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Arctic Security: Five Principles That Should Guide U.S. Policy

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The Arctic region is home to some of the roughest terrain and harshest weather found anywhere in the world. Arctic ice is increasingly melting during the summer months, causing new challenges for the U.S. in terms of Arctic security. For example, the decreasing presence of ice will mean new shipping lanes opening, increased tourism, and further natural resource exploration.

This means that more actors than ever before will be operating in the region, and this will present both challenges and opportunities for the U.S. Consequently, the U.S. should organize its Arctic security capabilities appropriately. The decisions and investments made now will greatly impact how the U.S. handles future Arctic security challenges.

1. National Sovereignty as the Highest Priority. National sovereignty should be the cornerstone of

U.S. Arctic policy. In the Arctic, sovereignty equals security and stability. Respecting the national sovereignty of others in the Arctic while maintaining the ability to enforce one's own sovereignty will ensure that the chances of armed conflict in the region remain low.

The question of sovereignty is also important in terms of defining actors in the Arctic. Only national or sub-national bodies (indigenous people, for example) or purely intergovernmental organizations (such as the Arctic Council or NATO) should have a role in Arctic matters. Nevertheless, due to the possibility of shipping lanes opening, some non-Arctic countries may also have a stake, however small, in the region. For example, the Chinese have applied for Permanent Observer status in the Arctic Council. However, supranational bodies such as the European Commission should be excluded from having a formal role in Arctic matters.

2. A Focus on Situational Awareness. In many ways, the U.S. is blind in the Arctic. Anyone who has visited or operated in the Arctic will agree that situational awareness of what is happening in the region is extremely important for maintaining security there. Since

the distances are vast, the terrain is harsh, and the weather is extreme, achieving situational awareness in the Arctic region is a challenge in itself.

The Arctic environment affects many capabilities that are required for good situational awareness. For example, high-frequency radio signals are degraded in latitudes above 70 degrees north due to magnetic and solar phenomena. The Global Positioning System (GPS), which is heavily relied on by both civilian and military authorities, is degraded due to poor satellite geometry. Navigation charts of some of Alaska's shipping lanes have not been properly surveyed since Captain James Cook sailed through in 1778.

The U.S.'s ability to locate, track, and identify surface vessels is limited and depends largely on collaboration with partner nations in the Arctic. Underfunding the civilian and military capabilities required to achieve good situational awareness simply makes an already bad situation worse.

3. A Comprehensive Approach to Arctic Security. In order to establish and maintain sovereignty, robust security capabilities—both military and civilian—are needed. There is a very low threat of armed

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conflict in the Arctic, and it is in everyone's interest to keep it that way. Currently, the biggest security challenges arise from increased shipping, for both cargo and tourists, and increased natural resource exploration resulting from new possibilities created by melting ice.

The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) has the primary responsibility for the Arctic waters of the U.S. Although the security challenges currently faced in the Arctic are not military in nature, there is still a requirement for military capability in the region that can support civilian authorities. For example, civilian search-and-rescue and natural disaster response can be augmented by the military.

Air and maritime surveillance and reconnaissance platforms operated by the military could contribute significantly to Arctic security. It is important that there is close coordination between civilian and military authorities, as both bring unique capabilities that are needed to ensure Arctic security.

4. Proper Investment. Currently, the USCG is not properly funded to carry out the tasks that are required to keep America's Arctic region secure and to enforce U.S. sovereignty in the region. The USCG has plans to extend its reach in the Arctic with icebreakers, the establishment of forward-operating locations, aviation assets, and vessels hardened to withstand the harsh conditions of the region. But it is unclear whether

this ambition will be met with financial resources.

For example, the funding for its new National Security Cutter has been reduced in the fiscal year 2013 presidential budget request without any explanation from the White House. From managing increased maritime traffic to providing search-and-rescue capability to increasing America's situational awareness, this platform is vital to ensuring America's sovereignty in the region.

The USCG also needs a new strategy for icebreaking capability. Considering the costs associated with building icebreakers and projected funding levels, the USCG will struggle to procure the six icebreakers that it deems necessary to adequately patrol Arctic waters. The USCG should explore options such as buying or even leasing commercial icebreakers with similar capabilities.

5. A Role for NATO. America's security interests in the Arctic extend beyond Alaska. Since four of the five Arctic littoral countries—in addition to Iceland—are also members of NATO, the alliance cannot afford to ignore the Arctic. Although NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept was praised for acknowledging new security challenges for the alliance such as cyber and energy security, Arctic security was not included. In fact, the word *Arctic* cannot be found in either the 2010 Strategic Concept or the 2012 Chicago NATO summit declaration.

As an Arctic power, the U.S. should be promoting Arctic awareness in the alliance and could start by calling for the next NATO summit in 2014 to be held above the Arctic Circle. This would bring immediate awareness of Arctic issues to the alliance.

The U.S. also needs to work closely with Canada, which has legitimate concerns regarding NATO's role in the Arctic. The U.S. should explain to its close partner why NATO could have a positive role in the region. Since NATO is an intergovernmental alliance of sovereign nation-states built on the consensus of all of its members, it has a role to play in Arctic security if it so chooses.

The U.S. Should Lead. America's security interests in the Arctic region will only increase in the years to come. As other nations devote resources and assets in the region to secure their national interests, America cannot afford to fall behind. Since the U.S. is the only littoral Arctic country not to have an Arctic strategy, the White House should lead on the development of a cross-government strategy. However, a strategy is meaningless without the resources to back it up.

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