

Russia launches floating nuclear power plant amid new “scramble for the Arctic”

Clara Weiss
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Last Friday, Russia launched a floating nuclear power plant, the Akademik Lomonosov, in the Arctic Sea from its port in Murmansk. The vessel is supposed to bring electric power to settlements and companies that are extracting hydrocarbons and precious stones in the Chukotka area.

The 144-meter (472-feet)-long platform is equipped with two KLT-40 nuclear reactors that are designed to generate power for up to 100,000 people living in the Chukotka region and companies operating there to extract raw material resources. It will first cross some 5,000 kilometers along the Arctic coast to Chukotka, where it will begin pumping out electricity offshore.

The launching of the Akademik Lomonosov platform is part of efforts by the Kremlin to significantly bolster its infrastructure in the region, including by electrifying it, building ports, and further expanding its icebreaker fleet.

It is the first time a floating nuclear power plant has been deployed since the US maintained one in the Panama Canal in the 1960s. Two Chinese state-backed companies are now also pursuing plans for at least 20 floating nuclear plants. American scientists are also reported to be working on similar projects. The Akademik Lomonosov has been criticized as a “floating Chernobyl” by the environmental group Greenpeace—referring to the 1987 nuclear disaster at Chernobyl—and a “nuclear Titanic.”

Fears about a nuclear accident are also running high because the launching of the Akademik Lomonosov comes just weeks after two significant military accidents in the region. In July, a fire on the nuclear submarine Losharik in the Arctic Barents Sea claimed the lives of 14 high-ranking Russian navy officers. A leading navy officer ominously stated at their funeral that they had averted a “planetary catastrophe.”

Then, in August, an accident occurred at a nuclear facility near the northern Russian town of Nyonoksa. Seven people, among them five nuclear scientists, were

killed, and radiation that was up to 16 times higher than average was released. The cause for the accident is widely believed to have been a nuclear-powered missile test gone awry. In both cases, the Kremlin was engaged in an attempt to cover up the scale of the accidents.

Doctors at the local Arkhangelsk hospital who treated victims of the Nyonoksa accident later told the outlet *Meduza*, which is close to Russia’s liberal opposition, that none of the medical personnel had been warned that the injured had been exposed to high levels of radiation. Consequently, no security measures by the medical personnel had been taken and both they and other patients in the emergency room had been exposed to dangerous levels of radiation. One doctor also reported that files about civilian patients treated at the hospital for injuries they suffered during the explosion were later destroyed. Moreover, reports suggest that four stations in the region measuring radiation were turned off in the immediate wake of the accident.

While the danger of new nuclear accidents is very real, it cannot be understood in isolation from the international nuclear arms race, triggered above all by US imperialism, which has unilaterally withdrawn from the INF treaty, and the escalating military encirclement by the imperialist powers of both Russia and China. The “new scramble for the Arctic” has become an intrinsic component of these developments.

The Arctic is estimated to hold 13 percent of the world’s undiscovered oil reserves and 30 percent of its natural gas reserves, as well as huge deposits of rare-earth elements and other minerals such as nickel, uranium and diamonds. Climate change has led to a reduction of the Arctic sea ice levels by 40 percent since the late 1970s, making it more likely that significant portions of these resources can become accessible for extraction.

It will also make it possible to establish a direct sea transit route from Europe to Asia. Naval traffic across the

Russian Arctic has already increased significantly in recent years. Lastly, the melting ice is set to fuel long-standing, unresolved disputes between the adjacent countries about territorial claims to the Arctic's land and seas.

In recent years, the Arctic has seen the largest military exercises since the end of the Cold War, including one by Russia with up to 70,000 troops in September 2017, and one by NATO in October 2018 that involved 50,000 troops, 20,000 of them from the US.

The Arctic is of central geo-strategic and economic significance to Russia. By virtue of its geography, Russia has a vast border across the Arctic Ocean. Up to two thirds of Russia's oil and gas reserves are estimated to be located in its Arctic exclusive economic zone. The region, though sparsely populated by only 2 million out of 140 million Russians, accounts for 20 percent of the country's GDP, which is highly dependent upon the extraction and export of raw materials.

Facing massive military and economic pressure from imperialism, Russia has focused much of its military spending in recent years on expanding and revamping its Northern Fleet and capacities in the Arctic more generally. Most recently, on Saturday, the Russian Ministry of Defense tweeted that there had been two successful ballistic missile tests from nuclear-powered submarines in the Arctic Ocean and the Barents Sea.

Well aware of the central economic significance of the Arctic to the faltering Russian economy, which is already targeted by massive sanctions by the US and EU, as well as to China, the US has escalated its push toward countering both Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

In a speech in May, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo threateningly announced that "Under President Trump, we are fortifying America's security and diplomatic presence" in the Arctic...we are hosting military exercises, strengthening our force presence, rebuilding our icebreaker fleet, expanding Coast Guard funding, and creating a new senior military post for Arctic Affairs."

Pompeo also declared that the US would bolster its presence in Greenland to renew "its leadership in this region." An article by *Politico* in May noted that Greenland was emerging as "the centerpiece of the State Department's effort to foil China's Arctic dreams." In addition to its geo-strategic location, which makes it an important corridor for naval traffic between the Arctic and North Atlantic, Greenland holds what is believed to be the world's largest deposit of rare-earth minerals outside of

China that are used to make batteries and cellphones. The US Interior Department last year called these minerals critical to the economic and national security of the United States.

In 2018, the US had already pressured Denmark to reject Chinese offers to help build three international airports in Greenland that would have allowed for direct flights to the US and Europe. A few weeks ago, Trump launched an unsuccessful bid to buy Greenland from Denmark. Last week, the US announced that it would open a consulate in Greenland for the first time in decades.

Pushed into a corner by US imperialism on a global scale, Russia and China to some extent collaborate on foreign policy and energy issues, including in the Arctic. At the International Arctic Forum in St. Petersburg in June of this year, Russian President Putin declared his support for Chinese plans for a "Polar Silk Road," which forms part of the Chinese "One Belt-One Road" initiative. The "Polar Silk Road" was first unveiled in a white paper in January 2018. At this point, China's most significant access to the raw material resources of the Arctic currently consists in its collaboration in the Russian Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project.

At the same forum, Putin declared that Russia was planning on building three nuclear icebreakers, in addition to four that already exist. By 2035, Russia is planning to have a fleet of 13 heavy icebreakers, nine of them nuclear-powered. Russia is also planning to dramatically increase the cargo it ships across the Arctic, from 20 million metric tons in 2018 to 80 million metric tons in 2025.



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