

## Russia's Arctic strategy – challenge to Western energy security

By Marcel de Haas

On 27 March 2009 the Security Council of the Russian Federation (SCRF) announced in a press-release the 'Foundations of the Russian Federation national policy in the Arctic until 2020 and beyond' (further: 'Arctic Strategy').<sup>1</sup> On 18 September 2008 the Arctic Strategy had already been approved by President Medvedev, but for unclear reasons publication was postponed until March 2009. The Arctic Strategy comprises the main goals, basic objectives, strategic priorities and mechanisms for implementing Russian policy in the Arctic region.<sup>2</sup>

### Contents

The Arctic Strategy contains the following main viewpoints. The document asserts that the Russian Federation (RF) Arctic Zone is a strategic resource base for resolving Russia's social-economic development problems. The Arctic region with its hydrocarbon resources and other types of strategic raw materials widens Russia's energy reserves and thus these deposits must be explored. Furthermore, the Northern Sea Route, as the exclusive RF transport route in the Arctic, also supports Russia's economic development. To achieve this, this resource base has to be protected, by securing RF national borders through the Arctic Zone. This will be accomplished by sustaining an adequate military potential of Defence Forces as well as of other troops of the power ministries (e.g. federal security service FSB Troops, Border Troops, Internal Troops), of which a dedicated (Arctic) group of forces and troops will be formed. Also a system of coastal protection by the FSB will be established. Moreover, RF interests will be legally secured by delineating maritime space and the use of Arctic sea-routes for international maritime traffic. This will be done by preparing a regulatory act to specify the geographical boundaries of the RF Arctic Zone. By 2020 the RF Arctic Zone should be a main strategic resource base for Russia, which will allow Russia to preserve its role as the leading Arctic power.

### Background

Estimates are that the Arctic region may contain up to 30 percent of the world's gas reserves and 13 percent of the oil reserves, which explains that Medvedev's Arctic Strategy did not come fully unexpected. The interest of Moscow in the Arctic as the new strategic base of energy resources was previously made clear under Putin. Already in 2001 Russia forwarded its territorial claims for the Arctic to the UN. Next, SCRF Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, at the time Director of the FSB, created in 2004 a special Arctic Directorate at the FSB. Furthermore, in 2005 and 2007 Moscow sent expeditions to the Arctic. The expedition of August 2007 planted a Russian flag on the seabed of the North Pole.<sup>3</sup> At a SCRF meeting of September 2008 Medvedev mentioned that some 20 percent of Russia's GDP and 22 percent of its export were produced in the

Arctic.<sup>4</sup> The other Arctic littoral states – the USA, Canada, Denmark and Norway – challenge Russia's claims of sovereignty over parts of the region. Disagreements between Russia and the West have already occurred. For example in March 2009, when Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov complained about Norwegian military exercises as aimed for getting access to resources. And the RF ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, in reply to NATO's desire of an increased role in the Arctic, replied that NATO had nothing to do with or in the Arctic. Conversely, Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs noticed in the Arctic an expansion of RF military operations, involving warships, aircraft and submarines. Likewise, Canada's Premier warned that Russia could act outside international law to secure its claims in the Arctic. In June 2009 Russia further emphasized the military aspects of the Arctic region, when the RF General Staff demanded that a restructured European security architecture should include the Arctic region.<sup>5</sup>

### Assessment

Taking into account that the climate change opens up the accessibility of oil and gas in the Arctic region, the Arctic Strategy expresses that the Kremlin is well aware of the value of this area. In their view the Arctic is a new ground of energy resources which can promote economic but also political leverage of Russia, which will reinforce Moscow's position in the international arena. Russia takes a proactive stance to be ahead of any Western initiatives, by determining the boundaries of its aspired area, by claiming the Northern Sea route under its national control – possibly denying access to others – and by forming a military force in the Arctic region which can enforce Russia's objectives.

The current Russian leadership is likely to stay in power in the years ahead; therefore an assertive security policy will be continued. The West is confronted with a resurgent Russia, in which 'Georgia 2008' type of Russian military action could be repeated. Considering that energy is a primary instrument of Russia's power, clashes are most likely to occur in regions where energy is to be won or lost. The Arctic is such a region. Grounds for a confrontation are the launching of a dedicated RF Arctic strategy, that Russia is already conducting a military build-up in this area, the unsolved territorial disputes with Western stakeholders, as well as frequent statements by Moscow that NATO / the West should keep out of this region. However, the most essential factors are the enormous amount of oil and gas in the Arctic, and, simultaneously, further growth of global scarcity of energy.

Political and economic cooperation between the West and Russia is inevitable and often mutual beneficial and should therefore be continued and intensified, in spite of Moscow's assertive stance. However, this does not mean that the West should except infringes of its legitimate interests, such as in the Arctic region. In this and other cases the West should demonstrate a policy of a tough stance. By pointing out to Russia what is acceptable, and by taking the initiative in stead of reacting to Moscow's

<sup>1</sup> 'Press-reliz no Osnovam gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2020 i dal'neyshuyu perspektivu', 27 March 2009, <<http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/421.html>> (accessed 4 June 2009).

<sup>2</sup> *Osnovy gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Arktike na period do 2020 i dal'neyshuyu perspektivu*, 18 September 2008, <<http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/98.html>> (accessed 4 June 2009).

<sup>3</sup> T. Halpin, 'Russia warns of war within decade over hunt for oil and gas', *The Times*, 14 May 2009.

<sup>4</sup> M. Sieff, 'Russia's growing Arctic power play', 6 April 2009, <[www.spacewar.com/reports/Russias\\_Growing\\_Arctic\\_Power\\_Pla\\_y\\_999.html](http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Russias_Growing_Arctic_Power_Pla_y_999.html)> (accessed 4 June 2009).

<sup>5</sup> T. Halpin, 'Russia sends army to frozen north in bid to claim Arctic's wealth of resources', *The Times*, 28 March 2009; 'Arktiku podvedut pod dogovor', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, 19 June 2009.

endeavours. This will demand first of all a united Western stance towards Russia. Considering that a number of EU member states are currently involved in constructing new Russian pipeline networks, there is still a lot of work to be done to reach a united EU stance on energy policy. The West should also prepare its expeditionary military capabilities for a show-of-force towards Moscow if Western interests are threatened by assertive Russian actions. In stead of being taken by (a Russian) surprise, the West should already assess what its interests are in the Arctic and how to respond to Moscow's contrary actions, by political and military means.

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