

# ARCTIC SOVEREIGNTY AND STRATEGIC INTERESTS: POLICY ANALYSIS

Policy Analysis for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation

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## I. ISSUE BRIEF

The Arctic region represents a vital strategic priority for the Russian Federation, encompassing territorial sovereignty, resource exploitation, military security, and great power competition. Russia possesses the longest Arctic coastline of any nation (approximately 24,140 kilometers, 53% of the Arctic Ocean's coastline)[1] and exercises sovereignty over the Russian Arctic Zone (approximately 9 million square kilometers, 53% of Russia's territory).[2]

Russia's legal position rests on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), ratified in 1997.[3] Russia's revised 2015 submission to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf claims extended shelf rights over approximately 1.2 million square kilometers of Arctic seabed based on the Lomonosov and Mendeleev Ridges constituting natural prolongations of Russian territory.[4]

Climate change fundamentally transforms Arctic realities. Sea ice extent has declined approximately 13% per decade since 1979,[5] opening the Northern Sea Route (NSR) along Russia's coast and enabling access to massive hydrocarbon reserves (estimated 90 billion barrels of oil, 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas).[6] Strategic competition intensified following Russia's 2022 Ukraine operation. The Arctic Council suspended cooperation with Russia,[7] while Sweden and Finland joined NATO,[8] fundamentally altering Arctic security architecture.

Resource development faces severe constraints. Western sanctions restrict technology for offshore drilling, LNG equipment, and financing,[9] forcing reliance on Chinese alternatives with reduced efficiency and higher costs. Russia's economy depends substantially on hydrocarbon exports (approximately 45% of federal budget revenue in 2021),[10] making Arctic reserves essential as Western Siberia fields decline.

The fundamental policy challenge lies in: asserting sovereignty over Arctic territories and waters; developing resources essential for economic prosperity while managing sanctions; maintaining credible military deterrent against NATO expansion; and positioning Russia as responsible Arctic steward while defending national interests against Western isolation.

## II. STRATEGIC INTERESTS

**Primary Interests:**

Territorial sovereignty over Russian Arctic lands and waters constitutes an absolute core interest. The Russian Arctic Zone includes the entire Arctic coastline, archipelagos (Franz Josef Land, Novaya Zemlya, Severnaya Zemlya, New Siberian Islands), Kola Peninsula hosting Northern Fleet, and major urban centers supporting approximately 2.5 million residents.[11] Any territorial loss would constitute catastrophic national humiliation comparable to historical losses (Alaska 1867, USSR dissolution 1991), undermining Russian great power status.

Extended continental shelf claims represent vital economic interests. CLCS approval would grant sovereign rights over seabed resources worth trillions of dollars. Conversely, rejection favoring Danish/Canadian positions would limit resource access and create adverse precedents. The 2007 symbolic flag-planting beneath the North Pole demonstrated political commitment and generated domestic nationalist support essential for regime legitimacy.[12]

Northern Sea Route control serves critical strategic interests. The NSR (approximately 5,600 kilometers) offers 40% distance reduction for Asia-Europe shipping.[13] Russian law designates NSR as national transport corridor requiring foreign vessels to obtain permits, pay fees, and use Russian icebreaker escorts.[14] While international transit ceased after 2022 sanctions, domestic cargo reached 34 million tons in 2021,[15] making NSR essential regardless of international shipping. Control provides economic revenue, strategic leverage over maritime commerce, and sovereignty assertion.

### **Secondary Interests:**

Hydrocarbon development represents vital economic interest. Russian Arctic contains estimated 22% of global undiscovered hydrocarbon resources.[16] Current production includes Yamal Peninsula gas fields (100 billion cubic meters annually via Yamal LNG) and ongoing Arctic LNG-2 development. These projects generate federal revenue, employ thousands, and are essential for replacing depleting production. Western sanctions severely constrain development, forcing reliance on Chinese technology with reduced efficiency.

Military-strategic security requires credible Northern Fleet capabilities. The Northern Fleet includes nuclear ballistic missile submarines carrying approximately 40% of Russia's sea-based nuclear deterrent,[17] attack submarines, surface combatants, and coastal defense forces. Arctic infrastructure includes reopened Soviet bases, S-400 air defense systems, Bastion coastal missiles, and new airfields. This presence serves nuclear deterrent survivability through SSBN bastions, defense of Arctic territories, intelligence collection, and power projection capabilities.

Northern Sea Route development and icebreaker fleet supremacy provide strategic capabilities. Russia operates the world's only nuclear-powered icebreaker fleet—four operational Arktika-class icebreakers,[18] with new vessels under construction. This enables year-round navigation, enforcement of regulations, emergency response capacity, and symbolic demonstration of Arctic mastery. Competing states lack comparable fleets—U.S. operates two heavy icebreakers (one operational), Canada has limited capacity.[19]

### **Tertiary Interests:**

Indigenous peoples' rights constitute constitutional obligations.[20] Arctic Indigenous groups (approximately 250,000 people including Nenets, Sami, Khanty, Evenki, Chukchi) face

pressures from industrial development and climate change. Policy must balance economic development with obligations to protect rights, though implementation faces corruption and inadequate consultation challenges.

International Arctic governance participation serves interests in rule-based order. Arctic Council provides multilateral frameworks when operational. UNCLOS provides legal basis for maritime boundaries and shelf claims. Participation provides recognition as legitimate Arctic power, venues for advancing positions, and constraints on unilateral Western actions. Complete isolation would enable Western-dominated frameworks developing norms contrary to Russian interests.

### **III. CONSTRAINTS**

#### **Economic-Technological Constraints:**

Western sanctions severely constrain Arctic development. Technology restrictions target offshore drilling equipment, LNG production technology, seismic survey equipment, and icebreaker components.[21] Financial sanctions block Western capital markets, restrict insurance, and deter third-country cooperation through secondary sanctions threats. These constraints delay major projects—Arctic LNG-2 faces indefinite delays, Vostok Oil timeline extended, offshore developments suspended.

Domestic technological limitations create dependencies despite import substitution efforts. Contemporary Russian industry struggles with complex offshore platforms, advanced LNG equipment, and extreme-cold specialized technology. Import substitution achieved partial success but failed to replicate Western cutting-edge technologies.[22] Chinese cooperation provides alternatives but often represents less advanced systems, higher costs, and potential dependencies on a geopolitical partner pursuing own interests.

Climate change creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Ice reduction opens navigation and resource access but generates permafrost thawing undermining infrastructure (\$150 billion at risk by 2050),[23] coastal erosion, ecological disruption affecting Indigenous livelihoods, and methane release accelerating warming. These impacts impose adaptation costs and create uncertainty for investments.

#### **Military-Strategic Constraints:**

Geographic disadvantages constrain power projection. Northern Fleet must transit GIUK gap (Greenland-Iceland-UK) chokepoints to reach Atlantic, passing through areas heavily monitored by NATO anti-submarine warfare including underwater sensors, maritime patrol aircraft, and barrier operations. These historically enabled NATO containment and remain relevant with Sweden/Finland joining NATO providing additional positions.[24]

NATO expansion to Finland/Sweden fundamentally alters security balance. Finland's 1,340km border with Russia and Sweden's strategic Baltic position provide NATO forward basing for surveillance, additional sensors monitoring Russian activities, strategic depth for Norway/Baltic defense, and potential for coordinated operations. Russian planning must account for potential two-front scenarios straining force structure.

Nuclear deterrence vulnerability creates existential constraints. SSBN bastions in Barents/Kara Seas represent critical strategic force components, with approximately 40% of sea-based deterrent operating from Northern Fleet.[25] NATO anti-submarine improvements, increased Nordic surveillance, and potential preemptive attacks create vulnerability requiring continuous defensive investment. Any compromise of SSBN survivability would undermine nuclear deterrent credibility and strategic stability.

### **International Legal and Diplomatic Constraints:**

UNCLOS framework creates both opportunities and constraints. While providing legal basis for extended shelf claims, it also imposes scientific evidence requirements, CLCS review potentially rejecting claims, competing Danish/Canadian claims requiring negotiated delimitation, navigational freedoms limiting NSR control if passages constitute international straits, and environmental protection obligations.[26]

Northern Sea Route legal status remains disputed. Russia claims NSR passages constitute internal/territorial waters subject to comprehensive regulation. U.S./EU dispute these claims, arguing NSR includes international straits where transit passage applies and excessive regulations violate freedom of navigation. Legal ambiguity creates vulnerability to future challenges, diplomatic costs, and enforcement constraints.

Arctic Council suspension eliminates cooperation benefits. Since March 2022 suspension, the Council cannot fulfill functions including environmental monitoring, emergency response, Indigenous representation, and sustainable development. Russian exclusion means loss of scientific cooperation, inability to coordinate on shared challenges, Western propaganda advantage, and potential for alternative frameworks developing without Russian input.

### **Domestic Political and Social Constraints:**

Economic dependence on hydrocarbon exports creates vulnerability to energy transition. Federal budget historically depended on oil/gas for 40-50% of revenue, while hydrocarbons represented 60% of export earnings.[27] Global transition threatens stranding Arctic investments, reducing budget revenue, and undermining energy leverage.

Arctic investments compete with national priorities within constrained budgets. Major projects require tens of billions: Arctic LNG-2 (\$21 billion), Vostok Oil (\$150+ billion projected), NSR infrastructure (\$13 billion). These compete with military modernization, social spending on aging population, infrastructure in European Russia, and macroeconomic stability. Post-2022 sanctions and Ukraine costs substantially constrain resources.

Demographic challenges affect sustainability. Arctic population declined from Soviet peaks despite recent stabilization, facing outmigration, aging structure, poor living conditions, infrastructure deficits, and high costs. Labor shortages, specialist deficits, and social instability undermine development and create dependencies on rotating workers rather than stable populations.

## **IV. POLICY OPTIONS**

### **Option A: Maximum Sovereignty Assertion Through Unilateral Action**

Pursue comprehensive strategy asserting maximum sovereignty through: formal declaration of NSR as internal waters under complete sovereignty with strict enforcement including against naval vessels; accelerated military buildup deploying additional systems creating overwhelming superiority; unilateral resource development in disputed shelf areas establishing facts on ground; withdrawal from constraining multilateral frameworks; and aggressive enforcement through interdiction against sovereignty challenges.

*Assessment:* Maximizes sovereignty assertion and demonstrates resolve, providing domestic nationalist support. However, generates catastrophic risks. Strict enforcement against U.S./allied vessels likely triggers military confrontation risking Arctic war; aggressive posture provokes NATO preemptive actions or arms races consuming unaffordable resources; unilateral shelf development violates UNCLOS undermining Russian legal positions globally; multilateral withdrawal eliminates influence enabling Western-dominated frameworks; economic consequences include total isolation making development impossible without complete Chinese dependence. Military confrontation risks escalation to nuclear thresholds given SSBN vulnerabilities. Historical precedent (Crimea, Ukraine) demonstrates Western willingness to impose comprehensive lasting sanctions rather than accept fait accompli, suggesting maximum assertion achieves opposite goals through confrontation. Russia cannot win economically or militarily.

### **Option B: Strategic Accommodation Through Western Normalization**

Pursue comprehensive normalization through: Ukraine operation termination and negotiated settlement potentially involving territorial compromises; compliance with Western demands on regime change, democratic reforms, human rights; acceptance of Western NSR interpretations; continental shelf compromise; Arctic demilitarization; and integration into Western-led governance accepting Western norms. Seek sanctions relief, security guarantees against NATO expansion, economic integration, and acknowledgment of legitimate Russian interests.

*Assessment:* Offers potential conflict resolution enabling economic benefits, technology access, and peaceful development. Sanctions relief restores offshore technology, LNG equipment, and financing; security normalization reduces military competition. However, politically impossible under any foreseeable Russian government and strategically undesirable. Fundamental requirements—Ukraine surrender, regime change, reforms—contradict national interests, sovereignty, and regime survival. Putin government cannot accept without losing domestic legitimacy and triggering elite fracturing/regime collapse. Strategic autonomy and great power status are incompatible with Western-led frameworks under subordinate terms. Western strategic objective is Russian defeat and transformation into compliant state, evidenced by three decades of NATO expansion despite initial cooperation.[28] Any government accepting accommodation would likely face nationalist/security apparatus coup. Western track record (NATO expansion, Libya intervention, Budapest Memorandum) suggests commitments are contingent and broken when convenient, making reliance highly risky.

### **Option C: Fortress Arctic Through Self-Reliance and Chinese Partnership**

Implement comprehensive self-sufficiency combined with deepened China cooperation: complete Western decoupling through import substitution; comprehensive Chinese partnership providing alternative markets, technology transfers, financing, and potential

military cooperation; intensive domestic development prioritizing Russian use; military fortress strategy creating impregnable A2/AD zones; autarkic economic model accepting lower efficiency; and alternative governance frameworks excluding Western participation.

*Assessment:* Maximizes strategic autonomy eliminating Western leverage while maintaining development and security. Chinese partnership provides alternative markets, technology access, and diplomatic backing. However, faces severe implementation challenges. Complete self-sufficiency likely impossible in relevant timeframes—Soviet Union never achieved full autarky despite decades and greater relative power. Chinese technology often represents previous-generation capabilities. Economic costs of self-reliance are enormous—domestic production costs multiples of imports, reducing project economics potentially to unprofitability. Chinese partnership creates different dangerous dependency—China pursues own interests potentially conflicting with Russia's regarding Central Asian competition, NSR passage rights, historical border claims, and leveraging dependency in negotiations.[29] Military fortress consumes resources needed for economic development. Alternative governance lacks legitimacy—Indigenous peoples prefer Western organizations, scientific institutions lose data access. Complete Western decoupling with deepened China dependence risks transforming Russia from independent great power into junior Chinese partner comparable to Mongolia or North Korea—contradicting self-conception and elite interests.

#### **Option D: Pragmatic Dualism Through Selective Engagement**

Implement differentiated strategy combining firm core interest defense with selective cooperation where beneficial, recognizing current adversarial relations while maintaining future normalization channels and avoiding excessive Chinese dependency.

*Assessment:* Balances competing imperatives through differentiated engagement rather than binary confrontation/accommodation choices. Recognizes current adversarial Western relations are likely long-term but not necessarily permanent, avoiding actions making future normalization impossible while defending core interests. Selective engagement preserves Russian influence over Arctic governance preventing Western narrative dominance. Economic pragmatism accepts constraints while prioritizing achievable projects, using limited resources efficiently. China partnership provides essential alternative without complete dependency through diversification and capability-building. Military sufficiency reduces costs while maintaining credible deterrence. However, faces implementation challenges including hardliner criticism as insufficient, liberal criticism as perpetuating confrontation, difficult economic prioritization, sophisticated China management requirements, uncertain multilateral engagement effectiveness, and potential military sufficiency inadequacy if NATO significantly increases Arctic presence. Success depends on accurate core interest assessment, careful calibration avoiding contradictions, and sustained implementation across competing bureaucratic entities.

## **V. RISK ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION**

### **Recommended Strategy: Option D – Pragmatic Dualism Through Selective Engagement**

This approach optimally balances Russia's competing interests given severe constraints from Western sanctions, technological limitations, military competition with expanding NATO,

and economic scarcity. The strategy acknowledges current Western confrontation precludes comprehensive cooperation while recognizing complete isolation and Chinese dependency create vulnerabilities potentially more dangerous than current challenges.

### **Implementation Framework:**

#### **Sovereignty Defense Component:**

Maintain comprehensive defense through legal, diplomatic, and military instruments. Continue CLCS engagement providing additional scientific data including bathymetric surveys, seismic profiling, sediment sampling, and gravitational/magnetic analysis. Engage diplomatically with Denmark/Canada on overlapping claims, exploring trilateral negotiations while maintaining maximum claims, framing positions in international law terms emphasizing UNCLOS compliance.

Implement comprehensive but legally defensible NSR regime: publish precise boundary coordinates providing transparency; distinguish vessel categories with appropriate regulations (commercial subject to permits and safety/environmental standards, warships governed by UNCLOS passage provisions, fishing vessels subject to EEZ regulatory authority); enforce proportionately—routine compliance for commercial violations, avoiding military responses except for hostile acts; develop infrastructure (icebreakers, search-rescue, navigation aids) demonstrating safety management capacity; accept transit passage through clear international straits while defending broader Article 234 authority for ice-covered areas.

Maintain credible military capabilities without expensive arms racing. Northern Fleet modernization prioritizes new SSBNs (Borei-class), attack submarines (Yasen-class), air defense (S-400/S-500), and coastal missiles (Bastion, Zircon). Arctic base infrastructure includes hardened facilities and Arctic-optimized equipment. Regular exercises demonstrate readiness without unnecessary provocations. Accept limitations in some areas while ensuring asymmetric capabilities provide effective deterrence.

#### **Economic Development Component:**

Prioritize projects based on technological feasibility, economic viability under sanctions, and strategic importance.

**Yamal Gas Development:** Continue expansion representing most accessible resources. Complete Arctic LNG-2 using Chinese technology substitutes and Russian domestic capabilities where possible. Plan future phases based on market demand and technology availability rather than aggressive timelines. Develop domestic LNG technology through reverse-engineering and targeted research, accepting generational lag but gaining independence.

**Vostok Oil Development:** Continue as major oil production center. Prioritize essential infrastructure (ports, pipelines, power). Sequence field development by reservoir accessibility. Pursue Asian financing accepting equity-for-finance arrangements but maintaining operational control and majority Russian ownership. Accept slower pace than pre-sanctions plans focusing on sustainable development.

**Selective Offshore Development:** Limit to achievable projects. Continue Prirazlomnoye operations (shallow water, fixed platform technology Russia possesses). Postpone frontier deep-water requiring Western technology. Maintain seismic surveys building knowledge for eventual development.

**Mining and Minerals:** Expand non-hydrocarbon development leveraging Russian metallurgical expertise. Norilsk Nickel continuation as major nickel, copper, platinum, palladium producer. Rare earth development at Tomtor reducing import dependencies for critical minerals. Diamond mining through Alrosa maintaining global producer position.

### **China Partnership Management:**

Deepen cooperation while maintaining autonomy and preventing excessive dependency.

**Energy Exports:** Expand Arctic hydrocarbon exports through long-term LNG contracts from Yamal/Arctic LNG-2, but diversify customers including Japan, South Korea, India preventing single-customer dependency. Oil exports via eastern pipelines and NSR tankers. Avoid Chinese controlling stakes—accept minority equity, financing, off-take agreements, but prevent scenarios where Chinese entities control resources creating permanent strategic dependency.

**NSR Development:** Cooperate on infrastructure with Chinese investment in ports, icebreakers, cargo handling equipment. Chinese cargo shipments create commercial traffic justifying infrastructure investments. Technology cooperation on icebreaker design but maintain Russian design authority and nuclear propulsion expertise preventing Chinese acquisition of sensitive technologies. Clear regulatory framework where China respects jurisdiction while Russia ensures reasonable access balancing sovereignty with commercial interests.

**Technology Cooperation:** Pursue targeted partnerships where Chinese capabilities substitute Western restrictions: LNG equipment accepting performance inferiority but enabling projects; seismic/drilling systems from Chinese oil service companies; Arctic construction using Chinese extreme-conditions experience. Establish technology absorption ensuring cooperation builds Russian capacity through joint ventures requiring transfers, reverse-engineering, and Russian engineer involvement.

**Limits:** Maintain boundaries: no Chinese military presence in Russian Arctic—refuse Chinese bases, permanent deployments, surveillance facilities, or joint operations beyond limited exercises; no Chinese participation in nuclear icebreaker program maintaining exclusive Russian control; maintain alternative Asian partnerships despite limitations preserving future diversification options; monitor and control Chinese activities preventing espionage or illegal extraction.

### **Selective Multilateral Engagement:**

Maintain participation where beneficial despite suspended cooperation. Remain Arctic Council formal member communicating willingness to resume when Western discrimination ends. Maintain Indigenous Permanent Participant contacts. Propose issue-specific cooperation (search-rescue, oil spill response, climate research) where humanitarian imperatives transcend politics.

Continue CLCS process demonstrating scientific rigor and legal compliance. Participate in International Seabed Authority maintaining Russian voice in ocean governance. Implement IMO POLAR Code regulations for Russian-flagged vessels demonstrating responsible behavior.

Continue domestic Arctic research adequately funded despite budget pressures. Pursue bilateral scientific cooperation with China, India, Asian partners establishing alternative networks. Support non-governmental scientific exchanges maintaining technical cooperation separate from political disputes.

Engage on UNFCCC processes and Arctic climate assessment ensuring Russian perspectives represented. Propose Arctic climate cooperation on black carbon, methane, permafrost, ecosystem protection as humanitarian/scientific imperatives transcending geopolitics.

### **Risk Mitigation:**

**NATO Escalation Prevention:** Establish military communication channels with Norway and potentially Nordic states through existing agreements enabling crisis management. Implement confidence-building measures unilaterally if necessary: exercise notification, incident reporting, avoiding simulated attacks near borders. Clearly communicate deterrence thresholds: SSBN bastion integrity—any actions threatening nuclear submarine survivability trigger maximum conventional response and potentially nuclear considerations; critical infrastructure protection—attacks on Arctic facilities considered acts of war; territorial integrity—incursions into Russian Arctic territory repelled with force. Maintain escalation control through political oversight preventing tactical decisions triggering strategic escalation.

**Economic Sustainability:** Conduct rigorous cost-benefit analysis before commitments avoiding prestigious but economically inviable developments. Maintain financial reserves for Arctic development separate from general budget. Sequence projects based on cash flow and revenue generation—prioritize developments generating near-term revenue enabling self-financing over mega-projects requiring sustained external financing. Accept that some Soviet-era settlements may require abandonment managing social impacts through relocation assistance.

**Chinese Dependency Management:** Continuous assessment of Chinese leverage establishing red lines where Russian interests require resistance regardless of economic costs. Intelligence monitoring of Chinese activities tracking extraction, technology acquisition, and strategic intentions. Preserve non-Chinese relationships ensuring pivot channels exist. Develop domestic alternatives accepting parallel development costs as insurance against Chinese leverage exploitation.

**Domestic Political Management:** Public communication emphasizing sovereignty defense, development achievements, and strategic autonomy managing nationalist expectations. Regional stakeholder engagement ensuring Arctic communities support policies through consultation, benefit-sharing, environmental protection, cultural preservation, and infrastructure investments. Elite consensus maintenance among security services, military, economic ministries, and regional governors preventing bureaucratic conflicts.

This framework positions Russia to defend core Arctic interests—territorial sovereignty, resource access, military security—while managing Western sanctions, navigating China partnership balancing cooperation against dependency, and maintaining long-term Arctic development viability supporting Russian great power status and economic prosperity. Success requires patient implementation over decades, sophisticated balancing across competing pressures, and willingness to adjust tactics while maintaining strategic consistency on fundamental interests.[30]

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## FOOTNOTES

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