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**Research Report**

## U.S. Arctic security policy: North American Arctic strategies, Russian hubris and Chinese ambitions

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# SWP Comment

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## U.S. Arctic Security Policy

North American Arctic strategies, Russian hubris and Chinese ambitions

*Michael Paul*

Unlike his predecessors, US President Joe Biden made important decisions early in his term to enable better coordination of US Arctic policy. This includes foremost the National Strategy for the Arctic Region that was published later than planned as a result of Russia's war of aggression, which destroyed the few remaining hopes for cooperation and made the Arctic a security policy issue. Alaska, as the northernmost American state, is naturally at the centre of US Arctic policy, which increasingly also must take Chinese activities into consideration. Most recently, in September 2022, the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) detected Chinese and Russian warships off Alaska. Currently, only one US icebreaker is continuously available in the Arctic theatre with the mission to protect sovereignty in the Arctic Ocean and monitor ice-covered areas. Alaska is also the very same US state that the recent Chinese spy balloon flew over, which was eventually shot down in February 2023. After decades of scant attention, is the Arctic now finally becoming the object of a more engaged US security policy?

Spanning 1.7 million square kilometres, Alaska is currently the largest exclave in the world in terms of surface area. Connecting it to the mainland is still a costly undertaking for the United States of America – albeit to a lesser extent than it once was for the Tsarist Empire. Since the United States acquired what is now the State of Alaska from Tsarist Russia for \$7.2 million in 1867, it has been an Arctic state. At 15 per cent, however, only a small part of US territory lies beyond the Arctic Circle (in contrast to Russia with 45 per cent).

This is one of the reasons why most Americans do not relate to the Arctic. In a 2019 US survey, Americans continued to mildly disagree with the assertion that the

United States is an Arctic nation holding broad and fundamental interests in the region. When US citizens are asked what associations they have with the Arctic, they tend not to mention national concerns, but overwhelmingly respond with notions of cold, ice, and snow (in 2019, for the first time, slightly more respondents associated the Arctic with climate change than snow). Most Americans do not feel close to Alaska, which was only admitted as the 49th state in January 1959 and is nicknamed the Last Frontier State. By the same token, Alaska has been of marginal concern in security policy. Oil production has been of eminent political and economic importance since the discovery of Prudhoe Bay Oil Field in



1968, the largest oil deposit in North America. As a matter of fact, oil production provides the bulk of state revenue.

Supporters of an active Arctic policy were therefore largely isolated for a long time. Since 2009, they have tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to get U.S. Congress to approve new icebreakers. Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski from Alaska, who has represented the state since 2002, also made several such attempts. It is mainly thanks to her that in 2015 the Arctic Caucus was established, the first committee in Congress to draw attention to politics in the 49th state.

Other Alaskan political representatives have tried to emphasize the security relevance of their state: “Alaska is America’s Arctic guardian”, declared Governor Sean Parnell (2009-14). His successor William Walker pointed out to President Barack Obama on a flight to Anchorage in September 2015 that the Russian military was undergoing its largest build-up since the Cold War. The Pentagon, on the other hand, was still arguing in December 2016 that the Arctic remains an area of cooperation, in spite of the ‘friction’ with Russia over sea lanes.

### Climate change, conflicts over sea routes and strategic rivalry as drivers of change

The climate-induced melting of sea ice, the accompanying opening of Arctic Sea lanes and intensifying great power rivalry have changed the perception of the North Polar region. Unlike its predecessors, Donald Trump’s administration assigned “relative priority” to the Arctic region. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo elevated it in May 2019 to a geopolitically significant “arena” in the struggle for power and influence, where a “new era of strategic engagement” was dawning. This eloquent yet premature exaltation of the Arctic was followed by strategy papers from branches of the armed forces containing many generalities, albeit few concrete measures and no priorities.

It was the Department of Defense Arctic Strategy of June 2019 that deviated significantly from the earlier cooperative approaches, focusing right from the outset — in accordance with the priorities of the 2018 National Defense Strategy — on “China and Russia as the principal challenge to long-term U.S. security and prosperity”. The Arctic, it said in Cold War diction, was “a potential vector for an attack on the U.S. homeland.” In addition to Russia, China’s armed forces had now become a focus of the threat assessment as well. Due to the extremely fast pace of China’s naval build-up compared to other rival states, maritime situational awareness and anti-submarine warfare again received high priority. In the Navy’s 2021 Blue Arctic Strategy, “increased Chinese Navy deployments on, below and above Arctic waters” were expected.

Indeed, in September 2022, once again a USCG vessel unexpectedly spotted seven Russian and Chinese warships — one of which was the newest 055 *Nanchang* guided-missile destroyer — navigating in the Bering Sea within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone. USCG Vice Admiral Kevin Lunday later explained it was important that *USCGC Kimball* had been present — which can be seen as an admission that the USCG does not have enough ships available to protect U.S. sovereignty in the Arctic Ocean. There are considerable gaps in the region’s reconnaissance capabilities: “Things start to get pretty dark once you get up higher than 72 degrees north”, former USCG Commandant Admiral Paul Zukunft remarked to a virtual audience in September 2020.

As early as September 2015, five Chinese warships had crossed the waters off Alaska, and since 2021 Beijing’s naval forces have repeatedly passed through the waters of the northernmost US state — sometimes in conjunction with Russian Navy ships. The USCG therefore warned, with regard to China and its behaviour in the South China Sea, that the People’s Republic could also seek to restrict freedom of navigation in the Arctic.

## The Biden Administration's Arctic Policy

President Biden was confronted with a long series of domestic and foreign policy problems at the beginning of his term. Some therefore feared that US Arctic policy would once again gather dust in a corner at the State Department. At the Pentagon, the North Polar region is yet another underfunded area of responsibility competing with the Indo-Pacific as a flashpoint in Sino-American rivalry. Unlike many martial documents of the Trump era, the 2020 US naval strategy also took a more relaxed tone towards the Arctic compared to other areas of the world.

Unlike his predecessors, however, Biden made decisions early on to allow for better coordination of Arctic policy: In September 2021, the administration reactivated the Arctic Executive Steering Committee (AESC) under the leadership of David Balton, and anchored it in the White House. It also appointed six people to the US Arctic Research Commission (USARC), chaired by Arctic expert Mike Sfraga, who was also nominated by Biden to be the ambassadorial-ranking Arctic coordinator. Major General (ret.) Randy "Church" Kee has been Senior Advisor for Arctic Security Affairs since 2021 and heads the new Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies in Anchorage. In September 2022, an Arctic division was established at the Pentagon, headed by Iris Ferguson. Like Pompeo, Ferguson sees the Arctic as a "potential gateway to the homeland and a potential arena for great power competition".

## Alaska and Russia's War of Aggression

Equally bizarre and revealing of the state of U.S.-Russian relations is the idea, voiced by an advisor to Putin, of demanding the "return" of Alaska as compensation for damage caused by sanctions and the war itself. First of all, mixing up cause and effect is significant — Russia itself must pay for the costs of its war of aggression. In addi-

tion, Alaska was not "seized" by the U.S. in 1867. At that time, the sale of Russian America was a very rational decision from the point of view of the Russian actors involved and was in line with the minimal interest that the remote colony attracted in its capital St Petersburg: from the perspective of the imperial centre, Russian involvement in the North Pacific had become more and more of a liability. The Russian state's "model of rule based on expansion, exploitation and subjugation" (Robert Kindler) had reached its limits, whereby the Tsarist Empire could neither supply nor defend its Arctic colony.

Washington has long shown a similar disinterest with regard to Alaska in general and Arctic assets such as icebreakers in particular. Now, however, it wants to become more involved in the North Polar region, a change in tact driven at least partly by Russia's war.

The attack on Ukraine has had many counterproductive consequences for Moscow, including a strengthening of the EU and NATO and an expansion of the Alliance to include Finland and Sweden, two formerly militarily neutral Arctic states. In Washington, the war forced President Biden to fundamentally revise his Russia policy: at the beginning of his term, Biden had sought a more stable relationship with Russia in order to be able to focus more on China as a key strategic competitor. To Putin's delight, at their meeting in Geneva in June 2021, Biden called Russia and the U.S. "two great powers", revising Obama's earlier demotion of Russia to a regional power (while at the same time abandoning great power rivalry as a guiding principle). They also talked about circumpolar areas in which the two Arctic countries could work together, despite diverging significantly on other policy issues. Such cooperative prospects were encouraged by the vague hope that, since Russia had received recognition as an equal power, Putin would moderate his foreign policy behaviour. Clearly, such a shift did not materialise.

As a result of the war of aggression, cooperation between Russia and the United

States in the Arctic has come to an almost complete standstill, except for when necessary between the USCG and the Russian Border Guard on both sides of the Bering Strait and with regard to the maintenance of treaty obligations arising from, among other things, the Air and Maritime Search and Rescue Agreement.

## The new US Arctic Strategy

Despite tensions with Russia, the new National Arctic Strategy of October 2022 invokes the vision of a peaceful, stable and prosperous Arctic, whose destiny will be managed cooperatively. Without underestimating the security risks, the North Polar region indeed remains one in which the situation is peaceful compared to other parts of the world. In this sense, the U.S. is following a dual strategy: on the one hand, it is determined to contain aggressive behaviour by Russia and China; and, on the other hand, it wants to maintain stability – also and especially in the Arctic – in order to be able to return to cooperation at a later date. The war of aggression, however, makes it almost impossible for Washington to separate Moscow's policy in the Arctic from the war in Europe. The Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) is also a controversial subject of interest in China and Russia's friendship of convenience, as the topics of conversation during Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow showed: China wants more access to energy and the Northern Sea Route in the AZRF.

While the interim version of the U.S. National Security Strategy of March 2021 did not mention the Arctic at all, the region has since become a national priority. This makes it easier to address corresponding planning processes and their funding – even though the Arctic ranks last in the the aforementioned document in terms of security priorities, behind the Indo-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

The four pillars of the Arctic Strategy are (1) security, (2) climate change and environmental protection, (3) sustainable economic

development and (4) international cooperation and governance. However, in the very first “security” strategic objective, aiming “to improve our understanding of the operational environment in the Arctic”, the U.S. places itself behind Russia and even China, the latter of which is not only advancing research in the Arctic but may soon even possess more icebreakers than the U.S. And while the strategy paper addresses climate change extensively, the larger Arctic space beyond Alaska is roundly ignored and US presence is only to be made “as required” – a rather short-sighted approach. The USCG Strategy published in October 2022 also remains vague.

In line with the National Security Strategy, the Arctic Strategy states that Russia's war in Ukraine has increased geopolitical tensions in the Arctic and created new risks of unintended conflict. Still, the security strategy remains cautious about concrete US presence in the Arctic. The U.S. defence strategy is also reluctant on this point, while maintaining greater focus on the Indo-Pacific. The Arctic Strategy postulates in general terms: “We will deter threats to the U.S. homeland and our allies by enhancing the capabilities required to defend our interests in the Arctic, while coordinating shared approaches with allies and partners and mitigating risks of unintended escalation”. Investments in reconnaissance, maritime domain awareness and icebreakers are mentioned as means to this end. If escalation can be avoided, and if certain conditions are met, it may even be possible for the U.S. to resume cooperation with Russia in the next few years.

The Biden administration is setting important priorities in the area of climate change by strengthening the resilience of indigenous peoples and reducing climate-damaging emissions. Accordingly, it wants to diversify Alaska's energy sector and initiate an energy transition. At the same time, however, it recognizes that the economy in the northernmost American state remains dependent on the extraction of fossil fuels.

In the context of international cooperation and governance, the Arctic Council is

to be maintained as a multilateral forum. However, the Biden administration is open to new bilateral and multilateral partnerships to advance scientific cooperation and promote other US interests in the Arctic.

In surprisingly brief terms, the Arctic Strategy also addresses the need for scientific research to better understand climate change in the Arctic. The question of how much the U.S. actually spends on research remains a mystery even to John Farrell, Director of USARC (estimates range from \$400 million to over \$1 billion). The most recent Arctic expedition, the Multidisciplinary Drifting Observatory for the Study of Arctic Climate (MOSAIC), was led by Germany's Alfred Wegener Institute and has been the largest and longest international research mission to date. Starting in 2023, Russia is expected to drift autonomously through the Arctic Ocean on a navigable platform with a research team of up to 34 people, establishing a presence in the Central Arctic. The US commitment to the Arctic remains minimalist in comparison. However, presence means influence – in the Arctic, this is even truer than in other regions where environmental conditions are less challenging.

Heather Conley, Arctic expert and president of the German Marshall Fund, criticises that the new Arctic Strategy ignores important geostrategic changes. The Arctic is only treated as a territory neighbouring Alaska, i.e. as a domestic issue, involving the extraction of natural resources in the state and policies towards indigenous peoples, and not as an international issue. The deficiencies of this approach become most obvious when looking at the embarrassing lack of icebreakers.

## A single icebreaker for the Arctic

One manifestation of the lacking concern for the Arctic is that the USCG has only two icebreakers, although the shortage was long foreseeable and debated in the Senate as early as 2009. The heavy icebreaker *USCGC Polar Star* is mostly used in Antarctica to

support McMurdo Station and has long since exceeded its operational lifetime (the *Polar Sea*, which was decommissioned in 2010, now serves only to provide for spare parts). The most technologically advanced icebreaker *USCGC Healy* has been in service since 1999, mostly in the Arctic, and has been to the North Pole three times, most recently in 2022.

Only icebreakers can ensure a permanent presence in the Arctic. The mission of the USCG's icebreakers is to: conduct and support scientific research in the polar regions; preserve and protect U.S. sovereignty and national interests through presence in US territorial waters; monitor maritime traffic; and perform other coastguard duties (such as search and rescue, law enforcement and marine resource protection).

The first new icebreaker is scheduled to be delivered to the USCG in 2026 or 2027. The programme includes three heavy vessels (Polar Security Cutters [PSCs]) and three medium vessels (Arctic Security Cutters [ASCs]), of which only the first two PSCs are fully funded. The cost of the PSC programme amounts to \$2.7 billion. A three-ship icebreaker fleet would in a couple of years put the U.S. on the same level as China, but still significantly behind Russia (40), and also short of Canada (9), Finland (8) and Sweden (4). By including the total number of ice-classed research and patrol boats, Russia has 57 ships, ahead of Canada (18), Finland (10) and Denmark (7). On that measure, the U.S., including three National Science Foundation (NSF) vessels, is currently tied with Sweden (5), and is ahead of Norway (2), China (2) and Germany (1).

While NATO depends predominantly on US capabilities in the Euro-Atlantic area, in the Arctic area the U.S. relies on icebreakers from European allies. This is reflected in the Arctic Strategy, which proclaims the goal of maximizing “unity of effort” with allies and partners. In fact, however, these efforts form the basis of a minimum Arctic presence for the U.S.

As a national agency, the NSF has three research vessels with icebreaking capability for American-led Arctic research, each of

which is supported by *Healy* in operations. Due to the growing importance of the Arctic and competition for attentions and funds with activities in the Antarctic, the question of whether icebreakers should be leased or purchased in the short term and whether more (PSCs or ASCs) ships are planned for the long term is being discussed. USCG Admiral Karl Schultz has prioritized the goal of a fleet of nine icebreakers (six PSCs and three ASCs); however, it is still unclear whether the Biden administration will go along with this proposal.

In December 2022, the Senate gave its approval to an omnibus spending bill of about \$500 million for 130 individual measures that benefit Alaska. While Senator Murkowski was pleased with it, her counterpart Dan Sullivan voted against the spending bill, among other things because the purchase of the icebreaker *Aiviq* was not included.

### The Arctic no longer offers protection

Washington's decades-long, comparatively relaxed attitude towards the Arctic is rooted in the fact that the geographical position of the U.S. gives it a natural advantage over countries like China and Russia, both of which share their borders with numerous neighbouring states. The Atlantic and the Pacific give the U.S. a security buffer that only an equal competitor on the opposite coast of the Atlantic or Pacific can realistically threaten. Arctic security issues have therefore rarely mattered to the U.S. since the end of the Cold War. In a 2014 U.S. Navy report, military security was not even mentioned in the strategic goals for the North Polar region to be achieved by 2030. In the 2017 National Security Strategy, the region was mentioned only once in passing and not even listed in the 2018 Defense Strategy.

However, increasing Russian activities made it necessary for the U.S. Navy's 6th Fleet to show its presence in the High North in October 2018 as a display of force, for the

first time since 1991. The NATO exercise Trident Juncture was the largest military manoeuvre since the Cold War: 50,000 servicemen and women, 65 ships and 250 aircraft took part, including the aircraft carrier *USS Harry S. Truman*, which deviated from its route to the Arabian Gulf specifically for this exercise. The U.S. forces thus demonstrated their dynamic force employment concept, which is intended to make a virtue out of the lack of available vessels. Also with Russia in mind, the 2nd fleet, whose attention during the Cold War was focused on Soviet naval forces in the North Atlantic, was reactivated in August 2018. Following exercises in the Norwegian Sea, the 6th Fleet operated once again in the Barents Sea in May 2020 with four *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyers and a British frigate. Since then, the U.S. Navy has maintained a continuous presence in the High North in line with its new "Blue Arctic" Strategy to improve its ability to operate under the new conditions of rapidly melting sea ice and progressively usable sea routes.

The increased presence is the result of a changed situation and threat perception: "The Arctic is no longer a fortress wall, and our oceans are no longer protective moats," the commander of North American Aerospace Defense (NORAD), General Terrence O'Shaughnessy, reported to Congress in March 2020. The Arctic Strategy of the U.S. Air Force now locates the Arctic at the intersection of two spaces important to U.S. forces, namely North America (U.S. Northern Command) and the Indo-Pacific (U.S. Indo-Pacific Command). Therefore, according to the U.S. Air Force's first Arctic Strategy, most of the latest generation fighter aircraft are to be stationed there. With 54 F-35s located at the Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson and Eielson Air Force Bases in Alaska, they represent the world's greatest cluster of these fighter aircraft.

As the northernmost base outside the United States, Pituffik Space Base (formerly Thule Air Base) in northern Greenland is home to one of the largest satellite ground stations for space surveillance and missile early warning. This is because missiles from

China or Russia can reach targets in the United States most quickly when they fly over the Arctic Ocean. Russian submarines carrying nuclear-armed ballistic missiles (SSBNs) are also relatively safe from detection under the ice sheet. This is another reason why US submarines have been training to hunt enemy submarines in the Arctic Ocean since the 1960s as part of ICEX (Ice Exercise). In March 2018, the U.S. Navy held another joint manoeuvre together with the British Navy after a ten-year break: The highlight of the exercise were the submarines *USS Connecticut*, *USS Hartford* and *HMS Trenchant* breaking through the surface of the ice and providing spectacular images. Three years later, three Russian nuclear submarines succeeded for the first time in rising through the one-and-a-half metre thick ice at a similarly photogenic distance of a few hundred metres — a reflection of the geopolitical competition in the Arctic Ocean.

The importance of the Arctic for the U.S. has grown. Yet, the North Polar region only attained the rank of a national priority since the publication of the new National Security and Arctic Strategy documents in 2022. This will make it possible to overcome bureaucratic hurdles in the future that previously made it difficult to allocate funds. There is indeed a great need to catch up.

One pertinent example here is the upcoming renewal of radar facilities. The North Warning System is part of the North American airspace surveillance NORAD, which has existed since 1957 and is also responsible for early warning of ballistic missile attack. Both are outdated with respect to modern cruise missiles and hypersonic weapons systems (by contrast, the detection of spy balloons, as in February 2023, is only a matter of setting the right technical parameters). Besides the sharing of costs between the U.S. and Canada, the question of cooperation in missile defence is controversial. Technically, all domain awareness and a multidimensional system are sought; to what extent Canada should also have access to satellite-based data is one of many points that are still unresolved

with regard to the modernisation of NORAD.

In addition, for the past two decades, consideration has been given to building a port that would provide a permanent presence for the Coast Guard and Navy in Alaska. In 2020, the coastal town of Nome, located off the Bering Sea, was selected for a new deep-water basin at Nome's Port. The USCG currently has little presence in the Bering Strait, although shipping traffic has more than doubled from 130 transits annually in 2009 to 347 transits in 2021. The naval air station on the Aleutian island of Adak, deactivated in 1997, would also be suitable for maritime surveillance of the Bering Sea, but the U.S. Navy has so far shied away from the costs of reactivating it. Instead, allied bases are preferred for monitoring maritime activities, such as Evenes in Norway and Keflavik in Iceland.

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has resulted in major losses for Russian troops previously stationed in the Northern Fleet — the entire land forces on the Kola Peninsula have been reduced to 20 percent of their former strength, according to reports from the Norwegian Intelligence Service. Although Russia continues to arm its Arctic forces even in times of the ongoing war, operational capability and the availability of qualified personnel have been called into question in view of the embarrassing deficits and high losses of men and materials in the war against Ukraine. Therefore, some experts think that the war creates an opportunity for the U.S. to overcome Russia's leading position in the Arctic, for example in drone technology. Matching or surpassing Russia on drones alone, however, cannot compensate for its superiority when it comes to icebreakers and other assets in the Arctic.

## America's Arctic Moment

The U.S. and Russia reached an agreement to regulate shipping traffic in the Bering Strait and the Bering Sea as recently as 2018. After that, incidents of Russian fighter jets

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being intercepted in the airspace over Alaska have become more frequent. Russian warships entered the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone during an exercise in August 2020 and threatened fishing boats like the *Blue North*. In the aftermath, Alaska's Governor Mike Dunleavy emphasized the urgency of protecting US waters to President Biden. Sino-Russian manoeuvres off Alaska in 2022 and the allegedly misguided Chinese spy balloon in 2023 have heightened sensitivity about security in the northernmost American state once again.

After decades of scant attention, is “America's Arctic Moment” coming? A study with the same title was published in 2020 by Arctic expert Heather Conley in which a list was included of efforts the new administration would have to undertake if it wanted to seize the opportunity for renewal. Some of them have already been implemented by the Biden administration, such as increased defence spending in the Arctic.

A look at the U.S. strategy papers, however, gives the impression that the proactive handling of hard security issues in the Arctic is still too vague and, against the backdrop of developments elsewhere, such as in the Indo-Pacific, not considered urgent enough. Washington continues to maintain deterrence and defence capabilities in the Arctic and to compensate for deficits, namely through cooperation with allies. Presence in the subarctic region – the High North – remains a joint task of the European allies including, in future, the German Navy to protect NATO's northern flank; as for the Central Arctic, this still has to be determined one day, when the U.S. acquires solid reconnaissance, means of operation suitable for the Arctic environment, and more than two icebreakers. Ultimately, the US has at least made a start toward strengthening its status in the Arctic.

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