



Lt. Col. Ethan Diven and Command Sgt. Maj. Evan Lewandowski lead a group of soldiers from the 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne) United States Army Alaska toward an extraction point after a successful airborne operation during Exercise Spartan Pegasus in Deadhorse, Alaska, on 22 February 2017. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Daniel Love, U.S. Army)

The Arctic Cold War

Competition and Deterrence at Our Northern Doorstep

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We're at a pivotal point on the timeline of the Arctic ... what we have to do now is be prepared to fight here and defend here.

—Lt. Gen. David Krumm, Commander of the Alaskan Command (2020)

Until recently, the Arctic has been known as an austere, inaccessible, and excessively harsh environment left to rogue explorers and hardened researchers. However, the formerly remote and untouched frontier is now becoming a competitive region. Polar ice melt opens access to rich natural resources and new shipping lanes which significantly shorten transnational sea routes. This brings not only resource competition, but also military competition.¹ A literal “cold war” is emerging in the Arctic. The United States must act now to remain competitive, to retain its freedom of access in the region, and to prevent a miscalculated conflict at America’s northern doorstep. For its part, the U.S. Army must transform its Arctic forces to deter conflict in the region—without provocation—by being present, increasing exercises with sister services, cooperating more with other Arctic nations, and refocusing on where and when it trains. Further, the Army in Alaska must transform and organize itself for both effective deterrence and command within the region.

The U.S. must be present, relevant, and capable in the region to deter any potential adversaries, especially as U.S. rivals increase their Arctic operations. For example, Russia, which claims 70 percent of the Arctic seabed, is expanding its military activity daily.² Last fall, its military conducted exercises in the Bering Sea, within the U.S. economic zone.³ These exercises included the largest number of sea and air forces Russia has mobilized in decades, sending a clear message about its Arctic intentions. Its naval maneuvers disrupted fishermen and harassed commercial vessels in an attempted display of dominance. It also maintains a large fleet of over 45 icebreakers to show its commitment and level of national interest in the region.⁴ In contrast, the United States, which is also an Arctic nation via Alaska, has a total of two icebreakers. Even China, in its ravenous quest to grab global resources, is now calling itself a “near Arctic state,” as it extends its “Polar Silk Road” initiative.⁵ It often conducts reconnaissance-like explorations around Alaska and the greater Arctic.

In response, the Department of Defense (DoD) and each of the U.S. Armed Services, to include the Coast Guard, have developed Arctic strategies to address the region’s emerging challenges and threats. Executing these strategies will undoubtedly be challenged by limited existing resources and future budget constraints. An effective Army component in support of these strategies must be a priority.

The Army’s 2021 strategy, “Regaining Arctic Dominance, calls for “regaining our Arctic focus” by developing the right “doctrine, training, and equipment.”⁶ The U.S. Army in Alaska can do this without a significant strain on resources and budgets. It can be more prepared by increasing cooperation with other Arctic nations. It must deter, and if necessary, defeat aggression as an allied force—it’s how we did it throughout our history and it’s how we will do it in the future.

Likewise, the Army will fight as part of a joint force in the future. Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen must continuously train together: the more repetitions, the better they will be in the event of a crisis or conflict.

The U.S. Army in Alaska must increase troop exchanges, and practice cold weather and mountain training with its Arctic allied and partner nations: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. It can do the same with other extreme cold weather or mountainous nations such as Nepal, India, Mongolia, South Korea, and Japan. Together, it can share expertise and experience to hone its skills in extreme environments.

Teaming with the other nations and sister services can maximize resources, expand learning, demonstrate unity, and create parity. Training alongside allies and partners, and across sister services, sends competitors a message of unity and resolve, and emphasizes the Arctic as a defense priority. Potential adversaries understand the power and influence of multinational efforts, as well as of capability, will, and joint warfighting synergy.

We all must train as we will fight. Where and when we train is also crucial. Intuitively, the Army must conduct training in the harsh elements of Alaska and other extreme-cold regions, which replicate the environments in which soldiers may fight. Instead of moving troops and

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equipment thousands of miles to train at California's temperate Fort Irwin National Training Center or Fort Polk, Louisiana's Joint Readiness Training Center, warfighting training should happen in Alaska, during winter.

Establishing a Joint, Pacific Multinational Readiness Center (JPMRC) in Alaska would permit units assigned to defending U.S. Arctic interests to perform critical warfighting training in an extreme cold weather environment. This would also save significant time and money associated with sending personnel and equipment to the "lower 48." With more training in Alaska and more focus on conducting high-intensity training during the winter months, Army units in Alaska could build upon the Arctic expertise they need to be the force's Arctic experts. To achieve this, the Army must also transform its Alaskan force.

Transforming the Army in Alaska requires both technological innovation and better organizational design. Its regional sister services are already pursuing one or both of these ambitions. Last year, for example, the Air Force based an F-35 Wing in Alaska.⁷ The Coast Guard plans on building at least three more icebreakers.⁸ The Army can also increase its capabilities in the Arctic without a dramatic troop increase or additional cost. Emerging multi-domain capabilities—like hypersonic weapons, cyber task forces, electronic warfare, and air defense elements—can add significant force capabilities and enhance deterrence by presenting potential adversaries with multiple dilemmas to confront. But technology alone is not the solution. The Army headquarters in Alaska is administrative in nature and is not designed for crisis or conflict. It must therefore "operationalize" and transform into a tactical, fighting headquarters, fully capable of planning, training, and commanding Army forces during a crisis or conflict.

Force structure should also be adjusted to align a new purpose with a new "Arctic" identity. In lieu of the current, multiple unit patches and confusing titles, the U.S. Army in Alaska needs a clear identification, such as

"Task Force Arctic" or "First Arctic Command" to signal a visible change in commitment. Instead of deploying on other potentially distracting missions, troops in this new Arctic organization must be true Arctic experts, solely focused on surviving, operating, and fighting in extreme cold weather, at high altitudes, in mountainous terrain.

During the Aleutian Campaign in WWII, the privation and suffering endured by U.S. forces was overcome only by creative and adaptive soldiers on the ground.⁹ Poorly equipped and lacking proper training, U.S. forces were unprepared for the challenges ahead of them, as they struggled against both the enemy and the weather. It was only through perseverance, discipline, and grit that the Army overcame adversity and reclaimed lost U.S. territory. The U.S. Army can overcome similar conditions in a future conflict by having a strong, organized presence that is properly trained and equipped for Arctic warfare and for deterrence against any adversary which may want to test U.S. resolve in the region.

Some may argue that now that the old Cold War is over, we don't need to create a new one in the Arctic—we're already stretched too thin. A resurgent and aggressive Russia, with its increased military activity in the Arctic, and an overly assertive China, both indicate that a ready and capable U.S. Arctic force presence is more than necessary. There is also a concern that changing force structure is a slow and arduous process, but that should not deter America from aligning the right structure to the mission at hand.

In the end, the Arctic does not have to remain a vulnerability; nor do we have to "militarize" the Arctic. With purposeful teamwork beside fellow Arctic nations and service teammates, coupled with technological innovations, proper structure, and focused training, the Army can be strong and competitive in the Arctic—without this being a drain on resources. Only an Army that is present, relevant, and capable can deter conflict, keep the region at peace, and assist in regaining U.S. military dominance in the Arctic. ■

Notes

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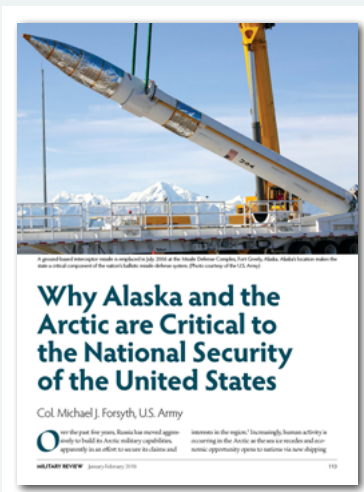
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<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/Forsyth-why-alaska-and-arctic-are-critical.pdf>



"Great Power Collaboration? A Possible Model for Arctic Governance," by Maj. Dai Jing, Singapore Armed Forces; and Master Sgt. Raymond Huff, U.S. Army

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/JF-20/Huff-Jing-Arctic.pdf>



"Preparing for the Unexpected: Enhancing Army Readiness in the Arctic," by Lt. Col. Kirby R. "Bo" Dennis, U.S. Army

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/JA-20/Dennis-Arctic-Readiness.pdf>