

Q&A

Adm. Karl L. Schultz, Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard

Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz speaks at the Coast Guard Academy's commencement ceremony on May 20.

Schultz assumed the duties as the 26th commandant of the Coast Guard on June 1, 2018. He oversees all global Coast Guard operations and 41,000 active-duty, 6,200 Reserve and 8,500 civilian personnel as well as the support of 25,000 Coast Guard Auxiliary volunteers. Schultz served from August 2016 to May 2018 as commander, Atlantic Area, where he was the operational commander for all Coast Guard missions spanning five districts and 40 states.

He discussed the state of the Coast Guard with Senior Editor Richard R. Burgess. Excerpts from that conversation follow:

What is your assessment of the results so far of the surge of drug-interdiction operations by U.S. Southern Command?

SCHULTZ: Overall, we're having a lot of success. In June, Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolfe, Drug Enforcement Administrator Tim Shea, U.S. Southern Commander Adm. Craig Faller and I watched the offload of 30 metric tons of drugs from [U.S. Coast Guard Cutter] James, one of our flagship national security cutters, a testimonial to the successes of the surge by several Coast Guard and U.S. Navy units.

As I was speaking at the podium, the destroyer USS Nitze was inbound to participate in the campaign. The Navy brings additional capacity to the equation, including P-8 aircraft and ships carrying Coast Guard law-enforcement detachments, and flying MH-60 Seahawk helicopters carrying a Coast Guard airborne use-of-force mission commander and a Coast Guard precision marksman.

There was a little bit of a down-tick in maritime smuggling through the February–March timeframe as borders in Colombia were locked down due to COVID-19. But right now, the pace is robust.

With the demand in the Western Hemisphere so great, how can you afford to send cutters to Oceania and the western Pacific, as you did last year with two national security cutters?

SCHULTZ: Your assessment that the demands in the Western Hemisphere are high is absolutely accurate. That said, there has been a “Pacific” Coast Guard for more than 150 years, now with robust relationships throughout the region with nation states such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam. We’re helping the ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] — with very robust maritime capabilities — to further develop their capabilities. Working with [the Defense Department], we transferred former cutters to the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Vietnam.

We’ve got advisers in the Philippines, Vietnam, Fiji and we’re putting a new adviser in Malaysia. We’re sending an attaché to Australia this year that will serve in Australia and New Zealand. We’re also putting a new adviser in Guam that is going to service the [Commonwealth of the Mariana Islands] and Federated States of Micronesia. We’re invested in the region. We have a finite amount of Coast Guard capacity, but there are unique capabilities that the Coast Guard brings to the region.

When I look at what China is doing with its coercive checkbook-like diplomacy throughout the region, what we bring is the ability to offer people-to-people partnerships. We leverage existing relationships with maritime nations that derive a lot of their GDP and other economic and social values from the ocean state. We partner at a level that is a little more compatible with their maritime forces than maybe even our Navy. We can build capacity. We have ship rider exchanges there. We just had the Cutter Sequoia, a seagoing buoy tender, service aids to navigations in Palau. That helps their maritime commerce.

I’m going to launch a strategic outlook for illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, where there is an even broader leadership role for the Coast Guard. We won’t be

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the world’s fish cops, but we can frame the conversation, bring voice to the International Maritime Organization, the Global Fisheries Councils and the Western–Central Pacific Fisheries Forum.

We also are working with the Navy and Marine Corps on the new tri-service maritime strategy. You’re going to see the Coast Guard bring some unique capabilities to that conversation, particularly in the Indo–Pacific region.

China has become more aggressive in the South China Sea. What are your observations?

SCHULTZ: Freedom of navigation operations are an important aspect of fostering and encouraging the rule of law and free and open oceans. In that region, there are a lot of disputed claims in the East China Sea and South China Sea. There are land masses where there weren’t before and those land masses now have runways on them, with Chinese fighter planes and air-search radars. Why is the U.S. Coast Guard there? The actioning arm of the central Chinese Communist Party has been their coast guard. Back in 2018, they made a move from civilian leadership for the China coast guard to putting it under the People’s Armed Police under the Central Military Commission, which reports directly to the CCP government. They are using their coast guard arguably under the guise of the law enforcement agency to really be their actioning arm against foreign fishing in disputed waters and other things.

We were there in 2019 with two national security cutters, Bertholf and Stratton, with back-to-back five-month deployments. By being in the theater, we demonstrate alternatives to China. The world’s best Coast Guard is an organization that lives by the rules, a champion of open seas and maritime government. The Coast Guard is another tool in the United States government toolkit that

says we're all about free and open seas. When you look at all the economy that moves through there — the energy products, containerized shipping — we absolutely as a nation need to promote the free and open rules-based order. The Coast Guard directly contributes to that.

I understand that you are basing Sentinel-class fast-response cutters in Guam and are reaching down into South Pacific.

SCHULTZ: Yes. We've got three 154-foot FRCs based in Hawaii, and they've done some expeditionary reach down into the Pacific Island countries. We teamed up the cutter Joseph Gerczak with the buoy tender Walnut, for about a 30-day extended expeditionary patrol — 2,700 miles or so from Hawaii. The buoy tender is a mothership that can refuel and provision the fast-response cutter. We're going to replicate that this fall, I hope, with two FRCs teamed with a similar ship.

The first two FRCs for Guam will arrive there in calendar 2021, with one more later. That extends our reach, a 2,500 to 3,000-plus mile radius from Guam and a from Honolulu and allows us to up of our game out there in terms of capacity building and helping those states protect their sovereign interests. We're bringing an alternative. We have transparent engagement. It's professional partnerships at the personal and professional level that really offer a counter to China's approach.

Will the future polar security cutters replace the Polar Star immediately?

SCHULTZ: The PSC program has been a long time in the making. We had the good fortune and good work of three of my predecessors and their teams to recapitalize the Coast Guard and the U.S. government's capabilities for work in the high latitudes, both Arctic and Antarctic. I coined the 6-3-1 strategy — the nation needs a minimum of six icebreakers and of that six, three need to be heavy, and one is needed now. We redesignated the heavy icebreaker the polar security cutter.

We awarded that detailed design construction contract in April 2019 to VT Halter Marine of Pascagoula, Mississippi. We are finalizing design work on the lead ship and ordered long-lead materials for the second PSC. The 2021 budget before Congress right now has \$555 million

to fund the second polar security cutter. The good news story here is the PSC program is on track. We're hoping to exercise the option to build out three.

We've got a plan to bridge the Polar Star until we get PSCs on the waterfront. For the first PSC, we expect delivery in 2024. We will need to keep the Polar Star alive. We've got a five-year service life extension program that will invest about \$15 million a year over the next five years. It will spend not quite half the year in the shipyard, and she will make her annual sojourn in November through about March down to Antarctica to breakout McMurdo Station. That's critical in the coming years even more so than other years. The National Science Foundation and the U.S. Science Committee are doing their Antarctic infrastructure modernization systems, upgrading the facilities at McMurdo, about a four-year program. My sense is we will keep the Polar Star probably until we get the second PSC online, probably around 2026. With the investments we've made, we could keep the 44-year-old Polar Star around here probably through the end of the decade if things go well.

We also are looking to build probably a medium breaker, potentially what we're going to call the Arctic security cutter — a little less capability in terms of icebreaking, but that capability would get us back to being an Atlantic and Pacific icebreaker Coast Guard.

Is there any comment you'd like to make about the president's recent directive on the polar security cutter?

SCHULTZ: Yes. Do I think the memo puts the program at risk? Absolutely not. The memo really is a broadening conversation, looking at the icebreaking capability and capacity that the U.S. government needs in the polar regions. It engages four Cabinet-level secretaries, ourselves, we're already in partnership here on the icebreaking project. It protects our ongoing capital programs so we can look at what more capability and capacity might look like. It will not put the Coast Guard's offshore patrol cutter program at risk. We've got to do some analysis work to look at all the potential capabilities, looking at potential foreign build or other types of leases. I'm excited about it because we've worked very hard to talk about the nation needing more high-latitude capability.

This puts some urgency on that. It puts administration interest on that. I welcome it.

Does the Coast Guard have enough people to man these new cutters coming online?

SCHULTZ: We've been growing the Coast Guard as we're fielding new platforms. For example, when you take a 378-foot high-endurance cutter — crewed by about 178 personnel — the NSC that replaces it comes with technological advancement and a base crew of about 128. When you add an aviation detachment, intelligence and cryptologic folks, and capacity to handle detainees, they sail probably north of 150 to 155. These new ships that are incredibly capable with a smaller crew than the ships they replace and are 40 feet or so longer at the water line, we still need a lot of humans to maintain that. Writ large, we have grown the force to the platforms we're bringing on board.

Is the Coast Guard planning on procuring unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) for its cutters and operating some larger ones from land bases?

SCHULTZ: Operating ScanEagle from our NSCs [using contractor-owned/contractor operated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance services] has been tremendously successful. We are getting after ScanEagle on all the NSCs. I've got it on six right now. We'll get the seventh one done this year. I'd like to see some type of UAS on board the offshore patrol cutter, whether that's ScanEagle or another type. Since we have a service contract with Insitu, we get benefits from the airframe improvements and upgrades that they are developing for their large customer base, which has worked well for us. We've got a good relationship with the contractor.

Broadening the conversation about land-based UAS, we've completed prototype deployments of ScanEagle in Puerto Rico and Texas. We've also got a partnership with Air and Marine Operations at Customs and Border Protection [CBP] and we've got some Coast Guard ground station operators, pilots and sensor operators that fly the CBP's MQ-9s. We teamed with U.S. Southern Command and CBP and employed one of those in an operation out of Panama that proved tremendously successful. I would like to see us commensurate with budgetary maneuver

space to further get into that lane and have more ship-board UAS and land-based UAS.

We've deployed short-range UAS to a variety of Coast Guard field units to do some exploratory, proof-of-concept work with quadcopters. They've done some creative things. We've used them to track oil spills, inspect maritime infrastructure and assess damage to facilities after hurricanes. We're looking across the whole continuum, but I think unmanned aircraft are a part of our future. We're starting to scratch a little bit through our R&D center up in New London [Connecticut] about what's out there in unmanned surface capabilities as well.

What do you see as the role of the Coast Guard with regard to cyber capabilities?

SCHULTZ: We stood up Coast Guard Cyber Command and are growing our cyber capability. We've stood up our first cyber protection team. Because we're a regulatory agency and big in the homeland security business, interfacing with shipping, the regulatory piece is going to put us in the ports. We're fielding personnel this year out to those field units that will be port security cyber specialists. We saw the cyberattack on Maersk a couple years ago that basically brought Maersk in Los Angeles and other parts to a standstill. They had to replace tens of thousands of computers that weren't upgraded with the latest security.

Our key role, first and foremost, is going to be in ensuring our maritime infrastructure is protected and hardened against cyberattack. Our fiscal year 2021 budget includes resources for a cyber mission team and a second cyber protection team. That is one of the biggest growth areas for humans in the Coast Guard here in the past budget cycle or two. There is somewhere north of 150 additional cyber warriors in the budget before the Congress right now.

Coast Guard cyber professionals at the Department of Homeland Security are doing things related to election security and other critical infrastructure security work. Coast Guard cyber men and woman are supporting U.S. [Cyber Command] at Fort Meade. We have a new cyber major at U.S. Coast Guard Academy, and we'll be having some cyber graduates here in the very near future who are very energized by the mission. ■