

U.S. Arctic Policy: Overview

Introduction

Since the purchase of the land that would become Alaska in 1867, the US government has had an interest in the Arctic region and developed varying policies toward economic, scientific, and military engagement in that part of the world. As one of multiple countries with lands considered to fall within that region, the United States in 1996 became a founding member of the Arctic Council alongside the other seven Arctic nations. Throughout the first decades of the twenty-first century, a variety of economic, environmental, and geopolitical factors led to increased interest in the Arctic region, prompting debate regarding the United States' approach toward Arctic policy. Some lawmakers and others called for the United States to adopt a more aggressive policy toward the region, arguing that a stronger US presence in the Arctic would ensure control over shipping lanes and would also allow the United States to capitalize on the area's still-untapped natural resources. Taking note of other countries' increased presence in the region, those favoring a more aggressive Arctic policy likewise argued that doing so was crucial to maintaining geopolitical balance in the region. Those opposed to a more aggressive Arctic policy, on the other hand, argued that increased resource extraction in the region would be harmful to the environment and that US Arctic policy could violate the rights of Indigenous communities. Critics further noted that increased military and economic activity in the Arctic would be costly and divert funds from higher-priority issues.

Understanding the Discussion

Alaska Purchase: The United States' 1867 purchase from Russia of 586,412 square miles of land at the northwestern tip of the North American continent.

Arctic: The region surrounding the North Pole.

Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA): A 2004 report on climate change in the Arctic produced by an international team of scientists, conservation groups, and Indigenous peoples.

Arctic Council: An international organization formed in 1996 by the eight nations with lands in the Arctic for the purposes of environmental protection and sustainable development.

National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR): A 2022 US agenda detailing a ten-year approach to securing American interests in the Arctic region.

History

The Arctic is the region of Earth surrounding the North Pole. While specific definitions of that region vary, it is generally considered to be the portion of the far north that falls within the Arctic Circle, the boundary of which is typically given as around latitude 66 north. That region includes the Arctic Ocean, much of which is covered in ice. Lands falling within the Arctic Circle include northern Alaska, portions of Canada's three northernmost territories, much of Greenland (a territory of Denmark), a small portion of Iceland, northern Norway, northern Sweden, northern Finland, and a large swath of northern Russia. The portion of Alaska located within the Arctic is the traditional home of multiple Indigenous peoples, known collectively as Alaska Natives. The area is also home to wildlife adapted to the cold climate of the region, including vulnerable species such as the polar bear.

The United States' official engagement with the Arctic began in 1867 with the purchase of what would become the US state of Alaska from present-day Russia, then known as the Russian Empire. Carried out during the administration of US president Andrew Johnson and under the direction of Secretary of State William H. Seward, the Alaska Purchase cost the federal government \$7.2 million dollars. The acquisition made the United States an Arctic power, as portions of northern Alaska fall within the Arctic Circle. Initially known as the Territory of Alaska, the region attracted settlers and others interested in seeking out valuable resources in the area, including gold, which was discovered in Alaska late in the nineteenth century. Alaska became the forty-ninth US state in 1959 and, in the following decade, was the site of major oil and natural gas discoveries. Alaska's Prudhoe Bay petroleum deposits would prove particularly important to the United States as the federal government prioritized locating and extracting domestic fuels, efforts that would remain ongoing into the twenty-first century.

The Arctic Ocean, which borders the United States and Canada as well as multiple European nations, was the site of military exercises and patrols during the Cold War, a political conflict between the Soviet Union (now Russia) and Western nations such as the United States that took place between the late 1940s and the early 1990s. The US government also maintained Arctic military bases in Greenland during that period. Following the Cold War, however, the Arctic nations placed increased emphasis on international cooperation, and that focus led to the founding of the Arctic Council in 1996. Its membership included the United States, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden. Several Indigenous organizations likewise joined the Arctic Council as permanent participants, and a number of non-Arctic countries also served as observer nations.

In keeping with the Arctic Council's collaborative roots, leadership of the council changed every two years, rotating through each of the member nations. The United States became the second country to hold that position, chairing the council from 1998 to 2000, and it would again serve as chair from 2015 to 2017. As an organization, the Arctic Council commissioned research into issues affecting the Arctic, including climate change, which had led to melting sea ice, rising water levels in the region, and a host of other environmental ramifications. The results of that research were published in the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA), a 2004 report on climate change in the Arctic, produced by Arctic Council working groups the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme and Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna, as well as the International Arctic Science Committee.

During the early twenty-first century, the United States' Arctic policy was shaped greatly by the prospect of locating and extracting additional natural resources from the region. In 2008, the US Geological Survey estimated that the Arctic as a whole still contained extensive oil and natural gas reserves, and while many of those

reserves were located in territories held by countries such as Russia, the US-controlled portion of the Arctic nevertheless had extensive untapped resources. Such resources were of great interest to those seeking to reduce reliance on foreign fuel products such as petroleum originating in the Middle East. US Arctic policy of the early twenty-first century was articulated in a number of major policy documents, including the 2009 Arctic Region Policy Directive and the 2013 National Strategy for the Arctic Region.

US Arctic Policy Today

US Arctic policy of the early 2020s was complicated by several factors, including Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. That invasion, and the war that followed, led the United States and other countries to decrease their engagement with the Arctic Council, as Russia was the organization's chair at the time. Leadership of the council passed to Norway in 2023, and the member countries other than Russia subsequently resumed much of their involvement with the council. However, Russian activities in the Arctic, as well as China's demonstrated interest in the region, continued to raise concerns in the United States, some of which were reflected in the new National Strategy for the Arctic Region policy released in 2022. An update of the 2013 strategy that was intended to shape US Arctic policy for the next decade, the 2022 National Strategy focused on four "Strategic Pillars" regarding the Arctic: security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, and international cooperation and governance. The US Department of Defense went on to release its own Arctic Strategy in 2024, with a specific focus on US defense capabilities in the region.

US president Donald Trump likewise demonstrated an interest in reshaping US Arctic policy early in his second term and, in January 2025, issued an executive order, "Unleashing Alaska's Extraordinary Resource Potential," that focused on expanding resource-development and resource-extraction efforts in Alaska. Trump also expressed interest in purchasing Greenland from Denmark, citing its untapped natural resources as well as its strategic positioning within the Arctic, which Trump and his allies characterized as critical to blocking Russian and Chinese expansion within the region. Such actions stoked further debate about US Arctic policy, with some calling for the United States to adopt a more aggressive policy as a means of protecting US military and economic interests. Opponents of that approach, however, cautioned that increased engagement in the Arctic would be detrimental to the people and environment of the region as well as costly to taxpayers.

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