

## Arctic Defense: The US Needs Polar Special Operations Forces Aligned with the 5 SOF Truths

### Description

In 1935, General (Retired) William “Billy” Mitchell testified before a secret hearing of the House Military Affairs Committee. During that closed-door testimony, General Mitchell stated, “I believe that in the future, whoever holds Alaska will hold the world. I think it is the most important strategic place in the world.”

Today, Mitchell’s assessment of Alaska is increasingly correct. Melting ice is opening up access to polar regions, bringing new opportunities and challenges. Sea lanes are becoming more viable for shipping, with ice free summers projected as soon as 2030. The Bering Strait is quickly becoming a vital waterway as it connects the Atlantic and Pacific via the Arctic. The region also has significant oil, gas, and precious metal deposits, and America’s strategic competitors are actively pursuing these opportunities. The US must respond to its Arctic challenges with a polar-capable Special Operations Force (POLAR SOF) – a uniquely trained, equipped, and dedicated force committed to operations solely in the polar environment.

Russia and China are making substantial investments in the region. Russia maintains 27 operational military bases above the Arctic (the US maintains one), and its [ice-capable fleet is the largest in the world](#), with 61 icebreakers and ice-hardened ships. In 2016 and 2017, China sailed its first icebreaker through the Northwest Passage and attempted to purchase an abandoned naval base in Greenland. In 2018, China declared itself a “near-Arctic State” in its first published Arctic [policy](#) and proposed a “Polar Silk Road” to develop shipping through the region. These states also question maritime and seabed boundaries. In 2023, the UN handed Russia a legal win on most, but not all, of its claimed seabed. [Russia responded](#) that the decision would “not be the last word in the discussion about Arctic seabed rights.”

While the US military services are slowly orienting towards the Arctic, this is unlikely to be sufficient to secure America’s northern flank. In the event of a major regional war, conventional forces are likely to be diverted away from the Arctic, exposing this flank to Russia and China, making it vulnerable to conventional and gray zone warfare. The severity of the arctic environment necessitates a dedicated force and training. The “[Five SOF Truths](#)” are foundational for POLAR SOF and help illuminate the way ahead for developing this capability.

## The Five SOF Truths of Future Polar Warfare

### **SOF Truth #1: Humans Are More Important Than Hardware.**

*POLAR SOF needs humans to deal with the complexity of arctic environments. The US Army identifies five environments in its [arctic strategy](#) — arctic (all-season), subarctic, extreme cold weather (ECW), high altitude, and mountainous. It's [nearly impossible for any unit to maintain proficiency](#) in all of these environments without constant immersion and focus. POLAR SOF must be dedicated exclusively to this environment, treating it much like a military domain. The Arctic is characterized by extreme temperatures, vast areas, limited mobility, long periods of darkness and daylight, serious storms, and seasonally changing terrain.*

Still, hardware is necessary to enable the human. POLAR SOF requires capabilities and equipment that provide it with the resources needed to make it credible, flexible, and resilient. For example, new Polar strike vehicles that are airmobile, survivable, and lethal would provide POLAR SOF with the mobility and kinetic capability needed to shape operations in support of the Joint Force and frustrate our adversaries. Equipment must also be designed to operate in extreme temperatures where fuels and lubricants gel, materials weaken, and batteries do not work.

The human side of POLAR SOF should also include unconventional warfare operations. The number of indigenous people is estimated to be approximately 10 percent of the total population living in Arctic areas, with over 40 different ethnic groups living in the Arctic. Just as the US worked with the Eskimo Scouts in World War II to monitor Alaska's enormous coastline, POLAR SOF must work by, with, and through these talented people to thwart Chinese and Russian advances.

### **SOF Truth #2: Quality Is Better Than Quantity.**

In World War II, Major David Stirling formed the British Special Air Service (SAS) Long-Range Desert Group using a small team of men to make quick raids against the German Luftwaffe. Using the vast desert as cover, Stirling's group generated the loss of hundreds of German aircraft and countless supplies. Similarly, POLAR SOF must focus on overcoming many of the same challenges as Stirling — vast areas, harsh climate and terrain, and limited mobility — with the same daring, innovation, and adaptability.

POLAR SOF should capitalize on the developments of the U.S. Marine Corps' operational concepts, employment doctrine, and developments in long-range, precision strike missiles. The use of small Marine teams, operating independently in remote locations, armed with precision fire capabilities, is a key component to the Marine Corps' plans for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations

(EABO) in the islands of the Pacific. Similarly, POLAR SOF should develop doctrine and capabilities that enable it to effectively operate small teams in remote polar regions, providing low-signature operations with equally formidable control and area denial capabilities.

In a major regional conflict however, particularly in Asia, the Marine Corps is likely to be fully engaged, operating at capacity. Consequently, POLAR SOF will be essential for managing operations in the Polar domain. Drawing on the principles of the US Marines' EABO, POLAR SOF must adopt a similar approach. This involves leveraging long-range, precision strike capabilities and using fluid, remote-basing concepts to deny our adversaries unfettered maneuver in the polar domain.

During peacetime competition, POLAR SOF can perform vital missions in support of the Joint Force, stalking and interrupting current adversary operations while complicating future plans. POLAR SOF can conduct Special Reconnaissance (SR), offensive cyber operations, and presence patrols to demonstrate resolve, provide "trip wires," and disrupt adversary operations. Should the need arise, POLAR SOF can assume a kinetic role as "hunter-killers." In much the same way that indigenous tribes in the region hunt larger prey, POLAR SOF can pursue adversaries in remote and critical contested areas. POLAR SOF can provide persistent and agile access denial forces, capable of standoff Direct-Action (DA), making them the apex predators in the Polar Domain.

Forward deploying via fixed or rotary wing aircraft, operating in small teams with unique mobility equipment and armed with drones, stand-off missiles, and drone swarm munitions, POLAR SOF can become a challenger in areas thought by our adversaries to be incontestable. In other words, then, what would distinguish POLAR SOF would be their specialized training and equipment tailored for operating in the vast and harsh Polar Domain. This capability, essential for such extreme conditions, cannot merely be surged from standing SOF forces during a crisis. It requires a dedicated investment in doctrine, training, basing, and equipment, underscored by a singularity of purpose.

### **SOF Truth #3: Special Operations Forces Cannot Be Mass Produced.**

SOF is already a niche capability, and polar operations are an exceedingly small slice of what is already a very small SOF pie. The US military is potentially falling behind in the training, equipping, and forward posturing of SOF units that can successfully operate in polar conditions. While some units, such as the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, have polar-skilled units, much of the rest of the SOF formation lacks such equipment, training, and experience.

SOF units identified to serve as POLAR SOF would undergo rigorous Arctic warfare training at both US and allied training facilities. Designated POLAR SOF units within the Army, Navy, Airforce, and Marine Special Operations will provide the POLAR SOF capabilities needed by the Theater Special

Operations Commands (TSOC). These Service component POLAR SOF units would need to be robust and should include a Special Forces Group (reactivation of the 11<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, based in Alaska); a Naval Special Warfare Group (reactivation of 3<sup>rd</sup> NSWG based in Washington); an Airforce Special Operations Wing (reactivation of the 333<sup>rd</sup> SOW in Alaska) and a Marine Raider Battalion (reactivation of the 4th Raider Battalion based in Japan.)

These units would be specifically trained and equipped for operations exclusively in the polar domain. POLAR SOF would include both active and reserve components and would routinely forward deploy to bases in Alaska and to allied countries to maintain and improve their capabilities.

Additionally, US POLAR SOF cannot operate unilaterally, the sheer vastness of the Polar domain predicates collaboration with similarly capable allied SOF. US POLAR SOF should form the nucleus of a multinational task force, combining the capabilities and resources of our allies into a formidable operational Combined Joint POLAR SOF component. Special Operations Command North (SOCNORTH) and its collaboration with the Canadian Special Operations Command (CANSOFCOM) would serve as the logical nexus for such a multinational task force.

**SOF Truth #4: Competent Special Operations Forces Cannot Be Created After Emergencies Occur.**

Creating competent POLAR SOF will require extensive lead time, and trying to create them after the need arises is likely to end in failure. The new paradigm of POLAR SOF is not a major departure from traditional roles and missions associated with SOF. Rather, it is an investment in new capabilities that envision highly mobile, versatile POLAR SOF units that operate across vast expanses, akin to the Long-Range Desert Group of SAS lore. Working in concert with the Joint Force, the mere presence of POLAR SOF forces our opponents to reevaluate their actions, complicating their strategic calculus. At a minimum, POLAR SOF can provide a show of force that will challenge our adversaries' progress in areas they perceive to be ungoverned. But this capability must be created now, as a crisis with Russia or China in the Arctic is on the horizon.

**SOF Truth #5: Most Special Operations Require Non-SOF Assistance.**

POLAR SOF should use expertise inherent in non-SOF organizations to enhance its mission capabilities. It could capitalize on the unique talents of the Alaska National Guard, including recruiting native peoples. POLAR SOF must study our adversaries who have a long history of training specialized military formations from regions with unique climate challenges. Russian Arctic Motorized Infantry units, for example, recently conducted exercises using pack animals to augment mobility with the help of local native herders.

Because of the tyranny of distance, POLAR SOF will require support bases in Alaska with smaller, resilient staging bases in remote locations above the Arctic Circle. These forward bases will provide POLAR SOF with the operational support, staging facilities, and forward stockpiles of special weapons and munitions needed for rapid deployment.

Additionally, basing access in allied countries will prove critically important. By capitalizing on existing arrangements, POLAR SOF should negotiate support in NATO countries such as Great Britain, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Canada and non-NATO allies such as Japan, Chile, and Argentina.

### **Opportunity Costs of Inaction**

The idea of POLAR SOF will have skeptics. Many analysts agree that a full-blown conflict in the Polar domain is still only a remote possibility, and indeed, the qualities of the Polar domain that have kept humans away throughout history, such as the cold and extreme conditions, still exist. However, skepticism is common for new ideas, particularly when the obvious need for such ideas is still ahead. Strategically, the US must anticipate the changing future and make appropriate investments today.

We already have trend lines that tell us what's likely in the future. First, Russia and China are increasingly asserting territorial aspirations in the Polar regions and expanding gray zone tactics. Contests in this region have been driven by the reality of climate change and melting ice, which is increasing access to trade routes and resource deposits. It will become a contentious region in the future, where geopolitical rivalries will continue to play out.

Second, the US military is underinvesting in polar capabilities, though it is making some progress. Improvements to the U.S. Navy's Second Fleet, such as developing the means to operate more visibly in the Arctic; the renovation and use of facilities in Keflavik, Iceland, and long-delayed plans for the construction of new icebreakers to replace the [aging vessels still in operation](#) by the U.S. Coast Guard are positive developments. The reactivation of the Army's 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division in 2022 and its commitment to the [Army's "Regaining Arctic Dominance" strategy](#) is also a much-needed advancement, providing a vital forward-deployed force projection capability. Missing from the Army's strategy, however, is the role of Special Operations and irregular warfare capabilities, which are mentioned sparingly and mostly within the training context.

Third, the Indo-Pacific region is on a trajectory of increased geopolitical tensions, making a regional conflict more likely in the future. A multipolar world with increased Chinese aggression is rattling the region. If the US joined a regional conflict, it would likely consume all conventional force capabilities, leaving the Joint Force commander with few options to address threats from the polar domain. This could have dire consequences. Without POLAR SOF to counter both asymmetric and conventional

military threats, our critical defense infrastructure, like early warning radars and vital lines of communication, will be vulnerable to our adversaries.

## Final Thoughts

POLAR SOF is the “economy of force” needed by the Combatant Commanders to cover key terrain in a major regional conflict, one that will require maximum combat power in its primary effort. It releases other conventional forces to be committed elsewhere and ensures there is a force that can successfully operate in the Arctic – a task requiring specialized training for both the environment and the mission. These capabilities make it well suited to counter gray zone tactics and serve as a potent deterrent.

Today, funding, manpower, and other resources for SOF are under close scrutiny and run a very real risk of being funneled away into the conventional forces. SOF leadership should aggressively campaign not to reduce SOF but rather demonstrate the need to preserve and expand these types of units to operate in the Polar domain. As the Arctic becomes increasingly accessible and contested, the establishment of POLAR SOF ensures the US remains prepared to secure its interests and maintain stability, thereby actualizing Mitchell’s vision of Alaska’s central role in global strategy.

*Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Richard Liebl is a retired US Army Special Forces officer who commanded in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Forces Group before becoming a Foreign Area Officer and Military Attaché. After retiring from the Army, He joined the Defense Intelligence Agency as an Intelligence Officer and later served at the Joint Military Attaché School. He is a graduate of the Northern Warfare Training Center at Fort Greely, Alaska.*

*Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Charles Faint is a retired US Army Military Intelligence officer currently serving as the Chair for the Study of Special Operations at the Modern War Institute at West Point. He previously served in units including the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, the 160<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Aviation Regiment, and the Joint Special Operations Command. He is also the owner of The Havok Journal and the Executive Director of The Second Mission Foundation.*

*Main image: U.S. Navy SEALs conduct High Altitude Low Opening (HALO) airborne operations in support of exercise Arctic Edge 2022 in Deadhorse, Alaska, on March 10, 2022. (Photo by [Staff Sgt. Alexzandria Gomez](#), US Special Operations Command North)*

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