Commentary

The End of the Arctic Exception: A Reflection on the Arctic Coast Guard Forum

Randy "Church" Kee

In May 2013, there were high hopes for continued international Arctic "exceptionalism" as experienced via the diplomatic and science community in non-security venues such as the Arctic Council and the International Arctic Science Committee.

On 10 May 2013, the U.S. White House released the first National Strategy for the Arctic Region (NSAR 2013), and on 21 May the U.S. Coast Guard released its own Arctic Strategy, which was well aligned to NSAR 2013. These strategies highlighted priorities to support Arctic economic and environmental stewardship, science collaboration and advanced efforts associated with the 2011 Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement and the 2013 Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response Agreement (which was signed on 15 May 2013).

Even in the defense sectors, there was reason for optimism. The Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR), created in 2010 between the Norwegian Defense Staff and Headquarters U.S. European Command, sought improved multinational collaboration among the defense establishments of Canada, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States. Russia, while invited to join as a full member, chose to participate only as an observer. ASFR's focus was collaboration among participating nations in defense support to civil authorities in search and rescue, humanitarian relief and disaster response.

During this same pivotal year, United States and Russian officials met to initiate discussions of creating an international collaboration among Coast Guards of the Arctic Region.

In February and March 2014, the security of Europe was shaken from the dreams of continued peace and stability. At the climax of a months-long series of peaceful protests in Maidan square,

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the government in Kyiv unleashed security forces on unarmed civilians and subsequently fled to Moscow. With the rapid establishment of a pro-European interim Ukrainian authority, Russia directly intervened, annexing Crimea and providing direct support of armed conflict across Ukraine's eastern provinces.

While U.S. and Allied defense forces moved to deter and defend against possible Russian aggression against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), planning for the Arctic Coast Guard Forum continued, resulting in the establishment of the venue in 2015, complete with the active participation of Russia's Coast Guard. For approximately the next seven years, a paradox was established. Armed conflict had fully returned to Europe, but there was at least some belief that the Arctic could continue as an exception, at least as far as diplomacy, economies, science and safety were concerned. By February 2022, that belief was extinguished in full by the full-scale illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russian Armed Forces.

Today, in large part responding to Russia's actions, NATO stands at 32 Allied nations, with 7 nations possessing sovereign territory above the Arctic Circle. Each multilateral instrument that advances unity of effort among the allied Arctic nations should consider aligning plans, programs and activities to realize new synergies and deter aggression. This includes, of course, the Arctic Coast Guard Forum, a highly relevant collaboration and one that should consider revising and refocusing its original charter to contend with the many security dynamics of the post-February 2022 era.

I offer this reflection as a former Co-Chair of the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, prior U.S. Arctic Research Commissioner, former Executive Director of the Arctic Domain Awareness Center (ADAC, a U.S. Department of Homeland Security research center) and current Director of the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies.

The article that preceded this commentary, by Commander Chris Salerno, USCG, and my former ADAC colleague Dr. Doug Causey, offers a very worthy set of proposals for that refocusing, and it merits the reader's fullest consideration.