



## ***THE STRATEGY GAP : WHY THE US MUST DETER RUSSIA AND CHINA IN THE NORTH PACIFIC***

**BY ANDREW ERSKINE**

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The 2025 [National Security Strategy](#) and the 2026 [National Defense Strategy](#) emphasized the Trump administration’s renewed focus on defending the American homeland and diplomatic priorities toward the Western Hemisphere. Both documents also reaffirm Washington’s commitment to a “free and open Indo-Pacific.” Together, these strategies highlight the increasing interconnectivity between the Indo-Pacific and the continental United States.

However, a critical geographic space is notably absent from both—the North Pacific. Instead, what we have seen in recent months is an ill-advised move from the Trump administration to focus on the North Atlantic—specifically, to acquire [Greenland](#). While the North Atlantic has a place within American military planning and force projection, the strategic imperatives emerging from the North Pacific cannot be ignored as the region sits at the intersection of homeland defense and Indo-Pacific deterrence alike.

### **The North Pacific is central to American geostrategy**

As a whole, the North Pacific is an indispensable periphery of American power, as [2,200 miles](#) of American territory is located in Alaska. Not only does this state host the world’s [highest concentration](#) of F-35s and F-22s, and the US Army’s 11th Airborne Division, it also houses the crucial sensors and radar equipment underpinning the joint North Warning System.

Beyond these military installations, Alaska extends American geopolitical interests well into the Bering Sea—an increasingly vital northern gateway of the Indo-Pacific, and perhaps one of the

most underappreciated aspects of the North Pacific. With the Arctic having potential as a key [geostrategic](#) region in the global economy of the mid-to-late-21st century, the North Pacific will be a central entry or exit point for countries and non-state actors seeking alternative trade and energy routes to mitigate geopolitical shocks and avoid critical [chokepoints](#) in the Indo-Pacific.

Moreover, with the potential for greater offshore energy exploration, [critical minerals and rare earth extraction](#), and more accessible fisheries—all of which can also be found in the [Alaska Outer Continental Shelf](#)—the North Pacific will see more economic engagement in the decades to come.

### **Chinese and Russian efforts to shape the North Pacific**

Russia’s [Arctic Policy 2035](#) makes clear that the economic viability of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which includes infrastructure investments to explore and exploit energy resources and critical minerals, is crucial for Russian prosperity and stability. Russia will seek to export its energy and critical minerals to new partners in the Indo-Pacific, as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and Europe’s push to diversify away from Russian supply are unlikely to result in these resources flowing westward. While Russia will probably continue its energy dealings with [China](#), attention will also expand toward Southeast and South Asia, making the North Pacific a vital logistical and economic gateway for Russia to transport its resources to Asian markets.

China expresses parallel ambitions through its Polar Silk Road initiative. With the Trump administration’s efforts to deny China use of the Panama Canal, it is in Beijing’s interests to support the [development](#) of the NSR, and subsequently the accessibility of the North Pacific, to counter future American attempts to curtail viable routes that have critical national security implications for Chinese trade and energy objectives.

Beyond the economic potential offered by the North Pacific, there are also narrative implications for China and Russia to exploit. Given that the US is not a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the administration’s [skepticism](#) towards transnational organizations,

Beijing and Moscow are well-positioned to shape the rules, values, and norms that govern the surface and subsurface areas of the North Pacific.

This is particularly concerning given that, while Moscow and Beijing actively participate in UNCLOS, both are deliberate in manipulating the legal framework by using [dual-use operations](#) to evade US and Western [sanctions](#), [harass](#) local and indigenous populations, and [sabotage](#) undersea infrastructure. This pattern of behavior is not incidental—it reflects a calculated strategy to expand the boundaries of the permissible in contested maritime spaces.

Should this collaboration deepen, the North Pacific could become a testing ground for [normalizing](#) illiberal governance practices across seabed mapping, resource exploration, maritime safety, and fishing management. Left unchecked, these developments would gradually erode the rules-based order underpinning a free and open Indo-Pacific, while testing Washington’s capacity to monitor and respond to unconventional threats in its own backyard.

### **The North Pacific’s military dimension**

The North Pacific is also an increasingly active military theater that can seriously complicate Washington’s strategy of deterrence. Aside from the region being home to Russia’s [Pacific Fleet](#) of nuclear-powered submarines, the North Pacific could become an exploitable vacuum—where a lack of strategic attention allows China and Russia to erode American credibility and project an image of US weakness.

The optics of US weakness are most consequential for Washington’s grand strategy to deny China from operating outside the First Island Chain. In recent years, China has expanded its military drills in the North Pacific by working closely with the Russian [Navy](#), [Air Force](#), and [Coast Guard](#). Aside from building up Chinese security and military capacity for Arctic operations, these activities are designed to degrade confidence in Washington’s capacity or will to deny Chinese freedom of maneuver outside the First Island Chain. Such perceptions risk undermining US deterrence credibility beyond the North Pacific itself.

Insufficient attention to the North Pacific also challenges prevailing assumptions within the US defense establishment that American forces can seamlessly balance homeland defense with forward deterrence unilaterally. With greater Sino-Russian military coordination in the region, and the administration’s quarrelsome relationship with allies, Washington risks further isolation in the North Pacific at a time when more partnership is needed.

Unlike in the North Atlantic, where NATO provides tested mechanisms for collective monitoring and response capacity, the US lacks a robust alliance framework with like-minded partners that can strengthen security and defense cooperation across the North Pacific.

While Canada, Japan, and South Korea [expressed](#) interest in pursuing more interoperability and joint defense operations in the North Pacific, there are no formalized structures to guide military-to-military and political-to-political discourse. This gap creates opportunities for China and Russia, who build more military

presence in the North Pacific, to undermine American military capability and credibility, as well as any assurance to its partners who rely upon the US defense capacity for command and control, targeting networks and extended deterrence.

### **Recommendations**

For the NSS and NDS to remain credible, the strategic gap presented by the US limited defense posture in the North Pacific must be addressed on two fronts.

First, the US should develop a North Pacific Deterrence Initiative (NPDI) that integrates force projection, alliance networking, and resilience against gray zone operations. The core objective of the NPDI would be to counter Chinese and Russian sub-threshold coercion—particularly in the maritime domain—by enhancing greater presence, collective defense credibility, and sustained regional engagement across the North Pacific.

Moreover, an NPDI would advance deterrence through three interconnected pillars focused on infrastructure resilience, maritime domain awareness, and rapid response cooperation. Investments in dual-use infrastructure would limit coercive leverage, while integrating surface and undersea awareness to strengthen capacity-building measures that can impose higher costs on Chinese and Russian grey-zone operations. Increased rapid response options, meanwhile, would improve escalation control, constraining an adversary’s ability to exploit uncertainty or political seams across the US defense capabilities in the North Pacific.

Second, the Trump administration should establish a North Pacific Security Forum with Canada, Japan, and South Korea to increase collaboration on intelligence-sharing and response-building measures to counter Sino-Russian illicit activities, joint operations, and grey-zone operations in the North Pacific.

To be effective, the forum would need to put forward concrete burden-sharing mechanisms that identify and resolve capability gaps in each member’s security and defense capacity for monitoring and responding to threats across the spectrum of high and low-intensity combat scenarios in the North Pacific.

In addition, the forum should build upon and expand initiatives—like Operation North Pacific Guard—with more explicit military mandates and interoperable command structures to give each member the capacity to respond decisively, rather than reactively, to threats across the region.

### **Conclusion**

While it may be politically convenient for the US to prioritize Latin America, the Caribbean, and the North Atlantic, doing so at the expense of the North Pacific reflects a strategic blind spot that adversaries are already moving to exploit.

China and Russia have made clear through their economic ambitions, legal maneuvering, and military coordination that the North Pacific is key to their long-term positioning against American power. Washington must respond in kind—elevating the

region from an overlooked periphery to a cornerstone of US homeland and Indo-Pacific defense planning.

*The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to [rob@pacforum.org](mailto:rob@pacforum.org) for more information on how to contribute.*