



**RUSSIA'S ARCTIC:
A NECESSARY SPACE FOR DIALOGUE**

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Over the weekend of November 21st, 2015, Russia flew 141 sorties over Syria, hitting 472 targets in eight different provinces throughout the country.¹ While the deployment of the Russian Air Force over Syria has been in full effect since last September, the events of November 20th proved to be unique. Two of the TU-160 Blackjack bombers that participated in the weekend's campaign took flight not from a base in southern Russia, but rather from Olenegorsk Airbase on the Kola Peninsula of the Russian Arctic.² The two bombers traveled southwest along the coast of Norway, skirting United Kingdom airspace, turning east through the straits of Gibraltar, and achieved their goal of firing cruise missiles on Syria from the eastern Mediterranean. After their mission was complete, they flew northeast over Iran and the Caspian Sea to their home base in Engels, Saratov Oblast, in Southern Russia.³ In total, the flight lasted 16 hours, with the aircraft traveling 8,000 miles, while motivating Norway⁴ and Britain,⁵ among other nations, to scramble fighter jets in the process.

Presumably, the Russians chose such a circuitous route along the edges of Europe to demonstrate its long range bombing capabilities. In doing so, the Russian Federation also showed the rest of the world that its capabilities might rival those of the United States, proving that Russia too could attack targets all throughout the world. This use of an Arctic airbase for active bombing missions also marks a turning point in history; not even during the Cold War did the Russians demonstrate Arctic-based military capabilities with such expansive reach.⁶ While this mission did not focus on targets within the Arctic, the use of an Arctic base for active bombing missions draws attention to Russia's military buildup in the region.

Beginning in the mid 2000s, Russia has steadily strengthened its presence in the Arctic. As the recognized frontier of the Federation includes half of all the land mass within the Arctic Circle as well as approximately 4,300 miles of coastline along the Arctic Ocean, increased emphasis on security in the region is unsurprising. Through a wide range of activities, Russia has added submarines to its northern naval fleet, reopened military bases along its Finnish border, and held large, complex military exercises to demonstrate a diverse set of Arctic combat capabilities. These activities all fit into a larger plan for Russia's Arctic. In total, Russia is building ten arctic search-and-rescue stations, 16 deep water ports, 13 airfields, and ten air defense radar stations across its northern frontier.⁷ To better manage its increased Arctic military presence, Russia has also created a new strategic command that focuses solely

¹"Russian air strikes 'killed over 400 Syrian civilians.'" *Al Jazeera*. November 23, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/syria-monitoring-groups-russian-air-strikes-kill-400-civilians-151122063024984.html>

²Farmer, Ben. "Russian bombers fly around Europe to strike Syria in 8,000 mile show of strength." *The Telegraph*. November 20, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/12009123/Russian-bombers-fly-around-Europe-to-strike-Syria-in-8000-mile-show-of-strength.html>

³Nilsen, Thomas. "Strategic bombers striking targets in Syria departed from Kola." *The Barents Observer*. January 30, 2016, <http://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/2016/01/strategic-bombers-striking-targets-syria-departed-kola>

⁴Nilsen, Thomas. "Strategic bombers striking targets in Syria departed from Kola." *The Barents Observer*. January 30, 2016, <http://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/2016/01/strategic-bombers-striking-targets-syria-departed-kola>

⁵Farmer, Ben. "Russian bombers fly around Europe to strike Syria in 8,000 mile show of strength." *The Telegraph*. November 20, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/12009123/Russian-bombers-fly-around-Europe-to-strike-Syria-in-8000-mile-show-of-strength.html>

⁶Nilsen, Thomas. "Strategic bombers striking targets in Syria departed from Kola." *The Barents Observer*. January 30, 2016, <http://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/2016/01/strategic-bombers-striking-targets-syria-departed-kola>

⁷Bender, Jeremy and Mike Nudelman. "This map shows Russia's dominant militarization of the Arctic." *Business Insider*. August 7, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/chart-of-russias-militarization-of-arctic-2015-8>

on the Arctic.⁸

Reflecting on the geographic enormity of the Russian Federation, and the massive amount of its land that lies within the Arctic, one argument purports that Russia's recent actions are only aimed to strengthen a portion of its sovereign territory that previously was considered weak. This argument only holds so much water as Russia's actions have proven to be much more offensive than defensive. Take, for example, the use of its Air Force in the Barents and Baltic regions. Incidents of Russian bombers and fighters flying into, or close to, Scandinavian and Baltic sovereign airspace without proper identification has reached levels not realized since the Cold War. For instance, in 2014, Norway intercepted Russian fighter jets 74 times, a 27 percent increase compared to the previous year. Other nations including Finland, Sweden, Lithuania and Latvia have all experienced a similar increase of incursions into their sovereign airspace from Russian warplanes.⁹

What is worrying to many is that Russia's intentions in the Arctic are not well understood. While on the surface an increase in bold military displays and strong public statements suggest a confrontational future for the Arctic, Russia's ambitions are in fact more complex. Contrary to its actions outside of the Arctic, Russia has also pushed for greater diplomatic collaboration within the Arctic sphere, specifically through the channels of the intergovernmental Arctic Council. The country's explicit intent to cooperate in the high north is aided by the structure of the Arctic Council itself. When it was founded in 1996, peace and security issues were consciously left outside of its mandate. By avoiding discussion of security issues as a rule, the Arctic Council provides a high level international forum where needed dialogue between disagreeing parties, such as Russia and the United States, can occur. The importance of such a forum has grown given recent global events, which have reduced the space for constructive collaboration between the two nations. Furthermore, collaboration within the Arctic Council has resulted in important agreements on search and rescue infrastructure,¹⁰ reduction of black carbon in the Arctic,¹¹ and a moratorium on fishing in the central Arctic Ocean.¹² These agreements demonstrate that Russia is willing to talk with its Arctic partners and support programs that ensure environmental sustainability in the high north.

Russia's collaborative push through the Arctic Council seems counterintuitive, but a recent CSIS report on the Arctic, "The New Ice Curtain," explains this duality in Russian policy, asserting how the Arctic's economic importance to Russia has created an "implicit policy impulse from Moscow that attempts to limit geopolitical damage to Arctic cooperation despite its military activism."¹³ Russian diplomats have also expressed a strong desire for cooperation in the far north, praising organizations like the Arctic Council and the Barents-Euro Arctic Council for "building stability and trust through practical cooperation, indeed as models

⁸Conley, Heather A., Rohloff, Caroline. *The New Ice Curtain: Russia's Strategic Reach to the Arctic, CSIS Reports*. (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2015), pg. 9.

⁹Conley, Heather A., Rohloff, Caroline. *The New Ice Curtain: Russia's Strategic Reach to the Arctic, CSIS Reports*. (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2015), pg. 13.

¹⁰U.S. Department of State. "Secretary Clinton Signs the Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement with Other Arctic Nations." *Fact Sheet: Office of the Spokesman*, May 12, 2011. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/05/163285.htm>

¹¹Bell, Jim. "Arctic Council black carbon deal a breakthrough, U.S. lawyer says." *Nunatsiaq*. April 24, 2015, http://www.nunatsiaqonline.ca/stories/article/65674arctic_council_black_carbon_deal_a_breakthrough_u.s_lawyer_says/

¹²Rosen, Yereth. "5 nations sign declaration to protect Arctic 'donut hole' from unregulated fishing." *Arctic Newswire*. July 16, 2015, <http://www.adn.com/article/20150716/5-nations-sign-declaration-protect-arctic-donut-hole-unregulated-fishing>

¹³Conley, Heather A., Rohloff, Caroline. *The New Ice Curtain: Russia's Strategic Reach to the Arctic, CSIS Reports*. (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2015), pg. 14.

for East-West Cooperation.”¹⁴ Russia’s willingness to collaborate within the Arctic Council while simultaneously bolstering itself militarily throughout the north is the true definition of a mixed message.

It is clear that Russia’s actions in the Middle East, Ukraine, and Georgia have severely eroded its relationships with its European neighbors and the United States. Unfortunately, this has narrowed the space for cooperation between the United States and Russia. The Arctic, however, still provides the two countries with an opportunity for constructive multilateral dialogue. The importance of the two nations’ ability to collaborate in the Arctic intensifies, as similar opportunities are lost in other parts of the world. Furthermore, as difficult as it may seem, the US needs to see Russia as a partner, rather than a competitor, within the region. Events in Ukraine pushed the US and its European allies to sanction Russia and suspend Russian Arctic military cooperation, cooling relationships throughout the world where they were once strong. For example, Norway, an American ally and NATO member, had up until that point worked together with Russia to secure the Barents region through joint naval exercises and intelligence sharing. After the events in Ukraine, however, all such military cooperation between the two countries was ended. While Russian relations have suffered throughout the world due to its actions in Ukraine, Arctic leaders in the US continue to stress the need for partnership with Russia in the Arctic.

Clearly, Russia is making bold moves to better support both its civilian infrastructure and military power in the Arctic. This, along with its unlawful invasion of Ukraine, has forced the world to distrust Russia’s ambitions and condemn its actions. Unfortunately, however, the United States cannot afford to let Russia’s actions outside of the Arctic dissuade it from cooperating with Russia in the north. As the space for constructive dialogue with Russia continues to diminish, it becomes more important that the US actively use the Arctic and the Arctic Council as spaces for cooperation and collaboration with the Arctic superpower.

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Andrew Yerkes is a second year Masters in Arts of Law and Diplomacy student at the Fletcher School, focusing on development economics and international negotiation and conflict resolution. He attended the University of Minnesota Twin-Cities (2009) with a double degree in both the Spanish language and anthropology. For his junior year, Andrew completed a full-year study program at the Danish Institute for Study Abroad, (DIS) in Copenhagen, Denmark. While at Minnesota, Andrew also completed two archaeological field schools, at the Center for American Archeology and at the Maya Research Program. From 2008 to 2012 Andrew worked as a field/laboratory technician at Great Lakes Archaeological research Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 2012 Andrew joined Peace Corps Indonesia as a TEFL volunteer, teaching English at a remote public high school in East Java for more than two years. While living in Indonesia, Andrew lead a variety of secondary projects, including an intercultural radio program and extracurricular English learning groups.

¹⁴Oldberg, Ingmar. 2011. “Soft security in the Arctic: The Role of Russia in the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Arctic Council.” *Swedish Institute of International Affairs, No. 4*. Available at: <http://www.ui.se/upl/files/52240.pdf>