



The Cambridge Security Initiative

U.S. NAVY OPERATIONS ASSERT RIGHT TO ARCTIC

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Dr. Tracey German, King's College London

Surface ships from the U.S. 6th Fleet sailed into the Barents Sea earlier this month for the first time since the Cold War. A joint U.S.-UK surface action group (SAG), comprising four U.S. vessels and one from the Royal Navy, were in the Barents Sea as part of a planned anti-submarine exercise. Russia has tended to view the Barents Sea as its own strategic backyard, rather than international waters, and the joint U.S.-UK operation was partly intended as a signal, a Freedom of Navigation operation to assert the right of the U.S. and its allies to sail in international Arctic waters. In response, Russia's Northern Fleet said that it was tracking the group and [announced](#) that a search and strike group was conducting 'planned combat' exercises in the Barents Sea, including torpedo firing. However, Russia did not formally protest the U.S.-UK exercise and the SAG left the Barents Sea after a week of operations.

The joint exercises came in the wake of a series of policy documents released last year, outlining U.S. interests and objectives in the Arctic. Both the Department of Defense and the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) published their strategies for the Arctic, emphasising that the U.S., as an Arctic power, has national security interests in the region that it will seek to protect. Enhancing Arctic operations was one of three approaches set out in the [2019 DoD Arctic Strategy](#), which stressed that the need to 'demonstrate and enhance' the ability to operate in the region through regular exercises and deployments, both independently and with allies and partners. One of the Navy's strategic objectives for the region, set out in the CNO's [Strategic Outlook for the Arctic](#), is to preserve freedom of the seas in an era of long-term strategic competition and concerns about challenges to the existing rules-based international order.

The 6th Fleet's return to the Arctic is clearly tied to these broader objectives and reflects the U.S. perception that Russia poses a threat to access to the global commons, and specifically the security of key routes, such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR). Amid growing international interest in the region, both in terms of exploitation of its natural resources and conservation, Russia is keen to protect its own vital national interests and has been taking steps to secure its position, both [militarily](#) and [economically](#). With the Russian budget in tatters on the back of the oil price collapse, combined with the dire economic impact of the on-going pandemic, the government will be looking for ways to diversify and stabilise the economy. The Arctic could provide one such avenue: the Kremlin hopes that in the long-term Russia will be able to benefit economically from a rise in international shipping along the NSR by offering icebreaker escorts, as well as refuelling and re-supply station. This raises the possibility of escorts being 'required' for all shipping using the NSR, providing Russia with a potential lever of coercion.

OUTLOOK

The U.S. has made it clear that it intends to boost its presence in the Arctic, working with NATO allies and partners to achieve its objectives, whilst also developing strong partnerships with international Arctic stakeholders such as Russia and China. Its desire to maintain freedoms of navigation and overflight in the region could well see increased tensions in the future with Russia, which believes that it is the dominant power in the Arctic and will be unwilling to see that position challenged.