



[The Arctic. Between Conflict and Cooperation](#)

The Melting Shield

The Russian Arctic as a Geopolitical Hotspot

Thomas Kunze / Leonardo Salvador

The High North has traditionally been of great importance to Russia¹ – not only as a storehouse of raw materials but also in terms of security policy. While the melting of the ice is opening up new economic opportunities for Moscow, it is also depriving the country of natural protection against military attacks. As a result, the remilitarisation of the Russian Arctic is in full swing.

Climate change is facilitating resource extraction in the Arctic and is also resulting in extended navigability of the Northern Sea Route as part of the Northeast Passage due to the melting of the ice. This is changing the geopolitical realities in the Arctic region. Amid global competition, Russia has been trying for some time to tap into fresh opportunities in the Arctic, but the invasion of Ukraine by its troops on 24 February 2022 has left Moscow in a state of foreign policy isolation that is also having an impact on its ambitions in the High North. Sanctions are putting the future of key projects at stake – a situation that China in particular could exploit to realise its long-held ambitions in the Arctic. However, there is another aspect which holds additional potential for tensions in the coming years: with the Northern Sea Route looking set to become increasingly traversable, the question arises as to the legal status of this trade route.

The Power of Geography

The Russian Federation is the largest Arctic littoral state, with the total surface area of Russia's Arctic territories amounting to some five million square kilometres. The Russian Arctic region is inhabited by around 2.4 million people.² Four of the five largest cities in the Arctic are in the Russian Federation, including the key seaport of Murmansk. Within the Russian Arctic itself, however, there are significant differences – especially in terms of infrastructure. While the Kola Peninsula near Murmansk, the Polar Urals near Salekhard and the Yamal Peninsula are relatively well developed with railway lines, roads and deep water ports, east of the Yenisei River neither roads nor train routes lead into the polar desert of the Taymyr

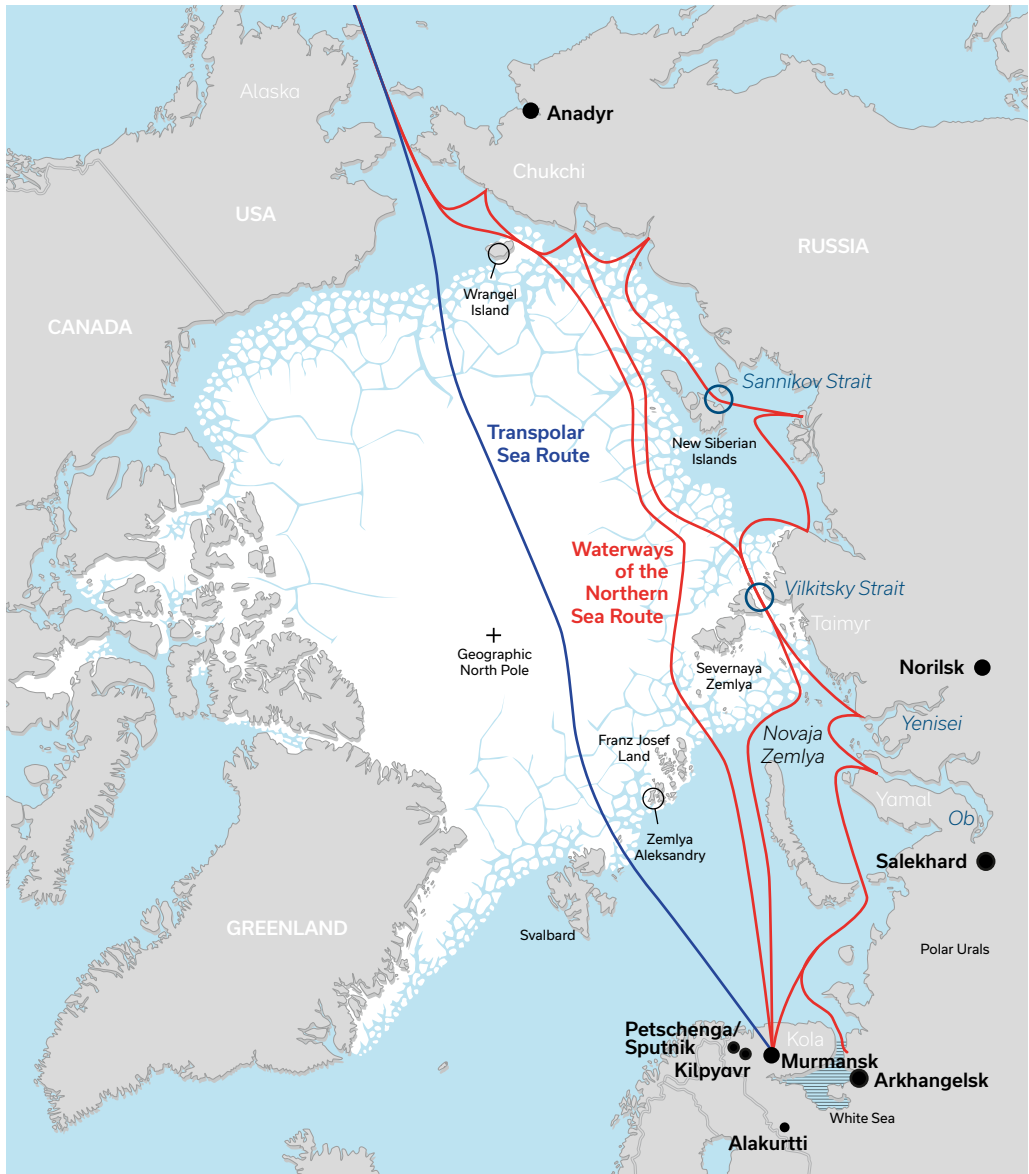
Peninsula, the swamps and mountains of northern Sakha, or the Chukchi Peninsula. Many of the ports, settlements and military installations in this part of the Russian Arctic can only be accessed by air or sea. The Northern Sea Route offers the possibility of further developing these areas for civil and military use as well as an option for establishing an alternative transcontinental transport route for energy deliveries and the flow of goods.

Historical Outline

The history of the development of the Russian Arctic region has always been linked to geopolitical considerations. In the 16th century, English and Dutch explorers failed in their attempts to find a sea route to Asia via the Northeast Passage. However, British merchants did find the passage to be a usable sea route to the White Sea and the Russian port of Arkhangelsk – this port city on the Northern Dvina was Russia's only access to the open sea at the time. Trade across the Arctic allowed Russian and English ships to bypass the Baltic Sea, where the ports were controlled by Swedes, Danes and the German Hanseatic League. In the mid-16th century, the new trade route led to the founding of the Muscovy Company, an English company dedicated to trading with Russia. London began to show an interest in northern Siberia. In order to prevent English economic expansion towards the mouth of the Ob river, Michael I, the first tsar of the Romanov dynasty, banned the use of the Arctic sea route to Siberia from 1620. As a result, the Arctic route fell into oblivion for centuries.

When the Great Northern War came to an end in 1721, Russia – under Peter the Great – established

Fig. 1: Northern Sea Route and Transpolar Sea Route



Source: own illustration based on Dutzmann, Silke 2011, here in: Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb) 2013: Karte: Der nördliche Seeweg, in: <https://bpb.de/172284> [17 Feb 2023]. Map: © Peter Hermes Furian, AdobeStock.

itself as a Baltic Sea power and hegemon in north-eastern Europe. This also led to a decline in the importance of Arkhangelsk as a port city. Arctic exploration continued in the centuries that followed, but apart from fur trade and fishing, more extensive economic exploitation was not possible due to the climatic conditions. For a long time, the biggest obstacle to the economic exploitation of the Arctic was the lack

of infrastructure. Up until the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway (1891 to 1916), the whole of Siberia was largely devoid of transport routes, and this was even more the case in the Arctic. The largest city in the Arctic Circle today and Russia's most important Arctic port, Murmansk, was not founded until 1916, during the First World War. Since the Imperial German Navy prevented transportation across the

Baltic Sea, aid and armaments for Russia from the Entente³ could only be transported via the Northeast Passage, which regained geostrategic and military significance as a result. Allied armaments also reached the Soviet Union via this route during the Second World War. The German Reich's attempt to block this supply route in 1942 – Operation Wunderland – was a failure.

Russia used its membership of the Arctic Council, founded in 1996, to position itself as a leading Arctic nation.

Extraction of mineral resources in the Russian Arctic began relatively late. The mining of raw materials did not start until the 1930s under the tyrannical regime of Joseph Stalin. At the same time, a sea route was opened up through the Arctic Ocean. In 1932, the icebreaker Alexander Sibiryakov travelled the Northeast Passage for the first time without wintering en route. In the same year, the Chief Directorate of the Northern Sea Route was founded – and the Northern Sea Route was born. With the deployment of hundreds of thousands of forced labourers, the necessary infrastructure for the use of the sea route in the Russian Arctic region was created in the years that followed, meaning that even remotely located raw material deposits became accessible for the first time. Most of the ports in this region were established during this period. From then on, the Northern Sea Route primarily served as an inner-Russian waterway to reach the Arctic extraction sites.

Stalin's death put an end to any further infrastructural development in the Arctic for the time being, with major projects such as the construction of a polar railway remaining unfinished.⁴ What followed mainly involved the technical maintenance of existing structures. The commissioning of nuclear-powered icebreakers at the end of the 1950s also ensured regular shipping traffic along the Northern Sea

Route. During the Cold War, the Arctic played a key role in terms of security policy because the hostile blocs were at particularly close quarters in this region. Strategic submarines armed with ballistic missiles cruised under the ice and were difficult to locate, giving both sides the possibility of a nuclear strike.

The shipping lane was opened to civilian navigation in 1991. As a result of the economic and political chaos after the end of the USSR, however, maintenance of the Arctic infrastructure collapsed. The result was widespread migration from the Arctic regions, with military installations and airfields being shut down. There was then renewed interest in the Arctic after the start of state reconstruction measures in the Russian Federation from the 2000s onwards. Russia's return to the Arctic was demonstratively marked with the North Pole expedition Arktika 2007: this involved a submarine reaching the seabed of the North Pole for the first time and planting a Russian flag there. Use of the Northern Sea Route increasingly became a focus for the Russian government, with climate change a not insignificant contributing factor.

Russia on the Arctic Council

Russia used its membership of the Arctic Council,⁵ founded in 1996, to position itself as a leading Arctic nation. The Council particularly seeks to achieve a balance between the interests of the Arctic states and the indigenous population, as well as endeavouring to protect the natural environment of the Arctic. Russia currently holds the Chairmanship of the Arctic Council until May 2023.

In response to Russia's attack on Ukraine, however, all other Arctic states temporarily suspended their participation in the Council from 2022 onwards – a decision that the Russian Foreign Ministry described as “politicised and irrational”.⁶ This affects the Russian Federation in a number of ways. Firstly, it is detrimental to a policy area in which Russia's international importance still remained largely unbroken.



Far-reaching claims: In 2007, a Russian submarine placed a flag on the seabed at the North Pole.

Photo: © ASPOLRF, AP Photo, picture alliance.

From an economic perspective, the future of major industrial projects and markets for Russia is at stake. Moreover, all Western partners have suspended their cooperation in the area of science and research.⁷

On the one hand, Moscow is therefore seeking to emphasise that as a result of the (envisaged) NATO membership of Finland and Sweden, Russia will be the only country on the Arctic Council that does not belong to the Alliance. In the past, the non-aligned status of Stockholm and Helsinki offered room for manoeuvre, says Moscow, but now a uniform NATO course dictated by Washington will prevail, according to the Kremlin.⁸ On the other hand, Russia is

trying to maintain a semblance of normality: immediately after the suspension of the Arctic Council's work, the country sent a scientific expedition called Umka-21 to Franz Josef Land, the country's northernmost archipelago, which is separated from the outside world by the ice of the Arctic Ocean. The researchers' goal was to count the polar bear population and carry out studies on the animals.⁹ The expedition also included a military component.¹⁰ Russia also announced that despite the suspension of the Arctic Council's activities, work on the Snowflake project would continue on the Russian side. The Snowflake International Arctic Station is planned as an autonomous complex to be powered on the basis of renewable energy

sources and hydrogen (without diesel fuel).¹¹ Finally, in August 2022, President Vladimir Putin welcomed those attending the festival “The Arctic. Breaking the Ice” in Usinsk – as if nothing had happened. The staging of the festival was part of the events planned under the Russian Chairmanship of the Arctic Council and is dedicated to helping keep the Arctic clean.¹²

It is Russia’s stated goal to establish the Northern Sea Route as an alternative transit route to the traditional sea route through the Suez Canal.

Russia and the Northern Sea Route

The traditional sea route from Europe to Asia passes through various straits (Strait of Malacca, Strait of Gibraltar) and the Suez Canal. The blockage of the Suez Canal by the Panamanian-flagged container ship *Ever Given* in March 2021 illustrated just how vulnerable such bottlenecks are and how crises or accidents there can impact the global economy. It was not until six days after the shipping accident that the canal was navigable again. The Northern Sea Route differs fundamentally from the traditional route in terms of the overall conditions. It leads over thousands of kilometres past Russia’s coasts and islands. For centuries, climatic conditions precluded the use of the Northeast Passage as an Arctic sea route to Asia. The limited period of navigability meant that commercial use was not worthwhile. Due to climate change in recent years, the navigability of the Northeast Passage has been extended into September, making the Northern Sea Route increasingly attractive. At the moment, the route is still comparatively unprofitable because of the need for icebreakers, which are costly.¹³ This is compounded by the difficulties of Arctic navigation. However, researchers predict that the Northeast Passage could be ice-free for at least nine months as early as 2040.¹⁴

It is Russia’s stated goal to establish the Northern Sea Route as an alternative transit route to the traditional sea route through the Suez Canal. At the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in 2022, President Putin said that the Far East and the Arctic were the regions where Russia’s future lay. Not only were there resources there, he explained, but also “access to a region of the world that is developing actively and at a very good pace”.¹⁵

For Moscow, this route is of both economic and geopolitical importance. The raw material deposits concentrated in the Russian Arctic generate a disproportionately high share of Russia’s gross domestic product. But many production sites – such as the Norilsk nickel works – are not accessible overland by road or rail, so they ship their output solely via the Arctic Ocean. From the very outset, therefore, resource extraction in the Russian Arctic was linked to the development of the Northern Sea Route. In addition to its importance in terms of the exploitation and transport of numerous mineral deposits, this route is also used for what is known as the “Northern delivery”: due to their remote location, Moscow supplies the isolated settlements and towns of the north with essential goods before the onset of winter. Moreover, at the end of October 2022, the Russian space company Roscosmos launched the satellite *Sputnik Skif-D* to supply the High North with high-speed internet.¹⁶

Expansion of the sea route is a significant aspect of the Putin administration’s political project to develop the Russian Arctic region. An ongoing increase in freight traffic has been observed on the Northern Sea Route in recent years. Nevertheless, experts are sceptical when it comes to overly optimistic forecasts regarding commercial shipping in the Arctic.¹⁷ On account of the war against Ukraine and the enormous economic and financial challenges Russia is facing as a result of Western sanctions, Moscow is currently focusing on other priorities. Nonetheless, the expansion of the Northern Sea Route is set to continue. The Russian leadership views the project both as an independent transportation

route and as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁸

The Northeast Passage as a goods and transport route differs from the traditional sea route to Asia in that it lies entirely within Russia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). This means that the Russian Federation has sovereign rights and jurisdiction to a certain extent in this part of the Arctic Ocean under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). What is more, the extreme climatic conditions here also mean that Russia needs to maintain the sea route, which involves providing icebreakers, weather stations and sea rescue bases. This has consequences for international shipping in terms of both international law and geopolitics.

The transport and export of oil, gas and coal produced in the Arctic via the Northern Sea Route may only take place under the Russian flag.

Conflicting Legal Interests

As long as Russia was using the Northern Sea Route primarily as a national transport route to reach its raw material sources in the Arctic, questions of international law were of secondary importance. With the increasing prospect of it being used as a transcontinental sea route, however, legal issues are coming to the fore. The legal situation regarding the Northeast Passage is complex and largely a matter of interpretation. As part of international maritime law, UNCLOS also governs shipping in the Arctic, and the Russian Federation is one of the signatories to this Convention. The contractual situation in the EEZ is of particular relevance to the Northern Sea Route. Although foreign states have the right to freedom of navigation in the EEZ without prior notification under Article 58 UNCLOS,¹⁹ Russia reserves the right to require prior clearance for use of the Northern Sea

Route, invoking Article 234 UNCLOS. This clause stipulates that laws and regulations are to be adopted and enforced "for the prevention, reduction and control of marine pollution from vessels in ice-covered areas within the limits of the exclusive economic zone".²⁰

In addition, tankers and merchant vessels using the Northern Sea Route rely on information from the relevant Russian authorities about ice movements and weather conditions, and may also be dependent on the deployment of icebreakers. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Ministry of Defence has proposed amendments to the Law on Internal Waters to establish new rules governing the passage of foreign vessels along the Northern Sea Route. The Ministry of Defence considers it advisable to add a clause to the current version of the law according to which foreign ships and boats must generally apply for permission to use the Northern Sea Route.²¹ A 2017 law also stipulates that the transport and export (cabotage) of oil, gas and coal produced in the Arctic via the Northern Sea Route may only take place under the Russian flag.²²

Russia's views conflict with those of both China and the United States: the latter regard the trans-Arctic sea routes as international shipping lanes. In such cases, the right of transit (Art. 37 UNCLOS) applies in the relevant straits. In contrast, Moscow considers the Northern Sea Route to be a national shipping route. In the event of a dispute, the Russian leadership could invoke customary international law, since for decades the United States was the only country to challenge the status of the Northern Sea Route as a Russian national shipping route. In addition, Moscow has consolidated its position by the fact that Article 7 UNCLOS on straight baselines²³ has been applied to numerous island groups.²⁴ This makes the straits between important island groups de jure internal waters under Article 8(1) UNCLOS. Moreover, Russia often puts forward the argument that it was Russia that enabled the sea route to be opened up and used in the first place.

These legal issues hold potential for future conflict, since UNCLOS leaves considerable

room for interpretation due to its low level of regulatory density. The fundamental problem is that parts of international maritime legislation are not clearly formulated. Particularly

for ice-covered sea areas such as those in the Arctic, there is no uniform understanding of the law. It is therefore ultimately a political matter of who is able to assert their presence along the



Northern Sea Route. Russia certainly is, and ongoing legislative initiatives and statements leave no doubt that Moscow considers the Northern Sea Route to be a national passage.

The Geopolitical Dimension

Even the very first attempts by the Dutch and English to find a northern sea route to Asia in the 16th century were based on geopolitical considerations: the aim was to find an alternative to the sea routes to Asia dominated by Portugal and the Ottomans.

Russia hardly has the financial means of its own to develop Arctic infrastructure.

In the 21st century, the rise of China is increasingly opening up the potential for the Russian Federation to become a transit power between East and West. Geography puts the Russian Federation in a favorable position in the future. It can be assumed that Russia will make use of it after the end of the war against Ukraine, if not before. The straits of the Northeast Passage – the Sannikov Strait near the New Siberian Islands and the Vilkitsky Strait near the Severnaya Zemlya archipelago – are all controlled solely by Russia. In the event of a conflict, it would take little effort for the Russian Federation to close this route. This will be particularly important in the event of an intensification of Sino-American or Sino-Indian antagonism.

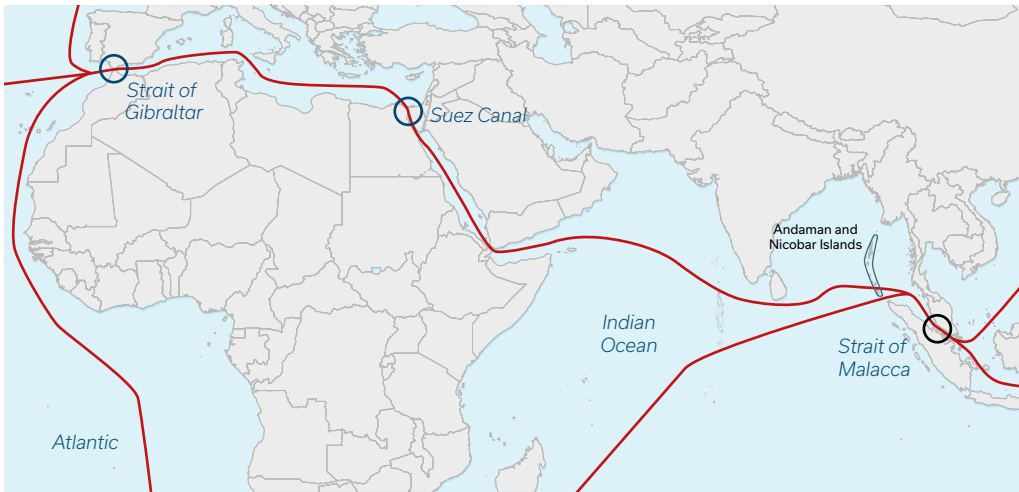
For the People's Republic of China, the Northern Sea Route offers an alternative to the traditional sea route. This is relevant in view of the Sino-Indian conflict of interests in Asia in that the Indian navy could block Chinese shipping near the Andaman Islands – which belong to India – in the event of a conflict. Something similar would apply in the event of a conflict with

An important instrument: Russia justifies its claim to the waters of the Northern Sea Route based on the fact that its infrastructure, including a large icebreaker fleet, ensures that the route is navigable in the first place.

Photo: © Denis Kozhevnikov, TASS, dpa, picture alliance.



Fig. 2: Conventional Euro-Asian Maritime Freight Routes



Source: own illustration based on shipmap.org. Map: Natural Earth ©.

the United States. This shipping route is vital to the Chinese economy, however: it is not only used to export Chinese goods but also to transport oil and gas supplies to China. From a strategic point of view, the Northeast Passage also theoretically allows the rapid transfer of warships from the Pacific to the North Atlantic and vice versa.

Russia faces a dilemma with regards to the development of Arctic infrastructure: Moscow hardly has the financial means of its own to pursue this, so recourse to foreign investors is unavoidable. Strategically, a diversification of these investors would make sense in order to prevent a single state from gaining unilateral influence in the Arctic. The West is no longer a potential investor as a result of the Russian war against Ukraine. By contrast, Beijing is quite willing to invest in the expansion of the Northern Sea Route. India is also positioning itself here: Indian companies are keen to get involved in the development of the Vankor oil and gas field.²⁵

And not only that: while Moscow's attention is currently focused on the western border, there have recently been increasing reports of China exerting its influence on the national republics and autonomous districts in the Russian Arctic. The fact that the titular nations of the Arctic

regions are Asian plays into China's hands. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, China's influence has grown in the resource-rich region of Sakha in particular – an area seven times the size of Germany.

The Military Dimension

In addition to the military challenges involved in the Russia-Ukraine war, climatic changes in the Arctic region pose an entirely new set of problems for Russia in terms of military geography. For centuries, the eternal ice of the Arctic formed an insurmountable barrier on the country's northern borders. This natural protection is gradually disappearing. From Moscow's point of view, the Arctic border regions now have to be controlled and indeed defended if the worst comes to the worst – historically speaking a completely new scenario. Operations were carried out in the Arctic by the British in the Crimean War (1853 to 1856) and by the German armed forces in the Second World War, but these were limited to a small area in the west. From Russia's perspective, the entire coastline of the Arctic will have to be kept in a defence-ready state in future if gas production facilities, ports, liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals, refineries, mines and the Northern Sea Route are not to be left without military protection.

Control over this vast expanse of land is made more difficult by its sparse population and poorly developed infrastructure.

Russia began a military restructuring process in the Arctic from the 2010s onwards. The old Soviet bases were in a desolate state. In 2014, a separate military administrative unit was created for the Arctic: the United Strategic Command “Northern Fleet”. In terms of its function and nature, it performs the tasks of a military district, also incorporating all the islands of the Arctic. This means that all naval, air and land formations from Murmansk to Anadyr are united under a single command. Its core is the Northern Fleet stationed near Murmansk, which is considered to be the most powerful and modern of the Russian fleets, equipped with submarines of the 955 Borei and 955A Borei-A classes – the very latest strategic fourth-generation nuclear submarines.

The Russian Arctic is also attracting attention as a testing ground for hypersonic weapons.

Russia introduced a new development plan for its armed forces in 2021 which provides for an accelerated expansion of military infrastructure by 2025.²⁶ In the Arctic, the old Soviet air bases Severomorsk-1, Severomorsk-3, Rogachevo, Talagi and Kipleovo (island of Novaja Zemlya, literally: “new land”) are to be modernised. There are also plans to reopen the Severomorsk-2 military air base, which was closed in 1998. In Nagurskoye (island of Zemlya Aleksandry, literally: “Alexandra Land”), the establishment of a new military base was already completed in 2020.²⁷ There are plans to expand infrastructure in the settlements of Pechenga, Sputnik, Alakurtti and Kilpyavr (locations of motorised rifle units and naval infantry units).

The Russian Arctic is also attracting attention as a testing ground for hypersonic weapons.

In 2019, Russia tested a Kinzhal missile there (literally: “dagger”, NATO name: AS-24 Killjoy), which can be equipped with a nuclear warhead, while in 2022, a new type of hypersonic missile, the Zircon (NATO name: SS-N-33), was launched from the Admiral Gorshkov frigate, part of the Northern Fleet.²⁸ A special multiple missile launcher system for Arctic units is also being planned: this is to be transported on a new autonomous all-terrain chassis, making it suitable for use in the High North.²⁹

As things currently stand, the war in Ukraine is likely to mean that Russia will set other priorities in its defence policy and will be forced to concentrate on arms production. Some of the troops stationed in the Arctic are said to have been transferred to other strategic locations or are being deployed in Ukraine.³⁰ All in all, however, Russia can be expected to continue to pursue an intensive arms build-up. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced in April 2022 that the modernisation of military infrastructure in the Arctic would continue, adding that facilities had already been erected there in 2021.³¹ Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the National Security Council, declared in December 2022 that he was seeking to promote “the production of the most powerful means of destruction, including those based on new principles”.³²

Conclusion

In the near future, the Northern Sea Route will not be able to compete with the route through the Suez Canal, although its importance as a route for transporting goods is expected to increase. Moscow would gain political leverage through its de facto control of the Northeast Passage. Any escalation of the antagonism between Beijing and Washington would have an inevitable impact on the Arctic. In this case, relations with Russia would be pivotal in terms of the extent to which China was able to project its power in the Arctic. China already has the largest navy in the world – thanks in part to Russian arms aid.

However, Russia will have to work hard to develop the infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route if it wishes to further expand this potential. Here, the Russian Federation is dependent on foreign investors. To the extent that access to Western capital continues to be restricted by sanctions, Moscow will be forced to resort to Chinese investments. Along with other developments such as increasing gas exports to China and arms cooperation, this is likely to strengthen ties with Beijing.

- translated from German -

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