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Assessing the US Navy's Arctic Blueprint

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In the face of climate change and growing geopolitical tension, the US Navy began 2021 looking north. This January it released its refreshed Arctic strategy, entitled *Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic*, a revision that follows hot on the heels of the service's last Arctic policy: its brief *Strategic Outlook for the Arctic* from January 2019. The *Blueprint's* release further emphasizes the importance of the region to the broader US military, joining Arctic strategies produced by the Air Force (2020), Coast Guard (2019), and the Department of Defense or DoD (2019). The US Army is the only service that has not released an Arctic strategy in the past two years, though one is reportedly in development.¹

The overall tone of the document aligns it with DoD's 2019 *Arctic Policy* and the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, which emphasize the re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition between nations. Gone are underlying assumptions from the Navy's 2014 *Arctic Roadmap* that "the region is expected to remain a low threat security environment where nations resolve differences peacefully,"² and even from the 2019 assessment that the Arctic is at "low risk for conflict because nations have demonstrated the ability to resolve differences peacefully."³ These are replaced by the *Blueprint's* demand for a "sustained American naval presence" to "operate more assertively" in the region.⁴ This is primarily to counter malign Chinese and Russian activity and prepare for a wide variety of unconventional security threats, as well as the potential "spill-over of major power competition in the Arctic."⁵ While the overarching objective of the US Navy remains peace, stability, and the maintenance of the rules-based international order, "history," the *Blueprint* states, "demonstrates that peace comes through strength."⁶

The document brings a harder edge to US maritime strategy by applying the broader national defence strategy that has been developing throughout the Trump administration. This is a useful guide – or blueprint – for how the Navy and Marines will approach the region, informing both friends and enemies. Like many high-level strategies it fails, however, to offer a really clear path forward, both in terms of what security challenges it

must prioritize and what capabilities the Navy should focus on developing. The *Blueprint* assesses a wide array of potential threats, from shipping and environmental dangers and hostile efforts to undermine regional economic and social progress, to the defence challenges posed by Russian and Chinese militaries. All of these are threats, but the document fails to separate the bothersome from the existential. That ambiguity allows an important question to linger: having identified these threats, what does the Navy plan to do about them? How will the Navy “build a more capable Arctic naval force”? What does that capability look like? The capacity to hunt Russian submarines off Norway is very different than that needed to patrol ice-infested waters in the Chukchi Sea, looking for illegal fishing vessels, yet both are Arctic security issues. Building programs should be influenced by strategy but it is hard to divine from the *Blueprint* if constabulary patrol ships or attack submarines are more needed. To take the Canadian example, the Canadian Armed Forces’ Arctic strategies have for decades identified unconventional security threats as the country’s most pressing concern in the North, elevating these as most likely to emerge and require a response.⁷ From this assessment came the Royal Canadian Navy’s building program, which is in the process of putting six ice-strengthened patrol ships into the water.⁸ Without that kind of prioritization, the US Navy is left with an unhelpful “all of the above” tasking, which will necessitate radically different ships, weapons, and training regimes. The US Navy is far larger than Canada’s and it may be fully capable of a broad front approach; however, it will be interesting to see in future operational documents if the Navy provides greater clarity in its priorities and threat assessments.

That failure to prioritize threats applies to the *Blueprint*’s geographic scope as well. As is the case in many broad assessments of Arctic security, the term “Arctic” is under-qualified, with little to no distinction between the radically different security and defence considerations affecting the different subregions within the broader circumpolar North. In effect, the document treats the entire region as though threats and naval requirements are uniform throughout. When the *Blueprint* talks about enhancing the US Navy and Marine Corps’ presence, it brings up examples from Alaska to Greenland to Norway, from Fort Greely to the Davis Strait. There is no indication that any of these Arctic subregions will need different approaches, assets, or activities. Thus, the submarine Ice Exercises (ICEXs) are mentioned in the same breath as Trident Juncture; meanwhile, the Canadian-led Operation Nanook is mentioned without much distinction from NATO’s Dynamic Mongoose off Iceland. All these exercises and operations are listed to showcase American naval involvement in the Arctic region, but without acknowledging the level or type of threat they are each meant to address. This is understandable for a broad strategy dedicated to conveying intent, though what will be very interesting in the future are the operational documents that must inevitably follow. Where in the Arctic does the Navy see serious security threats emerging first? Which areas does it intend to prioritize? When the Navy advocates for a “day-to-day” presence to meet state competitors, where does it envision that taking place?

The *Blueprint* was also written by a service with a strongly entrenched mindset of what the Navy does around the world and, for better or worse, the Arctic strategy is integrated into that framework. As such, the document stays on familiar ground with its stated need to deter aggression, enhance partnerships, and defend the homeland – all things that apply to any ocean in the world and have been staples of US Navy philosophy for years. Were it not for the occasional paragraph referencing recent Arctic exercises, one could easily replace the word “Arctic” with “Indo-Pacific” and the document would not look out of place.

While these over-generalizations and the lack of specificity may leave the precise nature of the Navy’s plans for the Arctic somewhat vague, the document as a whole does provide an overarching framework in which to

understand its approach to the region. Russia and China are presented as unalloyed threats to be resisted, rather than worked with. Russia's "escalatory and non-transparent" military buildup and China's economic influence are clear and present dangers.⁹ The Navy also confirms what has been suggested in other recent US government reports,¹⁰ namely that it expects the Chinese threat to move beyond challenges to regional governance and malign economic influence, to include naval deployments "on, below, and above Arctic waters."¹¹

Of particular interest is the new push for a less expeditionary approach to the Arctic, with the *Blueprint* suggesting that the Navy's presence in the region should now be "sustained."¹² While that term is left ambiguous, it suggests that the Navy wants to be able to project power into the Arctic as needed, rather than simply during pre-planned exercises. The document's reference to the critical need for "port facilities, airfields, and shore infrastructure" also suggests that DoD will push forward on its plans for an Arctic port.¹³ This initiative stems from provisions in the Fiscal Year 2017 and 2020 National Defense Authorization Acts, requiring DoD to designate a site for a strategic Arctic port.¹⁴ That study is ongoing and the prospect of regular naval operations in the "Blue Arctic" has picked up support, with the Commander of U.S. Northern Command Terrence O'Shaughnessy telling the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support: "I will say we have a stated requirement for fuel north of Dutch Harbor – 1,000 miles from Barrow – and ... the one thing we have to look at is it's not just getting a ship to Barrow ... it is its ability to continue to operate once it gets there, and not just have to turn around and go get gas."¹⁵

A regular presence, supported by robust infrastructure, would seem necessary for the *Blueprint's* vision to "apply naval power through day-to-day competition."¹⁶ That regular presence may also be called for if American adversaries begin deploying ships into the North American Arctic, or if unconventional security threats – like foreign fishing fleets or surveillance assets – regularize their presence in the North American Arctic or Polar Basin. It is important to note, however, that deploying scarce resources into the Arctic could also be a wasteful diversion from crucial theatres elsewhere. In reference to China, Whitney Lackenbauer and Ryan Dean highlight that danger succinctly, writing: "the Arctic may present an enticing opportunity for China to feign strategic interest and bait Arctic states to over-invest in or over-commit capabilities to that region rather than elsewhere in the world."¹⁷ A "day-to-day" presence may become essential, however greater clarity on the nature of that presence remains lacking, as do the projected costs and benefits. Such details will have to wait for further operational-level consideration.

Interesting for its absence in the *Blueprint* is the standard emphasis on freedom of navigation and potential Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) through Arctic waters. This is all the more surprising given the emphasis placed on these voyages in recent years by former Secretary of the Navy Richard Spencer.¹⁸ In fact, the term "freedom of navigation" appears nowhere in the document, with only passing references to the Navy's duty to "operate to preserve freedom of the seas."¹⁹ The concept has certainly not been dropped and, when asked recently by a reporter whether the US Navy should conduct FONOPs off Russia's Arctic coastline, Secretary of the Navy Kenneth Braithwaite said that Washington continues to reserve the right to "be more present in that part of the world ... where sea lanes open up in the northern passage becomes navigable [sic], the U.S. Navy is going to guarantee that freedom of navigation exists for our partners."²⁰ While the US has certainly not compromised on this key policy position, it is noteworthy that the Navy's 2019 *Strategic Outlook* placed far more explicit emphasis on this task,²¹ as did DoD's *Arctic Strategy*, both of which made specific

mention of the Northwest Passage as a continuing point of contention.²² While this downplaying in the *Blueprint* may not be intended as strategic messaging, it is still odd that such a central and long-standing component of US Arctic strategy should be underplayed to this extent. This could be a result of internal deliberation following Secretary Spencer's 2019 discussions of FONOPs through Canadian waters,²³ or a recognition that cooperation with Canada will be essential to future operational effectiveness. Indeed, that message of cooperation and burden sharing echoes throughout the document.²⁴

As a broad statement of intent, the *Blueprint* clarifies and confirms the US Navy's dedication to the principles laid out in the *National Security Strategy* and offers some insight into how the Navy intends to approach the Arctic in the future. The Arctic is no longer unique or exceptional and the Navy intends to expand its usual suite of global interests and activities into those waters and along its coastlines, no longer confident that other regional actors and institutions will suffice to ensure that American interests are upheld. However, rather than providing a comprehensive series of steps forward, the *Blueprint* offers a general framework that will influence future decisions that will define the Navy and Marine Corps' roles in the circumpolar region. The real question, therefore, is how this strategy is operationalized, the answer to which will truly define what a US Navy Arctic presence looks like.

References

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- ⁴ US Navy, "A Blue Arctic: A Strategic Blueprint for the Arctic" (January 2021).
- ⁵ US Navy, "Blueprint," 2.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.
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- ⁹ US Navy, "Blueprint," 7-8.
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- ¹¹ US Navy, "Blueprint," 8.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 2.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ¹⁴ Dan Sullivan, Senate News Release, "Sullivan Chairs Hearing on America's Military Readiness in the Arctic" (March 4, 2020).
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ US Navy, "Blueprint," 4.
- ¹⁷ Ryan Dean and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "China's Arctic Gambit? Contemplating Possible Strategies," Policy Brief, North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (April 23, 2020), 6.
- ¹⁸ Adam Lajeunesse and Rob Huebert, "Preparing for the Next Arctic Sovereignty Crisis: The Northwest Passage in the Age of Donald Trump," *International Journal* 74:2 (Spring 2019), 226.
- ¹⁹ US Navy, "Blueprint," 5, 12.

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²⁰ Levon Sevunts, “New U.S. Arctic Strategy Focuses on ‘Day-to-Day Competition’ with Russia and China,” Radio Canada International (January 7, 2021).

²¹ Office of the Undersecretary of Defence for Policy, DoD Report to Congress, “Department of Defence Arctic Strategy” (June 2019), 10 and US Navy, “Strategic Outlook,” 9.

²² DoD, “Arctic Strategy,” 13.

²³ For Secretary Spencer’s statements see: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Maritime Security Dialogue: Transcripts: A Conversation with Hon. Richard V. Spencer, 76th Secretary of the Navy, CSIS Headquarters, Washington, DC (December 6, 2018), 5.

²⁴ In particular, see: US Navy, “Blueprint,” 12-16.