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Designating EUCOM Lead Combatant Command in the Arctic Will Better Protect U.S. Interests

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As an Arctic nation, the U.S. has a strong stake in the region. Significant changes taking place in the Arctic have magnified its strategic importance to the U.S. Melting sea ice during the summer months has likely increased the viability of Arctic shipping lanes, bringing the potential for greater commercial activity for a nascent tourism industry and the availability of bountiful natural resources. In addition to these opportunities, the U.S. faces new challenges in terms of arctic security emanating from Russia's militarization of the High North.

The Pentagon publishes an annual document called the *Unified Command Plan* (UCP) that assigns responsibilities to each U.S. military combatant command for oversight of operations in their area of responsibility (AOR). U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) currently has responsibility for part of the Arctic. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the U.S. should designate U.S. European Command (EUCOM) as the lead combatant command for the Arctic to better facilitate cooperation and coordination between commands and to optimize resources. Six of seven non-U.S. Arctic nations fall within EUCOM's AOR; EUCOM's capabilities are located nearest to the region. EUCOM also provides the nucleus of U.S. support to the North Atlantic

Treaty Organization (NATO), which has a strong and growing interest in the region. This designation would best ensure the protection of U.S. sovereignty and national interests in the Arctic.

U.S. Interests in the Arctic

U.S. interests in the Arctic derive primarily as one of eight nations¹ with territory above the Arctic Circle. A secondary U.S. interest in the Arctic derives from its membership in NATO, as four of the five Arctic littoral powers are NATO members. Two additional Arctic nations, Finland and Sweden, are American allies and enhanced opportunity partners for NATO.

The Arctic is rich in natural resources. The opening of new shipping routes, while not yet a viable option for large container ships, will drive Arctic nations to press their interests in the region. The economic incentives of potentially shorter shipping times through the Arctic will create new business opportunities as well as challenges. For instance, many Arctic shipping lanes are a great distance from current search and rescue facilities, and natural resource exploration in the Arctic is costly, complex, and dangerous. Although the security challenges currently faced in the Arctic are not yet military in nature, there is still a requirement for military capability in the region that can support civilian authorities.

An Arctic nation must maintain requisite capabilities near or in the Arctic in order to respond to potential humanitarian or environmental situations. Military capabilities also allow U.S. military commanders to monitor the security situation in the Arctic, and to protect U.S. sovereignty and national interests in the region by responding to any potential future security concerns.

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Russian Militarization of the Arctic

While some military capabilities in the region is requisite, Russia has recently gone beyond that level. Its increasingly militarized presence in the Arctic reveals its efforts to exert a dominant influence.² EUCOM Commander General Curtis Scaparrotti, in his 2017 Posture Statement, described this buildup: “Russia is reasserting its military prowess and positioning itself for strategic advantage in the Arctic.”³

Russia’s Arctic militarization takes multiple forms including the revitalization of once defunct Arctic basing along with investment in new Arctic bases, the formation of specialized Arctic brigades, the development of equipment optimized for Arctic conditions, and increased military exercises in the region.⁴ Russia’s concentration of military forces on the Kola Peninsula had led in recent years to small population growth in many military towns on the peninsula, which had been in decline for decades.⁵

Russia’s Maritime Doctrine denotes the Arctic as one of the nation’s two focal points, along with the Atlantic.⁶ Russia’s largest and most important naval fleet, the Northern Fleet, is based in Severomorsk, above the Arctic Circle. Russia has increased submarine activity in the Arctic and North Atlantic, leading to a renewed focus for the U.S., Britain, and Norway on securing the Greenland, Iceland, and United Kingdom (GIUK) Gap.

NATO’s Role in the Arctic

The Arctic is becoming an increasingly important security theater for NATO. The alliance’s interests rest primarily on defending the territorial integrity of the five NATO members (Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and the United States) with territory

above the Arctic Circle. In addition, Russia’s Arctic militarization has security implications for NATO that the alliance cannot ignore. One implication is the threat posed to NATO’s ability to protect troop and ship convoys crossing the North Atlantic in the event of a future large-scale conflict.

NATO still has no agreed-to common position on its role in the Arctic region. The report from the Alliance’s most recent summit in Warsaw (2016) failed to mention the word *Arctic*, nor does the alliance’s most recent Strategic Concept (2010). The Warsaw Declaration, however, does discuss the renewed importance of the North Atlantic: “In the North Atlantic, as elsewhere, the Alliance will be ready to deter and defend against any potential threats, including against sea lines of communication and maritime approaches of NATO territory. In this context, we will further strengthen our maritime posture and comprehensive situational awareness.”⁷

Internal divisions within NATO on its role in the Arctic are hampering development of an Arctic strategy. Despite the lack of a strategy, the Arctic is beginning to gain recognition among NATO members as an operational domain as important as the Atlantic, Mediterranean, or the land borders with Russia. In recognition of the growing importance of the Arctic, as well as NATO’s gaps in addressing the region’s growing security concerns, the alliance is poised to recreate a command to oversee the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans.⁸

The U.S. should use its leadership role within NATO to push for an acknowledgement of the importance of the Arctic for the alliance. The U.S. should work with allies to develop a comprehensive NATO policy to address Arctic security with a robust role for

1 Along with Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden.

2 Dakota L. Wood, ed., *2018 Index of U.S. Military Strength* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2017), <http://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessing-threats-us-vital-interests/europe>.

3 General Curtis M. Scaparrotti, “EUCCOM 2017 Posture Statement,” testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, March 23, 2017, <http://www.eucom.mil/mission/eucom-2017-posture-statement> (accessed December 8, 2017).

4 Wood, ed., *2018 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, “Europe,” <http://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessing-threats-us-vital-interests/europe> (accessed December 8, 2017).

5 Atle Staalesen, “Military Towns in Kola Peninsula Are Population Winners,” *The Barents Observer*, May 30, 2017, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2017/05/military-towns-kola-peninsula-are-population-winners> (accessed December 8, 2017).

6 Dakota L. Wood, ed. *2018 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, “Europe.”

7 News release, “Warsaw Summit Communique,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, July 9, 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm (accessed December 8, 2017).

8 Julian E. Barnes, “NATO Plans to Create Two New Commands Amid Russia Tensions,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/nato-plans-to-create-two-new-commands-amid-russia-tensions-1508837829> (accessed December 8, 2017).

the alliance. In that regard, EUCOM will be vital in its role as conduit for U.S. partnerships with NATO and for Arctic allies both NATO and non-NATO in seeing these important policy changes implemented.

Establishing a Lead Combatant Command in the Arctic

The current UCP identifies six regional combatant commands (African Command, Central Command, European Command, Northern Command, Pacific Command, Southern Command) and three functional combatant commands (Special Operations Command, Strategic Command, Transportation Command).⁹

The UCP artificially divides responsibility for the Arctic between EUCOM and NORTHCOM. The 2011 UCP removed the Arctic from PACOM's AOR.¹⁰ EUCOM's Arctic AOR extends from Greenland across Europe and Russia to the tip of the Chukotka Peninsula in Russia's Far East; NORTHCOM is responsible for the Arctic across Alaska and Canada.¹¹ The Joint Chiefs of Staff should revise the UCP to designate EUCOM as the lead combatant command for Arctic operations.¹² Designating a lead combatant command will assist in coordinating between combatant commands where interests and AOR in the Arctic overlap.

Furthermore, EUCOM's long-standing and robust relationships with NATO and bilateral ties with the five European Arctic nations make it a natural choice. Continued cooperation with these allies in the form of exercises, intelligence sharing, joint training, and situational awareness is crucial to securing the Arctic and protecting U.S. interests and sovereignty there. Moreover, Russia, whose recent militarization of the Arctic is a challenge for both the U.S. and NATO, falls within EUCOM's AOR. EUCOM's decades of experience dealing with Russia, in terms of both former cooperation and active deterrence, make it an ideal selection.

Recommendations

The UCP should take into account the advantages associated with coordinating U.S. military capabilities and combatant command AOR's through one lead command for the Arctic. U.S. policymakers should:

- **Establish EUCOM as the lead combatant command for the Arctic.** EUCOM as lead combatant command for the Arctic will facilitate coordination and cooperation between combatant commands with overlapping interests and AOR in the Arctic. EUCOM's position is best for continuing to develop situational awareness and to facilitate robust cooperation, training, and strategy coordination with U.S. allies—most importantly through NATO.
- **Work with allies to develop a NATO Arctic strategy.** NATO has an important role to play in the Arctic. The U.S. should lead NATO to develop a comprehensive Arctic policy that addresses growing security challenges in the region. This should be done in cooperation with Finland and Sweden.

Conclusion

The U.S. has a clear interest in ensuring security in the Arctic, including safeguarding the sovereignty of U.S. Arctic territory, and defending the territorial integrity of NATO allies in the region. Designating EUCOM as the lead command for the Arctic will assist U.S. military commanders in better fulfilling this mission.

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9 On August 18, 2017, President Trump directed that a fourth functional command, U.S. Cyber Command, be elevated to the status of Combatant Command. It had previously been a subordinate command under USSTRATCOM. See The White House, "Statement by President Donald J. Trump on the Elevation of Cyber Command," August 18, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/08/18/statement-donald-j-trump-elevation-cyber-command> (accessed December 8, 2017).

10 U.S. Department of Defense, *Unified Command Plan*, October 28, 2011, <http://archive.defense.gov/ucc/> (accessed December 8, 2017).

11 U.S. Department of Defense, *Unified Combatant Commands*, <https://www.defense.gov/About/Military-Departments/Unified-Combatant-Commands/> (accessed December 8, 2017).

12 James Jay Carafano, Ariel Cohen, Sally McNamara, and Richard Weitz, "EUCOM Should Know U.S. Combatant Commands in the Arctic," *Heritage Backgrounder* No. 2536, March 28, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/defense/report/eucom-should-lead-us-combatant-commands-defense-national-interests-the-arctic>.