Security Challenges and Opportunities in a Changing Arctic Environment

https://www.e-ir.info/2012/04/26/security-challenges-and-opportunities-in-a-changing-arctic-environment/

HEATHER CONLEY, APR 26 2012

Security Challenges and Opportunities in a Changing Arctic Environment: An American Perspective

This article has been excerpted from the CSIS Europe Program report entitled "A New Security Architecture for the Arctic: An American Perspective". For the complete report, please visit: http://csis.org/publication/new-security-architecture-arctic

The Arctic region is experiencing rapid and extraordinary environmental changes. As sea ice extent is dramatically reduced, fish stocks migrate further north and human activity increases, these changes are likely to alter the dynamics of regional commercial, human, and state interaction. For the United States, the Arctic will take on greater economic importance in the future and will require a comprehensive security strategy that includes increased regional readiness and border security, as well as an enhancement of strategic capabilities.

The security challenges in the Arctic are vast, including search and rescue, environmental remediation, piracy, terrorism, natural and man-made disaster response, and border protection. There is presently a near absence of satellite coverage, limited hydrographic mapping, difficulties of ice forecasting, and mobility constraints of ice-strengthened equipment. A coherent surveillance of ice thickness does not currently exist, a critical factor when operating tankers, oil platforms, and cruise ships in the Arctic. This problem is exacerbated by the vacillation of sea ice, which makes safe navigation of the harsh territory more difficult. In addition, magnetic and solar phenomena limit communications equipment above 70 degrees north.

The Second World War and the Cold War were the defining historical frameworks for U.S. engagement in the Arctic. During World War II, the United States needed to create supply routes by air and by sea to resupply the Soviet front through the port of Murmansk and to fend off any possible Japanese invasion of Alaska. This justified the construction of a portion of the Alaskan highway system. At the height of the Cold War, the proximity of U.S. Arctic territory to the Soviet Union was the impetus for creating a continental defense and deterrence system, the Distant Early Warning, or DEW, Line. Much of the U.S. security infrastructure that remains in the region was constructed in the 1950s and 1960s.

As the Cold War's existential threat has faded in recent decades, U.S. Arctic capabilities have also been in decline. U.S. Arctic territory occupies only a small portion of the Arctic region as a whole and is far from the political and economic centers of the country. Although Alaska serves the natural resource needs and military interests of the United States, it has not been a major focus of U.S. policy. With the exceptions of the global missile defense architecture based at Fort Greeley and the U.S. government's ongoing scientific research work, the U.S. security approach toward the Arctic has largely been to outsource requirements to foreign-flagged commercial vessels or to borrow ice-strengthened vessels from Canada, Russia, or Sweden. For many senior U.S. homeland security officials, the concept of border security relates to overall U.S. counterterrorism efforts, its southern border with Mexico, and drug and human interdiction – the most northern borders of the United States receive far less attention.

As the U.S. defense and homeland security budgets are increasingly constrained, increased spending for regions

that do not pose an immediate threat seems unlikely. Unable to make difficult and future budget decisions, Washington reverts to a near-constant assessment process of U.S. infrastructure and security needs in the Arctic (such as the upcoming FY2014 Navy Arctic Capabilities Based Assessment), suggesting that an endless assessment process is equivalent to taking decisions on a future course of action.

In stark contrast, other Arctic coastal nations have declared the Arctic a main strategic area of interest and have placed budgetary resources behind their lofty development plans. Russia, for example, has clearly made the Arctic a priority in documents such as the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020 and has backed these goals with investment in icebreakers, regional coordination centers and other border enhancements. Russia has also created incentives to encourage oil and gas development in its Arctic territories. By the end of 2011, Russia had plans to establish a brigade especially equipped and prepared for military warfare in Arctic conditions. The 200 motorized infantry brigade in Pechenga, some 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) from the Russian-Norwegian border, is the first such unit. In addition, the Russian military is considering the deployment of paratroopers from the Arctic Spetsnaz brigade.

The United States is the only Arctic coastal state that does not currently have any large-scale economic development plan for the region and has a woeful lack of Arctic military capabilities. The most definitive declaration of U.S. policy toward the Arctic, the National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD-66) on Arctic Region Policy, articulates the most pressing U.S. security interests in the region: missile defense and early-warning systems ; deployment of sea and air systems for strategic sealift, strategic deterrence, maritime presence, and maritime security operations; ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight; and preventing terrorist attacks and mitigating criminal or hostile acts that could increase U.S. vulnerability to terrorism in the Arctic region. NSPD-66 also addresses governance, scientific cooperation, environmental issues, boundaries and continental shelf disputes, and economic developments.

Although the U.S. does maintain a competitive edge in the fields of polar research and science, unfortunately, strong capabilities as an Arctic science power do not make up for the deficiency in the rest of U.S. coastal and security capabilities. For example, the U.S. Coast Guard, responsible for ice operations, search and rescue, marine environmental protection, and aids to navigation within the Arctic Circle, is struggling to maintain these critical competencies. It has no operating bases or stations above the Arctic Circle in Alaska, thereby delaying any search-and-rescue or maritime deployment in the U.S. Arctic Sea time by a minimum of eight hours by air and days by sea. These extremely limited capabilities call into question the ability of the USCG and the U.S. government to effectively prevent terrorism and ensure strong law enforcement in the Arctic. Due to limited assets above the Arctic Circle, the Coast Guard has at times been forced to rely on third-party responders as it did in July 2007, when a Shell Oil Company helicopter and Canadian Coast Guard cutter assisted a 20-foot skiff near Barrow, Alaska.

What is missing from the myriad of U.S. documents related to the Arctic is a long-term vision or, at a minimum, the articulation of a U.S. national economic strategy for the Arctic. The economic aspect of this vision must include a public-private capabilities package that adequately supports its goals while ensuring robust maritime stewardship of the fragile Arctic ecosystem and increasing maritime safety. Until the United States has this strategy in place, it will be difficult to make informed decisions about the precise capabilities it requires in the Arctic. The complexity and value of the Arctic drive home the importance of careful and well-planned international coordination in this rapidly changing region. As the polar ice cap melts, the United States and the international community are underprepared to address the growing economic dynamics of the Arctic. These dynamics will demand innovative thinking as a new Arctic security environment begins to take shape. Such innovation requires a whole-of-government approach toward the region and mandates a multifaceted and multilateral cooperative approach in scientific understanding, resource development, environmental management, and security.

—

Heather Conley *serves as director and senior fellow of the Europe Program at CSIS. Prior to joining CSIS, Ms. Conley served as senior adviser to the Center for European Policy Analysis, an independent, nonpartisan public policy research institute dedicated to the study of Central Europe. From 2005–2008, Ms. Conley served as the executive director, Office of the Chairman of the Board of the American National Red Cross, where she focused her*

efforts on developing the first comprehensive reform to the governance structure of the American Red Cross Board since 1947, incorporating best governance practices for nonprofit and for-profit sectors.

From 2001–2005, Ms. Conley served as deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau for European and Eurasian Affairs, with responsibilities for U.S. bilateral relations for the 15 countries of northern and central Europe. Previously, she was a senior associate with an international consulting firm led by former U.S. deputy secretary of state Richard L. Armitage. Ms. Conley began her career in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, where she served as the State Department liaison for the U.S. Department of Defense's Global Humanitarian Assistance Program (HAP). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ms. Conley was selected to serve as special assistant to the U.S. coordinator of U.S. assistance to the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. She received her B.A. in international studies from West Virginia Wesleyan College and her M.A. in international relations from the Johns Hopkins University Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).