Transforming the Arctic Coast Guard Forum

Christopher P. Salerno and Douglas Causey

The Arctic is changing along security, economic, and environmental lines, and the eight Arctic states are responding with rapidly increasing investment in Arctic capabilities. The Arctic strategies published since 2024 show that governments recognize the need for increased awareness and presence as these conditions evolve. In addition, the Arctic states hold three binding agreements for the region (the 2011 Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement, the 2013 Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response Agreement, and the 2018 Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement). The next stage should be a permanent multilateral body that plans and coordinates coast guard operations under these agreements and the security tasks the Arctic strategies now ask of coast guards, in order to reduce the risks and threats of a rapidly changing Arctic. This article argues that the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) should be transformed, in phases, from exercise-based cooperation into an operational body, built on three pillars: Collaboration, Coordination, and Communication (C3). Drawing on two institutional-theory frameworks (rational institutional design and security communities), the C3 framework is both an analytic instrument and a policy proposal. Scored against the functions of an operational body, the existing bodies leave operational planning, enforcement coordination and a shared operating picture without a multilateral home, and participation by function keeps search and rescue and pollution notification open to all eight Arctic states.

1. Introduction

The Arctic is transforming along multiple concurrent axes. Atmospheric warming in the Arctic proceeds at nearly four times the global rate (Rantanen et al., 2022). As a result, the September 2025 sea-ice minimum was the tenth lowest in the 47-year satellite record, and the March 2025 maximum was the lowest on record (National Snow and Ice Data Center, 2025a, 2025b). These pressures are unfolding against a strategic environment shaped by sustained Russian Arctic activities, the first joint Russian-Chinese strategic bomber operations near Alaska in July 2024 (North American Aerospace Defense Command [NORAD], 2024), and the deployment of five

Christopher P. Salerno, Graduate Student, University of Alaska Anchorage, Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies

Douglas Causey, PhD, is an Affiliate of the Arctic Initiative, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University and Professor, Department of Biological Sciences, University of Alaska Anchorage.

Chinese research vessels to the U.S. Arctic in the summer of 2025 and four more in 2026. Some are icebreakers that the U.S. Department of Defense describes as enabling the PRC's "dual civil-military research efforts in the Arctic," and the vessels have ranged from the Aleutians and the Bering Strait to the North Pole (Fouche, 2026; U.S. Coast Guard, 2025; U.S. Department of Defense, 2024, p. 3). Until now, there has been little need for a permanent multilateral mechanism as the Arctic states have handled incidents through their national services and bilateral channels. Considering these pressures, that practice will likely not keep pace with the capability and the traffic now arriving in the region. The C3 framework moves the Arctic coast guards from periodic exercises and case-by-case contact to a body that plans their Arctic deployments together, maintains one common operating picture, and establishes clear information and personnel sharing agreements. Guidance for search and rescue and for oil pollution response is maintained by the Arctic Council's Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR) working group. Despite this, the services that would execute it meet in the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF), which brings the eight Arctic coast guards together for principals' meetings, working groups, and periodic live exercises (Arctic Coast Guard Forum, 2019). The link between the two groups is discretionary, and neither body plans operations, maintains a shared operating picture, or coordinates enforcement (Arctic Council, n.d., 2021; EPPR, 2017; Østhagen, 2015).

This coordination gap is becoming visible against a backdrop of rapidly increasing capital investment in Arctic capability across the eight Arctic Council member states, commonly referred to as the Arctic Eight: Canada, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States. Recent U.S. investments include the August 2025 commissioning of USCGC *Storis* (WAGB-21), the first new U.S. medium polar icebreaker since 1999 (LaGrone, 2025); the November 2024 trilateral Icebreaker Collaboration Effort (ICE Pact) with Canada and Finland (Department of Homeland Security, 2024); and contracts for eleven U.S. Arctic Security Cutters awarded between December 2025 and February 2026, with the first hull due in 2028 (U.S. Coast Guard, 2026b; Barrett, 2026). Allied investments parallel these U.S. efforts. Norway's ice-strengthened *Jan Mayen*-class coast guard vessels entered service from 2023 (Häggblom, 2023), and Canada ordered two polar icebreakers in March 2025, due by 2030 and 2032 (Public Services and Procurement Canada, 2025). Denmark's January 2025 Arctic and North Atlantic agreement committed three new Arctic naval vessels, alongside expanded drone and satellite surveillance capacity (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2025a), and a second agreement in October 2025 added two more Arctic vessels (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2025b). Russia's investment is larger than any of these. Its Arctic strategy to 2035 commits to at least seven Project 22220 nuclear icebreakers and the lead ship of the Leader class, together with 16 search and rescue vessels by 2024 and 30 by 2030 (President of the Russian Federation, 2020/2023, sec. 13(d)). The same strategy directs Russia to build a unified regional search and rescue system and to cooperate "within the framework of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum" (President of the Russian Federation, 2020/2023, sec. 16(e)).

These capabilities will operate in a uniquely demanding environment, where Arctic operations occur in remote locations across vast distances and austere conditions. This means that the typical redundancy in rescue, salvage, and response capability is sparse in the High North without practiced multilateral coordination. The ACGF's own chairship report for 2023 to 2025 makes the same point, recording that "no single country possesses the resources or solutions to handle a major incident alone" (Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, p. 10). The ACGF conducts exercises and high-

level dialogue but lacks the operational coordination structure to translate these activities into persistent multilateral operations (Østhagen, 2015, 2020).

This article advances a strategic vision for Arctic partnerships built around three pillars: Collaboration, Coordination, and Communication (C3). We argue that the United States Coast Guard, in concert with Arctic partners, should facilitate the transformation of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum from exercise-based cooperation into an operational body. The first phase of the transformation works within the Forum's existing governing documents and creates no new institution (§6.2). The body must work under current conditions, in which Russia has not been invited to the Forum since February 2022, and under future conditions in which it returns. Because of this, the framework assigns participation by function rather than by a fixed membership. Under this design, search and rescue and pollution notification must remain Arctic Eight functions. The 2011 and 2013 agreements are binding on all eight states, and the eight still coordinate on these efforts through the bilateral plans and rescue center contacts, although in a limited capacity since 2022. The functions that political conditions influence (operational planning, enforcement coordination, and information sharing beyond the unclassified level) will be executed by the participating coast guards, at present the seven other than Russia's (§5.1). Within this construct, the C3 framework serves two purposes. As an analytic instrument, it applies established institutional-design theory to evaluate the existing Arctic institutions. As a policy proposal, it is grounded across historical and current strategic doctrines (U.S. Coast Guard, 2019; U.S. Department of Defense, 2024; The White House, 2022, 2026b).

The method is a qualitative institutional analysis. The sources are the three treaty texts and the records of the Arctic Council and EPPR (work plans, after-action reports, and chairship reports). Sources also include the published documents of the ACGF and the Arctic strategies and official releases of Arctic and non-Arctic states from 2024 to 2026. Finally, the analysis draws on academic studies of Arctic coast guard cooperation. Earlier work called for the Forum to take "a step beyond the conference rooms and into real-life operations and practical action" (Østhagen, 2015) and to "address cooperative maritime law enforcement issues" (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017, p. 18), and the Forum's own guidelines set a common operational picture as an objective (Arctic Coast Guard Forum, 2019, p. 8). The contribution here is the design that would deliver these under the conditions since 2022. Each existing body is scored against the functions that an operational body must perform (§4.4, Table 2). This paper is anticipatory. No incident to date shows that the lack of an operational body led to a worse outcome, and we do not claim one. Instead, we argue that the changing conditions and increasing risks described in §3 will make this gap matter. Each step toward an operational body also takes time to establish. Because of this, the recommendations are phased to fiscal cycles rather than left to open-ended timelines.

2. Theoretical Framework

Rational institutional design (Koremenos et al., 2001) underpins the framework's choices on centralization, scope, and flexibility under variable membership and uncertainty. The Arctic case presents three conditions, each of which corresponds to a problem Koremenos and colleagues treat. First, the states have had limited assets to execute their agreements, but the ships now under construction will change this (§3.3). These ships are bought and crewed by individual services, and planning their deployments together would allow the Arctic states to gain more from them than any one service could alone. In Koremenos and colleagues' terms, this depends on reducing

uncertainty about behavior, as each service plans its own deployments. Second, Russia's participation has been in question since 2022, which leaves both the number of participants and their preferences uncertain. Third, the physical and political conditions described in §3 are still changing, which creates uncertainty about the state of the world. Their design variables (membership, scope, centralization, control, and flexibility) are the terms in which the participation rule of §5.1 and the limits on the planning cell in §5.2 are set.

Security communities theory (Adler & Barnett, 1998) underpins the Collaboration pillar's preservation of relationship infrastructure across periods of political stress. The ACGF was founded in October 2015 with Russia as a member, after the 2014 annexation of Crimea had strained relations among the Arctic states but left the political space for operational coast guard cooperation open (Østhagen, 2016). The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine is a different case, as it broadly closed cooperation with Russia and was followed by Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO (Government Offices of Sweden, 2026; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025, p. 6). Because of this, the C3 framework does not treat the 2015 founding as a precedent for the current period and does not assume a return to those conditions in the near future. That being said, the design keeps an accession path for Russia open when conditions allow (§6.1).

3. The Changing Operating Environment and the Coordination Imperative

3.1 Environmental change and the operating space

Three pressures characterize the contemporary Arctic and motivate the C3 framework's design. The first pressure is environmental transformation that exceeds the capacity of any single national response system. The warming and loss of sea ice described in §1 are increasing operational demand on Arctic coast guards and reshaping the physical space in which they operate. Russia's Arctic strategy to 2035 sets Northern Sea Route cargo targets of 90 million tons by 2030 and 130 million tons by 2035, against 31.5 million tons in 2019, and commits the icebreakers and rescue vessels described in §1 to support that traffic (President of the Russian Federation, 2020/2023, sec. 13(d), Appendix indicator 14). China's 2018 Arctic policy outlines a Polar Silk Road through the Arctic shipping routes (Figure 1; State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2018). The number of unique ships entering the Arctic Polar Code area rose from 1,298 in 2013 to 1,782 in 2023, and the distance they sailed more than doubled over the same decade (PAME, 2024, pp. 11–12, 16). Transit cargo on the Northern Sea Route reached 3.2 million tons in 2025 and 3.7 million tons by the end of September 2026, and container ships made 13 transits of the route in the 2026 season (four of them full Asia to Europe voyages, against one in all of 2025) (Humpert, 2026b). Finally, the Chinese research vessel deployments of 2025 and 2026 described in §1 extend the pattern to research Arctic civilian and possibly military considerations, all of which indicate that the stated intent is being acted on.

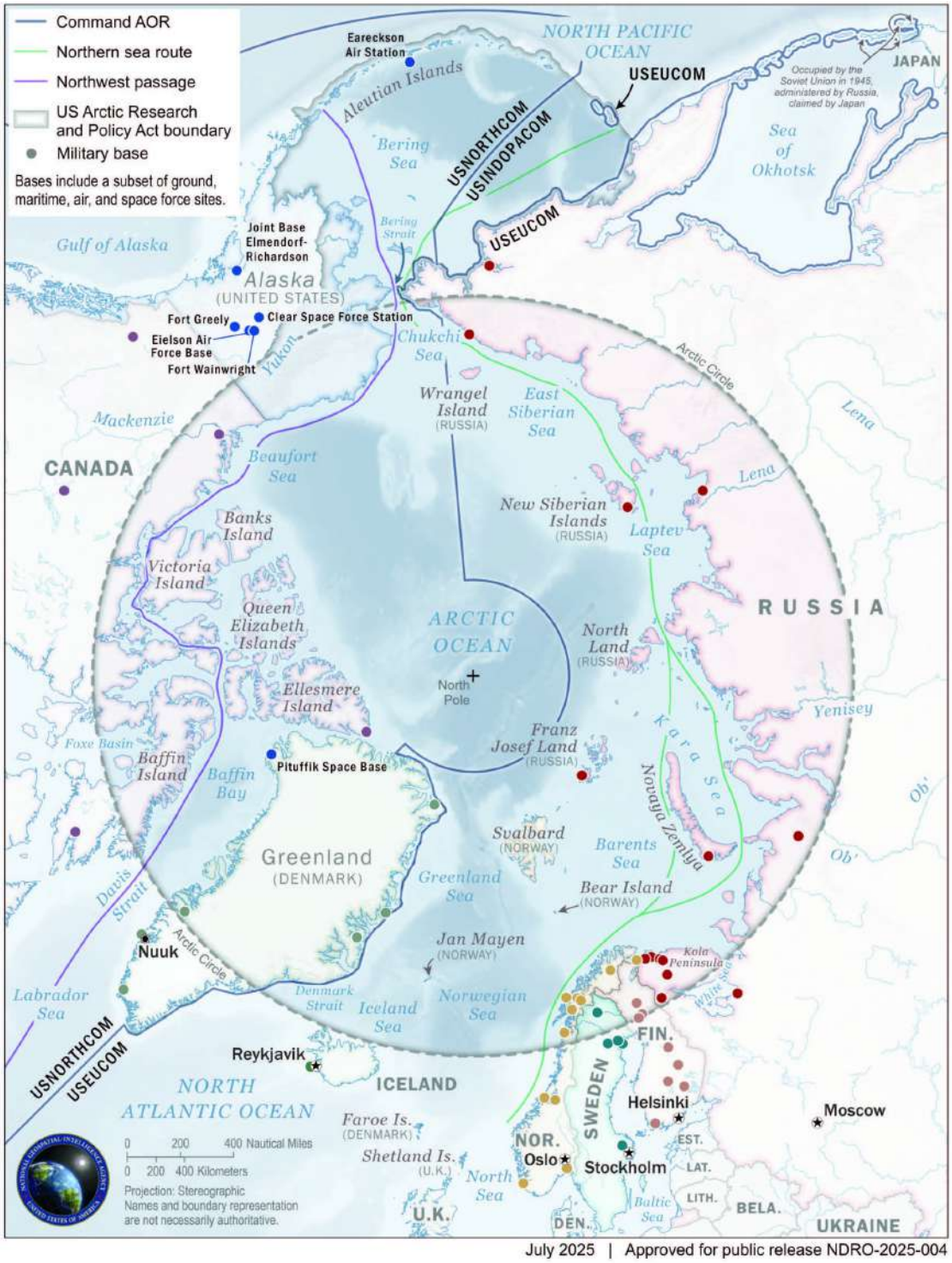

Figure 1. The Arctic region, with the Northern Sea Route, the Northwest Passage, the Bering Strait approach, the U.S. combatant command areas of responsibility and the Arctic Research and Policy Act boundary. Source: National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (2025), a map approved for public release (NDRO-2025-004) and supplied by the agency; U.S. government work, public domain.

The second pressure is the future opening of the Central Arctic Ocean for commercial fishing. Historically, this space has been inaccessible for fishing activity because of permanent ice cover. With the environmental changes, the space is now seasonally ice-free across portions of its high-

seas extent and will become more accessible as the ice edge recedes. In 2018, the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (CAOFA) was signed by the Arctic Five (Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States) along with five additional parties (China, the European Union, Iceland, Japan, and South Korea), establishing a precautionary 16-year moratorium on commercial fishing in this high-seas area. The agreement's initial term concludes in 2037, and it is then automatically extended for five-year periods unless any party objects (Schatz et al., 2019; Vylegzhanin et al., 2020). The operational problem starts when the moratorium ends after 2037 (or earlier if scientific assessment supports an earlier opening), as an area of about 2.8 million square kilometers becomes open to multinational commercial fishing with no enforcement arrangement. In 2025, the measures and a boarding scheme were still being discussed among the parties (§4.3), meaning they have about a decade to develop the coordination needed for enforcement across the Arctic. Considering the size of the area and its distance from any port, that coordination must be multilateral, must be established, and regularly practiced before the first measures take effect.

The third pressure is marine incidents in remote Arctic waters that compound the operating challenge. Part of the traffic described above is poorly suited to ice and poorly documented in unclassified settings. The number of sanctioned vessels on the Northern Sea Route rose from 13 in 2024 to 100 in 2025. Among them, 38 were oil tankers, of which 13 had inadequate ice class (Humpert, 2025c). By mid-September 2026, 50 shadow-fleet oil tankers had been recorded on the route in the season, 26 of them with insufficient ice class (Humpert, 2026a). Despite this growth, Rosatomflot, which administers the route, stopped publishing daily shipping logs in 2025 and no longer makes permit data available (Humpert, 2026c). In the 2025 season the tanker *Lynx*, with no ice class and 150,000 tons of oil aboard bound from Murmansk to China, became trapped in the ice without an icebreaker escort and had to wait several days for assistance (Humpert, 2025b; Staalesen, 2025). The LNG carrier *Arctic Metagaz*, also without ice class, became stuck in the East Siberian Sea on 29 August and waited more than a week to get free (Humpert, 2025a; Staalesen, 2025). Both voyages were in Russian waters, and they matter here because the same traffic passes through the Bering Strait toward U.S. waters. Although neither voyage ended in a spill, there was a considerable risk of one. MOSPA requires a Party that learns of an oil pollution incident to inform all States whose interests are affected or likely to be affected, but assistance must be requested to be acted upon (Arctic Council, 2013, arts. 6, 8; Arctic Council, 2020, sec. 1). As a result, a laden tanker disabled in the Chukchi Sea or the Bering Strait is a case in which the United States could be notified of a threat to its waters with no request for its assistance, and the same holds for Norway in the Barents Sea. Since 2022, the bilateral channels that would carry such a notification have remained partially open, although the exercises that practiced them have ceased (§4.2). Additionally, remoteness compounds the exposure even where the national response works. An example of this is the cargo ship *Thamesborg*, which went aground in Franklin Strait on 6 September 2025 and was refloated after 33 days. During that time, part of its cargo was lightered and the Canadian Coast Guard vessel *Des Groseilliers* stood by (The Maritime Executive, 2025). A more telling case is the cruise ship *Ocean Explorer*, which ran aground in Alpefjord in northeast Greenland on 11 September 2023 with 206 people aboard. The nearest Danish naval vessel, *Knud Rasmussen*, was about 1,200 nautical miles away, a transit of four days. On 14 September, the ship was pulled free by Tarajoq, a Greenland fisheries research vessel that was nearby (The Maritime Executive, 2023). The positive outcome in this case depended on a ship of opportunity as the *Ocean Explorer* was freed in three

days, and the naval vessel needed four to arrive. A U.S. Coast Guard Research and Development Center (2025) factsheet on the Polar Code's five-day survival requirement notes that rescue times in remote or adverse conditions "can exceed five days." Because of this, any single national fleet is constrained by the distribution and condition of its assets when emergencies cluster, regardless of which member state's waters are affected, and knowing in advance which neighboring service has the nearest capable asset is the practical requirement that follows.

3.2 Great-power competition and gray-zone activity

Beyond these environmental and economic pressures, the strategic environment has shifted. Russian Arctic posture has expanded since the 2014 reorganization of the Northern Fleet under the Joint Strategic Command Arctic. Russia has strengthened its network of forward bases, airfields and outposts along its Arctic coast, deployed sea- and air-denial capabilities, and focused more of its training on protecting the Northern Sea Route (Boulègue, 2022, pp. 17–23). The first joint Russian-Chinese strategic bomber operations in the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in July 2024 (NORAD, 2024) and the Chinese research vessel deployments of 2025 and 2026 (Fouche, 2026; U.S. Coast Guard, 2025) show that great-power competition in the Arctic is no longer hypothetical. China's articulated "near-Arctic state" positioning and Polar Silk Road doctrine (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2018) provide the policy context for the Chinese deployments. Gray-zone activity is also present, from sustained GPS jamming in northern Finnmark to the January 2022 severance of the Svalbard undersea cable (Evers, 2025; Nilsen, 2022; Schalin & Arts, 2026). In spring 2026 Russian deep-sea vessels of the Defense Ministry's Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research (GUGI) were reported to have rehearsed near Svalbard a method for disabling undersea cables without leaving traces, and they left the area only after a joint British, Norwegian, and U.S. operation tracked and confronted them (McFarlane & Slattery, 2026).

The 1996 Arctic Council framework explicitly excludes military security from its mandate (Arctic Council, 1996) under the premise that Arctic cooperation would proceed independently of military matters. That premise came under strain after 2014, and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has narrowed the political space in which environmental cooperation could proceed apart from military tension. The C3 framework treats the coast guard channel as the appropriate venue for operational cooperation across the security continuum. The channel works below the military threshold, its functions (SAR, environmental response, and fisheries enforcement) have not been politically contested, and the functions the treaties assign to all eight states can stay open to all eight while the functions that political conditions govern run among the states that participate (§5.1).

3.3 What the Arctic strategies anticipate

The Arctic strategies and agreements that the Arctic states have published since 2024 show that governments expect security and environmental conditions to worsen. Sweden's 2026 strategy names the ACGF directly, describing a forum that "promotes secure and environmentally responsible maritime transport through information-sharing, exercises, common procedures and operations during search and rescue operations and in the event of oil spills," and it notes that the Northern Sea Route "still lacks adequate infrastructure for search-and-rescue operations" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2026, pp. 17, 21). The U.S. Department of State's 2026 report to Congress lists the ACGF alongside the International Maritime Organization and CAOFA as one

body through which the United States pursues its Arctic interests (U.S. Department of State, 2026, p. 6). Canada's 2024 Arctic foreign policy names the ACGF among the forums "that contribute to upholding the rules-based international order" (Global Affairs Canada, 2024, p. 11). The agreement that the United States, Denmark, and Greenland signed on 22 September 2026 records "that the security situation in the Arctic is changing and that more efforts are needed to ensure security there in the future" (The White House, 2026a, preamble). These commitments are backed by new construction. The ICE Pact partners signed a memorandum of understanding to build Arctic and polar icebreakers in November 2024 (Department of Homeland Security, 2024). Each of these hulls will enter a national fleet, and as these ships are built and employed, there is an opportunity to coordinate allied deployments to increase maritime domain awareness (MDA) beyond national waters. Because of this, the construction years are the window for building the framework that this coordination requires.

Non-Arctic states and the European Union also exhibit the same expectation in their strategies. The United Kingdom's October 2026 update to its Arctic Policy Framework states that "the era of Arctic exceptionalism, of 'high North, low tension', that has characterized the region for the best part of 30 years, is over," and warns that environmental change "has the potential to outpace regulatory and governance standards" for safety, search and rescue, and environmental protection (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office [FCDO], 2026, pp. 10, 17). The European Union's new Arctic strategy, adopted on 20 October 2026, states that "effective and coordinated search and rescue response and enhanced maritime domain awareness are essential to Arctic, North Atlantic and Baltic maritime security," and commits the EU to propose an Arctic maritime domain awareness pilot in 2027. As a party to CAOFA, it also calls for "a robust high-seas boarding and inspection scheme" under that agreement (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2026, pp. 7, 17). It should be noted that of the strategies published since 2024 and cited here, only the Swedish, Canadian, and U.S. documents name the ACGF, and that an operational ACGF is an inference drawn from these documents and not the stated policy of any of them. That being said, the needs these documents describe fall within the functions that coast guards perform. For example, the EU strategy proposes shared maritime domain awareness, coordinated search and rescue, the tracking of a shadow fleet that switches off its AIS, Arctic-ready pollution response, icebreakers pooled under national command and, for civil preparedness, "targeted northern exercises, interoperability arrangements, and common planning" (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2026, pp. 6–10). A transformed ACGF would meet each of these needs for its members and for partners such as the EU through a coast guard body that works below the military threshold. This matters most in the waters the Arctic states share with Russia. Since 2022 the contact that remains runs through the coast guards and rescue centers rather than the political venues (Nilsen, 2024; Østhagen, 2023, pp. 9, 11), and Østhagen identifies two escalation risks, the mishap that comes with increased military activity and deliberate hybrid operations below the threshold of conflict (2023, p. 15). We argue a coast guard body can carry the security tasks these strategies ask for without adding to the risks noted, and can do so whether or not the wider cooperation with Russia returns.

4. The Existing Institutional Landscape

4.1 The Arctic Council

The Arctic Council, established by the Ottawa Declaration of September 19, 1996, is the principal high-level intergovernmental forum addressing issues of common Arctic concern (Arctic Council, 1996). Its membership comprises the eight Arctic states, with six Permanent Participants representing Arctic Indigenous Peoples' Organizations. The Council's mandate explicitly excludes military security, and it operates by consensus and lacks authority to adopt binding decisions. The Council operates through six working groups to produce assessments, the most relevant to operational coordination being the Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR) and Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME) groups. Three legally binding inter-state agreements have been negotiated under its auspices (the 2011 SAR Agreement, the 2013 MOSPA, and the 2017 Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation), and a permanent Secretariat was established in Tromsø in 2013. At the Arctic Council's twentieth anniversary, Young (2016) credited the Council's success to issue framing and agenda formation (pp. 100–101) and acknowledged that "some important Arctic issues must be dealt with in other venues" (p. 118).

Of the six working groups, EPPR holds the mandate closest to operational coordination. Its current work plan describes a mandate to contribute to "the best possible preparedness and response to environmental emergencies, search and rescue, radiological and nuclear incidents, and other accidents in the Arctic" (Arctic Council, 2025b, p. 45). This work is performed through expert groups for search and rescue, marine environmental response, and radiation. EPPR maintains the Operational Guidelines that implement MOSPA and supports the SAR Agreement by drawing lessons from exercises and real incidents. In 2024 it ran a MOSPA notification and request-for-assistance exercise with all Parties, and its report of that exercise noted the need for clear request procedures and reliable points of contact (EPPR, 2025, pp. 9, 12–13). EPPR has also continued to meet online since 2024, with the Russian Federation still leading two of its projects (Arctic Council, 2025b, pp. 45, 49–50). That being said, EPPR describes itself as "not an operational response organization" and leaves operational SAR tactics to its member states (EPPR, 2016, 2017).

4.2 The Arctic Coast Guard Forum and adjacent venues

The Arctic Coast Guard Forum was established in October 2015 by the heads of the eight Arctic coast guards. Its terms of reference describe it as "an independent, informal operationally driven organization, not bound by treaty" (Arctic Coast Guard Forum, 2019, p. 7). The Forum is consensus-based and non-binding, and operational capacity resides with the member coast guards under their respective national authorities (Østhagen, 2015). Its Voluntary Guidelines for Combined Operations provide a chair that rotates every two years in step with the Arctic Council chairship, a Secretariat, and a Combined Operations Working Group that plans, runs and reports the Forum's exercises (Arctic Coast Guard Forum, 2019; Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, p. 3). Between 2017 and 2025 the Forum held three live exercises, the latest Arctic Guardian 2025 (Arctic Coast Guard Forum, 2025a; Lambach, 2020, p. 284), and three tabletop or virtual exercises, two of them jointly with EPPR (EPPR, 2025, p. 6; Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, p. 8). The Forum's relationship with the Arctic Council runs through EPPR, and the 2021 Statement of Cooperation names EPPR as the Council's primary liaison to the ACGF for the SAR Agreement and MOSPA

but leaves each joint activity to be agreed case by case (Arctic Council, 2021). After the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, cooperation between Russia and the other seven members was curtailed, the Forum's joint work remained paused until Norway assumed the chair in 2023, and Russia has not been invited to the Forum's meetings since (Danish Defence, 2026; Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, pp. 3–4). In late September 2026, the seven participating members agreed to create a working group on maritime security, led initially by the Canadian Coast Guard (Edvardsen, 2026).

The pause and "exclusion" of Russia had an unintended consequence of bringing the FSB Border Guard Service and the China Coast Guard closer to an operational partnership. Russia, as chair, held its 2023 exercise with the China Coast Guard as observers, the two services signed a memorandum on maritime law enforcement cooperation the same week (Nilsen, 2023), and in 2024 they made their first joint patrol into the Arctic Ocean (Edvardsen & Hansen, 2024). Since the Forum resumed work in 2023, its contact with EPPR has not extended to joint exercises or planning, and the Council's 2025–2027 work plans do not mention the ACGF at all (Arctic Council, 2025b; Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, pp. 2, 5, 9). In October 2023, the Secretariat decided not to modify the Forum's governing documents unless all eight members were represented, and the strategic roadmap has not been revised since (Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, pp. 4, 8).

The services that meet in the Forum differ in parent ministry, legal status, enforcement authority, and ice-capable capacity, and these differences shape what an operational body can ask of each (Table 1). Fixed-wing patrol aircraft are a tool every member brings to the surveillance and search tasks in §5.2, flown by the coast guard in some services and by the air force in others, and Table 1 records the ice-capable ships only.

Table 1. The eight ACGF member services (status as of 2025–2026)

Service	Parent ministry or department	Status	Law-enforcement authority	Ice-capable vessels: in service / ordered / planned (indicative)
U.S. Coast Guard	Department of Homeland Security (Navy in wartime or by direction)	Military service and armed force at all times	Broadest of the eight: enforces all applicable federal laws on, under and over the high seas and U.S. waters, with authority to board, inspect, search, seize and arrest (14 U.S.C. §§ 102(b), 522); fisheries, drug and migrant interdiction, marine safety and port security regulation, pollution response; an element of the U.S. intelligence community	In service 3: *Polar Star*, *Healy*, *Storis*. Under contract: two Polar Security Cutters (the first under construction) and eleven Arctic Security Cutters (first delivery 2028). Planned: a third Polar Security Cutter
Canadian Coast Guard	Department of National Defence since 2 September 2025 (previously Fisheries and Oceans)	Civilian special operating agency	None: no peace-officer powers; fishery officers, RCMP and CBSA embark. The 2026 Oceans Act amendment adds security patrols and intelligence collection (s. 41(1)(f)), not arrest powers	In service 9: two heavy and seven medium icebreakers (plus ten multi-tasked vessels with icebreaking as a primary task). Under contract: two polar icebreakers (due 2030 and 2032) and six program icebreakers (contract August 2026, deliveries through the 2030s). Planned: a multi-purpose icebreaker class, in design
Kingdom of Denmark, Joint Arctic Command	Ministry of Defence (Defence Command Denmark)	Military joint command, headquartered in Nuuk	Sector-bounded: sovereignty, fishery inspection, maritime pollution prevention and SAR in Greenland and Faroese waters	In service 7: four *Thetis*-class inspection ships and three *Knud Rasmussen*-class patrol vessels, ice-strengthened. Under contract: none. Planned: five Arctic patrol vessels (three funded in January 2025 and two more in October 2025; specifications and contract pending)
Finnish Border Guard	Ministry of the Interior	Internal-security agency organized on a military basis	Broad within its remit: border control, customs control at the border, criminal investigation of border offenses, and police actions at police request (Border Guard Act 578/2005); SAR	In service 1: patrol vessel *Turva* (ice class 1A). Under contract: two offshore patrol vessels (the first, *Karhu*, due for delivery in winter 2026). Planned: none (Finland's state icebreakers belong to Arctia)
Icelandic Coast Guard	Ministry of Justice	Civilian (Iceland has no military)	General police authority at sea within the EEZ (Act No. 52/2006, art. 6); fisheries patrol	None documented at the ice class 1A threshold: *Þór* is ice class 1B, and no ice class is published for *Freyja* or *Baldur*. Nothing ordered or planned
Norwegian Coast Guard	Ministry of Defence (part of the Royal Norwegian Navy)	Military; an element of the Royal Norwegian Navy under military command and control	Sector-bounded: tasks assigned by the Coast Guard Act of 1997, including fisheries control and environmental protection	In service 4: KV *Svalbard* (icebreaker) and three *Jan Mayen*-class vessels (ice-strengthened), among 15 vessels. Under contract: none. Planned: none with a stated ice class
Swedish Coast Guard	Ministry of Defence	Civilian agency	Broad, limited to listed tasks: overall responsibility for the exercise of authority at sea, including control and supervision in fisheries and environmental protection, surveillance of the territorial sea and EEZ, and crime prevention and investigation with the Swedish Police (Coast Guard Act 2019:32)	In service 3: *KBV 001 Poseidon*, *KBV 002 Triton* and *KBV 003 Amfitrite*, the service's largest vessels (no ice class published). Under contract and planned: none (Sweden's state icebreakers belong to the Swedish Maritime Administration)
Russian Federal Border Guard Service (Coast Guard)	Federal Security Service (FSB)	Security-service law-enforcement body with military-type personnel	Broad within the border and maritime remit: state border regime, EEZ and continental-shelf protection with powers to stop, board and detain vessels, and fisheries protection; Northern Sea Route navigation is managed by Rosatomflot, not the Border Guard	In service: three Project 22100 ice-class patrol ships, the Project 22120 ice-going patrol series. Under construction: two Project 23550 icebreaking patrol ships, the first seriously damaged by a drone strike at Vyborg in March 2026. Not invited to the Forum since 2022

Note. Sources by row: United States, Office of the Law Revision Counsel (2024, 14 U.S.C. §§ 101–103, 522), O'Rourke (2026), U.S. Coast Guard (2026b); Canada, Oceans Act (1996/2026), National Defence (2026), Government of Canada (2025), Henderson (2025), Canadian Coast Guard (2026b), Public Services and Procurement Canada (2025); Denmark, Danish Defence (2021), Danish Ministry of Defence (2025a, 2025b), Häggblom (2024), Naval Technology (2001), Lundquist (2012), Baird Maritime (2017); Finland, Act on the Administration of the Finnish Border Guard (2024), Border Guard Act (2025), Finnish Border Guard (n.d.), Meyer Turku (2025); Iceland, Act on the Icelandic Coast Guard (2006), Government of Iceland (n.d.), Icelandic Coast Guard (n.d.); Norway, ARCSAR (n.d.), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (n.d.-a), Norwegian Armed Forces (2023), Vard (2024); Sweden, Swedish Coast Guard (n.d.-a, n.d.-b), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (n.d.-b), MI News Network (2026), Swedish Maritime Administration (2021); Russia, Federal Law No. 191-FZ (1998, art. 36), Dalziel (2026), Staalesen (2026), Danish Defence (2026); vessel column also Deltamarin (n.d.), Icelandic Coast Guard (2024), Karsten (2026), Naval News (2026). The vessel column counts coast guard-operated icebreakers and ice-class or ice-strengthened patrol ships; icebreakers operated by other state agencies are noted but not counted.

Beneath the Forum sit the bilateral channels through which Arctic coast guards work together, and these carry most of the operational traffic. The 2005 memorandum of agreement between the U.S. Coast Guard and the Norwegian Coast Guard provides for reciprocal personnel exchange (U.S. Department of State, 2005), and the most recent exchange the authors have identified was between the crews of USCGC Healy and KV Svalbard during joint operations northwest of Svalbard in fall of 2023 (U.S. Coast Guard, 2023). The 2009 U.S.–Canada Framework Agreement on Integrated Cross-Border Maritime Law Enforcement Operations lets specially designated officers of the two states jointly crew vessels and enforce the law on both sides of the boundary in shared waterways (Department of Homeland Security, 2013; Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2025). Norway and Russia hold Barents Sea agreements on search and rescue and on oil spill response dating from the mid-1990s (Lauta, 2014). The United States and Russia have cooperated on pollution response in the Bering and Chukchi Seas under an agreement first concluded with the Soviet Union in 1989, and the 2020 update to their Joint Contingency Plan was signed in February 2021 (U.S. Coast Guard 17th District, 2021). Since 2022, communication channels with Russia still exist, although the cooperation that ran through them has significantly deteriorated. For example, the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre for Northern Norway reported in 2024 that exercise contact with the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Murmansk had ended while emergency contact continued (Nilsen, 2024), and in the Bering Sea, Russia withdrew from a joint oil spill exercise with the U.S. Coast Guard planned off Nome in 2023 (Herz, 2023). The U.S.–Russia channel shows the deterioration in both the number of crossings and the response they receive. In 2023 the Coast Guard recorded six detections of Russian fishing vessels briefly crossing the Maritime Boundary Line, reported the incursions to the Russian Border Guard, and received its concurrence that there was no clear evidence of fishing, and in 2024 it detected none (U.S. Coast Guard 17th District, 2024, 2025). In contrast, in one week of May 2026, the U.S. Coast Guard detected 51 potential incursions by nine Russian fishing vessels, notified the Russian Border Guard of each, and was still awaiting a response as of June (U.S. Coast Guard Arctic District, 2026).

Beyond the ACGF, other venues address related but distinct functions. The Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (ASFR) covers military-to-military security cooperation. It was created with the Northern Chiefs of Defence Conference in 2011–2012 to give military leaders a formal space to build trust. Russia has since withdrawn from it (Depledge et al., 2019). In contrast, Russia remains a member of the ACGF but has not been invited since February 2022 (Danish Defence, 2026; Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, pp. 3–4). NATO's Arctic Sentry framework, launched in February 2026, provides a more recent venue for Alliance Arctic deconfliction and exercise coordination (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2026). Vessel technical standards are addressed separately by the International Maritime Organization's Polar Code, in force since January 1, 2017, which sets mandatory construction, equipment and operating standards for merchant and passenger ships in polar waters and which does not yet cover fishing vessels or small craft (Brigham, 2024). At present, the Code is enforced by the flag state of the vessel and by port-state inspection, with little recourse against infractions at sea (Brigham, 2024).

4.3 Three binding agreements without a standing body to execute them

The Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic, signed at the May 2011 Nuuk Ministerial and entered into force in January 2013, was the first legally binding inter-state instrument negotiated under the auspices of the Arctic Council (Arctic Council,

2011). The Agreement allocates SAR areas of responsibility among the eight Arctic states (Figure 2), requires parties to provide SAR services within their allocated zones, and establishes mechanisms for cooperation, joint exercises, and information exchange (Arctic Council, 2011).

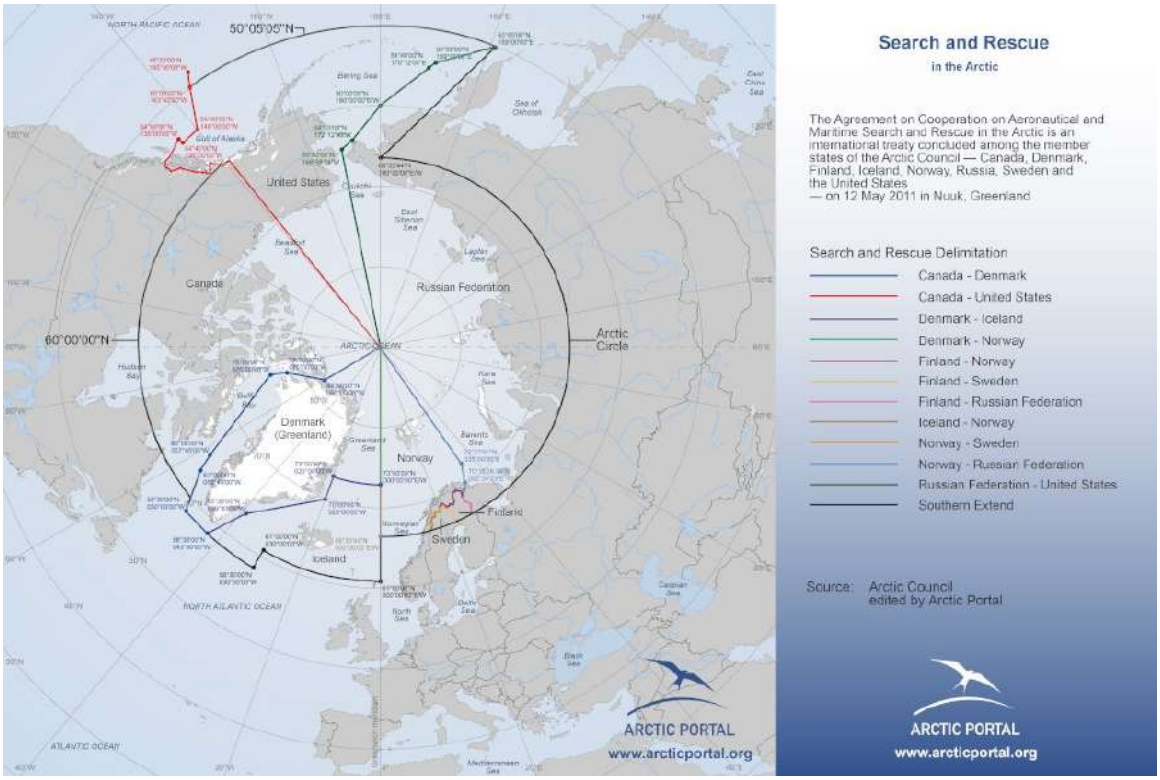

Figure 2. Search and rescue regions under the 2011 Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic. The colored lines are the delimitations between adjacent regions as displayed in the Agreement's Annex; the black line is the southern extent. Source: Arctic Portal, Arctic Council (Arctic Portal, 2022), reproduced with attribution, www.arcticportal.org.

A second agreement, the 2013 MOSPA, signed at the May 2013 Kiruna Ministerial and entered into force in March 2016, was the second legally binding inter-state instrument negotiated under Arctic Council auspices (Arctic Council, 2013). MOSPA requires parties to maintain national systems for responding to oil pollution incidents, to cooperate on response operations across national boundaries, to provide assistance on request, and to promote joint exercises and information exchange. Unlike the SAR Agreement, MOSPA allocates no regions. It applies in each party's waters above a southern limit, including its exclusive economic zone and continental shelf (Figure 3), and its notification and assistance articles also apply to the high seas above that limit, which include the Central Arctic Ocean (Arctic Council, 2013, art. 3). Overall, MOSPA establishes procedural mechanisms for coordination, but it does not fund, staff, or establish operational infrastructure to deliver on the obligations it imposes. Lauta (2014) documents the same implementation pattern in his analysis of MOSPA's early operational uptake. The Agreement formalized commitments that tracked pre-existing national obligations under OPRC 1990 and bilateral arrangements (such as the 1994 Norway-Russia Barents pollution-response cooperation) and generated limited new operational infrastructure. He also observes that the operational superiority of these pre-existing arrangements creates a real risk that MOSPA-channeled multilateral coordination will be secondary to existing bilateral channels in an actual response.

Auerswald (2020) extends the broader pattern across both MOSPA and CAOFA, noting that neither agreement required Arctic states to undertake obligations they were not already performing. Article 6 requires a Party that learns of an oil pollution incident to inform all States whose interests are affected or likely to be affected, Article 8 provides that Parties "may request assistance," and the Operational Guidelines state that notification "does not constitute an obligation to request or to provide assistance" (Arctic Council, 2013, 2020). EPPR's report on its 2024 notification and request-for-assistance exercise, the first MOSPA exercise it had led since the 2022 pause, confirms Lauta's point for now. The report records that in a real incident off northern Norway, Norway would likely turn to its bilateral Barents Sea agreement with Russia before MOSPA (EPPR, 2025, p. 11). It also found duty officers unfamiliar with the MOSPA procedures, contact details out of date, request forms kept where watch staff could not reach them, and an equipment database that had not been maintained (EPPR, 2025, pp. 9–13).

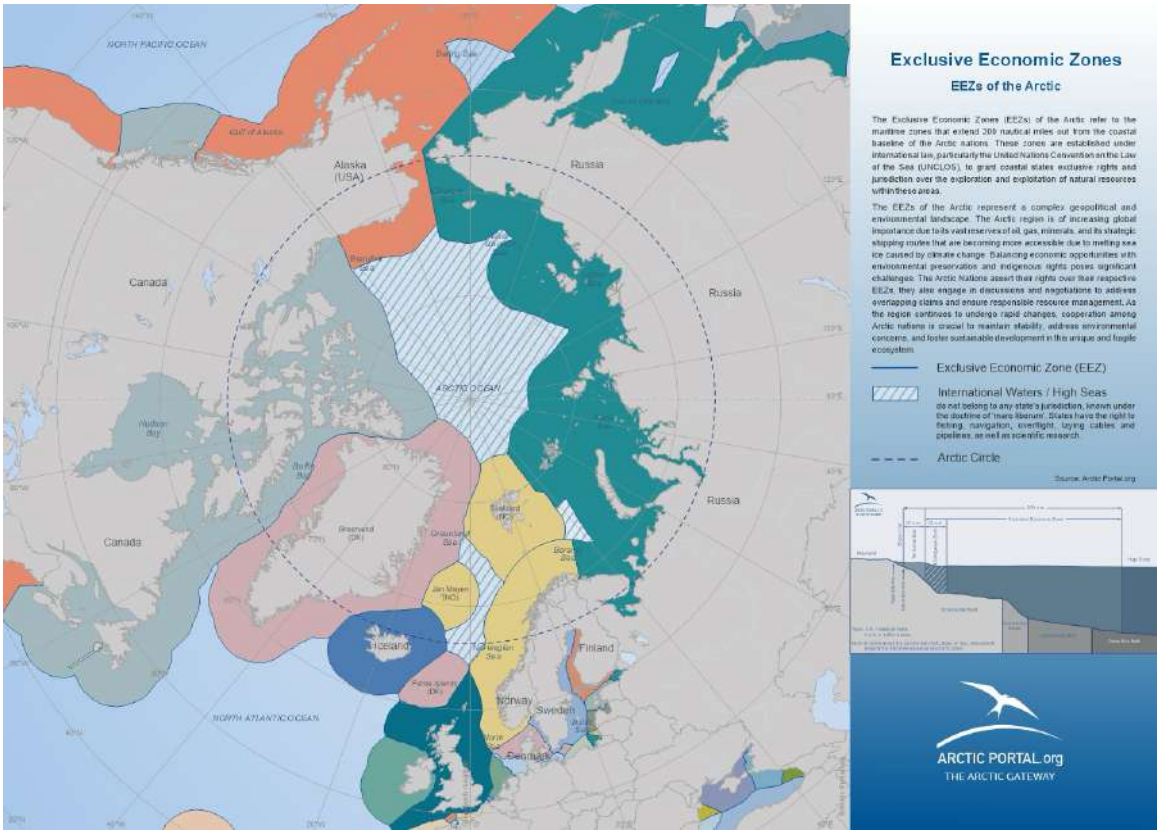

Figure 3. Exclusive economic zones of the Arctic states and the high seas of the Central Arctic Ocean. MOSPA applies to incidents in or threatening any marine area under a party's sovereignty, sovereign rights or jurisdiction, including its exclusive economic zone and continental shelf (Arctic Council, 2013, Art. 3); its notification and assistance articles also apply to the high seas above each party's southern limit; the hatched high-seas area in the central Arctic Ocean is the CAOFA agreement area (CAOFA, 2018). Boundaries are indicative and follow the Flanders Marine Institute (2023) Maritime Boundaries Geodatabase, version 12, which has no legal standing. Source: Arctic Portal (2023), reproduced with attribution, www.arcticportal.org.

A third binding inter-state instrument relevant to the C3 framework's institutional analysis is the 2018 Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (CAOFA), in force since June 2021. CAOFA differs from SAR and MOSPA in two respects. Its signatories include non-Arctic states with

distant-water fishing capability (China, Japan, South Korea, the European Union) alongside the Arctic Five, and its operational scope is the high-seas portion of the Central Arctic Ocean rather than coastal or EEZ waters. The implementation pattern, however, is similar to the SAR and MOSPA agreements. CAOFA imposes a binding moratorium and establishes a Joint Program of Scientific Research and Monitoring, but does not fund, staff, or establish operational infrastructure for enforcement when the moratorium ends, whether at the close of its initial term in 2037 or at a later five-year extension point (Vylegzhanin et al., 2020). CAOFA permits exploratory fishing only under conservation and management measures that the parties adopt by consensus, and those measures must let a party authorize such fishing only after notifying the others and giving them a chance to comment (CAOFA, 2018, arts. 3(3), 5(1)(d), 6). The conservation and management measures that were to govern such fishing were due by June 2024 and had still not been adopted at the parties' June 2025 meeting, and a high-seas boarding and inspection scheme remained under discussion in the parties' working group (CAOFA, 2018, art. 5; CAOFA, 2025, paras. 28, 30, 32). Enforcement of both the moratorium and any exploratory regime therefore rests on each party's good-faith monitoring of its own nationals (Vylegzhanin et al., 2020).

Rottem (2014), studying Norway, found that the SAR Agreement established no institutional arrangements beyond meetings of the parties, conferred no formal powers, and left each state to bear its own costs (pp. 287, 289–290). The same pattern applies to MOSPA, and prospectively to CAOFA. This means that three binding agreements share one operational gap, a legal obligation without the multilateral capacity to execute it. The C3 framework's central argument is that closing this gap requires the planning, the shared picture and, for CAOFA, the enforcement coordination that the three agreements assume but do not supply. These functions begin inside the Forum's existing structure and move into a permanent body as the framework matures (§6.2). The members are already bound by the SAR Agreement, MOSPA and CAOFA, and the proposal seeks no new obligation under them. What it adds are shared operational plans synchronized each year, one common picture, and a framework for shipriders.

4.4 The institutional landscape scored against C3 functions

Table 2 applies the C3 framework as the analytic instrument, scoring each existing body against the functions that an operational body must perform. The functions follow the three pillars. For Collaboration, the key questions are who participates and whether the body withstands political stress. Coordination covers whether the body keeps procedures and contact lists current, schedules operations and exercises regularly, coordinates responses as they happen, and coordinates enforcement. Under Communication, the focus is on whether the body maintains a shared operating picture and the information-sharing arrangements that support it.

Table 2. Existing bodies scored against the functions of an operational body

Body	Membership and persistence (Collaboration)*	Procedures and contact lists kept current (Coordination)*	Operational planning and exercise cycle (Coordination)*	Real-time coordination during an emergency (Coordination)*	Enforcement coordination (Coordination)*	Shared operating picture and information sharing (Communication)*
EPPR	Eight states and six Permanent Participants; meeting online with Russia since 2024	Partial: holds the MOSPA guidelines and contact points and tests RCC contacts for the SAR Agreement; its 2024 exercise found some contacts out of date and the equipment database unmaintained (§4.3)	Partial: exercises on its own cycle (MOSPA exercises since 2013, most recently in 2024; joint exercises with the ACGF in 2020 and 2021); no operations planning	None: "not an operational response organization" (EPPR, 2016)	None: mandate excludes military security; no enforcement or fisheries projects	Partial: aerial surveillance cooperation project (ICAMS) and contact lists; no operating picture
ACGF	Eight coast guards; Russia not invited since 2022; cooperation paused 2022–2023	Partial: its 2019 Voluntary Guidelines set procedures for the Forum's own combined operations and exercises, not for the agreements	Partial: live exercises in 2017, 2019 and 2025; Combined Operations Working Group; roadmap not revised in recent years	None: coordinates exercises, not live incidents	None in practice: safety and environmental response only (Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, p. 6); maritime security working group agreed September 2026	Partial: information sharing for combined operations under the 2019 Guidelines; a common operational picture is an objective, not built (Arctic Coast Guard Forum, 2019, pp. 8, 16)
Bilateral channels	Pairs, including Russia (U.S.–Soviet, now U.S.–Russia, agreement since 1989; Norway–Russia agreements since 1994–1995)	Yes: joint contingency plans and agreements	Partial: joint exercises with Russia stopped in 2022; allied exchanges continue	Yes: coordination under the joint contingency plans	Partial (pairs only): U.S.–Canada Shiprider agreement (2009), U.S.–Norway personnel exchange (2005)	None across the region
CAOFA	Ten parties, including China, the European Union, Japan and South Korea; all attended in 2025	None yet: the conservation and management measures due by June 2024 had not been adopted as of June 2025	None: an annual Conference of the Parties and a scientific program, not an operations or exercise cycle	None	None at present: flag-state enforcement only; boarding and inspection scheme under discussion; decisions by consensus	None

**Note.* Yes = the body performs the function on a continuing basis under its own documents; Partial = it performs part of it, or only on its own exercise cycle; None = it does not perform the function. Sources by row: EPPR, Arctic Council (n.d., 1996, 2025b), EPPR (2016, 2017, 2025), Quinn (2024); ACGF, Arctic Coast Guard Forum (2019, 2025a), Danish Defence (2026), Edvardsen (2026), Norwegian Coast Guard (2025), Østhagen (2015); bilateral channels, Department of Homeland Security (2013), Lauta (2014), Nilsen (2024), Royal Canadian Mounted Police (2025), U.S. Coast Guard 17th District (2021), U.S. Coast Guard Arctic District (2026), U.S. Department of State (2005); CAOFA, CAOFA (2018, 2025), Schatz et al. (2019).

Two results follow from the table. First, real-time coordination exists only in the bilateral channels, which are pairwise and cannot produce a picture of the region, and the initial response to a multinational incident is therefore coordinated by whichever pair of rescue centers is involved. Second, there is limited enforcement coordination beyond bilateral work. EPPR's mandate excludes security. The ACGF's practice has not included it, although its members agreed in September 2026 to form the maritime security working group described in §4.2 (Edvardsen, 2026). The shiprider arrangements work in pairs, and CAOFA will supply authority once its measures exist but has no mechanism to coordinate the vessels that would exercise it. As it stands, there is no joint Arctic entity that plans operations, coordinates enforcement or maintains a shared operating picture across the region. Real-time coordination and current procedures exist in full only in pairs. These are the gaps the design in §5 addresses. The ACGF is the body on which the design builds because its members are the services that perform every function in the table, its own terms of reference already describe it as operationally driven, and its existing link to EPPR gives it access to the guidance that the Communication and Coordination pillars require. MOSPA itself relies on these services, because as signed its 24-hour operational contact points for Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Sweden and the United States are coast guards or agencies that perform coast guard functions, and the Canadian, Swedish and U.S. coast guards are named competent national authorities (Arctic Council, 2013, Appendices I–II). A U.S. Coast Guard search and rescue specialist also chairs EPPR for 2025–2027 (Arctic Council, 2025a). Military-to-military security stays with ASFR and NATO, and classified material moves only government to government through each nation's channels (§5.3), which keeps the Forum's share of the security work at the coast guard level.

The strongest case against transformation is that the Forum's deliberate informality is the source of its resilience after 2014 and after 2022. The same non-binding, consensus-based design allowed the Forum to be founded in October 2015 after the Crimea annexation and to resume work in 2023 (§4.2), and Østhagen (2016, pp. 93–95) credits coast guard cooperation with Russia to its standing as low politics, kept apart from politicized issues. A more formal body with security tasks could erode that standing. According to the Norwegian chairship report, "ACGF's narrow focus on safety and environmental response, combined with dedicated member nations" is credited for making the cooperation effective (Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, p. 6). Since then, the members have addressed part of this objection themselves. By their own decision, the maritime security working group they created (§4.2) places security work inside the Forum. Two further objections follow from Table 2. EPPR exists as a guidance body with all eight states at the table, and its mandate could be widened instead. The bilateral channels are working, and the Norwegian rescue center reports no significant challenges so far from the loss of joint exercises with Russia (Nilsen, 2024). The answer to both objections lies in the gaps the table shows. EPPR cannot take on real-time coordination or enforcement without leaving the Council's mandate, which excludes security and has never included fisheries enforcement, and its own documents say it is not an operational body. The bilateral channels coordinate in pairs, cannot produce a regional picture or a multilateral enforcement presence, and are no longer practiced with Russia. The design in §5 keeps the Forum's narrow operational core unchanged and adds only the functions that the table identifies as gaps.

5. The C3 Framework

A transformed ACGF would fill these gaps through three additions (Figure 4). The first is a planning cell that coordinates mission planning across the participating coast guards (seven at present), maintains agency connections, request procedures, and equipment data (EPPR, 2025, pp. 9–13). The second is a common operating picture built on the Council's shipping and surveillance data and Indigenous-led monitoring (§5.3). The third is a shiprider arrangement that gives streamlined opportunity for Arctic coast guard personnel integration and preparation for CAOFA enforcement (§5.2). Two membership rules go with the three additions, both under the Collaboration pillar (§5.1): participation by function, so that the body works with seven members now, eight when conditions allow, and the Indigenous Peoples' Organizations, at each level of the operational body.

The proposal can be stated in the terms that strategy doctrine uses for an institutional strategy: ends to be attained by a given time, ways that correspond to lines of effort, means as resources and authorities, and risk guidance (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2019, p. III-2). In this proposal, the ends are the obligations the three agreements impose and enforcement coordination under CAOFA before 2037. The ways are the three pillars: Collaboration (§5.1), Coordination (§5.2) and Communication (§5.3). The means are the authorities in Table 1 and the capability the services are buying (§1), and the risk guidance is in §6.3. It must be noted that the construct is a framework for stating the proposal and not a strategy in itself.

5.1 Collaboration

The C3 framework assigns participation by function rather than by a fixed membership. In the terms of Koremenos et al. (2001), the rule restricts membership in the sensitive functions, as they expect when states are uncertain about one another's preferences, and builds in flexibility, as they expect when the state of the world is uncertain. Search and rescue and pollution notification are Arctic Eight functions by treaty and by practice. The SAR Agreement and MOSPA bind all eight states, the bilateral plans and rescue-center contacts with Russia described in §4.2 have continued since 2022, and the U.S. Coast Guard still notifies the Russian Border Guard directly of incursions across their maritime boundary (U.S. Coast Guard Arctic District, 2026). These functions therefore stay open to all eight states under any political condition, and nothing in the body's rules would close them. Operational planning, enforcement coordination, and information sharing beyond the unclassified tier vary with political conditions. Under current conditions, they run among the seven participating coast guards. When conditions permit, Russia could join planning, enforcement coordination and the sensitive-but-unclassified layer, while release of the classified layer stays each nation's decision under its own disclosure system or information-sharing agreements. Koivurova and Shibata (2023) observe that the SAR and oil-spill agreements "are still in effect, but they are not being implemented" (p. 7), which is the work that Russian participation in planning would restore. The rule does not treat every member alike. The treaty functions and the unclassified layer are open to all eight states, and the two restricted layers described in §5.3 are shared only among the participating states. Because of this, the framework does not claim that every function is open to every state on equal terms. Russia is a CAOFA party and the coastal state with the longest Arctic shoreline, so enforcement coordination in the Central Arctic Ocean without Russia would be challenging or incomplete, while enforcement coordination with Russia requires political conditions that do not exist. The design accepts that gap now, because a working framework among

the members willing to participate keeps a path open for Russia to join when conditions allow. Waiting instead for all eight members to be represented, as the Secretariat's October 2023 decision requires before the governing documents can be amended (Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, p. 8), would lose time in a period of significant change.

The second membership rule gives the Indigenous Peoples' Organizations a structural rather than a consultative place in this operational ACGF. The Inuit Circumpolar Council's Permanent Participation status within the Arctic Council provides the institutional model (Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2009, 2022), and its advance at the International Maritime Organization signals an emerging norm for Indigenous structural participation in maritime governance. In December 2025, the IMO Assembly endorsed the IMO Council's decision to grant ICC permanent consultative status, which makes ICC the only Indigenous Peoples' Organization with that status at the IMO (Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2025). The Government of Greenland's foreign and security policy commits Greenland to build civil emergency-response capability, to move search and rescue preparedness "from a predominantly military to a civilian model," and to expand cooperation with Iceland and Canada (Naalakkersuisut / Government of Greenland, 2024, pp. 43, 45), and the C3 framework reflects that direction. Olsvig and Cullen (2024) show that Arctic Indigenous peoples have shaped the international law that applies to them as much as it has shaped them, and a body that seats their organizations from the start builds on that record instead of adding them later.

The C3 framework identifies three design questions that require dedicated treatment beyond the scope of this article. The first is tiered partnership structures for non-Arctic states with demonstrated Arctic operational capacity. The second is the specific operational role of Indigenous Permanent Participants beyond their consultative role in the Arctic Council. The third is the boundary between civilian-character coast guard cooperation and military-to-military cooperation under existing statutory restrictions. The Indigenous Permanent Participants question requires a substantive mechanism design: voting posture, information-access tiers, Indigenous information sovereignty, secretariat representation, and treaty co-signature standing are reserved for a forthcoming article.

5.2 Coordination

Surface presence in the Arctic is national. Each of the eight coast guards deploys its own ships, mostly in its own waters, and the combined operations that occur are bilateral or run as exercises rather than planned operations across the region. The services also differ in parent ministry, legal status, enforcement authority and ice-capable assets in the ways that Table 1 shows. The Forum's live exercises (Arctic Guardian 2017, Polaris 2019, and Arctic Guardian 2025) show that these services can operate together when the planning is done in advance.

Along the Coordination dimension, the framework proposes an operational planning cell, established alongside the Forum under the members' arrangement of §6.1, with three core functions: a shared annual exercise calendar, shared planning for foreseeable contingencies (mass rescue at sea, multi-jurisdiction oil spill, coordinated pollution response, fisheries enforcement in the central Arctic high seas), and a campaigning approach that aligns activities, opportunities, and investments toward shared operational outcomes. The planning cell's powers are limited in three ways: 1) the host state keeps the lead for any incident in its search and rescue region or its waters, as the SAR Agreement and MOSPA provide, 2) partners hold the domain awareness at all times, at the classification level each is cleared for, so that they can sortie or make assets available if the

host requests them, and 3) the cell does not task any member's assets. In Koremenos and colleagues' terms, the limits set a low degree of centralization. The design closes the first-hours gap by giving the host rescue center a regional picture and agreed request procedures, which it uses to run the response under its own lead. The difference from the current Forum is that the services would plan real deployments together on an annual cycle, keep the treaty contact lists current between exercises, and share one picture. What the cell adds is the work that EPPR's 2024 exercise identified, namely current contact lists, duty officers familiar with the request-for-assistance procedures, liaison arrangements agreed in advance, and a maintained record of the equipment each member can offer (EPPR, 2025, pp. 9–13). These tasks fall to the coast guards themselves, and the planning cell is the means of keeping them current and connected between exercises. The United States Coast Guard is positioned to facilitate this evolution for two reasons. It holds law enforcement, military, regulatory, and intelligence-community authorities under a single command (Office of the Law Revision Counsel, 2024). In addition, it operates on both the Pacific and the European sides of the Arctic, from the Bering Strait boundary patrols to the joint operations off Svalbard described in §4.2, and it has operated or exercised with every other member, bilaterally or through the Forum. A U.S.-controlled body would be incompatible with the security-community premise on which the C3 framework rests (Adler & Barnett, 1998) and would invert the relationship that has historically sustained Arctic cooperation across periods of high political stress (Østhagen, 2016).

The cell's first product is an annual planning cycle. Through the year, staff-level virtual meetings share each service's intent. Each late fall, the ACGF Chair hosts a planning conference where the service liaisons synchronize their draft plans for the coming season. Each service is expected to bring its draft plan, the lessons and the information from the year, and the research cruises its nation has agreed to support. The end products would be agreed operational areas, objectives and communications for the deployments, with shipriders or exchange personnel assigned before the ships sail. The cycle gives integrated operations the lead time they need and builds each season's plan on the last. After the first cycle, the planning cell could move to a two-year schedule aligned with the services' ship and aircraft maintenance cycles.

Two cases show what the cycle changes. In the first, a suspected dual-use research vessel is working the U.S. extended continental shelf north of Alaska. Under the ACGF, a U.S. Coast Guard patrol aircraft would track it first. A Canadian maritime patrol aircraft would take the track as the vessel approached Canadian waters, Joint Arctic Command's aircraft would take it off Greenland if it continued east through the Northwest Passage, and Norwegian surveillance would take it once clear of Canadian and Danish areas of interest. A cutter or patrol ship would be committed where an escort or overt monitoring was warranted. Each hand-off would be planned before the vessel arrived, and the aircraft would fly the agreed surveillance plan with common reporting and communications procedures. This matters because in three of the four services, the patrol aircraft belong to the air force and not to the coast guard (Norwegian Armed Forces, 2022; Royal Canadian Air Force, 2025). The plan must also match each end state to a service that can carry it out, because the law enforcement authority of the eight services differs (Table 1). This means that Canada's end state runs through the RCMP, Fisheries and Oceans Canada or the Royal Canadian Navy rather than the Canadian Coast Guard, which can track and hand off but cannot board.

A dual-use research vessel has inherent military applications, so the coast guard-led chain should be coordinated with the defense commands rather than run separately from them. The U.S. Coast

Guard already monitors foreign vessels near U.S. waters with Northern Command and Alaskan Command, and in July 2026 it ran Operation Frontier Sentinel on the *Xue Long* and *Xue Long 2* alongside the Department of War and the Department of State (U.S. Coast Guard, 2025, 2026a). Its cutters also participate in Alaskan Command's homeland defense operation Tundra Merlin, and in July 2026, three of them sailed with HMCS *Max Bernays* through the Bering Sea and Bering Strait under that operation (Alaskan Command, 2025, 2026). On the Canadian side, Operation Latitude sent Royal Canadian Navy ships to the Western Arctic in 2025 to increase domain awareness and interoperability with the U.S. military (National Defence, 2025). The planning cell would carry this coordination into the multilateral plan through each service's national channel (§5.3).

In the second case, the response stays where the SAR Agreement and MOSPA place it, with the host state's rescue center in the lead within its own region. A tanker without ice class slows and stops at the ice edge, as *Arctic Metagaz* did in August 2025, or a cargo ship's track bends toward shoal water, as *Thamesborg*'s did in Franklin Strait (§3.1). With each participating service feeding one picture, the watch would likely see the movement before any distress call is made. The host rescue center would then take the case, knowing which neighboring service has the nearest operational icebreaker or aircraft (Table 1), what each could make available on request, and how a request under the SAR Agreement or MOSPA is made and answered.

Fisheries enforcement is the most concrete near-term application of the Coordination pillar. When the CAOFA moratorium ends (§3.1), the central Arctic high seas, bounded by the Arctic Five's EEZs, open to the fleets of the agreement's distant-water parties, four of which (China, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union) sit outside the ACGF. The model this article proposes keeps authority and coordination separate and would make it unnecessary for the non-Arctic parties to send their own enforcement vessels into the Central Arctic Ocean. Authority would come from CAOFA's own conservation and management measures once the parties adopt them by consensus (CAOFA, 2018, arts. 5–6). At the southern tip of the area it would also come from the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), the existing regional fisheries body whose convention area reaches into the CAOFA area and whose competence there the CAOFA preamble recognizes (Schatz et al., 2019). Coordination would come from the Arctic coast guards, whose platforms would carry fisheries enforcement officers from the non-Arctic parties as shipriders authorized to board vessels of their own flag. The precedent for this approach (though not the model) is Operation North Pacific Guard, in which coast guards coordinate high-seas boardings whose authority comes from the regional fisheries commissions' boarding and inspection schemes and the UN drift net ban (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2025; U.S. Coast Guard, 2024). Three risks remain. First, the approach stays anticipatory until the parties agree a boarding scheme (§4.3). Second, the non-Arctic parties may hold out for reciprocal boarding rights in place of a shiprider arrangement because CAOFA's substantive decisions require their consent. Third, the North Pacific Coast Guard Forum, whose six members include Russia and China (Japan Coast Guard, 2025), could be seen as a better venue. That being said, it has no Arctic remit, and its members are not the coastal states whose EEZs enclose the area.

Beyond fisheries, the Coordination pillar must also reconcile the variation in law enforcement authority presented in Table 1. The U.S. Coast Guard holds the broadest authority, and the Icelandic Coast Guard holds general police authority at sea within its EEZ. Broad authority is also held by the Finnish, Russian and Swedish services, but solely for the tasks specified in their national laws. The authority of the Norwegian and Danish services is limited to specific sectors, and the

Canadian Coast Guard has no law enforcement authority. This variation matters because the Arctic strategies now ask for enforcement, including cable protection and action against the shadow fleet. This type of enforcement ends in a boarding or a detention, which requires maritime law enforcement authority and jurisdiction over the vessel or the waters it is in. Defense assets can find, track and carry the boarding team, but execution falls to the agency that holds the authority and jurisdiction. When the cargo ship *Fitburg* was suspected of damaging the Helsinki–Tallinn cable on 31 December 2025, the Finnish Border Guard's patrol vessel *Turva* and a helicopter stopped the ship in Finland's exclusive economic zone and directed it into territorial waters (Lehto, 2025; Yle News, 2025). NATO supported Finland "with analysis and information exchange" and described the case as "a national and local police investigation led by national authorities" (Altman, 2025). Where a coast guard lacks the authority, it can carry a law enforcement team from a state that holds jurisdiction under an agreement between the two states. The embarked team then enforces its own state's law from the carrying vessel. The U.S. Coast Guard's Law Enforcement Detachments work this way under domestic law, carrying their Title 14 powers aboard U.S. Navy vessels in a drug-interdiction area (Office of the Law Revision Counsel, 2024, 10 U.S.C. § 279). Between members, the same construct needs the bilateral arrangement described below.

Two existing models from current practice could address this challenge. The first model is the bilateral Maritime Law Enforcement Agreement (MLEA), or shiprider agreement, operationalized by the United States through bilateral MLEAs across the Pacific (U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 2025). The model reinforces rather than dilutes coastal-state jurisdiction. A host-state law enforcement officer aboard a partner state's vessel exercises their own national authority in their own waters, with the partner contributing platform and crew and not jurisdiction. The 2009 U.S.–Canada Integrated Cross-Border Maritime Law Enforcement Operations agreement applies a similar approach between two Arctic Eight states (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2025). An Arctic-region collective MLEA, concluded by the participating governments and prepared through the ACGF, would reconcile authority variation through interoperability rather than authority transfer, and it would give the participating coast guards a common framework for shipriders and observers during deployments. The second model is personnel exchange, formalized in the 2005 U.S.–Norway memorandum of agreement in §4.2 (U.S. Department of State, 2005) and practiced in the Arctic in the short-term crew exchanges between USCGC *Healy* and the Norwegian vessel *Svalbard* (U.S. Coast Guard, 2023). Independent of enforcement authority, personnel exchange puts the security-communities framework of §2 into practice by deepening the shared operational language and standards of the coast guard professional community and the practitioner-level ties that, in Adler and Barnett's (1998) terms, sustain a security community amid political volatility.

5.3 Communication

Three conditions distinguish the Arctic from other operational environments. First, conventional satellite communications from geostationary orbit become unstable above approximately 70 degrees north latitude. This has left Arctic operations dependent on a few satellites in polar or highly elliptical orbits and on a small number of subsea cables that are difficult to install and difficult to repair (French et al., 2025). Second, proliferated low-Earth-orbit commercial constellations have substantially increased Arctic communications bandwidth for civilian and military uses alike (GPS World, 2026). Third, the same infrastructure is a point of strategic vulnerability, from the sustained

GPS jamming in Northern Finnmark to the cable disruptions in the European High North since 2022 (Evers, 2025; Schalin & Arts, 2026).

Along the Communication dimension, the framework proposes a communications cell, under the same arrangement, whose product is a shared operating picture, layered by classification. In the early phases, the picture is each service's access to the others' data through its own programs and capabilities, and a common picture, mirrored across the participating coast guards, comes later in Phase 2 (§6.2). The first layer is unclassified operational information, shared under a standard ACGF arrangement with all member coast guards. It carries SAR planning, environmental response coordination, fisheries surveillance data, exercise notifications, and vessel tracking equivalent to AIS. This is the layer that the §5.1 rule keeps open to all eight members. The second layer is sensitive but unclassified information, shared case by case under bilateral or sub-group arrangements with appropriate caveats. It carries specific operational dispositions, response timelines, intelligence-derived weather and ice products, cyber-incident notifications, and Indigenous data. The third layer is classified information releasable to the participating states (SECRET REL in U.S. usage), including hybrid-threat indications and classified ISR products. This layer is released through each nation's own disclosure system. Integrated operational planning at this layer turns a shared picture into coordinated action. The Forum has set this as a goal but has not yet built it (Table 2). "Build a common operational picture to ensure proper protocols for emergency response coordination, and safe navigation" is one of its strategic goals, and the Combined Operations Working Group was discussing its construction in October 2023 (Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, pp. 4, 8).

The common operating picture draws on four sources. The first is maritime domain awareness data, which includes AIS, satellite-derived vessel tracking and dark-vessel detection, the feeds of the national fusion centers and headquarters, and the Automated Mutual-Assistance Vessel Rescue system. The second category comprises environmental monitoring data, including sea-ice products from the National Snow and Ice Data Center and the Copernicus program, Russian Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute ice maps where political conditions permit, and national ice charts. The third is search-and-rescue coordination information from the Cospas-Sarsat distress beacon system and the national rescue coordination centers (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, n.d.). The fourth is Indigenous-led monitoring, handled at the second layer under the Inuit Circumpolar Council's Circumpolar Inuit Protocols for Equitable and Ethical Engagement (Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2022) and the Indigenous information sovereignty question in §5.1. Two Arctic Council projects already supply building blocks for the unclassified layer, EPPR's International Cooperation on Aerial Maritime Surveillance project (Canada, Denmark, Norway, and the United States, 2021–2027) and PAME's AIS-based Arctic Ship Traffic Data program (Arctic Council, 2025b, pp. 15, 25, 51–52). Building the picture on these projects avoids duplication because the Council's projects describe capacity and traffic, and the Forum's cell would use them to run operations. The EU's planned Maritime Security Hub is a potential source of shared maritime domain awareness data for the unclassified layer rather than a competitor to it. Its scope includes shadow-fleet tracking, illegal fishing, marine pollution, and "search and rescue components and navigation safety," three ACGF members are EU states (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2026, p. 8).

The agreements that carry these layers must cover each coast guard directly, and each service has a national channel through which the Forum's planning can be joined to security-related planning,

with classified material handled at the appropriate level through each nation's own disclosure system, as the third layer provides. For the U.S. Coast Guard, that channel is its existing relationship with the combatant commands. The relationship is based on the 2008 memorandum of agreement between the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense, which is now called the Department of War (Government Accountability Office, 2021, pp. 3, 7). This is a domestic instrument as it does not connect the Coast Guard to partner defense agencies. For Norway, Denmark and Canada, the channel runs through the Navy, Joint Arctic Command and National Defence respectively (Table 1). Considering that the U.S. channel runs through a separate instrument, the Coast Guard needs its own information-sharing agreements with the organizations it works with regularly, to include defense agencies. Canada's transfer of its coast guard into National Defence in September 2025, which the government says will "improve information-sharing," is the reverse of the U.S. arrangement (National Defence, 2026, Overview section, para. 1). This means that the agreements must follow each service's placement and not a single template.

The Communication pillar is where Collaboration and Coordination produce results, and it makes the Forum's work a question of Arctic data, knowledge systems, and self-determination as much as a question of the availability of ships and aircraft. The three classification layers, the four data sources, and Indigenous-led monitoring make up one common operating picture. This picture is mirrored across the participating coast guards and facilitated by the communications cell. Considering that the common operating picture is built from the members' data and from Indigenous knowledge, data sovereignty and its safeguards are built into the design. Each member keeps control of what it contributes and at what level, through the three layers and its own disclosure system, and Indigenous knowledge enters only under the ethical standards of the Inuit Circumpolar Council's protocols and the Indigenous information sovereignty question raised in §5.1.

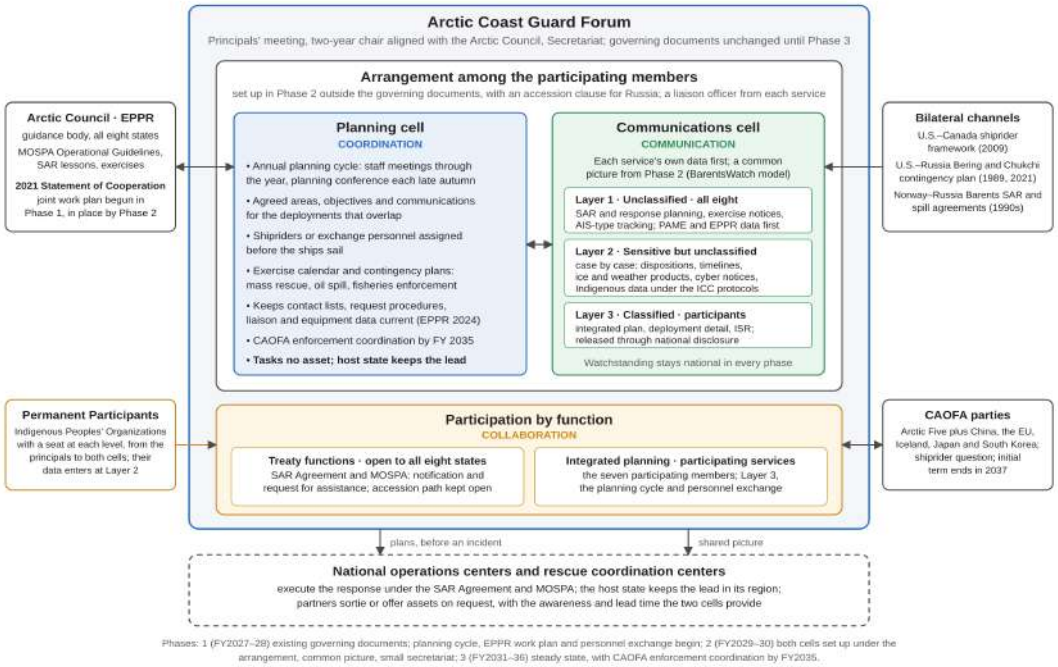

Figure 4. The C3 framework applied to the Arctic Coast Guard Forum. The planning cell (Coordination) and the communications cell (Communication) are set up in Phase 2 under an arrangement among the participating members, and participation by function (Collaboration) keeps the treaty functions open to all

eight states. The national operations centers and rescue coordination centers execute the response. Source: the authors.

6. Toward an Operational ACGF: Pathway and Risks

6.1 Why incremental, why now

Arctic institutions have evolved more often than they have been created. The Arctic Council itself emerged from the 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy rather than from a single founding act, and its institutional capacity (the Permanent Participants framework, the Working Groups, the rotating chairship, the eventual Secretariat) accreted over more than a decade (Young, 2016). An operational Arctic Coast Guard Forum should follow this incremental logic and demonstrate value within existing authority before requesting new authority.

The services are buying the capability before any framework exists to employ it together, with the ships described in §1 arriving between 2023 and 2035, and the strategies that fund them expect coordination (§1, §3.3). The change proposed is to the working practice of a forum that the services already run, and it starts from the 2021 Statement of Cooperation, the Arctic Guardian exercise series, and the bilateral agreements surveyed in §4.2. A military body, such as the Combined Joint Interagency Task Force–Polar Regions proposed on the JIATF-South model (Margolius & Pantaleo, 2026), could put at risk the Forum's coast guard character, which lets it balance security tasks against escalation risk (§3.3) and keeps the venue open to Russia in the future (Østhagen, 2016). Two further points make the incremental path practical. The cost is small in relation to the investment: liaison officers on new or existing billets, a planning conference each fall, and the staff work of releasing information through each nation's own disclosure system (§6.2). In addition, operational cooperation of this kind has outlived a political freeze before, within limits. U.S.–Russia cooperation on pollution response in the Bering and Chukchi Seas dates from a 1989 U.S.–Soviet agreement, concluded in the last years of the Cold War, and its Joint Contingency Plan was signed again in updated form in February 2021, nearly seven years after the annexation of Crimea (U.S. Coast Guard 17th District, 2021). The freeze since February 2022 is of a different order, and Russia has not been invited to the Forum's meetings since (Danish Defence, 2026; Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, pp. 3–4). That being said, the contact that remains runs through the coast guards and rescue centers (§3.3), which is the channel kept open.

One obstacle sits in the Forum's own record. In October 2023, the ACGF Secretariat decided not to modify the Forum's governing documents unless all eight members are represented, and the strategic roadmap has not been revised since (Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, pp. 4, 8). This decision should be revisited, because the conditions it assumed have changed since 2023. Sweden has since joined Finland in NATO (Government Offices of Sweden, 2026; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025). In 2024, the Arctic Council resumed its working-group business, online and with Russian participation (Quinn, 2024). The Forum then ran Arctic Guardian 2025 as seven (Arctic Coast Guard Forum, 2025a). The shadow-fleet seasons of 2025 and 2026 have put tankers without adequate ice class on the Northern Sea Route, within reach of the Chukchi and Barents Seas, where a casualty would fall to the SAR and pollution-response functions the Forum's members hold (§3.1). In April 2026, the Forum held its principals' meeting in Copenhagen (Canadian Coast Guard, 2026a). Most recently, in late September 2026, the seven created the maritime security working group described in §4.2 (Edvardsen, 2026). Under the 2023 decision,

the Forum's governing documents cannot adapt to any of these changes while one member remains uninvited. There is considerable risk in the other direction. Amending the rules with one member absent can be read in Moscow and elsewhere as closing the door, and the Forum's value has rested on keeping that door open (Østhagen, 2016). Because of this, the pathway below does two things in concert. First, the planning cell, the communications cell and the Permanent Participants' status are established in Phase 2 through a separate arrangement among the participating members, which sits alongside the Forum and uses its meetings, with an accession clause for Russia. This leaves the Forum's governing documents and the SAR, MOSPA and CAOFA treaties unamended and keeps the door open. Second, the Combined Operations Working Group reviews the 2023 decision during Phase 2 (Table 3), so that the Forum itself can decide in Phase 3 whether to bring the arrangement into its governing documents.

6.2 A three-phase pathway

Phases 1 and 2 are set in two-year blocks (Table 3) for two reasons. Facilitating responsibilities consist of recurring appropriation lines rather than one-time investments, and the members' budget cycles are not aligned. The budgets are annual but start on different dates. For example, the U.S. fiscal year begins on 1 October, with the President's request submitted to Congress the previous February (Office of the Law Revision Counsel, 2024, 31 U.S.C. §§ 1102, 1105), while Canada's fiscal year starts on 1 April (Financial Administration Act, 1985, s. 2). A two-year block gives every member at least one full budget cycle to fund its share. The phases are planning floors, and faster execution remains possible where budgets, operational opportunities or political conditions allow. Phase 1 (FY 2027 to FY 2028) works within the Forum's existing governing documents and needs no new appropriation. Its cost is staff time and travel carried on existing billets and exercise budgets so that the load in this phase is administrative rather than monetary. The EPPR link belongs in this phase. The 2021 Statement of Cooperation is put to work with a joint work plan and a joint exercise cycle (Arctic Council, 2021). Personnel exchange is widened in the same phase from the bilateral agreements of §5.2 to the other participating services. The planning cycle of §5.2 starts concurrently with the planning conference for Arctic Guardian 2027, hosted by Joint Arctic Command (Arctic Coast Guard Forum, 2025b). According to the Council's 2025–2027 work plans, the joint MOSPA exercise is left to "the discretion of the Kingdom of Denmark" (Arctic Council, 2025b, p. 54), so the initial joint exercise may occur during the same chairship. The unclassified layer begins as access to each service's own data and MDA services, starting with the PAME and EPPR data of §5.3, and a common picture is left to Phase 2. Indigenous Peoples' Organizations are invited to the principals' and working-group meetings, and their Permanent Participant status and seats in the cells follow in Phase 2 under the separate arrangement, so that they share in the information and the planning rather than receive its products (§5.1). The CAOFA shiprider question of §5.2 is opened with the agreement's non-Arctic parties.

In Phase 2 (FY 2029 to FY 2030), the planning cell, the communications cell and the Permanent Participants' status are established through the separate arrangement described in §6.1. The principals' meetings already host bilateral meetings (Norwegian Coast Guard, 2025, p. 6), and Canada and Norway signed their amended training agreement on the margins of the 2026 meeting in Copenhagen (Canadian Coast Guard, 2026a). The information-sharing arrangements for the three layers described in §5.3 are negotiated in this phase, with the unclassified-layer arrangement as the priority deliverable, together with the common shiprider and observer framework of §5.2.

By the end of this phase, the joint work plan with EPPR and the wider personnel exchange are in place.

Phase 3 (FY 2031 to FY 2036 and beyond) is the operational steady state. If the members agree, the governing documents are amended to incorporate the arrangement, and if they do not, it continues as the established practice of the participating services. The framework must be able to support CAOFA enforcement coordination by FY 2035, two years before the moratorium's initial term ends. The enforcement model is the shiprider arrangement in §5.2, timed to CAOFA's own boarding and inspection measures, which were still under discussion in 2025 (CAOFA, 2025).

At minimum, each participating service details one liaison officer to the planning cell on a new or existing billet, hosted in rotation with the chair. When the common picture is built in Phase 2, its unclassified layer can follow Norway's BarentsWatch, which the Norwegian Coastal Administration established in 2012 with an open public portal. This model includes a closed operational part that combines information from several sources for the public agencies with operational tasks at sea (High North News, 2023; Ministry of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs, 2010). Other systems already in use can supply or receive data as needed. Additionally, Phase 2 adds a small permanent secretariat with rotating or shared hosts and the staff work of releasing information through each nation's own disclosure system, funded through national instruments in proportion to each state's Arctic equities. It serves an arrangement among the Forum's own members that uses the Forum's meetings, which avoids the parallel permanent forum that Finland's strategy warns against (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025, p. 18). Watchstanding and operational control remain with national services in every phase.

Table 3. The three-phase pathway (FY 2027 to FY 2036)

Phase	Deliverables	Instruments	Decision points
Phase 1, FY 2027 to FY 2028	Planning cycle of §5.2 begun alongside the Arctic Guardian 2027 planning conference, which Joint Arctic Command hosts; 2021 Statement of Cooperation put to work with a joint work plan and a joint exercise cycle; wider personnel exchange begun; unclassified layer begun as access to each service's own data and MDA services, starting with PAME and EPPR data; Indigenous Peoples' Organizations invited to principals' and working-group meetings; CAOFA shiprider question opened with the non-Arctic parties	Existing governing documents, unamended; the 2021 Statement of Cooperation; the bilateral agreements surveyed in §4.2; existing billets and exercise budgets	Denmark's decision on a joint MOSPA exercise within its chairship
Phase 2, FY 2029 to FY 2030	Planning cell and communications cell established, with Permanent Participant status and seats in the cells under the separate arrangement; joint work plan with EPPR and wider personnel exchange in place; common operating picture built on the BarentsWatch model; information-sharing arrangements for the three layers, unclassified first; common shiprider and observer framework; small permanent secretariat with rotating or shared hosts, funded nationally in proportion to each state's Arctic equities	An arrangement among the participating members outside the governing documents, clear of the SAR Agreement, MOSPA and CAOFA, with an accession clause for Russia (§6.1); each coast guard's own agreements with the defense and civil organizations it works with (§5.3); each nation's disclosure system for the classified layer	Combined Operations Working Group review of the October 2023 decision, reported to the principals' meetings of 2029 and 2030
Phase 3, FY 2031 to FY 2036 and beyond	Operational steady state; capable of supporting CAOFA enforcement coordination by FY 2035; ready for Russian participation in the functions that vary with political conditions (§5.1)	Governing documents amended to incorporate the arrangement if the members agree, otherwise the arrangement continues as established practice; the shiprider arrangement of §5.2 under CAOFA's own boarding and inspection measures	The Forum's decision on its governing documents; adoption of CAOFA's boarding and inspection measures; political conditions for Russian participation

Note. Dates follow the U.S. fiscal year. Sources as cited in §6.2.

6.3 Risks and mitigations

There are five principal risks to the proposed C3 framework's implementation pathway.

The first risk is institutional drift, in which the ACGF expands beyond its operational mandate into political or military matters that the Arctic Council and ASFR more appropriately address. The ACGF's operational scope is bounded by the functions it can credibly perform without duplicating those of its sister institutions, with SAR, environmental response, fisheries coordination, and exercise planning inside the scope and high-level political deliberations and military operations outside it. A related risk is that security tasks and restricted layers move the Forum out of the low politics that Østhagen (2016, pp. 93–95) and Lambach (2020, p. 285) credit for keeping coast guard and search and rescue cooperation with Russia alive. The design limits this by keeping the treaty functions and the unclassified layer open to all eight and by moving classified material only through national channels (§5.3), but it does not remove the risk. Phase 1 maintains this boundary by operating within the existing terms of reference instead of broadening them. In Lackenbauer's (2021) typology, the Forum's functions answer threats to the Arctic, such as "a foreign vessel running aground … with deleterious environmental effects," while threats through the region remain with NORAD, U.S. Northern Command, U.S. European Command and NATO Joint Force Command Norfolk.

Asymmetric resource commitment is the second risk, where smaller members lack the personnel to staff a planning cell, causing the cell to function practically as a U.S.–Norwegian–Canadian-dominated venue. Mitigation is found in the secretariat's design: rotational or shared hosting arrangements, contribution-proportional staffing instead of fixed quotas, and participation via liaison rather than embedded staffing in the early phases (§6.2).

Geopolitical reversal is the third risk, where worsening conditions necessitate suspending relationships with members beyond Russia, or improvements lead to premature pressure to resume full eight-state operations before the institutions are prepared. The function-based rule in §5.1 serves as the mitigation, allowing treaty functions to remain open to all eight states under any condition while functions that change with conditions can gain or lose participants without redesign.

Appearing to overreach is the fourth risk. The framework gives Indigenous Permanent Participants an operational role, and it could be read as doing so without setting out what that role involves or how it was agreed. Member states uncomfortable with non-state participation in operations could push back on such a design. Indigenous Peoples' Organizations could also object to inadequate consultation during the design phase. The mitigation is in the Phase 1 sequencing, under which Indigenous Peoples' Organizations take part from the start and help set the terms of their role in planning and information sharing (§5.1).

The fifth risk is that the framework is the wrong response, the case described in §4.4. Two residual risks follow from it. First, EPPR may prefer another operational partner, because a project under development in its 2025–2027 work plan would build a meeting arena for rescue coordination centers on the Joint Arctic SAR arrangement in Iceland rather than on the Forum (Arctic Council, 2025b, pp. 54–56). In addition, the membership mismatch between a Council body that meets with Russia and a Forum that does not may keep the link between EPPR and the Forum thin whatever its design. The mitigation for the first is to make the Forum's planning cell useful to EPPR's own

exercises before asking anything of EPPR in return. The mitigation for the second is the function-based rule, which keeps the treaty functions open to all eight states, and these are the functions in which EPPR works. A related concern is that the transformed ACGF would duplicate the bilateral channels described in §4.2. Those channels connect two services at a time, so they do not provide the multilateral coordination for fisheries enforcement, mass rescue and coordinated oil-spill response that CAOFA, the SAR Agreement and MOSPA assume. Because of this, the pathway starts from those channels (§6.1) and adds the multilateral layer that they lack.

7. Conclusion

The C3 framework responds to the absence of a permanent body in which the Arctic coast guards plan their deployments together, share one operating picture and prepare for enforcement in the Central Arctic Ocean. EPPR maintains the guidance for search and rescue and oil pollution response, and the coast guards that execute it meet in the ACGF. Joint work between the two is agreed case by case under the 2021 Statement of Cooperation (§4.2). The 2011 SAR Agreement, the 2013 MOSPA Agreement, and the 2018 CAOFA Agreement together set obligations that no standing multilateral body helps the parties plan and practice, and EPPR's own 2024 exercise showed the work that executing the MOSPA Agreement requires (EPPR, 2025). The transformation of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum along its three pillars of Collaboration, Coordination, and Communication supplies that body. The retreat of the sea ice is likely to keep drawing more shipping into these waters (§3.1). Because of this, the transformed Forum would also reduce the operational risk that any single national fleet faces when emergencies cluster in remote waters. Indigenous Permanent Participation is built into the framework from the outset, reflecting the governance role that Arctic Indigenous Peoples' Organizations have established.

The operational test of the C3 framework's readiness is the end of the CAOFA moratorium's initial term in 2037. By that date the Arctic coast guards should have the planning cell, the common operating picture and the shiprider arrangement with the agreement's non-Arctic parties in place. Together these would let them coordinate enforcement across the high seas of the Central Arctic Ocean. Whether they exist by 2037 is a measurable test of the commitments their governments have made. Considering that CAOFA's boarding and inspection measures were still under discussion in 2025 (§4.3), the coordinating body should already exist when the parties adopt them, so that boardings can be coordinated from the first season the measures apply.

The Arctic states are buying the capability now, and the strategies they published between 2024 and 2026 show that they expect to need it together. Finland's strategy records that the surge in military activity is removing the grounds for Arctic exceptionalism (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025, p. 8), and the United Kingdom's framework states that the era is over (FCDO, 2026, p. 10), which means that the coordination the Arctic states expect cannot wait for a return to the conditions in which the Forum was founded. The research-vessel deployments, shadow-fleet traffic and military activity described in §1, §3.1 and §3.2 show that the challenges to security and sovereign rights in Arctic waters are growing (Humpert, 2026a; U.S. Coast Guard, 2026a). The C3 framework joins the security side of this coordination to each nation's defense planning through its own coast guard's channel (§5.2, §5.3). That being said, the function-based design lets the participating coast guards begin now, inside the Forum they already run and under the agreements their governments have signed, while search and rescue and pollution notification remain functions of all eight Arctic states. The coast guards must therefore build the planning and the shared picture that those

agreements assume before they are needed for a mass rescue, a major oil spill, or the first season of commercial fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean.

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