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The greater accessibility of the Arctic and potential for both engagement and conflict continues to transform the region from a peripheral to an important American national interest. This thesis outlines how modification of regional governance and protection of regional interests will leave the United States (U.S.) in better position to engage and defend its interests. The U.S. must implement policy changes that correspond with the reclassification of the region's national interest level.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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GOVERNING AND PROTECTING ARCTIC INTERESTS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: Governing and Protecting Arctic Interests

Author: Major Michael Gangemella, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: The greater accessibility of the Arctic and potential for both engagement and conflict continues to transform the region from a peripheral to an important American national interest. This thesis outlines how modification of regional governance and protection of regional interests will leave the United States (U.S.) in better position to engage and defend its interests.

Discussion: Access to the Arctic has increased due to climate change. This change shapes the potential for Arctic and other states to glean benefits from the broader region. The introduction of new states and increased efforts by traditional Arctic states will stress the region's governance structure. As one of the eight Arctic states, the U.S. possesses a responsibility and national interest in balancing stability with increased access. Therefore, this thesis argues that the U.S. should sustain the Arctic Council's structure while encouraging it to implement a security mandate, in particular by pursuing ascension to the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). That will allow the U.S. to retain international legitimacy as it enforces key Sea Lanes of Control (SLOCs). Furthermore, interplay between great powers make it prudent for the U.S. to reassess the Northwest Passage and implement policies that align with resource realities. The numerous great powers and peer competitors present and entering the region with similar, yet opposing, interests force the U.S. to view the region as an important and not a peripheral national interest.

Conclusion: The Arctic region will continue to grow in importance as environmental changes occur and resource insecurity widens. While the Arctic transitions to an important U.S. interest, the region could reemerge as a vital interest in the decades ahead. The U.S. must implement policy changes that correspond with the reclassification of the region's national interest level. It would be folly for the U.S. to ignore the region while other great powers exploit its benefits.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, the U.S. gave the Arctic a cold shoulder. This began in 1867 when William Seward negotiated the purchase of Alaska from Russia. “Seward’s Folly” initiated a policy of relative indifference that only began to thaw in 1971 with Richard Nixon’s issuance of National Security Decision Memorandum 144. This memorandum directed Nixon’s Cabinet Secretaries to improve environmental stewardship, increase regional cooperation, and protect national security interests throughout the Arctic.¹ These pillars of President Nixon’s Arctic policy have remained frozen and continue to serve as the current lines of effort within the *National Strategy for the Arctic Region*.² In the half-century that has passed, new Arctic realities, such as climate change and increased geopolitical competition with China and a resurgent Russia, have emerged, pushing U.S. policymakers to reevaluate the region. The first part of this paper argues that the Arctic Council’s original mandate no longer enables it to provide effective governance and proposes specific modernization actions. Recommended updates include restricting further Arctic observer membership to the Council, establishing a regional security forum, and ratification of UNCLOS by the U.S. The second part of this paper reviews the Chinese-Russian Arctic partnership and how the U.S. should respond to the region’s newfound importance within a great power competition context. The third, and final, section of the paper outlines recommended policy responses, including focusing on the Northwest Passage (NWP), reducing the overall scope of U.S. Arctic interests, and relying on low-cost security measures. The greater accessibility of the Arctic and potential for both engagement and conflict continues to transform the region from a peripheral to an important American national interest. This thesis outlines how modification of regional governance and protection of regional interests will leave the U.S. in better position to engage and defend its interests.

BACKGROUND OF ARCTIC ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Although environmental stewardship is the least important of the U.S. Arctic pillars, the realities of climate change over the past several decades have forced policymakers to reconsider how changes to the Arctic environment effect the other two pillars. First, the environmental changes drastically increased the regularity of interactions between states and necessitated the need for increased regional cooperation. Next, the environment changes uncovered new interests such as natural resources, trade routes, and military considerations while concurrently increasing the exposure of previous existing interests. The NASA Goddard Center, responsible for the space agency's satellite analysis, recorded the Arctic's summer sea ice extent in 2020 at the second lowest level ever. The first and third lowest recordings were in 2012 and 2019, defining this era as the most critical since recordings began in 1970.³ Additionally, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) reported multiple scientists forecasting the Arctic to be "ice-free in most late summers as soon as the 2030s."⁴ The two previous examples demonstrate the monumental transformation that climate change has introduced to the Arctic. This paper acknowledges Arctic environmental change and its great impact on regional governance and protection of U.S. regional interests without the need to delve any deeper into natural versus anthropogenic causes.

The reality of the Arctic's environmental change is now the overarching catalyst for policymakers and strategists to reevaluate the national interest of the region. This reevaluation includes recategorizing the region as an important interest instead of it remaining a peripheral interest. Joint doctrine *Strategy* categorizes national interests as either peripheral, important, or vital. It states that we are "willing to die for" vital interests, "willing to fight for" important interests, and "willing to fund" peripheral interests.⁵ Prior to significant environmental change, the U.S. was not willing to fight for the Arctic as the relatively inaccessible conditions of the

region placed the Arctic firmly within the peripheral category. *Strategy* classifies “access to the global commons and regional stability,” as important interests.⁶ The undeniable environmental changes now impact both interest classifications and push policymakers and military strategists to address the region’s newfound importance. The U.S. has historically fought for its international right to traverse the global commons and protect its shipping. The Quasi-War with France and World War I are specific examples. The purely naval Quasi-War occurred in the late 1790s when France captured hundreds of U.S. merchantmen after the U.S. entered into a commercial treaty with Great Britain. In the 20th century, the U.S. entered World War I for a number of reasons, but a key catalyst was German engagement in unrestricted submarine warfare on all shipping to the British Isles that included neutral American shipping. The U.S. is a major commercial nation that will seek to incorporate the Arctic commons in the same manner it benefits from every other SLOC. This incorporation will require reliable access and consistent regional stability. U.S. leaders will fight to protect its commercial interests as it has in the past. This reality depicts the Arctic’s transition from a peripheral interest to an important interest.

Regional environmental changes have brought great power competition to the broader Arctic, as the increased number and reliability of SLOCs bring more ships and economic activity to a previously inaccessible part of the world. In 2019, the *Department of Defense Arctic Strategy* acknowledged the importance of the NWP and the Northern Sea Route (NSR). It also detailed regulatory SLOC overreach by Canada along the NWP and Russia along the NSR.⁷ The NSR currently possesses the luxury of greater ice reduction. Struzik (2013) noted annual throughput of individual vessels on the NSR was 71 and the NWP was 17.⁸ There continues to be a disparity of throughput between the two SLOCs. Great power competitor Russia possesses an early advantage while the NWP slowly becomes a viable and more friendly alternative. In

Finland, then-Secretary of State Michael Pompeo highlighted the Arctic's future vital importance by stating that "new passageways could potentially slash the time it takes to travel between Asia and the West by as much as 20 days. Arctic sea lanes could come before the 21st century Suez and Panama Canals." Figure 1 displays relevant sea lanes and demonstrates the potential for Russian dominance of the NSR to secure future economic and geographical advantages.⁹

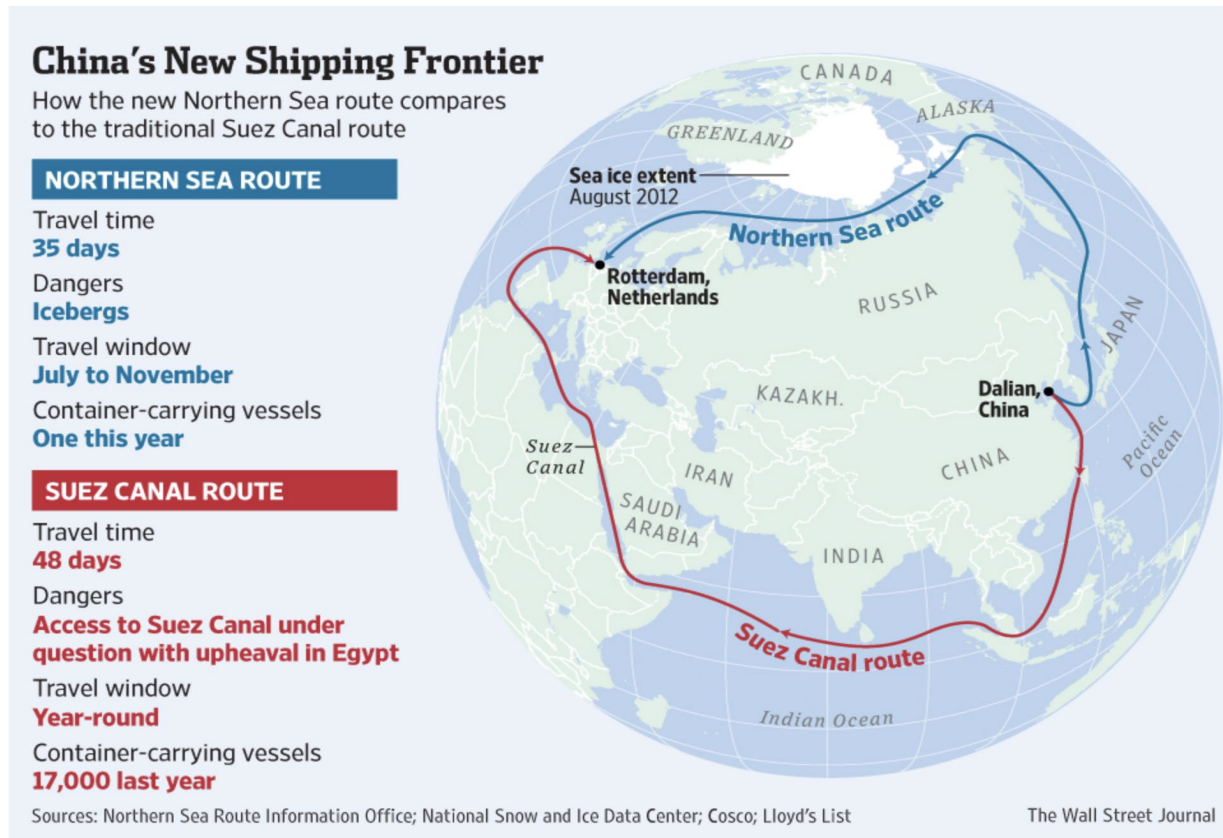


Figure 1: Comparison of Arctic and Suez Canal Sea Lanes

Source: Costas Paris, "Shipping New Arctic Routes Won't Thaw Cold Economic Reality," *The Wall Street Journal*, last modified September 26, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/shippings-new-arctic-routes-wont-thaw-cold-economic-reality-1537954385>.

ARCTIC COUNCIL REVIEW

The regional forum which facilitates Arctic governance is the Arctic Council. This forum, created in 1996 by the Ottawa Declaration, includes the eight Arctic states and thirteen non-Arctic observer states.¹⁰ The Council served U.S. interests well in the past while the region

resided on the periphery. Operating purely on consensus, it reached agreements on search and rescue, pollution preparedness, and scientific cooperation. U.S. policymakers were satisfied with the institution while the focus was predominantly scientific and environmental. However, now that the region has become more accessible the consensus platform will likely fail to address competitive influences from non-Arctic states when they arise. In fact, the Arctic states acknowledged “significant changes” in the Arctic Ocean when they issued the Ilulissat Declaration in 2008. However, they saw “no need to develop a new comprehensive international regime to govern the Arctic Ocean.”¹¹ Nor did they update the current one. The Ottawa Declaration specifically states that the “Council should not deal with matters related to military security.”¹² Arctic states are expected to negotiate outside of the Council to resolve security issues. Young (2019) explains that “conditions in the Arctic today differ dramatically from those prevailing at the time of the creation of the Arctic Council. In the 1990s, the Arctic was a peripheral region, no longer critical as the front line of the Cold War.”¹³ Policymakers disagree on whether the Arctic Council is sufficient to oversee the region’s additional state actors and competitiveness.

The future of the Arctic Council receives much debate from policymakers and scholars. However, three options across the literature rise predominantly to the forefront in terms of solutions to the debate: developing additional institutions, expanding the organization’s role, or preserving the Council in its existing form. First, many policymakers and scholars support the development of additional Arctic institutions. They believe that regional events have grown too diverse for the institution to manage alone. In fact, Senators Angus King and Lisa Murkowski created a U.S. Senate Arctic Caucus in 2015. These policymakers recognized that the U.S. government was not prepared to address key Arctic issues. Their caucus was an important step

in gaining momentum within the U.S. Senate to reinforce decision-making at the Arctic Council level. The Council owns a “narrow mandate” that has not changed since the founding of the institution, according to Exner-Pirot (2016), who argues that the organization’s original mandate negates its ability to meet new challenges. While Exner-Pirot recognizes the Council’s importance and recommends its retention, she supports creation of additional organizations beyond the Council to address new realities not covered by the original mandate.¹⁴ Similarly, Dams and van Schaik (2019) provide a specific recommendation for an additional institution buttressed by an increased European Union (EU) role in the Arctic, suggesting that the geography of the EU and proximity to the Arctic makes the EU a potential power player in the region. Most importantly, they recommend a “call for an Arctic Council on security and geopolitics.”¹⁵ This recommendation seeks to fill the “narrow mandate” void already addressed by Exner-Pirot and in the text of the Ottawa Declaration.

The inability of the Arctic Council to address regional security concerns is the gap many policymakers and scholars would like to address through additional institutions. Along the same lines as the EU recommendation, Boulègue (2019) envisions an increased Arctic role for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He endorses a NATO “Arctic working group” that would “address Arctic military affairs” but addresses the dissent amongst policymakers and scholars regarding an increased NATO role. He specifically states that “NATO is not the ideal forum for discussing military security affairs in the Arctic with Russia.”¹⁶ As Russia is the primary Arctic power, using an institution specifically designed to combat Russia will invite conflict and detract from existing cooperation which addresses most Arctic issues. These common issues revolve around search and rescue, pollution preparedness, and scientific

cooperation. However, since competition throughout the region will quickly become the new norm the inability of the Arctic Council to address regional security issues is the conundrum.

Secondly, expansion of the Arctic Council receives significant backing amongst scholars. Scholars agree that the organization has performed well in the past, but it requires an update to meet current global challenges. Conley and Melino (2016) advocate for “reform and repair” of the Arctic Council, including a “more globally focused Arctic governing structure.” Yet they posit that only the Arctic Council member states “command the influence” to make the necessary changes.¹⁷ Patey (2020), writing from the Danish Institute for International Studies, recommends that “Arctic states proactively engage a diverse group of non-Arctic states to reinforce regional norms” and advance an “international rules-based order” within the Arctic.¹⁸ The theme of expanding the Arctic Council’s regionally influenced structure to a globally influenced structure receives support from scholars.

The third option of preserving the Council’s existing form, rests on the desire to avoid exposing the Arctic Council to global influence. However, this stance is regionally manifested. Nations outside of the inner circle of eight possess the opposite view. Gisela Grieger, a member of the European Parliamentary Research Service, demonstrates the opposite view in her white paper on China’s Arctic Policy given that China is not an Arctic state. Grieger explains that China “suggests a strong desire to push for the internationalization of the Arctic’s regional governance system.”¹⁹ However, the Council’s member states are driven by the advantages of preserving a regionally managed Arctic. Benefits to their national interests decrease by expanding the Council into a globally managed entity. The *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* expresses that it “will continue to emphasize the Arctic Council as a forum for facilitating Arctic states’ cooperation on myriad issues of mutual interest within its current

mandate.” The U.S. sees the Council as a regional forum. The words “facilitating Arctic states’ cooperation” clearly ostracizes the rest of the world from having any claim on Arctic policy. Additionally, the U.S. encourages the Council to work within its “current mandate.”²⁰ The 1996 Ottawa Declaration only grants non-Arctic states “observer status.”²¹ The ability to watch does not encourage active participation or globalizing of the Council. The U.S. and other Council members see the Arctic as a regional concern. This view parallels the globalist policies also supported by the U.S. as a concurrent effort. In sum, the greatest impediment to scholars who wish to expand the Council are the policymakers of the council itself.

GREAT POWER EFFECTS ON ARCTIC GOVERNANCE

The Arctic Council as the sole regional institution performed well when great power competition was absent. Then-austere conditions restrained aggressive state agendas and limited competition, making cooperation a prudent course of action. The Arctic Council served as the region’s predominant intergovernmental organization, but aggressive agendas of non-Arctic states beyond their observership mandates, increased SLOC access, and competition for newly available resources all began to undermine the authority and effectiveness of the Council. Now great power competition threatens to overwhelm regional governance. The European Parliamentary Research Service briefed that non-Arctic state China seeks “to advocate the transformation of the Arctic’s governance from regional to global.”²² “Changes in the Arctic” (CRS 2020) noted that “the Arctic is increasingly viewed as an arena for geopolitical competition among the United States, Russia, and China.”²³ China’s entry into the Arctic geopolitical arena will likely make regional cooperation more difficult. It will also open the door for additional non-Arctic states to enter. Regional authority continues to dissipate as internationalist policy expands its influence over Arctic matters. The U.S. often supports globalist policies and even

expresses this within its *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* by endorsing cooperation with non-Arctic and non-state actors. It also desires to “work with other states and entities to advance common objectives” as long as they don’t interfere with U.S. “national interests”.²⁴ Now that the Arctic has begun to transition from the periphery to importance the U.S. is reevaluating its regional national interests. Meanwhile, globalism continues to introduce great power competition to a region that historically avoided those influences. The Arctic Council, acting within a changed environment and its current official mandate, isn’t prepared for additional actors and non-Arctic state competition.

The U.S. did little to protect or expand its Arctic interests while the region existed in the periphery. Its failure to commit adequate resources and prioritize infrastructure investment allowed other great powers to exploit the gap. The U.S. focused on environmental, scientific, and search and rescue matters while largely ignoring the actions of its major competitors. The hesitancy of the U.S. to commit to the region placed it at a significant regional disadvantage. It took three years for the DoD to evaluate the 2013 *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* and recommend resource requirements. Finally, in 2016, the DoD issued its *Report to Congress on Resourcing the Arctic Strategy*. The report’s conclusion explained its hesitancy to commit adequate resources to the region. The DoD deflected by announcing it was balancing “the risk of being late-to-need with the opportunity cost of making premature investments.” It went on to say that “early investment takes resources from other pressing needs.”²⁵ In other words, the Arctic was a peripheral interest in 2016 for the U.S. Now that great power competitors China and Russia are cooperating through an Arctic commercial arrangement the U.S. is more motivated to address its regional interests.

POLICY RESPONSE TO ARCTIC GOVERNANCE

The U.S. is currently undergoing a strategic shift towards the Arctic. It recognized the significance of the region and is transitioning its interests from peripheral to important. It may not yet realize that the region's governance structure requires a holistic overhaul. Additionally, the U.S. must undertake bold action to regain lost momentum and protect its regional interests from competing great powers. This requires updates to strategic policy in the areas of regional governance and protection of U.S. regional interests. This paper recommends the following policy updates: restricting Arctic Council observer membership; establishing an Arctic security forum, and the ratifying of UNCLOS.

RESTRICT ARCTIC OBSERVER MEMBERSHIP

The options of additional institutions, expansion, and preservation of the Arctic Council all possess merit. Individually, each option is woefully insufficient to address the governance of the region. However, taken together the recommendations of policymakers and academics chart a path forward. The following recommendations supplement previous proposals and seek to improve Arctic governance. This paper recommends restricting Council observer membership to only Arctic states and creation of a regional forum to manage security concerns.

The Arctic Council's record of cooperation continues to surpass expectations due to its limited scope. This limited scope resides not only in its mandate, but within its restricted membership. Recommendations to expand its membership to non-Arctic states exposes the Council to interests beyond the region. Furthermore, it increases the likelihood for competition and gridlock. The influence of non-Arctic states with observer status already degrades the Council's ability to unify. The globalist approach that academics and policymakers prescribe does not belong in the Arctic. The UN's inability to reach consensus is due to the vast number of

conflicting interests. It is within the power of the Council to protect its collective regional hegemony by restricting membership. Kevin Xie in the *Harvard International Review* notes that “some existing Council nations, notably Canada and Russia, have argued that admitting more observers would dilute the power of the current members.”²⁶ It will not be long until observers begin advocating for full membership or go it alone. This will only relegate the Council to the quagmire that has befallen international organizations such as the UN.

Very rarely do opportunities arise where the U.S. and Russia may reach consensus. The Arctic provides an opportunity for improved relations. Russia is the largest legitimate stakeholder of the Arctic and aspires to use the region as a foundation for a return to great power status. In the Arctic, the U.S. ought to provide Russia with the respect of a great power that it greatly desires. Reinforcing this respect in other areas such as space and climate matters will further assist with Arctic cooperation. With Russia assuming the Arctic Council’s Chairmanship in 2021, the U.S. has an opportune moment to demonstrate a dialogue of equality. Russia’s recent *Strategy for the Development of the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and Ensuring National Security for the Period until 2035*, released in October 2020, provides countless areas for cooperation.²⁷ The future of the Russian economy hinges on successful development of the Arctic. Assisting Russia in achieving their goals may allow for negotiating concessions in other locations around the world. The Arctic could become the catalyst for improving Russian and U.S. relations holistically. Furthermore, restricting China’s voice in observership discussions will assist in limiting the basis for further Sino-Russia Arctic tie development.

Cooperative efforts with Russia should align with degrading Chinese influence. China’s rise has replaced Russia as the U.S. global competitor yet Russia’s strategy for reemergence to great power status rests on the Arctic. The Arctic provides Russia vast economic and military

advantages that will amplify as the region becomes more accessible. The Arctic Council, comprised of only regional members, provides an opportunity for driving a wedge between Russia and China. Additionally, cooperating with Russia to restrict China's voice as an Arctic Council observer reinforces peace and stability throughout the region. This effort will not be as difficult as it seems. Buchanan (2020) explains that "of the eight members, Russia took the most convincing to grant China its observer status in 2013."²⁸ As China's regional assertiveness grows, so will Russian distrust. The U.S. must take advantage of this and seek to build closer ties with Russia while diminishing Chinese influence. Furthermore, introduction of new observer members to the Council will only increase tensions, demands, and conflict. The governance of the Arctic remains a regional concern. Unifying with Russia to ward off globalist agendas will draw them closer together. Lastly, the remaining Arctic states, including the non-rim states, have much to gain from supporting the exclusion of non-regional players. The globalists and non-Arctic states are not in a position to contest this. Geography says so and it ought to be the policy of the U.S.

ESTABLISH SECURITY FORUM

The Arctic Council's lack of a security mandate defers responsibility to individual states. It would be more efficient to create a security forum that could coordinate efforts. This would enhance regional governance and protect their interests collectively. Unfortunately, Russia's recent actions in the non-Arctic and its Cold War history complicates security coordination with its neighbors. A regional security forum that includes Russia would struggle to detach itself from events outside of the region. However, this likely scenario does not mean Arctic states should not try. The establishment of an Arctic regional security forum creates opportunities for dialogue with Russia that do not currently exist. The key to eventual success lies in the forum's

ability to disconnect from North American Treaty Organization (NATO) influence. As long as NATO exists as a counter to Russian aggression, a complete Arctic security forum remains unlikely. However, as Russian great power status wanes NATO has the future potential to realign its mandate. Having a security forum already established and functioning will accelerate regional cooperation with Russia when this occurs.

Nevertheless, the geography of the Arctic provides a unique opportunity to circumvent distrust. The Council is capable of updating its mandate to create two security zones. Each zone would operate independent of the other and coordinate where they can. The NWP and NSR would each serve as the foundation of the two security zones. The robust ice extent provides a convenient impassable boundary. It would be imperative to exclude observer states from participating in the Council's security forums. The Council would seek to merge the two zones once the Transpolar Sea Route becomes a viable SLOC. In the meantime, relations between NATO and Russia will have decades for cooler heads to prevail. History has demonstrated that enemies quickly become unlikely friends when the geopolitical situation changes. China threatens Russia immensely. Russia will recognize this fact eventually. Pursuance of a wedging strategy that ostracizes China from regional governance and security matters may produce a seam in China-Russian relations.

RATIFY UNCLOS

One of the greatest contributors to security of the region would be the adoption of UNCLOS by all members of the Arctic Council. It is imperative that the U.S. ratify UNCLOS so that the security forum may collectively enforce the exclusive economic zones more effectively. Additionally, the Council members must all submit their extended continental shelf claims to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. According to Article 77 of UNCLOS,

“the coastal State exercises over the continental shelf sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring it and exploiting its natural resources.”²⁹ Arctic states must remove incentives for non-Arctic states to exploit regional resources. The Council may achieve stable and enforceable governance by limiting the players.

The UN also regulates global SLOCs through UNCLOS and serves as the overseer of the international rules-based order. Redundantly, the U.S. also serves as the guarantor of the global commons. It is counterproductive for the U.S. to recognize international customary law and to uphold the rules-based international order while not ratifying UNCLOS. The UNCLOS preamble announces, “a legal order for the seas and oceans which will facilitate international communication” as well as its “peaceful uses.”³⁰ Increased access and use of Arctic SLOCs will further stress the convention’s enforcement throughout the region. The United States has declined to ratify UNCLOS while other great powers such as Russia and China, who frequently violate its provisions, have done so. Without joining UNCLOS, the U.S. remains hamstrung in appealing to the UN to address Russian and Chinese infractions. Although the *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* seeks to “work towards U.S. accession to UNCLOS,” it has avoided ratification for almost 40 years because of presumed harmful economic impacts.³¹ Senator James Inhofe states that “one of the most prominent arguments is that the convention’s royalty provisions have the potential to drain billions of dollars from the U.S. economy by ‘taxing’ potential U.S. corporate profits.”³² The argument goes on to criticize the inability of the U.S. to control the spending of those accumulated UN taxes. Essentially, the U.S. argument appears to allow the minority business interests to reap tyranny over the collective good of the majority. Nevertheless, the U.S. supports the treaty as a matter of policy. In fact, the Navy’s 2021 *Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic* supports enforcement of UNCLOS “to reduce the potential for

misperceptions, accidents, and unintended conflict among forces operating in the Arctic.”³³

Conditions for a “Wild Wild Arctic (West)” scenario appear likely as the UN struggles to enforce UNCLOS without U.S. buy-in.

U.S. policy regarding the Arctic Council requires modification. Advocating an Arctic state only membership would minimize internal friction of the Council. Efforts to create a regional security forum would ensure more effective use of Council member collective assets. Finally, adoption of UNCLOS would improve management of the region. These policy changes would improve regional governance and be a step towards potential reconciliation with great power Russia. Unfortunately, inaction by the U.S. and sanctions have caused Russia to partner economically with China.

OTHER GREAT POWERS REVIEW

The themes of additional institutions, expansion, and preservation of the Arctic Council arose from increased global interest in the region. The most interested non-Arctic state is China. The most invested Arctic state is Russia. Both states created an Arctic partnership that attracted the attention of U.S. policymakers and scholars. However, the impact of the Arctic partnership on U.S. interests resulted in two divergent themes. One theme envisions a strong Chinese-Russian alliance that will result in conflict with the U.S. The other theme predicts a brittle Chinese-Russian partnership that is little threat to the U.S.

A Chinese-Russian partnership benefited from increased Arctic access. However, this partnership grew from the perpetual U.S. policies of open hostility through diplomatic, informational, economic, and military pressures. As a result, Chinese-Russian policymakers anticipated future benefits from major SLOCs and resource harvesting. Meanwhile, U.S. policymakers treated the region as a peripheral interest. Only recently have U.S. policymakers

recognized the Arctic's potential. Increased reliability of Arctic SLOCs largely contributed to U.S. policymakers beginning the transition of the Arctic from a peripheral to an important interest.

One quantitative example where the U.S. previously shunned the Arctic was icebreaker ships. This decision deferred the initiative to China and Russia. The CRS report *Coast Guard Polar Security Cutter Program* details how Russia recognized the strategic importance of the region while the U.S. relegated it to the periphery. In 2017, Russia possessed 46 icebreakers with 15 more planned, while the U.S. inventory was five, with one not operational.³⁴ According to the 2019 U.S. Coast Guard's *Arctic Strategic Outlook*, distant China began production of icebreakers. China declared itself a "near Arctic state" with access to its resources being a vital interest.³⁵ In response to these realities, U.S. policymakers approved funding for the first of six polar security cutters requested by the Coast Guard.³⁶ After years of indifference, the U.S. recognized the Arctic's SLOC potential.

In addition to SLOC reliability, U.S. policymakers eventually recognized that the changing environment facilitated access to natural resources. The *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* stated that "oil and gas resources north of the Arctic Circle total approximately 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil and 30 percent of the world's undiscovered gas deposits, as well as vast quantities of mineral resources, including rare earth elements, iron ore, and nickel."³⁷ This access to current and future resources caused U.S. policymakers to shift from their indifferent view of the Arctic and encourage exploitation efforts and infrastructure investment. Although most resources lie within the exclusive economic zones of the Arctic-rim states and are not available for outside states to lay claim, their accessibility birthed great power rivalry within the region. The state most affected by the U.S. policy shift was Russia. The CRS

document *Changes in the Arctic* reported that “Russia is the most prominent of the eight Arctic states. Russia has at least half of the Arctic in terms of area, coastline, population, and probably mineral wealth. A substantial fraction of Russia’s oil and gas production and reserves are in the Arctic.”³⁸ This reality caused Russia to historically invest in its Arctic capabilities while the U.S. maintained a fringe mentality. According to policymakers, Arctic indifference will no longer be the regional U.S. standard. This change of U.S. attitude certainly charts an Arctic collision course with other great powers. For these reasons, some scholars anticipate that the Chinese-Russian partnership will result in conflict while others only see normal economic competition.

The first scholarly theme referencing a strong Chinese-Russian partnership foresees conflict stemming from the Arctic. Professor Deborah Larson utilizes cognitive social psychology to explain foreign policy. She argues that “China and Russia are cooperating to establish a common identity due to their rejection by the West as outsiders.”³⁹ Tariffs on China and sanctions on Russia contribute to sustaining a partnership that is in conflict with U.S. Arctic interests. Professor Rebecca Pincus (2020) addresses the partnership’s military potential. She identifies many hurdles that China and Russia would need to overcome before its partnership could expand to include economic and military cooperation. Nevertheless, she wrote that “deepening Chinese and Russian military cooperation may be in response to increasing tension with the U.S. While China does not yet have a military presence in the Arctic, it appears to be pursuing both icebreaker and Arctic submarine capabilities.”⁴⁰ The position that a Chinese-Russian partnership may target the U.S. and lead to conflict exists predominantly throughout literature.

Alternatively, Stronski and Ng (2018) expose fractures between the two partners. They depict a weak partnership that is quickly cooling as China becomes more pronounced in the region. The scholars highlight how China has begun courting other Arctic states at Russia's expense. There is a "distrust between Russia and Chinese business leaders over the Arctic." Meanwhile "concerns over China's growing presence in the region linger under the surface, particularly among defense and security officials."⁴¹ Historically, Russia resorts to defensive tendencies when the homeland feels threatened or insecure. These fractures make internal conflict likely because little trust exists between the two partnering great powers. This partnership rests on a shaky foundation with a dichotomy of competition and cooperation within. Combined with renewed U.S. competition, the Arctic is a tinderbox for conflict amongst three great powers. However, this literature predicts a combined Chinese-Russian alliance versus the U.S. unlikely.

POLICY RESPONSE TO OTHER GREAT POWERS

A Chinese and Russian Arctic partnership poses a major threat to U.S regional interests. Responding to the cooperation of these two rival great powers requires immediate adjustment to U.S. policy. The U.S. will struggle to create a rift between the two recent partners so it must offset their effect. First, the U.S. must implement a policy to improve throughput of the NWP and increase its Arctic infrastructure. Additionally, the U.S. must limit its Arctic scope and implement low-cost security measures to protect the homeland.

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

The Russians possess a superior SLOC due to reduced ice extent along the NSR. As maritime traffic increases, Russia possesses the luxury of a near monopoly. The U.S. must counter this by improving the viability of the NWP. The NWP will not degrade the Russian and

Chinese partnership, but it will increase deterrence options. A reliable NWP provides the U.S. based Atlantic and Pacific fleets the ability to reinforce each other more quickly. Additionally, naval forces of U.S. allies in Europe also acquire the ability to respond to Arctic or Pacific threats without the use of the NSR or the much longer Suez Canal route. Mutually supporting fleets will do much to deter aggressive military action by Russia or China.

Unfortunately, the U.S. and Canada have yet to settle a longstanding maritime dispute along the NWP. Not settling the dispute greatly inhibits the natural and geographic alliance of the two nations. Both nations must reach a resolution in order to respond more effectively to the Chinese-Russian partnership. Steinfeld (2020) outlines the premise for the disagreement. In short, “Canada has long claimed the Northwest Passage as internal territorial waters.”⁴² Conversely, the U.S., according to *Changes in the Arctic*, “believes that the part of the Northwest Passage that runs through the Canadian archipelago is an international strait.”⁴³ It must become U.S. policy to bring an end to this dispute before the ice extend recedes to a point allowing for yearlong NWP transit. The two nations no longer possess the luxury of time as the access of the NWP improves.

Figure 2 below provides a graphical depiction of the NWP:



The Economist

Figure 2: Depiction of Northwest Passage Sea Lane

Source: M.D., "Who Owns the Northwest Passage," *The Economist*, last modified May 22, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2019/05/22/who-owns-the-northwest-passage>.

As a matter of policy, the U.S should concede to Canada that the waters running through the archipelago are internal territorial waters. In return for its support the U.S. must obtain a freedom of navigation treaty from Canada allowing for uninhibited and unregulated throughput. This concession and navigation treaty will guarantee U.S. access while complicating access to rivals. Additionally, once the NSR's ice-covered areas melt further the U.S. and its allies ought

to press the issue of UNCLOS.^a This move would seek to complicate the Russian claims of sovereignty over the NSR beyond their 12-mile territorial waters. Resolving a dispute and creating a diplomatic crisis for the Russians would assist the U.S. in regaining the Arctic initiative.

The U.S. does not require an extensive ice breaker fleet. The recent plan of procurement of six additional polar security cutter ice breakers meets the U.S. requirement. Investment beyond this point exposes the taxpayer to needless spending for an asset risking loss in value once the ice extent recedes. Furthermore, the Canadian ice breaker fleet is significant, and it ought to be the U.S. policy to maximize the capability of its ally. The Navy's *A Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic* heralds the Chinese production of "nuclear-powered icebreakers." This is one naval race where the U.S. need not compete. However, the Navy goes on to warn of Chinese investment in "port infrastructure to improve access in the Arctic."⁴⁴ This is an investment area where the U.S must compete.

The 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) appears to recognize the importance of improving Arctic port infrastructure. The most current NDAA mandated an "assessment of the estimated cost of constructing, maintaining, and operating a strategic port in the Arctic." This task to the DoD is reassuring, however, the NDAA goes on to assert that "nothing in this section may be construed to authorize any additional appropriations for the establishment of any port"⁴⁵ The fact that Congress has begun recognizing the importance of the infrastructure demonstrates a major shift for pro-Arctic policy. Meanwhile, the U.S. must reduce its global strategy since it has overextended its resources in the face of great power competition.

REDUCED SCOPE AND LOW-COST SECURITY

^aThis cannot occur until the ice-covered areas melt enough to make Article 134 of UNCLOS incompatible with current Russian SLOC claims.

It has been the policy of the U.S. to compete globally. The haphazardly conceived Global War on Terror and the inability to win or withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan have jointly eroded U.S. power and allowed others to rise in the meantime. The ability of the U.S. to respond to these great power threats are now much reduced. In fact, the U.S. must make hard decisions on where to project power. Historically, the U.S. championed freedom of navigation everywhere around the globe. However, China's increased naval focus and Russia's militarization of the Arctic negate the U.S. ability to police everywhere. Furthermore, the geography of the NSR does not allow the U.S. to operate with impunity along this SLOC. The time has come to re-prioritize the peripheral, important, and vital interests of the U.S.

Although the North American Arctic is clearly an important interest, the Arctic writ large is not. Only the critical key terrain and NWP merit important resources. The time has come for the U.S. to readdress its policy of guaranteeing freedom of navigation to the world and look to securing its own interests. This means the U.S. must cede control of some SLOCs to the control of others. One of the *National Strategy for the Arctic Region's* key tenants is to "preserve Arctic region freedom of the seas".⁴⁶ It correctly refers to international law. The time has come for the international community to collectively address violations. The U.S. no longer possesses the resources to police other great powers.

The geography of the Arctic enables the U.S. to protect its interests through low-cost policies. The Bering Strait serves as the greatest piece of key terrain the U.S. occupies in the Arctic. It is the lynchpin to deterring most aggression throughout the region. Since the U.S. cannot dismantle the Chinese-Russian Arctic partnership, it must capitalize on the Bering Strait to deter.^b The Chinese-Russian partnership revolves around economics and energy. The U.S.

^bThe U.S. also demonstrates potential security collaboration with Russia through ongoing U.S. Coast Guard and Russian Border Guard combined operations throughout the Bering Sea.

must maintain a capable and constant presence on this terrain. The U.S. fears the Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities of its competitors. Now the U.S. must position an A2/AD force along the strait and the Aleutian Island Chain as a secondary cordon. The time has come to mirror competitors and utilize a cheaper option for deterrence.

CONCLUSION

Current environmental realities have created a growing consensus regarding the classification of U.S. Arctic interests. The “folly” of 1867 and the view that “the products of Alaska are polar bears and icebergs” no longer carries weight. President “Johnson’s polar bear garden” is transitioning from a peripheral interest to an important interest.⁴⁷ This transition owes its newfound importance to the region’s greater accessibility. This access provides many opportunities and potential conflicts as great powers jostle in a new strategic competition frontier. The Arctic Council remains ill-suited, in its current state, to moderate and arbitrate the clash of great power interests. However, the U.S. must maintain its support of the region’s governing structure while pressing for key policy reforms. It must convince the other seven Arctic states to resist a globalist takeover by denying non-Arctic states observership to the Council. Finding compromise with Russia and working with the Council to update the Ottawa Declaration by including a security mandate will be critical to preserving regional stability. The U.S. must ratify UNCLOS if it is to obtain international legitimacy and backing while enforcing freedom of the Arctic commons. Concurrent with the above three policy reforms, the U.S. must accept the realities and restraints of peer competition in the Arctic. The NSR lies outside the influence of the U.S. and the nation’s focus must shift to maximizing use of the NWP. Resource shortfalls which resulted from decades of overextension far beyond the Arctic require the U.S. to make critical decisions in defending key terrain instead of the entire Arctic. In summary, U.S.

interests throughout the Arctic no longer exist as peripheral concerns. The Arctic has re-emerged as an important interest. Recognizing this fact and looking to capability gaps while crafting a clear strategy are efforts that must begin now in Washington.

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