SWP

SWP Comment

NO. 48 AUGUST 2021

The Rush for the North Pole

A Furious Start to Russia's Arctic Council Chairmanship

Michael Paul

Russia assumed the Chairmanship of the Arctic Council at the 12th Ministerial in Reykjavik, on 20 May 2021. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov described his first meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken the previous day as "constructive". Two days before the meeting, however, Lavrov warned the West against encroaching in the Arctic: "It has been absolutely clear for everyone for a long time that this is our territory." But what exactly did he mean? The polar region claimed by Russia in its March 2021 submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf? Or the ongoing disputes over the Northern Sea Route? Moscow is working to fortify its positions in the Arctic through a combination of aggressive rhetoric and offers of dialogue, in another example of its ambivalent policy mix of security and cooperation.

The four priorities of the Icelandic Chairmanship (2019—21) were "the Arctic marine environment, climate and green energy solutions, people and communities of the Arctic, and a stronger Arctic Council". Iceland was proud of what it had achieved, said Foreign Minister Gudlaugur Thor Thordarson: Covid-19 had affected the work of the Chairmanship, he said, but in the end most of the plans had been carried through, including an initiative against Arctic plastic pollution and marine litter. Even more importantly, Iceland managed to finalise a long-term strategy for the work of the Arctic Council, which was also adopted in Reykjavik. Its spectrum spans from climate, ecosystems, marine environment, social development, sustainable development, research and communication, to strengthening the Council itself.

So which issues will Russia prioritise? The Arctic commission set up by the Security Council of the Russian Federation met in October 2020 to prepare the Chairmanship. Not entirely surprisingly, Dmitry Medvedev, as deputy chair of the Security Council, underlined the importance of national security given the perceived threat to Russia from its NATO neighbours. Subsequent remarks by Nikolay Korchunov, Russia's senior official for the Arctic, on the other hand, hewed to the Arctic Council's traditional cooperation-led agenda. Like Iceland, Russia has set four priorities for its Chairmanship: improving living conditions for the people of the Arctic, including indigenous peoples; environmental protection, including the consequences of climate change (with special attention to permafrost); socio-economic development (in Rus-

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

sia concentrating on settlements in the northern regions and along the Northern Sea Route); and strengthening the Arctic Council as a basis for multilateral cooperation.

Important as these issues may be, the geopolitical and security aspects of the Russian Arctic agenda remain volatile.

USA-Russia Relations

"The Arctic is one of few fields where Russia and the USA successfully manage to have a dialogue on a decent level," notes Yuri Averyanov, First Deputy Secretary of the Russian Security Council, because the Arctic agenda focusses on "practical questions" like coastguarding, fishery management and maritime safety. "This is a good model also for other fields of Russian-American relations: to start with concrete and practical questions and then move on with more general issues."

While Korchunov worked to calm the waters before the Reykjavik Ministerial, Foreign Minister Lavrov warned that "this is our land and our waters" and criticised "neighbours like Norway who are trying to justify the need for NATO to come into the Arctic". At almost the same time President Vladimir Putin told the Russian World War II commemoration committee: "Everyone wants to bite us or bite off a piece of Russia. But anyone who tries it should know that we will knock out their teeth so that they cannot bite." Both warnings were addressed to the United States, but also meant for its Nordic allies.

Nor can the new tone in Washington be ignored: in his latest memoir ex-President Barack Obama calls Putin the leader of a "criminal syndicate"; Biden calls him a "killer". The deployment of four B-1B bombers to Orland Air Base on Norway's west coast and the expansion of defence cooperation with Oslo also send a clear message to Russia: air and naval bases are available for bilateral operations. These measures respond to the sustained Russian military build-up in the Arctic and the associated concerns of Nordic NATO allies and partners like Sweden. Washington has thus helped to add new elements of deterrence to Oslo's traditional policy of balance towards Moscow.

While Washington is not actively seeking a further deterioration of relations, there are few openings for constructive cooperation, aside from negotiations over strategic stability (and a successor to New START). In the Arctic mutually advantageous cooperation is both necessary and possible.

That said, the tensions provoked by Russia's show of force close to its border with Ukraine in April cast the priorities of the Russian Chairmanship in an extremely ambivalent light. The conjunction of current threats with unsettled territorial claims around the North Pole creates a dangerous mix. The spectacular operation in 2007 to plant the Russian flag on the seabed 4,000 metres below the North Pole has not been forgotten. Russian polar researcher and former Duma deputy Artur Chilingarov left no doubts as to the mission's purpose: To prove that "the Arctic is Russian".

The Rush for the North Pole

According to data Russia provided to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in 2015 and 2019, Moscow claims an area of 1.2 million square kilometres in the Arctic, including the North Pole. Almost half —500,000 km^2 — overlaps with the Danish claim.

Russia expanded its submission in March 2021, on the basis of additional data gathered by two Russian ice-breakers in autumn 2020. The claim now stretches from the North Pole to the edges of Canada's and Greenland's exclusive economic zones, adding a further 705,000 km^2. "This is a maximalist submission. You cannot claim any more," commented the Canadian political scientist Robert Huebert. "In effect, they're claiming the entire Arctic Ocean as their continental shelf in regards to where

their Arctic comes up against Canada's and Denmark's."

Copenhagen claims 895,000 km^2 on the basis of its Greenland baselines — an area almost twenty times the size of Denmark itself. The claim, which also includes the North Pole, was already laid out in the Kingdom's Arctic strategy of 2011. Initially Denmark applied for an area of 150,000 km^2 agreed with Canada. But in 2013 Canada's then Prime Minister Stephen Harper renounced the deal, insisting that the Canadian submission include the North Pole. In response Copenhagen and Nuuk submitted the maximalist claim outlined above in December 2014.

The Danish and Canadian claims overlap with Russia's. Initially Moscow regarded this more as an opportunity than a problem, hoping that the three states would be able to agree among themselves. But the Russians changed their tactic after a May 2019 meeting in Ottawa ended without agreement, now expanding its demands instead.

Russia has everything to gain from cementing the application of the Law of the Sea in the Arctic. But at the same time, it is planning to invest several billion more roubles in construction at its northernmost airfield, on the Franz Josef Land archipelago. From there, fighter aircraft can fly as far as the North Pole.

On the High Seas and in Court …

In the Ilulissat Declaration of May 2008 the five Arctic coastal states rejected the idea of any legal regime modelled on the Antarctic Treaty of 1959. Instead they stressed their intention to clarify their sovereign rights and obligations according to the existing Law of the Sea.

Just a few years after the Ilulissat Declaration, however, the Danish intelligence risk assessment suggested that if the UN Commission rejected the Russian submission Moscow could challenge its competence and neutrality and override its recommendations. The Danish warning was repeated in the 2017 intelligence assessment, and in November 2020 lawyers for a Russian foundation did in fact recommend such an approach: Moscow, they said, did not need the United Nations' approval. It could simply declare that the continental shelf belonged to Russia and act accordingly. That would mirror China's actions in the South China Sea, where it ignored the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration and is claiming territory that belongs to neighbouring countries.

Unlike Beijing, however, Moscow is well-positioned to gain considerable territory simply by complying with the Law of the Sea. There is no real reason for a fight over the North Pole; the Russians are still following the rules and have every incentive to continue doing so. It is not as if they have any shortage of Arctic continental shelf. Denmark is also hoping for a mutual resolution among the Arctic states, although it would still not exclude the possibility that Moscow might "choose another approach at a later stage, should the UN process fail to result in an outcome acceptable to Russia".

So the possibility of Putin exploiting an opportunity to create facts on the ground cannot be entirely excluded, especially where Washington is paying much more attention to the Indo-Pacific. Thus, Moscow's support for a dialogue on military security in the Arctic also fits with Washington's interest in containing escalation risks in the Arctic and North Atlantic. On the other hand, sustaining the threat posture offers Russia opportunities to maintain its geopolitical status. Russia's activities in Europe and Putin's enthusiasm for the Northern Fleet's new "doomsday" weapons, including the nuclear-powered underwater drone *Poseidon,* suggest that the Kremlin shares that assessment. Where Moscow holds the military dynamic largely in its control, as in eastern Ukraine, escalation can serve Russia's interests. On the other hand Russia needs peace and stability in the Arctic to advance its gigantic investment projects.

On Thin Ice

In Reykjavik Foreign Minister Lavrov explicitly welcomed the prospect of a resumption of meetings of the Arctic states' senior military leaders. Doing so in session as designated chair — even though the Arctic Council is not concerned with matters of military security — underlines the importance Moscow attributes to resuming dialogue. One might almost think the Kremlin was trying to create a fig leaf for its own aggressive rhetoric.

It would be unwise, however, to expect too much from the constructive cooperation discussed in Reykjavik. Russia will not hesitate to use bilateral talks with the United States to underline its geopolitical status and to try to normalise relations without changing its aggressive policy towards Ukraine and the West. In its own interest, Moscow would be well advised to avoid misinformation and distortion — although the best defence is when myths turn out to be absurd.

For example, Putin's aforementioned threat alludes to Moscow's ire over former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's alleged "designs on Siberia". Albright left the government twenty years ago and never said anything of the sort (but according to a retired KGB general a special unit for telepathy had succeeded in reading Albright's mind).

Lavrov's warning that "this is our land and our waters" was referring not to Russian claims to the continental shelf, but to the waters along the Northern Sea Route. Unlike Washington, Moscow regards that as an international waterway.

Russia requires peace and stability in the Arctic if it is to advance its plans to extract coal, oil and gas and ship them via the Northern Sea Route, whose modernisation will demand considerable investment. To that extent national security — here concretely the energy sector and its military protection — generally enjoys priority, whereas the traditional concerns of the Arctic Council appear secondary to Russia. Nevertheless the Russian Chairmanship has laid out an ambitious programme for the next two years. This gives grounds to hope that the Kremlin might devote more energy to population, environment and sustainability. Ideally the Arctic could even regain its role as a place of cooperation and a stabilising factor in international politics.

It remains a geopolitical mystery whether a Russian, Canadian, Danish or even Greenland flag will one day fly over the North Pole. Russia's current mix of aggressive rhetoric and openness for dialogue keeps partners guessing while the Kremlin avoids concrete concessions. That does not make dialogue among the Arctic states any easier, especially as the ice on which they stand is getting ever thinner.

Dr. Michael Paul is Senior Fellow in the International Security Research Division.

SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3—4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN (Print) 1861-1761
ISSN (Online) 2747-5107
doi: 10.18449/2021C48

Translation by Meredith Dale

(English version of SWP-Aktuell 47/2021)