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Commentary

Russian Military Activities in the Arctic: Myths & Realities

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The outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis has spurred new accusations of Russia being an aggressive and militarist power not only in Eastern Europe but also in the Arctic (in addition to the charges brought earlier with regard to the planting of the titanium flag on the North Pole in 2007, the resumption of naval and air patrols in the region and the military modernization programs of the Russian conventional and nuclear forces deployed in the Far North). It was expected that in the wake of the crisis, Moscow would dramatically increase its military activities and presence in the region as well as accelerate its military modernization programs. Some experts paid attention to the fact that Russia's new maritime doctrine (July 2015) has identified the Arctic (along with the North Atlantic) as priority areas for the Russian Navy.

However, these alarmist expectations were not fulfilled. First of all, there was no substantial paradigmatic shift in the Kremlin's vision of the military power's role in the Arctic. As before, Moscow's military strategies aimed at three major goals: first, to demonstrate and ascertain Russia's sovereignty over the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF), including the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf; second, to protect its economic interests in the High North; and third, to demonstrate that Russia retains its great power status and has world-class military capabilities. In a sense, the Russian military strategies are comparable with those of other coastal states (especially those of the US and Canada).

Still, some impact of the Ukrainian crisis could be seen in the increasing number and scale of the Russian military exercises in the Arctic. For example, in March 2015, Putin ordered the inspection of the Northern Fleet for combat readiness. Some 38,000 soldiers, 3,360 vehicles, 41 naval vessels,

15 submarines and 110 aircrafts were involved in the inspection. In August, more than 1,000 soldiers, 14 aircraft and 34 special military units took part in drills on the Taymyr Peninsula (northern Siberia).

However, it should be noted that the March combat readiness inspection was a response to NATO's preceding drill in Norway, which involved 5,000 troops, the largest military exercise on the NATO northern flank since 1967. As for the August exercise, according to the Northern Fleet's Commander, Admiral Vladimir Korolev, this exercise was purely defensive as it was done more than 3,000 kilometres away from the Norwegian border and was directed to protect the economic security of the AZRF (to prevent poaching, smuggling, illegal migration as well as to conduct search and rescue operations) rather than to plan any offensive moves.

So far, Russia has responded to NATO's moves with more rhetoric than action in the Arctic, notes Andreas Østhagen, an Arctic policy expert with the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies. In contrast with the Baltic Sea region, where the NATO-Russian tensions have obviously increased over the last year, "The situation in the High North is close to normal compared to the activity of the last years," the head of the Norwegian Joint Command Headquarters, Lt. Gen. Morten Haga Lunde, believes. "This is in spite of the tense situation that has evolved between Russia and NATO."

According to official numbers from the Norwegian Joint Command Headquarters, there had been 43 scrambles and 69 identifications in the international airspace outside the coast of Norway in 2014. In 2013, there were 41 scrambles and 58 identifications, and in 2012, there were 41 scrambles and 71 identifications. The numbers are considerably lower than during the 1980s, when there could be as many as 500 to 600 identifications per year.[1]

There was no dramatic increase in Russia's naval and air patrolling of the North Atlantic and Arctic in 2014-2015. Moreover, after two catastrophes with the Tu-95 strategic bombers (Summer 2015), their flights were suspended for a while.

Russia's military modernization programs in the Far North were implemented according to schedule. However, some Western military analysts tried to represent the deployment of the Pantsir-S1 short-range air defence system on the Kola Peninsula, plans to replace the S-300 long-range air defence system with a more advanced S-400 "Growler" system, tactical training for fighter jet pilots in Arctic conditions, sea trials of nuclear

submarines (most of which are designed for deployment to the Pacific Fleet), and plans to establish 16 deep-water ports, 10 search and rescue stations, 10 air defence radar stations, and 13 airfields along its Arctic periphery as evidence of Russia's growing military ambitions in the High North.

These experts tend to ignore the fact that the Soviet-time military machine has significantly degenerated in the 1990s and early 2000s, and that the Russian conventional and nuclear forces badly need modernization to effectively meet new challenges and threats.

To reorganize in a more efficient way, the Russian land forces in the Western part of the AZRF had plans to transform the motorized infantry and marine brigades located near Pechenga (the Murmansk region) to the Arctic special force unit, with soldiers trained in a special program and equipped with modern personal equipment for military operations in the Arctic. The Arctic brigade should be operational by 2016. There were also plans to create another Arctic brigade somewhere in the Arkhangelsk region. All conventional forces in the AZRF should form an Arctic Group of Forces (AGF) to be led by the joint Arctic command (to be established in 2017).

However, the Ukrainian crisis has made adjustments to Russia's military planning. While two Pechenga-based brigades were left in place, the Arctic brigade was surprisingly created ahead of schedule (in January 2015) and deployed in Alakurtti, which is close to the Finnish-Russian border. Another surprise was that given the "increased NATO military threat" in the North, President Putin has decided to accelerate the creation of the new strategic command "North," which was established in December 2014 (three years ahead of schedule). It was also announced that the second Arctic brigade will be formed in 2016 and will be stationed in the Yamal-Nenets autonomous district (east of the Ural Mountains in the Arctic Circle).

Another interesting structural change is the ongoing reorganization of the Russian Coast Guard (part of the Federal Security Service (FSS), successor of the KGB). Now the Coast Guard has a wide focus in the Arctic: in addition to the traditional protection of biological resources in the Arctic Ocean, oil and gas installations and shipping along the Northern Sea Route are among the agency's new top priorities. For this purpose, the FSS has established two new border guard commands: one in Murmansk for the western AZRF regions, and one in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky for the eastern Arctic regions.

There are plans to equip the Coast Guard in the AZRF with the brand new vessels of Project 22100. The *Okean*-class ice-going patrol ship, the *Polyarnaya Zvezda* (*Polar Star*), is currently undergoing sea trials in the Baltic Sea. Vessels of this class can break up to 31.4 inches-thick ice. They have an endurance of 60 days and a range of 12,000 nautical miles at 20 knots. They are equipped with a Ka-27 helicopter and can be supplied with Gorizont UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles).

The attention that Russia pays now to the Coast Guard is in line with what other coastal states do (especially Norway and Denmark).

To conclude, serious international experts do not see any particular alarming trends in Russia's military behaviour in the Arctic in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis. According to the former Commander of the US Coast Guard and current US State Department Special Representative to the Arctic, Admiral Robert J. Papp, "Everything we have seen them doing so far [i.e., Russia], is lawful, considered and deliberative. So we'll just continue monitoring it and not overreact to it." Papp noted that all countries have a responsibility to be able to provide search and rescue capabilities and navigation assistance in the area, and Russia seems to be investing in that.[2]

Notes

1. T. Pettersen (2014, December 19). Stable Russian Air Activity in the North. *Barents Observer*. Available from http://barentsobserver.com/en/security/2014/12/stable-russian-air-activity-north-19-12.

2. Radio Sweden (2015, 22 May). New Security Landscape in the Arctic. Available from http://www.adn.com/article/20150522/new-security-landscape-arctic.