

The Russian Northern Fleet – Extended Status and Geopolitical Ambitions

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On December 21, 2020, by [Decree](#) #803 of the President of the Russian Federation, the Northern Fleet became the only one throughout the history of Russia to have the authority of a military district. In particular, the decree states that in order to ensure the integrity and inviolability of the territory of the Russian Federation, the Northern Fleet should be considered a strategic-territorial interdisciplinary union of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation which has the tasks of a military district. The Northern Fleet is responsible for the largest territorial zone of Russia. This territory is mostly an ice desert which has strategic importance for Russia. It runs along the North Sea Route which is 7,300 nautical miles from Yokohama to Rotterdam (11,200 nautical miles through the Indian Ocean). In addition, this territory contains a large supply of hydrocarbons and other mineral or marine resources. The shorter lines between the US and Russian strategic missiles and their intended targets also pass through this area.

Russian open sources have suggested that a strategic decision on the scale of granting military status to the Northern Fleet has not been made since Peter I and that Russia is trying to turn itself from the discoverer of the North into the owner of it. The Northern Fleet is an instrument for this.

Shortly before, the military-administrative division of the Russian Federation was changed by Presidential Decree #374 on June 5, 2020. The decree went into force on January 1, 2021. The Northern Fleet covered the administrative boundaries of the Komi Republic, the Arkhangelsk and Murmansk Oblasts and the Nenets Autonomous District. The fleet's area of responsibility extends far beyond its administrative boundaries and includes the Arctic Island and the Arctic Sea as well as the most of the Atlantic.



Administrative Boundaries of the Northern Fleet.

In 2020, the geography of naval vessels and aviation flights of the Northern Fleet included four oceans. The Naval Infantry and Motorized Rifle units, on the other hand, carried out their training and combat missions from Chukoti to the Franz Josef Land. The Air Defense Forces ensured air space protection of the Arctic side.

The last significant change in Russia's military-administrative division took place in 2010 when four military districts (West, South, Center, East) and corresponding strategic joint commands were created. In 2014, the Northern Fleet was separated from the Western Military District and its governance was transformed into a Strategic-joint Command and was granted the status of a military district from January 2021.

What Constitutes the Northern Fleet?

The Military District Command is located in Severomorsk, Murmansk Oblast. The fleet comprises:

- The Fleet submarine force:

Strategic nuclear-powered (missile) submarine cruiser – 1-unit, strategic nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine - 8 units (1 – under repair, in addition: 1 – under construction 2 – contract signed), multipurpose nuclear-powered cruise missile submarine - 2 units (1 of these – on trials. 3 – in addition, under construction), nuclear-powered cruise missile submarine - 2 units, multipurpose nuclear-powered submarine - 10 units (of these 3 – under repair and modernization, 1 – on long-time repair), nuclear deep-water station - 7 units (1 under repair) diesel-electric attack submarine - 6 units (1 under repair) and an experimental submarine - 1 unit.

- Kola Flotilla
- Belomorsk Naval Base

The total number of Fleet vessels is: heavy aircraft cruiser “Admiral Kuznetsov” (former “Tbilisi.” The only aircraft carrier of the Soviet Union and Russia. Now under repair and modernization), missile cruiser - 3 units (1 under repair), destroyer - 1 unit (under repair), frigate - 3+4 units (1 under repair and modernization, 1 preparing for trials), corvette - 8 units, artillery boat - 1 unit, minesweeper - 9 units (1 under repair), landing ship - 6 units and landing craft - 4 units. The Fleet also includes warships and support boats, ships and sailing vessels.

The importance of the Northern Fleet is evidenced by the fact that the flagship of the Russian Navy and its only aircraft carrier is subordinate to the Fleet, and, foremost, this Fleet receives new submarine cruisers of the Borei class (in 2020, it received the second such submarine equipped with the a new ballistic missile, "Bulava."

- Land Forces and Coast Guard:

The 61st Naval Infantry Brigade, 80th Arctic Mechanized Brigade 200th Separate Mechanized Brigade, 536th Coastal Missile Brigade, 71st Tactical Group. 99th Tactical Group, combat, technical and support units, special forces and etc.

- 45th Air and Air Defense Forces Army:

In total, the Northern Fleet aviation includes: carrier-based fighters - Su-33, MiG-29K/KUB, front-line bomber - Su-24, tactical reconnaissance aircraft - Su-24MP and training aircraft - Su-25UTG. Transport and special aircraft: An 12, An 24, An-26, An-72, An-140-100, Il-18, Il-38, Tu-142 and helicopters: Ka-27, Ka-29, Ka-32, Mi-8. In 2019, the transfer of two squadrons of MiG-31 carrier-based fighter jets to the Northern Fleet was also announced.

The main declared tasks of the Fleet:

- Ensuring constant readiness of strategic naval nuclear forces in the interests of nuclear containment;

- Protection of economic zones and production areas and the prevention of illegal production activities;
- Security of navigation;
- Carrying out government foreign-political actions in the regions of economic importance (missions, business visits, joint exercises, peacekeeping operations, etc.).

What is this change in the status of the Fleet related to and what is the goal of the political leadership of the Russian Federation in making these changes?

The Rising Role of the Arctic in Russian Military-Political Official Documents

While working on this issue, was reviewed all kinds of related official papers, including Russia's guides over the political, strategic security, military, foreign policy and naval fields as well as decrees of the president and the government of the Russian Federation.

"Arctic" emerges in the titles of political and strategic security documents of the Russian Federation from 2020. Of course, it was mentioned in texts before but the meaning of this geographical region changed substantially from year to year.

The Arctic and the Far North are very rarely mentioned in early documents and are mostly referred to in a general context. For example, in the [National Security Concept of the Russian Federation](#) (12/17/1997) there is only one proposal, entitled Mechanisms for Vital Activities, Especially in Crisis Regions and the Extreme North, Should be Developed Immediately. The region is not mentioned at all in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (6/28/2000).

By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the Russian Federation was no longer satisfied with the international situation at the time and began making global claims as reflected in the [National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020](#) document (5/13/2009). The second chapter of this document, entitled "The Modern World and Russia: Situation and Development Trends," expresses the view that there is a tendency to solve existing problems and resolve crisis situations on a regional basis without the participation of non-regional forces. The inability of the existing global and regional architecture, focused solely on NATO, as well as the imperfection of legal instruments and mechanisms, threaten international security. It is said that the Russian Federation has enough potential to become one of the leaders in the world economy in the medium term. It also mentions that in the long run, international policy will focus on mastering energy sources, including on the Barents Sea shelf and other parts of the Arctic.

In the fourth chapter entitled "Ensuring National Security," the issue of national defense discusses the endless process of the international demarcation of state borders and achieving the security of these borders at the expense of high technologies, including in the Arctic zone.

The section on economic growth states that in the medium term, public-private partnership instruments are expanding in the interests of national security in order to build transport, energy, information and military infrastructure, especially in the Arctic, Eastern Siberia and the Far East.

The Arctic is associated primarily with economic rather than military security issues in this document. An indirect proof of this is the fact that another document, hierarchically-based on the strategy, entitled [Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation for the Period until 2020](#) (2/5/2010), does not mention the Arctic. But, it may be slightly implicated in Article 27, "The Main tasks of the Armed Forces and other troops" as well as in sub-sections entitled "Fight against piracy, security of navigation" and "Protection of the economic activities of the Russian Federation in the world ocean."

This trend continues in the [Strategy of Maritime Activities of the Russian Federation until 2030](#) (12/8/2010) where the focus is mainly on Russia's economic interests in the world ocean and only one sentence mentions "the insufficient level of military protection of the national interests of the Russian Federation in the world ocean related to the exercise of sovereignty, sovereign and other rights as well as the country's naval and other activities, military security in the ocean and naval directions." In the appendix of the document, the increase in the operational capabilities of the Navy in terms of ensuring security in the seas and oceans important to Russia and the renewal of expeditionary activities in key regions of the Arctic and Antarctic are among the strategic goals mentioned.

According to these documents, the [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation](#) (2/16/2013) focuses on regional cooperation in the Arctic and in the North in general. In the [Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation](#) (12/25/2014), the main tasks of the Armed Forces and other troops and bodies during peacetime are: Fight against piracy, security of navigation, protection of the economic activities of the Russian Federation in the world ocean and securing national interests in the Arctic.

Thus, the Arctic and the Far North are mainly considered as a very important economic area in the state guidelines issued before 2015 and in demand to grow the importance and influence of Russia in the world the focus is on ensuring the security of these activities including through regional cooperation.

The [National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation](#) was renewed in 2015 (12/31/2015). There are brief but very important references to the Arctic in this document. In particular, the second chapter, entitled "Russia in the Modern World," states that "the process of developing a new, polycentric model of world order is accompanied by increasing global and regional instability. ... Leadership in the development of the world ocean and Arctic resources is gaining special importance in this process." and the document's fourth chapter states that the development of equal and mutually beneficial international cooperation in the Arctic has a particular importance.

The guidelines for the new National Security Strategy on the Arctic have led to appropriate changes in the hierarchically downstream documents. In particular, in the second chapter of the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation (7/26/2015) (which, although published a few months before the new security strategy, but, presumably, work on these documents was carried out simultaneously and the requirements of the strategy have already been reflected), entitled "National Maritime Policy" under the sub-section entitled "Principles Of National Maritime Policy," there is a mention of ensuring the presence of the Russian fleet in the Arctic. The third chapter, entitled "Content of the National Maritime Policy" with sub-section entitled "Activities for the Development of Marine Mineral and Energy Resources," states that the observed reserves of mineral and energy resources on the continental shelf of the Russian Federation should be maintained as a strategic reserve. The section, entitled "Marine Scientific Studies," focuses on the military-political, economic and legal problems of the Arctic's natural environment and the use of the world's ocean resources and space. The section, entitled "Naval Activities," states that the main component and basis of the Russian Federation's naval potential, one of the instruments of the state's

foreign policy, is the navy. In the section, entitled "Regional Directions of National Maritime Policy," the greatest attention is paid to the Arctic, including in terms of national security, the military and border issues.

The issue of the Arctic has also appeared in foreign policy guidelines. In particular, we find this in the [Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation](#) (11/13/2016). In its fourth chapter, entitled "Russia's Regional Foreign Policy Priorities," great emphasis is placed on the need to maintain trust and stability with Northern European states. It is noted that the Russian Federation is ready to sort out relations with Canada, including in the Arctic. Emphasis is placed on the importance of regional organizations in maintaining stability and promoting mutually beneficial activities.

Special attention to the Arctic appears in the guide documents of the Russian Federation from 2020, although a prelude to this can be considered in the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, entitled [About National Goals and Strategic Objectives for the Development of the Russian Federation for the Period 2024](#) (5/7/2018), which indicates an increase in the capacity of the seaports of the Russian Federation, including in the North-West Basin as well as the development of the North Sea Route and the increase in cargo shipping to 80 million tons.

The document, entitled [Strategy for the Development of Maritime Activities of the Russian Federation until 2030](#) (8/30/2019), and its second chapter, entitled "Problems of the Development of Maritime Activities of the Russian Federation," focuses on the following issues: territorial claims against the Russian Federation and the incompleteness of the international legal process vis-à-vis maritime space, the insufficient level of navigation-hydrographic support, especially in the Arctic and Pacific regions; the unsatisfactory results of the operation of the existing offshore hydrometeorological network, especially in the Arctic zone and the lack of Russian orbital groupings of Earth remote probing spacecraft and the substantial reliance on foreign satellite data for hydrometeorological and freezing provision in the Arctic, Antarctic and world oceans. In the third chapter, entitled "Priorities for the Development of the Russian Federation's Maritime Activities for a Longer Period of Time," there is a list of strategic tasks which include developing the Northern Sea Route, conducting fundamental and applied scientific research on the marine environment, resources and space of the world oceans, the Arctic and the Antarctic and developing a scientific-technical complex for the study of the world ocean, Antarctica and the Arctic.

A Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, entitled [On the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic for the Period up to 2035](#) (3/5/2020), was issued in 2020. This document, in its main provisions, emphasizes that the main national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic are the development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation as a strategic resource base and its rational use to accelerate the economic growth of the Russian Federation and the development of the Northern Sea Route as a national competitive transport means of the Russian Federation on the world market.

The second chapter, entitled "Assessing the National Security Situation in the Arctic," is devoted entirely to national security issues, stating that the implementation of the Russian state policy in the Arctic by 2020 ensured the formation of armed groups in the Arctic that can provide military security in various

military-political circumstances. Threats¹ to national security include an attempt by a number of countries to revise the basic provisions of international treaties governing economic and other activities in the Arctic without regard for those treaties and regional formats of cooperation. Further, the threats include the incompleteness of the international legal division of maritime space in the Arctic, the obstruction of legal economic or other activities of the Russian Federation in the Arctic by foreign states and/or international organizations, the increasing of the military presence of other states in the Arctic and the growing potential for conflict in the region as well as discrediting the activities of the Russian Federation in the Arctic.

In the third chapter, entitled "Goals, Main Directions and Tasks of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic," the goals of the state policy indicate the implementation of mutually beneficial cooperation and the peaceful settlement of all disputes in accordance with international law. Further, the goals also include the protection of the national interests of the Russian Federation, including in the economic sphere. Among the main directions of the state policy implementation in the Arctic are ensuring the military security of the Russian Federation and protecting the state border of the Russian Federation.

According to this document, the main tasks in the field of military security in the Arctic are: implementing a set of measures to prevent the use of military force against Russia in protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity, improving the complex air, surface, underwater control system of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation and establishing and modernizing military infrastructure facilities for the combined forces, other troops, military formations and bodies of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

The above-mentioned decree of the President of the Russian Federation was followed by the creation of a separate strategic document over the Arctic. This was the [Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Ensuring National Security for the Period up to 2035](#) (10/26/2020). Its general provisions state that the current Arctic zone is characterized by "growing conflict potential in the Arctic."

The second chapter, entitled "Assessment of the State of Development of the Arctic Zone and the State of National Security," states that the importance of the Arctic Zone in the socio-economic development of the Russian Federation and its national security is due to the following: the Arctic zone produces more than 80 percent of combustible natural gas and 17 percent of oil (including gas condensate) in the Russian Federation. Moreover, the continental shelf of the Russian Federation in the Arctic, according to experts, contains more than 85.1 trillion cubic meters of combustible natural gas, 17.3 billion tons of oil (including gas condensate) and is a strategic reserve for the development of the mineral resource base of the Russian Federation. The importance of the Northern Sea Route as a world transport corridor will increase as a result of climate change (the volume of cargo traffic in the water area of the Northern Sea Route increased from 4 million tons in 2014 to 31.5 million tons in 2019). Further, objects of strategic deterrent forces are located in the Arctic zone and the share of the gross regional product produced in the Arctic zone increased from 5 percent in 2014 to 6.2 percent in 2018.

¹ The threat, according to the strategic documents of the Russian Federation, is - direct or indirect possibility of harm to: constitutional rights of citizens, decent quality of life and standard, sovereignty and territorial integrity, sustainable development, state defense and security of the Russian Federation.

Among the major dangers, challenges and threats that pose risks to the development of the Arctic and national security, there is the growth of conflict potential in the Arctic which requires a constant increase in the combat capabilities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

In the third chapter which discusses the implementation goals of the strategy, ensuring Russia's presence in the Spitsbergen archipelago under the Spitsbergen Treaty (The Svalbard Treaty) of February 9, 1920 is indicated among the implementation measures.

This document envisages the following measures for the implementation of the main tasks of military security and protection of the state border of the Russian Federation: advancement of the composition and structure of the armed forces in the Arctic zone, ensuring a favorable operational regime in the Arctic zone, including maintaining the combat readiness of the armed forces in accordance with existing military threats and threats; arming the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the Arctic with modern armament and military and special equipment adapted for the Arctic zone, the development of infrastructure for the combat bases of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation while taking measures for the operational equipping of the territory and an improvement of the logistics system and the introduction of dual-use technologies and infrastructure facilities in the interests of the complex solution of defense tasks in the Arctic zone.

We can note the following stages when discussing the Arctic and the Far North vis-à-vis Russian guidance documents:

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century - Russia has other important foreign and domestic issues to be resolved. Hydrocarbon extraction grows on easily processed deposits and there is no need for expensive research and extraction in the Arctic or the Far North. Consequently, less attention is paid to this region.

The period from the end of the first decade of the 21st century to 2015 - Strengthened by the sale of hydrocarbons, Russia is beginning to take care of its growing importance in the world, including by increasing its influence in various global regions. Although the Arctic and the Far North are still considered as a providing region of economic strength which is particularly important due to need of increasing hydrocarbon reserves and the difficulty in obtaining them.

The period 2015-2019 - The published documents emphasize the need for a world polycentric arrangement and the importance of the military component in this context. Much attention is paid to increasing the capabilities and role of the naval forces in ensuring national security, particularly in the Arctic and the Far North.

The year 2019 and especially from 2020 - National level documents have already been published which clearly emphasize the theme of the Arctic and the Far North. Additionally, we find documents specifically about this region. The growing conflict potential in the region, territorial claims against Russia and border problems have been discussed in these documents. These issues are among the goals and objectives vis-à-vis increasing military capability in combat readiness and in ensuring a favorable operational regime.

The actions of the Russian Federation in this direction synchronously follow the requirements of the guidance documents. In 2014, the Northern Fleet was separated from the Western Military District. Decree #374 of the President of the Russian Federation (June 5, 2020) changed the configuration of the Northern Fleet and constrained it within the administrative boundaries of the Komi Republic and the

Arkhangelsk and Murmansk Oblasts and the Nenets Autonomous District. From December 21, 2020, the Northern Fleet is considered as a military district. At the same time, priority has been given to increasing the capabilities of the Northern Fleet over the last five to eight years, something which is also reflected in the guidance documents.

Interests in the Arctic

A prominent role in the Arctic is played by the countries around the Arctic which are part of the "Arctic Council." These are: the US, Denmark, Iceland, Canada, Norway, Russia, Finland and Sweden. Despite common approaches, they also have their own private interests. First of all, this concerns the United States. In particular, the US upholds the principles of free navigation and open sea routes worldwide and opposes the exclusive control of Russia and Canada, respectively, over the "North Sea Route" and the "Northwest Passage." In addition, some member states have territorial claims against each other. Notable among them is the dispute between Canada, Denmark and Russia over ownership of the Lomonosov submarine ridge. Each side considers this ridge to be its own. In 2007, a Russian submarine "placed" the Russian flag under the North Pole, prompting a backlash in other countries.

With the growing geopolitical importance of the Arctic, the interest of non-Arctic countries over it has increased. Leading countries in Europe and Asia have expressed interest in the work of the Arctic Council. A number of countries have been granted the status of permanent observers, including China, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Singapore formally and the European Union. The most active of them is China. Its growing economy needs free and unrestricted navigation in the Arctic which is in the interests of its national security. For this purpose, China is preparing its fleet. The interests of the EU countries are due to the fact that the Arctic holds a very large place in the supply of hydrocarbons, other minerals and bio-resources for European countries. In addition, Europe is very interested in solving the environmental problems of the Arctic which has a huge impact on global processes.

Strengthening Russia's military potential and China's presence in the Arctic is a significant challenge for the United States which has led to appropriate action. The Second Fleet of the US Navy was activated in this direction. The military facility in Keflavik (Iceland) from which US forces withdrew in 2006 was restored. New icebreakers are being built intensively. The "JOINT VIKING" exercises are held annually with the participation of NATO countries. Most notably, in 2019 the Pentagon submitted a [report](#) to Congress on an Arctic strategy, outlining the challenges posed by the actions of Russia and China in the Arctic.

The first response to the change in the status of the Northern Fleet may be the [statement](#) by the US Secretary of the Navy, Kenneth Braithwaite, that the US Navy will begin regular patrols off the Russian coast in the Arctic to resist Russian pressure in the Far North.

Conclusion

The Arctic and the Far North region, whose economic potential is very high in terms of communications and mineral reserves, are becoming strategically important to Russia. Therefore, it is important to protect the district. The military role of the region is important in terms of the use of strategic missiles and defense against them (due to the shortest trajectories to the targets and the minimum flight time). However,

despite all of this, it was not necessary to separate the Northern Fleet and then raise its status (which is logically followed by a sharp increase in manpower and resources and is associated with significant additional costs). These tasks could be performed by the Western Military District (which included the Northern Fleet) together with the Central and Eastern Military Districts. Recent changes can be seen as a manifestation of the intention of the Russian Federation to redistribute spheres of influence in the Arctic to its advantage, including revising existing borders and fighting for disputed territories. A strong Northern Fleet can be a powerful tool in this regard.