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**RUSSIA'S RECENT CONQUESTS AND LONG-TERM
STRATEGY IN THE ARCTIC**

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Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for

**AIR UNIVERSITY ADVANCED RESEARCH
(NEXT GENERATION INTELLIGENCE, SURVEILLANCE, AND
RECONNAISSANCE)**

in part of

**SQUADRON OFFICER SCHOOL
VIRTUAL – IN RESIDENCE
AIR UNIVERSITY
MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE
February 2021**

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ABSTRACT

Russia has a long history of exploration in the Arctic region. Exploration of the region first took place before Russia became the country-state as we know it. The Cossacks established a trade route to the region before the end of the 16th century, and Vitus Bering first mapped the west coast of the Bering Strait in the early 18th century. The northernmost border of its country is home to vast quantities of oil, natural gas, nickel, copper, and other metals. These are resources Russia desperately needs as it has cornered itself into an energy and natural-resources dependent economy. The dwindling polar icecap makes transit north from the region more accessible year by year. This situation provides Russia an opportunity for increased trade routes and new avenues to project power towards the United States, Canada, and their Scandinavian western-European neighbors. Further, Russian advancements in the region serve as a source of national pride, which is dwindling after 20 years under Putin's tenure in Moscow. There are avenues for the United States to counter Russian efforts in the Arctic, running the gamut of economics, diplomacy, and military options.

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As the ice sheet grows thinner in the Arctic area, the possibilities and ease of exploration for resources increase. Five countries can lay claim to those resources: Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States. However, Russia and Canada have pulled away from the other three as of now¹. In April 2003, roughly 100 miles south of the North Pole, Russian officials planted a flag into the upper surface of the ice. Revered polar explorer and politician Artur Chilingarov, declared “This is our Arctic, this is the Russian Arctic, and the Russian flag should be here².”

Four years later, the Russians planted another flag. Led by Chilingarov again, the flag went into the seabed. It was the third recent Arctic foray for Russia, including a failed mission in 2004³. It was a more permanent gesture than the earlier and indicative of the ongoing efforts that were to come. The gesture foreshadowed Russia’s intent to pursue oil and energy resources from the Arctic and further expand military basing in the region. Moscow, ever the chess player, treats the increased establishment of a military presence in the Arctic as a pre-requisite for economic investment in the region.

That presence includes six military naval ports, which is ideal for Russia now that it has the world’s largest fleet of icebreakers. Estimates are that up to \$35 trillion worth of oil, natural gas, ocean fisheries, and trade routes are up for the taking. With 53% of the Arctic’s shoreline as its own, Russia is locationally-advantaged. Russia also has over half of the world’s Arctic population along that shoreline, further cementing a foundation in the area.

In May 2019, the DoD announced that the September Arctic ice was receding at a rate of 13% per decade. This trend highlights another reality. Russia’s investments in basing and icebreakers do not just give them an economic advantage. They also increase their ability to power-project the U.S. from the North. U.S. Air Force Gen. Terrence O’Shaughnessy, who heads

up both U.S. Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command, said, “The Arctic is the first line of defense”⁴.

Russia’s investments and military activity have not been without response. One month after Russia launched its largest mass exercise since the end of the Cold War, Vostok-2018, in which 300,000 personnel participated in September 2018, the U.S. had an Arctic military exercise. Acting in concert with 30 NATO and partner countries, a combined force of 50,000-plus participants was amassed. This iteration of the Operation Trident Juncture exercise, which occurred in Norway, and smaller parts of Finland Sweden, involved participants engaging in air, land, and maritime scenarios. As the host country, Norway announced the exercise as a practice of defense against a “fictitious aggressor.” Russia denounced the exercise as “saber-rattling”⁵.

In addition to the 26 military bases along the Arctic coastline, including the six previously mentioned naval bases, Russia’s efforts have begun providing a solution to another problem-set: increasing revenue sources in its arguably most critical economic sectors. Russia is one of the world’s leading producers of oil and natural gas and is also a top exporter of metals such as steel and primary aluminum. Russia depends heavily on optimal world commodity prices. In 2005 alone, revenue from oil and natural gas alone contributed 18.6% of Russian GDP, which was up to 22.7% by 2013⁶. Their economy averaged 7% growth during the 1998-2008 period as oil prices rose rapidly. However, the country felt the deep sting of a recession with GDP falling 2.8%, continuing through 2016, due to the combination of falling oil prices and economic sanctions⁷.

The Arctic boasts 412 billion barrels of collectible conventional oil, natural gas, and natural gas liquids. In August 2017, then Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev stated that nearly \$2.8 billion would be spent developing the Arctic continental shelf and coastal areas through

20256. The announcement heralded a follow-on to the investments made in the region through military funding quite recently. The Russian military spent nearly 75% of its budget on Arctic expansion from 2015-2017⁸.

There are some, though, who would question Russia's use of this investment. Although Russia has substantially strengthened its security posture in the Arctic, there are still cracks in the armor, so to speak. Nearly half of the country's oil and gas fields lie in regions where thawing permafrost will continue to cause severe damage to buildings, roads, and industry. A spill of 20,000 tons of diesel fuel in the Russian town of Norilsk in May 2020 is a reminder that some of that nearly \$3 billion investment that Medvedev boasted of needs to be spent on improving infrastructure first⁹.

The spill was the largest spill of diesel fuel in history, and the cost of prevention might have been far less than the costs of cleaning it up. Estimates put the efforts at taking as long as ten years, with costs ranging from a conservative \$300 million up to a possibly exaggerated \$2 billion¹⁰. In early 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin decreed \$96 billion (6.3 trillion rubles) to fund a comprehensive infrastructure modernization plan. Almost a quarter of that money, set to fund projects into 2024, has been earmarked for seaports and the Northern sea route¹¹.

“Arctic development is indeed costly for Russia, but the government deems it necessary, and legitimate, to perform ‘great power status’ across this new frontier, as well as to anticipate the negative impact of climate change for coastal regions in the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation,” (said) Mathieu Boulegue, a research fellow at the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House¹². Russian efforts to accomplish these economic and military goals in the Arctic is not new. Reminiscent of the country's early Arctic exploration and Stalin's “Red Arctic” propaganda, Vladimir Putin seeks to identify Russia's conquering of this particular region as

unique to Russian nationalism. Additionally, Russia's military presence in the Arctic seeks to achieve three objectives¹³:

1. Enhance homeland defense; specifically, a forward line of defense against foreign incursion as the Arctic attracts increased international investment;
2. Secure Russia's economic future;
3. Create a staging ground to project power, primarily in the North Atlantic.

As outlined by the Center for Strategic & International Studies, the first objective is reminiscent of the classic Russian military doctrine of "attack as defense," first introduced by the first Russian tsar, Ivan the Terrible, in the 16th century. This concept sought to create a buffer zone between Russia and adjoining countries. Russia had been attacked numerous times, almost always through the vast Northern European Plain. This plane has an edge touching Russia's border that runs nearly 2000 miles from North to South. Subsequent rulers, including Peter the Great and later Catherine the Great, conquered most of modern-day Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. These victories gave the monarchy defensible positions against attacks from the Baltic Sea¹⁴. After these combined conquests, Moscow now had a massive ring of defense. As evidenced by Napoleon's defeat in 1812 and Germany's defeats in 1914 and 1941 during WWI and WWII, respectively, attacking countries would be doomed by their inability to sustain supply lines to break through this ring.

Secondly, Russia's economic dependence on energy proves to be a double-edged sword. Although GDP in Russia is closely tied to the energy futures market, sometimes at its peril, the country can also leverage the energy dependence of Europe. Donald Tusk, former prime minister of Poland, stated in April 2014 that "regardless of how the standoff over Ukraine develops, one

lesson is clear: excessive dependence on Russian energy makes Europe weak.”¹⁵. The Ukraine situation that Tusk refers to is the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea.

In the Crimea scenario, Russian actions unveiled a tangled dichotomy. For one, Moscow established for itself a warm-water port into the Black Sea while also commandeering a portion of the Black Sea within their newly claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The EEZ holds 70% of the Black Sea’s natural gas deposits and additional offshore oil sources¹⁶. Secondly, Russia decreased oil production, and thus supply, to raise prices and apply diplomatic pressure against the international outrage accompanying the Crimean annexation¹⁷. This effect was felt perhaps the most in Europe. The continent produces less than half of the energy that it consumes, and Russia makes up the bulk of the difference, providing up to 34% of Europe’s natural gas needs¹⁸. Regarding oil consumption, Europe received 3.8 million barrels of crude oil imports per day (BPD) from Russia in 2016, in addition to 2.4 million BPD of oil-based products¹⁹.

Third, Russia will continue to enhance staging ground to project power, particularly in the North Atlantic. Russia targeted Norway for simulated air attacks on ground targets and jamming of GPS signals in the years following the Crimean annexation in 2014. With the Kola Peninsula, which serves as a critical basing area to stage global deterrence options, Russia neighbors Norway to the east. Thus Norway makes a logical practice scenario target. Hence, the Norwegian military maintains F-16 aircraft with 15-minute alert times around the clock²⁰.

Russia is targeting other countries besides Norway. Looking at the events preceding Georgia and Crimea’s Russian invasions, in 2008 and 2014, respectively, the potential for the invasion of another European country is certainly a possibility, though a highly unlikely one. In both the Georgia and Crimea cases, Putin experienced an uptick in approval rating, hitting his rating peak in 2015. Russia has already begun an information war against Finland, spawning a

false narrative relating to that country's operations against Russian during the Russo-Finnish War of 1939-1940. This misinformation campaign is similar to the information operations waged leading up to and during the Crimean invasion. Consider the recent downward trend in Putin's popularity, highlighted by the tumult created by Alexey Navalny, which is at its second-lowest point in his career. Navalny, who motivated 20,000 Russians to come from across the country to defy Putin publicly on 27 January 2021, has become known world-wide since surviving an attempt on his life in 2020 by Putin's regime. Navalny is a legitimate contender for the next presidential election²¹. Putin needs a distraction now more than ever.

Either Sweden or Finland could serve as ideal targets as they are both European Union countries, but neither belongs to NATO. The attack against a non-former Soviet Union country would draw greater world recognition than would an attack against former Soviet-bloc countries Latvia, Estonia, or Lithuania. The attack would not need to take place against any major cities in either Finland or Sweden, but more likely a remote island or outpost²². If an attack did occur against either of these, then it would be in Russia's best interest to not attack a metropolitan area. Finland and Sweden have bi-lateral defense cooperation agreements, and both countries have focused on territorial defense and military procurement since the Cold War ended in 1991²³.

Latvia and Estonia would make more ideal targets as ethnic Russians make up 25% of their population, and this could fit into a Crimea-like narrative. However, this remains unlikely as both countries are members of NATO. An incursion into either one of these countries would draw in the U.S. along with the rest of NATO under Article 5. This dichotomy and lack of readily available countries give Putin an even greater need for a public-affairs win by achieving a victory for the Russian people with success in the Arctic.

The U.S. has multiple options to counter the objectives outlined previously. Increased training in the Arctic environment is a place to start. On 08 February 2021, U.S. Army Alaska (USARAK) held its first Arctic Warrior exercise in Greely, Alaska. The joint/coalition exercise, supported by USAF personnel from Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson and the Canadian Air Force, involves over 1200 personnel and is designed to increase soldier readiness and resiliency in the cold. USARAK intends for this to be an annual exercise and for the exercise to always be held in cold conditions²⁴. It is not the first nor the biggest exercise held in the state. Operation Northern Edge, which has been taking place biennially since 2004, had over 10,000 participants in its 2019 iteration. For the first time in over a decade, an aircraft carrier was integrated into this occurrence.

Secondly, the U.S. must continue to invest economically in the Arctic region. After two decades of the U.S. Coast Guard operating icebreaking operations with only two of the ships designed for the task, the Pentagon finally put in an order for three of the vessels in 2019. The three new Polar Security Cutters (PSC), valued at over \$700 million, are expected to be built by 2024²⁵. President Donald Trump upped the efforts in June 2020, issuing a memorandum calling for plans to build three more of the juggernauts by 2029 and to construct four support bases for the vessels. Two of these bases are slated to be within the U.S., and two are to be located on foreign soil²⁶. The U.S. must also remove the partisan political obstacles impeding corporate-America interest. Private-sector investors have been leery of investing in the region since the Obama-era administration decreed 94% of the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) acreage off-limits to energy development. The OCS program arranges leases for offshore oil and gas companies. The Trump administration issued an executive order to make 90% of the acreage of the OCS

available in 2017, but the effort was later overturned by a U.S. District Court in the District of Alaska in March 2019²⁷.

Next, the U.S. would benefit from posturing a significant long-term contingent of U.S. bases in Sweden, Finland, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. This would accomplish multiple objectives. First, the basing would enable U.S. service members to continually train in the frigid region and become more adaptive to the challenges of the environment. Second, the presence so near to Moscow would signal an enhanced commitment to deterrence. The U.S. has held exercises in all of these countries but has no permanent forces here. Up to 700 U.S. Marines were stationed in Norway from 2017-2020 but were removed due to an internal reform process within the U.S. Navy²⁸. U.S. forces in the region also present the opportunity to pre-position any materiel in the area needed if defensive operations were to ever kick off.

The U.S. would benefit from partnering with the one NATO country that has the most territory in the Arctic region: Canada. The two countries already share the world's largest trade relationship. Relations with the Canadian government, though historically strong, have been less congenial during the four years shared by U.S. President Donald Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Trump's economic policies, though advantageous for the American economy, did not benefit Canada reciprocally. One of the tariffs imposed by the Trump administration in 2018 was against Canadian aluminum and steel imports²⁹. A 2018 Pew research poll indicated that 46% of Canadians saw U.S. power and influence as a major threat to their country, as compared to 23% in 2013³⁰.

Canada shares an interest in the Arctic, as evidenced by an official Canadian announcement in September 2019. Government officials released the Canadian Arctic and Northern Policy Framework, laying out a strategy to invest in infrastructure in support of

economic advances in the region through 2030³¹. Canada already has 19 icebreakers, though some of these vessels need upgrades, or to be replaced³². The U.S. could benefit from Canada's favorable location and existing efforts in the region.

Lastly, the U.S. would benefit from leveraging its established technologies and diplomatic relationships in efforts to assist Europe with meeting their energy needs so that they are not dependent on Russian energy. By reducing Russian energy revenues, the U.S. can effectively decrease capital for Moscow to invest militarily, as well as revenues for advances in the Arctic. This energy assistance for Europe could come in the form of actual fossil fuels, as well as renewable energy, i.e., windmills, traditional solar, and in the long-term, space-based solar power.

In conclusion, Russia will continue to invest in the Arctic region for a myriad of reasons. Those investments can benefit the country both economically and militarily. The U.S. can counter these efforts. However, greater, innovative solutions must be brought to bear sooner than later, as the challenge will become only more difficult for as long as U.S. efforts and investments in the region remain static.

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