

# Why the United States Needs an Atlantic Strategy

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

America needs a coherent Atlantic Strategy to ensure a stable, prosperous, and secure Atlantic region that is, at the very least, sympathetic to America's vision.

China's malicious influence threatens America's ability to defend its interests, human rights, freely elected governments, and free enterprise in the Atlantic area.

U.S. strategy should make the region resilient against nefarious actors by expanding regional cooperation and helping to make partners sovereign and prosperous.

It is in America's interest to develop a coherent and coordinated strategy for the Atlantic region. While the geopolitical conditions of the Atlantic region may differ from those of the Indo-Pacific, a strategy is needed to mitigate the pernicious activities of the Chinese Communist Party. The aim of a U.S. Atlantic strategy is to make the Atlantic region resilient against malicious Chinese and Russian influence by expanding regional cooperation, and helping to make U.S. partners secure, sovereign, and prosperous. America is a global power with global interests and responsibilities. It cannot turn a blind eye to competition in its own hemisphere.

Safeguarding America's role in the world requires unfettered access to key regions and the global commons they encompass. The U.S. has long been a power in the Asia-Pacific, and it responded to China's attempts at dominating the region and marginalizing

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the American presence by advocating a free and open Indo-Pacific and adopting a strategy to ensure that outcome. In addition to China, the U.S. must address the threat from Russia—especially in the North Atlantic region and the Arctic.

The ultimate goal of an Atlantic Strategy is to create the conditions for a stable, prosperous, and secure Atlantic area that is aligned, or at least sympathetic to, America's vision for the region. The short-term goal of this strategy is to preserve the comfortable geopolitical status quo the U.S. enjoys. The long-term goal is to roll back the nefarious activities of China, Russia, and other adversarial non-state actors seeking more influence in the broader Atlantic region.

In order to ensure that the U.S. continues to enjoy a secure, stable, and prosperous Atlantic, it must take on a leadership role in the region, rally like-minded partners and allies around this cause, continue to raise awareness of China and Russia's malign activities in the region, break down the bureaucratic barriers inside the U.S. government that prevent a coordinated approach to the Atlantic region, and offer a better and brighter alternative to China for economic engagement across the Atlantic region.

## The Atlantic Region

The Atlantic region is the geostrategic and economic area that encompasses the Atlantic Ocean from Greenland and Iceland in the north to Antarctica in the south. The ocean itself is the second largest on Earth after the Pacific and covers approximately 46 million square miles.<sup>1</sup> In total there are 80 littoral nation states and dependent or autonomous territories in the region—all pursuing a diverse set of interests and all confronting diverse geopolitical challenges. The Atlantic region includes the world's most prosperous industrial democracies, emerging nations marked by political and economic freedom, as well as nations of the Global South that need to be persuaded to securely join the Western camp.

Overlapping this huge geographical region are a number of intergovernmental organizations and bilateral and multilateral trade agreements in which the U.S. participates. Examples of intergovernmental organizations are diverse and include the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which is focused on collective defense in the North Atlantic region, and the Organization of American States, which is focused on promoting democratic governance, human rights, and regional stability in Latin America.

The U.S. has nine bilateral free trade agreements with Atlantic Ocean littoral countries (Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic,

TEXT BOX 1

## The China Challenge

For much of the 20th century, the United States opposed the rise of a variety of hegemonic challengers: Kaiser Wilhelm II in Germany, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union. In each of these cases, these adversaries posed explicit, distinct ideological challenges to the United States. Their competition with the United States was as much about underlying philosophies as it was about power. For the same reason, the great power transition between Great Britain and the United States did not fall into what some have termed the “Thucydides trap,” because American and British ideologies were, at base, largely compatible.

In the 21st century, nearly three decades after the end of the Cold War, the United States finds itself confronted once again by a budding hegemonic power: the People’s Republic of China (PRC). But where the Kaiser and the Kremlin heavily relied on military forces to push an ideological agenda that was at odds with American beliefs, the PRC is taking a very different tack.

For Beijing, the key tools are economic, both aid and investment, and technological, ranging from space capabilities to 5G networks to quantum computing. This is not to say that China poses no military threat: The People’s Liberation Army today fields the world’s largest navy and air force. But the spearheads of Chinese influence are not warships, bayonet tips, and infantry divisions, but Chinese Communist Party-linked investments and promises of infrastructure development.

Equally important, alongside economic tools, Beijing is now employing political warfare techniques such as public opinion warfare and legal warfare. It is trying to make itself appear innocuous yet omnipresent, achieving global influence without becoming overtly threatening. Chinese brands, such as Huawei and DJI (Da-Jiang Innovations), are as much a part of this effort as are Chinese diplomats or arms sales.

Guatemala, Honduras, Morocco, Nicaragua, and Panama). In addition, the U.S. is a member of the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement.<sup>2</sup> While countries bordering the Atlantic have different interests and challenges, together the integrity of the region is a common cause and is defined by the free, open, and peaceful access by all peaceful nations.

Since 1850, when California became a state, America has been at least a two-ocean country.<sup>3</sup> With the rise of China in recent years, U.S. policy-makers have placed a strong focus on, and devoted many resources to, the Indo-Pacific—rightfully so. Compared to the challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, the U.S. enjoys relative stability and calm in the Atlantic region. However, the U.S. must not let complacency become an ill-suited substitute for a strategy.

## Aims of an Atlantic Strategy

Depending on the particular area of the Atlantic region, different interests are at stake for the U.S. In the High North, the main challenges for the

U.S. are deterring Russian aggression, reducing Chinese influence, and protecting the homeland. In the Southern Hemisphere, the U.S. is concerned with increasing Chinese influence, the weakening of the civilian institutions, as well as the rise of non-state actors involved in organized crime, human trafficking, and drug trafficking.

While China does not presently have the capacity to project sustained military power in the Atlantic community or to disrupt traditional American alliances, the U.S. cannot assume that these conditions will always prevail. The U.S. cannot forge the Atlantic region into a hardened sphere of influence, such as occurred during the Cold War, or the great power competitions of the 19th century. Instead, the U.S. has to prevail in open spheres of competition by materially contributing to make the Atlantic region resilient against pernicious Chinese influence, or nations of the region feeling compelled to abandon the Western model of economic and political development. This requires sophisticated and coordinated statecraft by U.S. policymakers; diplomacy, the art of persuasion, and political artistry are the essential components of statecraft when hardened spheres of influence cease to exist.

U.S. policymaking in the Atlantic region often falls victim to administrative and bureaucratic divisions within the U.S. government. For example, the Atlantic Ocean is divided amongst at least four different bureaus in the State Department: (1) The Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, (2) the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, (3) the Bureau of African Affairs, and (4) the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs. There are similar administrative discontinuities in the National Security Council staff. As for the Department of Defense, four different combatant commands cover the Atlantic region: (1) the Northern Command, (2) the Southern Command, (3) the European Command, and (4) the Africa Command. This situation tends to lead to a lack of any meaningful cross-government policy for the Atlantic region.

An Atlantic strategy is not primarily a military strategy, but there is a military component accompanied by enhanced intelligence cooperation. In addition to providing strategic and conventional deterrence against China and other adversarial powers, the U.S. and partner nations have to maintain the capacity to ensure that the commons of the region (sea, air, space, undersea, and cyberspace) remain free, open, and able to sustain critical strategic basing to support those operations.

Economic engagement must be a critical component of any Atlantic strategy. The free world can best prevail by winning the race for post-COVID-19 economic cooperation. Much of that cooperation will come not through traditional government foreign assistance, but from private-sector investment that promotes growth and respects the need for good governance. Building

the rule of law in the economic and trade arena is a critical component of building enhanced economic engagement.

There are many other areas, from public health to environmental protection (such as safeguarding fisheries) to independent media, in which the U.S. can contribute to promoting the resilience and capacity of partner nations such as through good governance initiatives.

The ultimate goal of an Atlantic Strategy is to create the conditions for a stable, prosperous, and secure Atlantic area that is aligned with, or at least sympathetic to, America's vision for the region. The short-term goal of this strategy is to preserve the comfortable geopolitical status quo that the U.S. enjoys. The long-term goal is to roll back the nefarious activities of China, Russia, and other adversarial non-state actors seeking more influence in the broader Atlantic region.

Broadly speaking, in order for the U.S. to meet these two goals, its policies must be based on five strategic themes in the Atlantic region. These strategic themes can be referred to as the five S's:

- **Stability.** The U.S. should promote policies in the Atlantic region that support regional stability. A secure Atlantic region offers many economic, trade, and energy opportunities. A stable Atlantic will also encourage much-needed foreign investment in the region.
- **Security.** There are a myriad of security challenges across the vast Atlantic region. These include everything from Russian encroachment in the Arctic to malign Chinese influence in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. Non-state actors, such as terrorist groups, narco-traffickers, and organized crime, plague certain areas of the Atlantic region. The second-order and third-order efforts of these security challenges can have a negative impact on the U.S. and its partners. Expanded intelligence cooperation is a critical element of enhancing security among the nations of the Atlantic region.
- **Serenity.** Even with all the security challenges, the Atlantic region enjoys relative peace compared to many other places around the world. It is in the interests of the U.S. to ensure that this remains the case.
- **Sovereignty.** It is in America's interests that Atlantic countries remain independent and self-governing with little or no malign influence from outside powers. This is particularly true of China's malign influence and hybrid tactics in the region. Strong and stable

governments resilient to outside influence are in America's interest in the region.

- **Success.** The region's economic success is America's success. This is why the U.S. must pursue policies that promote economic freedom and free trade in the Atlantic region.

## The Tropic of Cancer Dividing Line

To develop an American strategy in the Atlantic region, the area must be divided into two sections: the area north of the Tropic of Cancer and the area south of the Tropic of Cancer. This is not an arbitrary dividing line, but one that best reflects the different U.S. interests and challenges in the broader Atlantic region.

**North of the Tropic of Cancer.** In this region, U.S. strategic interests derive in large part from membership in NATO and the security obligations that entails. NATO is and will remain the bulwark of transatlantic security and, by extension, U.S. security. The U.S. is obligated by the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty to defend other NATO members.<sup>4</sup>

Article 6 of the treaty states that NATO's area of responsibility is in "the North Atlantic area north of the tropic of cancer." Due to the uniqueness of American security guarantees as a member of NATO, and due to the nature of the challenges in the region, the area north of the Tropic of Cancer must be treated differently from the South Atlantic region in any U.S. strategy.

Currently, the main security policy driver for the U.S. in the North Atlantic is a resurgent Russia. Also, the North Atlantic region is home to a number of important military facilities that help to ensure the security of Europe and North America. Of note are:

- **Gibraltar.** Gibraltar is strategically located at the western entrance to the Mediterranean, where the strait between Europe and Africa spans a mere 7.7 nautical miles at its narrowest point. It is a supply location for U.S. aircraft and ships and a secure docking area for nuclear-powered submarines.<sup>5</sup>
- **Keflavik Air Station, Iceland.** The U.S. uses Keflavik Air Station, on the very frontier of the North American landmass, to operate maritime patrols that monitor the vitally important naval passages through Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom (the "GIUK gap").<sup>6</sup>

MAP 1

## Dividing Up the Atlantic

Any strategy must divide the Atlantic region north of the Tropic of Cancer and south of the Tropic of Cancer. This is not an arbitrary dividing line, but one that best reflects the different U.S. interests and challenges in the Atlantic.





- **Lajes Field, the Portuguese Azores.** Lajes Field is an invaluable location on the island of Terceira in the Portuguese Azores in the mid-Atlantic. It is a valuable communications hub and fuel depot, adds resilience for U.S. military planners, allows U.S. monitoring of mid-Atlantic sea lanes, and serves as a barrier to significant Chinese investment in the region.<sup>7</sup>
- **Naval Station Rota, Spain.** Naval Station Rota is a U.S. base in Spain that has the largest weapons and fuel facilities in Europe and is home to forward deployments of ballistic-missile-defense-capable U.S. Aegis-equipped ships.
- **Thule Air Base, Greenland.** Greenland, an autonomous constituent country of the Kingdom of Denmark, hosts an important early warning radar and satellite tracking station for the protection of the U.S. homeland.<sup>8</sup>

The North Atlantic region is also home to the Arctic, where America's interests will only increase in the years to come. The ecologically fragile and unique High North is home to a wide array of natural resources, yet is becoming contested like never before. Expected growth in economic activity, combined with Russian militarization and Chinese efforts to carve out diplomatic, economic, and political beachheads in the region, requires comprehensive, sustained U.S. attention on meeting these challenges.

U.S. interest in the North Atlantic goes beyond security. The region is home to some of America's oldest (France) and closest (the United Kingdom) allies. The U.S. retains vibrant cultural, economic, historical, and political ties to the broader North Atlantic region. The economies of the member states of the European Union, along with the United States, account for almost half of the global economy, with U.S.–EU trade in goods and services equaling \$1.1 trillion in 2019.<sup>9</sup> That same year, Europe accounted for nearly two-thirds of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> Each side is responsible for the creation of millions of jobs.

One area in the North Atlantic region that differs significantly from the challenges in the Arctic or along Europe's Atlantic coast is northwest Africa. While slightly further south of NATO's traditional area of focus, the region is still north of the Tropic of Cancer and cannot be ignored. The Kingdom of Morocco and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania are both located in the region and have cooperated with the United States on a number of security and economic issues, particularly in the realm of counterterrorism.



As members of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership and the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, both Mauritania and Morocco work closely with the United States to combat Islamist terrorism and radicalization in the region from al-Qaeda and Islamic state networks operating in northern Africa and the Sahel region.

However, the two countries remain vulnerable to Islamist terrorism and other forms of violent unrest in the region. Therefore, the U.S. Department of Defense has strengthened its partnerships with Mauritania and Morocco by inviting them to conduct separate multinational military exercises in 2020. Mauritania hosted the Defense Department's flagship annual multinational military exercise known as "Exercise Flintlock 2020" in northwestern Africa, while Morocco hosted a joint Moroccan-American military exercise known as "African Lion."<sup>11</sup>

U.S. economic priorities and efforts vary in Morocco and Mauritania. The United States works closely with Morocco on economic stability and sustainable development. Morocco's 2006 free trade agreement with the United States has increased FDI opportunities, and now around 150 U.S. companies operate in Morocco in the renewable-energy, infrastructure, aviation, and environmental-technology sectors.

Mauritania has a limited (but growing) trade and investment relationship with the U.S. to develop its natural gas, but unaddressed effects of hereditary slavery have ended Mauritania's eligibility for trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act. Humanitarian aid remains steady to ensure internal stability.

**Chinese Activity in the North Atlantic.** The military threat to the North and Mid-Atlantic region remains Russia; overt Chinese military activities are rare, as China continues to focus militarily on its immediate vicinity.<sup>12</sup> One exception however was the Chinese and Russian joint military drills in the Baltic Sea in July 2017.<sup>13</sup> It was not China's first time sailing in the Baltic: "In May of 2015 Chinese warships conducted exercises with the Russian Black Sea fleet in both the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and later the same year a small flotilla of Chinese ships passed through the Kiel Canal for the first time on their way to port visits in Poland, Finland and Denmark."<sup>14</sup>

China instead wields trade and investment to garner diplomatic and political leverage in the region. For instance, China took advantage of a wave of privatization in Portugal following the debt crisis to secure positions at bargain prices.<sup>15</sup> In addition to securing investments in key sectors on mainland Portugal, China has shown consistent diplomatic attention to the Azores and sought ways to gain footholds through real estate acquisitions or

under the guise of scientific cooperation. Chinese investments in Spain have similarly targeted key sectors including energy, food services, industrial manufacturing, ports, and transportation.

China sees the Arctic region as another place in which to advance its economic interests and expand its diplomatic influence. As a non-Arctic country, China is mindful that its Arctic ambitions regarding international Arctic institutions are naturally limited—which has not stopped Beijing from increasing its economic presence in the region. It has also not stopped China from pushing dubious claims to phantom rights in the region, nor from declaring itself a “near Arctic state”—a made-up term that previously did not exist in Arctic discourse.

Some concerns about Chinese activity in the region are overblown, such as discourse around Chinese investments in Greenland. Similarly, while China’s embassy in Iceland is built to house 500 people, today only five diplomats are officially accredited to the country.<sup>16</sup>

China has looked to strengthen relations with both Morocco and Mauritania in recent years through various investments. In Morocco, China signed a series of partnership agreements in November 2020 relating to the planned economic hub Mohammed VI Tangier Tech City, investing \$1 billion to finance the project for nearly 200 Chinese companies.<sup>17</sup> China has also selected Morocco as a production site for its COVID-19 vaccines that it will distribute in Africa.<sup>18</sup> In Mauritania, China has focused its investments on the Nouakchott and Nouadhibou port projects for fishing and FDI.<sup>19</sup>

**South of the Tropic of Cancer.** The U.S. has a deep and abiding geopolitical interest in both Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>20</sup> that stems from economic ties, shared security challenges, and historic diplomatic relations. Latin America’s geographic proximity to the U.S., massive volume of trade with the U.S., prosperous energy markets, demographic ties, and destabilizing transnational criminal organizations make the region important to the United States.

U.S. engagement with Africa’s Atlantic littoral countries reflects America’s broader goals for the continent. Washington seeks to foster strong economies that can be good trade partners, consolidated democracies that are natural American allies, and stable countries that contain security problems and avoid humanitarian catastrophes. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation has a range of active investments in the coastal states, and the Millennium Challenge Corporation has awarded compacts or programs to 11 of them. Eight of the countries also have programs funded by the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.<sup>21</sup> The U.S. military collaborates with many of the Atlantic littoral states as well,

including for joint exercises, such as Operation Flintlock, U.S. Africa Command's largest annual special operations exercise.

Of the 20 free trade agreements the U.S. has, 11 are with Latin American countries, and the U.S. is the top trading partner for the majority of the region.<sup>22</sup> The Western Hemisphere is also the top source for the majority of oil and natural gas imports.<sup>23</sup> Mexico is the U.S.'s second-largest export market,<sup>24</sup> and an average of \$1.7 billion in legal goods and services crosses the southern border daily.<sup>25</sup> Transnational criminal organizations with networks in the U.S. and drug-fueled violence threaten the stability of much of the region. U.S. interests in advancing shared economic, governance, and security practices are undermined by these criminal elements. Ideological adversaries in Cuba, Nicaragua, and the failed state of Venezuela have provided foreign adversaries a permissive environment.

**Chinese Activity in the South Atlantic.** Africa is critical to ensuring that the Atlantic Ocean does not fall under undue Chinese sway. Twenty-three of its 54 countries stretch for thousands of miles along the ocean. They include the continent's two largest economies, its first-, fourth-, and fifth-most populous countries, and multiple countries boasting the world's largest reserves of important minerals, such as bauxite, cobalt, and phosphate, and platinum-group metals.<sup>26</sup> At its nearest point, the African coast is just over 3,000 miles from the U.S. mainland, making the U.S. East Coast closer to Africa than to Hawaii.

Yet there may be no other region on Earth more influenced by Beijing than Africa. China is the continent's largest trading partner and source of bilateral loans. Its telecoms giant, Huawei, whose equipment is often riddled with exploitable security vulnerabilities,<sup>27</sup> as of 2016 had built over 70 percent of the continent's commercial 4G networks,<sup>28</sup> giving it pole position in the race to provide fifth-generation (5G) technology to an under-connected continent experiencing a population explosion.

Chinese companies dominate the construction sector and have built, often for free or at a subsidized cost, at least 186 African government buildings, increasing many African states' vulnerability to Beijing's espionage and influence operations.<sup>29</sup> Chinese investors control the global supply chain for cobalt—70 percent of which is produced in the Democratic Republic of the Congo<sup>30</sup>—critical to many cutting-edge technologies.

While Africa is only a small part of China's trade and overseas investment activity, its countries are key sources of support for Beijing's foreign policy goals. They often vote with China at international forums, support Chinese candidates for leadership of important agencies within global organizations, and back Beijing on issues such as South China Sea dispute arbitration.<sup>31</sup>

There are elements of Beijing's engagements with Atlantic littoral states that require particular American attention. Chinese companies have already, or are in the process of, financing, constructing, or managing 28 African ports on the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>32</sup> While Beijing could try to build an Atlantic Ocean military base at a place like Walvis Bay, Namibia, its concept of civil-military fusion means that Chinese-involved ports may already be serviceable for Chinese military activity.<sup>33</sup> The hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels that ply, often illegally, West African waters could also serve as a significant unconventional force for Beijing to harass U.S. or allied shipping or naval vessels, as Chinese fishing boats have done in the South China Sea.<sup>34</sup>

China is undoubtedly the U.S.'s principal competitor in the Latin American and Caribbean region, and China has capitalized on the region's proximity to the U.S. to gain leverage. China's regional engagement is led by its statist economic policy and supplemented by its political agenda and military objectives. China needs access to Latin America's primary products, such as oil and agricultural products, and new markets for its manufactured goods. Isolating Taiwan is a key objective, as is expanding Beijing's influence in multilateral forums, and, more broadly, offsetting America's traditional leadership role in the region.

Commercial engagement has significantly ramped up over the past two decades with two-way trade flows increasing from \$17 billion in 2002 to \$315 billion in 2018.<sup>35</sup> While the U.S. remains the largest trading partner to most of the region, and the dominant source of FDI, China is the largest provider of credit financing. Leveraging its massive financial resources, China has enticed a region plagued by stagnant growth rates with sovereignty-eroding investments. From 2002 to 2018, 62 percent of its commercial engagement was through mergers and acquisitions, obtaining companies in the critical energy, telecommunications, and infrastructure sectors.<sup>36</sup> On Africa's Atlantic coast, China runs 27 ports, including the main ports on the Atlantic and Pacific sides of the Panama Canal.<sup>37</sup> In the past three years, the Chinese have aggressively poached three of Taiwan's diplomatic allies, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador, through opaque and corrupt deals. State telecommunications firm Huawei dominates the region's mobile market share and is poised to lead its 5G development. Similar to Africa, Chinese tech firms have exported their surveillance state, with the majority of the region utilizing Chinese technology for public security measures.<sup>38</sup>

While the U.S. remains the dominant military power in the region and China has no basing presence, its growing security engagement and the totality of its activities across all domains could compromise the U.S.'s Atlantic security interests in the future. The People's Liberation Army

sells arms and provides law enforcement assistance, technology transfers, professional military education, and humanitarian peacekeeping missions.<sup>39</sup>

Another region with which the U.S. must remain engaged is Antarctica. China operates four Antarctic research stations and has determined the location to build a fifth station expected to be finished by 2022. This gives China one of the largest Antarctic presences.

China has different motivations for its Antarctic activity than the U.S. A common assumption is that China is interested in the potential mineral and energy resources buried beneath the Antarctic ice cap. Large hydrocarbon reserves—by some estimates the world’s third largest—may lie beneath the southern polar region.<sup>40</sup> While the Antarctic Treaty prohibits all drilling and exploitation, that treaty will be up for renewal in 2048, and states with a larger presence are likely to be more influential. China signed the treaty in 1983, nearly 25 years after the treaty entered into force, and is clearly concerned that its voice and views be heard in any treaty review.

Another important factor in China’s growing commitment to Antarctic research is the political perception of contributing to global scientific knowledge. Chinese officials have often argued that scientific research is integral to advancing a nation’s “comprehensive national power.” Therefore, China must undertake basic scientific research, whether in interplanetary exploration, oceanography, or Antarctic research, to elevate its scientific and technological levels, which in turn will support its status as a major power. Conversely, to expand its comprehensive national power, China must also be *seen* as fielding a world-class scientific and technological establishment. Given the limited number of players, the Antarctic arguably imposes lower costs for entry than some other areas.

While Antarctica has been, and remains, demilitarized, China’s growing presence may also contribute to Chinese national security. The Chinese Kunlun station, located at Dome-A, is part of a multinational effort engaged in deep-space observations.<sup>41</sup> The telescopes there may contribute to broader Chinese space situational awareness, especially since polar orbiting satellites play key roles in Earth observation functions. Some have suggested that the Chinese facilities may allow eavesdropping on satellite communications.<sup>42</sup>

## The Way Forward

America’s challenges and opportunities in the Atlantic region will be changing in the coming years. There is no question that, left unaddressed, China’s actions present a long-term threat to the security, economies,

and environment of the United States and other nations of the Atlantic community.

China's activities in the Atlantic are not a conventional threat to the U.S., but their increasing engagement and footprint alter the strategic environment in a region close to the homeland. China's growing market share means that Beijing is setting economic and political agendas that suit its interests, inevitably undermining regional perceptions of the United States. If not addressed, China's expanding surveillance technology and military cooperation will undermine U.S. security and intelligence capabilities. Setting standards determines who has the competitive advantage.

A free Atlantic community in which an adversarial foreign power establishes a persistent threat and sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere is close to being an existential challenge to the traditional freedoms that America and its regional partners have long taken as a birthright. While things might seem calm currently, now is the time to get ahead of the situation and develop a strategy. In order to ensure that the U.S. enjoys a stable, secure, and prosperous Atlantic region, it should implement the following recommendations.

To safeguard the Atlantic region as a whole, the U.S. should:

- **Appoint a Special Envoy for the Atlantic region.** U.S. policymaking in the Atlantic region is often a victim of administrative and bureaucratic divisions in the U.S. government. For example, responsibility for the Atlantic region is divided amongst four different bureaus in the State Department, four different Combatant Commands in the Department of Defense, and four different directorates in the National Security Council. Not only would the appointment of a Special Envoy send a strong political message of commitment to the region, it would also help to lead to a coherent cross-government policy for the Atlantic.
- **Establish an informal grouping of like-minded nations in the Atlantic region.** This grouping could be modeled loosely on the Quad—consisting of Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.—in the Indo-Pacific. While the circumstances that led to the creation of the Quad are different from those in the Atlantic, the logic of having such a grouping is similar. The details and membership of such a grouping must be left to policymakers, but one proposal is to create an “Atlantic Quint” consisting of the U.S., Brazil, Colombia, Morocco, and Nigeria, or even an “Atlantic Sext,” adding South Africa to the grouping.



- **Pressure partners to secure their 5G technology.** Chinese companies are playing an outsized role in 5G technology rollouts in key Atlantic countries. China is an adversarial power that should not be allowed to use its government-controlled companies to gain a larger foothold in the burgeoning 5G wireless networks of the U.S. or partner countries. Such a presence would be a clear national security threat that could decisively compromise telecommunications and data infrastructure—including the communications integrity of the military and intelligence community. The U.S. should assist partners in building viable alternatives to Chinese offerings, including establishing a consortium of governments and industries. This consortium can, among other things, develop strategies for mutually supporting core 5G technologies within the transatlantic alliance, securing existing and future telecommunications networks against hostile foreign governments, and diversifying supply-chain dependence on China. Atlantic partners should support one another in blocking any companies that have a history of producing hardware or software with known vulnerabilities or supporting hostile governments.
- **Establish a focused defense and intelligence cooperation agreement with appropriate countries in the Atlantic region.** This could help to facilitate the free flow of intelligence as it pertains to the Atlantic region. If done responsibly and correctly, such an intelligence-sharing initiative could support policy objectives pertaining to an Atlantic strategy.
- **Host an Atlantic Summit in 2022.** Such a summit could serve as a useful forum to raise global awareness on ecological, economic, and security issues facing the Atlantic region. To begin with, this summit could be held at the foreign ministers level, and in the future possibly at the head of state or government level.
- **Conduct a combatant command coordination meeting of the Atlantic region.** The four combatant commands covering the Atlantic region must coordinate closely to see the region as a single operating environment. Holding an annual meeting with the four commands will help to build understanding of what drives policy in each command.
- **Coordinate closely with NATO members that have territory in the Atlantic region when developing an Atlantic Strategy.**



Denmark, France, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and United Kingdom have Atlantic coastlines either as part of their contiguous state, or through sovereignty over or possession of dependencies and overseas territories in the Atlantic region. The U.S. should leverage its relationships with these countries to advance an Atlantic agenda within NATO.

- **Recognize the global scale of the geopolitical challenge of China.** Because of the variety of Chinese tools, it is necessary to recognize that the U.S.–China rivalry is not simply in the Indo-Pacific, but also in Africa, Europe, and Latin America. The U.S. therefore needs to have China expertise, or at least awareness, embedded in embassies around the world, and in various international organizations and bodies that focus on transnational problems (such as crime, climate change, and human trafficking).
- **Cooperate with friends and allies in monitoring Chinese activities in the Atlantic.** There need to be multilateral efforts at monitoring Chinese investments in the Atlantic region, including participation in key infrastructure projects, such as 5G networks. U.S. partners can bring expertise, such as that of friendly countries in Francophone Africa, to the table.
- **Look beyond military aspects and responses in the Atlantic.** China’s penetration of many regions is not focused on military capabilities and therefore cannot be countered simply by the appearance of a carrier battlegroup. China has employed its space program to build ties to Brazil and Argentina, and the Belt and Road Initiative to make inroads in Latin America and Africa. At the same time, Chinese hackles have been raised by South Korean boy bands<sup>43</sup> and Norwegian and Swedish Nobel Prize decisions.<sup>44</sup> The United States needs to adopt a comparably multidimensional view of the competition.
- **Expand the number of high-level diplomatic visits and cultural engagement opportunities.** While China maintains a high tempo of senior diplomatic exchanges on both sides of the Atlantic, high-level U.S. visits to both regions are relatively rare.
- **Help Taiwan to maintain its diplomatic partners in the region.** Nine of the 15 countries in the world that formally recognize Taiwan’s

sovereignty are located in Latin America and the Caribbean. They serve as natural checks on Chinese diplomatic influence, as Beijing will not establish relations with any country that also has relations with Taiwan. Taiwan also has government offices throughout the region that do not require diplomatic relations with the hosts.

To safeguard the area north of the Tropic of Cancer, the U.S. should:

- **Remain a committed leader of the NATO alliance.** NATO remains the ultimate guarantor of transatlantic and U.S. security. The U.S. should continue to work with allies to invest in the capabilities necessary for providing credible deterrence. Also, Russia must remain the main focus of NATO. While the Alliance should be realistic about the current military threat from China, the U.S. should help to forge agreement inside the Alliance on what role, if any, NATO should play in dealing with Beijing, helping to create a united front that cannot be easily exploited.
- **Support the Atlantic Centre for Defence Capacity Building.** In a September 2017 visit to Washington, then-Portuguese Defense Minister José Alberto Azeredo Lopes discussed a proposal to create an Atlantic Security Center of Excellence located at Lajes Field, with the hopes that it would eventually become a NATO-accredited Centre of Excellence. The planned Atlantic Centre for Defence Capacity Building has potential to benefit maritime security in the Atlantic; as such, the United States should consider participating once it is formally established.
- **Take a long-term strategic view of U.S. forward deployed basing.** American forward deployed bases dotting the periphery of the Atlantic are strategic beacons whose diplomatic, military, and strategic importance should not be overlooked for short-term financial expediency. U.S. policymakers should take a long-term strategic view of key locations that serve as barriers to expanding Chinese and Russian economic and military presence in the Atlantic region.
- **Continue to use the port facilities at Gibraltar.** The hassle-free use of Gibraltar for U.S. Navy assets, especially nuclear-powered submarines, offers huge advantages to the U.S. military. In close cooperation with the U.K., the U.S. should continue to use the ports at Gibraltar.

- **Work with the British to determine the best way that the British Overseas Territories located strategically throughout the Atlantic region can be used to improve security.** One of the most important aspects of the U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship is access to military facilities around the world. British territories like Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands, Ascension Island, South Georgia, and the South Sandwich Islands and St. Helena could play an important role in regional security and economic activity. It goes without saying that the strategic location of Gibraltar makes the military facilities located there particularly important to the U.S. Access to these territories, in close cooperation with the British, adds resilience to contingency planning in the Atlantic region
- **Continue to raise awareness of China’s questionable Arctic ambitions.** China has declared itself a “near Arctic state”—a made-up term that previously did not exist in Arctic discourse. The U.S. should work with like-minded partners in the Arctic Council to raise legitimate concerns about China’s so-called Polar Silk Road ambitions. The U.S. should also make sure that China does not try to exceed what it is allowed to do under its status as an observer in the Arctic Council.
- **Make the U.S. diplomatic presence in Greenland fulltime.** Opening a part-time U.S. consulate in Nuuk was a good first step. A formal diplomatic presence would be an effective way for the U.S. to better understand local political and economic dynamics. This is particularly important at a time when other global actors, such as China, are becoming more involved in the Arctic region. But the U.S. should follow Iceland’s lead and have a diplomatic presence in Greenland year round.
- **Explore ways to increase economic links between Greenland and the U.S.** Greenland is actively trying to attract foreign investments, diversify its economy, and more closely integrate into the world economy. Greenland wants to raise its standard of living and prepare for eventual independence from Denmark. With Greenland located in North America, and with new potential transport links and tourism opportunities, the U.S. should pursue policies that develop economic ties between the two countries.

To safeguard the area south of the Tropic of Cancer, the U.S. should:

- **Focus U.S. engagement on strategically important countries with which the U.S. can collaborate.** Some Latin American and African countries are so in thrall to Beijing that Washington cannot work effectively with them on issues of strategic importance. The U.S. must also allocate its finite resources as efficiently as possible. Washington should identify which amenable countries, and which strategic assets, such as ports, are critical to protecting American influence in the Atlantic, and deploy to those countries and projects the full suite of U.S. engagements. That would include tasking the U.S. Development Finance Corporation and other U.S. development financing institutions to especially seek opportunities in those countries and for those projects; ensuring the countries always have fully staffed embassies complete with commercial attachés; U.S. government-facilitated visits by U.S. business delegations; high-level U.S. official visits and diplomatic engagement on behalf of U.S. companies; and mobilization of that country's U.S. diaspora to invest and engage in other constructive ways.
- **Convene a forum of Latin American and African countries affected by illegal fishing.** China's large fleet of heavily subsidized fishing vessels are key perpetrators of the illegal fishing that costs West African and Latin American economies billions of dollars every year,<sup>45</sup> degrades the environment, and crowds out local fishermen. A forum of adversely affected countries could discuss best practices for fighting the problem, and help them to organize collective pressure on governments to crack down on law-breaking vessels flying their flag. The U.S. could further assist with training and technical support for countries wishing to protect their territorial waters.
- **Task all U.S. embassies in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean with developing a digital-hygiene outreach program as a key part of their host-country engagement.** U.S. embassies should offer to help countries protect their vital infrastructure and digital networks. This could include best-practices training or technical support. If a government is interested in assistance beyond the embassy's capabilities, the embassy could solicit help from other U.S. agencies with the requisite expertise.

- **Provide technical assistance to African, Latin American, and Caribbean ministries of justice for anti-corruption tools.** In concert with an advisory committee with members from the U.S. Securities and Exchange Committee and the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Department of State should develop training programs for priority countries on establishing standards similar to those of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA). Mirroring the FCPA's strict anti-bribery prohibitions and legal remedies would provide legal avenues against Chinese bribery abroad.
- **Deepen military engagement to offset Chinese encroachment.** The U.S. should expand its partnerships with regional military forces to blunt China's growing military engagement. While China's military presence is modest to date, the People's Liberation Army's arms sales and donations of weapons have earned them goodwill and permitted their forces an expanded presence.
- **Communicate China's poor track record on the environment and human rights.** Latin America's deep affinity for the environment and pride for improvements of human rights conditions naturally contradicts China's authoritarian principles, and Chinese propaganda often misrepresents its true activities. The U.S. and like-minded partners should support civil society organizations that can create a public messaging campaign highlighting China's historic and current abuses.
- **Broaden public-private partnerships to improve African, Latin American, and the Caribbean's cybersecurity limitations.** The cyber threats facing both regions are growing, yet many governments lack the cyber policies, security tools, and processes to defend themselves. The U.S. government should consider replicating initiatives like the program launched by the Organization of American States and Florida International University to build Latin America's cybersecurity capabilities.
- **Sustain American Antarctic research.** In order for Washington to monitor Beijing's activities in the Antarctic, it must be able to sustain the American presence. This militates for the ability to field systems capable of supporting operations in the unique environment of the Antarctic (and the Arctic). This would include provision of additional icebreakers and aircraft suitable for operations in the Polar

regions. The need for a more robust U.S. presence in the Polar regions also means increased research into other areas—such as clothing, lubricants, and human activity—to sustain operations in these extreme conditions.

## Conclusion

The U.S. has the means to implement an effective Atlantic Strategy. What is required is political will and organizing U.S. strategy to best serve the ends. Rather than having federal agencies address new problems in old ways, all instruments of U.S. power must be redirected to serve as effective instruments to protect the free world from China and Russia.

The free nations of the Earth believe in human rights, representative governments, and free enterprise. The Chinese Communist Party does not believe in any of these things. If the U.S. and its free world partners do not band together to protect those equities, they will always be at risk. If Americans cannot enjoy the freedom, peace, and prosperity of the Atlantic community, then their future will be in peril.

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