

Putin Vows to Beef Up Arctic Military Presence

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Expanding Russia's military presence in the Arctic region is among the top priorities for the nation's armed forces, President Vladimir Putin said Tuesday.

Speaking at a meeting with the top military brass, Putin said Russia was "intensifying the development of that promising region" and needs to have "every lever for the protection of its security and national interests there."

He emphasized the importance of the Soviet-era base at the New Siberian Islands, which the military started to overhaul this year. Russian officials have described the facility as key for protecting shipping routes that link Europe with the Pacific region across the Arctic Ocean.

Putin also said Russia would restore a number of Arctic military air bases that fell into neglect after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

Russia, the U.S., Canada, Denmark and Norway have all been trying to assert jurisdiction over parts of the Arctic, which is believed to hold up to a quarter of the planet's undiscovered oil and gas. In 2007, Russia staked a symbolic claim to the Arctic seabed by dropping a canister containing the Russian flag on the ocean floor from a small submarine at the North Pole.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Tuesday that the military next year would form a dedicated group of forces in the Arctic to protect Russia's national interests in the region.

Shoigu added that the Russian armed forces would also work to expand their presence elsewhere.

He said the Russian navy will continue to maintain its permanent presence in the Mediterranean, which was restored this year for the first time since Cold War times. Until recently, the Russian Navy only made sporadic visits to the area, but it now has a rotating squadron of ships in the Mediterranean.

Russia has been a key protector and ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad and the deployment was part of efforts to project its power.

Shoigu said that Russian forces on the far eastern Sakhalin Island were also beefed up this year.

Putin, elected to a third presidential term in 2012, has sought to revive Russia's Soviet-era clout and military might amid a strain in relations with the U.S. amid disputes over the U.S.-led NATO missile shield and other issues.

He reaffirmed Tuesday his position that the U.S. missile shield would damage the strategic balance. Russia has described the missile defense array as a threat to its nuclear deterrent and rejected U.S. assurances that it is not aimed against Russian forces.

Putin said the massive effort to modernize Russia's military arsenals would continue next year, when the military will commission more than 40 intercontinental ballistic missiles, more than 200 military aircraft and two nuclear submarines, among other weapons.

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