

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Author: [Muhammad Ali Baig](#)

25.05.2024

Russia in the Arctic amidst the Conflict in Ukraine



The Arctic geopolitical phantasmagoria is incomplete without Russia, whose posture grows increasingly vigorous and risk-tolerant, with a desire for its emergence as a dominant geopolitical power in the region. Russia's Arctic calculus stems from its intrinsic desire to utilize the region as a strategic resource base. It also aims to develop the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as an alternative shipping artery to facilitate maritime shipping between Europe and Asia. As the region heats up with the fraught geopolitics, Russia anticipates the threats coming from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) which is bolstering its Eastern flank by enhancing its forward presence. Therefore, it has refurbished its Soviet-era bases to secure its energy infrastructure and exercise the subsequent strategies of sea control and sea denial.

The emerging geopolitical trends have a spillover effect on the Arctic region, which is on the cusp of a geopolitical shift. With a vast geography comprising the Sakha Republic, Arkhangelsk, and Murmansk; Russia exercises a dominant yet vulnerable position in the Arctic. The West's continued onslaught against Russia and the propaganda regarding Crimea's reunion with Russia, and the subsequent Special Military Operation in Ukraine, have forced the Russian policymakers to diversify its strategic and economic options. The aftermaths of the Ukraine military conflict had entered the Arctic frontiers, where Russia is trying to enhance its combat readiness to address the threat emanating from the United States (U.S.) and NATO allies. Similarly, Russia's policy documents have mentioned of Indo-Pacific's significance, which indicates its priority of turning towards the East. These factors determine the strategic objectives, economic goals, and political aims of the Russian Federation in the Arctic.

Drivers of Russia's Arctic Strategy

Russia's Arctic Strategy was adopted in 2020, which aimed to utilize the region as a 'strategic resource' to fulfil the socio-economic needs and put a cap on precariously draining energy reserves. It also seeks to use the NSR as a maritime route to facilitate shipping between Europe and Asia. It is noteworthy that the Arctic accounts for 10 percent of Russia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 20 percent of its export revenues. Thus, the resource significance of the region determines the strategic priorities of the Russian Federation. Moreover, Russia favours an integrated operating structure that allows the army, navy, and air force to conduct integrated and joint operations. In this regard, Russia has revived its Northern military district by stationing offensive and defensive assets to protect its vested interests in the Arctic. Furthermore, Russia aims to access the critical Greenland, Iceland, and United Kingdom (GIUK) gap to project its sea power in the Atlantic Ocean. Hence, the opening of the NSR is a strategic enabler for Russia to transform itself from a continental to a maritime power.

While dealing with the economic aspect, Russia is eager to sustain its status as an *energy superpower* by developing the untapped reserves under the thick permafrost. The Arctic region contains 85.1 trillion cubic meters of natural gas and 17.3 billion metric tons of crude and condensate oil. With such a significant abundance of resources, Russia aims to increase its Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) production to 91 million tons by 2035. Besides this, it is aiming to enhance the Arctic's role in crude and condensate oil production to 26 percent by 2035. However, these ambitious economic goals are predominantly dependent on the

successful functioning of the NSR. Therefore, the Arctic is an arena of Russia's complex interplay of politics, economics, and resource exploration.

The realization of the political, economic, and military goals of the Arctic is dependent on the NSR, which acts as a strategic enabler for its Northern Fleet and the ambitious Yamal LNG project. In the past, the NSR remained closed for eastbound shipping for more than half a year. However, the rapid change in weather patterns unlocked the NSR much earlier in 2019, reducing the time for the Yamal LNG cargoes to reach the East Asian markets. As Novatek's baby Yamal LNG has attracted a significant consortium of investors, it continues to develop the Arctic infrastructure to meet the demand of Russia's burgeoning energy appetite. Nonetheless, the benefits of the project are dependent on the NSR's functioning, as it will enable Russia to stretch its influence from the barren Arctic to the Asia-Pacific.

Russia's strategic mind-set perceives itself surrounded by the 'evil' West, which is waging its civilizational war against the 'fatherland.' Mikhail Frunze, a Soviet strategist, explains it as a 'besieged fortress' that is facing a constant imperial onslaught. This thinking is emulated in Russia's strategic choices when it comes to the Arctic. On one hand, it is seeking to access alternative markets for its energy supplies. On the other hand, it is trying to avoid the U.S.-controlled maritime trade routes to avoid the 'imperial bullying'. Therefore, it is trying to enhance its military capabilities around and across the Kola Peninsula to control and monitor the movements in the region. James Henderson, a scholar based at Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, believes that NSR facilitates Russia's multipronged goals. It not only provides it with a short passage from Yamal to Asia but also enables it to avoid the U.S.-controlled maritime routes of the Suez Canal. He further states that Russia's military modernization alongside the NSR allows it to leverage its military muscle on the regional geopolitical chessboard.

Russia's dominant role in the Arctic is gyrated with the military capacity of its Northern fleet. The fleet sits at the pivot when it comes to controlling and monitoring the shipping along the NSR. Russia realizes the significance of the Northern fleet; therefore, it has upgraded its status, equitable to the other military districts. The stationing of the offensive and defensive capabilities, particularly the S-400, reflects the strategic significance of the northern military district. Additionally, the induction of *Knyaz Vladimir*, a strategic missile submarine armed with Bulava Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM), and 667BDRM Delfin submarines armed with Sineva ICBMs is strategic signalling from Russia to other actors regarding its Arctic vision and aims. The Northern Fleet is also crucial in responding to the U.S. and NATO manoeuvres by maintaining tight sea control. These military assets also enable Russia

to deny the U.S. claims of freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) and maintain the Russian status quo in the region.

Russia's Strategic Calculations amid the Conflict in Ukraine

Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine has once again brought the Arctic into the geopolitical spotlight. As the Russian military grapples with the West-sponsored war of attrition in Ukraine, a Pandora's box is being opened arguing about the issues related to Arctic governance where seven of the Arctic states have suspended the 'usual business' with Russia. Dr. Elizabeth and Dr. Cameron Carlson in their article published in the U.S. Air University Press, argued that the Ukraine War has upended Russia's goals in the Arctic. This view appears to be consolidated by the unprecedented move by the remaining Arctic states to disconnect the usual business with Russia. Nonetheless, such notions cannot abate Russia's impregnable status in the Arctic, where the 'usual business' can't be pursued without Russia's participation.

Just before the start of April 2023, Russia published its much-awaited foreign policy document, which outlines its strategic priorities. The Arctic has gained prominence in Russia's new foreign policy calculus. After the near-abroad, the Arctic is designated as the second most important area in Russia's strategic calculations. The current policy posture indicates a shift towards international cooperation, where Russia isn't seeking legitimacy from the Western states or their multilateral settings. Instead, it is diversifying its diplomatic clout, which can be seen in the Asian powers' entry into the Arctic. It shows a shift toward a more pragmatic and utilitarian approach which will involve non-Arctic states, further heating the regional geopolitics.

The new policy document is clear in its language, where Russia has expressed an explicit desire to foster cooperation that suits its national interests. It will not tolerate any neglect or cornering attempts by the regional Arctic states. However, the Arctic states need to engage Russia and resolve the differences by dialogue. The entry of the Asian powers will exacerbate the tensions and create dividends in the existing mechanism. Neglecting Russia entails significant risks, as the U.S. and NATO forces are at a combat disadvantage due to insufficient military footprint in the region.

24.05.2024

Muhammad Ali Baig – is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), Pakistan. He is a Ph.D. candidate and a distinguished graduate of National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad, Pakistan.