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Security Nexus Perspectives

REBALANCE U.S. COAST GUARD CUTTERS TO HELP ADVANCE A 'FREE AND OPEN' INDO-PACIFIC

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Keywords: Maritime law enforcement, homeport, Oceania, IUU fishing, maritime domain awareness

*"We are recommitting to a shared vision for an Indo-Pacific region that is free, open, resilient, and inclusive."*¹ U.S. President Joe Biden and the leaders of the Quad nations, March 13, 2021.

For the United States Coast Guard (USCG) to best contribute toward a "free and open" Indo-Pacific, it needs to shift major cutter resources to the Pacific to meet the mission demands of the future. Currently, the USCG homeports only 33% of its major cutters in the Pacific, with the remaining fleet of cutters in the Atlantic, which severely restricts the USCG's ability to effectively operate across the diverse mission demands in the vast Pacific Ocean. On any given day, USCG cutters will conduct counter-narcotic patrols in the Eastern Pacific, protect against Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) encroachment in the Bering Sea, and use bilateral fisheries law enforcement agreements with Pacific Island Nations to promote Theater Security Cooperation and protect critical resources. Furthermore, USCG cutters are increasingly used in the Western Pacific to preserve a rules-based international order at sea. Now is the time for the USCG, while in the midst of the largest cutter recapitalization project in the fleet's history, to reexamine its major cutter force structure in the Indo-Pacific region so that it may better provide the sufficient means to achieve the desired strategic ends.

Coast Guard Presence in the Pacific: The Tyranny of Distance

The area of responsibility for the USCG's Pacific Area encompasses over 74 million square miles of ocean.² Despite its massive responsibilities, there are currently only 10 white-hulled, medium or major cutters homeported in the Pacific whose primary mission set is maritime law enforcement (compared to the 27 homeported in the Atlantic). While smaller patrol craft such as Fast Response Cutters (FRCs) are stationed throughout the Pacific, major cutters such as National Security Cutters (NSCs) and the forthcoming Offshore Patrol Cutters (OPCs)

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are most capable of transiting the long distances to conduct the numerous missions occurring far from the shores of the United States.

The USCG is constructing a new fleet of FRCs, OPCs and NSCs to replace its aging legacy cutters (See **Table 1** for a comparison in capabilities). Upon completion, the USCG’s major cutter fleet will consist of 11 NSCs and 25 OPCs.³ If the past force laydown allocation remains the same, only 12 or so of those major cutters will be homeported in the Pacific.

Table 1: Recapitalized fleet of USCG cutters

Type	Length (feet)	Range (nautical miles)	Endurance (days)
Fast Response Cutter (FRC) ⁴	154’	2,500	5
Offshore Patrol Cutter (OPC) ⁵	360’	10,200	60
National Security Cutter (NSC) ⁶	418’	12,000	60-90

The imbalance of cutter homeports, coupled with the vast distances in the region, strains Pacific-based cutters and limits operational effectiveness. To be sure, a significant portion of USCG presence in the Eastern Pacific, one of the Service’s primary operating areas, is provided by Atlantic-based cutters because their transits to that region are actually shorter than their Pacific-based counterparts. This geographic anomaly notwithstanding, Pacific distances make it impracticable and inefficient for Atlantic-based cutters to operate much further west than that. This leaves the 10 Pacific-based cutters responsible to not only patrol the Eastern Pacific, but also the Bering Sea, Oceania, and Western Pacific areas of ever-increasing mission demand.⁷

The USCG has only two NSCs homeported in Hawaii. The rest of the Service’s major cutters in the Pacific are based in Alaska or the west coast of the United States. With increasing calls for USCG engagement with like-minded partners in Southeast Asia and throughout the Indo-Pacific,⁸ the constraints of the tyranny of distance in the Pacific cannot be ignored. An NSC out of California has to travel nearly 6,000 miles just to reach Guam. Whether enforcing United Nations Security Council sanctions against North Korea⁹ or conducting at-sea maritime security exercises with the Indian Coast Guard,¹⁰ major cutters are stretching longer and farther to meet mission demands. At the tactical level, the weeks a USCG cutter spends transiting to operating theaters amounts to weeks lost in operations. At the strategic level, those long transits prohibit the ability to project sustained presence. The lack of presence equates to a lack of influence.

IUU Fishing and Oceania

In the Service’s newly-released Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing Strategic Outlook, the Commandant of the USCG highlighted that IUU fishing has “replaced piracy as the leading maritime global security threat.”¹¹ IUU fishing results in “tens of billions of dollars of lost revenue to legal fishers every year”¹² and serves as the gateway to more nefarious transnational crime, including slavery, human and drug trafficking, and resource exploitation.¹³

Oceania was recently reported as “the most vulnerable” region in the world for IUU fishing.¹⁴ This is a security concern for the United States. Composed of thousands of sparsely-populated islands surrounded by a vast ocean, Oceania, including the Hawaiian Islands, is home to 43% of the United States’ EEZ (1.3 million square miles).¹⁵ Furthermore, the region includes the massive EEZs of the

Compact of Free Association states (the Republic of Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau), whose defense the United States is responsible for. Home to China's second and third island chains, Oceania hosts the critical sea lines of communication that connect the United States to the Indo-Pacific region.

Despite the United States' sizable territorial interests and the unambiguous prioritization of the Indo-Pacific, Oceania has become the United States' strategic blind-spot. As the United States' maritime law enforcement agency, the USCG can mitigate the gap and best contribute to sustaining a "free and open" Indo-Pacific by combatting IUU fishing in Oceania. Doing so keeps the USCG operating within its primary homeland security missions, will protect marine resources and preserve regional stability. The USCG's modest footprint of cutters in the Pacific, however, constrains its ability to do so.

Fast Response Cutters

The USCG is increasing its presence in Oceania through the homeporting of FRCs. These FRCs, three in Hawaii and three in Guam, are already playing an outsized role in the region. In December 2020, shortly after arrival to its new homeport, a Guam-based FRC helped apprehend a Chinese vessel illegally fishing within Palau's EEZ.¹⁶

Despite improved capabilities, the FRC is still a relatively small patrol craft not originally designed for long-range missions. Recent proof of concept patrols in the region, however, highlight creative ways for the FRC to successfully operate well-beyond its designed range and endurance parameters. In October 2020, an FRC completed a 45-day patrol between Hawaii and Guam that included over 9,300 miles transited.¹⁷ The year before, a Hawaii-based FRC transited to Samoa alongside a USCG buoy tender (which transferred provisions and fuel to the FRC to extend its time at sea).¹⁸

The operational successes of FRCs prompted a White House announcement in October 2020 about exploring homeporting FRCs in American Samoa.¹⁹ FRCs in American Samoa would certainly increase USCG presence in the region. But to put it in perspective, a fleet of FRCs based out of Guam, Hawaii, and American Samoa is akin, distance-wise, to placing FRCs in Seattle, Miami, and Iceland. Instead of the continental United States between those three locations, it is mostly open ocean between Guam, Hawaii, and American Samoa, with no other USCG assets in between. The waters separating the three homeports are a significant gap for any cutters, let alone FRCs. While proof of concept patrols are encouraging, since the geography of Oceania requires FRCs to routinely operate well beyond typical operating parameters, it lends to concern over the extent to which such expeditionary patrols are sustainable.

Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)

FRCs in Oceania also face the challenge of real-time MDA. Without a flight deck to house aviation assets or unmanned aerial systems to enhance tactical MDA, FRCs are limited in their effectiveness. In Oceania, where there are few aviation assets, FRCs are left searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack while trying to locate small fishing vessels.

Recognizing the importance of MDA in tracking difficult-to-detect fishing vessels, a 2019 Report to Congress on "Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing: Pilot Program," highlighted ongoing efforts of using unmanned aerial systems to "maximize the effectiveness of Coast Guard operations" in combatting IUU fishing.²⁰ After equipping NSCs with unmanned aerial systems, the

cutters significantly improved their effectiveness in counter-narcotic operations.²¹ In countering IUU fishing in Oceania, the value in aerial assets is significant.

Major Cutter Capabilities

Multiple interactions with overseas partners caused the USCG's Commandant to call for the Service to "expand our permanent presence and effectiveness in the region through expeditionary capability."²² The USCG should use major cutters to expand its permanent presence in Oceania. By doing so, the USCG will greatly expand its operational capabilities.

Longer Reach

The USCG has bilateral fisheries law enforcement agreements with 11 Pacific Island Nations.²³ These agreements allow USCG vessels to embark host-nation shipriders. During at-sea boardings, the shipriders serve as the lead law enforcement agent while supported by USCG law enforcement teams. Such agreements greatly enhance the ability of nations with limited enforcement assets to conduct maritime law enforcement within their waters. With the shortage of major cutters in the Pacific, the USCG does not have the available surface assets to routinely put these agreements to good use. While FRCs are limited by their endurance and range, major cutters are equipped to reach the disparate EEZs spread across the Pacific. Major cutter presence could increase the frequency these bilateral shiprider agreements are used. Persistent law enforcement presence would help detect and deter IUU fishing and help ensure the sustainability of migratory fish stocks vital to Pacific countries.

Additionally, many of the U.S.' strongest allies and partners have a major stake in the region. With its enhanced capabilities and extended endurance, a major USCG cutter is the ideal asset to operate with partners. In 2020, an NSC became the first surface asset to participate in an annual Pacific Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group, consisting of the United States, Australia, France, and New Zealand.²⁴ The next year, that same cutter conducted operations with the Japan Coast Guard and Royal Australian Navy.²⁵

Enhancing MDA for Partners

Major cutters can greatly improve MDA. In early 2021, during its patrol throughout Oceania, an NSC used its unmanned aerial system to collect observation reports and then share them with the Forum Fisheries Agency Regional Fisheries Surveillance Center in the Solomon Islands.²⁶ In 2020, Australia announced the development of the Pacific Fusion Centre in Vanuatu,²⁷ and France's Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific calls on enhancing MDA in the region.²⁸ Major cutters working with regional surveillance centers to promote joint information-sharing will enhance MDA among allies and partners, and ensure the rules-based order is upheld in the maritime domain.

Force Multiplier

The optimal laydown of USCG assets in the region is a mix of major cutters and smaller patrol craft. A major cutter working in conjunction with other smaller patrol craft(s) is a force multiplier. When operating with smaller craft, the major cutter can use its enhanced command and control suite to serve as a "mother ship" and direct intelligence-driven operations. With its shipboard aviation and unmanned aerial systems, major cutters receive real-time MDA, and can use it to direct the smaller patrol craft to targets of interest. Partnering a major cutter with a smaller patrol craft is not limited to USCG vessels. Australia's robust Pacific Maritime Security Program delivers patrol boats in the region.²⁹ Japan has

similar efforts, recently delivering a patrol craft to Palau.³⁰ Using a major cutter to partner with other patrol craft can significantly expand the scope and effectiveness of joint maritime operations.

Recommendations

The USCG has limited resources and ever-increasing mission demands. The Service does not have the resources to maintain ubiquitous presence across the Pacific. The following will help the USCG optimize resources in the Pacific:

OPC in Guam

The USCG should seriously consider homeporting an OPC in Guam. Even if the overall force laydown of major cutters still favors Atlantic-based cutters, basing an OPC in Guam is the most effective way to spread USCG assets and maintain a permanent presence across the Pacific. Major cutters will optimize mission effectiveness as they can partner with the smaller patrol craft already in the region. Strategic basing in Guam will optimize the placement of major USCG assets, and thus give operational planners greater flexibility when allocating and apportioning resources across the vast distances of the Pacific.

Additional homeporting in Hawaii

The USCG currently only plans for 11 NSCs. In the fiscal year 2020 budget, however, Congress provided \$100.5 million for procurement materials in order “to preserve the option of procuring a 12th NSC while the Coast Guard evaluates its future needs.”³¹ If a 12th NSC is funded, it should be homeported in Hawaii. If a 12th National Security is not funded, Hawaii should still be considered as a homeport location for OPCs. A west-coast-based cutter transits 2,000 nautical miles just to reach Hawaii. With existing shoreside facilities and engineering teams to support the two NSCs already homeported there, Hawaii serves as an optimal “starting-point” for major cutters in the Pacific.

FRCs in the Atlantic, major cutters to the Pacific

Proof of concept patrols using FRCs from Hawaii and Guam successfully pushed the boundaries of the vessel’s operating parameters. FRCs, however, are mostly concentrated in the Atlantic (of the 42 in commission, only 12 are based in the Pacific). If the Service plans to use FRCs in a more expeditionary role, it should do so with the Atlantic-based ones (a notable exception being not using them for Northern Atlantic winter patrols, due to weather constraints). An FRC patrolling the Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, Eastern Pacific, or the eastern seaboard of the United States typically operates significantly closer to ports and aviation assets than an FRC operating in the remoteness of Oceania. With 19 FRCs in Miami, Key West, and Puerto Rico alone, using Atlantic-based FRCs in a more expeditionary role could free up the Atlantic-based larger cutters and allow some to shift to the Pacific, where the vast distances require longer-legged cutters to effectively operate.

Other surface assets

The USCG should continue using its buoy tenders in an expeditionary role. Typically focused on the maintenance of maritime aids to navigation, these multi-mission cutters have the endurance, range, and storage capacity to operate at sea for extended periods. Buoy tenders already routinely interact downrange with partner nations in Oceania and should continue to do so. The USCG can also continue exploring proof of concept patrols by pairing buoy tenders with other USCG surface assets (large and small) to enhance mission effectiveness.

Additionally, amidst calls for a 500-ship U.S. Navy (USN),³² the services should continue and even grow the Oceania Maritime Security Initiative (OMSI). OMSI optimizes resource allocation: when USN assets transit through Oceania to reach their operating theater, they embark USCG law enforcement detachment teams and host-nation shipriders to conduct at-sea boardings under the USCG's bilateral shiprider agreements. Optimizing the use of transit periods of USN assets allows for expanded maritime law enforcement and MDA efforts without pulling resources from USN missions.

A holistic approach

Lastly, other USCG capabilities can tremendously bolster mission effectiveness. Aviation assets are critical to USCG missions and face similar constraints by the vastness of the Pacific. Whether as a permanent presence or rotationally-based, aviation assets in Guam or elsewhere in Oceania would enhance the ability of the USCG to conduct multi-mission operations. Furthermore, continued coordination with the Department of Defense (DoD) to use reconnaissance gathered from Maritime Patrol Aircraft can help mitigate gaps in MDA.

USCG Deployable Specialized Forces units conduct a range of missions to enhance maritime security and provide an additional expeditionary capability that is interoperable with the DoD and the interagency. The USCG's robust intelligence enterprise can integrate with partner nation fusion and surveillance centers to improve information sharing and intelligence networks to drive operations. USCG mobile training teams provide training worldwide, while the USCG Training Center Yorktown provides international courses designed for building partner-nation capacity. Finally, as the USCG increases its number of attaches, liaisons, and maritime advisors in the Pacific, these officers will build partnerships for expanded international operations.

Conclusion

In a resource-constrained environment, the USCG will continue to be challenged by the demand for USCG assets exceeding the available supply. But by better strategic placement of those major assets, the Service can position itself to better meet the growing mission demands in the vital Indo-Pacific region. The time to evaluate this is now, while homeport decisions for the new cutters are still being made. Homeporting major cutters in Guam and/or Hawaii will increase the permanent presence of the USCG in a region with a substantial portion of the United States' EEZ, and give operational planners the most flexibility for apportionment of cutters to conduct missions spread across the vast waters of the Pacific.

The priority of a "free and open" Indo-Pacific is not fleeting. Given the global trends and geostrategic environment, the USCG will continue to be called upon to help achieve this strategic end for the foreseeable future. If the logistics to rebalance cutter homeporting and provide more major cutters to the Pacific are not worked out today, the USCG will be limited in its ability to contribute to a "free and open" Indo-Pacific tomorrow.

The views expressed in this article are the author's alone, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the DKI APCSS or the United States Government.

May 2021

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