
Arctic Tourism: An Army Special Forces Problem with a National Guard Solution

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ABSTRACT

Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) are poorly manned, trained, organized, and equipped to conduct sustained operations in the Arctic. ARSOF's current operations, referred to here as Arctic tourism, involve misaligned and episodic training combined with personnel policies that dilute Arctic expertise and hinder the retention of institutional knowledge and unit capability. This is compounded by the strained relationship between the U.S. government and Alaska Native communities, denying the U.S. military Arctic expertise and presenting a gap for malign influence. This piece explores how creating an Arctic-focused National Guard Special Forces unit can help address homeland defense gaps, Arctic capacity shortfalls, historically-fraught relationships with Alaska Native communities, and natural resource vulnerabilities.

The 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy largely ignores the Arctic and specifically fails to acknowledge how Alaska's exposed frontier will be defended in great-power competition with China and Russia. Alaska has faced hybrid and irregular threats long before these concepts emerged in

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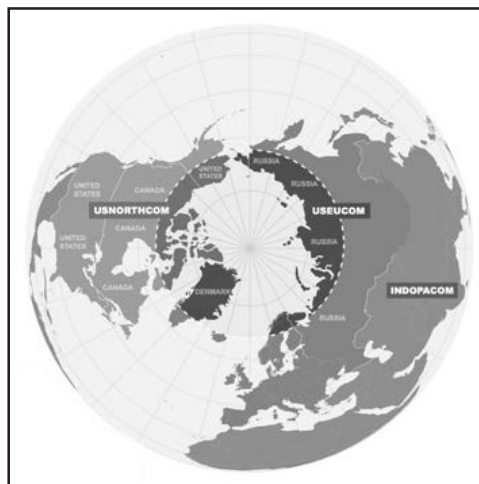
contemporary security discourse. The need for an Arctic-dedicated force is highlighted by the challenges of Russian and Chinese military cooperation, defense of critical infrastructure, and protection of Indigenous peoples—also known as Alaska Natives—made vulnerable by their remoteness, long history of exploitation, and infrastructure degradation due to climate change.

Alaska-based land forces currently consist of local Army National Guard and Reserve troops; various rotational units of active-duty Army Special Forces, also known as Green Berets; and the 11th Airborne Division. The 11th Airborne Division is the sole Arctic-focused active-duty Army unit in the United States but is simultaneously assigned to Indo-Pacific Command, whose area of responsibility does not encompass any Arctic territory. These forces are ill-prepared to address the security threats in the region, especially the Special Forces units, which conduct misaligned and episodic training with poor personnel policies. These policies dilute expertise and institutional unit knowledge by frequently rotating personnel out of the teams who execute Arctic training. We define this current approach as “Arctic tourism.” Creating a center of gravity for Arctic expertise in Alaska in the form of National Guard Special Forces could alleviate this problem.

An Alaska-based U.S. Army National Guard Special Forces unit could be a true force multiplier to address domain awareness and homeland defense gaps, Arctic capability and capacity shortfalls, neglected Alaskan Native communities, and vulnerable natural resources. U.S. Army Special Forces work with and through Indigenous communities, often in austere environments, to combat irregular and hybrid threats across the competition continuum. Alaska Native populations, who have survived and thrived in this harsh environment for generations, provide particular valuable insights around navigating the terrain. An Indigenous-focused approach in Alaska would allow National Guard Special Forces to address training shortfalls, enhance homeland defense, increase domain awareness in the Alaskan Arctic, and build Arctic capability for power projection abroad. The security challenges of budgetary and personnel limitations during a period of strategic ambiguity can be addressed partly by Special Operations Forces partnering with local Arctic communities. National Guard Special Forces present an economy of force option that can better address hybrid and irregular threats due to their smaller size and stabilized personnel trained to work with Indigenous forces with minimal financial and resource requirements.

HYBRID THREATS AND CURRENT SHORTFALLS

Alaska is vulnerable to hybrid threats due to its exposed strategic location on the seam of three combatant commands. The 11th Airborne Division is stationed in Alaska (the Northern Command) but is also assigned to Indo-Pacific Command, though the nearest threat emanates from Russia across the Bering Strait (proximal to the European Command). This Command relationship provides little assurance of a coordinated response in a crisis. For example, China has used buoys and balloons near Alaska to collect intelligence on the United States and even went so far as to send Chinese nationals posing as tourists through the Fort Wainwright gate near Fairbanks.¹ China has also coordinated with Russia to send combined naval patrols around the Aleutian Islands.²



Alaska’s strategic location, on the seams of three combatant commands.

Map source: “Regaining Arctic Dominance: The U.S. Army in the Arctic,” *Department of the Army*, January 19, 2021.

Additionally, two Russian nationals infiltrated Saint Lawrence Island to escape conscription.³ Native Alaskans on the Seward Peninsula, in the Northwest Arctic Borough, and on Saint Lawrence Island have generational relationships with Indigenous communities living in the Eastern Military District of Russia, to the point that the United States and Russia created a Bering Strait Visa-Free Travel Program that allows Indigenous peoples to freely cross the Bering Strait.⁴ Critical energy and homeland defense infrastructure in this area of Alaska is thus vulnerable to sabotage, due to both the challenge of mustering a coordinated response as well as the freedom of travel under the visa-free program. This underscores the necessity of ongoing threat and infrastructure assessments⁵ as well as the need for increased domain awareness and Arctic capability.

The Department of Defense wants to achieve “Arctic dominance” by improving readiness, training, and exercises with allies and partners.⁶ While these efforts—including training exercises like ARCTIC EDGE and actions taken to strengthen Arctic-capable forces within the 11th Airborne Division—represent a significant step in the right direction, they do

not fully address the unique challenges of Arctic operations.⁷ The Army does not have a coherent operational Arctic framework and struggles to execute training for large-scale combat operations (LSCOs) in Alaska.⁸ Challenges stem from and are compounded by the extreme environment and terrain that stress people, equipment, mobility, and logistics, in addition to the limited available means of communication caused by sparse satellite coverage at such high latitudes. The same conditions that

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..... apply in temperate regions cannot be expected in the Arctic, including ease of temperate mobility and logistics, communications, medical treatment and evacuation, or equipment operation and repairs in non-hostile environments. Combined with the fact that Special Forces do not have any specified mission-essential tasks for the Arctic, oversimplifying these challenges creates conditions where units struggle to sustain, move, or operate beyond infiltration.

..... Further compounding these challenges are critical military shortfalls due to a strained relationship with Alaska Native communities, who possess the specific knowledge and skills that U.S. forces need to learn to operate effectively in this environment. The U.S. government has historically antagonized Indigenous people, and its behavior in Alaska was no exception. During World War II, there was significant Indigenous membership in the Alaska Territorial Guard (ATG), a home defense unit that later became the Alaska Army National Guard scout battalions during the Cold War.⁹ The end of the Cold War forced a reexamination of their role and mission in rural Alaska. Tension already existed in the region due to the comparison between National Guard regulations and the special exceptions given to Alaska Natives regarding waivers for aptitude testing, fitness levels, and required attendance at training and drills. These exceptions for Alaska Natives were previously tolerated given their unique skills, remote location, hunting and fishing seasons, and remote way of life. The National Guard wanted to convert the scout units into conventional battalions, which necessitated integration into the rest of the U.S. force structure and possible deployment away from Alaska. These factors had not been a possibility previously due to Alaska Natives' specific place-based

knowledge and utility to their ancestral territories. Many Alaska Natives viewed the enforcement of National Guard requirements as “as an attack on their capabilities, an insult to their heritage and pride, and even an attack on Alaska [Natives] themselves,” and “while Alaska [Natives] still serve in the Alaska National Guard, the end of the Alaska Scout battalions effectively sundered the National Guard’s connections with Alaska [Native] villages.”¹⁰ As recently as 2009, the federal government moved to cut off retirement pay for veterans of the ATG, which only added insult to injury of the scout waivers being rescinded.¹¹ The federal and Alaska state governments, as well as the military and National Guard, would need to make amends with Alaska Native communities to again leverage their Arctic expertise while being careful not to treat Indigenous knowledge as mere means to an end. This can be done by taking significant action to invest in Alaska Native communities and preserve their cultural heritage for the benefit of both Indigenous peoples and U.S. defense.

ARCTIC TOURISM

Arctic tourism, previously defined as misaligned and episodic training with poor personnel policies that dilute institutional expertise, occurs through several types of training events, each with unique implications. At the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center (JPMRC) in Alaska, a conventional Army brigade supported by Special Forces trains



United States Armed Special Forces in Nederkalix, Sweden.

Photo credits: Patrick Tomaszewski, February 2021.

against a live opposition force in an LSCO scenario. In the European High North, Special Forces take part in theater security cooperation events that occur routinely with partners and allies aimed at building interoperability. In Alaska, Green Berets conduct special operations intended to deter strategic competitors through the demonstration of advanced infiltration and mobility capabilities.

When the 11th Airborne Division and Special Forces conduct JPRMC rotations in Alaska, they train using virtually identical scenarios as they do in the Mojave Desert and the swampy woodlands of Louisiana, where the other combat training centers are located. This one-scenario-fits-all-environments approach is understandable given the lack of Arctic-

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specific guidance, but does not make for realistic training. The likelihood of a conventional invasion occurring in Alaska is low and does not account for some of the most dangerous hybrid threats to the homeland, such as clandestine infiltration, infrastructure sabotage, economic subversion, or other

malign influences. The United States Army writ large, and Special Forces especially, need to prepare for hybrid threats in Alaska more than they do for high latitude LSCO.

Previous rotations have demonstrated that even “Arctic-ready” Special Forces units struggle in Alaska.¹² Recent observations highlighted the Special Forces’ inability to conduct even short-range ground infiltration and unrealistic drop zone preparation for military free-fall operations, which does little to instill the conventional force’s confidence in Green Berets. Credibility matters because, in a future crisis or conflict, those same conventional commanders may avoid employing Special Forces due to their previous interactions with Green Berets in training environments.

During theater security cooperation events, Special Forces teams train with highly competent European Arctic partners. When U.S. teams arrive, they often show up without the necessary foundational skills to keep up with their Arctic partners.¹³ Consequently, our allies are often burdened with providing basic Arctic training to ensure the teams’ minimum survivability. Even after receiving training in these fundamental skills, U.S. teams often struggle to keep pace. The frequent personnel turnover within active-duty Special Forces units complicates matters further, limiting or diluting acquired base knowledge. As a result, our partners are forced to repeatedly start from scratch, impeding their ability to advance their interoperability

with U.S. formations. This recurring cycle creates friction with our Arctic allies and hampers Special Forces' progression in the wide array of Arctic competencies.

Special Operations in Alaska aimed at deterring Russia and China present the starkest example of Arctic tourism by intending to demonstrate the exclusive capabilities of Special Forces to operate in the Arctic. While these exercises are useful for influencing the information environment, highly publicized photo opportunities mask how little capability actually exists within Special Forces beyond flashy free-fall parachute and dive infiltrations. Special Forces may even be unintentionally misleading U.S. leaders about the strength of its capabilities through social media posts intended to deceive our strategic competitors. This continued lack of preparedness sets the stage for potential disaster during a crisis or conflict.¹⁴

These three types of events (JPRMC rotations, theater security cooperation events, and deterrence special operations in Alaska) typify Arctic tourism, in which the participating units tend to build minimum capability solely for the event and then immediately shift to more pressing training for upcoming; non-Arctic operational deployments. Just as often, the collective institutional knowledge of the trained unit is lost when most of the members rotate out, forcing the unit to start at square one again with new members. The challenge of attaining minimum capability should not be underestimated, as it takes months of dedicated progressive training, exposure, and acclimation just to survive in the Arctic. Elevating a unit from basic cold weather competency to four-season Arctic capability requires a significant investment of time and resources that leaves little room for other priorities. The United States cannot feasibly have the same units simultaneously devoting limited time and finite resources to the Arctic as well as other regions. Addressing the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, deterring the PRC, and dealing with other challenges posed by our competitors understandably demands much of the operational force's attention, but the United States cannot afford to do this at the expense of Arctic readiness.

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A NATIONAL GUARD SOLUTION

Arctic tourism sets a dangerous precedent in an unforgiving environment, but there is a way to address the problem. The Arctic requires units with Arctic-focused mission-essential task lists, unique organization and equipment, and longer personnel assignments. The best option would be a National Guard Special Forces Company, but as a starting point, a single team could suffice. The U.S. Air Force currently employs a viable model in Alaska, where they maintain active-duty, Air National Guard, and reserve units that regularly interface with each other.¹⁵ The Air Force uses local guard and reserve pilots, who have operated in the Arctic for years, to train and mentor rotational active-duty pilots and impart Alaska-specific expertise that would otherwise take years to develop. At present, the U.S. Army cannot adopt this model because current Alaska Army National Guard units have been consolidated in and around Anchorage and Juneau. This places the U.S. Army far from the Indigenous communities with whom they would need to build relationships to counter the hybrid threats along

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..... the western and northern Alaskan coasts. The current model sharply limits domain awareness. A Special Forces Company headquartered in Anchorage, with its subordinate teams dispersed among periphery towns along the coast, could remedy this. This would go far in building a reliable domain awareness network while developing the Arctic expertise of the unit itself.

This proposed framework would require shifting away from the current training model that peaks at flashy infiltration to an Indigenous-focused approach to learn Arctic expertise from those who have honed it for generations. A National Guard Special Forces unit, with longevity and the ability to develop lasting relationships with Alaska Natives, provides a clear way ahead to start repairing relationships with local communities, addressing domain awareness gaps, and safeguarding vulnerable populations from malign influence.

An Alaska-based Special Forces unit could then be the training unit of choice to participate in Arctic exercises. This would further solidify the

unit as the nexus for Special Forces in Alaska and power projection in Arctic regions abroad. For JPMRC rotations, where integration, interoperability, and interdependence between Special Forces and the conventional Army is paramount, a truly Arctic-capable Special Forces unit could accurately convey its value to senior commanders.¹⁶ In addition, training exercises would provide another opportunity to learn from and support Indigenous communities in coastal villages and bring additional funds and projects to the villages that most sorely need them. Taken together, these steps could begin to repair the fractured relationship between the federal government and Alaska's Indigenous peoples.

The unit could serve as a cadre of Arctic experts, equipped to teach Arctic survivability, tactics, techniques, and procedures to active-duty Special Forces units. Once the unit's capability is firmly established, it could launch a special operations Arctic course to diffuse expertise across Special Forces and build Arctic capacity.

CRITIQUES OF THIS APPROACH

One could argue that this is a facile proposal with significant barriers to implementation, which do not justify the high associated costs. The first issue with establishing a National Guard Special Forces unit in Alaska is determining how exactly to do it. States can effectively "trade" National Guard units, but this is a contentious process that is filled with bureaucratic red tape and interstate resistance. States also have the option of reactivating old units, but this could strain budgets and impact current force structure equities. The previously mentioned fractured relationship with Alaska Natives is another obstacle. Additionally, outside of isolated crisis events such as the China spy balloon incident, it is difficult to convey the strategic significance of investing in homeland defense in Alaska or maintaining a demanding capability like Arctic readiness to decision makers, particularly when compared to more immediate security requirements in Europe and the Pacific.

While these arguments are valid, they do not negate the fact that there is a critical gap in Arctic Homeland Defense and Arctic capabilities for power projection abroad. Furthermore, a National Guard Special Forces unit would be a smaller, more cost-effective option than the current conventional or active-duty units stationed in Alaska. Special Forces are purpose-built for working with partner forces and could begin to repair relationships with Alaska Natives to leverage their unique Arctic expertise and knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This proposal aspires to first build true Arctic capability and, later, capacity. Multiple hurdles need to be cleared, including authorities, infighting among states, recruitment, funding, and relations with Alaskan Native populations. Establishing a long-term Special Forces Arctic capability supports domain awareness and homeland defense in Northern Command and projects power abroad. This can be done at a fraction of the cost by placing the right people with the right training to leverage the assets that already exist through an Indigenous approach. *f*

ENDNOTES

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