

US Navy plans to send surface vessels through the Arctic

The move comes in response to increased Russian activity in the region.

By **Malte Humpert, High North News** - March 12, 2019



Royal Norwegian Navy Skjold-class Corvettes HNOMS Storm and HNMOS Skudd ride alongside the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman during flight operations supporting Exercise Trident Juncture 2018 off the coast of Vestfjordern, Norway October 24, 2018. The exercise marked the first time in three decades a U.S. Navy surface ship sailed north of the Arctic Circle. But the Navy is beginning to pay more attention to the region, with plans for future sailings. (Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Thomas Gooley / U.S. Navy handout via Reuters)

The United States Navy is drawing up plans to send multiple surface vessels through the Arctic Ocean this summer, signaling a potential change in U.S. policy to more effectively counter and possibly contain Russia's influence in the region.

In a number of statements as recently as last week U.S. military leaders discussed a change of the country's policy and approach towards the Arctic region. In front of the Senate Armed Services Committee General Curtis Scaparrotti, commander of the US European Command, explained that [the effect of climate change is altering the Navy's calculations](#).



"Now the Northern Sea Route is open more often, and there is a resource and commercial interest in it. [...] This creates competition." Scaparrotti went on to explain that U.S. forces have updated their plans, including deployment of military forces and operational trends in order to provide containment. "We send a signal that the Arctic is important to us," he added.

[Russia sets out stringent new rules for foreign ships on the Northern Sea Route]

This sentiment was echoed by Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer who explained that the rapid opening of the Arctic Ocean to shipping traffic [requires the Navy's presence in the region](#). "As an example, this summer, the [chief of naval operations] and I have talked about having some ships make the transit in the Arctic." Spencer confirmed that the planned voyage would be a freedom of navigation exercise, but would not confirm if this would involve a voyage along or near Russia's Northern Sea Route.

US reacts to Russian activities

The Navy's plans may signal the beginning of a policy change and stronger efforts to assert U.S. interests in the region. "A U.S. Navy demonstration of the capability to operate in Arctic conditions is long overdue. The U.S. has been nearly alone among world powers in ignoring the Arctic. It is time to assert American rights in the far north," explains Andrew Holland, COO of the American Security Project, a non-partisan think tank based in Washington, D.C.

While the Navy has operated subsurface vessels, i.e. submarines, as well as patrol aircraft, in the Arctic since at least the 1960s, it has not regularly ventured above the Arctic Circle with surface vessels. In fact, in October 2018 the aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman and its strike group became the first surface vessels in nearly 30 years to travel into the Arctic when they participated in [operation "Trident Juncture" off the coast of Norway](#).

The United States' plans to reassert itself in the Arctic come as a direct result of Russian activity in the region explains Scaparrotti. "Russia reopened ten of their airports there. [...] They now have radar systems up. They've begun to move, on periodic times, different weapons systems up there for control of the area. So, those are all things that I have to bring into my planning. Russia is increasing its qualitative advantage in Arctic operations, and its military bases will serve to reinforce Russia's position."

Russia restricts access to Northern Sea Route

Russian officials did not respond to requests by HNN for comment, nor has Russia made any public statements responding to the U.S. Navy's plans. However, Russia has [developed strongly-worded](#)



[week](#). The new policy asserts Russia's control over the route and stipulates new rules for any foreign naval vessel entering the route. These rules come on the heels of the French Navy Loire-class offshore support and assistance vessel Rhône [traveled across Russia's NSR in September 2018](#) — the first military vessel by a NATO state to do so.

Under the new rules Russia requires notification of any voyage at least 45 days in advance and demands a host of information on the vessel and its route. In addition, it requires vessels to take on a Russian ice pilot for the duration of the trip, a stipulation foreign military vessels would likely not abide by.

Freedom of navigation in the Arctic

These new Russian requirements stand in contrast to the U.S. policy of enforcing freedom of navigation and the concept of "innocent passage" outside of territorial waters, [as it does routinely e.g. in the South China Sea](#).

Growing U.S. Navy activity in the region on one hand, and Russia's assertions of its interests holds the potential for discord between the two countries. "If the U.S. Navy sends a fleet through the Northern Sea Route, it would be tremendously provocative, even if it stayed outside of territorial waters the whole time. At the same time, the fleet would be on solid legal grounds under the U.N. Law of the Sea," explains Holland.

While the U.S. may soon begin to challenge Russia's primacy in the Arctic, the risk for military conflict in the region remains low, at least in the near-term, confirms Scaparrotti.

Questions about U.S. capacity remain

Even with a change in rhetoric on the part of U.S. military officials calling for greater Arctic engagement, the United States' capabilities in the Arctic will continue to lag behind Russia's.

The last U.S. Navy vessel designed with a system to prevent the buildup of ice on the ship's superstructure, the Ticonderoga-class cruisers, were conceived in the 1970s. Newer Navy vessels do not have ice capabilities such as ice-hardened hulls.

This stands in stark contrast to Russian capacity in the region, including the country's Northern Fleet based out of Murmansk, several dozen traditional and nuclear-powered icebreakers, and the expansion and reactivation of a number of military and air bases across its northern territories.

~~Even without ice, the rough waters of the Arctic Ocean present a challenge to smaller escort vessels~~



smaller vessels [faced more ice buildup and struggled with high waves](#). In fact, during a voyage from Iceland to Norway in October 2018, a smaller dock landing ship traveling with a larger amphibious assault ship, sustained damage in heavy seas and had to return to port.

