
U.S. Arctic Policymaking Under Trump and Obama IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIA AND CHINA

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Arctic policy priorities under the Obama and Trump administrations, though similar in some ways, are marked by distinct differences driven by contrasting governance styles. These differences have been most pronounced in the area of energy production where some efforts have broken radically with policies of the past. Former President Barack Obama had a more holistic policymaking framework that gave equal attention to economic development, national security, environmental protection, and scientific research. In contrast, President Donald Trump's policies focus on security and natural resource extraction. During the Obama era, the president played an active role in Arctic policymaking whereas the current administration has not made any substantive comments about the Arctic and appointed a director to the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) 18 months after it took office. Despite these differences, Trump's preservation of previously established Arctic legislation and strategic documents continues to align with the larger evolution of U.S. Arctic policy.

Looking internationally, the current administration's policies stand to have a negative impact on Russia's military and energy interests, while in China, these trends may have mixed results given possible benefits from increased U.S. energy production. This memo briefly lays out the history of U.S. Arctic policymaking and then examines the key institutions that shape this process: the presidency and National Security Council. The conclusion lays out how the Trump administration's different approach to the Arctic will affect U.S. policies toward that region and the principal competitors: Russia and China.

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The Evolution of U.S. Arctic Legislation and Decision-Making Bodies

Since Richard Nixon's presidency, the National Security Council guides Arctic policy in the Executive Branch. Nixon's Arctic priorities were developing the Arctic with minimal environmental impact, ensuring the country's defense interests, and enhancing mutually beneficial international cooperation. In 1994, President Bill Clinton modernized the policy for the post-Cold War era by broadening the U.S. Arctic focus on national security and defense needs, managing resource development in an environmentally sustainable way, strengthening international institutions focused on developing cooperation, seeking to involve Arctic indigenous people in decisions that affected them, and enhancing scientific monitoring and research into local, regional, and global environmental issues. Clinton sought to build on new cooperative opportunities with Russia, while providing financial and technical support to develop Russian environmental protection capacities. In 2009, President George W. Bush again revised U.S. policy to take into account the growing awareness of climate change and the increasing level of human activity in the northern regions.

On May 10, 2013, the Obama administration adopted the first U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region ([NSAR](#)). The Strategy developed themes from earlier documents and focused on national security issues, protecting the Arctic environment, conserving resources, and strengthening international cooperation. On January 21, 2015, as the United States took over the two-year rotating chairmanship of the Arctic Council, Obama [signed](#) an Executive Order to enhance coordination of national efforts in the Arctic. The order created the Arctic Executive Steering Committee (AESC) to coordinate the actions of the federal agencies, state, local, and tribal governments in Alaska, and the business and non-profit sectors.

While the AESC continues to exist in the Trump era, the current president has left it dormant. In an attempt to revive this institution and restore its status as a driver of Arctic policy, Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski introduced legislation in December 2018 to make the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) its chair and a White House office its co-chair.

Presidential Influence: Continuity and Change in U.S. Arctic Policymaking

As outlined in his 2013 Arctic Strategy, the Obama administration took historic actions to cement the importance of the Arctic by strengthening existing policymaking institutions and structures while creating new ones at the highest levels of government.

In 2009, Obama created the position of Assistant Director of Polar Sciences under the White House's OSTP, which was overseen by highly-respected OSTP Director John Holdren. The combination of Holdren's leadership, this new position, and Obama's prioritization of science allowed the OSTP to play a powerful and important role in Arctic

policymaking. On July 22, 2010, via presidential memorandum, Obama assigned the National Science and Technology Council (NSTC), under the OSTP, to coordinate the activities of the Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee (IARPC). Before this, IARPC's lack of direct links to the White House limited the authority of the interagency science committee to the National Science Foundation (NSF), a small non-cabinet-level agency. Placing the IARPC under the NSTC was a major advance in Arctic science policymaking.

Through a 2015 Executive Order, Obama made a further structural innovation by setting up the AESC to [guide](#) executive departments and agencies on Arctic issues and enhance coordination of federal Arctic policies across a range of relevant stakeholders. Mark Brzezinski, former U.S. Ambassador to Sweden, served as the director. He was an activist leader and solicited many ideas from members, although the (Republican) Congress did not fund them.

The Obama administration increased the visibility of Arctic issues while elevating the importance of environmental concerns in the region. In 2011, during Obama's first term, Hillary Clinton became the first U.S. Secretary of State to [attend](#) an Arctic Council ministerial meeting. That same year, Obama [imposed](#) a five-year ban on new offshore drilling and new lease sales in areas that included the Arctic. During the U.S. Chairmanship of the Arctic Council, Obama expanded his commitment to the Arctic by becoming the first sitting president to travel above the Arctic Circle during his visit to Alaska in 2015. Throughout his visit, Obama emphasized the threat that climate change poses to Alaskans and the world at large. In the final weeks of his administration, Obama invoked the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act to permanently ban oil and gas exploration and development in the Arctic Ocean and most U.S.-owned Arctic waters. The ban was part of a joint [partnership](#) with Canada that took parallel actions.

Even though Trump's public statements on the Arctic have been sparse, he has attempted to drive Arctic policies forward by encouraging more fossil fuel production in Alaska. At Trump's urging and with the support of Alaska's Congressional delegation, the Department of the Interior has sought to remove some Obama-era regulatory barriers in order to enhance oil and gas drilling in Alaska, including in the previously off-limits Alaska National Wildlife Refuge.

In 2017, Trump signed an Executive Order to [conduct](#) a multi-year review of federally prohibited waters for oil and gas drilling and to repeal Obama's 2016 drilling ban. However, the statute on which the ban was based does not include a provision authorizing a reversal [without](#) Congressional approval and there is no precedent for a president [attempting](#) such a reversal. On March 29, 2019, a federal judge overturned Trump's order and restored Obama's protections of the off-shore sites.

In contrast to Obama, Trump has not played a visible, personal role in the Arctic. His main statement on the Arctic is limited to a three-sentence [press release](#) describing a meeting with the Finnish president on April 23, 2018, in which “Both leaders affirmed that it is essential to increase security in the Arctic.” In short, it is apparent that the Arctic is not a high priority for the current president or his most prominent political appointees.

Working under the president, the NSC has historically been the key player in Arctic policymaking within the Executive Branch. However, no one knows what Trump’s now-third National Security Advisor John Bolton (appointed April 9, 2018) thinks about the Arctic. Casually illustrative of this point, a Google search of “Bolton Arctic” produces nothing of substance (as of April 2, 2019). Currently there is no pressing issue, such as Royal Dutch Shell’s efforts to drill in U.S. Arctic waters early on in Obama’s term, to call the NSC into action. During the first 18 months of Trump’s tenure, there was little evidence that the NSC played its traditional role of seeking input from across the government and presenting the president with a clearly defined set of policy choices, including for the Arctic.

U.S. Arctic Policy’s Significance for Russia and China

Russia and China have expressed great interest in taking advantage of emerging opportunities in the dramatically changing Arctic. The rapid melting of sea ice means greater opportunities for human activity in the region. Similarly, the changing climate is opening up the possibility of more economic development and the construction of more infrastructure.

Even as it faces constraints on its overall budget, Russia is increasing its military investments in the region: it has expanded its ice-breaker fleet, renovated old military bases and opened new ones, and has announced plans to deploy new weapons systems in the far north. Russia has conveyed the need to update aging infrastructure and seeks to increase and monitor shipping along its northern coast. The Kremlin’s (stated) plans and (occasional) investments serve as a way for Moscow to assert its interests in the north as other countries become more active there. Likewise, China’s 2018 Arctic White Paper announced a plan to use the Arctic much more extensively for commercial shipping while it continues to make investments in Arctic infrastructure.

It is important to recognize how Arctic priority shifts between the Obama and Trump administrations have different implications for Russia and China. Under Trump, the U.S. military is emphasizing a stronger focus on great-power competition in a new Arctic strategy expected to be published by early summer 2019, which, in combination with other policies and actions, stands to impact Russian and Chinese Arctic interests.

A greater military build-up and increased energy production in Alaska under Trump may be detrimental to Russian interests. Recognizing Russia’s increased militarization of the

Arctic, rising U.S. military capacity in the region may challenge any attempts by the Kremlin to exert military superiority there. The currently distant possibility of increased Alaskan energy production would also help to undermine general Russian attempts to dominate energy markets and extract a high price for its fossil fuels.

The picture is more mixed for China. While increased U.S. military capacity may be a detriment to China, expanded energy production, if it becomes profitable in the future, could potentially provide new sources of oil and gas for China in the medium term and help to hold down the costs of its imported energy.

Looking forward, even though the Arctic is often described as a region of cooperation, opportunities for greater tensions may also increase as interest among the great powers in this arena continue to rise. Despite Trump's apparent personal desire to improve relations with Russia, ongoing sanctions, including on the sale of off-shore drilling technology vital for the Arctic, and overall tensions due to Russian election interference and global competition, continue to impede efforts for enhanced cooperation between the two nations. Although bilateral collaboration largely endures within the Arctic, particularly through the Arctic Council, external political strain may eventually spill over into Arctic affairs as the region's strategic importance for Russia and the United States grows. Despite strong economic ties, U.S.-Chinese relations also seem likely to remain tense, especially given the trade disputes dividing them. Such uneasy relations can extend into the Arctic.

Finally, Russia and China have expressed a mutual desire to develop their own relations within and beyond the Arctic, but the extent to which this relationship will blossom remains unclear. Many of the announced bilateral projects have either been cancelled or are proceeding slowly with the two sides appearing to remain deeply suspicious of one another.

Recognizing the importance of great power cooperation to maintain stability in the Arctic, issues of urban sustainability might be one area where mutual interests can provide a foundation for forward-looking partnerships. Remote northern communities all suffer from high energy prices. Developing more accessible renewable energy from decentralized wind, solar, and other sources could improve living conditions for northern residents. Research and implementation of such technologies could provide a foundation for building ties among the private sectors of the three powers and thereby indirectly provide a path for potential improvements in the broader relationship later on.

Conclusion

Arctic policy priorities under the Obama and Trump administrations have not changed dramatically but the small differences—even the current neglect—have implications for U.S. relations with Russia and China and by extension for the greater Arctic region. The

Arctic's growing economic and strategic importance means that policymaking for the far north deserves more attention. Given that there are grounds for tensions among the great powers to increase both within and beyond the Arctic, improving these relations requires finding possibilities where mutual interests can be developed. Expanding collaboration on urban sustainability issues, particularly to reduce high Arctic energy prices, may present a small but high-value opportunity to reduce strains among Beijing, Moscow, and Washington, and in doing so, reduce potential causes of instability in the region.

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