

The U.S. Cannot Neglect Its Backyard—It Is Time for an Atlantic Strategy

Luke Coffey

KEY TAKEAWAYS

America needs a coherent Atlantic strategy to preserve a stable, prosperous, and secure Atlantic region.

China and Russia's malicious influence threaten U.S. ability to defend its interests, human rights, freely elected governments, and free enterprise in the Atlantic.

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. In the final weeks of the Trump Administration, officials on the National Security Council started developing such a strategy. It is not clear if the Biden Administration has continued with the initiative. The 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. In order to ensure that the U.S. continues to enjoy a secure, stable and prosperous Atlantic, the U.S. must take 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, and break down the bureaucratic barriers inside the U.S. government preventing a coordinated approach to the Atlantic

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region. Of course, the U.S. must also offer a better and brighter alternative to economic engagement with China 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.¹ 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 different geopolitical challenges.

Overlapping this huge geographical region are a number of intergovernmental organizations and bilateral and multilateral trade agreements in which the U.S. participates. The U.S. has nine bilateral free trade agreements with Atlantic Ocean littoral countries (Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Morocco, Nicaragua, and Panama). In addition, the U.S. is a member of the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) free trade agreement. While countries bordering the Atlantic have different interests and challenges, the integrity of the region is a common cause and is defined by free, open, and peaceful access to all peaceful nations.

Depending on the region, the U.S. has different interests at stake. In the High North, the main challenge is deterring Russian aggression, reducing Chinese influence, and protecting the homeland. In the Southern Hemisphere, the U.S. is concerned with increasing Chinese influence, as well as the rise of non-state actors involved in organized crime, human trafficking, and drug trafficking.

Aims of an Atlantic Strategy

The 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 that the U.S. enjoys. The long-term goal is to roll back the nefarious activities from China, Russia, and adversarial non-state actors seeking more influence in the Atlantic region.

Broadly speaking, for the U.S. to meet these two goals, its policies must be based on five strategic themes. These 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 is a myriad of security challenges across the vast Atlantic region. These include Russian encroachment in the Arctic and malign Chinese influence in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. Non-state actors, such as terrorist groups, narco-traffickers, and organized crime organizations, plague certain areas 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 interest of the U.S. to ensure that this remains the case.
- **Sovereignty.** It is in America's interest that Atlantic countries remain independent and self-governing, with little or no malign influence from outside powers. This is particularly true of China's influence and hybrid tactics in the region. Strong and stable governments resistant to outside influence are in America's interest.
- **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 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 and Russia's actions present a long-term threat to the security, economies, and natural environments of the United States and other nations of the Atlantic community.

An adversarial foreign power establishing a persistent threat and sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere could be an existential challenge to the traditional freedoms that America and its regional partners have long taken as a birthright. 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, the U.S. should:

- **Establish an informal grouping of like-minded nations in the Atlantic region.** This grouping could be modeled loosely on the Quad—Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.—for 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. While the details and membership must be left to policy-makers, 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.
- **Host an Atlantic Summit in 2023.** Such a summit could serve as a useful forum to raise global awareness of ecological, economic, and security issues facing the Atlantic region. This summit could be held at the foreign minister level, and in the future possibly at the head of state/head of 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 among the four commands will help to build understanding of what drives policy in each respective command.
- **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 among 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 to the region, it would also help to lead to a coherent cross-government policy for the Atlantic.
- **Coordinate closely with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members that have territory in the Atlantic region.** Denmark, France, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom have Atlantic coastlines either as part of their contiguous state or through sovereignty over and possession of dependencies and overseas territories. The U.S. should leverage its relationships with these countries to advance an Atlantic strategy within NATO.

- **Cooperate with friends and allies to monitor Chinese activities in the Atlantic.** Multilateral cooperation is needed to monitor Chinese investments in the Atlantic region, including participation in key infrastructure projects, such as 5G networks.
- **Think beyond military aspects and responses.** China's penetration of many regions is not focused on military capabilities, and therefore cannot be countered by the appearance of a carrier battlegroup. China has employed its space program to build ties to Brazil and Argentina; the Belt and Road Initiative is intended to make inroads in Latin America and Africa. The United States needs to adopt a comparably multidimensional view of the competition.

Conclusion

The United States has the means to implement an effective Atlantic strategy. What is required is political will and strategy development to best serve the ends. Rather than federal agencies addressing new problems in old ways, the agencies must be redirected to serve as effective instruments in protecting the free world from Chinese and Russian aggression and manipulation. If the U.S. and its free-world partners do not band together to protect those equities, they will always be at risk. If the U.S. cannot continue to enjoy the freedom, peace, and prosperity of the Atlantic community, its future security will be threatened.

Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.

Endnotes

1. This estimate does not include the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, or the Baltic Sea.