

Statement of Foreign Policy and National Security Specialists on the Proposed 2017-2022 OCS Oil & Gas Leasing Program

The Department of Interior is currently receiving comments on its proposed 2017-2022 Outer Continental Shelf Oil & Gas Leasing Program. The Proposed Program envisions up to ten sales in the Gulf of Mexico and one in each of three areas off of Alaska, two of these in the Arctic.

As foreign policy and national security specialists, we support retaining the two Arctic leasing areas when the Program is finalized. The strategic significance of the Arctic is growing due to rapid change in the physical and geopolitical environments. Excluding the Arctic from the Program would harm our ability to protect our interests and to promote cooperation in the region.

As the Arctic becomes increasingly navigable, human activity will increase in the region. Since Arctic sea routes cut transit distances between Asian, European and North American markets, shipping in the region will increase along with associated logistical infrastructure. Likewise, Arctic offshore energy development will occur, whether or not the U.S. participates, as other countries pursue the Arctic's large energy resources to meet long-term energy needs.

Russia, notably, has been investing heavily in the region with a world-leading 40 ice-breakers, new Arctic bases, airfields, and ports, and ambitious new energy development projects. Russia's military has established an Arctic Strategic Command and conducted large-scale Arctic exercises.

Even China, calling itself a "near-Arctic" state, has been building new icebreakers, encouraging Chinese shipping companies to use Arctic sea routes, and making resource-oriented investments in Arctic countries. In September, PLA destroyers and other combat ships sailed the Aleutian Islands as President Obama toured Alaska, the Chinese Navy's first operation in the Bering Sea.

In contrast, Arctic capabilities of the U.S. have dramatically declined. At one time, the U.S. operated a fleet of eight ice breakers and a network of over 100 radar and weather stations from the Aleutian Islands to Greenland. Today, the U.S. Coast Guard has two functioning icebreakers (the same number as Estonia) while facing increased activity in the region, including enforcing the U.S. exclusive economic zone along Alaska's coasts. Our reduced Arctic presence and capabilities challenges the U.S. ability to positively influence all developments in the region.

The White House, Defense Department and Coast Guard strategies for the Arctic depend on government and private sector cooperation, including private investments in Arctic infrastructure to provide presence and to share costs, resources and expertise. Excluding the Arctic from the Program would signal retreat, needlessly reducing U.S. flexibility for promoting our national interests and our ability to ensure international cooperation, including ensuring best practices in Arctic drilling, in this sensitive and increasingly strategic region.

Keeping the Arctic in the Program maintains our options; exclusion irreversibly eliminates them. After the Proposed Program is finalized, the Secretary of the Interior will still have full discretion to cancel a lease sale or to narrow the geographic scope of a proposed leasing area. But once the Program is finalized, leasing areas cannot be added or expanded. The President already withdrew certain sensitive Arctic areas from the Program and environmental reviews will be conducted before each lease sale pursuant to NEPA and other requirements, providing for thorough review and public comment. We support the Program as proposed, which keeps the Arctic option viable.

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