

# Commentaries

## U.S. Unable to Respond to Arctic Oil Spill

*Matthew K. Redihan*

According to the U.S. National Academy and industry leaders, the United States has no effective Arctic oil spill response. This could be directly addressed by the U.S. procuring a fleet of modern, heavy classification icebreakers.

The U.S. has five icebreakers, two of which are held by private companies. Of the three Coast Guard Cutters, one is out of commission, the second the USCGC Polar Star, a heavy icebreaker, and the third is the USCGC Healy, a medium icebreaker.

The privately-owned icebreakers are classified as light and cannot be heavily relied upon to aid in an emergency. The Healy lacks the ability to clear passage in the ice of large tankers. The Polar Star has to support both Arctic and Antarctic operations.

With the emergence of the Arctic Sea Routes as a result of global warming, the need of the U.S. having the capacity to clear passages for major tankers has never been greater. The Northwest Passage Sea Route (NWP), above Canada and Alaska, is now a feasible shipping route during certain times of the year,

with an estimated 1.5 million tons of cargo to pass through in 2020 and 40 million by 2021. The U.S. lacks the current capacity to support this economic mission in addition to lacking the capacity to respond to search and rescue efforts.

It is not like the U.S. to be lacking when it comes to naval capabilities. The U.S. Navy has the largest fleet in the world, with eleven of the eighteen active aircraft carriers. In contrast to the U.S., Russia has forty-four active icebreakers to support its operations in the Northern Sea Route (NSR), another emerging Arctic Sea Route of which twenty-seven are in the service of the Russian government with the rest privately owned.

A modern fleet of heavy icebreakers operated by the Coast Guard would allow the U.S. to be more politically and economically active in the Arctic; supporting both freighters and tourist vessels by clearing the ice and providing an infrastructure of search and rescue, in addition to assisting in scientific exploration and research.

It should be noted that Canada, which like Russia has massive territories in the Arctic, has the second largest icebreaker fleet in the world with twenty-one icebreakers, nineteen of which are owned by the Canadian Coast Guard. A coalition between the U.S. and Canada, as longstanding allies, could mitigate Russian influence in the Arctic by combining resources and missions.

The threat of an Arctic spill is very real. Recently, more than 20,000 tons of oil have leaked from containers into local rivers near Norilsk. It has been described as the second worst oil spill in modern Russian history. 140 miles<sup>2</sup> has been contaminated with total costs of cleanup at \$1.5 billion. Cleanup is estimated to take 5-10 years.

Those threats should continue to increase and result in larger oil spills. Both the U.S. and Russia have development plans for the Arctic that include drilling for oil and natural gas with the U.S. easing its environmental restrictions and Russia placing 10% of the nation's economic investments in the Arctic Region which includes not only the development of fossil fuels but also mining deposits of nickel, copper, and palladium.

A group that is particularly threatened by oil spills is the indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Oil spills destroy their traditional fishing and hunting territories in a region where grocery stores are not common, threatening a major food source as well as a way of life. However, the natives might be a valuable resource in responding to oil spills. With limited wage paying jobs in the region, resulting in abandoned settlements, having the native populations of the Arctic quickly respond to oil spills, per a binding agreement

of the Arctic Council, could solve not only economic issues in the region, but ecological as well.

Unless the U.S. has the capacity, with a modern fleet of heavy icebreakers, an oil spill in U.S. Arctic territory could be an unmitigated disaster, causing continuous damage that could eventually flow out of the Arctic and affect both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.



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