

ALEXANDER DALZIEL

The fishery and
Russia's quest for Arctic maritime power

Fishing for **TROUBLE**

July 2026



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Executive summary | *sommaire*

Russia wants to be a great power at sea. It is bringing all its fleets online to achieve that aim – and fishing vessels are not exception. Indeed, the fish they catch feed geopolitics, too.

President Vladimir Putin and Russia's leadership consider fishing fleets and their catches part of the geopolitical tool kit. We know this because recent Russian strategic documents indicate that the integration of civilian fleets into military and state planning and operations in peace and war is underway.

Fishing fleets have become one more layer in Russia's strategy to shore up its control of Arctic waters alongside dual-use infrastructure ashore, and hybrid warfare techniques – covert activities that it can deny – to intimidate, influence, and spy on neighbouring states.

Russia's reputation as a reliable food supplier to the global market has taken a beating because of its attempts to block Ukrainian grain shipments across the Black Sea to low-income markets worldwide. To address this, Russia is trying to use fish exports and its knowledge in the sector to cultivate countries in the "Global South." And, having gained important market share in China and the EU, Russia is trying to bolster its relations with the former and its influence in the latter. It is clear, especially in the case of Europe, that geopolitics are part of Russia's export strategy.

Not all is well, of course. Russia thinks it exports too much raw fish and that other countries get the credit for processing it. Moreover, the Kremlin needs to convince regular Russians, whose access to fish has decreased since 2014, that feeding them is the state's priority. So, President Putin and his government dedicate efforts to say that serving the domestic market is now their main objective – a claim that sits uncomfortably with the desire to tap the lucrative export market. In this context, Russia emphasizes social stability through food security – goals that also align with the language found in its national security and maritime strategy documents.

Russia's strategy will undoubtedly have global impacts. For instance, will Russia's fishing fleets – and Putin's broader maritime ambitions in the region – harm the little-understood and ecologically sensitive fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean? Russia is a

signatory to the international agreement that has put a moratorium on such fishing. With the agreement set to expire in 2036, Canada, the United States, and the other Arctic coastal states will need to closely monitor how Russia integrates Arctic fisheries into its broader geopolitical strategy in anticipation of potentially difficult negotiations.

Moreover, the areas where Russia conducts its two most important fisheries – the Barents Sea and the North Pacific – are highly relevant to other Arctic nations. Russian fishing fleets are one more part of the “grey zone” in spaces that are also vital to Canada, the United States, and their allies and partners in northern Europe and northeast Asia.

Russia’s Arctic ambitions are at the heart of the growing struggle for security, influence, and power in northern waters. Canada, the US, and their allies must urgently strengthen maritime security strategies to counter Russia’s diversified toolkit. Sustained surveillance and early detection will be essential to prevent emerging threats. Coast guards, fisheries enforcement agencies, Western diplomats, and Arctic coastal communities, which greatly depend on fisheries for their livelihoods, must be prepared for the reality that, under Putin, fishing is not just about fish – it’s about leverage cast far beyond the nets. [MLI](#)

La Russie aspire à devenir une grande puissance maritime. Elle mobilise l'ensemble de ses flottes dans ce but – y compris ses bateaux de pêche. Ses prises constituent également un levier d'influence.

La Russie mise sur son statut d'exportateur mondial dominant pour accroître son influence en Asie, en Europe et au-delà. Pour Vladimir Poutine et les dirigeants russes, les flottes de pêche et leurs prises font partie de l'arsenal géopolitique. Ce fait est connu, car certains textes de stratégie russes récents soulignent l'intégration en cours de la marine civile à la planification et aux opérations militaires et étatiques, en temps de paix comme en temps de guerre.

Les chercheurs relèvent certains éléments probants le corroborant. Les flottes de pêche représentent désormais un élément additionnel de la stratégie russe visant à renforcer la présence maritime et le contrôle sur les eaux arctiques, au moyen des infrastructures à double usage sur les côtes, des bateaux de pêche en mer, ainsi que des techniques de guerre hybride – activités secrètes pouvant être démenties – pour intimider, influencer et espionner les États voisins.

La Russie a terni sa réputation de fournisseur alimentaire fiable en bloquant les expéditions de céréales ukrainiennes à travers la mer Noire vers les marchés à faibles revenus. Pour y remédier, elle tente d'utiliser ses exportations de poisson et son expertise dans ce secteur pour se rapprocher des pays du Sud. Et, ayant conquis d'importantes parts de marché en Chine et dans l'UE, elle cherche à renforcer ses relations avec la première et son influence au sein de la seconde. Pour l'Europe en particulier, la géopolitique est essentielle pour la stratégie d'exportation de la Russie.

Bien évidemment, tout ne va pas pour le mieux. La Russie estime que les pays qui transforment ses trop abondantes exportations s'en attribuent le crédit. De plus, le Kremlin doit persuader la population russe de l'importance accordée par l'État à leur approvisionnement alimentaire, en dépit de la baisse de l'offre en poisson depuis 2014. Le président Poutine et son gouvernement s'emploient donc à affirmer que l'approvisionnement du marché intérieur est désormais leur objectif principal – ce qui coïncide mal avec la volonté d'exploiter le lucratif marché d'exportation. Dans ce contexte, l'accent est mis sur la stabilité sociale par le biais de la sécurité alimentaire – et s'aligne sur le discours tenu dans les textes de stratégie en matière de sécurité nationale et maritime.

La stratégie de la Russie aura inévitablement des répercussions mondiales. Par exemple, il convient de s'interroger sur la possibilité que les flottes de pêche russes – ainsi que les ambitions maritimes considérables de Poutine – portent préjudice aux pêcheries généralement méconnues et écologiquement sensibles de l'océan Arctique central. La Russie a signé le moratoire international sur ce type de pêche. Comme l'accord doit prendre fin en 2036, le Canada, les États-Unis et d'autres États côtiers devront surveiller de près comment la Russie intègre les pêches arctiques dans sa stratégie géopolitique étendue, en prévision de négociations potentiellement difficiles.

Enfin, les régions où la Russie pratique ses deux formes de pêche les plus actives, la mer de Barents et le Pacifique Nord, sont particulièrement importantes pour l'Arctique. Les flottes de pêche russes consolident la «zone grise» dans des espaces également cruciaux pour le Canada, les États-Unis ainsi que leurs alliés et partenaires en Europe du Nord et en Asie du Nord-Est.

Les aspirations arctiques de Poutine poussent l'Occident à s'engager dans une compétition accrue pour la sécurité, l'influence et le pouvoir dans les eaux boréales. Le Canada, les États-Unis et leurs alliés doivent d'urgence renforcer leur sécurité maritime pour repousser l'expansionnisme russe. Une surveillance constante et une détection précoce seront cruciales pour parer aux menaces émergentes. Les garde-côtes, les organismes responsables de l'application des lois sur la pêche, les diplomates occidentaux et les communautés côtières de l'Arctique, qui dépendent largement de la pêche, doivent se préparer à une réalité inéluctable : sous Poutine, la pêche ne concerne jamais seulement que les poissons – elle est un levier d'une portée bien plus grande que celle des filets.

Pour le Canada, les États-Unis, la Finlande, leurs alliés au sein de l'OTAN et leurs partenaires indopacifiques, la stratégie adoptée face aux ambitions de la Russie dans l'Arctique, manifestée par l'accroissement de sa flotte de brise-glaces nucléaires, repose sur le maintien de la stabilité et la poursuite assidue de leurs initiatives. Il est crucial que le Canada, les États-Unis et leurs alliés développent leurs capacités en matière de brise-glaces afin de répondre adéquatement aux besoins économiques, de souveraineté, d'approvisionnement pour les collectivités et de sécurité maritime. Dans de multiples

situations, la croissance économique de l'Arctique requiert l'investissement et l'appui des gouvernements. Cependant, le développement ne saurait émaner exclusivement du centre et des grandes entreprises. Afin de contrecarrer efficacement les perceptions erronées de la Russie quant à sa suprématie en Arctique, nous devons intensifier nos propres efforts en resserrant la coopération et l'interopérabilité entre nations démocratiques arctiques et populations du Nord. **MLI**

Introduction

Russia has made it no secret: it wants to have the status of a maritime power. Its *Maritime Doctrine*, the primary strategic statement of this intent, puts it in emphatic terms: President Vladimir Putin and his regime see Russia as “a great maritime power” (Russian Federation [RF] 2022a). That means it is talking up – but not always delivering – investments in the assets it needs to secure that status: ships, port infrastructure, sea lanes and so on.

One would expect the Russian Navy to be core to such an enterprise, and indeed it is. Its nuclear submarines are essential to projecting Russian power and deterring adversaries. But it is augmented by other elements of state power that extend beyond the military paradigm. Icebreakers are one such area, especially the fleet of eight nuclear icebreakers Russia operates in the Arctic (Dalziel 2026b). Commercial cargo fleets, most notably oil tankers and ice-hardened liquified natural gas (LNG) carriers, are now augmented by the so-called “shadow fleet” of sanction-busting vessels. The Coast Guard (RCG), Search and Rescue (SAR), and research fleets appear alongside the Navy in the *Maritime Doctrine* (RF 2022), projecting dimensions of Russian sea control off its coasts. And the Northern Sea Route (NSR) sea lane is a centrepiece of Russian geoeconomic strategy, with Russian sources positioning it as the backbone of the Russian national transport system and as a supposed asset of global significant.

One might be surprised, however, about the appearance of the fisheries in the *Maritime Doctrine's* list. And it is not at the end: the fishing fleet is named right after the more obvious militarily and economically significant commercial and navy fleets in a longer list of state and civilian fleets (RF 2022). It is therefore among the state tools Russia has identified to reach its goal of being a great maritime power. That needs unpacking if we are to understand the

set of maritime tools Russia conceives of as being relevant to the Putin regime's geopolitical and national security goals and methods. And while the fisheries' strategic value pales in comparison to the petroleum sector, this paper will show that fishing vessels and their catches are additional tools Russia brings to the geopolitical arena.

To do so, this paper will interrogate an expanded set of Russian-language sources to gain insight into that top-listed presence. The core strategic documents that define its efforts are the already mentioned *Maritime Doctrine*, the *National Security Strategy* (RF 2021), and its Arctic strategy documents (RF 2020c, 2020d, 2023). To widen the perspective, this paper will add a geopolitical and national security reading of three more documents to the mix: the *Fisheries Development Strategy* (RF 2019b), *Food Security Doctrine* (RF 2020a) and *Agriculture and Fisheries Development Strategy* (RF 2020b). It will update the reading of these documents by turning to Putin's public engagements since 2020 with the fisheries sector – and importantly, how the leaders of that sector engage him: the language they use, the themes they raise, and the objectives they set that transcend the commercial to gain grand strategic meaning. Their framing opens a window into what scholars call the “securitization” of the fishing sector – its treatment as an element of security, as opposed to a solely commercial activity. Thanks to recent scholarship, the paper can make better sense of the geopolitics and national security politics of the fisheries in this Russian-language material, and the paper draws on these sources throughout.

What the research finds is that fishing fleets and the fishing sector augment, advance, and diversify the geopolitical, geoeconomic, and national-security dimensions of Russian grand strategy. Geopolitically, it is about building Russian-flagged continual presence on the high seas, in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Antarctic Oceans. It is a tool of Russian influence, to cultivate a presence in the food politics of China, the so-called Global South and the European Union (EU). These geopolitical trajectories are all entangled with hybrid warfare concepts, such as intelligence collection, sabotage, and what one scholar calls “coercive signalling” (Vladymyrova 2026). And it aspires to strengthen both Russia's power projection and national security by developing the fishery sector's coastal infrastructure to provide a demographic foundation for the presence and operations of military and state-security agencies. Moreover, fisheries development strategies align closely with Russian national security

rationales, supporting the inference that these are motivated by more than purely commercial instincts. Finally, fisheries are defined as crucial to Russian food security, which the country's strategic documents depict as essential not just to the health of its citizens, but to its statehood – an intriguing insight into the Putin regime's expansive concept of national security.

This is not a sectoral study – its objective is to contribute to the public policy discussion of Russian activities relevant to the national defence and security threats, actual or potential, they present. Therefore, it has not undertaken to explore the gap between rhetoric and reality in Russian pronouncements and outcomes. Nonetheless, it will supplement its assessment with occasional insights into the challenges Russia has turning grand strategic intention into practical reality. As a baseline assumption, the reader should not believe that everything the Russia state says it plans to do translates into it getting done. But the general direction is clear: Russia wants to build up its fishing fleets and industry in ways that aid geopolitical goals and strengthen national security. And the strategic documents have a strong propaganda function: the Russian state wants ordinary Russians to believe it has a plan and is doing these things. Accountability, however, is in short supply in contemporary Russia, reflected in its worst-ever score in Transparency International's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International Russia 2026) .

The question this paper will ultimately try to answer is what we can learn from the Russian grand strategic conception of fishing fleets that will apply to the Arctic. It will, however, look at the main Russian fisheries – in the North Pacific, Barents Seas, and the High Seas – to provide a way to think about important Arctic agenda items, most notably the future of fisheries in the Arctic, embodied in the moratorium agreed upon in the 2018 Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (officially titled the Agreement to prevent unregulated high seas fisheries in the central Arctic Ocean) (Fisheries and Oceans Canada 2018), but also to the future negotiations between Canada, Denmark, and Russia to settle the delimitations of their extended continental shelves in the region. These questions need to be on the table of policymakers now: fish stocks are under pressure from global demand, climate change is altering their ecosystems and movements, and the Arctic Ocean will become more fishable – if there are commercial stocks there – as ice conditions change in the coming decades.

Means, (sea)ways and the fisheries in grand strategy

To start, this section will show how key developments in fishing sector strategy align closely to objectives of Russian grand strategy. These are building the fishing fleet, enhancing marine services, and vertically integrating the sector. As we will see, each of these ties to components of the suite of strategic documents that define the Putin regime's geopolitical and national security agenda, as Russia seeks presence at sea and preps its war readiness. Controlling the fisheries sector's commercial activities and leveraging it abroad and at home for non-commercial ends is one part of Russia's grand strategy.

Fishing fleet renewal and war readiness

Russia claims to want a modern fishing fleet but is struggling to build it. This is visible in Putin's press conferences from 2020 to 2025 with Ilya Shestakov. The head of the Russian Federal Fisheries Agency, known as Rosrybolovstvo, Shestakov repeatedly reports underwhelming results in building new ships for the fishing fleet. In 2020, Shestakov pointed out that Russia was building 107 new fishing vessels (President of Russia 2020). In 2022, he put the number at 105 new ships, and that number remained the same in 2023 (President of Russia 2022, 2023). In 2024, he had more progress to report: the total number of planned ships remained at 105, but he could confirm to the president that 22 of them were already under construction; moreover, plans were already evolving to add a second stage of shipbuilding, consisting of some 46 ships, although whether this was a component of the originally stated 105 or another 46 on top of them is unclear in the coverage (President of Russia 2024a). Finally, in 2025, he got more granular: shipyards had built 48 vessels – 25 factory freezer vessels and 23 crabbers – and that in 2026 Russia had plans for 24 more, of which 13 were factory freezer trawlers and 11 crabbers, as well as two scientific research vessels (President of Russia 2025a). While tracking the progress of the delivery of these promises is beyond the scope of this paper, Shestakov's words alone over time suggest less than stellar progress, even if those words can be trusted, which is less than certain in authoritarian Russia.

Russian sources present fleet renewal as urgent, although it is doubtful that it is well-positioned to compete for investments against the owners of the

MAP 1: Key Russian fisheries, the Barents Sea region



Source: Arto Vitikka, Arctic Centre, University of Lapland

naval, icebreaking and cargo fleets. As of 2023, the fleet numbered an estimated 1,534 vessels (FAO 2024). In 2019, the *Maritime Activities Strategy* and *Fisheries Development Strategy* presented scathing critiques of the condition of the fleet. It was aging, with almost the entire fleet of factory freezer trawlers in the country's prime fishing zones older than 5 years of age (RF 2019a, 2019b). Experts forecasted a lack of ship capacity by 2020, which they deemed would hold back the industry's prospects (RF 2019b). As a corrective, then, Russia's government set ambitious goals: the share of fishing vessels built in Russia was to grow from 10 per cent in 2016 to 60 per cent by 2025 and 80 per cent by 2030 (RF 2019b). Russia is almost certainly failing to meet these goals, as Shestakov's reports to the president suggest. Broadly constrained by sanctions, Russia's shipbuilding industry has slowed production of new vessels, including icebreakers, coast guard ships and naval vessels (Dalziel 2026a, 2026b; Kagermazov and Platonova 2025; Rybski 2025).

Here already we get a hint that fisheries have an importance beyond the commercial – they command presidential attention and are thus an element in state propaganda. The publicized presidential meetings make it obvious that remedying the failure to achieve fishing fleet renewal goals – or, perhaps

MAP 2: Key Russian fisheries, the North Pacific region



Source: Arto Vitikka, Arctic Centre, University of Lapland

more importantly, being seen to try to remedy it – is a matter of national importance to Russia and Putin. The Russian president’s handling of the underwhelming performance of building new fishing vessels is evident in the remedies he proposes. For instance, after fishery sector leaders in 2025 updated him on progress and the lack thereof on shipbuilding, Putin said he would turn to Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov and Maritime Collegium Director Nikolai Patrushev to help resolve the difficulties (President of Russia 2025b). That is very high-level involvement. Patrushev in particular hints that this is more than a commercial matter – the Maritime Collegium he leads is designed to coordinate the goals of Russian maritime strategy across the board and he came to the post with decades of experience in Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) and as a former chair of the National Security Council (Sukhankin 2024).

Russia’s strategic documents on national security make clear why fishing fleet renewal is getting this high-level attention – it a matter of the national security and war readiness of the Russian Federation. The *Maritime Doctrine* explains why: fishing fleet renewal aligns explicitly with its core elements, placing the building of a modern national fishing fleet among the top priorities

of both civilian and military shipbuilding while also advancing concepts for integrating civilian fleets into Russia's security and defence structures (RF 2022; Vladymyrova 2026). That is because the *Maritime Doctrine* brings civilian fleets under military control when there is an "immediate threat of aggression" or war, imposing an obligation for "conscription and use" of fishing vessels by the military (RF 2022). The fishing fleet is a component of war readiness.

Evidence for this claim is further furnished by Putin's attendance at a flag-raising ceremony for three new fishing vessels in 2022 during the first months of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine. There, he called on the patriotism of crews to sail with "honour and pride under the flag of the Russian Federation." He described fishing and shipbuilding as national priorities and announced that these sectors would receive state support amid foreign sanctions (President of Russia 2022). His words were not randomly chosen. Maritime patriotism is a goal of Russian strategy, stated in the *Maritime Activities Strategy* (RF 2019a). Putin's words embody an effort to inculcate a sense of pride in the traditions, history, and culture of Russian seafarers and the coastal communities that support them. Protecting the fishery is used, for example, to motivate the sailors of the Russian Coast Guard, the primary agency for fisheries enforcement at sea (Granitsa Rossii 2023a). It is no casual aside when Federal Fisheries Agency head Shestakov says that his fleet is flying under the Russian flag – he is emphasizing how the industry is meeting a state security goal of the Russian state, as articulated in the *Maritime Doctrine* – getting more civilian fleets flagged in Russia so they can be recruited in times of war (President of Russia 2024a; RF 2022).

Marine services

Second, the marine services sector gets similar attention for an upgrade. Russia is attempting to build up domestic repair and maintenance facilities for the fishing fleet. The 2019 *Fisheries Development Strategy* specified that Russia lacked a cost-effective and time-competitive ship-servicing sector, forcing Russian fishing vessels to go abroad for maintenance (RF 2019b). Here, too, Russian political theatre puts a component of the fisheries sector in the presidential spotlight. In multiple press conferences, Kamchatka Governor Vladimir Solodov updated Putin on ship repair and maintenance for the fishing sector, describing a growing interest in Kamchatka's services in this sector for import replacement and Arctic shipping (President of Russia 2025b). Earlier,

he reported to Putin that Kamchatka had also reduced dependence on South Korean and other foreign shipyards for maintenance services (President of Russia 2022).

When it comes to enhancing Russian marine services for the fishing sector, the national security thinking is again not far off. The *Maritime Doctrine* sets improving civilian ship maintenance infrastructure as a necessity in the country's readiness for war and sets the goal of having 80 per cent of ship servicing in Russia by 2030 (RF 2022). And Solodov's words express not just alignment with fisheries strategy, but with the geoeconomic goal of import replacement and the language of technological sovereignty that appears in Russia's *National Security Strategy* and *Mineral-Raw Materials Strategy*; the former speaks of the "strategic national priority" of a "new technological foundation" and technological independence and the latter about "technological sovereignty" in relation to strategic sectors in energy and mining (RF 2021, 2024). Notably, the *Agriculture and Fisheries Development Strategy* also talks of import replacement being crucial to Russia's economic competitiveness because it faces "external political pressure" and resulting "discriminatory measures" (RF 2020a) – that is, Western sanctions and other financial measures against Russian industry.

Vertical integration

Finally, to improve performance across the sectors fleet renewal, servicing, and market strategy, Russia's fishery strategy documents set the goal of a "vertical integration" of the sector (RF 2020b). In the *Agriculture and Fisheries Development Strategy*, the document's first sentence states that state support "in contemporary times" is a requirement to accelerate economic development (RF 2020b). The fishery is thus embedded in an extensive state-led effort to stimulate domestic industry, build new infrastructure, and replace imports under a national economic model. Ostensibly, vertical integration is a management innovation aiming to enhance the sector's economic competitiveness through a "systemic integrated approach" (*системный комплексный подход*) as part of the "structural transformation (*структурная перестройка*) of the Russian economy." Russian strategy contends this will strengthen supply and value chains – among the identified competitive shortcomings of the sector's competitiveness with foreign enterprises (RF 2019b, 2020b). The *Fisheries Development Strategy* argues that decades-long inertia and weak innovation performance in the sector, along with "global economic trends," justify state

intervention to establish “new models of economic development” (RF 2019b).

The documents make clear that such an enhancement of state control has social and economic objectives, not simply commercial ones – pointing to a tendency to politicize the sector in ways that may make it susceptible to geopolitical and national security considerations as well. “Socio-economic development” heads the list of goals of the *Food Security Doctrine* and it is embedded in the concept of “fishing industrial clusters” cited by the *Fisheries Development Strategy* (RF 2019b, 2020a). Socio-economic differences between rural and urban areas demand government “regulation,” states the *Food Security Doctrine* (RF 2020a). And intervention is further justified by inadequate logistical and transport infrastructure, such as multimodal ports and facilities (RF 2020a, 2020b).



*Russia's fishing fleet
is a component of war readiness.*

This is not simply the details of a bland sectoral discussion. It is geopolitics and national security. Beyond the commercial, social, and economic, a vertically integrated sectoral structure puts in place mechanisms of control for the Kremlin and Russian government to advance their geopolitical and national security objectives. Read in conjunction with other Russian grand strategic documents, talk of the “vertical integration” of the fisheries sector parallels the *Maritime Doctrine's* imposition of a “state management system” for civilian fleet readiness (RF 2022). Moreover, “integrated” (комплексный) policies in Russian bureaucratic parlance frequently fuse national security into their design. For instance, such integrated planning has direct connections to national security and enhancing the presence and reach of the security services in Russian oil, gas, and mining sectors – not least in the Russian Arctic (RF 2020d, 2021 and 2024; Dalziel 2025). The strategic documents are emphatic: a lack of government coordination is a primary risk to the sector that would, for instance, cast doubt on Russia's ability to conduct long-range fishing on the high seas, according to the two main fisheries strategy documents (RF 2019b, 2020b).

The geopolitically-infused language Russian officials use also ties fisheries to the conceptual framework of the “strategic resource base” (*стратегическая ресурсная база*), which sits at the centre of Russian grand strategic thinking. The “strategic resource base” is found in Russia’s *National Security Strategy*, *Maritime Doctrine*, and Arctic strategies, and also forms a fundamental component of the *Minerals and Raw Materials Development Strategy* (RF 2020c, 2020d, 2021, 2022b, 2023, 2024). It structures their talk of Russian power and relevance. Similarly, fish and seafood are parts of what Russian officials term “aquatic biological resources” (*водные биологические ресурсы*), which fall into the sub-category of “marine biological resources” (*морские биологические ресурсы*) – categories that extend to other marine organisms such as kelp and crustaceans (RF 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2022). These, according to the *Fisheries Development Strategy*, are “raw resource materials” (*ресурсно-сырьевая база*), terminology that aligns with the mining and petroleum sectors’ concept of a “raw mineral materials” (*минеральная-сырьевая база*) in the *Mineral and Raw Materials Development Strategy* (RF 2024). The *Maritime Doctrine* drives home that fisheries fit into the geostrategic conception of a strategic resource base that stretches beyond Russia’s maritime borders into the high seas. It posits that, as resources deplete on land, the necessity of turning to the seas – or the “World Ocean” (*Мировой океан*) in Russian parlance – becomes a strategic imperative for Russia (RF 2022). That logic of expanding maritime resource extraction directly implicates the Russian fisheries as a part of a multi-sectoral geoeconomic complex of maritime activities of grand strategic import.

One hint of the organizing principles in Russian thinking is the use of the term “добыча” as a synonym for “catch” (*вылов*) in strategic documents (RF 2019a, 2020a, 2020b). This translates as “harvest” or “extraction” and harmonizes with terminology employed in Russian policy in the petroleum and mining sectors (RF 2024). It is thus a subtle indication of the synchronization of the fisheries sector and Russian grand strategy, given the predominance of these sectors in Russia’s plans for developing the Arctic and its waters as part of the country’s “strategic resource base.”

The geopolitical and national security uses of fisheries

As we have seen, fisheries strategy aligns in multiple ways with the main documents that define Russian grand strategy. But what is the purpose of integrating a commercial activity like the fisheries into a grand strategic framework? If we apply a geopolitics lens to these documents and the statements of officials on the sector, we find the fishing fleet conceived of as an element of Russian maritime control and continual presence on the high seas; fisheries as a means to cultivate influence and relationships in the Global South; and fish exports as an economic lever to manage relations with other powers, most notably China and the EU.

The development of the World Ocean's resources is a necessity and prerequisite for preserving and expanding Russia's raw material base for economic and food security.

– *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation*,
2022 (RF 2022)

The way the fishing industry and its fleet are organized and supervised suggests that the state can easily use them to support Russia's geopolitical and national security goals. The geopolitical intentions are not hidden in official documents and statements, as we have seen above in the case of the *Maritime Doctrine* and fishing fleet renewal (RF 2022). In Russia's fisheries-sector strategies (RF 2019b, 2020a, 2020b), “continual presence” on the “World Ocean” (Russian phraseology that is more strategically pointed than but roughly aligns with the English-language concept of the “high seas”), is described as one component of the purposes of the Russian fishing fleet (RF 2019b). When it comes to the Arctic, Russian fishing fleets also function as part of a mechanism of sea control in waters off Russia's coast, such as in the Arctic and Far East. This section will explore these aspects and set up the argument in the following section that these dimensions of coastal presence, sea control, and hybrid warfare are applicable to the Arctic in Russian strategic thinking.

Coastal presence: Dual-use infrastructure, power projection, and national security

Russian strategy uses fisheries economic development strategy to build up Russia's capacity to project power and defend its land and sea borders from its coasts. More specifically, the Russian state aims to strengthen its presence along its coasts in rural and remote areas through fisheries infrastructure. What emerges from a reading of Russian fisheries strategy alongside coastal strategy has at least two dimensions: first, to maintain or grow the population, generate employment, and improve living conditions – a set of fundamentals to keep these regions inhabited and ready to support national security ends; and second, to enhance dual-use infrastructures and logistics systems, both to enable these economic activities and to enhance the capacity of national security agencies and the military to operate from remote coastal locations.

The first aim is to provide means to establish livelihoods that will maintain populations along the vast stretches of Russia's coastline. Rhetorically, that involves capturing more value-added processing in the fisheries sector locally and devising social policies to keep populations in rural coastal communities. Much of Russia's long oceanic coast, stretching from the border with Norway on the Barents Sea to the border with North Korea on the Sea of Japan, is sparsely inhabited. That presents a problem recognized in Russian strategy documents for the Arctic and Far East. Depopulation in Kamchatka and Russia's Arctic Zone has been a serious demographic challenge since the collapse of the Soviet Union – as much as one-third of the population having moved away (Heleniak 2025).

Russia's *National Security Strategy* identifies worsening demographics as a threat (RF 2021), and the Arctic Development Strategy presents diminishing population as a “fundamental danger” (RF 2020d). This concern extends to the fisheries sector; the *Food Security Doctrine* calls for extending social support programs to coastal fishing villages while expanding value-added processing (RF 2020a). Fish and fisheries have positive effects on “pressing” (*насыщенный*) socio-economic problems and improve quality of life, according to Putin (President of Russia 2025a). According to the *Fisheries Development Strategy* (RF 2019b), value-added processing enterprises play a “key role” in stimulating coastal development and addressing poverty, another threat listed in the *National Security Strategy* (RF 2021). The *Food Security Doctrine* puts it in more fundamental terms: it speaks about contemporary

risks to the “agricultural way of life,” and this concern, while not stated outright, almost certainly applies to the fisheries “way of life” in coastal Russia (RF 2020a). The fisheries sector’s coastal presence is thus an element in the *National Security Strategy’s* “harmonizing a strong state with human well-being” (RF 2021a). In his public meetings with President Putin, Federal Fisheries Agency head Shestakov portrays his sector as having a model to move Russia up the value-chain through enhanced positioning in the fish processing (President of Russia 2025b).

Fisheries, then, form a part of Russia’s efforts to build on remote regions of its coasts dual-use infrastructure – facilities and networks that have both military and civilian purposes. While it never mentions “dual-use” as a term, the *Maritime Doctrine* is a sustained elaboration of the interaction of military, state, and civilian infrastructures and agencies (Vladymyrova 2026) and its goals of bringing national civilian fleets under military control in times of war hinge on such infrastructure (RF 2022). It is forthright about wanting to improve civilian port and ship-maintenance facilities for war-readiness. In the case of the Pacific Ocean Regional Area, for example, the *Maritime Doctrine* directs efforts to developing transport centres and logistics networks, along with expanding the “basing network” for the Federal Security Service (FSB) and National Guard (Rosgvardia) (RF 2022). It interlinks to border security, for instance through efforts to modernize border regimes and their controls for veterinary, phytosanitary, and epidemiological risks and threats (RF 2020a, 2021b).

Moreover, the social and economic development strategies provide frameworks to advance and enhance a dual-use infrastructure system. Alignments to this language are found in Russia’s *Transport Strategy* (RF 2021b) and the fisheries development strategies (RF 2019b, 2020b), where the viability of rural, coastal enterprises hinge port infrastructure and transport logistics to improve transport interconnectivity among “low-population geostrategic regions” (*малонаселенные геостратегические территории*) and “hard-to-reach” (*труднодоступный*) communities in the Far East and Arctic (RF 2021b).

Statements from Kamchatka Governor Solodov capture the spirit of this dual-use approach. In remarks to Putin in 2022, he highlighted that progress in developing his region’s economic “cluster” had improved fishing fleet repair facilities and soon these would support the Russian Coast Guard (President of

Russia 2022), a branch of the FSB Border Guard. He portrayed his region as an “outpost of security” and a “strategic nuclear shield” when talking about the fishery and its importance to local society and the nation. In another more subtle example, the presidential administration in 2022 organized a press conference with local officials on the 168th anniversary of the defence of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, the region’s capital, during the nineteenth-century Crimean War (1853–56) – another gesture towards cultivating Russian maritime patriotism in a region where the fisheries is a prominent economic motor (President of Russia 2022b; RF 2019a).

Continual presence and sea control

Fishing fleets are useful for establishing and extending a state’s maritime presence. In the Russian context, the use of fishing fleets as a geostrategic tool to that end is made explicit in the concept of “continual presence” (*постоянное присутствие*) in the *Fisheries Development Strategy* (RF 2019a). The document describes continual presence as a way to achieve Russian interests in various parts of the high seas, with specific references to the Antarctic and North Pacific Oceans. The *Maritime Doctrine* states that the freedom to fish the high seas is one of Russia’s national interests (RF 2022), building on the *Fisheries Development Strategy*’s commitment to improving capabilities to catch pelagic fish species through its long-range, high-seas commercial fleet (RF 2019b).

Continual presence augments Russia’s maritime awareness in the pursuit of maritime or “sea” control. As scholars have pointed out, “sea control” sits on a spectrum where states can pursue strategic goals with “differing levels of intensity” to contest and exercise control over a body of water “with clear applicability in peacetime,” according to Choi (2019). Scholarship on maritime security sets fishing fleets amid a set of state and non-state tools that a “large ocean state” like Russia can employ (Bueger and Edmunds 2024), for geopolitical influence and power projection. Recent research indicates that Russia is doing exactly that. Ålander and Boulègue (2026) describe fishing vessels as part of a “vast network of civilian and dual-use vessels” including “cargo carriers, tankers, research vessels, and even private yachts” that Russia uses to threaten seabed infrastructure and collect intelligence. Episodes of damage to undersea critical infrastructure, they contend, are not isolated incidents: such activities by fishing fleets are a part of a Russian systemic “shadow warfare” approach to confrontation, rooted in history and ideology, which extends to the maritime

realm, on and under the waves (Greene 2026; Ålander and Boulègue 2026). Russia's use of fishing fleets is an example of "institutionalised use of civilian infrastructure as dual-purpose in Russian statecraft," rooted in Soviet practice and adapted to contemporary circumstances (Vladymyrova 2026).



In the Russian strategic context, sea control is a key justification for enhancing coastal infrastructure.

In the Russian strategic context, sea control is a key justification for enhancing coastal infrastructure to ensure a continuous presence at sea. One can see this in Russia's fight against poaching, and language in state sources about the Russian Coast Guard (RCG) also reflects the idea of being continually at sea (Dalziel 2026a). The *National Security Strategy* describes state and societal security as in part established by protecting the borders of Russia's territorial seas, Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), and continental shelves (RF 2022). To that end, the Russian Coast Guard (RCG) has as a primary function tackling illegal fishing and poaching (*браконьерство*) in order to protect "marine bio-resources," most particularly in the North Pacific Ocean and the Barents Sea. The portrayal of counter-poaching in the specialist literature of the FSB Border Service, of which the RCG is a part, reflects a strong relationship between enforcing environmental regulations and countering "blue crime" – at-sea criminal activities – to protect economic and food security (Granitsa Rossii 2019a, 2020a and 2022). Marine bio-resources are a particular area criminals are victimizing, according to the government (RF 2021b). While these sources do dedicate time to poaching by domestic criminal groups, they describe foreigners as having a long tradition of looting Russia's maritime riches, chronicling the problem back to the 1970s (Granitsa Rossii 2020b). In an interview, FSB Border Guard head Vladimir Kulishov cited statistics that illegal fishing infractions concentrate in the Far East–North Pacific, where 65 per cent of offences were reported, whereas some 23 per cent of them took place in Russia's Arctic waters (Granitsa Rossii 2023b) – an argument to justify, in his case, more presence of the RCG in these waters.

Sea control, the *Maritime Doctrine* suggests in its talk of civilian fleets (RF 2022), is not purely going to be effected by the RCG or the Russian Navy. It will involve what analysts call “hybrid warfare.” It is to that the next section will turn.

Fishing for trouble: the fleet in hybrid warfare

Perhaps the most suggestive point that emerges from reading Russian fisheries strategy documents alongside the *Maritime Doctrine* is about readying and mobilizing crews for “special operations” in peacetime, as well as in war (RF 2022). Recall that Russia calls its war in Ukraine a “special military operation.” It raises the question of how fishing fleets might fit into such “special operations,” the question to which this section will turn. Official Russian statements about fishing vessels do not, of course, speak openly about their usefulness for covert and deniable hostile activities below the threshold of open warfare. But recent research and scholarship shed light on Russia’s fishing fleets as hybrid warfare assets.

To unpack the issue, the paper will exploit scholarship on where fishing fleets might fit into hybrid warfare techniques. It will also turn its attention to expert analyses and media about other commercial fleets that Russia is using to covertly advance state objectives such as sanction evasion, espionage, and sabotage, to draw analogies and suggest insights on where fishing vessels might come into play. It is implausible that Russian fishing fleets would be exempt from similar forms of state usage, and indeed there are indications to suggest they are being so used.

The paper will employ a definition of hybrid warfare as a set of activities that are usually but not necessarily covert, deniable, asymmetric, and below the threshold of open hostility. They encompass a range of acts or attempted acts such as sabotage, malign influence, intelligence collection, and strategic signalling that the perpetrator uses for a variety of ends, for instance, to increase the perpetrating state’s strategic space to accomplish its goals, intimidate adversaries, and sow uncertainty. Even when deniable, ambiguity about responsibility is used to pressure the target state into changing its behaviour in ways that benefit the perpetrator. Hybrid threats can be carried out by states or civilians operating legally or illegally at a state’s behest. This definition of hybrid threats is built around concepts and scholarship articulated by the Hybrid Centre of Excellence (2025), Charap et al. (2022),

Cormac and Aldrich (2018), Vladymyrova (2026), Shalin and Arts (2026) and Dalziel (2024a, 2024b).

The concept of sea control intersects with hybrid warfare in recent scholarship, showing how the fishing fleet can advance other state strategic outcomes, such as deterrence. As Vladymyrova (2026) argues, “deterrence at sea is about . . . establishing control in contested waters.” This is especially relevant to Russia in the waters off its north coast, where it attempts to assert sovereignty on the Northern Sea Route beyond its territorial waters, a position contested by the United States and likely China (Dalziel 2026a). Vladymyrova (2026) sees Russian fishing fleet activities as strategic as well as operational, designed to deter NATO adversaries and for “shaping the strategic environment.” She contends that the “use of the Russian fishing fleet . . . for surveillance and alleged sabotage” contributes to “a broader deterrence signalling effort,” a form of “coercive signalling” designed to affect an adversary’s behaviour and decision-making by using the ambiguity of civilian cover to generate uncertainty. Her conclusion is that “employing a civilian fleet in such a way indicates a shift in Russia’s naval strategy: civilian vessels are now being used for pursuing national interests.” Ålander and Boulègue (2026) also argue for understanding Russia’s use of civilian vessels like fishing vessels in maritime hybrid warfare as actions of “deterrence by presence.”

The finding of the use of fishing vessels for national interests and coercive signalling introduces the idea that these ships can be used for hybrid warfare. The nature of that use will reinforce the conclusion that fishing fleets are part of Russia’s grand strategic posture at sea and in the Arctic. Further evidence for that conclusion comes from analyzing other forms of commercial shipping, as well as the suspected implication of fishing vessels in damage to undersea critical infrastructure off Norway in 2022.

The wider context of Russian shipping shows explicitly that commercial – mostly cargo - ships are being used unofficially for political and security ends. These provide us with a chance to consider how the commercial ships of the fishing fleet, too, might be drawn into such action. Civilian fleets are already essential to Russia’s war effort in Ukraine. The most publicized is the “shadow fleet” of cargo vessels that transport oil and gas under foreign flags and convoluted ownership structures to evade US, Canadian, and European sanctions (Maritime Executive 2026). This has created an ecosystem of networks and assets involved in activities that advance the Russian state’s

war and national security objectives. Most of their activity is to preserve supply chains and access export markets. However, analysts increasingly are concluding that the shadow fleet is not merely a way to circumvent sanctions, but that the Russian government is using it for sabotage and intimidation (Chatham House 2025, 2026a, 2026b), in addition to being a general danger to marine safety and the natural environment (Government of Canada 2025a, 2025b).



*The shadow fleet is not merely
a way to circumvent sanctions.
The Russian government is using it
for sabotage and intimidation.*

Recent research contends that Russian strategy assigns a high value to commercial vessels as “proxies” in carrying out intelligence, sabotage, and interference operations (Greene 2026). Suspicions of the state-backed involvement of cargo vessels in repeated instances of damage to undersea cables and pipelines in the Baltic Sea, along with disruptive drone operations at European airports (Greene 2026; Ålander and Boulègue 2026), have been greatly reinforced by repeated episodes of Russian military units lingering in waters in the vicinity of fibre-optic cables (Gardner 2025). A recent UK-Norwegian operation to disrupt Russian activities around subsea infrastructure has added to this collection of episodes (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2026).

Might Russia’s fishing fleet also be a platform of choice for the Russian regime in conducting hybrid operations? Three areas stand out for consideration: sabotage, intelligence gathering, and smuggling activities. Fishing fleets can present similar challenges of “dark vessel” detection, relevant mostly to illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing activities but also to hybrid warfare operations (Chatham House Rule 2026a).

Two incidents off the coast of Norway and Svalbard in 2022 that involved Russian vessels’ fishing gear doing extensive damage to subsea data cables drew attention to the potential for these fleets to conduct sabotage

operations against such infrastructures intentionally. These cases also showed the ineffectiveness of existing legal and policy tools to conclusively attribute responsibility and impose penalties (Dalziel 2024b). Experts have pointed out that the permissive maritime environment has increased the chance of a fisheries-related incident escalating into a more serious situation between states in Arctic waters (Evans and Østhagen 2023). The concerns persist among regional governments: the Norwegian Coast Guard has been keeping a close eye on the recent movements of EU and Norwegian-sanctioned Russian vessels off Svalbard's coast near where the fibre-optic link from the archipelago to the mainland was severed in 2022 (Lerpold 2026a, 2026b).

One area of activity for the Russian fishing fleet appears to be intelligence collection. The EU has banned Russian factory freezer trawlers from its ports due to suspected espionage activities (den Boer, Logger and Weijnen 2024). The Norwegian Naval Academy claims that 50–100 Russian fishing vessels could be conducting espionage activities in Norwegian waters (Evans and Østhagen 2023). Russian fishing vessels are appearing in a variety of security-sensitive situations, facilitated in part by the fact that civilian fleets can be present in areas where military ships cannot (overtly) (Vladymyrova 2026). Norway's security service (PST) advises that the Russian fishing fleet is among the civilian vessels the Kremlin uses as proxies to “collect information on infrastructure, technology and activity” along the Norwegian coast, with goals such as influencing decision-making and identifying sabotage opportunities. PST indicates that northern Norway and its Svalbard Archipelago are of particular interest to Russian intelligence agencies and influence activities (Norwegian Police Security Service 2026). Norwegian authorities have also fined a Russian fishing vessel for launching a small boat near critical infrastructure serving a military installation (Lerpold 2026b). Among other suspicious events are fishing ships lingering in Norwegian fjords for days after requests for shelter during harsh weather and their “shadowing” movements during port visits by US nuclear submarines (Nilsen 2026; Chatham House Rule 2026b; Vladymyrova 2026).

The suspected presence of criminal networks in the Russian fishing industry and its perennial struggles with corruption are also indicators of the susceptibility of fishing fleets and crews to becoming tools of state-backed smuggling. Journalists have uncovered evidence of fraud and violating quotas in exports to Europe, especially of high-value species like cod (den Boer, Logger,

and Weijnen 2024), criminal skills that could prove useful to state actors. The Norwegian PST identifies state-backed smuggling to circumvent sanctions and export controls as one of the threats arising from Russian fishing vessels and their crews, which retain access to some Norwegian ports (Norwegian Police Security Service 2026). Investigative journalism has shed light on the practices of the FSB in asserting control over the crews of Russian cargo ships, facilitating their potential use in “covert cargo operations” (Humpert 2025), again pointing to the Russian state’s desire to use commercial ships for state ends, in this case cargo ships. But the fisheries sector would not be immune to such practices.

Fish food, part 1: geopolitics

Further evidence that Russia use fishing fleets for non-commercial state ends is in the areas of diplomacy and foreign influence. Here the paper will shift its focus away from fishing fleets to look more at the fish the industry catches and exports to argue that the geopolitics of food security extends to the fishing industry. This section will contend that Russia wants the world to see it as a food security provider. The impetus for recent forays abroad on fish exports and sectoral cooperation is likely to compensate for damage that Russia’s campaign to halt Ukrainian grain shipments since 2022 have done to tarnish its international reputation in this respect.

First, Russia portrays itself as a global food security supplier, leveraging its role as the world’s largest exporter of grain (USDA 2024). Fish, too, are an important export. Russia is a large supplier to the global seafood market, exporting over 2 million metric tons (live weight) in 2023 (FAO 2024), mostly of raw or minimally refined fish (RF 2019b, 2020b); by comparison, China exported over 7 million tons, the United States over 1.5 million tons and Canada over 800,000 tons that year (FAO 2024). The *Fisheries Development Strategy* in 2019 emphasized that Russia ranked in the top five countries by volume of catch, some 71 per cent of which was caught in the Russian EEZ and on the continental shelf. These documents assert a Russian role in global seafood security, providing 20 to 40 per cent of the world’s supply of key species, like Atlantic cod, pollock and haddock. Russia saw a toughening set of “macroeconomic and geopolitical” challenges coming from abroad to the sector, singling out the dependence on exporting raw fish for foreign processing, the geographic concentration of its exports to the Asia-Pacific,

limits appearing on Russian fishing activity in other countries' EEZs, and broader currents of global competition and rising protectionism. A particular bugbear was that over 90 per cent of its fish was processed abroad, mostly in the EU and Southeast Asia, lessening the profitability of the Russian fisheries sector (RF 2019b).

According to the *Maritime Doctrine*, Russia is to be a global leader in fishing (RF 2022). That goal is explicitly informed by geopolitics. One of the geopolitical goals is influence in Europe. In a particularly blunt statement, Russia's *Fisheries Development Strategy* says that "geopolitical relations" determine that Russia should possess no less than 50 per cent of the French, German, and Polish markets, which are, it notes, 100 per cent dependent on imports for pollock filets; moreover, Russia is to export directly to these markets, without third-country middlemen (RF 2019a). More broadly, Russia wanted to secure a share 25 per cent in the EU fish market and 10 per cent in Asia-Pacific markets (RF 2019a). Such geopolitically informed trade strategies almost certainly aim to make the Russian sector less vulnerable to sanctions. Indeed, the EU has not sanctioned Russian fish and their export to Europe has in fact been growing since 2022 (den Boer, Logger and Weijnen 2024). Fish are another dimension of the EU's challenges to wean itself off Russian imports, in this case seafood. Sanctions bar Russian fish from the Canadian and US markets.

Fisheries also manifest themselves in Russian propaganda that attempts to diminish European and other foreign criticism of Russia for poor protection of marine ecosystems and poor management of natural resources management. Maritime Collegium head Patrushev portrayed foreign criticisms as an "instrument" of foreign states pressuring Russia, with the hypocritical objective of advancing their own commercial interests while holding back Russia's (Morskaya Nauka i Tekhnika 2025). Other platforms for state messaging have been making such claims for some time, for instance the claim in the FSB Border Guard journal that the Norwegians were checking "ecological standards" on Russian vessels to advance their own commercial interests (Granitsa Rossii 2019b).

Fish are also part of Russia's all-important relationship with China, its primary lifeline in mitigating the effects of Western sanctions. Russia has a two-fold presence in China through its fish exports, a component of both China's food security and China's own processed seafood export industry.

According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), in 2024 China secured 23 per cent of its fish imports from Russia, and some 42 per cent of its frozen fish, far ahead of the United States and Indonesia, respectively the second- and third-largest exporters of frozen fish to China that year (USDA 2025). As with most aspects of Russia–China relations, fish exports are another double-edged sword for Moscow. Not only are its fish going to Chinese consumers, but Chinese enterprises are major processors of Russian raw fish and fillets for re-export.

“As with most aspects of Russia–China relations, fish exports are another double-edged sword for Moscow.”

Those statistics suggest that Moscow likely perceives China as one of the challenges to its desire to see more value-added processing occur domestically. The countries that are processing raw Russian fish go unnamed in the strategy documents, the most precise language indicating Southeast Asia and Europe processing some 90 per cent of its exports. Statements about the “geographic concentration” of exports to the Asia–Pacific region – one of the tough macroeconomic conditions Russia claims to be contending with (RF 2019b, 2020b) – is likely a circumlocution to avoid naming China, a conclusion that is hard to avoid when reading between the lines of export-import data and Russian strategic statements.

Russian fish geopolitics are also about building influence in lower-income countries, which some term as the “Global South.” These are countries where Russia has work to do to maintain its image as a food-security provider, given that the disruptions its war in Ukraine particularly hit grain markets in lower-income countries, which received 65 per cent of Ukraine’s Black Sea exports in 2022–23 (Council of the European Union 2023). Before 2022, Russia had already identified that it suffered from a reputational shortfall in regard to the presence of its fish in foreign markets, because of the fact so much of it is processed in third countries. Labelling did not always indicate

the fish originated in Russia (RF 2019b). The composition of Russia's current fish export portfolio, which concentrates heavily on Europe and East Asia, rather than countries in Africa, the Middle East, and South America (Flanders Investment & Trade 2021), suggests that Russia is not making much headway as an exporter to these markets.

Propaganda is one way to make up this deficit. One effort to address its export underperformance was the 2024 “Great Africa Expedition” that emerged from the 2023 Russia–Africa Summit. Putin tasked the Federal Fisheries Agency to lead a research initiative on the fish stocks in the EEZs of African countries – what he called a “traditionally important sphere of co-operation” – ostensibly to enhance food security of the African continent, with an accompanying media promotion campaign (President of Russia 2024a, 2024c). Russia is also influence building in the Global South through its fishing education and training institutions for relatively overt geopolitical aims. For instance, it is trying to cultivate future sectoral leaders in the Global South to amplify Russian positions so that it is better positioned to compete with the EU and US on setting global standards (President of Russia 2024b). These have their own direct relevance to Russian food security and commercial interests, starting with the goals of gaining greater access to other countries' EEZs, with African EEZs singled out, and to “return” to the Central and South Atlantic Ocean to fish tuna (RF 2019b).

Finally, Russia's farther-flung fishing objectives on the high seas have a distinct Antarctic dimension. In 2019, the *Fisheries Development Strategy* set the goal of catching 450 thousand tons of Antarctic krill, a high-seas fish stock (*нелазический объект*) that Russia sees as a valuable “raw material” for new value-added production (RF 2019b). It assigned for construction five heavy-tonnage factory freezer trawlers and three transport ships to support the Antarctic fishery. In addition, one of the rationales that the document gave for adding new scientific research vessels was to conduct research in Antarctica, which it refers to as an “open part” of the World Ocean (RF 2019b). Notably, however, the *Maritime Doctrine* made no references to fisheries whatsoever in its section on the “Antarctic Regional Area.”

Elements of these approaches dovetail with Russia's ongoing ambition to reinforce or alter international law and its application in line with Russian interests. Russian strategy calls for presence at international and regional fishing organizations. Commercial and historic involvement in these institutions is

part of the reason, but the strategic documents also claim that the “geopolitical situation” dictates Russia have a voice in international fisheries co-operation, to ensure its fishing fleet’s access to the stocks of the high seas (RF 2019b, 2022). Russia’s ongoing efforts to maintain its presence and cultivate networks will be at least a background factor to future discussions over fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean.

The operative assumption throughout the above is that ecology will support Russia’s geopolitics. In other words, Russia’s fish stocks can support growing catches. That assumption results in inconsistent messaging in fisheries strategy. The fisheries sectoral strategic documents from 2019–2020 posit that fish stocks are stable and that there is “significant potential” to increase catches. By 2024, however, diminishing fish stocks in the Barents Sea forced the Federal Fisheries Agency to publicly explain to Putin that measures were in place to protect the stocks and allow for their replenishment (President of Russia 2024a). The *Fisheries Development Strategy* in 2019 forecast the growth of Russian catch from 4,812 metric tons in 2016 to 5,396 metric tons by 2030, a 10.4 per cent increase. Russian documents consistently downplay the impact of environmental factors. Among the macro-factors affecting future supply dynamics cited in the *Food Security Doctrine*, economic and technology factors outrank climate factors (RF 2020a). Meanwhile, demand factors like global population growth, urbanization, the rise of the middle class, and healthy eating habits are foregrounded in the *Fisheries Development Strategy*, while variations in stocks are attributed to natural “cyclical oscillations;” ecological risks, while identified, are not explained in any detail (RF 2019b). Officials depict a growing industry sporting record catches, for instance when Shestakov trumpeted in a meeting with Putin that 2023’s catch was the greatest in 30 years at 5.3 million tons (President of Russia 2024a). Nonetheless, the actual expected growth figures in the *Fisheries Development Strategy* are modest (and probably overly optimistic), suggesting a reason why fisheries policy is fixated on value-added processing to raise the profitability of the sector (RF 2019b, 2020b). As we will see in the next section, challenges in maintaining fish stocks have implications for the national security discussion of fisheries and food supply in Russia.

Fish food, part 2: national security

In Russian strategic thinking, food supply and nutrition are matters of national security. It is reflected in Russia's *National Security Strategy*, which places access to safe, quality nutrition and a healthy citizenry among its objectives (RF 2021). The *Food Security Doctrine* returns the favour by setting the goal of preserving Russian statehood and sovereignty (along with more routine goals such as raising Russians' living-standard and promoting healthy dietary habits) (RF 2020a). "Food independence" is a priority in fisheries, agriculture, forestry and hunting (RF 2020a). Geopolitical risk is a factor: the *Food Security Doctrine* identifies Russia as under external pressures that seek to limit national food-industry sectors (RF 2020a). Russian state documents ascribe one of the reasons for falling domestic fish consumption at least in part to foreign sanctions (RF 2019b). These external pressures have become only more acute since Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Food security in the Russian conception, then, is more than the challenges of production and supply – it is an approach formed around concerns about national security and geopolitical resilience. It is yet another example of what scholars call the "securitization" of policy (for example, Gricius 2021; Spencer and Conway 2026) in Russia, where more and more domains of policy become matters of security.

The food security of the Russian Federation is the condition of socio-economic development of the country, under which the food independence of the Russian Federation is ensured, guaranteeing physical and economic access for every citizen to food products in volumes that are not less than the norms required for the demands of food needs consistent with an active and healthy way of life.

– *Food Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, 2020 (RF 2020a)

Fish are an integral part of the Russian regime's securitized understanding of food. Food security has moved up the Russian agenda. It is evident in a shift in rhetoric towards prioritizing fish in domestic markets and dietary habits. In a late 2025 meeting, Putin stated that supplying the domestic market with affordable and quality fish products was the government's priority (President of Russia 2025b). There are good reasons to doubt the sincerity of Putin's statement and thus to see it as propaganda. This promotion of the domestic

market runs counter to the direction of previous strategy, which implied a prioritization of foreign markets while attempting to balance exports and domestic supply. For instance, the target markets for cod and pollock in 2019 were listed as EU and China, only then followed by the domestic Russian market. Investments in the sector were first and foremost to be oriented towards global demand signals and profitability (RF 2019b). These hint at the challenges of reorienting production for the poorer, less lucrative Russian market, as exports generate foreign currency, maintain geopolitically sensitive links in otherwise fraught relations with the EU and contribute to balancing relations with China through booming exports to its consumers. Add in the profit motives of a Russian fishing industry that suffers from extensive corruption (den Boer, Logger, and Weijnen 2024), and it becomes clear serving the domestic market is a tough sell to the sector.

Promoting domestic consumption is thus a strategic priority (RF 2019b). Russian state documents describe falling per capita fish consumption in Russia since 2014. Fish and seafood imports dropped sharply after 2013, by 42 per cent as of 2018. At the same time, exports grew by 14 per cent from 2013 to 2018 (RF 2019b). Russians were under-consuming the omega-3 fatty acids that fish is rich in, reaching only two-thirds of the suggested norms as of 2018 (RF 2019b). The Kremlin and the Russian government have a political challenge to manage the interests and optics of a reduced supply of affordable protein for Russians while its industries ply a profitable trade in foreign markets. It is a political dilemma with obvious negative socio-economic implications.

Putin set a high ambition to address this shortfall, seeking to raise per-person consumption to 28 kilograms (kgs) per year from (in 2023) 22.6 kgs/year (President of Russia 2023). Putin expounded in fall 2025 that Russians were not eating enough fish and that consumption needed to grow for a balanced diet. Fish, he argued, was a particularly effective source of nutrition – postulating that people live longer in countries that eat more fish – and advising that the “health of the nation” depends in part upon it (President of Russia 2025b), yet another geopolitically resonant statement when it comes to food security.

Much of this is propaganda. Facing pressures on its domestic supply of fish, passing the blame to foreign states for a Russia-generated problem is a reflex of the Putin state. Seeming to prioritize the domestic consumer over export markets is one way to prop up the regime’s credibility and portray a

responsible, caretaker image (Kaye 2025). As the *Agriculture and Fisheries Development Strategy* puts it, food security is founded on “social stability,” and assuring Russians that the president is on top of issues in the fisheries manages their expectation that protein-rich seafood will continue to make its way to their tables in war and peace. But the proof in this case is, quite literally, in the eating.

The Arctic and North Pacific

What we see here is that the supply of fish and seafood in Russia is melded into an interlinking approach that embeds consumption, industry structure, domestic infrastructure, geopolitical threats, and national security imperatives. Promoting domestic household consumption, developing logistics infrastructure, stimulating domestic processing and building and maintaining fishing fleets interact with national security and foreign policy in a whole-of-society system (RF 2019b). Such a comprehensive approach is sure to be nationwide. The paper will now turn to the geopolitical and national dimensions of the fisheries in the Russian Far East and Arctic regions. These are sub-components in this system – as sources for the raw products, places for its processing, and, especially in the case of the Arctic and the Northern Sea Route (NSR), a lane for its transport.

With this global view of the geopolitics and national security dimensions of fishing vessels, the fishing industry and fish exports, we can now turn to the Arctic. What stands out first is that, overall, Russia’s strategies pay little attention to Arctic fisheries. Some statements do appear. The *Fisheries Development Strategy*, for instance, states Russia will seek to strengthen its position in regulating fisheries in the Arctic Ocean (RF 2019b). That aligns with its signature, along with those of China, Japan, the EU and the ocean’s littoral states, on the 2018 Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (Fisheries and Oceans Canada 2018), which placed a moratorium on commercial fisheries in the region until 2036. The *Fisheries Development Strategy* provides guidance for more sectoral science and a research and development focus on the Arctic, North Pacific, and, more strikingly, the

Antarctic, which features more regularly in the *Fisheries Development Strategy* (RF 2019b) than does the Arctic.

This absence is curious, as Russian fisheries policy puts top priority on two regions central to Arctic policy: the Barents Sea and the North Pacific. A wider geopolitical reading of the strategic documents and press statements, however, suggests how the securitized image of the fisheries relates not only to activities in the Arctic but also in regions highly relevant to it. This reflects a geopolitical application of the threat concept articulated by Lackenbauer (2021), which analyzes threats to the Arctic in relation to whether they are in, to, or through the region, and aligns Russian economic and security thinking, which closely connects the Russian Far East and Arctic Zone.

That interconnection has gotten stronger with Russia's pivot to Asia and the increasing – although still modest – importance the NSR holds as a transport route to Asian markets. Kamchatka Governor Solodov's request to Putin to have his region added to the Industry Ministry's Arctic Ship Maintenance project is but one fisheries-relevant example of this tightening interconnection (President of Russia 2025b). While it is not typically described as such in the Russian documents studied here, the Barents Sea fisheries is for all intents and purposes an Arctic fishery by any measure – it is above the Arctic Circle and based in northwestern Russia, part of what Russia calls its "Arctic Zone." In the case of the Russian Far East, the concentration of fishing activities in the North Pacific puts them on the increasingly geoeconomically significant approaches to the Arctic and the Northern Sea Route. These fishing zones sit along maritime boundaries with NATO on the east, north and western "flanks" of the alliance, abutting both Europe and North America, which Russia sees as its primary geostrategic competitors and threats. Notionally, then, fishing vessels can add another layer of sea control on those approaches.

In each region, the aim is not only to harbour the fleet and process the catches but to integrate them into an infrastructure web to create a full supply chain and, importantly, a value chain where Russia asserts a higher-profit position in seafood processing. This is the "vertical integration" mentioned above (RF 2019b). To give a sense of the relative weight of these two regions and their overall dominance of the Russian fishing sector, as of 2019, 71 per cent of the national fishing fleet was located in the Far East and 16 per cent was located in the north (RF 2019b).

The Far East is the top priority in fisheries strategy, where the government aims to establish a “fishing industrial cluster,” with multiple socio-economic development spinoffs (RF 2019b), spinoffs that we have seen above are aspects of shoring up Russian national security on the coast. The government emphasizes Kamchatka as a centre for the regional fishery. In the *Maritime Doctrine*, the “Pacific Ocean Regional Area” has “colossal resources,” and establishing it as a leading fishing region and “overcoming the economic and infrastructure isolation” of the region are national objectives (RF 2022). That involves developing it into a transport and logistics centre, building Arctic ice-class vessels and fostering more employment in the maritime sectors. Modernizing its fishing fleet is a stated priority, echoed through Russian strategy, presidential and government statements (RF 2019a, 2022a; President of Russia 2025a, 2025b).

The second listed priority is northwestern Russia, and its Barents Sea fishery (RF 2019b). Its primary ports and processing facilities are in Kola Peninsula–Murmansk region and the White Sea region of Arkhangelsk and Karelia. Russia aims to develop fisheries industrial clusters in these regions, with a slightly stronger emphasis than in the Far East on the refined-products component of the value chain. In the *Arctic Development Strategy*, Murmansk is to get enhanced shipbuilding and processing facilities “for the purposes of preserving and developing the sector’s resource potential” (RF 2020d). In the White Sea region, Karelia is to also have a sectoral cluster, while Arkhangelsk is targeted for shipbuilding, ship-repair, biotechnology, and enhanced processing facilities (RF 2022d). Notably, the Kola Peninsula is strategically vital to the Russian Federation as a military base and export point (Pesu, Särkkä, and Linnainmäki 2025).

The fishery in the Barents Sea makes fisheries management with Norway particularly important for Russia and is illustrative of the challenges the Arctic states may face in the years ahead in the Arctic – as well as showing the narrow room for manoeuvre in a geopolitically tense setting. Heightened tensions in the relationship have complicated these relations. Norway has contributed extensively to Ukraine’s defence effort and has aligned itself with the EU on sanctions. The regional fishery has its own history of co-operation and tensions. Norwegian experts note that “interactions with Russian trawlers have at times been conflictual” over the last 25 years, with incidents of “arrests and attempted arrests” in 2001, 2005, and 2011 (Østhagen 2019). Tensions also

relate to Russia's growing information warfare campaign regarding Norway's Svalbard Archipelago (Myklebost, Bones and Nilsen 2025) and fears about the "potential escalation from a fisheries incident to a state-state incident" (Østhagen 2019). But strong Norwegian-Russian co-operation in managing the sector has been the norm since the 1970s (Jørgensen and Holm-Hansen 2026). Despite the tensions in the relationship, difficult negotiations managed to reach a new agreement on quotas in 2025 (Hønneland and Jørgensen 2025a and 2025b), a sign of the importance Russia assigns to this fishery.

Some lines in Russia's strategic fisheries documents suggest that Russia's future stance on a Central Arctic Ocean fishery may be more to commercial than precautionary. Most notably, Russia claims to be laying the groundwork for an "industrial fishery" in its "part" of the Arctic, conducting studies on the viability of the sector in order to prepare "technical-economic" justifications for it (RF 2019b). While this almost certainly applies to those parts of the Russian extended economic zone (EEZ) in the Arctic between the Barents Sea and Bering Strait, it does hint that a more determined commercial orientation may take shape that will have ramifications for Russia's future position on extending the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement past its current expiration in 2036. At the very least, it looks already to be a more overtly commercial interpretation of Articles 4.1 and 4.2 of the Agreement (Fisheries and Oceans 2018), which established a program of scientific research to examine whether a sustainable fishery might be feasible at some point in the Arctic. Nonetheless, Russia signalled from the early years of the Agreement that it ultimately wanted to draw the Central Arctic Ocean into its "strategic resource base."

Global warming and the rise in oceanic water temperatures add another dimension to Arctic fish stock management that is sure to affect their geopolitics. Warming waters are pushing fish northwards and dynamic ice conditions will at times open new spaces for fishing (Hop et al. 2026; Chatham House Rule 2026a). Evidence of this is already appearing, a recent Norwegian study indicating that capelin (*Mallotus villosus*) off Svalbard are growing more abundant and attracting the endemic polar cod (*Boreogadus saida*), which feed on them. However, the state of knowledge about fish stocks in the Central Arctic Ocean is poor and findings to date unpromising, the same study showing low to negligible stocks of pelagic fish at the highest latitudes (Hop et al. 2026). Security analysts have identified this dynamic ecological context as relevant to patterns of maritime activity in Arctic waters, which affects the nature and

extent of state involvement (Østhagen 2019). A particularly security-related and relevant development is that cod spawning grounds are moving more into Russia's EEZ. As its access to foreign ports constricts and its ability to conduct long-range fishing diminishes, Russia will be “fishing the future stock” of the Barents Sea, in the words of one interlocutor (Chatham House Rule 2026b; Jørgensen and Holm-Hansen 2026).

To look at some of the aspects surfaced in the analysis above that are relevant to the Arctic, the core strategy documents for the region (RF 2020c, 2020d, 2023) situate civilian infrastructure as a dual-use asset to support the military's defence mission, a trajectory that aligns with both the *Maritime Doctrine* (RF 2022) and the fisheries strategies (RF 2019b, 2020a, 2020b). In particular, Russian Arctic and fisheries strategy aligns with the *Maritime Doctrine's* directive to strengthen the position of internal security agencies and National Guard units in the region (RF 2020d, 2022b). Russian grand strategy in the Arctic intertwines the coastal infrastructure of the fishery with the resupply, basing and mission sets of Russia's national security and military communities in rural Russia, for the purposes of national defence and advancing its persistent hybrid warfare strategy to confrontation (Greene 2026). These investments in infrastructure lend themselves to establishing Russian dominance in Arctic logistics, which would be a strategic asset to the country in any form of confrontation (Schalin and Arts 2026). In terms of Kamchatka's position in Arctic policy, Governor Solodov claimed in 2022 that the fisheries sector “cluster” in Kamchatka will be a part of Arctic infrastructure, with the government designing its ports, services and cargo fleets to facilitate use of the route (President of Russia 2022b, 2023a).

Moreover, the main areas of Russian fishing activity correspond to the main approaches to the NSR from the east (the Bering Sea) and the west (the Barents Sea). This puts fishing fleets in areas where the Russian military has deployed its “Bastion” defence concept and where the Russian Coast Guard attempts to manage access to Russia's Arctic waters, augmenting valuable situational awareness in these expanses of water (Schalin and Arts 2026; Dalziel 2026a; Boulègue 2022).

In the future, a limited sea control will likely become part of Russia's eventual extended continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean. The United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) has already reviewed and largely confirmed the validity of Russia's claims; it continues

to review the submissions of the two other major claimants, Canada and the Kingdom of Denmark. Once it has reviewed all of them, the three countries will turn to bilateral negotiations to settle the exact demarcations of the shelves. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), these claims only apply to the seabed and the layers below it and will not result in new fishing rights in the water column. During the negotiations, fishing vessels could nonetheless be used for “coercive signalling” (Vladymyrova 2026), propaganda purposes to persuade Russians and the international community of Russia’s rights, or for intelligence collection (see Dalziel 2024a).

After the limits have been set, the fishing fleet will almost certainly play some role in monitoring Russia’s continental shelf, a role that will be determined by the viability or unviability of Arctic Ocean fish stocks for commercial fisheries and the dynamics of ice in its waters. Much more optimistically, the Russian fishing fleet could also be an asset to sustainably managing the region’s fisheries as one of the five Arctic Ocean littoral states, should Russia decide to return to a rules-based approach to international order and abandon its current aggression in Ukraine. In 2022, Putin touted one of the Russian fleet’s new factory freezer trawlers as ready to sail the high seas – and one feature was its ice-class (President of Russia 2022), a potential suggestion of Russian fleet capabilities being primed for Arctic sailings.

The fisheries is now also part of Russia’s Arctic propaganda targeting domestic audiences, framing it as bolstering food security. The Kremlin is positioning the Arctic as part of the domestic transport interconnection bringing fish and seafood from the Far East to markets in the country’s west. While the NSR does not score a mention in any of the core Russian fishing strategy documents of 2019–2020, this starts to change in earnest in 2022, where government officials like Kamchatka governor Solodov and Federal Fisheries Agency head Shestakov cite the NSR as a path to connect the predominant source of Russian fish in the Far East with domestic markets (President of Russia 2022, 2023, 2025b). In the intensely stage-managed public events for the president, the scripting of NSR-fisheries coming from lower levels of national and regional governance portrays an organic narrative for Russians of the NSR and its rationales – especially when it is portrayed as literally putting food on their plates.

Conclusion

From the above, a conclusion emerges: the Russian state has “geopoliticized” and securitized the nation fishing fleet and industry, seeing them not solely as commercial enterprises but as facets of defending Russian statehood, prestige, and international power and influence. For the Arctic region and its countries, any future expansion of fisheries in the region will involve a Russian fleet woven into patterns of Russian geopolitically infused, coercive state activities. These conclusions do not mean that Russia does not have real commercial aims, but simply that these are not separate from the geopolitical goals and national-security habits of the Putin regime. Nor does it mean that mutual interest might not drive Russia towards co-operation on settling a longer-term fisheries agreement in the high seas of the Central Arctic Ocean post-2036; diplomats persevered on that in the also trying times in 2018 after Russia’s 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea. But there should be no complacency on that question. Norway’s example (see above) in getting a new deal after tough negotiations in late 2025 on its fisheries co-operation with Russia suggests the potential for successful negotiations in fish-stock management amid worsened geopolitical times, even if those come with a suite of national security downsides – and they also show how tough bilateral negotiations were to get there – itself a harbinger of the difficulties that might face multilateral negotiations if geopolitical tension has not eased by the mid-2030s.

A recognition that Russian fishing fleets, while serving legitimate commercial ends, are also security actors will be crucial to dealing with the industry and future negotiations about fisheries management in the Central Arctic Ocean after the current moratorium expires in 2036. On the hybrid warfare front, as Ålander and Boulègue point out (2026), “denying deniability” is key. That observation speaks to the importance of ensuring Arctic coast guards have clear fisheries enforcement mandates and capabilities, and that those be plugged into broader maritime security frameworks coordinating intelligence, law enforcement, and regulatory agencies to improve port security, conduct complex investigations across multiple jurisdictions, and be equipped to collect and analyze data nationally and with allies and partners. Coordination with their private sectors and northern inhabitants is also a must, given the importance of fishing to rural and regional economies. The recognition that fishing fleets can partake in state-backed activities is another argument for

multi-national co-operation among democratic states on strengthening cross-border sectoral ties, to manage the likelihood that Russia's significant supply of fish to global markets will be subject to further change and potential disruption. And that is both a trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific endeavour.

And in the contestation of disputes over access to Arctic waters, fisheries will be part of the fabric of Russian response and readiness. Like the Russian Coast Guard, they mostly at this stage appear to be of strategic effect at the bookends of the NSR, in the waters of the North Pacific and Barents Sea. As the fluid dynamics shaping the Arctic Ocean evolve, fisheries may rise in priority across the region. Should relations with Russia normalize at some point in the future, fisheries enforcement might serve as an area for co-operation with other Arctic countries, as the Norway example shows. But in the current context of sharp geopolitical competition, it may also serve as a pretext for conducting high-intensity "law enforcement." Canada, the United States and their allies and close partners will need to be on guard against the multiple layers of Russian coercive influencing and activity at sea, and that includes in fisheries. [MLI](#)

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