

Written Testimony of Dr. Rebecca Pincus  
Director, Polar Institute, Woodrow Wilson Center  
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation (CGMT)  
U.S House of Representatives

*December 7, 2022*

**“U.S. Coast Guard’s Leadership on Arctic Safety, Security, and Environmental  
Responsibility”**

## Introduction

Chairman Carbajal, Ranking Member Gibbs, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for convening this hearing on the United States Coast Guard's (USCG) leadership on Arctic safety, security, and environmental responsibility. I am Dr. Rebecca Pincus and I am honored to appear before you today as the Director of the Wilson Center's Polar Institute to discuss these issues.

Prior to directing the Polar Institute, I served on the faculty of the U.S. Naval War College, in the Center for Naval Warfare Studies. From 2020-2022, I was detailed from the Naval War College to the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy, first to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development office and later the newly established Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Arctic and Global Resilience. Before joining the Naval War College, I served on the faculty of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, and led research for the Coast Guard's Center for Arctic Study and Policy.

## Woodrow Wilson Center's Polar Institute

The Polar Institute was established as a program within the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in 2017. Since then, it has become a premier forum for discussion and policy analysis of Arctic issues. The Polar Institute holistically studies the central policy issues facing these regions, with an emphasis on Arctic governance, climate change, economic development, scientific research, security, and Indigenous communities. Our nonpartisan analysis and findings are communicated to policymakers and other stakeholders.

The Polar Institute is holding a series of public events on the recently-released 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR). Our first event, in October, provided an opportunity for speakers from the Arctic Executive Steering Commission, National Security Council, Department of Defense, and Department of State to unpack the NSAR and discuss their agencies' work. Our next event will be a deep-dive into the work of the Department of Homeland Security in the Arctic. In February 2023, we will hold an event focusing on science and research in the Arctic. Events are livestreamed, and recordings are available on our website.

In addition, we have ongoing work streams on Nordic and European Union security perspectives on the Arctic, critical minerals and the green energy transition in the Arctic, and maritime security and stewardship.

We do this work within the administrative context of the Woodrow Wilson Center, which was chartered by Congress in 1968 as the official memorial to President Woodrow Wilson. The Wilson Center is the nation's key non-partisan policy forum for tackling global issues through independent research and open dialogue to inform actionable ideas for the policy community.

## The Coast Guard as a Strategic Means to Accomplish National Ends

In keeping with the global, policy-focused work of the Wilson Center, I offer the following comments on the U.S. Coast Guard's Arctic missions. By framing the USCG missions in the context of U.S. national interests and objectives in the Arctic and beyond, I will underscore the valuable contributions made by the Coast Guard and its value as a tool of national power.

In brief, my core argument is threefold: first, that in the global context of long-term, strategic competition, the Coast Guard is an effective means for strengthening relationships with Allies and partners and for competing with adversaries via the integrated deterrence framework established in the National Defense Strategy (NDS); second, that the U.S. has clearly identified the Indo-Pacific as the priority theater, and Europe as the secondary theater of strategic importance, and therefore the Arctic must be understood in that strategic hierarchy; and third, for a number of practical reasons, the Coast Guard is a cost-effective means to pursue multiple national interests in the Arctic.

### 1. Global context: long-term, strategic competition

The Coast Guard's missions in the Arctic take place in the global context of geopolitical competition, with China as the pacing threat. For several years, there has been bipartisan consensus in the United States on the importance and scale of the challenge posed by China, while Russia is broadly and accurately viewed as an "acute" threat. The 2018 and 2022 National Defense Strategies share similar language on the threats posed by China and Russia:

- (2018) "Long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities for the Department..."
- (2022) "The 2022 NDS advances a strategy focused on the PRC [People's Republic of China]...as our pacing challenge...also accounts for the acute threat posed by Russia..."

The 2022 NDS establishes the concept of integrated deterrence as the chief means of engaging in holistic competition with both the PRC and Russia: in the words of Secretary of Defense Austin, "to develop, combine, and coordinate our strengths to maximum effect...in close collaboration with our counterparts across the U.S. Government and with Allies and partners."<sup>1</sup>

The Coast Guard can play a unique role in integrated deterrence. It can serve as a fulcrum between the DoD and DHS, able to leverage the authorities and missions of both federal departments. It partners with State, local, and Tribal entities; with the private sector in the global maritime industry; and with its foreign counterparts. In this regard, the Coast Guard is a unique national tool for working across jurisdictions and functions.

The Coast Guard is useful in forging strong relationships with Allies and partners, in the Arctic and around the world. As a law-enforcement agency, it is also key to upholding the rules-based

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Defense, "2022 National Defense Strategy," pp. iv.  
<https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>

order that all countries rely upon. It is an important component of strategic competition with Russia and China.

In the Arctic and beyond, the Coast Guard is a welcome partner on a host of issues of shared concern. From search and rescue to fisheries enforcement to drug interdiction, the Coast Guard is a partner welcomed by countries around the world. The top maritime concerns of many partner nations are bread-and-butter USCG missions: enforcing fisheries regulations, interdicting crime and terrorism at sea, and maritime safety and response. The Coast Guard's Mobile Training Teams train over 1000 international military students each year, in over 40 countries, in both bi- and multilateral formats.<sup>2</sup> International training covers the range of Coast Guard missions, and is tailored to specific national or regional needs. Coast Guard international partnerships enhance partner capacity, pave the way for U.S. access, and embody the vision of integrated deterrence enshrined in the NDS.

Consider U.S. interests in forging closer ties with Greenland. As part of the Kingdom of Denmark, and host of the U.S. Air Base Thule, Greenland also holds important strategic mineral resources. In 2020, the U.S. reopened a consulate in Nuuk, Greenland, and work is ongoing to broaden and deepen the relationship between the U.S. and Greenland.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Coast Guard should be a more significant part of these efforts. According to the Greenlandic government, the fishing industry is responsible for more than 85% of exports and over 20% of employment. USCG is ideally poised to partner with Greenland and Denmark on maritime domain awareness, enforcement, and safety: issues of top concern to Greenland's leaders.

In the Arctic, the U.S. Coast Guard is also able to navigate sensitive relationships. The most obvious example is along the U.S.-Russia maritime boundary in the Bering Sea, where USCG has maintained a professional and functioning working relationship with the Russian Border Guard throughout the current crisis driven by Russia's further invasion of Ukraine. For example, even in 2022, we saw just one incident in which a Russian fishing vessels crossed the boundary line to fish illegally in U.S. waters; when the U.S. Coast Guard reported the vessel, the Russian Border Guard responded.

Another, less obvious example is Canada: the U.S. and Canada do not agree on the international status of the Northwest Passage, and the maritime boundary in the Beaufort Sea is unresolved. Despite these differences, the U.S. Coast Guard has partnered with its Canadian counterparts to conduct two transits of the Northwest Passage recently, in 2017 and 2021. In 2021, the icebreaker Healy carried officers from the British Royal Navy and the Dutch Navy on its transit, and used its onboard multibeam sonar system to provide Canada with high-resolution hydrographic survey data in the approach to the hamlet of Resolute, in Nunavut, which will be used by the Canadian Coast Guard to identify a safe shipping lane. This transit and associated

---

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see the website of the U.S. Coast Guard Office of International Affairs and Foreign Policy, <https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Director-of-International-Affairs-and-Foreign-Policy-CG-DCO-I/>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State, "The United States and Greenland." <https://dk.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/u-s-greenland/>.



## 2. The Arctic is not the priority theater in U.S. strategy

The clear identification of the Indo-Pacific as the first priority, and Russia/Europe as the second priority, helps place the Arctic in context. The Department of Defense has not yet achieved its desired posture and balance of forces in the Indo-Pacific. Military support to Ukraine and reassurance of NATO Allies have placed further demands on the DoD. In light of these urgent priorities, the DoD has identified stability in the Arctic as its desired objective and is taking a requirements-driven approach to calibrating DoD posture in the Arctic. DoD's priority in the Arctic is homeland defense and early warning.

The 2022 National Security Strategy seeks to “Maintain a peaceful Arctic” and states: “We will uphold U.S. security in the region by improving our maritime domain awareness, communications, disaster response capabilities, and icebreaking capacity... We will exercise U.S. Government presence in the region as required, while reducing risk and preventing unnecessary escalation.”<sup>10</sup> The 2022 National Defense Strategy notes that “The United States seeks a stable Arctic region characterized by adherence to internationally-agreed upon rules and norms.”<sup>11</sup>

In pursuit of stability in the Arctic, the Coast Guard also has a role to play in the NDS concept of campaigning. Defined as “the conduct and sequencing of logically-linked military initiatives aimed at advancing well-defined, strategy-aligned priorities over time,”<sup>12</sup> campaigning in the Arctic should not contribute to escalation. The Coast Guard is well-positioned to campaign without escalating, as white-hulled Coast Guard vessels are inherently less-escalatory than Navy warships.

Stability in the Arctic, and a lower priority relative to the Indo-Pacific, does not mean the region is not important to the United States. The U.S. has significant territorial equity and sovereignty interests, including northern and western parts of Alaska, as well as the Aleutian Island chain and the Bering, Beaufort, and Chukchi Seas adjacent to Alaska, which are all included in the definition of Arctic provided in the 1984 Arctic Research and Policy Act.<sup>13</sup>

The U.S. has economic interests in the Arctic maritime, including fisheries, energy, shipping, and tourism. The Alaskan fishing industry harvests two-thirds of the nation's seafood, according to an industry group, and generates over \$15 billion in direct and secondary economic outputs.<sup>14</sup> The cruise industry calls Alaska “the premier cruise destination market in the United States.” In

---

<sup>10</sup> The White House, “National Security Strategy,” October 2022. Pp. 44-45. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> 2022 NDS, pp. 16.

<sup>12</sup> 2022 NDS, pp. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Arctic Research and Policy Act of 1984, Section 112, “Definition.” Available from US Arctic Research Commission at <https://www.arctic.gov/legislation/>.

<sup>14</sup> Alaska Seafood, “Updated Report Affirms Alaska’s Seafood Industry is Essential Driver of State Economy.” January 12, 2022. <https://www.alaskaseafood.org/news/for-release-2022-economic-value-of-alaskas-seafood-industry-report/#:~:text=Nationally%2C%20the%20Alaska%20seafood%20industry,%248.6%20billion%20in%20multiplier%20effects.>

2019, Alaska received almost two-thirds of all cruise passenger visits at U.S. ports, producing \$1.2 billion in income in Alaska and 23,000 jobs.<sup>15</sup> Cruise traffic is rebounding from the pandemic and trends prior to 2020 indicate strong growth across the industry.

U.S. Arctic waters may also be affected by activities in adjacent Russian waters. While Russia's war in Ukraine has dampened shipping activity through the Northern Sea Route, Russia continues to ship LNG from its Arctic developments in Yamal. These LNG shipments are increasingly heading east, to Asia, transiting the Bering Strait and increasing environmental and maritime risks in the region. Less dramatic, but more frequent, are environmental impacts from garbage and pollutants that regularly wash into U.S. Arctic waters from Russia, including petroleum products and industrial debris. In 2020, large amounts of garbage washed ashore in the Bering Strait region, covering miles of shoreline and including hazardous waste (insecticide, lubricants, butane) and large amounts of plastic debris, as well as dead seabirds. Russian text and logos were identified on the marine debris, much of which was related to commercial fisheries.<sup>16</sup>

Reductions in sea ice and warming conditions in the Arctic enable increased maritime activity. Changing weather conditions create uncertainty. The combination of increased maritime activity and less-predictable weather conditions generate maritime hazards. Fishing vessels, cruise ships, and other vessels are all subject to the maritime hazards present in Arctic waters. Climate change is anticipated to increase need for search and rescue in the region.<sup>17</sup> Whatever the cause or origin, when an accident occurs in the Arctic—particularly in the Bering Strait, the narrow body of water separating the U.S. and Russia—there may be consequences in U.S. waters. Proximity to Russia raises the stakes for humanitarian or environmental disaster response.

From a military perspective, Alaska and the U.S. Arctic are important to homeland defense, as forward locations for early warning detection and interdiction systems. New delivery systems from vectors in Eurasia make investments in U.S. and NORAD missile early warning and defeat systems critical, as outlined in the NDS. Alaska is also an important location for its proximity to the Indo-Pacific theater. As such, it hosts the largest concentration of fifth-generation fighter aircraft in the world. However, the NDS demands that the DoD focus ruthlessly: “we must not over-exert, reallocate, or redesign our forces for regional crises that cross the threshold of risk to preparedness for our highest strategic priorities.”<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Practical benefits of Coast Guard missions in the Arctic

There is an Arctic cost premium: whether building infrastructure, maintaining vehicles, or buying milk, it's more expensive, often significantly so. In rural Alaska, a gallon of gas may

---

<sup>15</sup> Business Research and Economic Advisors, “The Contribution of the International Cruise Industry to the U.S. Economy in 2019.” Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA). Pp 51-52. <https://www.alaskatvia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-USA-Cruise-EIS.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> G. Sheffield, et al. “2020 Foreign Marine Debris Event—Bering Strait.” NOAA Arctic Report Card 2021. <https://arctic.noaa.gov/Report-Card/Report-Card-2021/ArtMID/8022/ArticleID/952/2020-Foreign-Marine-Debris-Event%E2%80%94Bering-Strait>.

<sup>17</sup> Fourth National Climate Assessment, “Chapter 26: Alaska.” <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/chapter/26/>.

<sup>18</sup> 2022 NDS, pp. 22.

often cost \$10-15, and a gallon of milk will be similarly expensive.<sup>19</sup> Shipping in goods raises costs. U.S. Government operations are not immune to the additional costs inherent to remote, harsh environments like the Arctic.

Given the extra costs associated with achieving and maintaining U.S. Government presence in the Arctic, it is imperative to achieve maximum results for the investment of taxpayer dollars. In the Arctic, the U.S. needs Swiss Army knife solutions: cheap, durable, and useful for accomplishing many different tasks. On a single patrol, a Coast Guard icebreaker might demonstrate sovereignty, respond to a search and rescue case, and support scientific research. The ability of Coast Guard assets to perform multiple missions in the Arctic simultaneously advances multiple national interests, in the spirit of the National Strategy for the Arctic Region's emphasis on whole-of-government solutions.

The Coast Guard's practical application in the Arctic contrasts with the U.S. Navy, which is confronting several significant strategic and operational challenges that defy quick solutions, and which make additional missions in the Arctic potentially costly, in both financial and strategic terms. Its shipbuilding and future fleet plans reflect the challenges of responding to the current and future threats posed by Chinese military advances, new technologies including unmanned systems, and budget issues. Its 30-year plan for shipbuilding has been characterized as requiring annual appropriations that the Congressional Budget Office describes as "unprecedented since World War II."<sup>20</sup> It faces serious challenges in maintenance and repair at yards<sup>21</sup>, including at Navy submarine yards.<sup>22</sup> In recent years, the Navy has experienced a string of accidents<sup>23</sup> and scandals<sup>24</sup> that further complicate its ability to reposition itself to meet future demands. Adding further demands, for operations in a region that is famously harsh, does nothing to help the Navy. Moreover, it does not reflect the broader national and defense strategies that enshrine cost-effective, whole-of-government, integrated solutions. The Coast Guard has a strong track record of achieving maximum effects with minimum resources, leading some experts to take a hard look at transferring Navy budgets for small combatant funding to USCG.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> See, for example: Zachariah Hughes, "Fuel in the Alaska village of Noatak was \$16 a gallon. The costs are more than just money." Anchorage Daily News, May 18, 2022. <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/rural-alaska/2022/05/18/fuel-in-the-alaska-village-of-noatak-was-16-a-gallon-the-costs-are-more-than-just-money/>; Ann Schmidt, "Extreme grocery prices in rural Alaska shock TikTok: '\$18 for milk'." Fox Business, December 3, 2021. <https://www.foxbusiness.com/lifestyle/rural-alaska-grocery-store-prices-viral/>.

<sup>20</sup> Congressional Budget Office, "An Analysis of the Navy's December 2020 Shipbuilding Plan." April 2021. <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/57091>.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Naval Shipyards: Ongoing Challenges Could Jeopardize Navy's Ability to Improve Shipyards." May 10, 2022. GAO-22-105993.

<sup>22</sup> Congressional Budget Office, "The Capacity of the Navy's Shipyards to Maintain its Submarines." March 2021. <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/57083>.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Faturechi, et al. "Years of Warnings, then Death and Disaster." ProPublica, February 7, 2019. <https://features.propublica.org/navy-accidents/us-navy-crashes-japan-cause-mccain/>.

<sup>24</sup> Blake Herzinger, "Fat Leonard Cost the US Navy More than Money." October 24, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/24/fat-leonard-us-navy-corruption-scandal/>.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Craig Hooper and Bryan Clark, "Fed Up, Congress Considers Giving Coast Guard the Navy's Small Ship Funding." Forbes, May 23, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/craighooper/2022/05/23/fed-up-congress-considers-giving-coast-guard-navys-small-ship-funding/>.

### So what can the Coast Guard do better?

In conclusion, there are both strategic and practical reasons to fully resource the Coast Guard's Arctic missions. The Coast Guard is a highly useful tool for conducting integrated deterrence, campaigning, and engaging in strategic competition. It is an agency with a remarkably high degree of trust around the world. Through its capacity-building work with partner nations on fisheries enforcement, drug interdiction, and search and rescue, the Coast Guard helps the U.S. win partners and future allies. By building maritime law enforcement capacity around the world, the Coast Guard contributes to the U.S. effort to establish and uphold the global rules-based order that our prosperity and peace depend upon.

In the Arctic, the Coast Guard could partner with Denmark and Greenland to build capacity and enhance maritime domain awareness, strengthening our relations with these important allies. While USCG already engages with the Danish Joint Arctic Command (JACO) in Greenland via the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, and has participated in international maritime exercises, expanding and deepening the relationship could yield benefits.

More importantly, the Coast Guard should develop a strategy for conducting and resourcing integrated deterrence and campaigning operations. This is important in the Arctic and beyond. The Coast Guard's 2022 Strategy and 2019 Arctic Strategic Outlook are valuable documents, but do not match the National Defense Strategy in terms of specificity, prioritization, and an overarching strategic framework to guide decision-making. The 2020 Tri-Service Maritime Strategy, which was jointly signed out by the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, provides an example of an integrated approach to naval and maritime strategy. The Arctic region provides an ideal test bed for developing and implementing integration concepts across the Navy-Marines-Coast Guard, as well as with Allies and partners.

The Coast Guard in the Arctic—and beyond—can play a unique role in integrated deterrence and campaigning as defined in the NDS. Through strengthening relationships with Allies and partners, and assisting in security cooperation, the Coast Guard can advance national objectives and minimize escalation. The Coast Guard is an important means of meeting the complex threats to U.S. security interests, and to ensuring a stable and open international system: only if it can clearly identify a path forward and justify additional resources. The Coast Guard should be asked to proactively articulate a coherent, specific, and rigorous strategic vision for its role in advancing U.S. strategic ends in the Arctic.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you today, and for your support for the Coast Guard family. I look forward to your questions.