



## Moscow Pledges “Preventive Measures” Against NATO in Arctic

In an interview with Russian news agency RIA Novosti published on September 17, Russian ambassador-at-large Nikolay Korchunov decried increasing hostilities in the Arctic due to what he labeled as the destructive policies of the United States and its allies, declaring that NATO’s military enlargement in the Arctic jeopardizes regional security and thus warrants countermeasures from Russia.

The senior Russian Foreign Ministry official added that NATO’s move to welcome Finland — which has already joined the bloc as full-fledged member — and Sweden demonstrated that NATO backed “forceful scenarios to increase its own security in the North at the expense of the security of other countries.” At the moment, Stockholm’s NATO application has been stalled by Türkiye and Hungary, both NATO members that have been hesitant to ratify Sweden’s bid owing to outstanding grievances with Stockholm.

Korchunov cautioned that Moscow would retaliate with “a set of necessary measures, including preventive ones,” considering the goals outlined in Russia’s foreign policy and Arctic strategy.

Concurrently, however, Korchunov maintained that Russia would continue encouraging mutual trust in the Arctic region to champion dialogue, stability, and collaboration.

Previously, Russian President Vladimir Putin singled out the development of the Arctic, together with the Far East, as Russia’s strategic priority. Putin had also erstwhile highlighted that the Arctic region was of great significance to Russia in the realms of natural resources and defense.

Last year, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg accused Russia of being a strategic challenge to NATO in the Arctic, urging for an enlarged military presence in the region.

In turn, Russian officials have insisted that Moscow’s policy in the far North was no threat to NATO, declaring that NATO’s “incursion” into the region would only increase regional tensions. Besides, Russia has claimed that it has always desired peaceful regional collaboration, despite its readiness to defend its territories and interests when necessary.

In August, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu visited Russian military outposts in the Arctic and inspected Northern Fleet garrisons that keep watch over a major regional shipping route.



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In a post on its Telegram channel, Russia's Defense Ministry announced that Shoigu had surveyed the combat readiness and living conditions of the forces based on the Novaya Zemlya archipelago in the Arctic Ocean. The statement divulged that Shoigu had flown over the central testing ground in a helicopter with the chief of the Rosatom nuclear energy agency, Alexey Likhachev.

Shoigu also inspected the housing conditions for military staff on the northern islands, as well as a local school and kindergarten.

In another post on Telegram, the ministry explained how Russia's Northern Fleet guaranteed the security of the Northern Sea Route, and disclosed that various navy vessels were presently at sea in the region.

Moreover, a fleet of MiG-31 fighter/interceptor jets guard the airspace over Russia's territorial waters in the Arctic Ocean, whereas radio-technical forces track regional air traffic.

A Bloomberg news report in July indicated that a Russian tanker containing crude traversed Arctic waters to China amid Moscow's attempts to use the Northern Sea Route to counter Western sanctions. The Aframax-class tanker *Primorsky Prospect*, loaded with around 730,000 barrels of Urals crude, departed Russia's Baltic port of Ust-Luga on July 11-12, based on ship tracking data.

The vessel, constructed in 2010 and owned by Russian shipping company Sovcomflot, was discovered sailing north up the coast of Norway, depicting its destination as Rizhao in China, where it was poised to arrive on August 12, as per the same Bloomberg report.

EU sanctions on Russian seaborne crude exports, along with price caps on oil and petroleum products originating from Russia, have led to a recalibration in global oil supply. Within months in 2022, Moscow rerouted most of its oil flows that used to head to the EU to Asian markets — increasing shipments to China and India.

That being said, Russia's new export destinations have prolonged delivery times, rendering freight more expensive.

With the Northern Sea Route (NSR), trade voyages could arrive at their destinations as fast as two weeks earlier than if they were to employ the southern route via the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal.

In that vein, Russia hopes the NSR could become a key shipping lane, with Moscow investing immensely in its infrastructure.

At the moment, Russian nuclear energy firm Rosatom, which boasts a fleet of nuclear ice-breakers and oversees the NSR, has been partnering oil producers to evaluate a possible reroute of crude shipments from Baltic ports through the Arctic.

Thick sea ice prevents the Arctic route from being used during winter months. Nonetheless, Novatek, Russia's second-largest natural gas producer, which operates liquefied natural gas projects on the Arctic coast, hopes to start year-round eastbound navigation via the NSR at the beginning of 2024.

Aleksey Chekunkov, minister for the development of the Far East and the Arctic, told Russia Today during the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2023 that the Arctic was vital for the future of Russia's economy. Chekunkov remarked that infrastructure projects such as the Eastern Range and NSR, and several projects to extract and process the region's natural resources, would benefit Russia in upcoming decades.

"The Arctic and the Far East are a treasure trove. The Arctic is where the future economy of Russia is



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being built. What happens today in the Arctic and the Far East will serve many generations of Russians,” Chekunkov said.

Chekunkov added, “It is the most dynamically developing sea transport corridor in the world today. Over the last seven years its freight turnover has grown more than eight times from 4 million tons to 34 million. By 2031 we can expect Russian cargo turnover alone to reach 200 million tons per year,” Chekunkov stated, noting that these volumes are comparable to what goes through the Suez Canal today. Apart from the route’s importance as a shorter link between Asia and Europe and its economic benefits, it also provides a safe alternative to other maritime freight passageways due to being distant from conflict zones, the minister noted.

Chekunkov emphasized that many foreign countries have been keen on joining Russia in developing the NSR, noting that such partnerships have to be made as soon as possible, as it might be too late for them to do so in a decade’s time.

“Those who are compelled to delay their cooperation with Russia for political reasons will regret it tomorrow. China, India and the Middle East, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are actively cooperating with us. These countries will be the beneficiaries of the Northern Sea Route development in the next ten years. Over the next ten years it will become a global transportation corridor where only those who can partner with us today will be able to go,” Chekunkov declared.

The minister opined that Western sanctions placed on Russia over the Russo-Ukrainian conflict have had positive outcomes for Russia’s efforts to develop the Arctic region. He compared such embargoes to a “disease in the human body, which provokes an immune reaction,” insisting that “the Russian economy is going through this immune reaction with dignity.”

“We haven’t even stumbled. The pace of new investments has increased. While we had 248 investment projects in 2021, the number reached 260 in 2022, while over 50 new businesses were launched. Some projects required changes ... but companies were able to adjust. All in all, it made us stronger, it made us more self-sufficient, it gave the industry the push to build what we’ve been buying for ten years,” he said.



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