Coast Guard Commandant: Illegal Chinese Fishing a ‘National Security Challenge’ That Warrants U.S. Response

U.S. Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz delivers his State of the Coast Guard address on Feb. 20. Defense Media Activity

ARLINGTON, Va. — The “Great Power Competition” with Russia and China isn’t limited to winning allies in geostrategic flash points or sailing through contested areas to promote freedom of the seas, according to the commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Near-peer adversaries “are actively exploiting other nations’ natural resources, including fish stocks. In many cases [they are] challenging the sovereignty of smaller or less-developed nations,” Adm. Karl Schultz said in his annual State of the Coast Guard address, live-streamed Feb. 20 from Charleston, South Carolina.

Schultz identified China, which has the world’s largest distant water fishing fleet, as “one of the worst predatory fishing offenders,” engaging in Illegal, unreported, unregulated fishing (IUU). The problem goes beyond conservation and sustainability, he said — “This is a national security

challenge warranting a clear response."

An essential protein source for more than 40% the world's population, fish stocks are critical to the sovereignty and economic security of many nations. The most conservative estimates put the annual loss to the global economy from IUU fishing at more than $23 billion.

The Coast Guard could be a global leader in combatting IUU fishing through international cooperation and targeted operations, Schultz said, adding that the agency was developing a progressive IUU Strategic Outlook, planned for release in late summer.

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> *— Charleston RiverDogs (@ChasRiverDogs) February 20, 2020*

The United States already holds 16 counter-IUU fishing bilateral agreements in the Pacific and West Africa. "And we are pursuing additional agreements to help us push back against the destructive fishing practices that are leaving vast expanses of the ocean and seabed in ruins," he said.

Nowhere is this more important than the Indo-Pacific, the epicenter of global maritime trade and geostrategic influence, Schultz said. Many Pacific Island countries – even U.S. island territories – lack the capability to fully police their sovereign waters. Without

mentioning any country by name, Schultz said he was most concerned by a "coercive state's influence operations, intentions to construct dual-use infrastructure projects and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed their strategic agenda."

To strengthen the community of island nations in Oceania, the Coast Guard will continue Operation AIGA, which last year deployed an oceangoing tender and a fast-response cutter (FRC) to Samoa and American Samoa, where they conducted exercises with ships from the Royal Australian and Royal New Zealand navies. By year's end, delivery is expected of the first two, 154-foot FRCs to be homeported in Guam.