

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-453](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The retreat of polar sea ice in the Arctic, as reported by the U.S. National Snow and Ice Data Center, combined with an expected increase in human activity, has heightened U.S. interests in the Arctic region. To supplement U.S. Arctic policy, the White House and federal agencies have issued Arctic strategies and plans. Since the Arctic region has a substantial maritime domain, the Coast Guard plays a significant role in Arctic policy implementation and enforcement. GAO was asked to examine the Coast Guard's responsibilities, capabilities, and plans for the Arctic. This report discusses, among other things, the extent to which the Coast Guard has (1) reported progress in implementing its Arctic strategy, (2) assessed its Arctic capabilities and taken actions to mitigate any identified gaps, and (3) reported being able to carry out polar icebreaking operations. GAO reviewed relevant laws and policies and Coast Guard documents that detail its Arctic plans. GAO conducted a site visit to Alaska and interviewed officials from the Coast Guard, state and local government entities, native village corporations, and private or nonprofit organizations. These observations are not generalizable, but provided insights on Coast Guard activities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Coast Guard develop measures for assessing how its actions have helped to mitigate Arctic capability gaps, and design and implement a process to systematically assess its progress on this. DHS concurred with our recommendations.

View [GAO-16-453](#). For more information, contact Jennifer Grover at (202) 512-7141 groverj@gao.gov.

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COAST GUARD

Arctic Strategy Is Underway, but Agency Could Better Assess How Its Actions Mitigate Known Arctic Capability Gaps

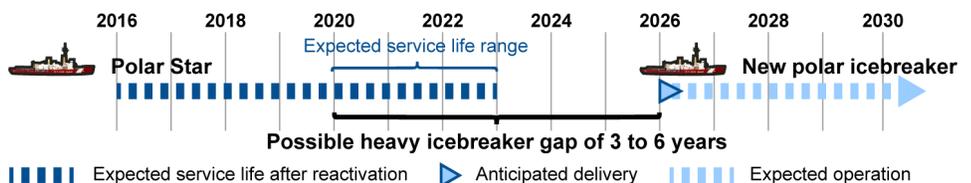
What GAO Found

The U.S. Coast Guard, within the Department of Homeland Security, reported making progress implementing its Arctic strategy. For example, the Coast Guard reported conducting exercises related to Arctic oil spill response and search and rescue, and facilitating the formation of a safety committee in the Arctic, among other tasks in its strategy. To track the status of these efforts, the Coast Guard is developing a web-based tool and anticipates finalizing the tool in mid-2016.

The Coast Guard assessed its capability to perform its Arctic missions and identified various capability gaps—including communications, infrastructure, and icebreaking, and has worked to mitigate these gaps with its Arctic partners, such as other federal agencies. Specifically, Coast Guard officials stated that the agency's actions to implement the various Arctic strategies and carry out annual Arctic operations have helped to mitigate Arctic capability gaps. However, the Coast Guard has not systematically assessed the extent to which its actions agency-wide have helped to mitigate these gaps. Coast Guard officials attributed this, in part, to not being able to unilaterally close the gaps. While mitigating these gaps requires joint efforts among Arctic partners, the Coast Guard has taken actions in the Arctic that are specific to its missions and therefore has responsibility for assessing the extent to which these actions have helped to mitigate capability gaps. By systematically assessing and measuring its progress, the Coast Guard will better understand the status of these gaps and be better positioned to effectively plan its Arctic operations.

The Coast Guard has been unable to fulfill some of its polar icebreaking responsibilities with its aging icebreaker fleet, which currently includes two active polar icebreakers. In 2011 and 2012, the Coast Guard was unable to maintain assured, year-round access to the Arctic and did not meet 4 of 11 requests for polar icebreaking services. With its one active heavy icebreaker—which has greater icebreaking capability—nearing the end of its service life, the Coast Guard initiated a program in 2013 to acquire a new one and is working to determine the optimal acquisition strategy. However, the Coast Guard's efforts to acquire an icebreaker, whether by lease or purchase, will be limited by legal and operational requirements. In addition, current projections show that the Coast Guard is likely to have a 3- to 6-year gap in its heavy icebreaking capability before a new icebreaker becomes operational, as shown below. The Coast Guard is developing a strategy to determine how to best address this expected gap.

Coast Guard's Heavy Icebreaker Availability and Expected Capability Gaps, Present until 2030



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard documents. | GAO-16-453