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Russia's double-track Arctic policy

On 12 May, the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov took part in a meeting of the Arctic Council, during which the member states concluded the first legally-binding agreement governing cooperation in the region, and announced further agreements. Through active participation in the work of the Council, Russia is demonstrating its willingness to resolve disputes on the Arctic by means of compromise. Yet at the same time, Moscow is ready to pursue its interests unilaterally if a situation develops in a manner unfavourable towards it, as evidenced by the creation of military units for action in the Arctic.

The agreement signed by the states of the Arctic Council (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Canada, Norway, Russia, Sweden, the USA) is limited in nature, and includes only cooperation in rescue missions. The parties announced work on an agreement on preventing oil leaks, which will be drawn up by Russia, the USA and Norway.

Russia, which since 2007 has demonstrated an assertive attitude towards the Arctic (by making claims to the continental shelf, planting a Russian flag on the North Pole, warning about the possibility of conflict in the Arctic in its National Security Concept), has adopted a more conciliatory attitude in recent months. Working within the framework of the Arctic Council, Moscow is seeking to prevent countries outside the organisation from deciding on the region's future. On the other hand, Russia is creating a military unit for service in the Arctic, on the basis of the 200th Mechanised Brigade, which is also intended to strengthen its negotiating position. <MAK>