



**TESTIMONY OF
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ON

“U.S. COAST GUARD ARCTIC OPERATIONS”

BEFORE THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

29 NOVEMBER 2023

Introduction

Good morning, Chair Green, Ranking Member Thompson, and distinguished Members of the Committee. It is my pleasure to be here today to discuss the U.S. Coast Guard’s role in advancing our U.S. national interests across the Arctic. The United States is one of only eight Arctic states with both sovereign rights and sovereign responsibilities to safeguard our respective interests. In a region where presence means not only influence, but also security, the U.S. Coast Guard has been a key leader and interagency partner in shaping the Arctic security environment for over 150 years.

The Arctic is undergoing a dramatic transformation of its physical, operational, and geostrategic environment. We’re witnessing firsthand the increasing impacts of climate change and how it is opening up new access to Arctic waters. Arctic activity is increasing and evolving at a rapid pace, from a surge in oil and gas exploration a decade ago to growth in types and locations of vessel transits, including an expansion of environmental tourism. The dynamic and accelerated changes in the Arctic environment make Arctic waters more accessible, creating new opportunities and challenges.

At the same time, the Arctic is a region of increasing strategic competition with the potential for elevating geopolitical tensions. In the U.S. Arctic, the U.S. Coast Guard is engaging more often with a growing number of strategic partners and competitors. Among the competitors, the Service is observing an increased presence by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Russia, involved in both individual and combined military activities.

A significant level of investment is needed to advance our Nation’s interests in the Arctic, and I embrace the trust Congress and the American people have placed in the U.S. Coast Guard. The Service will continue to prioritize actions that safeguard U.S. interests while promoting safe, secure, and environmentally responsible maritime activity in the Arctic.

National Security Priorities Across the Arctic

In 2022, the Administration released updates to both the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR). The NSS emphasizes constraining Russia and out-competing the PRC. The 2022 NSAR establishes priorities within the Arctic, addressing the climate crisis with greater urgency, expanding scientific research, recognizing the need to advance U.S. leadership at home and abroad, and directing new capability investments. The NSAR emphasizes both national defense and homeland security, and states our highest priority is to protect the American people and our sovereign territory and rights. The Administration recently released the Implementation Plan for the NSAR that serves as a blueprint for the Nation's approach to implementing actions within these national strategies. These documents provide clear strategic direction and messaging both domestically and to international allies, partners, and competitors alike, and the U.S. Coast Guard is important to their success.

The U.S. Coast Guard contributed to developing both the NSS and NSAR, and continues to be at the forefront of Arctic strategic leadership. We published the U.S. Coast Guard's Arctic Strategic Outlook Implementation Plan last month. The Implementation Plan underscores the U.S. Coast Guard's commitment to promoting safety, sovereignty, and stewardship in the region, describing actions the Service will take over the next decade, including continuing our efforts to increase Arctic communications capabilities, expanding Arctic surface capabilities, strengthening the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) and Arctic Council, and modernizing the U.S. Arctic Marine Transportation System (MTS). The Implementation Plan was developed by the U.S. Coast Guard's newly established Polar Coordination Office, which serves as the linkage between U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters, Area Commands, and external partners to efficiently and effectively coordinate polar policy, planning, and resourcing Arctic strategies and operations. These collective actions, together with broader diplomatic, economic, and strategic engagement activities, are crucial for U.S. Arctic security.

Strategy to Action

A peaceful, stable, prosperous Arctic region that is increasingly open to human activity requires responsible behavior in accordance with international norms and strong governance. In the maritime domain, the United States needs to be present, collaborate with others, and model professional behavior at sea. With our unique combination of authorities as an armed force, a law enforcement agency, a regulatory agency, and a humanitarian service, the U.S. Coast Guard is an ideal instrument for the Nation to responsibly govern the U.S. Arctic maritime environment. The U.S. Coast Guard continues to excel in all of these elements, to include setting an example of responsible governance and reinforcing the rule of law through operational presence and strategic leadership.

The U.S. Coast Guard acts at all regional scales to support U.S. strategic objectives, and to assert international leadership to advance cooperation and uphold international law, rules, norms, and standards for Arctic coastal states and other non-Arctic flag states whose ships sail in Arctic waters. The U.S. Coast Guard consistently provides guidance and direction through preeminent multilateral forums such as the Arctic Council and the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The 2022 NSAR emphasizes the importance of both institutions, as well as the ACGF, to enhancing national security for the United States and our like-minded allies and partners.

The ACGF acts as a bridge between diplomacy and operations by serving as an independent, complementary body to the Arctic Council, with an operational focus on safe and environmentally responsible Arctic maritime activity. Since 2017, the U.S. Coast Guard has conducted exercises with partner Arctic states through the ACGF and the Arctic Council to enhance interoperability and provide a platform for direct dialogue among Arctic agencies fulfilling Coast Guard-like functions.

In 2021, the Arctic Council and the ACGF issued a joint statement of cooperation to enhance collaboration on both search and rescue and oil spill preparedness and response. Since then, the U.S. Coast Guard has assumed the chair of the Combined Operations Working Group (COWG) under Norway's chairmanship of the ACGF. In October, the ACGF re-established live, in-person meetings to address critical issues and to commence planning of a 2024 tabletop exercise (TTX) and 2025 live exercise (LIVEX). These meetings were key in sustaining alignment between critical partners. In COWG sessions, participants discussed critical issues facing all states, with emphasis on increases in the number and size of cruise ships anticipated to visit the Arctic in the immediate future, as well as respective capabilities for responding to environmental disasters in the region. These discussions serve as a foundation for developing exercises to re-enforce critical partnerships and ultimately achieve the coordination and interoperability necessary to successfully respond to incidents in the region.

Security, Presence, and Preparedness

The geopolitical environment in the Arctic continues to evolve as state and non-state actors seek to advance their interests in the region. Allies, partners, and competitors increasingly contend for diplomatic, economic, and strategic advantage and influence. Russia and the PRC exemplify this competition. Both have declared the Arctic a strategic priority; both have made significant investments in new or refurbished capabilities; and both are attempting to exert direct or indirect influence across the region using all of their instruments of national power.

The U.S. Coast Guard is directly observing increased strategic competition in the U.S. Arctic. Through the operations of the U.S. Coast Guard Pacific Area Command and its Seventeenth District (D17), which is responsible for U.S. Coast Guard activities for an over 3,853,500 square mile area including Alaska and the Arctic, the U.S. Coast Guard meets presence with presence, through Operation *Frontier Sentinel*, both to counter competition and positively influence behavior. Over the past two years, the U.S. Coast Guard has provided operational presence and monitored a Chinese military Surface Action Group, as well as a combined Russian-Chinese Task Group, operated in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone. The U.S. Coast Guard also redirected a National Security Cutter to ensure the safety of U.S. fishing vessels in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone while Russian ships conducted missile exercises. In these instances, the U.S. Coast Guard's visible forward presence ensured that Russia and China operated in accordance with international law.

In the Atlantic segment of the Arctic, the U.S. Coast Guard's Atlantic Area Command actively participates in opportunities to reinforce the Service's role as a trusted, reliable partner in the region, including engagements with U.S. Navy, Canadian, Danish, French, and other allies. In June 2023, the U.S. Coast Guard participated in Exercise ARGUS 2023, the sixth exercise in a series of annual non-military exercises in the Arctic.

The exercise included ships and aircraft from Denmark, Greenland, France, and the U.S. Coast Guard. Also in June 2023, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Danish Joint Arctic Command, the French Atlantic Command, and local Greenlandic authorities executed a Combined Joint Disaster Relief and Search and Rescue (SAR) exercise. The exercise spanned five days, and included force integration training, navigation exercises, towing exercises, damage control exercises, SAR searches, air drops, and hoist exercises. In August 2023, U.S. Coast Guard participated in Operation NANOOK along with Denmark, France, and Canada. This exercise deployed forces in a Combined Task Group to demonstrate capabilities and integration with multinational defense allies and exchanged best practices during fleet integration training. Collectively, these exercises improved our capacity to respond to maritime threats and advanced the U.S. Coast Guard and broader U.S. government's standing and influence with key Arctic partners.

The U.S. Coast Guard will continue to exhibit model governance grounded in international law, rules, norms, and standards, including freedom of navigation in the U.S. Arctic and to empower like-minded partners and allies to do the same in their Arctic waters. This year, U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Healy* completed an around-the-world voyage from the high Arctic above Asia and Europe to the U.S. east coast before returning to its homeport. While underway, operations supported a blend of national priorities across the Arctic, including supporting scientific activities in partnership with the National Science Foundation (NSF) along the edge of the Russian Exclusive Economic Zone. *Healy* exercised U.S. presence in the Chukchi, East Siberian, and Laptev Seas, in accordance with international law, and experienced numerous professional encounters with Russian vessels and aircraft.

Healy then continued transiting east to conduct at-sea engagements and port calls in Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. These engagements reinforced both the U.S. Coast Guard and the Nation's enduring commitment to deepening our cooperation with the international community, promoting access in accordance with international law, and supporting scientific research on the impacts of climate change to better enable operational and strategic decisions.

Consistent with the whole-of-government approach highlighted in the NSAR, the U.S. Coast Guard has long provided Arctic access by including interagency and international scientists aboard *Healy* to conduct critical scientific research as *Healy* operates throughout the region. Robust partnerships with institutions like the NSF, U.S. Arctic Research Commission, the Woodrow Wilson Polar Institute, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S. Navy, and U.S. National Ice Center enables the U.S. Coast Guard, along with our national and international partners, to access remote Arctic Ocean locations, conduct hydrographic surveys, implement elements of the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement, protect the maritime environment, build community resilience, and shape international security norms. Research also informs decision-making to reduce potential operational and strategic consequences.

Since 2009, the U.S. Coast Guard has influenced Arctic governance and sustainable development through Operation *Arctic Shield*. This Operation demonstrates the U.S. Coast Guard's operational capability, asserts leadership, and models responsible international governance in a region of key geostrategic importance. Operation *Arctic Shield* delivers a full suite of U.S. Coast Guard services to residents and waterway users across Alaska and the U.S. Arctic region.

This work strengthens the MTS, protects the environment, and supports the resilience of remote communities. This year, U.S. Coast Guard personnel conducted extensive marine safety-oriented regulatory activities in 91 villages, inspecting bulk oil facilities and commercial vessels, and issuing commercial fishing safety decals. Each village deployment saw U.S. Coast Guard members integrating with the local communities and governments to enhance relationships, build partnerships, and provide training in areas such as boating safety and ice rescue. U.S. Coast Guard presence in the region is by far the largest of any Federal agency. The U.S. Coast Guard is also well aware of serious challenges facing many communities in Western Alaska stemming from the declines of certain fisheries in the Bering Sea. Through mechanisms such as the Task Force on the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area, the Coast Guard is participating with a broad range of federal departments and agencies in an effort to address these challenges, in partnership with representatives of affected communities.

Preparing for complex contingencies in the U.S. Arctic is a national priority. This year, D17 completed a Bering Strait pollution response exercise to advance the region's preparations for a large transboundary oil spill. The exercise included a full-scale exercise in the Bering Strait, and a Spill of National Significance briefing and seminar. D17 also conducted a combined mass rescue operation (MRO) exercise with the Canadian Armed Forces, the Canadian Coast Guard, and Parks Canada to test our ability to respond to an Arctic cruise ship incident. This event occurred in the Beaufort Sea near the border between Canada and the United States and included the French expedition cruise ship *Le Commandant Charcot*, which tested their ability to meet International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code) requirements. The exercise involved evacuating 71 passengers and crew from the vessel to a Canadian island. Canadian and U.S. Coast Guard aircraft deployed to the location and delivered sustainment packages and simulated hoisting survivors. This exercise highlighted the logistical and operational opportunities and challenges faced when deploying U.S. Coast Guard HC-130s and MH-60s to remote Arctic locations.

To better prepare the region for the future, U.S. Coast Guard members also met with local partners to assess plans for a mass search and rescue response, engaged on a government-to-government basis with federally-recognized tribes throughout the Arctic and Western Alaska, and implemented layered cyber security measures throughout the maritime domain and shoreside infrastructure. Through these consistent engagements focused on developing and implementing contingency, safety, and security plans, the U.S. Coast Guard further illustrates why the Service is a valued instrument to protect and enhance community and port resilience in the U.S. Arctic region.

Building Arctic Capacity

The ability for the United States to protect U.S. national sovereignty, safeguard our homeland, and meet the Nation's strategic priorities in the Arctic hinges on physical presence and access. U.S. operational presence and influence in the Arctic are founded on U.S. Coast Guard polar icebreakers. These ships provide assured, year-round access to the Polar Regions not only for U.S. Coast Guard missions, but also in support of critical activities of other agencies and Tribal Nations that protect key economic, environmental, and national security interests in the high latitudes.

The Polar Security Cutter (PSC) is a top acquisition priority for the U.S. Coast Guard and the Navy and is vital for the United States to continue to project sovereignty and protect national security interests in the Polar Regions. The PSC is the capability the Nation needs to ensure persistent presence and robust domain awareness in the Arctic and Antarctic regions. The integrated U.S. Coast Guard-Navy Program Office continues to work actively with the prime contractor to deliver this critical capability. Continued investment is key to meeting our Nation's growing needs in the rapidly evolving and dynamic Polar Regions.

The Fiscal Year 2024 President's Budget also requests \$150 million to support the acquisition of a commercially available polar icebreaker, including initial modifications, crewing, and integrated logistics support required to reach initial operating capability. The United States has vital national interests in the Polar Regions and the purchase of a commercially available polar icebreaker will accelerate U.S. presence in the polar regions in the near-term and increase capacity in the long-term.

In addition to recapitalization of our icebreakers, investment in Arctic-capable U.S. Coast Guard surface and aviation assets, properly trained and equipped personnel, enhanced communication and domain awareness capabilities, and logistics resources are crucial to delivering U.S. Coast Guard services and advancing our security and sovereign interests in the Arctic. As outlined in the U.S. Coast Guard's 2019 Arctic Strategic Outlook, closing gaps in these areas requires a whole-of-government approach, such as our partnerships with scientific research agencies, coupled with consistent investment to meet not only the challenges the Arctic presents, but also the opportunities.

Conclusion

The physical, operational, and geopolitical environment in the Arctic continues to change rapidly, driving demand for U.S. Coast Guard presence, influence, and services. The U.S. Coast Guard has served and shaped national security in the Arctic for more than 150 years and is central to a U.S. whole-of-government approach together with partners to secure national interests in the Polar Regions.

The continued support of the Administration and Congress for a modernized and capable polar fleet and increased U.S. Coast Guard Arctic capacity and capabilities will fortify the Nation's position in this age of Arctic prominence. U.S. Coast Guard leadership is essential in maintaining a coalition of like-minded partners to shape the Arctic domain as a region of strategic cooperation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and for your actions to support the members of the U.S. Coast Guard.