

Video: Arctic in Flames

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Global Research, May 31, 2020

[South Front](#) 30 May 2020

Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#), [US NATO](#)
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Of all the theaters of militarized international rivalry in the early 21st century, the Arctic promises to be the most complex and unpredictable. In terms of domain, military operations there would be conducted on land, in the air, on the sea surface, but also in the depths of the Arctic Ocean under ice cover. The geographic remoteness and climactic harshness of the climate and terrain mean any conflict there would be fought the gaze of international media or citizen reporters. Next to the Antarctic, the Arctic is one of the few areas of the global commons that has not yet been apportioned among the major and minor powers. And the stakes for all the players are quite high.

Military presence in the Arctic and extension of one's national sovereignty over it promises to yield the interested states and alliances with several sets of benefits. The first and most obvious is the access to copious natural resources, starting with hydrocarbons, lurking under the still relatively unexplored continental shelf there. The second one is the surveillance and/or control over maritime shipping routes whose importance will only increase as polar ice cover retreats. Thirdly, the Arctic does include some militarily very valuable real estate, in the form of great many islands and archipelagoes that may be used for advanced military outposts and bases.

In all three cases, the United States is acting as the spoiler, unhappy with the current state of affairs. It aims to extend its control over natural resources in the region, establish permanent presence in other countries' exclusive economic zones (EEZ) through the use of the so-called "freedom of navigation operations" (FONOPs), and continue to encircle Russia with ballistic missile defense (BMD) sites and platforms.

https://southfront.org/wp-content/uploads/video/FPD_Arctic_ENG.mp4

In view of the urgent and evident US preparations to be able to fight and prevail in a war against a nuclear adversary, by defeating the adversary's nuclear arsenal through the combination of precision non-nuclear strikes (including by the broad range of hypersonic missiles currently under development) and BMD systems, it would appear that third benefit is of the greatest importance to the United States, though certainly not the only one. The recent sortie by a force of US Navy BMD-capable AEGIS destroyers into the Barents Sea, the first such mission since the end of the Cold War over two decades ago, shows the interest United States has in projecting BMD capabilities into regions north of Russia's coastline, where they might be able to effect boost-phase interceptions of Russian ballistic missiles that would be launched in retaliatory strikes against the United States.

US operational planning for the Arctic in all likelihood resembles that for the South China Sea, with only a few corrections for climate. The key similarity of both potential theaters of war is that the decisive fighting would be in the air or at or under the sea, culminating in

comparatively small amphibious operations and battles for relatively small and/or isolated islands. Once one side prevails in the air and at sea, the outcome of these land battles would be all but foreordained. As the experience of World War 2 “island-hopping” campaigns in the Pacific shows, no isolated island fortress can survive for very long once it is isolated from own air and naval support. Every Japanese outpost targeted by the US eventually fell, and did not require masses of troops to overcome their resistance thanks to overwhelming naval and aerial firepower US forces brought to bear. Campaigns in the Arctic would follow a similar course, with US naval task forces pushing into the teeth of Russia’s submarines, land-based missile batteries, and land-based fighter and bomber squadrons. The recently announced plans to revamp the US Marine Corps that include doing away with its tank battalions and much of field artillery, while adding land-based anti-ship missile capabilities for the first time ever, suggest USMC is being tailored for such small-scale island-hopping operations in the Arctic, South China Sea, and other such theaters of war, to the detriment of its ability to conduct counter-insurgency or large-scale high-intensity combat operations.

The small size of forces used by both sides also means a premium will be placed on the element of surprise, since a small garrison on a remote Arctic island garrison could be overcome relatively quickly, in the manner similar to which the original Argentinian invasion of the Falklands succeeded in routing the Royal Marine garrison so quickly that no real fighting took place.

The remoteness of these islands, the small size of the military forces, and the practically non-existent potential for collateral damage due to absence of large civilian populations also mean that the use of low-yield nuclear weapons, against both land facilities and naval forces at sea, is far easier to contemplate than in any conflict in Europe or Asia. The remoteness of this theater of operations also means nuclear strikes would have a lower risk of strategic escalation, as long as all the nuclear adversaries refrained from targeting enemy mainland.

At the outset, however, the dominant weapon systems would be intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles, launched from land-based launchers as well as aerial and naval platforms. The US withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty means the US Army will have a large number of ground-launched missiles with ranges exceeding 500km in service, such as the Precision Strike Missile. The US Marine Corps is planning to organize Littoral Regiments whose armament will include Naval Strike Missiles on unmanned truck-based launchers, and which are intended for such island campaigns in the South China Sea but also elsewhere. Moreover, US Navy and US Air Force plan to introduce hypersonic missiles into their arsenals by the end of the decade as well. The current US procurement plans mean that by 2030 the United States could expect to concentrate overwhelming intermediate-range missile firepower in any given single theater of operations, be it the Persian Gulf, the Pacific Rim, or the Arctic.

At the same time the United States will have to solve the problem of disunity within its own camp. United States covetous eye has been cast not only on those areas of the Arctic within Russia’s continental shelf, but also Canada’s Northwest Passage and even Denmark’s Greenland.

The US intent to procure a small fleet of icebreakers is intended to enable “Freedom of Navigation Operations” in what Canada views its territorial waters, and Donald Trump actually may have revealed a state secret when he spoke of the United States buying

Greenland from Denmark and setting up a Trump Tower there. With the COVID-19 revealing America's weakness for all the world to see and the Europeans discovering an urgent need for unity and cooperation, United States might yet discover a unified European Union to be a formidable opponent when it comes to protecting its own interests.

The United States is slowly but steadily losing the geo-economic race in the Arctic with Russia and China.

In the situation when there is no chance to push forward own successful projects, Washington has opted the strategy of undermining efforts of other states. The fast development of Russia's Northern Sea Route is the source of the especial concern of the US strategists. Therefore, the US diplomatic activity and the so-called "freedom of navigation operations" are now mostly focused on undermining and limiting the freedom of navigation in the way that would allow to contain the Chinese-Russian cooperation in the region. If Washington cannot catch-up Moscow and Beijing in the field, it will do all what it can to at least slow down the progress of their joint projects.

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