

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-42](#), a report to congressional committees

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.

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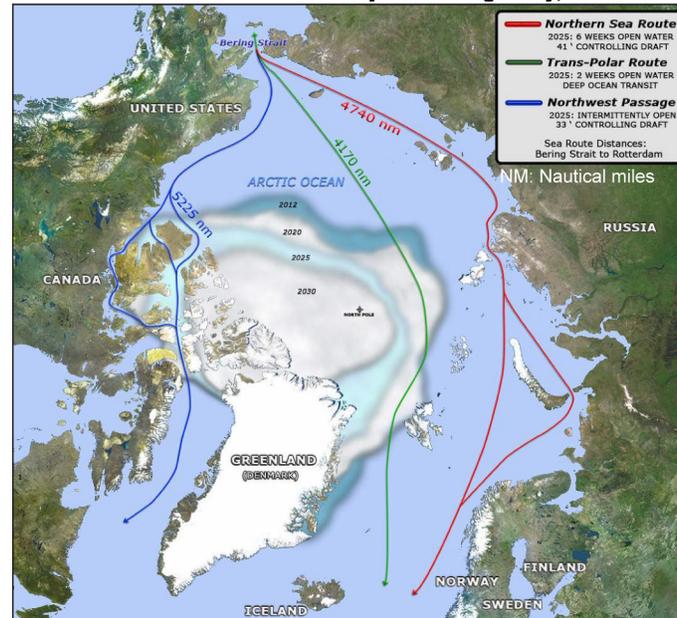
ARCTIC PLANNING

Navy Report to Congress Aligns with Current Assessments of Arctic Threat Levels and Capabilities Required to Execute DOD's Strategy

What GAO Found

The Navy's June 2018 report aligns with Department of Defense (DOD) assessments that the Arctic is at low risk for conflict and that DOD has the capabilities to execute the 2016 DOD *Arctic Strategy*. The June 2018 report also aligns with assessments of Arctic capabilities and gaps in the Navy's 2014 roadmap for implementing the strategy. The June 2018 report states that the Navy can execute the strategy with subsurface, aviation, and surface assets. The report notes the significant limitations for operating surface ships in the Arctic, but states that the Navy has the capabilities required for executing the strategy, and so has no plan to design ice-hardened surface ships. In addition, DOD officials stated that the United States has options other than Navy surface ships for demonstrating the U.S. right to operate in the Arctic, including using Coast Guard vessels, Navy submarines, or military aircraft.

Arctic Transit Routes and Their Projected Navigability, 2012-2030



Source: U.S. Navy. | GAO-19-42

Navy officials said that the Navy does not have a specific requirement for ice-hardening existing vessels or constructing new ones. The Navy plans to continue to use DOD's established process, the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System to reassess Arctic-related requirements as conditions evolve (see fig.). In October 2017, the Joint Requirements Oversight Council validated U.S. Northern Command's initial capabilities document identifying three gaps in the ability to exercise/deploy, position, and conduct deterrence/decisive operations in ice-diminished Arctic waters. At the time of GAO's review, the Joint Staff had validated the capability gaps, which will now compete for resources with other issues designated for further study. Officials said additional study may identify alternative solutions such as adding capabilities to Coast Guard ships or partnering with allies to achieve common strategic goals in the Arctic.