

Navy Arctic Expert Suggests a Fleet to Encompass Arctic Domain



Sailors assigned to the fast-attack submarine USS Connecticut stand watch on the bridge after surfacing in the Arctic Circle during Ice Exercise 2020 in March. U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Michael B. Zingaro
ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. interests in the Arctic Ocean and its connections to the Atlantic and Pacific oceans might be better served as a dedicated fleet's area of responsibility, rather than divided between the U.S. 2nd, 3rd and 6th Fleets, a Navy expert on the Arctic said.

Dr. Walter Berbrick, associate professor at the Naval War College and director of its Arctic Studies Group, was speaking July 16 during a webinar, Arctic East vs West: US Strategy in the Atlantic and Pacific Arctic, sponsored by CNA, a think tank in Arlington.

Berbrick said the lessened ice coverage of the Arctic Ocean is inviting to nations seeking to reduce maritime transit time between continents, especially considering that maritime commerce is expected to double over the next 20 years.

The Northern Sea Route along the Russian northern shoreline cuts 40% of the transit distance between Europe and the Far East, a route of considerable interest to China. The Northwest Passage, between the Bering Strait by Alaska and the Davis Strait by Greenland, is less viable, given the shallowness of the water and the narrow straits. More attractive, should the ice melt more, is the Transpolar Route, directly across the geographic North Pole from any direction, so far navigable only by submarines.

He said the current forecast of when the Transpolar Route might be navigable for surface ships by anywhere between 2035 and 2050 out to 2060.

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He noted that Russia is increasing its military presence in the Arctic region with modernizing old air bases, installing air-defense missile batteries, increasing submarine activity and building polar icebreakers armed with cruise missiles.

Berbrick said the heart of China’s Arctic strategy is use of the Arctic sea routes and gaining access to ports in northern Europe for maritime commerce. He said China’s increasing naval deployments away from home waters are likely to extend to the Arctic regions eventually, including Chinese subs making transits to the North Pole.

Regarding U.S. policy toward Arctic presence, Berbrick said the U.S. Coast Guard has done more than any other service to step up and dominate the discussion, but that this also means closer integration between the Coast Guard and U.S. Navy in the Arctic.

“What capabilities do we need to deter and, if necessary, to respond to any military by any nation or navy?” Berbrick asked rhetorically. “What forces do we need to assure our allies and partners in the region? How do we posture our forces to keep Arctic sea lines of communication free and open? What kind of naval power do we need [in the region] project from the Arctic to potentially gain an advantage in other places like the Pacific and the Atlantic?”

He noted that the U.S. Navy is designed for high-end fighting in warm waters.

The Navy also would need days or weeks to respond to a crisis in the Arctic, he said, given the distance from U.S. deep-water ports.

The 2nd, 3rd and 6th Fleets all have responsibilities in the region, he noted, with the Navy "facing a time/space/force problem in the Arctic," with too many other challenges around the world.

"Perhaps we should think outside the box and create a new fleet, an Arctic fleet," Berbrick said, saying that a total Navy battle fleet sized more toward 400 ships rather than 355 would be needed, which would allow for a fleet "permanently spread out across the Arctic region."

He said the supporting shore structure would require reactivating old bases in the Aleutian Islands and Greenland and establishing a port in Nome, Alaska, for example, he said.