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PROPOSED NEAR-TERM FOCUS FOR THE US NAVY IN THE ARCTIC

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Service Paper

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PROPOSED NEAR-TERM FOCUS FOR THE US NAVY IN THE ARCTIC

AIM

1. The opening of the Arctic Ocean presents the United States Navy (USN) with the unique challenge of projecting its global presence into a “new” sea. A typically forgotten region, especially in the years after the Cold War’s end, the Navy’s responsibilities there are no less relevant now than ever. Current US national and Department of the Navy (DoN) publications highlight a litany of requirements the nation and its military must focus on in the coming decades.¹ This paper’s aim is not to argue their points or assert different objectives; its aim is to stress which specific goals should elicit more attention in the near term.

2. In each of the aforementioned documents, the Navy intends to focus on increased presence, improved infrastructure, and enhanced inter-ally and partner cooperation in this Area of Responsibility (AOR). Some of our allies will need help reinforcing their sovereignty over expanded responsibilities as this AOR becomes more accessible. Competitors like Russia and China have already begun asserting their claims and intents in the region² – claims in the maritime inherently at conflict with the interests of US and friendly Arctic states. Therefore, while the broader scope of US intent remains valid, this paper asserts the near-term focus should be focus on presence and allies. Deployments, in terms of frequency and duration, serve to assert US naval power and credible capabilities to defend its interests. More integration amongst regional allies demonstrate collective commitment towards international laws and norms as well as improving existing and new relationships.

INTRODUCTION

3. The United States does not traditionally view itself as an Arctic nation³. Its citizens and its military abstractly acknowledge the region’s importance or even America’s historical involvement in it. Many are familiar with impressive photographs of nuclear submarines breaking through the Arctic ice, of which US submarines were the first to do so. Some might be familiar with Matthew Henson’s expedition to the North Pole at the dawn of the 20th Century.⁴ Though an undisputed *sea* power, the USN’s more routine expeditions stretch across the seas of the middle latitudes. Its broad reach stretches horizontally around the globe from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, the many Arabian seas, and finally into the greater Indo-Pacific theater. The service does generally have ships in northern waters like the Baltic and even Bering Seas, but ventures into America’s arctic area of responsibility are exceedingly rare. The fact is however,

¹ “A Blue Arctic,” January 5, 2021, 1, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/20441321/arctic-blueprint-2021-final.pdf>.

² Eugene Rumer Stronski, Richard Sokolsky, Paul, “Russia in the Arctic—A Critical Examination,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed January 24, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/03/29/russia-in-arctic-critical-examination-pub-84181>.

³ Heather A. Conley, “America in the Arctic,” June 4, 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/america-arctic>.

⁴ Dylan McCart, “The History of Arctic Exploration,” Churchill Northern Studies Centre, November 29, 2023, <https://churchillscience.ca/the-history-of-arctic-exploration/>.

the United States is indeed an Arctic nation⁵. Its Arctic⁶ coastline stretches for approximately 2,500 miles⁷ and affords the country access to staggering quantities of natural resources and strategic positions. Many NATO allies of the US share similar holdings in the region, with the Canada's extensive northern coastline being the obvious exception.

4. Threats to these interests have increased in recent years. Melting sea has increased the viability of trans-Arctic commerce potential. Russia, seeking to reinvigorate its position as a global power, and China, pursuing its own military and economic aims, have shown clear intentions of remaining consistently in the region. Russian military and business presence in Arctic are increasing, through new base construction and the reopening of older Soviet sites.⁸ Economically, the country has recently approved over \$300 billion for economic infrastructure in the region.⁹ Militarily, they have stated intentions to “phase NATO out of the Arctic” since 2017.¹⁰ China, viewing itself as a “near-arctic” nation has followed similar trends.¹¹ While its geography does not allow for any Arctic bases, it's military and commercial ships have demonstrated an increased intent to transit and occupy the waters of the Arctic Ocean¹². Allied with Russia, these two nations present strong-willed competition, militarily and economically, to the remaining Arctic nations. Their stated intentions to redefine the current international order in their favors serve as reinforcement for the need to stem their influence and long-term capabilities in this increasingly vital AOR. It is in the interest of the United States to resist Chinese and Russian advances.

DISCUSSION

5. In 2023, the US added one million sq.km. to its Arctic baseline.¹³ This, on paper, gives it rights to natural resources within this new boundary. Practically, however, the US has little resources available as means to protect and enforce this, and existing, sovereign claims. Against the threats listed above, present US capabilities in Alaska include fifth generation fighter aircraft, long-range over-the-horizon radar and warning systems, and Coast Guard ice breaker ships. Periodically, US warships and Coast Guard assets show the flag on a transit across the Arctic. On occasion a nuclear submarine breaks through the ice to remind friends and enemies alike both of US world-wide capabilities, and a strike-capable threat it's able to put right under the North Pole. Realistically, however, aside from the permanent assets and units in Alaska, the likelihood of any

⁵ Conley, “America in the Arctic.”

⁶ The “Arctic” is defined here as the land and seas inside the Arctic Circle. On a map or globe, it is all of the space above approximately 66° North latitude.

⁷ “The Coastline of the United States” (NOAA, 1975), 2, https://shoreline.noaa.gov/_pdf/Coastline_of_the_US_1975.pdf.

⁸ Stronski, “Russia in the Arctic—A Critical Examination.”

⁹ Stronski.

¹⁰ Daniel Brown, “Russia’s Northern Fleet Beefs up Its Nuclear Capabilities to Phase ‘NATO out of Arctic,’” *Business Insider*, accessed February 19, 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/russias-northern-fleet-beefs-up-its-nuclear-capabilities-phase-nato-out-arctic-2017-6>.

¹¹ Stronski, “Russia in the Arctic—A Critical Examination.”

¹² Rush Doshi, Alexis Dale-Huang, and Gaoqi Zhang, “CHINA’S ARCTIC ACTIVITIES AND AMBITIONS,” n.d.

¹³ “The U.S. Just Expanded Its Territory by One Million Square Kilometers,” accessed February 19, 2024, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/the-u-s-just-expanded-its-territory-by-a-million-square-kilometers/ar-AA1n8qZJ>.

of these maritime power-projection resources actually being in the Arctic at any given point in time is relatively low. Therein lies the nature of this paper's argument. In the high-stakes game Sea Powers play for control of the maritime commons, a negligible military force in a given area leaves room for contenders to occupy the space.

6. US political and military leadership recognize this gap and have begun shifting focus towards this oft-forgotten region. Four specific publications speak to this more intentional attention. On a national level the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR), both published 2022, outline executive level goals for the future of America's role in the Arctic. The US Navy highlighted its northern strategy even earlier in 2020 via two service-level publications. *Advantage at Sea* emphasizes the intent to harmonize the objectives of America's maritime components of Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard, including integrating their roles and responsibilities in the Arctic. Finally, and most clearly for servicemembers, *A Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic* outlines specifically how the United States Navy will embrace its 21st century obligations in the high north.

7. The United States Navy follows Mahanian principles of power projection¹⁴. The ability to project power at sea deeply reinforces a state's ability to project power in other aspects as well. The above documents delineate clear intentions for increased USN presence in the north. These include, among other things, increased commitments towards greater regional presence, enhanced cooperation with US allies, and improved infrastructure. All three are areas the USN can capitalize on to reach national strategic goals. Infrastructure will take time and the investment is a long-term aspect to the strategy. Presence and allied integration, however, are much more achievable in the near-term, with assets the United States already possesses. The majority of US fleets have AORs that touch the Arctic and can readily influence the region. Second and Sixth Fleets frequently interact and exercise with NATO allies in the high North Atlantic. Third and Seventh do similarly in the North Pacific. US maritime assets are often involved in enduring operations, such as Operation NANOOK, in Canada's northern AOR. It is this ally specifically the US must focus its near-term aims on reinforcing.

8. Through a combination of economic strength, population scale, and differing global threat assessments, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) - and here specifically the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) - can operationalize forces at a small fraction what the US is able to. Such a statement is not meant to minimize the contribution of America's most immediate neighbor and ally. It is meant to provide a realistic justification of the USN's increased need to assume responsibility in a region it generally ignores. In threat-based terms, a threat to Canada is a threat to the United States. Failing to provide adequate support to the RCN and CAF as a whole in the present will eventually lead to a reactionary scramble to fill gaps. With an appropriate risk mitigation mindset, the USN must be involved in increased presence and integration with its Canadian counterparts to mitigate future Russian or Chinese attempts to exploit the shortfalls.

¹⁴ Alfred Thayer Mahan's work *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* greatly influenced the evolution of the USN and how it demonstrated its global might through naval superiority. Mahan argued that a navy supported its nation's prosperity by asserting their abilities to control the sea and defend their maritime economic routes.

9. Canada has the world's longest coastline¹⁵, thousands of islands, and a broad economic zone in its Arctic reaches. Recent petitions to the United Nations (UN) have seen both Russia and Canada claim overlapping areas the Arctic Circle.¹⁶ Such contentions serve to highlight the increased interest being shown the region, and also the increasing likelihood of conflict over sovereignty and resources. For perspective, the Arctic AOR is estimated to hold nearly a third of the world's remaining natural gas and oil reserves. Just as important for the military and technology sectors, roughly one trillion dollars-worth of rare earth minerals are believed to be trapped under the ocean and ice¹⁷. The most viable methods for transporting these resources are across sea routes both the United States and Canada are responsible for protecting. Some predictions see sea trade roughly doubling in the next two decades, nearly 75% of which could transit the soon-to-be shorter trade routes across the top of the globe.¹⁸

10. To defend these sea lanes, across such vast distances in such a harsh environment, the Royal Canadian Navy is presently unprepared. The two main reasons are purely a matter of resourcing. As with most Western militaries, the CAF struggles to recruit and retain its members. In a military that was already small in comparison to its allies, such a trend is bordering on debilitating. Equally stressful are the number of maritime assets the RCN is able to deploy at a given time. Current RCN warships are old and require extensive maintenance in relation to their useful sea time. New ships are being ordered and designed, though naval acquisitions are never a fast process and near-term planning should not account for these future assets.

11. Canada does however bring multiple benefits to the relationship. New Arctic Offshore Patrol Vessels (AOPVs), the Harry DeWolf class, fill a niche presence capability and grant the RCN access to Arctic waters for a broader range of the yearly ice cycle. Canada has also purchased a new refueling aircraft, the Airbus A???, capable of refueling F-35s, allowing for extended ranges and loiter times for similar NATO aircraft. Similar to the USN, the RCN has also produced policy documents demonstrating the will to increase Arctic operations¹⁹. These capabilities and goals are exploitable by the USN and serve as key linkages for both nations' amplified interoperability and presence capacities.

12. Immediate options open to the USN should focus on operations, exercises, and deployments it is able to execute with its current forces. Acknowledging the breadth of global commitments, particularly in the Red Sea and national focus on the Indo-Pacific theater, the USN should endeavor to maintain a consistent, limited presence in northern latitudes. The USN's *Advantage at Sea* helps mitigate single service pressures by mandating increased interoperability between the US's maritime forces of Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. This would in turn provide greater flexibility when addressing presence and integrations. Whether provided by a single service or a combination of the three, the broader maritime goal should be to increase the

¹⁵ "Longest Coastlines in the World," Statista, accessed February 19, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/506526/longest-coastlines-in-the-world/>.

¹⁶ IMA Research Team, "More to Maritime Boundaries: The Extended Continental Shelf," *Sovereign Limits* (blog), February 4, 2022, <https://sovereignlimits.com/blog/more-to-maritime-boundaries-the-extended-continental-shelf>.

¹⁷ "A Blue Arctic."

¹⁸ "A Blue Arctic."

¹⁹ *Strong, Secure, Engaged. RCN Arctic and Northern Strategic Framework. RCN Arctic and Northern Policy Framework are all recent CAF policy documents outlining an increased focus on Arctic operations.*

presence of forces in the AOR consistently across longer windows of the year, proving to competitors the ability to reach and remain in Arctic locations at relative will. For increasing ally interoperability, the CAF already provides a ready avenue through its Operation NANOOK. Executed on a yearly cycle and composed of four smaller, seasonal operations, it provides an existing and repeatable framework for US forces to supplement. Such integration reinforces the supporting relationship Canada and the United States maintain, and helps to make the total military presence during each season larger and more formidable.

CONCLUSION

13. Access to the Arctic Ocean and its vast untapped resources is increasing. Through the next few decades international competition for this virgin region will increase. Presently, Russia and China are already demonstrating efforts to assert themselves and their Arctic interests as pieces of their overall desires to upset the existing, rules-based international order. The US and its allies must meet these challenges with intention and long-term strategic mindsets. In the short-term however, the United States must be ready and willing to assist those allies that do not yet have forces proportional to the vast area they are responsible for protecting. In this respect, the most immediate goals of the United States Navy should be to support those areas in which its Canadian counterpart struggles – namely a realistic and repeatable ability to deploy believable maritime military strength at will.

14. To better defend American interests, the US must commit to reinforcing Canadian sovereignty. While maintaining adherence to international law, the United States Navy's interests in the Arctic mirror those of the Royal Canadian Navy, and a safe Canada directly supports a safer America. Commitment by the USN to support the RCN and CAF in the coming years invigorates our alliance, defends our own interests, and mitigates the detrimental effects the two nation's mutual threats pose.

RECOMMENDATION

15. Recommendations are made here with focuses on immediacy, repeatability, and relationship enhancing. The United States Navy should focus first on supporting forces already in proximity to the Arctic, namely the Coast Guard assets in Alaska. Employment of the service's ice breaker ships in a defensive mindset would see them utilized to give USN warships increased access to the region. Second, USN planners and Foreign Area Officers (FAOs) should work with their Canadian counterparts to enhance US presence and integration into Operation NANOOK objectives to improve US familiarity with the region and interoperability with the RCN. Finally, over a longer time horizon, the USN should seek to increase presence through both more sustainable Arctic ports and increased use of expeditionary Maritime Operation Centers (MOCs) to the AOR.

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