

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-374T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard—a component of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—is a multimission, maritime military service that is responsible for maritime safety and national security, among other missions. Given the Arctic region's expansive maritime domain, the Coast Guard plays a significant role in Arctic policy implementation and enforcement. The Coast Guard is also the sole provider and operator of the U.S. polar icebreaking fleet—a critical component in ensuring year-round access to the Arctic. The Coast Guard is developing the first of three heavy polar icebreakers—the Polar Security Cutter—it has acquired in over 40 years.

This statement addresses (1) the Coast Guard's assessment of capability gaps in the region, and (2) key risks facing the Polar Security Cutter acquisition. This statement is primarily based on GAO's June 2016 report examining capability gaps in the Arctic and its September 2018 report examining the Coast Guard's polar icebreaker acquisition.

## What GAO Recommends

In June 2016, GAO recommended, among other things, that Coast Guard develop measures for assessing how its actions have helped to mitigate Arctic capability gaps. In September 2018, GAO recommended that the Polar Security Cutter program develop a program schedule according to best practices. DHS concurred with all of the recommendations, and the Coast Guard is in the process of addressing them.

View [GAO-20-374T](#). For more information, contact Marie A. Mak at (202) 512-4841 or [makm@gao.gov](mailto:makm@gao.gov).

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## ARCTIC CAPABILITIES

### Coast Guard Is Taking Steps to Address Key Challenges, but Additional Work Remains

#### What GAO Found

In fiscal year 2012, the Coast Guard—the primary federal maritime agency in the Arctic—assessed its capability to perform its missions in the region and identified a number of capability gaps. These gaps, which still exist today, include communications, infrastructure, maritime domain awareness, and icebreaking. The Coast Guard has worked to mitigate these gaps with its Arctic partners, such as other federal agencies. For example, during a 2015 annual operation in the Arctic, the Coast Guard took steps to enhance maritime domain awareness by testing the Department of Defense's communications equipment, extending communications capabilities further north than previously possible. However, in June 2016, GAO found that the Coast Guard did not systematically assess the extent to which its actions helped to mitigate these gaps. In response to GAO's recommendation, the Coast Guard is currently developing an implementation plan and corresponding metrics for its April 2019 Arctic Strategy.

In September 2018, GAO found that the Coast Guard faced four key risks when it established the Polar Security Cutter program in March 2018: technology, design, cost, and schedule. For example, the Coast Guard's initial planned delivery dates of 2023, 2025, and 2026 for the three ships were not informed by a realistic assessment of shipbuilding activities. The schedule was driven, instead, by the potential gap in icebreaking capabilities once the Coast Guard's only operating heavy polar icebreaker—the *Polar Star*—reaches the end of its service life (see figure).

U.S. Coast Guard's Icebreaker, the *Polar Star*



U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Polar Star

Source: U.S. Coast Guard. | GAO-20-374T

GAO recommended in September 2018 that the program develop a realistic schedule and determine schedule risks for the program. In response, the Coast Guard is now tracking additional schedule risks for the program and is in the process of updating its program schedule. GAO will continue to monitor the Coast Guard's progress in addressing this recommendation and other recommendations GAO made to address key risks, such as design and cost, facing the Polar Security Cutter program.