



## ROLES INSIGHTS

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### **New Infrastructures on Matua Island: Enhancements in Russia's Anti-Access in the Pacific?**

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Russia seems to have begun deploying new military assets in Matua Island located in the middle of the Kuril archipelago that surrounds the Sea of Okhotsk (Fig. 1).

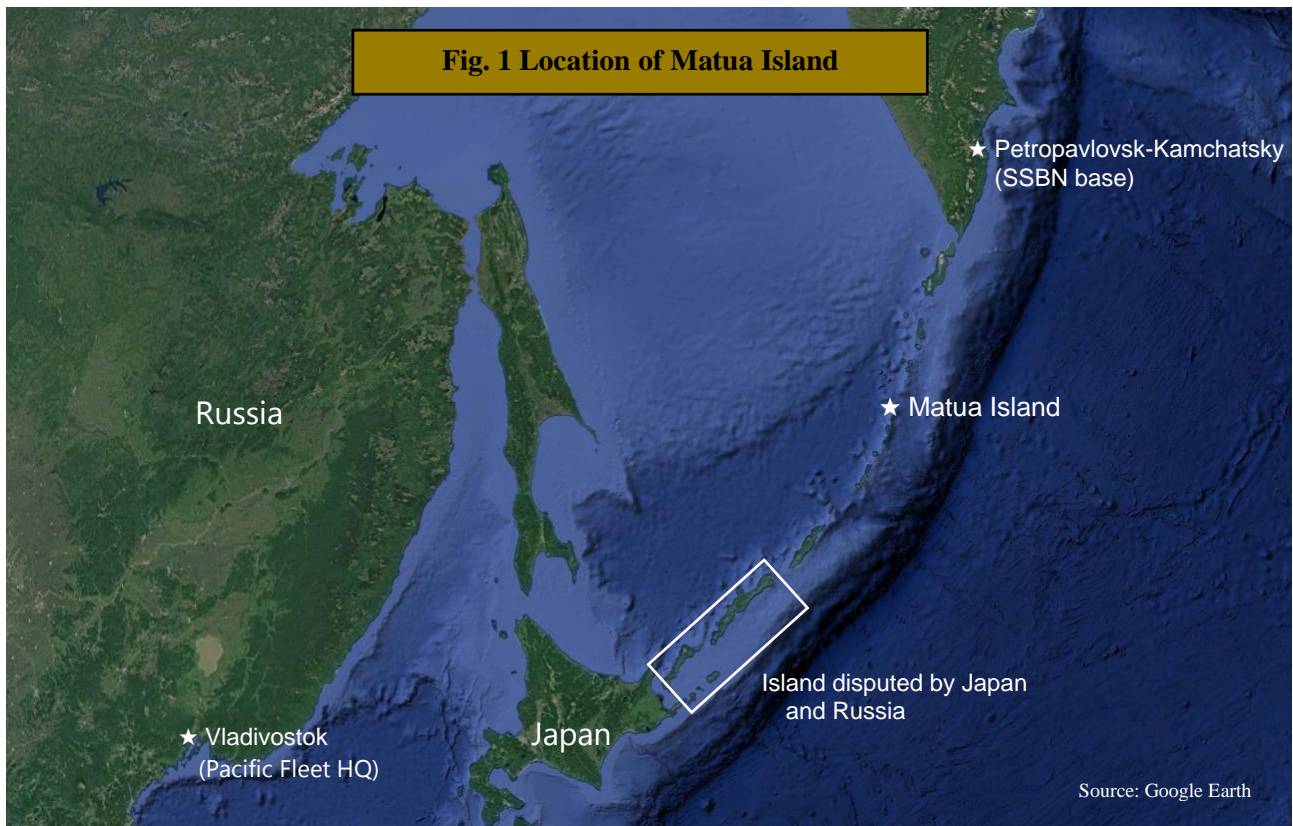
Given that the Russian Pacific Fleet's nuclear-powered strategic submarines (SSBNs) are patrolling this area, the island chain is critical for Russia's nuclear deterrence as the "nuclear bastion" to protect their SSBNs from U.S. and Japanese anti-submarine operations.

The importance of the "nuclear bastion" has been increasing after 2010s when Russia has started a major modernization program to replace obsolete Project 667BDR (Delta III) SSBNs built during the Soviet era. Since 2013, the Pacific Fleet has been joined by two newly built Project 955 (Borei) SSBNs, and two Project 955A (Borei-A) SSBNs are expected to be deployed there in 2022.

Developments have also been taking place in the "nuclear bastion" itself. Vladivostok and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky – the two main naval bases of the Fleet – are now armed with advanced area denial assets such as the long-range S-400 (SA-21 Growler) and the short-range Pantsir-S1 (SA-22 Greyhound) air-defense systems, anti-ship missiles (AShM) like the 3K55 Bastion (SS-C-5 Stoooge) and 3K60 Bal (SS-C-6 Sennight), as well as electronic warfare (EW) systems like the Murmansk-BN. Similar assets are being deployed in the southern rim of the "nuclear bastion" in Sakhalin and southern Kuril Islands, of four have been disputed by Japan and Russia.

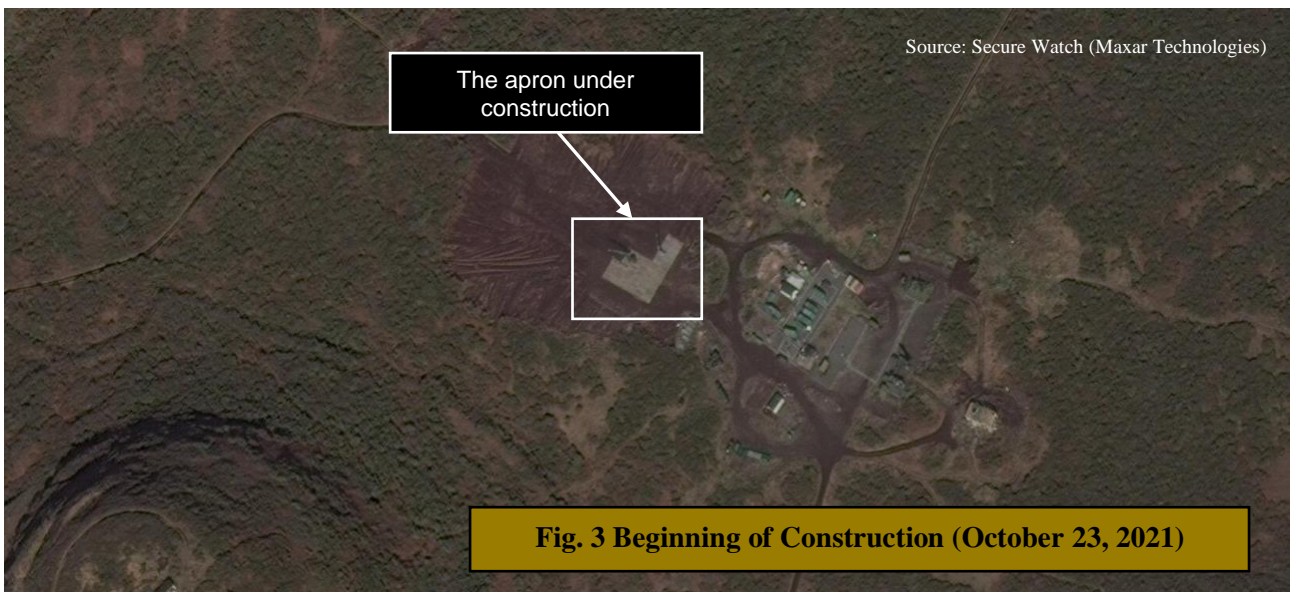
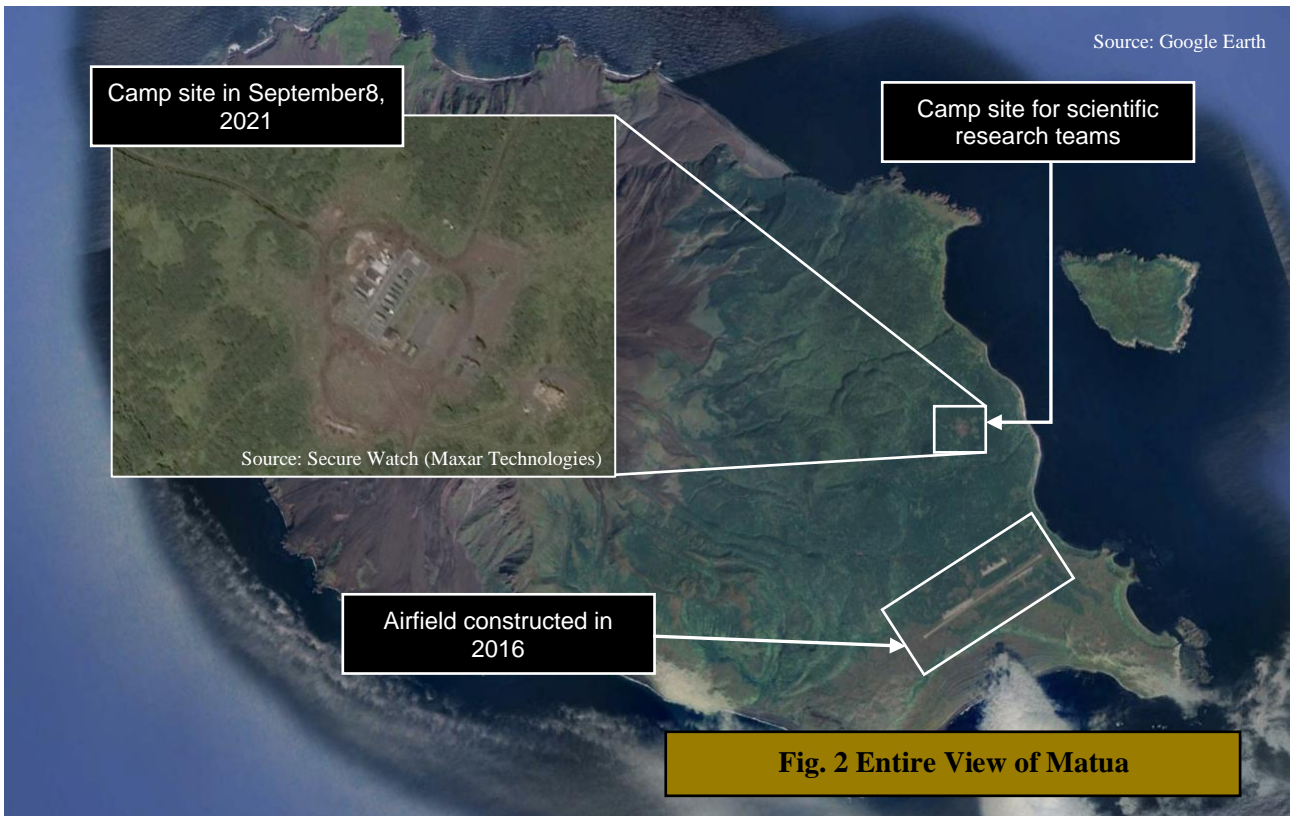
At the same time, the pace and scale of construction in the middle Kuril Islands have been slow and limited when compared with the other parts of the "nuclear bastion." While plans to [construct a naval base](#) and [deploy AShMs](#) have been reported several times, significant developments have not taken place. Much is because these islands are uninhabited with some having extremely rough terrains, making the costs for deployment,

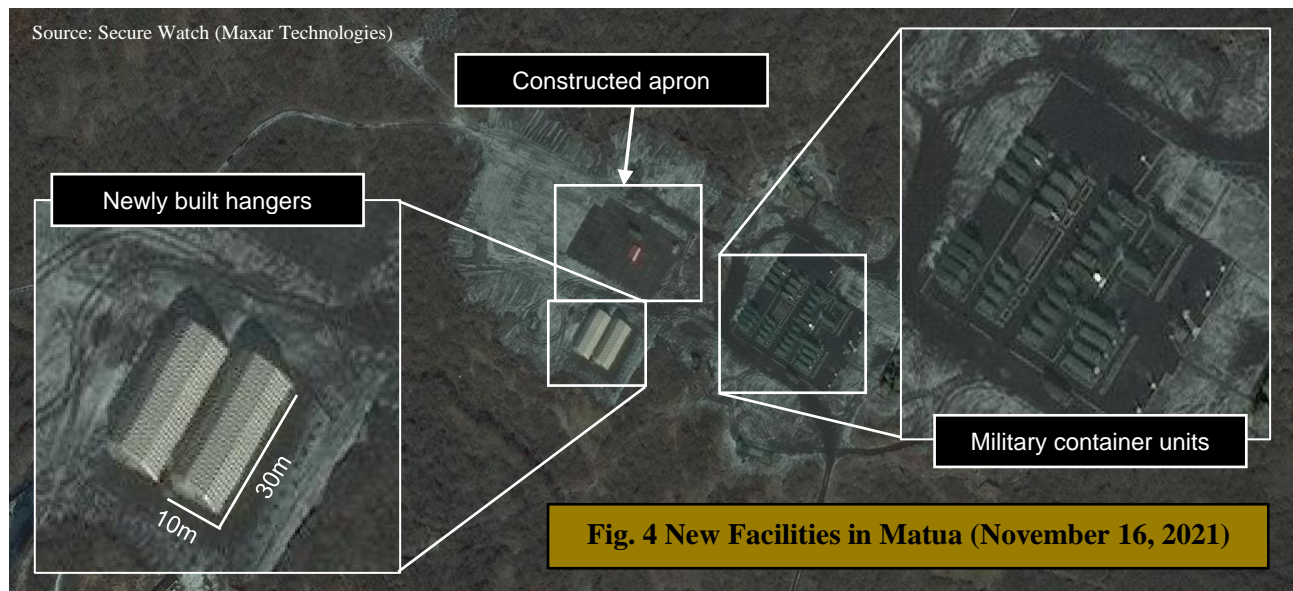
operation and maintenance of units are considerably high. Essentially, the only significant development in the middle Kurils was the construction of a 1,400m runway paved with steel panels in Matua Island in 2016.



However, recent satellite imagery reveals that some military infrastructures are being constructed on Matua Island from October this year.

As is shown in Fig. 2, 3, and 4, the small camp site on the eastern coast of the Island originally built for expeditionary scientific research has been enlarged by several times, and small numbers of military tents and obsolete buildings have been replaced by new container units. The western side of the camp site has been transformed into aprons paved with concrete panels, along with the construction of two large hangers (30m long, 10m wide).

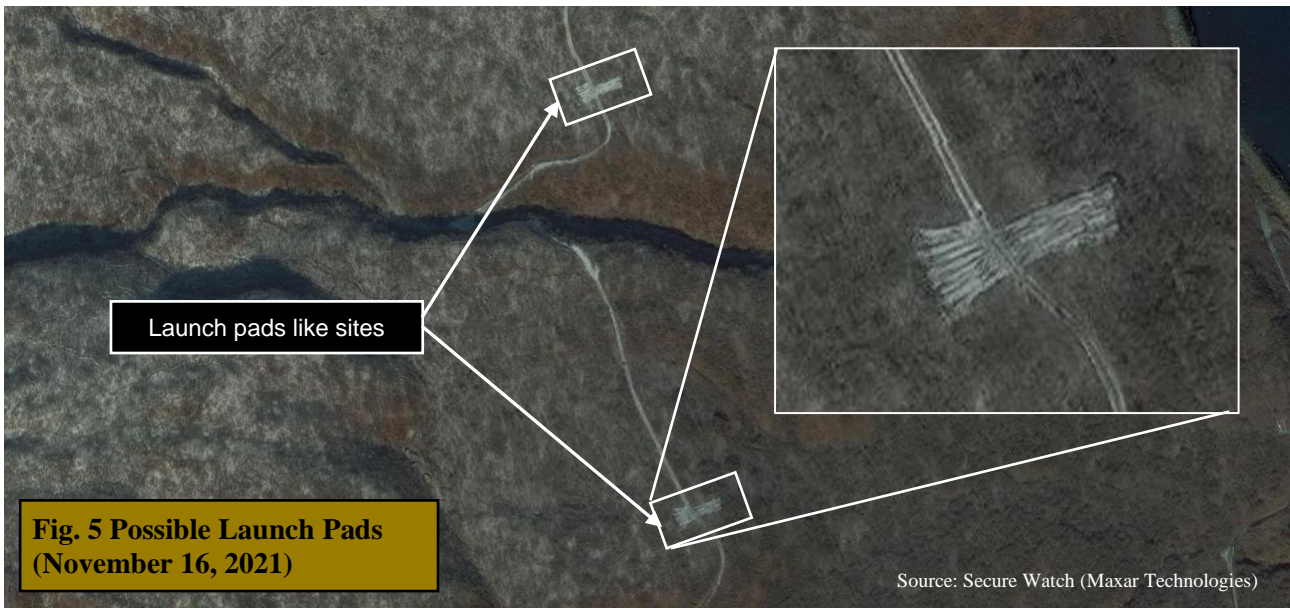




At this stage, it is unclear whether the infrastructural developments on Matua Island indicates the start of Russian military build-ups in middle Kuril Islands. There is still the possibility that this is just the construction of a new scientific research facility, and newly built hangers are too small when compared to the AShM units deployed in other parts of the Kuril archipelago. For example, in the case of Kunashiri and Etorofu, disputed islands between Japan and Russia, each of the AShM hangars measure approximately 130m long and 30m wide. Nevertheless, the presence of large aprons in front of hangers matches with the features of AShM facilities. For example, the AShM hangers in Kunashiri and Etorofu have such aprons to park and maintain the AShM battalion vehicles.

In addition, two launch pad-like facilities have been constructed in Matua as shown in Fig. 5. Given that the construction of the launch pads took place almost at the same time as the hangers, it is reasonable to consider those to be interrelated. Furthermore, Russian AShM units are often accompanied by launch pads around their basing facilities. Thus there are reasons to believe that the developments on Matua Island also follows that pattern.

The abovementioned facts strongly suggest that the latest developments in Matua Island are indeed the construction of Russia's first AShM base in the middle Kurils. While the most likely assets deployed there are the SS-C-5 and/or the SS-C-6 AShMs, smaller assets could also be deployed. In 2019, Russia unveiled a new type of small AShM launch systems known as the Rubezh-ME that consists of launch vehicles with Kh-35U AShM canisters, a Monolit-B fire control radar, and a command post unit mounted on KamAZ-6350 off-road trucks (Fig. 6). Even though the individual capacity of the Rubezh-ME is much smaller than SS-C-6, which is equipped with eight Kh-35U canisters, its compact size makes it possible for a whole battalion to be accommodated in small hangers like those in Matua.



Indeed, the anti-access arrangement on Matua is incomplete with the absence of air-defence systems. However, in the case of Kunashiri and Etorofu, the air-defense systems were deployed four years after the deployment of AShMs in 2016, thus it is possible that the same trend will take place in the middle Kurils.

There are also logistical problems given that the facilities are located in distant, uninhabited islands, particularly given that Russia's landing ship fleet in this area has shrunk dramatically over the last 30 years. However, the Russian navy is rebuilding its landing ship fleet, and some of these new generation vessels are to be deployed in the Pacific (Table 1). Hence it is expected that Russia's military build-ups in the middle Kuril Islands will proceed in congruence with the development of its logistic capabilities.

**Table 1 Transition of Russia's Landing Ship Fleet**

Class	Displacement	1985		2021		2030 (expected)	
		Entire	Pacific Fleet	Entire	Pacific Fleet	Entire	Pacific Fleet
Project 775/775M	4,400t	18	18	16	3	13	3
Project 1171	4,360t	14		4	1	0	0
Project 1174	14,000t	2	1	0	0	0	0
Project 11711	6,600t	0	1	1	0	4	2
Project 23900	40,000t	0	0	0	0	2	1

Sources: IISS, *The Military Balance 1985*; IISS, *The Military Balance 2021*; and estimates by the author.

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