

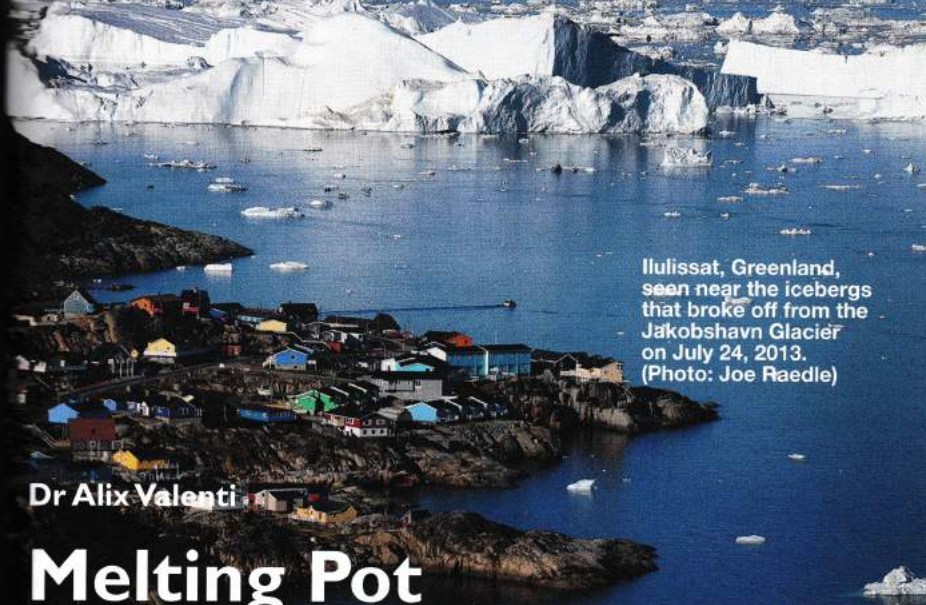
sea ice extent is decreasing, passages and lanes open-up, the days are longer and the operating environment seems manageable, but also during the winter season.”

Thus the stakes in the region are increasing for the five countries bordering the Arctic ocean - Canada, Denmark (through Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Norway, Russia and the US. Geopolitically, beyond the 200 nautical miles exclusive economic zone (EEZ) normally afforded by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), all five nations also have a right to claim mineral resources in the seabed outside of that zone if they can prove the geological shelf extends far out to sea. Thus far, in addition to Russia, which presented a first claim to the UN on the Lomonosov ridge in 2001 and a revised one in 2016, Denmark has also submitted a claim in 2014 and Canada presented a partial one in 2013, which it is supposed to renew this year. While it is highly likely that some of these claims may overlap (Denmark and Canada for instance both assert ownership of Hans Island) expert opinions differ as to whether this could actually lead to conflict.

This renewed interest in Arctic seabed ownership derives from the opening up of new economic opportunities with the melting of sea ice. The shortening of the ice season is resulting in increased possibilities for maritime trade through the Northwest passage, which links the Atlantic ocean to the Pacific ocean through Canadian islets, and the Northeast passage (also known as Northern Sea Route - NSR), which runs along the coast of the Eurasian landmass, primarily off the coast of northern Siberia. Both passages have the potential to significantly reduce shipping times between different regions and are subject to competing claims (the former between the US and Canada, the latter between Russia and the US/the European Union); experts, however, deem the situation unlikely to escalate any time soon due to the difficulties the region continues to present. The passages are still close a few months out of the year and in some place transit is possible only if aided by an icebreaker; moreover, the weather forecast remains unpredictable, adding too high a cost for any business seeking passage at the moment. Similarly, while the seabed is rich in minerals, oil and gas, Olesen notes: “The low price of natural resources on international markets currently discourages a number of extraction projects, and most industries are waiting for an increase in raw material prices before showing a real interest in the region.”

Arctic Exceptionalism

It would thus appear that so far relations in the Arctic have consistently succeeded in remaining peaceful, every potential contentious issue dealt with through the appropriate channels, be it the UN or the Arctic Council, leading experts to talk about a ‘period of ex-



Ilulissat, Greenland, seen near the icebergs that broke off from the Jakobshavn Glacier on July 24, 2013. (Photo: Joe Raedle)

Dr Alix Valenti

Melting Pot

Russian Arctic Policies and Naval Build-Up

This is the first of a two-parts article discussing the resurging importance of the Arctic as a consequence of melting sea ice. This first instalment focuses on changing dynamics in the region and Russian Arctic policies and naval build-up.

On 2 August 2007, Russia sent two submersible vessels two miles under the ice cap to plant a Russian flag on the seabed of the North Pole. The dive, impressive in its technical feat that included collection of water and sediments, was considered by Russia a key move to substantiate its claim that the seabed under the Pole, called the Lomonosov Ridge, is an extension of Russia’s continental shelf. At international level, however, it was widely dismissed, as indicated by the remark of Peter MacKay, then Canadian Foreign Minister, to CTV television: “This isn’t the 15th century. You can’t go around the world and just plant flags and say ‘We’re claiming this territory.’”

Russia may have been the only country in the region to be so bold as to plant a flag on the seabed, but other countries have also come forward in the last decades to claim their share of the Arctic. Untapped oil and gas resources as well as opening trade routes, which are slowly becoming available as a result of melting ice, have sparked a race to territorial claims through UN appeals and report submissions to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf UN Subcommittee. This, in turn, has sparked heated debates on whether it is likely to destabilise the Arctic region, which has otherwise succeeded in remaining peaceful through the development of diplomatic ties and fora such as the Arctic Council. The fact that in the past decade we have been seeing an increasing naval build-up in the region, including Russia’s re-opening of some its bases, is doing nothing to quell such concerns.

Melting Pot

In a paper published by the French Institute of International Relations (Institute Français des Relations Internationales - IFRI), ‘Understanding Arctic Rivalries’, Mikkel Runge Olesen writes: “After being at the margin of world politics for centuries, [the Arctic] was briefly thrown onto the front-stage during World War II then during the Cold War - primarily because nuclear-armed ships patrolled the area.” With the end of the Cold War, as the international political community turned its attention to other matters, the scientific community was instead beginning to focus increasingly on the changes in weather patterns and melting sea ice in the Arctic.

In his book *Brave New Arctic - The Untold Story of the Melting North*, Mark C. Serreze, Director of the National Snow and Ice Data Centre, details the research gathered since the mid 20th century on receding ice caps as the region is affected by recurring heat-waves that slow winter-time growth of sea ice and, consequently, shorten the ice season. In December 2015, for instance, during a brief period the surface air temperature at the North Pole appeared to have risen above freezing. “The heat wave persisted,” Serreze indicates, “and on March 24, 2016, when Arctic sea ice reached its seasonal maximum extent, it was the lowest maximum ever recorded.”

As such extreme events slowly (and unfortunately) become a pattern, the Arctic becomes a busier place, “with less sea ice opening up shipping routes and making rich stores of oil and natural gas under the Arctic seafloor more accessible,” Serreze continues. Indeed, the ‘Arctic Search and Rescue Capabilities Survey’ published by the Finnish Border Guards for the Arctic Maritime Safety Cooperation (SARC) project, states: “Maritime areas in the Arctic region are experiencing an increased amount of maritime and aeronautical traffic, not only during the summer season when the



A conceptual rendering of Project 23550 'Ivan Papanin' class multipurpose patrol ships. (Photo: Russian Ministry of Defence)

ceptionalism', as Robert Huebert, Associate Professor at the University of Calgary, told Naval Forces.

To some, this can be attributed to the Arctic Council, the leading intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among Arctic States, Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues. Indeed, the Ottawa Declaration, which established the Arctic Council and was signed in 1996 by the eight founding members (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the US), explicitly states that "The Arctic Council should not deal with matters related to military security." This appears to have prevented a number of security issues from spilling over into regional political discussions, channelling instead Arctic Council members' attention on cooperation for search and rescue (SAR) as well as environmental protection activities, to name but a few.

However recent events in the region are raising concerns that Arctic exceptionalism may soon be drawing to an end.

Tensions between Russia and NATO concerning other regions in the world have affected relations in the Arctic Council on several occasions. Some media reports have been showing Russian forces training around Russian Arctic bases and have disclosed details of a new counter-terrorism centre opening in Murmansk; given that terrorism in the Arctic is, much like further development of trade routes and resource extraction, a tangible yet distant possibility, these images have raised serious questions as to Russia's real intentions. Other news reporting on the rising tensions between Norway and Russia on the archipelago of Svalbard, which incidentally is just in front of Murmansk, have done little to quell such concerns. In September 2017, during its annual military exercise ZAPAD 2017 in the High North, Norwegian news site Aldrimer revealed that, amongst other drills, Russia had been exercising how to invade Svalbard. As if on cue, in October 2017, *The Barents Observer* noted that *Kommersant*, a Russian newspaper, had published an article highlighting some of the key points from Russia's 2016 national

security assessment in the field of maritime activities, which singles out a threat from Norway: "Listing reasons for potential military conflict with NATO, the report singles out a separate threat from Norway because of the country's plans for unilateral revision of international agreements."

Nevertheless, while there is no doubt that Russia is giving significant importance to the Arctic within its military strategy and naval modernisation, expert opinions differ as to the reasons driving such changes.

Russian Policies

The importance of the Arctic in Russian politics is set out in two key documents: 'The Foundations of the Russian Federation's State Policy in the Arctic until 2020 and Beyond', adopted in September 2008; and, 'The Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and National Security Effort for the Period up to 2020', adopted in 2013. In these documents, Russia highlights the importance of the Arctic both in terms of the security issues resulting from increased accessibility of the region and in relation to the economic potential of the extraction of natural resources in the Arctic seabed. In neither of these documents, however, does Russia refer to military challenges; rather, it advocates for continued cooperation among all Arctic states.

Russian military ambitions in the region are, instead, outlined in the December 2014 'Russian Military Doctrine' as well as the July 2015 'Maritime Doctrine'. Both documents highlight the importance of protecting Russia's interests in the Arctic, and the 'Maritime Doctrine' stresses the necessity of securing the bases and units of the Northern Fleet in the Arctic, a key objective further emphasised by the development, in December 2014, of the new Joint Strategic Command North, "which goal is to strengthen efficient use of resources, rapid reaction and ability to plan and conduct operations both within and outside of the new Arctic Command's area of responsibility," Katarzyna Zysk, Professor at the Norwegian Defence University College/Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies in Oslo, tells Naval Forces.

However, as noted in her article published in 2017 by IFRI, 'Russia's Strategic Objectives in the Arctic', Ms Zysk believes that while these policy developments ultimately seek to "maintain Russia's position as a leading Arctic power," they should be understood within Russia's broader defence policy and military strategy rather than be seen as a provocation. "The role of the Arctic region for Russia can be understood at two levels", Ms Zysk told Naval Forces. The first level is related to the opening-up of the region as a result of melting sea ice, which is expected to bring increased human presence, both military and civil, and will therefore require a number of actions related both to safety of navigation, surveillance

and control, and to increased foreign military presence in the future. "In this context, Russia is preparing for current and future developments," continued Ms Zysk. The second level, equally important, is that as a result of the importance of the Northern Fleet based in the Arctic, the region continues to play a key role in Russia's broader defence, deterrence and military strategy. This relates, among other aspects to the concept of Bastion defence.

Bastion defence, developed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, remains in place, though in a modified form, and aims to ensure freedom of action of Russia's strategic submarines, deployed with the Northern Fleet, through several layers of defences. "If Russia were to be involved in a major conflict somewhere, it is likely it would seek to close the area in immediate proximity to Russian military bases to penetration from enemy forces while it would seek to deny control for potential enemies in the areas further South" Ms Zysk explains.

There are two potential sources of inter-state conflict that could lead to such strategy, Ms Zysk concluded: "Over the past ten years, Russia has repeatedly demonstrated in its large-scale military exercises that it views various security regions in connection. For instance, when simulating regional conflict scenarios involving a major power in the Black Sea or the Baltic Sea, Russia deployed the bastion defence at some point in the conflict in support of escalation control."

Russia's Arctic Naval Build-Up

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russian military spending has been steadily increasing in real terms since 2002, reaching RUB4.6 billion (approximately \$75.3 billion) in 2016. While this trend was broken in 2017, with a decrease in spending down to approximately \$66.3 billion due to Western economic sanctions over Russia's Ukraine crisis and falling oil prices, this has resulted in substantial initial investments to modernise the Northern Fleet, "the largest of five Russian fleets, stationed at several large naval and air bases on the Kola Peninsula and along the coasts of the Barents and White seas," according to SIPRI's background paper 'Military Capabilities in the Arctic: A New Cold War in the High North' published in October 2016.

Priority has been given to the construction of fourth generation nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), the 'Borei' class (Project 955), which is due to replace Delta III/IV SSBNs. Russia plans to build a total of eight 'Borei' class submarines, evenly divided between the Northern and the Pacific fleets. According to local media, the first four 'Borei' class built by Sevmash, the fourth of which is scheduled for commissioning in 2018, will be assigned to the Pacific fleet replacing the 'Delta III' submarines; the Northern fleet, on

the other hand, is expected to continue to operate 'Delta IV' class submarines for another five to ten years while it was for the upgraded SSBNs, 'Borei-A' class, to be built. Indeed, Tom Waldwyn, Research Analyst for Defence and Military Analysis at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, told Naval Forces: "Most of the six 'Delta IV' currently operational will likely continue in service until at least 2025. However I expect the two older boats to leave service before 2020. If Sevماش Shipyard can achieve a seven year build time for the five new 'Borey-A' class currently in build then at least one will be in service by 2020 and all five by 2025. This would mean an all 'Borey'/'Borey-A' fleet by 2025 providing the already delayed 'Borey-A' construction is not pushed back any further."

In October 2005, the Russian Ministry of Defence (DoD) contracted Severnaya Verf for the construction of the lead 'Admiral Gorshkov' class frigate. These ships, designed to operate in multi-threat environments, are armed with eight SS-NX-26 Yakhont anti-ship cruise missiles, a Medvedka-2 ASW system and a Hurricane medium-range surface-to-air defence missile system. Just as importantly, the 'Admiral Gorshkov' class frigates are the only Russian ship to be equipped with BrahMos missiles. The DoD had originally planned to build 20 such ships, however, while the first one should be commissioned soon in the Russian Navy and the second one will begin sea trials this year, the rest of the programme has been delayed due to Western sanctions on Russia.

The Russian navy is also increasing its capabilities for operations in thin ice with the construction of four Project 21180 multi-purpose vessels to replace auxiliary ships. The contract was awarded to build JSC Admiralty Shipyards in 2014 and the first ship, *Ilya Muromets*, was commissioned on 30 November 2017. The diesel-electric icebreaker has a range of 12,000 nautical miles (nm) 22,224km, an endurance of approximately two months, and is capable of operating in 1m-thick ice. Media reports, however, note that it remains uncertain whether the other three icebreakers will be built, due to their high costs and as a result of the decrease in defence spending.

In 2015, the Russian Navy also ordered four Project 03182 Small Arctic Sea Tankers, designed by JSC Zelenodolsk Design Bureau. The first two Tankers, built by JSC Eastern Shipyard, started in 2015 and the ships are scheduled for delivery in November 2019. Construction of the other two, built by JSC "Zelenodolsk plant named after AM Gorky", as it is referred to across the media, began in 2016 and they are scheduled for delivery in 2019 and 2020. These ships, designed for the transportation of liquid and dry cargo, people and helicopters as well as to carry out SAR missions, are capable of operating in 1.5m-thick ice and have a range of 1,500nm/2,778km.

Finally, in 2016 the Russian Navy awarded a contract to JSC Admiralty Shipyards for the construction of two Project 23550 'Ivan Papanin' class Arctic Patrol Vessels. The keel for the first ship was laid in April 2017 and it is scheduled for delivery to the Navy by 2021. According to open sources, the keel for the second ship is scheduled to be laid down later this year; considering that build-time for the first ship, delivery of the second ship should be scheduled for 2022. With a displacement of 8,500t, the capacity to operate in 1.5m-thick ice and a range of up to 6,000nm/11,112km, these ships have been designed for guarding and monitoring Russia's EEZ. To this end, they are far more armed than the other ships the Russian Navy has procured, including: one AK-176MA automatic naval gun system developed by JSC CRI Burevestnik; an artillery gun for defence against sea, air and shore-based targets at a distance of up to 15.7km; and, four Kalibr-NK anti-ship/anti-submarine/land-attack subsonic cruise missiles that will be launched from two quadruple canister missile launch systems at the stern of the ship. Finally, the vessels will also house two high-speed patrol boats of the 'Raptor' class type.

uments for the region. While the two 'Ivan Papanin' class Arctic Patrol Vessels and the four 'Borei-A' class SSBNs and 'Admiral Gorshkov' classdo bode well for a strong Northern Fleet, thus far it would appear that the Russian Navy is mostly focusing on the modernisation seen in other important fleets around the world. Financial constraints and Western sanctions have also been impacting negatively these ambitions, with a number of projects delayed, some until further notice.

Nevertheless, the other four Arctic nations are looking upon these developments with concerns, especially Norway, as a result of its proximity and the tensions vis-à-vis Svalbard, and Canada, which is realising that it might not be able to rely on its North American neighbour as much as initially anticipated. The Arctic naval build-up this is triggering in those nations is the subject of the second part of this article to be published in Naval Forces IV/2018. At this stage, two important points raised by Ms Zysk and Mr Huebert should be considered when looking at Russia's behaviour in the High North.

Regarding the Kalibr missile, Ms Zysk noted: "Since Russia is struggling to renewits larger Blue water fleet, it has chosen the pragmatic solution to focus on smaller platformssuch as frigates and corvettes that are easier and cheaper to build and arm them with long-range Kalibr missiles." Mr Huebert, when discussing whether Russia could refrain from escalating conflict in the Arctic due to the economic interests it has in the region, pointed out that: "When Russia makes the strategic decision that it needs to make a military move, it will sacrifice economic interest. We know from history that politics trumps economics." Seeing as in 2009 Russian Navy SSBNs restarted patrolling near or under the Arctic ice, including launching ballistic missiles after breaking through the ice since September 2006, it might indeed be cautious for other Arctic nations to also re-focus some of their military investments in the region.

NAFO

Watch This Space

As noted by Ms Zysk, Russia's naval build-up in the Arctic is in line with the renewed interest is has been displaying in its recent policy doc-