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WORLD

Coast Guard Looks at More Ships, Innovative Patrols to Ramp Up Pacific Presence

Biden administration wants the Coast Guard to expand its footprint amid competition with China



The U.S. Coast Guard's remit has expanded as China's clout grows.

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By *Mike Cherney* [Follow](#)

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SYDNEY—During a recent patrol, members of a U.S. Coast Guard cutter's crew conducted a first-of-its-kind boarding of a fishing vessel in waters off the Federated States of Micronesia. Several months earlier, another cutter traveled thousands of miles from its home port in Guam to northern Australia, in what was considered a first for that type of ship.

The missions illustrate how the Coast Guard, which some U.S. officials view as a potent soft-power tool that can advance relationships with Pacific island nations, plans to ramp up activities in a strategic region that has become an arena of great-power rivalry between China and the U.S.

“The bottom line is we have to be innovative in how we increase our presence in the region,” Vice Adm. Andrew Tiongson, the Coast Guard's Pacific area

commander, said in an interview while on a visit to Australia aimed at deepening cooperation.

The Coast Guard's mission has traditionally focused on protecting U.S. maritime borders, but its remit has expanded as China's clout grows. The Coast Guard plans to increase the number of deployments of its 418-foot national-security cutters, its biggest and most capable general-purpose ship, to the western Pacific in the coming year, Vice Adm. Tiongson said.

Also, the Coast Guard is looking for more locations that can provide "logistics stops," where its ships can berth, resupply and replenish as they travel around the Pacific, possibly in foreign countries, he said. That would allow its smaller, 154-foot fast-response cutters to spend more time away from their home port and travel farther. Maintenance could be conducted and crews could even be swapped out in those ports, he said.

The Biden administration, in its Pacific island strategy released last September, called on the Coast Guard to enhance its engagements in the Pacific and expand its presence to support law enforcement. Vice Adm. Tiongson's comments offer an early look into how the Coast Guard is responding to that directive.

The Pacific has rich fisheries and strategic waterways and is home to U.S. military assets that could be crucial in any confrontation with China over Taiwan, which Beijing claims. China has expanded its diplomatic presence in the area, pouring money into infrastructure projects, and it signed a security deal with the Solomon Islands last year, which alarmed the U.S. and its allies.

Illegal fishing is a key concern among Pacific island countries, and Chinese fishing fleets, which have helped Beijing expand its presence at sea, have shown up in force around some islands. That has put the Coast Guard, which has boarded some Chinese vessels to stop illegal activity, on the front lines of U.S.-China competition.

Chinese officials have said the country's actions in the Pacific aren't a threat and are aimed at helping fellow developing countries prosper. China has also said that it has strict oversight over distant fishing operations and that its fishers must comply with local laws.

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Although Coast Guard vessels in the Pacific could support U.S. military operations, the Coast Guard offers a diplomatic touch. Coast Guard ships are painted white rather than military gray and its missions include law enforcement, search and rescue and environmental protection. Sending U.S. military assets to other nations, in comparison, can be controversial and more complicated.

Vice Adm. Tionsen said several initiatives in the Pacific area are under way. Usually, there is one deployment of its national-security cutters in the western Pacific annually, but the service is planning three this year, he said.

Vice Adm. Tionson said the Coast Guard is also looking to stretch the operational capabilities of the smaller fast-response cutters, such as the one that traveled to Australia. He said the journey of the cutter Oliver Henry to northern Australia, where it docked in Cairns for several days, served as a proof of concept. Medical personnel, for example, were brought on board for the trip.

Any additional logistics stops could include ports in allies such as Australia and New Zealand, or even other U.S. military bases, such as the naval base in Sasebo, Japan, he said.

More home ports for Coast Guard vessels are also a possibility, though the Coast Guard says it's too early to discuss specific locations. Legislation passed by Congress in December directed the Coast Guard to look at whether it needs more resources in the Pacific and how its assets should be dispersed across the region, including whether one of its cutters should be located at a U.S. military installation in a foreign country. The Coast Guard was given a year to put together a report.

Vice Adm. Tionson said a medium-endurance cutter, currently being upgraded as part of the Coast Guard's life-extension program, will be added to the region as an Indo-Pacific support cutter. He said the ship will shuttle between nations in the Pacific region to increase U.S. engagement.

The Coast Guard has previously been building up its resources in the Pacific, including basing brand-new cutters at its bases in Hawaii and Guam and placing attachés in friendly nations. Vice Adm. Tionson said more liaisons will be positioned in the region and more training teams will be deployed.

An enhanced agreement with Micronesia, which includes hundreds of small islands across a wide swath of ocean, could also serve as a model to deepen cooperation with other countries, the vice admiral said. The deal, often called a Shiprider agreement, typically allows Coast Guard vessels to patrol and board other ships on behalf of partner nations if a law-enforcement officer from that nation is present.

Micronesia, however, recently agreed to allow Coast Guard vessels to patrol even if a Micronesian officer isn't on board. Given Micronesia's large geographic size, that will give the Coast Guard more capability at sea because ships won't have to travel to the nation's capital to pick up a local law-enforcement officer. The first boardings under the enhanced agreement occurred in December.

The agreement is a "complete game-changer for us," the vice admiral said.

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