



DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY

Briefing papers by Ernie Regehr, O.C., Senior Fellow in Arctic Security

November 12, 2015

The Arctic Coast Guard Forum: advancing governance and cooperation in the Arctic

The eight states of the Arctic region have agreed to establish a new means of cooperating in support of public safety, search and rescue, and environmental protection in the Arctic, making the Arctic Coast Guard Forum another step toward solidifying the Arctic as cooperative security community. As US Admiral Zukunft said of the new Forum: “we have an opportunity to... make [the Arctic] a region that focuses on humanitarian concerns, on environmental concerns, on the way of life of indigenous tribes, and not as a war-fighting domain.”

The agreement to foster cooperation and coordination among the region’s Coast Guards is one part of the response to steadily changing Arctic realities. Increasing maritime traffic, the potential for intensified resource extraction, and hopes for expanded fishing are challenging Arctic states to improve their capabilities in areas such as search and rescue, environmental protection (including oil spill response capacity), aids to navigation, border control, fisheries inspection, policing services, and maritime domain awareness.¹ And enhanced international cooperation is one way to try and meet those requirements more effectively and efficiently. The Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) established at the end of October follows on the Arctic Council’s 2011 search and rescue agreement² and 2013 oil spills response agreement³ and is intended as a concrete step towards implementation of those earlier agreements.

As if to punctuate the importance of improving maritime regulation and emergency response capacity within the region, the Chinese cargo-shipping giant, Cosco, also announced at the end of October that it plans regular container shipments along the Northern Sea Route on the Russian side of the Arctic Ocean. For the time being the Russian Northeast route is more attractive than the Canadian Northwest passage because of less predictable ice conditions in the latter and because Russia has a more advanced marine infrastructure and continues to make major investments in it.⁴

While increased traffic, both through traffic like Chinese shipping and increased traffic to destinations in the Arctic linked to increased human activity in the region, can be a boon to economic development, to national Coast Guards it’s more a matter of preparing for the worst. While some may be fixated on the trillions of dollars’ worth of oil and gas reserves the Arctic is said to hold, Coast Guards are mandated to worry about what happens when a ship spills oil or a drilling operation goes horribly wrong. They need to think about “what happens if a cruise ship hits an uncharted sea mount and you have three thousand cruise ship passengers stranded on the ice or on the ship.”⁵

An official of the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans, under which the Canadian Coast Guard operates, notes that “the Forum was envisioned to provide an opportunity for coast guards with an Arctic area of responsibility to focus on and advance operational issues of common interest in the Arctic, such as search and rescue, emergency response, and ice-breaking, to facilitate multi-level collaboration between coast guards and to support the work of the Arctic Council.” Carole Saindon said collaboration among all eight states of the Arctic on such operational matters “is to everyone’s benefit.”⁶

The eight members that signed the ACGF founding document at the end of October are also the members of the Arctic Council (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia, and the United States), and while the Forum will operate independently of the Arctic Council, their mandates are inextricably linked. The ACGF Chair will follow the pattern of the Arctic Council Chair, which rotates in two year terms from country to country. The heads of the national Coast Guards will meet annually, with working groups – currently the combined operations group and the ACGF secretariat – meeting more often as needed.

The ACGF is described as “an operationally-focused, consensus-based organization with the purpose of leveraging collective resources to foster safe, secure, and environmentally responsible maritime activity in the Arctic.”⁷ Operational cooperation is expected to include data sharing, shared learnings on best practices, and cross-border exercises in search and rescue and oil spill prevention and mitigation.

While some Coast Guards are civilian agencies, and others are military, the activity coordinated under the ACGF will be toward the civilian and constabulary end of the spectrum. The US Coast Guard is a military organization but it has a tradition of defining itself as a law enforcement rather than a war-fighting organization. Captain Peter Troedsson, a USCG Military Fellow, puts it this way: “While some analysts have suggested that the Coast Guard become more of a war-fighting service to uphold maritime security and prevent conflict in the Arctic, this reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the Coast Guard’s value and purpose. It is vitally important not to confuse maritime constabulary operations with defense or combat operations. The Coast Guard prides itself on having fought in each of the nation’s conflicts, but its stock-in-trade is its law enforcement, regulatory, and first-responder role.”

Troedsson quotes Ellsworth Bertholf, the first commandant of the Coast Guard in the early 20th Century, on the difference between the Navy and the Coast Guard. “The Coast Guard exists for the particular and main purpose of performing duties which have no connection with a state of war, but which on the contrary, are constantly necessary as peace functions.” He called it “essentially an emergency service” organized along military lines.⁸

Apart from its operational dimensions, it is noteworthy that while the ACGF has emerged in a context of fraught relations with Russia in other contexts, the Forum’s debut is supported by some significant testimonies on the merits and reality of Arctic cooperation. In fact, some of the overt references to cooperation with Russia seem a direct rebuke of the Canadian Government’s posture more than a year earlier when the signing of the Coast Guard agreement was to have taken place in Canada but was prevented when the Harper Government refused to allow Russian officials to take part.⁹

The Commandant of the US Coast Guard, Admiral Paul Zukunft, called the establishment of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum “a critical step forward in our collective efforts to promote safety, security and environmentally-responsible maritime activity in the Arctic.”¹⁰ And noting the presence of his Russian counterpart, Admiral Yuri Alekseyev, he went on to say that “we have an opportunity to lay out a strategic framework for the Arctic, to make it a region that focuses on humanitarian concerns, on environmental concerns, on the way of life of indigenous tribes, and not as a war-fighting domain. An area that we can work with collegially and not as adversaries”¹¹

A Gordon Foundation seminar earlier this year also saw the development of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum as a means of enhancing cooperative Arctic governance “by bridging the divide between military and civilian forums....”¹²

As noted here before, one of the definitions of a regional security community is the realistic expectation that the region's conflicts will be resolved without recourse to military force. Participants at the founding of the ACGF agreed that while there may be, and are, tensions with Russia in other contexts, such tensions are not present at operational levels in the Arctic.

The region has fostered a climate of cooperation, even though geography itself is an obvious challenge to meaningful maritime cooperation – notably, the combination of the vast maritime distances of the Arctic, the measured pace of marine travel, and the relatively small numbers of vessels available in the region mean that cross-border maritime assistance is unlikely to become routine. And while increased intra-region cooperation in search and rescue and among first responders can only help, even formal arrangements for cooperation across borders cannot overcome the huge distances. That means that all Arctic states are faced with the need for major additions to infrastructure within their own jurisdictions. Until now the political remoteness of the Arctic has allowed states like Canada and the United States to make infrastructure promises without actually following through on them, but that era is ending.

Of course, it's not surprising that cooperation with Russia is still challenged in some quarters, but some challenges do seem genuinely surprising. A recent analysis on the CBC website refers to Russia's militarization of the Arctic and to the "shockwaves" it "sent through the Pentagon."¹³ Brian Stewart, a former senior correspondent with the CBC and currently a distinguished fellow with the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto, concludes that "militarization of the Arctic is always worrisome because of the quaint vagueness surrounding who owns what. This sovereignty holdover from the colonial era still hasn't been settled, which means disputed expansions and future intimidation can be expected, not unlike what's going on now in the South China Sea."¹⁴

There is little that is actually vague about who owns what in the Arctic. Maritime boundaries are well established (with the Canada/US boundary in the Beaufort Sea really the main exception). The extent of each nation's control over its continental shelf remains to be settled, but the Law of the Sea process is explicit and clear on that how that process will work – with decisions on additional maritime space to be brought under national control being made on the basis of scientifically delineated continental shelf extensions. Furthermore, all the Arctic Ocean states agreed in 2008 in the Ilulissat Declaration¹⁵ that "the law of the sea provides for important rights and obligations concerning the delineation of the outer limits of the continental shelf, the protection of the marine environment, including ice-covered areas, freedom of navigation, marine scientific research, and other uses of the sea. We remain committed to this legal framework and to the orderly settlement of any possible overlapping claims."

Under this new Coast Guard Forum, contact and cooperation with Russia promise to become routine, reinforcing prospects for the Arctic continuing to develop as an arena of cooperation.

Notes

¹ Andreas Osthaugen, "The Arctic Coast Guard Forum: Big Tasks, Small Solutions," The Arctic Institute, 03 November 2015.

² Agreement On Cooperation On Aeronautical And Maritime Search And Rescue In The Arctic, 2011.
[http://library.arcticportal.org/1874/1/Arctic_SAR_Agreement_EN_FINAL_for_signature_21-Apr-2011%20\(1\).pdf](http://library.arcticportal.org/1874/1/Arctic_SAR_Agreement_EN_FINAL_for_signature_21-Apr-2011%20(1).pdf)

³ Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic, 2013.
<http://www.ec.gc.ca/international/default.asp?lang=En&n=7772EA0E-1>

⁴⁴ David Thurton, "Arctic shipping route through Russia planned by Chinese company," CBC News, 30 October 2015.
<http://www.cbc.ca/new>

⁵ Tina Detelj, "Joint statement signed at first-ever Arctic Coast Guard Forum in New London," WTNH, 30 October 2015. <http://wtnh.com>

⁶ Levon Sevunts, "Arctic nations sign agreement on coast guard cooperation," Radio Canada International, 30 October 2015. <http://www.rcinet.ca/en>

⁷ Katie Braynard, "Establishment of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum," Coast Guard Compass, 30 October 2015. <http://coastguard.dodlive.mil>

⁸ Captain Peter Troedsson, "A Coast Guard for the Emerging Arctic," Council on Foreign Relations, 31 May 2013. <http://www.cfr.org>

⁹ Bob Weber, "8 Arctic countries sign historic coast guard deal," The Canadian Press, CBC News, 22 October 2015. <http://www.cbc.ca/news>

¹⁰ "Eight Arctic Nations Join Forces for Coastal Security," *Environment News Service*, 31 October 2015. <http://ens-newswire.com>

¹¹ Michael Melia, "Arctic coast guards pledge co-operation at US meeting," The Associated press, CBC News. <http://www.cbc.ca/news>

¹² "Coast Guard Co-operation in a Changing Arctic," A seminar Report April 2015, The Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Program in cooperation with The Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies. The Gordon Foundation. <http://gordonfoundation.ca/publication/749>

¹³ Brian Stewart, "Forget Syria, Russia's muscle is moving closer to Canada's doorstep," CBC News, 02 November 2015. <http://www.cbc.ca/news>

¹⁴ Brian Stewart, "Forget Syria, Russia's muscle is moving closer to Canada's doorstep," CBC News, 02 November 2015. <http://www.cbc.ca/news>

¹⁵ The Ilulissat Declaration, Arctic Ocean Conference, Ilulissat, Greenland, 27 – 29 May 2008. http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Ilulissat_Declaration.pdf