

Strategic Challenges in the European Arctic
Has the United States Changed its Policy of Benign Neglect?

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The Arctic is warming at twice the rate of the rest of the planet. Before the rapid melting of Arctic sea ice started, the Arctic was regarded as one of the most stable areas in the world. The eight Arctic countries, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia, and the United States, engaged in collaborative relations, helping each other with rescue missions and environmental protection issues. While such peaceful collaboration continues, political rhetoric is changing along with great power posturing in the areas north of the Arctic Circle. At the 2019 opening session of the Arctic Council in Rovaniemi, Finland, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo described the Arctic as “an arena of global power and competition.” He went on to warn the audience about Chinese and Russian ambitions in High North and promised a sharper American focus on the area. Secretary Pompeo’s speech left many attendees dumbfounded. Never before had a foreign minister given such a blunt speech at the Arctic Council meeting. But was the U.S. Secretary of State merely stating the obvious? Has the Arctic already become the new frontier of great power competition? If so, what is the United States prepared to do about it?

In this paper, which focuses on the European Arctic, the author will argue that Russia is already leading the great power race for Arctic dominance and China is showing determination to become a relevant player in the area with its Polar Silk Road initiative. The paper will start by explaining the drivers that motivate Arctic players to expand their influence over the world’s final frontier, as the Arctic is sometimes called. The discussion will center on the enhanced shipping opportunities through the Northeast Passage and increased availability of natural resources, especially oil, gas and rare earth minerals. Next, the author will show that the United States has been slow to upgrade the diplomatic, commercial and military infrastructure it will need to expand its influence in the European Arctic and protect its Nordic partners’ interests against those of Russia and China. The question is whether Pompeo’s Rovaniemi speech marks a departure from the U.S. policy of benign negligence in High North.

The last part of the paper will examine the changing security environment in the European Arctic against the backdrop of U.S.-Russia relations. Russia is the largest Arctic country and its assertiveness in recent years has caused the other seven Arctic nations to fear that Russia is undermining their commercial and strategic interests in High North. To deter Russia, which has military bases above the 66th parallel north, those Arctic nations that are members of NATO, especially Norway, have asked the Alliance to establish a more robust presence in the area. Does NATO have the will, resources and capabilities to protect its members’ sovereign interests in the region? What can the United States do to improve the security environment in the North with its friends, NATO partners and also Russia?

The paper will be based on policy papers, speeches and plans prepared by U.S., Russian and European lawmakers and civilian and military officials on the European Arctic. It will also address the domestic and international media accounts on the evolving narratives about conflict and cooperation in the area.