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THE CULTURE AND CONFLICT REVIEW



Defending the Arctic: America's Challenge

Chris Gaucher, 4/22/2011

Introduction

The earth is changing our nation's security landscape and we need to adapt. Climate change, independent of responsibility and cause, is a large part of this change. When such a large change occurs with such a global impact, the rules change the game. This new game requires that we in the United States re-think how we adapt to this change. For example, climate change is impacting the Arctic ice region, opening up access to sea lanes that heretofore were never as accessible to global commerce as they are now. With increased movement of shipping and increased access to a whole new source of natural resources, these opportunities present unique challenges. This situation impacts our national security and we need to be ready.

How should the United States address the threats to our national security presented to us by this new frontier? The U.S. Combatant Commanders (COCOM) currently responsible for this Area of Operational Responsibility (AOR) include U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM), and U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM). Each of their advantages to assuming full responsibility of the Arctic Region is discussed. This responsibility, however, does not come without costs. A recommendation is made as to which COCOM or COCOMs should assume full responsibility of the region. This discussion begins, however, with a definition of the Arctic Region and the many opportunities and threats in that region.

The Arctic Region

The Arctic Region is most often defined wherein the geographic boundary is the 10 degrees Celsius Isotherm mark. This is the area where the average temperature for the warmest month is below 10 degrees Celsius, located in the northern most part of the world around and below the North Pole. Within, or close to its boundary, sit a number of countries including the United States, Canada, Finland, Denmark (via Greenland), Iceland, Sweden, Norway, and Russia. Within this region, much is changing. "The Arctic ice pack melted this summer to its third-smallest size on record, up slightly from the low points of the past two years but continuing an overall shrinking trend symptomatic of climate change."^[1] Interestingly, the ice appears to be receding much quicker in the Northern Pacific. This trend is expected to continue in the future,^[2] opening up opportunities and access to an abundance of natural resources never before accessed.

Oil and natural gas are abundant in the region. The U.S. Geological Survey estimated in 2008 that the Arctic could hold 90 billion barrels of oil – "enough to meet world demand for three years."^[3] Additionally, "...[s]ome 90 billion barrels of oil and a third of the world's undiscovered natural gas lie beneath an area north of the Arctic Circle."^[4] And all this presents opportunity for many countries in the region. So much so that it is believed that about 84 percent of the undiscovered oil and gas is in this area resides offshore from those countries within the region, "but much of it is close enough to land to fall under national territorial claims"^[5] – and this presents the most challenging problem.

Challenges in the Arctic

Internationally, all coastal states are entitled to claim an exclusive economic zone, or "EEZ", extending

up to 200 nautical miles from their coastline. Beyond those 200 nautical miles (nm), these states can claim rights over a continental shelf so long as they can provide scientific proof to the United Nations that this claimed shelf belongs within their EEZ. However, a country can define its continental shelf in many ways, often extending this EEZ well beyond this 200nm constraint.

In August of 2007, a Russian submarine planted a national flag more than 14,000 feet beneath the North Pole. This action by Moscow demonstrates its belief that it should control the Northern Sea Route, a passage that stretches from Asia to Europe across northern Russia. With this claim have been additional statements and actions that lead the international community to believe that Russia intends to increase its military presence and focus in that region. This may lead to increased warships in the area (from Russia and other countries), making a tense situation much more so. Likewise, Canada is ready to defend its claims. It sees these actions by Russia as threatening to its territorial lands and waters. Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon recently stated that Canada is at the ready to defend its Arctic borders. "Our Northern Strategy is sending a clear message around the world... we will respond appropriately when other nations push the envelope when it comes to Canada's Arctic."^[6]

During a recent NATO Conference in Reykjavik, Iceland this January, Mr. Lee Willett, head of the maritime studies program at the Royal United Services Institute, said that "as routes open up, warships from nations seeking to defend claims to possible energy resources will follow. Having lots of warships, from lots of nations who have lots of competing claims on territory – that may lend itself to a rather tense situation. ... we may see that flash points come to pass there more readily than elsewhere in the world."^[7]

In reaction to this challenge and potential threat to the security of the United States, President Bush issued "National Security Presidential Directive 66" also known as "Homeland Security Presidential Directive – 25."^[8] This new policy envisions that the United States will "assert a more active and influential national presence to protect its Arctic interests and to project sea power throughout the region." As primarily a maritime domain, the new policy emphasizes that U.S. vessels have the right of international navigation both through the Northwest Passage and through straits along the Northern Sea Route. The policy further states the need to "develop greater capabilities and capacity" to protect U.S. "air, land, and sea borders in the Arctic region."^[9] Given these challenges, how are the COCOMs prepared? What are their strengths at meeting these challenges? What are the costs? EUCOM, PACOM, and NORTHCOM are each uniquely prepared to meet the challenges.

U.S. European Command (EUCOM)

When posed the question whether EUCOM should assume the Arctic within its AOR, Barry Zellen, director of the Arctic Security Project at the Naval Postgraduate School's Program for Culture and Conflict Studies (CCS), stated that Russia was key to this decision:

"Just as Canadians have a powerful emotional attachment to their northern frontier, Russians view their Arctic lands and seas as an extension of their heartland - which for them is the key to their survival, military or economic. ... They're more inclined to fully utilize their Russian assets (at least in theory, while in practice the post-Soviet economic collapse led to an abandonment of the centrally subsidized mega-projects in the Russian Arctic and a near collapse of their maritime infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route.) But ideologically, there is a commitment to full utilization and a sense that Russia's destiny, and the source of its future wealth, is tied to its far north. And as their confidence and capabilities increase, defending these assets will be a top priority."

"A lesson of their smackdown in Georgia is that Russia will very likely aggressively defend its Arctic interests, and potentially pre-empt any claims contrary to its interests. ... the Arctic (like Gorbachev proposed in the 1980s) could be a great testing ground for a new relationship between Russia and the West, and perhaps – if cooperation trumps competition over time – a path toward eventual NATO membership. But if competition trumps cooperation, it may be one of the first regions in which a newly assertive Russia confronts the West."^[10]

Managing U.S. and NATO relationships with Russia is an important part of the solution and was recognized in 2008 by the former EUCOM commander, General Craddock, USA:

"EUCOM engages Russia where it can, seeking Russian participation, but not

concurrency. EUCOM's relationship with Russia is a pragmatic one based on realistic expectations. Coordinating all U.S. military-to-military security cooperation activities with Russia, EUCOM strives to improve the quality and complexity of these activities to make our forces more interoperable and to promote mutual understanding. Demonstrating their desire to engage with U.S. forces, the Russian Ministry of Defense has taken considerable steps in funding their own participation in activities with U.S. forces – a significant change over previous years. Russia's cooperation with U.S. forces is a major element in fostering military cooperation in the Euro-Atlantic arena.”^[11]

It is also EUCOM's relationships with European nations within and around the Arctic Region that make it a prime candidate to take over the Arctic. The United States cannot go it alone, however, as this could be seen as an American “land grab” and may alienate our European allies. Vital to US relationships in the region are its close ties to NATO nations and the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) nations. This option acknowledges recent and existing positive relationships between all eight Arctic nations within the realm of NATO. Five Arctic nations – the United States, Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Iceland and Norway – are NATO members and Finland, Sweden and Russia are members of the NATO PfP. EUCOM is well positioned to leverage these relationships to peacefully resolve any developing conflicts in the region. However, their assets are limited.

A large cost to EUCOM will be the lack of resources required to support such a large effort. The drawdown of troops after the Cold War and the vast European theater logistics support to the war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan further exacerbate this. EUCOM will not be able to assume the Arctic within its AOR without costs and EUCOM cannot go it alone. Inter-agency and inter-COCOM coordination is vital. A Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) could successfully work in this case.

In response to a need for unified command and control of drug interdiction activities, the JIATF concept was introduced in the early 90's and transformed into what is now Joint Interagency Task Force- South, formally established in 1999. The current commander of EUCOM, ADM Stravidis, USN, was formerly Commander of SOUTHCOM where this concept originated and where it has been successful since its inception. This experience is noteworthy as the success of a similar concept could counter the challenges the US might face in the Arctic.

U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM)

PACOM, by its very nature, is a predominantly maritime domain-focused COCOM. Its AOR is the entire Pacific Ocean and environs, encompassing over half the earth's surface including 3.5 billion people in 36 countries. Given PACOM's AOR and unique mission, the Arctic aligns nicely within the COCOM's capabilities as the Arctic region is also primarily a maritime domain.^[12]

A unique aspect of this command is its presence in Alaska with Alaskan Command. Alaskan Command is a sub-unified command of PACOM with 21,000 Alaskan service members headquartered at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Anchorage, Alaska. It is charged with expediting worldwide contingency force deployments from and through Alaska as directed by the Commander, USPACOM. Likewise, shortly after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, there was a renewed emphasis on Homeland Defense issues and Joint Task Force-Alaska (JTF-AK) was established. JTF-AK was activated in February 2003 in support of NORTHCOM to address specific Homeland Defense issues and its mission continues today.

PACOM has the presence in the area and the assets to support the mission. However, the costs of using these assets will take away from an already stretched thin COCOM with obligations in the AFPAK region and a growing threat from China, a key nation in PACOM's AOR and one that is understood well by PACOM. China's search for alternative sources of natural resources, including oil and natural gas, force them to explore possibilities in the Arctic and potentially increase tensions with competing nations in that region. Their military and navy buildup^[xiii] increases China's capabilities to pursue and protect claims made within the Arctic.

U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM)

Established in October 2002, NORTHCOM's mission is to provide support to civil authorities during natural and man-made disasters within its AOR. The AOR includes air, land and sea approaches and encompasses the continental United States, Alaska, Canada, Mexico and the surrounding water out to approximately 500 nautical miles. It also includes the Gulf of Mexico, the Straits of Florida, and portions

of the Caribbean region to include The Bahamas, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. All events are expected to be managed at the State or local level, but some incidents may require Federal support provided by NORTCHOM only when approved by the Secretary of Defense or directed by the President. Additionally, the Commander of NORTHCOM is responsible for theater security cooperation with Mexico, The Bahamas, and Canada.

This relationship and proximity to Canada, in particular, is important to this discussion. The US relationship with Canada is replete with well established organizations and commitments to maintaining the security of our mutual interests. One example is the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), a bi-national Command formed by a partnership between the United States and Canada. NORAD has provided over 50 years of aerospace and maritime warning for North America leveraging a network of alert fighters, airborne early warning aircraft, and ground-based surveillance radars and satellite imaging and is a key component of Maritime Domain Awareness.

Increased Maritime Domain Awareness requires that NORTHCOM develop a common operational picture of vessels of interests in and around Canadian and U.S. waters. Information sharing among the Coast Guard, Departments of Transportation and Justice and other agencies represents a total force concept requiring focused efforts. This interagency effort requires closely working with the Canadians as the environment changes in the Arctic. General Renuart, Commander, NORTHCOM, recognized this important fact:

“pursuit of natural resources and the potential increase in traffic of northern waterways will demand increased air and maritime surveillance, security, and defense in the Arctic Region. A bi-national evaluation is underway to improve the quality and coverage of northern surveillance systems; and Canada is investigating the expansion of facilities at Resolute Bay, which may provide a more northern Forward Operating Location than any currently available.”^[14]

Further developing U.S forward presence in Canada and improving bi-national information sharing are key to successfully protecting US interests in the Arctic Region. Additionally, NORTHCOM's partnership with PACOM to develop a Maritime Domain Awareness Joint Integrating Concept^[15] will contribute to this success.

Recommendation

The advantages of each COCOM assuming the Arctic Region within its AOR are clear. EUCOM has important international relationships with NATO, Russia, and the EU. PACOM's mission and assets within the Maritime Domain give it unique capabilities to address expansive oceans and counter an increasingly capable Chinese Navy. NORTHCOM has well established relationships with Canada, a presence in Alaska, a developing capability of increasing Maritime Domain Awareness throughout North America, and tested inter-agency cooperation. The costs to each COCOM would be substantial, however. Each would require additional assets or a re-deployment of assets already made thin by competing priorities from the war effort. It seems futile to give the Arctic Region responsibility to a sole COCOM without expending a large amount of supplementary budget and redefining mission priorities.

A new organization, “U.S. Arctic Command” (or “ARCCOM”), should be created. ARCCOM should be a sub-unified command under NORTHCOM and include assets of all three existing COCOMs on an as-needed basis. In order to immediately address challenges in the Arctic and to develop a long term security roadmap (10-20 years) to address emerging national security requirements in the Arctic, a Joint Interagency Task Force-North (JIATF-North) should be created. JIATF-North should include elements of the Departments of Homeland Security, Justice, Energy, and Transportation. Other elements could include the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency.

The Arctic presents complex challenges with global impact. How the United States prepares for this now will define our nation's security for the future. A new and different way of thinking is required with consideration for what has worked well in the past, leveraging relationships, resources, and capabilities that already exist. ARCCOM and JIATF-North could safely get us there.

About the Author

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