



**Statement before the Senate Committee on Commerce,
Science, and Transportation Subcommittee on Security**

***“Expanding Opportunities,
Challenges and Threats in the Arctic:
A Focus on the U.S. Coast Guard
Arctic Strategic Outlook”***

A Testimony by:

Heather A. Conley

Senior Vice President for Europe, Eurasia and the Arctic, CSIS

December 12, 2019

562 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Thank you, Chairman Sullivan and Ranking Member Markey, for the opportunity to come before you this morning to discuss America's security strategy for the Arctic and the readiness of our frontline defenders, the United States Coast Guard. My testimony today could be as relevant for the Senate Armed Services Committee as it is for the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, such is the nature of Arctic security today.

It is a particularly fitting and timely moment to take stock of what we have accomplished this year regarding U.S. security policy toward the Arctic and, most importantly, what we must do to secure and increase America's security in the Arctic in 2020 and beyond.

It goes without saying that we are having this discussion today because of the profound transformation of the Arctic region due to climate change. From rapid permafrost thaw and extensive coastal erosion, which is breaking apart and collapsing terrestrial infrastructure to the extraordinary diminishment of the Greenland Ice Sheet and thinning and disappearance of polar ice caps, these changes have propelled the U.S. and all Arctic coastal states to protect and secure their territorial waters, exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and coastlines. This is particularly true for the United States which lacks infrastructure and capabilities to protect and defend its fourth coast.¹

After nearly a decade of study, 2019 will be remembered as the year that the United States formally launched the construction of a heavy polar security cutter, something this nation has not done for 42 years. 2019 however was marked, as in many previous years, by the release of a plethora of U.S. government Arctic strategies: the U.S. Navy quietly released its Arctic strategy in January, the Coast Guard released its updated strategy in April, and the Defense Department released its mandated study of U.S. defense operations in June. We had anticipated the release of an Air Force Arctic strategy but that has yet to be released. But 2019 will perhaps be most remembered as the year of significant U.S. rhetorical change as Washington now views the Arctic through the lens of great power competition, highlighting the increased military and economic presence of Russia and China in the Arctic. This policy shift was encapsulated in Secretary of State Pompeo's speech in Rovaniemi, Finland in May of this year. And of course, 2019 will be forever known as the year that Washington rediscovered the strategic importance of Greenland which prompted the U.S. to announce that is reestablishing a U.S. consulate in Greenland's capital of Nuuk.

In 2019, there was good news: The U.S. national security community is now talking more about the strategic importance of the Arctic more than ever before. But there is also bad news: The U.S. government isn't advancing its policies. Said a different way, the U.S. is acting as if it is still 2013 while the Arctic security environment worsens.

¹ "The Arctic of the Future: Strategic Pursuit or Great Power Miscalculation?: Keynote Address," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, remarks by Admiral Paul F. Zukunft, May 10, 2018. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/arctic-future-strategic-pursuit-or-great-power-miscalculation-keynote-address>.

The Updated Coast Guard Strategy

It is with this in mind that we must view the Coast Guard's updated Arctic Strategic Outlook. Its updated outlook is perhaps the best of the many U.S. government strategies that describe the new geopolitical realities in the Arctic. Without hyperbole or hype, the strategy clearly states Russia's and China's long-term strategic ambitions for the Arctic which pose challenges to U.S. interests and the United States' ability to maintain unfettered access in the region.

While the Coast Guard accurately describes these new challenges, its strategy, as well as the U.S. government's posture, remains largely the same as it was in 2013. There are no other significant U.S. infrastructure initiatives on the horizon other than the construction of a new polar security cutter which will primarily be used in Antarctica;² there is no dedicated budget or prioritization of infrastructure improvements. There is no deep-water port in the American Arctic and there are no ice-strengthened surface vessels in the U.S. Navy's inventory. There hasn't been a substantial investment in increased U.S. forward operating locations in the Arctic, communication and navigation assets or greater domain awareness. The U.S. could not conduct a freedom of navigation operation in the Russian Arctic today if it wanted to, and without agreement from the Canadian government, it could not traverse the Northwest Passage.

Despite our rhetoric, the current minimalist U.S. presence and posture in the Arctic signals that we consider the region a low priority. But Russia and China both have a long-term strategy and a dedicated budget to achieve their ambitions. Without a significant policy response from the U.S. and its allies, Russia and China will largely shape the region's future.

What makes this perennial U.S. minimalist posture in the Arctic so troubling is that the United States has not one but two security tasks in the Arctic: while the U.S. must always prioritize the protection of its waters and territory in the North Pacific, the narrow Bering Strait, and the U.S. EEZ in the Chukchi Sea, the U.S. also has Arctic security responsibilities in the North Atlantic, North and Barents Seas. Both the North Atlantic/European Arctic and North Pacific/North American Arctic present "avenues of approach" to the homeland that directly impact the security of the United States.³

Prioritizing the Great Powers in the Arctic

Russia. Russia poses the most immediate challenge to U.S. national security interests in both the North Pacific and the North Atlantic and must be the near-term priority. Russia has allocated trillions of rubles over the past decade to Arctic economic and military development, with the government declaring that it will spend approximately \$63 billion by 2020 and \$235 billion until 2035 with significant tax incentives. President Putin has announced that cargo shipments will increase to 80 million tons along the Northern Sea Route (NSR) by 2025 and the Russian

² Heather A. Conley and Matthew Melino, "The Implications of U.S. Policy Stagnation toward the Arctic Region," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 3, 2019. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/implications-us-policy-stagnation-toward-arctic-region>.

³ C. Todd Lopez, "Northcom Commander Cites Arctic as Area of Concern," *U.S. Department of Defense*, July 23, 2019. <https://www.defense.gov/explore/story/Article/1913989/northcom-commander-cites-arctic-as-area-of-concern/>.

icebreaker fleet will expand to 13 heavy icebreakers by 2035 – 9 of which will be nuclear powered and some will be fitted with cruise missiles –as well as investments in the expansion and upgrading of ports, infrastructure, and search and rescue activities along the NSR.⁴ In the past year, Russia has made several important changes related to the use of the NSR, to include giving the Russian nuclear agency, Rosatom, bureaucratic control over the maritime route, and limiting foreign warships traffic without a 45-day notification and permission by the Russian government.⁵

Like the United States, Russia also has “two Arctics.” In Russia’s eastern Arctic, Russia has refurbished airfields, search and rescue, and radar stations to improve awareness in the air and maritime domains, which includes Sopka-2 radar systems on [Wrangel Island](#) (300 miles from Alaska) and Cape Schmidt. These systems create a “protective dome” across Russia’s vast Arctic coastline and improve its overall operational picture to detect and track vessels and aircraft. For example, Sopka-2 radars also control civilian air traffic and provide meteorological data to better inform mariners traversing the route. But Russia’s military footprint transforms as one moves toward the European Arctic. The Russian military recently announced that it will increase the number of S-400 missile defense units deployed across the Russian Arctic which tracks with its recent deployment of more sophisticated equipment to defend its air and maritime domains. [Kotelny Island](#) and Novaya Zemlya for example are equipped with missile defense systems like the Bastion-P and Pantsir-S1 systems which create a complex layered coastal defense arrangement that secures territory deeper into the central Arctic. Such capabilities strengthen Russia’s power projection capabilities in the Barents Sea and increase its ability to deny aerial, maritime, or land access to NATO or U.S. forces. Perhaps most worryingly is what Russia is practicing (and signaling) in the Arctic through its recent Grom or Thunder 2019 exercise, which engaged Russia’s strategic nuclear forces and involved all four of Russia’s naval fleets, 12,000 troops, and included the launch of two nuclear warheads in the Barents Sea as well as several other ballistic missiles.⁶ This military posture exceeds the Coast Guard’s remit, and while the Coast Guard enjoys a pragmatic relationship with the Russian Federal Security Bureau (FSB) in joint monitoring of the Bering Straits and in the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, this challenge is of a different magnitude.

China. The longer-term challenge to U.S. security interests is China’s growing economic presence in the Arctic which could prelude an eventual military presence. China’s movement into the Arctic was both strategic and opportunistic, taking advantage of Russia’s financial shortcomings after the imposition of Western sanctions in 2014 as well as the precipitous drop in global energy and commodity prices. Beijing has also developed a broader Arctic engagement strategy which includes increased activities with international organizations and robust economic diplomacy with individual Arctic Council states, primarily related to access to Arctic protein sources, maritime access, infrastructure development, and enhanced information and telecommunications access.

⁴ Vladimir Isachenkov and Irina Titova, “Putin outlines ambitious Arctic expansion program,” *Associated Press*, April 9, 2019. <https://www.apnews.com/d0c2eb39a3b44b40ac8ddb1749ebe143>.

⁵ “Russia Tightens Control Over Northern Sea Route,” *The Maritime Executive*, March 8, 2019. <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/russia-tightens-control-over-northern-sea-route>

⁶ Thomas Nilsen, “Cruise missiles played key role in Putin’s strategic war games,” *The Barents Observer*, October 18, 2019. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2019/10/cruise-missiles-played-key-role-putins-strategic-war-games>.

By 2015, China had described the Arctic as a new strategic frontier (alongside space and the sea bed) where there was “undetermined sovereignty.” China’s efforts in the Arctic are designed to preserve its unfettered access to the international waters of the Central Arctic Ocean (CAO) and to construct a case for preservations of its sovereign rights to the region by means of discovery and by continual presence and influence. Over a relatively short period (approximately 5 years) of time, China has transformed from a low-key player in the Arctic to a major actor.⁷

China continues to enhance its scientific and industrial footprint across the Arctic. It maintains two research stations, one on Svalbard and one in Northern Iceland. Plans to develop a third in Russia are underway. The Department of Defense’s [Annual Report to Congress](#) on Chinese military and security developments presciently warned that Beijing could use the cover of science to gain a military foothold in the region through the utilization of dual-use technologies including satellites.⁸ In January 2018, China unveiled plans to expand its Belt and Road Initiative to the Arctic, establishing a Polar Silk Road across the region.⁹ Shortly after, in September, it launched its first domestically built and second non-nuclear polar class icebreaker, the Xue Long 2. This now gives China two polar icebreakers, matching the United States in terms of operational capabilities. Beijing has also announced plans to construct a nuclear-powered icebreaker which would enable China to retain a near permanent presence in the Arctic and could be a precursor to the development of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier.

The U.S. can develop a specific security policy vis-à-vis Russia’s military posture, and it can develop specific policies for China’s dual-use economic and scientific posture in the Arctic. But what U.S. policymakers are not equipped to address is the convergence of China and Russia’s economic and military interests in the Arctic. Over the past 24 months, we have witnessed an acceleration of Russian and Chinese cooperation, which has enhanced cooperation related to the Yamal LNG-1 and 2 Projects, in which the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has invested heavily and in which Chinese firms own 29.9 percent of the projects.¹⁰ The economic relationship continues to expand, and President Putin has suggested that the NSR, as part of China’s Maritime Silk Road, would create a “global and competitive route that connects Northeastern, Eastern, and Southeastern Asia with Europe.”¹¹ The two are also engaging in military affairs, as 3,200 Chinese troops and 900 weapons units participated in Russia’s large-scale Vostok-18 exercise.¹² While Chinese and Russian navies and land forces have exercised

⁷ Anne-Marie Brady, “China’s Expanding Antarctic Interests: Implications for New Zealand,” *Small States and the New Security Environment*, Policy brief no.2, June 3, 2017,

<http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/media/documents/research/China%27s-expanding-Antarctic-interests.pdf>.

⁸ Blake Hounshell, “Pompeo aims to counter China’s ambitions in the Arctic,” *Politico*, May 6, 2019.

<https://www.politico.com/story/2019/05/06/pompeo-arctic-china-russia-1302649>.

⁹ Philip Wen, “China unveils vision for ‘Polar Silk Road’ across Arctic,” *Reuters*, January 28, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-arctic/china-unveils-vision-for-polar-silk-road-across-arctic-idUSKBN1FF0J8>.

¹⁰ Elena Mazneva, “From Russia With Love: A Super-Chilled Prize for China,” *Bloomberg*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-10-26/china-to-get-first-yamal-lng-cargo-as-russia-says-thank-you>.

¹¹ Atle Staleesen, “Putin steps up talks with Beijing over Arctic shipping,” *The Barents Observer*, April 30, 2019, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2019/04/putin-steps-talks-beijing-over-arctic-shipping>.

¹² Danila Galperovich, “Analysts: Russia’s Vostok ’18 Troop Numbers, ‘China Alliance’ Claims Questionable,” *VOA* September 11, 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/europe/analysts-russias-vostok-18-troop-numbers-china-alliance-claims-questionable>.

together annually since 2015, in July 2019, the first Sino-Russian joint air patrols occurred over the Korean Peninsula. If such joint actions were to occur in the Arctic, it would be very concerning to U.S. security interests.¹³

What Needs to be Done in 2020

The Coast Guard frequently uses the following equation for the Arctic: presence = influence. This is absolutely correct: the U.S. must increase its physical presence in 2020 diplomatically, militarily, scientifically, and economically, primarily through public-private partnerships. Such a holistic approach must include the reorganization of the U.S. government related to Arctic issues; an increase in U.S. Arctic diplomatic presence and activity, strengthening science, research, and economic opportunities; and the development and positioning of increased U.S. security assets across the circumpolar Arctic.

While it is encouraging that the U.S. is restoring its consulate in Greenland, the U.S. must enhance its Arctic diplomacy with all of our closest allies in the Arctic and regionally, to include Canada, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom. The U.S. should initiate annual meetings of the foreign and defense ministers of Arctic allies to cooperatively discuss and address emerging challenges in the region. Similarly, the U.S. should push for more frequent meetings of the five Arctic coastal states to discuss pertinent issues like the future management of the high seas in the Central Arctic Ocean.

From a security and defense perspective, the U.S. must budget the necessary resources to enhance its presence in the North American and European Arctic. Just as the U.S. has responded to Russia's military posture in Eastern Europe through a series of bilateral defense enhancements funded in part by the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), the U.S. should create an Arctic Security Initiative or ASI. The ASI would fund greater exercises and training in the Arctic to include search and rescue, pollution response, and maritime domain awareness activities, as well as the work of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum. Funds could also be used for the development of a layered homeland defense design; the increased deployment of strategic forces with short-duration rotational deployment of bombers; an investment in upgraded sensors for indicators & warnings; and unmanned undersea vehicles and anti-submarine warfare equipment; Arctic infrastructure, such as reinforcing existing reception facilities along Greenland's west coast, limited reception facilities and/or sensor capabilities along Greenland's east coast to enhance ASW capabilities in the GIUK gap; and enhancements to Thule AFB such as upgrades to the early warning missile defense radar in Greenland as well as the eventual modernization of NORAD's air, radar, and satellite systems could also be viewed as an element of enhanced Arctic air and maritime awareness or preparedness.

The U.S. must also leverage its strength in Arctic science. This includes our robust and world-renowned scientific network of institutions and scholars. The budget for U.S. Arctic science and research should increase, particularly as it relates to observational research infrastructure and expanded research campaigns in the Alaskan Arctic. Crucial to these efforts is the inclusion of

¹³ Andrew Osborn and Joyce Lee, "First Russian-Chinese air patrol in Asia-Pacific draws shots from South Korea," *Reuters*, July 22, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-russia-aircraft/first-russian-chinese-air-patrol-in-asia-pacific-draws-shots-from-south-korea-idUSKCN1UI072>.

indigenous voices whose knowledge and experience in the region are invaluable. Internationally, the U.S. should use the recent Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation to establish other norms, code of conduct, and regulations. Doing so promotes transparency related to scientific collection, data monitoring, and analysis. The U.S. should consider the creation of an Arctic Science Infrastructure Fund (ASIF). Such a program would increase the number of U.S. research stations in the Arctic. Currently, the U.S. has only three: two in Alaska and one in Greenland.

As science drives our understanding of future developments in the region, sustainable economic activity should follow. The U.S. must actively facilitate public-private partnerships with other industries to identify and fund new infrastructure including a deep-water port, search-and-rescue stations, refurbished hangars for air assets, and improved telecommunications systems which could be incentivized through the Arctic Security Initiative. Doing so would improve observational coverage and domain awareness while promoting safer economic activity. Internationally, the U.S. should promote greater trade and investment between the North Atlantic/European Arctic region (which includes New England, Canada's maritime provinces, Iceland, Denmark and the UK) and the North Pacific/North American region (which includes Alaska and Canada's northwest territories).

And finally, organizationally, it is time for the U.S. government to demonstrate – clearly and on a daily basis – that the Arctic is strategically important to the U.S. The establishment of several senior positions in the national security community is required. New positions should include a Senior Director for the Arctic at the National Security Council, the re-naming of the Assistant Secretary of State for European, Eurasian and Arctic affairs, the establishment of a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Northern European and Arctic Affairs in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the creation of a senior civilian leader position in the Department of Homeland Security that is tasked with focusing on America's fourth coast.

Any nation can write an Arctic strategy, but a strategically minded and purpose-driven great maritime power will budget for and implement the strategy while also successfully engaging its allies. The United States has proven repeatedly it can write many strategies, but it has not proven it can shape and influence the Arctic in the future. Russia and China are implementing their strategies and shaping the region, unfortunately to their preferred interests and outcomes.

If we hold this hearing again at the end of 2020, what will the U.S. have accomplished to enhance its security in the Arctic?