

The Arctic in NATO's Crosshairs

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The endless desert of snow and ice has always been a subject for dispute among politicians, diplomats and scientists. The Arctic territory has now become a subject of a military dispute.

NATO has declared it a strategically important region. The announcement was made by NATO spokesman James Appathurai who also said a meeting with the participation of high-ranking NATO officials is to take place January 28-29 in Reykjavik, Iceland.

The list of participants leaves no doubt about NATO's real goals in the region. The decision of the Western defense alliance to declare the northern territories as strategically important will create a tense international situation in the region. The struggle for the Arctic is becoming the subject of long-term military games. Chances are very high, therefore, that they will send military units to the Arctic sooner or later.

Those, who keep an eye on the developments around the Arctic territories, will hardly fail to see that Mr. Appathurai's remarks come hard on the heels of the initiatives outlined in the US national security directive. The document says that Washington has fundamental national interests in the Arctic region. These interests are crystal clear: missile defense, strategic deterrence, marine security operations. There are no references to terrorists or pirates, who obviously feel themselves way more comfortable in the warm waters off the coast of Somali than among the polar bears of the Far North.

The US, Canada and NATO make no secret of why they need a military group deployed in the Arctic region. Their ice-breakers will arrive in the region to defend national interests of those members of the alliance who claim their right to the natural wealth of this part of the planet. The Arctic contains about 90 billion barrels of unexplored crude and enormous reserves of natural gas, which could be comparable to those of Russia making up about 30 percent of global gas reserves. Experts say that by 2030 Russia will be using many of its Arctic gas deposits to extract about 50 percent of its natural gas. For example, the Shtokman deposit in the Barents Sea contains 4 trillion cubic meters of gas.

Fully aware of the Arctic's strategic importance, Russia is ready to respond adequately to NATO's claims. That is why NATO is in such a rush to stake out these claims in the region. Russia's marine doctrine, which was signed during Vladimir Putin's presidency, singles out the Arctic territory as one of the major directions of the country's naval policy. Russia's Security Council is to unveil a new strategy of Arctic development at the end of January. The key message of the document will be as follows: "Russia is not going to give the Arctic away." Moscow also wants to considerably intensify the freight traffic activity along the Northern Seaway during the upcoming years and plans to build for this purpose six new powerful nuclear icebreakers before 2020.

About a year from now Russia will submit to the UN documents substantiating its claim to the Arctic shelf. Five countries of the Arctic Ocean – Russia, Canada, the US, Norway and Denmark – made a reasonable decision last year to carve up the Arctic region on the basis of existent conventions only.

However, NATO's plans to add a military dimension to the Arctic dialogue may lead to drastic changes in the approach to the current issues. All this may result in a new flare point of tension on the global map...

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