



## U.S. Re-Focuses Arctic Policy—The Consequences for Its Allies

Paweł Markiewicz

The Biden administration is increasing the U.S. capabilities in countering the effects of climate change in the Arctic, an aim overlapping the rivalry with Russia and China in this region. The U.S. announced increasing investments in infrastructure projects and defence, for example, modernising the Coast Guard's Arctic fleet. The planned measures provide an opportunity for closer American cooperation with their allies and may mark the beginning of a regional division of labour in the area of shared defence.

In February 2023, President Biden named Michael Sfraga the first U.S. ambassador-at-large to the Arctic. He is a native Alaskan and an experienced expert in issues dealing with the Arctic. Since 2021, he has chaired the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. The creation of this position was announced in the new National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR), which was published in October 2022. It replaces the previous strategy from 2013 released under the Obama administration and derives from the new [National Defence \(NDS\)](#) and [National Security \(NSS\)](#) strategies adopted by the Biden administration in 2022. The NDS and NSS indicate that Russia constitutes a direct threat to the U.S. and international order. Although the long-term U.S. priority will be the rivalry with China and security in the Indo-Pacific region, the Arctic strategy places a greater emphasis on the threats from Russia.

**Main Conclusions of the Strategy.** The NSAR describes four pillars of American involvement in the Arctic: security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, and maintaining a rules-based international order. The strategy indicates that global warming is causing profound changes to the Arctic. Rivalries between countries is increasing, environmental threats are emerging, and at the same time, new opportunities are growing for acquiring raw materials and sustainable economic development in the region. For the first time the U.S. Arctic strategy points to growing threats from China, which seeks to increase its political, economic, and military influences on the Arctic. It recalls how during the last decade China doubled investments in the mining sector throughout

the region and increased scientific activity, which is also used for intelligence and military purposes, and expanded its fleet of ice breakers.

The document, however, places more attention on Russia, which, among other things, continues to modernise its civil and military infrastructure in the region while also intensifying military activity and attempting to establish control over the Northern Sea Route. The U.S. signals that Russia's aggression against Ukraine has increased geopolitical tensions around the Arctic and raised the threat of an inadvertent conflict. That has led to strengthened U.S. cooperation with Arctic partners, improved NATO cohesion, and the Alliance's determination to develop its military potential in the region. The sanctions imposed on Russia may likely impede plans for economic exploitation of the Arctic and military modernisation.

The U.S. intends to strengthen its capabilities to compete and defend its interests while maintaining stability in the Arctic as a region where international law is respected. It has announced plans to increase civilian and military activity in region and tighten cooperation with key allies. The aim is to broaden their capabilities to deter Russia and to undertake other measures to minimise the risk of further militarisation or the outbreak of an unforeseen conflict.

**Developing Capabilities for Arctic Activity.** The U.S. announced that it will invest in, among other areas, especially air and naval capabilities for detecting and reacting to military threats and those connected to climate change. U.S. capabilities to react to armed threats in the region were ensured by Air Force units based in Alaska and

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Greenland, as well as the Coast Guard (USCG), which operates only two obsolete icebreakers. NSAR emphasises the importance of equipping the USCG with new vessels. The U.S. plans to build three heavy icebreakers, but they have been delayed. The first one will enter service only in 2027 at the earliest, instead of 2024 as originally planned. In addition, the U.S. wants three new patrol cutters capable of operating in the Arctic. As a temporary solution, the Biden administration plans to purchase a used icebreaker and adapt it for USCG needs. It will enter service however, no earlier than 2025. The USCG fleet of Arctic vessels will be stationed in Alaska, which will increase the U.S. potential to monitor threats from Russia or China. It's likely that the new 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division, stationed in Alaska and reactivated in 2022, will be operationally ready soon. It was bolstered by two army brigades (infantry and mechanised infantry). Adapting it to Arctic conditions demands investments in new equipment (e.g., Stryker armoured fighting vehicles will be replaced with cold weather, all-terrain vehicles—CATVs—and regular training).

**Cooperation with Allies and Partners.** Unlike the [Trump administration](#), which placed added emphasis on the geopolitical rivalry in the region and mineral exploitation, the Biden administration highlights sustainable development and cooperation with other countries. In effect the U.S. seeks to pursue a responsible policy that balances stopping climate change and its effects with defending its economic and security interests. This will allow the U.S. a leadership role and will strengthen cooperation with allies and partners.

As mentioned in the NSAR, the U.S. intends to strengthen regional stability through activity in the Arctic Council (which also includes Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden). The council's work remains suspended, however, following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The Biden administration instead will increase and broaden diplomatic activity concerning the region through the newly appointed ambassador-at-large to the Arctic.

The U.S. excludes regional bilateral cooperation with Russia, which is treated as the main military and geopolitical rival in the Arctic. The new strategy will be the basis for increasing U.S. military activity, including in the European Arctic, in order to strengthen allied capabilities in deterring Russia and minimising the risk of armed conflict. Although the NSAR does not envision more NATO involvement in the Arctic, the U.S. plans to increase interoperability between allies based

on closer cooperation with partners and NATO member states in the region, for example, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, as well as with countries pursuing NATO membership ([Finland](#) and [Sweden](#)). This will involve broadening training programmes and exercises to include severe winter conditions. As part of the *Arctic Forge 23* exercise conducted from 16 February to 17 March 2023, the U.S. manoeuvres include transporting the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division from Alaska over the North Pole to Finland. The NSAR specifically mentions close cooperation with [Canada](#) in modernising the North American air defence system (NORAD).

Even though the strategy focuses less on China than Russia, for the U.S., restraining China's expansion in the Arctic will be important. The goal of cooperating with partners will include monitoring China's increased regional activities. The U.S. will seek better coordination in the areas of common investments (e.g., with Canada, Greenland, and Norway) to limit China's engagement in telecommunications infrastructure development and in the rare earth mineral extraction sector.

**Conclusions and Perspectives.** The Biden administration's Arctic strategy opens new possibilities for cooperation between the U.S. and its European allies in the region. This will be an important element of a new burden-sharing scheme aimed at strengthening regional and global security. For the U.S., the priority is strengthening capabilities in the North American Arctic, which may limit the scope of cooperation with allies and partners in the European Arctic. With the ongoing war in Ukraine, increasing tensions between Russia and NATO, and incidents of [sabotage of critical infrastructure projects](#), it will be important to tighten relations related to monitoring and the prevention of such threats. Until the U.S. modernises its icebreaker fleet, the main potential for supporting maritime activity in the Arctic will have to be ensured by Canada and the Scandinavian countries. Finland and Sweden joining NATO will increase the Alliance's collective defence capabilities in the European Arctic and in the Baltic Sea area, relieving the U.S. in the latter. It is in the interest of NATO, including Poland, to continue to tighten interoperability and improve the armed forces' capabilities to conduct activity in Arctic conditions. This will increase the military abilities of Alliance member states to direct defensive activities in winter conditions in the Baltic Sea region.