Coast Guard Focusing More Attention on the Arctic, Commandant Reports



The Coast Guard's one heavy icebreaker, *Polar Star*, is four decades old and due to be replaced, but not until a new polar cutter comes online sometime in 2024. Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz says the lack of capability makes the increasingly active Arctic challenging. U.S. Coast Guard/Fireman John Pelzel

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – The Coast Guard has faced a challenging year – and going forward the sea service will continue to emphasize the importance of increasing resources in the Arctic, said Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz said May 8 during Sea-Air-Space 2019 here.

The service released a new Arctic Strategic Outlook in April, which updated the same report from six years ago that highlighted the shortfalls the service faces in the ever-evolving region.

"We were trying to be honest with the report, … be bold enough and frank and be candid enough with what the circumstances are," Schultz said.

The service has a full-time presence, District 17 in Juneau, Alaska, but have never had a full-time base in the Arctic. Over the past decade-plus, the Coast Guard has upped the rhetoric on the need to increase funding for resources in the region. This is starting to come into fruition, as the Coast Guard has begun to recapitalize its dated icebreaking fleet.

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>
> *Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz*

In April, the service awarded a $745 million design and construction contract to Pascagoula, Mississippi-based VT Halter Marine Inc. to begin building the next heavy icebreaker for the service. The Coast Guard now only has one, *Polar Star,* that is more than four decades old and suffering from increased mechanical issues and missed time at sea due to it.

Schultz added that the new icebreakers will have unmanned systems and a helicopter on them. The current fleet does not have either of these capabilities.

The commandant said the lack of resources, such as icebreakers able to operate in the Artic, keeps him up at night. But the new heavy icebreaker is expected to be ready by fiscal 2024, at the latest, though Schultz acknowledged there will be challenges in filling in the gap between that cutter coming online and keeping *Polar Star* operating.

“We are working on how we bridge this gap,” he said.

The service also has plans to build six new icebreakers – three heavy ones and three medium capability – over the next two decades.

Schultz said the Arctic is competitive economically as well as for national security. As sea lanes there open for longer

periods due to melting sea ice from climate change, cruise ship activity has increased, and commercial ships are able to traverse through the former icy waters more frequently.

“It’s an increasingly dynamic portion of the world. How do we innovate and adapt to the region?” the commandant said.

Schultz noted that the conversation is expanding regarding the Arctic. Congress is paying more attention, and the Defense Department conducted extensive exercises there earlier this year.

“How do we speak with a unified voice up there?” he said.

Part of the new Arctic Strategic Outlook states the Coast Guard will look to strengthen partnerships, address emerging demands in maritime law enforcement there and advance and modernize the Arctic’s marine transportation system.