

ISSUE BRIEF

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Congress and the Coast Guard Need to Do More to Secure America's Maritime Borders

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President Trump has made securing the U.S. border a top priority. While the Administration focuses on land borders, it cannot overlook America's vast maritime borders. The United States Coast Guard (USCG) is the primary armed service charged with defending these borders and the nation's sovereignty at sea, and Congress should better support its efforts to accomplish these responsibilities.

Protecting America's maritime borders is no small task. The U.S. coastline is over 12,000 miles,¹ and the Coast Guard must preserve the sovereignty of America's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which extends 200 nautical miles out to sea. The United States has exclusive rights to fisheries, minerals, and other offshore resources in this zone. In all, the U.S. has sovereignty over 4.5 million nautical square miles of surrounding seas.

In terms of economic activity, roughly 90 percent of global trade is shipped by sea. One and a half trillion dollars' worth of cargo passed through U.S. seaports in 2016 alone, and this flow of goods represents more than 40 percent of all American imports and exports. Maritime trade and commerce account for roughly \$650 billion of America's gross domestic product annually. The Coast Guard maintains aids to navigation, protects vessels at sea and in ports, and responds when they are in distress.

The Coast Guard is also the primary maritime agent in the fight against illegal maritime activity such as drug trafficking and human smuggling. In 2016 alone, the Coast Guard seized \$5.6 billion worth of cocaine headed for the U.S., which is roughly two-thirds the annual budget for the service. Yet the amount of known trafficking attempts has been outpacing the Coast Guard's ability to interdict them. Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Paul Zukunft has acknowledged this, saying, "We have an awareness of 80 percent [of known trafficking attempts], but we can only target 20 percent. We're giving 60 percent of what we know, literally, a free pass."² This is because the service's fleet has been undersized, aging, and wearing out for years.

The Coast Guard's capacity challenges are due primarily to insufficient funding. The service's Acquisition, Construction, and Improvements (AC&I) budget has been chronically underfunded. The Coast Guard itself consistently requests what it acknowledges is an insufficient budget. Presumably either the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) or the Office of Management and Budget constrains USCG budget requests before they arrive in Congress. While Coast Guard officials have maintained that the service requires between \$1.5 billion–\$2.5 billion annually in AC&I funding, it has only received \$1.2 billion annually on average, and it has requested as low as \$900 million in recent years.³ Combined with real cuts wrought by the Budget Control Act of 2011 and budget uncertainty caused by Congress' constant failure to pass a normal budget, the Coast Guard has had to delay or truncate numerous urgently needed new platforms.

Shortfalls are most severe in the Coast Guard's medium endurance fleet, where the Offshore Patrol Cutter (OPC) is planned to replace a fleet of extremely

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old⁴ and overworked legacy craft.⁵ The OPC has suffered many developmental delays caused by funding shortfalls and is currently scheduled to begin production in fiscal year (FY) 2018, two years later than originally planned.

The Coast Guard has sought to fill capacity gaps through increased use of its relatively new National Security Cutter (NSC) fleet, but the service's program of record (POR) for eight such cutters is too small. Numerous alternative analyses have established that nine NSCs are necessary to meet mission requirements. Given the growth in presence requirements in the East Pacific and waters off the coast of Alaska, there will be even greater demand on the NSC platform in particular, as it has the highest endurance and can sustain the harshest conditions of all modern cutter designs.⁶ Given these trends, an argument for at least 10 NSCs has gained traction in recent years. An unrequested ninth hull was funded by Congress and is beginning construction this year. Advanced funding for a 10th NSC was added by Congress in FY 2017, and Congress will have to decide in FY 2018 whether to continue this course as the Coast Guard has not updated its request beyond eight NSCs.⁷

The Coast Guard is currently strained to meet many of its missions throughout U.S. waters, making it less able to maintain and protect American interests at sea. To ensure the Coast Guard can continue to defend America's maritime border, Congress, the USCG, and DHS should take the following steps:

- **Accelerate the OPC program.** As the Commandant and other officials have expressed, this program is the Coast Guard's top priority, Congress should ensure that it receives the resources

necessary to ramp up production as quickly as possible.

- **Reevaluate the NSC fleet.** The NSC fleet is on a path to nine hulls, which is supported by numerous fleet analyses. Congress should continue to press the Coast Guard for a better understanding of its present requirements and what that might mean for an expanded fleet beyond nine hulls.
- **Update fleet requirements.** The Coast Guard's current acquisition POR uses fleet and aviation requirements assumptions from over a decade ago, which the service also acknowledges do not actually meet all its mission requirements. Since the last update to these requirements, the sea service's scale of responsibilities has grown considerably. The Coast Guard should issue an update to its platform requirements that accounts for actual mission needs rather than a predetermined budget topline.
- **Support Coast Guard readiness.** As the Coast Guard seeks to fulfill a number of modernization requirements, operational capability and readiness cannot serve as budget trade-offs. The overall Coast Guard budget must be robust enough to support current operations and future capabilities.

America is a maritime nation that relies heavily on the high seas for both economic prosperity and national security. Just as a strong Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps are crucial to our nation's defense, the Coast Guard carries the responsibil-

1. America's coastline is roughly 90,000 miles, but effectively 12,000 miles of coastline can be patrolled.

2. Meghann Myers, "In War with Drug Traffickers, Coast Guard Stretched Thin," *Navy Times*, October 18, 2014, <https://www.navytimes.com/story/military/coast-guard/2014/10/18/in-war-with-drug-traffickers-coast-guard-stretched-thin/17497201/> (accessed March 30, 2017).

3. Ronald O'Rourke, "The Status of Coast Guard Cutter Acquisition Programs," testimony before the Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Subcommittee, Transportation Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, February 3, 2016, <http://transportation.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2016-02-03-orourke.pdf> (accessed March 30, 2017).

4. Many of the Coast Guard's current Medium Endurance Cutter craft were built in the 1960s.

5. For a case study in how overtaxed this fleet has become, see Aaron Mehta and John Solomon, "Coast Guard Slowed by Mechanical Woes during BP, Haiti Rescues," Center for Public Integrity, June 10, 2010, <https://www.publicintegrity.org/2010/06/10/2655/coast-guard-fleet-slowed-mechanical-woes-during-bp-haiti-rescues> (accessed March 30, 2017).

6. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Coast Guard: Timely Actions Needed to Address Risks in Using Rotational Crews*, GAO-15-195, March 2015, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/668894.pdf> (accessed March 30, 2017).

7. Ronald O'Rourke, "Coast Guard Cutter Procurement: Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, updated March 20, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/R42567.pdf> (accessed March 30, 2017).

ity for defending the nation's maritime borders. The government must make a greater commitment to enabling the service to accomplish this mission.

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