

Transition 2020: Biden expected to cool it on Arctic security

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The Biden administration is expected to keep a close eye on Russian and Chinese activity in the High North as strategic interest there continues to grow, but the president-elect will also take a more friendly approach than the current administration's to counter competitors' advances.

Increases in funding beyond the current plans for military infrastructure in the Arctic, such as heavy icebreakers to add to the Coast Guard's dwindling fleet, is unlikely, because an uptick in other countries' military operations and maritime traffic does not pose an immediate threat to U.S. interests, experts and former Arctic State Department officials say.

"The temperature will be turned down a little bit ... and we'll try to work together where we can with Russia. With China ... I'm not sure that you'll hear the same kind of anti-China rhetoric in the Biden administration relating to the Arctic as you've heard during the Trump administration," said David Balton, who was chair of the Senior Arctic Officials during the U.S. chairmanship of the Arctic Council from 2015-2017.

Overall, having a climate advocate in the White House will help thaw some of the tension between the U.S. and its Arctic counterparts over environmental protections, spurred by President Donald Trump's downplaying of climate change.

Whereas a Trump administration was more inclined to take a one-on-one approach with major players in the High North, such as Norway, Denmark and Canada, experts say a Biden administration is more likely to embrace governmental institutions like the Arctic Council and work toward common goals with other Arctic nations.

A Biden transition team member said the campaign had no immediate comment on other Arctic-specific policies.

Russia: While Joe Biden is expected to ease tensions with Russia in the Arctic, the administration will still be paying attention, especially amid Moscow's [more frequent exercises near Alaska](#) and its [militarization of Arctic waters](#).

"We can stand down, not exactly let bygones be bygones, but at least reduce the heat in the conversation between Russia and the United States during the Biden administration," said Robert Farley, senior lecturer at the University of Kentucky's Patterson School.

Russia will take over the rotating chairmanship of the Arctic Council next year, but their leadership is not expected to drastically change how they've operated in the High North.

Much of Russia's investment in the Arctic "can certainly be turned to malicious use in the future, things like air bases, but they're fundamentally necessary also for Russia to extract economic value out of Siberia and out of the Russian Arctic. And so, we should also lend an eye towards what of this activity is more domestically focused," said [Josh Tallis, a research scientist and expert on polar affairs](#).

Icebreakers and military operations: While a boost in military operations or an influx of military resources in the Arctic is not expected to come under Biden, the new administration is expected to devote attention to the Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard's ability to operate there, experts say.

A high priority on climate change is also not likely to “come at the expense of the military and security issues,” said Luke Coffey of The Heritage Foundation.

The Coast Guard will continue to struggle to get more funding for its polar security cutter program, experts say, though it won't come to a full stop and icebreakers will continue to be built.

Under the plan now, a shipbuilder in Mississippi is on track to [deliver one new polar security cutter](#) to the Coast Guard by 2024. The Coast Guard's wish list has long included a total of three heavy and three medium icebreakers.

“If we're looking at a Biden administration that's looking to be conciliatory about Russia, they're not going to be thinking in terms of how we can defend the American people in the Arctic region. ... I would expect this idea to languish away as a final priority, unless the Coast Guard is able to make a bunch of noise about it,” said Nick Solheim, founder of The Wallace Institute.

China: While some experts downplayed the threat of Chinese economic influence in places such as Greenland and the Faroe Islands, a consensus among experts is that the pressure to get China out of the Arctic will be lowered, although it will stay on Biden's radar.

The U.S. could also see a stronger relationship with Japan on Arctic issues to counter Chinese economic investment, as Japan has expressed more interest in the region.

“Japan is literally closer to the Arctic than China is ... there's a lot of low hanging fruit with respect to supporting Japanese aspirations, which at the same time counters the Chinese,” Farley said.

What's next: The State Department's [first U.S. coordinator for the Arctic](#) James DeHart will likely stay put as he is a well-regarded diplomat. Another key player will be whoever fills State's special representative for the Arctic position, which is expected to become permanent.

The Arctic Council is set to hold [its annual ministerial meeting](#) in Iceland next year from May 19-20. Russia will then take the helm of the panel for the next two years.

Arctic observers will keep close tabs on what news comes out of the meeting — the first major international event for the new administration in the Arctic.

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