



PRIMER: The Arctic: An Emerging Security Frontier

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BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

- The Arctic's strategic location for missile defense, northern trade routes, and vast reserves of natural resources make it a valuable arena for U.S. national security.
- The United States and NATO presently work together to secure the Arctic through routine joint exercises and investment in Arctic defense. The September 2026 agreement between the United States, Denmark, and Greenland is a positive step for American security that safeguards America's long-term access to the island.
- Russia and China threaten regional security by strengthening their Arctic defense postures through joint aerial and naval patrols and investment in the region's natural resources and infrastructure.
- Building on this momentum, the United States must increase Arctic shipbuilding and aircraft production, bolster Arctic missile defense, expand strategic investments in infrastructure and mining projects for rare earths and other natural resources, and work with allies to secure northern shipping lanes.

IMPORTANCE OF THE ARCTIC TO U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY

The Arctic is important for U.S. missile defense systems, encompasses increasingly important trade routes, and is thought to hold extensive untapped reserves of oil, natural gas, and critical minerals. Alaska—itsself located in the Arctic—is home to over [700,000](#) American citizens, making Arctic defense an essential component of homeland security. The shortest [flight path](#) for a missile traveling from China or Russia to North America would most likely pass over the Arctic, making it a critical location for early warning systems and missile interceptors. Beyond security, glacial melting has made northern trade routes more easily accessible and opened a faster route between Asia and Europe. For example, the Northwest Passage, which connects the Arctic Ocean to the North Atlantic, can [save](#) close to 4,500 nautical miles, cutting some shipping routes from Asia to Europe in half. Last year saw an [increase](#) in ships passing through the Arctic, up 40 percent from 2013. The Arctic houses an [estimated](#) 90 billion barrels of oil and natural gas reserves, and Greenland alone [ranks](#) eighth in the world for rare earth reserves, minerals [critical](#) for a tremendous amount of our military and commercial needs.

The U.S. military currently has a number of military installations in [Alaska](#) and one base in [Greenland](#). Of note, [Fort Greely](#) in Alaska houses ground-based interceptors that can interdict intercontinental ballistic missiles, and the Pituffik Space Base in Greenland [serves](#) several defense functions including early warning for missile defense and space surveillance. During World War II, the United States operated several airfields and weather stations in Greenland, and in 1951 the United States and Denmark signed a defense [agreement](#) that allowed a sustained American military presence on the island. The United States also participates in [NATO](#) activities across the Arctic to help troops practice working together and operating in the cold. Some of these exercises fall under the recently launched [Arctic Sentry](#) initiative, which aims to strengthen the alliance's posture across multiple domains in the Arctic and High North.

ADVERSARY POSTURE IN THE ARCTIC

Russia and China also recognize the region's importance and have surged their Arctic ambitions in recent years. Russia is the [largest](#) Arctic country and has over [30](#) military bases in the region. To strengthen its Arctic posture, the Russian military has been [revitalizing](#) Soviet-era Arctic bases and building new military facilities, and most of Russia's [naval nuclear strike capability](#) is located on the [Kola Peninsula](#), a landmass near the northern border with Finland. The Russian icebreaker fleet [boasts](#) roughly 40 polar icebreaker ships with new nuclear-powered ones currently under construction. In contrast, the United States only has [one](#) currently operational heavy icebreaker,

in spite of how [important](#) icebreaker ships are for opening up trade routes and projecting military power in the region.

Despite having no Arctic coastline, China [proclaims](#) itself to be a “near-Arctic state.” Chinese and Russian [cooperation](#) has been increasing in recent years, including joint naval and bomber patrols. China has also [built](#) five icebreaker and ice-capable research ships for dual-use scientific and military research, and it is [deploying](#) satellites and subsea infrastructure for polar coverage with potential military applications. With Russia increasingly isolated internationally after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, [Chinese companies](#) have become significant investors and equipment suppliers in Russian energy projects in the Arctic.

Russian and Chinese ships transit the [Northern Sea Route](#) (NSR) along Russia’s northern coast to reach Europe more quickly. Moscow is attempting to exert control over the NSR by requiring commercial vessels to have prior transit permission from Russia, allow Russian pilots aboard, and Russian icebreaker escorts. China is also seeking to integrate the NSR into its “[Polar Silk Road](#)” by investing in ships and infrastructure to take advantage of this route, which provides it a much more direct route to ship goods to Europe.

RECENT CHANGES IN U.S. AND ALLIED POSTURE IN THE ARCTIC

Though the United States has underinvested in the Arctic region for too long, it is becoming a higher priority under the Trump administration. On September 22, the United States, Greenland, and Denmark signed an [agreement](#) that expands American access to Greenland and ensures the United States will retain a [permanent](#) military presence even if Greenland becomes independent from Denmark. The agreement allows the United States to expand Pituffik Space Base and establish two more bases in Greenland, with the potential to add additional military facilities in the future. The deal also prevents [non-NATO states](#) from building military bases in Greenland and safeguards Greenland’s critical resources by restricting the ability of non-NATO states to invest in key sectors. These provisions will prevent China and Russia from securing a foothold close to American shores and serve as a foundation upon which further enhancements to allied Arctic security can be built.

NATO is also continuing to [strengthen](#) its Arctic posture, working to develop intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, space-based capabilities like the NORTHLINK Arctic satellite project, maritime capabilities like icebreaker ships, air and sea drones, and equipment that can operate in extreme cold. Individual NATO allies are also investing more in Arctic defense. In March, Canada announced plans to [invest](#) \$25.7 billion in Arctic defense and infrastructure. [Norway](#), which helps NATO monitor the North Atlantic for Russian nuclear submarines, plans to spend \$179 billion on defense between 2025 and 2036. In 2025, the Danish government [announced](#) an increase in defense spending of \$4.2 billion purely focused on the Arctic. The addition in recent years of new NATO members [Sweden and Finland](#) also has improved NATO’s Arctic posture and will ensure it remains a higher priority moving forward.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Accelerate plans to build icebreaker ships:** The U.S. military currently has only two [icebreakers](#) that operate in the Arctic, and both ships are outdated and underequipped. The United States agreed to build several Arctic Security Cutters as part of the 2024 [Icebreaker Collaboration Effort Pact](#), but American manufacturers have struggled to produce icebreakers on schedule. The U.S. military should expedite its shipbuilding schedule to compete with Russia’s naval posture. Working closely with skilled allied shipbuilders like the [Finns](#) will help advance American shipbuilding capabilities.
- **Develop replacements for aging Arctic planes:** The U.S. military has two kinds of [aircraft](#) that can operate in polar regions: the LC-130 Skibird and the C-17 Globemaster III. Lockheed Martin is working on replacing the aging Skibirds, but there are no concrete plans to replace the C-17s. The Air Force should expedite the process for developing a new polar aircraft, as has been discussed by [Congress](#) as part of the FY 2027 National Defense Authorization Act.



- **Increase American strategic investments in Greenland's key resources:** Greenland contains a number of important natural resources including [rare earths](#), with two of Greenland's rare earth deposits ranking among the largest in the world. The United States should work with Denmark and Greenland to develop the infrastructure needed to successfully mine these resources. America and Denmark should [encourage](#) investment from the private sector by providing insurance, loans, and loan guarantees to finance these ventures.
- **Strengthen and expand U.S. missile defense systems in Greenland:** Because of Greenland's geographic importance for America's missile defense capabilities, the United States should strengthen missile defense systems currently in place, including potentially positioning [missile interceptors](#) in Greenland. Additionally, the United States should plan to host new Golden Dome components in Greenland as needed.
- **Create the support network necessary for Western ships to use the Northern Sea Route (NSR):** The United States should [work](#) with Scandinavian and Indo-Pacific partners like Japan and South Korea to create the infrastructure for ships to securely transit the NSR, including coordinating airfields, ports, equipment, and fuel. U.S. and allied icebreakers could escort commercial ships, and Denmark and Norway already possess commercial vessels ready for Arctic conditions.

