



Russia's war in Ukraine has inflicted damage on its Arctic military capability that will take a generation to repair. Robin Ashby reports

The Bear's Broken Paw

On the morning of 24 February 2022, units of the 200th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade crossed into Ukraine from Belarus. They were among Russia's finest soldiers — Arctic-trained, Syria-hardened, equipped with vehicles designed to operate at minus fifty degrees Celsius on terrain where wheeled transport is impossible. Within weeks, one of their battalion tactical groups had been effectively annihilated. By December 2022, the brigade as a coherent formation was described by multiple independent analysts as mostly wiped out. Russia attempted to reconstitute it at its Pechenga base using Northern Fleet sailors and reservists. Some of those replacements, it later emerged, were issued World War Two-era helmets and body armour without ballistic plates.

What happened to the 200th is not an outlier. It is the template. Russia's decision to commit the Northern Military District's specialist Arctic forces to a conventional land war in Ukraine has inflicted damage on its High North military posture that will take the better part of a decade to begin repairing — and in some domains, may never be fully reversed.

Russia chose to spend its Arctic specialist forces as a currency. The Arctic is now paying the bill.

The Cream of the Crop, Sent South

The Northern Military District had by 2021 assembled the most capable Arctic military force on the planet. It was built around two elite brigades. The 80th Arctic Motor Rifle Brigade, based at Alakurtti some sixty kilometres from the Finnish border, was equipped with T-80BVM tanks, purpose-built DT-30 tracked Arctic transport vehicles, self-propelled howitzers, and the only dedicated Arctic-variant surface-to-air missile systems in existence: the Tor-M2DT and Pantsir-SA, both mounted on enormous articulated tracked carriers and designed for operations in whiteout conditions at temperatures that would disable conventional military vehicles. The 80th's troops had cut their teeth in Syria.

All of them went to Ukraine. The 80th committed at least one battalion tactical group by July 2022 — described at the time by Finnish open-source analysts as the last untapped Arctic unit in the north. Heavy fighting in Kherson took a grievous toll on combat-experienced officers. By the time the brigade was engaged around the Dnieper River estuary in 2024, casualty estimates had reached eighty percent. It still exists, still fights — but it is now manned largely by conscripts and convicted criminals serving reduced sentences in exchange for front-line service. As the US Naval Institute's Proceedings assessed in November 2025, the brigade's specialist equipment losses alone will take years to replace. The human losses are a different and longer problem entirely.

Systems Built for Ice, Lost in the Mud

The depletion of Russia's Arctic air defence inventory deserves particular attention, because what was lost cannot be quickly remade. Before 2022, Russia held approximately twelve Tor-M2DT systems and a similar number of Pantsir-SA units — the only two dedicated Arctic-variant air defence systems in the world. They were dispatched to Kherson with the 80th Brigade. Ukrainian forces developed a straightforward counter: spot with drones, engage with GPS-guided Excalibur artillery rounds before the crews could react. The first Tor-M2DT was destroyed in combat in February 2023. By November 2025, at least three were confirmed destroyed by Oryx, the open-source equipment loss tracker — more than a quarter of the entire pre-war fleet.

Replacing them is not simply a question of money. Both systems depend on Western microelectronics whose import has been sanctioned since 2022. Five American-manufactured chips were recovered from a captured Pantsir system. Grey market procurement through China and the UAE partially mitigates this, but at higher cost and with supply unpredictability that makes production planning essentially impossible. Annual production of all Pantsir variants runs at roughly thirty systems across Russia's entire defence industry. In May 2025, Russia transferred Pantsir systems to North Korea — a decision that makes sense only if domestic

inventories are under severe pressure.

The officer and NCO cadre who held the Arctic's institutional knowledge has been largely killed or wounded. Training replacements takes longer than building new equipment.

The Fleet Steams On — Barely

The Northern Fleet's surface force has not suffered the same direct combat losses as its Black Sea counterpart, whose flagship Moskva was sunk by Ukrainian missiles in April 2022. But the war has inflicted damage of a different kind. Maintenance resources, skilled dockyard workers, and political attention have all been diverted southward. By late 2025, the fleet counted barely thirty to thirty-five operational ships, most built during the Soviet era, advancing rapidly in age without modern equivalents under construction.

The picture is not uniformly bleak. New frigates armed with Zircon hypersonic missiles are commissioning, and Yasen-M nuclear-powered cruise missile submarines — among the most capable in the world — continue to emerge from the Severodvinsk yards. The nuclear submarine deterrent, Russia's strategic bedrock, has been deliberately insulated from conventional attrition and remains broadly intact. But the surface force has no modern destroyer or cruiser under construction. The Kirov-class battlecruiser Admiral Nakhimov has been under reconstruction since 1999. The five ageing Udaloy-class destroyers have no successors. This is a force completing a long structural decline, and the Ukraine war has simply accelerated the timetable.

Strategic Aviation: the Strain Shows

Russia has fired over five hundred Kh-101 cruise missiles at Ukraine since February 2022, driving production from roughly fifty-six missiles per year in 2021 to orders exceeding six hundred for 2025, with factories running around the clock. The Tu-95MS bombers that carry them have been worked at rates their designers never anticipated. Ukraine's Operation Spiderweb in June 2025 — coordinated long-range drone strikes deep inside Russia — damaged or destroyed multiple Tu-95 aircraft at Belaya air base, forcing Russia to substitute its small fleet of Tu-160 Blackjack bombers. One Tu-160 was subsequently photographed at Anadyr, the remote Arctic Far East base — the first recorded presence of the type there, a

dispersal move that reflects real vulnerability in the strategic aviation force.

When Can Russia Recover?

The honest answer is: not soon, and not completely within this decade. Equipment losses in Arctic-specific systems cannot be restored at full pre-war inventory levels before 2032–2035. That assessment assumes no further losses and no further sanctions tightening — both optimistic.

The ground forces problem is harder still. Rebuilding the 80th and 200th as genuine Arctic specialist formations requires not just equipment but officers and NCOs with the accumulated knowledge that comes from years of service above the Arctic Circle. Training pipelines take five to ten years to produce experienced small-unit leaders. Rebuilding two elite formations that were assembled over a decade and then spent in three years of attritional warfare in an environment for which they were not designed is a generational problem, not a procurement one.

Two further constraints complicate recovery. Finland and Sweden's NATO accession in 2023 and 2024 has permanently altered the geography: the Kola Peninsula is now flanked by Alliance territory on both land borders, raising the reconstitution requirement above the 2021 baseline. And Russia's economy — comparable in size to Spain's before the war and under sustained sanctions pressure — must fund reconstitution while simultaneously rebuilding a military that has suffered nearly 1.2 million casualties since February 2022.

Full restoration of Russia's 2021 Arctic conventional posture is unlikely before the mid-2030s. The window is open. The question is whether NATO will use it.

The Window That Must Not Be Wasted

Russia's leadership is not unaware of its vulnerability. Putin's speech in Murmansk in March 2025 — delivered at the launch of the nuclear submarine Perm — warned that geopolitical competition in the Arctic was escalating and that Russia would respond. It is the language of a

power that knows it is temporarily weaker.

For NATO, the implication is straightforward even if the policy response is not. A conventional military window of Arctic advantage has opened — assessed by serious analysts as lasting at least a decade. Norway is investing; the United States maintains Arctic brigade combat teams in Alaska and has intensified High North exercise activity; the Royal Marines' Arctic warfare capability has been preserved and developed. But investment must match opportunity. The Alliance needs to decide, in the next few years, whether it intends to shape the Arctic security environment that will persist into the 2040s, or merely observe it.

Russia will recover, in time. It always does. But 'in time' in this case means a decade or more — and that is not nothing.

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This article draws on the author's Arctic Military Technology Status Report (March 2026) and the companion briefing paper on Northern Military District Attrition and Recovery, both published by the High North Observatory as part of the Mind the Gap background paper series. Equipment loss data sourced from Oryx.

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