As Arctic Sea Ice Melts, Deputy CNO Says U.S. Subs Will Become More Important

The Los Angeles-class submarine USS Annapolis is on the surface of the Arctic Ocean after breaking through three feet of ice during Ice Exercise 2009. U.S. Navy

ARLINGTON, Va. – Submarine forces operating in the Arctic will become "more and more important," as the polar ice melts, opening up more navigable blue water to commercial and naval vessels, a top U.S. Navy leader says.

The U.S. Submarine Force has traveled under the Arctic ice for decades, and continues to add to the Navy's understanding of the environment by testing operating systems, conducting valuable scientific research and partnering with allies in exercises like Ice Exercise (ICEX) 2020, Vice Adm. Phillip Sawyer told webinar participants Nov. 16 at the annual symposium of the Naval Submarine League.

The increasing decline of sea ice in the Arctic has opened potential sea lanes in the summer months, sparking territorial disputes. Russia, Norway, Canada and the United States all have boosted their military presence in the Arctic at a rate not seen for decades. China, calling itself a near-Arctic nation, is eager to use a trans-Arctic route to move its exports and is building its own ice breakers. Russia is placing cruise missiles on its new heavy ice breakers.

"As the polar ice recedes and more of the Arctic becomes a blue Arctic, this will present opportunities and challenges," said Sawyer, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Operations, Plans and Strategy. Noting submarines are the Navy's primary anti-submarine warfare (ASW) platforms, Sawyer added, "the submarine forces working the Arctic will become more and more

important.”

ICEX is a biennial submarine exercise to promote interoperability between allies and partners to maintain operational readiness and regional stability in the Arctic. In March, two U.S. attack submarines, the USS Connecticut and the USS Toledo, joined forces from the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway and Japan in the Arctic Sea for ICEX 2020.

“While the submarine force can go where other naval units can’t, ICEX is but one of several High North exercises the Navy executes with allies and partners.” Sawyer said. In May, the U.S. 6th Fleet conducted a bilateral ASW exercise with the Royal Navy above the Arctic Circle. Four ships, including a U.S. submarine, and a U.S. P-8A maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft worked together in the Norwegian Sea.