

# The Unconventional Approach to Arctic Security

## Increasing Domain Awareness through the US Army Special Operations Forces' Indigenous Approach

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### Abstract

This article explores various requirements needed for the Department of Defense to be competitive in the Arctic region. In particular, the role of US Army Arctic Special Operations Forces should be developed and leveraged as part of competitive operational solutions. While capability definitions and gaps remain a persistent doctrinal challenge in development and implementation, history, culture, exercises, and allies could greatly contribute to Arctic ARSOF progress. Furthermore, Indigenous knowledge must be acknowledged and leveraged to ensure the greatest chance for enduring Arctic operational success. Only then will all the specialized gear and training lead to genuine competitive advantages needed to deter adversaries and secure the homeland.

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It is no secret that the Arctic is heating up in the wake of climate change—figuratively and literally. Despite a history characterized more by cooperation than competition, the shrinking ice shelves and rising temperatures are fueling a race to secure economic benefits.<sup>1</sup> The Russian Federation is pursuing monetizing a commercially viable Northern Sea Route and has also voiced extensive claims to the vast deposits of oil and natural gas as well as base, precious, and rare earth metals. Paranoid about the deleterious security effects threatening Russia's economic future posed by the opening of the Arctic, Moscow has invested billions into refurbishing Soviet-era infrastructure and maintaining large Arctic-capable formations and capabilities, though its Arctic capabilities are likely being degraded to some extent by Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> Equally alarming, Beijing has forced the People's Republic of China's way into the Arctic through legal frameworks (Arctic Council and international treaties such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea) and aggressive investment projects under China's Polar Silk Road campaign.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past few years, the Department of Defense (DOD) has recognized the threat posed by US strategic competitors in this region and crafted Arctic strategies to address US current shortfalls.<sup>4</sup> Yet, in an era defined by increased fiscal constraints and potentially emerging crises with Russia and China, the question for US leaders has become: What level of investment is necessary to effectively compete in the Arctic? Further, what are the specific requirements of each of the services in what is primarily a maritime domain, characterized by remote communities and scant infrastructure? The services' published strategies are not widely inclusive of special operations forces (SOF) despite the challenges of the Arctic being ripe for SOF's unique traits and increased return on investment in austere environments.<sup>5</sup> The Army SOF (ARSOF) enterprise provides unique capabilities to the joint force to buy down risk by leveraging Indigenous populations to provide domain awareness, strengthen relationships, and build logistical networks. This value proposition is especially relevant in a theater of operations that will always be peripheral to US strategy, strains logistical systems, and has a high barrier to entry in terms of specialized supplies, equipment, and training.

### **Vignette**

The year is 2025, and the Arctic remains an arena of increasing strategic competition over economic and territorial gains. Along the western slope of Alaska, a small Indigenous tribe is located in the remote village of Teller, which is less than 50 miles from the Russian coastline and is home to approximately 250 residents. Not far from Teller, a Chinese-funded drilling company has agreed to help develop Alaska's liquefied natural gas sector through a private deal with an Alaskan Native corporation.<sup>6</sup> Over the years, the village infrastructure has slowly deteriorated due to global warming and the lack of government funding to correct the many problems caused by thawing permafrost and soil erosion.<sup>7</sup> The attitude of the population toward the US government is neutral due to their limited engagement with state and federal entities over the past few years and their increasing feeling of isolation. The continued effects of climate change in degrading their already inadequate infrastructure have exacerbated such ambivalence.

Last week, the Chinese drilling company sent a small delegation to the village to build a relationship and ensure the company's work would not negatively affect the village. During the meeting with the village elders, an agreement was made to allow some Chinese employees to live among the population of Teller. In return, the company would provide funding to upgrade the village infrastructure. The deal is a 10-year contract that will allow the Chinese-backed company to maintain and expand Chinese influence throughout the region. While it may seem benign, this relationship could be the beginning of a malign actor presence that

will fester throughout Alaska and further isolate the many Indigenous villages in the region from the US government if left unchecked.

Although this story is fictional, it could become a reality if the DOD does not start engaging more effectively with the many vulnerable Indigenous populations throughout the Alaskan coastline before our adversaries do. Countering malign influence would benefit from reexamining and leveraging a crucial piece of American history—the DOD’s use and reliance on the Indigenous approach. In the Arctic, this was done with the Alaskan Scouts during the World War II. The Alaskan Scouts were a volunteer military organization that employed more than 6,000 Native Alaskans to conduct surveillance-and-support activities along the remote coastlines. There are a multitude of opportunities in Alaska that would not only increase US national security posture but also allow ARSOF soldiers to refine their Arctic tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP). These refined skills would also help build ARSOF credibility and capability for combat operations in Europe while training and exercising in the High North.

### **Defining Arctic Capability**

One of the underlying issues of the Arctic problem set is the lack of understanding of the environment and the capabilities required to survive, thrive, and operate in harsh Arctic conditions. If you ask five military leaders what *Arctic capable* means, you will likely get five different answers. In the Army’s 2021 Arctic strategy, *Regaining Arctic Dominance*, the term *Arctic* in Arctic-capable/ready was defined as five distinct environments: Arctic (all-season), subarctic, extreme cold weather (ECW), high altitude, and mountainous.<sup>8</sup> While some similarities exist between these harsh environments, they are not analogous. It is vital to understand the differences between these five environments and their requirements. Combining these environments under one term and expecting soldiers and units to achieve or maintain a state of readiness at each echelon is unfeasible.

It is too much to ask of one unit to maintain a validation pathway that includes all five of these environments. For example, in Army Special Forces (SF), each SF company has a team designated as a “mountain team” and is required to maintain a “level-1 qualification” for military mountaineering. Even the most qualified mountain team in the Special Forces Regiment would not be considered Arctic-capable. Becoming Arctic-capable requires immersion in the actual conditions throughout the entire training and validation pathway, as our Scandinavian partners do. This requirement has severe implications for the length of time a unit can maintain a required state of readiness, particularly if that unit is not stationed in an environment that allows for constant immersion.

Furthermore, when most military leaders hear the term *Arctic*, they usually think of the words: cold, frozen, and winter. However, the Arctic is an all-season environment, where summer and winter present equally complex, but distinct, operational challenges. Additionally, the Arctic region includes different types of terrain depending on the area of operations—Alaska, European High North, and so forth. Being Arctic-capable in one region does not mean a unit is fully prepared for others. For example, units that train in the High North of Scandinavia will need to adapt their TTPs for operations in northern Alaska or Canada due to vast differences in the environment and conditions, even during the same seasons. When examining the training opportunities for units in an Arctic environment, nearly all training venues are below the Arctic Circle and, therefore, are considered subarctic. In other words, most Arctic training does not occur in an Arctic environment. This includes the Northern Warfare Training Center in Alaska and the Subarctic Warfare Center in Arvidsjaur, Sweden.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, most US units only train at these subarctic venues in the winter, when mobility is much easier and conditions are more favorable in many ways.

ARSOF requires more training, equipping, and Arctic experience than existing courses currently provide. The Winter Warfare Detachment at 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) implements a Winter Warfare Course to expand team-level winter operational capabilities. The course trains individuals on how to shoot, move, communicate, and survive in a winter operating environment and is used as a training and validation exercise for SF teams deploying to the High North or Arctic regions.<sup>10</sup> Yet, while winter warfare and Arctic warfare have some similarities, they are not analogous. The skills required to survive in the Arctic cannot be truly trained or exercised in Colorado or Montana. For Naval Special Warfare, SEAL Qualification Training students are sent to the Special Operations Forces Cold Weather Maritime Detachment at Kodiak, Alaska, to learn how to operate in moderately cold maritime environments. None of these training locations are in the Arctic, and they only provide minimal Arctic proficiency to units.

One of the hurdles to changing our Arctic training posture is the misperception that cold weather and the Arctic are the same. The Arctic as an environment is not confined to the extreme cold and snow, which the collective consciousness defaults to, but is characterized by extremes—near-constant darkness and cold in the winter juxtaposed with near-constant light and impassable terrain in the summer months. Leaders must understand that to have a functional capability in the Arctic, operators must be prepared for year-round operations and will find that in certain aspects, especially from a mobility standpoint, the summer may be more challenging than the winter.<sup>11</sup>

Senior leaders must consider the difficulties inherent in requiring a unit to maintain proficiency in multiple related yet distinctly different capabilities. Furthermore, distinct, Arctic-capable/Arctic-ready definitions must be understood across the joint force. Each service should have a standardized validation pathway for units expected to be Arctic-capable. This standard should include Arctic-specific tasks at individual and unit (collective) levels and eventually be institutionalized in doctrine and recognized by partner nations to qualify US units for participation in joint exercises in other Arctic nations. Currently, most US units must attend a Nordic nation's Arctic/winter warfare course as a prerequisite to any Arctic joint exercises in the High North.<sup>12</sup> As an Arctic nation, the United States can leverage Alaska's strategic location not only as a power-projection location but also as a world-class training ground to prepare for expeditionary deployments.

### Capability Gaps

Over the past few years, US policy makers and military leaders have released Arctic-specific strategies to address the unique environmental challenges in the strategic nexus between three geographic combatant commands: US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), and US European Command (USEUCOM).<sup>13</sup> Yet, there is still a massive gap between the US military's current capabilities and its aspirations to compete in the Arctic. This is equally true across conventional and special-operations formations, as the past 20 years of focus on the Global War on Terrorism led to nearly complete atrophy in the military's ability to operate in the Arctic. Many of the skills and lessons learned during the Cold War have been lost; for example, the regular use of Nordic-style skis for winter training by the 10th Special Forces Group and the consistent practice of high-frequency waveform communications by most ground force units.

Despite increasingly high-profile rhetoric about the region's strategic importance, the military's recent execution of training and operations—such as Arctic Edge, Vigilant Shield, and Arctic Warrior—in the Arctic might best be classified as *Arctic tourism*. Military units deploy for a few weeks to train but do not really build true Arctic capabilities. In an environment with as many demands and challenges in the summer as in there are in the winter, military Arctic tourism does little to build the capabilities needed for military forces to survive, thrive, and effectively operate in the harsh Arctic environment, especially for prolonged durations. The increased mentions of Arctic security issues, challenges, and opportunities in the various defense policy, planning, and strategy documents have yielded some progress; for example, the 10th Special Forces Group in Colorado now has a winter warfare training course, the 11th Airborne Division has been reactivated

in Alaska, and the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies is standing up in Anchorage.<sup>14</sup> Yet, there is still more effort needed to develop a true operational capability in the Arctic.

To effectively compete in the Arctic, leaders, and units across the conventional forces and ARSOF must prioritize manning, training, and equipping their Arctic-focused formations to achieve true, all-season Arctic capability. As the United States is one of eight Arctic nations, this current capability gap represents a gap in the country's ability to properly support the 2022 *National Defense Strategy's* (NDS) top priority: defense of the homeland, particularly for Alaska. Furthermore, the Arctic capability gap must be bridged to fully comply with all four NDS priorities.<sup>15</sup>

It is also worth noting that these priorities apply not only to the homeland and the Alaskan Arctic but also to the Canadian Arctic and High North of our Nordic partners, from whom we can learn a great deal. Our partners enjoy a benefit that most of our military does not: their service members grew up in an Arctic or subarctic environment and have lived there for most of their lives. They possess an inherent capability that perhaps only our Alaskan Natives have in the United States. Many partner-nation units consciously designed their manning, training, and equipping structures to meet the needs of the environments in which they operate. Their lifestyles reinforce baseline skills essential to operating in that environment. To illustrate the different mind-sets, it is helpful to note the difference between the United States and our Arctic partners. When it snows six inches in Ft. Carson, Colorado, the commanding general will close the post to mitigate safety risks, and Soldiers stay home and enjoy family time. When it snows two feet on bases in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, the soldiers ski to the ranges and ride snowmobiles to training events. The Arctic conditions are simply part of their training, not a barrier to it.

Although most other Arctic nations have a much higher baseline for Arctic capabilities in their conventional and special operations forces, they also have designated units that are mission-aligned to the Arctic and subarctic environments and specifically manned, trained, and equipped to operate there and provide domain awareness. The Canadian Rangers and Danish Sirius Patrol are examples of Arctic-focused small military units for which the US DOD simply does not have an equivalent. However, the operational utility of these units is well known and illuminates a potential gap in the current US force structure. Although vastly different, the two example units are focused on conducting surveillance and sovereignty patrols in the most remote parts of their Arctic territories and serve as their nations' eyes and ears in sparsely inhabited lands.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, European High North countries work closely with their Home Guard units to facilitate

domain awareness and readiness in remote regions and have numerous units that maintain a high level of Arctic capabilities year-round.<sup>17</sup>

The current deficit of capabilities between US forces and those of our Arctic partners is not only a detriment to our credibility and rapport, but also to the numerous opportunities for training and building domain awareness through bilateral and multilateral training events in the High North. Although the European High North is very different from the North American Arctic, many parallels still make our partners' understanding of the environment relevant to the USNORTHCOM and USEUCOM areas of responsibility. Uniquely, the US Army can train in an environment on home soil that is in many ways more challenging than what it might experience in expeditionary deployments to the European High North.

### **ARSOF's Value Proposition**

ARSOF's first and most important value proposition is its inherently small footprint, which is ideal for operating in remote, harsh, and geopolitically sensitive areas. The Arctic has traditionally been defined more by cooperation than by competition. Avoiding the misperception of US militarization of the Arctic is essential to international credibility in the rules-based Arctic.<sup>18</sup> SOF have traditionally been used in peripheral theaters or to support conventional operations that focus on the primary war-fighting objectives.<sup>19</sup> Second, ARSOF has been the force of choice to address the strategic opportunities resident in the Indigenous communities and through combined operations with international partners. Engagement and integration with the Indigenous communities in Alaska and with our partners in Northern Europe not only provide significant benefits in a defensive posture, but might also be leveraged to put additional pressure on the Russian Federation as these tribal communities usually have close cross-border relationships with communities on both sides of the Bering Strait or across the High North into Russian territory.<sup>20</sup> With a population so vulnerable to influence, Arctic Natives must see the United States as a more legitimate influence than they do its adversaries in the region. Third, the inherently expeditionary nature of ARSOF units allows for smaller logistical requirements, which can be fully supported by air movement and is therefore ideal in an environment that makes sustained logistics for large formations extremely difficult. In comparison, most conventional land forces in the Arctic are constrained to the limited road networks year-round, especially in the summer, as the Arctic terrain turns to swamp-like conditions that make land-based mobility and logistics extremely restrictive. Finally, due to the small size of ARSOF units, training and equipping these formations for Arctic operations will be inherently less expensive than for large-scale conventional forces.

While ARSOF plays a critical role across the spectrum and phases of conflict, the preconflict competition phase is essential to its utility throughout the remaining phases. It is a SOF truth that, “Competent special operations forces cannot be created after emergencies occur.”<sup>21</sup> This axiom is equally applicable to the relationships and skill sets that underpin ARSOF effectiveness across the range of special warfare tasks and highlights the need to increase US readiness in the Arctic before a crisis occurs in that region. In the event of large-scale combat operations against a near-peer competitor, SOF is unlikely to be the main effort; however, the Arctic is also unlikely to feature as a primary zone of future conflict. Yet SOF can and should be used as a hedge to mitigate strategic and operational risk in the region and to achieve national security objectives in what will likely be a peripheral theater. The way to ensure success is to operate in the Arctic alongside Indigenous populations and international partner forces. This unconventional approach, however, will require different investments and shifting ARSOF priorities from the current practice of Arctic tourism into a more persistent presence by designated forces to build a true Arctic capability within US Special Operations.

### **Reciprocal Opportunities**

Native Alaskans represent approximately 15 percent of the total population of Alaska, with more than 110,000 people.<sup>22</sup> This population is distributed across more than 225 communities, speaking more than 20 languages, and classified into five ethnic groups. Many of these communities exist along the western and northern coasts of Alaska, along the Bering Strait and the Arctic Ocean, and comprise the largest percentage of military veterans per capita among all US demographics.<sup>23</sup> Numerous Indigenous communities have poor or failing infrastructure, are isolated from the rest of the state, and are a prime target for malign actors seeking to undermine the United States. The severe lack of infrastructure represents an opportunity for adverse influence by our strategic competitors and a reciprocal opportunity for the US DOD. Investing in indigenous Alaskan communities is a chance to deny competitor influence, rebuild trust with Native Alaskan communities while establishing multiuse infrastructure with multi-domain effects, and increase our military’s Arctic readiness. As US Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) recently stated,

Infrastructure is one of the foundations of modern society, impacting everything from food security, health care, education, commerce, and our ability to operate militarily. It is no different in the High North. However, in many parts of the Arctic, infrastructure is often poor or simply non-existent, which is detrimental and unfair to its residents, and should be unacceptable to us as an Arctic nation.<sup>24</sup>



These communities, accessible almost exclusively by air or sea, fit squarely into Senator Murkowski's diagnosis and are precisely the environments in which ARSOF units thrive. The US government's force of choice for operating through or with Indigenous populations is Army Special Forces, more commonly known as Green Berets. Working with Indigenous populations is the cornerstone of Special Forces. Since their inception in 1952, Green Berets have conducted these types of missions worldwide to achieve US national security objectives.

ARSOF can engage with Alaskan Natives to leverage their ability to act as local eyes and ears in support of US national security, while simultaneously learning how to survive and operate in some of the harshest conditions in the world. This role could be the beginning of a potential redux of the Alaskan Scout program, focused on increasing domain awareness, deterring malign actors in the homeland, and strengthening the relationship between the government and these populations. This reciprocal relationship of an Indigenous approach would not only strengthen US national security and assist in rebuilding military Arctic capability but could also help address critical infrastructure issues in these communities.

At its least ambitious level, the Indigenous approach would leverage the environmental and survival knowledge that is resident in Native Alaskan communities. This basic survival knowledge would go a long way toward rebuilding the foundational skills that ARSOF operators will need to operate in an Arctic environment. Today, ARSOF forces are not manned, trained, or equipped to survive, compete, and dominate in this or similar environments. Things as simple as how to conduct route planning, types of equipment to bring, movement over terrain, and medical care in the Arctic are things that Indigenous communities have developed and mastered over centuries; yet, outside of individual efforts, that experience has not been translated into military TTPs or standard operating procedures (SOP). Nor has it been widely integrated into the Alaskan National Guard, whose footprint has been reduced to a presence mostly concentrated around Anchorage and Juneau.

An effective method would be to create training lanes prior to large-scale exercises, like Arctic Edge or Arctic Warrior, to learn the foundational skills needed for the operational environment, as opposed to the current approach of training Arctic skills in strictly alpine environments in Colorado or Montana. This could be further developed in the exercises themselves, by creating lanes in partnership with the Indigenous communities that provided the foundational training, and then adding supplemental training to reinforce those foundational skills. At Arctic Edge 2022, no SF soldier spent more than seven consecutive hours outdoors. With guidance and mentorship from communities that have thrived in this landscape for millennia, trainers can certainly increase the capabilities of our formations, while addressing commanders' risk considerations which, while not out of

place, have degraded Arctic training opportunities in the past. The incorporation of tactical level elements with a diverse set of Indigenous communities would also increase the command's understanding of the operational environment to better prioritize the small-scale construction funds that usually accompany large exercises. These projects could and should be dual-use to provide value within the exercise and to the Natives afterward.

In a slightly more ambitious scenario, the lanes within exercises would prepare Indigenous communities that participate to perform the domain-awareness tasks, critical infrastructure defense, and logistical and mission support activities they would be well suited to perform in a real-world confrontation with strategic competitors. This could either be an overt goal of the exercise or an inadvertent consequence of hiring Alaskan Natives as role-players within the exercise. In the most ambitious scenario, there would be continuous SF presence in Alaska, either in the form of an Arctic warfare training center run by the Special Warfare Training Center and School or by operational SF units (either active or National Guard) permanently stationed within the state.

In all these scenarios it is important to remember that relationship building, and more importantly sustainment, requires long-term investments of time, effort, and resources. It is hard to maintain effective relationships in a place as remote as Alaska in general, and its coastal communities in particular, when there is no permanent presence or habitual unit affiliation. Building these habitual relationships would help decrease the vulnerability of the Native populations and further prevent malign influence, like the example mentioned in the above vignette, from festering in the homeland.

### **Strategic Standpoint**

With the recent releases of Arctic strategies and legislative initiatives from Congress, interest in the Arctic is increasing within the defense community. Senators from four states outside of Alaska have expressed interest and concern in the DOD's military readiness in the Arctic in the past few years.<sup>25</sup> Yet, during a time when the Russian invasion of Ukraine is ongoing and tensions over Chinese saber-rattling over Taiwan continue, the Arctic has seemingly taken a backseat as a genuine priority within the DOD. This is reflected in the lack of prescriptive guidance in Arctic strategy, as well as the lack of funding.<sup>26</sup> As the combatant command responsible overall for the Arctic line of effort in the DOD, US-NORTHCOM recently submitted a classified Arctic capabilities assessment that highlights specific gaps and areas for development within the DOD's capabilities in the Arctic. However, with so many competing priorities across the services, urgency supersedes importance, and the ability to prepare for future challenges

rarely gets the attention it deserves. This is not meant to disparage the efforts of the Arctic Domain Awareness Center under the Department of Homeland Security or the recently established Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies.<sup>27</sup> The Ted Stevens Center has been allocated more than USD 10 million in funding this fiscal year based on the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act to meet the three defense objectives outlined in the 2019 DOD *Arctic Strategy*: defend the homeland, compete when necessary for the balance of power, and ensure common domains remain free and open.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the units of action for the Arctic remain mostly unaffected in the near term.

Aside from the importance of the Ted Stevens Center, numerous leaders among the Joint Staff agree on two additional aspects of the military in the Arctic. First, we must not discount a land-based force's significance in the Arctic. Although most domain awareness in that environment will come from the sea and the air, the Indigenous approach can only be accomplished through the land. The center of gravity in the Arctic remains the population and infrastructure, both of which are vulnerable. Second, as in many cases throughout history, ARSOF leads the way in military innovation. As demonstrated in Arctic Edge 2022, ARSOF forces experimented with numerous specialized skills and equipment in the Arctic to understand what works and what must be modified or changed to increase survivability and lethality.<sup>29</sup> Yet ARSOF is doing so as Arctic tourists with limited amounts of funding, authorities, and time spent in the environment.

## Conclusion

In an environment as challenging as the Arctic, it takes years to build military capabilities to a level that can effectively compete with and deter our adversaries. To truly increase domain awareness, rather than just survive, the DOD must pursue a policy of persistent presence by designated forces. Although the Arctic is not a uniquely SOF problem set, strategic leaders often consider SOF the force of choice in gray-zone competition.<sup>30</sup> As an enterprise, SOF must be better trained and equipped to operate in the Arctic to support national security objectives. The importance of the Indigenous approach in building domain awareness and competing with our adversaries in the rules-based Arctic requires an immediate increase in ARSOF capabilities and the priorities placed upon them. ★

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