

Cruise Missiles in the Arctic Seen as Another Outcome of Great Power Competition



The crew of the Seawolf-class fast-attack submarine, USS Connecticut (SSN 22), enjoys ice liberty after surfacing in the Arctic Circle during Ice Exercise (ICEX) 2020. ICEX 2020 is a biennial submarine exercise which promotes interoperability between allies and partners to maintain operational readiness and regional stability, while improving capabilities to operate in the Arctic environment. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Michael B. Zingaro

ARLINGTON, Va. –The Arctic, already an area of competing maritime, commercial and territorial claims among nations bordering the high latitudes, is also “an ideal site” for the launch of strategic missiles, say two retired admirals from the United States and the United Kingdom.

“Russia is building ice-capable combatants that can launch cruise missiles,” former U.S. Coast Guard commandant Adm. Paul Zukunft told a livestreamed panel discussion at the 2020 Defense News Conference Sept. 9, adding that those missiles can range as far south as Miami, Florida. The Coast Guard has only two ice breakers and one was recently sidelined by a shipboard fire. The Navy has no vessels with ice-hardened hulls (see

<https://old.seapowermagazine.org/u-s-lacks-ice-hardened-ships-repair-and-refueling-ports-for-arctic-ops/>)

Retired British Rear Adm. Simon Williams, a former submarine commander and senior Royal Navy and Defence Ministry planner, went even further on the strategic importance of the region at the top of the globe.

“It can be used, because of its location, as a very short missile launching site,” he said. During the Cold War, when Soviet, U.S. and NATO allies’ submarines patrolled beneath Arctic seas, “we spent a huge amount of effort in tracking submarines into the High Arctic.”

While the Cold War is over “the physics don’t change,” he noted. “The reality of the High Arctic is that as a strategic area, it is of great interest for all of us for that very reason. It provides us an ideal site for the strategic launch” and with new missiles in the near future “for tactical launch as well.”

The increasing decline of sea ice in the Arctic has opened potential sea lanes in the summer months, sparking territorial disputes. Russia, Norway, Canada and the United States all have boosted their military presence in the Arctic at a rate not seen for decades. China, calling itself a near-Arctic nation, is eager to use a trans-Arctic route to move its goods and is building its own ice breakers while partnering with Russia on commercial projects in the region.

Russia has opened a new large new base while refitting seven former Soviet bases within the Arctic Circle. Moscow also has modernized its powerful Northern Fleet, increasing submarine activity and building polar icebreakers armed with cruise missiles. In response, the United States has reconstituted the 2nd Fleet, adding the North Pole to its area of responsibility.

Currently the most viable trans-Arctic crossing is the Northern sea route bordering Russia, which considers it sovereign territory. A new Russian agency requires foreign naval ships to give 45 days advance notice before transiting, provide crew manifests and declare their intentions. The United States sees the northern route as an international waterway, said Zukunft, adding Russia’s demands are complete violation of the freedom of navigation. “Unfortunately, we

don't have reliable ships to challenge Russia on that front," he said, suggesting working with Canada and other allies to protect U.S. interests.