Coast Guard, Too, Has Role to Fulfill in ‘Great Power Competition,’ Vice Commandant Says



A group of scientists and engineers from the Coast Guard Cutter Healy deploy equipment on the Arctic ice in 2018. Healy is in a maintenance period now until June. U.S. Coast Guard/NyxoLyno Cangemi

ARLINGTON, Va. — The U.S. Coast Guard has a unique role in the growing global rivalry with Russia and China, the service’s second-ranking leader says.

In addition to Department of Homeland Security, law enforcement and maritime rescue missions, Coast Guard assets are deployed with the Navy in the Middle East, seizing illegal narcotics shipments in South American and Caribbean waters and traveling the increasingly tense Indo-Pacific region, said Adm. Charles W. Ray, the Coast Guard’s vice commandant.

In addition to interoperability with the Navy overseas, the Coast Guard forms “a unique element of the joint force with the smaller countries and navies of the world” because it is both a military and law enforcement organization, Ray told the annual Surface Navy Association convention here Jan. 15. “There’s something unique about a white ship with a racing stripe,” he said, adding the Coast Guard operates at “the

level below lethal
level.”

That role has become more significant because the “Great Power Competition” has reached the High North, where “the Coast Guard is
the nation’s presence,” he said.

The Arctic region makes demands not seen in a long time. When the medium icebreaker U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Healy sailed above the
Arctic Circle last summer, “she was literally off the grid for almost a month,”
Ray said.

“There’s not a lot of there, there, when it comes to comms and navigation,” the deputy commandant added, noting the issue isn’t just
communications but domain awareness. As Arctic sea ice melts, previously
impassable sea lanes are opening during the summer to commercial maritime
traffic and naval vessels. “We’ve got to be aware of who else is up there,” Ray
said.

Designed to break 4.5 feet of ice continuously and operate in temperatures as low as 50 degrees below zero, the Healy is out of service
for maintenance work until June. The nation’s only operational heavy
icebreaker, the much larger but aging Polar Star, can break ice 21 feet thick. Commissioned
in 1976, Polar Star is on its seventh tour of icebreaking duties in Antarctica.
Both vessels are homeported in Seattle, far from Arctic waters.

The Coast Guard wants to increase its icebreaking fleet with six new polar security cutters. Congress appropriated $655 million in fiscal 2019 to begin construction of the first, with another $20 million appropriated for long-lead-time materials to build a second icebreaker.

While the Coast Guard has gotten funding to build five classes of new cutters including icebreakers, Ray expressed concern about where they all will be homeported and maintained in the future. “We’ve got about $2 billion in shore infrastructure backlog,” the admiral said.