



Air Force C-130 Hercules flies over group of Navy SEALs, Norwegian naval special operations commandos, and attack submarine USS *Hampton* during exercise Arctic Edge, March 9, 2024 (U.S. Navy/Jeff Atherton)

The Key to Arctic Dominance

Establishing an Arctic-Focused Subordinate Unified Command

By Joseph R. Blume, Nathan L. Golike, Geoffrey R. Latimer, and Michael Stanski

Presence equals influence. If we don't have a presence there, our competitors will.

—ADMIRAL KARL L. SHULTZ, COMMANDANT, U.S. COAST GUARD¹

Major Joseph R. Blume, ARNG, is a Cyber Warfare Officer in the 126th Cyber Protection Battalion at the Massachusetts Army National Guard. Lieutenant Colonel Nathan L. Golike, USMC, is Commander of 2nd Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company. Commander Geoffrey R. Latimer, USN, is the Operations Officer at Military Sealift Command N4 Reserve Unit. Major Michael Stanski, ANG, is Special Victims' Counsel, Deputy Staff Judge Advocate, Headquarters, Florida Air National Guard.

The effects of global climate change have continued to melt away sea ice in the Arctic, presenting lucrative opportunities for new shipping lanes and potential key resource exploration and extraction. These opportunities have served to increase competition in the region among Arctic and non-Arctic nations.

As competition increases and more nations continue to occupy and advocate claims to Arctic resources, the need for military and nonmilitary uses will also continue to increase, adding significant security concerns for the region that must be addressed.

The United States currently does not have a formalized joint command

and control structure to address increasing security challenges in the Arctic. Under the current Unified Command Plan (UCP), responsibility for defense aspects of U.S. security interests in the Arctic region is spread across three U.S. geographic combatant commands (CCMDs): U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), and U.S. European Command (USEUCOM). However, the UCP specifically tasks USNORTHCOM with advocating for Arctic capabilities, with responsibility for operations in the region divided among the three CCMDs.² This arrangement violates the military principle of unity of command while hindering the Department of Defense's contribution to unity of effort in the comprehensive whole-of-government pursuit of larger U.S. national interests described in the U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region.³ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff should recommend to the Secretary of Defense the creation of an Arctic Command as a subordinate unified command under USNORTHCOM.

This article is divided into three parts. First is a discussion of the strategic background of Arctic operations. Next is a discussion of joint command relationships and resolution of what command relationship an Arctic region command should have. Third, if a subordinate unified command were established in the Arctic, a recommendation is given for which CCMD should establish it.⁴

Strategic Background of Arctic Operations: The North Pole Heats Up

The strategic background in Arctic operations is complex and involves multiple shareholders with varying interests. Since acquiring the Alaskan territory from the Russian Empire in 1867, the U.S. status as an Arctic nation and relations with the Russian Federation have been confrontational. Throughout the Cold War period, the Arctic was a key strategic region for the United States and the former Soviet Union. As such, the Arctic became a critical geographi-

cal location for the positioning and use of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in case a potential war escalated to the use of nuclear weapons. The Arctic offered both nuclear powers the shortest distance for ICBMs to travel from their launch points to their intended targets.⁵

After the Cold War, the United States lost interest in the Arctic, and several key regional governing bodies emerged, such as the Arctic Council in 1996, which includes eight countries with territory within the Arctic Circle (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russian, Sweden, and the United States).⁶ In the early 2000s, Russian activities in the region increased, causing the United States to turn back to it, furthering its investments in and cooperation with fellow allied Arctic nations to counter Russia. In 2007, the United States began to demonstrate an increased interest in the Arctic with its modern U.S. naval strategy.⁷

Current CCMD Operational Boundaries. The operational boundaries for the Arctic region, defined in the 2021 UCP, currently cut through the areas of responsibility (AORs) for three of the six geographic CCMDs: USNORTHCOM, USEUCOM, and USINDOPACOM.⁸ Specifically, the 2021 UCP splits the Arctic circle between USNORTHCOM and USEUCOM but recognizes that all three CCMDs have responsibility for operations in the region and provides guidance to conduct cross-boundary operations to be coordinated among all three combatant commanders to achieve unity of effort in the region.⁹ These three CCMDs have significant interest in advocating for Arctic capabilities, conducting operations to protect U.S. interests and support the security of the region, and countering the increasing presence of China and Russia. To determine the most capable CCMD, considerations must be made for threats and resources currently within the CCMDs' respective AORs.

Competition in the Arctic. The effects of global climate change on the Arctic have led to recent military expansion and economic development for all Arctic and non-Arctic nations, particularly Russia and China. This area is

increasingly gaining the attention of the Great Powers due to its huge untapped resource potential.¹⁰ The reduction in year-round sea ice has shifted the maritime geography and made the region more navigable, opening profitable new sea trade routes and opportunities for infrastructure development and the exploitation of natural resources, providing a potentially significant economic opportunity. For example, there is enormous potential for economic development as the reduction of the ice cover makes previously inaccessible Arctic hydrocarbon resources available.¹¹ Another example is cost savings for shipping vessels: Using routes through the Arctic can reduce travel distances by up to 40 percent compared to the Suez Canal, reducing the number of days at sea and saving the shipping industry up to \$250,000 per transit.¹²

Additionally, the diminishing sea ice is a major enabler for increased access through the Arctic Ocean to the northern parts of Europe, Asia, and North America, which generally have no recognized boundaries in the region. Maritime trade routes, such as the Northwest Passage and Transpolar Sea Route, are expanding and will likely bypass the Russian-controlled Northern Sea Route (NSR). This expanded accessibility comes with increasing security concerns, which will require a significantly increased U.S. military presence and increased security cooperation with allies in the region. Russia's military modernization there also adds to these concerns, posing significant challenges to the security of Norway, Finland, and Sweden.

Key Alliances in the Arctic. U.S. alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), are strategically important to maintaining order in the Arctic. As such, the Alliance has increased military exercises in the Arctic; U.S. participation in these exercises and defensive plans is integral to the protection of NATO's northern flank. These maritime- and land-based exercises focus on interoperability between Alliance countries, the collective self-defense of the High North (specifically NATO regional defense plans), and a rapidly expanding

Soldiers assigned to 1st Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 11th Airborne Division, move toward objective outside of Utqiagvik, Alaska, as part of Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Training Center 24-02, February 15, 2024 (U.S. Army/Brandon Vasquez)







Marine Corps Corporal Lorelei Bretz, motor transport operator with Marine Wing Support Squadron 273, 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing, guides Medium Tactical Vehicle Replacement to receive equipment from MV *New Amsterdam*, operated by Royal Netherlands Navy, in preparation for exercise Nordic Response 24 at Risoyhamn, Norway, February 18, 2024 (U.S. Marine Corps/Christopher Hernandez)

Alliance, which has recently added Finland and Sweden. The Nordic nations have also increased their involvement in bilateral and multilateral defense cooperation agreements with each other and the United States to deter Russian aggression in the region.¹³ Most recently, NATO has warned the world about Russia's and China's growing presence in the High Arctic, taking several steps to increase its military strength in the region. Due to Russia strengthening its military presence in the region, the Alliance doubled its military activities between 2015 and 2020.¹⁴ However, despite increasing its military presence in the region, Russia still struggles to fully reestablish the level of capability it once had during the Cold War, as the war in Ukraine continues to diminish its land-based capabilities.¹⁵

Along with expanding security cooperation through bilateral agreements and multinational exercises, freedom of navigation operations in the region, particularly along the NSR, has become a hot topic for all Arctic nations. To that end, the United States reconstituted the U.S. Second Fleet in 2018 and subsequently expanded it to form the Atlantic Joint Command, responsible for the western part of the Russian NSR. With this expansion, from a maritime perspective, the United States has now returned to full competition in the region with the other Great Powers. Additionally, as the United States and NATO partners work to force Russia to comply with the rules-based international order in the Arctic, they also seek to block China's access to the region.

Russian Arctic Defense Posture.

As the most prominent presence in the Arctic, Russia has been working to modernize its military capabilities and sees maintaining its nuclear deterrence capability as a key strategic priority. Russian objectives in the Arctic are defending resources, developing and managing the NSR, and protecting its sea-based second-strike deterrent forces.¹⁶ Russia has been successful in posturing Arctic military forces, as their presence and infrastructure north of the Arctic Circle vastly outnumber that of all other countries combined. Additionally, elements of Russia's strategic arsenal are prominent in the region, particularly its Arctic-based nuclear arsenal, which is sea-based and assigned to the Northern Fleet on the Kola Peninsula.¹⁷ With its militarization of the region and introduction of

its nuclear arsenal in the Arctic, Russia likely seeks to protect its northern coastline and take maximum economic profits.¹⁸ Building an Arctic defense has been a Russian strategic priority, and the Russians remain well ahead of the United States and its partners.

Climate change in the region has provided strategic benefits to Russia's efforts to improve its defensive posture, enabling seasonal linkages through the reduced sea ice to the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.¹⁹ Russia, which values territorial security and is deeply invested in Arctic equipment modernization, has capitalized on this seasonal linkage by constructing air-defense radar stations along with reorganizing its military command structure and activating old Soviet-era military bases. Since 2014, Russia has been building military camps and airfields on remote regions in the Arctic.²⁰ The maritime domain there will also become prime testing grounds for Russia's new nuclear-powered cruise missile and modern underwater drones. Additionally, Russia has invested heavily in its Northern Fleet and a new Joint Strategic Command; this Russian military buildup and modernization of military bases are being called "bastion defense."²¹

It Is Time for an Arctic Command

Acknowledging that the Arctic is increasing in strategic importance, the next call is to examine command and control of military forces in the Arctic region. USNORTHCOM's responsibility falls north of Canadian and Alaskan territories, with USEUCOM taking responsibility north of Russian territory. USINDOPACOM is tasked with an area of the Pacific contained in the Arctic Circle. USNORTHCOM is tasked with resource management for Arctic operations under the UCP.

Calls for a subordinate unified command nested under USNORTHCOM have been made time and again.²² Literature focused on the subordinate unified command solution lacks analysis on competing command structures to make the recommendation practical. Additionally, authors on the subject have

failed to show if the proposed solution is based on a predicted means-based need rather than an ends-based outlook. Authors have also fallen short on explaining whether a geographic combatant command would be the solution for a stand-alone command and control organization.

Types of Joint Command Relationship. The U.S. military is organized into force-projecting organizations as combatant commands. The military further organizes itself under combatant commands to project force through three principal methods: subordinate unified commands, joint task forces (JTFs), and single Service/specific operational forces. Each method has advantages and disadvantages but must fall in line with the joint planning criteria: adequate, feasible, acceptable, distinguishable, and complete.²³

Subordinate unified commands, also known as subunified commands, are established to conduct continuing operations within a geographic area or functional role. Subordinate unified commands are not merely smaller versions of a combatant command but rather reflect a need for enduring joint command and control not requiring full-spectrum command and control. Subordinate unified commands offer specialized command and control for some strategic and/or operational concern in the combatant command's AOR. The concerns are typically centered on a complex resource management or sophisticated threat present to justify the need for subordinate unified command. Current examples of subordinate unified commands are U.S. Forces Japan under USINDOPACOM, U.S. Forces Korea under USINDOPACOM, and Cyber National Mission Force under U.S. Cyber Command.

Alaskan Command (ALCOM) is also a current subordinate unified command, task-organized under USNORTHCOM. However, ALCOM operates with fewer than 100 personnel, many of whom report to USINDOPACOM. Further complicating command relationships, the ALCOM commander is assigned as the commander of the Alaskan North

American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) Region, 11th Air Force, and Joint Task Force–Alaska. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the level of ALCOM's command and control for Arctic operations outside of Alaska.

Joint task forces are single-focused and usually time-limited commands nested under combatant commands. JTFs integrate joint elements to meet the goals of a supported commander. JTF South during Operation *Just Cause* is an example of a JTF with the XVIII Airborne Corps leading the command and control while also serving as the supported command.²⁴ During *Just Cause*, the primary mission objectives required equities from all military Services, which precluded U.S. Southern Command from using a single Service force solution.²⁵ *Just Cause* was limited in scope and time, seeking to restore Panama's democratically elected government and arrest Manuel Noriega.²⁶ Ultimately, *Just Cause* lasted approximately 1 month once combat operations started.²⁷ The combination of limited-scope operations and time-bound objectives using a joint force made Operation *Just Cause* an ideal operation to use a JTF.

Single Service/specific operational forces allow commands to resolve small or medium crises with organic resources. An example of a single Service operational force response is the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade's response after Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippine Islands in 2013. This unit, using organic forces, was able to command and control its activities to support U.S. Agency for International Development missions in the aftermath of the hurricane. A subordinate unified command is the favored command relationship.

The Arctic challenge calls for a subordinate unified command instead of a single Service/specific operational force or JTF. Present and future operations in the Arctic will require a joint force command due to the resource management, unique operation sets, international partnership maintenance, and strategic importance of the Arctic. For these reasons, a single Service/specific operational force or joint task force would not be



Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarine USS *Pasadena* breaks through ice in ITEX 2022, March 12, 2022, in Beaufort Sea, Arctic Circle (U.S. Navy/Trey Hutcheson)

the appropriate command relationship to support Arctic operations.

Resource Management of Unique Capabilities. As the preferred command relationship, a subordinate unified command focused on the Arctic would be able to manage resources and contend with threats in the region appropriately to achieve the objectives and goals outlined in national and defense strategy documents. JTFs and single Service forces are not well suited for this task because Arctic resources will require specialized procurement and maintenance. Additionally, Arctic challenges will increase over time and will present varying problem sets. As noted, Arctic strategic and operational threats will change the security posture of allies and foes as well as human activity in the Arctic.

Arctic operations will increasingly fall in line with military and nonmilitary engagement by allies, neutrals, and competitors. The increase in Arctic operations

will only increase the need for resources to execute those operations. Operating in the Arctic is unique due to the cold, ice, lack of infrastructure, and extended periods of darkness. Simply put, Arctic operations require unique resources. Because of this uniqueness, a command and control structure is needed to manage the resources required in Arctic operations.

Challenges of the Arctic Operating Environment. The Arctic operating environment presents three major challenges. First, the natural environment and human interference in the region are changing rapidly. Second, technology to aid understanding of the Arctic is lacking. And third, the security concerns of the United States and its partners and allies must be addressed. A subordinate unified command can facilitate a persistent effort to further understand the operating environment for use by U.S. national security and national defense organizations as

well as the defense organizations of U.S. partners and allies.

As an enduring strategic concern for the United States and its allies, human engagement in the Arctic will only increase. Surface shipping traffic, exploration of mineral deposits, and Arctic-based threats to the U.S. homeland will also increase in the future. This endurance calls for a command and control relationship that joint task forces and single Service forces are limited in providing. A subordinate unified command is also capable of developing corporate knowledge and experience that might not be relevant to the broader combatant command. Such specialized knowledge and experience include operational environment awareness, partnership development with allies, and employment of unique Arctic forces.

Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the Arctic operating environment will require a sophisticated command and control structure that only a subordinate

unified command can offer. Additionally, the security-based need for a subordinate unified command falls in line with the three strategic objectives in the National Strategy for the Arctic Region: improving the Arctic operating environment, exercising presence to support security priorities, and maximizing the unity of efforts with allies and partners.²⁸ A subordinate unified command will be able to address those objectives, which prioritize technological development for unique Arctic concerns as well as partnerships for Arctic nations.

To achieve the security goals of the United States and its allies in the Arctic, military and nonmilitary deployments of personnel and equipment to the region must increase. A subordinate unified command can coordinate and command these efforts by leveraging the joint force in a supported and supporting role with allies and other organs of the U.S. Government. Increased presence in the Arctic will also require more coordination among allies, partners, and treaty organizations such as NATO. A subordinate unified command is well suited to facilitate such coordination, like U.S. Forces Korea does with the government of South Korea and other organizational stakeholders.

USNORTHCOM to Unify the Arctic

Arctic operations are better suited under a dedicated USNORTHCOM subordinate unified command. USNORTHCOM is the recommended CCMD to establish this proposed Arctic-focused, subordinate unified command. There are three principal benefits that call for USNORTHCOM to lead the new subordinate unified command instead of USEUCOM or USINDOPACOM. First, Alaska is at a critical choke-point for Arctic Sea routes. Second, USNORTHCOM is mandated in the 2021 UCP to advocate for capabilities in the Arctic. Third, USNORTHCOM is home to several Arctic-capable Service component organizations stationed in the far north. Using these three principal benefits, an examination for the establishment of a subordinate unified

command under USNORTHCOM is justified under resourced-based considerations; threat-based considerations; considerations for joint, interagency, international, and multinational (JIIM) coordination; and overall congressional interest.

Resource-Based Considerations.

USNORTHCOM is currently at an advantage because of stationed forces and existing infrastructure in the Arctic. Alaska is home to several Army, Air Force, and Space Force installations, such as Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Fort Wainwright, Eielson Air Force Base, and Clear Space Force Station. Additionally, the Coast Guard's 17th District is the only permanent maritime presence in Alaska and makes up United States Naval Forces Alaska, responsible for maritime homeland security operations in the area. ALCOM, headquartered at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, handles operations in and around the state of Alaska and maintains command relationships with Service component forces stationed there. However, despite having control over these organizations for operations within the borders of Alaska, many of these Army and Air Force units are not actually under the operational control of ALCOM.²⁹

USINDOPACOM maintains operational control of much of the force structure stationed in Alaska, technically giving the CCMD the preponderance of forces in the Arctic. For example, as part of the Army's updated Arctic Strategy, U.S. Army Alaska was redesignated as the 11th Airborne Division to provide more capable headquarters to provide command and control of formations in Alaska.³⁰ Despite being the premier Arctic warfare unit of the Army, however, the 11th Airborne Division falls under the operational control of USINDOPACOM and is more aligned to operations to the south of the Arctic region. This is much the same for Air Force organizations in Alaska. The 354th Fighter Wing, stationed at Eielson Air Force Base, is tasked with providing USINDOPACOM air capability in its small slice of the Arctic. Despite calling USNORTHCOM their home and maintaining their ability to

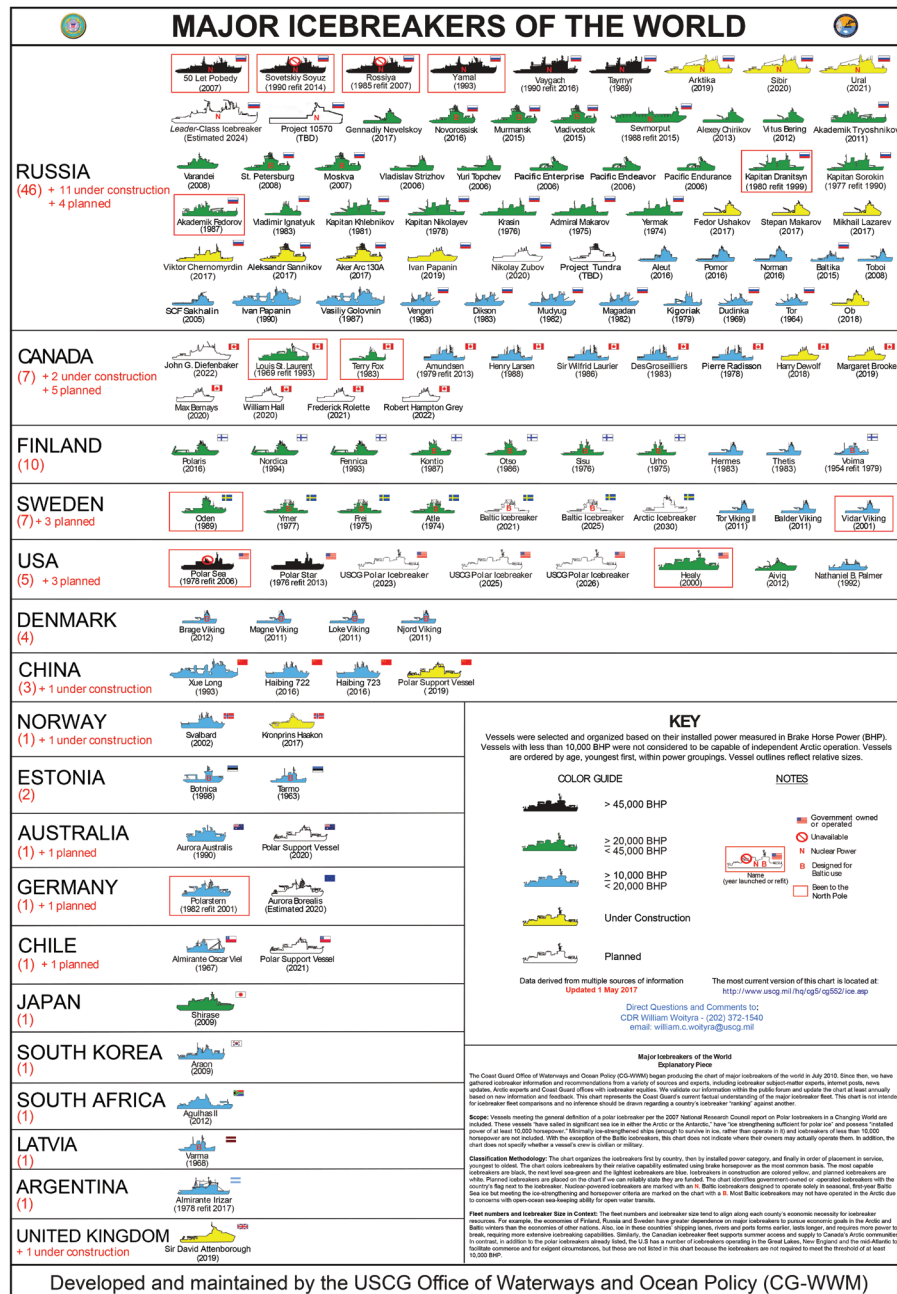
operate in Arctic environments, these organizations' capabilities are primarily focused on supporting operations in USINDOPACOM's AOR.

By comparison, USEUCOM also has the resources and capabilities to provide force structure to this proposed Arctic subunified command. The most recent capability is the Navy's Second Fleet, which, in conjunction with the Sixth Fleet, will support naval operations in the Arctic.³¹ However, compared to USNORTHCOM, there is a lack of infrastructure to station this command's headquarters and subordinate elements. Pituffik Space Base (formerly Thule) in Greenland, while boasting the only deep-sea port in the region, is primarily an early warning and space surveillance operations station.³² Recent renovations at Naval Air Station Keflavik in Iceland provides a key staging area for P-8A patrols and expeditionary maritime operations; however, there is no permanent U.S. military presence at the installation.³³ In addition to these resources, USEUCOM maintains strong and extensive partnerships with allied Arctic nations in its AOR, by obvious connection through NATO, but also through the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable as a co-chair with Norway.

Ultimately, USNORTHCOM edges out USINDOPACOM and USEUCOM due to its longevity of resource management in the Arctic as well as the future role of resource management in Arctic-like conditions. As noted, USNORTHCOM has managed resources for Arctic operations, which is reflected in the UCP designating USNORTHCOM as the resource manager for the Arctic. Additionally, even if an Arctic subordinate command were not nested under USNORTHCOM, it would still need to manage like resources for operations in Alaska and other northern areas. Therefore, on the balance of needs for resource management, USNORTHCOM is the CCMD of choice.

Threat-Based Considerations. As the primary military threat in the Arctic, Russia presents the most significant challenge to the interests not only of the United States but also of its allies. Russia continues to increase its capabilities in

Figure. Major Icebreakers of the World



Source: "Major Icebreakers of the World," U.S. Coast Guard, May 1, 2017.

the Arctic: establishing the Arctic Joint Strategic Command at Severomorsk (now a military district), renovating and modernizing several former Arctic military installations from the Cold War, and increasing operations and exercises in the Arctic. Russia's own icebreaker fleet dwarfs that of the United States and all other nations with over 40, with more planned in the coming years (see figure). While the "icebreaker gap" is a controversial

argument, its significance is that such a robust icebreaker fleet provides Russia with a major presence in the region and the ability to navigate the Arctic uncontested by the United States and its allies.³⁴

With the release of its Arctic policy document in January 2018 and the self-styled moniker of a "near-Arctic State," China is also poised to become more active in the region.³⁵ China is forming a strategic Arctic partnership with Russia

that is meant as a direct challenge to NATO security and interests in the region. This partnership has moved beyond conducting joint training exercises in the Bering Sea to expeditions into the Arctic Circle to gain control of and extract natural resources from the region, particularly the rare earth metals that are a critical need for the United States and its allies and that China seeks to maintain control of.³⁶ With these strategic goals in mind, China has already fielded two icebreakers for Arctic and Antarctic operations, with a third currently under construction.³⁷ Additionally, China seeks to expand its Belt and Road Initiative to establish a "Polar Silk Road" to continue its economic diplomacy with Arctic nations such as Greenland and Norway.³⁸ This expansion into the Arctic and the continued increase in security and economic cooperation between China and Russia in the region will only serve to further challenge U.S. security interests and influence on the international stage.³⁹

Considerations for JIIM

Coordination. Arctic security and operations require coordination with a variety of services, governmental organizations, and international partners. This argument generally favors USEUCOM to be singularly responsible for the Arctic region due to its focus on Russia and current partnerships with many of the Arctic nations through the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable and NATO. However, USNORTHCOM, being primarily focused on defense of the homeland and already possessing significant infrastructure, facilities, training, and stationed organizations (despite their command relationships with USINDOPACOM), is in the better position to provide for security of the Arctic region and deter the continued expansion of Russia and China in the region.

Additionally, USNORTHCOM (by virtue of NORAD) can better coordinate operations to deter threats and defend the U.S. homeland, as well as the whole of North America, through inherent responsibilities and established security cooperation with Canada.⁴⁰ Through legacy missions and relationship with NORAD, USNORTHCOM is in a



Personnel from Arctic Submarine Lab survey potential location to build Ice Camp Whale during Operation *Ice Camp 2024*, Beaufort Sea, Arctic Circle, February 23, 2024 (U.S. Navy/Mike De Mello)

unique position to respond to threats and to coordinate JIIM operations in the Arctic, over the other two CCMDs. Limiting threat warning and response for the Arctic to USEUCOM based solely on historical relationships would negatively impact USNORTHCOM's ability to defend the homeland.

Congressional Interest. Congress has also taken an interest in Arctic security and indicated that USNORTHCOM should take the lead in Arctic security focus.⁴¹ While also telegraphing USNORTHCOM's importance in the Arctic, there are congressional desires for a formal Arctic Security Initiative.⁴² USNORTHCOM has experience in five of the six cornerstone activities of this initiative by virtue of its long presence in Alaska. This experience includes:

- modernizing presence in the Arctic or near-Arctic region
- improving logistical and maintenance capacities

- providing exercises, war games, education, training, experimentation, and innovation for joint and coalition forces in North America
- building the defense and security capabilities, capacity, and cooperation of allies and partners
- improving infrastructure to enhance the responsiveness and resiliency of the Armed Forces.

USNORTHCOM will likely be the preferred choice to execute these activities if Congress passes an Arctic Security Initiative or requires a similar program.

Overall, USNORTHCOM is the best candidate to headquarter an Arctic-focused subordinate unified command. Establishing USNORTHCOM as the lead CCMD for the Arctic and authority for establishing this proposed Arctic Command would align appropriately with the UCP and the National Strategy for the Arctic Region. Finally, USNORTHCOM's primary mission to

defend the homeland and security cooperation through NORAD places it in the best position to deter threats and coordinate JIIM operations in the region.

Conclusion

Climate-driven reductions in year-round levels of sea ice have made the Arctic more accessible to shipping and resource exploration. The increasing activity will stress existing Arctic forums with more complex interactions among the region's stakeholders. The United States will need an organization to establish a much-needed presence in this strategically important region and focus efforts across all instruments of national power.

An Arctic-focused subordinate unified command under USNORTHCOM is the most viable option to meet the internal and external requirements for U.S. military forces operating in the region. This Arctic Command would be the conduit to the future for an enduring area of

strategic importance to the United States. As Arctic and non-Arctic nations begin to increase their activities in the region, security concerns will only increase, justifying the need for a dedicated joint command that can operate in the harsh conditions of the region. JFQ

Notes

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