

# Expanding the United States Coast Guard's Role within the Indo-Pacific Theater of Operations

Date Submitted: 10 May 2020

Word Count: 3,421 words

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the United States Naval War College Newport, RI.

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. <b>PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.</b>					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 20MAY2020		2. REPORT TYPE FINAL		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) N/A	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE  Expanding the United States Coast Guard's Role within the Indo-Pacific				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S)  LCDR Scott L. Farr, USCG				5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
				5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)  Writing & Teaching Excellence Center Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)  N/A				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) N/A	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the curriculum. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.					
14. ABSTRACT The Department of Defense is evaluating how to expand its Indo-Pacific presence in the era of great power competition. The Department's theater strategy report outlines a range of efforts for preparedness, promoting a networked region, and partnerships to achieve the United States' vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific. As the Department shifts its focus to the Pacific to maintain the United States' influence, what should the Coast Guard's role be within the Indo-Pacific region? Currently, the Coast Guard has only contributed to a limited role in supporting the Department of Defense objectives. Research findings indicate that by using white cutters instead of gray warships, the Coast Guard could help the Department achieve its objectives by lowering the risk of escalation. To expand the United States' presence in the Indo-Pacific region, the Coast Guard should increase its operational footprint overseas, dissuade maritime gray zone activities, and improve theater security cooperation to preserve the international rules-based order. Finally, the paper draws conclusions concerning the use of the Coast Guard and recommends further assistance to Pacific island nations. By supporting the development of their capabilities and increasing capacity, they can protect their sovereign interests and defend against threats in the region.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS (Key words) Department of Defense, Coast Guard, Indo-Pacific, Operational Footprint, Gray Zone, Theater Security Cooperation, Cutter, Rules-based Order, South China Sea, Law Enforcement, Capacity					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: UNCLASSIFIED			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT  N/A	18. NUMBER OF PAGES  15	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Director, Writing Center
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)  401-841-6499

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### **Abstract**

#### *Expanding the United States Coast Guard's Role within the Indo-Pacific Theater of Operations*

The Department of Defense is evaluating how to expand its Indo-Pacific presence in the era of great power competition. The Department's theater strategy report outlines a range of efforts for preparedness, promoting a networked region, and partnerships to achieve the United States' vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific. As the Department shifts its focus to the Pacific to maintain the United States' influence, what should the Coast Guard's role be within the Indo-Pacific region? Currently, the Coast Guard has only contributed to a limited role in supporting the Department of Defense objectives. Research findings indicate that by using white cutters instead of gray warships, the Coast Guard could help the Department achieve its objectives by lowering the risk of escalation. To expand the United States' presence in the Indo-Pacific region, the Coast Guard should increase its operational footprint overseas, dissuade maritime gray zone activities, and improve theater security cooperation to preserve the international rules-based order. Finally, the paper draws conclusions concerning the use of the Coast Guard and recommends further assistance to Pacific island nations. By supporting the development of their capabilities and increasing capacity, they can protect their sovereign interests and defend against threats in the region.

## Introduction

In 2019, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper remarked that the Pentagon was evaluating how to expand its presence in the Indo-Pacific as it becomes the national strategic theater in the era of great power competition. He indicated that “allies and partners want us to lead...but to do that we must also be present in the region.”<sup>1</sup> The geography of the Indo-Pacific would likely dictate that any conflict between a rising power and the United States would primarily be maritime.<sup>2</sup> In the maritime domain, presence helps set the conditions needed to assert pressure, develop situational awareness, and build coalitions.<sup>3</sup> As the Department shifts its primary focus from land to maritime-centric warfare to maintain the United States’ influence, what should the U.S. Coast Guard’s role be within the Indo-Pacific region? The Department of Defense’s theater strategy report outlines a range of efforts for preparedness, promoting a networked region, and partnerships to achieve the United States’ vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.<sup>4</sup>

The Department of Defense is not always the best tool to use, despite having an impressive budget, resources, and capabilities. Instead, the Department should strategically partner and support the increased utilization of the Coast Guard throughout the region. The Coast Guard, an armed service with unique authorities and expertise, has a long history in supporting the Department during times of peace, conflict, and war. The solution the region may need is applying more white hulls instead of gray to mature the region's military forces that resemble more of a coast guard than a navy. To expand the United States’ presence in the Indo-Pacific region, the Coast Guard should further expand its role within the Indo-Pacific theater to support Department of Defense regional objectives by increasing its operational footprint

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<sup>1</sup> Mehta, Aaron. 2019. *DefenseNews*. August 27. Accessed March 31, 2020. <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2019/08/27/esper-calls-for-new-basing-investments-in-the-pacific/>.

<sup>2</sup> Mahnken, Thomas G. 2011. "Asymmetric Warfare at Sea." *Naval War College Review* 95-121.

<sup>3</sup> Till, Geoffrey. 2013. *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> The Department of Defense. 2019. *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*. Washington, D.C.: The Department of Defense.

overseas, dissuading maritime gray zone activities, and improving theater security cooperation to support an international rules-based order.

### **Increasing the Operational Footprint**

The Coast Guard should increase its operational footprint throughout the Indo-Pacific region. An increased operational footprint overseas would support the Department of Defense's line of effort for preparedness. To be effective in the theater, resources need to be ready, well supported and deployed forward to fight and win. The underlying problem with the current military strategy in the region is the tyranny of space and time. The Indo-Pacific region is known for its maritime expanse, which increases the importance of having access and forward presence to maintain the balance of power.<sup>5</sup> If tensions escalate in the South China Sea, the United States, allies, and partners may not have sufficient time to concentrate in mass with adequate force and supporting resources to provide a meaningful response. The United States' operational situation in the Indo-Pacific is already under duress due to the global pandemic forcing a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier into port, allowing China to temporarily intensify its aggressive activity during the absence of the United States in the region.<sup>6</sup>

The theater strategy should implement combined preparations to establish more distributed elements of basing and deployment area control to decrease response time and increase potential threats the adversary will have to mitigate. Optimally, these elements should be established in peacetime.<sup>7</sup> If not established, it may be harder to counter and influence regional events when a crisis comes. In the last decade, China has already made significant progress by adding anti-access area-denial capabilities to its man-made islands to control the

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<sup>5</sup> Prabhakar, Lawrence W., Joshua Ho, and Walter Samuel Grono Bateman. 2006. *The Evolving Maritime Balance of Power in the Asia-Pacific: Maritime Doctrines and Nuclear Weapons at Sea*. Hackensack: World Scientific.

<sup>6</sup> O'Connor, Tom. 2020. *Newsweek*. April 13. Accessed April 18, 2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/chinese-aircraft-carrier-sails-pacific-state-media-mock-us-navys-coronavirus-troubles-1497539>.

<sup>7</sup> Vego, Milan. 2007. *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Newport: U.S. Naval War College.

South China Sea. Positioning itself to be ready and willing to deny others freedom of movement and maneuver within the disputed island chains, China is using the first element of sea power, its geographical position.<sup>8</sup>

The Coast Guard plans to conduct longer deployments in the Western Pacific after Operation Aiga, a thirty-day mothership expeditionary proof-of-concept deployment from Hawaii to American Samoa.<sup>9</sup> Although successful, this approach is not sustainable as it diverts critical Coast Guard vessels from their normal operations (aids to navigation) to provide deployment support. In the next few years, the Coast Guard plans to homeport three 154-foot Sentinel-class Fast Response Cutters in Guam to help protect their Exclusive Economic Zone from threats.<sup>10</sup> While this is a start, the Coast Guard should not limit their aspirations to use only patrol boats but should also homeport its flagship 418-foot Legend-class National Security Cutters overseas, designed for maritime homeland security and defense missions. They have already demonstrated their exponential success in record-breaking narcotics seizures in the South Pacific, sailing with the Navy through the Taiwan Straits, and enforcing United Nations sanctions against North Korea.<sup>11</sup> The Coast Guard could improve its Indo-Pacific effectiveness with an increased footprint and integrate into or form coast guard led surface action groups to achieve operational and tactical objectives. Furthermore, once the new 360-foot Heritage-class Offshore Patrol Cutters become available in 2022 to replace end-of-service fleets stateside, these modern cutters should also be based overseas to help bridge the operational gap between Legend and Sentinel-class cutters.

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<sup>8</sup> Mahan, A. T. 1987. *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*. New York: Dover Publications.

<sup>9</sup> Mahadzir, Dzirhan. 2019. *U.S. Naval Institute*. October 22. Accessed March 25, 2020.  
<https://news.usni.org/2019/10/22/u-s-coast-guard-mulling-more-operations-in-oceania>.

<sup>10</sup> Mahadzir, Dzirhan. 2019. *U.S. Naval Institute*. July 23. Accessed April 6, 2020.  
<https://news.usni.org/2019/07/23/schultz-coast-guard-expanding-western-pacific-operations>.

<sup>11</sup> Goure, Dan. 2019. *RealClear Defense*. April 5. Accessed April 18, 2020.  
[https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/04/05/twelve\\_for\\_twelve\\_congress\\_needs\\_to\\_fund\\_another\\_national\\_security\\_cutter\\_114310.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/04/05/twelve_for_twelve_congress_needs_to_fund_another_national_security_cutter_114310.html).

The Coast Guard should look to exploit opportunistic favorable bases of operations with other nations from Japan to Australia for support. Leveraging partner nations from which to base operations provide symbiotic benefits that would decrease transit times to the theater of operations, increase patrol effectiveness, allow greater freedom of action, and strengthen existing and emerging partnerships. Establishing new bases of operations and logistical support depots for Coast Guard operations could then serve a strategic dual-use purpose for future theater activities with operational functions already in place. Besides, the increased availability of Coast Guard surface assets throughout the theater of operations would become an immediate force multiplier and provide new opportunities for the Department of Defense to leverage.

For example, if the region becomes volatile requiring a more significant military response, the Navy currently does not have enough surface ships to protect and escort its sealift and supply convoys to protect its sea lines of communication.<sup>12</sup> These ships move slower than the Navy's warships and might be harder to protect. However, a forward-deployed Coast Guard force with an increased operational footprint overseas could support escort duties. Furthermore, as the U.S. Marine Corps looks to return to its expeditionary roots, they could partner with the Coast Guard to develop transport and replenishment tactics to support the corps' lines of operations instead of solely relying upon the Navy. With an increased presence, the Coast Guard would improve its familiarity with the region, support the principles of naval warfare for basing and deployment area control and be more effective in dissuading gray zone activities.

### **Dissuading Gray Zone Activities**

The Coast Guard could assist in dissuading maritime gray zone activities throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Dissuading gray zone activities would support the Department of Defense's

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<sup>12</sup> Axe, David. 2020. *The National Interest*. March 23. Accessed April 18, 2020. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/sealift-sadness-navy-doesnt-have-enough-ships-supply-army-next-big-war-136157>.

line of effort for promoting a networked region in the Pacific. China's military forces and maritime militia have conducted themselves inconsistently with international law with coercive actions below the threshold of war, known as the *gray zone* between peace and war. Their actions range from aggressive to persistent behaviors that include seizing or challenging pre-existing territory, ramming vessels, harassing fishermen, transiting through other nation's territorial seas, and keeping a paramilitary presence in disputed seas.<sup>13</sup> China's actions continue to threaten the stability and security of the entire Indo-Pacific region.

A region that is unified and networked together by sharing common interests can deter and defend against gray zone activities to protect national sovereignty, the region's most significant security challenge. Southeast Asian countries faced with increasing Chinese maritime assertiveness and other related threats have responded by establishing or expanding their coast guards to build up their capabilities to deter regional aggression.<sup>14</sup> Countries working together and operating their collective maritime forces under a combined task force or smaller surface action groups could be useful in dissuading maritime gray zone activities.

The Coast Guard should take the lead as a multi-mission force multiplier to support the United States' allies and partner nations by demonstrating professional behavior consistent with international law using combined arms and multi-national approach. With less armament than a naval warship, a Coast Guard force is not as threatening. However, this does not mean a Coast Guard led contingent would not be capable of deterring gray zone activities or responding with force, if necessary. The theater strategy should determine the distribution and composition of assorted naval forces to include the Coast Guard. The key to have in the theater of main effort is

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<sup>13</sup> Morris, Lyle J., Michael J. Mazarr, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, and Marta Kepe. 2019. *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone*. Research, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

<sup>14</sup> Searight, Amy E. 2020. *Statement before the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Hearing on "The International Role of the U.S. Coast Guard"*. Testimony, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies.

to possess a larger and more capable force able to respond to the "greatest concentrated force which the enemy can bring to bear."<sup>15</sup> Concentrating force through the use of the United States and Indo-Pacific resources working collectively together can achieve common objectives. Using a white hull instead of a gray hull could change the paradigm from competition to cooperation by reducing the perceived need for gray zone activities while raising the costs and risks to China if they continue to conduct these activities inconsistent with international law.

The Coast Guard could help fill in the gaps in the existing theater strategy.<sup>16</sup> Increasing the use of the Coast Guard to take on lower-end missions would free up the Department of Defense and Navy assets to focus on what they do best; projecting power ashore, preparing to fight, and win wars. No single solution or overarching strategy will resolve or prevent all gray zone activities from occurring. However, maintaining a persistent Coast Guard presence throughout the region that operates in international waters or territorial seas of host nations, the Coast Guard could deter adversaries from undertaking more extreme behaviors, which might inadvertently lead to a regional crisis or war. Much like the Coast Guard does to document and prosecute drug and migrant interdiction cases, National Security Cutters based overseas could be continually employed in scouting missions to document China's aggressive and coercive actions.

Using unmanned aircraft systems technology, the Coast Guard could detect and monitor vast portions of the region from a safe and non-threatening distance. Without an increase in resources to monitor, patrol, and board suspected vessels of interest, it will be impossible to screen all maritime traffic suspected of gray zone activity. "Some countries will use fishing boats and small vessels that resemble innocent coastal traffic to detect and report enemy

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<sup>15</sup> Vego, Milan. 2016. *Maritime Strategy and Sea Control: Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>16</sup> Orchard, Phillip. 2019. *Geopolitical Futures*. April 9. Accessed April 5, 2020. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/will-us-coast-guard-enter-south-china-sea-grey-zone/>.

presence."<sup>17</sup> Being present does not require surface ships to be within visual distance of each other. Modern Coast Guard vessels can conduct their missions over the horizon well outside the coverage area of surface radar to monitor adversaries without their knowledge. The Coast Guard's presence to document and prevent gray zone activities in the South China Sea could improve international support against China and pressure them to adhere to international law and norms. It would likely be harder for China to alter the region's narrative if intelligence proves otherwise, and regional nations collaborate against such illicit activity.

Using a Coast Guard cutter instead of a Navy warship would provide immediate benefits. Freedom of navigation operations alone are not sufficient by themselves to counter Chinese maritime aggression. Coast Guard theater contributions could help lower the threat of miscalculation or misunderstanding and reduce the likelihood of conflict. Coast Guard assets on patrol would be on par with other regional nations in providing a complementary force with efforts that could reshape the global narrative in supporting an international rules-based order instead of permitting gray zone aggression. Although the Coast Guard already has a limited presence and involvement in the region with various forums, initiatives, and use of bilateral "ship rider" agreements with partner nations, more should be done to address the evolving law enforcement challenges. Not only could the Coast Guard dissuade gray zone activities, but it could also further strengthen and improve theater security cooperation with host and partner nations.

### **Improving Theater Security Cooperation**

The Coast Guard could improve theater security cooperation with host and partner nations throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Improving theater security cooperation would

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<sup>17</sup> Hughes Jr., CAPT Wayne P., and RADM Robert P. Girrier. 2018. *Fleet Tactics and Naval Operations*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press.

support the Department of Defense's line of effort for partnerships. The Coast Guard can help meet the partner's immediate maritime security needs with more training, transfers of equipment, and advisement as it operates across the spectrum of operations. The Coast Guard is well versed in working with interagency partners and supporting bilateral agreements. By increasing host and partner nation capacity and assisting in the development of their capabilities, partners can protect their sovereign interests in the region.<sup>18</sup> The same theater security cooperation models used in the Caribbean and South America could easily be applied to the Indo-Pacific. Providing security cooperation and assistance would help buy time to allow regional forces to advance their capabilities and increase the capacity to improve their chances of deterring and responding to aggressive tactics and illegal activities.

Theater security cooperation cannot be a top-down approach, dictated only by the interests of the United States. Based on shared regional interests, the United States should engage and support where interests overlap. Each partner will have competing priorities and may employ any capabilities provided differently than envisioned by the United States.<sup>19</sup> This bottom-up approach will reduce the time needed for implementation while reducing waste, fraud, and abuse by giving what the region needs and can absorb. Despite some progress, more should be done as theater security cooperation is the most critical component in expanding the Coast Guard role in the Indo-Pacific. The partnerships and trust gained working together could make all the difference if conflict breaks out in the support and employment of forces that already know how to work together.

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<sup>18</sup> Ditzler, Joseph. 2019. *Stars and Stripes*. July 24. Accessed March 16, 2020. <https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/coast-guard-commandant-touts-rule-based-order-to-counter-chinese-aggression-in-the-indo-pacific-1.591631>.

<sup>19</sup> Moroney, Jennifer. 2016. "New strategic partnerships among Indo-Pacific partners: key enablers to building partner capacity." *Indo-Pacific Maritime Security: Challenges & Cooperation*. Acton: Australian National University. 80-83.

The Coast Guard recognizes the importance of helping foreign partners build sustainable capacity. In the 2015 Security Sector Assistance Strategy, the Coast Guard's Commandant outlined a new approach with goals to help support partner nations. The Coast Guard can increase its theater security cooperation by sharing its knowledge to influence and improve the operational effectiveness of partner nations that aspire to increase and improve their own Coast Guard-like organizations.<sup>20</sup> The strategy highlighted that the South China Sea was at the top of worldwide piracy and armed robbery against ships with the most incidents. So, it makes it a natural touchpoint for the Coast Guard to provide security cooperation to help partner nations address their shared security challenges. The use of the Coast Guard instead of the Navy is more palatable for many Southeast Asian countries as they balance the delicate security nature in their maritime backyards adjacent to China, an aspiring Indo-Pacific hegemonic power. Providing more security cooperation would leave partner nations with a fully functional, self-contained capability to disrupt and defeat common maritime security challenges. The 2015 Coast Guard security sector assistance strategy could serve as a guiding tenet to meet the needs of the Indo-Pacific region.

As a result of the Coast Guard's on-going recapitalization effort, many Pacific Island countries have already benefited from security assistance initiatives, which might help rebalance and stabilize the region. Vietnam has the largest coast guard fleet in Southeast Asia after receiving substantial investments from the United States, Japan, and Korea.<sup>21</sup> However, increasing the capacity of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia will help grow their forces to contain China within its first island chain. The strategic challenge again is the tyranny of space

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<sup>20</sup> Zunkunft, Admiral Paul F. 2015. *USCG Security Sector Assistance Strategy*. Strategy, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Coast Guard.

<sup>21</sup> Searight, Amy E. 2020. *Statement before the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Hearing on "The International Role of the U.S. Coast Guard"*. Testimony, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic & International Studies.

and time. The Indo-Pacific region is not in America's backyard like the Caribbean, therefore improving theater security cooperation and dissuading gray zone activities will require the Coast Guard to increase its operational footprint overseas to be continually present.

### **Jeopardizing Domestic Missions**

Some might argue, if the Coast Guard further expands its role within the Indo-Pacific theater, other important domestic national security missions to safeguard the United States would be at risk. Crucial national security missions include seizing illegal drugs, interdicting migrants to prevent their illegal entry, protecting living marine resources, preventing acts of terrorism, and conducting search and rescue operations. Shifting premium national assets and operations further away from the United States will incur additional operating and maintenance costs. The biggest constraint in expanding the role of the Coast Guard in the Indo-Pacific theater is the service's annual budget. Imposing additional requirements and obligations onto a service that is already constrained by limited resources and a shrinking checkbook is dangerous.<sup>22</sup> With a budget categorized as non-defense discretionary, expanding the Coast Guard's role throughout the Indo-Pacific will not garner the same financial support that is afforded to the Department of Defense.

The Coast Guard is already underfunded and under-resourced when compared to other armed services. With recent reductions to its annual budget, the Coast Guard will likely be unable to sustain any prolonged or meaningful international engagements to be effective in the long-term, supporting the Department of Defense's Indo-Pacific theater strategy. Since the Coast Guard receives inadequate budgetary support, it will be underutilized in the Indo-Pacific executing "one-off" missions that will not have a lasting effect to help deter China.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Harper, Jon. 2019. *National Defense*. May 21. Accessed May 1, 2020.

<https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2019/5/21/coast-guard-needs-congress-for-budget-bailout>.

<sup>23</sup> Mills, Captain Walker. 2020. "White Ships for the Gray Zone." *Proceedings*, February.

Additionally, utilizing the Coast Guard more internationally might be viewed as an increase of forces and a precursor for the potential use of military power. This utilization might provoke China to escalate tensions in order to preserve its geopolitical legitimacy increasing the likelihood of regional conflict. The Coast Guard should not be thrust into the Indo-Pacific to replace or duplicate the Department of Defense's assets or capabilities since it does not currently have the resources to be successful.<sup>24</sup>

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Despite what others may say, the Coast Guard has essential homeland security and defense missions. The Department of Defense should utilize the Coast Guard's unique authorities and capabilities to complement its strategic objectives. The United States can rebalance power and reduce tensions in the region by supporting our regional partners through the strategic and operational use of the Coast Guard. The world is globally connected but regionally controlled. Maritime disputes that continue to go unimpeded could have adverse national security effects, which is very concerning not only for the region but also for the United States. Considering that the majority of all commercial shipping traffic goes through the South China Sea, a rules-based order is needed to maintain national sovereignty and support economic prosperity for all nations. As a Pacific nation, the United States is one of the only countries willing and adept in deterring China if it works together with regional partners. As the Department of Defense looks at ways to prepare for and respond to Indo-Pacific contingencies, they should partner and support the Coast Guard more.

The Coast Guard is a capable maritime force that has proven itself as the world's premier coast guard. Uniquely positioned, the Coast Guard can operate between its law enforcement and

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<sup>24</sup> Mahadzir, Dzirhan. 2019. *U.S. Naval Institute*. July 23. Accessed April 6, 2020. <https://news.usni.org/2019/07/23/schultz-coast-guard-expanding-western-pacific-operations>.

military authorities to help achieve Indo-Pacific objectives. Contemporary geopolitics continue to dictate the widespread use of the Coast Guard as its importance will increase to national security.<sup>25</sup> The era of great power competition provides the Coast Guard a unique opportunity to train and partner with other nations far from the shores of the United States to enhance their capabilities and strengthen international ties while reducing escalation.

The Indo-Pacific region has thousands of miles of coastline, islands, and littoral waters, and it is where the Coast Guard has operational expertise. Pacific nations have said they do not want to choose between China and the United States. Therefore, the Department of Defense should partner more with the Coast Guard to harness synergies to increase the capacity and capabilities of host and partner nations. By expanding the Coast Guard's theater role instead of the Navy, Pacific nations will not have to make a choice. Supported with transparency and open dialogue, it will allow the region to grow its maritime force capacity while strengthening its resolve to unite against aggression and illegal activities. Pacific island nations working together are greater than the sum of their parts.

Expanding the role of the Coast Guard throughout the Indo-Pacific would help offset the current challenges that face the Department of Defense. The Coast Guard enjoys access not afforded to other governments and organizations as its missions allow the Coast Guard to provide sizable solutions needed for a diverse region. Since 2002, the Coast Guard has met the immediate cooperation and security needs in the Persian Gulf, working with the Navy's Fifth Fleet. It can do the same throughout the Indo-Pacific by increasing the capacity and effectiveness of smaller Indo-Pacific coast guards. This strategic shift could have a detrimental effect on China and allow other national instruments of power more time to be influential.

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<sup>25</sup> Cropsey, Seth. 2019. *The Hill*. September 11. Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/460844-cutting-the-coast-guard-torpedoes-our-national-security>.

Expanding the Coast Guard's role in the Indo-Pacific could be different if it fulfills a supported instead of a supporting role. The Coast Guard should further expand its role within the Indo-Pacific theater to support the Department of Defense's regional objectives by increasing its operational footprint overseas, dissuading maritime gray zone activities, and improving theater security cooperation to support an international rules-based order.

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