



The Coast Guard's Arctic Strategic Outlook Replaces its 2013 Arctic Strategy

The Coast Guard released its [Arctic Strategic Outlook](#) on April 22, 2019, which replaces the service's 2013 Arctic Strategy. The strategic outlook "reaffirms the service's commitment to American leadership in the region through partnership, unity of effort, and continuous innovation" through the establishment of three lines of effort: (1) Enhance capability to operate effectively in a dynamic Arctic domain, (2) Strengthen the rules-based order, and (3) Innovate and adapt to promote resilience and prosperity. Each line of effort will be pursued through sub-objectives:

LOE 1, enhance capability to operate effectively in a dynamic Arctic domain, has as its sub-objectives to (1) fill gaps in the Coast Guard's Arctic operational capability and capacity; (2) establish persistent awareness and understanding of the Arctic domain; and (3) close the critical communications gap in the Arctic.

LOE 2, strengthen the rules-based order, has as its sub-objectives to (1) strengthen partnerships and lead international forums, and (2) counter challenges to the international rules-based order in the maritime domain.

LOE 3, innovate and adapt to promote resilience and prosperity, has as its sub-objectives to (1) support regional resilience and lead in crisis response; (2) address emerging demands in the maritime law enforcement mission; and (3) advance and modernize the Arctic marine transportation system.

During her keynote remarks at the Arctic Encounter Symposium in Seattle last week, Vice Admiral Linda Fagan, the U.S. Coast Guard's Pacific Area commander, stated that the Coast Guard released its new strategic outlook four years early "in recognition of the accelerated security, economic and environmental trends in the region." The strategic outlook itself singles out the following as "what has changed since the 2013 Arctic Strategy:"

- There have been 6 Chinese Arctic expeditions. While not an Arctic nation, China has made the Arctic a strategic priority, declaring themselves a "Near-Arctic State."
- 10 million Tons of goods, including gas, oil, grain, and coal, transited the Northern Sea Route in 2017. 40 percent of vessels carrying these goods originated from or were going to a Chinese port.
- 14 Russian icebreakers have been built. Russia continues to invest heavily in military facilities, with 6 bases built since 2013.
- 1,700 people visited the Arctic onboard CRYSTAL SERENITY in 2016, the first large capacity cruise ship to transit the Northwest Passage.

Also mentioned in the text itself is that from 2006 to 2018, satellite imagery observed the 12 lowest Arctic ice extents on record. Presumably, this fact, together with the identified "what has changed" items listed above, are what collectively constitute the "accelerated security, economic



and environmental trends in the region” referenced by Admiral Fagan as the motivation for the service’s early release of its revised Arctic Strategic Outlook.

While the strategic outlook itself is a commendable product, and the Coast Guard’s accelerated release of it an appropriate recognition of the increasing pace of change in the region, there are still numerous grounds for concern that the Coast Guard, along with the rest of the world, is woefully behind the power curve in its planning and actions related to this strategic and threatened region.

Data consistently indicate that titanic change to the region’s natural environment is occurring at an ever-increasing pace. For example, a recent [study](#) concluded that Greenland has lost 4,976 gigatons of water through the melting of ice sheets since 1972, with nearly half of that loss occurring between 2010 and 2018. [Another](#) has estimated that the release of methane and carbon dioxide from thawing permafrost will add up to \$70 trillion to the world’s climate bill based on current national mitigation pledges under the Paris Agreement.

If such dire prognostications are even remotely correct, Coast Guard initiatives such as the accelerated release of its strategic outlook, the awarding of a [contract](#) for construction of a new icebreaker for delivery in 2024 to supplement the two oceangoing icebreakers the service currently operates, and last December’s launch of two mini satellites that Admiral Fagan [describes](#) as a pilot program for the Coast Guard’s possible acquisition and use of organic satellites that “may improve communications in the Arctic, assist in monitoring large areas for illegal activity and help to assist mariners in distress,” while laudable, would seem to be entirely inadequate, both in scope and timeline, to meaningfully respond to the profound natural changes underway in the Arctic.