



ARCTIC SECURITY BRIEFING PAPERS

Prepared by Ernie Regehr, O.C., Senior Fellow in Arctic Security and Defence

November 16, 2017

Arctic Coast Guard Forum – Cooperative Security Under Construction

The first ever “live exercise” involving all eight countries of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) rightly has some observers hailing this new forum’s potential for reinvigorating pan-Arctic security cooperation. Significant challenges remain – not the least being ongoing wariness of Russian military developments and growing Chinese interest¹ in the region, pushing some states towards the more familiar models of military competition – but the region-wide ACGF clearly affirms security cooperation as essential to survival in the Arctic. To the extent that all states of the region “benefit from a rules-based international order that enhances economic well-being, respects human rights and human dignity, and supports mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of disputes while providing for territorial integrity,”² the pursuit of more formalized, and thus more sustainable, forms of mutual security promises to remain a feature of Arctic geopolitics. The slow emergence of cooperative pan-Arctic Coast Guard operations in the Arctic is a case in point.

The Arctic Coast Guard Forum was established in 2015, with all eight Arctic Council states part of the arrangement. Two important developments in 2017 have helped move it towards becoming an operational presence in the region. All eight members of the ACGF (Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, and the United States) agreed to a statement on doctrine, tactics, procedures, and information sharing.³ And the ACGF conducted its “first live exercise,” described as “full-scale naval drills” in the Denmark strait near Reykjavik.⁴ All eight Arctic States participated, but maritime assets used were from Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and the United States, and air assets were from Canada, Denmark, Iceland and the United States.⁵

The Canadian contingent⁶ included the CCGS *Pierre Radisson*,⁷ a medium weight icebreaker able to manage ice a meter thick and carry provisions for 140 days and enough fuel to travel 15,000 nautical miles at cruising speed. The *Pierre Radisson* operates in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the winter and the Arctic in the summer.

The demands for state emergency response services in the Arctic are substantial and growing – hence, the focus of the live exercise on training to meet obligations under the 2011 Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic. The 2013 Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic represents another major requirement for state preparedness – all driving the need to convert cooperation in principle to practical capabilities through pan-Arctic exercises. Coast Guard roles in the region also include the provision of navigation aids, border/sovereignty patrols, fisheries inspections, and constabulary operations – which in turn requires enhanced maritime domain awareness.⁸ There are also responsibilities that accrue to the Coast Guards for implementing the new Polar Code, established by

the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in 2017. The IMO is the UN agency with responsibility for the safety and security of shipping and the prevention of marine pollution by ships. Its newly established and mandatory Polar Code goes beyond other IMO requirements to set minimum standards for the design, construction, and operation of ships in the polar regions. It also requires special training and environmental protection measures⁹ - and Coast Guards are mandated to monitor and ensure compliance.

The key strategic goals of the ACGF¹⁰ presume a significant regional governance presence: the pursuit of a stable, predictable, safe, secure, and transparent maritime operational environment; promoting cooperation among the region's Coast Guards toward those ends; building a common operational picture and shared domain awareness; supporting high operational standards; and sharing information and best practices. That means an operationally-focused ACGF, as the US Coast Guard described it after completing two years in the Chair and handing it off to Finland, "with the purpose of leveraging collective resources to foster safe, secure and environmentally responsible maritime activity in the Arctic."¹¹

But, even in times of normalized relations among states in the region, there are practical limits on full cooperation. Sovereignty patrols and support for constabulary forces, are examples of functions not conducive to joint operations, and joint operations are obviously also limited by geography – the vast distances make it unlikely, for example, that Canadian search and rescue assets will ever be available to assist Norway in an emergency.¹²

Nevertheless, cooperation among Arctic states, and especially with Russia, is recognized as essential, if challenging. Seven of the eight Arctic states are linked to NATO. Five are members of NATO and two (Finland and Sweden) are cooperating partners – and given the currently vexed state of relations between NATO and Russia, Moscow also harbors a certain measure of understandable wariness. But, as Andreas Østhagen, a Norwegian scholar with strong links to Canadian academics and researchers, concludes, "how much the Forum will be hampered by the current political situation, ultimately, is dependent on the willingness [of Arctic states] to keep [the ACGF] sheltered from the larger political environment in the Arctic and beyond." He notes, and we should all hope, that "in most cases, coast guard affairs constitute so-called 'low politics', which states tend to separate from larger diplomatic affairs."¹³

Thus, the ACGF has the potential – through joint engagement on International Maritime Organization requirements, the development of joint Search and Rescue units in strategic locations,¹⁴ and through regular joint exercises – for rising above the vagaries of geopolitics and promoting an overall climate of cooperation. A US Council on Foreign Relations task force report on Arctic security concludes, for example, that the ACGF offers "a practical, operationally focused context for confidence-building with Russia on Arctic issues," including in "cooperative maritime law enforcement."¹⁵

The importance of operational cooperation through the Arctic Coast Guard Forum is highlighted by Commander Ásgrímur L. Ásgrímsson of the Icelandic Coast Guard. All regional Coast Guards, he says, need each other, because all have long coast lines, extensive search and rescue areas, extreme weather and sea conditions, ice, few assets, and a lack of infrastructure. All in the context of increased human activity.¹⁶

The American policy community, as reflected in a recent release from Washington’s Wilson Center approvingly quoting Finnish Member of Parliament Katri Kulmuni, is generally oriented toward cooperation: “If we want to save the Arctic, we need the Arctic countries to cooperate.”¹⁷ That clear imperative is qualified by Kulmuni’s lament that, “right now, we are in a situation where we seem to be lacking the trust to continue in an open and constructive manner.”

Coast Guard cooperation has the potential for building trust and thus speaks to the larger question of cooperative region wide governance in the Arctic. The Wilson center notes that despite some disagreement within the Arctic Council regarding the “direction and pace” of regional governance developments and arrangements, there is what it calls a surprising level of agreement on the basic need for “a system of Arctic governance.” And such a system should, it is broadly recognized, “address five fundamentals – the need to protect the environment; develop resources sustainably; ensure that Arctic inhabitants benefit from that development; broaden participation in Arctic decision-making processes; and promote cooperation instead of conflict in the region.”¹⁸

The Canadian academic and Arctic expert Heather Exner-Pirot reminds us of the plethora of organizations and international agreements that already contribute to Arctic Governance. Sub-regional government-to-government cooperation occurs through groupings like the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the West Nordic Council. Indigenous communities come together through organizations like the Inuit Circumpolar Council and the Saami Council. International agreements like the Law of the Sea and the International Maritime Organization are especially important to Arctic Governance,¹⁹ and then there are the Arctic-wide agreements on search and rescue and oil spill recovery. In other words, Arctic governance is diverse and evolving, and as Østhagen points out, the ACGF “adds another layer to the governance of the region, ideally taking a step beyond the conference rooms and into real-life operations and practical action.”²⁰

Notes

¹ One such interest obviously includes shipping, which led to the successful voyage of the Chinese icebreaker, the *Xuelong*, through the Northwest Passage this fall, with Canadian cooperation and science personnel on board. Nathan Vanderklippe, “China casts its ‘net’ over Northwest Passage in search of a shortcut,” *Globe and Mail*, 15 November 2017. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/china-reveals-plans-to-ship-cargo-across-canadas-northwest-passage/article29691054/>

² “Arctic Imperatives: Reinforcing US Strategy on America’s Fourth Coast,” Council on Foreign Relations, Independent Task Force Report No. 75, 2017. <https://www.cfr.org/event/arctic-imperatives-reinforcing-us-strategy-americas-fourth-coast>

³ “Arctic Coast Guard Forum Agrees Protocols,” *The Maritime Executive*, 24 March 2017. <http://maritime-executive.com>

⁴ “Arctic Coast Guard Forum member countries to hold drills in the Denmark Strait,” <http://arctic.ru/international/>

⁵ “The First Operational Exercise, Arctic Guardian, of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, held in Iceland,” 11 September 2017. <https://www.arcticcoastguardforum.com/>

⁶ “Arctic Guardian – the Arctic Coast Guard Forum’s first live exercise,” Canadian Coast Guard. http://www.ccg-gcc.gc.ca/Fleet/Vessel?vessel_id=91

⁷ http://www.ccg-gcc.gc.ca/Fleet/Vessel?vessel_id=91

⁸ Andreas Østhagen, “The Arctic Coast Guard Forum: Big Tasks, Small Solutions,” Sebastian Bruns and Adrian J. Neumann (eds.) *Maritime Security Challenges: Focus High North*, Institute for Security Policy Kief University, 2016.

⁹ “Milestone for polar protection as comprehensive new ship regulations come into force,” International Maritime Organization (IMO), Briefing: 01 January 2017.

<http://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/PressBriefings/Pages/02-Polar-Code.aspx>

¹⁰ <https://www.arcticcoastguardforum.com/>

¹¹ “Coast Guard joins Arctic stakeholders in historic forum,” United States Coast Guard, Press Release, 24 March 2017.

<https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USDHSCG/bulletins/18fb6e2>

¹² Østhagen (2016).

¹³ Østhagen (2016).

¹⁴ Østhagen (2016).

¹⁵ Arctic Imperatives, Council on Foreign Relations (2017).

¹⁶ The Arctic: In the Face of Change, an Ocean of Cooperation, NewSecurityBeat, by Wislon Center Staff, 28 September 2017. <https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/>

¹⁷ “The Arctic: In the Face of Change, an Ocean of Cooperation” (2017).

¹⁸ Douglas C. Nord, “The Challenge of Arctic Governance,” The Wilson Quarterly, Summer 2017.

<https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/into-the-arctic/the-challenge-of-arctic-governance/>

¹⁹ Heather Exner-Pirot, “Why governance of the North needs to go beyond the Arctic Council, OpenCanada, 14 October 2016. <https://www.opencanada.org/features/>

²⁰ Østhagen (2016).