

Russia's Northern Policy: Balancing an 'Open' and 'Closed' North

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Abstract

This short introduction to Russia's northern policies examines Russia's historical and contemporary approaches to the North as a domestic space, the primary features of Russia's international cooperation in the North, and how Russia frames some key Northern issues, namely climate change, hydrocarbons and delimitation of maritime borders. Throughout, it is suggested that Moscow's approach to northern politics evidences a tension between the 'open' and the 'closed' North. In other words, Russia's northern policy encompasses both more outward oriented inclinations, exemplified by cross-border cooperation, and an emphasis on defending its national interests and national spheres of authority.

Many Norths

The North (and so-called areas equivalent to the North) as it is defined today encompasses more than 60 percent of the Russian landmass. The Russian North is seen by many as extending from Russia's Western land border with Norway to the Bering Strait off the coast of the Russian Far East. As a result, Russia has a key role to play in the international politics of the North—it is geographically the largest state in the Arctic and is an important regional and global player in Arctic energy markets.

Russia's engagement in the North, both domestically and internationally within the circumpolar Arctic, plays out against a regional background of change. In contrast to the Cold War period, in which the North was highly militarized, the immediate post-Soviet years witnessed high levels of cooperation on environmental, social and military issues. Although some of these cooperative efforts have floundered in recent years, others have grown in importance. Globally, the strategic significance assigned to the Arctic has grown, in part because the region is said to hold 25% of the world's undiscovered hydrocarbon reserves and because climate change is rendering the northern icescape less predictable in the short term, and more open in the long term.

Before proceeding to consider Russia's approach to the North, it is necessary to briefly clarify this article's use of terms. Firstly, although the terms 'Arctic' and 'North' are used interchangeably here, it is important to note that these terms are not exact synonyms and their usage varies across national discourses and international forums. Secondly, while this article discusses 'the Russian North' and 'northern policy' and broader features of Russian engagement in the region, it is necessary to bear in mind that the 'Russian North' is a complicated and nuanced concept. The Russian North is in fact many 'Norths', including the Russian northern mainland, undisputed Russian territorial waters and Russia's broader claims to further territory in the Arctic Ocean, including areas of unclear or contested status.

Domestic Policy

During the Soviet period, the North was primarily a closed nationalized space. While, it had long been a homeland to a multitude of indigenous peoples, the North, owing to its natural resources, became an important part of the Soviet planned economy, while the dramatic mastering/development of the North (*osvoenie Severa*) played a corresponding role in Soviet national identity. As a result, a pattern of settlement and transport developed in the North that was based on the principles of a planned economy and hence was ill-suited to the logic of a market. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian northern policy, during the transitional 1990s, is best described as haphazard and focused primarily on *ad hoc* measures in response to economic and social crises in the region.

The contours of a more clearly discernible policy emerged during the Putin presidency (2000–2008). As Blakkisrud (2006) argues in his comprehensive study of Russia's post-Soviet northern policy, this approach was initially based on principles of the free market, with an eye towards ensuring that the North became a profitable part of the Russian state that no longer required special policy attention. This included encouraging migration from areas of the North that no longer had prospects for viable economic activity.

However, the 2008 policy document, "Foundations of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic through 2020 and Beyond", marked the re-emergence of the North as a separate policy field. The policy itself is wide-ranging and similar in many ways to the northern policy documents of other Arctic states. It emphasizes soft issues, such as the environment and human security, and highlights common interests with other coastal Arctic states. The document also underlines the importance of the Arctic resource base (onshore and offshore) and of Arctic shipping routes for Russia's future economic development. The strategy also mentions issues of military security. However, as Trenin and Baev (2010) point out, Arctic sabre rattling remains limited to occasional

statements by individuals, rather than a state discourse. Russian President Dmitri Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov all frequently emphasize that there is little basis for thinking of the Arctic as a potential conflict zone. Nonetheless, it appears that the North has been clearly re-established as intertwined with Russia's political and economic interests, and thus northern issues are likely to remain on the federal agenda.

International Engagement

Following the end of the Cold War, international cooperation in the Arctic increased dramatically. There has been a proliferation of activities aimed at promoting stable and ongoing northern cooperation. This is largely due to the region's status as a relatively secure source of non-renewable resources (oil, gas, minerals), the allure of Arctic shipping routes, the increased politicization of Arctic indigenous groups, and a heightened awareness of the impact of global environmental problems on the Arctic environment.

This focus on the North led to the creation of several international organizations and cooperative projects in the 1990s, such as the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Region and, later, the EU Northern Dimension initiative. Against this background, Russia has, at times, sought to restrict international collaboration on northern challenges that had come to be (re) defined as domestic issues. One example of an attempt to 'close' the Russian North was Moscow's change in attitude towards the Arctic Military Environmental Cooperation (AMEC), which was established by the military authorities of Norway, Russia and the United States in 1996. AMEC focused on spent nuclear fuel containment and remediation of radioactive pollution in the North, with particular attention paid to the Northern Fleet in northwest Russia. In February 2007, a Norwegian representative within the AMEC project was denied entry to Russia on a routine working visit and was accused of conducting illegal information gathering. This signalled a changing attitude in Russian political and security circles with regard to both being a recipient of 'aid' via capacity-building projects and the extent to which the Russian North (and the military North in particular) should be 'open' to other actors and multilateral activities.

In the cooperative settings that continue to flourish, Russia is not an active agenda-setter and remains primarily oriented towards the safest zones of low political cooperation and coordination. The reasons for this low-key engagement may be that these regional multilateral arrangements are not seen as prestigious forums in which Russian national interest should be pursued, and

more generally, because Russian representatives tend to be sceptical about the possibility of achieving desirable outcomes in any multilateral setting. Furthermore, such northern cooperative forums, more or less, explicitly exclude politically and economically problematic issues.

In general, such security and economic interests in the Arctic are primarily addressed in national decision-making, more informal and flexible multilateral and bilateral relations and the UN system. For example, the important issue of a delimitation line in the Barents Sea was resolved bilaterally by Norway and Russia. Furthermore, the five Arctic coastal states (USA, Canada, Russia, Norway, Greenland/Denmark) have taken to meeting biennially outside of the Arctic Council to discuss issues of shared concern, such as enhancing expert-level cooperation on the territorial claims process and mandatory shipping standards for polar waters. Russia also argues consistently, as do the rest of the 'Arctic 5' states, for the adequacy of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in addressing territorial claims and allocating responsibility in the maritime Arctic. This reflects the relatively positive view Russia has on the UN system and a desire to foreclose EU and NGO rumblings about the necessity of establishing a new cooperative regime in the Arctic, which could impinge on the political centrality of the Arctic coastal states.

Northern Concerns

How might Russia's political approach to the North change in the medium term? In the following section, the article outlines the central opportunities and challenges facing the region and potential consequences for Russia's northern policy.

Climate Change

At the present time, it remains unclear to what extent the consequences of climate change, such as the impact of melting permafrost on infrastructure and settlements, are being incorporated into Russia's northern policy-making and planning. There are indications, however, that the climate change issue is becoming more integrated into the broader Moscow policymaking agenda, albeit somewhat indirectly. The 2009 Russian 'Climate Doctrine', for example, encourages the relevant governmental bodies to take into consideration the need to adapt to and plan for the potential economic and social impacts of climate change. Furthermore, reducing greenhouse emissions dovetails nicely with an important policy aim in Russia, which is to increase energy efficiency domestically, as part of the wider modernization effort, and in order to free up more oil and gas for export to lucrative foreign markets. This incrementally

increasing national awareness may lead to the devotion of greater attention to the specific problems of climate change in the Russian North.

Oil and Gas

The rising global demand for oil and gas render the Arctic an important feature of future oil and gas production. Already today, the Arctic produces one-tenth of the world's crude oil and a quarter of its gas. Of this production, 80% of the oil and 99% of the gas comes from Russian Arctic areas (AMAP 2007).

The tension between an 'open' and 'closed' North has been manifest in debates around the development of Russia's northern hydrocarbons. Since 2005, growing attention has been paid to the question of how to promote private investment (both Russian and foreign), while maintaining a high level of state control over the development of, and profits from, new oil and gas developments in the Arctic. The tussle over the Sakhalin II oil and gas field and the resulting entrance of Gazprom into a consortium, previously dominated by Shell, was one example of this tension. Of late, the rules of engagement for foreign companies seem to have become somewhat clearer, both in legislation and practice. In 2009, Putin explicitly invited foreign companies to team up with Rosneft and Gazprom to develop the Yamal peninsula, an Arctic region that is seen as a key area for petroleum development in the medium term. The financial crisis and the spectre of shale gas as a new and more widely available source of energy has placed somewhat of a dampener on expensive, technically challenging projects in the high North. Nonetheless, some joint Russian-multinational consortiums continue to plan for Arctic petroleum development (primarily in the Barents Sea and on the Yamal Peninsula), despite delays resulting from legal, political and profitability concerns.

Maritime Claims

The circumpolar states, including Russia, remain keen to settle their claims on northern territories. In the Soviet period, a huge sector covering about one-third of the Arctic Ocean was designated as Soviet territorial waters and Russia's 2002 UNCLOS claim was of similar proportions. The August 2007 planting of a Russian flag on the seabed at the North Pole was perceived by many as

a vivid example of such attempts to stake out—if only symbolically—such a claim. It is worth noting that the Russian political leadership applauded the effort as a scientific feat, but assiduously emphasized that all such claims would be resolved in the appropriate international setting. More recently, Russia and Norway agreed to a delimitation line in the Barents Sea by dividing the area to which both countries had laid claim rather neatly in half. The settlement of this issue bilaterally with Norway may have been part of an effort to put Russia in good stead for delimiting its broader claim about the outer continental shelf in the Arctic. The agreement also served to emphasize the peacefulness of the Arctic and the ability of the circumpolar states to resolve their conflicts peacefully, either bilaterally or within UNCLOS (Moe 2011). Again, there is an interesting twist on the open/closed dichotomy. Here Russia remains international in orientation, but not to an unlimited extent and only within a familiar and preferred body of international law.

Concluding Thoughts

While the open/closed dichotomy is a simplistic conceptualization, it serves to draw attention to some of the long-term trends that have shaped Russia's northern policy over the last two decades. In sum, one could say that impulses towards openness and towards closure overlap and compete with one another in Russia's northern politics. The increased level of strategic attention being given to northern issues may complicate international cooperation—with higher stakes and less free flow of information and personnel. For example, environmental problems, once the mainstay of cooperation with Russia in the Arctic, are increasingly being presented as strategic issues and are therefore less open for cross-border cooperation than in the 1990s. The question of what comes to be defined and accepted as within the remit of international cooperation and what remains within the field of domestic politics is an interesting one to consider. Examining the overlaps and tensions between these two modes for governing the Arctic space may be more fruitful than debating the often overdrawn caricatures of the Arctic, as either a zone of intense geopolitical competition over resources or a region of exclusively seamless international cooperation.

About the Author

Elana Wilson Rowe is a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI) and an adjunct professor at the University of Nordland. Her research interests include the Russian North, climate policy, international relations in the Arctic and the politics of expert knowledge.

Suggestions for further reading are overleaf.

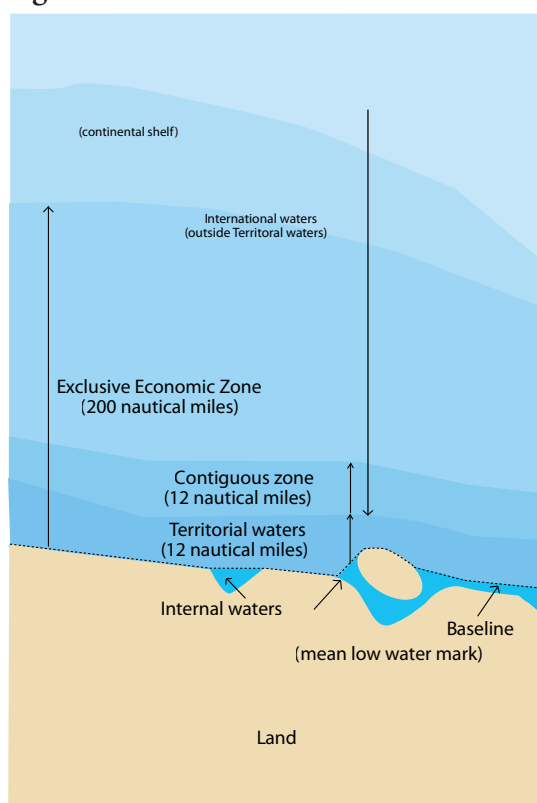
Further Reading

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DOCUMENTATION

International Law of the Sea

Figure 1: Sea Areas in International Law



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