Why GAO Did This Study

The Navy is responsible for providing ready forces for current operations and contingency response in the Arctic Ocean. According to data from the National Snow and Ice Data Center, the coverage of sea ice in the Arctic has diminished significantly since 1981. This could potentially increase maritime activities there, leading to a need for a greater U.S. military and homeland security presence in the region.

Public Law 115-91 required the Navy to report to Congress on the Navy's capabilities in the Arctic, including any capability gaps and requirements for ice-hardened vessels. It also included a provision for GAO to review the Navy's report. This report (1) assesses the extent to which the Navy’s report aligns with current assessments of Arctic threat levels and capabilities required to execute DOD’s 2016 Arctic Strategy and (2) describes any current requirements for ice-hardened vessels and DOD’s approach for evaluating the capabilities needed as Arctic requirements evolve.

GAO reviewed the Navy's report along with DOD’s assessments of Arctic threats and naval capabilities. GAO also reviewed the 2016 DOD Arctic Strategy—the most current strategy, DOD and Department of State information on the freedom of navigation program as well as DOD’s processes for developing capabilities and assessing Arctic capability gaps.

GAO is not making any recommendations in this report. DOD provided written technical comments which were incorporated as appropriate.

View GAO-19-42. For more information, contact John H. Pendleton at (202) 512-3489 or pendletonj@gao.gov.