SSOAR

Open Access Repository
www.ssoar.info

Polar power USA: full steam ahead into the Arctic

Paul, Michael

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Stellungnahme / comment

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Paul, M. (2019). *Polar power USA: full steam ahead into the Arctic.* (SWP Comment, 42/2019). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. https://doi.org/10.18449/2019C42

Nutzungsbedingungen:
Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.
Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:
This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.
By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

gesis Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Diese Version ist zitierbar unter / This version is citable under:
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-65535-2

SWP

SWP Comment

NO. 42 NOVEMBER 2019

Polar Power USA: Full Steam Ahead into the Arctic

Michael Paul

The Arctic's melting ice not only acts as an early warning system for the world's climate, but also makes this region an indicator of change for international security policy. The Trump administration sees the Arctic primarily as an arena of competition between great powers. This could both benefit and harm the region. A greater engagement on the part of the USA would be welcome, but if it comes with an attempt to exclude other states, this would damage the high level of cooperation that has held sway in the Arctic thus far. US Arctic policy has become a variable that is dependent on great-power rivalry. The resulting polarisation of relations makes it difficult to find the necessary common solutions for coping with the changes caused by global warming.

China and Russia are the main driving forces in the great-power competition for the development of Arctic passages and resources. Having ignored the Arctic for years, the US has recently sought to curb the influence and investment of countries that are far from the Arctic such as China (which was admitted to the Arctic Council as an observer in 2013, and which sees itself as a "Near-Arctic State"). It is not only in Denmark and Greenland that such behaviour meets with resistance. Other states with observer status are also likely to be irritated by such attempts of exclusion. Blaming Moscow and Beijing for militarisation of the Arctic also rebounds on the Trump administration, which is in turn accused of jeopardising traditionally peaceful cooperation in the Arctic. The era of "Arctic exceptionalism" is obviously coming to an end.

The more military security is in the Arctic becomes a topic, the more NATO will become involved. The Arctic states Denmark, Iceland, Canada and Norway are members of the Alliance; Sweden and Finland are closely connected to it via exercises and almost full interoperability. Although military security in the High North is not a matter for the Arctic Council, it is of growing importance for NATO. While Norway regards the region as an insecure northern flank, Canada, with its policy of "High North, Low Tension", is the least enthusiastic about a heightened NATO engagement.

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

The Reluctant Arctic Power

With its 1.718 million sq km, Alaska is the largest exclave in the world by surface area. By acquiring it in 1867, the USA became an Arctic state. Alaska borders Canada to the east, the Bering Sea to the west, the Arctic Ocean to the north and the Gulf of Alaska to the south. The USA and Russia are only 85 kilometres apart at the narrowest point of the Bering Strait. After the end of the Cold War, the Arctic initially played no political role in Washington. However, the intensifying great-power rivalry in addition to the melting sea ice is changing perceptions, and the Arctic is becoming a "relative priority" in the Trump administration.

Vague aspirations, relative neglect compared to other regions, and reluctant engagement long characterised US Arctic policy from the early 1990s onwards. In a directive of June 1994, President Bill Clinton placed great emphasis on "unprecedented opportunities for collaboration among all eight Arctic nations" on the basis of new cooperation with Russia. After that, no US Arctic policy was articulated for more than ten years. George W. Bush's government allowed oil exploration in the Chukchi Sea in February 2008, only to discover that the results of test drilling were disappointing. Two presidential directives in January 2009, at the end of Bush's term, suggested minimal engagement just like Clinton; the USA remained at a distance.

Barack Obama did not define the goals of his Arctic policy until May 2013, during his second term. His strategy paper set the expansion of Arctic infrastructure and the strengthening of international cooperation as goals, and saw the responsible use of oil and gas resources as an important contribution to national energy supply. The Arctic should remain a "conflict-free area", with the Arctic Council playing an important role as a forum to promote cooperation "within its current mandate" (of which military security issues are not a part). When the USA took over the Presidency of the Council (2015–17), a US Special Representative for the Arctic was appointed for the first time. Overall, the record was modest; Obama's Arctic strategy complemented much earlier directives, and ultimately the attempt to persuade Congress to approve new icebreakers remained unsuccessful. The Pentagon stated in December 2016 that the Arctic remained an area of cooperation, although there were still "friction points" with Canada and Russia concerning sea routes.

One of the main differences between Donald Trump and his predecessor is that he has turned his back on the Paris Agreement on climate change and withdrawn numerous environmental protection measures. Since he denies climate change, he has ordered resources in the Arctic to be further exploited and less protected. He has also described Obama's Clean Power Plan as harmful and unnecessary. Instead of reducing emissions, planned coal production will probably increase them. In March 2019, Trump issued a decree to release approximately 52 million hectares of a previously protected area for drilling. In August 2019 — while fires raged in Alaska, Greenland and Siberia — Trump instructed his Secretary for Agriculture to exempt more than half of the world's largest intact temperate rainforest, the Tongass National Forest, from the logging ban. More than 50 attempts to roll back environmental rules and regulations were successful, others are still in progress.

For the first time in the history of the Arctic Council, the meeting in May 2019 nearly ended without a final statement because the US delegation led by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo rejected the concept of climate change. Instead, a blank text was published. While several speakers at the Arctic Circle meeting in Reykjavik in October 2019 stressed the need to reduce emissions and thus mitigate the worst effects of climate change, US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry praised the "incredible... energy potential" of the Arctic. Trump's energy policy is ploughing full steam ahead into the Arctic.

International Security in the Arctic

As for international security, under Trump the great-power rivalry also shapes how his administration deals with the Arctic. The latter was mentioned only once in passing in the National Security Strategy 2017 and not at all in the open version of the Defence Strategy 2018. But the Pentagon's Arctic Strategy published in June 2019 blatantly deviates from the former cooperative approach and focuses on "China and Russia as the principal challenge to long-term US security and prosperity" from the outset. The Arctic is, in the language of the Cold War, "a potential vector for attacks [...] on the homeland". This is nothing new with regard to the nuclear-armed submarines of the Russian Northern Fleet, but could in the future also mean Chinese submarines in Arctic waters (or even in Russian Arctic ports). In order to implement the strategy, extensive measures must be taken to maintain and expand the Arctic bases, in particular of the US Air Force. So far, however, it is unclear whether the Pentagon is prepared to make the necessary investment.

The Pentagon regards the network of American allies and partners as the USA's greatest strategic advantage in the region and the cornerstone of its strategy. But how should Trump's idea to buy the island of Greenland from Denmark — an important US ally in the Arctic and NATO — be interpreted? Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen rejected it as "absurd". In accordance with the island's autonomous status and right of self-determination, its population (and not the government in Copenhagen) has to decide whether Greenland would like to become part of the USA. In fact, Trump's offer was a reaction to China's interest in Greenland as part of the Polar Silk Road. The island's rare earth deposits — whose production is already 90 percent dominated by China — also make it attractive. According to a paper compiled by Chinese Arctic researchers, a "small and weak Greenland nation" could in future be the "most important link for the successful implementation of the Polar Silk Road". Pompeo compared this stance to China's approach in the Indo-Pacific. The US's current Arctic policy is thus strongly shaped by great-power rivalries. According to that geostrategic perspective, Greenland lies at the very tip of North America.

In July 2018 the US Navy, with Russia in mind, reactivated the Second Fleet that was originally set up to deter the Soviet Navy in the North Atlantic during the Cold War. Its new zone of deployment now also includes the Arctic. An operation centre was temporarily set up in Keflavík, Iceland. In its April 2019 strategy paper, the US Coast Guard also mentions various challenges posed by Russia and China; the US Navy considers the associated conflict risk to be low. As in the Pacific, however, Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOP) in Arctic waters are under discussion. This concerns the sea routes claimed by Canada and Russia, both of whom consider them domestic rather than international waterways. Washington is particularly critical of Moscow's restrictive policy on the Northern Sea Route. The potential for competing fishing fleets has also been mentioned as a reason for FONOPs. A deep-sea port in the Bering Sea (Nome) has been discussed for years, which could accommodate coastguard and naval vessels. The aim is to re-establish a permanent presence in the Arctic, particularly since shipping traffic has increased considerably. Currently, only a few US Coast Guard aircraft are deployed in the Bering Strait and the Arctic. Furthermore, the military base on the Aleutian island of Adak could once again accommodate ships and aircraft (P-8A). Since the US Coast Guard currently has only one heavy icebreaker, it plans to procure new ships for polar operations; the first Polar Security Cutter is scheduled to begin construction in 2021 and be delivered in 2024.

(Re-)Militarisation of the Arctic?

Given its geographical location, the United States has a natural advantage over coun-

tries such as China or Russia. The Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic Oceans offer security that only a peer and rival on the opposite coast could threaten. For a long time, Arctic security issues therefore did not play an important part in US defence policy; a report did not mention military security as one of the strategic objectives in the Arctic for 2030. This is beginning to change.

In 2018 — and for the first time since 1991 — the US Sixth Fleet was back in Arctic waters as part of the NATO exercise Trident Juncture. And the Arctic also remains important for air and missile defence in the context of strategic deterrence and defence. The shortest route for missiles from Russia and China to the USA cuts across the Arctic. The US Navy regularly trains the war-fighting capabilities of submarines in extreme cold-water conditions as part of ICEX (Ice Exercise). In March 2018 it did so again together with the British Navy for the first time in a decade. Aside from that, the US Navy has only a "minimal presence" in the region. US Admiral (ret.) James Stavridis has stated that the USA does not yet need a fleet for the Arctic, but should reserve the number for a Ninth Fleet for the High North. Probably, the US Navy, which is already under stress in areas of operation scattered across the globe, would then need even more ships than the planned number of 355 — and with different ice classes.

Diplomats from Nordic countries, who have long criticised the US's lack of interest in the High North, are now concerned about the US's aggressive behaviour, as exemplified by its Secretary of State. Sweden's former foreign minister Margot Wallström has criticised the "sad and dangerous" approach of American Arctic policy, which, she said, endangered decades of cooperation with countries like Russia and China. Moreover, she pointed out, security policy had never been a matter for the Arctic Council, and should not become one. The USA made an about-turn in this respect when Pompeo declared that the Arctic Council had so far allowed itself the "luxury" of dealing only with issues of scientific cooperation, culture and the environment. Now, he stated, the Arctic was rapidly gaining new strategic importance, and since China and Russia were militarising the Arctic, America's security and presence in the region needed to be strengthened.

Conclusion and Prospects

Thus far there have been very few occasions for conflict with China or Russia. Although recognition of the continental shelf is still pending, Russian claims do not affect any American territories. Nevertheless, approaches that aim to continue the long-standing cooperation may fail due to the polarisation of relations. As late as 2018, the USA and Russia agreed to regulate shipping traffic in the Bering Strait and Bering Sea, where there are now more than 400 passages a year.

The Trump administration denies climate change, yet its very consequences — sea routes that are open for longer in summer, and exploitation of more accessible resources — have awakened their interest in the Arctic. Rather than excluding other states, however, a policy of integration would make sense to promote a sustainable and peaceful development of the Arctic.

Russia will take over the chairmanship of the Arctic Council from Iceland in 2021. Security issues should be discussed well in advance in an appropriate framework such as the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, and a code of conduct should be developed to increase transparency and prevent miscalculations.

Dr Michael Paul is a Senior Fellow in the International Security Division at SWP.

© Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2019
All rights reserved

This Comment reflects the author's views.

The online version of this publication contains functioning links to other SWP texts and other relevant sources.

SWP Comments are subject to internal peer review, fact-checking and copy-editing. For further information on our quality control procedures, please visit the SWP website: https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/about-swp/quality-management-for-swp-publications/

SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3—4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 1861-1761
doi: 10.18449/2019C42

Translation by Tom Genrich

(English version of SWP-Aktuell 56/2019)