

Hot Takes on the New Arctic Strategy: What's Changed and What it Could Mean for the U.S. Coast Guard

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Things are certainly cooking when it comes to the Arctic.

A glance back over just the last month reveals some notable events that are emblematic of the rate of change and the challenges and opportunities emerging in this dynamic region:

- Sept. 17, Western Alaska was lashed by the remnants of Typhoon Merbok, bringing heavy winds and historically high-water levels that battered several vulnerable communities.
- Sept. 19, the patrolling U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Kimball discovered a Russian and Chinese flotilla of seven naval vessels 86 miles north of Alaska's Kiska Island.
- Oct. 4, it was announced that the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Healy had reached the North Pole on 30 September during a major scientific mission. This is the third voyage for Healy to the Pole (2001, 2005, and 2015) and 4th for a USCG cutter as Polar Sea was the first U.S. surface ship to reach the NP in August 1994.
- Oct. 6, two Russian nationals, apparently asylum seekers fleeing compulsory military service, created a stir when they arrived by small boat on St. Lawrence Island, just 37-miles from mainland Russia at the mouth of the Bering Strait.

So, it was great timing for the White House and the Pentagon to roll-out three important national strategy documents; first, the "[National Strategy for the Arctic Region](#)," in their own words, an update of its 2013 predecessor; the "[National Security Strategy](#)"; and the "[National Defense Strategy](#)."

The National Security Strategy (NSS) represents the tip of the U.S. national strategy pyramid, so it is expected that the tenets of the NSS will trickle down into geographic strategies like the Arctic. Therefore, one should first look for what the Biden-Harris Administration is saying about the region and potential implications for executive-branch agencies, and specifically for the U.S. Coast Guard and its partners.¹

The 2010 NSS, which guided the previous 2013 national Arctic strategy, held a single short paragraph on the Arctic, right at the end of the main body of the strategy, that simply said:

The United States is an Arctic Nation with broad and fundamental interests in the Arctic region, where we seek to meet our national security needs, protect the environment, responsibly manage resources, account for indigenous communities, support scientific research, and strengthen international cooperation on a wide range of issues.

¹ The most important and influential Arctic policy document today that underpins all the subsequent strategies, as referenced on page 5 of the N-SAR, is [NSPD 66/HSPD 25](#) signed in January 2009. This remains the established U.S. Arctic region policy.

The 2015 NSS mentioned the Arctic three times, but only in passing as one of many regions experiencing a certain security challenge, and the 2017 strategy mentioned the Arctic one time.

By comparison, the 2022 NSS treats the Arctic as a distinct region, even listing it specifically in the Table of Contents, and gives it nearly a half-page of dedicated focus. Notably, half of this extended focus is dedicated to detailing the competitive posturing of Russia and China in the region.

This focus on competition is the most significant element of change in the current Arctic strategic environment as reflected in this NSS and Arctic regional strategy. Thus, the Arctic portion of the 2022 NSS lays out a series of related tasks: 1) To uphold U.S. security by improving domain awareness, communications, disaster response capabilities, and icebreaking capacity in preparation for increased activity in the region; 2) Protect freedom of navigation; and 3) Determine the U.S. extended continental shelf in accordance with international rules.

Not specific to competition, but key factors to consider in the conduct of this strategy are the expectations to build resilience to and mitigate climate change in the region, reduce emissions, and increase cross-Arctic research collaboration.

This raised Arctic strategic profile is echoed in the National Defense Strategy (NDS), in which the Arctic received significant attention as one of six regions singled out for attention, as well as incorporation within the section on, “Climate Change and Transboundary Challenges.”

The Arctic has only been mentioned in preceding NDS documents once, in 2008, as an example of actions taken by, “a Russia exploring renewed influence, and seeking a greater international role.”

This more competitive profile of the Arctic in the NSS and NDS underscores the regions strategically shifting ice through which to view the updated National Strategy for the Arctic Region (N-SAR). To examine this shift, let’s compare the new N-SAR to the last to see what’s out, what’s in, and what are the notable shifts in the 2022 Arctic strategy.

What’s out

Oil and gas production are the big omission in the revision. In 2013, energy resources were a major consideration with their own subsection, now they receive a single mention, almost as an afterthought.

Also out is cooperation with Russia, with the strategy declaring, “government-to-government cooperation with Russia in the Arctic virtually impossible at present,” because of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.

What’s in

Competition, literally. The word was not used once in the 2013 strategy and appears six times this year. Further, specific text is given to the competitive behaviors of both Russia and China. In 2013, Russia was mentioned once in a footnote listing of the Arctic Council member nations, and China was not mentioned at all.

International competition is not just about potential adversaries but also allies. NATO made no appearance in 2013 but receives five references in the updated strategy as a counter to Russian aggression, a strengthening of the alliance with the prospective NATO accession of Finland and Sweden, and as a key partner to reduce risks and prevent unintended escalation.

The new strategy does hold out hope for a return to a more cooperative regional environment where, “it may be possible to resume cooperation under certain conditions,” but what those conditions are and what that cooperation might look like is to be determined.

Climate change, perhaps surprising to some, was only referenced four times in the 2013 strategy and only as an external change agent contributing to the increased access, activity, and interest in the region. In 2022, climate change receives major attention as one of the four pillars of the strategy, with emphasis on building resiliency and mitigating the cause and effects.

Notable shifts

National strategies are not often known for their prescription, a truism that would certainly apply to the 2013 Arctic strategy. However, the 2022 update is notable for its willingness to detail specific functions and activities.

The best example of this is the level of detail presented in “Pillar 1,” focused on security and describing the desired approach to the exercise of sovereignty through presence and the specific capabilities and operations to be pursued.

Both strategies discussed economic development, but in very different terms. Consideration of oil and gas has been replaced by renewable energy, critical minerals, tourism, and knowledge economy. There is specific reference to an undefined concept of, “high-standard investment,” and there is clear implication that government is an initial driver of infrastructure and service investments that have a multiplier effect on improving living conditions and setting the conditions for future economic developments.

Finally, the Coast Guard, present by implication in the 2013 strategy and continuing in this update, is also explicitly referenced this year. Specifically, once when directed to expand, “the icebreaker fleet to support persistent presence in the U.S. Arctic and additional presence as needed in the European Arctic,” and indirectly twice through the Arctic Coast Guard Forum’s role in sustaining Arctic institutions and upholding international law.

Implications for the Coast Guard

The 2022 Arctic strategy updates its nine-year-old predecessor and is intended to guide the next ten years of U.S. government focus and activities in the region.

Coincidentally, the [Coast Guard just published its own updated service strategy](#) on Oct. 13. This strategy provides a strategic framework to link enduring Coast Guard strategies to the Commandant’s Intent for a Coast Guard that generates sustained readiness, resilience, and capability in new ways.

Even a cursory crosswalk between these four new strategy documents reveals strong parallels between the strategic environment and intent established by the national security, defense, and Arctic strategies, and the Coast Guard strategic framework to manage this required evolution.

Technological advancements will be essential in the pursuit of improved Arctic maritime domain awareness, presence, and effective, efficient, and sustainable high-latitude operations.

Climate change is the driving force behind the changes in the Arctic's physical environment and must be a primary planning factor to shape the investments and infrastructure needs, and ensure the sustainability and environmental stewardship, of the region's future economic prosperity and the Coast Guard's regulatory and pollution prevention and response capabilities.

The new Arctic strategy expresses an intent to not only manage, but to pursue economic development, especially in the form of infrastructure with multiple beneficiaries. The specific economic sectors called out all have clear Coast Guard mission nexus that must be factored into Coast Guard regional planning, capabilities, capacity, and operations. Further, the Coast Guard's own capital investments in the region should be considered through this prism.

The geopolitical landscape has altered drastically, from one dominated by cooperation to one of competition. The Coast Guard is uniquely positioned and capable of supporting the full spectrum of international engagement necessary in this dynamic geopolitical environment and should expect to be called on often for its unique capabilities, authorities, responsibilities, and partnerships.

Every aspect of Coast Guard operations – surface, air, cyber, response, prevention, preparedness and regulatory – will be required to enhance their contributions to the Coast Guard's Arctic operations if we are to appropriately respond to the intent established in these new national strategies.

To riff off the Commandant's maxim regarding the future – The next Arctic decade will look different to the last, and will require the Coast Guard to adapt, connect, operate, and invest in new ways.



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