

THE ARCTIC GAMES

ENHANCING THE UNITED STATES' SECURITY IN THE ARCTIC



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Abstract

This policy brief explores how the United States’ strategy in the Arctic can be enhanced in relation to its security. In doing so, it traces the history of the United States in the Arctic and analyses its past activities. To secure the United States’ position in the Arctic, the policy brief suggests to 1) calibrate agencies’ positioning, 2) ratify UNCLOS; and 3) enhance military capabilities in the Arctic.

Keywords: Arctic, U.S. security, Arctic Council, Russia, China

1. Pointed Summary

- The U.S. position in the Arctic is deemed to be disadvantageous.
- More emphasis should be put on the Arctic in the U.S. agencies.
- In the light of the Arctic Council’s inactivity, the U.S. ought to sign UNCLOS.
- The U.S. should enhance its military capabilities in the Arctic.



Figure 1: the Map of the Arctic with territorial claims (IBRU, Durham University; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, n.d.)

2. Introduction

The U.S., being one of the eight Arctic states, has undoubtable regional interests in the Arctic. One of them is security, as outlined in the many strategic documents. With the rising Russian and Chinese activities in the Arctic, with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, and Chinese plans to build a Polar Silk Road, the Arctic is of a strategic significance for the U.S. However, notwithstanding the strategic relevance of the region, the United States' policy towards the Arctic is deemed to be moribund; its regional inactivity may bare consequences in the future. This policy brief explores how the United States' strategy in the Arctic can be enhanced in relation to its security. Firstly, it traces the history of the United States' entanglements with the Arctic. Secondly, it analyses its past activities in the Arctic territory, with the emphasis on the security matters related to Russian and Chinese presence in the region. Lastly, it elaborates on how the U.S. should adjust its Arctic future strategy to ensure its regional security.

3. Relevance

The strategic importance of the Arctic lies in the interplay between global warming, security matters, and geopolitics. There is a persisting dichotomy between the environmental interests and the states' interests in controlling strategic resources. On the one hand, with the Arctic's polar ice caps melting due to soaring global warming, its sea ice decreases by almost 12 percent decade. If global warming increases at this pace, the Arctic could become ice-free by 2040 causing global implications, like floodings, food shortages, and further advancement of climate change (Arcanjo, 2020; Hancock, n.d.). On the other, the ice sea cap shrinkage opens a new front in strategic competition; researchers estimate that about 5.3 percent of oil and about 21.7 percent of gas could be in the Arctic; the Arctic meltdown uncovers the hidden reserves and makes the region more accessible (Jørgensen-Dahl, 2010; Matthews, 2019). Consequently, there are rising national' interests and states' claims to the region that often overlap, resulting in fuelling international tensions. Moreover, the states' drilling activities that are the extract strategic resources, advance global warming (Matthews, 2019). Therefore, there is an apparent tension between the global environmental aspirations and states' regional interests related to strategic resources control.

Although the high relevance of the Arctic region, and the United States' connection to it, by virtue of Alaska, its current position is rather disadvantageous and risks falling behind

even further due to the United States' lack of capabilities (Conley & Melino, 2019; Mahle & Cronkhite, 2022; Sadat, 2022). Firstly, the U.S. has only two functioning icebreakers, this is one of the fewest numbers of all the Arctic states (Marshall, 2015). In comparison, Russia has forty-four icebreakers, including five nuclear-powered ones. Secondly, lack of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) ratification deprives the U.S. of claiming the 200.000 square miles of the undersea territory in the Arctic as its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The Russia's strong regional position imposes risks in the light of its recent assault on Ukraine. An ample amount of Russia's gas comes from its pipelines connected to the Arctic, for instance and Russia will utilise its control of the strategic resources as a leverage against the states that oppose its assault on Ukraine (Bennet, 2022),

Additionally, the war imposed challenges for the Arctic Council, an international body set up to manage the cooperation of the Arctic states in the region, which as a result of Russia's assault, paused its activity with seven out of eight member states refusing to partake in the meetings. Consequently, the 'Nordic Plus' with all the previous members, excluding Russia, was established (Koivurova, 2022). However, the 'Nordic Plus', unlike the Arctic Council, is deprived of institutional legitimacy and the hitherto progress. Due to the absence of Russia in the 'Nordic Plus', which accounts for nearly half of the Arctic's population, over half of its coastline, and most of the industry, the 'Nordic Plus' influence is largely limited, and so is one of the United States' most strategic tools to exert influence in the Arctic territory, the international cooperation. (McVicar, 2022; Paul 2022).

Alongside Russia, China is another actor that may impose security threats in the Arctic for the U.S. China launched its Arctic strategy in the 2018 White Paper, where it asserted itself as a 'near-Arctic' state and outlined the Polar Silk Road plan, which is an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Lino 2020; Koong Son, 2020; Nakano, 2018;). Further, in the past years, China has fostered its industrial, scientific, and technological cooperation with Russia and the Nordic countries (Tillman et al., 2018).

Considering, the above-mentioned problems, a new comprehensive strategy towards the Arctic of the U.S is vital to ensure its security and strong regional position. Nevertheless, to come up with possible policy outputs, it is vital to analyse the United States' past activity in the Arctic.

4. History

The United States' direct entanglements with the Arctic started in 1867 when it purchased Alaska from the Russian Empire and hence became one of the eight Arctic nations; the Arctic states include, the U.S., Canada, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, and Denmark representing Greenland. The first explicit activity towards establishing the U.S. Arctic strategy was in 1971 during the Nixon administration, when the National Security Council was set to guide the U.S. Arctic policy and the Interagency Arctic Policy Group, a group connecting scientists that research the Arctic-related issues, was formed.

1996 was a ground-breaking year for the United States' activity in the Arctic. By virtue of the 1996 Ottawa Declaration, the U.S. became a member of the Arctic Council, a high-level intergovernmental forum addressing the problems of the Arctic states' governments and the Arctic indigenous populations. The U.S. assumed chairmanship in the Arctic Council from 2015 to 2017. During its presidency, the U.S. steered focus on the following issues: improving economic and living conditions of the Arctic indigenous communities, security, and addressing the impact of the climate change (U.S. Department of State, 2015).

Apart from the international cooperation, the U.S. published two major strategic documents establishing Arctic region priorities. The 2009 United States Arctic Policy includes: meeting relevant security needs, protecting the Arctic environment, ensuring sustainable resource management, strengthening cooperation between the Arctic nations, involving the Arctic's indigenous peoples in decision-making, and enhancing scientific research related to the Arctic's environmental issues (United States Arctic Policy, 2009). On the 10th of May 2013, the Obama administration published the National Strategy for the Arctic Region, which emphasized three areas in the region: U.S. security interests, responsible Arctic stewardship, and enhancing international cooperation (Department of Defense, 2013).

5. Tried Policy

Notwithstanding the United States' hitherto activity in the international cooperation and the release of two strategic documents, its actual Arctic policy inputs in relation to security are moribund; the U.S. pursued certain actions to pave the path to a comprehensive Arctic strategy, but its current actions are not very effective.

Both Obama and Trump recognised the national security implications of rising engagements in the Arctic, especially from Russia and China, albeit with different approaches. Obama addressed the regional security issues by engaging in the existing Arctic policy institutions, mainly the Arctic Council, while holding a rather neutral stance towards the Russian and Chinese presence in the Arctic. On the other hand, unlike Obama, who relied on diplomatic means, Trump took a more aggressive approach and bypassed traditional policy processes. For instance, in 2019, he proposed to purchase Greenland to ensure that China doesn't aggrandize its influences in the Arctic territory. The decision, however, was neither run through a policy process, nor was coordinated with the State Department (Weingartner & Orttung, 2019).

2016 the Pentagon published its U.S Arctic Strategy (Department of Defense, 2016). The document highlighted the following regional goals: homeland defense, ensuring freedom and openness of the common areas, and maintaining a favourable balance of power (Department of Defence, 2016). In achieving the desired Arctic state, it outlined three strategies: building Arctic awareness, enhancing Arctic operations, and strengthening rule-based order in the Arctic (Department of Defence, 2019). Moreover, the 2018 US National Defense Strategy recognised that China and Russia pose the most significant threat to the US interests, though it didn't recognise the threat in the Arctic territory (Department of Defence, 2018). However, the recognition of the Russian and Chinese threat in the Arctic was embedded in the updated version of the Pentagon's Arctic Strategy in 2019 (Department of Defence, 2019).

The Arctic is not high on the Biden's priority. Although the Biden administration reactivated the Arctic Executive Steering Committee (AESC), appointed a new slate of research commissioners, and will enhance the U.S. military and civilian capabilities, the U.S. Arctic strategy has still not been updated and the Arctic issue overall remains a rather parochial (Stronski & Kier, 2021; The White House, 2021). The last strategic document was published in 2013 and due to the changing international theatre, for instance, the Chinese Polar Silk Road and the Russia's war in Ukraine, is largely outdated. Despite the U.S. inactivity in the Arctic, the Biden's administration continues to recognise both the Russian and the Chinese security threat in the region (Stronski & Kier, 2021).

Although, the United States have been engaged with the Arctic region to some extent, its actual position remains disadvantageous. With other actors' rising national interests and

potential in the Arctic region, most significantly Russia and China, the U.S. must establish an effective strategy towards the Arctic.

6. Stakeholders

The most prominent stakeholders in the Arctic region include 1) 'the Arctic Seven', including, the U.S., Canada, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. The Arctic Seven pursues multilateral cooperation to solve regional problems and foster the Arctic governments' interests relating to climate change, sustainable resources management, and maintaining a stable regional power-balance; 2) Russia, whose interests in the Arctic centres on the expansion of the petroleum industry to fulfil its energy and economic needs since the Arctic accounts 10 percent of Russia's GDP and 20 on its exports (Ahmad & Zafar, 2022). Additionally, Russia utilises its position ensuring control of the strategic resources as a leverage in the international tensions stemming mainly from its assault on Ukraine (Bennett, 2022). Lastly, the stability in the Northern Fleet, one of the Russian strategic fleets housing nuclear submarines, is of a strategic importance too (Østhagen, 2022); and 3) China, whose Arctic interests are of economic dimension, specifically in relation to building the Polar Silk Road (Klimenko, 2019).

7. Nonpartisan reasoning

Despite the U.S. being a global power, its position in the Arctic is considered to be weak. For example, in 2012 the U.S. had to rely on Russia to resupply its research base in Antarctica, which was a demonstration of how far behind the U.S. has fallen. Since 2011, Russia reopened several military bases and is building at least six new ones, has been building 'Arctic Army' of at least 6.000 soldiers, restored airfields and radar stations, and modernized sea-based nuclear forces and the surface ships. Russia's increasing military capabilities in the Arctic create space for power projection into other regions, like the North Atlantic, which poses a viable security threat for the U.S., whose military capacities in the region are rather mediocre (Klimenko, 2019; Marshall 2015). Lastly, the growing Chinese influences in the region enhance its global economic standing, which imposes a possible threat for the U.S in terms of its tensional trade relations and economic competition with China.

8. Policy outputs

Calibrating Agencies' Positioning

Although the United States' Arctic plans date back to Nixon's administration, its current Arctic strategy was published in 2013 and not updated since then, which was before Washington shifted its focus towards the strategic competition with Russia and China, before the outbreak of the Russia's war in Ukraine, and before the Chinese aspirations to build the Polar Silk Road. The lack of strategic direction leaves space for ambiguities for policymakers and the U.S. Arctic allies.

It is essential that the U.S. updates its National Arctic Strategy and address the new realities and national-security interests. However, the action should go further. It must break down several operational verticals by integrating foreign allies and assimilating space capabilities. Further, any update to a National Arctic Strategy should also be comprehensively entailed in the Department of Defense strategic documents, but also in the departments of Homeland Security, State, the Interior, and Energy, that are all connected to the Arctic policies development. Currently, besides the Department of Defense, only the Department of Homeland Security fall within the formal Arctic strategy (Sadat, 2022). An effective synchronization is necessary to further foster a comprehensive security approach towards the Arctic.

UNCLOS Ratification

In the light of the current deactivation of the Arctic Council and the limited effectiveness of the Nordic Plus, ratifying United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea is essential (Mahle & Cronkhite, 2022). Ratification would allow the U.S. to claim 200.000 square miles of the undersea territory in the Arctic as its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Marshall, 2015). UNCLOS strengthens the U.S. position in the following ways. Firstly, thanks to the Exclusive Economic Zone, the U.S. would exert a greater influence in the region in the light of the international law. Further, it would fill the power vacuum after the Arctic Council and possess new tools to remain influential in the region. Thirdly, the Convention advances the U.S. commercial interests; clear rules legitimated by the global acceptance create a stable environment for global commerce. Additionally, the U.S. oil and gas industries would benefit from the Convention thanks to the provisions on offshore resources, which allow coastal nations to claim exclusive authority over the resources within two hundred miles of the shore and authority over all the ocean floor beyond the 200-mile zone, to the edge of the continental

shelf. Fourthly, by not ratifying the Convention, the U.S. risks backsliding of nations that have put aside excessive maritime claims over the past years. Fifthly, it is a fact that UNCLOS contains some unfavourable provisions. However, by being a signatory to the Convention, the U.S. could propose to amend them, for example a provision on prohibiting coastal states from denying transit rights to the vessels based upon its means of propulsion. Considering its global power, it could likely convert the other states to vote in favour of the proposal (Sandalow, 2004).

Military Modernization

The U.S. must ensure maintaining and sustaining a credible force in Alaska. Firstly, the U.S. forces must exercise frequently and visibly in order to demonstrate its military capacities to the other actors and secure the Arctic interests. The exercises should incorporate some joint operations with the Arctic partners. This would showcase not only the U.S. strength, but also strong multilateral cooperation and interoperability with the partner nations, possibly exerting a deterrent effect (Forsyth, 2018). Secondly, the U.S. military forces must regain Arctic skills by a continued winter exercising targeted at the operational level of war and supplying new equipment to the military forces. Thirdly, technological modernization is needed, like, updating the early-warning defense radar systems, ground mobility technologies, satellite communications, aviation assets, deep water ports, and navigational aid (McVicar, 2022). Moreover, the U.S. must invest in ice breakers to strengthen its regional hard power considering it currently has only two functioning ice breakers, in comparison to Russia's forty (Di Pane & Romaine, 2021). Fourthly, an authority responsible for conducting military-to-military consultations with counterparts in the Arctic must be established. The U.S. maintains this through the Alaskan Command's security cooperation. However, 2013, the consultations with Russia were curbed. Despite the ongoing war, regular consultation with Russia could ensure the curtailing the tense relations between the nations, at least in the Arctic region; lack of an effective communication may lead to misunderstandings and potentially provoke a conflict.

9. Conclusions and Recommendations

The U.S. has been present in the Arctic from the 1971 onwards, and since then it has pursued a rather limited activity in the region. Although being the global superpower, possessing

necessary tools and resources, its security policy in the Arctic has remained largely ineffective, by many deemed to be moribund. With the recent rising influences in the Arctic of the actors like Russia and China, the war in Ukraine, and Chinese aspirations to build an extension to BRI, the Polar Silk Road, the U.S. must advance an effective Arctic strategy to secure its regional position. To do so, the policy brief proposed that the U.S. should 1) calibrate agencies' positioning, 2) ratify UNCLOS; and 3) enhance its military capabilities. By creating a comprehensive strategy intersecting the U.S. political setup, international law enforcement, military capacities and technology, the United States' will assert its position in the Arctic and ensure regional security.

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