

Stepping Stones to a Secure Arctic

Strategic importance of arctic island chains grows in lockstep with rise in polar temperatures, state rivalry

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The maritime security and geopolitics of islands, island chains, and archipelagos—and the distinct political geography they categorize—undergirds and reinforces much strategic thinking with regard to emerging zones of maritime and naval competition around the world. In our era of polar thaw, this is especially true in the Arctic where a wide range of systemic changes have transformed the region, fostering its reconnection to the world ocean.¹

Island Chains and International Security

By understanding the geopolitical significance of these marine structures, and their enduring importance to a stable world order, we can better contextualize the emerging strategic importance of Alaska and adjacent areas across the Arctic region. This understanding also applies to other remote regions in the world where the security and alliance integration of isolated islands, island chains, and archipelagos bears a striking similarity to the security challenges facing the circumpolar north.²

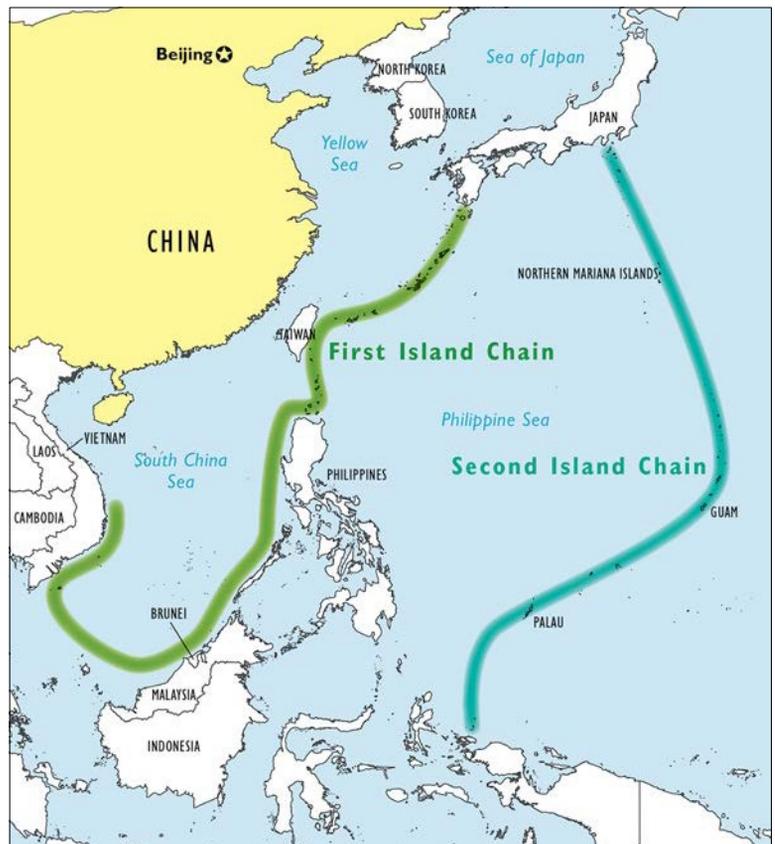
Much attention has been paid to island chains in discussions of Chinese naval strategy in recent years, as the People's Liberation Army Navy continues its evolution from regional brown water fleet to blue water naval power.³ This has been galvanized by Beijing's ongoing fleet modernization and naval expansion from its proximate first island chain⁴ out to the more distant, mid-Pacific third island chain.

Unsinkable Aircraft Carriers and Contested Regions

Punctuating the world ocean much the way frontier forts punctuated the American West, Taiwan is more than a network of "unsinkable aircraft carriers,"⁵ as famously described by General

Douglas MacArthur during the early Cold War. The term has been applied to a diverse constellation of strategic islands including Britain, Malta, Iceland, the Aleutians, Japan, and Singapore. It was applied to myriad South Pacific island and atolls during World War II and the Cold War, and to the many islets of the South China Sea fortified by Beijing in recent years.

These unsinkable aircraft carriers provide essential



China's military strategists are increasingly including two island chains in their maritime perimeter. The first includes Borneo, Taiwan, Okinawa, and Kyushu, while the second extends from Eastern Indonesia to Japan's main island of Honshu via Palau, Guam, the Northern Marianas, and Iwo Jima. Department of Defense map

forward offshore supply depots; safe harbors for repairs, recovery, and maintenance; and air strips for power projection and over-the-horizon air defense. These define a strategically advantageous zone for persistent presence, force resilience, and effective control of surrounding air and sea space as central to recent Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations strategies as they were to our island-hopping efforts in World War II.⁶

A modernized version of the offshore coaling stations central to Mahanian naval strategy, well-defended islands and archipelagos can be costly to neutralize during war. In times of peace, they become *de facto* zones of unrivalled economic, diplomatic, and political influence, and stepping stones toward further strategic expansion. This importance of island and archipelagic control to larger states' abilities to project military power, defend trade routes, assert diplomatic influence, and contain regional rivals explains why Beijing has fortified so many islands and archipelagic clusters. This is evident from its "Great Wall of Sand"⁷ in the South China Sea to its "String of Pearls" arcing across the Indian Ocean. Indeed, Moscow has done much the same to its own chain of Arctic islands immediately north of Russia's mainland.⁸

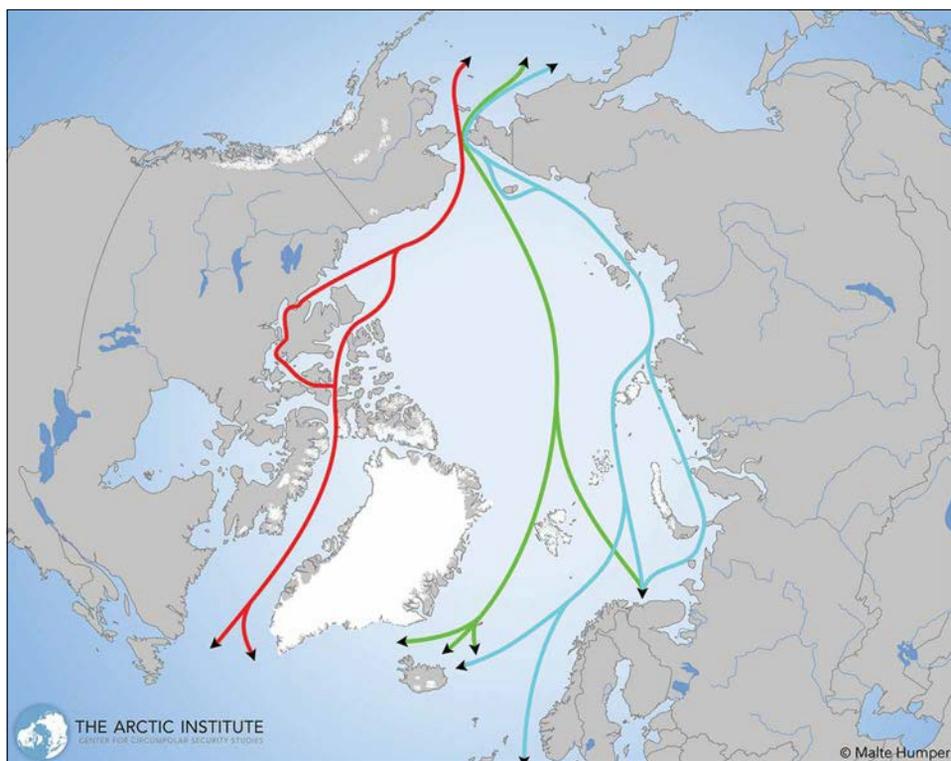
That both major powers, and leading rivals to western influence, sense this same vulnerability and opportunity suggests Beijing and Moscow share a view of geopolitical theory and its intersection with naval strategy. As cognizant of this geopolitical view now as it was during the Cold War, the West is moving to counterbalance. This also explains why the White House, amidst its many pressing challenges, has mustered the renewed energy, foresight, and policy attention to reassert and clarify its polar interests, as expressed in its June 9, 2020, memo on Arctic security.⁹ The re-opening of an American consulate in Nuuk, Greenland, for the first time since 1953 preceded this memo by just one day. Only a year before, the White House briefly floated an unsolicited bid for sovereign acquisition of Greenland from Denmark, which Denmark quickly rejected.¹⁰ Around same time, it committed over a billion dollars in funding for its long-anticipated icebreaker modernization program.

Appropriate to the increasingly contested Arctic region, it's known as the Polar Security Program—providing a robust, mobile platform for sovereign assertion from Alaska to the North Pole.¹¹

Irregular Strategic Polygons and Invisible Fault Lines

There has been much recent discussion of a triangular strategic competition¹² in the Arctic between the United States on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other. The latter pair of rivals are widely perceived to have the advantage of momentum, while the States' plays catch-up. In her seminal Spring 2020 *Strategic Studies Quarterly* article, National War College professor Rebecca Pincus explains that the "Arctic is an important locus for great power competition and triangular balancing between the US, China, and Russia. It is what political science professor Rob Huebert has dubbed the 'New Arctic Strategic Triangle Environment.'"¹³

Huebert's "New Arctic Strategic Triangle Environment" is an elegant concept, rooted in a tripolar diplomatic dialectic predating President Nixon's historic 1972 overture to Mao's China, realigning American and Chinese strategic interests after an earlier Sino-Soviet alignment. The reality of Arctic geopolitical competition is much more multiangular, multilevel, and asymmetrical. It is more accurately visualized as an irregular strategic polygon with a dynamic mix of largely stable bilateral



As the Arctic continues its historic thaw, proposed shipping routes will start to call into question national sovereignty for Arctic states. Graphic courtesy of The Arctic Institute

and multilateral interstate relations. To this is added the complexity of an overlapping, but largely invisible to outsiders, set of internal and transnational fault lines of conflict, yielding a diverse but largely collaborative group of predominant stakeholders. This includes Arctic and non-Arctic states, inclusive of their national, regional, and local governments and major economic actors; Indigenous peoples' organizations, some holding regional and local governing powers; and numerous issue-specific NGOs. The end results are dynamically shifting alignments of interests and a complex patchwork of governing systems with extreme variance and volatility over time, yielding a complexity that eludes easy explanation or simple strategic statement.¹⁴

While triangularity may elegantly describe one of the many salient levels of analysis in Arctic geopolitics, this trinity of states comprised by the United States, China, and Russia is anything but equal when it comes to relative power and influence in the Arctic. Without Arctic territory of its own or a seat at the Arctic Council's table as an observer state, China is, in the most important ways, not even a significant player. This stands in marked contrast to Russia, whose Arctic territories are the world's largest, or the United States, which with its Arctic NATO partners Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Iceland, and Norway, presents a formidable and united bloc. It is along these sovereign shores that all proposed marine shipping routes in a warming Arctic will pass. Indeed, as the Arctic continues its historic thaw, its archipelagic nature becomes increasingly apparent.

Colonial States and Sovereignty by Proxy

A triangular strategic rivalry pitting Washington's interests against the alignment of those of Moscow and Beijing presumes an inherently Westphalian nature of the Arctic states. But this is far from the case in much of the Arctic, where most of the states are not unitary nation-states, but instead independent, one-time colonial states. These were cobbled together in earlier centuries by unitary states of the Westphalian core that expanded across the seas, leaving Indigenous peoples and their local governing structures largely intact and enabling colonial rule via local proxies. This, in turn, preserved the prior power relationships of the precolonial world, whether sultanates, caliphates and emirates of Eurasia's rim, or the tribal polities of the Americas, that would be successfully leveraged in the interest of ascendant colonial powers. Because of this defining feature of Arctic states, a lingering fault line is the internal divide between center and periphery, with settler elites in command of the state apparatus to the south, and Indigenous communities in the remote hinterland. The latter have been gradually regaining self-governing powers, with the exception of Iceland, which was settled prior to the



The Arctic without ice, though unlikely to be experienced before mid-century and then only temporarily, reveals a maritime domain defined by islands, archipelagos and increasingly strategic island chains comparable to the Pacific and Atlantic. Pyty | Shutterstock.com

arrival of the eastward migrating Inuit, leaving this one Arctic state a truly unitary Westphalian polity.

Understanding this internal dynamic, and achieving a stable balance of interests through inclusive and respectful policies of native inclusion, enrichment, and empowerment may be of momentous consequence in the event of external agitation by a non-Arctic state. This historic struggle for the human terrain of the Arctic is thus of great importance to the future stability of the region. It requires forward thinking investment, respectful relationship-building and sustainment, and a continuous process of confidence-building measures to ensure that the legitimacy of the rule of the sovereign states of the Arctic remains intact and uncontested. Otherwise, a foreign interloper such as China could destabilize the status quo. Because many socioeconomic challenges face northern villages across the Arctic, this is a potential vulnerability that an external power could seek to exploit – and, some argue, has already become a target for exploitation by Beijing. These Indigenous homelands have been imperfectly integrated with the political economies of the Arctic states, despite much progress and effort in recent years, and “Fourth World” challenges persist, eclipsing those of the Third World. This remains a near universal fault line across the Arctic that challenges the seven Arctic states that have Indigenous populations engaged in ongoing processes of cultural renewal, economic development, and the restoration of land rights.

Progress on this front has varied greatly by region

and by state, offering an opportunity, albeit an uneven one, that differs greatly across the Arctic, for external exploitation. Russia has, in recent years, mastered the art of hybrid warfare, as demonstrated in its persistent but low-level interventions along the arc of what it once referred to as its “near abroad,”¹⁵ with particularly effective results in Crimea. And Beijing has similarly deployed “checkbook diplomacy”¹⁶ to co-opt elites along the global network envisioned by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including its northern component, the Polar Silk Road. But China has faced strong blowback against what the United States has successfully reframed as “debt-trap diplomacy.”¹⁷ And Russia’s aggressiveness has generated a near-universal distrust, particularly by border states fearing they could become the next Crimea. Tactical blunders by both Moscow and Beijing, through clumsy and overconfident efforts to coerce smaller polities and peoples, have blunted their capacity to project power into the Arctic. One exception, of course, is Moscow’s own Arctic territories and waters where its sovereignty remains uncontested, but where it remains behind its democratic Arctic counterparts on reconciling state and tribal interests.

Universalizing Indigenous Empowerment

Intriguingly, the strengthening alignment of interests between Indigenous peoples and their sovereigns across the non-Russian Arctic from Alaska to Finland can provide the democratic Arctic with an advantage over Russia. Indeed, Moscow’s own native peoples remain marginalized; with many Indigenous leaders in exile, their lands and resources remain encroached upon or expropriated, and their homelands threatened by outside interests.¹⁸ One can even imagine the democratic Arctic states mastering the art of hybrid warfare, just as many, by necessity, re-mastered the art of counterinsurgency warfare during the long Global War on Terror.¹⁹

By turning the tables on Moscow, the democratic Arctic can win the battle for the hearts and minds of Russia’s own oppressed native peoples. To some degree, this is already underway with the warm diplomatic reception enjoyed by Russian Indigenous leaders in Arctic institutions like the Arctic Council, where Indigenous organizations enjoy a distinct membership status as Permanent

Participants (PPs). PPs are second only to the founding member states—the Arctic 8—and are superior in power to the many observer organizations and states, among which China is included. Russia may already be realizing its security can be strengthened by achieving parity with its democratic counterparts on the Arctic Council in the area of native rights and empowerment. This is reflected in its latest Arctic strategy extending through 2035, which devotes significant and unprecedented attention to Indigenous issues. If Moscow continues in this direction, Arctic collaboration can be strengthened, further eroding the saliency of the strategic triangularity described above, and restoring the condition known as Arctic exceptionalism.

With its deep pockets, China may take the opportunity to retool its approach, shifting away from the naked power grab of debt-trap diplomacy and foster a more mutually beneficial model of Arctic economic development. This could reposition Beijing to more adeptly exploit any failures by the Arctic states to sufficiently support and re-empower their own Indigenous peoples, who are intimately aware of any unevenness in Arctic social, cultural, and economic development. A triumph by the democratic Arctic states is by no means guaranteed in the battle for Indigenous hearts and minds, but we still have many advantages over Russia and China. These could make it impossible for either rival to meaningfully undermine western influence in the region or to dilute the sovereignty we have over their respective Arctic territories. Thus, if there is indeed a new Cold War in the Arctic region, the home front in each of the Arctic states, where continued gains in native development are crucial, will be an important theater of engagement. But it is one where the United States and its allies have many opportunities and advantages to consolidate victory.



As the Arctic region opens up to more vessel and exploration traffic, Arctic states will be best served by joining together in regional policy decisions. WindVector | Shutterstock.com



Since the 17th century, the National Guard has provided first-line national defense, and the Scout Battalions of the 297th Infantry, Alaska Army National Guard, composed mostly of Inuits, continue this historic mission today across the vast Arctic tundra. Mort Kunstler depicts this in, "Guardians of the North." National Guard image

And to strengthen our Arctic sovereignty through more inclusive and effective governance, in partnership with the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic, as we achieved in the past with the Alaska Eskimo Scouts during World War II.

Of equal importance to securing the home front in any looming Arctic Cold War is maintaining control over the many islands, island chains, and archipelagos of the Arctic and adjacent gateway regions. These are of increasing importance to not only the security of the Arctic region, but to global stability and world order itself. It is true that much of the insular and archipelagic Arctic north of Canada's mainland is either lightly settled or unsettled. Where settled, the region remains haunted by complex histories of resettlement whose pain lingers generations later. This could provide a weakness for potential exploitation by China of otherwise recognized claims of Arctic sovereignty, much the way it exploited other such sovereign weaknesses in the South China Sea. In the latter, China fortified unoccupied islands adjacent

to much weaker states that lacked effective means of asserting sovereignty against the rival claim. While in the former, the islands of Canada's High Arctic, like those off Russia's mainland or the sovereign and semi-sovereign island polities of the High North Atlantic, are internationally recognized. And Canada's Arctic neighbors recognize its claims just as Canada reciprocally recognizes the claims of its Arctic neighbors, with few, and largely insignificant, exceptions. It would thus be immeasurably harder for China to replicate its tactics as developed in the South China Sea. Indeed, doing so would almost certainly generate a universal rebuke from the entire membership of the Arctic Council, state and Indigenous alike, and lead to China's isolation—from not only the democratic Arctic states, but its partner-of-the-moment Russia. This is a consequence Beijing would find humiliating, and which would show the fragility of Beijing's current entente with Moscow.

And while China may seek to influence the loyalties of Indigenous communities across the Arctic through its

checkbook, such efforts will likely catalyze a renewed effort by the democratic Arctic sovereigns to invest in the development of their northern frontier communities. We saw this recently after China sought to assert itself in Greenland,²⁰ which ironically precipitated not only the 2019 White House overture to “buy” Greenland from Denmark, but a longer-term and more mutual diplomatic re-engagement between the United States and Greenland. This includes the June 10, 2020, re-opening of the U.S. consulate in Nuuk, an offer of direct U.S. aid to help Greenland battle the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resolution of a lingering base maintenance contract dispute at Thule. This suggests Beijing will ultimately have to accept its place in the Arctic order as an outsider, an Arctic Council observer state with maritime and commercial interests, but limited strategic, military, or diplomatic space for expansion.

A more concerted effort by the democratic Arctic states to court Moscow through existing international institutions like the Arctic Council and the Arctic Coast Guard Forum can greatly help toward this end. By strengthening ties within the Arctic states to their Indigenous communities, and their relationship with fellow Arctic sovereign, Russia, the members of the Arctic Council can greatly reduce the likelihood of experiencing a new polar Cold War. With long traditions of Indigenous engagement to build upon and a solid foundation for enduring intra-Arctic collaboration, active participants in the Arctic Council and Arctic Coast Guard Forum are well positioned to take the lead on these initiatives. While the Cold War divided not only the Arctic but much of the planet into competing military-diplomatic-economic blocs, today’s world is much more integrated and thus much less likely to bifurcate again. The added unity fostered by the long, continuing processes of Arctic globalization and economic integration will ultimately trump whatever regional advantages China may seek. As much as Beijing may persist in its pursuit of such advantage, with continued unity among the Arctic states China will, in the end, emerge both humbled and disappointed by the results of its efforts. ■

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Endnotes:

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