



Julia Goddard/Trompet

The Battle for the Arctic

‘Russia’s icebreakers make it king of the Arctic, and America is just a pauper.’

- Jeremiah Jacques
- [27-05-2019](#)

St. Petersburg

Our entrance into St. Petersburg via boat could have been difficult and dangerous had it not been for Russia’s famous icebreaker ships that came through a few weeks earlier. Through the window of our cabin on the M/S Princess Anastasia, we saw miles of ice that had been shattered to make way for commerce and tourism in the waters around the nation’s former capital city.

Russia’s icebreakers in the Baltic Sea are a significant economic asset. But there’s another region where Russia’s expanding fleet of icebreakers is making a more meaningful difference, not only economically but also militarily: the Arctic.

Historically, the frigid Arctic has been relatively free of the geopolitical struggles among world powers that have beset most other regions. But in recent decades, due to thawing ice and improving technology, this has begun to change. The region has become increasingly important to the Arctic nations: the United States, Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. And none has been more determined to dominate it than Russia, which is accomplishing its objectives largely with icebreakers.

Energy and Minerals

The U.S. Geological Survey estimates that the Arctic holds 30 percent of the world’s undiscovered natural gas and 13 percent of oil. It also contains vast caches of minerals, such as gold, zinc and platinum. Altogether these resources are worth an estimated \$30 trillion, and the Russians are tapping into them at unprecedented rates.

The Yamal liquid natural gas plant is one notable example. Located almost 380 miles north of the Arctic Circle, *yamal* in the local language literally means “end of the world.” Temperatures drop lower than 58 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, and for seven to nine months each year the waters around this wasteland are frozen solid in ice up to seven feet thick. Until mining facilities are opened on the moon, you will not find a more hostile environment for industry than the one surrounding Yamal LNG.

But thanks to a new fleet of 15 Arc7 icebreakers that can carry liquefied natural gas shipments, the Russians can keep operations humming year-round as they extract and transport Yamal’s 44 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves. “[T]he LNG icebreaker carrier ... will allow LNG to be transported not only during the summer months, but also all year long,” Hellenic Shipping News wrote (April 16).

Grand Vision, Tightening Grip

During a visit to Yamal LNG in 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin made clear that the plant and its icebreakers are part

of a larger vision to dominate the region. “This is perhaps the largest step forward in our developing of the Arctic,” he said. “Now we can safely say that Russia will expand through the Arctic this and next century.”

A major part of this expansion is development of the Northern Sea Route, which runs along Russia’s Arctic coast from the Kara Sea to the Bering Sea and the Pacific Ocean. With this route, Russia can ship gas from Yamal and other Arctic locations to energy-thirsty Eastern nations weeks faster than the time required to go west around Europe and through the Suez Canal. In the case of China, the most energy-thirsty nation of all, the Northern Sea Route cuts shipment times by as much as 15 days.

And Russia is now tightening its grip on this route in a troubling way. Moscow announced in March that foreign ships must submit a request 45 days in advance, bring a Russian maritime pilot aboard for the crossing, and pay hefty transit fees. Any vessel that fails to comply can be detained and even “destroyed,” Moscow said. Even if a foreign vessel abides by all the requirements, authorities say they can reject any request for passage with no explanation.

The worrisome—and illegal—part of these new Russian rules concerns the Bering Strait, which lies between the U.S. and Russia. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) says waters within 200 nautical miles from a given nation’s coast constitute that country’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ), and the nation has control over them. But international straits such as the Bering are excluded from EEZs. The UNCLOS guarantees freedom of navigation through them.

Russia, however, insists that the Northern Sea Route, including the Bering Strait, is subject to its new rules. Due to this illegal policy, U.S. Coast Guard Cmdr. Sean Fahey recently warned that “the rights and freedoms all states enjoy to operate ships and aircraft in the maritime domain” might soon become “the most important strategic issue” in the Arctic.

But because of an ever widening “icebreaker gap” between Russia and the rest of the world, Russia’s grip on the Arctic will only get tighter.

‘King of the Arctic’

“You can’t explore the depths of the Arctic, or traverse its seas, if you can’t get to it,” Terrell Starr wrote for Foxtrot Alpha in “Russia’s Icebreakers Make It King of the Arctic, and America Is Just a Pauper” (Jan. 26, 2017).

With 54 vessels, including seven nuclear-powered models, Russia already has the world’s largest fleet of icebreakers by far. A distant second place, with 10 ships, goes to Finland. Canada has seven, as does Sweden. The United States has five, none of which is nuclear.

The number of icebreakers alone doesn’t tell the whole story. Only Russia and the U.S. operate “heavy” icebreakers, which have the power to break through thicker ice packs. But here again, Russia has a major advantage with two operational heavy icebreakers and four more in refit. The U.S. has just one—the 42-year-old USCGC Polar Star—and it operates in Antarctica, on the other side of the globe.

Russia’s heavy icebreakers are considerably newer, and they remain in the Arctic year-round. Putin says that by 2035, Russia will have 13 heavy icebreakers, including nine nuclear-powered behemoths. At the end of the year, Russia’s 33,000-ton Arktika-class of heavy nuclear icebreakers will undergo sea trials. Not far behind will be the 71,000-ton nuclear-powered Lider-class, which will be the world’s heaviest icebreaker many times over. The Polar Star, in comparison, weighs around 10,000 tons.

“The highways of the Arctic are icebreakers,” U.S. Sen. Dan Sullivan recently said. “Russia has superhighways, and we have dirt roads with potholes.” As Russia’s fleets keep growing, the U.S. and other nations will find it ever more difficult to challenge Putin’s control of the Arctic.

Military Matters

In the last few years, Russia has rushed to revive many abandoned Soviet military bases in the Arctic. Thanks largely to its icebreakers, the Russians have revamped airstrips and radar facilities on numerous islands, established four new Arctic brigade command units, opened 16 ports, built new air bases, and deployed anti-ship and ground-to-air missile systems to the region.

“The modernization of Arctic forces and of Arctic military infrastructure is taking place at an unprecedented pace not seen even in Soviet times,” Mikhail Barabanov, editor in chief of *Moscow Defense Brief*, told Reuters (Jan. 30, 2017).

With these bases and missiles, Russia can guard its energy claims and enforce its new rules for the Northern Sea Route even if other Arctic nations dispute their legality.

‘A Dangerous New Era’

After the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991, Russia trudged through the next decade as a depleted and exhausted nation. It was outside the mainstream of international affairs, and many Westerners ignored it.

Then Putin came to power and began to right the ship and change its course. In August 2008, he shocked much of the

world by invading the former Soviet nation of Georgia and bringing one fifth of its internationally recognized territory under Russian control.

That October, *Trumpet* editor in chief Gerald Flurry wrote about what the invasion signaled for the future: “Russia’s attack on Georgia in August marks the beginning of a dangerous new era in history. This was the first military strike of a rising Asian superpower—and there will be more! ... We have witnessed the beginning of a new era!”

Mr. Flurry then speculated on which former Soviet nation Russia might set its sights on next: “Will a crisis occur over Ukraine? That area is the breadbasket of Russia, and surely it is willing to wage war over that as well.” Time proved that forecast accurate, with Russia’s 2014 invasion and annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula and destabilization of Ukraine’s eastern regions.

Since then, Putin has continued using his power to prevent Georgia, Ukraine and other former Soviet countries from developing closer relations with Europe. He made Russia a major player in the Middle East, where it has weakened U.S. influence, assisted the brutal Syrian regime, and helped Iran keep pursuing nuclear weapons. Putin has also transformed Russia’s military into a modern and more lethal 21st-century force, including his militarization and control of the Arctic.

It is clear that Putin is restoring Russia’s power and boosting its international relevance back toward Soviet levels. And as Mr. Flurry wrote, the world is now in a “dangerous new era.”

Bible prophecy shows that, in the years ahead, Putin will lead Russia in an even more aggressive direction. In his booklet [*The Prophesied ‘Prince of Russia,’*](#) Mr. Flurry explains that Putin is personally described in ancient Bible prophecies in Ezekiel 38 and 39. “We need to watch Vladimir Putin closely,” he writes. “I believe he is *almost certain* to be the ‘prince of Rosh’ whom God inspired Ezekiel to write about 2,500 years ago!”

Vladimir Putin’s rule indicates that “[w]e are entering into the worst crisis ever in man’s history,” he writes, but adds that these developments are “super-inspiring at the same time.”

Mr. Flurry continues: “VLADIMIR PUTIN IS A SIGN, LITERALLY *asign*, THAT JESUS CHRIST IS ABOUT TO RETURN! This is one of the most inspiring messages in the Bible. What we are seeing in Russia ultimately leads to the transition from man ruling man to *God* ruling man! And it is almost here! It is just a few short years away.”

The rise of Putin’s Russia, including its dominance of the Arctic, signals that nuclear World War_{III} is near. That is a fact that should sober every one of us. But these trends are also intimately tied to the best imaginable news: Jesus Christ will soon return to Earth and bring in an age of unprecedented peace and prosperity for the whole world. ■

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