

USS *Connecticut* and USS *Hartford* break through ice in support of Ice Exercise 2018, Ice Camp Skate, March 9, 2018 (U.S. Navy/Michael H. Lee)



The Bering Strait

An Arena for Great Power Competition

By Ryan Tice

Maritime corridors such as the Straits of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandeb have long been vitally important to the interests of the

United States and the global community. Now due to Russia's and China's interests and activities in the Arctic, the Bering Strait is an emerging maritime

corridor that is becoming increasingly vital to the economic and national security interests of the United States and its allies. Once a region of cooperation between the Soviet Union and the United States, rapidly changing environmental conditions and the resulting increase in human activity have made the Arctic an arena for potential Great Power competition between Russia, China, and the United States. The Navy foretold the Bering Strait's significance in 2013 when it published its *U.S. Navy Arctic Roadmap: 2014–2030*, asserting that

this 51-mile-wide strait between Russia and the United States . . . will become a more important security planning consideration as maritime activity continues to increase. . . . As the Pacific gateway for

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*Russia's Northern Sea Route, the Bering Strait will become increasingly important for seaborne trade between Europe and Asia.*¹

Any threat, perceived or real, to the freedom of access to these maritime corridors usually elicits a strong and swift response by the United States and its allies. Although the importance of the Bering Strait is increasingly being recognized throughout the Department of Defense (DOD), the United States still faces several obstacles to achieving the strategic objectives outlined in the Navy's roadmap, namely to "ensure United States Arctic sovereignty and provide homeland defense," "provide ready naval forces to respond to crises and contingencies," "preserve freedom of the seas," and "promote partnerships within the United States Government and with international allies and partners."²

In particular, because the Bering Strait lies at the boundary of three geographic combatant commands (GCCs), increased adversary activity around the strait creates challenges for unity of effort among those combatant commands. Moreover, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has invested little in Arctic capabilities, and since 2014, the United States and its allies have focused personnel and resources on deterring Russian aggression around northern Europe.³

As a result, the United States finds itself in a position of weakness in the region. If steps are not taken to correct these vulnerabilities, the Bering Strait will almost certainly become a region like the South China Sea or the Baltic region, where competition, harassment, and intimidation threaten its status as a place of peaceful cooperation and exploration. To meet the challenges posed by the rapidly changing security environment in the Arctic and the Bering Strait in particular, U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) should establish Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) in Alaska. A CJTF in Alaska, like CJTFs in other parts of the world, would enable the necessary conditions to integrate the full effects of the joint force across land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace warfare domains; create a venue for military cooperation among partners

with Arctic interests; and ensure that U.S. adversaries do not exploit gaps created at the far boundaries of the GCC areas of responsibility (AORs).

External Challenges: Russian and Chinese Interests in the Arctic

To fully appreciate the exigency of establishing a CJTF in Alaska, it is necessary to understand Russian and Chinese interests and activities in the Arctic. Russia's military assertiveness in the region is a strong indicator of its ambitions. In December 2015, President Vladimir Putin stated in his National Security Strategy that

*leadership in exploiting the resources of the world's oceans and the Arctic is acquiring particular significance. . . . An entire spectrum of political, financial-economic, and informational instruments have been set in motion in the struggle for influence in the international arena.*⁴

To achieve its geostrategic objectives in the Arctic, Russia has established the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command, embarked on large-scale investment in Arctic airfields and ports,⁵ and initiated the development of discrete Arctic military capabilities such as the Northern Fleet's Arctic Motorized Rifle Brigade⁶ and "Arctic-proof" drones that can withstand the region's severe climatic conditions.⁷ This Arctic investment was on full display during Russia's strategic exercise Vostok-18, when units of the Arctic Motorized Rifle Brigade conducted an amphibious insert on the Chukotka Peninsula and executed a tactical foot movement from its insertion point to an undisclosed location along the Pacific coastline while the Northern Fleet conducted multiple amphibious landings and search-and-rescue missions throughout the exercise.⁸

In addition to developing Arctic capabilities, Russia is investing in Arctic infrastructure to enable operations and has developed a system of military facilities—radar stations, air bases, and ports. Its militarization of the Arctic sends clear signals to the other Arctic littoral

countries that it seeks to assert itself as the dominant Arctic power.

But Russia is not the only power with its eyes on the Arctic. Potential economic and ambiguous international regulations, as well as a lack of institutional governance, are already enticing China to position itself as a powerful stakeholder in Arctic affairs. China is looking north to use the Arctic sea lines of communication as a third belt in its massive infrastructure network dubbed the Belt and Road Initiative.⁹ All Chinese maritime traffic utilizing Russia's Northern Sea route will have to transit the Bering Strait in order to travel between the Chinese port at Dalian to the port in Rotterdam, Netherlands. To further its economic interests in the region, China is wielding its soft-power weapons to gain leverage. It has invested in nuclear-powered icebreakers and increased its foreign direct investment in such countries as Finland and Norway, with ambitions to establish a Chinese-Arctic corridor that connects China with European markets.¹⁰ In only a few years, such trans-Arctic shipping will become an economically viable alternative to the Suez Canal and cut travel time between Shanghai and northwestern Europe by approximately 18 to 27 percent.¹¹ Thus, it was unsurprising that, after visiting with President Donald Trump in April 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping stopped in Alaska to meet with Governor Bill Walker, attempting to find opportunities for Chinese investment in Alaska.¹²

China's interests in the Arctic may not be purely economic, however, but might also involve national security. China views the Aleutian Islands as the northernmost extent of the first island chain, a series of islands extending from the Aleutians in the northeast down through the Philippine archipelago in the southwest.¹³ The Chinese, a historically seafaring nation, see these islands as barriers used by the United States and its allies to limit their power projection capabilities by restricting their maneuverability.¹⁴ Seen from this perspective, freedom of maneuver through the Aleutian Islands and Bering Strait in order to access the Arctic's natural resources and trade routes is of great strategic importance for China.



Crew of U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Maple* follows Canadian Coast Guard Icebreaker *Terry Fox* through icy waters of Franklin Strait, in Nunavut Canada, August 11, 2017 (U.S. Coast Guard/Nate Littlejohn)

Both China and Russia are taking the long view in their Arctic strategies, setting the necessary conditions to assert themselves in the region. As noted in the British publication *The Observer*, “A great chess game is being played with countries staking claims to the Arctic to make sure they are not left out. . . . Some countries, like China, are looking 50 years ahead.”¹⁵

External Challenges

In other regions where they have interests, both China and Russia secure those interests through increased militarization, employing antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities from sovereign territory to control strategic maritime corridors, and they could take the same approach around the Bering. In late 2017, China constructed military infrastructure on Subi, Mischief, and Fiyero Cross reefs in the South China

Sea.¹⁶ This infrastructure, including a military airfield, is believed to consist of hardened facilities for the deployment of radars, antiship and anti-air missile launchers, and combat aircraft. China uses these activities to secure its claims to natural resources and extend its influence over that strategic maritime corridor in an attempt to reduce U.S. sway over what China considers to be its rightful area of influence.¹⁷

Similar to Chinese actions in the South China Sea, Russia’s deployments of A2/AD capabilities in the Black Sea and Kaliningrad offer operational planners insight into what a Russian land-based A2/AD “bubble” in the vicinity of the Bering Strait might look like: a nearly impenetrable, three-dimensional area where the United States and its allies would be under the threat of attack across surface, sub-surface, air, and electromagnetic

domains.¹⁸ With Russia’s increased investment in infrastructure in the Arctic, it has the ability to create such an integrated network of sensors and shooters in and around the Bering Strait. The Sopka-2 radar system on Wrangel Island is a three-dimensional dual-use S-band air-route radar with a range of 350 kilometers.¹⁹ Though not a significant threat in isolation, this radar—potentially employed as a part of an integrated network of Russian land-based antiship cruise missiles, electronic warfare systems, and ground-based mobile air defense systems in the Bering Strait—would pose a formidable obstacle to the United States and its allies’ ability to access the Arctic.

That said, given the concentration of Russian A2/AD assets being employed elsewhere, it is unlikely that Russia will employ them around the Bering Strait in the near term. Instead, Russia will likely

adopt the role of Arctic intimidator, using a complement of electromagnetic sensors and electronic warfare capabilities to collect information about and probe and harass countries it deems competitors in the region. There is evidence that this is already happening. During the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) multinational large-scale exercise Trident Juncture-18, Russia was accused of employing global positioning system jamming measures from the Kola Peninsula, a border region with Norway and Finland, on NATO aircraft flying in support of the exercise.²⁰ The former head of NATO's Emerging Threats Division characterized Russia's behavior as follows: "We've seen transmitters going down mysteriously in Sweden, hacking of soldiers' personal devices in the Baltics, disruptions to mobile phone networks in Lithuania during maritime exercises and so on."²¹ Without a complement of responses from the United States and its allies, the sum effect of these more aggressive tactics in the Bering Strait is a normalization of bad behavior that threatens access to the region, potentially creating a situation in which the United States and its allies would only be able to access this maritime corridor under the threat of nonkinetic or even kinetic attack.

Internal Challenges: Command and Control and Balanced Forces

In addition to the challenges China and Russia pose in the Arctic, the United States faces a number of internal challenges. One is that the Bering Strait exposes a potential seam at the edges of three GCC AOR boundaries: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, U.S. European Command, and USNORTHCOM. As human activity increases and China and Russia seek to further assert themselves in the Arctic, the task of effectively identifying and tracking potential threats across multiple warfare domains will challenge the coordination and unity of effort of these commands. The 2011 update of the U.S. Unified Command Plan boundaries illuminates the command and control (C2) challenges the Bering Strait presents.

For example, a Russian navy surface combatant traveling from the Northern Fleet port at Murmansk along the Northern Sea route toward Vladivostok to link up with the Russian Pacific Fleet would have to pass through the Bering Strait and the maritime waters of three GCCs. An individual GCC has the authority to plan operations and operate its forces whenever and wherever they are required to accomplish their mission. However, any cross-AOR operations or activities require coordination with the affected GCC.²² Russia and China know well the Unified Command Plan and will look to exploit the gaps at the AOR boundaries. The current U.S. institutional conception of geographic responsibility will thus challenge the unity of effort required to respond to security issues in the Bering Strait.

Another challenge to U.S. efforts in the Arctic is that the Euro-centric focus on the Russian threat has diverted personnel and resources away from the growing threats that Russia and China pose in and around the Bering Strait. The eight littoral Arctic countries (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States) are either NATO or European powers and, as a result, have drawn U.S. attention and resources toward the European Arctic to meet their collective defense needs.

Since the annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the Pentagon has responded by initiating Operation *Atlantic Resolve*, which has established enduring rotational units and commands to reassure the Alliance and deter further Russian aggression in Europe. Recognizing Norway's strategic position and unique security challenges, the U.S. Marine Corps has prioritized support to contingency operations in NATO's northern flank by eliminating rotational forces to the Black Sea region and reallocating forces to Norway as Marine Rotational Force-Europe.²³ The U.S. Army has committed a regionally aligned division headquarters in Poland with armored and aviation brigade combat teams with support from logistics task forces on 9-month rotations in Northern

Europe.²⁴ In 2018, the U.S. Navy reestablished Second Fleet with the stated mission to develop and dynamically employ maritime forces ready to fight across multiple domains in the Atlantic and Arctic in order to ensure access; deter aggression; and defend U.S., allied, and partner interests.²⁵ This surge of personnel and resources toward Europe has left little capacity to devote forces to address emerging threats in and around the Bering Strait. With little to no Navy or Marine Corps forces stationed in Alaska, the United States finds itself unbalanced across the Pacific and Atlantic sides of the Arctic.

The United States will have to develop an Arctic strategy that views the Bering Strait as a strategic maritime corridor serving as the bridge between the growing threats in Asia and Europe. The critical task will be to balance forces across the Arctic region to ensure that China and Russia do not exploit the physical gaps and organizational seams created by the current imbalances between forces assigned to the European and Asian regions of the Arctic and the combatant command boundaries.

Combined Joint Task Force—Alaska: Leveraging Partnerships to Win Early

Ensuring access to the Arctic by controlling the Bering Strait is a global issue, one that requires participation from U.S. Asian and European allies, including NATO, Japan, and South Korea, which have commercial and security interests in the Arctic. Therefore, we need a CJTF; it has a track record of success in addressing the very institutional issues and foreseeable threats emerging in the Bering Strait. Alaska is an ideal location to establish a CJTF to demonstrate to China and Russia that the United States takes access to the Arctic seriously.

One reason a CJTF would be effective is that it would necessitate establishing a combined joint operation area (CJOA) with sufficient land, sea, and air space—a critical first step toward ensuring unity of effort when conducting operations at the geographic boundaries of contiguous

areas of operation. As defined in Joint Publication 3-0, *Operations*, “A CJOA is an area of land, sea, and airspace, defined by a geographic combatant commander or subordinate unified commander, in which a joint force commander . . . conducts military operations to accomplish a specific mission.”²⁶ In the case of the Bering Strait, this CJOA would create an area owned by one commander, thereby streamlining decisionmaking by routing it through only one GCC.

Another virtue of the CJTF as a solution to the Bering Strait problem is that it would create an institutional platform for cooperation among allied and partner nations, thereby providing the necessary balance of forces across the Arctic region. Japan and South Korea, both seafaring nations and close allies of the United States, look to the Arctic for access to hydrocarbons, minerals, and fisheries.²⁷ Their participation in CJTF–Alaska would serve to enhance their ability to protect their economic and security interests in the North Pacific and the Arctic, while the CJTF could leverage their icebreakers and ice-class ships to bolster the coalition’s presence in the Arctic. Both Japan and South Korea could increase rotational training opportunities for their air forces and armies at the Joint Pacific Alaska Range Complex and further develop their amphibious capabilities in partnership with the U.S. Marines at Adak Island in the Aleutian Island chain.²⁸

As with Asian allies, a CJTF in Alaska would likely draw interest from NATO and our European allies, serving as a welcome opportunity for Europe’s non-NATO members to contribute to global security and cooperation outside the auspices of NATO. Finland and Sweden, non-NATO Arctic countries, would benefit greatly from cooperating with the Alliance in a non-NATO military structure. Likewise, inviting both countries to participate in CJTF–Alaska would bring valuable Arctic military experience to the team. Recognizing the growing threats to their security, the United States, Sweden, and Finland signed a nonbinding trilateral security agreement in 2018. All three countries recognized the need to increase

their military interoperability, specifically by planning and executing joint training exercises.²⁹ Increasing this allied presence in Alaska would balance the force posture on both sides of the Arctic and bring much needed Arctic capabilities to bear.

CJTF–Alaska is not merely an effective but hypothetical solution; it is an altogether logistically achievable one, as it could capitalize on the existing facilities and personnel force structure of Alaska Command (ALCOM), a sub-unified joint command of USNORTHCOM headquartered in Anchorage and commanded by an Air Force three-star general. ALCOM could readily serve as the foundation of a CJTF headquarters. The rest of the personnel needed could be globally sourced by USNORTHCOM through the Request for Forces process. Both the Air Force and the Army have significant capabilities in Alaska and would not require additional forces above discrete capabilities needed to compete across warfare domains. With little Navy and Marine Corps presence, the CJTF might be better served employing rotational Navy and Marine Corps forces. As noted by Walker Mills, shorter “deployment for training periods of one or two months to Alaska would still offer much better training opportunities while limiting the impact to our global force model and current deployment commitments.”³⁰ This concept of rotational forces would also apply to U.S. multinational partners and would go a long way toward enhancing multinational interoperability.

Alaska also serves as an ideal location for a standing CJTF headquarters because it has the established military infrastructure, including 32 military facilities and 12 major bases and stations, to meet the military demands of the rapidly increasing human activity in the Arctic region. With well-established and ready-to-use resources, Alaska would facilitate security cooperation training across all warfare domains with coalition partners. Alaska’s Joint Pacific Alaska Range Complex (JPARC) has 65,000 square miles of airspace, 2,560 square miles of land space, and 42,000 square nautical miles of surface, sub-surface, and overlying airspace in the Gulf of Alaska.

Accredited a Joint National Training Capability, JPARC is a resource that ensures training is conducted under realistic conditions across warfare domains.³¹ The port of Alaska in Anchorage is another ready-to-use capability that the state has to offer. During the height of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the port supported more than 20 military deployments and the onward movement of 18,000 pieces of military equipment.³² It has direct access via secure rail lines to major military installations and year-round accessibility, allowing the United States and its allies to deploy rotational forces and equipment with ease.

Redesignating ALCOM as a standing CJTF headquarters and inviting countries to participate in a coalition come with little opportunity cost in the near term; serve to demonstrate U.S. resolve to deter malign activity in the Bering Strait; set a strategic anchor on the Pacific side of the Arctic sea lines of communication; and complement the military planning and security cooperation that has heretofore been focused on the threats on the European side of the Arctic.

The CJTF headquarters is a proven model that fosters cooperation and collaboration. Establishing a CJTF headquarters in Alaska would signal to U.S. partners across the globe that Washington is taking the necessary steps to address the growing security challenges in the Arctic. The CJTF is not a novel idea but rather a time-tested model that fosters integration and unity of effort and clearly signals U.S. resolve to adversaries. Controlling the Bering Strait, in concert with sea control efforts in the European Arctic, would provide the essential security necessary to deter aggression so the Arctic remains a place where peaceful nations can coexist without fear of interference or intimidation. JFQ

Notes

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The European Union’s Permanent Structured Cooperation: Implications for Transatlantic Security

By Jonathan Dunn



Many U.S. defense officials expressed concern over the EU’s November 2017 launch of its Perma-

nent Structured Cooperation. They fear that a more capable EU would make it a competitor to NATO for European security issues, and in so doing reduce U.S. influence in European security. Concerns about diminished U.S. influence and EU divergence from NATO as a result of PESCO are misguided. Rather than be concerned about the remote possibility of European strategic autonomy, the United States should throw its full support behind the PESCO initiative and other attempts to strengthen European defense. That said, the United States has an interest in the direction that the EU takes with PESCO and should therefore attempt to shape it constructively.



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