



The loss of the submarine Kursk in August 2000 exposed the fragile condition of Russia's navy at the start of the century. All 118 crew died. Ageing equipment, maintenance shortcomings and a rescue capability so degraded that Norway and Britain had to be asked for help combined to reveal how far the fleet had declined since the Soviet collapse. The disaster did not in itself trigger reform — that required the political will and the revenues that came later — but it became the most visible symbol of neglect and reinforced the case for reinvestment in maritime power that Putin had already begun to make.

The Rebuilding: Capability Over Mass

During the following decade, Russia's naval trajectory began to shift. Increased defence spending, supported by rising hydrocarbon revenues, enabled a deliberate move away from the numerical mass of the Soviet fleet towards a smaller but qualitatively superior force. The strategic logic was clear: Russia could not afford to rebuild the Soviet navy's 1,700 vessels. It did not need to. What it needed was a force capable of protecting its sea-based nuclear deterrent, threatening NATO's transatlantic reinforcement routes, and operating in the wider North Atlantic when required. Submarine capability became the central pillar of this modernisation.

The Borei-A class ballistic missile submarine — of which six are now in service with further boats building — represents a generational improvement in the survivability of Russia's sea-based nuclear deterrent: quieter, deeper-diving, and armed with the Bulava SLBM. The Yasen-M class cruise missile submarine, armed with Kalibr and increasingly with the Zircon hypersonic missile, introduced a strike capability that did not exist in the Soviet fleet in this form. Admiral Gorshkov fired Zircon in a live exercise in the Barents Sea in September 2025. The Northern Fleet retains the majority of Russia's nuclear-powered submarines and remains the centre of gravity of Russian maritime power.

Operational patterns reflected this renewed emphasis. Long-range Tu-95MS Bear-H aviation

patrols into the North Atlantic approaches resumed from bases on the Kola Peninsula, frequently shadowed by NATO maritime patrol aircraft. Submarine deployments into the Norwegian Sea became more regular and, as Western anti-submarine warfare capability atrophied, less consistently tracked.

The Infrastructure Revival

Platform modernisation was accompanied by a systematic infrastructure revival described in full in the supporting paper *Zashchitnyy Kupol: Russia's Protective Three-Ocean Dome along the Northern Sea Route*. Across the Arctic littoral, a network of airfields, radar installations and logistics hubs was refurbished or rebuilt along the 20,000-kilometre Northern Sea Route. Facilities at Nagurskoye on Franz Josef Land, Kotelny Island, Cape Schmidt and Tiksi — many of which had fallen into disuse in the 1990s — were returned to operational readiness with 2,500-metre runways capable of supporting fighter and bomber operations, radar systems covering Arctic airspace, and missile defence batteries adapted for Arctic conditions. The result is what Russian doctrine conceives as a protective dome: a layered defensive and surveillance architecture extending from the Kola Peninsula to the Bering Strait.

The Ukraine War: Costs the Series Cannot Ignore

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 imposed costs on the Northern Fleet's land component that deserve more than the cautious language of early reporting. Several amphibious vessels from the Northern Fleet deployed southwards through the Baltic to the Black Sea theatre in the opening weeks — their subsequent status in open reporting remains unclear, though the broader Black Sea Fleet suffered catastrophic losses including the sinking of the flagship *Moskva* in April 2022.

More significantly for the High North, the Northern Fleet's ground forces paid a disproportionate price. The 80th Separate Arctic Motor Rifle Brigade — Russia's premier Arctic warfare formation, based at Alakurtti and combat-hardened in Syria — was committed to Ukraine and by 2024 had suffered approximately 80% casualties. It is now manned largely by convicts and conscripts. The 200th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade at Pechenga was effectively destroyed as a coherent formation by the end of 2022 and reconstituted with Northern Fleet sailors issued Second World War-era helmets. The 61st Naval Infantry Brigade has been continuously committed in Ukraine. These are not peripheral losses. They represent the destruction of Russia's entire specialist Arctic ground force cadre — the units whose purpose was to defend

the landward approaches to the Kola Peninsula and its nuclear assets. The full assessment, including recovery timelines extending to the late 2030s, is set out in the supporting paper *Russia's Northern Military District: Losses, Attrition and the Path to Recovery*.

The Moskva episode also illustrated the constraints imposed by geography and treaty regimes. Efforts to reinforce the Black Sea theatre with additional Slava-class cruisers were blocked by the Montreux Convention, which restricts warship transit into the Black Sea in time of war — a reminder that geography disciplines even major naval powers. The Marshal Ustinov, detached from the Northern Fleet in February 2022, spent 236 days and 36,000 nautical miles largely fruitlessly cruising the Mediterranean before returning to Severomorsk in September 2022, unable to enter the Black Sea it had been positioned to reinforce. Surface combatants retain symbolic importance; their strategic impact is overshadowed by the continuing centrality of submarine forces in Russian doctrine.

The Northern Fleet today is neither a replica of its Soviet predecessor nor a purely regional force. It is a modernised formation designed to secure Russia's strategic deterrent, protect Arctic approaches, and operate across the wider North Atlantic when required. But it is a force whose conventional ground component has been severely degraded by the Ukraine war — a vulnerability whose strategic implications for the High North are only beginning to be absorbed by Western defence planners.

The Seabed Dimension

Beneath the surface, the strategic environment has become more complex still. Subsea communications cables and offshore energy infrastructure now represent critical national assets whose vulnerability has moved from theoretical concern to demonstrated reality. Since 2022, approximately ten subsea cables have been cut in the Baltic and North Sea region. The Baltic Connector gas pipeline was severed in October 2023. The Estlink 2 power cable was cut on Christmas Day 2024 and remained out of service for seven months. Russian naval research vessels — most notably the Yantar, operated by the Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research — have conducted sustained intelligence operations in British, Irish and Norwegian waters, mapping cable routes with transponders off. On 25 March 2026, the United Kingdom announced the legal basis for interdicting shadow fleet vessels in British waters, though the sovereign immunity of commissioned Russian naval vessels such as Yantar places them beyond the reach of that authority. The full record and its legal implications are examined in the supporting paper *The Seabed as a Battlefield: Subsea Infrastructure and the New Domain of Hybrid Competition*, and in the Intelligence Note *UK Shadow Fleet Interdiction: Legal Basis and the Yantar Problem*.

China and the Wider Contest

China's engagement with the Arctic has moved well beyond the posture of scientific observer it maintained through much of the previous decade. Beijing commissioned its third polar icebreaker, *Jidi*, in 2024. A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Russia concluded the same year explicitly references Arctic cooperation. Joint Russian-Chinese naval exercises in Arctic-adjacent waters took place in 2023. Chinese investment in port infrastructure in the Russian Far East — directly relevant to Northern Sea Route access — continues to expand. The long-term implications for the balance of access and influence across the northern maritime space are addressed in the ICE10 supporting paper on EU Arctic policies and other nations' Arctic strategies.

Return of Maritime Competition

The return of maritime competition to the region has been gradual in its structural drivers but increasingly visible in its operational expression. Geography, resource interests, technological change and strategic ambition have combined to restore the North Atlantic, and the seabed beneath it, to a position of strategic importance not seen since the end of the Cold War.

In the next article we examine how the High North has reawakened as an operational theatre — the Arctic base network, the changing navigable season, and the integration of military and economic control along the Northern Sea Route.

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