



On February 28, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that their Northern Fleet (NF) had created an additional Air Defense (Voyska Protivovozdushnoy—PVO) division, ensuring that, "the Northern Sea Route [NSR] is now under steady protection", writes Sergei Sukhankin. He noted that protection of the east–west NSR, which follows Russia's northern coast, as well as "the defence of vital industrial objects and protection of Russia's economic interests in the Arctic zone" is a task jointly performed by the NF, the Russian Airborne Forces (Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska—VDV), the Aerospace Forces (Vozdushno Kosmicheskikh Sil—VKS) and the Special Operations Forces (SOF). Furthermore, by the end of 2020, the NF "will receive more than 180 pieces of military equipment specifically tailored for the harsh conditions of the Arctic region," which will include, among others, "the K-549 Knyaz Vladimir, a Borei-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, and the Admiral Flota Kasatonov frigate" as well as "four capital ships, submarines and motor ships" .

The notion of further bolstering Arctic defence was echoed in an earlier statement by Russian military affairs expert and ultra-conservative commentator Alexander Shirokorad, who noted, "[O]ur main objective is not to let them [Americans] into our Arctic [...] it [the NSR] is our first and last line of defence." Speaking about the importance of the NEP, Shirokorad not only emphasized the geopolitical and military opportunity in the region, but also pointed out its strategic and geo-economic value, noting that "if it had not been for the demonstration of our military potential [in the 1920s–1930s]—by showing our proto-military icebreakers—third parties would have continued their economic activities in the area." He also noted that the drive of the West to "internationalize" the NSR should be viewed as an aggressive and far-reaching move, which is aimed at curtailing Russia's presence and influence in the Arctic region. Indeed, Russia today sees military icebreakers as one of its competitive advantages in a potential struggle for the Arctic.

In a broad sense, four additional tools are meant to secure Russia's posture in the Arctic (in

general) and its dominance over the NSR (in particular). The first is Air and Missile Defense (Voyska Protivovozdushnoy i Protivoraketnoy Oborony—PVO-PRO) capabilities. Moscow announced it will be deploying two Resonance-N radar complexes to the Kola Peninsula by the end of 2020. Resonance-N is able to detect ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, hypersonic targets and stealth aircraft, adding additional PVO-PRO competencies to Russia's Arctic presence. According to one source, this move "will allow Russia to increase the military potential of the Northern Fleet and secure uninterrupted monitoring of the most missile-dangerous [raketoopasnyii] directions controlled by the fleet" . The importance of the PVO-PRO element was explained by the prominent Russian military expert and commentator Igor Korotchenko, who argued that due to the specific conditions of the Arctic, potential military encounters in the region will take a rather different form. "Our [Russian] military detachments [there] are primarily presented by Arctic bases and locally deployed means of counter-air defense... When it comes to equipment, we have created [...] the TOR-M2DT, which is specifically designed for Arctic conditions. It is capable of targeting almost all flying objects," he said.

The second key tool for security Russia's Arctic supremacy is strategic aviation. Russian sources refer to the Tupolev Tu-160, which can be deployed to Alexandra Land island Nagurskoye military. Such a move could create a serious challenge for the West primarily due to the fact that this type of aircraft can carry Kh-101/Kh-102 air-launched cruise missiles, which are capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear payloads. If these missiles are used by the Russian side, they "will make it impossible [for the United States] to ward off a potential strike against their Thule Air Base in Greenland. In effect, Moscow would have a chance to call checkmate in a single move," military commentator Aleksandr Frolov argues.

The third tool is ground transportation and infantry fighting vehicles (IFV). Russian Deputy Minister of Defense Aleksey Krivoruchko has contended that this element is one of the main priorities for the Russian Armed Forces in general and the Arctic region in particular. In particular, he mentions that a new-generation Russian IFV, the Ritsar, was specifically designed for operations in the High North and will soon become operable . Despite the lack of concrete information on the Ritsar, some Russian sources have claimed it will soon become "the main ground-based means of military operations in the Arctic"ÂÂÂ

The final element for ensuring Russia's Arctic dominance is high-precision weaponry. The Kh-47M2 Kinzhal nuclear-capable air-launched ballistic missile (ALBM) was first deployed to airbases in Russia's Southern Military District in 2017. According to the editor-in-chief of the military magazine Arsenal Otechestva, Viktor Murakhovskii, the Kh-47M2 is "the result of deep and profound modernisation of the operative-tactical ballistic missile [9M723] from the Iskander complex" . Following its deployment in the Black and Caspian seas, Russia has expanded the operative theatre of its deployment to the north. In mid-November 2019, according to one source close to the Ministry of Defense, the MiG-31K for the first time fired the missile near the

Pembey training ground, located northeast of Vorkuta. Furthermore, having taken off from the airfield in Olenegorsk, the MiG reportedly destroyed a land-based target with the Kh-47M2 missile, which traveled at a speed of Mach 10. The Russian VKS refused to issue any comments regarding the event, however. According to reputable Russian sources, this test—as well as other similar measures aimed at the remilitarization of the Arctic—is related to the "potential accretion of NATO forces in the Arctic region, which also requires the creation of weaponry that can be used in harsh climactic conditions of the High North" .

Unlike its socio-economic, cultural, and political policies toward the Arctic, Russian military actions in this remote region have followed a much more solid, complex, and result-oriented path.

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Dr Sukhakin is a Research Fellow at the Jamestown Foundation and Advisor at the Gulf State Analytics (both Washington DC); Lecturer at the University of Alberta, Concordia University of Edmonton and MacEwan University (all - Edmonton, Alberta).