

U. S. Department of
Homeland Security

United States
Coast Guard



Commandant
United States Coast Guard

2703 Martin Luther King Jr Ave SE
Washington, DC 20593-7318
Staff Symbol: CG-0921
Phone: (202) 372-4411
Fax: (202) 372-8342

**TESTIMONY OF
VICE ADMIRAL PETER GAUTIER
COAST GUARD DEPUTY COMMANDANT FOR OPERATIONS**

ON

**“U.S. COAST GUARD LEADERSHIP ON ARCTIC
SAFETY, SECURITY, AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY”**

BEFORE THE

HOUSE COAST GUARD & MARITIME TRANSPORTATION SUBCOMMITTEE

7 DECEMBER 2022

Introduction

Good morning, Chair Carbajal, Ranking Member Gibbs, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. It is my pleasure to be here today to discuss the Coast Guard’s role in advancing national interests in the Arctic. The United States is one of only eight Arctic coastal States with both sovereign rights and sovereign responsibilities to safeguard our respective and shared interests. As climate change and strategic competition increasingly affect the geography, stability, and security of the Arctic region, U.S. Coast Guard presence and leadership have never been more critical.

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 a significant expansion of environmental tourism over the past five years. The dynamic and accelerated changes in the Arctic environment make Arctic waters more accessible, creating new opportunities and challenges, and increasing multinational strategic competition.

The Arctic’s dynamic evolution magnifies the importance of U.S. national security across the region and intensifies the demand for the Coast Guard’s services and leadership. 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. I understand the significant level of investments required to further champion our Nation’s efforts 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 Drivers Across the Arctic

The 2022 U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR) sets the vision for the Arctic as peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative. The four pillars to achieve that vision are security, which encompasses both homeland security and national defense, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, and international cooperation and governance. These pillars are interconnected in terms of domestic and international risks, effects, and mitigating actions. They require coordination with the State of Alaska and across a broad spectrum of Arctic stakeholders including Indigenous communities, partners and allies, domestic and international bodies, academics, scientists, and the private sector. Our 2019 Coast Guard Arctic Strategic Outlook and its three lines of effort – enhancing capability to operate effectively, strengthen the rules-based order, and innovate and adapt to promote resilience and prosperity – support the four NSAR pillars.

Peace and prosperity depend on adherence to the rules-based international order, particularly in the maritime domain. As we see around the globe, state and non-state malign actors take advantage of any governance gaps to poach natural resources or attempt to intimidate others through incursions into sovereign waters. Meeting these challenges requires the United States to be present, collaborate with others, and model professional behavior at sea. With our unique combination of authorities as an armed service, a law enforcement agency, a regulatory agency, and a humanitarian service, the Coast Guard is an ideal tool for the Nation to govern the U.S. Arctic maritime environment responsibly. The Coast Guard has excelled and will continue 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.

Pillar 1: Security and Capability

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 China 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.

As the only U.S. armed force with both military and law enforcement authorities, and as a member of the Intelligence Community, the Coast Guard seamlessly employs multi-mission assets and cross-trained personnel to advance U.S. Arctic priorities. The Coast Guard serves as a critical bridge between the power of the Department of Defense and the diplomacy of the State Department, cultivating strong international relationships and building coalitions among Arctic partners based on mutual interests and values. These relationships enhance safety, maritime governance, and prosperity across the region, which in turn strengthen both national security and regional stability.

The Coast Guard is directly observing increased strategic competition in the U.S. Arctic. Through the operations of its Seventeenth District, which is responsible for Coast Guard activities for an over 3,853,500 square mile area including Alaska and the Arctic, the Coast Guard meets presence with presence both to counter competition and positively influence behavior. Over the past two years, the Coast Guard has intercepted a Chinese military Surface Action Group, as well as a combined Russian-Chinese Task Group, operating in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone. In both instances, the Coast Guard's visible forward presence ensured that both groups operated in accordance with international law. The 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 empowering like-minded partners and allies to do the same in their Arctic waters.

Pillar 2: Climate Change and Environmental Protection

The effects of climate change span the Arctic's physical, operational, and strategic environments. These pronounced effects threaten the stability of Arctic communities and natural resources, the traditional lifestyles of Alaska Natives, and national sovereignty across the region. Addressing these impacts begins with an informed understanding of how, when, and where the physical environment is changing, which enables evidenced-based decision-making to reduce the operational and strategic consequences. Scientific research within the Arctic, in general, will require investments and a coordinated whole-of-government approach to inform policy decisions. The Coast Guard looks forward to supporting Arctic research endeavors through its robust partnerships with institutions like the National Science Foundation, U.S. Arctic Research Commission, Polar Institute, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S. Navy, and U.S. National Ice Center. The Coast Guard has long provided Arctic access by including interagency and international scientists aboard the USCGC *Healy* to conduct critical scientific research. This research, and the understanding it affords, has enabled the Coast Guard, along with our national and international partners, to protect the maritime environment, build community resilience, and shape the security environment.

While long-term trends indicate a more consistently navigable Arctic, near-term conditions are less predictable and thus more dangerous. In September 2022, Typhoon Merbok hit more than 1,000 miles of Alaska's west coast with hurricane-force winds, wave heights over 50 feet, and storm surges that were the highest recorded in almost 50 years. Storms of Merbok's magnitude usually occur in October and November after the formation of shoreside (first-year) ice that offers protection for coastal communities. However, unusually warmer waters in the Bering Sea enabled this storm's formation much earlier in the season. Merbok also hit during the fall subsistence harvest, damaging or destroying hunting and fishing boats and camps along the coasts and forcing immediate repairs to homes, businesses, and camps at the expense of harvest activities necessary to ensure winter food security in these communities.

In the face of Merbok's dangerous and challenging conditions, the Coast Guard provided critical value to the region by proactively advancing community resilience. As a visible, agile, and adaptive force, the Coast Guard helped to coordinate the Federal, Tribal, State, and local response.

The Service conducted damage assessments in 32 remote communities, focusing on bulk fuel facilities, and connecting waterways to ensure communities could receive their fuel shipments and other critical supplies ahead of the winter freeze-up. Natural disasters like Merbok are only expected to increase in frequency and severity as a result of climate change, and the Coast Guard will be increasingly called upon to respond.

Pillar 3: Sustainable Economic Development

As Arctic accessibility increases, so does the potential for new economic opportunities. The Arctic currently supplies roughly 10 percent of the world's oil and 25 percent of its natural gas, but it is estimated to hold 22 percent of the Earth's undiscovered oil and natural gas supply. It also contains significant deposits of minerals essential to technology supply chains; at present, Alaska has the world's largest zinc mine and the largest known graphite deposit in the United States. Today, Alaska's top export is its seafood, topping \$6 billion in labor income annually, \$15 billion in economic output, and accounting for over 40% of the total U.S. seafood exports and a significant portion of global seafood supply.

These valuable resources are driving increased maritime activity in the U.S. Arctic. Oil and gas exploration has surged, as has environmental tourism. During the 2022 operating season, at least eight transits of adventure tour ships were planned from Greenland to Nome. As another means of enabling sustainable development, the Coast Guard supports scientific research, such as NOAA studies on the distribution of impacts to the region's fish and marine mammal stocks as well as other aspects of wildlife ecology. These studies also help inform our domain awareness and operational risks across the region. For example, understanding where fish stocks are moving and how commercial, recreational, and subsistence harvesters are responding enables the Coast Guard to proactively manage the waterways as well as protect both the mariners and the environment.

Since 2009, the Coast Guard has influenced Arctic governance and sustainable development through Operation Arctic Shield. This Operation demonstrates the Coast Guard's operational capability, asserts leadership and models responsible international governance in a region of key geostrategic importance. The annual Operation includes three task forces – National Security and Enforcement, Aviation, and Marine Safety. Through these task forces, the Coast Guard, along with its Federal, Tribal, state, and Arctic Nation partners, protects sovereignty, enhances domain awareness, and regulates commercial activity. This year's operational highlights included the Coast Guard's interception of a Russian vessel fishing illegally in U.S. waters. The Coast Guard notified our counterparts in the Russian Border Guard who, at our request, investigated the incident and fined the vessel. The Coast Guard also conducted spill response and mass rescue exercises with Arctic hub communities, industry partners, and various other Tribal, state, and local stakeholders. These exercises enable our ability to not only protect people and the environment but also enhance our ability to maintain the Arctic's waterways and marine transportation system, the primary transportation mechanism across the region. This operational presence and responsible model of governance positions the Coast Guard as a central U.S. leader in influencing, shaping, and protecting sustainable economic development, subsistence lifestyles, and cultural traditions in the Arctic across the international landscape.

Pillar 4: International Cooperation and Governance

The Coast Guard's unique authorities, experience, and leadership distinguish it from the other Armed Services and traditional military instruments of national power. Leveraging these skills and characteristics provides the ability to both model responsible governance and compete below the level of armed conflict across the Arctic landscape. A key tenant of the new NSAR and the 2019 Coast Guard Arctic Strategic Outlook is asserting international leadership to advance cooperation that upholds international law, rules, norms, and standards for the Arctic coastal states and other non-Arctic flag States whose ships sail in Arctic waters. Upholding this strategic initiative, the Coast Guard consistently asserts its leadership and provides guidance and direction through such preeminent multilateral forums as the Arctic Council and the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

The Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) similarly acts as a bridge between diplomacy and operations. This forum continues to serve as an independent, but complementary, body to the Arctic Council, with an operational focus on safe and environmentally responsible Arctic maritime activity. Since 2017, the Coast Guard has conducted multiple exercises with partner Arctic nations through the ACGF. These exercises enhance interoperability and provide a platform for direct dialogue among the Arctic agencies fulfilling Coast Guard 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. This cooperation includes joint exercises, such as the 2021 ARCTIC GUARDIAN exercise, conducted under Iceland's Chairmanship, which explored both large-scale search and rescue and oil spill response protocols to a cruise ship incident in Arctic waters.

Despite Russia's illegal war against Ukraine, the Coast Guard continues to bolster international cooperation and leadership commitments with the other Arctic Nations. The Coast Guard continues to participate in bi-lateral and multi-lateral Arctic exercises and patrols throughout the Arctic region with like-minded partners. This cooperation highlights that all other Arctic nations are aligned in upholding international law, rules, norms, and standards for those operating in the region. Participation in these activities enables the Service to build experience operating across the region, expand response capacity with international partners, and strengthen these strategic relationships.

Building Arctic Capacity

The ability for the United States to protect U.S. national sovereignty, safeguard our homeland, and lead in the Arctic hinges on physical presence and access. U.S. operational presence and influence in the Arctic are founded on Coast Guard polar icebreakers. These ships provide assured, year-round access to the Polar Regions not only for 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.

Thanks to Congressional support for the Coast Guard's Polar Security Cutter (PSC) program, which includes our Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 President's Budget request of \$167.2 million for PSC program management and production activities, Coast Guard presence will continue well into the future. The PSC is a top acquisition priority for the Coast Guard and the Navy and is vital for the U.S. 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 Coast Guard-Navy Program Office continues to work actively with the prime contractor to mitigate schedule risks and ensure effective and efficient use of U.S. taxpayer dollars to deliver this critical capability. With Congress's continued support, the Nation is closer than we have been in over 40 years to recapitalizing our icebreaking fleet. Continued investment is key to meeting our Nation's growing needs in the rapidly evolving and dynamic Polar Regions.

The FY 2023 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 U.S. has vital national interests in the Polar Regions and the purchase of a commercially available polar icebreaker is a viable strategy to 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, the Coast Guard also needs adequate Arctic-capable surface and aviation assets, properly trained and equipped personnel, enhanced communication and domain awareness capabilities, and logistics resources. As outlined in the Coast Guard's 2019 Arctic Strategic Outlook, closing gaps in these areas requires a whole-of-government approach coupled with consistent investment to meet not only the challenges the Arctic presents, but also the opportunities.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard has served and shaped national security in the Arctic for over 150 years and continues to play a critical role in the whole-of-government approach to secure national interests in the Polar Regions. The Coast Guard, and the Nation, must remain committed and agile in the rapidly evolving geopolitical and operational Arctic.

The continued support of the Administration and Congress for a modernized and capable polar fleet and increased Coast Guard Arctic capacity and capabilities will fortify the Nation's position in this age of Arctic prominence. 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 Coast Guard. I look forward to answering your questions.