

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-566](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

Decreasing seasonal sea ice in the Arctic has made some Arctic waters navigable for longer periods and, as a result, may contribute to new economic opportunities in commercial shipping, oil exploration, and tourism. This could eventually increase the need for a U.S. military and homeland security presence in the Arctic, particularly in the maritime environment.

House Report 113-446, which accompanied a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, included a provision that GAO review DOD's Arctic capabilities.

This report discusses (1) the role of DOD in the Arctic based on recent strategic guidance and its assessment of the security environment in the region, (2) the actions taken by DOD to address near-term capability needs, and (3) the efforts DOD has under way to update plans for the Arctic and identify future capability needs.

GAO reviewed national, DOD, military service, and combatant command strategies; reviewed studies on near-term capabilities needed and examined efforts initiated to address those needs based on supporting documentation; reviewed Northern Command's regional plans that cover the Arctic and identified ongoing planning activities; and interviewed agency officials. GAO also issued a classified version of this report in June 2015 that includes details on the Arctic's security environment.

GAO is not making any recommendations in this report. DOD provided written technical comments, which we incorporated into the report as appropriate.

View [GAO-15-566](#). For more information, contact John Pendleton at (202) 512-3489 or [pendletonj@gao.gov](mailto:pendletonj@gao.gov)

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## ARCTIC PLANNING

### DOD Expects to Play a Supporting Role to Other Federal Agencies and Has Efforts Under Way to Address Capability Needs and Update Plans

#### What GAO Found

Recent strategic guidance on the Arctic issued by the administration and the Department of Defense (DOD) establish a supporting role for the department relative to other federal agencies, based on a low level of military threat expected in the region. In January 2014 the administration issued the *Implementation Plan to the National Strategy for the Arctic Region* that designated DOD as having a largely supporting role for the activities outlined in the plan. Additionally, DOD's *Arctic Strategy* issued in November 2013 and the Navy's *Arctic Roadmap 2014-2030* issued in February 2014 emphasize that, as sea ice diminishes and the Arctic Ocean opens to more activity, the department may be called upon more frequently to support other federal agencies and work with partners to ensure a secure and stable region. To further its role, DOD participates in a number of forums focused on military security cooperation in the Arctic, including the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, a senior-level event aimed at encouraging discussion among the security forces of Arctic and non-Arctic nations. In addition, DOD leads training exercises focused on building partner capacity in the region, including Arctic Zephyr, a multilateral scenario-based exercise. DOD continues to monitor the security environment in the region and is tracking indicators that could change its threat assessment and affect DOD's future role.

DOD has taken actions, along with interagency partners, to address some near-term capabilities needed in the Arctic, such as maritime domain awareness and communications. In recent years, DOD has conducted a number of studies to identify near-term capabilities the department needs to operate in the Arctic. *The Implementation Plan to the National Strategy for the Arctic Region* created an interagency framework and identified activities to address many of these needed capabilities. For example, as the lead agency for Arctic sea ice forecasting, DOD has established an interagency team to focus on improved sea ice modeling. DOD has also begun other efforts within the department to address capability needs. For example, the Navy's *Arctic Roadmap* prioritizes near-term actions to enhance its ability to operate in the Arctic and includes an implementation plan and timeline for operations and training, facilities, equipment, and maritime domain awareness, among other capabilities.

U.S. Northern Command—the DOD advocate for Arctic capabilities—stated that it is in the process of updating its regional plans for the Arctic and is conducting analysis to determine future capability needs. For example, Northern Command is updating the *Commander's Estimate for the Arctic*, which establishes the commander's intent and missions in the Arctic and identifies near-, mid-, and long-term goals. Additionally, the command is conducting studies of various Arctic mission areas, such as maritime homeland defense and undersea surveillance, to identify future capability needs. However, according to DOD's *Arctic Strategy*, uncertainty remains around the pace of change and commercial activity in the region that may affect its planning timelines. Difficulty in developing accurate sea ice models, variability in the Arctic's climate, and the uncertain rate of activity in the region create challenges for DOD to balance the risk of having inadequate capabilities or insufficient capacity when required to operate in the region with the cost of making premature or unnecessary investments. According to its *Arctic Strategy*, DOD plans to mitigate this risk by monitoring the changing Arctic conditions to determine the appropriate timing for capability investments.