

US Coast Guard “doubles down” on Pacific operations targeting China

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On his maiden trip to the western Pacific in February, US Coast Guard (USCG) commander Admiral Karl Schultz declared the tour was a sign of Washington’s “increasing commitment” to the strategically important and contested region.

The USCG is seeking a greater role across the Indo-Pacific, the admiral told Radio New Zealand on November 20. As “different mindsets” permeated the area, he declared, “cooperation” with Pacific nations would become pivotal. “You think about the environmental threats, climate threats, transnational criminals and because it is such a vast area I think how we work together, those like-minded partners, becomes everything,” Schultz added.

In an obvious shot at Beijing, Schultz criticised “some nations that are not like-minded in shared ideals about free and open rules-based order in the Pacific region.” The so-called “rules based order” as defined by Washington, describes the “rules” it deems necessary to maintain its global hegemony.

In a media call from the Northern Marianas’ capital Saipan, cited by *This Week in Asia*, Schultz went further, pointing to “clear indicators” of Beijing’s increased presence in the Pacific. Beijing had ramped up investments and engagement in some US Pacific territories, as well as the Pacific island nations, he said. “We don’t have to look far to see places around the world where economic investment has contributed to things like ownership of ports,” Schultz warned.

Schultz told Radio NZ the USCG would work with Pacific island nations in a manner which didn’t “infringe on their sovereignty.” The admiral claimed: “Each sovereign nation gets to do business on their terms but we want to show that the Coast Guard brings a really good human to human partnership capability here.” He identified the illicit drugs trade and

unregulated fishing as key areas of concern.

In fact, the contest over who rules the Pacific has nothing to do with “sovereignty” or the interests of the Pacific peoples. Formal independence for the impoverished micro-states is an utter fiction. Dominated economically by transnational corporations and major financial institutions, dependent on aid hand-outs and remittances from overseas families, the Pacific nations remain trapped in neo-colonial relations under the sway of the main imperialist powers.

The USCG’s aggressive positioning across the expanses of the Pacific, thousands of miles from America’s shores, is part of the US drive to dominate the region and intensify preparations for war. Schultz reiterated a statement he made last July that the USCG was “doubling-down” its presence in the region and intends to “synchronise with key partners,” i.e., Washington’s military allies, Australia and New Zealand.

The US currently employs 11 bilateral “shiprider” agreements with Pacific Island Forum nations, ostensibly to counter illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing within their 200 nautical mile economic zones. The month-long USCG anti-IUU Operation Aiga [family] in American Samoa last year, including the Australian and NZ navies, will be extended to 60 days this year. Two armed USCG cutters were involved in the last exercise, according to Schultz, “advancing US strategic interests in Oceania” and expanding the USCG’s “expeditionary capabilities.”

While the USCG’s official role, according to its website, is to “defend America’s borders and protect the maritime environment,” it is a vital part of the US military machine, with a global reach involving 41,000 active-duty, 6,200 reserve, and 8,500 civilian

personnel. As a specialist force operating under the wing of the US Navy, its missions include “maritime intercept operations, deployed port operations/security and defense, peacetime engagement, and environmental defense operations.”

Schultz declared that the USCG has begun deploying three new, armed high-speed cutters, with the capacity to travel 5,000 kilometres, to Guam in order to expand its “permanent presence” and “expeditionary reach” across the western Pacific. Guam is a longstanding advanced staging post for US imperialism’s military operations in Asia. In 2015, \$US8.7 billion upgrades to the huge Navy and Air Force facilities on the island were begun as part of the Pentagon’s aggressive war build-up.

Last year, the USCG cutter *Bertholf* concluded six months deployed in the western Pacific, operating under the aegis of the US 7th Fleet. It was the first USCG vessel to sail through the Taiwan Strait, accompanying a guided-missile destroyer. The *Bertholf* also operated in the contentious waters of the East China Sea enforcing UN sanctions against North Korea. In May the USCG staged a provocative joint exercise with two Philippine vessels in Chinese-claimed waters in the South China Sea, reportedly sailing past two Chinese ships, followed by another exercise with Malaysian forces.

The USCG deployments coincided with a visit to the Pacific territory of Micronesia by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in August, the first by such a high-ranking official. Pompeo negotiated an extension to a key regional security agreement made necessary, he claimed, to face off “Chinese efforts to redraw the Pacific.” The agreement gives the US military exclusive access to the vast airspace and territorial waters of the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and Palau.

The escalating war preparations are being accompanied by a public relations offensive. *Cook Islands News* editor Jonathan Milne posted a propaganda piece in February following a visit “at US taxpayer expense,” to US Navy headquarters at Pearl Harbour. Milne breathlessly reported he had been given the “once unthinkable opportunity to go inside a high-tech nuclear submarine and talk candidly with its crew.”

Such visits, Milne wrote, were part of a “battle to win

hearts and minds in a new cold war—this time against the People’s Republic of China.” Without reflecting on the irony of his report coming from a nuclear-armed assault submarine, Milne declared: “The Americans hope articles like these will demystify their defence operations in the region and show a warmer, more friendly face than some in the Pacific may expect.”

Milne continued that “you’ll hear a lot about partnerships, and interoperability” in the region. The US Army and Navy, Air Force and Coastguard will work, he asserted, “with the New Zealand Defence Force, or the Samoan health ministry, or the Cook Islands Police Service.” New Zealand is upgrading its aged Air Force Orions to four new P8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft, the same planes used by the US Navy.

As part of its Pacific “Step up” strategy, the Australian government is pushing to position itself as the “security partner of choice” for Pacific nations, with the formation last year of a new expeditionary training force to work with regional neighbours, including Papua New Guinea (PNG), Fiji and Vanuatu.

The so-called Pacific Support Force is considering options for a dedicated vessel to support “increased engagement with regional navies.” Canberra has allocated four of a projected 21 Guardian class naval patrol vessels to 12 Pacific nations and Timor Leste. The first tranche of boats has gone to PNG, Samoa, Tonga and the Solomon Islands.



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