

Between Hegemony and Harmony: Unpacking Russia's Dual Strategy in the Arctic

Written by Sara Seppanen

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SARA SEPPANEN, DEC 23 2024

Far from being peripheral to world order, the Arctic has in the last decade transformed into a region of notable strategic importance for Russia's great power ambitions. While flexing its muscles through the expansion of military capabilities—including the re-opening of 50 previously closed Soviet-era military posts (Conley et al., 2020)—Russia has also remained committed to principles guiding international peace and cooperation in the Arctic. To explain this dual approach in Russia's Arctic behaviour, this essay will demonstrate the importance of adopting a constructivist lens to understanding state behaviour in the High North. It transcends realist lenses, as well as the traditionally applied idea of Arctic exceptionalism, to delve into how strategic cultural elements inform Russia's Arctic policy. It argues that while realist perspectives and the focus on Russia's economic interests shed light on the balance between military expansion and cooperative engagements, the frameworks overlook how Russia's unique strategic culture—marked by a sense of great power status and inherent vulnerability—underpins strategic decisions in an uncertain regional setting.

This essay proceeds in three parts, starting with an examination of the mainstream literature on Arctic security policy before engaging with how the concept of strategic culture can pivot analysis of Russia's behaviour in the region. By exploring culturally sensitive elements of Russian strategic thinking in the final section, the essay argues that Russia's dual approach to Arctic policy cannot be fully understood without reference to its deep-rooted ideational factors.

Between Conflict and Cooperation

Mainstream literature on Russian Arctic policy has long been trapped in a binary framing of geopolitical conditions. The region has either been portrayed as one of strong cooperation isolated from wider international security realities (Black, 2015; Staun, 2017) or a resource-rich area that Russia is attempting to conquer and dominate (Käpylä & Mikkola, 2015; Clark & White, 2022). Much of this latter commentary arose following Russia's ceremonial planting of a corrosion-resistant titanium flag on the Arctic seabed as part of an international scientific expedition in 2007, which caused Western suspicion "about what lengths Russia may go to secure its Arctic sovereignty" (Roberts, 2015, p. 114).

This alarmist Western discourse saw the second iteration of the Russian Arctic Strategy in 2013 emphasise the importance of enhancing the combat and mobilisation readiness of the armed forces to "ensure the sovereign rights of Russia's Arctic Zone" (Klimenko, 2016, p. 19). From an offensive structural realist perspective—relying on key assumptions that the international system is anarchic and that states can never with certainty know the intentions of others—Russia's expansive moves in the Arctic can be considered through the prism of self-help, where "the pursuit of power stops only when hegemony is achieved" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 34). Reflecting the view that states seek to surpass conditions of simple survival by defensively preserving power (Waltz, 1979), Russian moves in the Arctic—including its resumption of long-range air and naval combat patrols in the region (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2014)—can be seen as means through which to signal hegemonic operational capacity. This includes significant emphasis on military modernisation, as seen in the 2017 widely featured unveiling of the military Arctic Trefoil base, forming part of Russia's new Arctic Joint Strategic Command (Foxall, 2017).

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Having said that, many scholars—not least Trenin and Baev (2010, p. 25)—consider this hard-line geopolitical discourse “increasingly shorn of any connection to the real situation in the region”. This strand of literature points to the cooperative spirit Russia has demonstrated in the Arctic, as evident in its engagement in US bilateral research programmes, the 2011 establishment of collaborative search and rescue operations (SAR), and multilateral environmental protection efforts (Sergunin & Konyshv, 2014). In terms of security strategy, Russia's signing of the Murmansk Agreement with Norway in 2010—which saw the settling of a 40-years long border dispute through agreement of a delimitation line in the Barents Sea—is often considered emblematic of Russian intentions not being as belligerent as some realists maintain (Staun, 2017).

To explain this, certain observers highlight the idea of an Arctic exceptionalism, of which the most conventional applications since the 1990s “have sought and served to isolate the Arctic as a political region apart from, rather than a part of, international relations writ large” (Lackenbauer & Dean, 2020, p. 343). According to this, cooperative efforts in the Arctic—such as the multilateral Arctic Council (Graczyk & Rottem, 2020)—have survived wider international tensions, most notably Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, because the region is characterised by a state of environmental emergency and geological change (Dittmer et al., 2011) that results in Russia focusing on “the primacy of Arctic coastal states in developing and safeguarding the region” (Wilson Rowe & Blakkisrud, 2014, p. 82).

Wilson Rowe and Blakkisrud (2014, p. 83) nevertheless acknowledge that this diplomatic framing of the region plays into “overdrawn caricatures of the Arctic as either a zone of intense geopolitical competition over resources or a region of exclusively seamless international cooperation”. While sceptics have suggested that Russia's collaborative approach is mere camouflage for military build-up as “part of a master plan to thwart American objectives or balance American power” (Roberts, 2015, p. 115), more nuanced scholars maintain that there are more complex dynamics at play. This analysis tends to focus on the specific strategic utility underpinning Russia's combination of international cooperation and build-up of military capabilities, suggesting—for example—that it is “increasingly governed by national economic interests” (Åland, 2010, p. 269). As its Arctic policies highlight, Russia places significant emphasis on utilising the territory as a resource base for continued national economic growth (Klimenko, 2020).

Russia's Arctic actions are by many therefore considered as being driven by pragmatic interests, “in contrast with the Cold War era when the Soviet behavior was driven by ideological or geopolitical factors” (Konyshv and Sergunin, 2014, p. 323). A key trope of this pragmatism is the often-cited Northern Sea Route (NSR), which Russia is promoting as a new “major international transportation artery” (Lackenbauer et al., 2022, p. 164) and through which it is aiming to increase traffic from 30 million tons in 2020 to 80 million tons by 2024 (Klimenko, 2020). While this project explains why Russia has chosen to engage in a marriage of convenience with China throughout the 2010s—presenting it with an opportunity to integrate a ‘Polar Silk Road’ design in NSR to open up investments and attractive trade deals for Russia (Ziegler, 2021; Staun & Sørensen, 2023)—it does not necessarily explain Russia's two-track policy in relation to the West. Though it could be argued that Russia is strengthening the commercial appeal of NSR by promoting geopolitical certainty in the region while securing the route through military posturing (Lackenbauer et al., 2022), such explanations are reductive of wider political influences at play.

Strategic Culture

While preceding literature provides a useful preliminary lens through which to explore Russia's Arctic activities, the focus on binary framings and economic incentives fails to address how cultural factors inform Russia's two-pronged activities. Instead of employing a spectrum of realist and liberalist foreign policy discourse to examine its actions (Staun, 2017), it is important to explore the cultural forces behind its policies. By employing a constructivist lens of strategic culture, analysis can open up for how “a nation's traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behaviour, symbols, achievements and particular ways of adapting to the environment” influences problem-solving “with respect to the threat or use of force” (Booth, 1990, p. 121). Despite being a contested conceptual tool—most starkly demonstrated by the debate regarding whether ideational variables should be understood as causal or interpretive factors in studies about foreign policy (Johnston, 1999)—constructivists employing strategic culture agree that state behaviour cannot be explained purely by accounting for material power structures or by relying on utility-maximising calculations (Desch, 1998; Gray 1999; Duffield et al., 1999).

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By employing the concept to Russia's actions in the Arctic, this paper considers strategic culture as "collectively held ideas that do not vary in the face of environmental or structural changes" (Desch, 1998, p. 152) and which represent a "set of beliefs held by elites concerning strategic objectives and the most effective method of achieving it" (Klein, 1991, p. 3). This influence of cultural bias in decision-making is especially prevalent in the Arctic, given that it is a region shrouded in much environmental uncertainty. While there are, as Baev (2019, p. 37) suggests, "many exogenous factors influencing Russian choices, some of them fundamental (economic decline and sustained contraction of available resources), others more transitory (development of conflict situations in other regions)", the Arctic is an area where rapid environmental decline and second-order effects make it hard to foresee the extent to which climate change will impact international security and order (Granholm et al., 2016).

To address changing material realities and the subsequent strategic ambiguity, social constructivists posit that decision-makers use cognitive shortcuts as a way to "reduce environmental complexity" in evaluations of strategic choice (Gomez, 2021, p. 28). This uncertainty is further compounded by the fact that "there is no formal, foundational document that governs the principles of interstate relations in the Arctic" (Roberts, 2015, p. 117). As such, instead of relying "on ahistorical calculations of interest and capabilities" (Johnston, 1995, p. 64) to explain Russia's behaviour, strategic culture can circumscribe "how government officials understand the world" (Götz & Staun, 2022, p. 483).

Great Power Imaginaries and Threat Perception

An integral part of Russia's strategic thinking is its self-perception of being an exceptional great power on the international stage. Underpinned by supranational myths of Orthodox heritage (*Holy Rus*) and the existence of a unique Russian world (*Russkiy Mir*) (Naydenova, 2016), the conviction that "Russia is destined to be a great power has been a fixture of Moscow's political elite for several decades" (Götz & Staun, 2022, p. 485). While Western observers tend to ascribe this patriotism to Vladimir Putin's personal return to presidency in 2012—labelling Russia's foreign policy as a Putin Doctrine focused on "the recovery of economic, political and geostrategic assets lost by the Soviet State in 1991" (Aron, 2013) -much of the great power sentiment has roots going back many centuries (Neumann, 2008).

In the context of the Arctic, this notion of greatness is reinforced by the fact that Russia physically "encompasses half of the Arctic coastline" and "40% of the land area beyond the Arctic Circle" (Laruelle, 2014, p. 253). While the vast natural resources of the Arctic—containing 30 percent of the world's undiscovered natural gas reserves and 13 percent of the global oil reserves (Bird et al., 2008)—"is music to the ears of Russians, whose prosperity depends on the extraction of natural resources" (Trenin & Baev, 2010, p. 25), Russia's presence transcends mere financial incentives. As Götz and Staun (2022, p. 485) maintain, its "status ambitions are deeply intertwined with spheres-of-influence thinking" where—being emblematic of its geographic uniqueness—the northern coastal region serves "as the last frontier for both imperial Russia and the Soviet Union" (Grajewski, 2017, p. 143).

Rather than Russia being driven by a "romantic idea of establishing a hold over *new territory*" (Trenin & Baev 2010, p. 25; emphasis added), however, the Kremlin's narrative invokes a sentiment of historical entitlement to the region. Indeed, Russia's claims to the Arctic go at least as far back as 1926, when the USSR first attempted to announce the High North part of its sovereign territory and embarked upon several polar expeditions in the 1930s (Smith & Giles, 2007). As Grajewski's (2017) examination of its Arctic policy reveals, Russia invokes the history of grand Soviet polar explorations—including the technological prowess demonstrated by the Sibiriakov icebreaker voyage of the Northern Sea Route in 1932—and upholds "physical mastery of the Arctic's harsh terrain as symbol of communist triumph" (Grajewski, 2017, p. 148).

Though displaying technological and military strength is foundational to Russia's military romanticism after decades of being perceived as less technologically advanced than the United States and China (Bendett et al., 2021), other elements of Russian strategic culture limit the extent to which it is willing to display this capability in confrontation with the West. This is because Russia's claim to great power status is grounded in an anti-hegemonic posture *vis-à-vis* the West, where the perceived necessity to defend traditional Westphalian sovereignty lies at the forefront of geopolitical competition. While modernisation of the Arctic Northern Fleet is "seen as an important instrument for demonstrating Russian sovereign rights in the High North" (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2014, p. 327), Russia considers

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legal measures as primary instruments through which to limit Western influence. This is most evident in Russia's long running adherence to international legal procedures in its claim to, and contestation of, territory of the central Arctic seabed—including resource-rich Lomonosov Ridge also claimed by littoral states Canada and Denmark—through the UN Commission on the limits of the Continental Shelf since 2001 (Hager, 2023).

This is because, as argued by Deyermond (2016, p. 962), Russian policymakers have seen “the primacy of state sovereignty [...] come under pressure from shifting international norms” since the collapse of the USSR, in a world order “strongly associated primarily with the US acting in its capacity as global hegemon and standard bearer of liberal political values” (Deyermond, 2016, p. 960). In opposition to earlier Western-led interventionism in Kosovo 1999 and Iraq 2003—which expressed sovereignty as being “contingent on the conduct of states towards their populations” (Deyermond, 2016, p. 595) rather than a foundational Westphalian principle of international relations—Russia's peaceful approach to Arctic disputes can be interpreted as a desire to cement its leading great power role amongst the developing multipolar order.

Though one might point to Russia's interventions in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 to argue that Russia itself is a militaristic revisionist power, its “actions in Ukraine and its interests in the Arctic are two very different issues” (Roberts, 2015, p. 112). Indeed, Russia's relation to ex-Soviet states bear the legacy of the Soviet constitutional model where “the Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) had little sovereignty in relation to the federal centre” (Deyermond, 2016, p. 967), while the Arctic remains free from governmental tradition. According to Nae's (2022) analysis of narratives in Russian international state media RT and Sputnik, framings of Arctic cooperation therefore focus on both Russia's responsibility vis-à-vis an interventionist West, as well as its indispensable great power status as a facilitator of peace in the region. The significance of this ideational stance can be seen in Russia's continued willingness to cooperate with its Arctic neighbours since its intervention of Ukraine in 2022, as—despite refusal by the other nations to engage in multilateral discussions with Russia—it has asserted that “dialogue is the key to keeping the Arctic a region of peace, stability, and international cooperation” (Jonassen, 2023).

In addition to Russia's Arctic behaviour being influenced by a sense of entitlement to the region as a great power, Russia's more forward-leaning military posture is informed by an inherent sense of vulnerability and encroachment in relation to the West. As another central strand of its strategic culture, the perceived vulnerability to external attack is grounded in its “territorial grandness and long borders” (Götz & Staun, 2022, p. 484), where historical traumas of invasions and wars prompts Russia to view neighbours “not as potential Allies but as bridgeheads for potential foreign aggression, necessitating their subjugation or domination by whatever means available” (Foreman, 2016, p. 2). Some of these measures have in recent times included suspected Russia-backed targeting of Arctic undersea fibre optic cables—which in 2021 led to Norway's LoVe Sea observatory losing its ability to monitor fish stocks and passing submarine activity (Kertysova & Gricius, 2023)—as well as increased disinformation campaigns seeking to devalue and weaken domestic support for Western military exercises in the region, such as Trident Juncture and Cold Response (Lackenbauer et al., 2022).

Indeed, because the Arctic is seen as an additional front of vulnerability to Russian security in a world of it being a besieged fortress (Lipman, 2015), military build-up has been guided by what many observers identify as the Kremlin's need to reinforce strategic depth for national survival (Lo, 2015; Lukyanov, 2016). Though it is difficult to discern the causal effect this has had on Russia strengthening its military posture (Marten, 2020), its 2013 Arctic policy specifically identifies NATO enlargement as the primary security threat in the region (Klimenko, 2016). Considering a strategic culture engrossed in the sense of vulnerability of external borders (Giles, 2015), it is of no great surprise that Russia deems the modernisation of other coastal neighbours' military programmes around the Barents Sea suspicious (Sergunin & Konyshchev, 2014).

While those sceptical of cultural explanations to Russia's behaviour might argue that the flexing of military muscles around the Kola Peninsula—however restrained at times, because of over-stretched resources in other military locations like Syria and Ukraine (Baev, 2019)—is a realist response to anarchic security conditions of constant great power rivalry, such stances fail to fully appreciate the Western dynamics at play. Rather than NATO aggression forcing Russia to adopt a supposedly defensive security posture—as suggested by Putin (2013) identifying NATO developments on anti-ballistic missile defence systems in 2013 as “methodological attempts to undermine the

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strategic balance in various ways and forms”—the alliance has continuously attempted to assert how it has “no intention of raising its presence” (O'Dwyer, 2013) in the High North. Given the lack of Western aggression in objective realities, Russia's military posture has therefore been the product of idiosyncratic factors and a siege mentality seeking protection “from imagined competitors” (Trenin & Baev, 2010, p. 25).

Conclusion

This essay has explored Russia's dual approach to Arctic policy, focusing on its expansion of military capabilities alongside commitments to international cooperation. While realist perspectives suggest that Russia's behaviour can be understood as a response to security concerns and resource competition, these frameworks alone do not fully explain the complex motivations underlying Russian Arctic policy. By incorporating a constructivist lens and examining strategic culture, this essay has emphasised how Russia's actions are influenced by deeply rooted ideational factors and cultural predispositions, including its perception of great power status and an inherent sense of vulnerability.

Russia's dual approach of expanding military capabilities and committing to international cooperation in the Arctic is the result of it simultaneously wanting to signal its indispensability as a great power—upholding traditional values of legality and international order—while feeling under threat by its Western adversaries. Though an account of these cultural elements does not grant policymakers with predictive powers to fully delineate future trends in a complex region of hegemonic posturing and rapid environmental change, the understanding of Russia's strategic culture—being the largest nation in the region—allows for more comprehensive planning of Western Arctic initiatives. This is especially pertinent in times of increased political uncertainty of the 2020s, a decade when the Arctic is likely to experience further environmental transformation as its players attempt to navigate shifting geopolitical realities.

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