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Arctic: The Next Cold War

by Gordon G. Chang | February 2026

“You have Russian destroyers and submarines and China destroyers and submarines all over the place,” President Donald Trump said in January, referring to the Arctic.¹

Hostile powers are just about everywhere at the top of the world. In late summer 2015, five Chinese warships, after participating in a drill with Russia, sliced through U.S. territorial water in the Aleutian Islands as they headed south out of the Bering Sea.² The transit, permitted by international law as an “innocent passage,” was nonetheless a warning to the U.S. that China intended to dominate Alaskan waters.

China has continued provocative activities there. In 2024, for instance, China and Russia flew military patrols near Alaska over the Bering Sea for the first time. Chinese bombers took off and landed

from a Russian air field. “Such ‘access transfer’ accelerates and extends China’s ability to threaten North America in the air domain and raises the specter of coordinated military operations in the event of a strategic conflict,” U.S. Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot, commander of U.S. Northern Command and the North American Aerospace Defense Command, told the House Armed Services Committee last April.³

The big concern is China’s subsea activities. Chinese research submarines traveled beneath Arctic ice for the first time last summer, “a technical feat with chilling military and commercial implications for America and its allies,” reports the *Wall Street Journal*. “The U.S. and its allies expect Beijing will be able to send armed submarines to the North Pole within a few years.”⁴

“China doesn’t field the world’s largest fleet of oceanographic survey ships because they want to save the whales,” Hunter Stires, a naval strategist, told that paper. “China aims to take the lead in marine and climate science because understanding the ocean and the climate is a critical enabler to success in naval operations, particularly in anti-submarine warfare.”⁵

China is studying and surveying Arctic waters to help submarines navigate and evade detection. Soon, the People’s Liberation Army Navy will station nuclear-armed subs in the Arctic, close to potential targets in North America.

China is also patrolling Alaska with both coast guard vessels, which despite civilian markings look like navy frigates, and research ships.⁶ In November, the Department of Homeland Security reported that China’s military and research vessels were operating around Alaska in numbers never seen before.⁷

And where did China’s “weather-monitoring balloon,” which subsequently passed over sensitive military bases in America in January and February 2023, first cross into U.S. airspace? That would be the west coast of Alaska, just south of the Arctic Circle.

Beijing claims its intentions in the Arctic are benign—China says it promotes “peace, stability, and sustainable development” there⁸— but Mike Pompeo views Chinese objectives differently. Beijing, he said while secretary of state in 2019, was working to create a “new South China Sea” around the North Pole.⁹

The comparison was apt. “Beijing’s polar exploration echoes its military expansion in the South China Sea,” the *Wall Street Journal* reported

in December. “China launched research expeditions and published academic papers about the region almost 20 years ago. In 2013, Beijing used what it learned to begin building artificial islands that now hold military air bases, according to intelligence officials from the U.S. and Pacific allies.”¹⁰ Now, China is reusing its playbook in the High North.

As Gen. Guillot told Congress, China and Russia could jointly attack the United States from the Arctic.

Not every analyst is concerned, however. T.X. Hammes of the National Defense University and the Atlantic Council termed the region a “strategic distraction.” None of the reasons to be in the Arctic, he wrote in January, “is sufficient to divert scarce resources from higher value theaters.”

“Unfortunately,” he correctly notes, “the Joint Force is already overtasked in trying to meet its global and domestic missions while rebuilding the force.”

But Hammes adds this: “Strategy should serve as an appetite suppressant to keep the nation from committing to peripheral missions at the expense of critical ones.”¹¹

“Peripheral missions”?

Hammes points out that Trump’s National Security Strategy, released in December, does not mention the Arctic. Yet that landmark document and the National Defense Strategy, issued in January, both make the Western Hemisphere America’s No. 1 priority.

Part of the Arctic is, of course, in that hemisphere. The United States is one of the Arctic Five, the five

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littoral states bordering the Arctic Ocean. It is also one of the eight countries with territory inside the Arctic Circle. The Arctic, for these reasons alone, should be considered a priority and defended.

After all, Chinese and Russian militarization of the Arctic has consequences. As the ice cap recedes, vessels can transit the top of the world between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans easily, avoiding chokepoints like the Panama Canal and the stormy waters off Cape Horn, at the tip of South America.

Finally, it is important to have resources and assets where adversaries and enemies deploy theirs. The United States has been neglectful in the Arctic, however. The U.S. Navy, for instance, has no base in Alaska and has few ships designed for warfare in cold conditions. The U.S. and its allies, which are now moving back into the Arctic, had even stopped patrolling the region in the early 1990s.¹²

America's two NATO partners with Arctic territory in the Western Hemisphere, Canada and Denmark, have also ignored the area.

As Trump has repeatedly said, Greenland's defense now consists of "two dog sleds."¹³ That's not much of an exaggeration. In January 2025, Troels Lund Poulsen, Denmark's defense minister, admitted Copenhagen had long neglected Greenland's defense.¹⁴ NATO countries—France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Britain, the Netherlands, and Belgium¹⁵—have sent military personnel to the world's largest island in recent months, but these were only tiny deployments.

Canada has been especially complacent. Justin Trudeau, the former prime minister, devoted almost no resources to that front. The backbone of Canada's defense in its Arctic domains—40% of the country's landmass and over 70% of its

coastline—is the 5,000-strong Canadian Rangers, a paramilitary unit drawn from Inuit, Dene, Cree, Anishinaabe, Metis, and other local residents in the remote northern and coastal regions. As Charles Burton of the Synopsis think tank points out, Ottawa provides the Rangers with only "inadequate equipment for harsh conditions, such as antiquated rifles and snowmobiles for patrols across their massive frozen territory."

"Canada has ranked among the lowest defense spenders in NATO, allocating only about 1.4% of gross domestic product prior to recent pledges," Burton, author of the just-released *The Beaver and the Dragon: How China Out-Maneuvered Canada's Diplomacy, Security, and Sovereignty*, notes. "The underfunding stems from post-Cold War complacency, reliance on the U.S., and prioritization of social programs over military defense."¹⁶

Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy paper, issued in 2024, is long on rhetoric, but the government is short on actions. "Prime ministers have completely neglected the defense of the largest portion of our country," Burton, a former Canadian diplomat in Beijing, told me in January. "Every nation must defend its borders. Canada for a long time has not."¹⁷

Trump's solution now is to build icebreakers—he struck a shipbuilding deal with Finland to expand the U.S. fleet of these vessels¹⁸—and create angst in the Atlantic Alliance, making threats to annex both Canada—he persists on calling the country America's "51st state" and Prime Minister Mark Carney "Governor"—and Greenland.

On January 20, the American president posted on Truth Social an AI-generated image of himself in the Oval Office seated with European leaders and next to a map showing both Canada and Greenland

It is important to have resources and assets where adversaries and enemies deploy theirs.

as part of the United States.¹⁹ He has often issued implied threats to use force. “One way or the other, we’re going to have Greenland,” Trump told reporters in January.²⁰ That month he even threatened tariffs on European nations that opposed his bold designs on the island.²¹

Trump’s words have triggered boycotts of American products in Canada, stirred up Canadian and Danish nationalism, and led to analyses pronouncing the death of NATO. American allies—especially Carney—call the Chinese regime “more predictable.” There is now a “pivot to China” as Western presidents, prime ministers, and chancellors troop over to the Chinese capital.²²

Western leaders do not get Trump. As an initial matter, they should be criticizing themselves for ignoring real threats, such as China’s and Russia’s militaries openly operating in the Arctic and China installing infrastructure of satellite ground stations and fiber-optic cable as it builds out its Polar Silk Road and Digital Silk Road initiatives.

Moreover, Western leaders have little right to complain because, despite persistent American urging, they have refused to spend for their own and the common defense. Trump, through abrasive tactics, got them to pledge substantially more defense spending last June.

In any event, NATO partners have to realize they have a relationship with the United States of America, not just with America’s current but temporary occupant of the Oval Office. Moreover, they need to remember that it is only the United States that can lead them. For all the talk of Europe’s “strategic autonomy”—a favorite French

talking point—NATO without the America is leaderless.

And toothless, as NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte made clear in January. “If anyone thinks here, again, that the European Union, or Europe as a whole, can defend itself without the U.S., keep on dreaming,” he told European Parliament committees on foreign affairs and defense matters in Brussels on January 26. “You can’t. We can’t.”²³

In any event, Trump was bluffing about invading. “People thought I would use force,” he said at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 21, referring to his threats to annex Greenland. “I don’t have to use force. I don’t want to use force. I won’t use force.”²⁴

These important words put an end to the fears that NATO, which has kept the peace in Europe since 1949, would dissolve in a war among members over frozen territory. Additionally, Trump that day took another step to repair relations by announcing on Truth Social that he had arrived at a “framework of a future deal with respect to Greenland, and, in fact, the entire Arctic region.”²⁵

Although Trump has said little about the arrangement, it’s clear that the U.S. will get greater rights to erect defenses on the world’s largest island. Greenland, for example, will be a prime location for sites housing America’s “Golden Dome” missile defense system.

Progress toward a solution was visible even before Trump made his important concessions at Davos. Danish Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen and Greenland’s Foreign Minister Vivian Motzfeldt met

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Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Washington on January 14.

The Washington meeting did not settle the issue of sovereignty, but there was important forward movement: A “Danish diplomatic source” expressed “cautious optimism” to CNN. At the meeting, there was, the news outlet reported, no demand for a transfer of sovereignty from Denmark to the United States.²⁶

Then, Rasmussen said, the U.S., Denmark, and Greenland, would be forming “a high-level working group to explore if we can find a common way forward.” The meeting was “focused on how to ensure the long-term security in Greenland.”²⁷

Long-term, the threat is China and its partner Russia. China, which calls itself a “Near-Arctic state,” is not, in fact, an Arctic state. It is not, for instance, one of the Arctic Five.

Russia, one of the five, is outnumbered: All of the other four—the United States, Canada, Norway, and Denmark—are NATO members. Of the eight countries with territory inside the Arctic Circle—the Arctic Five plus Finland, Iceland, and Sweden—all but Russia are in that alliance.

That’s a powerful combination on America’s side. With Trump’s threat of force off the table, NATO can unite in the Arctic.

As Rubio said on January 28 at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, “We may be the richest country in the world, but we don’t have unlimited resources.”²⁸

Yes, America needs allies especially as China and Russia cooperate to take over the top of the world. It is time, therefore, for Trump to repair relations fast with Canada and Denmark, which, after all, guard America’s northern borders. As Rutte said in Brussels in January to the European Parliament committees, “We need each other.”²⁹

Gordon G. Chang is the author of *Plan Red: China’s Project to Destroy America* and *The Coming Collapse of China*. Follow him on X @GordonGChang.

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MAILING ADDRESS

PO Box 60485

Pasadena, CA 91116

Tel 415-989-0833

SACRAMENTO OFFICE

2110 K Street, Suite 28

Sacramento, CA 95816

Tel 916-389-9774

PASADENA OFFICE

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