

A New UCP for a Blue Arctic: Why USEUCOM's AOR Should Cover All of the Arctic Ocean

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<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> Climate change is rapidly altering the Arctic environment, enabling easier access to the vast resources within the Arctic Circle and opening potential avenues for conflict and competition between Arctic Nations. In the early 2000s, Russia began to aggressively develop its Arctic coastline through infrastructure projects and the revitalization of Cold War-era bases. Additionally, Russia has constructed an impressive icebreaker fleet capable of conducting sustained operations in the challenging Arctic environment. These investments are part of Russia's goal of becoming a hegemonic power in the historically peaceful high north. Due to the late emergency of the Arctic as a strategic priority, the United States finds itself lagging in resources to operate in the region. To further complicate matters, the Unified Command Plan (UCP) splits responsibility of the Arctic between USEUCOM and USNORTHCOM. This paper outlines the negative impacts of the UCP on Arctic operations and capabilities development and describes the positive impacts of changing USEUCOM's AOR to include the entire Arctic Ocean.					
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## INTRODUCTION

The President of the United States issues the Unified Command Plan (UCP) to establish a U.S. military command and control (C2) structure that spans the globe, assigning regions of responsibility to Combatant Commanders (CCDRs). These regions' boundaries create unity of effort and command in diverse and complex geographic areas where the United States has military and national interests. Prepared by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) and signed by the President, the UCP is typically revised every two years but can be updated anytime political or strategic issues require a change.<sup>1</sup> The intent is for the UCP to act as a living document adapted to meet crises in rapidly changing regions where the United States may need to adjust its operational policies or priorities.

Although all the earth has experienced the accelerating influences of climate change, no region has felt the changes more than the Arctic. Due to the phenomenon known as arctic amplification, the polar caps are warming at twice the rate as the rest of the earth. Melting sea ice exposes greater portions of sea water, which absorbs heat at a faster rate than the ice resulting in a continuously accelerating melting rate.<sup>2</sup> Several scientific models estimate the Arctic Ocean to have completely ice-free periods in the summer months starting in the 2030s.<sup>3</sup> Reduced sea ice has created opportunities to extract the nearly 90 billion barrels of petroleum and 1,670 trillion cubic feet of natural gas assessed to exist in the Arctic region.<sup>4</sup> However, competing economic claims along the Continental Shelf have the potential to destabilize a historically peaceful

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Feickert, "The Unified Command Plan and Combatant Commands," 6.

<sup>2</sup> National Snow and Ice Data Center, "Climate Change in the Arctic," 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald O'Rourke et al., "Changes in the Arctic," 11.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Geological Survey, *Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle*, 4.

Arctic.<sup>5</sup> This competition for resources poses national security concerns for the eight Arctic nations: Canada, Denmark (Greenland is an autonomous territory of Denmark), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States.<sup>6</sup> Russia maintains a high interest in the Arctic, investing heavily in both the extraction of liquified natural gas (LNG) along its northern coast and establishing the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a future commercial highway. The investment comes as a reaction to economically crippling sanctions imposed by Western nations after the 2014 annexation of Crimea.<sup>7</sup> However, under the guise of national defense, Russia has also invested heavily in militarizing its Arctic coast to attain regional dominance, resulting in 14 airfields, 16 deep-water ports, and several long-range anti-air and surface missile sites.<sup>8</sup> Russia has also proclaimed the NSR as an internal waterway, a claim that no other Arctic nation recognizes.<sup>9</sup> In 2016, then United States European Command (USEUCOM) Commander General Philip Breedlove described this militarization as an attempt "to counter an imagined threat to their internationally undisputed territories [and] stands in stark contrast to the conduct of the seven other Arctic nations."<sup>10</sup>

Following a review in 2011, the UCP divided the Arctic Ocean between United States Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) and USEUCOM along the 90° line of latitude running through the North Pole and designated NORTHCOM as the lead advocate for Arctic capabilities.<sup>11</sup> By making these changes, the DoD intended to "leverage long-standing

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<sup>5</sup> O'Rourke et al., 131.

<sup>6</sup> O'Rourke et al., 4.

<sup>7</sup> Marc Lanteigne, "The Changing Shape of Arctic Security," 1.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen M. Coffey, Daniel Kochis, and James DiPane, "Arctic Security Is Not About Preparing for War, but about Preparing for the Future," 7.

<sup>9</sup> Jim Danoy and Marison Maddox, "Set NATO's Sights on the High North," 1.

<sup>10</sup> Senate, *United States European Command: Hearing before the Committee on the Armed Services*, 114<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 2016, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Feickert, 8.

relationships and improve unity of effort."<sup>12</sup> However, dividing the world's smallest ocean between two CCDRs with differing missions and command structures only complicates unity of effort and hampers the U.S.' ability to maintain stability in the region.

Currently, operations in the harsh Arctic climate are challenging due to a lack of infrastructure to conduct sustained surface and air operations and a lack of domain awareness resources that range from inaccurate nautical charts to a lack of both radio frequency and satellite communications coverage.<sup>13</sup> As outlined in the National Defense Strategy (NDS) of 2018, the DoD's focus is on "long-term, strategic competition with China and Russia"<sup>14</sup> worldwide, but the Arctic is a region where the U.S. lacks the capability and experience to operate and win if a conflict should arise. In order to provide better, short- and long-term readiness and responsiveness to the rapidly changing Arctic region, the Unified Command Plan needs to be revised by expanding USEUCOM's AOR to include all the Arctic Ocean and designating EUCOM to advocate for Arctic capabilities.

## **THE NATO SOLUTION**

EUCOM's extensive partnerships in the region, including a close C2 relationship with NATO, make it the logical choice as the lead CCDR for all of the Arctic Ocean.<sup>15</sup> The 2019 DoD Arctic Strategy described the U.S. relationship with allied partners as "the cornerstone of this strategic approach"<sup>16</sup> and mentions several joint exercises regularly occurring to increase joint capabilities in the region. The DoD has already prioritized increasing Arctic operational

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> O'Rourke et al., 45.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy," 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ariel Cohen et al., "EUCOM Should Lead U.S. Combatant Commands in Defense of National Interests in the Arctic," 1.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Report to Congress: Department of Defense Arctic Strategy*, 7.

readiness through exercises both with other nations and directly with NATO and NATO partners.<sup>17</sup> In October 2018, Norway hosted Exercise Trident Juncture, which included over 50,000 personnel and 31 NATO and partner nations. It most notably included the first U.S. carrier operations in the Arctic Circle since 1991.<sup>18</sup> Large, multi-national exercises like these represent the shared commitment by the U.S. and its NATO partners in deterring any threat to Arctic stability and deter revisionist adversaries.

The primary benefit of close coordination with allied partners in the Arctic region is the ability to use a larger number of resources and capabilities towards a common goal. Current U.S. domain awareness in the Arctic is so poor that when the Coast Guard sent a routine Arctic patrol out in the late summer of 2020, the patrol discovered a joint exercise involving Chinese and Russian forces that U.S. intelligence services were unaware was occurring.<sup>19</sup> The current philosophy guiding the DoD's goals for future Arctic operations is that the U.S. military should avoid mimicking the capabilities and goals that potential adversaries already possess.<sup>20</sup> This goal is immediately attainable through the US-NATO alliance. U.S. forces can rely on NATO Arctic nations' capabilities to counter regional instability while the joint forces develop more in-depth strategies for long-term procurement. NATO members like Denmark and Canada maintain Arctic capabilities that can bolster short-term readiness for the U.S. ranging from icebreaker and ice-hardened ships to domain awareness and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance tools.<sup>21</sup> Of the eight Arctic nations, six of them are NATO members or Enhanced Opportunities

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>18</sup> Megan Eckstein, "Truman Carrier Strike Group Operating North of Arctic Circle; First Time for US Navy Since 1991," 3.

<sup>19</sup> O'Rourke et al., 45.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Congress, *U.S. Policy and Posture in Support of Arctic Readiness*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization: HQ Allied Maritime Command, "NATO Begins Cooperation with Danish Joint Arctic Command in Greenland," 2.

Partners, resulting in a shared desire to maintain the historically peaceful status quo that the Arctic Ocean has enjoyed over the last century.<sup>22</sup> For example, the U.S. currently maintains four operational ice breakers while the Arctic NATO members combined have 21.<sup>23</sup> Russia maintains over 40 operational icebreakers, including several that are nuclear-powered.<sup>24</sup> The time and financial investment required to attain parity with Russia is not a likely avenue the U.S. would be able to pursue without falling even farther behind.

Arctic nations like Denmark, Canada, and Sweden also possess valuable experience operating in the Arctic Circle, particularly in the maritime domain. EUCOM rotationally deploys personnel from Special Operations Forces (SOF), the Army, and Marine Corps to Norway to conduct training and gain experience with Norwegian Allies.<sup>25</sup> These experiences and opportunities are crucial for the U.S. to exploit as it continues to adapt its current forces to meet the Arctic environment's challenges.

Sharing the responsibility of maintaining Arctic peace with allied partners also results in a strengthened NATO alliance. The 2018 NDS acknowledged that Russia seeks to undermine and even fracture the NATO alliance to shift the balance of power away from the U.S.<sup>26</sup> Russia's view of NATO is not surprising, given the central role NATO played in countering communist adventurism throughout the middle part of the twentieth century. A strong NATO alliance in the Arctic can deter Russian aggression.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, a strong U.S. presence in the formulation of NATO Arctic policy can help ensure that U.S. interests are protected and included in the defense

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<sup>22</sup> U.S. Congress, *“U.S. Policy and Posture in Support of Arctic Readiness,”* 3.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Coast Guard, *“Major Icebreakers of the World,”* 1.

<sup>24</sup> Lanteigne, 10.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Congress, *“Posture of U.S. European Command: Hearing before the Senate Committee on Armed Services,”* 14.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *“Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,”* 9.

<sup>27</sup> Cross, Tyler. *“Strategy on Top of the World, Pt. 2: Regional Arctic Perspectives,”* 3.

policies of other partner nations. EUCOM's role in the C2 structure of NATO is the best way to represent U.S. interests in drafting NATO policy.

### **STRENGTH THROUGH EXPERIENCE**

USEUCOM's experience dealing with Russian aggression makes the USEUCOM staff subject matter experts best positioned to advocate for the resources and capabilities that will be required for the U.S. to regain parity with Russia in the Arctic. The National Defense Strategy labels Russia as a "revisionist power" that seeks to undermined international norms to create a status quo in their favor.<sup>28</sup> Russian military incursions in both Georgia and Ukraine show that Russia cannot be relied on to act in good faith or abide by international norms. During both crises, EUCOM led the way in countering and deterring the Russian threat both unilaterally and with NATO allies. EUCOM's experience, when coupled with the capabilities that U.S. NATO allies possess, makes it uniquely positioned to counter Russian militarization of the Arctic. The daily anti-submarine warfare (ASW) monitoring operation that EUCOM currently manages in the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap is a prime example of a successful NATO operation against Russia. Monitoring this crucial corridor helps maintain the transatlantic sea lines of communication as well as facilitate commerce between Europe and North America.<sup>29</sup> This effort is just a small portion of the daily operations and intelligence gathering that EUCOM conducts against Russia and is particularly important due to the GIUK gap's immediate proximity to the Arctic Ocean.

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<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy," 2.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Congress, "Posture of U.S. European Command: Hearing before the Senate Committee on Armed Services," 8.

The GIUK gap represents just one of the threats that Russian militarization in and immediately adjacent to the Arctic poses to the U.S. homeland. The Russian Federation claims their military buildup in the Arctic is for national defense missions; however, the continued development of offensive weapons like the nuclear-powered Poseidon 2M39 torpedo undermines this claim. Recent developments include conducting tests of the weapon in the Arctic and building likely storage facilities along the Russian Arctic coast.<sup>30</sup> Russian ambitions for the Arctic are not solely limited to regional military hegemony. In 2007, Russian explorers used an unmanned submersible to lay a Russian flag at the North Pole, signifying the Arctic's future importance to the Russian Federation and possibly alluding to increased Russian seabed claims along the Lomonosov Ridge.<sup>31</sup> To counter these threats, the U.S. needs to posture deterrent assets as close to the threat as possible. Although EUCOM is currently assigned the responsibility of the European side of the Arctic, the Arctic Ocean is so small that 2 CCDRs are not needed to ensure U.S. interests are safeguarded. EUCOM can posture forces closer to the Russian coast, which increases detection ranges for any threats to the continental U.S. originating from Russian Arctic basing.

Focusing on utilizing shared resources in the Arctic is a sound strategy and can be further strengthened by designating EUCOM as the lead advocate for Arctic capabilities. Before 2009, the U.S. did not have a published policy for the Arctic region, and not much substantive change has occurred in the time since. The 2019 Navy Strategic Outlook for the Arctic openly admits that regions of conflict will continue to be the priority over conflict-free areas like the Arctic.<sup>32</sup> Budgetary restrictions will likely further downgrade the Arctic prioritization in future defense

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<sup>30</sup> Nick Paton Walsh, "Satellite images show huge Russian military buildup in the Arctic," 4.

<sup>31</sup> O'Rourke et al., 132.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Report to Congress: Department of Defense Arctic Strategy*, 9.

strategies and allow Russia to increase its competitive edge. This budget-based outlook's sad reality is that it fails to adequately prepare U.S. forces for areas of future competition and conflict. Establishing EUCOM as the lead Arctic advocate helps alleviate budgetary concerns by pooling resources with partner nations to pursue shared interests for continued peace in the Arctic and avoids costly redundancies. This pooling of resources is not just high-minded rhetoric reminiscent of Cold War days but actual core policy. NATO's Four Thirties Initiative, agreed in principle in July 2018, is designed to create a rapid response to Russian aggression by committing 30 squadrons, 30 ships, and 30 battalions within 30 days of being mobilized.<sup>33</sup> This initiative is directly in line with increasing the joint force's lethality through partnerships that the DoD Arctic Strategy and NDS proposed.

NORTHCOM's designation as the Arctic capability advocate does help fulfill the DoD's Arctic Policy priority of homeland security, but it is also short-sighted and provides mostly one-dimensional protection.<sup>34</sup> America's close partnership with Canada is largely based on the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and the shared goal of continental defense from Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) and long-range aircraft equipped with nuclear weapons. However, NORAD provides protection from only one facet of the potential conflict possibilities in the Arctic. Moreover, the nuclear threat is the most dangerous course of action, but not the most likely. Russian adventurism along any portion of its seabed claims can threaten the Arctic region, and NORAD can do nothing to counter.

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<sup>33</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Press Release (2018) 074, "Brussels Summit Declaration: Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 11-12 July 2018," 7.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Report to Congress: Department of Defense Arctic Strategy*, 6.

Another problem that complicates NORTHCOM's force employment in the Arctic is that Canada's Northwest Passage (NWP) remains choked with ice even during the summer's warmest months.<sup>35</sup> Crisis response involving U.S. Navy surface assets requires a transit into EUCOM's AOR near the GIUK gap to enter the Arctic. Scientists forecast that it will remain that way despite warming temperatures.<sup>36</sup> Cutting the Arctic in half only for NORTHCOM's Atlantic units to enter EUCOM's domain adds undue burden to unity of command without any noteworthy increase in capability or efficiency. Also, Canada views parts of the NWP as interior waters, whereas the U.S. and European Union view it as an international strait. This point of contention could prevent the rapid transit of defense assets to the region, mainly because the Canadian government prefers to handle disputes through diplomatic means such as the Arctic Council instead of military force.<sup>37</sup>

## **GEOGRAPHIC INHIBITORS**

Geographic constraints also prohibit NORTHCOM from conducting different mission sets in the Arctic. Deployment of land or expeditionary forces along the Canadian or Alaskan Arctic coasts, while an unlikely course of action, is nearly impossible due to a lack of infrastructure to support those forces thanks largely to melting permafrost.<sup>38</sup> These environmental changes make maintaining the DoD's four Alaskan military bases increasingly difficult and expensive and reduce the potential assets that NORTHCOM can deploy to the Arctic. While the NWP connects the Pacific and Atlantic oceans without using the Panama Canal, it is unlikely that this route will ever be economically viable due to the increased cost of

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<sup>35</sup> O'Rourke et al., 55.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Tyler Cross, "Strategy on Top of the World, Pt. 2: Regional Arctic Perspectives," 2.

<sup>38</sup> O'Rourke et al., 44.

operating in the Arctic environment.<sup>39</sup> Currently, the joint force cannot conduct surface freedom of navigation (FON) operations with any regularity. The FON operations they are capable of conducting are performed mainly by aircraft and submarines, which provide little visible enforcement of international maritime navigation laws.<sup>40</sup> NORTHCOM will likely never be called upon to conduct extensive patrolling or Freedom of Navigation (FON) operations along Canada's northern coast. Any small-scale patrolling that will be required can be handled by U.S. Coast Guard vessels. NORTHCOM also lacks a fueling station for the sustainment of vessels north of Dutch Harbor, Alaska, which is approximately 1,000 miles from the Arctic Circle, limiting the on-station time for assets in the high north.<sup>41</sup>

## THE CHINESE THREAT

U.S. long-term readiness and force posture in the Arctic must also focus on the potential threat posed by China. China currently maintains a limited presence in the high north, focusing mainly on their research station on the Svalbard Archipelago. However, the Chinese have two polar-capable icebreakers with the intention of building more in the future.<sup>42</sup> In 2018, China published a white paper designating themselves as a “near-Arctic state”<sup>43</sup> and detailing the inclusion of Arctic shipping routes as part of their Polar Silk Road, a subset of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>44</sup> To further this initiative, China and Russia signed an agreement to create the Ice Silk Road, an infrastructure project to develop the NSR funded mainly by China.<sup>45</sup> Chinese

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<sup>39</sup> Stephen M. Carmel. “Cold Hard Realities of Arctic Shipping,” 40.

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Congress. Senate. “*U.S. Policy and Posture in Support of Arctic Readiness: Hearing before the Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support*,” 47.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Congress. Senate. “*United States Southern Command and United States Northern Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2022 and the Future Years Defense Program: Hearing before the Senate Committee on Armed Services*,” 34.

<sup>42</sup> O’Rourke et al., 29.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>45</sup> Xinhua, “China, Russia Agree to Jointly Build ‘Ice Silk Road,’” 2.

interest in the Arctic, especially the NSR, is driven by the need for alternate shipping routes for natural resources to limit Chinese dependence on the Strait of Malacca.<sup>46</sup> An alliance between China and Russia in the Arctic poses real challenges and threats to the peaceful status quo and raises serious national security concerns for the United States. Without a clear designation of a lead CCDR in the Arctic region, there is little reason to believe that the U.S. can respond quickly to a crisis or develop a coherent Arctic strategy.

### **CRISIS RESPONSE**

Complications to unity of command would occur if a crisis were to break out in the Arctic. A likely course of action would be that a Joint Task Force (JTF) would be stood up and given geographic responsibility for the entire region. The problem is that a JTF is ad hoc in nature, is expensive to maintain, and requires time to establish. Per the DoD's Joint Publication 3-33, *Joint Task Force Headquarters*, "the preferred approach to forming a JTF HQ (headquarters) is around an existing C2 structure."<sup>47</sup> Usually, this structure is formed from a Service Component's H.Q. under the cognizant CCDR. In the Arctic, the selection of the cognizant CCDR is complicated by the statutory barriers placed by the UCP. C2 structures from both NORTHCOM and EUCOM are available, and NATO if the task is multinational in nature. While NORTHCOM is the current capabilities advocate, EUCOM holds the most capability in the region through its NATO alliance and experience countering Russian aggression.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

U.S. Arctic policy and capabilities badly lag both Russia and NATO allies. Current policies set forth by the DoD and Navy have underscored the importance of our alliances and

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<sup>46</sup> O'Rourke et al., 30.

<sup>47</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, "*JP 3-33: Joint Task Force Headquarters*," II-2.

partnerships in maintaining peace in all regions where the U.S. has interests. These policies are underscored by U.S. joint forces, particularly EUCOM, conducting numerous exercises with NATO partners to increase experience and knowledge of the Arctic environment. Despite these efforts, further investment in the Arctic will be tempered by budgetary constraints and the relatively peaceful nature of the Arctic Circle. Arctic capabilities will likely remain a low funding priority and allow Russia to maintain its competitive advantage unless costs can be mitigated. Although its AOR covers half of the Atlantic Ocean, NORTHCOM is poorly positioned to provide forces in the region and does not have the experience of EUCOM with regards to dealing with Russian aggression. While NORTHCOM's homeland defense mission is crucial to protecting the continental U.S., it does not substantially benefit the Arctic region. Even worse, it undermines the development of capabilities needed to compete in the high north. The UCP does not reflect the DoD's current priorities and actions and is a barrier to developing future resources for a blue water Arctic. Splitting the world's smallest ocean between two CCDRs only confuses who is in charge of maintaining stability in the region and complicates any response when a crisis arises. Even though the standing relationship between NORTHCOM and EUCOM is close coordination to ensure readiness, unity of cooperation is never an adequate substitute for unity of command.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, EUCOM's AOR should be expanded to include all the Arctic Ocean, and EUCOM should be designated as the lead Arctic capabilities advocate.

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<sup>48</sup> U.S. Congress, "*Posture of U.S. European Command: Hearing before the Senate Committee on Armed Services*," 19.

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