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“The Northern Northern Border: Homeland Security Priorities in the Arctic, Part I”

**Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security
of the Committee on Homeland Security**

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Chairman Correa, Ranking Member Lesko, 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,¹ 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.²

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

¹Nordic Council of Ministers, *Arctic Social Indicators*, January 27, 2011, p. 13, http://library.arcticportal.org/712/1/Arctic_Social_Indicators_NCoM.pdf (accessed September 16, 2019).

²U.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 September 16, 2019).

to find it out.”³

So far the Trump Administration has been a mixed bag when it comes to U.S. Arctic policy. On the positive side, there have been practical policy outcomes regarding the Arctic since 2017. The Trump Administration has ended diplomatic sanctions applied to Iceland by the Obama Administration over the issue of whaling.⁴ Secretary Pompeo’s visit to Iceland was the first cabinet-level visit since 2008 and did a lot to improve bilateral relations with an important Arctic and NATO ally.⁵ Secretary Mike Pompeo and his predecessor Secretary Rex Tillerson both attended the Arctic Council Ministerial meeting—continuing a trend first started under the Obama Administration.

There has been a renewed focus on China’s role in the Arctic and Secretary Pompeo made this issue his focal point at the recent Arctic Council Ministerial. There has also been increased funding for the U.S. Coast Guard’s Polar Security Cutter program. After years of putting it on the back burner, the Trump Administration recently announced that the U.S. will maintain a part-time diplomatic presence in Greenland.

However, there have been some shortcomings. The unwillingness of the U.S. to agree to a joint statement during the 2019 Arctic Council Ministerial strained U.S. engagement in the region. The position of Special Representative for the Arctic has been left unfilled by the Trump Administration leaving the U.S. as the only Arctic power without a Special Representative or Arctic Ambassador.

Sometimes America’s voice is missing in the debate. At last year’s Arctic Circle Assembly in Iceland, U.S. government officials could not be seen. They definitely were not heard. Those who were there know that China happily filled this void.

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

- 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

³Frederick W. Seward, “Seward’s Folly: A Son’s View,” *University of Rochester Library Bulletin*, Spring 1967, <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/487> (accessed September 16, 2019).

⁴Bryan Walsh, “Obama Takes Steps to Stop Icelandic Whaling. Could He Do More?” *Time*, September 16, 2011, <http://science.time.com/2011/09/16/obama-takes-steps-to-stop-icelandic-whaling-could-he-do-more/> (accessed September 16, 2019).

⁵Lesley Wroughton, “U.S. and Iceland Boost Trade Ties, Discuss Arctic Security,” Reuters, February 15, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iceland-pompeo/us-and-iceland-boost-trade-ties-discuss-arctic-security-idUSKCN1Q41RT> (accessed September 16, 2019).

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.

While the Arctic region remains peaceful, Russia's recent steps to militarize the Arctic, coupled with its bellicose behavior toward its neighbors, makes the Arctic a security concern. The Arctic-based Northern Fleet accounts for two-thirds of the Russian Navy. An Arctic command was established in 2015 to coordinate all Russian military activities in the Arctic region. Two Arctic brigades have been formed, and Russia is planning to form Arctic Coastal Defense divisions, which will be under the command of the Northern Fleet and stationed on the Kola Peninsula and in Russia's eastern Arctic.⁶ Russia's Northern Fleet is building newly refitted submarines and

⁶MarEx, "New Forces to Guard Northern Sea Route," The Maritime Executive, January 20, 2017, <http://www.maritime-executive.com/article/new-forces-to-guard-northern-sea-route> (accessed September 16, 2019).

Russia announced in May 2017 that its buildup of the Northern Fleet's nuclear capacity is intended "to phase 'NATO out of [the] Arctic.'"⁷

Russia is developing equipment optimized for Arctic conditions like the Mi-38 helicopter and three new nuclear icebreakers to add to the 40 icebreakers already in service (six of which are nuclear).⁸ Air power in the Arctic is increasingly important to Russia; in January, the Northern Fleet announced it would "significantly expand the geography of the Arctic flights."⁹ These flights are often aggressive.

Twelve Russian aircraft simulated an attack against NATO naval forces taking part in a May 2017 exercise, EASTLANT17, near Tromsø, Norway, and later that month,¹⁰ Russian aircraft targeted aircraft from 12 nations including the U.S.¹¹ that took part in the Arctic Challenge 2017 exercise, near Bodø.¹² In April 2018, Maritime Patrol Aircraft from Russia's Pacific Fleet for the first time exercised locating and bombing enemy submarines in the Arctic, while fighter jets exercised repelling an air invasion in the Arctic region.

Over the past decade, Russian investment in Arctic bases has resulted in 14 operational airfields in the Arctic along with 16 deep-water ports.¹³ Russia reportedly has placed radar and S-300 missiles on the Arctic bases at Franz Joseph Land, New Siberian Islands, Novaya Zemlya, and Severnaya Zemlya.¹⁴ Last year, Russia activated a new radar complex on Wrangel Island.¹⁵ Beginning in 2019–2025, Russia plans to lay a nearly 8,000-mile fiber-optic cable across its Arctic coast, linking military installations along the way from the Kola Peninsula through Vladivostok.¹⁶

⁷Daniel Brown, "Russia's NATO Northern Fleet Beefs Up Its Nuclear Capabilities to Phase 'NATO Out of Arctic,'" *Business Insider*, June 1, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/russias-northern-fleet-beefs-up-its-nuclear-capabilities-phase-nato-out-arctic-2017-6> (accessed July 14, 2017).

⁸Osborn, "Putin's Russia in Biggest Arctic Military Push Since Soviet Fall."

⁹Atle Staalesen, "Russian Navy Announces It Will Significantly Expand Arctic Air Patrols," *The Barents Observer*, January 2, 2018, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2018/01/russian-navy-announces-it-will-significantly-increase-arctic-air-patrols#.Wkt86ZewoVM.twitter> (accessed September 16, 2019).

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Thomas Nilsen, "Arctic Challenge 2017 Set for Take Off," *The Barents Observer*, May 16, 2017, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2017/05/arctic-challenge-2017-set-take> (accessed September 16, 2019).

¹²Nilsen, "Russian Bombers Simulated an Attack Against this Radar on Norway's Barents Sea Coast."

¹³Robbie Gramer, "Here's What Russia's Military Build-Up in the Arctic Looks Like," *Foreign Policy*, January 25, 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/25/heres-what-russias-military-build-up-in-the-arctic-looks-like-trump-oil-military-high-north-infographic-map/?utm_content=buffer12641&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer (accessed June 2, 2017).

¹⁴Trude Pettersen, "Northern Fleet Gets Own Air Force, Air Defense Forces," *The Barents Observer*, February 1, 2016, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2016/02/northern-fleet-gets-own-air-force-air-defense-forces> (accessed July 14, 2017).

¹⁵Damien Sharkov, "Russia Deploys Air Radar on Arctic Wrangel Island," *Newsweek*, January 4, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-deploys-air-radar-arctic-wrangel-island-538527> (accessed September 16, 2019).

¹⁶Thomas Nilsen, "Russia Plans to Lay Trans-Arctic Fiber Cable Linking Military Installations," *The Barents Observer*, April 24, 2018, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2018/04/russia-slated-lay-military-trans-arctic-fibre-cable#.Wt-EVDOjIWI.twitter> (accessed September 16, 2019).

As an Arctic power, Russia's military presence in the region is to be expected. However, it should be viewed with some caution due to Russia's pattern of aggression. Last year EUCOM Commander General Scaparrotti testified saying, "Although the chances of military conflict in the Arctic are low in the near-term, Russia is increasing its qualitative advantage in Arctic operations, and its military bases will serve to reinforce Russia's position with the threat of force."¹⁷

China's Increasing Role

With the focus on what China is doing in the South China Sea, its massive infrastructure investments in Central Asia and Africa, and the trade war with the U.S., 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 published last year offers a useful glimpse into how Beijing views its role in the region.¹⁸ 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"¹⁹—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 Secretary Pompeo has said: "There are Arctic states, and non-Arctic states. No third category exists. China claiming otherwise entitles them to exactly nothing."²⁰

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.

¹⁷European Command, "EUCOM Posture Statement 2018," March 8, 2018, <http://www.eucom.mil/mission/eucom-posture-statement-2018> (accessed September 16, 2019).

¹⁸The 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 (accessed on September 16, 2019).

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Radio 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 September 16, 2019).

So far the Trump Administration has used every available opportunity on the international stage to raise awareness of Chinese ambition in the Arctic. During a recent trip to Iceland Vice President Mike Pence made Chinese economic activity in the Arctic one of the focal points of his visit.²¹ During the 2019 Arctic Council Ministerial meeting, Secretary Pompeo devoted a sizable amount of his speech highlighting the threat China posed to U.S. interests in the region, saying, “The United States and Arctic nations welcome transparent Chinese investment that reflect economic interests, not national security ambitions.”²²

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.

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.

²¹“Pence, in Visit to Iceland, to Discuss ‘Incursions’ into Arctic Circle by China, Russia: Official,” Reuters, August 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pence/pence-in-visit-to-iceland-to-discuss-incursions-into-arctic-circle-by-china-russia-official-idUSKCN1VIIQW> (accessed September 16, 2019).

²²Simon Johnson, “Pompeo: Russia Is ‘aggressive’ in Arctic, China’s Work There also Needs Watching,” Reuters, May 6, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-finland-arctic-council/pompeo-russia-is-aggressive-in-arctic-chinas-work-there-also-needs-watching-idUSKCN1SC1AY> (accessed September 16, 2019).

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