

More Presence Needed in Both Polar Regions, Commandant Said



The Coast Guard Cutter Healy (WAGB-20), a polar-class icebreaker, transits Southeast Alaskan waters, Nov. 24, 2018. The Healy is one of two ice breakers in U.S. service. *U.S. COAST GUARD / Lt. Kellen Browne*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Coast Guard’s senior admiral made his case before Congress for an increased presence in the Arctic and Antarctic and reaffirmed the need for more heavy icebreakers.

“We absolutely need to be up in the Arctic and down in the Antarctic on a more persistent basis than we are today,” said Adm. Karl Schultz, commandant of the Coast Guard, testifying June 23 before the House Committee on Homeland Security. “The great power competition is alive and well there [in the Arctic]. China had operated off the Alaskan Arctic for six of the last nine to 12 years. Russia is building an increasingly large fleet of icebreakers that intends to use the Northern Sea Route, potentially as a toll route.

“There will be freedom-of-navigation issues in the future, and we will have the organic domestic capability to press into that and project our sovereign interests,” Schultz said.

He said the Coast Guard is sending the medium icebreaker USCGC Healy to the Arctic this summer for some scientific research for about 30 days, followed by a transit of the Northwest Passage over the north coast of Canada. Some Canadian researchers, British sailors and others will be on board the Healy for the voyage. Current plans call for a port call in Greenland and then return to Seattle via the Panama Canal.

Shultz also pointed out that Coast Guard medium-endurance cutters have exercised with Dutch and French forces in the Arctic region.

The Coast Guard has assigned an attaché to Copenhagen, Denmark, the country with sovereignty over Greenland.

“We’re trying to make sure we’re touching the entire Arctic Council membership,” he said.

The Coast Guard has only one operational heavy icebreaker, USCGC Polar Star. 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.

“We are woefully underinvested in high-latitude capability and capacity in terms of icebreakers,” Schultz said. “We haven’t built a heavy icebreaker in more than 45 years. ... Four to six heavy icebreakers are what we really need, and we need some medium breakers.