

“Securing the Northern Flank”

Reflections toward Establishing the Department of Defense’s Newest Regional Center: The Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies

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Executive Summary

The National Defense Authorization Act of 2021 provided the Secretary of Defense (SecDef) the authority to assess, plan, and establish a new Department of Defense (DOD) Regional Center, specifically oriented to the Arctic. Following a period of analysis on the merits of creating such a center, the Secretary announced the establishment of the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies (Stevens Center or TSC) on 9 June 2021. As part of that announcement, SecDef Llyod Austin elaborated these key details: “The center will support the U.S. Interim National Security Strategic Guidance direction to work with like-minded partners and across the interagency to pool our collective strength and advance shared interests,” Austin said. “It will address the need for U.S. engagement and international cooperation to strengthen the rules-based order in the region and tackle shared challenges such as climate change.”¹

In the same spirit as the other DOD RCs, the Stevens Center will build strong, sustainable, domestic, and international networks of security leaders and promote and conduct focused research on Arctic security to advance DOD security priorities in the Arctic region. In accordance with the authorizations from NDAA 21, the DOD developed a plan to establish the Stevens Center and defined four mission areas to govern efforts and activities. These include:

- Advancing Arctic awareness, both among partners and within the increasingly professionalized field of US Arctic service;
- Advancing DOD Arctic priorities;
- Reinforcing the rules-based order in the Arctic; and
- In keeping with Secretary of Defense Austin’s priorities and the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, addressing the impacts of climate change in the region.

The TSC is underway in pursuit of a “build while doing” strategy to organize, equip, and provide education, research, and multifaced engagement via virtual,

in-person, and hybrid methodologies to create strong, sustainable, international networks of multidiscipline security leaders to advance US national security priorities in coordination with allies and partners across the Arctic region.

In the same spirit of the named DOD Regional Centers (the George C. Marshall, William J. Perry, and Daniel K. Inouye Regional Centers), the Stevens Center honors the legacy of a highly distinguished, remarkable public servant, Sen. Ted Stevens (R–Alaska). Accordingly, the TSC will respect the legacy of Senator Stevens in establishing a DOD Regional Center to the benefit of US national security for the Arctic, while advancing such efforts with America’s allies and partners. The following pages provide background and details associated with establishing this new regional center.

Discussion

People and nations have been drawn to the North since the dawn of time. Indigenous peoples from Asiatic and European cultures have inhabited the Arctic since prehistoric times, learning and solving the challenges in how to survive and thrive in and across a difficult and, at times, forbidding part of the planet.

Following in the footsteps of the Arctic’s first inhabitants, nation states arrived, developed, and established territorial claims across the High North—in many cases, displacing the original residents in the name of exploration and commerce. With the arrival of defined national borders and national interests, Arctic states exercised sovereignty and control to protect and harvest resources, conduct development, and govern people.

The development of the Arctic has seen extraction and exploitation of natural resources, first with furs, then from oil-producing whales, followed by extraction of mineral wealth. Overall, despite the riches produced, the Arctic region has seen only modest benefit from the harvesting of its natural abundance, and currently, the Arctic remains underdeveloped and economically fragile. The Arctic also remains one of the few remaining places on the earth where a considerable percentage of people harvest their livelihood directly from the land and sea via subsistence measures.

The Arctic region represents several challenges and opportunities affecting US national interests. The Arctic is changing dramatically in terms of the physical environment and geostrategic challenges. As reported across the science community, Arctic warming is now estimated to be advancing three times or greater when compared to lower latitudes in the Northern Hemisphere. The Arctic region still contains vast amounts of potential mineral wealth and remains one of the wildest and most remote regions left on the planet. Approximately four million people live above the Arctic Circle, with approximately half that population resid-

ing across the Russian Federation. Below the Arctic Circle, many nations in the Indo-Pacific and the European continent maintain strong national interests in the Arctic. These Arctic interests can generally be described as including economic, transportation, environmental, as well as geostrategic factors. Among such factors are facets associated with national and regional security. For example, as Arctic region climate change continues to develop, industry and nations alike are seeing the Arctic as a region of opportunity, and now competing national claims for extended continental shelves across the Arctic basin are already well under way within the framework of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea.² While competition within the Arctic continues to develop, it is important to remember, Arctic interests among Arctic nations include concerns for their respective citizens and a need for the region to remain peaceful and stable.

The United States became an Arctic nation in 1867 when the Russian Empire ceded its claimed Alaskan holdings in return for much needed cash. It is understood that at the time, key Russian decision makers believed that selling their Alaskan claims to a non-European country would prove useful for the overall balance-of-power challenges from Russia’s European competitors. While America’s purchase of Alaska enabled the United States to become an Arctic nation, America’s interests rightfully include more than Alaska—and today, collaborating with allies and partners, involves a pan-Arctic orientation.

Throughout history, the Arctic has not been a region where nations come to fight, conversely, the region has been a place of remarkable collaboration among various people groups—including governments. As a reflection of the unique spirit of collaboration across the High North, the Arctic Council,³ a non-security-oriented multinational forum representing all eight Arctic nations and six Arctic indigenous groups (regarded as equals to the Arctic states) advances several collaborations to benefit Arctic regional safety, environmental, science, educational, and economic activities. Since establishment in 1996, the Arctic Council has proven a useful and helpful forum to continue momentum in Arctic collaboration. In addition to the member states and indigenous groups, the Arctic Council currently has 38 observer groups, which include non-Arctic nations and nongovernmental organizations. Among these, as demonstrated via interaction with Arctic nations, academics and industry, the People’s Republic of China seeks and is achieving greater involvement in Arctic matters. It is important to note many non-Arctic nations in Europe and the Indo-Pacific (comprising many of the world’s economic engines) are engaging on the Arctic and a significant aspect of that engagement is through the Arctic Council.

It can fairly be said the Arctic has historically been too forbidding for nations to battle with each other, with the notable exception of the Cold War between the

United States and America's North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies against the former Soviet Union. During an approximate 43-year-long struggle, America and its NATO allies witnessed competition and contest and faced off with their adversaries in the Soviet Union across the Arctic, including leveraging the ice-covered Arctic Ocean as a place to hold each other at risk with strategic deterrence staged under the sea.

Despite peaceful measures like those of the Arctic Council that have helped to continue aspects of "Arctic exceptionalism," the challenge of strategic competition returned to the High North starting in early 2007 with the establishment of Russian Long-Range Aviation, which saw Russian long-range bombers operating in and through the Arctic in patterns reminiscent of the Cold War. Since that time, Russia has refurbished and constructed additional military facilities along its Arctic shorelines and has made military operations in the Arctic a normative activity. The United States, along with NATO allies and partners, has responded to these Russian activities and has advanced activities and capabilities to demonstrate resolve and strength toward securing respective national and allied interests in the Arctic. In sum, meeting hard-power challenges with hard-power defense measures.

However, military competition is but one facet of friction; competition for natural resources, along with regional political and economic influence, has been steadily rising, fueled in part by the unparalleled rise in regional temperatures, which has reduced access barriers through a significant contraction of size and volume of the Arctic sea-ice pack since notice of such warming began in the early 1980s. As such, the hard truth is, while many facets of collaboration continue quite well in the non-security realm, the Arctic is now a space in which military powers maintain presence, posture, and prepare for conflict that most hope will never materialize.

The Arctic is intrinsic to US national and international security interests, and many of America's closest allies and partners share these interests. Underscoring these US national security interests are a host of awareness challenges of the changing Arctic, which ranges from environmental (including flora and fauna), business, social/societal, military, and governance aspects. In the broadest context, advancing Arctic awareness is needed as much as ever, particularly among the community of security practitioners. Studies and analysis that evaluate risks, challenges, and opportunities to inform decision makers along with corresponding education and engagement could prove quite important to addressing Arctic complexities, particularly when oriented to a broad set of security facets.

In early January 2021, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (NDAA 21) became US law. Included in Section 1089 of NDAA 21, provi-

sions permitting the SecDef to establish a new DOD Regional Center (RC) were authorized. The legislation articulated the need for DOD’s sixth and newest RC—one that would focus in providing education, studies, analysis, and multinational (and multidiscipline) engagement programs addressing US security risks for the Arctic region. Subsequently, following several months of study and providing the US Congress an analytical report as required by NDAA 21, the SecDef announced on the establishment of the **Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies** (as previously described in the executive summary).

Currently, the TSC is developing the following initial framework to guide on-ward development activity:

- **Vision:** Achieve inclusive awareness and understanding through advancing convergent, collaborative, and comprehensive security in accordance with Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) policy priorities and strategy.
- **Mission:** Provide education, research, and convening initiatives to build strong, sustainable, international networks of multidiscipline security leaders to advance US national security priorities in coordination with allies and partners across the Arctic region.
- **Value:** Through delivering relevant education, analysis, and symposia, the TSC contributes to informing civilian and military security practitioners and providing a useful forum that enhances people networks, all of which contribute to a stable, rules-based order in the Arctic that supports US national security interests.
- **Implementation:** Consistent with practices of the established DOD RCs, the TSC will support DOD Arctic regional engagement via conducting symposia, workshops, seminars, and exercises that advance US national security interests across the Arctic. Further, the center will support DOD goals to advance studies and analysis and education programs to improve professional understanding of Arctic security and other DOD priorities that overlap in the region.

As with the other RCs, the TSC supports the policy aims of the OSD; collaborates with the Joint Staff; and will support Arctic and climate security studies, exercises, education, and engagement need as derived from the Pentagon and unified commands; and address Arctic strategy implementation requests from the military departments/services. Among assigned and implied tasks, the TSC will provide Arctic- and climate security-oriented scholarship and research, advance partnerships in security and defense matters, and conduct multiagency and multinational symposia and seminars oriented on Arctic and climate security needs

for the DOD. The TSC anticipates providing special attention to the overall unified command lead for the Arctic, US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) and its sub–Unified Command, Alaskan Command (ALCOM), due to ALCOM’s designated role as lead for Arctic affairs.

Due the intersection of Arctic interests from North America, Europe, Eurasia, and the Indo-Pacific, the TSC plans to work closely with the associated RCs in collaboration with the associated US geographic unified commands (e.g., Daniel K. Inouye Center for Asia-Pacific Security Studies with US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM)). Like the other centers, the TSC will advance initiatives and activities expressly designed for and aligned to better understand and advance security measures for the circumpolar Arctic, to support DOD needs in this unique region of increasing geostrategic importance and value.

To establish a successful DOD Arctic RC, partnerships and collaborations will be essential. Accordingly, the TSC will seek to establish defense and security partners within Alaska, across the United States, with defense allies internationally, in the circumpolar Arctic, and coordinated with existing RCs in the European and Indo-Pacific region to ensure that the new RC brings unique value to the DOD, to the nation, and to America’s allies and partners.

Specifically, it is important the new Stevens Center develop meaningful and dedicated partnerships with Arctic indigenous communities and organizations and with subject-matter experts across US Arctic-oriented universities and institutes. As the Arctic’s permanent populations have unmatched Arctic insights and understandings, there is so much that civilian and military security practitioners can and need to learn from the people who have known about the Arctic for a millennium. In addition to advancing such learning, the Stevens Center can also provide unique seminars and workshops that advance recommended solutions to improve many facets of security by teaming with Arctic indigenous leaders and collaborating with Arctic indigenous-led organizations.

To advance both the Arctic and climate security agendas, the center will strive to collaborate with the Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee, US Arctic Research Commission, and Arctic professionals within the Departments of State, Commerce (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), Interior (Bureau of Indian Affairs; Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management; and Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement), and Energy (Arctic Energy Office and the National Laboratories).

Internationally, the TSC will seek to establish near-term collaboration with Canadian and Nordic allied and partner militaries, including the Canadian Joint Operations Command, Joint Task Force North, Danish Arctic Command, and military entities associated with Nordic Defense Cooperation, as well as other

Arctic-minded interests in the Indo-Pacific, Trans-Atlantic, and Eurasian regions in coordination with the established RCs, respective unified commands, and the OSD.

There is considerable value for the TSC to engage with the professional defense and security academic institutions across the United States, Canada, and European and Indo-Pacific countries to further develop circumpolar knowledge and expertise. This is vital to address as global geopolitical and economic interests in the Arctic region have increased due to the rapidly changing environment, technological advances, and an Arctic Ocean that is shifting, at least seasonally, from ice-covered to open water, enabling greater shipping activity, tourism, fishing, and development of other resources, such as oil and gas and minerals.

Rising competition in the Arctic among strategic competitors, such as Russia and China, is becoming a greater concern in the Arctic. By not soberly assessing threats and risks, along with strategies to reduce them, the United States and its allies and partners could experience growing confrontation and potential for conflict. Such conflict could range from economic warfare to aggressive military encounters and exercises in air and sea, low-intensity skirmishes, to armed combat among militaries comprised of enormous destructive means. In the near term, increased activities in the Arctic from both China and Russia represent a set of security and defense challenges that potentially hold US national interests at some level of risk. While Russia's Arctic interests, understandably, include defense of its own national sovereignty, its military buildup across the Arctic is larger than that required solely for defense. China's interests and continued investments in the Arctic are multifaceted and include considerable effort to access to marine protein, petrochemicals, mineral resources, transportation routes, scientific research (on land and sea), gaining experience in Arctic maritime operations, participation in Arctic governance (e.g., via the Arctic Council), and broader, geopolitical, and geostrategic interests.

As security interests in the Arctic rise, there is a parallel and increasingly compelling need to focus on security studies in the circumpolar Arctic. The results from these studies will help the United States address risks and vulnerabilities as well as opportunities to advance and gain improved initiative for America's defense and security allies and partners.

In sum, the Stevens Center will advance scholarship and affiliated engagement activities associated and in support of the DOD's *National Defense Strategy*. The center will also address the professional education needs for US forces assigned and/or aligned to Arctic security and defense missions and conduct associated allied and partner Arctic education seminars. Such efforts will strive to be inclusive of regional “whole-of-society” security concerns, consistent with practices of

the established RCs. Accordingly, the Ted Stevens Center will provide the DOD an intellectual and engagement center of gravity to understand the fundamentals of evolving Arctic and climate security risks and opportunities, advancing research, education, and engagement to provide networks and solutions needed to better secure US and allied and partner interests from a broad and multidiscipline vantage, becoming a DOD developed center of soft power to complement US hard-power capabilities for the Arctic region.

The mission and goals outlined above reflect the center's long-term aspirations and should not be viewed by the reader as a short-term action plan. To reach these goals, the Stevens Center will have to "build while doing," and there are several essential staff and faculty actions that need to transpire to advance the center to an initial operating capacity (IOC). In pursuit of "build while doing," the TSC will leverage in-person, virtual, and hybrid approaches to hasten the pathway to IOC, while also planning an intentional and inclusive route from IOC to full operating capacity and beyond. Establishing the Stevens Center as a collaborative and contributing member of the DOD RC community is an exciting and meaningful adventure.

Lastly, in the same spirit of the George C. Marshall, William J. Perry, Daniel K. Inouye Regional Centers of Security Studies, the Stevens Center of honors the legacy of a highly distinguished statesman, Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska). For nearly his entire adult life, Senator Stevens was a devoted public servant, starting as a World War II airlift pilot in the China-Burma-India theater, continuing in his dedicated efforts in support of Alaska statehood, and inclusive of a historic career in the US Senate. The legacy of Senator Stevens includes a remarkable number of legislative achievements that advanced US interests, while leveraging the unique role that Alaska provides in supporting national security in the Arctic, North American, and Indo-Pacific regions. Accordingly, the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies will respect and honor the legacy of Senator Stevens in establishing a DOD Regional Center to the benefit of US national security, while advancing such efforts with America's allies and partners via research, education, and engagement across the multidiscipline intersections of the Arctic.

Please stay tuned for more details in the coming weeks and months.

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Major General Kee is the Senior Advisor for Arctic Security Affairs, tasked with assisting with the establishment of the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies, the Department of Defense's sixth and newest regional center. He previously served as the Executive Director of the Arctic Domain Awareness Center (ADAC) at the University of Alaska, a Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence. Kee is a former commissioner of the US Arctic Research Commission. General Kee has led at the squadron, group, wing, and air ops center levels. His staff assignments include US Transportation Command, Headquarters USAF, and the US Joint Staff in both Operations plus Strategic Plans and Policy Directorates. He has contributed to US Arctic Strategy and supported domain-

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awareness technology development and Defense Support to Arctic crisis response. He culminated his military service as Director of Strategy, Policy, Planning and Capabilities for US European Command in Stuttgart, Germany. General Kee is a Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center Polar Institute and serves an important role for the Office of Naval Research led International Cooperative Exchange for Polar Research.

Notes

1. Please see: “DOD Announces Center to Collaborate on, Advance Shared Interests in Arctic Region,” *DOD News*, 9 June 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/>.
2. Please see: United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), <https://www.un.org/>.
3. Please see: Arctic Council, website, 2021, <https://arctic-council.org/>.

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