

Services Continue to Examine Challenges, Obstacles of Operating in Arctic

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Panelists at a Sea-Air-Space discussion May 6 on the operational and logistical challenges for agencies that operate in the Arctic region. Lisa Nipp

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – The Arctic continues to present operational and logistical challenges for the agencies that operate there, but studies are providing a clearer picture of how they should be adjusting to climate change, service leaders said during a panel presentation at the Navy League's annual Sea-Air-Space exposition here.

"We are working on how to better understand the Arctic," said Rear Adm. John Okon, commander, Naval Meteorology and Oceanography Command, and oceanographer and navigator of the Navy.

Noting that climate change is happening – and there are undeniable changes in sea ice over the last decade– Okon said the use of unmanned systems could be a force multiplier for missions in the Arctic.

"We know we are going to have to operate [in the Arctic] and protect the homeland," he said.

Vice Adm. Daniel Abel, the U.S. Coast Guard's deputy commandant for operations, said the risks presented in the polar region are growing each year.

"It is undeniable conditions are changing up there ... the change has happened, and the change is happening," Abel said.

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Panelists at “Arctic: Strategies for the Frozen Domain.” Lisa Nipp

The Coast Guard’s annual Operation Arctic Shield will once again take place this summer. Arctic Shield’s goal is to increase knowledge of operating in the region, as the service sends additional personnel and resources to the area to see how they react.

The Coast Guard has no full-time base in the Arctic, as the service operates there seasonally. Over the last several years, as sea ice has melted sooner and shipping lanes have been opened for longer periods of time as a result, the requirements for the Department of Homeland Security agency have been more plentiful in the polar region.

Communicating with the Defense Department and allied nations through automatic identification systems and other means has presented unique challenges for the Coast Guard, given the harsh climate conditions.

“We are making sure that our requirements work with U.S. Northern Command, and we have the abilities to communicate at the highest latitudes,” Abel said.

“We are working on how to better understand the Arctic.”

Rear Adm. John Okon, commander, Naval Meteorology and Oceanography Command, oceanographer and navigator of the Navy

Jeffrey Hutchinson, commissioner of the Canadian coast

guard, said he hopes the service continues to work closely with its counterpart agency in the United States.

“We want to strengthen our partnership role,” he said.

Echoing comments from fellow panelist, Hutchinson said climate change is an issue for the Arctic, and Canada needs to communicate to get support from allies along with improving its relationship with other nations that have a stake in the region.

U.S. Air Force Gen. Terrence O’Shaughnessy, commander, U.S. Northern Command, said the department is working on a unified approach among all agencies that operate in the polar region.

Noting that they all face common challenges, he said new technology is important in the Arctic and that continuing to better study the region will be a focal point going forward.

“The [Arctic] is a critically important topic,” he said.