

## Working together: Opportunities for Canada-U.S. cooperation on Arctic search & rescue

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In 2011, the Arctic Council signed the *Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic (AAMSAR)*.<sup>1</sup> The Agreement was a major step forward for the Council, as it was the first international binding agreement negotiated under its auspices. The Council renewed its dedication to implementing AAMSAR at the most recent meeting of Ministers in May 2013, making it an ongoing priority for the current Canadian Chairmanship ending in 2015.

Arctic states have taken different approaches to develop their capacity to respond to the search and rescue obligations stipulated by AAMSAR. For example, some states have chosen to cooperate bilaterally or multilaterally with other Arctic states. Russia and Finland are even jointly procuring icebreakers.<sup>2</sup> Sweden led a study that included eleven states to examine information sharing for quicker search and rescue responses along the Arctic Ocean, Barents

Sea, and North Sea. Arctic states — including Canada and the United States — have jointly participated in many search and rescue exercises, such as SAR-EX Greenland Sea in 2012 and 2013. However, specific cooperative initiatives between Canada and the United States have not flourished in the same way that has been seen in the Nordic countries.<sup>3</sup>

Arctic residents need to feel confident that if they need search and rescue services, responders with the necessary skills and assets will be available to help. Increased bilateral cooperation between Canada and the United States on search and rescue is one method to ensure that this is the case. This cooperative approach promotes Northern made-and-tested strategies and is a less costly solution to focusing solely on procurement. The Canadian Coast Guard, as both an on the ground responder and part of ongoing national and circumpolar dialogue, should take the lead in facilitating the bilateral cooperation between

Canada and the United States that will contribute to increasing search and rescue preparedness in Arctic North America.



### **Are we ready?**

The Arctic is the global ecosystem’s “canary in the coalmine.” Here, the effects of climate change are seen most dramatically. Climate change is shaping and re-shaping how Arctic residents move and work on the land. For example, the ice is frozen for shorter periods of time in the winter and the ice is less thick as there has been a depletion of the Arctic’s multi-year ice cover. The ice is also becoming less predictable, creating uncertainty among those who use the ice for winter travel and to harvest country food. Indigenous peoples can no longer rely solely on their longstanding traditional knowledge of travel routes, as the landscape around them is changing far too quickly.

Residents of the North American Arctic are acutely aware of the impact that this is having on search and rescue. In 2011, *Rethinking the Top of the World: Arctic Public Opinion Survey* reported that 85 percent of respondents emphasized the need for search and rescue preparedness.<sup>4</sup> When asked if the Canadian Arctic was “well equipped” to respond, only 40 percent responded positively — less than half of those who said that search and rescue preparedness was important.

Alaska’s Institute of the North uncovered a similar disparity in perceptions on search and rescue when they released a 2013 public opinion study on Alaska. On average, Alaskans responded that the American Arctic “was neither well equipped nor poorly equipped” to respond to emergencies and search and rescue missions. These surveys amplify the real concern about search and rescue preparedness among residents in the North American Arctic, which is clearly shared by Northern policy-makers.



### **A Destination without a roadmap**

In 2013, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs asserted that increasing risk — and the resulting increase in demand for search and rescue services in the Canadian Arctic — needs to be met by increasing investment.<sup>5</sup> These investments are necessary if Canada is going to have the capacity to implement the provisions of *AAMSAR*.<sup>6</sup> The Standing Committee report echoes the findings of the Auditor General of Canada’s report on federal search and rescue activities. The

audit revealed personnel and aircraft shortages, along with a lack of leadership across the multiple departments tasked with search and rescue.

Similar calls are coming from policy-makers in the United States and Alaska, in particular. Shortfalls in investments for search and rescue have not gone unnoticed.<sup>7</sup> Many U.S. departments are involved in prevention, preparedness and response for Arctic search and rescue. Their strategic reports recommend investing in training and infrastructure to increase preparedness, but they do not provide a roadmap for this investment. However, these calls for new approaches come neither an action plan, nor the required budget, making implementation of these recommendations difficult. In response to a tight fiscal environment, Canada and the United States can avoid wasting limited funds on assets that the other country has by coordinating their procurement strategies.



### **What resources for cooperation are already at our disposal? How do we use them in a cooperative way?**

Last year, the Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Program held meetings in Northern Canada with communities to discuss search and rescue preparedness. Sharing knowledge and expertise within communities, and between communities, was a priority raised in every territory. For example, there are projects underway to map inland waters using local knowledge in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Teslin, Yukon, and Barrow, Alaska. These communities could benefit from knowing and learning from each other’s approaches to these projects and how to best share the information with officials to ensure that it is incorporated into their policies and approaches.

Sharing lessons learned about best practices and strategies among the small communities in Canadian and American Arctic is one means through which cooperation can have a positive effect on improving the search and rescue system. Territorial and state-level governments have the capacity to be catalysts for bringing communities together. In territorial and state-level governments, a core group of dedicated individuals work with diverse communities to assist with emergency planning and provide training to close preparedness gaps. Their “birds-eye view” of the strengths and needs on the ground make them best positioned to see the connections between communities with needs and communities who have built that particular expertise or skill.

In June 2013, the Canadian military with the Government of Nunavut initiated the largest Arc-



tic search and rescue in recent history. Twenty-four people, consisting of a hunting party and adventure tourists, were stranded on an ice floe. The rescue required six search and rescue aircrafts.<sup>8</sup> To prepare for future large scale SAR events, U.S. and Canadian federal governments are using joint training to test how they can deploy people and resources in the most efficient way. In fall 2013, the U.S. hosted Canadian search and rescue personnel and simultaneously deployed the Canadian Major Air Disaster Operations and U.S. Arctic Sustainment Package kits to see how the kits could complement each other in a real life crisis. In this exercise, survivors were on scene and needed treatment and stabilization before they were evacuated. Such joint training exercises are a positive example of how cooperation between the two countries can proceed.

Another positive vehicle for increasing bilateral cooperation to meet search and rescue needs in the Arctic would be the establishment of an Arctic Coast Guard Forum that would bring together coast guard personnel and policy makers in Canada and the United States. The Forum would be a central point for coordinating the many prevention, preparedness and response activities for search and rescue. As activity in the Arctic continues to rise, a similar argument can easily be made for the importance of the Canadian Coast Guard.

Arctic states currently participate in two forums dedicated to dialogue among coast guards. The North Atlantic Coast Guard Forum has twenty members, including all states with territory in the Arctic Circle. Its Pacific counterpart has six member nations: Russia, China, Japan, Korea, United States and Canada. The missions of both organizations are similar: to foster multilateral cooperation and share information and best practices in their region of operation. All Arctic states participate in the North Atlantic Coast Guard Forum (NACGF). However, a forum specifically addressing operational issues in Arctic waters is needed, as the operating conditions north of the Arctic Circle are quite unique and thus require specialized approaches.

The vital relationships needed during SAR responses can be built in this forum by expanding lessons learned by the coast guards of Arctic states. This forum is optimal for developing a search and rescue communications protocol between military and civilian command systems. Discussing the outcomes of search and rescue scenarios, including bilateral and multilateral exercises, is an ideal first step towards the development of this protocol. In Alaska, the Coast Guard plays a key role in discussions, including the consequences of Arctic expansion

and the infrastructure that is needed to accommodate development. Consequently, the United States Coast Guard should spearhead the creation of an Arctic Coast Guard Forum. This forum could initially include just Canada and the United States, but over time, once that cooperation is well-established, reach out to include additional Arctic states, most notably Russia, given its geographic proximity to Alaska.

Cooperation will help increase search and rescue preparedness in the Arctic. Moving forward, Arctic states will need to be viewed as being proactive. Cooperation will provide opportunities to share Northern tested innovations, and reinvest saved funds into other areas of training and resource procurement. Enhancing preparedness through cooperation will require all levels of government to participate in the developing, sharing, and receiving of knowledge and best practices. The commitment to making cooperation a tool for preparedness will be a meaningful contribution at all levels of search and rescue service in the Arctic. ●

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#### Notes

1. This agreement reaffirms international obligations under customary law and conventions such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) Safety of Life at Sea Convention, the IMO Search and Rescue Convention, and sections of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.
2. *Finland and Russia Plan Icebreaker Cooperation*, Finnish News Agency (25 September 2013).
3. The Arctic coast of North America includes Alaska, Canada's three territories and Greenland.
4. Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Program, *Rethinking the Top of the World: Arctic Security Public Opinion Survey* (Toronto: Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, January 2011): 21.
5. House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, *Canada and the Arctic Council: An Agenda for Regional Leadership* (Parliament of Canada, May 2013): 24, 52.
6. House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, *Canada and the Arctic Council: An Agenda for Regional Leadership* (Parliament of Canada, May 2013): 80.
7. Governmental agencies calling for increased search and rescue response services in the Arctic include: The White House, Alaska Northern Waters Taskforce, the Department of Defense, U.S. Coast Guard, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Congressional legislation.
8. Adrian Humphreys, "Canadian military spent \$2.7 million to rescue wealthy tourists off of breakaway ice floe," *National Post* (24 August 2013).
9. Email correspondence between David Martin from Joint Task Force Alaska and Vanessa Gastaldo (19 February 2014).