



**TESTIMONY OF
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ON**

“U. S. COAST GUARD INDO-PACIFIC OPERATIONS”

**BEFORE THE
HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
INDO-PACIFIC SUBCOMMITTEE**

SEPTEMBER 28, 2023

Introduction

Good afternoon, Madam Chairwoman and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Today, I look forward to discussing the Coast Guard’s unique authorities and capabilities, and how our forces are employed to promote a free, open, and resilient Indo-Pacific in support of the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States.

Importance of the Indo-Pacific

The United States has direct sovereign interests in the Indo-Pacific comprising 1.3 million square miles, which is 43 percent of the 4.5 million square miles of ocean that is the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Operations pursuant to the Coast Guard’s network of more than 60 multi- and bi-lateral agreements, with nations around the globe, and participation in international fora, are unique among other government agencies and military forces. The Coast Guard’s activities within the U.S. EEZ surrounding American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Marianas, with neighboring Pacific Island Countries and South and Southeast Asian countries, bolster a rules-based order to address challenges ranging from fisheries enforcement, forced labor, human smuggling and counter narcotics, to support for disaster and pollution response. The partnerships the Coast Guard builds are vital to America’s ability to secure our EEZ and our success in the broader context of geostrategic competition.

Challenges in the Region

Many factors are transforming the maritime domain and converging at an unprecedented pace across the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Global competition can challenge rules-based order by eroding international norms, maritime governance, and regional stability. Malign Actors pose a threat to peace and prosperity throughout the maritime commons. Additional competitors, violent extremists, and increasingly powerful and capable transnational criminal organizations exploit weak governance at sea, corruption ashore, and gaps in maritime domain awareness to gain economic and political advantage.

The Indo-Pacific region is challenged by a wide range of criminal, geopolitical, and climate risks. Current regional governance limits the reach and efficacy of efforts to combat transnational crime and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Increasingly innovative transnational criminal organizations challenge intelligence and law enforcement best practices. Natural disasters due to a changing climate, combined with sea level rise, threaten already fragile economies and ecosystems.

Why is the Coast Guard important for the region?

The Coast Guard's strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific is to build a more free, open, prosperous, secure, and resilient region with unrestricted, lawful access to the maritime commons for all nations—advancing the existing international rules-based order and solidifying the United States as a reliable, trusted partner for maritime safety, security, and prosperity in the region.

While the Coast Guard safeguards the U.S. EEZ, protects and defends more than 100,000 miles of U.S. coastline and inland waterways, and saves thousands of lives per year, the Service is also working to answer an increased demand for Indo-Pacific engagement within available resources, balancing numerous dynamic maritime risks facing our Nation.

A free and open Indo-Pacific can only be achieved through building collective capacity; these efforts begin with deepening regional partnerships and encouraging partners to strengthen their ties with one another. We will support our allies and partners as they take on regional leadership roles themselves, and we will pool our collective strength to face the defining issues of our time.

Over time, increasing engagement in South and Southeast Asia assists South China Sea claimants to further their own maritime governance. Frequent positive engagements – on land, at sea, and in the air – bolster efforts of partners to maintain sovereignty in their own EEZs. Our engagement also helps to deter malign activities in zones that are gray due to actions of those who would undermine international rules-based order.

Such a transformative environment demands sound maritime governance by, with, and through trusted partners that enable prioritization of available resources and a sustained, multilateral effort to combat the most critical threats and challenges. As such, the Coast Guard is postured to operate in unison with interagency, joint, and international partners to help address universal challenges posed by transnational crime, human smuggling, maritime safety and security, environmental stewardship, IUU fishing, and provocations in their nation's waters.

At all times a branch of the U.S. Armed Forces, a federal law enforcement agency, a regulatory body, a first responder, and a member of the U.S. Intelligence Community, the Coast Guard operates on all seven continents and throughout the homeland, serving a nation whose national security and economic prosperity are inextricably linked to the sea.

The Coast Guard supports national strategic guidance with our operations, activities, and investments by synchronizing efforts across the interagency and with allies and partners. Coast Guard actions in the region directly align with the Administration's five objectives in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy:

1. Advance A Free and Open Indo-Pacific;
2. Build Connections Within and Beyond the Region;
3. Drive Regional Prosperity;
4. Bolster Indo-Pacific Security; and
5. Build Regional Resilience to Transnational Threats.

The Coast Guard has operated in the Indo-Pacific for more than 150 years, and the Service is increasing efforts through targeted patrols with our National Security and Fast Response Cutters in support of Coast Guard missions and to enhance our partnerships. With a modest regional Coast Guard footprint, the Service works with the Department of State (DOS) and the Department of Defense (DoD) to engage partners. Across Oceania, we actively leverage our 12 bilateral law enforcement agreements with Pacific Island Countries (PIC) to assist our partners in enforcing their sovereign rights, building good maritime governance regimes, and forming a unified front against malign activity.

Cooperation

The Coast Guard's law enforcement, regulatory, and humanitarian missions promote professional service-to-service relationships and enhanced cooperation on maritime, economic, and national security challenges. In this context, the Coast Guard works through Security Cooperation, Security Assistance, and capacity building programs in DoD and DOS to provide bilateral and multilateral training to partners.

The Coast Guard works with regional partners to assess their needs and develop strategies to improve their capabilities; for one nation this may mean advanced law enforcement training or subject matter expert (SME) exchanges, and for another country this may include disaster response training to build climate change resiliency. Beyond building capacity through a consistent training presence and SME exchanges, these efforts demonstrate commitment to the region and promote the United States as a trusted partner. Additionally, training and SME exchanges enable long-term relationships, as foreign military members and students advance in their respective organizations and continue interacting with Coast Guard personnel.

Further, the Coast Guard's multi- and bi-lateral agreements can authorize personnel with enforcement authority from partner nations to embark on Coast Guard cutters and conduct combined law enforcement operations inside a partner nation's EEZ. In doing so, the Coast Guard continues to build capacity and regional security cooperation through trust and enables partner nations to better protect their EEZs.

Advancing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific

Building and reinforcing partnerships, the Coast Guard provides specialized operational capabilities in support of national security objectives in the Indo-Pacific. The Coast Guard employs a unique blend of diplomatic, military, economic, and law enforcement tools. By setting and enforcing standards of behavior in the maritime domain, the Coast Guard represents the international rules-based order and provides options for like-minded nations to counter malign actors.

As part of a whole-of-government approach to addressing challenges in Oceania and the broader Indo-Pacific region, including South and Southeast Asia, the Coast Guard offers transparent, persistent engagement and partnership. The Coast Guard is establishing additional long-term presence as attaches, liaisons, and advisors to strengthen regional and partner engagement, working to build capacity of many in the coast guards and maritime law enforcement agencies in the region in coordination with DOS and DoD, creating a multi- and mini-lateral friendly and encouraging environment. We are also working closely with like-minded partners coordinate capacity building and expand information sharing in the region. The Coast Guard works closely with DoS to implement maritime law enforcement capacity building efforts to include symposiums encouraging multilateral cooperation.

The Coast Guard uses its expeditionary capacity to support operations with partners and allies to protect national interests and expand operations beyond the U.S. EEZ. Utilizing this capacity, the service focuses on enhancing partner nation capability and disrupting and deterring threats further from our shores. Coast Guard engagement throughout the region is increasingly desired as engagements at sea improve understanding and governing activity within their vast EEZs.

Beyond regular multi-mission patrols across the Indo-Pacific by our National Security Cutters, the Coast Guard demonstrated our enduring commitment to the region by homeporting three of our newest Fast Response Cutters (FRC) in Guam. The Service is also relocating a major cutter to the region in FY 2024, with the specific mission of promoting maritime governance, establishing persistent U.S. presence, and conducting meaningful engagements. These cutters increase Coast Guard operational presence throughout the vast Indo-Pacific region.

Defense Readiness

The Coast Guard has served in every major armed conflict involving the United States since 1790. Around the world, on any given day, Coast Guard members are deployed in direct support of geographic Combatant Commander priorities. In the Indo-Pacific theater, Coast Guard capabilities and authorities are leveraged to advance important strategic national security objectives. National Security Cutter deployments support the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) and provide opportunities to engage partner nations. The Coast Guard also supports INDOPACOM with small adaptive force packages and professional engagements. The Service remains committed to interoperability with our DoD partners and is always ready to fulfill a complementary role during conflict or contingency operations as a part of the Joint Force. Whether we are supporting military mobility through our management of the marine transportation system or operating jointly with other services and combatant commanders, the Coast Guard remains *Semper Paratus* (Always Ready) to protect and serve whenever our nation calls.

Operations At Sea

To date in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, multiple Coast Guard National Security Cutters participated in multi-national initiatives. These deployments supported the U.S. 7th Fleet during U.S. Navy-led Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training, Rim of the Pacific, and Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training exercises. National Security Cutters supported the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) targeting IUU fishing in Oceania. Finally, Coast Guard deployable specialized forces embarked on U.S. Navy vessels operating in the Western and Central Pacific in support of IUU fishing enforcement under the Oceania Maritime Security Initiative.

The Coast Guard's FY 2024, Unfunded Priority List included \$400 million for four FRCs to further the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States through expanded presence and engagement to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific. Additional FRCs would help transform the Coast Guard from an organization which currently provides episodic presence, to a persistent and visible presence, strengthening coordination with Allied and partner nations to bolster regional security.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard has operated in the Indo-Pacific with our key partners for more than 150 years and is proud to be considered a trusted partner in maritime security, safety, and stewardship. Partnership with relevant U.S. government agencies and like-minded partners is critical to the Coast Guard's continued capacity building efforts and regional presence. Through international engagement, partnership, and presence, the Coast Guard resides in that space between the DOS diplomacy and DoD force. The Coast Guard and our partners address threats to the maritime rule-based order regardless of who the perpetrator may be.

The Coast Guard recognizes this consequential new period of American foreign policy requires additional Coast Guard presence in the Indo-Pacific. U.S. interests in the region have become ever-clearer, just as they have become more difficult to protect. The Coast Guard has a valuable role in conducting persistent and effective operations to uphold rules-based maritime governance and supporting like-minded nations to govern their maritime interests in a manner that resists those that desire to undermine international order. The Coast Guard anticipates an increasingly dynamic future and stands ready to increase cooperation, promote order, and deter conflict.