While Useful Tools, Unmanned Systems Don’t Equal Presence in Arctic, Coast Guard Adviser Says



The Coast Guard Cutter Polar Star (WAGB 10) breaks ice in the Chukchi Sea, Saturday, Dec. 26, 2020. *U.S. COAST GUARD / Petty Officer 1st Class Cynthia Oldham*

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. — Unmanned systems may be a solution for handling dirty, dull or dangerous tasks in the Arctic, but they’re no substitute for a U.S. flagged ship when it comes establishing presence in the Far North, a Coast Guard Arctic expert says.

“Unmanned systems are a great tool but they don’t deliver presence,” according to the Coast Guard Senior Arctic Advisor Shannon Jenkins. “Presence is a U.S. flagged [manned] sovereign vessel,” Jenkins told an Aug. 3 exhibit booth briefing at the Navy League’s Sea-Air-Space expo at National Harbor, Maryland. “You can’t surge into the Arctic. You have to be up there.”

Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz has said repeatedly that “presence equals influence in the Arctic” to counter a resurgent Russia, and China — which styles itself a “near Arctic nation” — from ignoring the rules-based international order and modern maritime governance as they have done in other regions like the Black and South China seas.

Maritime domain awareness in the Arctic requires more than periodic exercises. It is important to understand how the environment is changing, Jenkins said, “So that we’re better prepared for when industry changes their operations up there, so we can be prepared to be up there and regulate, enforce and

protect those operations as well as the U.S. citizens up there."

The U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the waters off Alaska and the Aleutians is greater than all other American EEZs along the Pacific, Atlantic, Gulf coasts and U.S. territorial waters in the Central Pacific and the Caribbean. "That's a lot of water," Jenkins said, "so we have to go where the activity is." That includes going where the fishing fleets, the cruise ships and the oil and gas explorers operate as climate change melts polar sea ice, opening up new sea lanes across the top of the world in summer as well as access to mineral resources and fish stocks long-hidden beneath the ice.

The Russian fishing fleet has begun experimental fishing in the Chukchi Sea, north of the Bering Strait "and that means the Coast Guard is going to be up there to monitor," Jenkins said. Among worldwide fishery production, Alaska ranks seventh, and the six larger producers are all nation states, he said. Illegal, unlawful and unlicensed fishing is replacing piracy as the top global maritime security threat facing the nation, according to the Coast Guard.

"We're going to need ice breakers, more ships, more planes, more helicopters, more people," Jenkins said, adding those systems and platforms have to be able to operate in the austere conditions of the Arctic. "There's a lot of icing and extreme winds. With unmanned aerial systems, we've had issues deploying in that region. Wind factors are just too great," said Jenkins. "It's also an access issue. That's where the ice breakers are so essential. They're our floating infrastructure."

The Coast Guard currently has only two operating ice breakers, both of them old. Congress has provided funding for the first two Polar Security Cutters (PSCs), which will be heavy icebreakers. A contract was awarded to VT Halter in 2019 for

the first PSC. Delivery is expected in 2026, Jenkins said.