



**TESTIMONY OF
VICE ADMIRAL PETER GAUTIER
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AND
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DEPUTY COMMANDANT FOR MISSION SUPPORT
ON**

“SNOWED IN: U.S. DISINVESTMENT IN THE ARCTIC”

BEFORE THE

**TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COAST GUARD & MARITIME TRANSPORTATION**

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Introduction

Good morning, Chair Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. It is our pleasure to be here today to discuss the Coast Guard’s Arctic investments and operations, and their benefits to our national interests. The United States is an Arctic nation, and the Coast Guard has been a key leader and interagency and international partner in advancing maritime safety, security, and stewardship in our Arctic homeland and across the entire Arctic region for over 150 years. Through routine presence, meaningful engagements, and deliberate actions that strengthen maritime governance, the Coast Guard provides a full suite of missions and services to Americans living in the U.S. Arctic and promotes a peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative Arctic during a time of great regional change.

The Arctic is undergoing a dramatic transformation across the physical, operational, and geostrategic domains. We are witnessing firsthand the increasing impacts of climate change and how it is enabling new access to Arctic waters. Arctic activity is increasing and evolving at a rapid pace, from migrating fish stocks and changing fishing patterns to growth in types and locations of vessel transits, including an expansion of tourism. Greater storm impacts and thawing permafrost affect maritime communities across the U.S. Arctic. Accelerated changes in the Arctic environment make Arctic waters more accessible, creating both opportunities and challenges.

At the same time, the Arctic is a region of increasing geostrategic activity, amongst partners and competitors alike. In and near the U.S. Arctic, the Coast Guard is observing increased presence by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Russia, which are engaged in unilateral and combined military and coast guard activities, as well as increased research vessel presence. Internationally, the Coast Guard and Arctic partners are increasing activities and engagements that support our common goals.

The Coast Guard has the right combination of authorities, mission expertise, and partnerships to address U.S. Arctic equities head on. However, the Service needs significant investment to modernize and grow our capabilities to keep pace with rapidly evolving challenges and to advance our Nation’s interests in the Arctic, and we appreciate the trust and support of Congress and the American people. The Service will continue to prioritize actions that safeguard U.S. interests and serve Americans while promoting safe, secure, and environmentally responsible maritime activity in the Arctic.

Arctic Strategies and National Priorities

The Coast Guard is guided in our actions and investments through a set of national, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and Coast Guard strategies. The National Security Strategy (NSS) emphasizes constraining Russia and outcompeting the PRC, and the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR) emphasizes national defense and homeland security and states that our highest priority is to protect the American people and our sovereign territory. In 2022, the Administration released the Implementation Plan for the NSAR, which serves as a blueprint for the Nation’s investments to achieve these national priorities. In addition, in July 2024, the Department of Defense (DoD) published the 2024 Arctic Strategy, which outlines DoD’s plan to enhance its Arctic capabilities, deepen engagements with allies and partners, and exercise calibrated presence in the Arctic. The Coast Guard contributed to the development of both the NSS and NSAR and its Implementation Plan, and we will continue to be at the forefront of Arctic strategic leadership.

In October 2023, the Coast Guard published its Arctic Strategic Outlook Implementation Plan to fulfill our obligations across national strategies. This plan underscores the Coast Guard’s commitment to promoting safety, sovereignty, and stewardship in the region by describing actions the Service will take over the next decade, given the requisite support and investment. In addition to expanding the Coast Guard icebreaker fleet, the plan aspires to develop additional capabilities and capacity, increase Arctic domain awareness and communication capabilities, strengthen the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) and Arctic Council leadership, and modernize the U.S. Arctic Marine Transportation System (MTS). These actions are necessary to meet national strategic objectives and to advance the Arctic priorities of DHS, for which the Coast Guard has a leading role.

Strategy to Action

A peaceful, stable, and prosperous Arctic region that is increasingly open to human activity requires sound rules-based governance and responsible behavior in accordance with international norms. As the NSAR states, we continue to “expand U.S. engagement and leadership, pursue new partnerships and arrangements that advance shared interests, and prepare for increased and evolving activity in these regions.” With our unique combination of authorities – as an armed force, a law enforcement agency, a regulatory agency, and a humanitarian service – the Coast Guard is an ideal instrument for the Nation to responsibly engage in this unique maritime environment. However, given the vast and unforgiving reaches of the Arctic region, the Coast Guard needs more capable modern assets and resources.

We continue to strengthen maritime safety, security, and stewardship in Alaska and the U.S. Arctic through Operation Arctic Shield, providing persistent cutter presence, rotary wing aircraft positioned seasonally, and sustained personnel engagements for search and rescue, law enforcement, and security missions. As maritime traffic through the Bering Strait and Northern Sea route increases because of receding sea ice and Russia’s changing economic factors, the Coast Guard tracks vessel movements and continues to engage in spill response preparedness with partners. Additionally, through partnerships with Alaska communities and federal partners, the Coast Guard will continue to build resilience to the impacts of climate change to conserve critical Arctic maritime ecosystems.

The geopolitics in the Arctic continue to evolve as state and non-state actors seek to advance their interests in the region. As allies, partners, and competitors increasingly contend for diplomatic, economic, and strategic advantage and influence across the globe, these trends also manifest in the Arctic region. Russia and the PRC exemplify this competition – both declared the Arctic a strategic priority; both made significant investments in new or refurbished capabilities; and both are attempting to exert direct and indirect influence across the region.

Russian, PRC, and joint Russian-PRC activities are dramatically increasing in the U.S. Arctic. The Coast Guard tracks these activities, and we continue to “meet increasing presence with presence” along the U.S.-Russian maritime boundary line and within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) through Operation *Frontier Sentinel*, both to ensure our sovereign rights and assure behavior is in keeping with international norms. Between July and October 2024, the Coast Guard monitored three Chinese research vessels operating in the area above the U.S. extended continental shelf. The Service also monitored a PRC Naval Surface Action Group (SAG) and a separate Russian Federation Navy SAG with our cutters and aircraft. Additionally, this year, for the first time, we observed a joint Russian Border Guard and Chinese Coast Guard exercise in the Arctic, an indication that their Arctic cooperation is expanding. As this type of activity continues to increase, the Coast Guard remains committed to meeting presence with presence to ensure that Russian and PRC vessels operate in accordance with international law in a region important to the United States.

This summer, CGC *Healy* conducted underway operations to enhance presence in the U.S. EEZ in the Arctic, support the National Science Foundation’s research into global climate change impacts, and further enhance the safety of the Arctic MTS. These operations were conducted in addition to Coast Guard fisheries enforcement, search and rescue cases, and other extensive marine safety-oriented regulatory activities in Alaskan villages. For each village engagement, Coast Guard members integrate with the local communities and governments to enhance relationships, build partnerships, and provide training in areas such as boating safety and ice rescue.

To reinforce our role as a trusted and reliable partner, the Coast Guard actively participates in bilateral and multilateral Arctic exercises and at-sea engagements with Canadian and European partners. These are critical for advancing multilateral capabilities, integrating with multinational defense allies, and exchanging best practices during fleet integration training. Collectively, they improve our capacity to respond to maritime threats and advance Coast Guard and broader U.S. government interests with key Arctic partners.

The Coast Guard remains a principal member of the ACGF, the North Atlantic Coast Guard Forum, and the North Pacific Coast Guard Forum, and supports U.S. efforts in the Arctic Council. The ACGF is a bridge between diplomacy and operations, serving as an independent, complementary body to the Arctic Council with an operational focus on safe and environmentally responsible maritime activity. The Coast Guard conducts exercises with partner Arctic states through the ACGF to enhance interoperability and provide a platform for direct dialogue among Arctic agencies fulfilling coast guard-like functions. The ACGF is planning its first live exercise since a pause due to COVID and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The exercise will occur in April 2025, ahead of Norway's scheduled transfer of the Arctic Council and ACGF chairmanship to Denmark.

The Arctic Council is the principal multilateral forum for Arctic governance. The Coast Guard provides expertise and leadership in Arctic Council working groups, particularly those related to environmental protection and search-and-rescue. These investments position the United States to model responsible governance and sustainable development across the region.

Investing in Arctic Capabilities

These broad operations and wide-ranging activities are executed in one of the globe's most expansive, remote, and unforgiving maritime environments. We are the only federal agency responsible for assuring surface vessel access to polar regions. Our vast responsibility supports myriad national security and strategic objectives and requires commensurate investment. To maintain operational readiness while we recapitalize and build the capacity and capability necessary to meet increasing Arctic challenges, the Coast Guard requires predictable, consistent, and expanded investment. To keep pace with the ever-increasing rate of change, we must provide our workforce with modern assets, systems, and infrastructure to support mission execution. In line with this direction, and with strong congressional support, the Service continues to invest in a multibillion-dollar portfolio of acquisition programs established to deliver capabilities to meet these national demands.

With strong support from Congress, the Coast Guard is investing in Arctic capabilities to meet these challenges. We are building Polar Security Cutters (PSC), Offshore Patrol Cutters (OPC), Fast Response Cutters (FRC), aircraft, and vital shore infrastructure required to meet America's operational needs. Over the past five years, Congress appropriated more than \$500 million that directly invests in Alaska's shore infrastructure, \$1.1 billion for the two OPCs that will be homeported in Kodiak, over \$250 million for four FRCs homeported throughout Alaska, and \$125 million for a Commercially Available Polar Icebreaker that will be homeported in Juneau. Alaskans are already benefitting from earlier funding that included \$625 million for the five C-130s and nearly \$200 million for the six MH-60T helicopters that are already operating out of Air Station Kodiak. Other investments include more than \$800 million for the PSC, \$60 million to sustain CGC *Polar Star*, and \$350 million for the PSC's homeport in Seattle, Washington, that will advance Coast Guard mission execution in the Arctic.

All told, these amount to just over \$3.3 billion in investments over the past five years. The combined \$3.3 billion represents more than one-third of the \$9.6 billion the Service has received in Procurement, Construction, and Improvement (PC&I) appropriations over the same five-year timeframe.

Highlighting the importance of the investments in polar icebreakers, the United States, Canada, and Finland earlier this year announced their intent to create the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort (ICE) Pact. This proposed trilateral arrangement is intended to strengthen the shipbuilding industry and industrial capacity of each nation and build closer security and economic ties among our countries through information exchange and mutual workforce-development focused on building polar icebreakers. The Coast Guard is supporting DHS and the Department of State's effort to craft the framework of this agreement and looks forward to working with our trilateral partners to advance our Nation's icebreaking capacity through collaboration.

Polar Icebreaking

Heavy polar icebreakers are the foundation of U.S. operational presence and influence in the polar regions. These multi-mission cutters provide assured, year-round access not only for Coast Guard missions, but also in support of critical activities that protect key U.S. interests in the high latitudes. The Coast Guard faces gaps in capability that challenge our ability to operate reliably and meet mission needs. For instance, achieving persistent presence in the Arctic and seasonal Antarctic presence requires a fleet mix of eight to nine icebreakers – including both heavy and medium types. Today we rely on an aging and limited ice-breaking fleet.

With the strong support of this Subcommittee, we are moving forward with the acquisition of the Nation's first new heavy polar icebreakers in nearly five decades. When fully operational, PSCs will provide the global reach and icebreaking capability necessary to project U.S. presence and influence, conduct Coast Guard missions in the high latitudes, and advance our national interests.

Through an Integrated Program Office (IPO), the Coast Guard and Navy are leveraging each Services' experience and expertise in large, complex vessel acquisition programs. The Coast Guard and Navy remain committed to attaining the necessary design maturity prior to beginning production activities. Detail design activities are very nearly complete, and long lead-time material for the lead ship has been delivered to the shipyard. The IPO has adopted an innovative and incremental approach to support early production, Prototype Fabrication Assessment (PFA), which is based on Navy best practices. By prioritizing and starting production on up to eight low-risk modules, PFA allows the shipbuilder to progressively build workforce capability, test new processes and equipment, and reduce production risk. Six modules are currently under construction. These modules have achieved near 100 percent design maturity and present very low risk of re-work. All of these efforts combined are aimed to begin PSC production as soon as possible.

Earlier this year, the Coast Guard notified Congress that the PSC program would exceed cost and schedule thresholds. The program has been working closely with Bollinger Shipyards, who acquired the shipyard from VT Halter Marine in 2022, and is nearing the end of the long and complex process of reviewing their proposal and, following Bollinger's acquisition of the shipyard from VT Halter Marine, negotiating the contract modifications necessary to formally establish new cost and schedule parameters in the updated acquisition program baseline. This work is occurring in parallel with ongoing program activities to support delivery of the PSC fleet as quickly as possible.

To maintain heavy polar icebreaking capability until the PSC class is delivered, the Coast Guard will complete an innovative and successful service life extension on Coast Guard Cutter *Polar Star*, the Nation's only operational heavy polar icebreaker, in 2025. The cutter recently completed the fourth of five planned annual work periods which will enable continued operation of the aging cutter.

Likewise, the Service has initiated a service life extension program for Coast Guard Cutter *Healy*, the Service's only operational medium polar icebreaker, which was commissioned in 1999. The five-year phased production builds upon the lessons learned from *Polar Star*'s service life extension and is planned to be completed between 2026 and 2030. This effort will recapitalize a number of major systems while addressing significant operational degraders to maintain the Coast Guard's required medium icebreaking capability.

In addition to the ongoing maintenance and service life-extending work in the Service's current fleet and with the Subcommittee's support, the Coast Guard received funding in Fiscal Year 2024 to procure a commercially available polar icebreaker. The purchase of a commercially available polar icebreaker is an effective strategy to increase operational surface presence in the near-term and add long-term national capacity in the Arctic. Under the authority granted by the Don Young Coast Guard Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 2022, as augmented by the temporary correction in the current short-term continuing resolution, the Coast Guard intends to acquire the motor vessel *Aiviq*, which is the only available U.S.-built icebreaker that meets the Service's requirements.

The negotiations to purchase *Aiviq* are underway, and the Coast Guard's initial activities will be directed at achieving initial operational capability for deployment to District 17 in the spring of 2026. A series of phased modifications will occur between annual Arctic operations to achieve full operational capability. We look forward to adding this important medium icebreaker to our fleet furthering our ability to meet increasing demands in the Arctic.

Conclusion

The physical, operational, and geopolitical environment in the Arctic continues to change rapidly, driving demand for U.S. investments, to include Coast Guard presence, influence, and services. The Coast Guard has shaped national security in the Arctic for over 150 years and is central to a U.S. whole-of-government approach to securing national interests in the Polar Regions.

Continued support for a modernized and capable polar fleet and increased Coast Guard Arctic capacity and capabilities will fortify the Nation's position in the increasingly critical Arctic domain. Coast Guard leadership is essential in maintaining a coalition of like-minded partners to shape the Arctic domain as a peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative region. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and for your actions to support the members of the Coast Guard.