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## U.S. Arctic Messaging in an Era of Renewed Great Power Competition

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### Background

In December 2016, President Obama and Prime Minister Trudeau made a Joint Arctic Leaders' Statement that largely focused on a science-based approach to oil and gas and the management of Arctic fisheries, supporting Arctic communities, low-impact shipping, and deepening partnerships with other Arctic nations. In contrast, as part of his "energy dominance" agenda, President Trump issued an executive order in 2017 that revoked Obama's sweeping ban on oil and gas drilling in the Arctic and Atlantic oceans (an order that would be ruled illegal by a federal judge in early 2019).

Obama's focus on environmental and climate change initiatives in the Arctic gave way to U.S. Arctic messaging framed in an era of renewed great power competition. Policy priorities shifted with a political change in leadership but also as inter-strategic competition, not terrorism, became the primary concern in U.S. national security.<sup>1</sup> Historically, Arctic nations have sought to isolate the region from wider geopolitical conflicts and this commitment to multilateral cooperation endures with the immediate prospect of conflict in the Arctic

being low. However, Russia and China are pushing for greater influence in the fast-melting Arctic.

U.S. messaging about the Arctic, in the form of public statements and defence and security strategies, highlights the increasing uncertainty and problematic strategic trends that make the Arctic security environment complex.

### Context

There are a variety of issues and priorities in the Arctic including: climate change and loss of sea ice, sovereignty issues, commercial sea transportation, oil, gas, and mineral exploration, oil pollution and pollution response, fisheries, protected species, working with indigenous communities and the effects of climate change, polar icebreaking, search and rescue, and sustaining military capabilities.<sup>2</sup> These issues intersect with American (and international) defence and security concerns in the Arctic and the renewal of great power competition poses a potential challenge to the region's tradition of cooperation, low tensions and respect for international law.<sup>3</sup>

In April 2019 General Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy, Commander of USNORTHCOM and NORAD said that

he views “the Arctic as the front line in the defense of the United States and Canada.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, he explained how revisionist powers Russia and China have clearly changed global strategic dynamics and “the homeland is not a sanctuary...defense of the homeland depends on our ability to detect and defeat threats operating both *in* the Arctic and passing *through* the Arctic.”<sup>5</sup>

The rhetoric of Great Power competition and its global nature permeates U.S. defence and security messaging and Arctic messaging more specifically. This can be found across U.S. defence and security documents (or unclassified summaries), including Congressional Research Service (CRS) Reports to Congress on “Changes in the Arctic” (2018 and 2019), the U.S., National Security Strategy (2017), National Defence Strategy (2018), The U.S. Navy Strategic Outlook for the Arctic (2019), and the Department of Defence Arctic Strategy (2019). Such messaging is also echoed in statements from officials like Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and President Trump. Of note is that the Arctic is not mentioned in any specificity in America’s National Security Strategy or in the synopsis of the National Defence Strategy.

## Key Findings

Examples of U.S. Arctic messaging framed around a renewal great power competition are summarized from the Department of Defence Arctic Strategy, a comparison of revisions in the CRS Report: Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress from July 2018 to September 2019, remarks made by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and American posturing towards Greenland.

The Department of Defence Arctic Strategy confirms that the immediate prospect of conflict is low but the Report to Congress goes on to outline key

dynamics in the region and problematic trends that could adversely affect U.S. national security interests, promote instability and degrade security in the region.<sup>6</sup> These dynamics include:<sup>7</sup>

- Physical environment changes: declining snow cover, melting ice, thawing permafrost and temperature increases
- Multilateral cooperation to address shared interests and challenges: respect for sovereign interests, international agreements, shared interest in peace and stability
- Status of Arctic sea routes: Russia and Canada’s claim to regulate Arctic waters
- Increasing military activity: Russia’s commercial investments in the region matched by continued defence investments and activities while they gradually strengthen its military presence in the region
- Attempts to alter Arctic governance through economic leverage: despite having no territorial claims in the region, China is seeking a role in Arctic governance. Its interests are primarily focused on natural resources and opportunities offered by the Arctic sea routes for Chinese shipping

A review of changes in the CRS Report: Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress from July 2018 to September 2019 identified the addition of “tension” in a description of issues that could affect the region.<sup>8</sup> There was a more substantial focus on China in the 2019 iteration and it frames the Arctic in an “Era of Renewed Great Power Competition” with China and Russia. The Geopolitical Environment section was considerably expanded upon and is centred around the potential implications of the shift in the international security environment, combined with the diminishment of Arctic ice and the resulting increase in human activities in the Arctic. The 2019 report also added the following section: “Although there is significant

international cooperation on Arctic issues, the Arctic is increasingly being viewed by some observers as a potential emerging security issue. Some of the Arctic coastal states, particularly Russia, have taken actions to enhance their military presence in the high north.”<sup>9</sup>

On May 6, 2019 U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered remarks at the Arctic Council in Finland during which he said: “The world has long felt magnetic pull towards the Arctic, but never more so than today...the region has become an arena for power and for competition. And the eight Arctic states must adapt to this new future.” His speech intended to sharpen America’s Arctic focus as he refers to this as “America’s moment to stand up as an Arctic nation and for the Arctic’s future.” To Pompeo, the Arctic is “at the forefront of opportunity and abundance” and while he champions America’s belief in free markets, he cautions that “all parties in the marketplace have to play by those same rules.” He specifically calls out China saying, “There are only Arctic States and Non-Arctic States. No third category exists, and claiming otherwise entitles China to exactly nothing.” There is concern about China’s pattern of aggression elsewhere and Pompeo says this behaviour “should inform what we do and how it might treat the Arctic.” There is also concern about Russian patterns of aggression and provocative actions and Pompeo concludes that “American leadership stands in stark contrast with the Chinese and Russian models.”<sup>10</sup>

In August 2019 President Trump proposed buying Greenland and described the purchase as “essentially...a large real estate deal.”<sup>11</sup> Greenland has strategic value as home to Thule Air Force Base and as a source of raw materials. The country lifted a ban on mining radioactive materials in 2013 and Greenland’s foreign minister reassured Trump that the country is “open for business”. After Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen refused to consider

selling Greenland to the U.S., President Trump postponed a planned trip to Denmark. This move was largely criticized by the media and in think tank analyses, one such piece placed the canceled trip in a disturbing pattern of Trump regularly beating up on and abusing America’s closest democratic allies while being sycophantic to autocrats.<sup>12</sup> In November 2019 the U.S. State Department began laying the groundwork to open a consulate in Greenland. It will be the first time in 70 years that the U.S. will have a diplomatic presence there. The push for such a presence reflects growing concerns in Washington that the U.S. will lose political and economic influence in the fast-changing Arctic. Reactions have been mixed from suspicion to positivity.

## Conclusion

In the context of the renewal of great power competition, U.S. messaging collectively frames the basic questions: in the coming years, will the Arctic continue to be a region generally characterized by cooperation and low tensions, as it was during the post-Cold War era? Or will it instead become a region characterized at least in part by competition and increased tensions, as it was during the Cold War?<sup>13</sup> Political, economic, and military influence are at stake in the Arctic. Russia and China are asserting themselves in a region where melting ice has opened access to untapped natural resources and maritime trade routes.

In U.S. messaging during the Trump administration the Arctic is intertwined with great power politics. NAADSN scholars intend to parse out this relationship between grand strategic threats and the Arctic nexus. How do we separate what’s going on elsewhere in the geopolitical environment from what is taking place in the Arctic in order to better understand security and defence threats.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

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