SENIOR LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Strengthening Arctic Security Through Soft Power
The Ted Stevens Center’s Vital Mission

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Abstract

The article discusses the growing challenges the United States faces in defending the homeland, particularly in the Arctic region. It highlights the importance of a strong defense alliance, such as the partnership between the United States and Canada through the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). The article emphasizes the need to address the increasing geopolitical and security risks in the Arctic, including cyber, conventional, unconventional, and hybrid threats from strategic competitors. To address these challenges, the United States has established the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies (TSC), the first new Department of Defense (DOD) regional center in more than 20 years. The TSC is tasked with advancing Arctic awareness, supporting DOD Arctic priorities, reinforcing the rules-based order in the region, and contributing to deterrence efforts. The article outlines the center’s five enduring conditions that guide its mission, including improving domain awareness, enhancing defense capabilities, maintaining regional stability, and addressing the impacts of climate change. The TSC is positioned to be a key soft-power complement to the DOD’s integrated deterrence measures in the Arctic.

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The homeland of the United States confronts an increasingly complex and competitive array of challenges. As America’s strategic competitors expand their capabilities and capacities, they escalate risks to US national security interests abroad, demanding a deeper understanding and proactive approach to countering threats at home. Gone are the days when the United States could afford the luxury of debating isolation versus global engagement; today’s threat landscape renders isolationism an impractical strategy for defending the homeland. The most viable path forward for safeguarding America lies in robust defense alliances overseas coupled with a comprehensive national effort to fortify our defenses at home. A globally layered, multilateral, integrated defense is imperative to counter malign threats to US national security interests.

In contrast to its strategic rivals, the United States enjoys a significant asymmetric advantage in the form of a strong and vibrant defense alliance, beginning with our closest and most steadfast ally, Canada. Through the bi-national command structure of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), the
United States and Canada staunchly protect their respective homelands. Sustained by a longstanding and pragmatic collaboration, the armed forces of both nations advance integrated deterrence measures, operating within a “tri-command” framework comprising NORAD, US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), and Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC). This arrangement includes subordinate units within USNORTHCOM and CJOC, collectively creating a robust defense fabric for the homelands of North America.

The North American Arctic is undergoing significant geophysical transformations, progressively diminishing access challenges and emboldening both regional and external strategic competitors. These actors are increasingly assertive in their pursuit of the region’s abundant natural resources, posing a heightened threat to the Arctic approaches to North American coastlines.

Defense challenges in the North American Arctic are becoming more varied and complex. Effectively countering cyber, conventional, unconventional, and hybrid risks originating from adversaries with the capability to rapidly transition into active threats across space, air, and sea corridors poses a tangible and pressing challenge. Incorporating the Arctic, particularly the North American Arctic, into a global, multilayered, integrated deterrence and defense strategy is imperative.

The security interests of the United States in and around the Arctic region begin with safeguarding the US citizens who call the region home and who are relying on US defense leaders and armed forces to defend the region. This includes a significant population of citizens of Arctic Indigenous descent, who have inhabited the region since time immemorial.

When assessing current challenges and prospects, planners, practitioners, force providers, and decision makers confront a growing quandary: Are the United States and Canada adequately equipped and prepared to defend the North American Arctic against strategic rivals who continuously enhance their capabilities to jeopardize Canadian and US Arctic defense and security interests? An essential follow-on inquiry arises: Are US and Canadian defense leaders and key personnel receiving comprehensive analysis and strategic foresight regarding the increasingly complex risk environment? Without such analytical depth, the task of furnishing a pertinent, ready, and effective defense becomes considerably more daunting. It is imperative to anticipate, deter, and if necessary, prevail in times of conflict.

The Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies (TSC) is the first new US DOD regional center in more than 20 years. On 9 June 2021, as authorized and appropriated by the US Congress, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced the establishment of the Stevens Center to enhance cooperation on the distinct challenges and security concerns of the Arctic region, making it the sixth DOD
Strengthening Arctic Security Through Soft Power

Subsequent Department of Defense policy and Congressional legislation formalized the establishment of the Stevens Center at Joint Base Elmendorf–Richardson in Anchorage, Alaska. Under the directive of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, all DoD regional centers are tasked with building strategic alignments and interoperability, enhancing regional networking, and amplifying strategic messaging, while strengthening collaborative relationships with allied and partner nations.

In his directive to establish the TSC, Secretary Austin tasked the Stevens Center with advancing Arctic awareness among partners and within the growingly specialized field of US Arctic service. This involves supporting and promoting DOD Arctic priorities, as well as engaging in programs and activities that uphold the rules-based order in the Arctic while also addressing the impacts of climate change in the region. The decision to create this pan-Arctic focused center was influenced, at least in part, by the escalating security interests associated with the Arctic and the growing imperative to enhance security measures that promote Arctic awareness, literacy, and cooperation among American, allied, and partner nations throughout the region. This complements investments in national defense measures such as fifth-generation fighters, long-range radars, military communications systems, infrastructure, and logistics. In essence, the Stevens Center’s efforts serve as the soft-power complement to the hard-power measures represented by military forces and their associated equipment.

In accordance with US National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and National Strategy for the Arctic Region, and within the parameters of DOD’s current Arctic Strategy, and other promulgated guidance, the Stevens Center is actively advancing scholarship, research, and affiliated engagement programs and activities. Reporting directly to the Assistant Secretary of Homeland Defense and Hemispheric Affairs (ASD HD&HA), the Stevens Center is formally aligned to Headquarters USNORTHCOM. Following national strategy and specific directives from ASD HD&HA, the Stevens Center executes a comprehensive set of mission requirements spanning the North American and Trans-Atlantic Arctic regions. Collaborating with fellow regional centers in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, the center adopts a cooperative and partnered approach aligned with each of its authorized mission areas to support DOD policies and security cooperation objectives.

1 As established in U.S. Code Title 10, Chapter 16 (Security Cooperation) Section 342 and 2611 all six Department of Defense (DOD) regional centers are provided authorities for executive education, research & analysis, and engagement & outreach. These three mission authorities are exercised in support of DOD policy and security cooperation goals and objectives and are oriented to the respective center’s assigned region.
The Stevens Center takes great pride in bearing the name of Senator Ted Stevens (R–AK), one of America’s foremost advocates for the Arctic. As Alaska’s longest-serving US Senator to date, Senator Stevens spearheaded crucial initiatives and legislation aimed at safeguarding US national security interests in the Arctic. His efforts also fostered significant pan-Arctic cooperation with US allies and partners.

The commander USNORTHCOM provides aligned combatant command guidance to the TSC, directing the center to support the command’s homeland defense mission. This guidance emphasizes the crucial collaboration between the TSC, USNORTHCOM, and the US Air Force Academy’s Homeland Defense Institute (HDI), fostering a unique partnership that combines the international security cooperation efforts of the Stevens Center with HDI’s expanding network of homeland defense–focused academics and security professionals. This collaboration holds significant potential to enhance mutually beneficial analysis aimed at bolstering the defense of the North American homelands. While both the TSC and HDI are in their nascent stages of development, they have already joined forces to host a workshop in Colorado, with further collaborative initiatives on the horizon.

As an Arctic nation, America is creating a soft-power center, and its associated network can play a pivotal role in promoting programs and activities geared towards preparing thought leaders within, across, and adjacent to the region. This collective effort aims to advance future initiatives that bolster the defense of US and allied homelands. Homeland defense remains America’s top defense priority. Examining the Arctic through the lens of homeland defense is imperative now, perhaps even more so than during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, along with our North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies.

Similar to the previously established regional centers, the Stevens Center serves as an instrument of policy and security cooperation. However, unlike previous regional centers, the Stevens Center aligns with US national and DOD strategy, as well as specific guidance from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and USNORTHCOM. Driven by the unique characteristics of the Arctic region, it places a greater emphasis on research and analysis to address the concerns of US and international policy makers and practitioners. These concerns include enhancing domain awareness, facilitating decision making, understanding geophysical dynamics, and assessing geostrategic challenges, while also addressing regional climate security. In response to this guidance, the Stevens Center organizes its programs and activities accordingly.

Since the arrival of the center’s first employee in late August 2021, the TSC has been engaged in a dual mission of building infrastructure while actively implementing initiatives. It achieved initial operational capacity on 1 July 2022, and is diligently
working towards achieving full operational capacity by approximately 30 September 2024, following a “hub-and-network” approach. This approach leverages experimentation and innovation to establish networks and solutions in support of U.S., allied, and partner Arctic defense and security efforts. Over the span of 30 months, the center has launched programs and activities across all three mission areas, resulting in the education of more than 1,500 individuals. It has conducted various engagement programs from Arctic Alaska to northern Finland and has contributed to Arctic analyses through the establishment of a new professional journal, publication of an initial set of special reports, and determined support to the International Cooperative Exchange Program for Polar Research.

The TSC is actively developing a wide range of curricula for a planned two dozen practitioner courses, encompassing topics ranging from Arctic security fundamentals to defense-specific programs, and incorporating insights into Arctic Indigenous perspectives on security matters. Similar strategies are being employed to address more than two dozen research tasks, alongside a diverse approach to outreach—spanning fieldwork, conferences, and digital engagement platforms.

These efforts have already yielded early successes across the North American and Trans-Atlantic Arctic regions. New programs and activities are being implemented to facilitate a deeper understanding of risks, support executive education initiatives, conduct analyses, and engage at the strategic level. These endeavors aim to enhance regional planning, programs, and activities, while enhancing the security of US defense allies and security partners.

As previously discussed, strategic competitors of the United States, its allies, and partners are challenging established institutions of international law in the Arctic region, striving to promote their own priorities, and exploit any advantages available to them. Whether through industrial development, political influence, or military capabilities, these competitors have demonstrated their intent to exert influence over Arctic-oriented nations for their own gain.

As a soft-power complement to DOD’s integrated deterrence measures, the TSC’s mission does not aim to achieve a traditional end state, but rather focuses on fostering and maintaining ongoing processes that align with the strategies of the White House, DOD, and specific directives from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and commander of USNORTHCOM. Accordingly, the center is developing a set of enduring conditions to guide its ongoing efforts in implementing and advancing measures that support higher-level strategies and directed guidance to the TSC. These enduring conditions are:
• **Enduring Condition 1: Advanced Arctic Awareness.** Improve understanding of the operating environment, challenges, and opportunities Arctic nations face, building awareness and enhancing Arctic operations, capabilities, expertise, and cooperation in the Arctic.

• **Enduring Condition 2: Advanced DOD Arctic Priorities.** Improve Arctic capabilities, domain awareness, polar communications, and ability to conduct sustained multi-domain operations in the North American Arctic, enhancing the defense of North America from the Northern Approach.

• **Enduring Condition 3: Reinforced Rules-based Order in the Arctic.** Enhance and maintain regional stability through strengthened partnerships and unity of effort, reinforcing the rules-based order in the Arctic.

• **Enduring Condition 4: Effective Support to Deterrence.** Contribute to U.S., allied, and partner nation efforts in and across the Arctic region to deter and dissuade strategic, regional, and non-aligned competitors from challenging the existing rules-based order of the Arctic region.

• **Enduring Condition 5: Impacts of climate change in the Arctic region understood and implemented/integrated into defense plans.** Enhanced Arctic climate change research and knowledge contributes to advance DoD’s ability to plan for and operate in and through the Arctic.

As the challenges confronting the United States and its allies and partners continue to escalate, particularly regarding the defense of North American homelands, organizations like the HDI and the TSC have vital roles to play in assisting policy makers and practitioners better anticipate and proactively shape measures to mitigate risks and enhance integrated deterrence efforts, both at home and abroad.

Despite being in its formative stages, the Stevens Center is committed to innovation, experimentation, education, analysis, and engagement as the linchpin of soft power within the DOD’s Arctic strategy. Accordingly, the TSC will strive to advance awareness of Arctic issues, address the implications of environmental change, and emphasize the significance of upholding a rules-based order in the region. Through collaborative and respectful coordination, this emerging institution aims to foster a peaceful and stable Arctic, where international cooperation grounded in shared values is paramount.

**Maj Gen Randy “Church” Kee, USAF, Retired**

Major General Kee currently serves as the director of the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies, leading the center’s mission to engage in global security issues through research, communication, and education. Appointed on 14 December 2023, Kee is responsible for building international networks of security leaders to advance US national security priorities in the Arctic region and ensuring a stable, rules-based order in the Arctic. Prior to this,
he served as the executive director of the Arctic Domain Awareness Center and was appointed as a commissioner to the US Arctic Research Commission. Kee’s distinguished 30-year military career includes leadership roles at various levels, significant contributions to US Arctic strategy, and extensive political-military, defense policy, and security cooperation experience. He holds three master’s degrees in organizational leadership, air mobility/logistics management, and strategic studies.

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