



ANALYSIS

COMPETING ON THE PERIPHERY: A NEW APPROACH TO THE ARCTIC

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Introduction

Countries have largely maintained former Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's 1987 vision of the Arctic as "a zone of peace" built on shared development, coordinated research, and restricted military activity.¹ Exacerbated by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, however, the Arctic has regained strategic importance as countries vie for regional security, resource access, and control over emerging shipping routes.² For Washington, the challenge becomes adapting a historically cooperative framework to a growing competitive domain. While it is not currently—and may never become—a primary operational theater, the Arctic is likely to be a strategic flank in a larger conflagration. It offers avenues along which Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) threaten U.S. national security, restrict economic access, and undermine existing rules-based regional and international norms.

Complicating matters further, while the United States has acknowledged the Arctic's rising strategic value, it approaches the region with inherent structural disadvantages. Arctic responsibility spans three geographical combatant commands and numerous federal entities, each having distinct priorities, authorities, and limitations.³ This fragmentation divides operational planning, blurs accountability, and slows critical decision-making at times when it is needed most. In contrast, Russia employs a unified Arctic command while the PRC advances its strategy for the region. Lacking unity and cohesion, the United States hinders its ability to anticipate and shape a rapidly evolving theater.

This study argues that Washington's Arctic strategy reflects a deeper misalignment between U.S. strategic ends and operational means. It proposes that adopting a "shape-and-monitor" approach—a strategy anchored in incremental force restructuring and allied integration—offers Washington a more coherent process for managing risks and sustaining deterrence in the Arctic. It begins with an overview of the Arctic's strategic situation, those

¹ Mikhail Gorbachev's Speech in Murmansk at the Ceremonial Meeting on the Occasion of the Presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star to the City of Murmansk," *The Asia Dialogue*, https://theasiadialogue.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Gorbachev_speech.pdf; Iona Allan, *Arctic Narratives and Political Values: Arctic States, China and NATO* (Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020), p. 87, https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/?file=/publications/download/nato_arctic_study_2020_18-06-2020-2.pdf?zoom=page-fit.

² Kiel Pechko, "Rising Tensions and Shifting Strategies: The Evolving Dynamics of US Grand Strategy in the Arctic," The Arctic Institute, January 7, 2025, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/rising-tensions-shifting-strategies-evolving-dynamics-us-grand-strategy-arctic/>.

³ Charlotte Bertrand, "Three ways the US can build a more lethal fighting force in the Arctic," *Atlantic Council*, October 23, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/three-ways-the-us-can-build-a-more-lethal-fighting-force-in-the-arctic/>.



critical conditions and dynamics impacting current and future U.S. national security.⁴ It then introduces and outlines an alternative strategic approach rooted in U.S. national interests and guiding principles. Lastly, it concludes by examining potential risks to the proposed strategy.

The Arctic In Context: Defining the Stakes

Climate contributes significantly to the conditions under which nations fight, and climate change is reshaping the Arctic's physical geography and redefining its strategic environment.⁵ Having warmed three times faster than global averages between 1971 and 2019, the Arctic could experience ice-free seasons within the next few decades.⁶ As sea ice melts, newly exposed water absorbs solar radiation, locking the Arctic into a self-reinforcing warming cycle and altering global incentives for access to and control over its economic potential.⁷ The Northern Sea Route (NSR) and Northwest Passage—once the “Holy Grail of Victorian exploration”—are becoming increasingly traversable, reshaping global trade routes.⁸ Climate and economic changes are transforming the geopolitical landscape as states reposition to secure access to, influence over, and control of emerging resources and routes.⁹ Consequently, Russia and the PRC are maneuvering to shape the Arctic's future, capitalizing on its emerging economic and military advantages.¹⁰ Their maneuvering underscores the urgency for Washington to move from reactive observation to proactive influence.

Rooted in perceived threats of Western encirclement and its desire for renewed great-power status, Russia views the High North as both a territorial shield and an economic lifeline. For Moscow, the Arctic remains a vital historical component of its national identity. In *The Persian*, author David McCloskey's character, reminiscing about his time spent in America, quips that he, “had been shocked—though he knew he should not have been—to find [Americans] entirely unburdened from history. The Americans he knew best possessed

⁴ Steven Heffington, Adam Oler, and David Tretler, *A National Security Strategy Primer* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019), p. 7.

⁵ Sylvia Jordan and Antonio Salinas, “Melting Frontiers: A Bold Vision for US Strategy in a Warming Arctic,” Modern War Institute at West Point, February 7, 2025, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/melting-frontiers-a-bold-vision-for-us-strategy-in-a-warming-arctic/>.

⁶ Laura Comay et al., “Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress,” November 1, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41153>.

⁷ Scott G. Borgerson, “Arctic Meltdown: The Economic and Security Implications of Global Warming,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 2, 2008, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/arctic-antarctic/2008-03-02/arctic-meltdown>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Michael Albertus, “The Coming Age of Territorial Expansion: “Climate Change Will Fuel Contests—and Maybe Wars—for Land and Resources,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 4, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/climate-change-coming-age-territorial-expansion>.

¹⁰ Heather A. Conley, “The Arctic Spring: Washington is Sleeping Through Changes at the Top of the World,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/commons/2019-09-24/arctic-spring>; Albertus, “The Coming Age of Territorial Expansion.”

a rosy nostalgia about the past and a preposterous hope for the future.”¹¹ While the United States may remain “unburdened from history,” Russia is not. History is integral to its national sovereignty, identity, and independence from Western interference, shaping Moscow’s worldview and strategic culture.¹² Extending back to the pre-1917 era, this historical awareness reinforces Moscow’s enduring perception of the Arctic as both its rightful inheritance and physical defense.¹³

A 2025 report to Congress estimates Russia controls approximately 50% of the Arctic’s “area, coastline, population and probably mineral wealth.”¹⁴ Russia alone accounted for 50-60% of all Arctic investments from 2017-2022, with the remaining 40-50% distributed across the other seven Arctic countries—underpinning the region’s strategic and economic importance to Moscow’s ambitions.¹⁵ Consequently, anticipating climate change’s implications on national security, Moscow is exerting “border control” over a larger portion of the region and protecting what it sees as a “new border.”¹⁶ It is expanding region-specific Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities and infrastructure, and modernizing its Arctic air and maritime bases. These efforts ensure Russia’s ability to monitor and, if deemed necessary, physically deny access to adversaries operating within its northern approaches. Its Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command includes new air defense and permanent basing capabilities, airborne units, and retrofitted ground units designed for sustained operations in the harsh environment.¹⁷ Underscoring Moscow’s effort to institutionalize Arctic operations, the fleet became the country’s fifth military district, unifying its Arctic capabilities.¹⁸ As militarization continues, Moscow’s aim would likely be to secure its sea-based nuclear capabilities and ensure freedom of maneuver in a larger conflict.¹⁹

Economically, as natural resources become more readily available, Russia has pursued international consensus on controlling passage through the Northern Sea Route (NSR). If successful, Moscow could impose economic—and physical—restrictions on who can operate

¹¹ David McCloskey, *The Persian* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2025), p. 45.

¹² LTC Jussi Puustinen, FIN A (CSAG/CCJ5), “A Look into the Origins of Russian Strategic Culture,” Near East South Asia Center for Security Studies, July 11, 2023, p. 1, <https://nesa-center.org/a-look-into-the-origins-of-russian-strategic-culture/>.

¹³ Bouffard et al., *Arctic Narratives and Political Values*, pp. 47-48.

¹⁴ Comay et al., “Changes in the Arctic.”

¹⁵ “Overview of Russia’s Arctic Investments in 2017-2022,” Business Index North - Bin Arctic, September 2024, https://businessindexnorth.com/sites/b/businessindexnorth.com/files/2024/09/overview_of_russias_investments_in_the_arctic.pdf, p. 2.

¹⁶ Mathieu Boulègue, “Russia’s Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in ‘Low Tension’ Environment,” Chatham House: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, June 2019, p. 11, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/06/russias-military-posture-arctic>

¹⁷ Abbie Tingstad et al., “Report on the Arctic Capabilities of the U.S. Armed Forces,” RAND Corporation, November 1, 2023, pp. 25-28, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1638-1.html.

¹⁸ Malte Humpert, “Russia Elevates Importance of Northern Fleet Upgrading it to Military District Status,” *High News North*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-elevates-importance-northern-fleet-upgrading-it-military-district-status>.

¹⁹ Boulègue, “Russia’s Military Posture in the Arctic,” p. 24.

throughout the NSR.²⁰ Though primarily *defensive* in nature, the purpose of the defense is creating what the U.S. Army's Doctrine Publication 3-90 calls "conditions for the *offense* ... aggressively [seeking] ways of attriting and weakening enemy forces *before* close combat begins."²¹ Moscow must not continue to believe that "it can operate unhampered in a potentially contested environment."²² While Russia relies on hard power to secure its Arctic ambitions, the PRC pursues influence mainly through soft power (e.g., economic investment, scientific research, and regional governance)—a complement rapidly redefining the High North.

For its part, the PRC views the Arctic as an open frontier, a space to expand influence opportunistically. As a self-declared "near-Arctic state," Beijing is becoming increasingly confident in effectively reshaping regional and global norms to reinforce its influence. Utilizing a "comprehensive approach," the PRC is exploring gaps in Arctic governance. Politically, it relies on "soft power" mechanisms to influence existing Arctic governments and indigenous populations. Economically, its "Polar Silk Road" could generate "political and strategic influence" through increased interdependences across critical supply nodes. Scientifically, its dual-purpose research capabilities and stations buttress larger military-civil fusion ambitions, potentially strengthening its ability to surge military power should the need arise. Militarily, while China's Arctic capabilities fall well short of Russia's, Washington should no longer ignore the PRC's expanding icebreaker fleet and potential increase in subsurface activities.²³

Most concerning, however, is the deepening collaboration between Russia and the PRC. While not without their differences (e.g., historical mistrust, divergent goals, and asymmetrical cultures), these competitors are increasingly working together to erode Western influence and capabilities. Russia remains the more acute Arctic threat, but when coupled with Beijing's fusion of civilian assets with military capabilities and its economic growth, the partnership presents rare and complex challenges for the West.²⁴ Taken together, these trends signal that the Arctic's previously stable balance of power is tilting toward authoritarianism—highlighting Washington's need to reexamine its regional interests, roles, and responsibilities.

While climate and competition reshape the Arctic, the United States must anchor its regional strategy—regardless of approach—in clearly defined national interests, foremost among which is homeland defense and security. Washington has a constitutional obligation to protect its sovereign territory and population, as well as the defense architecture underpinning both (e.g., NORAD). Although the probability of conflict originating in the

²⁰ Bouffard et al., *Arctic Narratives and Political Values*, pp. 48-49.

²¹ Headquarters, Department of the Army, *ADP 3-90: Offense and Defense* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019), p. 4-1, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN34828-ADP_3-90-000-WEB-1.pdf.

²² Boulègue, "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic," 32.

²³ Matti Puranen and Sanna Kopra, "China's Arctic Strategy - a Comprehensive Approach in Times of Great Power Rivalry," *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 2023, pp. 239-253, <https://sjms.nu/articles/196/files/658ab62d3da14.pdf>.

²⁴ Captain Mark Vicik, "Chinese Arctic Expansion: How Beijing Benefits from Moscow's Isolation," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies (JAMS) Special Issue on Arctic Security*, pp. 74-75, <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.2025SI004>.

Arctic may be low, a crisis or conflict elsewhere—for example, in Europe or the Indo-Pacific—is likely to spill north. The strategic consequences of such a spillover are too significant to ignore.

Beyond the immediate defensive imperatives, the United States must recognize and appreciate the long-term national security implications stemming from a rapidly warming Arctic. Rising sea levels increase the risk of temporary and permanent coastal flooding, consequently displacing populations, straining infrastructure, and further intensifying domestic political and social animosities. Any discussion of the Arctic, therefore, must incorporate climate change's impact on the region's future security dynamics.

The Arctic's natural resources—estimated to contain 13% of the world's undiscovered oil and 30% of its undiscovered natural gas—further elevate its strategic importance.²⁵ With such a deep well of economic potential, the United States must ensure the region remains accessible while pursuing responsible economic exploration, sustainable infrastructure development (so as not to exacerbate global warming), and continued access to key trade corridors. Arctic access, then, is key not only to preserving U.S. economic resilience but also to preventing adversaries from monopolizing its economic opportunities.

Finally, while a universal consensus is not necessary, a rules-based order emphasizing transparency, cooperative security, and lawful regional access bolsters U.S. security. Anchoring U.S. regional policy in its enduring national interests—homeland defense, stable climate and controlled warming, continued freedom of navigation and open trade, and collaborative, rules-based regional governance—provides the policy framework upon which Washington shapes, rather than reacts to, emerging conditions in the High North.

With seven of the eight Arctic states now NATO allies, the U.S. need not—and should not—approach the evolving region alone. Any sustainable strategy must consider allied threat perceptions, domestic political constraints, and military capabilities. Two allies in particular, Canada and Finland, can prove instrumental to the alliance's emerging Arctic posture. Canada, often inclined to downplay immediate military threats to its Arctic territory, has seen new language emerge in favor of adopting a more comprehensive approach to Arctic defense and security.²⁶ Following former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's 2022 visit to Canada, official documents and narratives signaled greater openness to NATO adopting a more explicit role within the region.²⁷ This willingness, combined with its geographic location, makes the Canadian Arctic prime real estate for a NATO-integrated defense ecosystem comprising more advanced sensors, ships, and aircraft.²⁸ Finland's membership bolsters NATO's position, adding its deep Arctic experience and expertise—including advanced ice-capable shipbuilding, proficiency in winter war fighting, and regional

²⁵ Scott G. Borgerson, "The Great Game Moves North: As the Arctic Melts, Countries Vie for Control," *Foreign Affairs*, March 25, 2009, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/commons/2009-03-25/great-game-moves-north>.

²⁶ Bouffard et al., *Arctic Narratives and Political Values*, pp. 11, 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

technologies—to its collective capabilities.²⁹ While allied perspectives and capabilities vary, they all recognize the evolving regional security challenges and the need to address them proactively and collectively.

The United States faces a critical—and narrowing—window of opportunity to influence the Arctic, secure vital interests, and defend its critical northern frontier.³⁰ The accelerating economic, military, and environmental shifts demand that the United States adopt a more deliberate posture. While Washington’s current strategy identifies broad national interests, it fails to explain how it *shapes* the Arctic in line with those interests—reading more like a wish list than a regional strategy.³¹ Implicit within its strategic framework is the assumption that the United States can shape conditions, but its posture and approach remain reactive. Instilling allied cohesion and resilience abroad starts with the United States first creating cohesion at home. The “shape-and-monitor” approach that follows could be an essential first step—not to fix a larger, more systemic issue of whole-of-government fragmentation, but to operationalize the intent already articulated in existing strategic documents.

Shape-and-Monitor: From Reactive to Proactive

The Arctic’s evolving dynamics are symptomatic of larger climate and geopolitical trends. As Russia and China continue entrenching militarily, economically, and politically, and although the West has placed “renewed strategic thinking” on the Arctic, Washington remains encumbered by a *reactive* posture.³² While a “monitor-and-respond” approach affords greater flexibility, it relies on reactivity rather than on developing a forward-looking, sustained presence. Such an approach only leaves Washington perpetually behind its primary adversaries, its ends continuing to outpace its ways and means.

In today’s strategic environment, the United States faces a unique challenge—revisionist autocracies increasingly collaborating and coordinating to undermine the liberal world order.³³ Competing effectively requires shifting from a reactive strategy to calculated anticipation. Recognizing the changing dynamics, Moscow and Beijing are already taking actionable steps to shape the Arctic’s future. Their growing collaboration—though not without its difficulties—is steadily challenging Western influence, further accelerating shifts

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 26-27.

³⁰ Heather A. Conley, Mathieu Boulégué, Sophie Arts, and Kristine Berzina, “Defending America’s Northern Border and Its Arctic Approaches Through Cooperation With Allies and Partners,” German Marshall Fund, August 17, 2023, p. 29, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/defending-americas-northern-border-and-its-arctic-approaches-through-cooperation-allies-and>.

³¹ The Biden Administration, “National Strategy for the Arctic Region,” October 2022, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/NSAR-2022-Implementation-Report-.pdf>.

³² Esther Brimmer, “Changing Geopolitics in the Arctic,” Council on Foreign Relations, July 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/report/changing-geopolitics-arctic-0>.

³³ Peppino DeBiaso, “*The Rise of a New Axis: Great Power Struggle and the Future of Conflict*,” *Information Series*, No. 622, (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, April 8, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/peppino-debiaso-the-rise-of-a-new-axis-great-power-struggle-and-the-future-of-conflict-no-622-april-8-2025/.

in the balance between access and control.³⁴ Preserving regional and global stability, credibility, and deterrence requires a strategy that *shapes* the environment *before* crises emerge, integrating all tools of national power to influence the Arctic's future conditions.

This study posits such an approach, classifying it as a “shape-and-monitor” strategy. To shape means deliberately and proactively influencing the Arctic environment, cohesive allied posture, and adversary options *before* a crisis or conflict emerges. To shape is to deter. At its core, it focuses on denying adversaries uncontested freedom of action. It seeks to influence emerging competition in the Arctic. Its theory of success rests on four key premises: (1) the Arctic is no longer immune to great-power rivalry; (2) conflict elsewhere will more than likely spill north; (3) adversaries are increasingly using gray zone tactics to degrade Western influence; and (4) allied integration remains a decisive advantage for the West. The following section evaluates how the United States, in concert with its allies, can synchronize its instruments of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic—to translate theory into action, restoring coherence among its strategic ends and operational ways and means. Individually, each instrument exerts a different kind of influence. Collectively, they generate shaping power, allowing Washington to *shape* an evolving Arctic rather than *react* to one.

Diplomatic. Diplomacy is how an actor interacts with another.³⁵ It underpins all other instruments. For the Arctic, Washington's central diplomatic challenge is how best to integrate security-focused dialogue without further undermining regional cooperation. Established by the 1996 Ottawa Declaration, the Arctic Council has served as the region's central intergovernmental body, promoting and facilitating research and cooperation across its eight council members and indigenous communities.³⁶ Once a space to address common Arctic-related concerns, it has stagnated since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. And while cooperation has gradually restarted, the Arctic Council faces a very difficult geopolitical situation ahead.³⁷ Furthermore, while the council has provided agreements addressing environmental- and governance-related matters, it is incapable of addressing defense- and security-related concerns.³⁸ A proactive approach, then, involves creating an Arctic sub-council among the Western Arctic states and NATO partners. This institutionalizes Western coordination, lending political validity to further initiatives. While critics argue it risks further fragmenting fragile Arctic cooperation and could fuel existing perceptions of regional “blocs,” the Arctic is already bifurcated.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Heffington, Oler, and Tretler, *A National Security Strategy Primer*, p. 23.

³⁶ “Arctic Council,” Britannica Editors, Encyclopedia Britannica, May 19, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arctic-Council>.

³⁷ Marc Jacobsen and Svein Vigeland Rottem, “The Arctic Council in the Shadow of Geopolitics,” The Arctic Institute, May 12, 2025, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/arctic-council-shadow-geopolitics/>.

³⁸ Arctic Council, “Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council,” September 19, 1996, p. 2, <https://oarchive.arctic-council.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/bdc15f51-fb91-4e0d-9037-3e8618e7b98f/content>.

Another option, though no less divisive, would see the United States champion efforts to embed Arctic cooperation within NATO's "High North" security framework.³⁹ This option focuses U.S. efforts on its closest allies, accelerating cooperation and integration. With Finland's and Sweden's accession into NATO, Washington has a unique opportunity to draw upon the Nordic countries' extensive Arctic operational knowledge and capabilities—something upon which it has yet to fully capitalize.

Domestically, the U.S. Senate should once again consider ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). While the United States adheres to many of the convention's principles in practice, ratifying UNCLOS bolsters Washington's diplomatic credibility. As of now, it remains "outside looking in as a nonmember to various legal and technical bodies," consequently weakening claims that rules, not force, govern the Arctic.⁴⁰ Washington can lead a stronger Western Arctic coalition, but it must do so in a way that reinforces the very cooperative framework it seeks to defend. Furthermore, ratification bolsters U.S. military advantages, economic opportunities, and diplomatic leadership in the evolving region. UNCLOS codifies maritime passage (to include warships) while strengthening U.S. influence within the maritime domain.⁴¹

Informational. Informational power encompasses a nation's ability to collect, analyze, and transmit information to influence a specific audience, while simultaneously protecting its own information environment.⁴² The informational instrument serves as the link between U.S. capability and willingness—both critical to deterrence. When effectively integrated across all instruments, information power strengthens U.S. credibility by shaping perceptions and exposing an adversary's intentions.⁴³

Currently, adversaries are actively probing legal and informational frameworks (e.g., UNCLOS) to erode Western influence. Using persistent, multi-domain information operations, Russia employs disinformation, diplomatic pressure, and military intimidation to sow distrust and undermine NATO's collective resolve in the Arctic.⁴⁴ Weaving positive (e.g., "China is a partner") and negative (e.g., "Sweden is unsafe") narratives, the PRC uses

³⁹ Lee Mottola, "NATO's Arctic Command: A Case for the Expansion of NATO's Mission in the High North," The Arctic Institute, January 17, 2023, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/nato-arctic-command-case-expansion-nato-mission-high-north/>.

⁴⁰ Borgerson, "Arctic Meltdown."

⁴¹ Ensign Lara Malaver, U.S. Navy, "It is Time for the United States to Ratify UNCLOS," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, Vol. 147, June 2021, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/june/it-time-united-states-ratify-unclos>.

⁴² Curtis McGiffin, "DIMET: Shaping the Age of 'Techno-Strategic' Power," *Information Series*, No. 637 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 22, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/curtis-mcgiffindimet-shaping-the-age-of-techno-strategic-power-no-637-september-22-2025/; MAJ Kevin Piercy, USA, "I Do Not Think It Means What You Think It Means: Information Power and Deterrence," Air University Wright Flyer Paper No. 92, January 2023, https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jan/31/2003153216/-1/-1/0/WF_092_PIERCY_I_DO_NOT_THINK_IT_MEANS.PDF, p. 2.

⁴³ Piercy, "Information Power and Deterrence."

⁴⁴ Vladimir Sazonov et al., "Russia's Information Influence Operations in the Nordic-Baltic Region," NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, November 25, 2024, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-information-influence-operations-in-the-nordic-baltic-region/314>, pp. 13-14, 146-150.

tailored information campaigns targeting Nordic and Baltic states as it continues its drive to “Polar great power” status.⁴⁵

Competing in the information domain requires the United States to adopt a whole-of-government approach—no single agency can signal both capability and willingness. The Department of State can convey authoritative political intent to Arctic allies while countering adversary disinformation and attempts to fracture the Western Arctic coalition. When it comes to collection, the Intelligence Community, through strategic declassification efforts similar to the months leading up to Russia’s 2022 invasion, can expose adversarial influence and bolster the already emerging Western suspicion of Chinese Arctic investments. Furthermore, consistent messaging among the United States and its allies bolsters their political legitimacy and counters Russia’s attempts to fracture the alliance and sow discord. It provides Arctic allies with the necessary framework to reassure their domestic populations and secure support for proposed councils. While consistent messaging is critical, it rests on visible capabilities communicated through a credible presence.

Military. The military serves as a blunt instrument, reinforcing a nation’s diplomacy through an *integrated, persistent, and demonstrable* capacity and capability to deter.⁴⁶ The central challenge, however, is deterring without escalation or overextension. It is not simply about dominating the region. Adversaries must no longer assume they have uncontested freedom to maneuver within the High North. In the proposed “shape-and-monitor” approach, military shaping should unfold in four interconnected and overlapping phases, each designed to reinforce diplomacy while balancing risk and burden sharing.⁴⁷

Phase One—Foundation. This phase focuses on reinvigorating domain awareness and U.S. credibility. Increased domain and situational awareness requires hardened Command, Control, Communications, computers, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C5ISR) systems, more robust aerial surveillance, dedicated maritime awareness assets and missions (e.g., anti-submarine warfare), and longer-reaching detection and sensing capabilities.⁴⁸ When integrated, these systems create “seabed-to-space” awareness designed

⁴⁵ Viesturs Bērziņš, “Chinese Arctic Narratives: How Chinese Media is Approaching the Nordic-Arctic States,” NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, October 5, 2022, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/chinese-arctic-narratives-how-chinese-media-is-approaching-the-nordic-arctic-states/249>.

⁴⁶ Matthew R. Costlow, “*Deterrence is Integrated in Theory, but not in Practice: The Problem and (Partial) Solution*,” *Information Series*, No. 614 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 3, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/matthew-r-costlow-deterrence-is-integrated-in-theory-but-not-in-practice-the-problem-and-partial-solution-no-614-february-3-2025/.

⁴⁷ Calls for a force posture adjustment are not new. See, for example, Joseph R. Blume, Nathan L. Golike, Geoffrey R. Latimer, and Michael Stanski, “The Key to Arctic Dominance: Establishing an Arctic-Focused Subordinate Unified Command,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 115 (4th Quarter 2024), pp. 4-14, <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1132&context=joint-force-quarterly>; Jordan and Salinas, “Melting Frontiers;” and MAJ John F. Soto, “Time for a United States Arctic Command,” United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, April 3, 2017, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1176613.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Mathieu Boulegue, Rebecca Pincus, and Madison Lipson, “Protecting the North American Arctic and Beyond: USNORTHCOM’s Role and Place in a Changing Circumpolar Environment,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 12, 2025, https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/protecting-the-north-american-arctic_fpri.pdf, p. 5.

to close informational and geographical gaps stemming from the region's complexity.⁴⁹ It aims to deny adversaries informational advantages and reestablish shared understanding across Western allies. By reallocating ISR assets focused explicitly on the Arctic, Washington would not only expand its domain awareness but also reinforce diplomacy and deterrence, signaling renewed credibility and commitment. Although it requires diverting finite resources, early actions would create demonstrable proof to allies of Washington's commitment to building deeper integration. This foundation is necessary to set conditions for deeper integration across the joint force.

Phase Two—Integration. This phase focuses on unifying Arctic operations and commands to improve operational coherence. It repurposes the existing Alaskan Command (ALCOM) and Joint Task Force - Alaska (JTF-AK) into a Joint Task Force - Arctic (JTF-AR), integrating Arctic responsibilities and authorities under a single domain-focused command, thereby improving coordination and accountability across the joint force.⁵⁰ Formalizing functions and authorities, bolstered by rotational deployments from the JTF-AR, would advance persistent deterrence efforts and deepen allied interoperability. Doing so is not without risks, however, including the creation of additional bureaucratic silos and increased resource competition across commands. To address these concerns, annual follow-up reviews would assess progress and effectiveness, helping mitigate bureaucratic friction. Furthermore, while icebreakers do not make or break a nation's strategy, the United States needs to revitalize its stalled Polar Security Cutter (PSC) program.⁵¹ Its recent deal with Finland is an excellent start at leveraging allied operational and industrial advantages.⁵² When combined, these measures create a framework for innovation to follow.

Phase Three—Innovation. Phase Three enhances U.S. capacity by expanding public-private partnerships, turning innovation into operational advantages. By leveraging private industry and commercial innovation, Washington can offset high initial costs while simultaneously improving Arctic deterrence. It should focus on domain-specific R&D efforts (e.g., cold-weather autonomous systems and undersea communications) to enhance domain awareness and force protection in the harsh environment.⁵³ These public-private partnerships will require sustained political support to balance private-sector innovation speeds with public-sector security. This phase provides greater flexibility to scale forces, command, and strategy as the Arctic evolves.

⁴⁹ Ibid., Dr. Paolo Braca, "Multi-Domain Situational Awareness: Seabed-to-Space Situational Awareness (S3A)," NATO Science & Technology Organization Centre for Maritime Research & Experimentation, March 29, 2023, <https://ieeaeess.org/presentation/lecture/multi-domain-situational-awareness#resources>.

⁵⁰ "Our Story," U.S. Northern Command, <https://www.northcom.mil/About/>.

⁵¹ Ronald O'Rourke, "Coast Guard Polar Security Cutter (PSC) and Arctic Security Cutter (ASC) Icebreaker Programs: Background and Issues for Congress," June 30, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL34391>.

⁵² Malte Humpert, "U.S. Coast Guard to Receive 11 New Icebreakers Under Landmark Finland Deal," *High News North*, October 13, 2025, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/us-coast-guard-receive-11-new-icebreakers-under-landmark-finland-deal>.

⁵³ Boulegue, Pincus, and Lipson, "Protecting the North American Arctic and Beyond," p. 4.

Phase Four—Consolidation. Phase Four finalizes structural reform—evaluating and, if the analysis confirms, creating an Arctic Combatant Command (USARCCOM). It must address political costs inherent in such structural changes, focusing on whether the structure improves strategic coherence. The objective is not a command in and of itself, but rather to consolidate Washington’s shaping power, streamline integration, and anchor its Arctic presence. Regardless of the path chosen (JTF-AR or USARCCOM), it requires economic support to maintain long-term viability.

Economic. The economic instrument leverages U.S. wealth and economic vitality to influence another nation.⁵⁴ Economic shaping aims to counter the PRC’s “Polar Silk Road,” or Washington risks giving Beijing the leverage it seeks over regional infrastructure. It includes continued sanctions and export controls that limit key technologies supporting the PRC’s dual-purpose research. It aims to provide economic aid to key regional allies to support infrastructure development that advances subordinate objectives, such as domain awareness (e.g., Pituffik Space Base in Greenland). It balances fiscal incentives (e.g., tax cuts) to unlock greater private-sector interest in the Arctic, leveraging the sector’s innovation and technical expertise. These modernization efforts demonstrate tangible commitment and, when combined with consistent messaging, reinforce the image of the United States as a long-term, reliable partner.

This proposed approach is not about dominance. Instead, its aim is proactivity, giving the United States an integrated, phased, and measured approach to begin *shaping* the region. While reinforcing strategic cooperation in burden-sharing and deterrence, it does not pursue cooperation as an end in itself. Pursuing cooperation as an end risks compromising any U.S. position of advantage. The approach seeks to convert cooperation into competitive advantages, preventing adversaries from redefining the rules of the Arctic. It rests on five key assumptions: allied cohesion, adversary restraint, sustained political and bureaucratic alignment, stable domestic support, and incremental reform.

- **Allied Cohesion.** A core group of Arctic—and NATO—allies is *willing* and *able* to expand Arctic cooperation beyond climate governance to include security coordination, burden-sharing, and domain awareness initiatives. It likely requires sustained U.S. leadership, even if the resulting coalition remains asymmetrical.
- **Adversary Restraint.** Russia and the PRC are unlikely to initiate direct armed conflict in the Arctic. They will, however, continue their close collaboration to exploit governance gaps through legal, informational, and economic gray-zone activities. The Western alliance must therefore evolve from reactivity to proactivity.
- **Sustained Political and Bureaucratic Alignment.** Long-term Arctic investment requires sustained interagency and political coordination to maintain presence, posture, and strategic coordination. Through a dedicated Arctic combatant command, DoD can unify military capabilities, while agencies such as the State

⁵⁴ D. Robert Worley, *Orchestrating the instruments of power: A critical examination of the U.S. national security system* (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University, 2016), p. 281.

Department, amplify U.S. resolve at Arctic security forums alongside its Western allies.

- **Domestic Support.** Garnering domestic support, and thus congressional backing, requires framing Arctic policy around homeland defense, economic resilience, and alliance credibility.
- **Incremental Reform.** Provided executive leaders prioritize intra-governmental alignment and accountability, Washington can craft a coherent Arctic policy through a phased strategy.

Should these assumptions hold, success is indicated across three categories of key performance indicators: short-term (1-3 years), mid-term (3-7 years), and long-term (7+ years).

- **Short-Term Indicators.** Expanded ISR bubble over the Arctic, improved integration of allied ISR reports, and consistent public messaging reinforcing burden-sharing.
- **Mid-Term Indicators.** Formally expanding JTF-AK and ALCOM into the Joint Task Force - Arctic (JTF-A), measurable improvement in joint and combined Arctic interoperability, and enhanced security-focused multilateral forums.
- **Long-Term Indicators.** Sustained U.S. freedom of navigation through contested corridors; reduced gray-zone activities from adversaries in allied exclusion zones; enhanced strategic alignment among Arctic allies; and forward-looking strategic development, infrastructure access, and crisis response.

Strategy is not without risk, and deterrence is not without uncertainty.⁵⁵ The proposed approach accepts uncertainty as a constant and builds in flexibility as conditions evolve. In general, risks are *external* (i.e., adversaries and allies) or *internal* (i.e., resource shortfalls and bureaucratic infighting). Addressing both requires continual assessment, coordinated mitigation strategies, and an accurate picture of the evolving domain.

Externally, the most significant risks stem from misperception, escalation, and differences in allied participation. Increased Western focus—strategically and materially—risks reinforcing Russia’s perception of Western encirclement and the PRC’s perception of U.S. hegemony. Furthermore, it could deepen the burgeoning cooperation between Russia and the PRC, potentially leading to a stronger counter-balancing coalition. In terms of its allies, Washington should consider partners’ domestic contexts when pushing for increased contributions and assessing hesitations. Whether from adversaries or allies, managing external risks requires discipline, strategic, and consistent messaging.

Internally, the most persistent risks stem from continued resource shortfalls and bureaucratic infighting. The lack of PSC modernization, NORAD shortfalls, and capability gaps (e.g., search and rescue, ISR) mean a lack of U.S. presence, potential loss of maritime

⁵⁵ Keith B. Payne, “Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is More Difficult,” *Information Series*, No. 527 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 6, 2022), https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-deterrence-is-not-rocket-science-it-is-more-difficult-no-527-july-6-2022/.

access, and a degradation of situational awareness. Bureaucratic infighting and political divisions are equally problematic, not only diluting the proposed command restructuring but also perpetuating the strategic fragmentation this proposal seeks to address. Addressing internal risks will require sustainable funding commitments and reframing Arctic investment as plainly integral to homeland defense and economic security.

Conclusion

The only certainties in strategy are its financial, organizational, domestic, and political costs. In today's Arctic, however, the context is equally clear. Russia continues deliberately militarizing the region while the PRC develops its economic—and increasingly, its military—presence under the auspices of benign research. Dr. Charlotte Hulme argues that the United States should keep its focus on the main theater of competition, the Indo-Pacific, and remember that “the Arctic is a peripheral theater to that competition.”⁵⁶ While the United States may not win the next war on the periphery, it can certainly lose it. The Arctic will not be immune to the next conflict and it will be too late to shape the environment after the fact. The strategic approach proposed here does not seek regional dominance. It seeks to deny adversaries uncontested access and ensure the United States maintains a measured, integrated, and forward-focused posture within a rapidly evolving domain. It is not a silver bullet, but it is a starting point from which U.S. interests and alliances may best be served.

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⁵⁶ Charlotte Hulme, PhD, “The Arctic as a Periphery in U.S.-China Competition,” *Journal of Advanced Military Studies (JAMS) Special Issue on Arctic Security*, p. 63, <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.2025SI003>.