

U. S. Department of
Homeland Security

United States
Coast Guard



Commandant
United States Coast Guard

2703 Martin Luther King Jr Ave SE
Washington, DC 20593-7000
Staff Symbol: CG-0921
Phone: (202) 372-4411
FAX: (202) 372-8300

**TESTIMONY OF
ADMIRAL CHARLES D. MICHEL
COAST GUARD VICE COMMANDANT**

**ON
“COAST GUARD ARCTIC IMPLEMENTATION CAPABILITIES”**

**BEFORE THE
HOUSE COAST GUARD AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION SUBCOMMITTEE**

JULY 12, 2016

Introduction

Good morning Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. It is my pleasure to be here to discuss the U.S. Coast Guard’s expanding mission demands in the Arctic.

The Coast Guard is the world’s premier, multi-mission, maritime service responsible for the safety, security and stewardship of U.S. waters. At all times a military service and branch of the U.S. Armed Forces, a federal law enforcement agency, a regulatory body, a first responder, and a member of the U.S. Intelligence Community, the Coast Guard operates on all seven continents and throughout the homeland, serving a nation whose economic prosperity and national security are inextricably linked to vast maritime interests. We safeguard the nation’s maritime interests through our broad authorities, unique capabilities, and vast partnerships.

To ensure our service is aligned with national strategies and best positioned to address these complexities, we have developed a five-year Strategic Intent and continue to focus on our Western Hemisphere, Arctic, Energy and Cyber strategies. By using these strategies as guideposts, leveraging the intelligence community, and employing a risk-based approach to direct our resources where they are needed most, we are able to address maritime threats with greater precision and effect.

Indeed, the Coast Guard is fully engaged answering the call and balancing a multitude of dynamic maritime risks facing our nation. Guided by the National Strategy for the Arctic Region and our own Arctic Strategy, we are taking a proactive, but measured, approach to the increasing mission demands in the Polar Regions.

Increasingly Active Polar Regions

The United States is an Arctic nation, and the Coast Guard is responsible for safety, security and environmental stewardship where our sovereign rights extend in the Arctic region, including the resource rich seabed along our Extended Continental Shelf. These are not new requirements. The Coast Guard has been operating in Polar Regions since the United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867. Then, as now, our mission included protecting our sovereign rights, enforcing treaties and U.S. laws and regulations, conducting search and rescue and environmental response operations, assisting in scientific exploration, and fostering navigation safety. Yet, the Polar Regions are evolving as changing weather patterns and receding ice continue to introduce risks and opportunities in the Arctic. As ice melts, sea lanes and access to natural resources open, increasing the national interest in safe and responsible use of this vital region. Interest in the Polar Regions and the natural riches they contain, is on the rise, and requires us to plan for a more robust U.S. maritime presence commensurate with development of the region. Icebreakers that can assure access throughout the Arctic are a key element of that planning.

United States Security Interests in the Polar Regions

Consistent with the National Strategy for the Arctic Region, our highest priority is to protect the American people, our sovereign territory and rights, natural resources, and interests of the United States. To this end, the United States will identify, develop, and maintain the capacity and capabilities necessary to promote safety, security, and stability in the region through a combination of independent action, bilateral initiatives, and multilateral cooperation. As many nations across the world aspire to expand their role in the Arctic, the Coast Guard is collaboratively working through appropriate fora to address the emerging challenges and opportunities in the Arctic region, while we remain vigilant to protect the security interests of the United States and our allies.

The Polar Regions present unique opportunities and challenges to United States security interests. Relatively few countries in the world can claim sovereign rights to any portion of the Arctic, and few have the resources to operate consistently and effectively in these harsh and remote areas. U.S. security in the Arctic encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, ranging from those supporting safe commercial and scientific operations to national defense. To respond to this challenge, the United States will enable our vessels and aircraft to operate, consistent with international law, through, under, and over the airspace and waters of the Arctic, to support lawful commerce, achieve a greater awareness of activity in the region, and intelligently evolve our Arctic operations and capabilities, including ice-capable platforms as needed.

Meeting these challenges requires the United States to develop and maintain capacity for year-round access to greater expanses within Polar Regions. In the Arctic, highly capable icebreakers will ensure the United States can meet our national interests, protect and manage our natural resources, enable U.S. forces to uphold freedom of the seas consistent with international law, and strengthen our international, state, local, and tribal relationships. In the Antarctic, they can also provide capability to resupply our scientific outposts while also supporting treaty obligations.

Icebreaker Requirements

The 2010 High Latitude Mission Analysis Report (HL MAR) identified the need for three heavy and three medium icebreakers under the assumption that in the future Coast Guard would be required to perform nine of its eleven statutory mission year-round in the Arctic and support all icebreaking needs for the National Science Foundation in Antarctica. The primary differences between heavy and medium icebreakers are endurance and power. The Coast Guard considers a heavy icebreaker to be one that can operate year-round in the Arctic, with the necessary systems and endurance to protect its crew in the event it had to “winter-over” in substantial ice conditions. In addition to exceptional power, a heavy icebreaker must have a fully mission capable cutter endurance of 80 days underway without replenishment, be able to deploy helicopter detachments, and be able to perform the full suite of Coast Guard missions. As Coast Guard vessels are considered U.S. Warships under International Law, a heavy icebreaker must be fully interoperable with interagency and international stakeholders, including the Department of Defense, to carry out National Defense Operations.

Whereas a heavy icebreaker has the power and endurance to operate year-round in the changing ice conditions of the Polar Regions, medium icebreakers can only operate seasonally in the Arctic. The Coast Guard has chartered an Integrated Product Team to define an Operating Concept and requirements for a Medium Icebreaker. While medium icebreakers like the HEALY provide critical capability identified in the HL MAR, the age and condition of our only operational heavy icebreaker, POLAR STAR, makes recapitalizing this heavy icebreaking capability a higher priority.

Icebreaker Status

The current Coast Guard icebreaker capacity is one heavy polar icebreaker, CGC POLAR STAR – commissioned in 1976, and one medium icebreaker, CGC HEALY – commissioned in 2000. An additional heavy polar icebreaker, CGC POLAR SEA, is in a caretaker status and has not been operationally viable for nearly 10 years. When assessing our current inventory, it is helpful to understand the history that led us here.

The acquisition of our heavy polar icebreakers over 40 years ago introduced a shift in our operating regime from several less capable icebreakers that worked in tandem with supply convoys, to fewer more capable icebreakers capable of operating independently. The WIND Class icebreakers, a product of the U.S. naval build-up for World War II, were smaller and less capable ships that operated in groups of two or three. The POLAR Class requirements initially supported four heavy POLAR icebreakers to replace the seven aged WIND Class vessels, but other priorities ultimately led to a decision to build two: POLAR SEA and POLAR STAR. The harsh polar operating environment, coupled with the arduous nature of actually breaking ice, age these vessels more quickly than our normal surface assets. When both were operational, we maintained a self-rescue capability and were able to balance maintenance periods to better mitigate wear and tear caused by the unforgiving operating environment. Today, substantial annual maintenance and upkeep is required in order to maintain the minimum operating capability our current inventory represents.

Acquisition

In September 2015, the President directed the Coast Guard to accelerate construction of the first new heavy icebreaker and to begin planning for additional assets. Consistent with this commitment, the President's FY 2017 Budget includes \$150 million to accelerate the acquisition of a new heavy Polar Icebreaker. This investment reflects our interests as an Arctic Nation and affirms the Coast Guard's role in assuring access to this region. Since the President announced this initiative last September, the Coast Guard has made progress toward recapitalizing our heavy icebreaker fleet and have worked closely with our federal partners throughout this process. Key stakeholders participated in the identification of operational requirements, and the Coast Guard completed the heavy icebreaker Operational Requirements Document (ORD) earlier this year.

We have also completed initial industry outreach efforts that included a highly successful industry day with over 200 stakeholders, and over 50 one-on-one discussions with vendors, shipyard representatives and other industry professionals in conjunction with the release of a technical package laying out the high-level design and performance requirements. Industry has shown an eagerness to participate in this process, and we welcome their input. Developing new icebreaking capability at best possible speed remains among the Service's highest priorities.

The Coast Guard acquisition team is aggressively finalizing an acquisition strategy, and this year we plan to publish a draft specification for design. This will be followed by a statement of work and a draft Request for Proposal to provide additional opportunity for industry to review and submit comments before a final solicitation is released.

Sustainment

The Coast Guard also understands that we must maintain our existing heavy and medium icebreaking capability while proceeding with recapitalization. Maintenance of the POLAR STAR will be critical to sustaining U.S. heavy icebreaker capability until new heavy icebreakers are commissioned. To mitigate the risk of crippling failure, we have engaged in a yearly dry dock maintenance cycle to overhaul critical components and make repairs necessary to keep the POLAR STAR operational. While the maintenance cycle has ensured the POLAR STAR's availability for the annual McMurdo break-out, it increases the POLAR STAR's time away from homeport to roughly 300 days per year and this is not sustainable over the long term.

We are on track to complete the POLAR SEA materiel condition assessment and alternatives analysis to determine whether it is most prudent to decommission or reactivate this ship. These efforts will determine the scope of work and costs to reactivate POLAR SEA based on the vessel's current condition. The latter part of this effort will also consider whether an additional service life extension on POLAR STAR would be the most prudent option for maintaining heavy icebreaker capability while the Coast Guard proceeds with a new acquisition.

Acknowledging that our only medium icebreaker is approaching 20 years of age, we are also taking initial steps to prepare for a mid-life maintenance availability on HEALY as was indicated in the President's FY 2017 Budget which included \$1.5 million for this purpose. We are also investigating the feasibility of segmented midlife maintenance projects to mitigate impacts to operations.

Building the 21st Century Coast Guard

History has proven that a responsive, capable, and agile Coast Guard is an indispensable instrument of national and international security. Funding 21st century Coast Guard icebreakers is an especially prudent investment. To ensure we are equipped to address the demands of the evolving Arctic operating environment, the Coast Guard, with the continued strong support of the Congress, is accelerating acquisition of a heavy icebreaker and beginning to plan for additional icebreakers. Modern platforms and a strong, resilient workforce will ensure the Coast Guard is prepared to meet 21st century challenges.

Conclusion

As we approach our 226th anniversary, with the continued support of the Administration and Congress, the Coast Guard's future is bright and we will continue to live up to our motto to be Semper Paratus – Always Ready. I look forward to continuing to work with the Administration and Congress to answer the President's call for new heavy polar icebreakers as soon as they can be built. We understand the significant investment recapitalizing this fleet represents, and appreciate and embrace 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 your feedback and answering your questions.