LOOKING NORTH
WESTERN RESPONSES TO RUSSIA’S MOVES IN THE ARCTIC
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In August 2015, fifty Wikistrat analysts participated in an online, crowdsourced simulation to analyze the increasing Russian activity in the Arctic and to explore policy options for how Western Arctic nations can cope with Russia’s newfound assertiveness in the region.

Three of the experts who participated in the simulation contributed to this report:

**PROFESSOR RASMUS GJEDSSØ BERTELSEN**
Wikistrat Senior Analyst
Barents Chair in Politics at the University of Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway

**DANITA CATHERINE BURKE**
Wikistrat Contributing Analyst
International Relations and Arctic Politics Scholar in Aberystwyth University’s Department of International Politics

**VELINA TCHAKAROVA**
Wikistrat Contributing Analyst
Senior Research Fellow at the Austrian Institute for European Security Policy, Vienna
Since Russia planted its flag at the geographical North Pole in 2007, it has raised defense spending in the Arctic, stepped up bomber flights and submarine patrols, and carried out several military drills in the area. A demonstration of the huge importance Moscow attaches to the “High North” came earlier in 2015, when more than 80,000 troops, 220 aircraft, 41 ships and fifteen submarines trained in the icy conditions of the Russian Arctic in one of the largest military exercises in the region in years.

All this being said, Russia is still operating within the framework of the Arctic Council and adhering to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to pursue its interests and settle disputes in the North.

But given Russia’s violations of international norms (e.g., in Ukraine in 2014), Western states would be ill-advised to count on it to continue to respect these mechanisms. Nor can the United States and its allies afford to turn a blind eye to Russia’s military buildup in the Arctic – if only because of Russia’s advantages: It covers about half the Arctic and has significant scientific and technological capacities there, including a large icebreaker fleet.
It is important to think of the Arctic in a global context – conflict there is seldom about the Arctic itself. The North Pole region was highly militarized in the last century, but not because it was itself vital to either Russia or the United States. It was rather because the transpolar route was simply the shortest flight path for strategic bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles carrying nuclear weapons.

There is not much ground for locally driven conflict in this century either. There are practically no conflicts over exclusive economic zones, except between Canada and the United States in the Beaufort Sea and between Canada and Denmark over Hans Island. None of these countries is likely to go to war over their conflicting claims.

Russia has vast and important reserves of energy and other natural resources in the Arctic. But these are mostly on land or in sea that unquestionably belongs to Moscow. Furthermore, Russia has agreed with Norway on a delimitation of the Barents Sea where the two had overlapping claims. The danger here is that the broader East-West relationship deteriorates to such an extent that powerful voices in Russia challenge the Barents Sea settlement, which some have said is too generous to Norway.
Given the above, the following are strategies that the West can take in response to increased Russian activity/assertiveness in the Arctic.

1. **Coordinate Arctic Policy within NATO**: Western nations have been hamstrung in their response to Russia’s efforts in the Arctic by the absence of a coherent vision for cooperation. The “Arctic pivot” is clearly an important pillar of Russian strategy and is relevant to Moscow in terms of geography (territorial claims), trade (the Northern Sea Route), energy (oil and natural gas) and defense. Indeed, changes in Russia’s military doctrine in December 2014 and its naval doctrine in June 2015 have emphasized the newfound importance of the region in Russia’s strategic thinking.

Despite being the second most populous Arctic state, the United States has failed to set out its goals in a similar way. Canada, which is the second largest Arctic power in terms of area, has a clearer sense of its role. But it does not have nearly the same operational capabilities in the Arctic as Russia.

However, there is a platform for cooperation among the Western Arctic states: NATO. Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and the United States are all members. Traditionally neutralist Finland and Sweden are increasingly sympathetic to joining as well, given Russia’s aggression in Eastern Europe. The United States should consider creating an Arctic working group within NATO to discuss and coordinate policy. Existing institutions for Western cooperation (e.g., the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Nordic Council and the North American Aerospace Defense Command) fall short for the simple reason that they do not include all allied states or include Russia. NATO is the obvious alternative.

2. **Invest in Maritime Capabilities**: Another thing the United States can do to offset Russia’s advantage in the Arctic is cooperate with Canada to maintain year-round operational maritime capabilities there.

While American nuclear submarines are capable of operating under the Arctic ice all year, they are not suitable for search-and-rescue missions or environmental cleanup – the need for both of which will likely grow as the Arctic waters become busier.

Both Canada and the United States have indicated a commitment to raising their maritime capabilities, including the construction of new icebreakers and other limited ice-operating vessels. They need to follow through. The ships are not only needed – they should help protect the sovereignty claims of the Western Arctic states in the face of Russian assertiveness.

3. **Invest in Arctic Communities**: Western policymakers must not neglect the socioeconomic development of their own Arctic regions. National governments can work with such communities to improve infrastructure – e.g., renovating ports, building new power generators and fuel storage, and improving housing. Such investments are not a direct response to Russia’s military buildup; however, they would help raise the region’s appeal for eco-tourism and natural resource development. This, in turn, could help attract commercial investment that might otherwise go into the Russian Arctic, thus limiting Russia’s ability to finance its own Arctic development.
» Russia is likely to continue to increase its presence in the Arctic in the coming years, as it considers the region to be of high strategic importance.

» That said, the likelihood of locally driven conflict in the Arctic is low. Disputes over exclusive economic zones are confined to NATO allies Canada, Denmark and the United States, while the bulk of Russia’s energy and mineral resources are on land or in sea that is unquestionably Russian.

» There is a chance that the Arctic becomes another theater in the wider standoff between Russia and the West, if only to demonstrate capabilities.

» To offset Russia’s advantage, Western states should consider coordinating Arctic policy within NATO. Other platforms are unsuitable, because they either do not involve all Western allies or involve Russia.

» Canada and the United States should consider maintaining joint year-round operational maritime capabilities in the Arctic for search-and-rescue missions and environmental cleanup.

» Western governments must not neglect socioeconomic development of their Arctic communities.
ABOUT US

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AUTHORS:
Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen
Danita Catherine Burke
Velina Tchakarova

EDITOR:
Steve Keller

GRAPHIC DESIGNER:
Sheila Elizan