the
jurisdictional aspects of control of the NSR conflict with the U.S. and other Arctic nations. Such issues must be resolved in an international forum before Russia's contentious claims lead to conflict. Finally, the U.S. must change its strategic messaging in order to mitigate the increased potential for conflict in the Arctic. The recent Russian annexation of Crimea from Ukraine has given testimony to the world that Russia is prepared to take provocative action to pursue interests in the face of weak messaging and hollow threats from the international community.
i Rob Huebert et al., *Climate Change & International Security: The Arctic as a Bellwether* (Arlington, VA: Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, [2012]).

ii Ibid.


vi Ibid.


ix Ibid.


xi Ibid.

xii Ibid.

xiii Ibid.

xiv Policy,

xv Zysk, *Russia’s Arctic Strategy: Ambitions and Constraints*, 103

xvi "The Northwest Passage Opens." Weather Underground, Inc.,


xviii Ibid.
"Army; Russia Gives up Murmansk Region as "Arctic Brigade" Deployment Site - General."


"Russia may Lose Sovereignty if Loses Competition for Arctic - Deputy PM Rogozin."


Godzimirski, Rowe and Blakkisrud, The Arctic. what does Russia See? what does Russia Want?


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