COAST GUARD

Observations on Progress Made and Challenges Faced in Developing and Implementing a Common Operational Picture

What GAO Found

The Coast Guard, a component of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has made progress in developing its Common Operational Picture (COP) by increasing the information in the COP and increasing user access to this information. The Coast Guard has made progress by adding internal and external data sources that allow for better understanding of anything associated with the global maritime domain that could affect the United States. The COP has made information from these sources available to more COP users and decision makers throughout the Coast Guard. For example, in 2006, the ability to track the location of Coast Guard assets, including small boats and cutters, was added to the COP. This capability—also known as blue force tracking—allows COP users to locate Coast Guard vessels in real time and establish which vessels are in the best position to respond to mission needs. In addition to adding information to the COP, the Coast Guard has also made the information contained in the COP available on more computers and on more systems, which, in turn, has increased the number of users with access to the COP.

The Coast Guard has also experienced challenges in developing and implementing COP-related systems and meeting the COP’s goals for implementing systems to display and share COP information. These challenges have affected the Coast Guard’s deployment of recent COP technology acquisitions and are related to such things as the inability to share information as intended and systems not meeting intended objectives. For example, in July 2011, GAO reported that the Coast Guard had not met its goal of building a single, fully interoperable Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance program (C4ISR) system—a $2.5 billion project intended to enable the sharing of COP and other data among its offshore vessels and aircraft. Specifically, GAO noted that the Coast Guard: (1) repeatedly changed its strategy for achieving the goal of the C4ISR system and (2) that not all vessels and aircraft were operating the same C4ISR system, or even at the same classification level and hence could not directly exchange data with one another as intended. GAO found similar challenges with other Coast Guard COP-related systems not meeting intended objectives. For example, in February 2012, GAO reported that the intended information-sharing capabilities of the Coast Guard’s WatchKeeper software—a major part of the $74 million Interagency Operations Center project designed to gather data to help port partner agencies collaborate in the conduct of operations and share information, among other things—met few port agency partner needs, in part because the agency failed to determine these needs when developing the system. Further, in April 2013, GAO reported that, among other things, the Coast Guard experienced challenges when it deployed its Enterprise Geographic Information System (EGIS), a tool for viewing COP information that did not meet user needs. The challenges Coast Guard personnel experienced with EGIS included system slowness and displays of inaccurate information.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made recommendations in prior work to enhance the Coast Guard’s development and implementation of its COP-related systems. DHS generally concurred with the recommendations and has reported actions under way to address them.

View GAO-13-784T. For more information, contact Stephen L. Caldwell at (202) 512-9610 or caldwellsw@gao.gov.