

GREAT POWER COMPETITION AND OVERSEAS BASING IN THE ARCTIC

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Executive summary

The Arctic remains a sphere of geopolitical competition between the great powers, making basing arrangements a natural part of their strategic planning. With rising global temperatures increasing access to the Arctic Ocean and its natural resources, the United States, Russia, and China all desire guaranteed freedom of movement and protection of their sovereign rights and interests. In addition to investments at home, the United States and other great powers in the Arctic will need to build strategic partnerships that enable beneficial agreements and access rights to bases, particularly for dual-use and civil-military operations.

The Arctic is heating up

Temperatures, competition, and interest in the Arctic have been heating up at an unprecedented rate over the past decade. Nowhere else in the world does geostrategic competition in the 21st century so

clearly overlap with the two other largest challenges facing global society: climate change and economic stability. The Arctic is both a geopolitical hotspot and home for the United States and its NATO allies. The United States' release of its updated National Strategy for the Arctic Region in October 2022 along with its elevation of the Arctic as a priority region in its 2022 National Security Strategy — drives home this point. Meanwhile, Russia occupies almost 50% of the landmass and has some form of sovereign rights and jurisdiction to the majority of the water column above the Arctic Circle. And China has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to its Polar Silk Road, which has the potential to reap new natural resources, enhance China's influence in the region, and strengthen its ties to Russia. Due to climate change, the world is beginning to perceive the Arctic as an ever-expanding operational domain, where protecting freedom of access or defending territory (depending on one's national perspective) will be necessary in the coming decades. New sources of natural resources will be available to those with the jurisdiction, access, or technology to reach them.

Russia's Arctic basing will always be existential to its survival

Much has been made about Russia's "military buildup" in the Arctic region and its renewal of old military bases along its northern coastline.² It is estimated that Russia has nearly 30 military or dual-use facilities in active use or under construction north of the Arctic Circle, including air bases, naval ports, radio/communications facilities, and military nuclear facilities.³ Some of these facilities are quite elaborate and are militarily capable, given that Russia has made significant investments in military power well into the central Arctic Ocean.⁴ Russia's bases inside the Arctic Circle outnumber NATO's by about a third, according to data compiled by Reuters and the International Institute for Strategic Studies.⁵

Of course, Russia has always been an Arctic nation and has prioritized the Arctic since the 16th century and the conquest of Siberia. Today, the Arctic is an essential access point for Russian naval assets in and around the Kola Peninsula and is critical to Russia's ability to maintain a second-strike capability in the unlikely event of nuclear conflict with the West. Moscow views the Arctic as one of the largest fronts in its competition with Europe and NATO forces, and the likely accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO will only intensify that view.

To say that Arctic basing or militarization is new would be to completely overlook the strategic nuclear posturing between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The United States created the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) in the 1950s specifically to deter Soviet nuclear forces from launching an attack over the shortest distance from Soviet airspace to North

America (over the Arctic).⁸ A large bulk of NORAD infrastructure is still based in the U.S. and Canadian Arctic to conduct early warning and interdiction of Russian military assets coming into the U.S. Air Defense Identification Zone.⁹

Russian air forces still test and prod U.S. and Canadian air defenses in the Arctic almost monthly, but their real objective in the region is the protection of Russia's access rights to land-based minerals and resources, offshore oil and natural gas, and the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a viable maritime "toll road" for commerce.¹⁰ As recently as October 2022, Senior Arctic Official, Ambassador Nikolai Korchunov, stated, "We will take military measures to prevent threats to navigation along the NSR."¹¹

To be sure, the war in Ukraine remains a drain on Russian military assets, but the Arctic will continue to be a priority region for the Russian military. It should not be assumed that significant capability will be lost there in the near term. As Rebecca Pincus of the Wilson Center stated, "While the war in Ukraine has impacted Russia's low-end military capabilities and capacity, in the Arctic, it retains a seriously formidable set of high-end capabilities." 12

Perhaps the most important implication of Russian military buildup in the Arctic is that the Russians may actually find the rules-based international order favorable to their interests in the region. For example, the U.N. Charter, the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and customary international law all effectively grant Russia wide swaths of territory, sovereign rights and interests, and influence. Moscow's continued efforts to keep its chairmanship of the Arctic Council relevant, despite the temporary withdrawal of all other council members, is reflective of this fact.¹³ Ambassador Korchunov, speaking right after the announcement of a pause in council activity, asserted that "it is of utmost importance to safeguard the project activities of the Arctic Council in order to be able to pick up where we paused and step up cooperation."14

China's investments will keep strengthening access without traditional basing

China's declaration of being a "near-Arctic state" in 2018 set off alarm bells in many nations, including in Russia. While mostly hyperbole, it does indicate that Beijing clearly seeks to be part of the future of Arctic policy. 15 As climate change continues to impact every nation on Earth, the Arctic remains the bellwether for the planet, and China's research there is critical to understanding the future of its agricultural landscape, city planning, and industrial policy. For instance, as fish stocks continue to be depleted in the South China Sea and southern Pacific Ocean due to overfishing and warming waters, China may have to turn their attention to the central Arctic Ocean where fish stocks will inevitably migrate — in order to satiate a growing Chinese middle class hungry for more expensive proteins. Likewise, as stocks of critical minerals continue to be depleted worldwide, China and other states may seek to mine deep seabed mineral nodules in the Arctic Ocean floor. As technology improves, this practice is likely to become more economically feasible, providing a new source for minerals. In the short term, having access to Russia's northern Arctic coastline and diversifying gas and oil supplies will be a strategic priority for Beijing given that the United States and its allies are amenable to using blockades in any conflict.

China likely has no plans to build traditional military bases or outposts in the Arctic, but it will seek occasional access rights to existing Russian bases for its ships and aircraft operating in support of research missions or possible joint exercises with Russia in the NSR. These missions will demonstrate Beijing's ability to project power into the Arctic, but in a limited way — primarily to protect China's research and commercial interests. Chinese military presence in the Arctic will most likely remain in the form of dual-purpose facilities operating as research stations or economic investments.

As China's 2018 Arctic White Paper laid out, "States from outside the Arctic region do not have territorial sovereignty in the Arctic, but they do have rights in respect of scientific research, navigation, overflight, fishing, laying of submarine cables and pipelines in the high seas and other relevant sea areas in the Arctic Ocean, and rights to resource exploration and exploitation in the Area, pursuant to treaties such as UNCLOS and general international law. In addition, Contracting Parties to the Spitsbergen Treaty enjoy the liberty of access and entry to certain areas of the Arctic, the right under conditions of equality and, in accordance with law, to the exercise and practice of scientific research, production and commercial activities such as hunting, fishing, and mining in these areas."16

These "rights" described by Beijing will be protected by China's consistent presence in the Arctic via research stations, icebreaker deployments, and possibly military asset deployments.¹⁷ Since 2016, north of the Arctic Circle, in Kiruna, Sweden, China has been operating the Remote Sensing Satellite North Polar Ground Station. And since 2018, in Sodankyla, northern Finland, China has been operating a joint research center for Arctic space observation and data-sharing services. Also since that year, in Karholl, northern Iceland, China has been running a joint Arctic Science Observatory. China's research-focused Yellow River Station sits on the strategic Svalbard Islands off Norway's northwestern coast.¹⁸ Each of these facilities may be capable of dual civilian-military use for communications, targeting, logistics/resupply, and intelligence.

Additionally, Chinese economic investment has been a key part of Arctic infrastructure development in both Russia and the allied Arctic, including in Canada, Iceland, and Norway. These investments will almost certainly provide additional support for China's military presence in the region. In a comprehensive report on China in the Arctic, Rush Doshi, a senior official at the U.S. National Security Council, noted, "Several Chinese infrastructure projects that have little economic gain have raised concerns about strategic motivations and dual-use capabilities. These include efforts by a former Chinese propaganda official to purchase 250 square kilometers of

Iceland to build a golf course and airfield in an area where golf cannot be played and later to buy 200 square kilometers of Norway's Svalbard archipelago. Chinese companies have also sought to purchase an old naval base in Greenland; to build three airports in Greenland; to build Scandinavia's largest port in Sweden; to acquire (successfully) a Swedish submarine base; to link Finland and the wider Arctic to China through rail; and to do the same with a major port and railway in Arkhangelsk in Russia."19

These investments and dual-use facilities create a dilemma for U.S. and NATO planners who have recently declared that China's "stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values."20 Additionally, should the Chinese and Russian militaries enhance their cooperation — which is already at an uncomfortable level for the United States – these facilities will only become more threatening to allied interests. It is clear that China is using Russia to gain a foothold in the Arctic, but it remains to be seen how deep and far that marriage of convenience will go. According to widespread reports, Russia has grown weary over too much Chinese investment or control of Russian Arctic assets, as Moscow does not wish to be so clearly seen as subordinate to Beijing in the area of investment.21 However, the war in Ukraine or the punishing sanctions against Russia may change this calculus for Moscow.

The United States' presence and partnerships in the Arctic will continue to expand

As an Arctic state, the United States' last bold move in the region was its 1867 purchase of Alaska. Historically, for the most part, U.S policy toward the Arctic has been one of ambivalence, treating the region as a limited strategic priority. This was for good reason, as the Arctic was generally considered

to be peaceful and too treacherous to be used as a front in any war. However, all of that changed after World War II. In the mid-1950s, the former Soviet Union developed the first intercontinental ballistic missile, which could fly across the Arctic in hours or minutes; this became a particular concern during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union was a hostile superpower located just a few miles from U.S. territory across the Bering Strait.

Since the founding of NORAD in 1958, the United States and Canada continue to maintain a robust early warning and detection capability in the Arctic and are actively committed to modernizing and upgrading its capabilities.²² The United States has also demonstrated a commitment to modernizing existing military bases in the U.S. Arctic, including in Alaska with the recent arrival of an F-35A fighter wing permanently stationed at Eielson Air Force Base and the activation of the 11th Airborne Division at Fort Wainwright.²³ Additionally, the new U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region calls for the completion of a deep-water port in Nome, Alaska, that would open access for future U.S. naval assets, including the Coast Guard's planned multimission icebreakers, known as Polar Security Cutters.24

U.S. Arctic deployments have also begun to rely on NATO allied nations, as seen in the biennial Exercise Cold Response, a military training effort last conducted in 2022 with Norway, or the 2020 deployment of U.S. and UK surface warships to the Barents Sea for the first time since the 1980s.²⁵ Perhaps the strongest sign of U.S. commitment to overseas access arrangements in the Arctic is found in the recently revised U.S.-Norway Supplementary Defense Cooperation Agreement, which allows the United States to build military facilities at three Norwegian airfields and one naval base: Rygge Military Air Station south of Oslo, Sola Military Air Station on the southwestern coast, and Evenes Military Air Station and Ramsund Naval Station in the far north.26 This agreement will greatly enhance sustainability of the U.S. presence in the European Arctic and facilitate cold weather training for U.S. forces, which will strengthen NATO's joint capability in the "High North", NATO's term for the Arctic territory and adjacent waters.

U.S. policy for maintaining a peaceful Arctic with guaranteed access

Former Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, Admiral Karl Schultz, was fond of saying that in the Arctic, "presence equals influence. If we don't have a presence there, our competitors will."²⁷ With China's annual deployment of icebreakers and other research vessels to the Arctic and its increased scientific and economic investments in the region, it is in a position to have more operational presence in the Arctic than the United States does — for some time.²⁸ And Russia has made it very clear that its future depends on the extraction and sale of fossil fuels, which makes the Arctic an essential part of its foreign policy. Moscow is investing significantly in Arctic infrastructure and the military capability to defend it.

The United States is awakening to this reality, and though its progress toward an increased presence is slow, the trajectory is sound. The United States' elevation of the Arctic in the 2022 National Security Strategy as a strategic priority is a positive development, and the release of an updated National Strategy for the Arctic only confirms the importance of the region. The effective implementation of these strategies, however, will be essential to supporting U.S. Arctic policy and having a more solid footing in the strategic competition for Arctic influence. Movement in the following areas would help with implementation:

 Foreign policy begins at home, and nowhere is that as true as it is in the Arctic.²⁹ Targeted and expedited sustainable investments in Alaska are the first steps toward a sound U.S. Arctic policy. There is a desperate need for deep-water ports, roads, and communications infrastructure; airfields need to be upgraded; and infrastructure threatened by the ravages of climate change need to be relocated.³⁰ With proper engagement and planning, all of these investments would benefit

- the Indigenous communities of Alaska, while providing a dual-use capability for U.S. forces operating in the region.
- Maintaining a peaceful Arctic does not necessarily require the construction of new military bases in Alaska or throughout NATO countries, but it does require the constant maintenance of existing infrastructure, upgrades to accommodate new assets, and the proper economic infrastructure to support temporary deployments of ships and aircraft to the region. The United States will require significant investment in polar satellite coverage and other long-range communications facilities in Alaska and allied countries to sustain any future deployments and to ensure that the region remains attractive for private economic development that can benefit from similar communications infrastructure.
- Polar ice is melting at a rapid pace, but there will still be a significant amount of ice in the Arctic Ocean for the foreseeable future. Importantly, normal ships, including naval assets, cannot sustain contact with any substantial ice. This makes the U.S. Coast Guard's Polar Security Cutters even more critical to operations. Icebreakers will provide more than just military access; they will drive economic growth by providing much-needed sea lane access. They will also enable search and rescue efforts, as well as scientific research that is vital to gaining civilian and military knowledge of a changing planet.
- In addition to its commitment to Alaska and overall infrastructure development, the continued expansion of access rights and partnerships with NATO Arctic nations will enhance U.S. military capabilities. The accession of Sweden and Finland to the NATO alliance presents an opportunity for NATO to revamp its High North strategy, while ensuring that the Arctic does not become a zone of constant military exercises.³¹ Demonstrating Arctic military capabilities in a measured fashion, while fostering a commitment to the military support of logistically difficult and expensive Arctic research, will pay dividends for the alliance.

• While strategic competition with Russia and China may not be the primary reason to implement a sound U.S. Arctic strategy, engagements and investments should be designed to reinforce the rules-based international order. This may require a gradual, working-level reengagement with Russia on Arctic Council matters that benefit all Arctic States and their citizens. Doing so with clear, tangible nonsecurity policy goals will provide the best hedge against Chinese disruption in the Arctic, while demonstrating to Russia the benefits that they reap from the current order. This approach will not stop Russia from being an unpredictable global spoiler, nor will it single-handedly prevent China from dominating trade and investment in the Arctic, but it could reinforce the distance between the two competitors and strengthen U.S. leadership in the region at the same time.

The United States' ability to have a consistent and committed presence in the Arctic will be essential to its stated objective of seeking "an Arctic region that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative."³²

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