The Tip of the Iceberg: Understanding US Arctic Security Posture

by

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In completion of the requirements for the MAIR Capstone Seminar Fall 2019
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ABSTRACT

Since the Cold War, the United States has largely undervalued the strategic value of Arctic region and limited its institutional participation to environmental and scientific sectors. However, with warming temperatures, opening maritime routes and untapped economic opportunity, the Arctic region continues to gain geopolitical prominence on the international security agenda. U.S. competitors, such as Russia and China, have taken assertive measures to increase their presence and investment in the Arctic region. This study will analyze the security implications of Arctic thaw and provide a theoretical explanation as to why the United States has not pursued a more consistent, security-forward posture in the Arctic. Using documentation of U.S. official statements on Arctic security, international agreements, academic and political literature, budgetary data on Arctic defense readiness and survey data on U.S. Arctic norms and understanding, the research study finds evidence to support the claim that U.S. public consciousness of the Arctic is particularly limited. As such, the evidence supports the theory of constructivism and its value of the role of social norms and discourse in international relations. Overall, the analysis will provide better understanding of the strategic role of Arctic region, the impacts of social understanding on U.S. Arctic posture and provide foundation for U.S. Arctic security recommendations.
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Introduction

Historically a no-man’s land of permafrost, sea ice and polar expedition, the Arctic has cracked open her doors to warming temperatures. While climate change is most often understood with an environmental connotation, its implications are far more diverse. The unipolar locality of the North Pole holds multi-modal significance across environmental, economic and security sectors. Prior to the warming Arctic, the region was more or less geopolitically insular and exclusive to the eight Arctic nations with territorial claims to the region. Moreover, the majority of Arctic nations’ regional interests were scientific, academic and environmental. As such, the Arctic was relatively excluded from the international security agenda. The most recent exception was the Cold War, where the Arctic featured prominently as a strategic training ground and demonstrative front between the United States and the Soviet Union. Cold War tensions aside, the remote arena has primarily fostered an understated environment of circumpolar synergy.

In recent years, however, melting sea ice and increased geographical access to the maritime region has triggered geopolitical adjustments. Most predominately featured is the increased military activity and maritime presence by Russia in the Arctic region. However, other worrisome security trends include the increasing interests of non-Arctic nations, such as China, and the decrease of competitive operational advantages previously held by Arctic nations as civilian research and interests expands in the Arctic arena.

This study will explore how the United States is out of touch with the Arctic in general, but most alarmingly, disengaged with its Arctic security posture. Currently there is abundant literature primarily by academic and policy-research institutions, acknowledging the lack of U.S. leadership in the Arctic security arena and the need to address these shortcomings. The United States’ own Arctic strategies and capabilities are being compared to other Arctic nations, like Russia. However, literature suggests that Russia itself holds an entirely different social connection to the region, or Arctic identity, than the United States. These glaring differences in Arctic identity suggest that perhaps social norms and understanding may play a role in the countries’ posture in the region.

Ergo, this study will centralize around the following research question: “What theoretical framework best contributes to understanding the social narratives behind United States’ reputedly lagging posture in the Arctic, particularly in the security sector? The study elects to apply the theory of constructivism, due to its emphasis on the value of social narratives and understanding. The study will provide supporting evidence to the claim that U.S. constituents are normatively disconnected to the Arctic, which is detrimental to U.S. government efforts to redress posture in the region. The primary hypothesis is: The United States has not pursued a consistent, security-forward posture in the Arctic due to limited normative understanding of the Arctic.

Increased access to the Arctic continues to augment the policy importance of the region across economic, environmental, political and security agendas. Without a notable redress of U.S. Arctic posture, geopolitical misunderstandings could lead to a security dilemma and resource war for which the United States is poorly prepared for. The room for misinterpretation of intentions in the Arctic juxtaposed with a pallid U.S. Arctic posture is the foundation for building insecurity amid contemporary Arctic geopolitics. The overall motivation behind this study is to increase dialogue and acknowledgement on the strategic value of the Arctic and encourage due attention to the normative undertones of U.S. Arctic security posture. In sum, the study will dually emphasize the lack of Arctic knowledge and social understanding of the Arctic by the United States and the growing geo-strategic importance of the region to the United States’ global interests.
The Far North

The circumpolar region of ocean, sea ice and tundra that is the Arctic can be defined in various ways. The most common definition of the Arctic is the region above the Arctic Circle, a latitude line of 66.34 North. Other scientists define the Arctic using the boundary of the “arctic tree line,” where tree growth gives way to tundra. Others still use a temperature limit definition, wherein high latitude locations that do not rise above an average of 50 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer are considered to be within the Arctic. For the purpose of this study, the operational definition of the Arctic region will be as set forth in the U.S. Arctic Research and Policy Act (ARPA) of 1984. This definition is used as it best represents U.S. arctic interests.

“...the term ‘Arctic’ means all United States and foreign territory north of the Arctic Circle and all United States territory north and west of the boundary formed by the Porcupine, Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers [in Alaska]; all contiguous seas, including the Arctic Ocean and the Beaufort, Bering, and Chukchi Seas; and the Aleutian chain.”

Approximately 2,521 miles of shoreline, the U.S. Arctic also holds an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of about 889,000 square miles. The Arctic Circle itself is about 5.6 million square miles, approximately 2.8% of the world’s surface area. Eight nations hold sovereign territory claims to the region, eliciting label of Arctic Nations: The United States, Canada, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Denmark (i.e. Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Sweden and Russia. Of those eight, the United States, Canada, Russia, Norway, and Denmark are coastal Arctic states with main coastlines north of the Arctic Circle. Some of these hold greater territorial claims to the Arctic than others: Canada holds over 100,600 miles Arctic coastline, and Russia holds almost 15,000 miles, in comparison to the United States’ much smaller, 2,521 miles of Arctic coastline.

U.S. Arctic History

The United States’ Arctic nation status is the result of the 1867 purchase of Alaska from Russia. The purchase totaled 7.2 million dollars, about 2 cents per acre for 586,412 square miles. Russia had previously offered the sale to the United States in 1859 in order to limit the power of their then-rival in the Pacific region, Great Britain. The American Civil War took precedent but following the war, Secretary of State William Seward encouraged another Russian sale proposal. On October 18th, 1867 the territory of Alaska was officially consigned to the United States. The decision was not particularly popular among the American public, leading to the dubs “Seward’s Folly” and “Andrew Johnson’s Polar Bear Garden.” However, the negative sentiment turned when gold was discovered, triggering a historic gold rush and acknowledgment of the territory’s resources. Named after the Aleut word “Alyeska”, which means “great land,” Alaska became the 49th state in 1959. Today, Alaska celebrates Alaska Day on October 18th in honor of its formal territory transfer.

Economic drivers aside, U.S. arctic history also holds a notable security background. Prior to World War II, U.S. defense in the Arctic region was limited, consisting of a small Army garrison near Skagway, and a Navy seaplane base in Sitka with intermittent presence. The approach of war and Japanese pressure on the Aleutians (string of Alaskan islands in the Bering Sea) was accompanied by a dramatic increase in troops, air bases and garrisons across strategic locations in the state. The proximity to Russia also lent the region to be a major route for lend-lease fighters and supplies from the U.S. in the Allies’ campaign against Germany. With 78 Arctic convoys supported by the United States, Canada and Great Britain during the war, Arctic routes were one of the primary distribution routes for military supplies and civilian support.
The strategic value of the Arctic arena was once again recognized in U.S. history during the Cold War. With nuclear tensions high, the Arctic was the buffer between the two nuclear powers, but also the shortest route between the two countries. As such, the Arctic arena became an active training ground and demonstrative front for both U.S. and Soviet operations. During this time, the United States built the Distant Early Warming (DEW) line across Alaska and Canada for missile detection. The Cold War largely expanded the U.S. Arctic presence with new and expanded bases, and the establishment of region specific commands, such as the Alaska Command (ALCOM) and North American Air Defense (NORAD) command. At the height of active duty military presence in 1957, the region held about 50,000 U.S. troops. Budget cuts and improved technologies slowly reduced U.S. presence. At the War’s end, the United States largely withdrew their defense posture from the Arctic region. Recent and present-day U.S. security posture will be discussed in a following section.

**Contemporary Changes & Challenges**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Arctic returned to a sphere of relative institutional cooperation. Mikhail Gorbachev’s Murmansk Initiative in 1987 kickstarted the dialogue among Arctic nations that supported the Arctic as a “zone of peace.” The last two decades in the Arctic have been touted as a region of “high north, low tension” with focus on non-traditional security frameworks. Recent Arctic thaw, however, has changed the dynamic of the northern arena in a myriad of ways.

First and foremost, the Arctic is dramatically experiencing the effects of climate change. According to the 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, global warming is two to three times higher than the global annual average in the Arctic, making the region’s bio-systems and indigenous populations disproportionately at risk for climate-related consequences. This year’s annual summer sea-ice minimum was 4.3 million square kilometers, the second-smallest amount on record tied with the recorded sea-ice minimum of 2007. Some scientists predict ice-free summers in the Arctic as soon as the late 2030s.

Although melting sea-ice comes with a slew of environmental and social challenges, it also opens the door to the region’s natural resources, including oil and natural gas reserves, maritime transit routes, commercial fishing and even tourism. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the Arctic is estimated to hold about 13 percent of the world’s undiscovered oil reserves and 30 percent of its natural gas. The possibility of increased maritime transportation is also pivotal given that approximately 90 percent of world trade is transported through maritime shipping lanes. With the prospect of sea-ice free summers, the Russia’s Northern Sea Route could reduce transit time from Southeast Asia to Europe by as much as 30 percent, in comparison to the highly trafficked Suez Canal. Although comparatively less lucrative than other tourist destinations, the Arctic is experiencing growing tourism rates as global interest in the region increases, which could lead to even further social and economic development among the northern territories of the Arctic Nations. According to U.S. Committee on The Marine Transportation System, projected vessel traffic numbers for the Arctic region in 2030 is 377 vessels, which is 50% more than current vessel traffic and 200% more than historical traffic in 2008.

Another notable impact of increased Arctic access is the expansion of civilian research in the area by both Arctic and non-Arctic nations. Nord University professor Torbjøn Pedersen posits that the increased parameters of Arctic research will result in increasingly homogeneous perceptions about operability and environmental qualities and conditions of the region that will continue to bring new Arctic actors to the table. In consequence, he further argues that the competitive security advantages previously held by Arctic nations is decreasing, leveling the operational battlefield.
transformation of the traditional security framework in the Arctic is particularly relevant to present-day geopolitical dynamics. Overall, as resources in the Arctic have become increasingly accessible, regional actors have exponentially extended their investment and security posture in the Arctic.

The most apparent geopolitical bellwether in the region is the increased maritime presence and military build-up by Russia in their Arctic territories. Given Russia’s annexation of Crimea and posture in Ukraine and Syria, their rehabilitation of seven former Soviet era bases and addition of new, modernized bases is noteworthy. Moreover, Russia recently authorized a policy requiring foreign vessels to provide notice 45 days in advance to use the Northern Sea Route. This isn’t the first time Russians have taken bold political action in the Arctic. In 2007, Russians planted a flag at the North Pole seabed, provoking international rebuke. Yet, there remains much uncertainty as to Russia’s Arctic strategy. Some experts believe that Russia is strategically enhancing its military capabilities in the Arctic to gain regional hegemony, others argue that Russia is simply protecting their economic assets and development and will continue to collaborate with various Arctic organizations for their commercial benefit. Others, more pragmatically, contend that Russian strategy combines both Arctic militarization with economic cooperation.

China, another U.S. competitor, has also increased its polar footprint, identifying as a “near-Arctic state.” An Arctic Council observer state since 2014, China has dramatically increased its ventures in polar research and infrastructure. In 2018, China released an “Arctic White Paper” under its Belt and Road Initiative, detailing its future economic interests in the region, including: transportation and commercial infrastructure, and energy extraction. Additionally, China has increasingly invested in Arctic countries’ economies, such as Iceland, Greenland and Russia.

Both Russia and China have earned negative U.S. attention and rebuke for their actions in the Arctic. However, NATO, a strong U.S. ally, has also increased its stake in the Arctic arena. The 2016 Warsaw Summit saw increasing strategic importance given to the Arctic region, particularly in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine and Georgia. In fact, also in 2016, U.S. Rapporteur Gerald Connolly recommended to NATO the creation of an “Arctic Working Group” to focus on the evolving security dynamic of the Arctic. NATO has also devoted security planning to the far north region. The 2018 Trident Juncture 18, the largest NATO exercise since the Cold War, featured all NATO members in a joint exercise with a significant Arctic focus.

The Tip of the Iceberg: U.S. Arctic Posture

In 1909, American Admiral Robert Peary achieved the first successful expedition to the North Pole. He subsequently informed then President Taft; “I have the honor to place the North Pole at your disposal.” In response, Taft quipped: “Thanks for your interesting and generous offer, I do not know exactly what to do with it.” Incidentally, this research study will pivot on the argument that Taft’s sentiment largely represents the tenure of U.S. posture in the Arctic.

From the U.S. perspective, the significance of an opening Arctic region demands a comprehensive response. Yet many critics have pointed out that the United States is out of touch with the Arctic in general, and most alarmingly, disengaged with its Arctic security posture. This research study will investigate the development of the United States’ reputed disconnect to the Arctic. As such, this study will centralize around the following research question: “What theoretical framework best contributes to understanding the social narratives behind United States’ reputedly lagging posture in the Arctic?”

With focus on the U.S. security agenda, the following literature review will expand upon the political, institutional and security posture of the United States in the Arctic and provide a
framework for understanding the factors behind the development of U.S. posture. Overall, understanding the parameters of U.S. Arctic posture is essential to identifying and implementing solutions to enhance U.S. security posture in the region in an informed and sustainable manner.

U.S. Political & Institutional Posture

The United States is accused of having a limited political and institutional framework in the Arctic region, concentrated on environmental and economic issues. According to Rob Huebert, Associate Professor at University of Calgary, “US Arctic policy may be summarized as reactive, piecemeal, and rigid.” He points out that up until 2009, standing U.S. policy combined the Arctic and Antarctic regions. The prior U.S. Arctic policy, established in 1994, primarily focused on national objectives of environmental protection and conservation, institutional collaboration, natural resource management, social engagement with indigenous populations, and scientific research in the Arctic and Antarctic region. The policy indicated that this largely environmental focus is a resultant policy shift following the end of the Cold War.

Yet, this environmental focus was not entirely novel. Prior to 1994, the Arctic Research and Policy Act (ARPA) of 1984 identified national research needs and objectives specific to the Arctic region, with again, a primary focus on scientific and environmental opportunity in the region. ARPA established the Arctic Research Commission (ARC) and the Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee (IARPC), both of which continue to advance U.S. research interests in the region.

Toward the end of the Cold War, Canada and Finland collaborated on a mutual interest to create a multi-lateral institution in the Arctic, to establish a precedent of cooperation in the Arctic, particularly with the Soviets. Thus was established the 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, which all eight Arctic states signed, including a “very reluctant United States.” The AEPS lays out multi-lateral agenda priorities for the protection of the Arctic environment, with focus on organic contaminants, oil pollution, heavy metals, noise, radioactivity, and ocean acidification.

The relative success of AEPS led to another Canadian initiative and the creation of a multi-lateral forum, the Arctic Council. The idea was to create an international organization that could address a variety of issues in the Arctic, including security and territorial issues. During the negotiation and planning phase of the Arctic Council from 1990-1995, the United States showed minimal interest and participation in the initiative. In 1995, the United States finally agreed to back the initiative on the condition that the Arctic Council would remain a primarily environmentally focused institution, with no security-related mandate. The Arctic Council was enacted in 1996 as an intergovernmental forum responsible for the AEPS working groups and facilitating indigenous cooperation in the Arctic region. The Ottawa Declaration creating the Arctic Council specifically notes, “The Arctic Council should not deal with matters related to military security.”

Though not specific to the Arctic, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), has also had a significant impact on states’ posture in Arctic. The treaty established freedom of navigation rights, exclusive economic zones (EEZ), the process for extending continental shelf rights, and more. According to UNCLOS, each Arctic state holds sovereign rights over the resources within its EEZ. Although the United States upholds the majority of the treaty, it is, to this day, not a signatory. The United State originally refused to become party to the treaty due to objections on seabed mining provisions. Although several U.S. administrations have expressed support, the U.S. Senate has not yet voted on whether to give consent to ratify the UNCLOS treaty. All littoral Arctic states, aside from the United States, have used the UNCLOS treaty provisions to prepare or submit claims regarding the extension of their continental shelf rights in the Arctic.
The 2009 U.S. Arctic Policy Directive released by the George W. Bush Administration signaled the growing importance of the Arctic region to the United States. The policy stated that, “The United States is an Arctic nation, with varied and compelling interests in the region.” Yet, the policy retained a political vagueness as to how the United States intended on pursuing its interests. The subsequent 2013 National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR) enacted by the Obama administration is considered to complement rather than replace the 2009 policy directive. The National Strategy highlights three specific objectives for the United States in the Arctic region: [to] “advance United States security interests”, [to] “pursue responsible Arctic region stewardship”, and [to] “strengthen international cooperation.” Yet again, the policy largely identified sweeping goals under these objectives, without providing a comprehensive and measurable plan of action for the United States. Under the Obama administration, U.S. policy efforts largely focused on regional environmental protection efforts and even created the position, U.S. special representative for the Arctic.

However, American Security Project expert Andrew Holland points out that neither the Bush nor Obama administration seriously advocated for the allocation of resources behind their “toothless Arctic policy papers.” As for the U.S. Arctic representative, he highlights that the position is not senate confirmed and thus lacks institutional support. In comparison, he argues, Russia consistently advances their Arctic priorities, and even non-arctic countries such as Japan and Singapore have politically prestigious positions at the helm of their Arctic agenda. Holland’s concern may have been justified as the Arctic representative position has been vacant since January 2017.

It is important to note that this study does not intend to undermine the political and institutional successes of the United States. As author Steven Pincus recognizes, “although the United States has come relatively late to the table, it has picked up the pace of policy making in the Arctic in recent years.” For example, in 2018 the U.S. collaborated with Russia and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to create a Vessel Traffic Management System for the Bering Strait between the two countries, the first IMO-approved ship traffic mandate for the Arctic region.

However, any political and institutional successes aside, the United States does not have a consistent, resource-enabled political or institutional approach to the Arctic, particularly in light of growing Arctic development ambitions from U.S. competitors. “Washington is acknowledging Russia and China’s growing footprint in the Arctic but is allowing both nations to largely shape the region’s future.” With uncertainties about competitors interests and ambitions in the Arctic region, U.S. security posture is also under the spotlight. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo remarked during an Arctic council meeting in May, “The region has become an arena for power and for competition, and the eight Arctic states must adapt to this new future…a new age of strategic engagement in the Arctic.” As such, the United States is arguably in the midst of reevaluating and resourcing its security approach to the region.

U.S. Security Posture

The United States’ vague policy and lackluster institutional track record in the Arctic is compounded by experts underlining inconsistencies across US Arctic security strategy, assets, and infrastructure. According to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “the greatest failing of U.S. policy has been its reluctance to understand the strategic implications of great power competition in the Arctic.” The report presents the argument that the United States has in recent years under-estimated the strategic value of the Arctic region and the adequacy of its Arctic security infrastructure.
According to military strategist H. J. Mackinder, the geo-strategic location of the Mongol Empire or present-day Russia is the strategic pivot point of the world, with access to all hemispheres due to its long, northern border with the Arctic ocean. Although his argument may overestimate Russia’s geostrategic positioning for world domination, it does speak to the strategic value of the Arctic.

As previously mentioned, the post-Cold War era led to a de-emphasis of the Arctic region in military planning and security posture. However, recent geopolitical dynamics in the Arctic have raised concerns as to whether the United States’ security posture is appropriately resourced and comparatively competitive to other nations in the region.

In 2016, the Department of Defense (DoD) reported to Congress their updated Arctic posture “in light of significant changes in the international security environment.” The DoD Arctic strategy was last released in 2013 alongside the Obama administration’s National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR). The 2016 DoD Arctic Strategy reflects the growing recognition of U.S. national security interests in the Arctic, and identifies operational plans, joint efforts and capabilities. The strategy emphasizes “friction points” resulting from maritime claims, and the security implications of climate change.

The most recent DoD Arctic Strategy, published in June of 2019, updates U.S. security objectives in the region in coordination with the 2018 National Defense Strategy. Interestingly, the unclassified summary of the National Defense Strategy does not mention the Arctic region, though it does emphasize the growing threat dynamic from Russia and China. The 2019 Strategy highlights three priorities for pursuing U.S. Arctic security interests: building Arctic awareness, enhancing Arctic operations, and strengthening the rules-based order in the Arctic. Additionally, the document emphasizes the Arctic as part of the U.S. homeland, and the strategic value of the Arctic region in great power competition.

Expert commentary on the 2019 strategy highlights the increased critique of Russian and Chinese ambitions and activity in the region, yet they also point out that the strategy uses vague phraseology in regards to its plan of action. According to Ryan Uljua, a senior fellow at the Arctic Institute, the biggest difference between the Obama administration 2016 DoD Arctic Strategy and the current Trump administration DoD Arctic strategy is the explicit attention given to the strategic competitors in the region, particularly China. The 2019 strategy directly references Chinese investment into the region as a potential threat to Arctic governance and U.S. security interests. His colleague at the Arctic Institute, Andreas Osthagen, added: “This strategy must be understood as a call for more investments in military capabilities and infrastructure.”

Increasing recognition is being given to the Arctic at the defense level. In the words of U.S. Air Force Gen. Terrence O’Shaughnessy, head of both the U.S. Northern Command and the North American Aerospace Defense Command, “The Arctic is the first line of defense.” U.S. Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Karl Schultz echoed the sentiment saying, “We talk about the Arctic through a different lens now. We talk about the Arctic as a competitive space.”

However, greater strategic focus on the region has also underlined unique difficulties of operating in the Arctic and the operational limitations of the U.S. defense community. The Arctic is an environment where weather can prove to be the greatest enemy. Magnetic storms, heavy metal presence in the biosphere, the positioning of geostationary satellites, the effect of high latitude on radio signals and more all limit strategic communications in the region. The U.S. Navy chief meteorologist likened the scenario to operating blindly. In particular, the military has faced difficulties in building their weather predicting capabilities, an essential asset to operating in a hazardous environment. Traditional sensors used to collect weather data in lower latitudes often do
not function above the Arctic circle, and materials like batteries have a considerably shorter lifespan. Technological limitations aside, the need for joint training is also essential to preparing manpower with alpine navigation skills, terrain analysis and other region-specific skills. As such, military leaders have acknowledged the role indigenous communities could play in educating troops. Overall, given an argued lack of strategic infrastructure investment in the region in recent years, the U.S. defense community is playing a game of catch-up.

Across DoD, military and intelligence agencies are giving renewed attention and resources to the Arctic region. The military “catch-up” is most apparent in Alaska. Current military planning includes a focus on engaging the indigenous community, running more rural operations, emphasizing joint-trainings and modernizing defense assets. The Air Force, for example, is magnifying its capabilities at Clean Air Force Station and Fort Greely, and the Coast Guard is contributing its Arctic-operations knowledge to both Navy and Marine Corps units.

Demonstrative exercises and partnerships have also occurred on a multi-national basis, including the first U.S. air operation in northern European airspace since the Cold War. The U.S. B-2 stealth bombers fueled in Iceland, conducted a joint exercise with the UK Royal Air Force, and traversed the Norwegian Sea airspace near Russia’s northern fleet location in the Kola Peninsula. Although the U.S. Airforce, Army and Marine Corps have each reengaged their posture on Artic operations, this study will focus primarily on the U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard assets and capabilities due to the maritime quality of the Arctic region. Incidentally, these two military institutions are the only services with specific Arctic strategies.

January of 2019, the U.S. Navy quietly released an updated strategic outlook for the Arctic region. The document lists a number of operational challenges facing the Navy today, including a lack of oceanographic and meteorological data, resource allocation and limited communication infrastructure. Interestingly, however, the document posits, “While there are recognized threats, opportunities, and risks in our return to an era of great power competition, the Arctic is assessed to be low risk for conflict because nations have demonstrated the ability to resolve differences peacefully.” The updated strategy, which replaces 2014 Navy Arctic Roadmap, has met with heavy commentary. Criticism of the strategy ranged from the brevity of detail on current regional problems and potential solutions to the lack of design given to the document itself. Retired U.S. Navy Rear Admiral David Titley summarized his reaction as “massively underwhelmed.” According to retired Navy captain and dean of the Center for Naval Warfare Studies, Thomas Culora, the strategy illustrates the Navy’s “struggle to adapt” to operational needs in the evolving Arctic region.

Unclassified strategy documentation aside, the U.S. Navy has been clearly increasing its Arctic posture in recent years. The U.S. Navy formally reestablished the 2nd Fleet in August of 2018, the Navy fleet strategically used to counter Soviet naval forces during the Cold War. Created in 1950, the 2nd Fleet had been dissembled in September of 2011. Since its resurrection, a number of 2nd Fleet vessels have entered the Arctic Circle to build practical and operational knowledge. However, roaming the Arctic seas have highlighted the difficulties of operating in the region, from weather conditions to a lack of fueling infrastructure.

Underwater capabilities are another matter. The U.S. Navy has consistently conducted Arctic submarine operations, like the biennial ICEX operation. According to a Government Accountability Office Report assessing Navy capabilities for current Arctic threat levels, the Navy has significant limitations in surface vessel capabilities but that its other operational capabilities mitigate its ability to execute DoD strategy in the region. However, although Navy submarines have operated with relative success in the Arctic, submarines typically are not used to provide
surveillance or promote freedom of the seas.\(^9\) As Titley points out, with regards to U.S. Navy submarine capabilities, “virtual presence is physical absence…if you can only be on the surface where there is little or no danger of ice, then your presence is very restricted.”\(^9\) Moreover, growing competition from Russia in submarine technology and development maintains steady pressure on the United States to consistently innovate and expand their undersea capabilities.\(^9\)

Likewise, the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) posture and capabilities have also come under the scrutiny of U.S. officials and policy experts. Comparatively to the U.S. Navy Arctic Strategy, the recent 2019 U.S. Coast Guard Arctic Strategic Outlook is a lengthy document detailing the USCG’s history and role in the Arctic, and its three strategic priorities: to enhance Arctic capabilities, strengthen Arctic institutions, and encourage maritime innovation. The 2019 strategy updates the last USCG Arctic strategy from 2013 and highlights the geopolitical changes since, in particular the challenges posed by Russia and China in the region. Most notably, the document acknowledges that in comparison to other Arctic nations, the United States has not made commensurate investment in ice-breaking, surface maritime assets, which “limits the ability of the Coast Guard and the Nation to credibly uphold sovereignty or respond to contingencies in the Arctic.”\(^9\) According to an Arctic Institute review, the strategy is particularly candid about its operational vulnerabilities in the region and the Coast Guard’s role in “upholding sovereignty” not entirely for the purpose of defense readiness but also for functionality within U.S. domain (i.e. crisis response, maritime development, resource extraction, etc.).\(^9\)

If anything, the USCG strategy provides additional momentum to the long-drawn-out recognition of gaps in the U.S. Coast Guard’s Arctic capabilities. A 2018 research project funded by the USCG Office of Emerging Policy identified four capability gaps limiting the USCG mission set in the Arctic, including: unreliable communications in the Arctic, limited capacity to monitor and accrue data on Arctic conditions, a lack of assets and supporting infrastructure, and poor institutional frameworks for identifying and redressing capability gaps.\(^9\)

Perhaps the most acknowledged, yet slow to be addressed shortcoming is the United State’s ice-breaking capability. Currently, the US Coast Guard, the agency designated with ice-breaking operations, has only one operational heavy icebreaker, the Polar Star. The icebreaker, which entered its service during the Ford administration, is now thirteen years over its intended thirty-year lifespan. Although the Coast Guard has invested millions to extend the vessel’s service life, many of the ship components are no longer produced and are being sourced from the Polar Sea, a heavy icebreaker that has been nonoperational since a 2010 engine failure. According to a 2013 Department of Homeland Security Mission Need Statement, ice cutter demand modeling indicates that the USCG will need three heavy and three medium ice breakers to meet mission objectives in the polar regions.\(^9\) With the limitations of the Polar Star’s availability and fast expiring operability, the Coast Guard has only been able to comply with 78% of polar icebreaking requests from 2010-2016.\(^9\)

In comparison, Russia has forty-six icebreakers (with fifteen projected in construction) and China has three icebreakers. Following significant advocacy since its 2013 conception, the US-Navy Polar Cutter (icebreaker) program has slowly gained Congressional funding and political headway. In April 2019, VT Halter Marine, a ship builder, was awarded the government contract for the design and construction of the first polar icebreaker, with the options to a second and third icebreaker. With an estimate of over 2 billion dollars in procurement costs, the first icebreaker is scheduled to be delivered in 2024, with the other two icebreakers projected for 2025 and 2026.\(^9\)

Progress on the polar security cutter program aside, it is possible that the first heavy-ice breaker to be built will be sent to the Antarctic region, the current deployment location of the Polar Star. Thus,
Arctic ice-breaking capabilities may be delayed until the second planned icebreaker can be operationalized. Moreover, as a report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) highlights, there are acquisition risks to the polar cutter program, especially related to the predicted cost and schedule of the icebreakers. According to GAO, the USCG cost analysis may underestimate the cost of funding the program, and the predicted delivery dates for the icebreakers are unrealistically formulated. Moreover, there is no agreed contingency plan for the potential gap between the Polar Star (which may lose its operationality at any point) and the delivery of the first icebreaker. Although the USCG plans to continue to extend the life of the Polar Star, reports indicate that this approach may not be feasible.

On that note, even if the USCG successfully acquires three new heavy icebreakers, the United States as a whole lacks the arctic infrastructure necessary to support icebreaker deployments, such as ports, and logistical support equipment. Not to mention, none of the U.S. military services hold an Alaskan base above the Arctic Circle. Although, the recent U.S. Senate 2020 Defense bill calls upon Washington to explore potential locations for strategic Arctic ports for Navy or Coast Guard vessels, the idea is unlikely to develop quickly.

Overall the concern surrounding U.S. posture in the Arctic, both at the institutional and military levels, has gained political clout in light of the growing great-power tensions over the region. Although one would hope that Arctic security is being given even greater due attention at classified levels, there is a lack of dialogue and resources that drives the United States to skate on thin ice, in terms of Arctic security. As Andrew Holland pointedly concluded a presentation to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in 2014 on the national security concerns of the Arctic:

“There is a danger that other countries may perceive U.S. inattention as weakness. In the absence of clear statement of policy, backed up by high-level attention and resources from the United States, there is a danger of misreading U.S. intentions about what it perceives as core interests in the Arctic. . . . The United States is an Arctic nation: it should start acting like one.”

Below the Waterline: Constructivism

The existing literature on U.S. Arctic posture, as above outlined, is very prescriptive. Government documentation, scholarly articles, public-interest reports all highlight the increasing access to the Arctic region, the capacity and capability disconnect between the United States and the Arctic and the U.S. security posture “catch-up” in Arctic assets and operations.

However, these sources undervalue an important question: how did this disconnect develop? It is important to highlight that the shortcomings of the United States are being compared against other Arctic nations, like Russia, which has a very different Arctic history and social connection to the region. Thus, one might assume that normative differences among Arctic nations may account for differences in Arctic posture. In fact, some experts have made the argument that Russian militarization in the opening Arctic is entirely justified because of Russia’s strong social-level or cultural connection to the Arctic. It was with this kind of argument in mind, that this study intends to understand the United States own perceptions of their Arctic identity. Thus, perhaps the real question is, does public understanding play a role in the United States’ political and strategic disconnect to the Arctic region?

In order to investigate the potential influences behind the United States’ failure to develop a more consistent, security-forward posture in the Arctic, this study looks towards the theoretical framework of constructivism. As such, the purpose of this study is to move beyond providing evidence that U.S. security posture in the Arctic has stagnated. Rather, this study seeks to understand
and emphasize the state of U.S. social connection to the Arctic region, their most northern and relatively detached territory. Thus, this study draws upon the theory of constructivism as a framework for understanding how social narratives and normative understand could have contributed to the reputed disconnect and stagnation of security capabilities developed in the United States. In short, this study is about how the United States became disconnected to the Arctic, in order to provide an alternative and socially-focused avenue for understanding how to adjust U.S. security posture.

The study briefly touches upon how the two main schools of thought in international relations, liberalism and realism, contribute to the understanding of the United States’ posture in the Arctic. Although both can provide differing explanations as to how the United States should or could pursue their interests in the Arctic, neither adequately address how U.S. interests and posture are informed and developed by social narratives and normative understanding.

Consequently, constructivism is applied and identified as the most relevant framework of analysis for understanding the influence of social norms and public understanding relevant to U.S. Arctic security posture. As supporting evidence, this study analyzes survey data and other measures on public perception of and identity to the Arctic region. In particular, this study highlights the existence of competing social norms in U.S. Arctic arena and the possible impact of contiguity on the creation and sustenance of a U.S. Arctic identity, by comparing the public understanding of Alaskans and U.S. contiguous residents. Overall, the evidence presented supports the claim that U.S. norms and identities to the Arctic are limited, even among Alaskans, which in accordance to constructivism has implications on U.S. Arctic security interests and posture.

It is important to note the basic limitations and assumptions of the forthwith argument and evidence. The primary assumption of this research study is the general premise that the United States’ security posture in the Arctic is lacking. However, given the national security nature of the topic, the scope of this study is inherently limited due to the limits of publicly available data on the subject of national security and strategy. It can be safely assumed that critical information on U.S. security assets and operations in the Arctic is protected from the general public. Another primary assumption is that the Arctic region is strategically important to the United States’ interests, which may be contested by some who do not prescribe to the rationalist framework of a world measured by relative gains and losses. However, this study strives to illustrate the increasing strategic value of the Arctic region by highlighting the growth of great-power competition in the region, and in particular, the national security threats posed by Russia and China.

Additionally, there is limited social data on U.S. Arctic security perceptions and on the Arctic in general. Likewise, there is limited normative research done on comparing Arctic nations different normative understandings and connection to the Arctic region. For example, although there is consistent literary reference to Russia’s strong Arctic identity, the study was unable to find social or survey data measuring this social salience and normative understanding. However, this study was also limited by language constraints and an inability to search for and apply Russian literature.

On a final note, the existing survey data on Arctic knowledge and perceptions may be limited in their accuracy of representing public understanding. The concluding assumption based off constructivist theory is that social norms are the contributing elements to the development of state’s interests and actions, yet, it is inherently difficult to measure or prove the impact of social constructs like public perception. The study relies heavily on existing survey data, although questions and their responses can be inherently misleading. Thus, this study strong acknowledging that any perceived patterns among social perception data must be taken with a skeptic grain of academic salt.
Theoretical Applications

To begin with, the presence of institutional frameworks in the Arctic provides general evidence for the theoretical framework of liberalism. Prior to the opening of the Arctic, the costs of regional cooperation via institutions were low in comparison to the costs of maintaining sovereign development of the inaccessible region. Liberal theory’s most basic principle is that international institutions encourage cooperation and norms that reduce the incentives and increase the costs for states to defect and pursue their interests and gains relative to other states. In other words, liberals posit that institutions promote prosperity through interdependence, which make it difficult for states to pursue anarchical, or realist ambitions on their own. Thus, liberalism is a rationalist theoretical framework for explaining why the United States would or should use institutions to secure their interests in the Arctic region.

However, the United States’ alleged muted engagement in Arctic institutions and tunnel vision policy focus on environmental and economic interests have undermine the cooperative utility of institutional frameworks, particularly when faced with great-power competition. “We are seen as a non-cooperating power…we don’t have much influence in those forums [Arctic institutions] because we aren’t seen as a good strategic partner,” says Victoria Herrmann, Director of the Arctic Institute. As the United States is increasingly unable to pursue its interests through cooperative engagement, the potential power of Arctic institutions is undermined. Additionally, liberalism does not incorporate the influence of social perceptions and normative understanding into its institutional framework. Given that this study intends to interpret the social norms and understanding behind U.S. Arctic posture, again liberalism is not the ideal theoretical framework.

On the other hand, realism is most common to traditional security studies and provides a useful lens for understanding why the Arctic is strategically important to our relative gains in a great-power competition. However, just as liberalism fails to explain the United States’ patchy institutional engagement in the Arctic, realism does not account for the United States’ security shortcomings or lack of relative gains in the region. Instead, the tenets of realism highlight why the United States should pursue relative gains in power and its security interests. Additionally, realism offers useful perspective on the potential impacts of growing great-power competition in the Arctic, from actors such as Russia and China. Realism is also a useful macro-level paradigm for arguing why the United States is currently responding to geopolitical shifts in the balance of power and reevaluating its U.S. Arctic posture. Overall, however, realism does not address how social values or understanding in the United States could have influenced the lack of our relative gains within the changing security arena of the Arctic.

This is not to mean that one could not apply liberalism or realism to understanding arctic security and relations. However, when purposefully examining the social values and understanding relevant to U.S. Arctic identity as the basis for understanding U.S. Arctic posture, neither theory fits the bill. The limitations of liberalism and realism in explaining the micro-level social influence is well supplemented by constructivism. In his book, Creating Insecurity, Anthony Lott explores examples of U.S. national security policies through both a realist and constructivist lens. He argues that while realist theory provides a framework for understanding the consequences of certain policies within international relations, it does not fully explain the social beliefs or values within a state that would incline it to pursue said policies. Meanwhile, constructivism can illustrate how social narratives and norms are calculated into security policy interests.

First introduced to international relations theory by Nicholas Onuf in 1989, constructivism posits that states and other actors live in a “world of our making.” According to Emmanuel Adler,
“constructivism is the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretation of the material world.” This is in opposition to most rationalist theories like liberalism and realism, which believe that international relations are shaped by actors to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs through institutions or power-seeking behavior. Simplistically, constructivism believes that actors’ objectives and actions are socially constructed by how actors interact with each other.\textsuperscript{112}

Like liberalists, constructivists analyze a wider range of actors, not limited to the state (realists). Constructivists investigate how organizations can impact actors’ behavior (similarly to the cooperative cost-analysis of liberalism) but focus on how organizations influence actors’ norms and identities through social discourse. Norms are shared social understandings of standards for behavior.\textsuperscript{113} Although norms do not necessarily dictate outcomes, they have implications for how actors can respond to or interpret their interests. In other words, “Norms shape interests and interests shape actions.”\textsuperscript{114} As a result, constructivists focus on actors’ social interaction and the meaning they give to norms. The school of thought primarily focuses on explaining behaviors that cannot be explain by rationalist approaches like realism, which emphasize the structures of power.\textsuperscript{115}

In application to issues like national security, constructivism highlights how norms within the social context of security issues influence and are influenced by actors’ behavior. For example, since the Cold War the norm of “security” has burgeoned across non-traditional frameworks outside of the traditional military framework such as, environmental security, economic security, social or human security, etc. According to constructivism, the deepening complexity of the security agenda is the result of evolving, socially constructed norms. “A security threat is socially constructed according to a process of securitization whereby a particular issue comes to be framed as posing an existential threat…via a speech act, for example, in the context of political speeches and media representation.”\textsuperscript{116}

Overall, constructivism emphasizes the functional power of normative ideas or understanding as the foundation of human behavior. Constructivists argue that in order to understand international phenomena, like war, it is essential to identify the interests that led to war and the social constructivism behind these interests.\textsuperscript{117} As many would point out, constructivism is more of an approach to analyzing real-world events, than a theoretical, predictive model. The general aspiration of constructivism is to encourage greater recognition of social constructs and norms and their implications on actors’ interests and behaviors.\textsuperscript{118} In sum, using the logic of constructivism, U.S. Arctic norms or social identities shape U.S. interests and behavior in the Arctic region. The following evidence investigates the role of domestic norms and identities relevant to U.S. Arctic security posture.

Although the literature highlighting the disconnect between the Arctic and U.S. security posture has largely focused on the U.S. need to adapt and redress its posture, a few experts postulate that lagging U.S. security capabilities is the result of limited visible interest in the Arctic. U.S. Naval War College Assistant Professor Rebecca Pincus argues that the remote location of the Arctic region to the United States limits public discussion of Arctic interests and capabilities. The lack of integration of the Arctic into the United States’ global security strategy, like the National Defense Strategy or National Security Strategy, exacerbates the disconnect and potentially undermines efforts to advance U.S. interests in the Arctic.\textsuperscript{119} A similar argument is made by Russian scholar L.A. Matiyak, who alleges that the passive posture of the United States in the far northern region is due to a limited sense of Arctic identity, in comparison to countries like Russia who hold a strong “sense of belonging to the North.”\textsuperscript{120}
Given that the 2019 DoD Arctic Strategy’s number one priority is “building Arctic awareness,” the argument has grounds for greater analysis. The following evidence investigates the potential role of domestic norms and understandings relevant to the Arctic to support the constructivist claim that norms have shaped U.S. Arctic interests and thus, impacted U.S. Arctic security posture. The evidence is categorized into two subsections. The first section will analyzes U.S. Arctic norms and understandings for trends, in order to identify the social constructs that may impact U.S. Arctic security posture. The second section focuses on the implication of contiguity in the development of Arctic norms, to identify if the U.S. normative disconnect is simply a result of the majority of the United States being primarily detached from the Arctic region. The context of contiguity is primarily based in conflict theory, which posits that the presence of contiguity increases the potential for conflict between actors. This hypothesis is well supported by conflict data and analysis over time. Given the constructivist ideology that conflict itself is a social construct, it can be assumed that contiguity may impact the development of norms, i.e. social connection like Arctic identity.

Evidence on U.S. Arctic Norms & Understandings

In 2017, the Arctic Studio, an independent U.S. research initiative focused on Arctic politics and security, conducted an extensive online survey with the intent to measure “arctic identity” or American attitudes towards the Arctic region. Across a sample size of over three thousand U.S. based respondents, the survey respondents were asked to rate their agreement to the following statement on a scale of one to seven, with one indicating complete disagreement and seven complete agreement: “The United States is an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic Region.” This statement is a direct quote from the 2010 and 2013 U.S. Arctic Strategy. The survey found that Americans mostly disagreed with the statement, with an average response of 3.51. Additionally, a plurality of 27 percent of respondents indicated complete disagreement with the statement. These survey results support the argument that the U.S. public is relatively disconnected to the value of U.S. interests in the region.

The second phase of the Arctic Studio survey, with a sample size of one thousand U.S. based respondents, asked “When you think about the Arctic, what is the first thing that comes to mind?” Sixty-seven percent of the individually initiated responses overwhelmingly referenced Arctic climate references, such as “cold”, “ice”, “snow”, “Bears” and “Climate Change” were an additional fifteen percent of the responses, highlighting a general environmental theme across all responses. See Figure 1. Given the environmental and scientific focus of most U.S. policy and strategy as highlighted in the literature review, the survey results align with the expected normative focus on environmental aspects of the Arctic region.

Figure 1: Survey of US Residents, What word comes to mind when you think of the Arctic?
This environmental focus is not only normative. A glimpse into U.S. Coast Guard budgetary data since 2009 also highlights the environmental mission focus by the lead U.S. federal agency in the Arctic. Using annual discretionary budget requests categorized by mission set, this study focuses on the following mission set categories: Living Marine Resources, Marine Environmental Protection, Marine Safety, and Defense Readiness. The first three mission categories as described by the U.S. Coast Guard broadly fall into environmental security, with specific objectives like maritime regulations, environmental hazard response, and conservation compliance. Defense readiness, as the name suggests, focuses on providing security capacity like ice breaking in support of other DoD branches. A comparison of these two categories, environmental security and traditional security, illustrate that environmental security is by far the focus. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: US Coast Guard Annual Discretionary Budget for Defense & Environmental Missions

In light of the United States’ primarily scientific and environmental approach to the Arctic and the growing awareness of climate change in the far north, the Polar, Environment, and Science (POLES) survey, another U.S. focused study, attempted to measure U.S. public knowledge of the Arctic in 2017. Conducted by the Survey Center of the University of New Hampshire, 1,407 people were interviewed across the United States to assess their basis knowledge of the Arctic. The survey found that sixty-nine percent of respondents correctly answered that Arctic sea ice has declined, and thirty-four percent correctly identified that melting land ice has the most significant impacts on sea level rise.

The survey also found that only forty-four percent of respondents knew that the North Pole is located over a deep ocean, rather than on land or a mountain range. Even more surprisingly, only eighteen percent answered correctly in response to, “which of the following countries has territory with thousands of people living north of the Arctic Circle.” The possible answers were the United States, China, Estonia, Great Britain or none of the countries listed. The majority of the interviewees responded none of the countries listed and only eighteen percent correctly identified the United States as holding Arctic territory. See Figure 3. The overall results indicate moderate environmental awareness of the region, but not a sense of “homeland” connection to the Arctic.
An earlier 2006 public opinion survey also investigated the U.S. general public’s knowledge of and interest in the polar regions, with particular focus on climate change. In comparison to the topics of economic policy, foreign policy, science and technology and global warming, forty percent of 1863 interviewees responded that they felt “very informed” or “somewhat informed” on the polar regions. Subsequent questions sought to measure public concern on the consequences of climate change in the polar regions. The survey controlled for several demographic characteristics including political affiliation, i.e. conservative or liberal, in order to measure how political ideology may influence public concern. The survey found that overall, most respondents expressed some concern with regards to the consequences of climate change to the polar region. However, most interestingly, the survey found that environmental concern was lowest among those who identified as conservative. Although a bit tangential, the results add a layer of complexity to the U.S. norms surrounding the Arctic region.

The cumulative assessment of these survey results supports two claims. Firstly, the aforementioned surveys highlight that U.S. norms and awareness relating to the Arctic region are limited. Secondly, the existing, observable norms and understandings of the Arctic region largely fall under an environmental theme. An Arctic public opinion survey conducted by the Gordon Foundation in 2015 asked contiguous U.S. based residents to identify their definition of security in the Arctic. Seventy-two percent of respondents identified environmental security as important or most important to protecting the American Arctic. In comparison, only sixty-four percent of the survey respondents identified national security as a top priority.

For further visualization, a Google trends analysis of web searches in the United States since 2010 identifies the disparity between environmental and traditional security norms relevant to the Arctic. Across four terms, “Arctic Defense”, “Arctic Security,” “Arctic Environment,” and “Arctic Climate,” the last two environmental terms were of significantly more salience to the U.S. public. See Figure 4.
Both of the above claims have likely implications on U.S. security posture and capabilities. If there are minimal social narratives and understanding connecting the U.S. public to the Arctic, it is not likely to be a policy priority to advocate for greater resources to be directed to security capabilities in the region. Moreover, it is likely to be more difficult to gain normative traction on Arctic security posture, if the majority of existing U.S. norms relevant to the Arctic are centralized to an environmental agenda. Without norms that shape and reinforce traditional U.S. security interests in the Arctic, limited existing norms will continue to emphasize environmentally focused interests in the Arctic.

Impact of Contiguity

Operating under the constructivist assumption that norms shape interests, it is crucial to investigate factors that may impact the establishment of norms. This study chooses to investigate how contiguity, or geographical proximity, may influence the development of U.S. social norms on the Arctic, given that the majority of the continental United States is detached from the Arctic region. According to Rebecca Pincus, “Geography is the ‘most fundamentally conditioning factor in the formulation of national policy because it is the most permanent’. “128 The study focuses on the impact of contiguity by highlighting any difference between the norms and understanding of continental U.S. residents and Alaskans, who live in or near the Arctic region. Simply put, the study attempted to identify if there were significant differences in Arctic identity among Alaskans and contiguous U.S. residents.

Firstly, a Google Trends analysis of web searches in the United States over the last five years for the term “Arctic” by subregion illustrates that the significant majority of “Arctic” web searches occurred in Alaska. Calculated on a popularity scale from zero to 100, where 100 is the location with the highest popularity as a ratio of all searches, Alaskan-based web searches for “Arctic” scored 100. The next closest states were Maine and Vermont with popularity scores of eleven and ten, respectively. These results indicate that the region is much more socially salient to Alaskan residents than their contiguous U.S. counterparts. Moreover, the results provide evidence to support the claim that contiguity or proximity to the Arctic region has implications on the development of U.S. norms and consequently, U.S. interests in the Arctic.
Next, the aforementioned Arctic Studio survey compared responses by Alaskan residents to contiguous U.S. residents and found that the Arctic region resonated much more with residents of the “Last Frontier,” i.e. Alaska. In scaling their agreement with the statement, “The United States is an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic region,” Alaskans averaged 5.77 on a scale of one to seven (seven indicating complete agreement). In contrast, as outlined above, contiguous U.S. residents mostly disagreed with the statement, averaging a 3.51.  

Likewise, the POLES survey identified the heightened awareness of Alaskans, who were significantly more likely to answer their basic Arctic knowledge questions correctly. In respective comparison to the sixty-nine percent and thirty-four percent of contiguous U.S. residents, eighty-three percent of Alaskans correctly identified that Arctic sea ice is declining and forty-four percent correctly identified that melting land ice is most impactful to sea level rise. Somewhat surprisingly, only sixty-three percent of Alaskans knew the location of the North Pole, in comparison to forty-four percent of contiguous U.S. residents. But most unexpectedly, only about half of Alaskans identified the United States as having territory and populous in the Arctic, although directly correlated to their own state. As such, the survey highlights that Alaskans are much more aware of the Arctic, yet also reflects that Alaskans themselves have limited normative connection to the Arctic. See Figure 5.

The Gordon Foundation Arctic public opinion survey further delves into the normative divergence between Alaskan and contiguous United States’ residents. When asked to identify the importance of various elements to Arctic governance and protection, sixty-nine percent of contiguous U.S. residents ranked climate change and environmental policies as important, closely followed by sixty-eight percent of Alaskans. However, Alaskans placed a slightly higher priority on security assets in the Arctic with sixty-two percent in comparison to fifty-nine percent. On that note, fifty-two percent of Alaskans believe that the United States should strengthen its military presence in the Arctic region, whereas only forty-five percent of contiguous residents agree.

A closer analysis of public opinion on military dynamics in Arctic security asked Alaskans and contiguous U.S. residents to gauge their point of view among the following options: 1) Security of the American Arctic is extremely important and we should be putting more military resources in that area, even if it means putting fewer resources on our military presence in other parts of the world, 2) We should not be diverting our military resources away from other countries to increase our
presence in the American Arctic, 3) Neither one, and 4) I don’t know or no response. Almost fifty percent of Alaskans agree that greater national security resources and capabilities should be directed towards the Arctic region, and over eighty percent of Alaskans agreed with one of the two first statements. On the other hand, only twenty-six percent of contiguous U.S. residents agree that greater security resources should be diverted towards the Arctic and almost half of their responses fell into the last two ambivalent categories.\(^{132}\)

Overall, Alaskans demonstrate greater knowledge and normative awareness of the Arctic region than contiguous U.S. residents, particularly with respect to traditional security norms. However, Alaskan social understandings of the Arctic are not overwhelming different from contiguous U.S. residents, indicating that Alaskans too are also relatively limited in their normative connection to the Arctic. It appears that contiguity is a contributing factor to norm development, yet its influence is limited. In sum, prior normatively focused research illustrates that the US is normatively disconnected to the Arctic region, with narrowly and environmentally confined understanding. Yet, this disconnect is not entirely a result of contiguity as even Alaskans illustrated limited normative understanding to the Arctic, even if not to the extent of contiguous US residents.

**On Thin Ice: The Implications of Limited Norms**

Although this study acknowledges that greater research into U.S. social norms relevant to the Arctic is essential to pinpointing the U.S. public’s Arctic security identity, an assortment of prior research supports the claim that the United States has limited normative understanding of Arctic region in general, or minimal Arctic identity. Additionally, said research also supports the claim that observed Arctic norms and understanding in the United States appear to be primarily environmental in nature, and is not entirely a result of a lack of contiguity to the Arctic. The study concludes that existing evidence supports the constructivist argument that the United States has not pursued a consistent, security-forward posture in the Arctic region due to limited, and environmentally rangebound normative understanding of the Arctic.

These findings have important implications for the United States as it attempts to redress its security capabilities and posture in the increasingly accessible Arctic region. In particular, these findings are important given the study’s secondary argument that the Arctic region is strategically important to U.S. interests.

**International Implications**

The international implications of the United States’ minimal Arctic posture, as a result of limited and environmentally rangebound normative understanding, is twofold: it undermines the United States’ ability to lead or influence the region and it increases the United States’ vulnerabilities to its competitors.

Although competitors’ behavior in the Arctic have raised U.S. concern and even rebuke by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo,\(^{133}\) perhaps the greatest concern should be the limits of United States’ own leverage in the Arctic region. In a great-power competition, the lack of normative support for Arctic security issues could have serious implications on the United States’ ability to compete and provide leadership in the region.

In a survey of Canada, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Russia, the United States, and Arctic Indigenous focus groups, only eight percent of respondents answered that they would be most comfortable dealing with the United States on Arctic issues, while a plurality picked any one of the Scandinavian countries. In answer to which country they would be least comfortable dealing with on Arctic issues, nine percent picked the United States, closely followed by sixteen percent for China.
and thirty-one percent for Russia. Clearly, the United States is not considered a valuable Arctic partner in comparison to its allies, and only marginally better than its competitors, which does not bode well for its leadership and leverage among developing Arctic security challenges. See Figure 6.

Figure 6: Percentage of Responses in answer to, “Which of the following countries would you be most/least comfortable with <your country> dealing with on Arctic issues”?

On that note, a comparative analysis across the United States, Russia and China highlights a difference in the salience of the Arctic region to the countries and illustrates the normative rank of the United States in comparison to its competitors. A Google Trends analysis of global web searches in the United States, Russia and China over the last 12 months for the term “Arctic Ocean” highlights the virtual salience of the northern region to constituents in all three countries. Clearly, over the last year, Russia is in the lead with a 51% popularity rate of the term, followed by China with 31% and the United States with only 12%. See Figure 7. These results provide some additional support for the argument that the United States is lagging behind its competitors in the region, at least in terms of normative salience as measured by residents’ web searches. According to the data, the Arctic region is more socially salient to both Russia and China. Using the constructivist argument that states’ behaviors and interests are socially constructed, it also provides a visual for the differences in norms and social salience on the “Arctic Ocean” in conjunction with the countries’ different behaviors in the Arctic region.

Figure 7: Comparative Popularity Rate of Web Searches for the Term "Arctic Ocean" in the United States, Russia, and China
In a recent speech to U.S. Coast Guard graduates, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton acknowledged that American leadership in the Arctic has been neglected and emphasized the increasing need for a redress of U.S. Arctic posture. In a thinly veiled jab at Russia and China, Bolton argued that reasserting U.S. Arctic posture is essential to sustaining rules-based Arctic governance and undermining countries’ coercive maneuvers of militarization (Russia) and economic exploitation (China). According to the 2019 DoD Arctic Strategy, these two countries are identified front and center as growing great-power security threats to the United States.

In the words of Russian polar explorer Artur Chilingarov, “The Arctic has always been Russian.” With almost twenty percent of Russia in the Arctic region, Russia has historically had a deep normative connection to the North. The evolving accessibility of the region is triggering assertive action by Russia to pursue and protect its interests in shaping Arctic development, including Arctic-specific military modernization.

Although experts are divided on Russia’s ultimate Arctic interests, Russian military reinvestment into Arctic is unarguable. Russia’s nuclear agency, Rosatom recently bought stake in Delo Group, a transportation conglomerate, in hopes of encouraging transport and logistics development of Russia’s Northern Sea route. This investment partnership could realize Russia’s Arctic shipping ambitions via improved Arctic infrastructure. In terms of security infrastructure, Russia is pursuing an updated long-range radar system and over the horizon satellites focused on the Arctic for the purpose of early warning and monitoring capabilities, assets that U.S. leaders have also emphasized as increasingly important to the strategic region.

China, on the other hand, which does not have territorial claim to the Arctic, is also actively pursuing stake in the region as a “near-Arctic state”. While commercial development is at the forefront of China’s activity in the Arctic, they are also expanding their military capacity to protect their interests. China has conducted several military research projects focused on the Arctic region. Not to mention, China already has three military icebreakers and plans to build a new, nuclear powered icebreaker.

Chinese investment into the Arctic region has been developing since the early 2010s, when mentions of the Arctic region in national planning and strategy documents began increasing. China emphasized its seat at the Arctic table by gaining observer status to the Arctic Council in 2013 and highlighting its participation in Arctic Council meetings by use of its leadership in Arctic science. According to a 2016 report, China ranks 7th in Arctic scientific publication and has illustrated the highest relative growth in publication over the last couple decades. China has used its scientific contributions to Arctic knowledge to not only legitimize its presence in the Arctic, but also its investment into dual-use equipment, like heavy icebreakers. Yet increasingly security-focused Chinese assets and policy in the Arctic are justly concerning.

China’s Arctic influence was a centerpiece of discussion among this year’s US-EUCOM led-Arctic Security Forces Roundtable in Greenland, an Arctic nation in which China is actively pursing economic investment. This “economic charm offensive”, similar to the above-mentioned science smokescreen, enables China to gain influence that could potentially prove to be a national security threat in the long term. Chinese investment in the Arctic can be particularly tempting given the high costs of building infrastructure in the region. However, skepticism of China’s ambitions is built off previous Chinese investments into areas like European ports and other infrastructure that give them increased authority and manipulation over industrial movements.

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Individual Arctic ambitions aside, both Russia and China are highlighted as threats to U.S. security and the U.S. supported system of rules-based order. Both countries are increasingly cited for “gray zone” activities, i.e. measures short of military conflict with the intent to undermine democratic governance. Russia often utilizes cyber warfare, political disinformation and manipulation against the United States, for the purpose of influencing geopolitical conditions and outcomes; for example, the 2016 U.S. elections. On the other hand, China employs economic investment, maritime influence and nonmilitary forces, such as maritime law enforcement and civilian paramilitaries, to coercively undermine regional actors’ access to resources like exclusive economic zones; for example, the South China Sea disputes. Even more unsettling is the growing “anti-American alliance” between Russia and China, which experts warn could significant undermine American influence.

In a developing region like the Arctic, these competitors’ gray zone agendas could potentially subvert the presence of rules-based Arctic governance and sabotage the United States’ leverage in the Arctic arena. Perhaps more concerning, these competitors seem to be consistently amassing relative gains in the Arctic region across strategic and economic sectors, outpacing the United States’ own Arctic gains. Given the international implications of undermined regional leadership and the patterns of aggression by Russia and China, the United States is in a critical position to amend its investment and strategy in the Arctic region.

Overall and rooted in realist understanding, this study argues that, normative disconnect aside, the Arctic region holds increasingly strategic value for the United States as its direct competitors invest in the region. Traditionally unprofitable to develop, the exponentially growing viability of the previously identified assets of the Arctic region- natural resource extraction, maritime shipping routes, and other commercial activities- makes the Arctic a rare resource commodity among the international system, ripe for relative gains. Allowing either or both of our competitors to develop comparatively greater capabilities and investment in the region only undermines our own self-interests and security in the Arctic region.

Domestic Implications

The domestic implications of the United States’ limited and environmentally rangebound Arctic norms also impact our ability to compete with our competitors and ensure security in the northern region. A lack of public awareness and support for Arctic investment could undermine the rate at which the United States is able to bolster its Arctic strategy and invest in Arctic-capabilities, including assets and infrastructure like icebreakers and arctic ports. With the normative focus on Arctic environmental issues, soliciting public and political support for enhanced Arctic policies, assets and infrastructure will require significantly increased dialogue on security issues and national strategy in the Arctic. Competing norms and awareness levels between environmental initiatives and national security priorities could make the United States’ ability to procure and redress its Arctic security capabilities and capacity a lethargic process. In other words, making substantial relative gains in security capabilities may pivot on Washington’s ability to encourage a normative connection to the Arctic as a national security issue, relating to the region’s economic potential and homeland connection.

It is worth mentioning that environmental awareness relevant to the Arctic in the United States seem to gather primary support from those with a liberal political affiliation. In general, a preponderance of liberal support for environmental norms and interests is a well-supported phenomenon in recent decades. Conversely, national security politics are typically championed by conservatives. With this politicization in mind, an increased emphasis on U.S. Arctic security posture may come to odds with established normative support and awareness of U.S. stake in Arctic...
environmental protections. This potential friction of partisan priorities could also negatively impact the rate at which the U.S. defense community can update its capabilities in the Arctic.

However, establishing normative awareness and understanding of the needs for Arctic security capabilities is essential to funding such assets and infrastructure. Political scientists have long explored the impact of public opinion and support behind defense spending and found public opinion to have an impactful influence on defense budgets. Changes in defense spending typically hinge on supportive public opinion, although security sector decision makers are essential to fostering normative dialogue and opinion on defense spending.\(^{152}\) Thus, decision-makers themselves should be widely involved in encouraging normative awareness of the Arctic.

As of late, the U.S. public opinion is cooling on increased defense spending, with an uptick in Americans who believe the U.S. should spend less on the military and defense initiatives. Moreover, the percentage of Americans who believe too little is being spent on defense has decreased with President Trump’s administration.\(^{153}\) This current public climate on defense spending may impact the momentum defense decision-makers are able to garner towards advancing spending on Arctic security capabilities.

Enhancing contemporary Arctic security capabilities will certainly require greater defense budget allocation towards the Arctic region. For example, the US Navy-Coast Guard Polar Cutter program created to initiate the construction of new heavy icebreakers was introduced in 2013 and only just this year awarded a construction contract, illustrating the protracted timeline of defense budgeting and procurement, particularly on a less-visible defense priority.\(^{154}\)

Defense funding and procurement timelines aside, the relationship between national security policy and public awareness itself lends complexity to the ability for the United States to overhaul its Arctic security posture. As argued by Princeton University Professor Gabriel Almond in a presentation at the Army War College, public opinion and national security policy are often disjointed due to the qualities of national security, including the “technical nature” of security capabilities and posture, the need for classified levels of information, and the complex relationship of government agencies, interests groups, the media and the public in creating security policies. The technical and classified nature of security issues inherently alienates the awareness of the “mass public” to national security dynamics.\(^{155}\) U.S. attempts to build normative support for modernizing security capabilities and assets in the Arctic will need to take into consideration the relationship between U.S. national security policy and public awareness.

Overall, the general normative disconnect to the Arctic in the United States risks putting America in a compromising position of limited interests and low relative gains in the region. Advocates for updating and enhancing U.S. Arctic security posture should not overlook this normative disconnect in their endeavors, but rather should capitalize on engaging and building public awareness and norms relevant to the objectives of U.S. Arctic security. As constructivists would argue, investigating the role of norms is essential to understanding and re-shaping U.S. interests and behavior in the Arctic region. Capitalizing on normative understanding could be the pivotal difference in transforming U.S. Arctic policy and strategy from reactive to proactive.

**Next Steps**

As an Arctic nation with territorial claim, it is indisputably in U.S. interests to position itself to be a leader in the Arctic, particular in light of current geopolitics and the ever increasing economic, environmental and political potential of the region. If the United States sits back, the Arctic region may be primarily shaped and controlled by its competitors. Policy experts, political institutions and
DoD agencies have a variety of recommendations from specific enhancements to Arctic infrastructure and capabilities to strategic procedures that amplify the connection of the Arctic to national strategy.

A purpose of this study is to underline the importance of norms and understanding in the success of any proposed Arctic-related initiatives. In order to garner necessary momentum and support, advocates for U.S. Arctic objectives should emphasize developing a normative “center of gravity” for U.S. Arctic posture. Coined by General Carl Von Clausewitz and often incorporated into strategic theory, the concept loosely defines a center of gravity as a fundamental driver behind action. Although centers of gravity are often attributed to material assets and capabilities like icebreakers and oceanographic weather models, this study promotes the constructivist principle that social norms and public understanding are an essential center of gravity to influence U.S. interests and behavior in the Arctic. Leaders and institutions must expressly engender public understanding in order to facilitate proposed U.S. national security interests. A failure to engage the public and build normative understandings relevant to arctic security issues at hand yields the center of gravity to competing influencers and their narratives, the great-power competition agenda for example. As cited in a recent Congressional Research Service report, due to the constraints of U.S. resources, attention to Arctic security challenges have to compete with the building influence of great-power conflicts in other regions like Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

Thus, analogous with previous constructivist treatise, this study seeks to encourage an approach to U.S. Arctic security that highlights the implications of norms on interests and behavior, in order to give the Arctic region the attention that is far overdue. In this case of Arctic security, the study concludes that enhanced normative understanding and identity to the Arctic region by the U.S. public will provide greater foundation for strengthening U.S. security interests in the evolving region. Some potential recommendations for U.S. Arctic security advocates to consider center around the role of institutions and the role of leadership, particularly security sector leadership, in encouraging normative development and understanding of the issues and priorities of the Arctic region.

Harnessing U.S. Institutions for Arctic
The influence and role of institutions on norm development is strongly encouraged by constructivists and accordingly, this study. In particular, Arctic security advocates should employ U.S. institutions, including government, academic, private and public-interest organizations, in norm-building by encouraging opportunities for public engagement with and understanding of the Arctic, shaping the political dialogue on the region, and developing multi-lateral nodes for security transparency.

Opportunities for public engagement and education on Arctic security could be encouraged via concerted government and public-interest communications and outreach, academic and professional fellowships, and exchange programs between Alaskan and contiguous U.S. schools. A recommendable model is the Arctic Youth Ambassadors program, a joint program by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of State. This program enables cross-cultural engagement between Alaskan youth for the purpose of advocating for their communities and increasing awareness about the Arctic. Another notable effort is led by the Arctic Institute, an independent scholarly think-tank dedicated to connecting Arctic researchers, experts and advocates on the issues and challenges in the Arctic and providing transparent and comprehensive information to the public.
Additionally, institutions should take seriously their role in shaping U.S. arctic dialogue via media, communications, legislation and political influence. Institutions should actively channel their discussions on Arctic issues for the benefit of building public understanding. One potential strategy, as suggested by Matthew Hickey in the Georgetown Security Studies Review, is to avoid the “polarizing nature of the climate change conversation” and refocus Arctic dialogue on security and economic issues that may gain more bipartisan awareness. On the other hand, perhaps the normative understanding behind climate change is the vehicle for raising awareness on the evolving Arctic and climate-initiated security issues and communicating the growing threat of great-power competitors in the Arctic arena. Regardless, institutions are invaluable to norm development.

This study understands that there are real-world resource limitations to the ability of institutions to reframe and intensify normative understanding relevant to the Arctic. However, as the Arctic region continues to evolve geopolitically, advocates should strive to harness geopolitical momentum on the Arctic to garner due attention. Arguably this is already being done to a degree, as Russian militarization in the Arctic has gained media and public-interest attention in the United States and subsequently increased security dialogue relevant to the region.

Mobilizing Leadership behind Arctic Security Priorities
On the note of security and defense dialogue, Arctic security advocates should play to their advantage and mobilize security sector leadership behind the Arctic agenda to gain public attention. One potential opportunity could be reminiscent of the appointment of a U.S. Special Representative for the Arctic to engage with Arctic Ambassadors from other countries, which has been vacant since the end of the Obama administration. Filling this position with a security sector leader and even expanding the functions to include coordinating U.S. Arctic security and defense strategies could improve inter-agency partnership and priority given to the Arctic. Moreover, a security representative for the Arctic region could be the face for engaging the public and normative understanding on the security challenges developing. In the words of retired Marine and Senator Mike Gallagher, “despite the old adage that ‘loose lips sink ships’, nonexistence strategic communications can sink entire navies.” In order to solidify the public’s normative connection to and understanding of Arctic security issues, the security-sector decision makers should be actively involved.

Strengthening Normative Research on the Arctic
Above all, this study recommends further research. If the United States intends on successfully redressing its posture and stake in the Arctic region, Arctic advocates should place value on citizens normative connection to and understanding of the Arctic. As such, additional research on the U.S. public’s perception of the Arctic is essential to interpreting and cultivating greater appreciation for the strategic value of the Arctic region. Additionally, further comparative and normatively focused research between Arctic nations is essential to definitively proving that social norms and “arctic identities” are truly a contributing vehicle behind countries Arctic posture.

On a theoretical level, additional research should also be conducted on the constructivist lens to better identify at what level norms are most effective on actors’ interests and behavior. For example, are norms most effective at the decision-maker level or the general public level? And how do the implications of norms differ, if at all, in democratic versus non-democratic states? Given that current great-power competitors in the Arctic-the United States, Russia, and China- each have their own very different internal politics, the implications of norms may differ on their behaviors. The ability to pinpoint the level at which norms have the greatest influence would be invaluable to political science and would engender more effective public policy on issues like the evolving Arctic.
Conclusion

By investigating the social narratives behind U.S. engagement and security posture in the Arctic region, this study began an important foray into understanding if normative understanding influences macro-level geopolitics. Much like existing literature’s insinuation that Russia’s military reinvestment into the Arctic region is rooted in their strong Arctic identity, there seems to be causal value behind the United States’ limited Arctic norms and minimal posture in the region.

The theoretical framework of constructivism applied is helpful in understanding the social value behind lagging US posture in the Arctic region. Moreover, constructivist theory illustrates how essential norm are to shaping actors’ interests and behavior. The study has shown, the United States has limited normative connection to their most northern region, which is not overwhelmingly a result of minimal contiguity. This preliminary finding based off sparsely, existing research merits further research into the value of social narratives and identities, particularly as the Arctic region increases in geopolitical value. However, this study’s purpose is not only to underscore our normative limitations in relation to the Arctic region but also to emphasize the zero-sum dangers of allowing our direct competitors to shape the region.

As the Arctic region transforms from an inaccessible, undeveloped ice box to a viable and geo-strategic arena of competing interests, the United States must be proactive in its strategic planning for Arctic security. As the United States reevaluates its security capabilities and capacity in the Arctic region, advocates should engage and encourage social norms and understandings as an important component of U.S. security interests. Currently, the United States is poorly prepared for competition on the Arctic stage, across economic, environmental, and defense sectors. A substantial lag in relative gains could set the United States in the backseat, with little influence on the geostrategic development of the Arctic. Given that the two countries most increasing their relative gains in the Arctic are the United States’ direct competitors, the United States cannot afford to ignore the situation.

In closing, the overall motive of this study is to increase dialogue and acknowledgement on the strategic value of the Arctic and encourage long overdue attention to the normative undertones of U.S. Arctic security posture. The winter of a new Cold War is coming.

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