

2026 Joint Arctic SAR Event

Report



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Executive Summary

The 2026 Joint Arctic SAR Event (JASE) gathered around 70 participants in Reykjavik, Iceland, on 5–6 May 2026. The event was organized by AECO and the Icelandic Coast Guard, in collaboration with the Canadian Coast Guard and MRCC Tórshavn in the Faroe Islands. Marking ten years since the first event, JASE 2026 continued to serve as a practical forum bringing together SAR authorities, operators, embassies, port and coastal authorities, and other Arctic stakeholders to strengthen preparedness, coordination, and shared understanding across sectors.

The 2026 program focused on emerging threats and growing complexity in Arctic search and rescue. The agenda addressed the operational baseline for Arctic SAR, the geopolitical context, consular integration, cyber security threats, community preparedness, and cross-sector coordination. A central component of the event was the tabletop exercise *Frozen Silence*, which tested decision-making and coordination under conditions of degraded navigation, communication disruption, and increasing uncertainty.

Throughout the event, participants emphasized that effective Arctic SAR depends on trust, timely information sharing, realistic understanding of capabilities and limitations, and strong working relationships established before an incident occurs. Recurrent themes included the tyranny of distance, limited response assets, communications resilience, the need for redundancy, and the importance of including embassies, communities, and operators in preparedness discussions. The event reinforced that Arctic SAR preparedness is not only about operational response, but also about collaboration, planning, and maintaining the relationships that enable effective action under pressure.



Day 1

The first day of the event focused on building resilience in Arctic SAR through discussion of emerging threats, cooperation, and operational preparedness. The event was opened by Georg Lárusson, Director General of the Icelandic Coast Guard, and Frigg Jørgensen, Executive Director of AECO. Both emphasized that the event is intended as a practical forum where preparedness is strengthened through cooperation, planning, and relationship-building rather than as a traditional conference.

Operational Baseline: Are We Really Prepared?

Auðunn Kristinsson of the Icelandic Coast Guard and Peter Garapick of Quark Expeditions outlined the current operational baseline for Arctic SAR. Their session highlighted how Arctic response continues to be shaped by long distances, severe weather, limited infrastructure, restricted medical evacuation options, and an operating environment that is becoming more complex due to climate change, increased geopolitical tensions, and changing patterns of navigation. While the 2011 Arctic SAR Agreement remains a key foundation for cooperation, speakers emphasized that effective preparedness depends on continued information sharing, sustained networks, and mutual trust across sectors and borders.

Participants also discussed the role of expedition vessels as contributors to the broader preparedness and response picture. Vessel capability, self-sufficiency, and integration with public rescue structures were presented as important considerations in a region where response resources remain limited and incidents may quickly outpace local capacity.

“Building connections is important, maintaining connections is key to collaboration”

- Peter Garapick, Director, External Relations at Quark

Arctic Security and Geopolitical Context

Soley Kaldal, Risk Management & Safety Engineer addressed how geopolitical developments are affecting the assumptions that have traditionally underpinned Arctic

cooperation. Reduced predictability, more complex decision-making structures, and lower willingness to share information may affect future incident coordination. The session underlined that expedition cruise incidents may rapidly evolve into multi-state events involving coastal states, flag states, operators, embassies, and SAR authorities.

A key point in the discussion was that preparedness should account for a less predictable operational context, including reduced international cooperation, consular complexity, and the need for redundancy in communication and navigation systems. Participants noted that redundancy may be costly to establish, but the consequences of entering a crisis without it may be significantly greater.

- In periods of heightened geopolitical tension, preparedness planning should account for reduced international cooperation, extended decision-making processes, and slower authorization or clearance procedures during a crisis.
- Scenario-based planning should include geopolitical friction and delayed coordination, not only ideal response conditions.
- Establishing redundancy before a crisis is less costly than attempting to build it under crisis conditions.

“In an environment where geopolitical tension can affect relations even between allies and long-standing partners, friction-free cooperation can no longer be assumed as a given.”

- Soley Kaldal, Risk Management & Safety Engineer

Consular Integration in Arctic SAR

James Moody, Consular Regional Operations Manager at the British Embassy, and Steven Gardiner, Consul – Denmark, Norway, Iceland, at the Embassy of Australia, presented consular perspectives on Arctic SAR. They clarified that embassies do not direct operational response, but can support coordination, casualty assistance, repatriation, family liaison, and communication with national authorities. Effective consular support depends on timely information sharing, clear contact structures, and compliance with privacy and legal constraints.

The discussion emphasized that consular coordination should be prepared before an incident occurs. Participants identified the need for agreed communication pathways between operators, AECO, coast guards, and embassies, and suggested developing simple guidance on the information embassies may require during an emergency, including nationality estimates, casualty information, repatriation needs, and family liaison considerations.

- Clear contact structures and agreed communication pathways should be established between operators, AECO, coast guards, and embassies before a crisis occurs.
- Preliminary information, including estimated affected nationalities, can support embassy preparedness if shared within applicable privacy and legal constraints.
- Simple guidance for operators could clarify what information embassies may need during an emergency, including casualty, repatriation, and family liaison considerations.

Cyber Security Threats

The session on cyber security was presented by Bryndís Bjarnadóttir, Cyber Security Specialist at CERT-IS, followed by a panel discussion on maritime cyber threats. The session addressed cyber security threats relevant to maritime operations, including GNSS interference, spoofing, extortion, data theft, and spillover effects from third-party systems. Bryndís emphasized that cyber security in this context is not limited to technical protection. It also concerns the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of the systems and information on which vessels, operators, and responders depend during normal operations and emergency response.

The discussion highlighted the particular risk of spoofing and false information, where systems may appear to function normally while presenting an inaccurate operational picture. Participants noted that this can create hazardous decision-making conditions because crews and responders may act with confidence on information that is incomplete, manipulated, or incorrect. For this reason, technical resilience must be supported by clear fallback procedures, human verification, independent information checks, and personnel training that enables teams to identify anomalies and confirm critical information through trusted counterparts.

- Cyber risk is an operational risk. Maritime cyber security affects the reliability of navigation, communication, passenger information, emergency coordination, and decision-making systems.
- Cruise vessels are exposed targets. They are data-rich, continuously operating, highly visible, and reputation-sensitive, making them vulnerable to disruption, extortion, data theft, and indirect impacts from compromised third-party systems.
- False data may be more dangerous than no data. GNSS spoofing or manipulated information can create false confidence, as systems may appear credible while presenting an inaccurate operational picture.
- Single points of failure should be avoided. Preparedness planning should include fallback navigation, backup communication channels, manual procedures, and agreed methods for cross-checking critical information.
- Human verification remains essential. Personnel should be trained to recognize anomalies, operate under degraded-system conditions, and verify information through independent channels and trusted counterparts.

“No data creates uncertainty; wrong data creates false certainty. In a crisis, the latter may be the greater risk, because decisions can be made with confidence on a faulty operational picture.”

- Bryndís Bjarnadóttir, Cyber Security Specialist at CERT-IS

Day 2

The second day of the event focused on community preparedness, practical coordination, and crisis simulation. Building on the strategic discussions from Day 1, participants examined how Arctic SAR readiness depends on realistic local capacity, repeated engagement across stakeholder groups, and the ability to coordinate under complex and degraded conditions.

Introduction “Cruise Control 2028”

Dr. Albrecht Beck from Prepared International introduced *Cruise Control 2028*, a planned large-scale live exercise scheduled for 2028 in Iceland. The exercise is intended to bring together coast guards, local government agencies, operators, communities and private entities to practice coordination during a major emergency at sea. The presentation aimed to raise awareness of the project, gather initial feedback, and identify operators and organizations interested in participating.

Community Preparedness

Steve Thompson, Superintendent Maritime SAR at the Canadian Coast Guard, addressed the role of remote communities in Arctic SAR preparedness. The presentation and subsequent panel discussion emphasized that local communities are often the first responders in Arctic incidents and remain central to overall response capacity, particularly when incidents occur close to shore. The panel also included Craig Lingard, Director, Civil Security, Kativik Regional Government, whose participation marked the first time a representative from a local Canadian community took part in the JASE conference. His contribution added an important community perspective to the discussion, while the panel as a whole underscored that community-based preparedness can serve as a practical force multiplier for national SAR systems when planning is based on realistic expectations, repeated engagement, and a clear understanding of local capabilities and limitations.

The discussion highlighted several practical considerations for operators, SAR authorities, and local stakeholders:

- Preparedness planning should include realistic discussion of shelter, food, water, fuel, runway access, medical limitations, and the length of time a community may be able to support evacuated persons.

- Local responders are central to Arctic preparedness, but repeated engagement is needed to align expectations, clarify roles, and reduce the risk of responder fatigue or burnout.
- Updated SAR cooperation plans, early notification to rescue authorities, and clear communication structures were identified as practical measures for reducing uncertainty and improving response effectiveness.
- Involving local responders during community visits can strengthen mutual understanding of shipboard capabilities, local limitations, and practical coordination needs before an incident occurs.

“Arctic preparedness is built before an incident occurs, through repeated engagement, clear communication pathways, and trusted working relationships.”

- Steve Thompson, Superintendent, Maritime SAR, Canadian Coast Guard

Summary of the Tabletop Exercise – Frozen Silence

The tabletop exercise *Frozen Silence* formed a central part of JASE 2026. It was designed and facilitated by Johan Müller, MRCC Faroe Islands; Snorre Greil, Project Manager, Icelandic Coast Guard; and Anna Finnbogadóttir, Specialist, Icelandic Coast Guard. Developed as a decision-making and coordination exercise rather than a technical cyber exercise, the scenario examined how stakeholders would manage a maritime crisis under conditions of hybrid interference and increasing uncertainty. The fictional scenario involved the expedition cruise vessel *MV Borealis Dawn*, with approximately 400 persons on board, located southwest of Iceland in a region where multiple search and rescue regions converge. The exercise unfolded across three phases: navigational denial through GNSS disruption, confirmed hybrid interference with degraded communications, and finally blackout, loss of propulsion, and a request for full evacuation.

The exercise was designed to test the ability of operators, SAR responders, and embassies to coordinate under pressure, communicate amid fragmented information, and make decisions when systems could no longer be fully trusted. Participants repeatedly emphasized the need to verify information through independent systems, backup communications, third-party inputs, nearby vessels, and direct coordination

among authorities and operators. The embassy groups focused on crisis coordination, casualty support, public messaging, and avoiding premature attribution in the absence of technical certainty.

The scenario highlighted several recurring concerns. These included the tyranny of distance, limited rescue assets, uncertainty in casualty and passenger tracking, the risk of conflicting or false signals, the importance of fallback navigation and communication systems, and the challenge of maintaining one coherent operational picture while media, diplomatic, and public narratives develop in parallel. The exercise also underscored the operational importance of including embassies and other non-traditional actors in preparedness planning.

Lessons Learned

- Arctic SAR preparedness depends on trust, shared situational awareness, and relationships established before an incident occurs.
- Technology can support response, but it cannot replace trained personnel, practical procedures, and cross-sector coordination.
- Redundancy, fallback communications, and independent verification are essential when navigation or information systems are degraded.
- Consular integration requires clear contact structures, timely information sharing, and agreed messaging before a crisis develops.
- Community preparedness should be based on realistic local capacity, repeated engagement, and clear understanding of roles and limitations.
- Scenario-based exercises are necessary to test coordination, expose gaps, and ensure that lessons identified are carried forward.

“The strength of Arctic search and rescue lies not only in systems, assets, or procedures, but in the relationships built before a crisis occurs. When technology is degraded and assumptions no longer hold, trust, shared understanding, and practiced cooperation become essential to coordinated response.”

Closing Reflections

Participants valued the event as a forum bringing together operators, SAR authorities, embassies, and other stakeholders who do not often meet in the same setting.

Community preparedness, cyber security, and the tabletop exercise were highlighted as especially relevant and practical parts of the program. A consistent conclusion across discussions was that Arctic SAR preparedness depends not only on plans and systems, but on active maintenance of networks, mutual understanding, and trust across the wider response community.



Appendix I

5-EYES CONSULAR SUPPORT

IN PEACETIME: ROUTINE CONSULAR SUPPORT

For travellers, this means timely, reliable support when something goes seriously wrong. For tour operators, it means having a trusted partner who can help handle complex individual cases, allowing their teams to focus on delivering the overall travel experience.

➤ What operators and passengers can generally expect:

- 24/7 access to consular assistance

Travellers can contact consular services at any time if they face serious personal difficulties abroad, such as hospitalisation, arrest or being a victim of crime. This provides a dependable backstop when issues cannot be resolved onboard or through local agents.

- Support when travel documents are lost or compromised

Consular services can help travellers replace lost, stolen or damaged passports through emergency travel documentation processes, reducing disruption and enabling onward travel where possible.

- Clear guidance in difficult personal situations

Practical, authoritative guidance is available on issues such as deaths abroad, serious illness, detention or being a victim of crime, helping operators give calm and accurate advice at stressful moments.

- Signposting to local professional services

Consular teams can point travellers to local lawyers, doctors, interpreters and funeral directors, helping them act quickly and appropriately in unfamiliar environments.

- Authoritative travel and country information

Official advice supports predeparture briefings, onboard messaging and passenger decision making.

- Clarity about limits and responsibilities

Clear boundaries on what consular services can and cannot do help manage expectations and reinforce the operator's lead role in customer care.

IN CRISIS: COORDINATION, INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

➤ What operators can generally expect:

- Clear, reliable and sustained communication through consistent government contact
- Authoritative situational awareness, drawing together information from host authorities and diplomatic networks
- Focused support for vulnerable individuals, easing pressure on operators
- Coordination across borders and systems to support decision making and longer term case management
- Credibility and reassurance for passengers, families and stakeholders
- A partner, not a replacement: consular services complement, but do not take over rescue, medical or commercial responsibilities

➤ What consular services typically need from operators

- Timely, accurate information on numbers and nationalities of people affected and what support is in place or might be required from Consular staff.
- A clear operational contact point
- Realtime, on the ground insight
- Agreed time for next update from operator

Appendix II

Participant List

Name	Title	Company
Anna Lea Gestsdóttir	Head of Mission Operations	Embassy of Canada in Iceland
Annika Rautiola	Expedition Compliance Manager	Ponant Explorations
Aron Grimsson	Consular Officer	Embassy of Canada in Iceland
Ásdís Halla Arnardóttir	Lawyer	Icelandic Coast Guard
Ásgrímur L. Ásgrímsson	Chief of Operations	Icelandic Coast Guard
Baldur Johann Thorvaldsson	Postgraduate Student of Crisis Management	Bifrost University
Banovsha Ibragimova	Key Account Manager	North Atlantic Agency
Björn Jónsson	Co-Founder, Chairman, Chief Operating Officer	Hefring Marine
Bryndís Bjarnadóttir	Cyber Security Specialist	CERT-IS
Carl Paret	Engineering Manager	Pole Star Defense
Caroline Dimbylow	Vice Consul	The British Embassy in Copenhagen
Chirag Batliwala	Marine Operations Manager	Anglo Eastern Cruise Management Inc.
Claus Andersen	SVP Maritime Operations	HX Expeditions
Craig Lingard	Civil Security Director	Kativik Regional Government
Dagbjartur Kr. Brynjarsson	Security & Safety Specialist	Icelandic Tourist Board
David A. Cohen	Vice President	Pole Star Global
David Jesson	Manager, Corporate Situational Management	Royal Caribbean Group
Einar Ingi Reynisson	Navigation Officer	Icelandic Coast Guard
Frederic Roy	Senior SAR Operational Requirements Analyst	Canadian Coast Guard
Gabriel Walker	Resilience Staff Officer	HM Coastguard
Gísli Jóhann Hallsson	Harbour Master	Faxaflóahafnir sf. / Associated Icelandic Ports
Giuseppe Russo	Captain	Silversea Cruises
Guðbrandur Örn Arnason	Project Manager Search & Rescue	ICE-SAR
Halla Tinna Arnardóttir	Special Advisor	Ministry of Justice - Government of Iceland
Hallur Bech	SAR Mission Coordinator	MRCC Tórshavn, Faroe Islands

Heather Fay	Consular Associate	U.S. Embassy in Iceland
Helgi Guðnason	Navigation Officer	Icelandic Coast Guard
Henrik Ramm-Schmidt	Founder & Chief Executive Officer	Fleetrage Ltd.
Hilmar Johannesen	SAR Mission Coordinator	MRCC Tórshavn, Faroe Islands
Íris Hrunð Jóhannsdóttir	Senior Manager - Port Operations	Gára Port Agency
James Moody	Consular Regional Operations Manager	The British Embassy in Stockholm
Jón Sveinsson	Head of Health, Safety & Security	Faxaflóahafnir sf. / Associated Icelandic Ports
Karin Strand	Vice President, Expedition Development	HX Expeditions
Louise Ellis	Consular Regional Director - Euro Asia North	The British Embassy in The Hague
Marco Filippi	SAR Coordinator	Italian Auxiliary Coast Guard
Marie Kaas	Senior Policy Adviser	Arktisk Kommando - Joint Arctic Command
Mark van der Hulst	Project Manager - URN Project	AECO / Eightysixfour consulting
Marner Ludvig	Chief Officer	MRCC Tórshavn, Faroe Islands
Martin Berg	Advisor	Faroe Safety Authority
Martin Dahrup Andersson	American Citizens Services Assistant Supervisor	U.S Embassy & Consulate in the Kingdom of Denmark
Maarten van der Duijn Schouten	Vessel Manager	MC Cape Race
Patrick Kilbane	Director Marine Operations - Expeditions	Holland America Line & Seabourn
Paul Mastin	First Secretary & Consul, Consular Affairs	U.S Embassy & Consulate in the Kingdom of Denmark
Peter Garapick	Director External Relations	Quark Expeditions
Ragney Líf Stefánsdóttir	Pro-Consul	The British Embassy in Reykjavik
Randy Jenkins	AVP Maritime Safety Compliance, Regulatory Affairs, and Crisis Management	Royal Caribbean Group
Rebecca Doffing	Arctic Watcher	U.S. Embassy in Iceland
Remi Eriksen	Vice President Ship Operations	66° Expeditions
Sam Rae	Maritime SAR Coordinator	Canadian Coast Guard
Sebastian Charge	Operations Manager	Adventure Canada
Shaun Powell	Director of Expedition Operations	Seabourn
Soley Kaldal	Risk Management & Safety Engineer	
Sophie Stewart	Deputy Head of Mission	The British Embassy in Reykjavik

Stanislav Kozhuharov	Sr. Manager, Maritime Compliance and Investigation	Royal Caribbean Group
Steffen Waedeled-Moeller	Head of the Civil-Military Cooperation Section	Arktisk Kommando - Joint Arctic Command
Steven Gardiner	Consul	The Australian Embassy in Denmark
Thilo Natke	Captain	Hapag-Lloyd Cruises
Tomás Rito	Staff Captain	Mystic Cruises
Veronika Iakovleva	Consultant - Port Operations	Gára Port Agency
Volodymyr Goncharenko	HSSEQ Manager / DPA / Company Security Officer	VShips Leisure SAM
Frigg Jørgensen	Executive Director	AECO
Milan Kolinsky	Membership, Event & Office Manager	AECO
Leoni Dickerhoff	Acting Head of Operations	AECO
Gyda Gudmundsdottir	Head of Community Engagement	AECO
Anders la Cour Vahl	Deputy Director	AECO
Martin Wisth	Chief Financial Officer	AECO
Anna Finnbogadóttir	Specialist	Icelandic Coast Guard
Auðunn Kristinsson	Chief of Operations	Icelandic Coast Guard
Johan Müller	SAR Mission Coordinator - VØRN	MRCC Tórshavn, Faroe Islands
Steve Thompson	Superintendent, Maritime Search and Rescue Arctic Region	Canadian Coast Guard
Snorre Greil	Project Manager	Icelandic Coast Guard

Appendix III

Evaluation

Overview

Overall satisfaction is very high. Average scores (out of 10) are approximately **9.3 for on-site organization**, **9.1 for venue**, **9.1 for information content**, and **8.8 for presentations**.

The TTX is strongly endorsed. Among respondents who answered the question, **~79% (30 of 38)** marked the TTX as **“yes” relevant**, and the remaining **~21% (8 of 38)** marked **“to some extent.”** This indicates the exercise format is widely valued and worth keeping as a core element

~70% of respondents who answered preferred an **annual** conference cadence, indicating there is appetite for **yearly continuity** in the forum.

~86% rated the **social programme as valuable**, while a minority preference for “more professional focus” suggests keeping social elements but ensuring they are clearly tied to networking.

Improvement themes

Some comments call for **more time for questions / interaction**. One suggests the TTX would be better in **smaller groups**, noting that a small number of individuals blocked the discussion this year. This suggests **interactivity is highly valuable to participants**.

Specific suggestions tied to increased interactivity: “Mix table seating for post sessions”, “some interactive trivia on SAR as a great way to engage the whole room”.

On incident handling, there's calls for more **focus on what happens after rescue at sea and at the ground reception** during an ongoing crisis. Participants want a full pipeline view: from distress through rescue through post-rescue management and onward coordination.

One respondent suggests using a real, known event as an improvement point (presumably in connection with the TTX, although not explicitly stated). Another comment suggests bringing a speaker who experienced a crisis event and who would share their side of the story. There is one suggestion for bringing a vessel or group affected specifically by a massive calving event or similar.

Some comments call for involving **all stakeholders** in TTX planning and for establishing a **TTX planning committee**.

When taken together, the comments at K10, K38, and K42 suggest participants wanted more detail surrounding local national agencies, especially those authorities or actors that are relevant during coordination. The comment on involving members of each group in a planning session (K42) may suggest some wanted a clearer definition of the “borders” between stakeholders.

At least one respondent notes the room was too small, and another called for more microphones (“only speakers had mics”). However, it is worth noting there are far more positive comments regarding the venue than there are criticisms of it.

Specific requests for future programs: focus on Eastern Greenland with its infrastructure challenges; media representation among speakers and attendees; and holding the event in Canada.

Highlights

Cyber / cybersecurity content is a **major “most useful”** theme, with frequent mentions in this column.

The **TTX** itself is repeatedly singled out **as a key value-driver** across different columns. Open responses under "comments" reference the TTX and almost exclusively in a positive light. Two respondents used the "anything else" section to further comment on the TTX.

Field trips, both the CCP visit and the UK residence visit, were a clear highlight. Multiple respondents emphatically praise these, describing them as “fantastic,” “brilliant,” and valuable for networking.

Up to 14 respondents used the "anything else category" to explicitly praise the event and/or thank AECO for organizing it. Given this is a voluntary question that can be easily skipped, these proactive comments are especially meaningful and a strong indicator of positive sentiment and success.