
Arctic Governance: U.S. Coast Guard Presence and Leadership in the Region

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ABSTRACT

Throughout its 150-year history in the region, the U.S. Coast Guard's presence and leadership in the Arctic have not been more important than they are today. The Arctic is experiencing unprecedented levels of environmental, operational, and geostrategic stress, which requires continuous U.S. Coast Guard presence to protect America's vital national and economic security interests. The Service aims to integrate its distinctive qualities across intergovernmental and multinational teams to tackle emerging challenges in the Arctic. Specifically, the U.S. Coast Guard Atlantic Area Command will utilize its ties to European Arctic partners and leadership in international forums to share

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best practices, protect the Arctic region, and promote rules-based order.

The emergence of the Arctic region as a strategic imperative for the United States has gained much attention in recent years. As geopolitical competition expands and environmental conditions allow for increased human activity

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and economic opportunities in the Arctic, a comprehensive and collaborative approach to governance has become paramount. To ensure that the Arctic remains a peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative region, the U.S. Coast Guard must be used as an instrument of national power to model governance and adherence to rules, norms, and standards. This will be accomplished through persistent presence, focused international cooperation, and deepened relationships with allies and partners. The U.S. Coast Guard has served as a national leader in

Arctic security and safety and is uniquely suited to deliver expertise and advance U.S. national interests across the region.

ADDRESSING THE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE OF THE ARCTIC REGION

As described in the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR), “Alaska makes the United States an Arctic nation, which instills authority and responsibility for the stewardship and protection of the region.”¹ In recent years, the United States has increasingly encountered strategic competitors within U.S. sovereign waters near Alaska, which is elevating tensions. Both Russian and Chinese military Surface Action Groups and combined Russian and Chinese military exercises occur annually within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). As defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the EEZ is the area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, not extending beyond 200 nautical miles from the baseline of the territorial sea within which the coastal state has the right to explore and exploit, and responsibility to conserve and manage both living and non-living resources.² Although the military exercises are conducted in accordance with international law, they still necessitate a U.S. presence, which the U.S. Coast Guard is capable of providing. In its 2018 Arctic Policy, China promulgated its national objectives by declaring itself

a “near-Arctic State.”³ In support of this declaration, China’s Arctic Policy states “[China] is an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs ... and enjoys the freedom or rights of scientific research, navigation, overflight, fishing, laying of submarine cables and pipelines, and resource exploration and exploitation in the high seas, the Area and other relevant sea areas, and certain special areas in the Arctic Ocean, as stipulated in treaties.”⁴

As allies, partners, and competitors alike seek to advance their interests in the Arctic, the U.S. Coast Guard is best positioned to secure America’s Arctic future. In addition to the U.S. Coast Guard’s consistent presence, operational capabilities and well-established relationships with the international community will be critical to the whole-of-government approach in the Arctic, which “refers to the U.S. military and civilian agencies working across boundaries to achieve shared goals and an integrated government response”.⁵ This includes continuing to use the U.S. Coast Guard’s current Arctic icebreaker, building new Polar Security Cutters, and increasing cooperation and presence in the European Arctic.⁶ In addition to at sea operations, professional engagements with our allies and partners are the ultimate force multiplier in the region. These relationships provide the U.S. Coast Guard with an opportunity to share its value through demonstrated global mission excellence in emergency management, shipping safety and environmental standards enforcement, fisheries enforcement, search and rescue, and mass casualty and disaster response. In terms of shipping safety and environmental standards, the U.S. Coast Guard has the authority to enforce compliance under the *Polar Code*, which is an “international code to cover compliance for the full range of design, construction, equipment, operations, training, and environmental protection for ships operating in Polar Waters.”⁷

MODELING GOVERNANCE

In a region where presence equals influence, the U.S. Coast Guard continues to execute the NSAR to secure the interests of the United States. Most recently, the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Healy* conducted a high-latitude transit north of Russia’s EEZ with a presence in the Chukchi, East Siberian, and Laptev Seas. This patrol was conducted per international law and exercised the Arctic Council’s 2017 Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation. As such, this transit also supported scientific research for the Nansen and Amundsen Basins Observational System (NABOS), to protect the maritime environment and evaluate climate change effects. It is important to note that during this voyage, the *Healy*

encountered Russian vessels and aircraft, all of which operated professionally and safely.

The *Healy* transit also provided an opportunity to model adherence to the rule of law and exchange best practices with allies and partners through at sea engagements and port visits. While in transit through the Arctic, *Healy* team conducted its scientific mission and broadcasted the ship's location on the publicly available Automatic Identification System. Once in the European Arctic, the team worked with members of sea services from Norway, Denmark, and Iceland to promote partnerships and interoperability. During these engagements, *Healy* hosted scientific roundtables and subject matter expert exchanges, and conducted a search and rescue exercise with the Norwegian Coast Guard near the Norwegian Arctic. This deployment demonstrated the importance of the presence of the U.S. Coast Guard in the Arctic to deliver scientific research and deepen relationships and understanding with the international community.

The U.S. Coast Guard also continues to advance maritime safety and environmental resilience in the American Arctic through focused operations and exercises. Most notably, the U.S. Coast Guard's Seventeenth District (D17), under the U.S. Coast Guard Pacific Area Command, leads Operation *Arctic Shield*. This annual operation focuses on strengthening the marine transportation system, protecting the environment, and safeguarding U.S. citizens in the Arctic. In 2023, this exercise included extensive marine safety-oriented activities in ninety-one villages such as inspecting bulk oil facilities and commercial fishing vessels as well as providing training for boating safety and ice rescue.

The Pacific Area Command also serves as the principal for the North Pacific Coast Guard Forum (NPCGF). This forum is a strategically important multilateral group that operationalizes international fisheries enforcement on the high seas through an annual deployment called Operation *North Pacific Guard*. During the July 2023 iteration, competing demands prevented the U.S. Coast Guard from providing a surface asset for the operation. Highlighting the importance of joint operations, the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans answered the call and secured a leased surface resource that functioned as a platform for fifty-nine days of U.S. Coast Guard-led fisheries boardings. While not an Arctic forum, this model of operationalizing and utilizing partnerships as a force multiplier is an example of bridging capability gaps. As we see a growing demand for U.S. Coast Guard services in the Arctic, the U.S. Coast Guard's Atlantic Area Command can use its position within the Arctic and North Atlantic Coast Guard Forums (NACGF) to enhance cooperation and meet common goals.

The geostrategic implications and interconnectedness of the Arctic requires the United States to lead not only in the U.S. Arctic north of Alaska but also across the entire region, including the European Arctic and North Atlantic, to meet national strategic goals. The Arctic Council member states—comprised of eight nations that include Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Russian Federation, and the United States—span the operating areas of both the U.S. Coast Guard Pacific and Atlantic Area Commands. The Atlantic Area Command has the responsibility to bridge that gap to the east by deepening relationships with Arctic Council member states within their area of responsibility through subject matter expert exchanges, engagement-based exercises, and operations with regional partners focused on Coast Guard areas of expertise.

ATLANTIC AREA COMMAND FOCUS IN THE EUROPEAN ARCTIC

The European Arctic provides an opportunity for the U.S. Coast Guard to tackle maritime and environmental security challenges, strengthen pan-Arctic governance, and reinforce Arctic cooperation and stability through the Arctic Coast Guard and the North Atlantic Coast Guard Forums. Leveraging efforts in these forums, the U.S. Coast Guard can foster synergies across the entire Arctic region and build alliances with like-minded partners to compel compliance with international law.

While the U.S. Coast Guard has a role in every pillar of the NSAR, Atlantic Area Command efforts focus on Pillar 1, Objective 1.3: *Maximize Unity of Effort with Allies and Partners*, and Pillar 4: *International Cooperation and Governance*.⁸ The Atlantic Area Command is poised to collaborate with the whole of government to execute these objectives through the initiatives in the U.S. Coast Guard's recently released Arctic Strategic Outlook Implementation Plan. Through its leadership position as the current chair of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum Combined Operations working group, the Atlantic Area Command is working within the multilateral forum to conduct a tabletop exercise in April 2024, followed by a live exercise in Norway in April 2025.

The scenario currently being developed for the two exercises will involve a vessel collision between a cruise ship and a freight ship operating in the Arctic, off the coast of Tromsø, Norway. The collision will require the mass evacuation of passengers from the cruise ship, which engages both the search and rescue and spill response agreements under the Arctic Council. There will also be an aspect of Marine Environmental Preparedness and Response (MEPR) due to a reported oil spill that will threaten a marine

protected area. These exercises mark a return to in-person interactions following the three-year pause on international engagements due to the impacts of COVID-19 and Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Another routine Atlantic Area Command engagement is the Canadian Coast Guard–led Operation *Nanook*, which is an annual exercise that takes place in the waters between Greenland and Eastern Canada. This operation offers an opportunity for the U.S. Coast Guard to engage with the Canadian Armed Forces, a wide spectrum of Canadian government agencies, and other partners to advance shared maritime objectives, enhance partnerships, and deter competitors. Operation *Nanook* typically includes three phases with each one addressing different mission goals towards maritime security and incident management.

Demonstrating continued collaboration, Atlantic Area Command also participates in the Danish Joint Command Exercise *Argus*. This exercise, which first took place in 2018, tests the interoperability and strength of cooperation with Denmark, Greenland, and France, which is necessary to respond to incidents in high latitudes. In 2023, the Atlantic Area Command supported *Argus* with a robust force package, including U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Sycamore*, three National Strike Force members, an embedded liaison at the Joint Rescue Coordination Center in Nuuk, Greenland, an embedded Public Affairs Officer with the Strategic Communications cell, a pilot with Air Greenland helicopter aircrews, an Exercise Control Officer. As the Arctic opens to more traffic, such exercises can be leveraged to solidify existing alliances and partnerships, promote interoperability, and deliver national strategic messaging effects.

As these exercises illustrate, preparing for complex contingencies in the Arctic continues to be a top priority for safety and security. Indicative of this, the U.S. Coast Guard Arctic Implementation Plan focuses on strengthening MEPR in the Arctic. Environmental protection and response

operations have been integrated into the Arctic Coast Guard Forum planning cycle as the Council explores significant challenges that we must be ready to face. The U.S. Coast Guard is proficient with MEPR in lower latitudes. However, significant barriers to respond to oil spill recovery and environmental impact mitigation on ice continue to pose challenges due to difficult logistics and extreme weather faced in higher latitudes.

To overcome these barriers, D17, in partnership with federal, state,

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tribal, and local agencies, recently completed an oil spill response exercise in the Bering Straits. The breadth of agencies involved highlighted the need for a whole-of-government approach to governance in the Arctic, which the U.S. Coast Guard can coalesce. The U.S. Coast Guard can lean into its expertise in organizing and coordinating disaster response by participating in exercises supporting the Arctic Council's Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic (MOPSA). For the Atlantic Area Command, integrating this concept into Operation *Nanook* in 2024 and 2025 is also important to developing unity of efforts for future multinational response operations and contributing to MOPSA.

**ARCTIC RESILIENCE PERSPECTIVES FROM DEPUTY COMMANDER,
ATLANTIC AREA**

The Atlantic Area Command is responsible for coordinating operations throughout the Atlantic region, including operations within the Arctic: search and rescue; combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; capacity building with partner nations; and humanitarian relief and disaster response. Environmental changes in the Arctic are making the region more accessible and economically viable. The resultant implications are environmental and geopolitical stressors that require continuous U.S. Coast Guard presence to protect the mutual interests of the United States and its allies and partners in the region. One area of mutual interest that requires more attention is natural disaster response operations. In 2022, Typhoon Merbok brought devastating winds and storm surges on the Bering Sea coast in Western Alaska. This storm tested the emergency support functions of the National Incident Management System in Alaska. Similarly, the 2023 Atlantic basin hurricane season ranked among the most active in history and witnessed storms with impacts as far north as Canada and Iceland.

The increased frequency and size of Atlantic basin hurricanes and North Pacific and Arctic typhoons such as Merbok are threatening the Arctic region in ways previously unimagined.

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to international forums to ensure preparedness and unified response for climate-driven natural disasters in the future. Participation in these forums also provides the U.S. Coast Guard with an opportunity to learn from its international counterparts and improve its processes. The frameworks used for hurricane response in the middle latitudes can be applied to the high latitudes, such as leveraging organizational strengths with the Incident Command Structure that spans military and civilian agencies. Climate change is increasing the potential for these storms to become a regular occurrence and not simply an anomaly. All Arctic states must, therefore, be prepared to respond.

To further climate resiliency and emergency management, the Atlantic Area Command will continue engaging the Arctic community through senior leader engagements. For example, at the Arctic Frontiers conference in February 2024 in Tromsø, Norway, the author (RADM Moore) provided remarks on a focused session titled *Arctic Security—Local Resilience*. This session focused on the growing geopolitical shift, ongoing climate crisis, and rising military presence in the Arctic and how these impact businesses and communities regionally and locally. The panel sessions explored the collaboration between military and civil institutions to address security issues from emergency preparedness to the development

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of climate-resilient infrastructure. The Rear Admiral’s specific experience as the commander in Alaska during typhoon Merbok, coupled with his recent management of Atlantic Basin hurricanes, helped provide a unique perspective on how Arctic states can improve response to disasters in the high latitudes. The U.S. Coast Guard looks forward to deepening our coop-

eration with the international community on shared national interests in the high latitudes to better understand and act on the implications of climate change.

THE WAY AHEAD

With these objectives in mind, the U.S. Coast Guard has begun recapitalizing its icebreaking cutter fleet with Polar Security Cutters and signaling the need for other resources in the Arctic region. Force readiness in the Arctic is directly linked to sustained, predictable growth in capabili-

ties and capacities. This can be accomplished through investments in critical infrastructure and assets such as deepwater ports and ice-capable patrol vessels, which are imperative to overcoming the harsh Arctic environment and confronting geopolitical tension. The United States must have capable platforms and well-trained personnel to challenge strategic competitors while adhering to the rule of law, bolstering international collaboration, providing capacity for search and rescue response, environmental protection, scientific research, and enforcement of sovereignty and fisheries laws.

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In the absence of U.S. sovereign waters in the European Arctic, the U.S. Coast Guard addresses the strategic issue of Arctic governance through an engagement-based approach. As such, the Atlantic Area Command stands ready to collaborate with all actors to engage regional Coast Guard forums and participate in regional exercises and operations. By maintaining commitments, the United States can assert influence, improve coordination, and enhance international alignment across the spectrum of critical Arctic governance issues.⁹ Nevertheless, implementing the NSAR and addressing the strategic imperative of the Arctic Region is “contingent upon additional Service focused and whole-of-government investments in technologies, capabilities, resources, and personnel,” for which U.S. Coast Guard senior leaders will continue to advocate.¹⁰

Myriad strategies and articles address the strategic nature of the Arctic. The Atlantic Area Command will continue implementing these strategies by exporting best practices, building relationships, conducting operations with like-minded counterparts, and participating in regional working groups and forums. This work aims to build a strong multinational team capable of tackling emerging Arctic challenges. Along these lines of effort, the Service must continue evaluating and messaging its enduring role to secure sovereignty and promote regional governance. Throughout its history in the region, never has the U.S. Coast Guard’s presence and leadership in the Arctic been more important than it is today. The U.S. Coast Guard is uniquely qualified and positioned within the whole of government to confront this historical moment, overcome challenges, and keep the Arctic peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative. *f*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not to be construed as official or reflecting the views of the Commandant or the United States Coast Guard.

ENDNOTE

- 1 The White House, *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2022), 5.
- 2 Yoshifumi Tanaka, *The International Law of the Sea, Fourth Edition* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 158.
- 3 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy* (Xinhua, 2018), 3, <https://www.uaf.edu/caps/resources/policy-documents/china-arctic-policy-2018.pdf>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Brett Doyle, *Lessons on Collaboration from Recent Conflicts: The Whole-of-Nation and Whole-of-Government Approaches in Action* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Arthur D. Simons Center for Interagency Cooperation, 2019), 120. <https://thesimonscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/IAJ-10-1-2019-pg105-122.pdf>
- 6 United States Coast Guard, *Arctic Strategic Outlook Implementation Plan* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Commandant, 2023), 14.
- 7 Ibid, 17.
- 8 The White House, *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2022), 7.
- 9 Ibid, 12.
- 10 United States Coast Guard, *Arctic Strategic Outlook Implementation Plan* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Commandant, 2023), 14.