



Testimony

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# ARCTIC REGION

## Factors That Affect the Advancement of U.S. Priorities

Statement of Chelsa Kenney, Director  
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Chairman Green, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work on U.S. priorities and diplomacy in the Arctic as you examine Arctic security challenges. My testimony today summarizes our September 2023 report entitled *Arctic Region: Factors That Facilitate and Hinder the Advancement of U.S. Priorities*.<sup>1</sup>

Current geopolitical trends indicate the Arctic region is growing more important to the United States and its allies and strategic adversaries. For example, record low coverage of sea ice has made Arctic waters navigable for longer periods and has increased opportunities for shipping in the region. We have also reported on the impacts of climate change on Alaska Natives, who have inhabited the Arctic region for thousands of years and whose ways of life are particularly sensitive to environmental changes.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the escalation of great power competition between the United States, Russia, and China has heightened tensions in the Arctic's geopolitical environment. For example, both Russia and China have developed Arctic strategies with geopolitical goals contrary to U.S. interests, with Russia seeking to consolidate sovereign claims and control access to the region and China aiming to gain access to Arctic resources and sea routes to secure and bolster its military, economic, and scientific rise. In September 2022 and August 2023, the United States monitored Chinese and Russian military vessels conducting joint exercises off the coast of Alaska in the Bering Sea and near the Aleutian Islands, respectively.

The United States has articulated its interests in the Arctic through a series of strategies since the early 1970s. The federal government published its most recent Arctic strategy in October 2022 and an implementation plan in October 2023. Together, these serve as a framework for guiding its approach to addressing emerging challenges

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<sup>1</sup>GAO, *Arctic Region: Factors That Facilitate and Hinder the Advancement of U.S. Priorities*, [GAO-23-106002](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 6, 2023).

<sup>2</sup>GAO, *Alaska Native Issues: Federal Agencies Could Enhance Support for Native Village Efforts to Address Environmental Threats*, [GAO-22-104241](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 18, 2022); *Climate Change: A Climate Migration Pilot Program Could Enhance the Nation's Resilience and Reduce Federal Fiscal Exposure*, [GAO-20-488](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 6, 2020); and *Alaska Native Villages: Limited Progress Has Been Made on Relocating Villages Threatened by Flooding and Erosion*, [GAO-09-551](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 3, 2009).

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and opportunities in the Arctic.<sup>3</sup> The strategy identified four pillars (or priorities) spanning domestic and international issues: security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, and international cooperation and governance. The implementation plan includes specific actions for agencies to take to address these four pillars. For example, the plan outlines actions for the Department of Defense and other federal agencies to take to deter threats and aggression in the region.

Numerous federal entities and interagency groups with varying roles manage U.S. Arctic efforts, but the Department of State serves as the overall lead for Arctic diplomacy efforts at an intergovernmental forum known as the Arctic Council and more broadly.<sup>4</sup> Two offices take the lead on most Arctic efforts at State.

- The Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs within the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs focuses on the Arctic Council portfolio, and an official in this office serves as the U.S. Senior Arctic Official to the Arctic Council.
- The Office of the U.S. Coordinator for the Arctic Region was created in 2020 to coordinate the broader Arctic portfolio within State, including security-related issues. The Foreign Service Officer serving in the Arctic coordinator position left the office in June 2022. In August 2022, the President announced that the existing Arctic coordinator position would be elevated to an Ambassador-at-Large position. This change followed questions raised by U.S. lawmakers about State's structure for Arctic diplomacy and gaps between Arctic leadership positions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>White House, *Implementation Plan for the 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 18, 2023) and *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, D.C.: October 2022).







<sup>4</sup>The Arctic Council, formally established in 1996 by the Ottawa Declaration, is an intergovernmental forum that includes the eight Arctic countries and involves Arctic Indigenous communities, among others. The Arctic countries are Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark (Denmark), Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation (Russia), Sweden, and the United States. The focus of the Arctic Council is to promote cooperation, coordination, and interaction on Arctic issues, particularly those related to environmental protection and sustainable economic development. However, the council's charter expressly excludes matters related to military security.

<sup>5</sup>The Biden administration nominated Mike Sfraga, current Chair of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission, for this position in February 2023. The Senate has not held a confirmation hearing for this position, as of November 2023.

Our September 2023 report and my statement today address factors stakeholders identified that may facilitate or hinder the federal government’s management of U.S. Arctic priorities, and State’s role in managing those priorities.

We identified these factors, and State’s role in managing these priorities, through our interviews with 31 stakeholders and review of Arctic strategies, State documentation, and other relevant reports. We selected the stakeholders to capture a range of perspectives and grouped them together on the basis of their affiliations, but their perspectives are illustrative only and cannot be generalized (see fig. 1).

**Figure 1: Selected Stakeholder Groups Interviewed for Perspectives on the Federal Government’s Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities**

	Stakeholder group name (number of stakeholders)	Description of stakeholder group
	Department of State (9)	Representatives from nine selected State bureaus with Arctic roles, including eight bureaus and one office—the Office of the U.S. Coordinator for the Arctic Region, which is not located within a bureau
	Other Agencies (6)	Representatives from six other selected federal agencies — Departments of Defense, Energy, and Interior and the U.S. Coast Guard, Environmental Protection Agency, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
	Experts (7)	Seven selected U.S. experts on Arctic issues
	Foreign Governments (5)	Government officials from five other Arctic countries
	Alaska Native Organizations (3)	Alaska Natives serving in three Permanent Participant organizations in the Arctic Council and representing other Alaska Native entities
	State of Alaska (1)	Representatives from one state government, specifically representatives from Alaska’s Office of the Lieutenant Governor and other state government departments

Source: GAO (data); GAO (icons). | GAO-24-107192

More detailed information on our objectives, scope, and methodology can be found in our September 2023 report. Our work was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

## Factors That Affect the Federal Government's Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities



Stakeholders identified five factors that facilitated and five factors that hindered the federal government's management of U.S. Arctic priorities. For example, stakeholders identified the following two facilitating factors:

- White House-led coordination mechanisms support Arctic-related information sharing, projects, and strategy efforts.** White House-led coordination groups serve as mechanisms that support information sharing, interagency Arctic projects, and Arctic strategy efforts, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups. For example, a stakeholder from the State group explained that Arctic Executive Steering Committee meetings are a useful venue for State to provide briefings about current geopolitical issues that may inform U.S. activities in the Arctic and to learn more about other agencies' work in the Arctic for informational purposes.<sup>6</sup>
- The United States exerts influence within the Arctic Council.** The federal government exerts influence in the Arctic Council through its expertise and engagement, according to stakeholders from five of the six groups. For example, a stakeholder from the Foreign Governments group said the federal government brings expertise to the council on various issues, including wildfires, search and rescue, climate change, and sustainable development. The stakeholder further noted that the more a country engages in Arctic Council projects, the more opportunities it has to build bridges with other Arctic countries and expand the Arctic community's knowledge on these topics.

Stakeholders also identified the following four hindering factors:

<sup>6</sup>A 2015 Executive Order established the interagency Arctic Executive Steering Committee to provide guidance to executive departments and agencies and enhance coordination of federal Arctic priorities. Exec. Order. No. 13689, *Enhancing Coordination of National Efforts in the Arctic*, 80 Fed. Reg. 4191 (Jan. 26, 2015).



- **Federal government coordination and partnership with Alaskans may not align with Arctic strategy principles.** Stakeholders from three of the six groups said that the federal government does not regularly or meaningfully coordinate or partner with the state government of Alaska or Alaska Natives, falling short of meeting certain principles of the strategy.<sup>7</sup> For example, stakeholders from the Alaska Native Organizations group questioned whether agencies fully considered their input. One of these stakeholders raised concerns about federal agencies’ inconsistent communication and last-minute engagement with Alaska Natives.



- **Some challenges to Arctic-related interagency coordination exist, and a lead coordinating group lacks authority to advance U.S. priorities.** Stakeholders from five of the six groups discussed Arctic-related interagency coordination challenges. For example, all seven experts we spoke with said the United States lacks an effective interagency coordination mechanism for Arctic efforts as a whole. The experts disagreed on where such a mechanism should reside, but several said the Arctic Executive Steering Committee has the potential to meet this need. However, the committee does not have the institutional convening or budgetary authority needed to advance U.S. Arctic priorities, according to stakeholders from the Other Agencies and Experts groups.



- **Americans have limited awareness of Arctic issues and federal government activities.** Stakeholders from four of the six groups discussed Americans’ limited awareness of Arctic issues or a broader lack of awareness concerning federal government activities in the Arctic. For example, stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group questioned Americans’ awareness of Arctic issues and said that the federal government and public may need a greater appreciation of the region to fully support the implementation of the strategy. However, one of these stakeholders said that attention from the White House and the Senate has helped to advance the U.S. Coast Guard’s

<sup>7</sup>The strategy identifies four pillars, or Arctic priorities, and five guiding principles, two of which apply to Alaska Natives. The first principle is to consult, coordinate, and co-manage with Alaska Native villages and communities. According to the strategy, the United States is committed to regular, meaningful, and robust consultation, coordination, and co-management with Alaska Native Tribes, communities, corporations, and other organizations and to ensuring equitable inclusion of Indigenous Peoples. The fifth guiding principle is to commit to a whole of government, evidence-based approach, in which the federal government will work in close partnership with the State of Alaska, Alaska Native villages, local communities, and others.

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Polar Security Cutter Program, which will enable the United States to increase its maritime presence in the Arctic.<sup>8</sup>



- **Budgetary and resource constraints limit the federal government’s advancement of U.S. Arctic priorities.** Budget uncertainties, such as continuing resolutions, and resource constraints affect agencies’ ability to plan, coordinate, and implement projects in the Arctic, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups. For example, a stakeholder from the Other Agencies group told us that without an annual appropriation, it is impossible to plan future travel and other events because the agency must develop incremental plans to align with the length of the continuing resolution. If relevant U.S. officials do not attend international events, it limits the federal government’s ability to push back against strategic competitors who may be promoting interests that do not align with U.S. priorities for the Arctic region, according to a stakeholder from the State group.

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## Factors That Affect State’s Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities and Elements to Consider for New Ambassador Position



Stakeholders identified three factors that facilitated and two factors that hindered State’s management of U.S. Arctic priorities. Stakeholders identified the following three facilitating factors:

- **The Senior Arctic Official and staff effectively manage U.S. engagement and leadership in the Arctic Council.** The Senior Arctic Official and staff effectively manage U.S. engagement and leadership in the Arctic Council, according to stakeholders from five of the six stakeholder groups. Some of these stakeholders commented that institutional knowledge within the Senior Arctic Official position and office has facilitated U.S. leadership at the Arctic Council. Specifically, a stakeholder from the Other Agencies group explained that vast knowledge about the Arctic Council, including the history behind U.S. and Arctic Council decisions, facilitates U.S. efforts to promote its priorities on the council.

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<sup>8</sup>In partnership with the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard is procuring three heavy, polar-capable icebreakers (“Polar Security Cutters”) to begin to address mission gaps and to expand U.S. presence in both polar regions. See GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Polar Security Cutter Needs to Stabilize Design Before Starting Construction and Improve Schedule Oversight*, [GAO-23-105949](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2023).





- An Arctic coordinator position has improved internal coordination across the broader Arctic portfolio.** The creation of a position to coordinate the broader Arctic portfolio has improved internal coordination within State, according to stakeholders from two of the six groups. Stakeholders from the State and Foreign Governments groups told us that the Arctic encompasses a broad set of issues, including energy, climate, defense, and sustainable development, that requires a broad range of expertise that spans the department. A stakeholder from the State group said that the coordinator position afforded the department insight into all bureaus, enabling the coordinator to understand how several Arctic issues are interrelated. For example, the coordinator identified how some Arctic security issues affect environmental discussions because of the position’s broad reach across the department.



- Separation between the roles of the Senior Arctic Official and the Arctic coordinator position supports U.S. engagement in the Arctic Council and on broader issues.** The existing State structure—in which the Senior Arctic Official focuses on the Arctic Council portfolio while an Arctic coordinator position coordinates the broader Arctic portfolio within State—supports U.S. engagement both in the council and on broader issues, according to stakeholders from three of the six stakeholder groups. For example, stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group said that the U.S. role in the Arctic is too big for any one person to cover both of these portfolios. One of these stakeholders stated that the growing number of non-Arctic countries with Arctic interests and Arctic-related issue areas indicates a growing need for engagement on Arctic issues outside of the Arctic Council.

Stakeholders also identified the following two hindering factors:

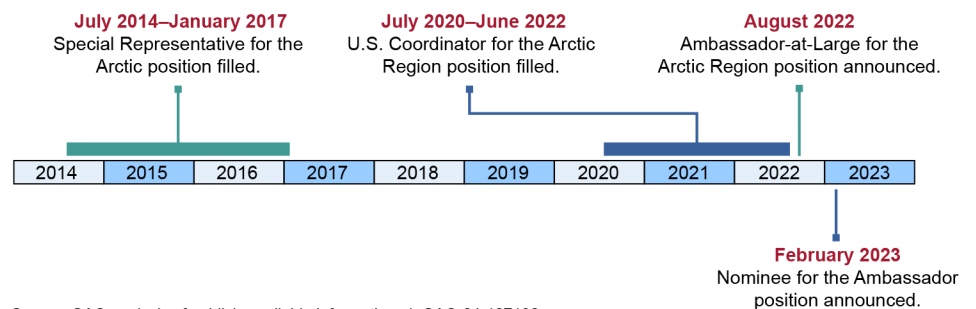


- Gaps in leadership and in staff coordinating the broader Arctic portfolio have limited State’s engagement outside the Arctic Council.** Gaps in leadership and in staff responsible for coordinating the broader Arctic portfolio have limited State’s efforts outside the Arctic Council, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups. Since 2014, State has created three leadership positions with varying titles and roles to oversee a broad Arctic portfolio (see fig. 2). Stakeholders from the State group said that gaps in leadership led to fragmented efforts, with one of these stakeholders noting that State loses momentum on Arctic issues with constant changes in leadership and staffing. Moreover, stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group said that gaps in Arctic leadership limit U.S. engagement with other Arctic countries on broader issues outside of the Arctic Council.



For example, one of these stakeholders commented that there is no one person at State who can discuss broader Arctic issues at a working level. According to this stakeholder, the other six like-minded Arctic countries discuss broader Arctic issues together, and they wish the United States had someone who could engage in those discussions consistently.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 2: Timeline Showing Different Arctic-related Leadership Positions at State**



Source: GAO analysis of publicly available information. | GAO-24-107192



- Prior positions coordinating the broader Arctic portfolio lacked convening authority.** Prior positions coordinating the broader Arctic portfolio had limited convening authority to, for example, bring decision makers together or quickly address informational needs, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups. For example, a stakeholder from the State group said that the prior Arctic Coordinator did not have a direct reporting line to the Secretary, which contributed to internal coordination issues. Some bureaus responded more slowly to requests from the Arctic Coordinator or the coordinator’s office than they would to requests sent by officials with a direct line to the Secretary, according to this stakeholder.

Stakeholders from the State, Other Agencies, Experts, Foreign Governments, and Alaska Native Organizations groups viewed the 2022 announcement of the Ambassador-at-Large for the Arctic Region (Ambassador) position positively. Some stakeholders noted that the announcement served as a positive sign of increased U.S. interest in the region, while others focused on the implied benefits of such a position. For example, according to stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group, the announcement is a strong sign of the continued importance

<sup>9</sup>Stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group referred to the Arctic countries other than Russia (i.e., Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States) as the “like-minded” countries.

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that the federal government places on the Arctic, and such a position may raise the status of Arctic issues in the United States.

However, many stakeholders identified elements State and the new Ambassador should consider to manage U.S. Arctic priorities successfully going forward. These are:

- **Consistency in position title and corresponding office.** State should create a consistent position and office responsible for coordinating the broader Arctic portfolio that would span administrations, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups. Some of these stakeholders said that such a change would lead to greater institutional knowledge on the issues and support better working relationships across State, while others said that it would improve engagement with U.S. foreign partners.
- **A formalized office structure with a “deep bench.”** Stakeholders from three of the six groups highlighted the need to create a formal office structure to support the Ambassador. Creating this structure would include assembling a group of staff that can support the office’s efforts during a gap in leadership, an action one stakeholder referred to as “building a deep bench.” According to this stakeholder, State did not develop a plan for filling the leadership void prior to the departure of the U.S. Coordinator, and State has not conducted long-term planning for the Arctic office structure.
- **Clarity of Ambassador’s role within the department.** State should clarify the Ambassador’s role in relation to other bureaus and offices, according to stakeholders from three of the six groups. For example, a stakeholder from the Experts group stated that Ambassador-at-Large positions blur management lines within State and suggested that the Secretary of State define the Ambassador role in clear and specific terms, with concrete objectives. This stakeholder suggested that the Secretary of State require assistant secretaries to meet regularly with the Ambassador to discuss Arctic issues.
- **Greater authority within State.** The Ambassador should have greater authority to effectively coordinate within State, according to stakeholders from four of the six stakeholder groups. Some of these stakeholders assume that the ambassadorial title and the Senate-confirmed position will carry more weight than the prior Arctic coordinator position, and that such authority will provide the convening authority needed to bring everyone together. Other stakeholders focused on the need for the Ambassador to have clear

#### Rank and Reporting Line of Ambassadors-at-Large

According to a 2017 Congressional Research Service report, Ambassadors-at-Large generally rank immediately below assistant secretaries of State in terms of protocol, but their reporting line is not consistent. In 2017, two of the four Ambassador-at-Large positions at State reported directly to the Secretary of State while the other two reported to an Under Secretary.

Source: GAO analysis of Congressional Research Service report. | GAO-24-107192

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and direct authority, such as that provided by direct access to the Secretary of State.

In closing, addressing Arctic-related issues, which have increasingly become global issues, will require strengthened leadership and coordination across the federal government and with other Arctic countries. State, as the federal lead for Arctic diplomacy, will play a critical role in managing heightened security tensions in the region going forward. However, State has taken an inconsistent approach to coordinating and managing the broader Arctic portfolio outside of Arctic Council work. It is important that State address the concerns identified above as it creates the new Ambassador position, which will be essential for leading U.S. efforts in international cooperation and governance in the Arctic.

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Chairman Green, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or other Members may have.

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## GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact Chelsa Kenney, Director, International Affairs and Trade, at (202) 512-2964 or [kenneyc@gao.gov](mailto:kenneyc@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. Key contributors to this testimony include Godwin Agbara (Assistant Director), Amanda Bartine (Analyst-in-Charge), and Debbie Chung. Additional contributors to the prior work on which this testimony is based are listed in our September 2023 report.

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