

Commentary

## **The Arctic Coast Guard Forum: A Welcome and Important Step**

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In October 2015, the eight Arctic states will send their heads of coast guard or equivalent official delegation to the US Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut, where the Commandant of the Coast Guard will host a ceremonial summit and the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) will be formally launched. A terms of reference document that outlines the basic framework of the ACGF will be finalized at the summit signatory meeting, and this will serve as the foundation for a Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC). The MOC will become the non-binding document that establishes the ACGF as an international body with rules and organizational responsibilities.

This moment will mark the advancement of a commitment on the part of all Arctic states to cooperate at the operational level in the maritime Arctic. The operational level is where the rubber meets the road: where missions are executed afloat and in port, where helicopters are scrambled, inspections carried out, and incident response units deployed. While high-level diplomacy gets more attention, the kind of inter-service relationship-building at the operational level promised by the ACGF can lead to immediate benefits to Arctic communities and stakeholders.

The ACGF is a welcome step. At a time when the region is facing unprecedented challenges, including warming that is occurring at a rapid pace, the establishment of the ACGF is a concrete sign that Arctic nations are committed to cooperation in the North, despite other differences. Recognizing that increasing access to the Arctic Ocean will increase the demands placed upon Arctic

states for the scarce operational resources available in this remote region to respond to missions such as search and rescue, as well as enforcement of regulations pertaining to environmental protection, fishing, and vessel safety, the ACGF will provide a forum where Arctic states can build cooperation and leverage available resources to maximize operational effectiveness. The ACGF will build on existing Atlantic and North Pacific Coast Guard Forums, and will be operationally focused and consensus based. While independent of the Arctic Council, the ACGF will be complimentary to AC efforts.

Through building relationships at the operational level, as well as sharing best practices and lessons learned, Arctic coast guards can improve their individual mission fulfillment as well as refine cooperative responses to incidents that require a multi-lateral response. The ACGF offers practical benefits to all Arctic nations, especially those with large search and rescue territories as defined in the 2011 Arctic Search and Rescue treaty.

The ACGF is not only welcome, but important. The extreme conditions and distances present in the Arctic maritime region, particularly across North America and Russian coasts, pose significant challenges to efficient execution of coast guard missions. Several recent incidents of note demonstrate that the dangers of the Arctic region argue forcefully for coordinated international response capacities. For example, the extended transit of a Canadian barge, which drifted over 1,300 miles from Canadian waters, through US waters, before reaching Russian waters where it was finally retrieved,<sup>1</sup> demonstrates not only the challenges present in the region, but also the critical importance of building strong working relationships between all Arctic coast guard agencies at the operational level. Another example, the sinking of the South Korean fishing vessel, the Oryong 501, which sank in heavy seas in December 2014, triggered an international response including US and Russian parties along with South Korean vessels.<sup>2</sup> While the Oryong 501 sank in the Russian SAR zone, the proximity and capability of US Coast Guard assets led to a response including USCG assets, working with Russian and South Korean authorities.

The examples above should make clear that grave incidents occur in the Arctic, and as maritime traffic increases and weather patterns become (even) less predictable as the climate continues to destabilize, their frequency is likely to increase. With this in mind, the establishment of the ACGF can be applauded as a concrete step that will bring the Arctic states together to respond collaboratively to a challenge that involves them all. The establishment of the ACGF will further advance the interests of all Arctic states in ensuring safe and sustainable vessel traffic in the Arctic region.

## Notes

1. For more information about the barge, please see a series of articles in the Alaska Daily News. Most recently, <http://www.adn.com/article/20150316/supply-barge-adrift-arctic-months>.

2. For more information, see for example KTUU coverage at <http://www.ktuu.com/news/news/us-coast-guard-hands-off-massive-bering-sea-search-to-south-korea/30242314>.