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A Shifting Focus of U.S. Arctic Policy: China and Security, Front and Center

August 21, 2020 By [Jason Li](#) [Commentary](#), [Defense and Security](#), [Politics and Strategy](#), [United States](#)



The USCGC *Healy* is the largest of the U.S.' icebreakers protecting national interests at the Earth's highest latitudes. Photo: [United States Coast Guard](#)

In June, the Trump administration released its first presidential memo on the Arctic, marking a significant step in crafting a strategy for the region of growing interest. The memo called on executive departments to devise a plan to launch three heavy icebreakers by 2029 and establish two domestic and two international support bases. While previous U.S. strategic documents and statements had hinted at shifting policy, the presidential memo brings into direct view two key aspects of the U.S.'s current Arctic policy.

First, the Trump administration's Arctic policy has been overwhelmingly military in focus, and attention has centered on catching up with Arctic competitors. Congress and now the White House have agreed on the need for six new "polar security cutters"

(PSC) to address the U.S.'s icebreaker deficiency, especially vis-à-vis Russia. Russia operates about 40 icebreakers, nine of which are nuclear-powered, and is soon to add almost a dozen more. The U.S. has also upped military exercises across the Arctic to expand operational capabilities. The U.S. Navy conducted its [first exercise](#) in the Barents Sea since the 1990s, and U.S. troops alongside NATO allies have continued to participate in large-scale exercises like [Arctic Edge](#) and the Norwegian-led [Cold Response](#).

Second, China has held an outsized place in the Trump administration's approach to Arctic engagement. The 2019 "Arctic Strategic Outlook" mentions China and Russia in pairs and almost the same amount of times, despite the disparate threat each poses. And while the presidential memo did not make a direct mention of it, the "[China threat](#)" in the Arctic can be read between the lines: the White House ordered the U.S. government to "evaluate defensive armament adequate to defend against threats by near-peer competitors," a term [the Pentagon](#) uses for both China and Russia. Since 2018, increased Chinese presence in the Arctic has raised red flags in Washington. The completion of Beijing's new icebreaker *Xuelong 2*, natural resource [investments](#) in Greenland, and signs of [Sino-Russian cooperation](#) have evoked fears of an encroaching China in an area Washington sees as outside Beijing's legitimate sphere of influence. In May, Navy Secretary nominee Kenneth Braithwaite [stated](#), "You'd be alarmed at the amount of Chinese activity off the coast of Norway," indicating some officials' attention to Chinese activity up north.

These two aspects seen from the presidential memo—military catchup and a focus on China—form the basis of current U.S. Arctic policy. And they are interlinked. The U.S. has perceived Chinese military threats in the Arctic across multiple domains. The Pentagon's 2019 annual report to Congress on China's armed forces devoted an entire page to "China in the Arctic" and drew a direct connection between Chinese civilian research and a "strengthened Chinese military presence in the Arctic Ocean, which could include deploying submarines." Days after the Pentagon report's release, Pompeo asked at the Arctic Council, "do we want the Arctic Ocean to transform into a new South China Sea, fraught with militarization and competing territorial claims?" And while China's icebreakers currently serve non-military purposes, speculation of military applications abounds. The *Xuelong* has conducted three research missions to collect acoustic modeling data, which [commentators](#) note is essential for Arctic submarine development.

This focus on the "[China threat](#)" is a new development in U.S. Arctic policy. Obama-era policy, such as the [2013 National Strategy for the Arctic Region](#) and the [2014 U.S. Navy Arctic Roadmap](#), made no mention of China. The Trump administration's policy, in contrast, has brought China front and center as Chinese Arctic activities have increased, not unrelated to the overall downturn in U.S.-China relations since the administration began.

The current administration's focus on the military and China aspects within Arctic policy aside, the U.S. has additional interests and responsibilities that its policy should address

moving forward. As the U.S. works to patch security weaknesses, it should address non-military threats as well. The U.S. should reincorporate, for example, climate resilience and Indigenous community development into its Arctic strategy to ensure the wellbeing of local communities. The U.S. should additionally promote stability and a rules-based order by investing in diplomatic capital and regional partners. In this vein, the reopening of the consulate in [Nuuk](#), Greenland, while most directly [motivated](#) by military factors, could have the added benefit of deepening diplomatic engagement with allies like Denmark.

U.S. policymakers should also ensure that resources and attention are spent on anticipating all threats, not just those posed by a specific strategic competitor like China. Essential to this is qualifying the urgency of threats posed by all Arctic actors independently. As U.S. Arctic policy matures and sub-strategies develop, the Pentagon and Homeland Security should issue recommendations with the unique interests and on-the-ground capabilities of each strategic competitor in mind. Russia is an Arctic state with great Arctic assets and vested interests, and China poses less traditional challenges to the region. China, for example, only operates two icebreakers and has [contracted](#) the construction of a nuclear-powered icebreaker. Considerations of Russia's overwhelming icebreaking fleet versus China's smaller fleet can help distinguish the threats posed by each country and illuminate where additional resources are best allocated.

In distinguishing these threats, context will be particularly helpful. Despite the dearth of information on China in the Arctic, it is clear that China [does not view](#) the Arctic as its primary theater. While its self-designation as a "near-Arctic" state was heavily criticized by the U.S., it represents the reluctant acceptance of China's disadvantages in the region. It will be important to reevaluate direct comparisons of the Arctic to the South China Sea – one is seen by the Chinese as an aspiration and the other as a centuries-old issue of reputation and territorial integrity – as a reconsideration of this comparison will help calculate China's risk tolerance in protecting its Arctic interests.

After many years of unfulfilled budgetary requests, the United States is finally addressing long-standing deficiencies in the U.S.'s security presence in the Arctic. Yet challenges remain. The next steps for policymakers will involve juggling multiple difficult tasks: defining the real challenges in the Arctic, prioritizing policies based on the urgency of threats, and balancing military and non-military responses. A multipronged and nuanced Arctic strategy will best prepare the U.S. to confront the diverse challenges in this arena where multiple great powers are already converging.

[Jason Li](#) is a Research Assistant with the East Asia Program at the Stimson Center, a Washington-based think tank.