New DOD Strategy Calls for Enhancements, Engagements, Exercises in Arctic



The USS Pasadena breaks through the ice in the Beaufort Sea, March 12, 2022, during Ice Exercise, an exercise that allows the Navy to assess operational readiness in the Arctic. (Photo by: Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Trey Hutcheson)

July 22, 2024 | By C. Todd Lopez, DoD News

The Defense Department today released its 2024 Arctic Strategy. The strategy acknowledges how environmental changes are affecting the Arctic region, details the implications for U.S. security and spells out how the department plans to be ready to meet new challenges there.

“The Arctic region of the United States is critical to the defense of our homeland, the protection of U.S. national sovereignty and the preservation of our defense treaty

commitments," Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks said today during a briefing at the Pentagon. "Our Arctic strategy will guide the department's efforts to ensure that the Arctic remains a secure and stable region."

Eight nations have a presence in the Arctic, including Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the United States and Russia. All have interests there for both commerce and security.

Climate changes have meant the melting of ice in the Arctic and the opening of new sea routes, which means new opportunities for commerce and resource exploitation, but also increased risk to nations whose borders were previously protected by the region's inaccessibility.

"Climate change is fundamentally altering the Arctic, and with it, geopolitics and U.S. defense missions," Hicks said. "The readiness of our forces for those missions is always foremost on our minds, and that's why for decades, across Republican and Democratic administrations, the department has been seeking to ensure our military capabilities can meet the mark, even in the face of a changing climate."

Climate change and the shifts in the operating environment, Hicks said, mean the U.S. must rethink how to protect warfighters and prevent conflict.

The People's Republic of China, not an Arctic nation, is increasing its presence in the Arctic. The PRC operates three icebreakers in the Arctic, for instance, and has a military presence there as well. The Chinese military has also demonstrated its ability to operate in the Arctic by conducting operations with the Russian navy, for instance.

"While not an Arctic state, the PRC seeks greater influence in the region, greater access to the region, and a greater say in its governance," Hicks said. "That's concerning given that it's the only strategic competitor with the will and

increasingly the wherewithal to remake the international order."

Russia's presence in the Arctic, including its military presence – the largest of all Arctic nations – can hold U.S. and allied territories at risk. At the same time, Russia is increasing its presence in the Arctic by reopening Soviet-era military installations.

"Russia continues to pose an acute threat to security and stability in the region," Hicks said. "Russia has continued to build up its military infrastructure in the Arctic and assert excessive claims over Arctic waters."

Russia is also partnering with China, Hicks said, and this presents additional concerns for U.S. defense.

"We've seen growing cooperation between the PRC and Russia in the Arctic, commercially, with the PRC being a major funder of Russian energy exploitation in the Arctic, and increasingly militarily, with Russia and China conducting joint exercises off the coast of Alaska," Hicks said. "All of these challenges have been amplified because the effects of climate change are rapidly warming temperatures and thinning ice coverage, and it's enabling all of this activity."

The DOD's 2024 Arctic Strategy addresses these concerns in the Arctic with three lines of effort, including enhancing the capabilities of the joint force, greater engagement with allies and partners and exercising U.S. presence in the Arctic.

"Our Arctic strategy adopts a 'monitor and respond,' approach in the region," Hicks said. "It is underpinned by robust domain awareness and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, cooperation with our allies and partners and deterrent power enabled by the agility of the joint force. The strategy focuses on enhancing our domain awareness and Arctic capabilities, engaging with our allies

and partners and exercising calibrated presence in the region.”

Iris Ferguson, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for arctic and global resilience, said mission enhancement includes, among other things, a focus on domain awareness in the Arctic.

“We must improve our domain awareness and enhance our ability to detect and respond with our Canadian allies to threats to the homeland,” Ferguson said. “A key focus for my office is championing investments that will enhance our awareness of threats in the region. We want to make sure that we have the right sensing architecture and the right communications architecture for command and control.”

Also, a target for operational enhancements in the Arctic are enhancements to communications and data architecture; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities; infrastructure; and cold weather equipment and mobility.

With seven of the eight Arctic nations also members of NATO, the U.S. has great partnership opportunities in the region. The strategy directs the U.S. to take advantage of those partnerships and others, as a way to strengthen U.S. security.

“Our strong network of partners, including Arctic allies, federal, state, local and tribal partners, are key stakeholders in securing the Arctic and our homeland,” Ferguson said. “From the communities that host our bases and troops in Alaska, to our colleagues in the U.S. Coast Guard and the Department of Homeland Security, we all have a role to play to maintain the stability of the Arctic Region.”

Finally, the 2024 Arctic Strategy directs the department to enhance U.S. security through increased presence in the Arctic, including increased operations and military exercises.

“Exercising tactics and equipment is a prerequisite not only for success but for survival in the unique Arctic environment,” Ferguson said. “To this end, one of my office’s key implementation priorities will be ensuring that the joint force is equipped and prepared to operate there.”

The strategy calls for continued service-specific, joint, interagency and combined exercises as well as war games, simulations and tabletop exercises that focus on the Arctic. The strategy also calls for military services to conduct training in the Arctic to build experience operating there.