

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Strengthen the Coast Guard's Presence in the Arctic

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The Arctic region is becoming increasingly important to U.S. national interests. Ice in the Arctic has reached the lowest level since records began in 1979, opening up new possibilities for maritime trade, tourism, and natural resource exploration. Consequently, more actors than ever before will be operating in the Arctic region.

This reality will present both challenges and opportunities for the United States. The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) will play a vital role in ensuring America's interests in the Arctic. In order to do so, the sea service needs to be properly funded and resourced.

**The Role of the U.S. Coast Guard.** In the Arctic, sovereignty equals security and stability. Respecting the national sovereignty of others in the Arctic while maintaining the ability to enforce one's own sovereignty will ensure that the chances of armed conflict in the region remain low.

This is where the USCG plays such an important role. The USCG has had a continuous presence in the Arctic since 1867, when the Revenue Cutter Service, the precursor to the Coast Guard, was assigned to the region. Since then, the USCG has performed

numerous search-and-rescue missions (SAR), facilitated the flow of maritime traffic by escorting ships with its icebreaking capabilities, and responded to numerous other emergency and non-emergency incidents.

In 1965, the U.S. Navy (USN) transferred its fleet of eight icebreakers to the Coast Guard. Since that time, the Coast Guard's polar assets have atrophied severely. Currently, the USCG is operating one icebreaker, the *USCGC Healy*, which serves primarily as a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration research vessel.

Other Arctic nations (such as Russia, Norway, and Canada) continue to field robust icebreaking capabilities with many heavy-duty icebreakers and assets in the region.<sup>1</sup> America's icebreaking capabilities are lagging behind. While the self-declared requirement for U.S. icebreakers is three heavy-duty and three medium-duty vessels,<sup>2</sup> the USCG currently operates only one heavy-duty icebreaker (the *USCGC Polar Star*) and one medium-duty icebreaker (*the Healy*). Furthermore, the *Polar Star* requires significant maintenance to return to operational status, leaving the *Healy* as the only functioning polar icebreaker fielded by the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

The lack of icebreaker presence in the Arctic greatly inhibits the USCG's ability to achieve its objectives in the polar regions without the help of foreign nations.<sup>4</sup> Reliance on foreign nations, especially those with which the United States has an unsteady relationship, should be unacceptable when it comes to matters of national security

**More Than Breaking the Ice.** The USCG should plan to extend its reach in the Arctic not only with its icebreakers but also with operating

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bases, aviation assets, and vessels hardened to withstand the harsh conditions of the region. Currently, the USCG operates only one forward-operating location (FOL)—in Barrow, Alaska, and then only during the summer season. This location currently has a helicopter hangar in need of serious repair.<sup>5</sup> For the USCG to field a more serious presence above the Arctic Circle will require updated facilities.

The USCG has already decided that its new National Security Cutter (NSC) will manage an increase in traffic and activity in the region.<sup>6</sup> In the fiscal year 2013 presidential budget request, long-lead funding for the seventh and eighth NSCs was removed, which would effectively halt production of these vessels. The Administration has given no explanation for this reduction, and the USCG has not reduced its required fleet size of eight NSCs.

The NSC platform brings a diverse set of capabilities and can perform a broad range of missions from blue-water patrolling to search and rescue. While these vessels cannot penetrate ice-covered water, they can deploy helicopters and unmanned rotary-wing aircraft to perform surveillance and search-and-rescue missions at a distance.<sup>7</sup> This ability to operate at a distance is imperative, as the USCG's abilities are severely limited by the location of its assets below the Arctic Circle.

**The U.S. Cannot Afford to Dither.** The U.S. should catch up with the other Arctic nations and field a presence that can legitimately protect U.S. sovereignty in the region. In order to do this, the U.S. should:

- **Develop a new strategy for icebreaking capability.** The USCG should explore options such

as buying commercial icebreakers with similar capabilities. Privately operated icebreakers could make way for commercial vessels and be called upon to support the USCG in emergency scenarios. This would in turn require a reevaluation of the Merchant Marine Act of 1920 (also known as the Jones Act).<sup>8</sup>

- **Build the entire required fleet of national security cutters.** The U.S. should ensure that the USCG is properly funded to meet its fleet requirements.
- **Provide permanent stationary assets in the Arctic region.** Due to the increase in maritime traffic, there will be a great need for helicopters, as well as communication and maintenance personnel, based in the Arctic region for longer periods of time. Congress should work to fund Arctic operations at a level sufficient to make FOL Barrow a more capable base.
- **Continuing to strengthen cooperation between the USN and the USCG.** Combined with the blue-water-centric missions of the NSC, the joint operations between the sea services will become more significant in the future in the Arctic. Furthermore, the USCG cooperates effectively with the USN in its drug interdiction missions. The sea services should look to find lessons learned and apply them in the Arctic.

**Needed: A Fully Resourced USCG.** Interest in the Arctic region will only increase in the years to come. As other nations direct resources and assets

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1. Rob Huebert, "The Newly Emerging Arctic Security Environment," Canadian Defense and Foreign Affairs Institute, March 2010, p. 11, <http://www.cdfai.org/PDF/The%20Newly%20Emerging%20Arctic%20Security%20Environment.pdf>, (accessed March 25, 2013).
2. ABS Consulting, "United States Coast Guard High Latitude Region Mission Analysis Capstone Summary," July 2010, p. 2, <http://assets.fiercemarkets.com/public/sites/govit/hlsummarycapstone.pdf> (accessed March 25, 2013).
3. U.S. Coast Guard, *United States Coast Guard 2012 Posture Statement*, February 2012, [http://www.uscg.mil/posturestatement/docs/USCG\\_2012\\_Posture\\_Statement.pdf](http://www.uscg.mil/posturestatement/docs/USCG_2012_Posture_Statement.pdf) (accessed March 25, 2013).
4. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of the Inspector General, "The Coast Guard's Polar Icebreaker: Maintenance, Upgrade, and Acquisition Program," January 2011, p. 1, [http://www.oig.dhs.gov/assets/Mgmt/OIG\\_11-31\\_Jan11.pdf](http://www.oig.dhs.gov/assets/Mgmt/OIG_11-31_Jan11.pdf) (accessed March 25, 2013).
5. Kirk Johnson, "For Coast Guard Patrol North of Alaska, Much to Learn in a Remote New Place," *The New York Times*, July 21, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/22/us/coast-guard-strengthens-presence-north-of-alaska.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/22/us/coast-guard-strengthens-presence-north-of-alaska.html?_r=0) (accessed March 25, 2013).
6. Stew Magnuson, "Coast Guard Considering Permanent Bases in Arctic," *National Defense*, April 2012, <http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/archive/2012/April/Pages/CoastGuardConsideringPermanentBasesinArctic.aspx> (accessed March 25, 2013).
7. U.S. Coast Guard, *National Security Cutter: Project Profile*, January 1, 2013, <http://www.uscg.mil/acquisition/nsc/features.asp> (accessed March 27, 2013).
8. This act was created to protect the U.S. shipbuilding industry by requiring that all vessels traveling within U.S. waters be U.S. built.

there, America cannot afford to fall behind. As an Arctic nation, the U.S. needs to field a strong Arctic presence. In order to make this a reality, the USCG will require adequate funding and resources.

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