



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

ANALYSIS

Multi-National Cooperation Will Accelerate U.S. Defense Capabilities in the Polar Regions

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In the fall of 2020, the United States, Canada, Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, Norway, and Sweden signed a ground-breaking defense agreement: the International Cooperative Engagement Program for Polar Research. ICE-PPR is the first multilateral effort specifically focused on cooperation in high-latitude, cold weather locations across the globe and is a direct response to the rise of great power competition in polar regions.

ICE-PPR enables the full spectrum of research, development, testing, evaluation, experimentation, acquisition, fielding, and personnel exchange. Most importantly, if the United States takes full advantage of the agreement, it lays the groundwork to address long-standing capability gaps in critical areas.

As commercial shipping, tourism, and resource competition have increased in the polar regions over the past decade, so have Russian and Chinese military activity. Tensions have increased due to Russian bomber flights and harassment of U.S. fishermen. Russia is installing missiles on icebreakers and claims to have constructed more than 475 military outposts in the Arctic. It has also caused severe Arctic pollution.

Meanwhile, China is increasingly active in the polar regions. It has engaged in illegal fishing, attempted to buy rare earth mineral mines in Greenland, tried to establish new shipping ports in Iceland, is procuring nuclear-powered heavy ice-breakers, and outlined its concept for a Polar Silk Road. China has also increased the number of research bases on Antarctica, creating the potential for Antarctica to become a land-based parallel version of the activities that have unfolded in the South China Sea.

The United States, however, has failed to keep pace. Since the 1980s, when it last conducted serious, sustained, comprehensive operations in the Arctic, U.S. capabilities for high-latitude, cold-weather regions have atrophied. As a result, the Coast Guard suffers from a shortage of icebreakers, Navy surface ship operations are restricted in icy conditions, Air Force capabilities are available only intermittently, Marines in Norway have been left with broken skis and faulty gear, and there is not yet a single deep water port in the U.S. Arctic. Only U.S. Navy submarines, Air Force early-warning operations, and Coast Guard search and rescue capabilities have continuously persisted.

Over the last decade, the U.S. has released a series of Arctic strategies and roadmaps, including from the White House, DoD, U.S. Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard, Department of the Air Force, and the U.S. Army. As seen in several reports to Congress, insufficient progress has been made in enhancing U.S. capabilities in the polar regions. Additionally, because the challenges of high-latitude cold-weather regions are common, a previously limited focus on the Arctic must be broadened to include the Southern Ocean and near-Antarctic regions.

Meanwhile, the other ICE-PPR nations have continuously operated in polar regions and invested in relevant capabilities. Finland has designed and is constructing a new ice-capable naval surface combatant, New Zealand is launching an ice-capable logistics ship, Canada is constructing an Arctic Offshore Patrol ship (AOPS), Canadian and Danish C-130s have delivered scientific payloads to the high Arctic, and Canada has led exercises to test Arctic logistics and survival skills. A renewed focus on undersea warfare has also quietly galvanized multiple efforts in Canada, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland.

The U.S. can learn from the experience of frontline polar nations, all of whom punch above their weight when it comes to defense capabilities, especially in high-latitude, cold-weather regions. The U.S. should cooperate with them on critical polar missions such as surveillance and reconnaissance, search and rescue, and disaster response. ICE-PPR also has provisions to enable each nation's defense organizations to tap into talent and expertise from their domestic scientific, homeland defense and border security, and environmental monitoring communities.

Over the long term, the United States could work with frontline polar nations to better prepare for contested operations elsewhere. High-latitude, cold weather conditions create natural anti-access, area denial (A2AD) environments, where establishing physical access, maintaining secure communications, and sustaining expeditionary logistics are all extremely difficult.

ICE-PPR provides a key strategic cooperation framework to rapidly accelerate the abilities of the U.S. and like-minded nations to preserve safe, stable, and secure polar regions through advancements in science, technology, and capability. We must be prepared and proficient across the spectrum of great power competition in the polar regions. And if deterrence fails, cooperation through ICE-PPR will help all these nations be able to fight more effectively together in the harsh conditions of high-latitude, cold-weather regions.

Chris Bassler is a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and is one of the "plankowners" of ICE-PPR. During his previous time serving as a civilian in the U.S. Defense Department, he worked with and traveled to all the Arctic nations, including several remote outposts.