

What Makes an Arctic Nation?

Looking Within at American Arctic Narrative

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In the Arctic region since the end of the Cold War, if not before, there has been a mismatch between the national interest of the United States as expressed on paper versus the drive to act on feelings expressed by the American public. The era of great-power competition, played out against the backdrop of rapid environmental changes and increasing commercial interests, has accelerated focus on the Arctic region across the US defense enterprise.¹ And though looking outwardly at the stated and implicit intentions of the People's Republic of China and Russian Federation in the region is valuable for strategists, we should also think about our internal strengths and weaknesses with regard to perceptions, investments, and actions in the Arctic of today and tomorrow.

Expanding Interests

The attention placed on the Arctic has roots in the early 1990s, when climate change was first mentioned in President George H. W. Bush's 1991 *National Security Strategy* and President William J. Clinton's issuance of Presidential Decision Directive 26 (PDD-26) titled "United States Policy on the Arctic and Antarctic Regions."² PDD-26 was essential for structuring the executive branch and budgeting for scientific research and logistics in the polar regions, but it hardly caused a media sensation.

In 2009, President George W. Bush established a new US policy (National Security Presidential Directive 66/Homeland Security Presidential Directive 25) for the Arctic region that superseded the Arctic portions of PDD-26, leaving Antarctic policy intact.³ Therein, President Bush made clear that the "United States is an Arctic nation"; his successor, President Barack Obama, embraced this in the last portion of his 2010 *National Security Strategy*, the first to contain a section on "Arctic Interests."⁴

In May 2013, President Obama issued a separate "National Strategy for the Arctic Region," followed by the issuance of the Department of Defense "Arctic Strategy" in November 2013.⁵ The release of the US Coast Guard's "Arctic Strategic Outlook" in 2019, the US Air Force's "Arctic Strategy" in 2020, and the US Navy's "Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic," the US Army's "Regaining Arctic Dominance" guidance, and the Department of Homeland Security's "Strategic

Approach for Arctic Homeland Security” in 2021 highlight recent defense and security prioritization of the northern polar region as climate warming takes hold and opens new areas to trade and resource exploitation.⁶ On the procurement front, defense leadership and Congress have reached a consensus on the need for polar security investments and prioritization, with funding for ski planes, the Polar Security Cutter program, and Arctic port studies.⁷

America’s Arctic Heritage

The exponential, upward curve in strategic document production demonstrates that US policy has rediscovered the security value of its Arctic homeland. While some of this is an acute awareness of the existential threats to sea ice, temperatures, permafrost, and ecosystems, the visible Russian and Chinese naval, aerial, maritime, space, and commercial presence in the Arctic have given policy makers a reminder that Alaska is very much a part of the United States.

Congressional and media focus on weapons and technologies acquisitions of F-35 fighter aircraft, ballistic missile defense systems, radar systems, and space surveillance in Alaska has led many to believe that the northern front is a vast, white, depopulated wasteland sprinkled with military resources and training facilities. This vision obscures some of the greatest assets our nation has with respect to the Arctic region: the land and sea itself, the social and cultural heritage of Alaska Native peoples, and our nation’s human capital.

Alaska as we know it was purchased from the Russian Empire and transferred by treaty in 1867 to the United States.⁸ However, Alaska Natives were present on the land for thousands of years prior. Though largely outside the scope of this work, the history of America’s largest state by area is thus rich and complex and can be studied from multiple perspectives to account for Indigenous heritage and the US federal government’s involvement.

In 1935, Brigadier General William L. “Billy” Mitchell, a key early proponent of American airpower, told the House Military Affairs Committee: “I believe in the future he who holds Alaska will hold the world, and I think it’s the most strategic place in the world.”⁹ Basing aircraft there provides clear time-distance advantages in accessing Eurasia. The Alaskan theater was critical in World War II (when Japan invaded the Aleutian Islands) and the Cold War. This geostrategic refrain is often referenced by US congressional delegations from Alaska vying for infrastructure budgets and defense resourcing.¹⁰ Their voices and those of military leaders familiar with the theater have seemed trapped in an echo chamber until the renewed surge of strategic competition narratives.

Defining an “Arctic State”

One item sparking interest in the Arctic is Russia’s chairmanship of the Arctic Council, set to last until 2023.¹¹ The Arctic Council is a consensus-based international forum of Arctic Indigenous peoples and eight national governments for cooperation across Arctic affairs related to the environment and social and economic development. It is not a treaty-bound organization, but its founding charter, the Ottawa Declaration of 1996, specifies there are eight official Arctic States: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States.¹²

There are a few definitions of “the Arctic.” First is the strict geographical definition of all portions of the globe above 66°34’ North latitude (the Arctic Circle). Second is the political definition instituted in the Ottawa Declaration, defining “Identified Geographic Areas” that extend farther south to encompass the Bering Sea, Hudson Bay, and territories in the high-50° latitudes.¹³ Additionally, there are two environmental definitions: the area north of the northern tree line, and the area in which the average daily temperature in summer does not exceed 10° Celsius (50° Fahrenheit).¹⁴ These latter definitions are shifting along with climate change and may alter political conceptions of what the Arctic is in the future.

As a percentage of territory and coastline, the Arctic portion of the United States is low relative to some of the other states. Russia has 53 percent of the Arctic Ocean’s coastline, for example, stretching across 24,150 kilometers, compared to the 1,790 kilometers of Alaskan Arctic coastline.¹⁵ More than 40 percent of Canada is within the Arctic Council’s Identified Geographic Areas, and large proportions of each of the Scandinavian member nations’ territories are included.¹⁶

There is no doubt that Russia is an Arctic State, and it invests, acts, and defends its interest as such with military forces, bases, icebreakers, aircraft, and a dedicated Northern Fleet.¹⁷ As well, 2.5 million Russian citizens live in the Arctic, including members of 40 Indigenous groups.¹⁸ This inherent relationship with the unique regional environment and its peoples is not without struggle for the Russian government. Siberia—long thought of as a place for gulags, hard labor, and mineral extraction—faces similar domestic challenges in narrative for most of the population. There is a great need for government support and infrastructure repair as individual villages and regions fight to maintain livelihoods and protect themselves from physical changes such as melting permafrost, coastal erosion, raging forest fires, and the dangerous combination those elements present to the industrial processes and chemicals stored in Arctic facilities.¹⁹ Though news of natural

and commercial disasters in the Russian Arctic is not always reported openly, Moscow cannot easily forget its Arctic endowment.

The People's Republic of China, by contrast, has none of the above inherent stakes to claim it is an Arctic State. It has no historical territory, geographic adjacency, or peoples there. Nevertheless, it has relentlessly pursued access to the region for resource development, scientific, and trade purposes. Despite its status as a non-Arctic State, China managed to obtain Permanent Observer Status at the Arctic Council in 2013.²⁰ China has called itself a "Near-Arctic State," issued an official "Arctic Policy" paper in January 2018, and most recently embarked on its "Polar Silk Road" initiatives via the 2021–2025 Five-Year Plan.²¹ China's stated intentions have been backed up with budgetary investments in polar research, the launch of the second icebreaker in its inventory (the R/V *Xue Long 2*, China's first domestically built icebreaker), and multiple transits of Arctic sea routes by Chinese shipping fleets.²²

These actions have attracted high-level attention in the United States and among NATO allies. In a fiery speech at the May 2019 Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated: "Beijing claims to be a 'Near-Arctic State,' yet the shortest distance between China and the Arctic is 900 miles. There are only Arctic States and Non-Arctic States. No third category exists, and claiming otherwise entitles China to exactly nothing."²³

US-Chinese and US-Russian relations currently are on downward spirals. However, the Arctic is a global commons. Human activities worldwide affect the health of Arctic marine and terrestrial ecosystems, while that degradation in turn affects our climate, wind, and weather patterns here in the United States. The Arctic Council was formed to collaborate on these issues and has provided opportunities for international understanding and cooperation in search and rescue, science, the environment, and other areas.

The Role of Narrative and Polar-Mindedness

Our capacity to lead globally and regionally will be dependent on narrative. We have seen the importance of this in battles of information and disinformation across borders and domestically. A narrative of external fixation on the actions of the People's Republic of China and Russian Federation *does* have its place in the battle for budgets. The United States has a long, upward crawl ahead to invest in resilient infrastructure, icebreakers, ski planes, and communications systems in Alaska, Greenland, and at NATO bases.

It is time to open the aperture beyond procurement and look within. The United States is an Arctic State through and through. The land, the coast, the tundra, the

mountains, the rivers, the ice—they are all Arctic. The psychological, cultural, and social elements of geography are essential. There is a need for a unification of these fields to have success in preserving the environment itself, the people’s way of life, and the geopolitical standing of the United States.

If narrative is where the battle is to be fought, then Arctic identity cannot be a theory on paper. The elements of heritage and culture must be embraced in a powerful display of *truth* and *fact*—that Alaska is both a point of pride and an American responsibility. Polar-mindedness—appreciating the relevance of the polar regions to national and international policies and our daily lives—can help us venerate the legacy of the Arctic in a way that serves the national interest.²⁴

A polar-oriented mindset that reverberates through our education system, science and technology investments, and strategic thought would be beneficial to harnessing the human capital of our diverse nation. This expression of truth in narrative must not become exploitative of Alaska Native communities but should instead engage and support them as they face the burden of environmental and political challenges ahead.

The keystone to our success in the Arctic during the era of great-power competition is right in front of us. It is within us. The Department of the Air Force’s “Arctic Strategy” highlights the importance of cooperation with allies and partners.²⁵ This overarching line of effort acknowledges the roles of Indigenous communities and traditional international partners in a military context. But it could go further in recognizing that the strength of our operations in the Arctic does not begin in Alaska alone. It starts with partnerships in academia, industry, civic society, and population-wide interest across all US states and territories. 🌟

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