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Russian Military Strategies in the High North

Valery Konyshov and Alexander Sergunin

Abstract: *In contrast with Western perceptions of Russia as an expansionist power in the Arctic, this chapter argues that Moscow does not seek military superiority in the region. Moscow's military strategies in the Arctic pursue three major goals: first, to ascertain Russia's sovereignty over its exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in the region; second, to protect its economic interests in the North; and third, to demonstrate that Russia retains its great power status and still has world-class military capabilities. The Russian military modernization programs are quite modest and aim to upgrade the Russian armed forces in the High North rather than providing them with additional offensive capabilities or provoking a regional arms race. Moscow favors soft rather than hard power strategy in the Arctic.*

Keywords: the Arctic; military security/strategy, Russia; sovereignty

Heininen, Lassi, ed. *Security and Sovereignty in the North Atlantic*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

DOI: 10.1057/9781137470720.0012.

Introduction

The Western mass media is replete with assessments of Russia's Arctic policies as expansionist. According to some Western analysts, because of its economic weakness and technological backwardness Russia tends to make an emphasis on military-coercive instruments to protect its national interests in the North and this will inevitably lead to the regional arms race and even military conflicts in the Arctic (Borgerson, 2009; Huebert, 2010; Huebert et al., 2012; Smith and Giles, 2007). Moscow denies these allegations and points out that it plans use its military power only to protect its legitimate interests in the region.

This chapter aims to discuss the question – whether Russia is really a revisionist power in the Arctic or can it be evaluated in different, more positive terms, particularly as a country that is interested in the region's stability and open to international cooperation in this part of the world? However, before addressing this main research question the Russian threat perceptions should be analyzed.

Threat perceptions

Since the general focus of the Arctic policies had shifted from hard to soft security (see the Introduction of this volume) the Russian threat perceptions have also evolved significantly over the last two decades. Moscow is no longer concerned about the threat of a large-scale nuclear war and now pays greater attention to threats and challenges that stem from climate change and growing competition over Arctic natural resources and sea routes rather than from the military sphere. Now the Russian security structures are charged not only with purely military functions but also with issues such as cleaning the Soviet-made environmental mess, search and rescue operations (SAR), fighting oil spills, poaching, smuggling, and illegal migration.

It should be noted that some climate change implications such as, the Northern pole ice cap's meltdown necessitate some serious changes in the Arctic states' military strategies, including the Russian one. On the one hand, as the recent US Navy's document argues, the extension of an ice-free season can result in a significant expansion of surface naval activities in the Arctic (*The United States Navy Arctic Roadmap for 2014–2030*, 2014, pp. 8, 16–19). However, on the other hand, the shrinking

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