Russia bolsters military presence in Arctic

Russia’s efforts to extend its military base footprint in the Arctic region are starting to bear fruit. Tim Ripley analyses recent developments in Russian military basing in the country’s far north

Key Points
- The Russian military has set up new bases across the strategic Arctic region as climate change affects sea ice and shipping routes.
- Air defence enhancements are a priority for Moscow to address reciprocal military build-ups by its adversaries.
- Forces that can be projected into the region are being expanded but the harsh climate creates severe difficulties to maintain a year-round posture.

Russia’s 414th anti-aircraft regiment formally stood up for duty on 3 April after a ceremony at Tiksi airbase in northern Russia. The unit’s two S-300PS batteries are strategically located 3 km southwest of Tiksi Air Base, projecting power and defending economic interests in the Russian Arctic and along the Laptev Sea.

The event was the latest demonstration of Moscow’s increasing military interest in the Arctic. The region’s growing importance was demonstrated by President Vladimir Putin’s visit in March 2017 to Nagurskoye base in the Franz Joseph Land archipelago to view efforts to expand the military outpost on Russia’s most northerly territory.

Imagery of the visit illustrated the challenges faced by militaries attempting to establish a presence in the Arctic. Between November and March, the region is shrouded in darkness. Sub-zero temperatures make it impossible for humans to live outside during winter months and storm systems prevent air and naval activity for long periods. The Arctic ice cap also severely inhibits shipping traffic, even though global warming is opening up some routes during the short summer between mid-June and mid-August.

Throughout the 2010s, Russia reinforced and expanded its military footprint in the Arctic region. This has been a multi-faceted strategy that extends beyond just building more outposts across the country’s far north.

Russia’s military command structure in the region has been reorganised and streamlined. A new organisation has been established to run air defence operations, and new forces to project power in the Arctic are being stood up. The result is that the Kremlin is now better placed to project its military strength across the Arctic.
In December 2014, the Russian Ministry of Defence embarked on a significant reorganisation of its military district structure and established a dedicated theatre command for the Arctic region. According to Russian government announcements and military doctrine publications, the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command was established to take control of all of Russia’s Arctic air and sea zones, as well as the Arkhangelsk, Komi Republic, Murmansk, and Nenets Autonomous regions. It was also given responsibility for the defence of islands stretching along the Russian northern coast from the Kola Peninsula eastwards towards eastern Siberia.

Reconnaissance unit members of the Russian Northern Fleet’s Arctic mechanised infantry brigade conduct military exercises to learn how to ride a reindeer sled at a reindeer farm near the Lovozero settlement on the Kola peninsula, Murmansk Oblast, northwestern Russia (Lev Fedoseyev\TASS via Getty Images)

As a result, the Severomorsk-headquartered Northern Fleet was transformed into a joint-theatre command with operational control of all air, land, and sea forces in its area of responsibility. This reorganisation transferred fixed-wing and helicopter units of the Russian Aerospace Force (RuAF) based in the Northern Fleet area to the Naval Aviation organisation.

Ground Force motor rifle units were also transferred to the Northern Fleet’s Coastal Forces organisation. The exception to this merger was the RuAF air defence units, which remain
administratively part of their parent service but operationally report to the Joint Strategic Command headquarters. The RuAF air defence units also report to the national air defence organisation.

At the time of writing, the commander of the Joint Strategic Command was Vice-Admiral Aleksandr Moiseyev. According to his published military biography, Moiseyev is a career submariner who has spent the bulk of his service in the Northern Fleet after joining the Soviet Navy in 1981.

Vice-Adm Moiseyev controls his command from the Northern Fleet’s headquarters complex on the hillside above the port of Severomorsk. The headquarters of the 45th Air and Air Defence Army was formed in December 2015 out of the Northern Fleet’s naval aviation organisation to become the Joint Strategic Command air component headquarters, and is also located in the city.

Land operations in the Joint Strategic Command’s area come under the control of the 14th Army Corps headquarters in Murmansk, which is sometimes referred to as the Northern Fleet Army Corps. It was established out of the Northern Fleet Coastal Forces headquarters in April 2017. Similar to the air domain, this headquarters and its subordinate units are part of the Russian Navy rather than the Ground Forces.

The core military assets of the Joint Strategic Command are the surface units and submarines of the Northern Fleet. Its key components are the 43rd Missile Ship Division, which controls the Admiral Kuznetsov carrier battle group when it is at sea and other large surface combatants, and the Kola Mixed Force Flotilla, which controls coastal defence missile boats, mine counter-measures ships, and other small vessels.

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