Articulating Smart Power

The Strategic Information Environment of the Northern Sea Route

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Abstract

This article analyzes Russia's evolving strategy to assert control over the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and consolidate its geopolitical, economic, and military dominance in the Arctic. Following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine and subsequent global isolation, Moscow intensified its Arctic ambitions, framing the NSR as both a sovereign transportation artery and an economic lifeline to "friendly" nations. Russia's smart-power strategy blends hard-power posturing, including remilitarization and surveillance expansion, with economic development and legal narratives aimed at legitimizing its claims. Simultaneously, Russian experts portray the United States and its allies as driving Arctic militarization, using this narrative to justify Moscow's actions. The article proposes a smart-power response for the United States and its allies, emphasizing enhanced maritime domain awareness, legal countermeasures, and infrastructure diversification to undercut Russian leverage. By adopting a layered strategy, Arctic allies can shape a more stable, rules-based order before Moscow achieves de facto control of the NSR.

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The Northern Sea Route (NSR) stands as a central pillar of Russian national strategy, serving as the Kremlin's Arctic *center of gravity*—"the source of power that creates a force or a critical capability that allows an entity to act or accomplish a task or purpose." Moscow anchors its broader northern ambitions on the NSR, fusing military, economic, and political objectives into a coherent whole.[1]

Russian military, civil defense, and security institutions place the highest operational priority on the 24,000-kilometer Arctic coastline—the northern bastion of Russia's layered defense architecture and a vital artery for economic survival. The Kremlin's Arctic blueprint extends beyond territorial defense to encompass a sweeping array of state interests: regulating and promoting the NSR as a major maritime artery; supporting resource extraction; overseeing environmental stewardship; enforcing civil security; and supervising scientific research and public administration. Moscow also frames its Arctic policy around emerging issues such

[1] Dale C. Eikmeier, "Center of Gravity Analysis," *Military Review* 84, no. 4 (July–August 2004): 2–5.

as indigenous rights, technological innovation in navigation and infrastructure, international cooperation in regional governance, climate adaptation, Arctic tourism development, and the expansion of search and rescue capabilities. The NSR, by design, has become both the physical embodiment and the ideological symbol of Russia's Arctic identity.

The Kremlin's ambitions for the NSR extend into the realm of international legal contestation, where Moscow seeks to reshape the rules of the game. Russia aims to secure de facto customary law status over the surface waters of the NSR, pushing jurisdictional control out to the 200-nautical-mile boundary of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).[2] The Kremlin justifies this expansive claim through a broad interpretation of Article 234 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which addresses "ice-covered areas," and by anchoring its position in domestic legislation—notably Federal Law 132-FZ (2012) and its 2022 amendments, which impose pilotage, notification, and fee requirements on foreign vessels transiting the route.[3] This legal gambit exceeds established international norms and, if left uncontested, would grant Moscow not only an unprecedented maritime defensive buffer but also a potent lever for controlling commercial access to Arctic waters.

To secure these objectives, the Russian state orchestrates a calculated blend of hard and soft power—a textbook application of *smart power* in service of national strategy.[4] Central to this effort is a coordinated, relentless information campaign designed to shape perceptions of the NSR, both at home and abroad. This article offers a comprehensive survey of the Kremlin's information strategy as a critical enabler in advancing one of Russia's highest national security priorities: the consolidation of control over the NSR.

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[2] Troy Bouffard, "National Security Interests of Russia's Northern Sea Route: Additional Elements of Domestic and International Importance," in *Defending NATO's Northern Flank: Power Projection and Military Operations*, ed. Lon Strauss and Njord Wegge (London: Routledge, 2024).

[3] Janis Kluge and Michael Paul, *Russia's Arctic Strategy through 2035*, SWP Comment 2020/C 57 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, November 2020); and Jan Jakub Solski, "The 'Due Regard' of Article 234 of UNCLOS: Lessons from Regulating Innocent Passage in the Territorial Sea," *Ocean Development & International Law* 52, no. 4 (2021): 314–34.

[4] Giulio M. Gallarotti, "Smart Power: Definitions, Importance, and Effectiveness," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 3 (April 2015): 244–84; Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 4 (July/August 2009): 160–63; Olga F. Rusakova, "«Умная сила»: Как государственная стратегия" ["Smart Power" as a State Strategy], *Политический вектор-PRO. Комплексные проблемы современной политики* [Political Vector-PRO. Complex Problems of Modern Politics], no. 1 (2013); and Ernest J. Wilson III, "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (March 2008): 110–24.

Background

Strategic communication, especially when tied to vital national interests, operates through a deliberate cycle: policy makers anchor messages in formal strategies, weave them into compelling narratives, and amplify them across media ecosystems. This process aligns neatly with the doctrinal framework of operational art—specifically the interplay of ends, ways, and means.[5]

Applied to Russia's Arctic ambitions, the equation is straightforward. The Kremlin's strategic communications endstate centers on securing Western acquiescence to Russian dominion over the surface waters of the NSR out to the boundaries of its EEZ. The ways consist of framing Russia's Arctic posture through the language of international law, environmental stewardship, maritime safety, and commercial pragmatism—a diplomatic balancing act between hard and soft power. The means span an array of delivery platforms: domestic and international media, curated narratives within Arctic forums, calculated engagement with multilateral bodies such as the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), and military demonstrations ranging from force projection and Northern Fleet maneuvers to air defense identification zone (ADIZ) incursions and calibrated confrontations with NATO. Together, these elements form the architecture of Moscow's information influence strategy.

Understanding this strategy demands a clear distinction between narratives and information influence—both mechanisms designed to shape perceptions, though each serving a distinct function in the Kremlin's toolkit.

The academic literature on smart power—the fusion of coercive and persuasive instruments—offers a robust analytical foundation.[6] Smart power, as originally

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[5] Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine Note 2-19: Strategy* (Washington: Joint Staff, 19 December 2019), https://www.jcs.mil/.

[6] Gallarotti, "Smart Power"; Virginie Grzelczyk, "Hard, Soft, Smart? North Korea and Power: It's All Relative," *Asian International Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (December 2017): 51–70; Igor A. Istomin, "Механизм научно-аналитического обеспечения внешнеполитического процесса в США" [Mechanism for Scientific and Analytical Support of the Foreign Policy Process in the United States], Вестник МГИМО Университета [Bulletin of MGIMO University] 6, no. 9 (2009): 90–96; Per Jansson, "Smartness as Prudence: Smart Power and Classical Realism," *Journal of Political Power* 11, no. 3 (September 2018): 441–57; Kornei V. Kozlov, "Подход «умной силы» во внешней политике США и её трансформация в XXI веке" [The Smart Power Approach in U.S. Foreign Policy and Its Transformation in the 21st Century.] Политика *и* общество [Politics and Society] no. 6 (2017): 40–49; Sophie Lecoutre, *U.S. Shift Towards "Smart Power" and Its Impact on the Transatlantic Security Partnership*, College of Europe EU Diplomacy Paper 2/2010 (Pittsburgh, PA: Archive of European Integration, University of Pittsburgh, January 2010), http://aei.pitt.edu/; Lasha Markozashvili and Tinatini Dvalishvili, "Russian Smart Power in Georgia," *Przegląd Politologiczny* [Political Science Review], no. 4 (2017): 105–17, https://www.ceeol.com/; and Sergey A. Podyapolskiy, "'Soft Power' and 'Smart Power' of Modern China," *Journal of Siberian Federal University: Humanities & Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2014): 200–05.

conceived, refers not to a novel category of power but to the disciplined orchestration of existing tools. Hard power, with its blunt instruments of military might and economic sanctions, compels compliance. Soft power, by contrast, seeks to attract and persuade through cultural appeal, ideological alignment, and policy credibility. When wielded in concert, these forces enable states to amplify their strategic reach.[7]

Hybrid warfare, while often conflated with smart power, operates as a separate construct. Rather than blending attraction and coercion, hybrid warfare knits together conventional, irregular, cyber, and informational capabilities to exploit strategic ambiguity below the threshold of open conflict.[8]

Francisco Wong-Diaz underscores the essence of smart power as a matter of statecraft rather than capability: "the smart use of power is neither a new type of power nor a power attribute, but rather a better way of using power capabilities—both military and nonmilitary. It is the exercise of good statecraft, which seeks the optimal use of power in the most effective way to carry out strategic plans to achieve strategic goals."[9] This principle dovetails with the DIME model—diplomatic, information, military, economic—which remains the intellectual backbone for understanding the sources of national power.

Although scholars continue to debate soft power's elasticity and application, few dispute its symbiotic relationship with hard power. The two are "mutually enabling." As one school of thought holds, "soft power flows to the owner of hard power."[10] Moreover, soft, hard, and smart power form the connective tissue between ends and means, determining the character and scale of state behavior—whether coercive or persuasive—because each complements the other.[11]

Joseph Nye, who first coined the term, often described soft power's origins as "soft co-optive power"—a label that continues to capture its core function.[12] At its heart, soft power still revolves around *attraction* and *persuasion*, whether through cultural resonance, policy credibility, or ideological appeal.

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[7] Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 4 (July/August 2009): 160–63, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/.

[8] Andrew Mumford and Pascal Carlucci, "Hybrid Warfare: The Continuation of Ambiguity by Other Means," *European Journal of International Security* 8, no. 1 (February 2023): 103–21, published online 17 June 2022, https://doi.org/.

[9] Francisco Wong-Diaz, *Smart Power and U.S. National Strategy*, JSOU Report 13-5 (MacDill AFB, FL: JSOU Press, 2013), 25.

[10] Angelo M. Codevilla, "Tools of Statecraft: Diplomacy and War," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 15 January 2008, https://www.fpri.org/.

[11] Codevilla, "Tools of Statecraft," 61. Eikmeier provides a useful military analytical process connecting 'ends, ways, and means' with center of gravity (COG) analysis; see Dale C. Eikmeier, "A Logical Method for Center-of-Gravity Analysis," *Military Review* 87, no. 5 (September–October 2007): 62–71.

[12] Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (Autumn 1990): 153–71.

Yet the modern information contest does not stop at attraction alone. To counter soft power's influence, Alexey Fenenko advanced the concept of *anti-soft power*. He defined it as the state's ability to render an adversary "unattractive," "disliked," or even "unacceptable" in the eyes of its intended audience. [13] Where soft power seeks to draw others in, anti-soft power aims to repel—transforming perception into a weapon.

Vladimir Goliney offers a sharper refinement, framing this approach as *soft counter-power*. Unlike anti-soft power, which targets the reputation of a rival, soft counter-power focuses on recapturing the same audience through a competing message of attraction and persuasion. The distinction is subtle but strategic: anti-soft power attacks the opponent's image, while soft counter-power competes for the audience's allegiance.[14]

Russia has crafted and deployed its strategic communications campaign around the NSR as a textbook exercise in soft counter-power. One of the Kremlin's most conspicuous narratives frames the NSR as a superior alternative to the increasingly volatile Suez Canal. This approach not only markets the Arctic passage's advantages but also exploits the perceived liabilities of its competitors.

Russian officials and state-aligned media have hammered home the NSR's core selling points: shorter transit times, lower fuel consumption, and reduced shipping costs compared to the Suez Canal. Moscow amplified this narrative in the wake of high-profile disruptions, most notably the *Ever Given* incident in March 2021, when the massive container ship ran aground and paralyzed global trade through the Suez for nearly a week. The Kremlin seized the moment to cast the NSR as the reliable and strategically prudent alternative.

Russia has also sharpened its appeal by positioning the NSR as the environmentally responsible choice. Officials point to the route's shorter distances and corresponding reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, framing the corridor as both economically and ecologically sound. Alongside this narrative, Moscow highlights its own commitment to Arctic environmental stewardship—a calculated effort to burnish its image as a responsible maritime power.

By pitting the NSR against the Suez Canal, Russia aims to entice international shipping firms and persuade global stakeholders of the Arctic route's viability. Beneath the marketing gloss lies a deeper strategic ambition: to cement Russia's

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[13] Alexey V. Fenenko, "Anti-Soft Power in Political Theory and Practice," *Russian Journal of World Politics and Law of Nations* 1, no. 3 (2023): 16–29.

[14] Vladimir A. Goliney, ""Концептуальное пересмысление «мягкой силы»: отечественный и латиноамериканской взгляд" [Conceptual Rethinking of "Soft Power": Domestic and Latin American Perspectives], *Век глобализации* [Age of Globalization] 2, no. 46 (February 2023): 95–103, https://doi.org/.

image as the indispensable gatekeeper of a critical maritime artery, thereby enhancing its geopolitical leverage and challenging the entrenched dominance of traditional shipping lanes.

Narratives

Russia's Arctic use of information should be understood as part of a grand *legitimizing strategy*—one designed to secure not just influence, but lasting acceptance of its geopolitical claims. This strategy relies on crafting and managing narratives that position Russia as the preeminent Arctic power, both in fact and in perception.

In anticipation of its two-year chairmanship of the Arctic Council, which ran from May 2021 to May 2023, Moscow accelerated its efforts to shape the region's agenda. The Kremlin used the chairmanship as a platform to advance its narratives, steer international conversations, and frame Arctic affairs on Russian terms—a critical step in securing recognition of its Arctic ambitions as legitimate and unavoidable.[15]

Like every Arctic state, Russia seeks to define the region in ways that protect its national interests. Unlike most, however, it treats the publishing of definitions, conditions, and circumstances not as diplomatic routine, but as an essential component of its legitimizing strategy.[16] The ultimate goal is to embed Russian talking points so deeply into the discourse that foreign officials, analysts, and media repeat them as fact. Chief among these: Russia's self-portrait as the largest, strongest, most developed, and most legitimate Arctic actor.[17]

This narrative project also serves a second purpose: to weaken the credibility of the United States and its democratic allies and partners. "Because some pillars of this ecosystem generate their own momentum as opposed to waiting for specific orders from the Kremlin on every occasion," the US Department of State explains, "they can be responsive to distinct policy goals or developing situations, and then pivot back to their status quo of generally pouring scorn on Russia's perceived adversaries."[18] Of all the narratives in Russia's Arctic arsenal, none has been more

[15] Troy J. Bouffard and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "The Russian Arctic Council Chairmanship: National Security Considerations in the Shadow of Regional Cooperation," *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 269 (27 June 2021), https://doi.org/.

[16] Troy J. Bouffard, *A Developing Maritime Operational Environment: Forward Presence and Freedom of Navigation in the Arctic*, NAADSN Quick Impact Report No. 8 (Peterborough, ON: North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, Trent University, 12 January 2021).

[17] Sergey Sukhankin, Troy J. Bouffard, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Strategy, Competition, and Legitimization: Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation," in *Arctic Yearbook 2021*, ed. Lassi Heininen (Akureyri, Iceland: Northern Research Forum, 2021), 1–22, https://arcticyearbook.com/.

[18] Global Engagement Center, *GEC Special Report: Russia's Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda* (Washington: Department of State, August 2020).

assertively promoted than those tied to the NSR—a linchpin of both its economic strategy and its geopolitical identity.

The US State Department's Global Engagement Center defines Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem as "the collection of official, proxy, and unattributed communication channels and platforms that Russia uses to create and amplify narratives" (see fig. 1). This ecosystem rests on five pillars:[19]

1. official government communications;
2. state-funded global messaging;
3. the cultivation of proxy sources;
4. the weaponization of social media; and
5. cyber-enabled disinformation.

Together, these pillars form the foundation of Russia's legitimizing strategy—an effort to reshape the global conversation, control the Arctic narrative, and cement Moscow's role as the region's indispensable power.

Figure 1. Pillars of Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem. (Source: US Department of State Global Engagement Center.)

Official statements from the Kremlin, Russian government agencies, and senior officials represent the most direct expression of Moscow's strategic communications. These pronouncements anchor Russia's broader legitimizing strategy and shape the narratives that ripple through the rest of its information ecosystem.

[19] Global Engagement Center, *GEC Special Report*.

State-funded media outlets such as *RT* and *Sputnik* form the second pillar of this system. Operating under the facade of conventional international journalism, these outlets play a central role in broadcasting Kremlin-approved narratives to global audiences.[20] They do not work in isolation. Instead, they coordinate with the ecosystem's other elements to manufacture, recycle, and amplify disinformation. Their coverage often mirrors or directly echoes the language of official government statements, creating an illusion of independent corroboration.

These platforms also serve as force multipliers for Kremlin-aligned proxy sites, many of which operate under varying degrees of connection to Russian intelligence. The State Department rightly describes these proxies as "unofficial mouthpieces"—conduits for disinformation and propaganda that blend state influence with plausible deniability. Some proxies maintain overt ties to the Russian state; others weave themselves more loosely into the fabric of the Kremlin's messaging architecture, often linked only by the narratives they push. The ambiguity is deliberate. By design, these connections remain murky enough to shield Moscow from direct accountability while still advancing its strategic aims.[21]

Nowhere is this machinery more visible than in Russia's promotion of the NSR. The NSR stands at the center of the Kremlin's Arctic narrative, and the information ecosystem bends to serve that end—reinforcing Russia's vision of the route as both an indispensable commercial artery and a pillar of its geopolitical legitimacy.

Information Influence

Strategic narratives, when developed and delivered by or for state actors, aim to articulate and advance a compelling vision of national interest—and few states execute this craft with the discipline and persistence of the Russian Federation. In its Arctic campaign, Russia has maintained a striking degree of consistency across government, academia, media, and business. The lone exception came when President Vladimir Putin imposed an ambitious tonnage target for the NSR, triggering short-lived bureaucratic turmoil.[22] Beyond that episode, the Kremlin has maintained a uniform, unyielding front across its public and private sectors.

This cohesion is no accident. Russian narratives about the Arctic and the NSR are carefully engineered and tightly synchronized across state media platforms,

[20] Global Engagement Center, *GEC Special Report*.

[21] Global Engagement Center, *RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem* (Washington: Department of State, January 2022).

[22] Bouffard, "National Security Interests of Russia's Northern Sea Route: Additional Elements of Domestic and International Importance," in *Defending NATO's Northern Flank: Power Projection and Military Operations*, ed. Lon Strauss and Njord Wegge (London: Routledge, 2024).

diplomatic statements, scholarly publications, and international business forums. The storyline rarely wavers: Russia portrays itself as the rightful steward of the Arctic, a status justified by its long-standing presence, superior polar navigation expertise, and self-declared commitment to sustainable development. Central to this narrative is the economic promise of the NSR, marketed as both a strategic shipping corridor and a global commercial artery that only Russia possesses the capability—and legitimacy—to manage.

But Russia's narrative warfare does not stop at promotion. The Kremlin actively shapes the flow of information inside its own borders, reinforcing state-approved storylines while working to undermine alternative accounts. This two-pronged strategy promotes favorable stories about Russia's Arctic achievements while simultaneously discrediting foreign critiques — whether about environmental risks, military buildup, or the legal ambiguity of the NSR. Through this comprehensive legitimizing strategy, Russia seeks to control not only Arctic realities but also global perceptions.

Strategic narratives are not written to inform; they are crafted to connect, tailored to resonate with the beliefs, biases, and emotions of targeted audiences. As *Foreign Policy* observes, citing RAND's work, influence operations are "the collection of tactical information about an adversary as well as the dissemination of propaganda in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent."[23]

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace offers a broader definition:

> Organized attempts to achieve a specific effect among a target audience. Such operations encompass a variety of actors—ranging from advertisers to activists to opportunists—that employ a diverse set of tactics, techniques, and procedures to affect a target's decision making, beliefs, and opinions. Actors engage in influence operations for a range of purposes. Covert political influence operations originating from foreign sources have been the subject of intense scrutiny in recent years and have stoked fears about how influence operations might undermine the legitimacy of liberal democracies. However, influence operations can also be motivated by commercial interests rather than conviction.[24]

Regardless of motive, the consequences are often destabilizing. As the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency warns "constitute deliberate interference in a country's

[23] Alina Polyakova, "8 Ways to Stay Ahead of Influence Operations," *Foreign Policy*, 12 August 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/.

[24] Elise Thomas, Natalie Thompson, and Alicia Wanless, *The Challenges of Countering Influence Operations*, Partnership for Countering Influence Operations (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2020), https://carnegieendowment.org/.

internal affairs to create a climate of distrust between a state and its citizens."[25] Russia's Arctic narratives exemplify this playbook. By amplifying its strengths, obscuring its liabilities, and injecting disinformation into foreign media ecosystems, the Kremlin exploits societal fissures and undermines trust in liberal institutions. Its goal is not merely to win acceptance of its Arctic claims but to weaken the resolve and unity of those who would oppose them.

Russia's Arctic Strategic Communications and the Northern Information Environment

Russia's Arctic soft-power strategy revolves around building international acceptance for its interpretation of the NSR and asserting sovereign control over the region's surface waters. Through strategic communications, Moscow seeks not only to shape perceptions but also to set conditions favorable for regulatory acceptance by both state and commercial maritime actors. At its core, Russia's strategy aims to position itself for legal advantage should disputes reach international tribunals, including the International Court of Justice.[26] While legal coercion and military deterrence remain ever-present in Russia's Arctic calculus, soft-power strategic communications serve as the principal instrument for achieving these ends short of conflict. Regulatory control and legal defense are not separate ambitions for Moscow—they are interdependent pillars of the same legitimizing strategy. Every element of Russia's state apparatus, from government ministries to state-owned enterprises, advances this effort through a tightly coordinated campaign to normalize Moscow's preferred outcomes.

National Laws, Polices, and Regulations

Russia's campaign to control the NSR begins at home, anchored in law and national strategy. The Kremlin has woven its Arctic ambitions into the fabric of Russian legislation and policy, securing both administrative authority and international leverage. This foundation dates to Soviet times. On 17 December 1932, the Council of People's Commissars established the Main Directorate of the Northern Sea Route (Главное управление Северного морского пути, or Glavsevmorput) by Decree No. 1873.[27] This decree created the NSR's first formal management

[25] *Countering Information Influence Activities: A Handbook for Communicators* (Stockholm: Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, March 2019), https://www.msb.se/.

[26] Bjørn Kunoy, "The Scope of Compulsory Jurisdiction and Exceptions Thereto under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea," *Canadian Yearbook of International Law / Annuaire canadien de droit international* 58 (May 2021): 135–64, https://doi.org/.

[27] "The Northeast Passage and Northern Sea Route," *Arctis.de* (website), 2010, http://www.arctis-search.com/.

structure, placing it under the direction of Otto Yulievich Schmidt, a Soviet scientist and Arctic explorer.[28]

Modern Russian law deepened this foundation. On July 28, 2012, the Russian government codified its contemporary vision for the NSR by passing Federal Law No. 132-FZ, which added Article 5.1: *Navigation in the Waters of the Northern Sea Route*.[29] This legislation clearly defined the NSR's geographic boundaries, established the NSR Administration, introduced a formal permit system for vessels, and laid out rules for ice pilotage, icebreaker support (including fees), environmental protection, and maritime safety. These laws anchor both Russia's operational activities and its strategic communications, serving as the legal scaffolding for its broader claim of legitimacy.

In the lead-up to its Arctic Council chairmanship (May 2021–May 2023), Russia sharpened its legal and policy instruments to fortify its position.[30] In March 2020, President Vladimir Putin signed *The Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic through 2035*. This document set ambitious targets: increasing NSR cargo traffic to 80 million tons by 2024, developing port infrastructure, accelerating the construction of icebreakers for year-round navigation, and reinforcing Russia's sovereign claims and economic interests in the Arctic. It also mapped out socio-economic development plans for Arctic communities linked to the NSR.[31]

In September 2020, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin operationalized this strategy by issuing detailed navigation rules for the NSR. These rules addressed permit acquisition, vessel safety standards under varied ice conditions, restrictions on foreign-flagged ships, environmental safeguards, and mandatory reporting procedures while operating in NSR waters.[32]

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[28] "Шмидт, Отто Юльевич" [Shmidt, Otto Iul'evich], *TASS Encyclopedia*, https://tass.ru/.

[29] Russian Federation, Federal Law No. 132-FZ, "О внесении изменений в отдельные законодательные акты Российской Федерации в части государственного регулирования торгового мореплавания в акватории Северного морского пути" [On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the State Regulation of Merchant Shipping in the Waters of the Northern Sea Route], 28 July 2012, http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/.

[30] President of the Russian Federation, Decree No. 740, "Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 25.11.2020 № 740 «Об Организационном комитете по подготовке и обеспечению председательства Российской Федерации в Арктическом совете в 2021 - 2023 годах» [On the Organizational Committee for Preparing and Ensuring the Chairmanship of the Russian Federation in the Arctic Council in 2021–2023], 25 November 2020, http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/.

[31] President of the Russian Federation, Decree No. 164, "Об основах государственной политики Российской Федерации в Арктике на период до 2035 года" [On the Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic until 2035], 5 March 2020, http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/.

[32] Government of the Russian Federation, *Правила плавания в акватории Северного морского пути* [Rules of Navigation in the Waters of the Northern Sea Route], approved 30 November 2022, Northern Sea Route Administration, http://www.nsra.ru/.

One month later, President Putin issued additional directives, further elevating the NSR's status within Russia's national strategy. These directives emphasized the NSR's role as a cornerstone of Russia's economic and geopolitical interests, outlined plans for its development as an international shipping corridor, reaffirmed the need for a permanent Russian military presence in the Arctic, encouraged foreign investment in NSR-linked infrastructure, and pledged improvements to Arctic living standards.[33]

By mid-April 2021—one month before assuming the Arctic Council chairmanship—Mishustin released a comprehensive implementation plan to synchronize these initiatives.[34] The July 2021 update to Russia's *National Security Strategy* further cemented the NSR's central role in Russian statecraft.[35]

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 did not derail these Arctic ambitions; rather, it intensified them. In July 2022, Moscow published an updated national naval doctrine that underscored the NSR's growing strategic importance.[36] Later that year, the Russian legislature advanced laws to strengthen the maritime regulatory framework, reaffirming Moscow's intent to formalize and enforce control over the NSR.[37] In February 2023, on the one-year anniversary of the invasion, the Kremlin amended both the March and October 2020 Arctic strategies to reflect the evolving geopolitical environment.[38]

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[33] President of the Russian Federation, Decree No. 645, "О Стратегии развития Арктической зоны Российской Федерации и обеспечения национальной безопасности на период до 2035 года" [On the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and National Security until 2035], 26 October 2020, http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/.

[34] Government of the Russian Federation, Order No. 996-r, "Единый план мероприятий по реализации Основ государственной политики Российской Федерации в Арктике на период до 2035 года и Стратегии развития Арктической зоны Российской Федерации и обеспечения национальной безопасности на период до 2035 года" [Unified Plan of Measures to Implement the Fundamentals of State Policy... and the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone...], 15 April 2021, http://government.ru/.

[35] President of the Russian Federation, Decree No. 400, "О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации" [On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation], 2 July 2021, http://www.kremlin.ru/.

[36] President of the Russian Federation, Decree No. 512, "Об утверждении Морской доктрины Российской Федерации" [On Approval of the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation], 31 July 2022, http://www.kremlin.ru/.

[37] Russian Federation, Federal Law No. 155-FZ, "О внутренних морских водах, территориальном море и прилежащей зоне Российской Федерации" [On Internal Sea Waters, Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone of the Russian Federation], as amended 5 December 2022, http://www.kremlin.ru/; and Aker Arctic, *New Regime and Regulations on Northern Sea Route* (Helsinki: Aker Arctic Technology Inc, 2020), https://akerarctic.fi/.

[38] President of the Russian Federation, Decree No. 129, amending Decree No. 164 "Об основах государственной политики...", 21 February 2023; President of the Russian Federation, Decree No. 130, "О внесении изменений в Стратегию развития Арктической зоны..." [On Amending the Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone...], 27 February 2023, http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/.

These laws, policies, and regulations form the bedrock of Russia's Arctic legitimizing strategy. They provide the legal and rhetorical basis from which Moscow synchronizes its strategic communications to domestic and international audiences. The NSR holds a central place in Russia's Arctic identity, appearing prominently in its most consequential national documents. Should Moscow face an international legal challenge over the NSR, these instruments would serve as the primary exhibits in its defense.

Soft Power and the NSR

Soft power rests on the ability to attract and persuade rather than compel. Russia applies both to elevate the strategic importance of the NSR, promote its use as a commercial maritime corridor, legitimize its expansive regulatory claims, showcase its stewardship over Arctic natural resources, and portray itself as a responsible custodian of the region's fragile environment. These efforts also include promoting solutions for the social and economic needs of Russia's northern communities. On occasion, Moscow has employed soft counter-power—using attraction and persuasion to resist or deflect rival narratives. The following examples offer a representative collection of how Russia's strategic communications have operationalized soft power in the context of the NSR.

One of the most recognizable examples of Russian Arctic soft power emerged in August 2007, when polar explorer and State Duma deputy Artur Chilingarov led a Russian expedition to plant the national flag on the seabed beneath the North Pole.[39] The stunt, reminiscent of the US flag planted on the Moon in July 1969, achieved its intended purpose: global visibility and symbolic assertion of Russian Arctic ambitions. The gesture triggered both international media frenzy and competitive responses from other Arctic states. Beyond symbolism, the act served a strategic function. Russia, like Canada and Denmark (via Greenland), is seeking an extension of its outer continental shelf under the UNCLOS. The applications submitted by all three states overlap at the geographic North Pole.

Although sovereignty over the North Pole itself remains legally unattainable—the UNCLOS framework grants only rights to resources on or beneath an extended continental shelf, not territorial ownership—the symbolic power of a "claim" has enduring soft-power value. Even in the absence of proven natural resources, the ability to assert proximity or association with the North Pole enhances a state's

[39] Clifford J. Levy, "Russians Plant Flag on the Arctic Seabed," *New York Times*, 3 August 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/.

Arctic branding and geopolitical narrative, especially when integrated into marketing, diplomacy, and strategic communication campaigns.

The Arctic Council has also offered Russia—and other Arctic states—a ready platform for soft-power projection. The Council's rotating chairmanship allows the host nation to shape the agenda, control the rhythm of meetings, and select event locations, offering unrivaled opportunities for strategic influence. As chair, a nation can advance its Arctic priorities in a concentrated, coordinated manner, achieving progress at a pace and scale otherwise unattainable. Although a comprehensive analysis of the Council's rotational chairmanships lies beyond this article's scope, even a cursory review of each chair's published objectives and programs underscores the value of this soft-power lever.[40]

Russia's efforts to market the NSR as a viable international shipping corridor stretch back to October 1987, when Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev publicly declared the route open for international navigation.[41] Since then, successive Russian administrations have sought to attract foreign shippers with promises of reduced transit times and shorter distances between Asia and Europe.[42] However, the NSR's soft-power appeal has proven easier to advertise than to deliver.

As Tanja Poletan Jugović and colleagues observe, the gap between Russia's optimistic NSR narratives and the realities of commercial uptake remains substantial.[43] Their findings reflect a broader consensus in Arctic scholarship: Russia's soft-power campaign around the NSR has met with limited success in terms of actual maritime traffic, though it has found rhetorical and strategic support in parts of Southeast Asia—particularly in Japan and China—where both states have an enduring interest in diversifying shipping lanes for trade with Europe.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) extends beyond traditional overland and maritime corridors to include the Polar Silk Road—a policy that formalizes Beijing's ambitions for Arctic shipping, particularly along the NSR.[44] The initiative gained explicit definition in China's 2018 white paper, *China's Arctic Policy*, which designates the NSR as the "blue economic passage" of the Polar Silk Road and

[40] Arctic Council Secretariat, "All Chairmanships," *Arctic Council* (website), https://arctic-council.org/.

[41] Mikhail Gorbachev, "General Secretary Gorbachev's Speech in Murmansk, October 1987" (transcript, Council on Foreign Relations, 2014), http://www.cfr.org/.

[42] Björn Gunnarsson and Arild Moe, "Ten Years of International Shipping on the Northern Sea Route: Trends and Challenges," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 12 (2021): 24–49, https://doi.org/.

[43] Tanja Poletan Jugović, Dražen Žgaljić, and Katarina Balić, "Market Analysis and Affirmation Factors of the Northern Sea Route," *Transactions on Maritime Science* 9, no. 1 (April 2020): 120–33, https://doi.org/.

[44] Gao Tianming and Vasilii Erokhin, "China-Russia Collaboration in Shipping and Marine Engineering as One of the Key Factors of Secure Navigation Along the NSR," in *China's Arctic Engagement: Following the Polar Silk Road to Greenland and Russia*, ed. Justin Barnes et al. (Peterborough, ON: North American and Arctic Defense and Security Network, 2021), 234–63.

pledges joint development and scientific collaboration with Russia. In this case, Beijing's rhetoric has been matched by deliberate and sustained action.

Between 2013 and 2021, China's state-owned COSCO Shipping Corporation completed 42 NSR transits using 33 separate vessels and has signaled plans for a record-breaking season in 2025.[45] Following a profitable 2024 operating year, NewNew Shipping Line announced a twelve-sailing Arctic liner service for the 2025 season, indicating an effort to regularize Arctic shipping as part of its global network.[46] Chinese financial stakes also underscore its strategic commitment: Chinese investors hold a 29.9 percent share in Yamal LNG and a 20 percent stake in Arctic LNG 2—both pivotal energy projects along Russia's Arctic coastline.

Further deepening the bilateral partnership, Moscow and Beijing established a Sub-Commission on NSR Development in May 2024, an intergovernmental body designed to coordinate port infrastructure investments, facilitate the exchange of digital ice navigation data, and support the expansion of Chinese-flagged transits along the NSR. In parallel, China's maritime authorities launched daily ice forecasting services for the Northeast Passage in July 2024, aimed at providing real-time decision support to Chinese shipping operators.[47]

Taken together, these moves reflect more than aspirational policy—they represent a deliberate, resource-backed campaign to embed China's commercial and strategic presence along Russia's Arctic coast. Although the Polar Silk Road remains a work in progress, its trajectory points to deeper entanglement. For Russia, the growing Chinese footprint offers both economic lifeline and narrative fodder—proof for international audiences that the NSR remains viable, attractive, and integral to global trade, even as sanctions and war cloud Moscow's standing elsewhere.

Soft Counter-Power and the NSR

Russia's war in Ukraine, however, has highlighted the limits of soft power and the force of soft counter-power. International shipping firms—especially those driven by private capital—prioritize political stability and legal certainty. In this context, Russia suffered a severe reputational blow in 2022 when the NSR saw zero international transits. According to *High North News*, foreign-flagged traffic dropped from 37 transits in 2021 to none the following year, despite a record 34

[45] Audrey Todorov, "Arctic Shipping: Trends, Challenges and Ways Forward," *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, 23 August, 2023, https://www.belfercenter.org/.

[46] Malte Humpert, "Chinese NewNew Shipping Line to Expand Arctic Container Service after Profitable 2024 Operation," *gCaptain*, 24 March, 2025, https://gcaptain.com/.

[47] *China's Arctic Policy* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, 2018), http://english.gov.cn/.

million tons of cargo moved—almost entirely by Russian-flagged vessels.[48] Sanctions did not explicitly target the NSR, but the broader economic isolation of Russia discouraged foreign participation, rendering the route commercially radioactive for international operators.

This abrupt abandonment not only damaged Russia's Arctic ambitions but also created a potent soft counter-power narrative for Western policymakers. The episode stands as a vivid reminder of the commercial sector's sensitivity to geopolitical risk, and likely will serve as both a cautionary tale for future investors and as a rhetorical weapon for Western Arctic strategies.

Institutional Architecture and NSR Governance

Moscow has spent the better part of the past decade constructing an institutional framework to translate its Arctic ambitions into enforceable policy. In 2015, the Kremlin established the State Commission for Arctic Development to coordinate federal initiatives, facilitate information-sharing among Arctic stakeholders, and resolve interagency and interregional conflicts.[49] The commission's scope and priorities were outlined by Yuri Trutnev, Deputy Prime Minister and President Putin's chief Arctic advisor, in 2018.[50]

The administrative elevation continued in 2019 when Arctic affairs were formally integrated into the Ministry for the Development of the Far East—an upgrade that signaled the Kremlin's long-term strategic commitment to the region.[51] By May 2022, Putin consolidated operational control of the NSR under the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation (ROSATOM). This decision granted ROSATOM full authority over NSR infrastructure, port access, shipping security, and development, positioning the state-owned corporation as both regulator and operator.[52] As one of only two Russian state corporations with such expansive authority, ROSATOM's stewardship amplified the NSR's profile both at home and abroad, offering what

[48] Malte Humpert, "Northern Sea Route Sees Lots of Russian Traffic, but No International Transits in 2022," *High North News*, 20 June 2023, https://www.highnorthnews.com/.

[49] Helge Blakkisrud, "Governing the Arctic: The Russian State Commission for Arctic Development and the Forging of a New Domestic Arctic Policy Agenda," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 10 (2019): 214–35, https://doi.org/.

[50] "Юрий Трутнев провёл совещание о приоритетных задачах развития Арктики" [Yury Trutnev Held a Meeting on Arctic Development Priorities], Government of Russia website, 4 October 2018, http://government.ru/.

[51] Atle Staalesen, "Russia Gets Ministry of the Far East and Arctic," *The Barents Observer*, 18 January 2019, https://thebarentsobserver.com/.

[52] Charles Digges, "Russia's Rosatom Consolidates Control over the Northern Sea Route," *Bellona.org*, 9 November 2022, https://bellona.org/.

Moscow portrayed as a coherent and "progressive" solution to the route's complex logistical and management challenges.

Under this mandate, ROSATOM reorganized its maritime oversight arm—the Chief Directorate of the NSR, formerly known as Glavsevmorput and later the Northern Sea Route Administration—cementing the corporation's primacy over Arctic shipping governance.[53] Bilateral collaboration deepened further in May 2024, when Russia and China established a joint commission for NSR development, co-chaired by ROSATOM's CEO on the Russian side and China's Minister of Transportation.[54] This administrative structure, along with the two states' long-standing strategic alignment, lends additional legal and diplomatic weight to Moscow's NSR claims and frames the route as an integral part of both Russian sovereignty and Sino-Russian cooperation.

Domestically, Moscow faces a parallel challenge: persuading the Russian public to support sustained investment in Arctic infrastructure—despite the fact that few Russians directly benefit from NSR commerce. The route serves as a vital artery for Siberia and the Russian Far East, a vast and underdeveloped expanse larger than either the United States or Canada.[55] The NSR enables the shipment of goods into this remote hinterland, particularly through barge-supported supply chains that extend from Arctic ports into Siberia's river systems and isolated communities, most of which lie beyond the reach of rail or road networks.[56]

Although the Kremlin's autocratic model theoretically allows it to dictate workforce assignments, Russia's experience has demonstrated that sustaining a capable labor force in the Arctic requires more than coercion—it demands targeted soft power. Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin's Arctic implementation plan and supporting strategies reflect this reality, emphasizing incentives and quality-of-life measures designed to draw and retain workers in the north.

President Putin echoed these themes during the 2024 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), casting Siberia and the Arctic as central to Russia's future. In a keynote address, he remarked:

> The same applies to Siberia in its entirety – once again, both Western Siberia and Eastern Siberia. The former has traditionally developed since the

[53] "Chief Directorate of the Northern Sea Route to Be Established in Rosatom," Center for High North Logistics, 15 June 2022, https://chnl.no/.

[54] "Russia and China to Establish a Commission to Develop the NSR," *Arctic Russia*, 16 May 2024, https://arctic-russia.ru/.

[55] "Ice Reconnaissance Ensures Safety of Navigation Along Northern Sea Route—Expert," *TASS*, 26 August 2022, https://tass.com/.

[56] Bouffard, "National Security Interests of Russia's Northern Sea Route."

> Soviet era, given its [vast] mineral resources that our country still uses. But gradually, these centres of economic development are shifting to the east and north. To quote a famous saying of the past (and we remember who said it), "Russia's power will grow with Siberia." Now, we can say that Russia's power will grow with the Arctic as it appears to have major mineral resources; they are still complex and expensive to develop—yet, the prospects are vast.[57]

The 2024 SPIEF also placed the NSR in the spotlight at levels not seen in recent years—a likely soft counter-power response to the reputational and operational damage inflicted by the war in Ukraine and Western sanctions. During the forum's plenary session, Putin reaffirmed his commitment to Arctic infrastructure, declaring:

> The Northern Sea Route is on track to become a global artery that enjoys high demand. Last year, it carried 36 million tonnes of cargo, and this number is projected to increase to over 150 million tonnes over time. To get there, we will continue to expand the Northern Sea Route infrastructure, and to build access roads to the Arctic ports. The leaders of the northern constituent entities of the Federation are to play a special role in this work. In this regard, we will form a State Council commission on the Arctic regions and the Northern Sea Route.[58]

The forum's closing readout underscored the material commitments backing this rhetoric, including a 50 billion ruble loan agreement between Atomenergoprom—a subsidiary of ROSATOM—and VTB Bank. The loan is earmarked for NSR development and the construction of new nuclear power plants, reinforcing the Arctic's role as both a geopolitical priority and a proving ground for Russia's state-capitalist model.[59]

While Western engagement with Russia has sharply diminished in recent years, the Arctic Economic Council (AEC) continues to offer Moscow select opportunities to showcase its Arctic ambitions on an international stage. During the 2024 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), the AEC convened alongside the main event, drawing key Russian Arctic stakeholders, including senior ROSATOM officials and members of the Russian Arctic State Commission.[60]

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[57] Vladimir Putin, "Plenary Session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum" (address, President of Russia, 7 June 2024), http://en.kremlin.ru/.

[58] Putin, "Plenary Session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum."

[59] "Recap of SPIEF 2024," St. Petersburg International Economic Forum website, Roscongress Foundation, 2024, https://forumspb.com/.

[60] "Arctic Economic Council Meeting," SPIEF 2024 News, Roscongress Foundation, 2024, https://forumspb.com/.

China, seizing the moment, leveraged the gathering to deepen its Arctic partnership. Beijing secured a high-profile interview with Aleksey Chekunkov, Russia's Minister for the Development of the Far East and Arctic, extracting a series of soft-power soundbites that underscored both countries' shared interests. Chekunkov pointed to the active role of China's NewNew Shipping Line as proof of the NSR's growing viability:

> Already this past year, a Chinese company NewNew Shipping Line has performed several round trips on the Northern Sea Route. This proves that the Northern Sea Route can work. Our aim now is to increase the frequency and the tonnage of the transit route so that the cargo volume of the Northern Sea Route continues increasing. And I believe that by combining Chinese navigational and technological capabilities, and by combining our traditional ice-breaking fleet and Russian ports, we can achieve significant progress in growing the volume of cargo shipped by a Northern Sea Route.[61]

Chekunkov followed this statement with a familiar soft counter-power refrain—framing Russian-Chinese cooperation in the Arctic as both economically essential and morally justified,[62] while casting Western criticism as politically motivated obstructionism:

> When any one side is trying to politicize the Arctic, trying to put pressure and spread geopolitical pressure in the Arctic, it harms all of humanity. I am certain the Russian Federation, alongside the People's Republic of China, will always stand for peaceful relationships in the Arctic to oppose militarization. At the same time, we are strong in the Arctic. We will always keep the Arctic safe. We will not let any opposing or unlawful forces militarize the Arctic or jeopardize its security. [63]

This rhetorical balancing act has become a cornerstone of Moscow's Arctic strategy. Russia has long employed soft power to promote and legitimize its claims over the NSR, blending symbolic gestures—such as planting a titanium flag on the seabed beneath the North Pole—with persistent diplomatic engagement through forums like the Arctic Council. Even as the NSR falls short of its full commercial potential, Moscow continues to market the route as a viable and strategic maritime corridor, especially to Asian partners such as China and Japan.

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[61] "West's Smears on China-Russia Cooperation in Arctic Myopic, Unwise: Russian Minister," *Global Times*, 7 June 2024, https://www.globaltimes.cn/.

[62] "Companies Plan to Transport Cargo Worth $1.1 Trillion Along Northern Sea Route — Minister," *News.az*, 10 June 2024, https://news.az/.

[63] "West's Smears on China-Russia Cooperation."

The Kremlin's creation of specialized administrative bodies, particularly ROSATOM's elevation to sole NSR authority, signals a deep institutional commitment to the region. At home, Moscow has worked to sell the NSR as a linchpin for national development, especially for the resource-rich but infrastructure-poor territories of Siberia and the Russian Far East.

International economic forums—including SPIEF—serve as both showcase and shield for Russia's Arctic ambitions. These gatherings allow the Kremlin to counterbalance the reputational fallout from its war in Ukraine and sanctions by spotlighting development initiatives and partnerships, most notably its strategic alignment with China. Throughout these efforts, Russia has framed its Arctic posture as both peaceful and economically indispensable while painting Western scrutiny as a thinly veiled attempt to contain Russian influence under the guise of environmental or security concerns.

Taken together, this carefully choreographed soft-power campaign underscores the NSR's central role in Russia's Arctic strategy and its broader geopolitical aspirations.

Hard Power and the NSR

Hard power, defined as the use of military force, economic sanctions, and coercive diplomacy to advance national interests, has long shaped Arctic affairs—though often in indirect and understated forms.[64] Economic sanctions remain the most visible manifestation, particularly following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, when Western measures specifically targeted Arctic offshore oil exploration and production, hampering Moscow's energy ambitions in the region.[65]

Coercive diplomacy and conventional military deterrence, while present, typically play out in subtler forms across the Arctic.[66] Intercepts of Russian bombers by American and Canadian NORAD assets, and similar encounters between Russian aircraft and Scandinavian air forces, occur with routine frequency on both the North American and European flanks.[67] Yet the highly scripted and predictable nature of these encounters blurs the distinction between hard-power projection and status-quo signaling.

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[64] Wilson, "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power."

[65] Suleyman O. Altiparmak et al., "Inducing New Bilateral Oil Interdependencies: The Unintended Impact of 2014 US-Led Sanctions on Russia," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 3 (May–June 2023): 78–106.

[66] David C. Gompert and Hans Binnendijk, *The Power to Coerce: Countering Adversaries without Going to War* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016); and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

[67] Chris Gordon, "NORAD Boss: Chinese Aircraft Could Start Operating Near US This Year," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 12 March 2024, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/.

Most hard-power applications in the Arctic align with Stephen Walt's post-Cold War concept of "balancing against threats."[68] NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg underscored this shift in an August 2022 opinion piece, where he argued that Russia's war in Ukraine had erased lingering Western sensitivities about provoking Moscow in the Arctic and that NATO would assume an expanded security role in the region.[69] Even so, the Arctic continues to pose a unique policy dilemma: identifying and defining actionable threats remains difficult, often delaying the kind of clear decisions that drive meaningful resource allocation.[70]

Despite heavy losses in Ukraine, Moscow continues to signal its determination to strengthen its Arctic military footprint. Russian defense planners justify these efforts by pointing to both geography and security logic. The Arctic hosts key elements of Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent as well as the infrastructure supporting conventional armed forces. According to Russian military analysts, this geographic reality demands a robust defensive posture—one designed to deter both individual adversaries and collective military action against Russian interests. From this perspective, the Kremlin insists on an unbroken "complex security architecture" stretching from Murmansk to Anadyr, with special emphasis on ensuring full, unchallenged control over the NSR, which it views as the region's most vital transportation artery.[71]

Russian military exercises—particularly those involving the Northern Fleet—serve both to refine operational capabilities and to reinforce the soft-power narratives Moscow deploys internationally. Among the more visible demonstrations was Exercise Umka 21, which featured three Russian ballistic missile submarines—two Delta IV-class and one Borei A-class—surfacing in unison through Arctic ice near the North Pole. Similarly, live-fire "Bastion" coastal defense drills conducted from Franz Josef Land projected a hard-power backdrop to Russia's Arctic claims.[72]

Western powers, meanwhile, have sharpened their own Arctic military readiness. The US-led Arctic Edge 22 exercise in Alaska and NATO's Nordic Response 2024—part of the alliance-wide Steadfast Defender 24 series—reflected an emerging consensus among NATO members that rapid reinforcement, multi-domain

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[68] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[69] "In the Face of Russian Aggression, NATO Is Beefing Up Arctic Security," *Globe and Mail*, 24 August 2022, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/.

[70] P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Threats Through, To, and In the Arctic," *Vanguard*, 6 December 2021, https://vanguardcanada.com/.

[71] Vasily Klimov, "Военные аспекты позиции России в Арктике" [Military Aspects of Russia's Position in the Arctic], Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), 20 September 2022, https://russiancouncil.ru/.

[72] Thomas Nilsen, "Three Nuclear Ballistic Missile Subs Surfaced Simultaneously Through the Ice in Complex Russian Arctic Exercise," *Barents Observer*, 26 March 2021, https://thebarentsobserver.com/.

integration, and cross-regional cooperation are essential to counterbalance Russian activities in the High North.[73]

In 2023, Russia's Arctic naval forces conducted a string of exercises centered on defensive operations within the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF). The overarching goal: to secure full sovereignty and unimpeded control of both Arctic waters and the NSR itself.[74] A defining element of this effort was a set of drills held in August 2023, which simulated the defense of the Franz Josef Archipelago. These exercises combined amphibious landings by the landing ship *Alexander Otrakovskii* with follow-on expeditionary offensives designed to rehearse the seizure and defense of strategic territory.[75]

Complementary exercises focused on enhancing command and control (C2) across Russia's Arctic military district, aimed at improving coordination between naval forces and land-based units assigned to defend the NSR.[76] These efforts reflect a coherent operational strategy: to isolate and defeat any adversary attempting to disrupt Russian access to, or sovereignty over, the NSR.[77]

Russian policy makers and academic experts increasingly draw from Soviet-era precedent to justify contemporary efforts to consolidate military control over the AZRF. Central to this approach is the creation of a so-called "joint system of coastal defense" designed to secure Russia's command over the entire NSR, including key chokepoints such as the Bering Strait and Wrangel Island.

Analysts like Oleg Viktorovich Matveev and Maxim Vladimirovich Shtol argue that the foundation for maintaining Russian dominance in the Arctic rests not only on military superiority but also on improving the region's socio-economic conditions and living standards. They advocate reviving elements of the Soviet five-year plan system (*piatiletka*) and expanding state intervention, positioning this

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[73] "Arctic Edge 22 Comes to a Close," *U.S. Northern Command Newsroom*, 18 March 2022, https://www.northcom.mil/; and "Nordic Response 2024," *Norwegian Armed Forces* (Forsvaret), 20 December 2024, https://www.forsvaret.no/.

[74] "На Северном флоте стартовала командно-штабная тренировка по управлению силами и войсками" [Command and Staff Training on the Management of Forces and Troops Started in the Northern Fleet], *ТВ Звезда*, 11 August 2023, https://tvzvezda.ru/.

[75] "Группировка Северного флота отработала защиту островной зоны на Земле Франца-Иосифа" [The Grouping of the Northern Fleet Worked Out the Protection of the Island Zone on Franz Josef Land], *VPK.name*, 25 August 2023, https://vpk.name/.

[76] NOTE: This exercise reportedly involved 8,000 military personnel, 20 surface combatants/submarines/support vessels, 5 aircraft, and up to 50 pieces of military/special equipment.

[77] "На Северном флоте началось учение по защите Севморпути" [The Northern Fleet Began an Exercise to Protect the Northern Sea Route], *VPK.name*, 14 August 2023, https://vpk.name/. Other exercises involved deploying systems like the K-300P Bastion-P coastal defense missile system; see "Северный флот РФ провел учение с ракетными комплексами "Бастион" на острове в Арктике" [The Northern Fleet... Conducted an Exercise with Bastion Missile Systems...], *Interfax*, 12 September 2022, https://www.interfax.ru/.

blend of militarization and economic planning as a modern smart-power strategy—one that links hard and soft power to secure long-term Arctic preeminence.[78]

Russian commentators routinely frame the West, and NATO under US leadership, as the true source of Arctic geopolitical instability. According to this narrative, Western ambitions have shattered the Arctic's status as a zone of "peace and partnership," forcing Russia to reassert its military presence.[79] While the West's alleged thirst for Arctic hydrocarbons and mineral resources remains a familiar talking point, Russian experts have increasingly emphasized what they see as the West's determination to challenge Russia's control over strategic maritime routes—especially the NSR.

Anna Kotlova of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) accuses the "collective West" of crafting "quasi-legal arguments"— allegedly the work of American legal scholars—designed to undermine Russia's sovereignty over the NSR and reframe it as an international waterway.[80] Military historian Nikita Buranov echoes this suspicion, predicting an intensified Western military buildup aimed at prying the NSR from Russian control. In his view, NATO's broader ambitions include not only seizing influence over Arctic shipping lanes but also gaining access to Russian oil and natural gas deposits.[81]

This skepticism is reinforced by Russian security experts, who often portray US policy as driven by expansionist aims and a desire to maintain "unchallenged superiority" in the region.[82] Many frame the NSR as the central fault line in US–Russian Arctic relations.[83] Pavel Gudev, a Valdai Club member and senior fellow at the

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[78] Oleg Viktorovich Matveev and Maksim Vladimirovich Shtol, "Советский опыт обеспечения безопасности в Арктической зоне" [Soviet Experience in Providing Security in the Arctic Zone], *Обозреватель*, no. 1(396) (2023): 20–31, https://cyberleninka.ru/.

[79] "Арктика – территория мира и стабильности" [Arctic—Territory of Peace and Stability], *Военно-политическая аналитика* (website), 6 July 2021, https://vpoanalytics.com/.

[80] Anna Kotlova suggested introducing associate member status for non-Arctic states to expand rights while outlining responsibilities; see "Анна Котлова: интерес Запада к Севморпути приобретает агрессивный характер" [Anna Kotlova: The West's Interest in the Northern Sea Route Is Becoming Aggressive], *РИА Новости* (МИА «Россия сегодня»), 22 March 2023, https://ria.ru/.

[81] "НАТО пытается вырваться в арктические лидеры. Россия этого не допустит" [NATO Is Trying to Break into the Arctic Leaders. Russia Will Not Allow This], *VPK.name*, 12 September 2022, https://vpk.name/. Despite the rather bellicose tone often found in academic and policy circles, official military rhetoric can be more cautious; for example, Adm. Alexander Moiseev was quoted stating that, as of late October 2022, "there are no real challenges and threats to regional security in the Arctic [but] negative tendencies in military-political domain are increasing somewhat." See "Российские военные инженеры ведут разработку РСЗО для арктических подразделений ВС РФ" [Russian Military Engineers Are Developing MLRS for the Arctic Units of the Russian Armed Forces], *VPK.name*, 24 October 2022, https://vpk.name/.

[82] Valery Petrovich Zhuravel, "Арктика в 2022 г.: итоги и перспективы" [The Arctic in 2022: Results and Prospects], *Научно-аналитический вестник ИЭ РАН* 1, no. 31 (2023): 7–13, https://cyberleninka.ru/.

[83] Russian Federation, Federal Law No. 155-FZ, "О внутренних морских водах..." [On Internal Sea Waters...], as amended 5 December 2022, *КонсультантПлюс*, https://www.consultant.ru/.

Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), contends that the regulation of traffic along the NSR has remained the principal dispute between the two countries since the 1960s. He warns that an expanded US icebreaker fleet could empower US Coast Guard forces to contest Russian claims and seek a greater operational presence along the NSR.[84]

Similarly, Mikhail Popov, deputy secretary of the Russian Security Council, has argued that the United States is laying the groundwork for a multipronged Arctic challenge—not only through legal and diplomatic pressure, but also through enhanced military capabilities, propaganda campaigns, and nonmilitary forms of influence designed to undermine Russia's position.[85]

In parallel with these rhetorical defenses, Russia continues to invest in advanced surveillance and intelligence-gathering systems to tighten its grip on the NSR. During the "Army 2023" military-technical forum, the JSC Tactical Missiles Corporation (KTRV) unveiled a coastal monitoring system engineered for the AZRF.[86] With an advertised range of 50 to 200 kilometers, the system is designed to support the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations (MChS), the Navy, and the FSB Border Service in tracking unauthorized or suspicious vessels attempting to navigate the NSR.[87]

Russia's strategic communication surrounding these hard power developments forms an essential pillar of its broader smart-power campaign. Through carefully choreographed military exercises, the rollout of advanced monitoring systems, and public declarations by senior officials, Moscow projects an image of defensive preparedness rather than aggression. By embedding military expansion within a narrative of sovereign self-defense and economic stewardship, Russia seeks to normalize its remilitarization of the Arctic and preempt international criticism.

This sustained effort to frame military buildup as both necessary and inevitable underscores Russia's long-term objective: to integrate hard-power assets into a seamless smart-power strategy designed to entrench its dominance over the Arctic—and, above all, the NSR.

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[84] "Арктика стала зоной противостояния России и США. Почему она так важна для сильнейших держав планеты?" [The Arctic Has Become a Zone of Confrontation Between Russia and the United States. Why Is It So Important...?], *Lenta.ru*, 8 October 2023, https://lenta.ru/.

[85] "В Совбезе РФ сообщили о планах США создать "арктическую дивизию"" [The Security Council... Announced US Plans to Create an "Arctic Division"], *Interfax*, 16 February 2022, https://www.interfax.ru/.

[86] "От АК-19 до гиперзвукового 'Авангарда': что посмотреть на форуме 'Армия-2023'" [From AK-19 to Hypersonic Avangard: What to See at the Army-2023 Forum], *Российская газета*, 18 August 2023, https://rg.ru/.

[87] "На форуме «Армия 2023» была представлена береговая система наблюдения прибрежной Арктической зоны" [At the Army 2023 Forum, a Coastal Surveillance System... Was Presented], *VPK.name*, 23 August 2023, https://vpk.name/.

Conclusion

Since 2007, Russian political leadership has consistently signaled its ambitions to expand and entrench control over the Arctic. At that time, Russia remained a fully integrated participant in the global economic, diplomatic, and cultural order, balancing its Arctic initiatives against broader international engagements. However, the Kremlin's strategic calculus shifted sharply following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As the war dragged on with mounting costs and diminishing returns, the Arctic's role in Moscow's geopolitical priorities grew significantly.

President Putin has repeatedly emphasized that Russia's development of its Arctic territories—often referred to as the country's "northern third"—is inseparable from its core national interests.[88] Central to this vision is the NSR, which Moscow regards as both an economic artery and a symbol of sovereign control. The Kremlin insists that effective utilization of the NSR demands centralized state coordination, spearheaded by ROSATOM, along with a comprehensive development strategy and the integration of both hard- and soft-power tools into a broader smart-power framework.

As Paul Goble, a senior fellow at the Jamestown Foundation, has observed, "Russians living in the Far North are fed up with the lack of basic living supplies from their local governments" and "Moscow must be able to supply population centers and military bases along the country's northern border on a regular and reliable basis for the Northern Sea Route (NSR) to be effective and for Russia's military facilities to be able to project power into the Arctic."[89]

In the aftermath of its deepening isolation from the West, Russia has sought to leverage the NSR as an economic and geopolitical bridge to "friendly countries," chiefly China and India.[90] To that end, the Kremlin has intensified its control over Arctic navigation and accelerated the development of Arctic-based hydrocarbon projects, positioning the NSR as the primary export corridor to Indo-Pacific markets. While Russian officials have announced plans to invest in land-based infrastructure

[88] "Путин спрогнозировал «прирастание» России Арктикой" [Putin Predicted the "Growth" of Russia by the Arctic], *РБК*, 22 December 2022, https://www.rbc.ru/.

[89] Paul Goble, "Moscow Struggles to Deliver Supplies to Populations Along Northern Sea Route," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 20, no. 176 (14 November 2023), https://jamestown.org/.

[90] "Внешнеполитическая и дипломатическая деятельность Российской Федерации в 2022 году. Обзор МИД России" [Foreign Policy and Diplomatic Activity... Overview of the Russian Foreign Ministry] (press release, Moscow, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 29 March 2023), https://www.mid.ru/; and Sergey Sukhankin and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Looking Beyond China: Non-Western Actors in the Russian Arctic after February 2022," in *Arctic Yearbook 2024*, ed. Lassi Heininen (Akureyri, Iceland: Northern Research Forum, 2024), 1–28, https://arcticyearbook.com/.

to complement the NSR, domestic analysts remain skeptical about the feasibility of these ambitions given Russia's strained resources and widening economic pressures.[91]

At the same time, Moscow continues to accuse the United States of advancing "expansionist plans" and pursuing "unchallenged superiority" in the Arctic,[92] framing Washington's legal and military posture as a direct challenge to the NSR's status as a "historical national transportation artery of the Russian Federation."[93] Russian experts consistently depict the NSR as the central fault line in Arctic competition, with control over the route representing both a geopolitical imperative and a litmus test of Russia's global standing.

In short, Russia's evolving Arctic strategy—and its focus on the NSR in particular—reveals a layered approach that merges geopolitical ambition, economic necessity, and security calculus. The Kremlin's framing of the NSR as both a sovereign lifeline and a strategic bulwark underscores its intent to turn Arctic access into leverage against Western isolation. By positioning the NSR as a vital link to emerging economic partners and embedding it in a narrative of national resilience and historical entitlement, Moscow seeks to safeguard its Arctic ambitions and project strength in an increasingly contested region.

For American and allied policy makers, three complementary smart-power lines of effort stand out as essential to shaping Arctic stability and countering Russian ambitions:

1. **Elevate maritime domain awareness (MDA)**. The United States and its allies should spearhead the creation of a coalition Arctic maritime situational awareness network that integrates data from the upcoming Canada–U.S. Arctic and Polar Over-the-Horizon Radar (part of NORAD's modernization),[94] Norway's Barents satellite AIS array, and the European Union's space-based vessel tracking capabilities. These efforts should be underpinned by multilateral political frameworks, such as the 2025 G7 Foreign Ministers Declaration on Maritime Security.[95] A regional multilateral MDA fusion cell—

[91] One recent study claimed that NSR development plans "were exaggerated and [given international sanctions] unachievable"; see Alexei Yuryevich Smirnov, "Оценка рисков реализации новых проектов в зоне Северного морского пути" [Risk Assessment of New Projects in the Northern Sea Route Zone], *Экономика Инноваций* 9, no. 2 (2023): 6–11, https://cyberleninka.ru/.

[92] Zhuravel, "Арктика в 2022 г."

[93] Russian Federation, Federal Law No. 155-FZ, "О внутренних морских водах..." [On Internal Sea Waters...], as amended 5 December 2022.

[94] Department of National Defence, "NORAD Modernization Project Timelines," Government of Canada website, 22 November 2024, https://www.canada.ca/; and "Reinforcing Canada's Security and Sovereignty in the Arctic" (backgrounder, Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, 18 March 2025), https://www.pm.gc.ca/.

[95] G7 Foreign Ministers, *Declaration on Maritime Security and Prosperity* (Charlevoix, QC: Global Affairs Canada, 14 March 2025).

modeled after the Information Fusion Centres in Singapore and Madagascar—would allow coast guards and port authorities to identify and flag suspicious NSR traffic in near real time.[96] Such a capability would weaken Moscow's informational advantage and support the lawful exercise of freedom of navigation.

2. **Challenge legal contest lines**. Allied and partner nations should establish a standing "High North Navigation Council" composed of G7 members and other like-minded coastal and user states. This body could issue a joint interpretive statement—echoing language from the 2025 G7 declaration—clarifying that Article 234 of UNCLOS, which covers ice-covered areas, does not authorize Russia to deny innocent or transit passage during peacetime, nor to impose blanket pilotage fees beyond those permitted by the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS).[97] The council should also commit to pursuing compulsory conciliation under UNCLOS Part XV if Russia attempts to bar foreign warships or levy discriminatory charges, signaling that legal resistance will exact both diplomatic and adjudicative costs. Western experts must likewise challenge Moscow's sea ice projections and modeling, which the Kremlin uses to justify exclusive NSR control, by providing countervailing evidence on environmental risks and the commercial viability of alternative Arctic routes.[98]
3. **Strengthen and expand economic resilience**. Reducing dependence on the NSR is essential to blunt Russia's coercive leverage over Arctic maritime trade. Allied infrastructure priorities should include upgrading Kirkenes, Norway, into a secure, allied-controlled deepwater transshipment hub—while screening foreign investment for national security risks.[99] Additional efforts should accelerate Sweden's Iron Ore Line expansion[100] and advance a prospective Finland–Sweden rail link to Haparanda, which would shorten

[96] Nicolas Regaud, *From the Pacific Fusion Center to the Security Information Fusion Center in the Indian Ocean?*, Strategic Brief No. 11 (Paris: Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire [IRSEM], 2020), https://www.irsem.fr/.

[97] *International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea* (SOLAS), adopted 1 November 1974, entered into force 25 May 1980, 1184 U.N.T.S. 2, https://www.imo.org/.

[98] Troy J. Bouffard et al., "Russian Ambitions to Control Freedom of Navigation and Arctic Access: Refined Data Challenging Moscow's Northern Sea Route Claims" (manuscript under review, *Maritime Studies*, 2025).

[99] K. Oanh Ha et al., "China's Arctic Dreams Make a Tiny Port a Global Prize," *Bloomberg News*, 6 September 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/.

[100] "A Better Iron Ore Line Comes Closer This Year with Large-Scale Improvements," *RailFreight.com*, 16 April 2025, https://railfreight.com/.

Baltic–Barents haulage.[101] Allied states should also pursue the development of green shipping corridors, including the proposed Narvik-to-Rotterdam route. Together, these measures would create redundancy, reassure commercial shippers, and insulate global supply chains from Russian efforts to weaponize icebreaker escorts, levy sudden fee hikes, or impose arbitrary NSR restrictions.

Taken as a whole, this layered approach would translate smart-power theory into a practical Arctic strategy: one that hardens the information environment, sets clear legal boundaries, and diffuses Moscow's economic leverage—all without triggering direct military escalation. By adopting such measures now, American and allied policymakers can shape a more stable, rules-based Arctic order before Russia cements unilateral control over the NSR as a strategic fait accompli. Each of these lines of effort warrants further research and refinement to ensure a coordinated and effective response.

While Russia's Arctic ambitions remain bold, they are not without limitations. The widening gap between the Kremlin's grand strategy and its ability to deliver basic services to Arctic communities underscores the inherent difficulties of developing this remote and unforgiving region. At the same time, Moscow's portrayal of US "expansionist plans" serves a dual purpose: legitimizing its military buildup and reinforcing domestic political support for Arctic initiatives. As global attention converges on the Arctic, Russia's ability to project smart power—balancing hard-power posturing with credible soft-power diplomacy and sustainable economic development—will determine whether its Arctic strategy can withstand international scrutiny and domestic fatigue. In the face of this challenge, the seven Arctic allies must marshal their own smart-power tools to shape, rather than merely react to, the emerging strategic environment.

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[101] "Passenger Rail Between Finland and Sweden Could Start in Late 2025," *YLE News*, 27 January 2025, https://yle.fi/.

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