

The Emerging Need for an Arctic Grand Strategy

Climate change is receiving ample attention in global media. Greta Thunberg's youthful vigor has brought renewed energy to the climate change issue, and the Democratic Party's presidential primary is full of candidates with policy recommendations to tackle carbon emissions. There are plenty of thoughtful recommendations, but few are giving strategic thought to the geopolitical implications of climate change. As ice thaws, water levels rise and new sea lanes open. Additional sea lanes can change the security calculus of nation-states.

The United States has traditionally benefitted from what scholar John Mearsheimer terms, the "staying power of water".¹ He is emphasizing that large bodies of water pose strategic and logistical problems and benefits. Nation-states separated by water are less inclined to attack each other. They are deterred by the prospects of long supply lines and of long distances that troop transports must sail. America's national defense has been geographically enhanced by major bodies of water. The Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans are often recognized as major defensive barriers, but less thought has been given to the Arctic Ocean. By default, the Arctic functions as a defensive barrier for Alaska and Canada, our North American neighbor and ally. Low temperatures have created substantial ice barriers that require passage by either submarine or icebreakers. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union developed nuclear-powered submarines and icebreakers capable of bypassing these barriers. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s largely reduced the security threat in the Arctic, but climate change is reawakening it.

The "staying power of water" is being diminished as ice melts and barriers are removed. Geographically, access to Arctic ports in Europe and North America would significantly reduce the transit time for commercial ships. Arctic sea lanes will invite further commercial activity. China is keen on taking advantage of new waterways. Beijing estimates that the Northern Sea Route (NSR) could have a two-week reduction in shipping times.² The NSR runs between Alaska's western maritime border and Russia's eastern border and extends into Northern Europe. International firms might welcome the prospects of lower costs, but security concerns must also be taken into consideration. China's navy, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), has been entrusted with "ensuring the safety of maritime transportation."³ From Beijing's point of view, Chinese commercial vessels in the Arctic Ocean provide legitimacy for PLAN vessels to operate in the Arctic. China should have the right to protect vessels sailing under the Chinese flag, but the U.S. should be concerned. The U.S. Navy (USN) and the PLAN have endured tense moments in the South China Sea, but the Arctic could bring tensions between the two maritime powers much closer to America.

America should begin reprioritizing the Arctic, using instruments of diplomatic, military, and economic power. The last national strategy on the Arctic was issued in 2013. Diplomatically, the U.S. should woo its fellow Arctic Council members (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden). China has already signed trade deals and is creating diplomatic goodwill with these nations. America needs to be just as active. The U.S. should elevate the Arctic Council's importance by appointing an ambassador-rank diplomat as its representative. Also, the U.S. should reconsider becoming a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. This will allow Arctic Council members more legitimacy in settling territorial and sovereignty issues that arise with the opening of sea

¹ Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2nd Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 2014), pp. 44, 83-84, 114-128.

² Goodman, Sherri and Elisabeth Freese, "China's Ready to Cash In on a Melting Arctic," *Foreign Policy*, May 1, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/01/chinas-ready-to-cash-in-on-a-melting-arctic>.

³ Information Office of the State Council (The People's Republic of China), *China's Military Strategy*.

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lanes. Militarily, the USN should maintain the vessels and the personnel necessary for missions in the Arctic. Research and development should include that which is necessary for vessels, armaments, and naval infrastructure to withstand frigid Arctic temperatures. Economically, America should build commercial ports and transportation infrastructure that will benefit American trade and the development of Alaska. If the Arctic becomes an economic corridor, then America should reap the economic reward. Ultimately, America needs the Arctic to be a stable, peaceful region simply because it is in our direct sphere of influence and because water has staying power; building more capabilities in the Arctic will contribute to continued American prosperity and peace. Climate change may open up the Arctic and may allow more maritime activity closer to home, but America will be ready to meet those challenges.