

Great Power, Arctic Power: Russia's engagement in the High North

Project summary and policy advice

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Russia has attracted attention of late for two quite different Arctic efforts – the planting of a Russian flag on the seabed under the North Pole and the resolution of the delimitation issue in the Barents Sea with Norway. The contrast between the two events is striking. While the flag planting brings to mind the patriotic pursuit of national interest and an imagery of the old-fashioned land grab, the process around the delimitation agreement is replete with an assiduous attention to international law and overtones of good neighbourliness.

In this project, we have taken a fresh look at Russia's Arctic policy and engagement. This policy has both a domestic and an international dimension. The division between the two partly coincides with the on-shore/offshore divide (11.9 million km² of Northern Russia and Siberia is defined as the Russian 'North' and subject to special 'Northern' legislation and privileges). Our focus here has been on the international/offshore dimension.

We argue that Russian actors today primarily see the Arctic as an international relations zone where cooperation, a positive image and stable relations with the 'West' are achievable and valued ends. However, in order to understand whether this approach is simply the attitude of the moment or something more institutionalized, we ask the following questions:

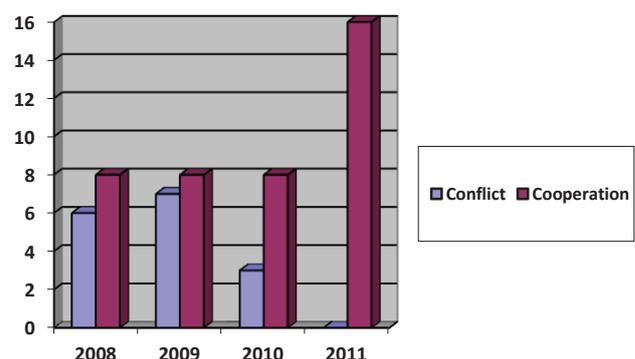
- How durable is this approach? To what extent is the current policy firmly anchored within the current political establishment rather than an expression of more narrow sector interests?
- To what degree could non-regional problems and frustrations poison the current positive approach to Arctic cooperation?

In order to answer these questions, we have adopted a two-pronged approach: first we have reviewed Russian Arctic discourses as observed in recently released policy documents and in public debate in the media; second, in order to examine the extent to which these particular discourses or representations of the Arctic are manifested in practice, we have interviewed civil servants from the 'Arctic Five' (Russia, Norway, Denmark, Canada and the US).

Russian discourses on the Arctic

The media analysis was based on the coverage of Arctic issues in the official newspaper *Rossiiskaya gazeta* from May 2008 (the onset of Medvedev's presidential term) until the end of June 2011. A total of 323 articles were analysed and coded for content. Our aim was to understand how the Arctic has been represented in Russian sources and to trace how this representation has changed over the past three years. The key findings from this analysis include:

Figure 1: Russian media coverage: 'conflict' vs. 'cooperation'



First, media coverage representing the Arctic as a *zone for cooperation*, rather than conflict, grew steadily between 2008 and 2011 (see Figure 1). A great deal of coverage in this cooperative tone was generated by international cooperation activities, ranging from high-level ministerial meetings in the Arctic Council to new programs in the University of the Arctic. More competition oriented articles are also triggered by discrete events. For example, Canadian military exercises in the North, NATO activity in the North, and the visit of the Canadian foreign minister to Moscow generated more conflict-oriented commentary.

Second, there is *no one driver* of policy/media attention to Arctic issues. Concern for energy or security issues in the articles analyzed was fairly matched by attention to other issues, such as Arctic research. If any one issue can be said to dominate, it is domestic concerns around the Russian *territorial* North, such as environmental issues, research, living standards and domestic economic development (see Figure 2).

Third, in terms of policy actors, the *range of persons* speaking about Arctic politics *increased markedly* through the three years covered in this study. While the MFA and the Presidential Administration were the dominant voices in 2008 and 2009, by 2010 the debate around the Arctic had clearly spread to other institutions in Moscow, including the Ministry of De-

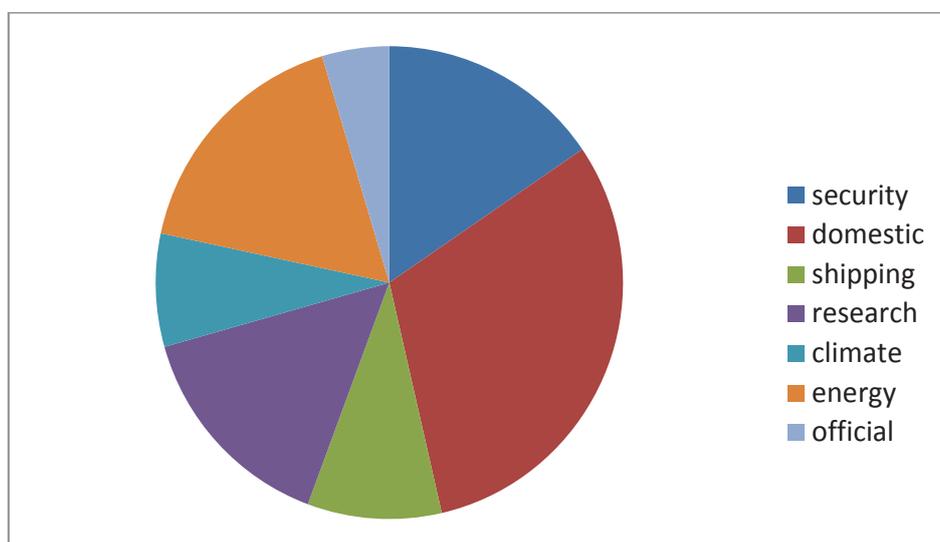
fence, Ministry of Natural Resources, Ministry of Economic Development, Ministry of Transport, Federal Assembly, FSB (Border Services), Security Council, as well as to regional institutions. This growth in the number of 'Arctic actors' suggests that Russia is aware of the myriad of ways in which Arctic sovereignty can be demonstrated and Russia's interests in the Arctic pursued. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's 'use it or lose it' statement, which attracted so much attention in Russia, has not been interpreted primarily through a military or security optic. While strengthening the border services has been an important part of Arctic policy of late, there is also an increased emphasis on economic presence and research.

Russian practice in the Arctic

The second step of our project was to examine the extent to which the discourses or representations of the Arctic we identified in Russian media are manifested in practice. In particular, we were interested in the question of non-regional spillovers (e.g. did the 2008 war with Georgia sour Arctic cooperation?). In order to assess this, we carried out 19 semi-structured interviews with civil servants from Russia, Norway, Canada, the US, and Denmark involved in ongoing Arctic cooperation. The key findings from the interviews are:

First, Russian interviewees argued that there is wide agreement across sectors in Moscow about Russia's

Figure 2. Coverage of Arctic issues in *Rossiiskaya gazeta* 2008–11





current, low threat, cooperation-oriented and internationally-law minded approach to the Arctic. As one Russian interviewee put it, ‘There are no longer competing visions for Arctic development.’

Second, all interviewees noted that Russia had an increasingly positive attitude towards Arctic cooperation over the past three years. They argue that Russia has invested effort into developing and filling with content a positive, leadership-oriented image in policy fields seen as interesting from a Russian perspective (primarily oil spills and search and rescue).

Third, no interviewees dealing with explicitly Arctic cooperation noticed any negative spillover from the war with Georgia on Arctic cooperation. In fact, some Russian and non-Russian interviewees noted a positive spillover in that both the US and Russia began engaging more substantively in Arctic relations around this time.

Conclusions

Russia’s approach to the Arctic appears to be fairly institutionalized across various authorities in Moscow and is, consequently, buffered against extra-regional conflict.

As to Russia’s relations with the other Arctic states, Russia has sought to disaggregate foreign policy geographically and across issue areas, trying to achieve some positive developments internationally in the Arctic even when relations with the ‘West’ were otherwise at a low point (e.g. the 2008 war with Georgia and the controversy over plans about a US-led missile shield in Europe). This is in contrast to the oft-cited idea that Russia goes through periods of being ‘for or against the West.’

Still, moments of uncertainty do remain. Two such moments are:

- 1) How the Arctic states decide to deal with China’s increasing interest in the North will be important. Russia is active in defending the privileges of Arctic states, while the US, in particular, is for the idea of an open Arctic Council.
- 2) An American failure to ratify UNCLOS could have repercussions. As one Canadian interviewee put it, ‘Might this be music to the ears of some on the Security Council who would prefer to write rather than follow international law?’

Policy recommendations

- The 2007 flag planting shows us that there is still some room for a difference of opinion in the pursuit of Russia’s Arctic goals and that the political space remains for the expression of it. However, the delimitation agreement, in that it required the involvement of the Russian leadership, likely has more to say about dominant Russian domestic political commitments and discourse. The Security Council has played an important role as a facilitator of the new policy platform. This should not, however, be seen as a step towards ‘securitization’ of the Arctic, but is rather a result of the council being a forum where all the major stakeholders are represented. We have, to the contrary, observed a widening of the political field, with the relevant sector ministries playing a more active role in the Arctic debate.
- Several interviewees (both Russian and Western) noted the importance of keeping budget constraints in mind when interpreting Russia’s Arctic plans. Despite the stated Russian interest in developing Arctic infrastructure (including the Northern Sea Route), one should be aware of the gap between stated interests and the costs involved – Russian policy declarations are often divorced from fiscal realities and should not necessarily be taken at face value.
- Arctic cooperation has to some extent been facilitated by the ‘reset’ in US–Russia relations. Should a change in the presidential administration in the US lead to a harder line towards Russia there could be repercussions for international relations in the Arctic. However, that Arctic cooperation intensified at the same time as Russia’s relations with the West reached a new low due to the Georgian war suggests that a policy or administration change in the US will not necessarily have serious negative effects on regional Arctic cooperation. At any rate, one should not infer an automatic spillover from one vector of Russia’s foreign policy to another.



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