

The 5th MARPART Conference
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Summary

Maritime Preparedness, Risk Factors and International Collaboration

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At the conference, many key MARPART issues related to Arctic preparedness were raised:

1) While the general thematic focus was on operational issues, the conference started out with a discussion of Norwegian, Danish and EU Arctic policies. In the intervention on Norwegian Arctic priorities, the emphasis was on balancing economic interests – such as oil and gas exploration, fishing, mineral resource extraction and tourism – and environmental concerns emanating from climate change and other ecological risk factors. To achieve this balance, Norway places much emphasis on safety and preparedness, on regional and international cooperation, and on international treaty obligations.

The individual policies of Denmark, Greenland, and the EU were explored within the context of trilateralism and institutional interlinkages and interdependence. Thus, Greenland has welcomed EU involvement in the Arctic, while firmly seeking to preserve its self-determination in domestic affairs. With Greenland being part of the Danish Kingdom, Denmark wants to maintain its constitutional prerogatives when it comes to justice, foreign affairs and defense. It was pointed out that even if the EU’s policy documents on the Arctic have tended to be rather bland – and that its admission as an Observer to the Arctic Council has not yet materialized – it is heavily involved in the Arctic and in the Council’s activities.

2) An assessment of risk patterns in different maritime regions was presented followed by a discussion on the need for innovation to counter vulnerabilities in preparedness systems. It was stated that contrary to predictions, economic activity in the Arctic has been hampered by external factors, such as low oil prices and new technologies. When it comes to government preparedness systems, the argument was made that there have been severe gaps in the Arctic, including the lack of capacity and technologies for large scale emergency operations as well as a lack of coordination between domestic institutional structures within states and with external organizations. This has hampered efforts to develop innovative solutions and caused overlapping. All these trends point to the need of a broader and better knowledge production in the field.

3) On the question of Search and Rescue cooperation in the Arctic, there was special focus on SAR coordination capabilities in Russia and the United States. In addition, attention was given to Barents Sea Exploration Collaboration (BASEC) cooperation between oil companies in the Barents Sea. In the Russian case, there has been a reduction in northern route shipping passage, even if internal traffic in the region, has increased. On the other hand, Arctic tourism

has experienced growth in Russia and also other types of economic activity, such as fishing. There was an exposition on U.S. Coast Guard preparedness experiences in the Arctic, where it has had to deal with both large-scale emergencies and smaller incidents in a vast geographic terrain, where many areas possess limited infrastructure. It was argued that given the need for international cooperation in this area, the establishment of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum was seen as a positive step; it is a venue where high politics is set aside in the interest of safety and security. As for privately-sponsored preparedness cooperation in connection with oil exploration in the Barents Sea, the discussion centered, among other things, on manageable challenges for emergency response, such as regional remoteness, the need for a system for sea ice management and surveillance in far-away areas.

4) With respect to emergency maritime management, the focus was on three issues: large scale-emergencies, explorer cruise and contingency preparedness, and the response to accidents at sea. What was specifically pointed out was the complexity of large scale emergencies with respect to stakeholders, whether private or public bodies, ship-owners or law enforcement agencies. The need to follow strict guidelines when dealing with incidents was stressed, with terms such as “recognition,” “response” and “reporting” providing a theoretical framework for maritime preparedness. It was also pointed out that a risk profile of maritime areas and the ships operating there is important as an accident prevention tool. There was also a discussion of the northern operational areas of the Association for Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators (AECO). The point was made that while cruise tourism has declined in the last few years, the outlook for the industry was changing with increased capacity and growth rates predicted in many areas. This was coupled by a discussion of safety issues, including exercises and cooperation with coast guards and multilateral organizations. The emphasis was on seeing the role of the cruise industry as part of a SAR readiness system in the Arctic and point to examples of the institutionalization of such cooperation on the basis of private-public partnerships and dialogue. Finally, there was a discussion on the challenges posed by increased Arctic tourism for police and rescue operators in Northern Norway, with crisis management pressures involving such factors as sparse resources, large distances, media attention, and low temperatures. It was also stressed that one could not expect to prevent the loss of life in large scale emergencies in the Arctic.

5) There were also interventions on educational issues, such as training for SAR vessel crews for the implementation of the Polar Code and for joint operations. The focus was on transnational cooperation in this field, sharing simulator training experiences, and on the content of training courses. The discussion touched upon the challenges posed by joint operations and on how different emergency organizations can have a more coordinated impact on emergency situations, whether involving fire, oil spill or other types of incidents. Echoing a recurring theme at the conference, the need for organizational cultural understanding among emergency participants and the use of education and training exercises was stressed in an effort to promote interagency cooperation on the local, regional and national levels. There was also a contribution on student training, centering on using simulations in an innovative way for complex operations in maritime settings, where creative team work, operational coordination and smooth information exchanges are paramount. Finally, there was an intervention on Aerial unit coordination search and rescue operations within a Norwegian context.

6) Finally, there was a discussion on counter-terrorism as part of Arctic preparedness and formalized bilateral cooperation between Norway and Russia in the area of safety and security. In an analysis of the legal framework for counter-terrorism in Russia, the nature of

domestic and external terrorist threats was explained and the main institutional actors in counter-terrorism in the Arctic singled out. It was pointed out that counter-terrorism exercises are part of emergency preparedness exercises in the region, for example in connection with the protection of oil and gas facilities. In this sense, counter-terrorism is seen as a necessary component in a comprehensive safety-security regime in the Russian Arctic – together with Arctic SAR and Arctic oil spill response. Nonetheless, it is still separated from the well-established fields in Russia's Arctic preparedness.

As for bilateral cooperation between Norway and Russia on oil spill prevention and Search and Rescue in the Barents Sea, it was pointed out that joint policies have been developed on the basis of legal precedents, operational planning, as well as institutional arrangements, involving bilateral training and joint exercises. While there are still deficiencies such as border crossings procedures, communications problems and organizational incompatibility, both sides value this cooperation. The argument was made that it was characterized by professionalism and that it has promoted individual and institutional cultural understanding. The same goes for Search and Rescue cooperation. To be sure, there have been problems with transborder issues and with a lack of information sharing – and there is no formalized decision-making entity (unlike the institutional set-up of the oil spill cooperation) or contingency planning. But, again, the collaboration is rooted in legal regimes, such as the SAR convention, and involves resource cooperation and exercises.

All these topics fit well into the core themes of the MARPART project, which has been expanding with new members and institutional affiliations. This conference has clarified our minds about venues and instruments for deepening cooperation on preparedness in a broad sense, both within a multilateral and state-to-state framework as well as on the institutional and public-private levels.

This will also serve a political purpose: to help make the Arctic a region of stability in a time of increased world tensions. References to Great Power rivalry in the past have been used as a warning against the need for maintaining a cooperative order in the Arctic. And it is clearly in the interest of all parties—and backed by international agreements such as the Law of the Sea Convention, IMO Resolutions, and Arctic Council Agreements—to cooperate on Arctic preparedness.

I want to thank the conference participants for their contributions, and to take the liberty on their behalf to single out the organizers, especially Odd Jarl Borch, Johannes Schmied, and Andrey Kazakov for a very well organized gathering in a truly spectacular maritime setting.