A survey of current Russian strategies and military thinking about the Arctic points to clear separate military and development goals. Leading Russian military commentators usually include both in their analyses, often highlighting the softer development aspect of security. Moreover, much of the military writing identifies broad possibilities for international co-operation in the Arctic.

In March 2020, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin signed a new ‘Framework for the state policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic until 2035’. Replacing

**KEY FINDINGS**

- Russian military commentators usually insist that all relevant actors need to act with care to avoid a deterioration of the situation in the Arctic
- Russian military writing contains a strong focus on the development of the Russian Arctic
- Russian military writing identifies broad possibilities for co-operation in both the military and civilian fields
an earlier document covering the years 2008-2020, the
new Framework catalogues the main future interests,
aims and tasks relating to the Russian Arctic, as well
as the threats and challenges to it. It is complemented
by a large number of more targeted strategies and
policy papers that have a bearing on the region.

The Framework essentially stands on two pillars.
The first is a military pillar, which includes the
protection of state sovereignty, Russia’s response
to a military build-up by other states in the Arctic
and preparations for an increase in the potential for
conflict in the region.

The second is a development pillar, which directs
attention to such diverse issues as out-migration
and population decline, difficult socio-economic
conditions, a poor investment climate, an out-dated
and inadequate infrastructure, and environmental
degradation.

The political thinking expressed through strategies
and policy papers forms an important part of the
background against which Russian military
commentators analyse current and future situations in
the Arctic. This study surveys recent Russian military
thinking about the Arctic as expressed in the pages of
the two leading publications in this field, Voennaya
mysl [VM] and Voenno-promyshlenny kurer [VPK].

This assessment is representative of most of these
writings. The message is that, while the Arctic is still
some distance from the brink of military conflict, all
relevant actors need to act with care to avoid a
deterioration of the situation. Using key definitions
from the 2014 Military Doctrine, Russian military
commentators usually point to the risk of ‘military
dangers’ growing into ‘military threats’, or the ‘real
possibility of the emergence of a military conflict
between the conflicting sides’.

Russia’s military thinking about the Arctic and its
build-up in the region, so the general argument insists,
is a response to the West’s aggressive policy, which is
forcing Russia to prepare adequate countermeasures.
‘The second Cold War essentially started after the
return [i.e. annexation] of Crimea to Russia’, so notes a
military analyst in 2016 in VPK, adding that this caused
the emergence of a new ‘cold hot spot’ in the Arctic.

Russian military commentators openly admit that
much had to be learned anew by the Russian armed
forces. ‘Do not shoot at the polar bears’, says a
2016 headline in VPK to an article describing how
Russian special operations forces [SOF] had begun
preparations for operations in the Arctic domain. A
string of later articles makes it clear that since the
collapse of the Soviet Union much knowledge has
been lost and much of the infrastructure in the Arctic
has been left to decay.

The current military-political situation in the Arctic
generally is not critical. However, the relationship between
the Russian Federation and Western countries is
deteriorating, and its future does not inspire optimism.

A. Khomkin, in Voennaya mysl 5, 2020

From military dangers to military threats
Striking a seemingly optimistic tone, one military
commentator writing in the pages of VM in 2020
explains that ‘presently, there are practically no
interstate conflicts in the Far North capable of
turning into military threats’. Nonetheless, he adds,
‘the likelihood of hotbeds of tension emerging in the
Arctic may increase by 2030’.

In 2016 a seasoned Russian Arctic explorer explained
to the readers of VPK that ‘we are talking about
preparing the [fighter’s] necessary psychological
platform. He cannot be afraid of the natural
environment in which he has to live’. Similarly, other
writers highlighted the need to develop and test new
equipment under extreme temperatures and to
establish a new and contemporary infrastructure, not
only to replace the dilapidated Soviet-era infrastructure, but also to create a larger grid to connect up this vast area in face of the external military challenges identified by the Russian state.

As expected, much of the military focus is on missiles, submarines and ice-breakers, but considerable attention is also being given to the issue of mobility, as it is clear that the available troops in this region are often stretched thin, making it hard to defend. Military planners foresee scenarios in which local units will have to exercise extended autonomy and rely on their own resources while awaiting reinforcements. SOF play a critical role in this, serving as the glue that holds much of it together.

As an indication of this, in April 2020 Russian SOF parachuted over the Arctic from a height of more than 10,000 metres in order to demonstrate a rapid response capability that Russian writers claim to be unique to Russia. Even this demonstration of force, however, failed to impress two high-ranking officers, who, writing in VM in late 2020, regretted what they believed to be ‘a lack of forces, equipment and the necessary military infrastructure’ in the region.

"National security is not just a matter of resisting military threats: it also includes a socio-economic component."

N. Sidnyaev in Voennaya mysl, 2017

Environment and infrastructure

‘In the Soviet era’, according to a 2016 article in VPK, ‘for a long time questions of ecology and the protection of the environment did not receive any attention’. This has changed, so readers are given to understand, and a later article in VM notes the positive process ‘associated with the solution to ecological problems: cleaning the Russian Arctic of rubbish, eliminating the many radioactive waste sites and organising a system to prevent accidents in sites of oil and gas extraction’.

The environmental focus, so a 2017 VPK article adds, is also good for the economy. The writer insists that cleaning up the Arctic could pave the way for much-needed tourism in the region. He points to the island

Heavy snowfall in Norilsk. Photo: Denis Kozhevnikov/TASS/Ritzau Scanpix
of Franz Josef Land, selected for an early clean-up and the site of Russia’s northernmost air base at Nagurskoye, as a prime destination for Arctic tourism.

The Northern Sea Route (NSR) is central to the economic development of the region and is rivalled in importance only by the prospect of the increased exploration and extraction of fossil fuels and minerals. The disruption of sea transport [and of] the Arctic transport system in general (…) may have catastrophic social and economic consequences, causing an immediate threat to the lives of people of [the Arctic], so warned a 2017 VM article. Since the publication of this article the importance of the NSR has only increased, as reflected in Putin decreeing a sharp rise in the annual tonnage in 2018, from 21 million tonnes in that year to a minimum of 80 million tonnes in 2024. The figure for 2020 was a more modest 33 million tonnes.

Russian writers openly draw attention to the poor state of the supporting infrastructure, both on-site and across the country. Much of the focus is on the railway system that serves the Arctic ports for both military and commercial purposes. This includes, according to a Russian expert interviewed by VPK in 2019, the establishment of a Transarctic railway line along the breadth of the Russian Arctic. In his optimistic assessment, it may take some ten to twelve years to complete once a decision has been made.

A feature article on the NSR in VM in 2020 confirmed the central importance of this transport line alongside access to ‘the riches of the Exclusive Economic Zone and the continental shelf of [Russia]’. Both have implications for sovereignty and development. As far as the NSR is concerned, the economic dimension relates to the use of the supporting infrastructure, as well as possible compulsory on-sea services, including ice-breakers and pilots.