

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Cold War Games: U.S. Is Preparing to Test the Waters in Icy Arctic

Navy explores expansion of operations in far North, going head-to-head with rivals Russia and China



The U.S. Navy is planning to station resources in Adak, Alaska, a onetime World War II and Cold War base. PHOTO: JULIA O'MALLEY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [Ben Kesling](#)

Jan. 11, 2019 4:53 pm ET

WASHINGTON—The Navy is planning to expand its role in the Arctic as climate change opens up more ocean waterways and the U.S. vies with great-power rivals Russia and China for influence in the far north.

A Navy warship will sail through Arctic waters in coming months on what's known as a freedom of navigation operation, or FONOP, said Navy Secretary Richard Spencer in an interview with The Wall Street Journal this week. It will be the first time the Navy has conducted such an operation in the Arctic.

The Navy also is planning to station resources in Adak, Alaska, which would mark a return to the onetime World War II and Cold War base that operated from 1942 to 1997, when U.S. troops were withdrawn. The new detachment could include surface ships and P-8 Poseidon patrol and reconnaissance aircraft, he said.

“The concept is, yes, go up there,” Mr. Spencer said, adding that plans for new Arctic operations are in early stages. “We’re developing them as we speak,” he said.

The Arctic has become a markedly more contentious military and commercial environment as the changing climate has led to greater ice melt in the summer, opening more navigable waterways and leading to greater sea traffic in once-impassable lanes.

The National Snow and Ice Data Center found that 2018 saw the third-lowest Arctic ice level since satellite data collection began in the late 1970s, part of an adverse trend the center says threatens to further accelerate global warming and negatively affect climate patterns. This could open up more trans-Arctic maritime routes, according to the Government Accountability Office, allowing exploration of untapped petroleum reserves and threatening the borders of countries once insulated by thick ice off their coasts.

The U.S. and allied militaries have used freedom of navigation operations around the world to assert the rights of ships from the U.S. and elsewhere to operate freely in waterways where there are territorial disputes, hoping to discourage or counter

excessive claims. Dozens of such operations in the South China Sea have targeted excessive Chinese maritime claims around islands and outposts across the region.

The Arctic mission will be the first time the U.S. Navy will undertake a FONOP in the Arctic, according to Cmdr. Jereal Dorsey, a Navy spokesman. Mr. Spencer said that the planning hasn't yet addressed which ports would be visited or which ship will be used.

Russia has long worked to develop its Arctic capabilities because of its lengthy northern coastline and use of Arctic waters for trade and national defense, including establishment of military bases.

China, which has declared itself a near-Arctic power, issued a comprehensive Arctic policy last year that included a desire to build a "polar silk road" and to ensure its freedom to operate in the region.

Adak, which sits at the end of the Aleutian Islands near Russia, once served as a U.S. naval facility and still has a functioning airstrip used for commercial flights. The base was closed in the 1990s as part of the Base Realignment and Closure Program, better known as BRAC.



Soldiers landing on the Aleutian islands in 1943. The base was closed in the 1990s. PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The decommissioned naval station was taken over in 2003 by the Aleut Corporation, founded in the 1970s to settle Alaska-native claims against the federal government. With only a few thousand acres of the island still under government control, the Navy is currently in talks with the corporation, Mr. Spencer said. The Aleut Corporation didn't respond to a request for comment on the matter.

"It has some amazing facilities," Mr. Spencer said. "Could we bring some surface ships there? Yes."

The Navy's planning is part of a broader move by the U.S. military to expand its influence in a region it has discounted, according to experts and military officials, and doing so is likely to pose a series of challenges.

Expanded military operations in the far north will require coordination with the Coast Guard, which handles a large portion of search-and-rescue missions and other

U.S. surface capabilities in the Arctic. Mr. Spencer hasn't said whether the Navy plans to move into some of these roles, but has said the Navy will work with the Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard also operates the only U.S. icebreaker in the region, a cause of concern among some lawmakers and defense officials because Russia operates dozens of icebreakers and the Chinese are building a fleet of such vessels. The most recent U.S. defense budget includes authorization for new icebreakers, though the first one won't be ready for use for years.

Ships that regularly sail in icy waters must be ice-hardened or winterized, to withstand the pounding and stress of thick ice and cold temperatures. The Navy's current fleet hasn't been designed to operate in icy waters, the GAO said, but some experts and lawmakers have said the issue will have to be addressed.

The Navy is preparing changes to its official Arctic operations policy to include a broader focus on surface warfare, Mr. Spencer said. Existing policy focuses in large part on the Navy's submarine and air patrol capabilities—not surface navigation.

Sen. Dan Sullivan (R., Alaska) said in an interview that surface navigation was important to emphasize the U.S. role as an Arctic nation.



The buildings of the former military base in Adak, shown here in 2015, sit empty. PHOTO: JULIA O'MALLEY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“I’ve been pressing them to do something—not just with submarines,” Mr. Sullivan said. “It kind of defeats the purpose if you can’t see it.”

The Navy has moved to expand its footprint in the Arctic region in other ways recently. It launched what officials called the Second Fleet in August to focus on the North Atlantic and on expanding Marine Corps training for extreme cold-weather operations.

Currently, 600 Marines are training in Norway, with that country’s forces, and are preparing for land warfare in Arctic conditions, part of a longstanding commitment to such operations.

The coming Arctic freedom of navigation operation and plans for expanded missions in the far north are planned, in part, to better understand how to work and operate in the extreme cold, Mr. Spencer said.

“We’ve got to get up there and learn,” he said. “There’s no other way to do it.”



The decommissioned naval station was taken over in 2003 by the Aleut Corporation, founded in the 1970s to settle Alaska-native claims against the federal government. PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Write to Ben Kesling at benjamin.kesling@wsj.com

Appeared in the January 12, 2019, print edition as 'Cold War Games: U.S. Prepares To Test the Waters in Icy Arctic.'