



The Cambridge Security Initiative

RUSSIA EYES ARCTIC OPPORTUNITIES

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While Norway marked the centenary of its rule of the Svalbard archipelago on 09 February 2020 with concerts and cake, Russia chose to mark the occasion by asserting that Russia has 'long-term plans to strengthen, diversify and modernise its presence' there. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov sent a letter to his Norwegian counterpart reiterating long-running concerns that Russian interests and activities are being discriminated against in Svalbard. The 1920 Svalbard Treaty, which established Norwegian sovereignty over the archipelago, also granted rights to all the [signatory states](#), including the right to settle and engage in economic activity. Russia is the sole signatory to have made use of this and Russian companies have mined coal in the area for years. Norway's response: Norwegian sovereignty over Svalbard is undisputed and it will not consult with other parties over how this is exercised.

The Arctic has always been an important region for Russia, but events in recent years have demonstrated its significance to Russian security. Moscow's Arctic strategy dominated the headlines in 2007 after a Mir submersible planted a Russian flag on the seabed in the Arctic to support its claim that the underwater Lomonosov Ridge was an extension of Russia's continental shelf. The following year, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) released a [report](#) stating that the Arctic could be 'the geographically largest unexplored prospective area' for oil on the planet, and estimated the mean total of undiscovered conventional oil and gas resources to be approximately 90 billion barrels of oil and 1,669 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

Amid growing international interest in the region, both in terms of exploitation of its natural resources and conservation, Russia is keen to protect its vital national interests and has been taking steps to secure its position. The [2014 military doctrine](#) affirmed, for the first time, Russia's intention to protect its national interests in the Arctic, and was preceded by the establishment of a new Arctic Command, which came into operation on 1 December 2014, and the return of a permanent Russian military presence in the region.

In recent months there has been a flurry of Russian governmental activity targeting the Arctic. A new tax regime covering the region was pushed through at the end of January 2020, offering incentives to state oil majors for significant investment in Arctic fields. Furthermore, at the end of 2019, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev signed a 15-year development plan for the [Northern Sea Route](#) (NSR), which envisages the development of infrastructure projects, including airports, railways and ports, as well as the construction of a large number of new icebreakers. Rosatom, Russia's state-owned nuclear energy company, is at the heart of these plans, as the operator of

the country's [nuclear icebreaker fleet](#). Russia would be able to benefit economically from a rise in international shipping along the route by offering icebreaker escorts, as well as refuelling and re-supply stations.

OUTLOOK

Lavrov's letter emphasises the ongoing challenge that Norway (and others) face from Russia, which will continue to pursue its interests using all available means. The Arctic will remain high in Russia's priorities and it is likely to increase its activities in the region. It is an area Moscow is able to dominate geopolitically and there are significant economic opportunities on offer, both in the form of untapped hydrocarbon resources and the NSR. Russia's ambitious plans for the NSR are not assured though. A growing number of global companies have [pledged](#) not to use Arctic transshipment routes amidst growing international concern about the environmental impact.