

Katarzyna Zysk 22, Professor of International Relations and Contemporary History, Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, 8-23-2022, accessed on 10-4-2022, Chatham House, "Myth 8: 'Russia's military build-up in the Arctic is defensive'",
<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/myths-and-misconceptions-around-russian-military-intent/myth-8-russias-military-build>, HBisevac

Although Russia claims that its expansion of military assets in the region is both a legitimate response to emerging threats and part of a necessary modernization process, offensive capabilities are also in evidence.

What is the myth? The narrative of a looming conflict over Arctic resources and territories, with Russia as the most likely aggressor, has been largely put to bed. At the same time, the claim that Russia's Arctic military build-up is defensive or mainly defensive in nature continues to be perpetuated. The basic argument is that the development of Russian facilities and assets in the region is merely a necessary modernization after the decay of the 1990s, and that it aims to ensure safety and security for Russia's legitimate Arctic interests. The argument often highlights Moscow's cooperative and constructive policies toward regional relations, especially compared with the country's behaviour in other borderlands. Who advocates or subscribes to it? This argument has been at the centre of the Russian official Arctic narrative since the early stages of the country's military development in the region (set in motion in 2008). Senior figures, including President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, have repeatedly stated that Russia's Arctic military modernization is purely defensive, and that it provides a response to a spectrum of growing threats from both state and non-state actors. For example, Lavrov stated at the International Arctic Forum in St Petersburg in 2019: 'We don't threaten anyone. We ensure sufficient defense capabilities given the political and military situation around our borders.' In a similar vein, Putin said in 2014: 'We are not going to engage in militarization of the Arctic. Our actions in the Arctic are restrained and reasonable in scope but are absolutely necessary to ensure the defensive capability of Russia. Over the years, the Kremlin has been keen to maintain an image of Russia as a reliable and responsible Arctic leader. To this end, it has highlighted Russia's interest in broad multilateral dialogue and cooperation, and has promoted the image of the Arctic as a 'zone of peace and cooperation' and 'territory of dialogue', where there are 'no problems requiring a military solution' Similarly, analysis by various Russian and Western experts has held that 'there is only a rather limited level of modernization and increases or changes in force levels and structures', and that this constitutes 'a correction rather than a wholesale militarization'. A recurrent justification for the 'limited modernization' programme has been the decay in Russian defence infrastructure in the 1990s and early 2000s. Others have claimed that development in the region is no cause for alarm because modernization has also been ongoing in other Russian regions, and the build-up in the Arctic is 'roughly in line with other strategic directions'. Even if it is slightly larger, it is simply because the region was neglected previously. Why is it wrong? This argument is flawed for several reasons. First, it oversimplifies the military dynamics in the Arctic. The distinction between offence and defence is not clear cut in Russian strategic thinking. One example is the prominent role of pre-emption in Russian military theory, notably in the concept of 'active defence'. This problem is also highly relevant when considering some of the Russian military capabilities, including a broad spectrum of nuclear weapons and long-range high-precision weapons; the Russian Aerospace Forces, which integrate offensive and defensive capabilities; and the offensive elements of Russian airpower, not least long-range and tactical-strike capabilities, which are integral to Russia's air defence posture. Russia has also conducted numerous operations in the Arctic that can qualify as provocative or threatening to other countries, even if the level of such activities has generally been lower than in the Baltic and Black Sea regions. Hence, describing the Russian military posture in the Arctic as defensive does not explain much from the military strategy point of view. Likewise, claiming that Russian Arctic military investments are primarily designed to 'protect' critical economic and security infrastructure from attack by the United States, in a pre-emptive attack' does not preclude offensive use of these capabilities. Second, the geography is misunderstood.