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# CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

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**National Security Implications of Climate Change in the Arctic**

**Testimony before the  
Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber of the  
Committee on Foreign Affairs**

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Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick and distinguished Members of the Committee. I am honored to speak before this esteemed Committee about Arctic security issues.

My name is Luke Coffey. I am the Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

The Arctic region, commonly referred to as the High North, is becoming more contested than ever before. The Arctic encompasses the lands and territorial waters of eight countries on three continents. Unlike the Antarctic, the Arctic has no land mass covering its pole (the North Pole), just ocean. The region is home to some of the roughest terrain and harshest weather on the planet.

The region is also one of the least populated areas in the world, with sparse nomadic communities and few large cities and towns. Regions are often very remote and lack basic transport infrastructure. In Greenland, no two population centers are connected by a road. Norway's Ny Ålesund, located on the Svalbard archipelago, is the world's most northerly permanently inhabited place with a population of only 35. Although official population figures are non-existent, the Nordic Council of Ministers estimates the figure is four million,<sup>1</sup> making the Arctic's population about the size of Los Angeles. Approximately half of the Arctic population lives in Russia.

The region is rich in minerals, wildlife, fish, and other natural resources. According to some estimates, up to 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and almost one-third of the world's undiscovered natural gas reserves are located in the Arctic.<sup>2</sup>

The melting of some Arctic ice during the summer months creates security challenges, but also new opportunities for economic development. Reduced ice will mean new shipping lanes opening, increased tourism, and further natural resource exploration. However, it will also mean a larger military presence by more actors than ever before. This increase in economic activity will mean a larger military presence. This is not because there is a heightened threat of conflict in the region—on the contrary things are relatively calm.

However, many capabilities needed in the Arctic, such as search and rescue, are more immediately, and at least for now, more effectively, provided by the military and coast guard.

### **U.S. Arctic Security Interests**

The U.S. became an Arctic power on October 18, 1867, at the ceremony transferring Alaska from Russia to the U.S. At the time this purchase was ridiculed and was known as “Seward’s Folly”—named after the then-Secretary of State William Seward. However with a stroke of a pen, Seward ended Russian influence in North America, gave the United States direct access to the northern Pacific Ocean, and added territory nearly twice the size of Texas for about 2 cents an acre along with 33,000 miles of coastline. In his retirement Seward was asked what his greatest achievement was. He said: “The purchase of Alaska. But it will take another generation to find it out.”<sup>3</sup>

Today, the U.S. has four primary security interests in the Arctic region:

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<sup>1</sup>Nordic Council of Ministers, *Arctic Social Indicators*, January 27, 2011, p. 13,

[http://library.arcticportal.org/712/1/Arctic\\_Social\\_Indicators\\_NCoM.pdf](http://library.arcticportal.org/712/1/Arctic_Social_Indicators_NCoM.pdf) (accessed November 12, 2021).

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Geological Survey, “Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle,” July 23, 2008, <http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2008/3049/> (accessed November 12, 2021).

<sup>3</sup>Frederick W. Seward, “Seward’s Folly: A Son’s View,” *University of Rochester Library Bulletin*, Spring 1967, <https://rbsep.lib.rochester.edu/487> (accessed November 12, 2021).

- 1) Ensuring the territorial defense of the United States.** This is particularly true as it pertains to the growing ballistic missile threat. In this regard our relationship with Canada is key. This is also why it is important for the U.S. deepen its relations with Iceland and Greenland—both serving essentially the forward operating bases of the North American continent.
- 2) Enforcing U.S. sovereignty in the region.** In the Arctic, sovereignty equals security and stability. Respecting the national sovereignty of others in the Arctic while maintaining the ability to enforce one’s own sovereignty will ensure that the chances of armed conflict in the region remain low. This is why investment in the U.S. Coast Guard is vital to America’s Arctic security interest.
- 3) Meeting treaty obligations in the Arctic region through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).** Five of the world’s eight Arctic countries belong to NATO. Another two, Finland and Sweden, have a very close relationship with NATO. However, NATO has no agreed common position or policy on its role in the Arctic region. This needs to change.
- 4) Ensuring the free flow of shipping and other economic activities in the region.** Economic freedom leads to prosperity and security. With melting ice creating new economic and shipping opportunities in the region it is in America’s interests that shipping lanes remain open in line with international norms.

## **U.S. Strategic Challenges in the Arctic**

While the military threat in the Arctic remains low, U.S. policymakers cannot ignore Russia’s recent activities to militarize the Arctic region or China’s increasing role in the region. Both directly impact America’s ability to meet the four aforementioned security interests.

### **Russia’s Militarization**

Russia is motivated to play an active role in the Arctic region for three reasons:

- 1) Low risk promotion of Russian nationalism.** Because nationalism is on the rise in Russia, Putin’s Arctic strategy is popular among the population. For Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Arctic is an area that allows Russia to flex its muscles without incurring any significant geopolitical risk.
- 2) The economic potential of the region.** Russia is also eager to promote its economic interests in the region. Half of the world’s Arctic territory and half of the Arctic region’s population is located in Russia. It is well-known that the Arctic is home to large stockpiles of proven, yet unexploited, oil and gas reserves. The majority of these reserves is thought to be located in Russia. In particular, Russia hopes the Northern Sea Route (NSR) will become one of the world’s most important shipping lanes.
- 3) Russia’s security in the region.** Russia has invested heavily in militarizing its Arctic region. While the Arctic region remains peaceful, Russia’s recent steps to militarize the region, coupled with its bellicose behavior toward its neighbors, makes the Arctic a security concern.

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## China's Increasing Role

With the focus on what China is doing in the South China Sea, its massive and questionable infrastructure investments in Central Asia and Africa, its threatening actions against Taiwan, and its coverup of the origins of the COVID-19 virus, it is easy to overlook another aspect of Beijing's foreign policy: the Arctic.

In the simplest terms, China sees the Arctic region as another place in the world to advance its economic interests and expand its diplomatic influence. As a non-Arctic country, China is mindful that its Arctic ambitions in international Arctic institutions are naturally limited—but this has not stopped Beijing from increasing its economic presence in the region.

China's Arctic strategy offers a useful glimpse into how Beijing views its role in the region.<sup>4</sup> Running 5,500 words long in the English language version, the strategy is littered with all the Arctic buzzwords like “common interests of all countries,” “law-based governance,” “climate change,” and “sustainable development.” The irony is not lost on observers of the South China Sea where China has shunned international norms to exert dubious claims of sovereignty, or the fact that China is the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases.

Even though China's closest point to the Arctic Circle is more than 800 nautical miles away, Beijing refers to itself as a “near Arctic State”<sup>5</sup>—a term made up by Beijing and not found in the lexicon of Arctic discourse. In fact, extending Beijing's logic to other countries would mean that Belarus, Estonia, Germany, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom are also “near Arctic states.” These are hardly the countries that one imagines when thinking about the Arctic. As former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has said: “There are Arctic states, and non-Arctic states. No third category exists. China claiming otherwise entitles them to exactly nothing.”<sup>6</sup>

But even with its self-professed and exaggerated role in the Arctic, China does have legitimate interests in the region. After all, China is a global trading nation. It is the world's second-largest economy. It holds a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council.

Thankfully, so far China's motivation in the Arctic seems to be more about economics and less about security. But considering the economic mess and massive debt China has left in places like Sri Lanka and Djibouti, it is only normal to question China's motivations in the Arctic.

For the most part China wants to increase access and influence in the Arctic region for economic reasons and it is through this lens that U.S. policymakers should approach Chinese activity in the Arctic region.

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<sup>4</sup>The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, “China's Arctic Policy,” White Paper, January 26, 2018, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2018/01/26/content\\_281476026660336.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm) accessed November 12, 2021).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Radio Canada International, “US Stuns Audience by Tongue-Lashing China, Russia on Eve of Arctic Council Ministerial,” May 6, 2019, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2019/05/us-stuns-audience-tongue-lashing-china-russia-eve-arctic-council-ministerial> (accessed November 12, 2021).

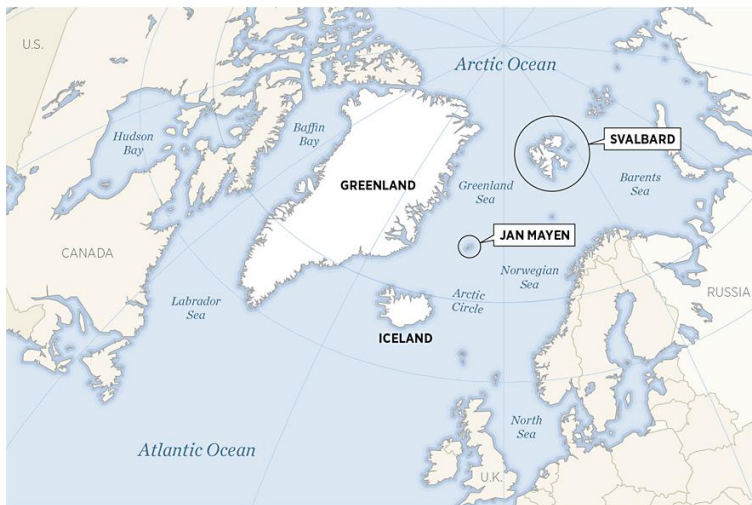
## The Arctic Chain of Defense

During the Cold War, Soviet submarines, bombers, and reconnaissance aircraft traversed the GIUK (Greenland, Iceland, and the U.K.) gap, key naval passages through the waters of those three countries. The GIUK gap, on account of Russian activity in the North Atlantic, continues to remain strategically important. Technological advancements and a changing environment in the Arctic have shifted some of this military activity further north into Arctic waters.

Today, four islands are vital to the defense of the United States. Due to their geographical locations, Greenland, Iceland, Svalbard, and Jan Mayen are essentially the forward-operating bases of the North American and European continents and serve as an Arctic Chain of Defense (ACOD).

MAP 1

Greenland, Iceland, Svalbard, and Jan Mayen Are Vital to the Arctic Chain of Defense



NOTE: Greenland is a territory of Denmark. Jan Mayen and Svalbard are territories of Norway.  
SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

IB5051 heritage.org

- Greenland (Denmark).** The U.S.–Danish relationship is built on its shared membership in NATO and shared interest in the Arctic region. However, one of the most important aspects of the U.S.–Danish defense relationship is the access that the U.S. enjoys to Greenland. Greenland is part of North America, and a critical part of America’s national security architecture. Today, the main U.S. military presence is at Thule Air Base in the north of the island.<sup>7</sup> Thule also serves as a crucial early warning radar and satellite tracking station for the protection of the U.S. homeland.

- Iceland.** A NATO ally in the northern Atlantic Ocean, Iceland sits on the very frontier of the North American landmass, is the westernmost nation in Europe, and is a mere 186 miles from Greenland. Today, Iceland still plays an important role in transatlantic security, especially when viewed in light of recent Russian behavior in continental Europe. Iceland’s relevance to U.S. policy is also largely derived from its location at the edge of the Arctic Circle. After closing the facility in 2006, the U.S. has started to use the facilities at Keflavik Air Station for maritime patrol aircraft. The U.S. reportedly plans to begin housing two fighter jets squadrons accounting for between 18 planes and 24 planes on a rotational basis at Keflavik.<sup>8</sup> In August, a B-2 Stealth Bomber landed in Iceland for the first time on a refueling stop.

<sup>7</sup>Peterson Air Force Base, “821st Air Base Group,” <https://www.peterson.af.mil/About/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/326240/821st-air-base-group/> (accessed November 12, 2021).

<sup>8</sup>“Pence to Visit Iceland Over Concerns of ‘Russian Aggression’ in Arctic Region,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 29, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/pence-iceland-visit-russian-aggression-arctic-region/30134840.html> (accessed November 12, 2021).

- **Svalbard (Norway).** Norway’s geographical location is vitally important for the defense of the north Atlantic region, and the country is a reliable partner for the U.S. inside NATO. Svalbard is a non-militarized Norwegian archipelago some 500 nautical miles off the northern coast of Norway. The military importance of Svalbard is limited in peacetime due to the restrictions placed on the region under the Svalbard Treaty, which demilitarized the islands. The geostrategic location of Svalbard, especially in terms of its proximity to the Kola Peninsula, home of Russia’s Northern Fleet, is not lost on the Russians, either. In 2017, officials in the Russian defense ministry reportedly highlighted Svalbard as a potential area of future conflict for the Russian navy. Even though Svalbard is currently demilitarized, one cannot pretend that in the event of a major outbreak of conflict in the Arctic region that the archipelago would not be front and center in any military campaign. U.S. military planners must always have this reality in the back of their minds.
- **Jan Mayen (Norway)** Situated between Greenland and Norway in the Norwegian Sea, Jan Mayen is a strategically located island, just under 600 miles north of Iceland. The Norwegian Air Force continues to maintain a 1500 meter dirt runway on the island which once served as an important communications outpost during the Cold War. In November 2019, members of the U.S. Air Force visited Jan Mayen and "assessed runway surfaces, glideslope obstructions and firing capes,"<sup>9</sup> specifically to determine if “C-130J Super Hercules aircraft can land at the Jan Mayen airfield in order to provide transport and resupply to the station located there.”<sup>10</sup>

## A role for NATO

The U.S. ability to meet national security objectives in the Arctic is made possible (and easier) by the close collaboration with partner nations in the region. Luckily for the U.S., six of the other seven Arctic countries are either treaty allies through NATO (Canada, Denmark, Iceland, and Norway) or very close partners, such as non-NATO Finland and Sweden.

Considering that five of the world’s Arctic countries are in NATO, one would expect that the Alliance would place a strong focus on the region. This has not been the case. NATO has no agreed common position or policy on its role in the Arctic region. The most recent Summit Declaration does not mention the word “Arctic,” nor does the Alliance’s most recent Strategic Concept published in 2010.

NATO has been internally divided on the role that the Alliance should play in the High North. Norway is the leading voice inside the Alliance for promoting NATO’s role in the Arctic. It is the only country in the world that has its permanent military headquarters above the Arctic Circle, and it has invested extensively in Arctic defense capabilities.

Canada has likewise invested heavily in Arctic defense capabilities. However, unlike Norway, Canada has stymied past efforts by NATO to take on a larger role in the region. Generally

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Woody, “The US Air Force is fixing up a remote base that could help keep an eye on Russia,” *Business Insider*, January 14, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-air-force-fixing-up-norwegian-base-arctic-near-russia-2020-1> (accessed November 12, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/357202/435th-crs-strengthens-eucom-capabilities>

speaking, Canada is concerned that an Alliance role in the Arctic would afford non-Arctic NATO countries influence in an area where they otherwise would have none.

As a sovereign nation state, Canada has a prerogative to determine what role, if any, NATO should play in Canada's Arctic region. However, as a collective security alliance, NATO cannot ignore the Arctic altogether, and the Alliance should not remain divided on the issue.

### **Recommendations**

Russia is reverting to its imperial ways, and China is expanding its economic influence across much of the world. As new economic opportunities and security challenges continue to manifest in the Arctic, the U.S. must be prepared. The U.S. should:

- **Conduct Freedom of Navigation operations in the Arctic.** Russia's dubious claim that the Northern Sea Route is an internal waterway goes against international law and norms. The U.S. should follow the lead of the French navy and conduct Freedom of Navigation operations in the region.
- **Continue to invest in the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Navy Arctic situational awareness capabilities.** The remote and harsh conditions of the Arctic region make unmanned systems particularly appealing for providing additional situational awareness, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. The Coast Guard should also consider upgrading facilities, such as its Barrow station in Alaska, to reinforce its Arctic capabilities and demonstrate a greater commitment to the region.
- **Officially acknowledge NATO's role in the Arctic for the first time.** The upcoming NATO Strategic Concept should acknowledge that NATO is, in part, an Arctic alliance
- **Work with allies to develop a NATO Arctic strategy.** The Alliance should agree to develop a comprehensive Arctic policy to address security challenges in the region. This should be done in cooperation with non-NATO members Finland and Sweden.
- **Call for the next NATO summit to be held above the Arctic Circle.** This would bring immediate awareness of Arctic issues to the Alliance. In the next few years, perhaps the Norwegian city of Tromsø would be most appropriate, since few cities above the Arctic Circle have the required infrastructure to hold a major international gathering like a NATO Summit.

Recognize the importance of the ACOD by:

- **Deepening relations with Iceland.** Not only is Iceland an important NATO member, it is also home to a very important air base in the Arctic region. There is also a new opportunity to advance bilateral relations after that the Trump Administration ended the diplomatic sanctions that applied to Reykjavik by the Obama Administration over Icelandic whaling.
- **Improving relations with Greenland.** The Trump Administration announced the establishment of a part time diplomatic presence. This is a positive step that could be improved by the Biden Administration making the diplomatic presence year around. Also, the U.S. should ensure that it invests adequately in the military infrastructure on Greenland.
- **Considering the use of Svalbard for any required scientific needs.** Due to its location in the Arctic region and its particular environmental conditions, Svalbard is very attractive for scientific research. In the past, the Department of Defense has conducted research there

and it should consider doing so in the future if the need arises. This is an excellent way for the U.S. to “fly the flag” in a region with significant geo-political importance.

- **Recognizing the importance of Jan Mayen island.** Its strategic location astride submarine lanes in the Norwegian Sea has once again highlighted Jan Mayen’s role as a valuable piece of the ACOD. The U.S. should continue working closely with Norway to better leverage the island’s strategic location in the Arctic and seek to include Jan Mayen Island in future bilateral or NATO exercises.

## **Conclusion**

America’s interests in the Arctic region will only increase in the years to come. As other nations devote resources and assets in the region to secure their national interests, America cannot afford to fall behind. The U.S. needs to champion an agenda that advances the U.S. national interest and devotes the required national resources to the region. With the Arctic becoming increasingly important for economic and geopolitical reasons, now is not the time for the U.S. to turn away from its own backyard.



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