

Why GAO Did This Study

The gradual retreat of polar sea ice, combined with an expected increase in human activity—shipping traffic, oil and gas exploration, and tourism in the Arctic region—could eventually increase the need for a U.S. military and homeland security presence in the Arctic. As a result, the Department of Defense (DOD) must begin preparing to access, operate, and protect national interests there. House Report 111-491 directed DOD to prepare a report on Arctic Operations and the Northwest Passage, and specified five reporting elements that should be addressed. House Report 112-78 directed GAO to review DOD's report. GAO assessed the extent to which 1) DOD's *Report to Congress on Arctic Operations and the Northwest Passage (Arctic Report)* addressed the specified reporting elements and 2) DOD has efforts under way to identify and prioritize the capabilities needed to meet national security objectives in the Arctic. GAO analyzed DOD's *Arctic Report* and related documents and interviewed DOD and U.S. Coast Guard officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD develop a risk-based investment strategy and timeline for developing Arctic capabilities needed in the near-term; and establish a forum with the Coast Guard to identify collaborative Arctic capability investments over the long-term. DOD and the Department of Homeland Security generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

ARCTIC CAPABILITIES

DOD Addressed Many Specified Reporting Elements in Its 2011 *Arctic Report* but Should Take Steps to Meet Near- and Long-term Needs

What GAO Found

DOD's *Arctic Report*, submitted May 31, 2011, addressed three and partially addressed two of the elements specified in the House Report, as shown in the table below.

Extent to Which DOD's *Arctic Report* Addressed the Five Specified Reporting Elements

Specified reporting element	GAO assessment
An assessment of the strategic national security objectives and restrictions in the Arctic region.	Addressed
An assessment on mission capabilities required to support the strategic national security objectives and a timeline to obtain such capabilities.	Partially addressed (does not include a timeline for obtaining needed capabilities)
An assessment of an amended unified command plan that addresses opportunities of obtaining continuity of effort in the Arctic Ocean by a single combatant commander.	Addressed
An assessment of the basing infrastructure required to support Arctic strategic objectives, including the need for a deep-water port in the Arctic.	Addressed
An assessment of the status of and need for icebreakers to determine whether icebreakers provide important or required mission capabilities to support Arctic strategic national security objectives, and an assessment of the minimum and optimal number of icebreakers that may be needed.	Partially addressed (does not include an assessment of the minimum and optimal number of icebreakers)

Source: GAO analysis of DOD's *Arctic Report*.

While DOD has undertaken some efforts to assess the capabilities needed to meet national security objectives in the Arctic, it is unclear whether DOD will be in a position to provide needed capabilities in a timely and efficient manner because it lacks a risk-based investment strategy for addressing near-term needs and a collaborative forum with the Coast Guard for addressing long-term capability needs. DOD's *Arctic Report* acknowledges that it has some near-term gaps in key capabilities needed to communicate, navigate, and maintain awareness of activity in the region. However, DOD has not yet evaluated, selected, or implemented alternatives for prioritizing and addressing near-term Arctic capability needs. In addition, DOD and the Coast Guard have established a working group to identify potential collaborative efforts to enhance U.S. Arctic capabilities. This working group is focused on identifying potential near-term investments but not longer-term needs, and it is currently expected to be dissolved in January 2012. Uncertainty involving the rate of Arctic climate change necessitates careful planning to ensure efficient use of resources in developing Arctic needs such as basing infrastructure and icebreakers, which require long lead times to develop and are expensive to build and maintain. Without taking steps to meet near- and long-term Arctic capability needs, DOD risks making premature Arctic investments, being late in obtaining needed capabilities, or missing opportunities to minimize costs by collaborating on investments with the Coast Guard.