

Securing Arctic Dominance: A Comprehensive U.S. Strategy to Counter Russian and Chinese Influence in the High North

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Executive Summary

The Arctic has rapidly evolved into a key strategic frontier where climate change, geopolitical competition, and economic interests converge. The United States, as one of the eight Arctic nations, faces mounting challenges from Russia's military expansion and China's increasing economic influence in the region. The current U.S. policy lacks a cohesive and assertive strategy to counter these growing threats. There is a current need for the U.S. to transition from passive observation to active presence in the Arctic, emphasizing military readiness, infrastructure development, and NATO collaboration.¹ This policy capstone paper evaluates three policy options—hawkish military expansion, a diplomatic strategy balancing military preparedness with economic and diplomatic measures, and maintaining the status quo—to determine the best course of action for securing U.S. Arctic dominance. The shift in U.S. Arctic strategy amid tensions with Russia and China highlights the need for a balance between security, climate action, and energy interests.²

Russia has asserted its dominance in the Arctic through an extensive military buildup, including the deployment of nuclear-capable submarines, missile defense systems, and the world's largest icebreaker fleet.³ Moscow has further militarized key Arctic trade routes, particularly the Northern Sea Route (NSR), giving it de facto control over critical maritime corridors.⁴ China, despite lacking Arctic territory, has declared itself a "near-Arctic state" and

¹ Jordan, Sylvia, and Antonio Salinas. "Melting Frontiers: A Bold Vision For US Strategy In A Warming Arctic."

² Pechko, Kiel. "Rising Tensions and Shifting Strategies: The Evolving Dynamics of US Grand Strategy in the Arctic."

³ Katz, Justin. "Ice Pact: Why the US Had to Recruit Help In Race With Russia, China for Arctic Icebreakers."

⁴ Hedlund, Stefan. "Russia's Lifeline Via the Northern Sea Route."

has expanded its influence through economic investments, scientific research, and infrastructure development.⁵ Notably, Chinese companies have invested over \$90 billion above the Arctic Circle, primarily in the energy and minerals sectors.⁶ If left unchecked, these developments pose a significant risk to U.S. national security, economic interests, and Arctic governance.

A hawkish policy approach advocates for a significant military buildup, including expanded icebreaker fleets, new Arctic military installations, and regular military exercises to project power and deter adversarial expansion. While this strategy offers a strong deterrent effect, it comes with considerable financial, logistical, and diplomatic challenges, potentially escalating tensions with Russia and China. For instance, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has examined Russia's extensive military presence in the Arctic, highlighting the reopening of Soviet-era installations and the construction of new bases along the Northern Sea Route.⁷ This buildup is seen as a means for Russia to assert control over the region and deter competitors. Similarly, discussions around NATO's strategic positioning in the Arctic emphasize the need for enhanced deterrence measures against Russian and Chinese activities.⁸ Reports suggest that NATO Arctic states have invested in greater surveillance and defense systems to counter potential threats in the region.⁹ Such strategies come with considerable financial, logistical, and diplomatic challenges, potentially escalating tensions with Russia and China. The U.S. Department of Defense's Arctic Strategy underscores the importance of

⁵ Funairole, Matthew P., Brian Hart, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., and Aidan Powers-Riggs. "Frozen Frontiers: China's Great Power Ambitions in the Polar Regions."

⁶ House Committee on Foreign Affairs. "China Regional Snapshot: Arctic."

⁷ Conley, Heather A., Matthew Melino, and Jon B. Alterman. "The Ice Curtain: Russia's Arctic Military Presence."

⁸ Odgaard, Liselotte. "Russian-Chinese Cooperation in the Arctic: Will NATO Step Up to the Challenge?"

⁹ Evers, Zachary Mason. "A Changing Security Landscape: NATO and Russia in the Arctic."

balancing military enhancements with engagements to deter malign activities while avoiding unnecessary escalation.¹⁰

The status quo policy, which emphasizes limited engagement and reliance mostly on international diplomatic frameworks, fails to adequately address the accelerating pace of Arctic militarization and economic competition. This approach risks ceding influence to adversarial powers, diminishing U.S. strategic positioning in the region. CSIS highlights that the Arctic is swiftly becoming a theater of global competition, a development accelerated since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It also emphasizes the need for NATO-aligned Arctic states to enhance situational awareness to protect critical infrastructure and deter Russian gray-zone tactics.¹¹ Similarly, the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) underscores that the changing Arctic security landscape necessitates that the U.S. and NATO deter Russian aggression.¹² Furthermore, the National Interest points out that the cessation of Arctic engagement with Russia post-2022 has disrupted the regional status quo, potentially impacting U.S. influence in the area.¹³

This paper recommends a diplomatic policy approach that balances military strength with economic investments and diplomatic engagement. This strategy includes enhancing Arctic military infrastructure, increasing joint exercises with NATO allies, expanding the U.S. icebreaker fleet, and reinforcing surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. Economically, the U.S. should invest in Arctic resource development, particularly in Greenland, to counter China's

¹⁰ Mongilio, Heather. "Russian, Chinese Cooperation in Arctic A Growing Concern, Says CJCS Brown."

¹¹ Berge, Jonas Vidhammer, and Max Bergmann. "Addressing Arctic Vulnerabilities."

¹² Ålander, Minna, Mathieu Boulègue, Charlotta Collén, Edward Lucas, Catherine Sendak, and Krista Viksnins. "Up North: Confronting Arctic Insecurity Implications for the United States and NATO."

¹³ Buchanan, Elizabeth. "How America Lost the Arctic."

growing influence in rare earth mineral extraction and the creation of new Arctic trade and military routes. Diplomatically, the U.S. must lead Arctic governance initiatives, strengthen alliances, and push for international regulations that limit adversarial encroachment.

The Arctic is no longer a remote frontier but a pivotal theater of geopolitical competition. By adopting a diplomatic strategy that integrates military preparedness, economic investments, and diplomatic leadership, the United States can secure its interests, counter Russian and Chinese influence, and maintain Arctic dominance in the face of an evolving global power landscape.

Introduction

The Arctic has emerged as a critical geopolitical and economic battleground as climate change accelerates the melting of ice caps, opening new trade routes and unlocking vast reserves of untapped natural resources. The United States, as an Arctic nation, has significant strategic, economic, and security interests in the region. The current approach lacks coherence and urgency, leaving a power vacuum that Russia and China are eager to fill. Global interest, in 2009, surged throughout the Arctic when the US Geological Survey estimated that 13% of the world's undiscovered oil and 30% of natural gas were located there.¹⁴ With its expansive icebreaker fleet and military build-up, Russia seeks to control Arctic trade routes and reinforce its strategic defense posture. In 2007, Russia was already taking an aggressive position at the North Pole, planting a Russian flag, asserting its dominance over Arctic resources, and claiming that symbolically, "The Arctic is Russian."¹⁵¹⁶ Despite lacking territorial claims, China has

¹⁴ Pechko, Kiel. "Rising Tensions and Shifting Strategies: The Evolving Dynamics of US Grand Strategy in the Arctic."

¹⁵ Pechko, Kiel. "Rising Tensions and Shifting Strategies: The Evolving Dynamics of US Grand Strategy in the Arctic."

¹⁶ Shoumatoff, Alex. "The Arctic Oil Rush."

declared itself a "near-Arctic state" and is rapidly expanding its influence through economic investments, scientific research, and infrastructure development. These developments present a direct challenge to U.S. interests, necessitating a comprehensive strategy to secure American dominance in the High North.

This policy capstone paper argues that the United States must take decisive action to counterbalance Russian militarization and Chinese economic expansion in the Arctic. Without immediate and sustained efforts, the U.S. risks losing strategic influence over critical maritime corridors, resource extraction rights, and Arctic governance mechanisms. The paper examines the historical evolution of Arctic competition, analyzes the key stakeholders involved, and evaluates the most pressing challenges to U.S. Arctic security. Through a thorough assessment of policy options—ranging from an aggressive military build-up to a more balanced diplomatic strategy and the continuation of the status quo—this research provides a policy recommendation that best aligns with U.S. national security, economic interests, and diplomatic imperatives.

This study follows a structured approach, beginning with an exploration of the historical background that has shaped contemporary Arctic dynamics. It then identifies key stakeholders, including Arctic and non-Arctic nations, indigenous communities, and international organizations, each with competing interests in the region. The paper highlights the security, economic, and environmental challenges that threaten U.S. leadership in the Arctic. A comparative analysis of three distinct policy options—hawkish military deterrence, a hybrid diplomatic strategy, and a status quo approach—guides the selection of a recommended course of action. This evaluation is based on five critical decision criteria: technical correctness, political supportability, implementability, risk considerations, and sustainability.

Ultimately, this paper contends that a diplomatic policy—balancing military preparedness with diplomatic engagement and economic investments—offers the most viable pathway for securing U.S. Arctic dominance. By leveraging alliances, expanding Arctic-focused military infrastructure, and countering adversarial influence through strategic economic partnerships, the United States can reclaim its leadership position in the High North.¹⁷ The future of Arctic security and economic prosperity hinges on immediate, well-coordinated action. Failure to act decisively will cede control to geopolitical rivals, jeopardizing American national security and economic interests in one of the world’s most rapidly evolving strategic theaters.

Policy Problem

The Arctic is rapidly emerging as a key geopolitical battleground due to climate change, resource availability, and shifting global power dynamics. As Arctic ice recedes, new shipping lanes and untapped natural resources—such as rare earth minerals, fossil fuels, and fisheries—are becoming increasingly accessible, transforming the region into a focal point of great-power competition. While the United States possesses significant strategic interests in the Arctic, it has failed to develop a coherent and comprehensive policy that adequately addresses the growing challenges posed by Russia and China. This failure to act decisively has left the U.S. at risk of ceding influence in one of the world’s most strategically significant regions. Russia has taken a highly assertive stance in the Arctic, viewing the region as a cornerstone of its national security and economic strategy. Moscow has expanded its military presence by constructing bases, deploying advanced missile systems, and increasing Arctic naval operations. Furthermore, Russia has built the world’s largest icebreaker fleet, granting it unparalleled control over Arctic

¹⁷ Secretary Of Defense, Secretary Of Defense. “2024 Arctic Strategy.”

shipping routes—particularly the Northern Sea Route, which has the potential to reshape global trade patterns. Russia’s aggressive militarization and resource extraction efforts threaten to disrupt regional stability and weaken U.S. strategic positioning in the Arctic. In 2021, Russia sent multiple submarines that broke through the ice that could each carry up to 16 ballistic missiles, possibly carrying multiple nuclear warheads, alongside two MiG jets for an aggressive military exercise.¹⁸ China, though lacking territorial claims in the Arctic, has similarly sought to expand its presence in the region. Declaring itself a “near-Arctic state” in 2018, China has pursued Arctic engagement through economic investments, scientific research, and infrastructure development. Beijing has financed port construction, engaged in joint ventures with Arctic nations, and actively sought to increase its influence within Arctic governance structures such as the Arctic Council. While China’s Arctic strategy has been largely economic in nature, its history of expansionism—particularly in the South China Sea—raises concerns that its Arctic ambitions could evolve into a broader geopolitical challenge. China has also built research stations in the Arctic while attempting other infrastructure developments and projects that some believe are with military and other geostrategic intentions.¹⁹ The United States must counterbalance China’s growing Arctic footprint before it solidifies control over key economic and strategic assets. Despite these mounting challenges, the United States remains relatively underprepared to assert dominance in the Arctic. The U.S. military presence in the region is limited, with a small fleet of aging icebreakers and insufficient Arctic-focused military infrastructure. U.S. investment in Arctic economic development has been inconsistent, leaving

¹⁸ Naval News Staff. “Arctic Exercise UMKA-2021 Shows Russian SSBN Can Deliver Massive Strike.”

¹⁹ Auerswald, David. “A U.S. Security Strategy For the Arctic.”

an opening for China to secure resource extraction deals and infrastructure contracts.

Washington's engagement with key Arctic stakeholders—including Canada, Denmark, and Greenland—has lacked strategic depth, reducing its ability to counterbalance Russian and Chinese advances effectively. A potential solution to this policy shortfall lies in Greenland. Greenland's vast reserves of rare earth minerals, oil, and natural gas present a unique economic opportunity for the United States to reduce its reliance on foreign supply chains, particularly for critical minerals vital to defense and technological industries. According to the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Greenland's large deposits of rare-Earth elements are required for manufacturing batteries, wind and solar technologies, and advanced military equipment.²⁰ A 2023 survey indicated that 25 of the 34 minerals deemed "critical raw materials" by the European Commission are found in Greenland.²¹ Greenland's geographic location offers unparalleled strategic advantages, providing direct access to Arctic trade routes and enhancing U.S. military surveillance capabilities. Strengthening U.S. ties with Greenland—whether through diplomatic negotiations, economic investments, or territorial acquisition—could significantly bolster America's position in the Arctic. Without immediate and decisive action, the United States risks losing strategic dominance in the Arctic to its geopolitical rivals. A comprehensive policy framework that prioritizes military readiness, economic investment, and diplomatic engagement is necessary to counter Russian and Chinese influence while securing U.S. national security interests in the High North.

Historical Background and Context

²⁰ Spence, Jennifer, and Elizabeth Hanlon. "Explainer: The Geopolitical Significance of Greenland."

²¹ Reuters. "Key Details of Greenland's Rich but Largely Untapped Mineral Resources."

The Arctic has long been strategically important but often overlooked in favor of more immediate geopolitical concerns. Climate change has accelerated the opening of Arctic trade routes and resource extraction opportunities, intensifying great-power competition. “Arctic climate change is a threat to U.S. national security. Defense officials tend to focus on the geopolitical implications of melting sea ice, but the danger is far more diffuse.”²² As an Arctic nation, the U.S. has significant economic, military, and diplomatic interests in the region but has lagged behind Russia and China in developing a comprehensive strategy. Russia has rapidly expanded its Arctic infrastructure, modernizing military installations, increasing resource extraction, and asserting territorial claims through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Russia has been utilizing provisions in UNCLOS to advance its national interests, notably by claiming an extended exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 350 nautical miles, significantly larger than the generally accepted 200-mile EEZ.²³ China, despite lacking territorial claims, has positioned itself as a “near-Arctic state,” integrating the region into its Belt and Road Initiative through investments and research initiatives. These developments highlight the urgent need for a robust U.S. strategy to counter foreign influence while advancing its own strategic objectives. The U.S. Arctic presence dates back to the 19th century, marked by exploration, whaling, and scientific research. The 1867 Alaska Purchase, initially criticized as “Seward’s Folly,” ultimately proved economically and strategically valuable due to its vast natural resources. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American whalers, fur traders, and gold prospectors expanded economic activity, laying the groundwork for future U.S. control

²² Leddy, Laura. “Arctic Climate Change: Implications for U.S. National Security.”

²³ Mehdiyeva, Nazrin. “Russia’s Arctic Papers: The Evolution of Strategic Thinking on the High North.”

over Arctic resources.²⁴ Technological advancements, such as steamships and early aviation, facilitated further Arctic exploration, though harsh conditions remained a challenge. While governmental oversight was minimal, increasing commercial activity underscored the region's economic and strategic potential. The growing presence of American enterprises in the Arctic reshaped indigenous economies, raising long-term questions about land sovereignty and resource control.

World War II marked a turning point in U.S. Arctic strategy. The U.S. established military bases in Alaska and Greenland, recognizing their strategic importance for North American defense and transatlantic supply routes. The Cold War further militarized the Arctic, transforming it into a frontline in U.S.-Soviet tensions. The U.S. constructed the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line to detect Soviet incursions and integrated these radar stations into NORAD.²⁵ Nuclear submarines, air defense systems, and Arctic bomber patrols reinforced the region's role in deterrence strategy. Despite militarization, the Arctic remained stable due to extreme environmental conditions and shared recognition of the risks of conflict. Arms control agreements, such as the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents on and over the High Seas, helped prevent accidental military engagements, while scientific cooperation provided rare channels for U.S.-Soviet collaboration.²⁶ The end of the Cold War reduced Arctic tensions, shifting the focus to environmental conservation and scientific research. The 1996 establishment of the Arctic Council promoted multilateral cooperation on climate change and

²⁴ Lay, Paul. "The Alaska Purchase."

²⁵ Mazzeno, Laurence W. "Canada and the United States Establish the DEW Line: EBSCO."

²⁶ U.S. Department of State. "Agreement Between the Government of The United States of America and the Government of The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas."

sustainable development.²⁷ Economic interest in Arctic resources persisted, with nations expanding exploration efforts as ice caps melted. Increased accessibility also raised concerns over sovereignty and geopolitical competition.

The early 21st century saw renewed Arctic competition as Russia expanded its military presence, modernized its icebreaker fleet, and asserted territorial claims. China increased its Arctic footprint through economic investments, research projects, and integration of Arctic trade routes into its global strategy. Despite these developments, the U.S. struggled to maintain a strong presence due to bureaucratic fragmentation, insufficient icebreakers, and competing foreign policy priorities. There has been a growing recognition of Arctic security and economic imperatives in recent years. The U.S. has sought to strengthen military exercises, reinforce alliances with Arctic partners, and invest in icebreaking capabilities. Challenges remain, including the need for enhanced surveillance, infrastructure development, and a cohesive long-term strategy.

The current U.S. Arctic strategy, as articulated in the Department of Defense's 2024 Arctic Strategy, emphasizes a "monitor-and-respond" approach to a rapidly changing and increasingly contested region. With the Arctic warming more than three times faster than the global average, the U.S. recognizes both the opportunities and the strategic risks posed by this transformation, especially those tied to increased activity from competitors like Russia and China.²⁸ The DoD's primary objective is to preserve the Arctic as a stable, secure region that supports homeland defense and broader national interests. To achieve this, the strategy calls for bolstering early warning systems, enhancing all-domain awareness, particularly in aerospace and

²⁷ Arctic Council Secretariat. "The Arctic Council: A Quick Guide, 3rd Edition (Revised)."

²⁸ Secretary Of Defense. "2024 Arctic Strategy."

maritime surveillance, and modernizing infrastructure critical to operations in extreme Arctic conditions. With an ice-free summer in the Arctic projected by 2030, the U.S. must also account for increased maritime transit, resource extraction, and potential accidents or miscalculations.²⁹ Recognizing this, the DoD underscores investment in cold-weather equipment, resilient communications, and advanced forecasting tools, ensuring military readiness in a region where weather volatility, permafrost thaw, and wildfires are no longer anomalies but expected challenges.

In geopolitical terms, the strategy directly confronts Russia's entrenched Arctic military posture and China's ambitions to rewrite regional governance norms under its "Polar Silk Road." Russia derives over 80% of its natural gas and nearly 20% of its petroleum output from the Arctic, a fact that drives its heavy investment in Arctic military infrastructure, including strategic nuclear forces on the Kola Peninsula.³⁰ China has conducted 13 Arctic research expeditions and operates three dual-use icebreakers, signaling long-term ambitions despite not being an Arctic state.³¹ In response, the DoD emphasizes coordination with NATO Allies—especially following the accession of Sweden and Finland—and aims to integrate local knowledge by working with Alaska Native communities and other stakeholders. Looking ahead, the U.S. and its Arctic Allies are projected to field over 250 advanced multirole combat aircraft capable of Arctic deployment by the 2030s, a show of force that reinforces deterrence and operational readiness.³² Ultimately, this strategy does not treat the Arctic as a backwater—it

²⁹ Secretary Of Defense. "2024 Arctic Strategy."

³⁰ IEA. "Energy Fact Sheet: Why Does Russian Oil and Gas Matter?"

³¹ POGOC. "The 9th Chinese National Arctic Research Expedition (Chinare 2018)."

³² Pechko, Kiel. "Rising Tensions and Shifting Strategies: The Evolving Dynamics of US Grand Strategy in the Arctic."

positions it squarely as a frontline in the 21st-century contest for strategic influence and environmental adaptation.³³

To maintain its Arctic leadership, the U.S. must integrate military preparedness, economic investment, environmental stewardship, and diplomatic engagement. This includes modernizing Arctic infrastructure, expanding icebreaker production, strengthening partnerships with NATO allies, and countering Russian and Chinese ambitions through coordinated multilateral efforts. The U.S. can solidify its position in this evolving geopolitical theater by balancing national security, economic development, and sustainability.

Key Stakeholders and National Interests

Priority Level	National Interests in Arctic Security
Vital	-Ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight in Arctic waters. -Securing U.S. economic interests in Arctic resource extraction (oil, gas, rare earth minerals). -Protecting critical Arctic infrastructure, including military bases and energy assets. -Preventing foreign military dominance in the Arctic, particularly by Russia and China.
Extremely Important	-Preventing militarization and conflict escalation in the Arctic. -Maintaining alliances and partnerships (e.g., NATO, Arctic Council) to counter strategic rivals. -Ensuring environmental security to mitigate climate change’s impact on U.S. interests.

³³ Secretary Of Defense. “2024 Arctic Strategy.”

Priority Level	National Interests in Arctic Security
Important	-Upholding international law, including UNCLOS, to manage Arctic disputes peacefully. -Promoting governance frameworks to regulate Arctic shipping, resource management, and environmental protection. -Supporting democratic governance in Arctic nations like Canada and Nordic states to strengthen cooperative security. -Encouraging investment in Arctic industries such as shipping, energy, and technology.
Secondary	-Supporting Indigenous Arctic communities' rights and sustainable development. -Assisting partner nations in securing their Arctic territories against external threats.

The Arctic is becoming a region of increasing geopolitical competition, particularly as climate change opens new sea routes and access to resource-rich areas. The United States has significant national security interests in the Arctic, especially as Russia expands its military presence, China seeks greater influence, and competition over strategic resources intensifies. Several key stakeholders play a role in this dynamic, including various U.S. government agencies, international partners, and private sector entities. The Department of Defense (DoD) and U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) are responsible for Arctic defense, deterrence, and operational readiness, while the U.S. Coast Guard enforces sovereignty, conducts search-and-rescue missions, and operates the nation's limited icebreaker fleet. The Department of State manages diplomatic relations with Arctic nations, including Canada and Denmark, which oversees Greenland. Congress, through committees such as the Arctic Caucus and Armed Services Committees, plays a crucial role in funding Arctic infrastructure and military initiatives.

Beyond the United States, Russia is the dominant Arctic power, maintaining a substantial military presence, including nuclear-powered icebreakers and Arctic military bases. China, despite not being an Arctic nation and declaring itself a "near-Arctic state," has aggressively pursued investments in Arctic infrastructure, shipping routes, and resource extraction, particularly in Greenland. Canada, a key U.S. ally, shares overlapping Arctic claims and collaborates with the U.S. through NORAD to maintain continental security. Denmark, which governs Greenland, also plays a strategic role in the region. Private sector players, including energy and mining corporations, seek to capitalize on the Arctic's vast oil, gas, and rare earth mineral reserves, while indigenous Arctic communities, such as Native Alaskans and Greenlandic Inuit, have a vested interest in sovereignty, environmental protection, and economic development.³⁴

The United States' primary national security concerns in the Arctic revolve around geopolitical deterrence, economic security, and maintaining an operational presence. As Russia continues to expand its Arctic military infrastructure and deploy hypersonic missile systems, the U.S. must counterbalance these developments through military readiness and enhanced surveillance. The Arctic is also a key area for missile defense, particularly through the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), which relies on early detection capabilities for potential Russian air or missile threats. NORAD employs a layered defense network, including satellites and ground-based and airborne radars, to detect and track aircraft, informing appropriate defensive actions. Additionally, the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS) includes radar installations in the Arctic designed to provide early warnings of

³⁴ Arctic Council Secretariat. "The Arctic Council: A Quick Guide, 3rd Edition (Revised)."

intercontinental ballistic missile launches, enhancing North America's defensive posture.³⁵ As Arctic ice melts, new shipping lanes such as the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage will become increasingly crucial for global commerce and strategic mobility. Ensuring the security and stability of these sea routes will be vital for U.S. economic and military interests. Scientists project that by 2035, these routes will be more viable for maritime navigation, potentially reducing transit times between major markets by 30%-50% shorter than using the Suez Canal or Panama Canal.³⁶

Beyond military concerns, the Arctic presents significant opportunities and challenges in resource security. The region holds vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and rare earth minerals, which are critical for U.S. technology and defense industries. Given that China dominates global rare earth production, securing alternative sources, such as those found in Greenland, would be a significant strategic advantage for the U.S. Preventing Chinese investments and influence in Greenland's mining sector would be crucial to maintaining Western control over critical Arctic resources.

Increasing its presence in Greenland is one of the most significant potential strategic moves for the U.S. in the Arctic. Greenland's geographic position makes it an essential asset for missile defense and surveillance, as demonstrated by Thule Air Base, which already hosts a U.S. ballistic missile early warning system. If the U.S. could strengthen its foothold in Greenland, it would dramatically enhance its ability to monitor Russian and Chinese Arctic and North Atlantic activities. Beyond defense considerations, control over Greenland's landmass would provide the

³⁵ NORAD. "NORAD Monitors Russian Aircraft Operating in the Arctic."

³⁶ Bradley Staff. "Melting Arctic to Open Up New Trade Routes and Geopolitical Flashpoints."

U.S. with direct access to Arctic shipping routes and crucial mineral deposits, reducing reliance on China for rare earth elements. Furthermore, increasing the U.S. presence in Greenland would serve as a counterbalance to China and Russia's growing influence in the region. China has made repeated attempts to establish a foothold through infrastructure investments and mining deals, while Russia continues to dominate the Arctic militarily.³⁷ A stronger U.S. presence would reinforce NATO security and ensure that Western allies maintain control over the Arctic's strategic resources and shipping lanes. There is an opportunity to seize, with the addition of Finland and Sweden into NATO, as well as to expand and deepen coordination efforts with both Arctic nations.³⁸

Greenland is a vital asset in the evolving Arctic security landscape. While outright acquisition of Greenland may be diplomatically unfeasible, strengthening U.S. influence through military cooperation, economic investments, and diplomatic agreements with Greenland and Denmark would provide significant national security advantages. The U.S. must prioritize Arctic military modernization, secure access to critical resources, and counter adversarial expansion to maintain a strategic advantage in this increasingly contested region.

Vice President J.D. Vance's recent visit to Greenland speaking at Pituffik Space Base, Vance criticized Denmark for what he described as chronic underinvestment in both Greenland's security infrastructure and its people. He argued that the United States has "no option" but to assume a greater role in safeguarding Greenland, implicitly suggesting that closer alignment with the U.S. —even to the point of potential independence from Denmark— would better serve the

³⁷ Gronholt-Pedersen, Jacob, and Gwladys Fouche. "Dark Arctic: NATO Allies Wake Up to Russian Supremacy in the Region."

³⁸ Garamone, Jim. "Now The Hard Part: Implementing Arctic Strategy."

island's strategic interests. These assertions were met with firm rebuttals from Danish and Greenlandic leaders. The episode reflects a strategic contest unfolding in the Arctic—a region where melting ice is unlocking new maritime corridors and access to critical resources, thereby attracting heightened interest from major powers, Russia and China. The Trump administration's increasingly assertive posture on Greenland highlights its pivotal role in this evolving geopolitical landscape. Such overtures have raised legitimate concerns regarding national sovereignty, alliance cohesion, and the long-term stability of Arctic governance.³⁹

Challenges to U.S. Arctic Security

U.S. Arctic security faces multifaceted challenges that demand strategic attention and decisive policy action. The U.S. infrastructure in the Arctic is outdated and needs updating. The Security infrastructure consists of aging early warning radars in Greenland and Alaska, missile defenses with fighter jets in Alaska, submarines, and ground forces that rotate in Norway and Iceland.⁴⁰ Foremost, among the most pressing issues is Russia's intensified militarization of the region, exemplified by an expansive buildup of military infrastructure, including the restoration of Soviet-era bases, the construction of new airfields and naval facilities, and the strategic placement of advanced missile defense systems such as the S-400. Russia's deployment of icebreaker fleets, nuclear submarines, and Arctic-specialized military units conducting regular exercises underscores a clear intent to assert dominance in the region.⁴¹ Moreover, Russia's

³⁹ Vance, J.D. "Vance Tells Greenland US Has 'No Other Option' as China, Russia Pose Risk to Arctic Security."

⁴⁰ Auerswald, David. "A U.S. Security Strategy For the Arctic."

⁴¹ Kabachynskyi, Illia. "Arctic War: How Russia Is Turning a Peaceful Region Into a Military Base."

increasing frequency of bomber patrols and maritime incursions near U.S. and allied Arctic territories challenges NATO's deterrence posture and necessitates significant vigilance.

Russia's Arctic strategy is rooted in a dual-track approach: safeguarding national sovereignty and securing strategic deterrence, especially via nuclear forces, while simultaneously promoting economic development and international cooperation in the region. There is no single, codified Arctic security document in Russia; instead, the strategy is pieced together from various frameworks—chiefly the 2008 Foundations of the Arctic Policy, the 2013 Arctic Strategy, and updated versions of the National Security Strategy and Military Doctrine. Official Russian rhetoric emphasizes keeping the Arctic a “zone of peace,” downplaying the likelihood of conflict over resources since most reserves lie within established national jurisdictions.⁴² This posture is accompanied by a steady militarization of the region, particularly in response to what Russia perceives as NATO's encroaching influence and U.S. strategic assertiveness. At the operational level, Russia has pursued an ambitious military modernization program in the Arctic, restoring Cold War-era infrastructure and expanding its sea, air, and ground forces. Their Northern Fleet—headquartered on the Kola Peninsula—houses the majority of Russia's sea-based nuclear deterrent, with over 80% of its strategic submarine warheads stationed in the region and according to the Nuclear Threat Initiative, the Russian Navy possesses seven Delta IV-class SSBNs are all assigned to that Northern Fleet.⁴³ In addition to modernizing Delta IV SSBNs and introducing Borei-class submarines, Moscow is investing in MiG-31 deployment, new radar systems, and the construction of airfields, search-and-rescue centers, and dual-use infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route. Despite severe budgetary constraints and delays

⁴² Klimenko, Ekaterina. “Russia's Arctic Strategy: Ambitions and Constraints.”

⁴³ NTI. “Russia Submarine Capabilities.”

due to corruption and bureaucratic infighting, Russia continues to view the Arctic as integral to its long-term strategic posture. “Russia is the dominant Arctic power, based on its extensive and sustained commitment to the expansion of land claims, port facilities, infrastructure, and population, all of which go far beyond those of any other Arctic nation.”⁴⁴ Ultimately, while Moscow publicly resists framing the Arctic in confrontational terms, its actions reflect a clear intent to dominate this high-value frontier both defensively and economically—particularly through deterrence, denial, and control of access.⁴⁵

Despite its status as a “non-Arctic state,” China's Arctic strategy is a calculated blend of economic ambition, strategic positioning, and geopolitical opportunism. Now that China has declared itself a “near-Arctic state,” it argues the Arctic should be treated as a global commons rather than controlled by Arctic Council members, reflecting its broader effort to reshape international norms and challenge Western governance. Central to this effort is the Polar Silk Road, an Arctic extension of its Belt and Road Initiative, through which China has invested heavily in Russian energy infrastructure, including the Yamal and Arctic LNG 2 projects. Chinese companies hold substantial stakes in Russian Arctic energy projects, including a 30% share in Yamal LNG and a 20% stake in Arctic LNG 2.⁴⁶ The Northern Sea Route (NSR) is particularly interesting for Beijing as a faster, potentially less vulnerable alternative to traditional maritime corridors like the Suez Canal. While China publicly denies military ambitions in the region, its deployment of dual-use capabilities—including advanced icebreakers (Xue Long 1 & 2), satellite monitoring systems, and Arctic research stations—suggests otherwise. It has pursued

⁴⁴ Rosenberg, Elizabeth, David Titley, and Alexander Wiker. “Arctic 2015 and Beyond: A Strategy for U.S. Leadership in the High North.”

⁴⁵ Klimenko, Ekaterina. “Russia’s Security Policy in the Arctic.”

⁴⁶ Humpert, Malte. “China Acquires 20 Percent Stake In Novatek’s Latest Arctic LNG Project.”

a pragmatic economic partnership with Russia, leveraging Moscow's need for investment amid Western sanctions. Yet this relationship remains transactional, with China quietly positioning itself for greater independence and long-term influence in Arctic governance. U.S. and NATO officials have grown increasingly wary, viewing China's footprint as the precursor to potential militarization akin to its maneuvers in the South China Sea. China, in turn, accuses the U.S. of provoking instability through NATO expansion—particularly after Sweden and Finland's accession. Beyond rhetoric, Chinese state-owned enterprises have pursued critical infrastructure projects across the Arctic—ports, energy sites, telecom cables—raising serious concerns about strategic leverage and sovereignty vulnerabilities. As climate change accelerates Arctic accessibility, China's approach is one of incremental entrenchment: cooperative when convenient, assertive when necessary, and always cloaked in the language of peaceful scientific and commercial intent.⁴⁷

The accelerating pace of climate change in the Arctic—where temperatures are rising three times faster than the global average—has profound implications for U.S. national security. As ice melts and previously inaccessible routes and resources become viable, the Department of Defense faces a rapidly evolving operating environment. Deputy Secretary of Defense, Kathleen Hicks stated last July that, "The region is warming three times faster than the rest of the world," she said. "Melting ice and warmer temperatures, they affect DOD operating context, and lead to increased human activity, including from our competitors."⁴⁸ This transformation not only challenges the logistics of military readiness and infrastructure in extreme conditions but also invites a surge in human activity, including that of strategic competitors like Russia and China.

⁴⁷Pelaudeix, Cécile. "Along the Road: China in the Arctic."

⁴⁸ Garamone, Jim. "Now The Hard Part: Implementing Arctic Strategy."

These nations are expanding their Arctic presence through military buildup, economic ventures, and influence campaigns, seeking to reshape the balance of power in the region. The United States must respond with a comprehensive Arctic strategy that reinforces defense capabilities, protects sovereignty, and ensures freedom of navigation in this emerging geopolitical frontier.

Domestically, the U.S. confronts critical capability gaps that impede effective Arctic operations and responses. The United States currently possesses an aging and insufficient polar icebreaker fleet, severely limiting its operational presence, maritime mobility, and ability to maintain sovereign patrols, leaving vital interests and maritime domains less protected. The U.S. Coast Guard relies on an aging fleet of icebreakers, with only one heavy icebreaker, the *Polar Star*, which is well past its intended service life.⁴⁹ Further deficiencies exist in communications infrastructure, satellite coverage, and logistical networks in the region, impairing real-time command, control, and situational awareness. Finally, inadequacies within existing international legal frameworks—particularly unresolved maritime boundary disputes, contested exclusive economic zones, and ambiguous rights to shipping lanes—exacerbate diplomatic tensions, presenting persistent risks of confrontation and complicating American efforts to secure and stabilize this strategically vital region.

Policy Options for U.S. Arctic Security

Three policy options are under consideration, each taking a different general approach to strengthening U.S. security in the Arctic: hawkish, diplomatic, and status quo. Under each of these umbrellas, we introduce several possible actions the U.S. can take to counter growing

⁴⁹ Poulin, Gregory Noddin. “America Must Build More Icebreakers or We’ll Lose the Battle For the Arctic.”

Russian and Chinese influence in the region, focusing on four key components: military presence, international governance, economic investment, and environmental security.

Policy Option	Summary
Hawkish Policy	Effective short-term deterrent but risks existential escalation. Suitable for demonstrating strong U.S. resolve.
Diplomatic Policy	Offers a balanced and adaptable approach, minimizing immediate escalation risks while strengthening regional deterrence.
Status Quo Policy	Maintains stability but risks diminishing U.S. influence and Taiwan's security over the long term.

The hawkish policy option is the most aggressive, advocating for a significant military buildup, expanded icebreaker capabilities, and the establishment of permanent bases to project power and deter adversarial expansion. The diplomatic approach leverages diplomacy and economic pressure, using sanctions, trade restrictions, and strategic partnerships to limit adversarial influence while avoiding direct military escalation. The status quo approach maintains current policies, relying on existing international frameworks and minimal increases in military or economic engagement to manage competition in the Arctic.

Hawkish Policy Option 1

Category	Characteristics
Diplomatic Policy	Assert U.S. dominance in Arctic governance, isolate adversarial influences (Russia and China), and push for NATO expansion into Arctic security matters.
Military Policy	Establish permanent Arctic military installations, aggressively expand icebreaker and naval presence, and conduct frequent high-intensity military exercises to deter threats.
Regional Policy	Challenge Russian claims over Arctic waterways, deploy advanced surveillance and missile defense systems, and integrate Arctic allies into a joint security framework.

Category	Characteristics
Economic Policy	Fast-track U.S. Arctic resource extraction, block Chinese and Russian economic footholds, and secure critical mineral dominance to outcompete geopolitical rivals.

The United States must assert its dominance in the Arctic as a matter of strategic necessity, ensuring that adversarial influences, Russia and China, are systematically isolated from the region’s governance. Russia has long viewed the Arctic as a core element of its strategic depth, militarizing the region and claiming vast stretches of Arctic waterways as its own. During this time, Russia worked constructively with the other Arctic nations to shape a framework for regional governance—one that upheld their sovereignty, established guidelines for handling territorial disputes, and aimed to divide control over Arctic resources primarily among Arctic states while keeping outside powers largely on the sidelines.⁵⁰ China has positioned itself as a “near-Arctic state” despite lacking Arctic territory, seeking economic and political leverage over regional affairs. China’s emergence as a major Arctic stakeholder has been years in the making, driven largely through science diplomacy. Beginning with the purchase of its first icebreaker in 1994 and the establishment of the Yellow River Station in Svalbard, Norway, by 2004, China laid a foundation of scientific engagement to secure observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013 to expand its influence in the region.⁵¹ Institutions like the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center and joint observatories with Iceland and Finland have allowed Beijing to gather data, foster diplomatic ties, and project soft power—while raising suspicions about dual-use capabilities and strategic surveillance. These efforts are tied to

⁵⁰ Klimentenko, Ekaterina. “Russia’s Arctic Aspirations.” (page 6)

⁵¹ Xinhua. “Chinese Expedition Team Kicks Off Research At Arctic Yellow River Station.”

China's broader Polar Silk Road strategy, which is embedded in national security law and Five-Year Plans, positioning the Arctic (alongside the Antarctic, deep sea, and space) as a strategic frontier where China intends to shape the international rules and secure access to resources, data, and influence.⁵² To counter these threats, the U.S. must take the lead in Arctic diplomacy, actively shaping governance structures to exclude and isolate adversarial actors. Washington should drive the expansion of NATO's Arctic security role, ensuring that allied nations such as Canada, Norway, and Denmark are fully aligned in containing Russian and Chinese ambitions. Furthermore, the U.S. must reinforce diplomatic efforts within the Arctic Council to limit Russia's influence while fostering a security-oriented agenda that prioritizes Western interests.

Militarily, the United States must make a decisive commitment to the Arctic by establishing permanent installations to project power and deter adversarial incursions. The strategic importance of the Arctic has prompted discussions on enhancing U.S. military capabilities in the region. Analysts have highlighted the need for the United States to establish a more robust presence to deter adversarial actions, particularly in response to Russia's extensive military infrastructure.⁵³ Russia has already constructed over 50 Arctic military sites, including air bases, radar stations, and missile defenses, and since 2005, Russia has reopened numerous Soviet-era Arctic military bases, modernized its navy, and developed new missile systems with powerful and multi-layered air defense and coastal defense capabilities, including S-400 and S-300 air defense systems, P-800 Oniks anti-ship cruise missiles, and Kalibr-NK land-attack cruise missiles, enhancing its military footprint in the region.⁵⁴

⁵² Pelaudeix, Cécile. "Along the Road: China in the Arctic." (page 3)

⁵³ Greenwood, Jeremy. "Great Power Competition and Overseas Basing in the Arctic."

⁵⁴ Boulègue, Mathieu. "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic."



*Mike Nudelman/Business Insider*⁵⁵

Regionally, the U.S. must challenge Russia's expansive territorial claims over Arctic waterways, particularly along the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Moscow has increasingly claimed that this passage is an internal waterway, imposing restrictions on foreign vessels and militarizing key choke points.⁵⁶ The U.S. takes a firm stance by deploying freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) to assert international access to these waters. Simultaneously, advanced surveillance and missile defense systems should be deployed to monitor and counter any Russian or Chinese military movements in the region. Integrating Arctic allies into a joint security framework is also critical—cooperative defense initiatives with Canada, Norway, and Denmark will strengthen deterrence efforts while ensuring a unified response to potential threats.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Nudelman, Mike, and Jeremy Bender. "This Map Shows Russia's Dominant Militarization of the Arctic."

⁵⁶ Todorov, Andrey. "New Russian Law on Northern Sea Route Navigation: Gathering Arctic Storm or Tempest in a Teapot?"

⁵⁷ Coffey, Luke. "Time Right for More Freedom of Navigation Operations in the Arctic."

Economic dominance in the Arctic is equally crucial for securing U.S. interests. The region is home to vast reserves of critical minerals, hydrocarbons, and rare earth elements essential for modern technology and defense industries. Securing these resources is vital for U.S. national security, as emphasized by the Department of Defense, which highlights the importance of a stable supply chain for producing defense systems ranging from unmanned aerial vehicles to submarines.⁵⁸ The U.S. must fast-track resource extraction projects, particularly in Alaska, to reduce dependence on foreign supply chains and gain a competitive edge over adversaries. At the same time, Washington should take aggressive measures to block Chinese and Russian economic expansion, using investment screening mechanisms and sanctions to prevent state-backed enterprises from establishing footholds in Arctic infrastructure. Ensuring that key energy and mining projects remain under U.S. or allied control will prevent adversarial economic coercion and safeguard strategic resources for future national security needs.

The United States must also work to secure Arctic trade routes, which are becoming increasingly viable due to climate change. As ice recedes, new maritime pathways such as the Northwest Passage and the Transpolar Sea Route will emerge as critical corridors for global commerce. The U.S. should position itself to control and regulate these trade routes, ensuring that Western-aligned nations, rather than authoritarian adversaries, benefit from Arctic economic expansion. This effort will require both military and commercial investments, including modernizing Arctic ports, enhancing maritime infrastructure, and incentivizing private sector participation in Arctic logistics.

⁵⁸ Vergun, David. “Securing Critical Minerals Vital to National Security, Official Says.”

Ultimately, the Arctic is not just an emerging frontier—it is a battleground for geopolitical dominance. The United States must take swift, aggressive, and decisive action to prevent Russia and China from gaining the upper hand in this strategically vital region. The Center for European Policy Analysis emphasizes that the evolving Arctic security landscape necessitates proactive measures by the U.S. and NATO to deter Russian aggression and maintain regional stability.⁵⁹ Similarly, The Arctic Institute highlights the need for the U.S. to engage in trans-polar trade routes to counterbalance Russia's military presence and China's expanding influence. These perspectives underscore the urgency for the U.S. to adopt a robust and strategic approach to safeguard its interests in the Arctic.⁶⁰ By asserting dominance in diplomatic, military, regional, and economic spheres, Washington can ensure that the Arctic remains an arena of Western strength rather than a contested gray zone vulnerable to authoritarian encroachment. A failure to act quickly and with a tough stance will cede influence to adversaries who are already moving aggressively to shape the future of the Arctic to their advantage. The time to hawkishly secure American interests in the High North is now.

Diplomatic Policy Option 2

Category	Characteristics
Diplomatic Policy	Use diplomatic and economic pressure to isolate Russia and China in Arctic affairs while leveraging sanctions and strategic agreements to force compliance with U.S. interests.
Military Policy	Conduct persistent military operations, including Arctic naval patrols and airspace enforcement, to challenge adversarial movements and signal U.S. control over the region.

⁵⁹ Ålander, Minna, Mathieu Boulègue, Charlotta Collén, Edward Lucas, Catherine Sendak, and Krista Viksnins. “Up North: Confronting Arctic Insecurity Implications for the United States and NATO.”

⁶⁰ Basak, Ashton. “The Arctic Trilemma: The United States Must Compete for the Transpolar Sea Route.”

Category	Characteristics
Regional Policy	Leverage military and economic dominance to pressure Arctic nations into aligning with U.S. security priorities while undermining Russian territorial claims.
Economic Policy	Impose trade restrictions on adversaries exploiting Arctic resources, seize economic leverage over Arctic supply chains, and counter foreign investments with U.S.-led projects.

The United States must adopt a diplomatic strategy to secure its dominance in the Arctic, leveraging diplomatic, military, and economic pressure to isolate adversarial powers—primarily Russia and China—and force compliance with U.S. interests. The Atlantic Council's recent issue brief details Russia's use of economic pressure to intimidate European neighbors and its militarization of the Arctic, suggesting the need for countermeasures.⁶¹ Diplomatically, Washington should employ a combination of sanctions, strategic agreements, and economic restrictions to diminish Russian and Chinese influence in Arctic governance. This includes working with allied nations to exclude both adversaries from key regional decision-making bodies, such as the Arctic Council, while simultaneously leveraging trade policies to impose economic costs on their Arctic activities. By linking Arctic cooperation with broader geopolitical issues—such as Russia's aggression in Ukraine and China's unfair trade practices—the U.S. can use diplomatic pressure as a tool to enforce alignment with Western interests.

On the military front, the U.S. must establish an enduring presence in the Arctic through persistent naval patrols and airspace enforcement operations. By conducting regular freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in contested Arctic waters, the U.S. can directly challenge Russian claims and reinforce international access to critical shipping routes. Simultaneously,

⁶¹ Brzezinski, Ian, and Ryan Arick. "Issue Brief: A NATO Strategy for Countering Russia."

U.S. forces should maintain a near-constant presence in the region, deploying advanced surveillance aircraft, submarines, and warships to monitor and deter adversarial activity. Military exercises should be conducted with increasing frequency and intensity, ensuring that both Russia and China recognize the costs of any attempt to assert dominance in the region. The clear demonstration of U.S. force will serve as a deterrent, signaling that any hostile action in the Arctic will be met with an immediate and overwhelming response.

Regionally, the United States must use its military and economic strength to pressure Arctic nations into aligning with American security priorities while actively undermining Russian territorial claims. This requires pushing U.S. allies—such as Canada, Denmark, and Norway—to fully integrate their Arctic security policies with American strategic objectives, ensuring a unified front against adversarial expansion. Economic incentives should be used to sway neutral Arctic nations, offering infrastructure investments and trade benefits in exchange for stronger alignment with U.S. security goals. At the same time, Washington should challenge Moscow’s excessive territorial claims through legal mechanisms, diplomatic pressure, and military posturing, making it clear that no Russian expansion in the Arctic will go unchallenged.

Economically, the U.S. must weaponize trade policy to restrict adversarial access to Arctic resources and supply chains. This includes imposing targeted trade restrictions and sanctions on Russian and Chinese companies involved in Arctic development, denying them critical investment opportunities. The U.S. should also work to dominate Arctic resource extraction and logistics, ensuring that American-led projects control key energy and mineral supplies. By seizing economic leverage over Arctic industries, Washington can deny adversaries the ability to profit from the region while securing long-term dominance over critical supply

chains. For instance, the U.S. Department of State announced sanctions to degrade Russia's energy sector, which is a primary source of revenue fueling Russia's activities, while the U.S. has also expressed concerns over China-Russia cooperation in developing Arctic shipping routes, viewing it as a challenge to its strategic interests.⁶² Foreign investments in Arctic infrastructure should be systematically countered with U.S.-backed projects, effectively blocking adversaries from gaining a foothold in the region.

To consolidate control over Arctic trade routes, the U.S. should enforce strict regulatory measures that disadvantage adversarial nations while ensuring Western-aligned countries benefit from Arctic commerce. By leveraging its naval dominance and regulatory influence, Washington can make it difficult for Russia and China to operate freely in Arctic shipping lanes, restricting their economic opportunities and reinforcing American control over key trade corridors. This approach will force adversaries to either comply with U.S. economic and security interests or risk being locked out of the Arctic's emerging economic opportunities.

A diplomatic Arctic policy is essential to securing U.S. strategic interests and preventing adversarial powers from expanding their influence. Through a combination of diplomatic isolation, military enforcement, regional pressure, and economic dominance, the United States can establish itself as the uncontested power in the Arctic. By taking aggressive measures now, Washington can ensure that the Arctic remains a domain of Western strength rather than a contested space vulnerable to Russian and Chinese encroachment. The U.S. must make it clear that any effort to undermine its Arctic position will be met with decisive consequences.

Status Quo Policy Option 3

⁶² Office of the Spokesperson, Office of the Spokesperson. "Sanctions to Degrade Russia's Energy Sector."

Category	Characteristics
Diplomatic Policy	Maintain leadership in the Arctic Council, uphold international law, and cooperate with allies to balance Russian and Chinese influence without direct confrontation.
Military Policy	Sustain current Arctic military capabilities, conduct joint exercises with NATO partners, and gradually expand icebreaker and surveillance assets.
Regional Policy	Support allied Arctic nations, ensure freedom of navigation, and monitor Russian military activity while avoiding escalation.
Economic Policy	Promote responsible resource development, encourage private-sector investment in Arctic infrastructure, and safeguard critical supply chains without aggressive intervention.

The United States should maintain a steady and balanced approach to Arctic policy, preserving its leadership in the region while avoiding direct confrontation with Russia and China. Diplomatically, this means continuing to play a central role in the Arctic Council, reinforcing international legal norms, and working closely with allies to counterbalance adversarial influence without resorting to aggressive measures. The U.S. should leverage its existing alliances with Canada, Norway, and Denmark to ensure that Western interests are protected while promoting cooperative engagement in scientific research, environmental protection, and regional governance. Rather than seeking to exclude Russia and China outright, Washington should use diplomatic channels to hold them accountable to established Arctic norms and agreements, ensuring that their actions remain transparent and constrained by international law. This policy option advocates for upholding international law and norms, engaging with allies and partners, and supporting institutions like the Arctic Council to manage the region's increasing activity.⁶³

The 2024 Department of Defense Arctic Strategy outlines a "monitor-and-respond" approach to

⁶³ Zellen, Barry. "Russian Aggression Gives US Excuse to Focus Military, and More, on Arctic."

preserve regional stability, enhance domain awareness, and strengthen collaboration with allies to deter adversarial influence without direct confrontation.⁶⁴

Militarily, the U.S. should sustain its current Arctic defense posture while making gradual, strategic enhancements to its capabilities. Joint exercises with NATO partners should continue to reinforce readiness and interoperability, demonstrating a collective commitment to Arctic security without provoking unnecessary escalation. The U.S. should also take a measured approach to expanding its Arctic assets, prioritizing investments in icebreakers, surveillance systems, and maritime infrastructure to improve situational awareness and operational reach. By maintaining a steady presence and avoiding overt militarization, Washington can effectively deter adversarial actions without triggering an arms race in the region.

Regionally, the United States must remain committed to supporting allied Arctic nations while ensuring freedom of navigation through international waters. This requires continued engagement with partners like Canada and the Nordic countries to strengthen regional security coordination and intelligence-sharing mechanisms. Monitoring Russian military activity is essential, but any response should be carefully calibrated to avoid unnecessary provocations. The U.S. should focus on reinforcing legal norms and diplomatic efforts to address territorial disputes and maritime access rather than pursuing direct confrontations that could destabilize the region.

Economic policy should focus on fostering responsible resource development while encouraging private-sector investment in Arctic infrastructure. The U.S. must ensure that its economic activities in the region align with long-term environmental sustainability and do not

⁶⁴ Secretary Of Defense, Secretary Of Defense. “2024 Arctic Strategy.”

contribute to unnecessary geopolitical tensions. By safeguarding critical supply chains and facilitating private investment in energy, minerals, and shipping infrastructure, Washington can support economic growth in the Arctic without resorting to heavy-handed intervention or direct competition with adversarial nations. This is reinforced by The U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region, released in October 2022, which emphasizes fostering responsible resource development and encouraging private-sector investment said Arctic infrastructure.⁶⁵ The strategy outlines plans to invest in infrastructure, enhance access to services, and support the development of industries that expand economic opportunities for local communities while ensuring that economic activities align with long-term environmental sustainability and do not contribute to unnecessary geopolitical tensions.⁶⁶ The strategy aims to strengthen the resilience of U.S. supply chains by exploring sustainable and responsible critical mineral production in Alaska.⁶⁷ Trade and commerce should be guided by a pragmatic approach that balances economic opportunity with strategic caution. The U.S. should remain open to Arctic economic cooperation where it aligns with national interests while implementing safeguards to prevent undue foreign influence over critical industries. By working with allies and the private sector, Washington can ensure that economic development in the region remains secure and beneficial without disrupting the broader geopolitical balance.

A status quo policy ensures stability in the Arctic while protecting U.S. strategic interests through diplomacy, military readiness, and responsible economic growth. By avoiding

⁶⁵ Middleton, Alexandra. "Security and Economic Development: The US National Strategy for the Arctic Region 2022."

⁶⁶ Middleton, Alexandra. "Security and Economic Development: The US National Strategy for the Arctic Region 2022."

⁶⁷ The White House, The White House. "National Strategy for the Arctic Region."

unnecessary confrontation while reinforcing existing capabilities, the U.S. can maintain its leadership in Arctic affairs without escalating tensions with Russia and China. This approach prioritizes long-term engagement, upholds international norms, and ensures that the Arctic remains a stable and cooperative environment for future generations.

Decision Criteria

I evaluated my three policy options using five main decision criteria: technical correctness, political supportability, implementability, risks (including externalities and unintended consequences), and sustainability.

Criteria	Description
Technical Correctness	Assesses whether the policy effectively deters Russia and Chinese aggression and achieves the desired outcome.
Political Supportability	Evaluates the likelihood of support from key stakeholders, including Congress, the President, and the public.
Implementability	Analyzes the feasibility of enacting the policy, including resource availability and logistical challenges.
Risk Consideration	Examines potential externalities, unintended consequences, and the likelihood of escalation or backlash.
Sustainability	Considers the policy's long-term viability and adaptability to evolving geopolitical dynamics.

The first, technical correctness, assesses whether the proposed policy option effectively achieves the desired outcome—in this case, maintaining stability and preventing geopolitical conflicts in the Arctic. I analyze whether the outputs of each policy option sufficiently deter aggressive actions by regional or external powers, ensuring that the Arctic remains a zone of cooperation rather than confrontation.

Next, I evaluate political supportability, considering whether key stakeholders—such as the U.S. government, Arctic Council member states, and international organizations—are likely

to endorse and support each policy option. I specifically analyze the extent to which the U.S. Congress, executive leadership, and allied Arctic nations (including Canada, Norway, and Denmark) might be amenable to each policy proposal.

The third criterion, implementability, assesses whether the policy options are feasible given available resources, logistical constraints, and legal frameworks. This includes examining whether the U.S. and its allies can enact legislation, deploy necessary assets, and coordinate diplomatic efforts to implement the policy. I also consider whether the proposed solutions are realistic in terms of cost-effectiveness and the time required for implementation.

I also evaluate each policy option based on risk considerations, which include potential externalities and unintended consequences. Even well-designed policies can introduce risks, such as increased militarization, diplomatic backlash, or economic repercussions that could undermine Arctic cooperation. A careful analysis of these risks helps ensure that the chosen policy minimizes negative fallout while maximizing strategic benefits.

Finally, I consider sustainability, assessing whether each policy option is viable over time, given the evolving geopolitical and environmental dynamics in the Arctic. This includes examining whether the policy can adapt to future changes, such as shifting climate patterns, emerging energy interests, or evolving international legal norms. A sustainable policy should maintain U.S. strategic interests in the Arctic without requiring constant adjustments that could undermine its long-term effectiveness.

By evaluating my policy options through these five decision criteria, I ensure a balanced and strategic approach that aligns with U.S. national security interests while fostering stability

and cooperation in the Arctic region. Here is a chart that organizes the decision criteria into clear columns:

Criteria	Hawkish	Diplomatic	Status Quo
Technical Correctness	Strong deterrence but risks escalation	Effective balance, avoids provocation	Limited impact on deterring Russia and China's advances
Political Supportability	Support from hawkish lawmakers, divisive.	Bipartisan potential aligns with key policies.	Broad support but lacks momentum for change.
Implementability	High resource needs and diplomatic barriers.	Moderately challenging relies on existing frameworks.	Simple to maintain under current structures.
Risk Consideration	Escalation, economic retaliation, credibility risks.	Reduced risk of immediate escalation.	Long-term erosion of deterrence capabilities.
Sustainability	High initial impact, declines over time.	Adaptable to changing dynamics.	Less viable as Russia and China's power grows.

Hawkish Policy Option 1– Forward Military Presence and Strategic Assertion

A Hawkish Policy in the Arctic focuses on establishing military dominance through a strong forward-deployed presence to deter adversarial expansion, particularly from Russia and China. This approach would involve expanding military bases in Alaska, increasing the number of operational icebreakers, enhancing air and naval patrols, and engaging in more frequent NATO-led military exercises in the Arctic region. The U.S. would also conduct Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge Russian and Chinese territorial claims in the Arctic. The objective is to demonstrate strategic resolve and readiness to defend U.S. interests while ensuring adversaries recognize the Arctic as a critical national security priority.

Sustainability

A Hawkish Policy has an immediate impact in establishing deterrence but presents significant long-term sustainability challenges. The Arctic is an extreme environment that requires specialized infrastructure, training, and equipment, all of which demand high levels of continuous investment. Unlike Russia, which has developed an extensive Arctic military infrastructure, the U.S. currently lacks essential logistics support in the region, making it difficult to sustain prolonged operations. Military hardware, such as icebreakers and Arctic-capable aircraft, have long lead times for production and require significant budget allocations. Over time, political shifts and budget constraints could lead to reduced funding, weakening the long-term sustainability of this policy. Furthermore, environmental concerns related to increased military activity in the Arctic could generate pushback from global climate organizations, limiting U.S. maneuverability in the region. The policy, while effective in the short term, risks becoming unsustainable due to economic, logistical, and environmental factors.

Risk Consideration

The primary risk of a hawkish Arctic policy is military escalation with Russia, which has the world's most significant Arctic military presence, including nuclear-capable submarines, air defense systems, and a vast fleet of icebreakers. By expanding U.S. military activities in the Arctic, Russia may perceive this as a direct threat to its strategic security, prompting increased militarization on its side. This could lead to direct confrontations between U.S. and Russian forces in the region, heightening the risk of miscalculation and conflict escalation. China, while not an Arctic nation, has expanded its involvement in Arctic infrastructure projects and shipping lanes. If the U.S. takes an aggressive stance, China could align more closely with Russia to

counterbalance U.S. influence, leading to a strategic disadvantage for Washington. Economic retaliation is a potential consequence, as Russia and China may impose counter-sanctions or disrupt Arctic trade routes, impacting global supply chains. Another risk factor is the credibility of U.S. commitments—if the U.S. initiates a hawkish approach but fails to sustain the required military build-up, it could weaken global perceptions of U.S. deterrence capabilities.

Implementability

A Hawkish Policy is difficult to implement due to its high resource requirements and diplomatic barriers. The U.S. would need to significantly expand Arctic military infrastructure, which requires long-term funding commitments and logistical investments in icebreakers, surveillance systems, and military bases. The U.S. Coast Guard, Navy, and Air Force would need to increase Arctic-specific training programs, and additional personnel rotations in harsh conditions would create new operational challenges. Furthermore, the U.S. would need to navigate diplomatic tensions with Arctic allies such as Canada, Norway, and Denmark (via Greenland), as these nations prioritize cooperative security approaches rather than full-scale militarization. Another major obstacle to implementation is congressional approval for increased defense spending, as many policymakers may prioritize other defense commitments in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East over Arctic militarization.

Political Supportability

A Hawkish Policy would receive strong support from national security hawks, defense industry stakeholders, and policymakers advocating for strong military deterrence. Key members of Congress, particularly those aligned with defense-heavy states such as Alaska, would likely champion increased military spending on Arctic operations, icebreaker expansion,

and military base development. This policy would also be highly divisive, as moderate and progressive lawmakers would likely oppose increased militarization due to its high costs, environmental concerns, and risks of escalation. NATO allies and Arctic Council members may not fully support this policy, as militarization could undermine diplomatic efforts that prioritize peaceful cooperation in Arctic governance. Environmental organizations and climate-focused policymakers would also resist expanded military operations in the region, particularly if they interfere with climate change mitigation efforts in the fragile Arctic ecosystem.

Technical Correctness

From a military and strategic standpoint, a Hawkish Policy is technically sound as it provides immediate and credible deterrence against adversarial expansion. The presence of Arctic-capable military assets, enhanced air and naval patrols, and expanded NATO-led operations would ensure that Russia and China do not outpace the U.S. in Arctic security affairs. This approach assumes that military deterrence alone can counter adversarial ambitions, which may not hold true if Russia and China pursue non-military strategies, such as economic investment and soft power influence in the region. The technical feasibility of maintaining full-scale Arctic military operations year-round remains uncertain, as extreme weather conditions and limited existing infrastructure pose operational challenges.

Pros and Cons

A Hawkish Policy in the Arctic centers on military dominance through an expanded forward-deployed presence aimed at deterring adversarial advances, particularly from Russia and China. This strategy would involve bolstering U.S. military bases in Alaska, increasing the fleet of operational icebreakers, intensifying air and naval patrols, and conducting more frequent

NATO-led military exercises in the region. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) would also challenge Russian and Chinese territorial claims. The goal is to showcase strategic resolve and reinforce U.S. interests while solidifying the Arctic as a key national security priority.

The primary advantage of this policy is its immediate and strong deterrent effect, signaling U.S. commitment to Arctic security and reassuring allies. It enhances NATO's strategic position in the region while increasing American control over vital Arctic trade routes and resource-rich zones. The policy comes with substantial risks. Chief among them is the potential for military escalation, particularly with Russia, which already possesses the most extensive Arctic military infrastructure, including nuclear-capable submarines, air defense systems, and a large icebreaker fleet. The financial burden of sustaining an Arctic military presence is considerable, requiring continuous investment in infrastructure, equipment, and training. Diplomatically, a militarized Arctic approach may strain relations with Arctic allies and international organizations that prioritize cooperative security. Environmental concerns also loom large, as increased military activity in the fragile Arctic ecosystem could provoke global criticism.

Sustainability is another major challenge. While this approach establishes deterrence in the short term, long-term viability remains questionable due to economic constraints, logistical difficulties, and environmental considerations. Unlike Russia, which has spent decades building an extensive Arctic military network, the U.S. lacks essential logistical support in the region, making sustained operations challenging. Military assets such as icebreakers and Arctic-capable aircraft require long lead times for production and significant funding commitments. Over time, shifting political priorities and budget limitations could erode the policy's effectiveness.

Environmental opposition from global climate organizations may further restrict maneuverability, adding another layer of complexity to the policy's sustainability.

Risk considerations extend beyond military escalation. If the U.S. aggressively asserts its presence in the Arctic, Russia may interpret this as a direct security threat, leading to a corresponding militarization response and heightening the chances of direct confrontation. Since China is expanding its influence through Arctic infrastructure investments and shipping lanes, a hawkish U.S. approach could push China and Russia closer together, creating a strategic disadvantage for Washington. Economic retaliation is also a potential consequence, as adversaries could disrupt Arctic trade routes or impose counter-sanctions that affect global supply chains. Moreover, if the U.S. initiates an aggressive Arctic posture but fails to sustain it, it risks undermining the credibility of its deterrence, weakening its global strategic position.

Implementing this policy presents significant challenges due to its high resource demands and diplomatic complexities. Expanding Arctic military infrastructure requires long-term funding and logistical investments in icebreakers, surveillance systems, and military bases. The U.S. Coast Guard, Navy, and Air Force would need to develop Arctic-specific training programs, while personnel rotations in harsh Arctic conditions would create operational difficulties. Diplomatic friction with key Arctic allies such as Canada, Norway, and Denmark (via Greenland) is another hurdle, as these nations favor cooperative security approaches rather than outright militarization. Securing congressional approval for increased defense spending on Arctic operations may prove difficult, as competing defense priorities in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East could take precedence over Arctic militarization.

The political supportability of a Hawkish Arctic Policy is mixed. National security hawks, defense industry stakeholders, and policymakers focused on military deterrence would likely endorse this approach, particularly representatives from defense-heavy states such as Alaska. Moderate and progressive lawmakers may resist the policy due to its high costs, environmental implications, and risk of military escalation. Internationally, NATO allies and Arctic Council members may express reservations, as Arctic militarization could undermine existing diplomatic efforts centered on peaceful cooperation. Environmental organizations and climate-focused policymakers would also push back, arguing that expanded military operations could disrupt fragile Arctic ecosystems and climate mitigation efforts.

From a technical standpoint, a Hawkish Policy is strategically sound, providing immediate and credible deterrence against adversarial expansion. Arctic-capable military assets reinforced air and naval patrols, and expanded NATO-led operations would ensure that the U.S. remains a dominant security force in the region. The assumption that military deterrence alone can counter adversarial ambitions may be flawed, particularly if Russia and China adopt non-military strategies such as economic investment and soft power initiatives to expand their influence. The feasibility of maintaining full-scale Arctic military operations year-round remains uncertain due to extreme weather conditions and limited infrastructure. While technically viable, the policy's effectiveness depends on sustained investment, long-term strategic commitment, and careful diplomatic balancing to mitigate risks of escalation and global pushback.

Diplomatic Policy Option 2 – Strategic Engagement with Deterrence

A Diplomatic Policy balances military deterrence with diplomatic engagement, economic measures, and hybrid security strategies to ensure U.S. Arctic security while avoiding unnecessary provocation. This approach leverages multilateral partnerships, intelligence-sharing, cyber deterrence, and economic pressure to counter adversarial influence in the Arctic. Instead of full-scale militarization, it focuses on strategic investments in dual-use Arctic infrastructure, such as scientific research facilities with embedded security capabilities. By blending deterrence with diplomacy, the U.S. can assert its influence without escalating tensions with Russia and China.

Sustainability

This policy is highly sustainable because it integrates military readiness with diplomatic, economic, and technological strategies, allowing the U.S. to maintain a strong Arctic presence without excessive financial burdens. Unlike a purely hawkish approach, which requires continuous military expansion, a diplomatic strategy leverages existing alliances (NATO, Arctic Council) and international frameworks to share the costs and responsibilities of Arctic security. Investing in dual-use infrastructure—such as research stations that support both scientific and security objectives—ensures that U.S. efforts remain relevant even as geopolitical conditions shift. By diversifying security measures, this approach is more flexible and adaptable to long-term Arctic challenges, including climate change, evolving trade dynamics, and shifting global power balances.

Risk Consideration

A diplomatic approach significantly reduces the risk of direct military confrontation, as it does not rely solely on military buildup or aggressive force posturing. Instead, it uses economic

sanctions, cybersecurity defenses, and diplomatic alliances to exert pressure on adversarial actors. This lowers the risk of unintended escalation, particularly with Russia, which already has a strong Arctic military presence. There is a risk that adversaries may test the limits of U.S. deterrence if they perceive that the U.S. is unwilling to use force when necessary. While hybrid deterrence strategies are effective in curbing economic and cyber threats, they may be less effective in countering physical military expansion in Arctic territory. Diplomatic policies require continuous diplomatic coordination, meaning that any breakdown in alliances or strategic partnerships could weaken the overall effectiveness of deterrence efforts.

Implementability

A Diplomatic Policy is moderately challenging to implement, but it benefits from building on existing diplomatic and security structures. The U.S. already has strong Arctic partnerships through NATO, and reinforcing these partnerships would require only incremental increases in intelligence-sharing, security coordination, and infrastructure investment. Unlike a Hawkish Policy, which demands significant military spending and force deployment, coercion relies on enhancing existing security frameworks and using targeted deterrence tools (such as cybersecurity, economic sanctions, and Arctic-specific intelligence gathering). Successful implementation depends on interagency coordination between the State Department, Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, and Arctic-focused agencies like the U.S. Coast Guard. Implementing coercion could become inefficient or inconsistent without clear strategic cohesion across these departments.

Political Supportability

This policy has bipartisan appeal because it combines assertive national security posturing with diplomatic engagement, making it a more politically viable option than direct militarization. Conservative lawmakers and national security hawks may support it because it includes measures to counter Russian and Chinese influence. At the same time, moderate and progressive policymakers may endorse it because it avoids unnecessary military escalation. Environmental organizations and Arctic Indigenous groups may support this policy because it includes sustainable development initiatives and protects Arctic communities from militarization risks. While some defense-focused policymakers may argue that this strategy is not aggressive enough, its combination of security, diplomacy, and economic engagement makes it a feasible and politically balanced option.

Technical Correctness

From a strategic standpoint, a Diplomatic Policy is technically effective in balancing military deterrence and diplomatic engagement. It enables the U.S. to maintain influence over Arctic security while minimizing the risk of provocation and financial overextension. The integration of economic deterrence (sanctions on Arctic resource extraction), cyber defenses (protecting critical Arctic infrastructure), and hybrid security strategies makes this approach multifaceted and adaptable. This policy assumes that adversaries will respond to diplomatic and economic pressure, which may not always be the case. If Russia and China continue military expansion despite economic deterrence, this policy may require additional military adjustments to remain effective.

Pros and Cons

A Diplomatic Policy—Strategic Engagement with Deterrence—effectively balances military deterrence with diplomacy, economic measures, and hybrid security strategies to secure U.S. interests in the Arctic without unnecessary provocation. This approach integrates multilateral partnerships, intelligence-sharing, cyber deterrence, and economic tools to counter adversarial influence while avoiding the high costs of full-scale militarization. The U.S. can maintain a strong presence without escalating tensions with Russia and China by focusing on dual-use infrastructure, such as research facilities with embedded security capabilities. This strategy enhances Arctic partnerships, ensuring the security burden is shared rather than solely on the U.S.

One key advantage of this approach is its cost-effectiveness. Unlike a purely hawkish policy that demands significant military expansion, a diplomatic strategy leverages existing alliances, including NATO and the Arctic Council, to distribute security responsibilities. This makes the policy highly sustainable, integrating military readiness with diplomatic, economic, and technological strategies. It offers a more flexible and adaptive security posture, responding to evolving geopolitical conditions, climate change, and shifting trade dynamics.

The policy also minimizes the risk of direct military confrontation by prioritizing economic sanctions, cybersecurity defenses, and diplomatic coordination over aggressive force posturing. This reduces the likelihood of unintended escalation with Russia, which has already established a strong Arctic military presence. There is a potential downside—adversaries like Russia and China may perceive the lack of immediate military force as a weaker deterrent, possibly testing the limits of U.S. resolve. Furthermore, the policy's effectiveness is heavily

dependent on the strength and cohesion of diplomatic alliances. If key partnerships falter, the deterrent effect of this strategy could diminish.

Implementing a diplomatic strategy presents moderate challenges, but it benefits from existing diplomatic and security structures. Strengthening Arctic partnerships would require only incremental increases in intelligence-sharing, security coordination, and infrastructure investment. Unlike a hawkish approach, which necessitates substantial military spending, this policy relies on enhancing current security frameworks and employing targeted deterrence tools, such as cybersecurity measures, economic sanctions, and Arctic-specific intelligence gathering. Successful implementation demands strong interagency coordination between the State Department, Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, and Arctic-focused agencies like the U.S. Coast Guard. Without clear strategic cohesion, inefficiencies or inconsistencies could weaken its impact.

Politically, this policy is widely supportable across party lines. It appeals to conservative lawmakers and national security hawks by addressing Russian and Chinese influence while also garnering support from moderates and progressives who favor diplomatic engagement over militarization. Environmental organizations and Arctic Indigenous communities may endorse it due to its emphasis on sustainable development and the avoidance of large-scale military buildup in the region. While some defense-focused policymakers may argue that the approach lacks sufficient aggression, its combination of security, diplomacy, and economic engagement makes it a feasible and balanced national security strategy.

From a technical standpoint, a diplomatic policy is strategically sound. It effectively integrates deterrence and diplomacy to maintain Arctic security while minimizing financial

overreach and unnecessary escalation. The policy's reliance on economic sanctions, cyber defenses, and hybrid security measures creates a multidimensional approach to deterrence. It assumes that adversaries will respond to diplomatic and economic pressures, which may not always be the case. If Russia and China continue their military expansion in the region despite economic deterrence, additional military adjustments may be necessary to ensure long-term effectiveness.

Status Quo Policy Option 3 – Limited Engagement with Minimal Risk

A Status Quo Policy maintains the current level of U.S. engagement in the Arctic without significant expansions in military or diplomatic efforts. This approach focuses on limited Coast Guard patrols, diplomatic engagement through the Arctic Council, and encouraging private sector investment in Arctic development. While this policy prioritizes stability and avoids escalation, it risks allowing adversaries to gradually expand their control over Arctic trade routes and resources.

Sustainability

The Status Quo Policy is easy to maintain in the short term, as it does not require additional funding or major strategic shifts. However, its long-term sustainability is questionable as Russia and China continue to expand their Arctic influence. Without a more proactive security strategy, the U.S. risks falling behind in Arctic security, potentially ceding influence over key trade routes and strategic zones.

Risk Consideration

The primary risk of this policy is the long-term erosion of U.S. deterrence capabilities. By failing to counter growing Russian and Chinese influence in the Arctic, the U.S. may find

itself at a strategic disadvantage in the future, making it harder to protect national security and economic interests in the region.

Implementability

This policy is the easiest to implement, as it requires no major policy shifts or financial commitments. Maintaining the status quo delays necessary Arctic security enhancements, meaning that future intervention may become more difficult and expensive.

Political Supportability

While this policy enjoys broad support from moderates, it lacks momentum for change. National security advocates and defense policymakers will likely push for stronger deterrence strategies, arguing that the U.S. is falling behind its adversaries in Arctic security.

Technical Correctness

While technically feasible, this policy does not effectively deter adversaries. As Russia and China expand their Arctic presence, maintaining the status quo risks diminishing U.S. strategic influence over time.

Pros and Cons

The Status Quo Policy—Limited Engagement with Minimal Risk—maintains the current level of U.S. involvement in the Arctic without significant expansions in military or diplomatic efforts. This approach relies on limited Coast Guard patrols, diplomatic engagement through the Arctic Council, and private sector investment in Arctic development. One of the key advantages of this policy is its low cost and the ability to avoid immediate military escalation. By maintaining diplomatic channels without provocation, the U.S. can continue engaging with other Arctic nations while minimizing the risk of conflict. This strategy has significant drawbacks. It

fails to deter adversarial expansion, particularly from Russia and China, both of whom are increasing their influence in the Arctic. This lack of deterrence weakens U.S. authority in Arctic security affairs and leaves the nation vulnerable to long-term strategic setbacks. Over time, the erosion of U.S. influence could make protecting the region's national security and economic interests more challenging. While the status quo is easy to maintain and politically viable among moderates, it lacks the proactive measures needed to secure U.S. interests against growing geopolitical competition.

Recommendation

To secure U.S. strategic interests in the Arctic, the United States must adopt a diplomatic policy framework that asserts dominance, deters adversaries, and ensures regional stability under American influence. This approach, grounded in Policy Option 2, leverages military presence, economic measures, and diplomatic pressure to counter rising threats, particularly from Russia and China. Militarily, the U.S. must expand its Arctic-capable forces, increasing naval and air patrols while establishing permanent military installations in Alaska and allied Arctic nations. Given Russia's militarization of the Arctic—marked by expanded bases, missile installations, and nuclear-capable forces—the U.S. must bolster its defense posture through increased joint military exercises with NATO allies, pre-positioning of military assets, and the development of ice-hardened naval capabilities. The expansion of the U.S. icebreaker fleet, which currently lags behind Russia's, is critical for sustained Arctic operations. Furthermore, a dedicated Arctic Command within the U.S. military would enhance operational coordination, ensuring rapid response capabilities to emerging threats while asserting American sovereignty in the region. The reactivation of the 11th Airborne Division in Alaska would aim to enhance Arctic operations.

This effort would be part of a broader approach to counter the growing influence of Russia and China in the Arctic region.⁶⁸

Economically, the U.S. must counterbalance China's expanding Arctic investments, which threaten to erode American influence and grant Beijing de facto control over key energy and trade corridors. Washington should strengthen investment partnerships with Arctic allies, ensuring that strategic infrastructure—such as ports, energy exploration projects, and telecommunications—remains under the control of U.S. and allied entities. The U.S. should implement more targeted economic sanctions against Chinese and Russian entities seeking to exploit Arctic resources in a manner that threatens American security. Such as, the U.S. Department of the Treasury has already started to take action against Russian efforts to evade U.S. sanctions, targeting schemes involving actors in Russia and China facilitating cross-border payments for sensitive goods.⁶⁹ In parallel, increasing federal investment in Arctic research, energy exploration, and sustainable development will ensure that the U.S. maintains a competitive economic foothold in the region. By leveraging trade restrictions and regulatory barriers, Washington can prevent adversarial nations from using Arctic routes to circumvent existing sanctions, thereby tightening economic pressure while securing critical supply chains.

Diplomatically, the U.S. must take the lead in Arctic governance to marginalize adversarial influence and solidify cooperative security arrangements. Within the Arctic Council, Washington should advocate for stricter regulatory frameworks that limit the ability of China—despite its “near-Arctic state” claims—and Russia to exploit the region for geopolitical gain. The

⁶⁸ Panella, Chris. “The US Army Has Its Eyes on the Arctic and Is Ready Soldiers for the Cold, Unforgiving Wastes That Could Be Their next Battlefield.”

⁶⁹ U.S. Department of the Treasury, U.S. Department of the Treasury. “Treasury Disrupts Russia's Sanctions Evasion Schemes.”

U.S. should also establish a formal Arctic Security Pact with NATO allies, reinforcing collective defense commitments and ensuring rapid military mobilization in response to provocations. Strengthening diplomatic and economic ties with Canada, Norway, Denmark, and Finland will create a unified front against Russian and Chinese encroachment. Finally, the U.S. must integrate the Arctic strategy into broader Indo-Pacific and European security frameworks, recognizing that competition in the Arctic is deeply linked to global power dynamics. A diplomatic strategy that blends military strength, economic leverage, and diplomatic leadership will ensure that the Arctic remains a domain where American interests are protected, adversaries are deterred, and regional stability is maintained under U.S. leadership.

Conclusion

The Arctic represents one of the last great frontiers of global competition, where strategic foresight and decisive action will determine whether the United States maintains its leadership or allows rivals to gain the upper hand. The rapid melting of ice has unlocked unprecedented opportunities for trade, resource extraction, and military positioning, yet Washington's response has been fragmented and reactive. Russia has solidified its Arctic supremacy through an extensive military buildup, including nuclear-powered icebreakers, missile defense systems, and advanced submarine deployments. Moscow's militarization of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) further tightens its grip on regional trade, granting it both economic leverage and strategic depth in a region where the U.S. presence remains comparatively weak. China, though lacking official territorial claims, continues its economic expansion under the guise of scientific research and infrastructure development, embedding itself in Arctic affairs through strategic investments in Greenland and Russian energy projects. If the U.S. fails to counteract these maneuvers with a

comprehensive and assertive Arctic strategy, it risks not only losing its influence in the region but also allowing its adversaries to dictate the future of Arctic governance, resource allocation, and security arrangements.

A diplomatic approach, which carefully balances military strength, economic influence, and diplomatic leadership, offers the best path forward for securing U.S. dominance in the High North. This strategy requires a robust military presence, including expanded joint exercises with NATO allies, permanent Arctic military installations, and a significantly enhanced icebreaker fleet to maintain operational superiority. Economic measures must include greater federal investment in Arctic energy and rare earth mineral extraction, ensuring that critical supply chains remain under U.S. and allied control rather than falling into Chinese hands. The U.S. has expressed concerns over foreign investments in strategic regions like Greenland, emphasizing the need for thorough investment screening to safeguard national security interests. Washington must also implement aggressive investment screening to prevent Beijing from using financial influence to secure long-term economic dominance in Arctic infrastructure projects.⁷⁰

Diplomatically, the United States must lead in shaping Arctic governance, advocating for stricter regulations within the Arctic Council, and forming a dedicated Arctic Security Pact with NATO allies to counter Russian militarization. The Arctic is no longer a remote and frozen wasteland but a battleground for economic supremacy, military strategy, and geopolitical influence. The United States must act decisively, leveraging all elements of national power to secure its long-term strategic interests. A failure to do so will weaken America's position in the Arctic and

⁷⁰Lucht, Hans. "Chinese Investments in Greenland Raise Us Concerns ..."

embolden its adversaries to reshape the region in ways that fundamentally threaten U.S. security and economic prosperity for generations to come.

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