

# ACTIVITY REPORT



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North Star: The First Department of the Air Force Arctic Strategy

## Report on the North Star Event: The First US Air Force Arctic Strategy

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### Overview of North Star

The July 21, 2020 North Star webinar event was hosted by the Atlantic Council Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security and sponsored by SAAB. This event was part of the Atlantic Council's Commanders Series speakers' forum for senior military and defence leaders to discuss strategic issues with the US policy community – the US government, embassies, think tanks, and the media. The North Star event served as the launch platform for the first Arctic Strategy produced by the Department of the Air Force, "the department with the largest presence in the Arctic, from multiple bases in Alaska to space domain awareness assets in Greenland, the Department of the Air Force has increasingly emphasized the geostrategic significance of the Arctic and its services' crucial role for defense and security in the region." The event featured the Secretary of the Air Force, Barbara M. Barrett, the Air Force Chief of Staff, General L. Goldfein, and the Chief of Space Operations, General John W. Raymond. These senior leaders discussed the strategy's key components, strategic trends and challenges in the Arctic, air and space capabilities requirements unique to the Arctic operating environment in cooperation with close allies and partners.<sup>1</sup> The event began with introductions by Michael Anderson (SAAB) and Damon Wilson (Atlantic Council). The panel was moderated by Ambassador Paula J. Dobriansky (Senior Fellow, Future Diplomacy Project, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School of Government; Vice Chair, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security Atlantic Council).

### Activity Report

This activity report provides a chronological presentation of items discussed by the panelists. Ambassador Dobriansky posed questions to the panelists and moderated questions by the broader audience. This report presents some of these questions explicitly while addressing others as part of the discussion. It begins with a brief background and reflection on the new Air Force Arctic Strategy, followed by a series of key takeaways, the panel discussion, and final remark on the Arctic and Space domains as related and comparable geopolitical regions.

## US Air Force Arctic Strategy <sup>2</sup>

On July 21, 2020, the US Air Force released its *first ever* Arctic Strategy. This is a significant development given that the Air Force has operating in the Arctic since the 1940s, including its role in NORAD since 1957. The Air Force Arctic strategy follows upon a sequence of recent Arctic policies and strategies released by the US White House, DoD, Navy, and Coast Guard since 2009.<sup>3</sup> Recent strategies reflect the US accepting its role as an Arctic nation via Alaska and responding to emerging strategic challenges involving the Arctic. These challenges include a return to great power competition involving threats through the Arctic, non-traditional security threats related to climate change and environmental hazards affecting the terrain, maritime domains, local populations, and wildlife; in addition to impacts of commercial and economic activity in the region. In response to these strategic challenges the Air Force Arctic Strategy focusses on four lines of effort:

1. Vigilance in all domains;
2. Projecting power through a combat-credible force;
3. Cooperation with allies and partners;
4. Preparation for Arctic operations.<sup>4</sup>

The Strategy describes efforts by both the US Air and Space Forces “to deter adversarial behaviour and defend the homeland,” in collaboration with the Joint Force and international allies and partners. This demonstrates a holistic approach towards the desired Arctic end-state of a “secure and stable region where U.S. national interests are safeguarded, the homeland is protected, and national address shared challenges collectively.”

Like the 2019 Arctic DoD Strategy,<sup>5</sup> the Air Force Arctic Strategy reflects a sense of urgency, as a result of a growing vulnerability not previously experienced (the North American homeland no longer being a sanctuary) and America’s recognition that it is an Arctic power. The Strategy states that “the Arctic is an increasingly vital region for U.S. national security interests.” The recent release of the Air Force Arctic Strategy is significant and necessary step considering that the Air Force has been a key operating branch of the US military in the region since the Second World War. As stated in the Strategy “the Department of the Air Force is the most active and invested U.S. military department in the Arctic” and the conclusion of the Strategy states that “The Department will continue to lead as the DoD’s most active and invested department in the region.”

While the other key military branches – the US Navy and Coast Guard produced Arctic strategies over the past decade – the absence of the Air Force in defence strategy created a gap<sup>6</sup> that is being rapidly addressed. The release of the Air Force Arctic strategy may also see the formulation of an Arctic Strategy by the US Army, as joint interoperability between the branches (and allies and partners) features prominently in recent Arctic strategies, including an emphasis on cold weather training for land forces.

## Key Takeaways

- This is the first Arctic strategy produced by the US Air Force “reflecting the need for a comprehensive Arctic strategy”; the Air and Space Forces “are elevating their strategic priorities in the region.”
- The panel identifies the Arctic as a “through” or thoroughfare for threats to the US homeland.

- The Arctic was once a peaceful domain, but is now a region of emerging strategic competition posed by great power politics and non-traditional threats. These include:
  - Russia’s military and economic buildup in the region
  - China’s increasing activity in the Arctic as an Arctic Council observer and predatory economic behaviour through One Belt One Road to include the Polar Silk Road.
  - non-traditional threats posed by increasing international activity in the region, including tourism, requiring search and rescue responses and environmental changes impacting local infrastructure and communities.
- Emphasis on allies and partners to take a stronger role in achieving the four lines of effort.<sup>7</sup>
- The increasing role and importance of space in surveillance and communications through satellite technology at the pole; including collaboration with allies.
- The need for engagement with indigenous peoples of the North who have the knowledge and adaptability to live in the region – this operational focus will help US forces train and adapt to the challenging Arctic terrain.
- The need to update the aging infrastructure and assets (such as the North Warning System) in response to new threats and environmental impacts of melting permafrost. Upgrades concern access for the basing of air assets.
- Interoperability and the integration of capabilities in a networked system comprising all domains, for both US military forces and in collaboration with allies and partners. The need for increasing joint all domain awareness is address – situational awareness enhances peace and deters aggression.
- Some Arctic states are NATO nations and NATO plays an important strategic role to allies and partners – the Arctic region is of increasing strategic importance. NATO is looking to space as an operating domain with broad partnerships with Arctic partners and NATO allies.
- The Air Force needs professional and capable airmen to operate in the Arctic, as in other regions.
- There is a need for rules and norms in the Arctic and in space to ensure stability in the region.
- There is a need for a sophisticated dialogue with Russia to find common interests in the Arctic and space, seeking opportunities for cooperation.

## Panel Discussion

The Arctic has been identified as a key arena for great power competition. The region poses a “through” which threats may pass and it poses direct challenges to US interests. There are calls for maintaining stability in the region, through security and defence, as Arctic geostrategic issues emerge.

The new Air Force Strategy is released today. This unveiling of an Air Force strategy reflects the need for a comprehensive Arctic strategy. Air Force goals are the same as DoD goals: defending the homeland, maintaining a balance of power in the Arctic, and keeping common domains free and open.

The Arctic, like space, was a peaceful domain. This is now changing.

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Russia is developing offensive air assets and a coastal missile system. Its GDP is concentrated north of the Arctic Circle where it develops hydrocarbons. This explains its military activity in the region, in addition to search and rescue (SAR) operations.

China is attempting to normalize its presence in the Arctic. It desires access to oil and gas through its One Belt One Road initiative. Of concern is China's predatory economic behaviour.

Air and Space are elevating their strategic priorities in the Arctic. Need for vigilance and surveillance through the North Warning System (NWS) and space. The US is committed to collaboration with its Canadian allies on solutions to the aging systems.

There is a need for combat credible forces. Alaska is an important strategic and geographic territory in the Arctic. The F-35 will be based there – providing power projection.

The US allies and partners – the 6 to 7 Arctic nations are cooperating with the US.

Air and Space forces engage in interoperability with allies. They engage with High North indigenous knowledge acquired through indigenous peoples' millennia of living on the land.

The Air Force augments military missions and is of strategic importance in the Arctic. Air and Space forces comprise 79% of DoD investment. Alaska is key to the aviation future.

Access and stability in the Arctic require cooperation, vigilance, power projection, cooperation, and preparation.

But why now? What are the core challenges that face the Air Force?

There remains a Cold War era aging infrastructure. It is time to focus on the Arctic region. Russia's buildup in the Arctic requires greater attention to the area. New technologies and capabilities are emerging with geostrategic significance for the region.

What is DoD threat assessment of Russia regarding the Arctic?

When required the US military must collaborate, compete, and win.

Russian aircraft flights with missiles within range of the US. Why would we allow this to happen? There are increasing interests on both sides (US and Russia) for long-range aviation.

Neither side can afford miscalculation or airmen performing below standards. The US must continue to operate in the region and will continue to compete.

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The strategy is important for the space domain for forward operations. Environmental changes are occurring in the region. The strategic environment has changed.

The warfighting domains are vital in the region – in the space and Arctic domains. A strategy is essential to continue to operate.

The Arctic is important for a new space role. Its AOR is 100 km above the earth's surface and higher globally. This is needed for operational capabilities.

The key terrain involves missile warning. The Arctic is the front edge – Thule, Greenland, North of the Arctic Circle; and Alaska Air Force station.

Space protects global vigilance.

C2 satellites are best positioned at the pole to provide access – geographically – which makes space advantageous to operate in the Arctic. However, it is difficult to operate there due to being dark and cold half of the year, posing significant challenges.

How does China fit into the Arctic strategy?

The China threat underpins the Arctic strategy. China is not an Arctic nation, but has claimed an Arctic role through the Belt and Road initiative. It is also an Observer in the Arctic Council. It wants to be a participant.

The US maintains its interest in the open and free use of the common domain of the Arctic. However, it will defend its interests and those of its allies in the region. It is attentive to China overreaching.

Ambassadorial roles of significant actors provide a level of understanding across departments and agencies.

China has gone from zero to sixty in space. Integrating space capabilities threaten our access to space, including domain awareness, which requires investment and modernization.

How does the Air Force and the Coast Guard serve in the Arctic?

The DoD is best operating as a joint team. The Air Force is nested with the Coast Guard, Navy, Army, and Marine Corps. Concept of Joint all Domain operations (JAD)<sup>8</sup> for the spectrum of operations. No one domain is dominant, but is rather a connected team across all systems.

Purpose: arm diplomats to move towards a better peace and better place.

The strategy is consistent with what the other branches are saying – part of operating jointly.



How to improve cooperation and collaboration with allies?

Cooperation is strengthened by working with allies and partners. Canada is an Arctic nation of the greatest impact. It cooperates with the US on the North Warning System and as part of its missile warning mission it cooperates on missile defence. Canada is an ally of the highest order.

Finland is a valuable, albeit non-NATO partner. Denmark – Thule, Greenland is an important partner.

Situational awareness (SA) with other Arctic nations enhances and preserves peace and deters derogatory action.

What about NATO in the Arctic? Should there be an Arctic Command for NATO?

There had been an allied peace in the space domain, which was benign and had no issues in the past. This is not the case today. Collaboration with allies is important – Canada helps. A manned radar is operated at Thule, Greenland, contributing to domain awareness.

The Arctic is undergoing a changing strategic environment. We need satellites in orbits over the pole. This is being undertaken in partnership with Norway, involving two communications satellites in the Arctic region. Costly to build new satellites, but practical to add assets to current satellites. This gets capabilities into orbit quicker.

Commanders speak to NATO SAC on Arctic issues. NATO plays an important role in strategic assets among allies and partners united by common interests. Its brand is a winning narrative (values and norms of the West). NATO has an important role – the Arctic region is of increasing strategic importance. NATO is looking to space as an operating domain.

Broad partnerships involve Arctic partners and NATO in the space domain.

Regarding the operating environment of the Arctic, how does the Air Force respond to the melting of ice and terrain, particularly installations and operations. How did this inform its planning?

Thule Air Force Base is undergoing changes. The thawing and melting of permafrost are having an impact on infrastructure, structural integrity of runways, tourism via cruise shipping is creating SAR issues. The impact on the infrastructure is posing a challenge to keep up and running, particularly as the permafrost is affecting foundations of structures.

The US is a land-based Air Force. Referencing General O'Shaughnessy – he would say that access basing overflight is our primary concern. The environment creates challenges for the bases from which to operate. This receives great attention as it affects protecting the homeland.

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The LC-130 ski-equipped aircraft is pivotal to Arctic operations. It has access to terrain that is otherwise inaccessible.

The USAF is truly one air force. It has an international grand operations mission set. There is no reduction in demand and need for unlimited access to the Arctic region.

Recapitalizing the number of weapons systems will look to a networking capability. The network we need to build will include platforms, sensors, and weapons to operate seamlessly.

The strategy does not address the division of responsibility between commands, but rather the spotlight is on needs that might affect the division of responsibilities. Globally integrated operations that look beyond traditional borders provide seamlessness across all military departments. We are not looking at global operations through the lense of commands.

The AOR for space is not constrained by lines on a map. This is global integration by nature.

Will allies have a role to play outside of NORAD?

Affirmation that “our partnerships are our strengths.” This involves global partnerships with a significant focus on strategy moving forward.

Considerations about the modernization of infrastructure, particularly space, missile warning, and communications – what about spending priorities in the Arctic?

There is a focus on integration of capabilities and how to marry the fourth and fifth generations. The future of warfare relies on data – data will be the currency we operate on, involving the sharing of data with allies and partners.

The investment strategy focuses on the integration of capabilities – “a highway versus trucks” – namely, operational networks in which to invest.

Consideration of the role of Russia’s offensive air assets in the Arctic. The Chief of Air Staff affirms that Russia has a professional, accountable, and responsible Air Force. We are meeting more and more in the air. It is important to hold airmen to a high standard, to be professional and capable.

Russia’s air activity is observed to be increasingly operable in Syria. Russia and the US are continuing to advance. We need to ensure that professionalism remains high in terms of capabilities and allow ambassadors to operational diplomacy.

How does the Air Force strategy contribute to strategic parity with Russia?

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We need to establish the rules of the road in the Arctic. As the region grows in accessibility and interaction, we need to know what the rules are. There are complex international relationships. There have been times in history where areas of common interest occurred, and not at other times. We can work with Russia on science R&D. We have worked together on the international space station; but not below the atmosphere. Below the atmosphere we have an adversarial relationship.

Is there an opportunity to cooperate in the Arctic?

We have a sophisticated dialogue with Russia. We find areas of common interest and we are better together than separate. In the Cold War, we had partnerships in space. There was professional and safe conduct in the space domain. But this is now becoming a warfighting domain. We need norms of behaviour and conduct in space.

We have a very strong partnership with Greenland (Denmark) through Thule. Arctic forces are located within the region – strong partnerships which enhance operations.

In the Arctic training is key to being able to operate in the region. Forces must be ready for the harsh environment (e.x. how to put large resources into small compartments). People and equipment must be able to function/operate in the Arctic. Exercises, such as Arctic Challenge (involving 140 aircraft at the multinational level), and Red Flag operations in Alaska, provide opportunities for training. Airmen must be prepared to go anywhere globally on any mission in any terrain – they must be ready.

What is the role / place of indigenous people in the new Arctic strategy?

Indigenous peoples of the North have been effective in the region for millennia, with knowledge of the land. They are adept. US forces are cooperating with indigenous people who volunteer to be part of the US military. They are key to the US ability to operate in the region.

Concluding remarks: The Air Force strategy is forward-looking. The issues are broad.

## Brief Remarks

What is interesting about this forum is that it addresses the Arctic and Space domain as linked at some points and at other points they are discussed as separate, although comparable domains. This seems to highlight the distinctions of the Arctic region as an “other” that is becoming a geopolitical arena of strategic significance and competition; while space is also emerging as a new strategic domain with warfighting potential if norms and rules are not established to constrain the counterspace capabilities of strategic actors. Notably, both “regions” or “domains” were once areas of peaceful cooperation prior to increasing access and recognition of resource potential.



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<sup>1</sup> Atlantic Council, “North Star: The First Department of the Air Force Arctic Strategy,” 21 July 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/north-star-the-first-department-of-the-air-force-arctic-strategy/>.

<sup>2</sup> US Department of the Air Force, “Arctic Strategy: Ensuring A Stable Arctic Through Vigilance, Power Projection, Cooperation, and Preparation,” 21 July 2020, <https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/2020SAF/July/ArcticStrategy.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> White House, Office of the Press Secretary, National Security Presidential Directive-66 / Homeland Security Presidential Directive-25, Arctic Region Policy, 9 January 2009: <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=750476>. The first official U.S. Arctic policy document was produced in 1971: National Security Council, National Security Decision Memorandum NSDM-144, United States Arctic Policy and Arctic Policy Group, Washington, DC, 20506, 22 December 1971, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdm-nixon/nsdm-144.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Lines of Effort – Air Force Arctic Strategy, 2020, p. 7, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Defense, *Arctic Strategy*, Report to Congress, Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, (June 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF>.

<sup>6</sup> In 2017, Col John Conway addressed the gap in the absence of an Air Force Arctic Strategy in light of the important role of the Air Force in the Arctic, lamenting the lack of “air-mindedness” in the DoD Arctic Strategy.

Col John L. Conway III (Ret, USAF), “Toward a US Air Force Arctic Strategy,” *Air and Space Power Journal*, 31.2 (Summer 2017), [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Volume-31\\_Issue-2/V-Conway.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Volume-31_Issue-2/V-Conway.pdf).

Lindsay Rodman notes that only in the past two years that the US defence establishment has started to appreciate the Arctic’s significance. Regarding the Air Force she states that “Air defence, missile defence and air power projection will all be essential components of a robust Arctic strategy.” Lindsay L. Rodman, “The Pentagon’s Arctic Strategies Reveal the Benefit of a North American Approach,” CDFAI Policy Perspective (May 2020),

[https://www.cgai.ca/the\\_pentagons\\_arctic\\_strategies\\_reveal\\_the\\_benefit\\_of\\_a\\_north\\_american\\_approach](https://www.cgai.ca/the_pentagons_arctic_strategies_reveal_the_benefit_of_a_north_american_approach).

Rodman also references an op-ed authored by the outgoing secretary of the air force and the air force chief of staff concerning the need to think strategically about the Arctic. Secretary Heather Wilson and Gen. David Goldfein, “Air Power and the Arctic: The Importance of Projecting Strength in the North,” *Defense News*, 9 January 2019,

<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2019/01/09/air-power-and-the-arctic-the-importance-of-projecting-strength-in-the-north/>.

<sup>7</sup> Rodman identifies the need for a North American Arctic strategy that envisions a holistic, integrated, interoperable framework for bilateral cooperation between the US and Canada. The 2016 Pentagon Strategy (referenced below) discussed filling gaps by working with allies and partners, which is also addressed in the 2019 Strategy. Rodman, “Pentagon’s Arctic Strategies.” The Op-ed by Wilson and Goldfein states that “In addition to our enduring partnership with Canada, the Air Force is looking at opportunities to expand relationships with other Arctic allies — especially through exercises — by sharing weather, communications and reconnaissance data, as well as trading operational best practices.” Wilson and Goldfein, “Air Power and the Arctic.”

Department of Defense, Report to Congress on Strategy to Protect United States National Security Interests in the Arctic Region, OUSD (Policy) (December 2016), <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2016-Arctic-Strategy-UNCLAS-cleared-for-release.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> See JADC2 (Joint All Domain Command and Control) emerging concept for homeland defence, North American integrated concept – General Terrence O’Shaughnessy.