



Norway's Chairship of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum 2023-2025

Chairship Report



Foreword

From 2023 to 2025, the Norwegian Coast Guard has chaired the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF), focusing on enhancing cooperation among Arctic nations through expert meetings, principal discussions, and exercises. After a pause in 2022 due to geopolitical tensions, the Forum has resumed its activities, despite challenges that prevent the participation of one member. The ongoing engagement from the remaining member nations demonstrates the significance of this cooperation for all involved.

Key events such as the tabletop exercise in Trondheim and the live exercise near Tromsø have provided valuable insights into Arctic Coast Guard operations, verifying current capabilities while identifying areas for improvement. These activities contribute to enhancing safety and security in Arctic maritime operations.

During Norway's chairship, the Forum has adhered to four main priorities: reviving cooperation, focusing on core Coast Guard functions like Search and Rescue (SAR) and Marine Environmental Response, presenting expert insights on Arctic Coast Guard operations, and ensuring the safe execution of live exercises. In parallel, Norway also chaired the Arctic Council, fostering interaction between the Council and ACGF, particularly through the Emergency Prevention, Preparedness, and Response (EPPR) working group.

The Norwegian Coast Guard extends its gratitude to the participating member states, with special thanks to the USCG for leading the Combined Operation Working Group (COWG), and to national partners such as the Joint Rescue Coordination Center (JRCC), Norwegian Coastal Administration (NCA), and the Norwegian Radiation and Nuclear Safety Authority (DSA).

Looking ahead, Norway wishes Denmark and the Joint Arctic Command the best in leading the Forum for the next two years, and promises continued support to the Danish chairship. Norway will remain an active partner in the Forum's future initiatives.



*Commodore Øyvind Dunsæd
Commander Norwegian Coast Guard*



The Arctic Coast Guard Forum

Maritime activity in the Arctic is steadily increasing and within several areas also moving further and further north. Increased water temperatures and reduction in sea ice coverage create new commercial opportunities in several ways. Tourism on keel, transport of goods, petroleum activity, fisheries and maritime research are all areas with increased activity in the Arctic region. At the same time, the strategic importance of the Arctic is also increasing.

The increase in maritime activity in the High North also increases the risk of large-scale unwanted incidents. Due to remoteness, low temperatures, uncertain ice and weather conditions, and a lack of infrastructure, the Arctic region is a risky and highly complex area when it comes to both search and rescue (SAR) and marine environmental response (MER) operations.

The recognized need for cooperation to develop common knowledge, experience, and best practices related to the challenges generated by maritime operations in the Arctic led to the establishment of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum in 2015.

The Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) is not bound by treaty but is an independent, informal, operationally driven organization to foster safe, secure, and environmentally responsible maritime activity in the Arctic.

The Arctic countries, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States are members of the Forum.

The chair duties of the ACGF rotate every two years in concert with the chair of the Arctic Council. The United States Coast Guard was the first chair of the Forum in 2015–2017, followed by Finland, Iceland, Russia, and Norway. During the Russian chairship, all cooperation stopped in February 2022 and was paused until Norway assumed the chair in April 2023.

The structure of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum includes two working groups, the Secretariat and the COWG. The Secretariat oversees the governance of the ACGF, whereas the COWG focuses on preparing operational level cooperation and the planning, execution, and reporting of the Forum's exercises. The United States Coast Guard led the work of the COWG during the Norwegian chair period. The working groups physically convened three times a year to exchange information on Arctic maritime safety issues, in addition to several digital meetings. Furthermore, the Principals of the ACGF member states meet once a year at the ACGF Principals' meeting to discuss topical issues related to the work of the ACGF and to provide strategic direction for the Forum.

Arctic Coast Guard Forum Strategic goals

The ACGF has developed 10 strategic goals to support the work of the Forum

- **Strengthen** multilateral cooperation and coordination within the Arctic maritime domain, and existing and future multilateral agreements
- **Seek common solutions** to maritime issues related to the agencies fulfilling the functions of coast guards within the region
- **Collaborate with** the Arctic Council through the sharing of information
- **Facilitate** safe and secure maritime activity in the Arctic region, with sustainable development to be promoted as appropriate
- **Contribute to** a stable, predictable, and transparent maritime environment
- **Build** a common operational picture to ensure proper protocols for emergency response coordination, and safe navigation
- **Work** collaboratively to advance the protection of the marine environment
- **Maximize** the potential for Arctic maritime activities to positively impact the communities, lives, and culture of Arctic communities including indigenous peoples
- **Integrate** scientific research in support of coast guard operations as appropriate
- **Support** high standards of operations and sustainable activities in the Arctic through the sharing of information, including best practices and technological solutions to address threats and risks

Arctic Coast Guard Forum Strategic Roadmap

The ACGF has developed a strategic roadmap to support the attainment of its strategic goals. This roadmap is an action-oriented document that guides the work of the Forum. It is divided into strategic objectives, each with themes and concrete actions to support them.

The strategic roadmap is a non-binding document that is long-term and forward-looking. The objectives, themes, and actions are reassessed every two years in

conjunction with the change of chair, and on an ad-hoc basis as necessary. The roadmap consists of multiple concrete actions related to the different themes laid out in the strategic goals of the ACGF.

Since one member has not been invited to the meetings, the strategic roadmap has not been revised over the last few years. However, the practical work of the Forum has been developed to meet the current situation and is in line with the strategic goals.

Norwegian Chair 2023–2025

The Norwegian Coast Guard assumed the two-year Chair of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum in April 2023. Norway's overarching priority for the Chair has been to get the cooperation in the ACGF back on track and continue strengthening existing cooperation in the field of Arctic maritime safety by:

1. Strengthening the ACGF organizational activities and developing information sharing within the Forum and with the Arctic Council through the EPPR.
2. Ensuring the efficient and safe execution of ACGF exercises and strengthening the exercise routine.
3. Increasing the understanding of present and future challenges and developments related to maritime activity in the Arctic.



The Norwegian focus through the Chair of the ACGF has been on the development and challenges related to maritime activity in Arctic waters. How will the development of activity in the Arctic be in the years to come, and in what way can we, from a Coast Guard perspective, meet the safety and environmental challenges this represents in the best possible way?

What happens in the Arctic does not stay in the Arctic. It will at least have circumpolar effects and may also have global effects. The need for cooperation is therefore of great essence.

Sustainability is both a political goal and one of the strategic goals of the ACGF in relation to the development of maritime activity in the Arctic. An aspect of sustainability is to avoid incidents that can generate negative consequences for the people operating

or living there, and for the environment. One way of avoiding this is through regulatory means when it comes to ships, equipment, and sailing routes. Proper mapping of the Arctic areas is key to safe navigation, especially where glaciers are decreasing. Another aspect is the demand for know-how and Arctic competence among the people operating there. A crucial role for the coastguards of the Arctic countries is to contribute with situational awareness and to be prepared to handle incidents when they occur, and to minimize the consequences.

Through the meeting sequence 2023–2025, Norway arranged for presentations from expert environments on different topics related to the status and future development around maritime activity in the Arctic.

Overall experience:

Chairing the ACGF for two years has been a challenge for a small organization like the Norwegian Coast Guard. One project officer supported by three retired officers managed the planning and execution of the Chair.

At the same time, this has been very fruitful in many ways. The experience can be summarized in three categories:

Internally:

- Chairing the ACGF has raised the organizational competence with regards to working in an international setting.
- During the Chair, the establishment of a permanent coordinator for international relations was approved by higher authority. This is the start of an international relations department in the Norwegian Coast Guard.

Nationally:

- The Norwegian model for Coast Guard functions involves primary authorities for different segments, with the Coast Guard as executive authority on their behalf at sea.
- Having the primary authorities; JRCC (SAR), the Norwegian Coastal Administration (MER), and the Norwegian Nuclear Radiation Authority participate in “Team Norway” increased the professional knowledge base of the Chair significantly.
- The fact that the primary authorities covered their own financial and personnel resources was of great benefit to the Chair.
- By working closely with these three organizations during this project, the organizations are now significantly closer in daily operations and better prepared to handle unwanted incidents in the Arctic if they occur.

Internationally:

- During the last two years, the ACGF has increased Coast Guard cooperation around SAR and MER in the Arctic.
- ACGF’s narrow focus on safety and environmental response, combined with dedicated member nations, makes the cooperation effective and promotes practical results.
- The exercises raised knowledge about the Arctic SAR agreement and the Arctic oil spill agreement (MOSPA)
- The ACGF brings its members closer, not only as a group but also on a bilateral level. Bilateral meetings have been arranged in connection with the principals’ meetings, and Norway has signed several Letters of Intent related to practical bilateral cooperation. The same seems to be the situation between the other nations.

The value of the TTX and especially the LIVEX cannot be exaggerated, both on a national and an international level. Our impression is that we are constantly moving in the right direction when it comes to preventing unwanted maritime incidents in the Arctic and the ability to handle them if they occur.



Meetings and Events

The work of the ACGF during the Norwegian Chair 2023–2025 was primarily carried out through meetings and other events arranged by the Norwegian Coast Guard with assistance from the “Team Norway.” This was done in accordance with the established schedule for the Forum.

Additionally, there has been one physical meeting between the Norwegian Coast Guard and the USCG as leader of the COWG, along with digital meetings on Teams. During Norway's Chair, the focus of the work has been on recognition and common understanding of maritime challenges in the Arctic, development of cooperation, and sharing of knowledge between the ACGF members. Special emphasis was placed on practical cooperation through the planning and execution of Tabletop (TTX) and Live exercises.

A visit by the Joint Arctic Command to NoCG HQ as preparation for their Chair 2025–2027 was also carried out.

- 2 ACGF Principal meetings
- 4 ACGF Expert meetings
- 1 ACGF Chair and chair COWG meeting
- 50+ TEAMS meetings
 - Team Norway
 - Secretariat
 - COWG
- 1 ACGF Chair – Joint Arctic Command meeting
- 1 Arctic Emergency Management Conference
- 3 Live exercise planning conferences
- 1 Tabletop Exercise
- 1 Live Exercise

Oslo October 2023



The first expert meeting of the Norwegian ACGF chairship took place in Oslo from October 10th to 12th, 2023, with 30 participants from Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the USA. The event featured two main working groups: the Secretariat, led by Commander Kenneth Dahl of the Norwegian Coast Guard, and the COWG, chaired by the USCG's Captain Brett Workman. The sessions included discussions on future maritime challenges in the Arctic, such as mass rescue operations (MRO) due to increased cruise traffic and the lack of infrastructure. The meeting also included presentations on the Polar Code, future fuel systems, and an incident review of the Viking Sky cruise liner disaster.

During the meeting, the Secretariat decided not to modify the ACGF governing documents unless all eight member nations were represented. A dynamic Strategic Road Map was proposed, and a live exercise in 2025 will focus on Search and Rescue (SAR) and Marine Environmental Response (MER), incorporating radiological/nuclear aspects.

The COWG discussed maritime activity challenges, notably the building of a common maritime operational picture for Arctic operations and the logistics of SAR and MER in the region. They emphasized the importance of communication, information sharing, and handling incidents involving radiological materials in cold, icy waters.

Bodø February 2024



In the subsequent February 2024 expert meeting in Bodø, a report on cruise traffic-related MROs was presented, focusing on lessons learned from the Viking Sky incident. The gathering also highlighted the significance of involving Indigenous peoples in SAR operations. The Secretariat focused on the management of costs, the use of an online platform for ACGF working documents, and the creation of a shared media policy.

Trondheim April 2024



The meeting in Trondheim in April 2024 was a Principals' gathering, which included high-level officials from the member nations. The meeting featured discussions on maritime propulsion, plastic pollution, and cooperation with SINTEF, a Norwegian research institute. A sailing exercise was held to enhance towing preparedness. The Principals also participated in a Tabletop Exercise (TTX), providing valuable insights into the planning for the 2025 "Arctic Guardian" live exercise.

Bergen October 2024



In Bergen in October 2024, the COWG held the Main Planning Conference (MPC) for "Arctic Guardian 2025," focusing on the exercise scenario and preparations. The event included presentations on Arctic fisheries, the EPPR of the Arctic Council, and Radio Medico.

Tromsø February 2025



The final planning conference for "Arctic Guardian 2025" occurred in Tromsø in February 2025, with a focus on finalizing the exercise directive and resolving remaining challenges. A key feature was the visit to the



Fram Center, where the exercise's command center would be located. Preparations for the exercise continued through numerous Teams meetings, ensuring that all logistics, public relations, and air unit engagement were in place.

Tromsø April 2025



The Principals' meeting in Tromsø in April 2025 focused on the execution of "Arctic Guardian 2025," with participants observing SAR operations and discussing the lessons learned. The Chair responsibilities were handed over from Norway to Denmark, and the overarching theme for Denmark's chairship will be the influence of ice on Arctic maritime operations.

Conclusion

Overall, the series of expert meetings and conferences contributed to strengthening cooperation among Arctic nations in addressing maritime safety, environmental response, and operational challenges in the region. The "Arctic Guardian 2025" exercise aimed to enhance collective preparedness for SAR and MER operations in the Arctic, ensuring better coordination and response capabilities among member nations.

EXERCISES

An incident in the Arctic environment presents a significant challenge for any nation, as no single country possesses the resources or solutions to handle a major incident alone. The remoteness, harsh climate conditions, and lack of infrastructure are critical factors in this context. International cooperation, such as that within the ACGF, is essential for enhancing maritime safety in the Arctic. This cooperation not only aids in prevention but also builds capacity and develops the ability to manage incidents effectively. Sharing knowledge and developing best practices are crucial, but to validate and further these efforts, conducting exercises is necessary. Joint exercises are the cornerstone of the Forum's work.

Live joint exercises are the most effective way to gain knowledge and experience, serving as a foundation for developing cooperation and best practices. Tabletop exercises organized by the ACGF are smaller and more cost-effective, complementing and preparing for live exercises. They provide opportunities for in-depth discussions on scenarios, capabilities, actions, and best practices related to responding to various maritime emergency situations. Lessons identified and learned from tabletop exercises are implemented in the planning and execution of live exercises.

Tabletop exercise Trondheim

As preparation for the live exercise Arctic Guardian 2025, a TTX was arranged at the Principal meeting in Trondheim in April 2024. The scenario was based on a collision between a cruise liner and an oil tanker, involving Search and Rescue operations, a transition to MER, and MER operations. The TTX also included discussion around what influences nuclear propulsion or nuclear materials onboard any of the involved vessels would have on the operations.

In addition to Coast Guard personnel from member nations, the TTX included participants from JRCC Bodø, JRCCs from Sweden, Finland, and the Faroe Islands, the Norwegian Coastal Administration, the Norwegian Radiation



Protection Authority (DSA), universities in Tromsø and Bodø, and the Icelandic environmental authority. In addition to representatives of local government organizations in Tromsø, external participants included the Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators and P&I clubs. The TTX had a positive outcome, and the COWG presented the key points to the Principals. An evaluation team from the COWG produced a report to be used in preparation for the live exercise.



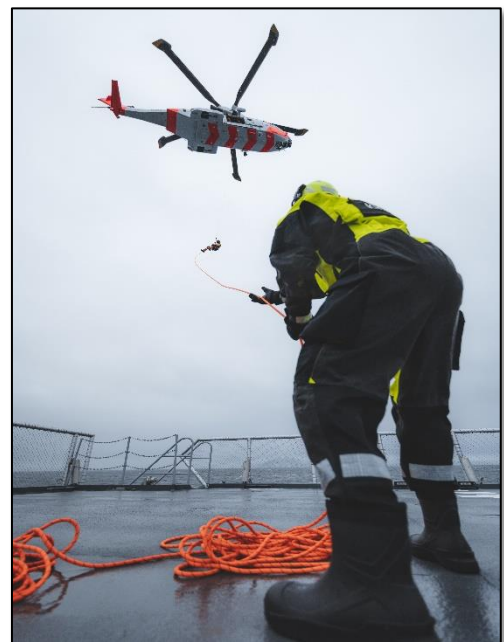
LIVEX Tromsø – Arctic Guardian 2025



The planning of Arctic Guardian 2025 was led by the USCG over nearly two years, resulting in an exercise directive that comprehensively covered all aspects of the exercise. This directive can serve as a template for future exercises.

AG-25 was designed not to train individual skills or national capabilities, but to foster cooperation between different assets from various nations. Participating units were given the opportunity to utilize their expertise and capabilities to some extent, while respecting the overall ACGF objectives and the training needs and wishes of other nations. To achieve this, the exercise was scripted and directed to a certain degree.

A White Cell was established in C2/Excon, with representatives from insurance, police, port authority, and others. Throughout the exercise, they discussed issues related to the current situation and provided valuable input to the decision-making processes within C2, Excon, and NCA Incident Command.



The exercise was conducted without any major safety breaches and no injuries to participating personnel. The only known breach occurred when a helicopter entered an area before verifying that a drone, which had been operating there 10 minutes earlier, had left the area.

AG-25 was initially planned to take place off the coast west of Tromsø, but fortunately, it also had a bad weather alternative inside Ullsfjord. Operating in the Arctic in April is unpredictable due to weather conditions, and the SAR phase provided realistic conditions for the participating units, even within the fjord. For the MER phase on the second day, the exercise area was moved further inside the fjords to Balsfjorden, where the conditions were suitable for placing "oil," represented by popcorn, on the sea and to operate heavy oil spill response equipment.

The Arctic Guardian 2025 exercise was conducted in five key phases to simulate and evaluate ACGFs preparedness for search and rescue maritime environmental response and radiological and nuclear incidents in Arctic conditions.

Phase 0 – Pre-STARTEX focused on preparatory activities, including the establishment of Command and Control (C2) and the Exercise Control (Excon) center at the Fram Center. Communication infrastructure and weather forecasts were analyzed to finalize plans and adapt exercise directives as needed.

Phase 1 – STARTEX included the Pre-Sail Conference, final planning adjustments, and safety briefings for aviation and maritime personnel. These sessions were also streamed for remote participants, ensuring broad engagement across involved units.

Phase 2 – SAR (Search and Rescue) was initially planned for one location but was moved to Ullsfjord due to adverse weather forecasts. This phase tested the coordination and efficiency of SAR operations, involving helicopters, vessels, coastal radio, and the P8 Poseidon as the Airspace Control Officer (ACO). A total of 30 markers, simulating personnel in distress, helped create realistic search, rescue, and evacuation scenarios. Communication between C2/Excon and the field units was maintained



throughout via VHF-channels and BarentsWatch, ensuring continuous oversight and operational control. The transition from SAR to MER, a critical handover of responsibility from the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) to the Norwegian Coastal Administration (NCA), was executed effectively in line with established protocols.

Phase 3 – MER (Maritime Environmental Response) had to be relocated from the original training area due to worsening sea conditions. Balsfjorden was selected as the new site, where the focus shifted to minimizing environmental impact by collecting oil from the water and towing a distressed tanker. Satellite imagery, drone footage, and live updates via BarentsWatch ensured high situational awareness for the C2 team. The innovative use of popcorn to simulate oil allowed for realistic tracking and response. Overall, this phase successfully tested environmental mitigation strategies under dynamic conditions.

Phase 4 – Radiological and Nuclear (RN) concluded the exercise with a comprehensive presentation by the Norwegian Radiation and Nuclear Safety Authority. It covered previous incidents and the implications of RN scenarios on SAR and MER operations. Two scenarios—an accident involving a nuclear-powered vessel and the transport of radioactive materials—were discussed, followed by a panel debate and equipment demonstrations.

The exercise offered a robust and realistic platform for interagency coordination, operational effectiveness, and environmental risk mitigation.





For Arctic Guardian 2025, a reactive media strategy was adopted, meaning media access to the exercise area and the Fram Center's C2/EXCON was restricted. A Press & Information (PI) coordination cell, led by a chief Public Information Officer and comprising members from participating nations, managed press activities.

AG-25 marked the third live ACGF exercise, reinforcing multinational cooperation in Arctic maritime safety. An evaluation report will be shared among member nations.

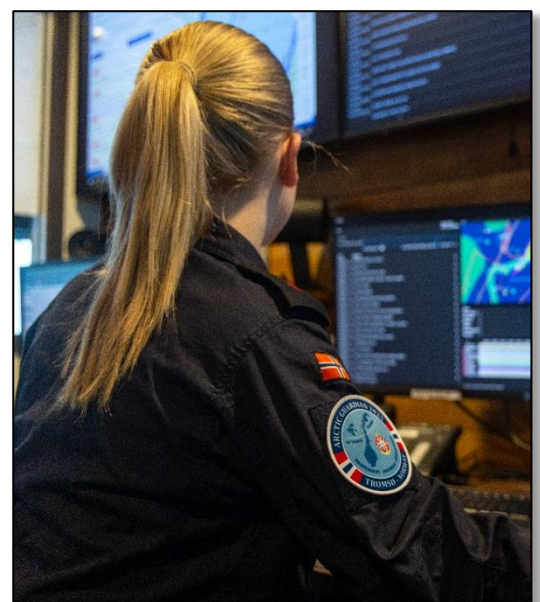
Though the Norwegian Coast Guard is not the primary authority in ACGF focus areas, it plays a crucial operational role in emergencies. Key collaboration with agencies like the JRCC, Coastal Administration, and Radiation Safety Authority enhanced realism and coordination.

Despite limited public visibility since 2022, the ACGF remains a vital platform, with stakeholders from public and private sectors continuing to support its mission and knowledge-sharing efforts.

Conclusions:

Since its establishment in 2015, the Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) has demonstrated significant progress in fostering cooperation among member nations. This collaboration has greatly enhanced the coast guards' collective ability to address safety and environmental challenges stemming from increased maritime activity in the Arctic. When Norway assumed the chair in 2023, efforts were directed toward revitalizing the collaboration—despite one member currently not being invited to participate.

Our conclusion is that the ACGF remains a highly relevant and valuable platform for addressing the complex safety and environmental issues emerging in the Arctic. No single nation possesses all the solutions to the challenges that may arise, making the ACGF an essential arena for joint efforts and information sharing. Through this cooperation, member states can work together with other authorities to develop a comprehensive and coordinated approach to the unpredictable conditions of the Arctic region.





Danish Chair 2025 – 2027

In April 2025, the Norwegian Coast Guard handed over the chair of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum to Denmark and the Joint Arctic Command, who will lead the Forum's activities for the next two years. The Joint Arctic Command will continue to develop the Forum based on the work done by previous chairs, with a special emphasis on ice and its influence on maritime operations in the Arctic. The fourth live exercise of the ACGF is planned to take place in the spring of 2027 in Greenland. The Norwegian Coast Guard will continue to be an active member of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum and will support Denmark to the best of its ability in the coming two years.



