



**TESTIMONY OF  
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**ON**

**“COAST GUARD ARCTIC OPERATIONS”**

**BEFORE THE**

**SENATE COMMERCE, SCIENCE, & TRANSPORTATION SECURITY  
SUBCOMMITTEE**

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**Introduction**

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. It is my pleasure to be here today to discuss the Coast Guard’s role and activities to advance national security priorities across the Arctic Region. This effort includes safeguarding U.S. sovereignty and executing our national responsibilities while effecting safe, secure, and environmentally responsible maritime activity.

The U.S. Arctic remains particularly dynamic, evolving environmentally, operationally, and strategically. Environmental changes, combined with the tyranny of distance and limited infrastructure, exacerbate the harshness of the operating environment. The types and levels of commercial activity are also transforming, from a surge in oil and gas exploration a few years ago to increases in vessel transits and expansion of environmental tourism. These alterations in types and location of activity, along with the changes in the physical environment, coincide with the reemergence of great power competition across the globe which are exemplified in the Arctic. The importance of, and demand signal for, Coast Guard’s services and leadership have never been greater as these dynamic challenges magnify U.S. national security interests across the Arctic.

**National Security Drivers Across the Arctic**

The actions and intentions of Arctic and non-Arctic nation states continue to shape the security environment and stability of the region. The geopolitical environment is evolving as state and non-state actors seek to advance their own interests in the Arctic. Allies, partners, and competitors increasingly contend for diplomatic, economic, and strategic advantage and influence. Russia and China exemplify that competition. Both have declared the Arctic a strategic priority; both have made significant investments in new or refurbished capabilities; and both are exerting direct or indirect influence across the region.

Russia's expansive Arctic has the potential to support naval fleets readily deployable between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. This region also represents significant economic opportunities, such as oil and gas extraction and development and attempted control of the Northern Sea Route for trans-Arctic shipping. As such, Russia continues to plan and expand its capabilities and capacity to influence and surge throughout the Arctic. This year, Russia launched the first in a new class of nuclear-powered icebreakers, which they sailed to the North Pole. In addition to continuing the expansion of its extensive icebreaker fleet, its renewed capabilities include air bases, ports, weapons systems, domain awareness tools, and search-and-rescue stations. Furthermore, Russia recently established an inter-agency commission of the Russian Security Council focused on ensuring Russian national security interests in the Arctic. Finally, Russia recently completed Exercise Ocean Shield 2020, a multi-theater exercise involving participation by both its Pacific and Northern Fleets and including maneuvers in the Northern Bering Sea and Arctic approaches. Through this exercise, Russia extended its operations into the U.S. exclusive economic zone and interfered with the safety and sovereignty of the U.S. fishing fleet, indicating a willingness to push the boundaries of acceptable, responsible behavior and governance.

China continues to aspire to assert influence across the Arctic including pursuit of economic investments in key strategic areas such as rare-earth elements, oil and gas development, air and sea ports, railways, and infrastructure to further its strategic objectives. Last year, China launched its first domestically-built icebreaking vessel, the Motor Vessel XUE LONG 2, which operated in the Arctic this year, including taking a sediment core sample while operating on the waters over the United States' extended continental shelf. China is also designing an even more powerful polar icebreaker expected to have twice the icebreaking capability of XUE LONG 2. With three icebreakers, China could outpace U.S. icebreaker capacity and polar access by 2024. The primary concern with Chinese activities in the Arctic is the potential to disrupt the cooperation, stability, and governance in the region for both Arctic and non-Arctic states.

### **Coast Guard Leadership in the Arctic**

The Coast Guard has shaped and influenced national security in the Arctic for over 150 years. This effort includes asserting the Nation's sovereign rights, upholding our sovereign responsibilities from the strategic to the tactical level, and countering malign influence that is contrary to U.S. values and international rules and norms. The Service's missions have evolved along with the evolution of the physical, operational, and strategic environments.

As the only U.S. Armed Force with both military and law enforcement authorities, combined with membership in the Intelligence Community, the Coast Guard seamlessly shifts between mission sets utilizing multi-mission personnel and assets. Specifically, the Coast Guard's constabulary functions and broad authorities serve as a critical bridge between the hard-power lethality of the Department of Defense (DoD) and soft-power diplomacy of the State Department. These characteristics enable the Service to cultivate strong international relationships and build coalitions among Arctic partners based on mutual interests and values that strengthen national security and regional stability while enhancing safety, maritime governance, and prosperity across the region.

Where strategic goals align, the Coast Guard works closely with the DoD to ensure efficient operations. The Coast Guard is a member of the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, a EUCOM-sponsored multi-national group concerned with Arctic security issues, including maritime domain awareness. We work closely with NORTHCOM through the Arctic Capabilities Assessment Working Group, which was created to identify potential collaborative efforts to enhance Arctic capabilities in communications, maritime domain awareness, and presence. The Service's role as a member of the Intelligence Community offers a natural nexus for broad intelligence and information sharing, as appropriate, to counter nefarious actions in the Arctic and throughout the world. These efforts are only a few examples of partnerships between the Coast Guard and DoD.

This year, Arctic operations and engagements have faced unique challenges and interruptions, mostly due to the global pandemic of COVID-19. However, because of these challenges and the growing strategic imperatives across the Arctic, the Service has adapted operations to meet the Nation's mission demands. The following highlights some of these initiatives that have particular impacts on the Nation's readiness as well as national and international security.

### **Advancing Safety and Security in the U.S. Arctic**

Operation ARCTIC SHIELD is the Coast Guard's year-round planning and operations effort that incorporates an expeditionary approach for deploying resources and conducting integrated operations to meet statutory mission demands, buys-down maritime risk, and advances national security objectives through maritime operations in the United States Arctic. ARCTIC SHIELD 2020 objectives included advancing national and Coast Guard strategic goals; enhancing capabilities to operate effectively in a dynamic Arctic; strengthening the rules-based order; and innovating and adapting to promote safety, resilience, and prosperity. An emergent priority was to protect Arctic residents by not transmitting or contracting COVID-19 while conducting missions. The pandemic imposed challenges on engagements and presence, both in communities and across the maritime domain, but has also presented other opportunities to broaden Arctic experience, training, and operational readiness to safeguard the U.S. Arctic.

The Coast Guard conducted additional, unscheduled patrols in Arctic waters this season with CGC HEALY, CGC ALEX HALEY, and CGC MUNRO. With these patrols, the Service monitored foreign maritime activity, including the Arctic deployment of the XUE LONG 2; enhanced monitoring and enforcement of maritime activities including commercial fishing in the United States exclusive economic zone and along the maritime boundary line with Russia; supported other U.S. marine scientific research; and protected U.S. sovereign interests. This activity included a joint patrol with a Russian Border Guard vessel along the U.S. / Russian maritime border that highlighted the Coast Guard's continued focus on regional cooperation to combat trans-Arctic threats such as illegal fisheries. Additionally, aircrews trained with CGC HEALY and CGC MUNRO as they patrolled in the Chukchi Sea and Bering Strait region, recertifying aircrews in shipboard landings in order to extend the operational reach of the Coast Guard into the higher latitudes.

As in the past few seasons, the Coast Guard deployed two MH-60 helicopters to Kotzebue, Alaska for four months to enhance response capabilities and provide direct support to communities in the U.S. Arctic region.

These helicopters have flown over 390 flight hours, and executed eight long range search and rescue missions. Additionally, they provided critical support to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Office of Naval Research, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and the University of Washington in multiple missions to include assisting scientific research studying marine mammals plus Arctic ice and environmental conditions. Coast Guard HC-130 and MH-60 aircrews also conducted regular Maritime Domain Awareness flights, establishing a U.S. Government presence over U.S. Arctic waters, protecting U.S. sovereign interests, and executing U.S. responsibilities.

Because of pandemic concerns in Antarctica, the National Science Foundation informed the Service that it will not use CGC POLAR STAR to support the McMurdo Station resupply mission this year. This change affords the Coast Guard the unique opportunity to conduct maritime operations in the U.S. Arctic during the winter. From December 2020 to February 2021, POLAR STAR will project power throughout the Arctic and defend American sovereignty along the U.S. and Russia maritime boundary line. This opportunity enhances Coast Guard readiness by increasing Arctic ice navigation proficiency and informs operations of the future Polar Security Cutters.

### **Building Arctic Capacity**

The ability for the U.S. to lead in the Arctic, both strategically and operationally, hinges on physical presence to protect U.S. national sovereignty and safeguard our homeland security interests. The foundation of the Coast Guard's operational presence and influence is U.S. icebreakers, whose purpose is to provide assured, year-round access to the polar regions for executing not only Coast Guard missions but also national missions in the high latitudes.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Congress for its continued support of the Coast Guard's Polar Security Cutter program, which awarded a contract for the detail design and construction of the first ship in 2019. This program is efficiently managed through the joint Navy-Coast Guard Integrated Program Office, which was established to accelerate the project and leverage best practices from each Services' shipbuilding programs. Because of Congress's support and this partnership, the Nation is as close as 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.

Until the delivery of Polar Security Cutters, the Coast Guard must maintain cutters POLAR STAR and HEALY, the nation's only operational icebreakers. Robust planning efforts for a service life extension on POLAR STAR are already underway, and initial work for this project will begin in 2021, with phased industrial work occurring annually through 2023. The end goal of this process will be to extend the vessel's service life until delivery of at least the second new Polar Security Cutter. The recent casualty to CGC HEALY, our only medium icebreaker, underscores the importance of this effort. It also highlights the Nation's limited bench strength for this particular mission set, and the importance of devoting sufficient resources for maintenance and repair activities to aging assets.

On June 9<sup>th</sup> of this year, the Administration released a Presidential Memorandum on Safeguarding U.S. National Interests in the Arctic and Antarctic Regions that directed a review of requirements for a polar security icebreaking fleet acquisition program that supports our national interests in the Arctic and Antarctic regions. This memorandum highlights the Administration's priority for securing national interests in the Arctic and for recapitalizing the Nation's icebreaker fleet. The Coast Guard will continue to work within the Department of Homeland Security, with the Department of Defense, and with other Departments in responding to the Nation's need in the Arctic.

The Coast Guard must continue to evaluate options to advance U.S. interests in the region, which extend beyond the provision of icebreakers. As outlined in the Coast Guard's 2019 Arctic Strategic Outlook, in order to respond to crises in the Arctic, our Nation must also muster adequate personnel, aviation, and logistics resources in the region. To meet the challenges of the Arctic as a strategically competitive space, the Coast Guard must also expand its means to shape the security environment and respond to, intercept, and collect information on activities and intentions of those operating in the Arctic region.

### **Advancing Strategic Leadership and National Security Across the Arctic**

As many nations and other stakeholders across the world aspire to expand their roles and activities in the Arctic, the Coast Guard continues to be a leader across the region, expanding collaboration, cooperation, and interoperability.

The Service exercises leadership through engagement in Arctic Council activities including representation on a variety of working groups. As Chair of the Marine Environmental Response Experts Group, the Coast Guard engaged with Russia during the response to the June 2020 Arctic oil spill in Siberia, the worst ever in the region, and continues to work with partners to identify and apply lessons-learned from the spill to reduce risks in the United States. As a member of the Shipping Experts Group, the Coast Guard supports projects such as mitigation of risks associated with the use and carriage of heavy fuel oil by vessels in the Arctic. The Coast Guard also chairs the Council's Search and Rescue Experts Group, served on the Council's Task Force on Arctic Marine Cooperation, and has been active in other task forces that established the 2011 Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement, the 2013 Oil Spill Prevention and Response Agreement, and the 2015 Framework for Oil Pollution Prevention.

Additionally, the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) continues to be a bridge between diplomacy and operations. Formally established in October 2015, the ACGF operationalizes all of the elements of the Service's Arctic strategy, as well as the objectives of the Arctic Council. It is a unique, action-oriented maritime governance forum where the Coast Guard and peer agencies from the other seven Arctic nations<sup>1</sup> strengthen relationships, identify lessons learned, share best practices, carry out exercises, conduct combined operations, and coordinate emergency response missions. In April 2019, the ACGF conducted its second live exercise<sup>2</sup>, POLARIS, which incorporated six ships and five aircraft from ACGF member nations to respond to a simulated cruise ship in distress near Finland.

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<sup>1</sup> Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia and Sweden

<sup>2</sup> The first live exercise, Arctic Guardian, was held in September 2017

The exercise was a successful demonstration of combined operations, and highlights the criticality of coordination preparedness for maritime environmental response and search and rescue. In April 2021, the ACGF will hold its third live exercise off the coast of Iceland.

When Russia assumes chairmanship of the Arctic Council and the ACGF in Summer 2021, the Coast Guard will continue to encourage advancement of shared ACGF objectives, including more collaboration with operational Arctic entities and increasing joint response capability for both search and rescue and marine environmental response cases.

The Coast Guard has also supported Arctic safety through other international bodies such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The Coast Guard was instrumental in the IMO's development and adoption of the International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code), which is mandatory under both the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution of Ships (MARPOL).

The Polar Code covers the full range of design, construction, equipment, operational, training, search and rescue, and environmental protection matters relevant to ships operating in the inhospitable waters surrounding the two polar regions. Additionally, in November 2017, the Coast Guard collaborated with the Russian Federation to jointly develop and submit a proposal to the IMO to establish a system of two-way routes in the Bering Strait and Bering Sea, with the objective of advancing the maritime transportation system in the region; promoting the safe, responsible flow of commerce; and de-conflicting commercial uses of the waterways with subsistence activities.

The Coast Guard continues to work to expand the Service's influence across the Arctic. From July through September of this year, the Coast Guard deployed CGC CAMPBELL and CGC TAHOMA in the North Atlantic region to participate in joint military and Search and Rescue exercises. This included engagements with the Danish Joint Arctic Command, Canada, and France. These operations demonstrate the Service's strong relationships with international partners across the globe.

### **Improving Critical Communications in the U.S. Arctic**

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges in the Arctic is simply communicating. Out of necessity, the Coast Guard uses a variety of solutions to communicate in the Arctic, which minimally satisfies current operational requirements. The Service is undertaking multiple connectivity and communications efforts to support and improve operations in the Region and will partner with the Department of Defense and other partners when possible. These efforts include recapitalizing our military satellite communications terminals, upgrading high-speed data "Cutter Connectivity" solutions with emerging polar satellite services, replacing all Coast Guard cutter High Frequency (HF) radios, and reengineering the terrestrial HF network. These efforts will dramatically improve the Service's Arctic communications and operations in the Arctic.

Additionally, the Coast Guard is working with the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology (S&T) Directorate to execute a comprehensive review of mariner communications and connectivity needs with the broader Federal, State, local, and industry communities of interest in the Arctic. We have also engaged the DHS S&T Arctic Domain Awareness Center of Excellence (ADAC) at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, to conduct relevant research. The intent is to identify areas of possible collaboration in a whole of government approach and potential public-private partnerships to address shared communication and connectivity gaps and needs.

## **Conclusion**

The Coast Guard's value proposition in the Arctic includes upholding freedom of navigation and the rules-based order by setting and enforcing standards of behavior in the maritime domain. The Coast Guard's role in our whole-of-government approach to securing our national interests in the polar regions is using our experience, leadership, and ability to both influence and compete below the level of armed conflict. Leveraging the Service to set the example for maritime governance in the Arctic positions the United States to be the preferred partner of other Arctic allies and stakeholders to positively shape the security environment across the region. The Coast Guard, and the Nation, must remain committed and agile in the rapidly evolving geopolitical and operational Arctic environments.

The Administration's and Congress' continued support for a modernized and capable polar fleet and Arctic infrastructure will posture not only the Coast Guard, but the Nation, to lead across the national and international landscape to build a coalition of like-minded partners in order to shape the Arctic domain as a continued area of low tension and great cooperation while preserving our national interests and rights. We understand the significant investment required to secure the Arctic, and we appreciate the trust the Nation has placed in the Service. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and for all you do for the men and women of the Coast Guard. I look forward to answering your questions.