

# U.S. Strategic Interests in the Arctic

## A Proposed Department of Defense Approach

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**Abstract:** In the wake of climate change, the Arctic is witnessing a level of transportation and access to resources unprecedented in modern history. Since the end of the Cold War, the Arctic has been a region of cooperation among both Arctic and non-Arctic nations. However, as the region witnesses an increased level of activity and race for resources, so too will the level of stress increase the strain on cooperation and diplomatic relationships, especially those between Russia and the West. The United States has been slowly preparing for an increased presence in the Arctic region, publishing its first strategic security document earlier this decade. The progress of the Department of Defense (DOD) still pales in comparison to current competitors' efforts in the Arctic. To protect national interests in the Arctic, the DOD requires a new plan of action focused on increased levels of cooperation, force, equipment, and infrastructure improvements, as well as revising the department's Unified Command Plan. This plan should provide a strategic message to allies, partners, and adversaries alike that the United States is prepared to operate in the Arctic.

**Keywords:** Arctic, Department of Defense, DOD, Russia, China, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, cooperation, Unified Command Plan, U.S. European Command

**T**he Arctic region came into its own strategic significance during the Cold War. It offered the shortest distance for intercontinental ballistic missiles and long-range bombers between the Soviet Union and the continental

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United States. The region witnessed an extensive level of militarization from both sides, including air and naval bases, radar stations, submarine activity, military exercises, and nuclear testing.<sup>1</sup> The Arctic still maintains its strategic importance for not only the United States, Russia, and other Arctic states but also for China, a self-proclaimed near Arctic nation.<sup>2</sup> No one should advocate for a return to the high level of tension between the United States and Russia that characterized the latter half of the twentieth century, but recent events have stressed a complicated relationship: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion into Eastern Europe, Russian interference in U.S. and European elections, Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory, U.S. and Russian friction in Syria, and recent cyberattacks by Russia. Due to these Russian actions and an increasingly powerful China, the 2017 U.S. *National Security Strategy* focused on a return to great power competition. This competition could lead to conflict with Russia or China, especially as their military capabilities are estimated to peak around 2030.<sup>3</sup>

Recent issues aside, one region where countries from North America, Europe, and Asia have demonstrated a willingness to cooperate is the Arctic. Through a multitude of forums, primarily the Arctic Council, the eight Arctic nations have agreed on search and rescue coordination, oil-spill response preparations, scientific cooperation, a fishery agreement, and boundary dispute settlements.<sup>4</sup> The one issue not addressed by numerous Arctic forums is security, which continues to remain in the background of other Arctic-related issues.

However, as the Arctic becomes more accessible due to climate change, cooperation among Arctic nations could falter. The continued ice melt will expose more consistent shipping routes and increase opportunities for resource extraction, commercial traffic, and tourism. As other non-Arctic countries seek access, the likelihood for economic, military, and resource competition will increase. In addition, the Arctic remains a geographic location where NATO member states and Russia intersect, creating an area of potential strategic spillover, where disagreements and tensions in Europe and the Middle East could manifest.<sup>5</sup> Cooperation among allied Arctic nations will only increase in importance going forward, especially in the face of an aggressive Russia and an increasingly ambitious China.

During this decade, Russia has increased its efforts to revitalize and rebuild its military with a special focus on Arctic capabilities. In 2014, Russia deemed the Arctic region a high enough strategic priority to establish a Northern Joint Strategic Command, specifically oriented on the Russian Arctic in combination with its Northern Fleet.<sup>6</sup> In addition, they have upgraded communications and satellite equipment, military infrastructure, established specific Arctic infantry units, and continued to increase the lethality and size of their naval combatant fleet.<sup>7</sup> The Russian military has also focused on comprehensive reform programs

with completion windows between the 2020s and 2030s to increase professionalization, modernize equipment, and increase readiness with the goal of a smaller and more capable military formation.<sup>8</sup> Focusing on military reforms will enable the Russian leadership to protect national interests and maintain domestic control as their oil- and gas-dependent economy continues its downward trend.<sup>9</sup> The Russian military is taking the necessary steps toward protecting their country's interests in the Arctic, whereas the United States, as stated by the secretary of the Army, has "mortgaged its readiness" during the last 18 years.<sup>10</sup> The current U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) commander, General Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy, has also stressed that the United States is not nearly on par with Russia to execute and sustain operations in the Arctic, pointing directly to the lack of infrastructure and presence.<sup>11</sup>

China's ambitions in the Arctic reflect their continued pursuit of global economic dominance and a desire to reshape the world order. Unlike Russia's approach, in part because they are not a littoral Arctic state and currently lack an Arctic military presence, China is pursuing a strategy of influence and investments to gain access to both transpolar waterways and the multitude of resources estimated to exist in the Arctic region. They are creating a fleet of nuclear-powered icebreakers, in addition to their six gas-powered vessels, and have invested considerably in European Arctic infrastructure projects.<sup>12</sup> As China moves forward to solidify their positioning in the Arctic, they could pursue stronger economic ties with Russia; Russia provides the access and land bases and China provides financial backing for a weakened economy. The U.S. secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, recently acknowledged the possibility of the Chinese using the cover of scientific research in the Arctic as a way of increasing their military presence.<sup>13</sup>

The DOD is duty bound to prepare for the future and defend U.S. national interests in the Arctic. These interests include strategic deterrence, freedom of navigation, and the protection of sovereign territory and rights.<sup>14</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, the DOD has focused its efforts in other theaters of operation, combating terrorism and focusing less on militarily defending territory, resources, and lines of communications that are vital to the nation. However, the potential for future conflict in the Arctic requires the DOD reexamine its current strategy and posture. A proposed DOD approach to protecting national interests in the Arctic requires a focus on increased cooperation and coordination, preparing forces, equipment, and infrastructure for the Arctic and modifying the Unified Command Plan.<sup>15</sup>

### **Increased Military-to-Military Cooperation and Coordination**

A cornerstone of the DOD's approach in the Arctic should focus on an in-

creased cooperation between NATO members and partner countries. A way of increasing cooperation is through additional military training and readiness exercises. NATO conducts on average about one to two exercises in the Arctic region per year, accounting for less than 10 percent of its annual exercise total.<sup>16</sup> While the limited number of exercises in the Arctic region does not indicate a lack of military cooperation among Arctic states, it is an indicator that NATO's focus is elsewhere. The United States, NATO-allied militaries in the Arctic (Canada, Norway, and Denmark), and NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Partners (Sweden and Finland) would benefit from additional exercises and training opportunities to build interoperability, increase Arctic war fighting expertise, and demonstrate their resolve along NATO's northern boundary. The DOD could approach this cooperation in a multitude of ways: bilaterally with Arctic countries, especially Canada and Denmark due to colocation in North America, and as part of additional Arctic-centric NATO exercises, as demonstrated during Trident Juncture 2018.

The United States, and other Arctic states as a whole, also stand to benefit from increased military coordination with Russia on specific issues, such as monitoring commercial use of trade routes, enforcing adherence to exclusive economic zones, combining search and rescue capabilities, and providing broad military support to civil authorities.<sup>17</sup> Nonmilitary cooperation with Russia in the Arctic is already established through various organizations; however, since the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, security dialogue has stalled across several forums, including the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable. The 2019 U.S. National Defense Authorization Act authorizes U.S. forces to coordinate, not cooperate, with the Russian military for operational deconfliction.<sup>18</sup> With the current authorization act in mind, the DOD could request approval for the establishment of a formal coordination apparatus at the U.S. combatant command—Russian Northern Joint Strategic Command level to demonstrate capacity and resolve in the Arctic while preventing unintended escalation. Even though a coordination mechanism at the military level appears difficult under the current circumstances, this should still remain a long-term objective for the DOD.

### **Forces, Equipment, and Infrastructure to Support Operations**

To protect U.S. interests in the Arctic, the DOD should focus on preparing forces, equipment, and infrastructure. Currently, the DOD has minimal dedicated, trained, and equipped forces aligned and positioned forward to conduct operations in the Arctic region. The ground forces are limited to less than one U.S. division, with two infantry brigades from the Army stationed in Alaska and not fully dedicated to Arctic operations under the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) and a rotational U.S. Marine infantry battalion pres-

ence in Norway under U.S. European Command (EUCOM).<sup>19</sup> In addition, four total combined active duty and Reserve Air Force fighter squadrons are stationed in Alaska.<sup>20</sup> The Navy's Arctic presence consists of only aerial and sub-surface patrols.<sup>21</sup> If the Army forces in Alaska are deployed in support of other worldwide contingency operations, as they often have during the last 18 years, then there are no other Arctic-trained forces to fill the gap. The DOD does not currently maintain a dedicated and trained Arctic force capable of projection 365 days a year. In addition, brigade-size organizations and larger do not currently rotate through Alaska or northern Europe as they do in central Europe and South Korea to train for operations under Arctic conditions. The lack of trained Arctic forces limits the DOD and its combatant commands' ability to respond to threats in the Arctic.

Part of the DOD's approach in the Arctic should hinge on maintaining a dedicated, capable, and ready force to support operations and deter aggression in both the North American and European Arctic. The military could accomplish this through the use of operational plans with designated forces, both for the North American and the European Arctic, assigned to NORTHCOM and EUCOM. The plans could utilize a 12- to 24-month period when units from across the Services, including the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), are designated to respond to security threats in support of both combatant commands. This approach provides two benefits to the DOD: one, it offers NORTHCOM and EUCOM commanders an allocated joint force package with a specified purpose without taxing their currently assigned forces; and two, as units rotate through this "Arctic Reaction Force," they are able to train under Arctic conditions and increase their warfighting proficiency in a unique environment. In addition, this Arctic warfighting knowledge and expertise would spread across the Services as different units and personnel conduct rotations.

The DOD's approach to preparation for Arctic operations should also include key dual-purpose infrastructure and equipment programs necessary to execute and sustain future operations. Numerous military leaders, academics, think tanks, and governmental agencies have previously identified the lack of infrastructure and operational equipment in the U.S. Arctic: there is currently no deepwater port along the U.S. Arctic coast capable of supporting U.S. Navy cruisers, carriers, and destroyers; minimal Alaskan infrastructure and communications capabilities; and only one heavy, active U.S. icebreaker with a potential three- to six-year gap without an operational icebreaker in the near future.<sup>22</sup> When compared to the reconstitution efforts by the Russian military and capability improvements by the Chinese, the United States falls drastically short.

Going forward, the DOD, along with other relevant government agencies, should work to bridge these capability gaps to enable better support for the

forward projection of forces. Infrastructure improvements in Alaska would also better prepare the U.S. Arctic for future increases in economic and transportation activity throughout the region. In the near term, the military should establish forward staging bases. These staging bases would not necessarily require full-time operation but would serve as warm bases to support training, exercises, and operations when needed in the Arctic environment. For example, the U.S. Navy is currently modernizing a portion of the mothballed Naval Air Station Keflavik, Iceland, to support Boeing P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol/submarine-hunting aircraft and visiting U.S. Navy vessels.<sup>23</sup> Arctic staging bases would also assist in the reinforcement and protection of the transatlantic sea lines of communication and counter potential adversary antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) operations. Protecting U.S. national interests and demonstrating resolve in the Arctic requires the DOD to establish a long-term and executable plan for a dedicated Arctic force, procurement of necessary equipment, and investment in key infrastructure.

### **Updating the Unified Command Plan**

The current DOD Unified Command Plan addresses the Arctic area in three separate facets. First, the plan splits the area between EUCOM and NORTHCOM in half, with the North Pole falling within the NORTHCOM area of operations. Second, the Unified Command Plan designates NORTHCOM as the lead combatant command for Arctic capability advocacy. Third, the plan states that both EUCOM and NORTHCOM share combatant command responsibility for the Arctic region.<sup>24</sup> NORTHCOM's boundary is also at certain locations closer to Europe and Asia than to North America, and with their focus on homeland defense, potential Russian aggression in the Arctic could exacerbate ambiguity of responsibility between the two commands. To provide more flexibility for EUCOM to deter threats and support steady state operations, the DOD should shift the NORTHCOM boundary closer to the North American continent, potentially adhering to the 200 nautical mile economic exclusion zone. The boundary shift would also provide EUCOM more maneuver space on the European side of the Arctic Ocean to conduct operations, cooperate with allies and partners, and prevent crises.

In addition to shifting the current combatant command boundary, EUCOM should be designated the lead overall command for Arctic operations, with NORTHCOM maintaining sole responsibility for the North American Arctic. The highest Arctic population density and the fastest ice melt rate of the Arctic region both reside on the European side of the Arctic. The European Arctic is also the most likely side for future conflict and potential security issues, considering the complex and often tense relationship between Western Europe, NATO, and Russia. Six of the eight Arctic

countries also fall within the EUCOM area of responsibility. In addition, these European Arctic nations already possess a strong relationship with the EUCOM commander, staff, and Service components through combined exercises, security force assistance, exchanges, and coordination.<sup>25</sup> Considering the potential for strategic spillover in the Arctic, EUCOM also possesses the experience and expertise in dealing with Russian aggression in Europe.<sup>26</sup> NORTHCOM lacks this experience and historical connections to the European Arctic nations.<sup>27</sup> All Arctic countries also share a connection to NATO; the United States, Canada, Norway, Iceland, and Denmark are all members of NATO with Finland, Sweden, and even Russia all serving as partners of various degrees.<sup>28</sup> As the commander of EUCOM also serves as the Supreme Allied Commander for NATO's military forces, Arctic security issues neatly fit under both EUCOM and NATO's portfolios.

The simplicity of a single lead combatant command is vital for the future Arctic landscape, where non-Arctic actors will push for increased access to potentially vast resources. EUCOM as the lead would provide a single point of coordination for the INDOPACOM commander and staff, focusing primarily on China. EUCOM as the lead combatant command also provides other geographic combatant commands with a single point of contact as well. With China increasing their posture for Arctic operations and investing heavily in Arctic states, such as Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Finland, constant monitoring will require significant intelligence sharing and cooperation between the two geographic combatant commands. Designating EUCOM as the lead command for the Arctic provides a single coordination point, providing simplicity for the DOD's efforts in the region.

Finally, when considering training and joint-coalition exercises in the Arctic, they are most likely to take place within the EUCOM and NATO footprint with a focus on Russian deterrence. As demonstrated during Trident Juncture, these exercises have historically involved Norway, Sweden, and Finland. In addition, EUCOM can access additional funds outside its normal combatant command budget, through the European Deterrence Initiative, to spend on exercises, training, infrastructure, and prepositioning within the European Arctic.<sup>29</sup> Designating EUCOM as the lead combatant command for the Arctic and shifting the current boundary will enable one combatant command to focus on potential threats in the Arctic—a single command that already cooperates with other Arctic allies and is closely aligned with NATO.

## Conclusions

The Arctic transportation waterways are projected to become nearly ice free during the summer months by the 2030s and hence more accessible for commercial activity, transportation, tourism, and military forces.<sup>30</sup> The DOD can ill

afford to be under prepared to potentially face a resurgent Russian threat, whose forces can execute and sustain operations in the Arctic at a higher level than the United States and its allies. In addition, China is increasing their capabilities and influence in the Arctic region as they continue to pursue their own “Polar Silk Road” strategy and further cement their partnership with Russia.

The Arctic does present a unique operating environment in the sense of historical cooperation among nations. However, if conditions change, the DOD must be ready to protect U.S. national interests through continued and increased cooperation, force, equipment, and infrastructure readiness, and by changing the Unified Command Plan to better address the realities of the Arctic domain.

Cooperation among allied Arctic nations can be increased through additional military exercises and military-to-military cooperation to increase preparedness, interoperability, and demonstrate resolve in the face of competitors and adversaries. An increase in cooperation also serves the secondary effect of improving the military’s ability to operate under Arctic conditions. The DOD must be ready to provide trained forces, equipment, and infrastructure capable of Arctic operations. The military is making headway with the recent reestablishment of the U.S. Navy’s 2d Fleet and rotational U.S. Marine forces in Norway, but currently the overall force is still not prepared to operate and sustain itself without significant coalition assistance. At the same time, the United States faces both an increased Russian military presence, including the most submarine activity in the Atlantic during the last 25 years, and increased Chinese expansion and influence.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, the Unified Command Plan still designates that NORTHCOM and EUCOM share responsibility for the Arctic, a fact that ignores the most likely location of future security conflicts in the Arctic. EUCOM and its Service components are already best postured to conduct coordination with NATO and deter threats. To prevent operational gaps in the Arctic, the DOD should adjust the boundary and designate EUCOM as the overall lead combatant command for the Arctic.

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## Notes

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2. The terms *Arctic nations* or *states* used throughout the document specifically refer to what is known as the “Arctic Eight.” These are the eight nations that comprise the core members of the Arctic Council and possess sovereignty above the Arctic Circle. These nations include the United States, Canada, Russia, Iceland, Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark (due to the island of Greenland). Other nations, such as China, possess observer status in the Arctic Circle and profess status as a “Near-Arctic” nation.
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7. Thomas, *Russia’s Military Strategy*, 322–44; and Michael Kofman and Jeffrey Edmonds, “Why the Russian Navy Is a More Capable Adversary Than It Appears,” *National Interest*, 22 August 2017.
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24. Andrew Feickert, *The Unified Command Plan and Combatant Commands: Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2013), 65; and *Arctic Imperatives*, 20.
25. Former senior military planner, future operations (J35), EUCOM, conversation with author regarding combined operations between EUCOM, Service components, and allied/partnered nations, 28 February 2019.
26. Ariel Cohen et al., *EUCOM Should Lead U.S. Combatant Commands in Defense of National Interests in the Arctic* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2011), 8.
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28. Finland and Sweden are members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the Partnership for Peace, and maintain a national delegation to NATO. They are also part of the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership in NATO, which allows for increased cooperation and intelligence sharing. Russia is also a member of the Partnership for Peace and the NATO-Russia Council; however, meetings are only at the ambassadorial level and have taken place less frequently since 2014.
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