

# Preparing for the Unexpected

## Enhancing Army Readiness in the Arctic

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**T**oday’s security environment is one expressed in distinct lexicon; phrases like great-power competition, near-peer threat, and large-scale combat operations have become firmly mainstream. These descriptors—primarily oriented toward China and Russia—will rightfully play a visible role in future defense strategy and policy. At the same time, however,

military planners must steadfastly prepare for global contingencies not associated with the Pacific and European theaters. In the closing days of his chairmanship with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford gave clear intent on contingency planning when he stated that “priorities don’t mean exclusivity.”<sup>1</sup> Contingency readiness also features prominently in the 2018 *National Defense Strategy’s* Dynamic Force Employment concept, a joint force employment model

designed to “account for the uncertainty that exists in the changing global strategic environment.”<sup>2</sup>

This guidance clearly reflects a world that is ever-changing and marked by ubiquitous threats. While the nature of these threats compels military planners to look to the east and the west, they would be wise to also look to the north. In its 2019 strategy report to Congress, the Department of Defense (DOD) uses the word “threat” thirteen times to describe the Arctic theater. Moreover, this strategy outlines its Arctic objectives in unambiguous terms, stating that the U.S. military “must be able to quickly identify threats in the Arctic, respond promptly and effectively to those threats, and shape the security environment to mitigate ... those threats in the future.”<sup>3</sup> With this in mind, the Army must take steps to enhance its Arctic posture through a training-and-equipping effort commensurate with the theater’s strategic importance.

Once considered a conflict-free zone, the Arctic has largely been defined by international cooperation. At its inception in 1996, the Arctic Council embodied this spirit by altogether excluding the issue of security in its establishment declaration.<sup>4</sup> This overt commitment to consensus over conflict was apt for the time, but over two decades onward, the landscape has changed considerably. According to NATO, the Arctic Council’s current agenda is largely driven by “hard security concerns”; a statement that stands in stark contrast to the body’s original founding.<sup>5</sup>

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Moreover, a mix of trends that include increased human activity, enhanced accessibility to the region, and population growth is fueling global interest in the region and portends a future marked less by cooperation and more by geopolitical maneuvering.<sup>6</sup>

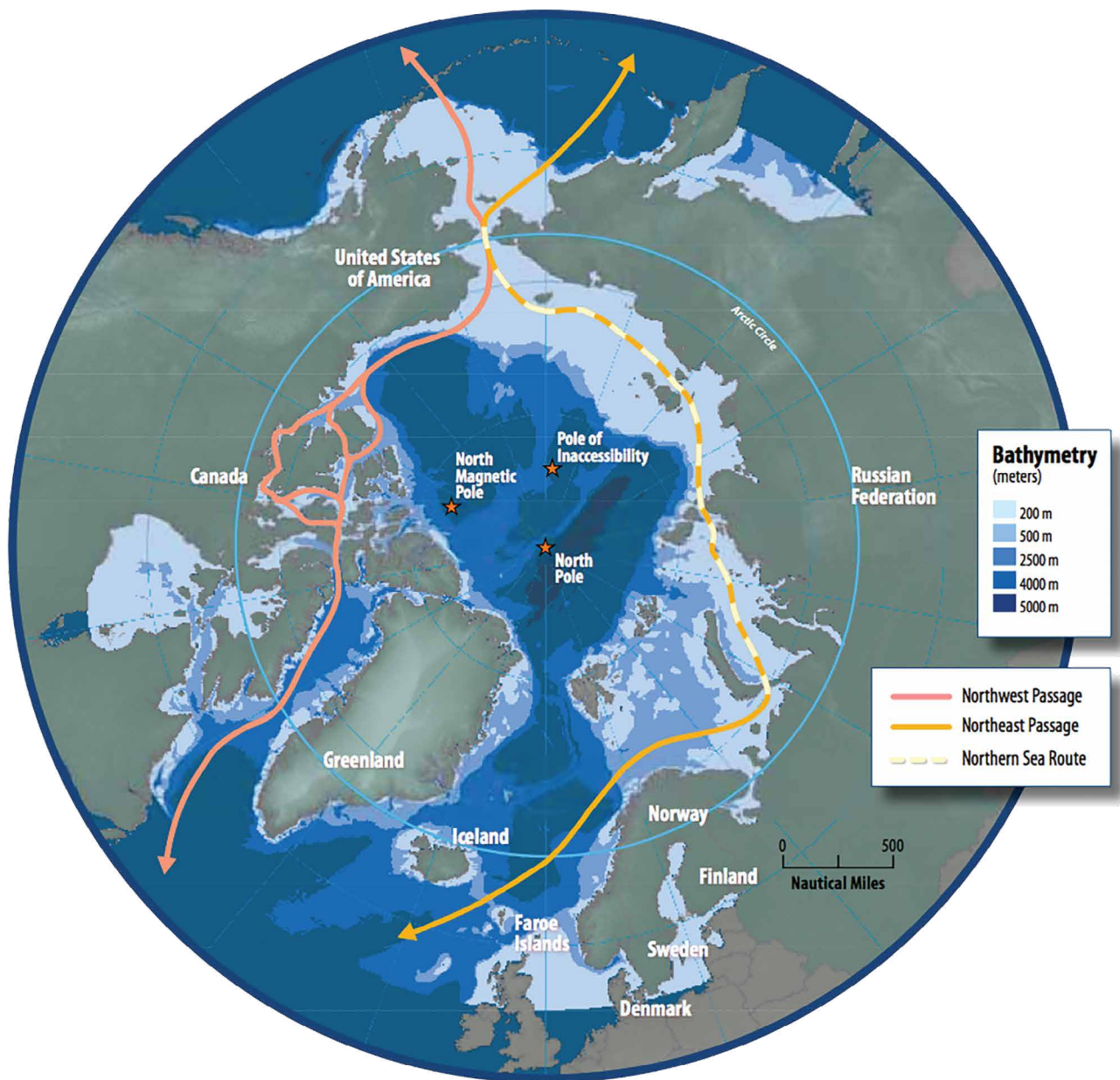
The importance of this theater to American competitors is abundantly clear, because one-fifth of Russia's gross domestic product comes from the Arctic, and estimates of Chinese investment in the region are upward of \$90 billion.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Russia's military buildup in the Arctic is undeniable—as evident in its fleet of icebreaker ships, military base infrastructure, and employment of personnel in training exercises.<sup>8</sup> During this year's Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo brought all of this into sharp focus when he declared that “the [Arctic] region has become an arena for power and for competition” and subsequently outlined a range of hard measures aimed at protecting U.S. interests and preserving international norms in the region.<sup>9</sup> In light of these developments, and even as experts continue to weigh the evidence and assess the future, it is increasingly clear that today's Arctic is one where the ideas of great-power competition are already in full motion.

Soldiers assigned to 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, participate in a combined arms live-fire exercise 15 March 2018 during Alaskan Command's exercise Arctic Edge 18 at Fort Greely, Alaska. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. Efren Lopez, U.S. Air Force)

U.S. military services and American allies have taken notice because recent activities indicate a growing commitment to enhance Arctic readiness; however, more can and must be done. While many acknowledge that U.S. strategic interests in the region most closely align with the activities of the Navy, Coast Guard, and Air Force, all agree that the Army's Arctic capabilities and presence will be vitally important to efforts moving forward. Therefore, the Army should operationalize the Arctic strategy through concrete and modest steps, all of which align with the DOD's roadmap for implementation.

## Build Arctic Awareness

Training is a centerpiece of the “Arctic Strategy,” which states that the “DOD will demonstrate and enhance the Joint Force's ability to operate in the Arctic through regular exercises and deployments in the



(Map by Susie Harder [2009], Arctic Council/Arctic marine shipping assessment)

## Arctic Region Shipping Routes

region.”<sup>10</sup> Despite this very clear guidance, many agree that the current level of training is out of balance with the Arctic’s strategic significance. While there is no question that the Army maintains some level of preparedness through the Arctic Edge exercise series and the Alaska-based Northern Warfare Training Center (NWTC), the 2019 strategy necessitates a change in Arctic training activities to ensure maximum readiness.

Specifically, the Army should adopt a rotational unit program that exposes more brigade combat teams to the rigors of Arctic operations because this will ensure optimal readiness across the force. As it currently stands, only five of the Army’s fifty-eight brigade combat teams train in Arctic-like conditions, and while this may make sense from a monetary and logistical point of view, broadening the training audience to include



more units based in the continental United States is the optimal approach for the future.<sup>11</sup>

Importantly, a rotational unit concept will complement intertheater readiness by training forces in conditions found in three different combatant commands: Northern Command (NORTHCOM), European Command, and Indo-Pacific Command. At a more basic level, exposing more units to cold weather training will build toughness in the force, enhance situational understanding for leaders, and test deployment capabilities at all organizational levels. Recent exercises in high north locations such as Alaska and Norway underscore this latter point, as units and installations were considerably tested on “fort to port” logistics; joint reception, staging, onward movement, and integration activities; and intratheater movement.<sup>12</sup> Given the Army’s senior leader emphasis on strategic readiness, recently defined by Secretary of the Army Ryan McCarthy as the “capability to rapidly mobilize and deploy forces anywhere in the world and sustain the Joint Force,” availing more Army units and installations to the unique training opportunities in the Arctic is a logical next step.<sup>13</sup>

If deploying additional units for cold-weather maneuver training is not feasible in the short term, then interim steps should be explored. Expanding the NWTC to accommodate more units and leaders from across the Army is one such step as this would build upon the NWTC’s decades-long record of successfully training thousands of soldiers.<sup>14</sup> Dr. Anthony Pfaff, a former Arctic policy advisor at the Department of State, agrees. In a 2019 analysis in *Parameters*, Pfaff notes that training data from the NWTC indicate that “fighting expertise is limited to Soldiers stationed in

Alaska” and should therefore prompt an expansion of training audiences.<sup>15</sup> Other options are at the Army’s disposal, such as growing the Army’s emergency deployment readiness exercises program to include Arctic environs. This low-cost, high-payoff activity is yet another means by which the Army can measure power projection capabilities and readiness for an Arctic contingency. Finally,

the Army should continue to increase participation in symposia, tabletop exercises, and plenary sessions that aim to enhance understanding and develop solutions to Arctic challenges. Events such as the 2018 RAND-organized and Norwegian Institute of International Affairs-sponsored scenario-based exercise as well as the U.S. Alaska

Command Arctic Symposium 2019 are examples of collaborative engagements.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, robust participation in these events will provide the intellectual backbone and interagency connectedness necessary to inform strategy modifications in the future.

## Strengthen the Rules-Based Order and Deter Aggression

Homeland defense is a central tenant of the *National Defense Strategy*, which establishes that continued investment in air and missile defense (AMD) is necessary to protect the United States and its allies. This guidance is echoed by the Army that listed AMD as one of six enterprise modernization priorities in its 2019 strategy document and established a cross-functional team dedicated to AMD modernization.<sup>17</sup> These efforts clearly signal strong commitment to future readiness; however, investment in current technologies is also needed. McCarthy underscored this point in his



U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson addresses the 10th Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting 11 May 2017 in Fairbanks, Alaska. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Air Force)





12 September 2019 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, stating that the Army missile defense has “atrophied a great deal” since the onset of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup>

This stark assessment, combined with increased geographic combatant command demand for missile defense assets, should focus efforts not only on the future force but also on existing AMD infrastructure. To this end, a close examination of missile defense assets aligned to the Arctic is warranted because recent activities in the theater highlight a need to recapitalize these formations. Specifically, preparations for Arctic Edge 2020, a NORTHCOM-sponsored exercise that will occur in winter months, indicate that Patriot units possess degraded communications and end-item protective gear that is necessary to operate critical equipment in extreme cold weather (ECW) conditions.<sup>19</sup> More broadly, the current communications equipment standard issue that exists for Army air defense units is not sufficient to meet the demands of the Arctic, which can reach temperatures of minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>20</sup> These seemingly minor equipment difficulties are not trivial; many argue that the Army’s ability to pace adversarial threats vis-à-vis ground-based air defense assets is at risk without a fix. Moreover, given the vital nature of AMD to the homeland defense mission, the Army can expect to consistently provide air defense units to NORTHCOM for exercises and real-world purposes in the future, thus making investment in ECW equipment both sensible and necessary.

## Enhance Arctic Operations

Equipment readiness is front and center within the “Build Readiness” line of effort of the 2019 Army

Strategy. Specifically, the strategy outlines a clear goal to “modernize Soldier Organizational Clothing and Individual Equipment issue by tailoring it to support deployments.”<sup>21</sup> For too long, the Army’s notion of a deployment was, and is, associated with the U.S. Central Command theater of operations; however, for all of the aforementioned reasons, the Army must broaden its equipment issue to account for all operational environments. Therefore, the Army should take appropriate steps to procure an ECW inventory that will enable soldiers and critical equipment to operate effectively in the Arctic.

Soldier gear is recognized as the most important pillar of a larger equipment winterization strategy, which experts define as individual equipment and Arctic kits designed for heat, fluid resiliency, and water freeze prevention.<sup>22</sup> While the specifics of any future winterization strategy can and should be debated, current theater concept of operation plan guidance charges the services with ECW equipment training and procurement, thus making this a matter of imperative importance.<sup>23</sup> Adding to this urgency, any future procurement plan will likely rely on heavy commercial involvement. While off-the-shelf solutions have proven to be very efficient in the past, current ECW equipment fielding estimates range between six to nine months—a factor that should compel immediate steps.<sup>24</sup> In sum, the complexity of the Arctic environment does not lend itself to ad hoc equipping solutions but rather a concerted strategy that builds upon the numerous lessons learned endogenous to the Army.

Many argue that the costs of fielding ECW will divert much-needed resources away from higher priorities—a claim that certainly bears merit. Therefore, the Army should initiate the first step in an enterprise-level ECW solution by funding a cold-weather equipment set to air defense artillery units expected to operate in the Arctic. Such a step would promote readiness for this high-demand asset and meet the specified tasks outlined in current theater plans and strategies. Beyond the short term, ECW procurement should be accounted for in the next program objective memorandum because this will serve as a significant step in advancing the objectives laid out in the Arctic Strategy.

In a similar vein, the Army should take steps to invest in an Arctic infrastructure footprint that will assure a “fight tonight” posture for the future. This step

**Top left:** The Yamal LNG (liquefied natural gas) initiative—located on the Yamal Peninsula, six hundred kilometers north of the Arctic Circle, in Western Siberia—is spearheaded by Russia and supported by Chinese and French interests. The commercial operation of the port and the first LNG train were launched on 8 December 2017. (Photo by Alten Group/courtesy of Novatek)

**Bottom left:** U.S. Navy Ice Camp Nautilus drifts on a sheet of ice in the Arctic Ocean 18 March 2014 during Ice Exercise (ICEX) 2014. ICEX 2014 was an exercise highlighting submarine capabilities in an Arctic environment. (Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Joshua Davies/Dr. Amy Sun, Lockheed Martin)

would both buttress senior leader emphasis on strategic readiness and ensure that the Army can meet its responsibilities under the aforementioned Dynamic Force Employment concept. Specific measures to enhance power projection to austere Arctic locales such as prepositioning ECW equipment at “in-stride” locations like Joint Base Lewis-McChord and constructing additional cold weather infrastructure within Alaska that can house equipment, personnel, and maintenance materiel should be considered moving forward.<sup>25</sup>

Aside from these specific Army measures, the larger strategic picture of the Arctic must be assessed through current plans and doctrine. While the previously mentioned big-power competition ideals are beginning to manifest in the north, the Arctic is also a theater where asymmetric provocation will undoubtedly occur in the future. As such, the services and combatant commands should continue to fully exercise authorities to review the Unified Command Plan (UCP) and to make recommendations to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff if changes are necessary. The 2011 UCP embodied this notion, as President Barack Obama made changes to both combatant command geographic boundaries and responsibilities in the Arctic based on a changing strategic environment.<sup>26</sup> Eight years later, the world is more complex and dangerous, and as such, the UCP is tested more than ever by the exogenous nature of existing threats. Recent doctrinal updates like the *Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning* and organizational changes such as merging global joint force

integration into the chairman’s portfolio are notable efforts to meet the challenges of the day.<sup>27</sup> Similar efforts to bolster the force’s ability to respond to an Arctic contingency will most certainly be required if we are to execute decision-making at what Dunford described as “the speed of relevance.”<sup>28</sup>

Today, the Army fills over 60 percent of combatant command requirements across the globe.<sup>29</sup> This statistic highlights the exigent demands on the force and underscores the belief that committing more resources to the Arctic would undermine readiness for more likely conflict scenarios in Europe, the Pacific, or the Middle East. Others advocate for the Arctic to remain an economy of force mission with American allies shouldering significant responsibility for protecting American interests in the Arctic. These concerns are problematic, however, as the former ignores the clear security trends emerging in the Arctic while the latter underestimates the power of American influence. More fundamentally, numerous senior leaders have described the Arctic as an avenue of attack against the homeland, an outlook that should inspire Army planners to commit intellectual effort to advancing the department’s inchoate strategy.<sup>30</sup> In the end, there is no question that the military must balance priorities and resources and that hard choices will need to be made. However, the confluence of threats and interests in the Arctic demands that the Army adopt a range of operationally enhancing measures in the near future. ■

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## Notes

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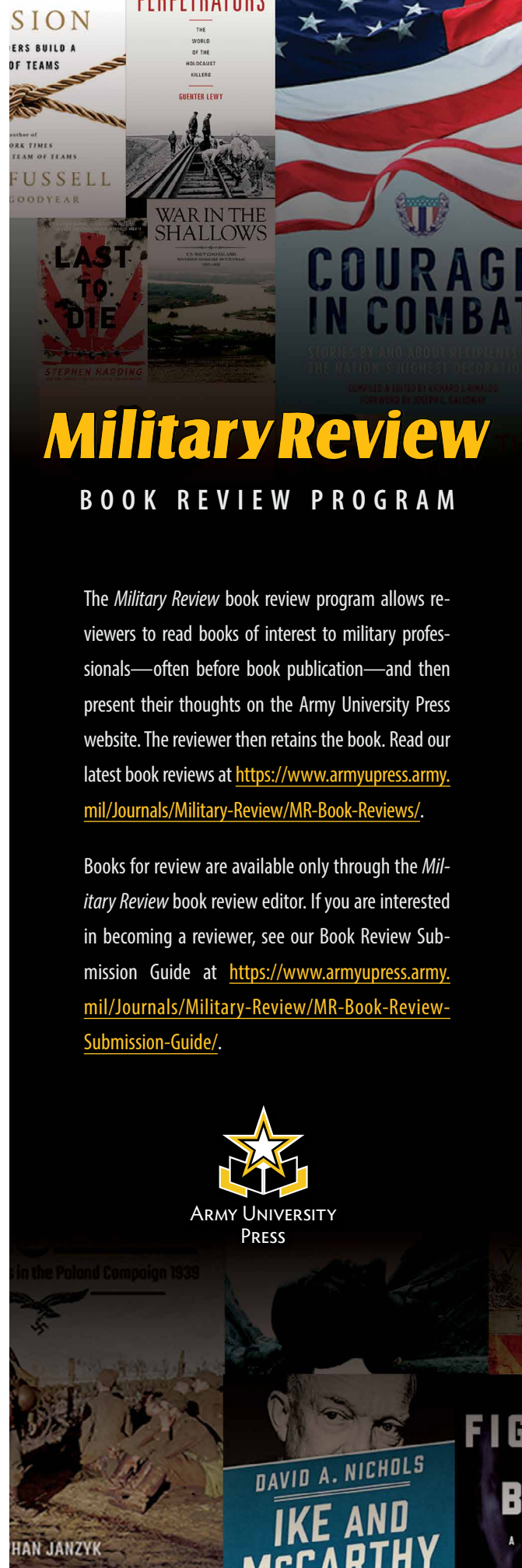
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