

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Online Event

**“Beyond America’s Coastline: A Conversation with  
Admiral Linda L. Fagan, 27th Commandant of the United  
States Coast Guard”**

DATE

**Tuesday, April 4, 2023 at 9:00 a.m. ET**

FEATURING

**Admiral Linda L. Fagan**

*27th Commandant of the United States Coast Guard*

**Jahaan Johnson**

*Senior Vice President, Citi*

CSIS EXPERTS

**Kathleen McInnis**

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*Transcript By*

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Kathleen  
McInnis:

Good morning. I'm Dr. Kathleen McInnis, director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative, and senior fellow in the International Security Program here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

Today we are honored to host the 27th Commandant of the United States Coast Guard Admiral Linda Fagan. Admiral Fagan assumed the duties as 27th commandant of the United States Coast Guard on June 1st, 2022, becoming the first woman to lead any military branch of the armed forces. With 37 years of service under her belt, serving on all seven continents, we are in for what I'm sure will be an insightful conversation for you guys in our audience.

But before we get started, I'd like to say a huge thank you to our supporters at Citi. Because of their support, we can amplify the voices of such important, incredible women, like Admiral Fagan, who are leading and serving our country.

So over to Jahaan Johnson over at Citi for a few remarks. Jahaan.

Jahaan Johnson:

Thanks, Kathleen. And thank you all today for joining us today from all around the world. As we convene the Smart Women, Smart Power Series, Citi has been a proud supporter for over seven years. As we know that women are a vital component to solving the world's challenges, uplifting our contributions and insights on global commercial, economic, political, and security issues helps us all. And as a leading global bank, with offices in 95 countries and clients in nearly every country around the world, we know well the many difficulties across geographies. And Citi seeks to be helpful as a partner in finding solutions where we can.

Which is why today we are especially honored to be a part of the conversation with Admiral Fagan, the 27th commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, and learn more about the Coast Guard's widening global role under her leadership. With concurrent crises such as the pandemic and ongoing global food crisis being amplified by geopolitics, it underscores the need for a collective effort across multiple sectors to help us solve these global issues. This work will entail unified work between businesses, multilateral institutions, nonprofit organizations, and governments to solve these crises facing us all, and generate a real impact and relief for people across the globe.

Citi furthers this effort from both the business and philanthropic perspective. Our foundation has supported multiple humanitarian and livelihood projects, which have been strengthened by partnerships with nonprofit and community organizations around the world. This is demonstrated by our new Global Innovation Challenge for Food Security,

which will provide 25 million (dollars) to help fund solutions from these partners.

And on the business side, we've participated in deals such as acting as the sole financial advisor to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, on COVAX, a facility designed to provide fair and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for every country in the world. We're also actively involved in social finance transactions, including our global social finance framework with the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, that supports Citi's commitment to reach 15 million households, including 10 million women, in underserved communities by 2025.

We are happy to kick off today's Smart Women, Smart Power event with a trailblazer in foreign and defense policy and want to thank CSIS for convening these critical discussions with key leaders, such as Admiral Fagan. Back to you, Kathleen.

Dr. McInnis: Thank you, Jahaan.

First, welcome back. You were here at Smart Women, Smart Power two and a half – before my time here – two and a half years ago. And you were serving as the Pacific area commander. And you shared insights on Arctic security, the threat of illegal fishing, to maritime security, challenges of managing the Coast Guard, and then COVID. So we're so excited to have you back today as the commandant of the Coast Guard.

But before we get into the substance, I would love to know what drew you into the field of national security?

Admiral Linda Fagan:

Yeah, so it's a great question. And, you know, I'm about 10 months now into the job as commandant. And certainly, perspective on the organization has continued to grow and mature. But as a young 18-year-old, I was looking for something different than what my father was doing at the time. He was in HR for a large Fortune 500 company. We were living in New England, and my parents are Midwesterners. And when we moved to the Boston area, the agreement was that that Dad got to get a boat. (Laughter.) So we found – that's how I grew up, was sailing the New England coast weekends and summers.

And one of the original services, you know, Revenue Cutter Service, Life-Saving Service, foundational organizations to the modern Coast Guard, are heavily invested in New England. And so any time you're on the water, you see the Coast Guard. And I discovered the Coast Guard Academy as a sophomore in high school and, in fact, never looked back. I only applied to two colleges. In hindsight, I probably should have done that a little differently, but –

Dr. McInnis: (Laughs.) But you knew.

Adm. Fagan: I knew. And I was just – I was drawn to the work. I was drawn to the service. And have had the great fortune of finding a calling and a profession and a way of life and sense of purpose that I did not anticipate as an 18-year-old.

Dr. McInnis: Over the course of your career, have there been any particular role models that have stood out to you and encouraged you to continue service?

Adm. Fagan: You know, so there have been several. We were talking before coming here into the studio about Thad Allen, who I worked for as his executive assistant. And it was really – it was a transformational assignment for me, just his leadership, the lessons in sort of civics that I got during that assignment. But another individual who I didn't actually meet until later, who was very transformational for me, was Owen Siler. And he was the 15th commandant. He made the decision in, you know, late 1975 to integrate the Coast Guard Academy. And all of the service academies have women enter in 1976, and then graduate in 1980.

And so when I show up to Coast Guard Academy in the summer of 1981, we had only just graduated women the year before. And so I met him several years later at a building dedication. And but for his courage, I would not be sitting here today. But for creating that opportunity for myself and other women. And I'm proud to say now, the Coast Guard Academy is 45 percent women. This was not the Coast Guard Academy I experienced in the '80s, but it is an incredible place for men and women who are looking to serve the Coast Guard.

Dr. McInnis: That's incredible. That's incredible. So turning to the Coast Guard's roles, missions, and areas of operations. You know, many people know the Coast Guard's critical role in protecting our nation's coastlines, waterways, ports, property at sea. But the Coast Guard continues to have a remarkable and growing presence beyond America's immediate maritime borders. I'd love your views on the factors that have led to that change, and some of the ways that the Coast Guard continues to pivot to these missions that are well beyond America's shores.

Adm. Fagan: Yeah. So one of the things that some do not sort of fully realize about – we're a maritime constabulary force. So it is important to highlight that we are at all times a military service. We also have authorities as a law enforcement agency and a regulatory agency. And that mix of authorities allows us to create capacity and capability truly globally. We have Coast Guard men and women supporting every one of the geographic combatant commands. So truly serving around the world.

If you look at the problem set – and, you know, we spoke about the Indo-Pacific region when I was the Pacific area commander. And, you know, you look at the challenges that small island nations, you know, maritime nations, have in the region. You know, lack of capacity to enforce their own economic zones, their own sovereignty. This is work that's ready-made for the Coast Guard.

And so we – the demand for us really comes from a place of we have expertise in, you know, maritime law enforcement work, governance work. And we're a preferred partner of choice. We come to you as you are. We won't arrive and say: Hey, let me tell you how to get this done. We'll bring the capacity and the expertise in a way that's professional, that there's, you know, a mature value proposition there, without strings attached. We really, truly, want to help other countries create their own capacity and abilities. We'll partner with you. We'll do bilaterals. We'll engage multilaterally. And because we've got that trust relationship around the world, people are hungry for more of us.

Dr. McInnis: Well, and when you think about great power competition, the strategic competition, whatever you want to call it, a lot of the activities that China in particular has been conducting have been in the maritime constabulary sort of space. You know activities that are strategic, but nonmilitary in nature. And so the Coast Guard has been stepping up in these spaces, yeah?

Adm. Fagan: Yeah. So in the – so we talk about it in the context of in the gray space, right? In the competitive space, short of conflict. And this is really the sweet spot for the Coast Guard. You know, as I've traveled quite a bit over the last 10 months and engaged literally around the world with other navies and, in some cases coast guards, many of the world's navies are actually postured in a way similar to the U.S. Coast Guard.

So you mentioned China. I'll take – you know, illegal fishing is a perfect example – you know, IUU fishing, illegal, unregulated, unreported fishing. China is one of the worst offenders. This is theft of a nation's natural resources. And so helping a nation, one, create awareness around where that activity is occurring, and then capacity to enforce their own sovereignty. And this is ready-made work for the Coast Guard. And whether it's with one of our ships, large ships, and a ship rider, an expert, from that country, or, again, capacity building and training and engagement, we're ready-made for that kind of work and literally do it around the world.

And so certainly going on the Pacific, but illegal fishing's a global – a global threat. It's going on off the coast of Africa, in our own Gulf of Mexico, South and Central America. It is a global – truly a global problem.

Dr. McInnis: So a lot of the Coast Guard's mission is about building – what in DOD land we'd call building partner capacity. Like, building the actual security capacity of other maritime constabulary forces. As you've engaged in and, now that you're the commandant, what lessons learned have you – or, lessons have you observed that will allow the Coast Guard to do that mission even more effectively?

Adm. Fagan: Yeah. So we do a really good job of coming to you where you are. And so if a nation comes to us – and I had this happen recently. Last week I was speaking at an international maritime course. And I was talking about bilaterals and signing MOUs and things. And the first question I got wasn't a question. The individual raised their hand and said: Hey, how do I get a bilateral with you? I want to engage in – how do I have this kind of opportunity?

And so it – you know, all of that, whether it's bilateral, multilateral, regional forums, our competitive advantage – the, you know, allies and partners – that competitive advantage is the partnership, is the engagement, is talking in times like now, you know, how we counter competition in a way that's aligned and complementary, and not each of us conducting individual efforts. I mean, truly bringing that synergy together is our competitive advantage, and we need to continue to build and grow that.

Dr. McInnis: And doing it over time.

Adm. Fagan: Yes, in a persistent way, right?

Dr. McInnis: In a persistent way, yeah.

Adm. Fagan: So it – again, traveling throughout the Pacific, and engagement recently with 25 African countries, this isn't about a big, grand gesture. This is about, again, coming to you as you are in a way that's persistent and useful, and that builds trust. And so that, you know, other nations know they can – they can lean on us, partner with us, and that that collaboration and impact will continue.

You know, so one of the things that we do, we offer this International Maritime Operators Course. We've been running the course for 25 years. And recently I was at the African Security Summit. And there were over – there were about 15 people there who had graduated from the course over the past 21 years. And this speaks to persistence, and how much impact that has. They were super proud of their time at the course. They all were serving now in senior roles in their coast guards and navies. And so we're absolutely better for that opportunity.

Dr. McInnis: That's fantastic. I mean, and we can't surge trust overnight, right?

Adm. Fagan: No, no.

Dr. McInnis: You know, you got to be there over time.

Adm. Fagan: You absolutely have to be there over time. And it's just, you know, persistent, enduring engagement is what builds trust. And you build trust in the times before the conflict happens, right? Now is the time to be building trust.

Dr. McInnis: Yes. So, turning to the Arctic, your very first assignment in the Coast Guard was aboard the Polar Star, a heavy polar icebreaker. So coming full circle – (laughs) – you're now at the head of your service. And the geopolitical dynamics in the Arctic have changed a little bit. Just a small. (Laughs.) Could you update us on how the Coast Guard is responding to the challenges in the Arctic, and your vision for how the Coast Guard should operate in that environment in the future?

Adm. Fagan: Yeah, so my first tour was on the Polar Star. And that ship was built in the mid-'70s. And Polar Star is currently heading north. She's been in Antarctica. Her 26th deep freeze. This is hard work on a ship. It's hard work on a crew. But she is still getting it done – getting it done for the nation, and supporting that critical national security work in Antarctica to make sure that McMurdo Station is resupplied.

So I always like to start the answer to this particular question with: We are an Arctic nation. We have, you know, economic interest, national sovereignty interest within the Arctic, as it pertains to the coast of Alaska. And so the way you protect your own sovereignty is with presence. And so the polar security cutter, which will be the replacement for Polar Star, we are on budget. The '24 budget gets us long lead-time material for a third polar security cutter. We can't field those quick enough.

So having said that, shipbuilding is complicated. These are going to be incredibly capable ships, but very dense ships, and will be a challenge to build. But we're on contract for them. We're working detailed design. I'm really excited about what we will be able to operate on behalf of the nation with regard to surface icebreaking capacity. We also, in addition to the Polar Star, we have Healy, a medium icebreaker, who is able to operate in the Arctic as kind of a mix of creating presence and doing scientific operations. But we, you know, ensure our own national security with actual on-the-water presence in the Arctic, and creating that capability is really front and center right now for us as a service.

We – you know, you talk about the changing geopolitics. Two winters ago, because of COVID, the McMurdo mission did not happen. And so Polar Star had planned on going down there. So we sailed her north into the Arctic. She

got up above the Arctic Circle. This is, like, late January. Not normally our time or the location for this ship. And what was interesting, that we definitely got the attention of the Russians. Because it was a different pattern of behavior for us. It was – you know, all the engagements were professional but they were definitely like, what are you guys doing up here? This isn't normally where you are.

And so it just speaks to how critical it is to create, again, on-the-water capacity and presence for our own national security. And just one segue here on the Arctic. We aren't the only Arctic nation. And so, back to allies and partners, we have key allies and partnerships around the other Arctic nations. And so the Arctic Council, Arctic Coast Guard Forum, those become key engagement opportunities for likeminded nations to ensure that all of our interests are addressed in the high latitudes.

Dr. McInnis: So, speaking of, you know, sovereignty and how – you know, America's maritime missions, in your State of the Coast Guard Address last month you emphasized that a key Coast Guard mission is protecting America's maritime transportation system.

Adm. Fagan: Yes.

Dr. McInnis: Right. So as the National Security Strategy highlighted, commerce by sea sustains over 31 million jobs, bring 5.4 trillion (dollars) to our economy each year, and 90 percent of America's imports and exports move by water. What vulnerabilities are you – (laughs) – that's a lot. That's – you know, there's no getting around, that's a lot. What vulnerabilities are you worried about? How do you think about that mission?

Adm. Fagan: Yeah. So obviously the risk and how we think about that continues to evolve. You know, so 5.4 trillion (dollars), right? What I like to point out to people is basically – you know, if you're wearing a pair of Nike sneakers, I mean, most clothing/food, right, it is coming into the nation by water. It is critical to our economic prosperity. The very way of life that we enjoy in the country is enabled by that maritime system. And it is a system. It's a complex system. And it includes, you know, the large container ships that you see, but the shoreside facilities, cranes, trains – there's all kinds of aspects to how that cargo is moved.

And so, one, just ensuring that it's reliable, resilient, that ships come and go safely, and so this is the – it's the navigation work that we do. We patrol. We do ports and waterway security patrols with our small boats. We license mariners. We inspect ships. We engage with regulated facilities. All critical work the Coast Guard is doing. The area where we've seen the most evolution is around cyber and cyber risk in the marine transportation system.



You know, there's SCADA – there's control systems that are talking to the internet, components, cranes that have been bought overseas. They have, you know, components from countries that could potentially have malign intent. And so ensuring that the cyber readiness of the system is adequate is a role that the Coast Guard is engaged in. And, you know, we work with – we work regularly with the industry on exactly that. We have stood up a cyber special rating within the Coast Guard to ensure our own expertise, and then are hiring individuals who know cyber, but also understand the marine transportation system, to help sort of bridge that conversation, again, in a way that's helpful to industry and helps eliminate where the evolving risk is.

Dr. McInnis: Mmm hmm. So across the national security domain and discourse, you know, climate change impacts are changing the nature of threats, or at least intersecting with the different threats, and changing how companies and military services operate. How is climate change affecting the Coast Guard missions? And how is the Coast Guard preparing to be ready for these dynamics? I mean, you know, you see the hurricanes and the –

Adm. Fagan: Yeah, hurricanes.

Dr. McInnis: – and the coastlines. It's just –

Adm. Fagan: Yeah. So we –

Dr. McInnis: (Laughs.) A small question. (Laughs.)

Adm. Fagan: Yeah. Little question, climate. Yeah. So we've recently published a climate framework to help focus our efforts with regard to, you know, our missions, our infrastructure, our people, with a focus on increased resiliency. The – you know, wherever you are on the science, climate is changing. And, you know, the intensifying of storms puts people, infrastructure, missions at risk. So we are a maritime organization, which means that we have a lot of infrastructure right at the water's edge, literally. And we'll need to continue to do that.

And so as we make investments in infrastructure, as we build new piers, as we look at repairing damaged stations post-hurricane, doing that in a way that increases resiliency with anticipated continued change around climate. And so it's literally that impact affects all aspects of the organization, and getting sort of the business rules and processes to ensure that we're considering that as we're making long-term investments. And ensuring our own people are – you know, sort of have the tools and the resiliency to understand it. You know, for themselves in their personal lives, as well as for the operational aspects of the organization.

Dr. McInnis: If I could tease that out a little but further. The term being bandied about right now is polycrises. You know, multiple, simultaneous crises. And climate change is often a driver for those discussions. But how is the Coast Guard thinking about managing multiple simultaneous crises?

Adm. Fagan: So one of our roles – and, you know, again, from a sort of leadership and culture standpoint. So we are a response agency as well. We've been talking about Deepwater, which I think we're coming up on 13 – is it 13 years since the Deepwater spill happened. We have crisis leadership expertise. And so whether it's a large oil spill or it's the aftermath of a hurricane, we invest and train in that expertise. And so we are – in a hurricane response, we're really good about, you know, if you're in peril in the immediate aftermath of a storm, that is our expertise. We will – we will get in, save lives.

And then as the rest of the state and federal response entities gear up, we fold ourselves into that response network and are important and relevant to that. And so the way the Coast Guard is postured operationally, we have units literally all along the entirety of our coast. And with a command structure so that if you had a significant event on the West Coast and a hurricane in the East Coast, we easily surge into that – into that opportunity, and move resources as we – as we need to. And that's not to say if it gets really big, and we have a lot of events, that we won't find it challenging to create that capacity and readiness. But –

Dr. McInnis: But it's sort of baked into the –

Adm. Fagan: It is baked into the DNA of the organization, that we will – you know, we're in the lifesaving business. And we have a very – we talk about on-scene initiative. And, you know, sort of unity of effort is you won't – when you talk to Coasties, when we talk about C2, you know, we do have a military command and control structure. But it's more about communicating, collaborating, coordinating, and how you do that in the aftermath of an event. We will never come in and say: Who's in charge? We come in and say, how can we be helpful?

Dr. McInnis: Well, turning to recruitment and retention, because that's been a big topic across the services, what, in your view, is the Coast Guard's value proposition when it comes to Gen Z? We're all sort of trying to figure out how to crack that nut, I suppose. And soon, Generation Alpha. How are you thinking about communicating the value proposition?

Adm. Fagan: Yeah. So I have been very public and open with regard to the recruiting challenge in front of this service. It is not unique to the Coast Guard. This is – the current generation, we all need to inspire them to service. And, you know, just, one, communicating, one, about just how incredible the Coast

Guard is. And we are hiring, by the way, anybody listening. We're a great – we're a great organization. A little bumper sticker there. (Laughter.)

But one of the things I think we need to talk about more is the value proposition of a sense of purpose, camaraderie, meaning, work that's valued, and the work team experience that you have in an organization like the Coast Guard. It truly is priceless. It's not something that you pay people – but when people find the service – I was a mentor at a boot camp company just a couple weeks ago. They were – they were two weeks in. It's one of the hardest places to be as you enter the organization.

They had a sense of purpose. They knew why they'd joined. They were in and were planning on staying for 20 years. And at their graduation, their parents – you know, my generation – was all there. And they were, like – some of them in uniform, other services – said, we – this sense of family and belonging, we've never experienced this in our services. And the point I'd make to them was: This isn't unique here at this entry point. This is what your sons and daughters will find everywhere around the Coast Guard.

So, back to that, how do you – you know, where do you find Gen Z? One of the things we're doing is, as we advertise and look to increase awareness around recruiting, you know, we're going to places like Twitch, the online gaming site, where the youth are that we're looking to bring into the service. It's not – you know, you can't do the big, splashy ads, you know, at the Super Bowl. We're really focusing into where that generation is. But this is – this is a national security issue for the country. And we're feeling it, along with the other services.

Dr. McInnis: Well, uniquely, the changes you are inspiring and driving within your service have a direct impact on your daughter, who is following in your footsteps and currently serving as a lieutenant in the Coast Guard.

Adm. Fagan: Yes.

Dr. McInnis: How does – how does that family dynamic impact your thinking on workforce development, and command climate, and, you know, the workforce?

Adm. Fagan: Yeah. So my daughter, she graduated from the Coast Guard Academy in 2016. There are days where she's, like, oh this is really cool. Mom's the commandant. And then there are days she's, like, I need to change my last name. (Laughter.) I'm not sure how I feel about this. And she's assigned to Coast Guard headquarters, so in fact I'll probably see her when we go back over there later.

But for me, and I shared this with this boot camp company and their parents a few weeks ago, it – what I want for their sons and daughters is the same thing that I want for mine, which is meaningful work, where you’re safe, you’re valued, and you’re contributing to something that, you know, is worthwhile. And it’s not a lot more complex than that. So, again, there’s a cultural component to it. There’s a resourcing component to it. But, you know, I want my daughter to be fulfilled and have a sense of camaraderie and esprit de corps. And that’s what I want for the entirety of the workforce.

She entered a Coast Guard very different than the Coast Guard that I entered. And we continue to move forward as an organization. As I shared, the Coast Guard Academy is 45 percent women. That’s – it’s just – the other – the other services are envious of that for us. (Laughter.) And, you know, diverse work teams matter. Diverse work teams out-perform non-diverse work teams. And so this, you know, is also about readiness and resiliency of the force.

Dr. McInnis: And effectiveness.

Adm. Fagan: And effectiveness, and perspective. And, you know, when I use the term “diversity,” I use it as broadly as possible. It’s not just gender and ethnicity. It’s everything that makes each of us different and unique, because it brings – it brings strength and resiliency to the team in a really key way.

Dr. McInnis: Mmm hmm. So, wrapping up our conversation, it’s Smart Women, Smart Power. I’d like to know your thoughts on whether you feel, you know, being a woman has impacted your leadership style, the positions that you’ve taken? If so, why? If not, why not?

Adm. Fagan: Yeah. So, you know, the number of times that I’ve come out of a meeting – this isn’t unique to now, this has been happening for years. You come out of a meeting and you’re talking to a male counterpart and offer a perspective, and they’ll offer perspective. And I think, like, were we even in the same room, right? It’s so different what they took out of the – out of the meeting. And so for me, it just highlights how critical it is that we bring that differing perspective into the room. And I – you know, I do not have all the answers at this point. And so I lean heavily on a team of advisors who bring that perspective and strength and opportunity into the equation.

And so, for me, I just try and create the environment where people feel safe and valued and have a voice. You know, you’re in the room for a reason. So, you know, be empowered to share that perspective. Don’t presume that I’ve got the same perspective. And it’s really been a – it is a privilege, leading this organization and advocating for the incredible workforce that is the United States Coast Guard.

Dr. McInnis: Well, thank you, Admiral Fagan, for sharing your thoughts on the Coast

Guard, its global missions, and how you are helping people ensure their voices are heard. That is so critically important for any organization. That matters so much for recruiting and retention. So thank you so much for joining us.

Adm. Fagan: Yeah. Thank you.

Dr. McInnis: And thanks so much to our in-person audience, and for our audience online for tuning in. I am shortly going to be heading out on maternity leave, but I look forward to returning and kicking off our 10 year anniversary campaign for Smart Women, Smart Power. Until then, have a poke around the CSIS website for our continued work on all the issues that are pressing strategically for our nation today, as well as a range of different work on defense security and global issues.

Have a great day, and thanks again.

Adm. Fagan: Thank you. Thank you.

(END)