

Strengthening America's and NATO's Arctic Chain of Defense

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

U.S. interests in the Arctic will only increase in the years to come, and the U.S. cannot afford to fall behind as other nations devote resources to the region.

U.S. priorities in the Arctic include ensuring U.S. territorial defense, protecting U.S. sovereignty, meeting NATO obligations, and ensuring free flow of shipping.

The U.S. must increase its presence on, and relationship with, Iceland, Greenland, Svalbard, and Jan Mayen—the islands forming the Arctic chain of defense.

As other nations devote resources and assets to the Arctic region to secure their national interests, America cannot afford to fall behind. America's very real interests in the Arctic will only increase in the years to come. Lately, Russia has been increasing its military presence in the Arctic region. As the U.S. prepares for future security challenges in the Arctic, it must focus on increasing its presence in Greenland, Iceland, Svalbard, and Jan Mayen. These four islands are essentially the forward-operating bases of the North American and European continents, and serve as an Arctic chain of defense (ACOD) for the U.S. and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies.

U.S. Security Goals in the Arctic

Today, the U.S. has four primary security goals in the Arctic region:

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1. **Ensuring the territorial defense of the United States.** This is particularly true, as it pertains to the growing ballistic missile threat. In this regard, the U.S. relationship with Canada is essential. This is also why it is important for the U.S. to increase its attention to the strategic importance of Iceland, Greenland, Svalbard, and Jan Mayen.
2. **Enforcing U.S. sovereignty in the region.** In the Arctic, sovereignty equals security and stability. Respecting the national sovereignty of other countries in the Arctic, while maintaining the ability to enforce America's own sovereignty, will ensure that the chances of armed conflict in the region remain low.
3. **Meeting treaty obligations in the Arctic region through NATO.** Five of the world's eight Arctic countries belong to NATO. Another two, Finland and Sweden, have a very close relationship with NATO. Due to its treaty obligation under the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, the U.S. must be able to defend Tromsø, Norway, like it does Trenton, New Jersey.
4. **Ensuring the free flow of shipping and other economic activities in the region.** Economic freedom leads to prosperity and security. With melting ice creating new economic and shipping opportunities in the region, it is in America's interests that shipping lanes remain open in line with international norms.

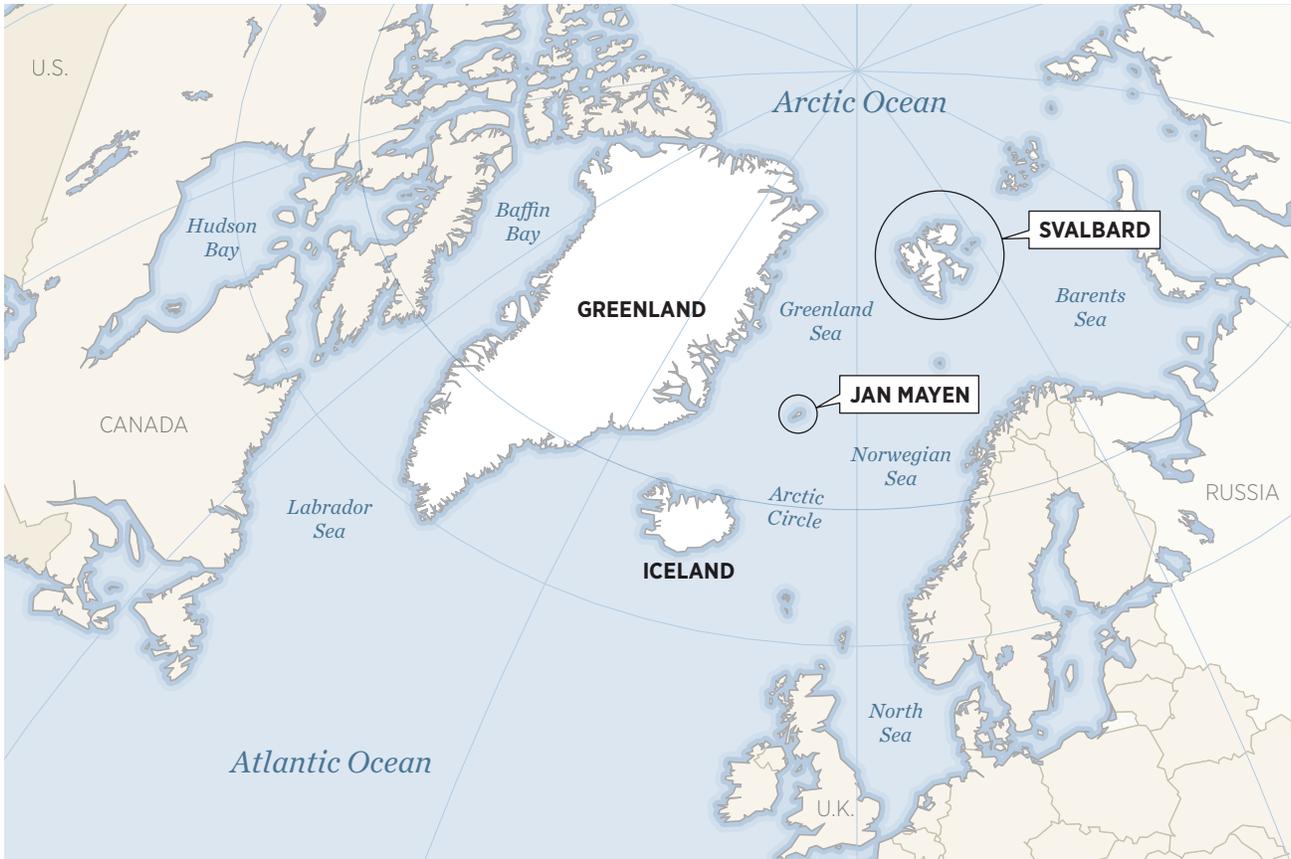
While the military threat in the Arctic remains low, U.S. policymakers cannot ignore Russia's recent activities to militarize the Arctic region. Russian infrastructure development, military structuring, and procurement have in recent years focused heavily on bolstering Russia's Arctic capabilities.¹ Russia now has at least 34 key military installations in or near the Arctic,² is optimizing those facilities for cold weather combat, and has expanded the variety and sophistication of capabilities deployed to the Arctic, while increasing the range and tempo of the often-aggressive nature of air and sea patrols in the region.³

The Arctic Chain of Defense

During the Cold War, Soviet submarines, bombers, and reconnaissance aircraft traversed the GIUK (Greenland, Iceland, and the U.K.) gap, key naval passages through the waters of those three countries. The GIUK gap,

MAP 1

Greenland, Iceland, Svalbard, and Jan Mayen Are Vital to the Arctic Chain of Defense



NOTE: Greenland is a territory of Denmark. Jan Mayen and Svalbard are territories of Norway.

SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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on account of Russian activity in the North Atlantic, continues to remain strategically important. Technological advancements and a changing environment in the Arctic have shifted some of this military activity further north into Arctic waters.

Today, four islands are vital to the defense of the United States. Due to their geographical locations, Greenland, Iceland, Svalbard, and Jan Mayen are essentially the forward-operating bases of the North American and European continents.

- **Greenland (Denmark).** The U.S.–Danish relationship is built on a shared membership in NATO and shared interest in the Arctic region. However, one of the most important aspects of the U.S.–Danish

defense relationship is the access that the U.S. enjoys to Greenland. Greenland is part of North America, and a critical part of America's national security architecture. Today, the main U.S. military presence is at Thule Air Base in the north of the island.⁴ Thule also serves as a crucial early warning radar and satellite tracking station for the protection of the U.S. homeland.

- **Iceland.** A NATO ally in the northern Atlantic Ocean, Iceland sits on the very frontier of the North American landmass, is the westernmost nation in Europe, and is a mere 186 miles from Greenland. Today, Iceland still plays an important role in transatlantic security, especially when viewed in light of recent Russian behavior in continental Europe. Iceland's relevance to U.S. policy is also largely derived from its location at the edge of the Arctic Circle. After closing the facility in 2006, the U.S. has started to use the facilities at Keflavik Air Station for maritime patrol aircraft. The U.S. reportedly plans to begin housing two fighter jet squadrons, accounting for between 18 planes and 24 planes on a rotational basis at Keflavik.⁵ In August, a B-2 Stealth Bomber landed in Iceland for the first time on a refueling stop.
- **Svalbard (Norway).** Norway's geographical location is vitally important for the defense of the North Atlantic region, and the country is a reliable partner for the U.S. inside NATO. Svalbard is a non-militarized Norwegian archipelago some 500 nautical miles off the northern coast of Norway. The military importance of Svalbard is limited in peacetime due to the restrictions placed on the region under the Svalbard Treaty, which demilitarized the islands. The geostrategic location of Svalbard, especially in terms of its proximity to the Kola Peninsula, home to Russia's Northern Fleet, is not lost on the Russians, either. In 2017, officials in the Russian defense ministry reportedly highlighted Svalbard as a potential area of future conflict for the Russian navy. Even though Svalbard is currently demilitarized, one cannot pretend that, in the event of a major outbreak of conflict in the Arctic region, the archipelago would not be front and center in any military campaign. U.S. military planners must always keep this reality in mind.
- **Jan Mayen (Norway).** Situated between Greenland and Norway in the Norwegian Sea, Jan Mayen is a strategically located island, just under 600 miles north of Iceland. The Norwegian air force continues to maintain a 1,500-meter dirt runway on the island, which once served

as an important communications outpost during the Cold War. Jan Mayen served as a Sound Surveillance System terminal, and hosted a long-range-radio navigation transmitter.⁶ Jan Mayen has no permanent population, and 14 of 18 people living on the island today are members of the Norwegian armed forces.⁷ Norway requested U.S. assistance in performing bimonthly supply flights to the island.⁸ Before that could happen, members of the U.S. Air Force visited Jan Mayen and “assessed runway surfaces, glideslope obstructions and firing capes,”⁹ specifically to determine whether “C-130J Super Hercules aircraft can land at the Jan Mayen airfield in order to provide transport and resupply to the station located there.”¹⁰ In addition to helping resupply the Norwegian presence on Jan Mayen, the island now provides a potential additional landing option for U.S. aircraft operating in the Arctic. Jan Mayen continues to host meteorological and seismographic monitoring stations, along with a station for Europe’s Galileo GPS system.¹¹

What the U.S. Should Do

As Russia continues to invest heavily in its Arctic military presence, the U.S. should plan and respond accordingly. One key part of America’s Arctic security focus should be building close relations with the countries forming the ACOD. To do so, the U.S. should:

- **Deepen relations with Iceland.** Not only is Iceland an important NATO member, it is also home to an important air base in the Arctic region, used by American aircraft and for NATO’s Icelandic Air Policing mission.¹² There is also a new opportunity to advance bilateral relations now that the Trump Administration has ended the Obama Administration’s diplomatic sanctions on Reykjavik over Icelandic whaling. The U.S. should use this new opportunity to advance American security interests in the Arctic.
- **Work more closely with the Danish and Norwegian militaries.** Both countries have proven themselves to be important NATO members. Although neither meets NATO’s benchmark of 2 percent of gross domestic product for defense spending, each punches above its weight when it comes to deploying troops for NATO missions, and participating in NATO missions and exercises. Each has also increased its defense spending in the Arctic.

- **Improve relations with Greenland.** Last year, the Trump Administration announced the establishment of a part-time diplomatic presence in Greenland. This is a positive step that could be improved by making the diplomatic presence year-around. The U.S. should also ensure that it invests adequately in the military infrastructure on Greenland.¹³
- **Consider the use of Svalbard for any required scientific needs.** Due to its location in the Arctic region and its particular environmental conditions, Svalbard is very attractive for scientific research. In the past, the Department of Defense has conducted research there¹⁴ and it should consider doing so in the future if the need arises. This is an excellent way for the U.S. to “fly the flag” in a region with significant geopolitical importance.
- **Recognize the importance of Jan Mayen island.** Its strategic location astride submarine lanes in the Norwegian Sea has once again highlighted Jan Mayen’s role as a valuable piece of the ACOD. The U.S. should continue working closely with Norway to better leverage the island’s strategic location in the Arctic and seek to include Jan Mayen Island in future bilateral or NATO exercises.

Looking North

With so many challenges for the U.S. coming from the south, policymakers should not forget to look north, as well. Americans should not overlook the ACOD’s importance to the territorial defense of the U.S. With new security, energy, and economic challenges and opportunities in the Arctic region, the U.S. needs a strong relationship with these countries.

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Endnotes

1. For a full overview of Russia's recent activities to militarize the Arctic, see Luke Coffey, Daniel Kochis, and James Di Pane, "Arctic Security Is Not About Preparing for War, But About Preparing for the Future," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 220, January 22, 2020, pp. 4-10.
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4. Peterson Air Force Base, "821st Air Base Group," <https://www.peterson.af.mil/About/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/326240/821st-air-base-group/> (accessed October 30, 2019).
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