

Russia Chooses 'Soft' Approach to the Arctic

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Recent initiatives in the Arctic Council show that Arctic nations have chosen business as a universal language of rapprochement. Russia's limited military presence should be viewed as an opportunity to build a safer economic environment without prejudicing the security of anyone.

The extraction of minerals in the Arctic has become a hot topic after the Parliament of Norway opened up a new area on the fringe of the Arctic Ocean to offshore oil drilling last year. For more than a decade Norway has been exploring the Barents Sea region to boost performance and counteract falling oil production. Leading EU companies have flocked to the Norwegian Arctic, encouraged by discoveries by Statoil, ENI and Total, [writes](#) the industry website, Rigzone. Russia's oil & gas majors have followed suit.

A year later it becomes more and more apparent that technically challenging initiatives such as Arctic oil & gas exploration are in need of better protection and a [clear set of rules](#) (as noted by Norway's former foreign minister Espen Barth Eide as early as in 2012). Pirazlomnaya oil rig incident [1] has shown once again that protective action planning is a sad necessity for all interested parties. Russian air and space defense troops have already begun deploying units in the Arctic. The development of Soviet military infrastructure in the Arctic, installation of modern radar systems and reconstruction of Northern airfields are among top priority [goals](#).

The good news is that today all mining operations on the continental shelf must rest on a [solid contractual basis](#), so, more often than not, the widely discussed security risks may be overblown. A military presence in the High North should not be viewed as a sign of heightened tension. On the contrary, the growing interest in more security might be a great opportunity to further improve the cooperation among the Arctic nations. A limited military prescriptive may prevent illegal border crossing, organized crime and [ecoterrorism](#). "Everything is done transparently, logically, and is not aimed against any neighbors, is not of a destabilizing character and does not cross any 'red lines'", [concludes](#) Russia's Ambassador at Large and representative at the Arctic Council Anton Vasiliev.

Arctic search and rescue (SAR) operations and oil spill response also demand broader force projection. Not coincidentally the Arctic Council gave special priority to the Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement in 2013 and established the areas of SAR responsibility of each state party. SAR operations are impossible without direct involvement of the military and the EMERCOM. As a country that is de facto in full control of the Northern Sea Route and extended continental shelf, including the Lomonosov Ridge, Russia has prepared [a set of measures](#) to maintain safety on the open sea. Such deterrent force is a timely and reasonable precaution because fast climate change has intensified the Northern Sea Route

(NSR) shipping. Jong-Deog Kim, a division director at the South Korean Maritime Institute, [predicted](#) that traffic between Europe and Asia along the NSR will grow by 6.5% a year and could potentially account for a quarter of all cargo traffic by 2030.

A plan to control oil pollution risks in Russia's future area of responsibility is currently being developed in close cooperation with specialists from Norway. The Arctic Council oil pollution task force meeting in January, 2014 was one of the latest examples of productive work in this vital sphere. Both Statoil (Norway) and Rosneft (Russia) expressed interest in oil spill regulations. Another promising initiative was the [creation](#) of a new circumpolar business forum called the Arctic Economic Council (AEC) on the basis of The Task Force to Facilitate the Circumpolar Business Forum (TFCBF) in December, 2013.

Canadian journalists [stress](#) the fact that in the light of recent military buildup the problem of the overlapping Arctic claims of Russia and Canada may "send wrong message". Deeper analysis of political environment in the High North shows that the issue of Arctic "land grab" is highly exaggerated. All UN procedures on the matter that include the necessary legal justification to support Russia's Arctic claim will be completed by the end of 2014, so there is no territorial dispute. The claim is backed by the detailed mapping necessary to support the bid. Russian scientists completed several geological survey expeditions and have been gathering evidence to meet the UN Commission's criteria since 2001.

Ottawa is trying to catch up with other littoral states and create some room for diplomatic maneuvering [2]. Canada lags behind other Arctic stakeholders, Norway and Russia, in Northern economic development, [believes](#) John Higginbotham, a senior fellow at Carleton University who focuses on Arctic research. Mostly due to domestic political situation, Canadian leaders have made a number of ambitious statements, for instance, issued a Canadian passport for [Santa Claus](#) and included the symbolic North Pole in Canada's territorial claim.

Nevertheless, such statements are mostly intended for domestic audience and should not be interpreted as a sign of conflict potential. Canada and Russia enjoy very good relations on the Arctic, a view that was confirmed by Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird in a recent interview. Ottawa hosted the meeting of the Task Force on the Arctic and the North under the Canadian-Russian Intergovernmental Economic Commission [resulted in](#) signing of a bilateral cooperation plan.

Existing international law framework and forums like the Arctic Chiefs of Defense Staff Conference provide all the necessary mechanisms to treat and resolve all overlapping claims on the basis of negotiations. In any case, there is no need for screaming headlines about "the new cold war". Recent examples of economic cooperation prove that business has become a gateway to regional political accord, debunking popular myths about the race for resources in the Arctic.

Notes

[1]The Prirazlomnaya oil rig is, in fact, a very complex industrial object. It's the first Arctic-class ice resistant offshore gravity platform in the world. Attempts to exert "green" pressure on the Arctic nations might be a part of a broader strategy of ambitious non-Arctic players to sneak into the mineral-rich region.

[2] The Government of Canada has submitted a preliminary application to the UN in December,

2013.

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