

Hearing calls for investment in Coast Guard capabilities in the Arctic

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The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee held a hearing on the Coast Guard's Arctic capabilities led by Chairman Duncan Hunter (R-CA) and Ranking Member John Garamendi (D-CA).

According to Admiral Charles Michel, Vice Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, investment in Arctic Coast Guard capabilities is increasingly critical because, "[a]s ice melts, sea lanes and access to natural resources open, increasing the national interest in safe and responsible use of this vital region" and requiring the Coast Guard "to plan for a more robust U.S. maritime presence."

Attention quickly focused on the need for three heavy and three medium icebreakers, as outlined in the 2010 High Latitude Mission Analysis Report (HLMAR). So-called 'heavy' icebreakers must have sufficient power and endurance to operate year-round in the Arctic; 'medium' icebreakers operate seasonally.

This fleet would allow the Coast Guard to perform nine of its eleven statutory missions year-round in the Arctic and fulfill its obligation to the National Science Foundation to annually resupply McMurdo Station in Antarctica.

Currently, the Coast Guard icebreaker capacity consists of one heavy icebreaker commissioned in 1976, Polar Star, and one medium icebreaker commissioned in 2000, Healy. The Polar Sea, a retired heavy icebreaker, has been inactive 10 years.

The age and condition of Polar Star raised concerns from all witnesses. Although the Obama Administration plans to begin work on a new icebreaker in 2020, a \$1 billion project according to the Senate Appropriations Committee, a 3- to 6-year capability gap is possible if the Polar Star fails. Additionally, the completion of a single icebreaker would leave the HLMAR recommendation unmet.

To address possible gaps, Michel argued that leasing an icebreaker, even Aiviq used by Shell for exploratory Arctic operations until 2014, would be cost-prohibitive due to refits necessary to meet military standards. Additionally, medium icebreakers, like Healy, cannot complete the Antarctic mission. Instead, Michel suggested lengthening the life of Polar Star or reactivating Polar Sea.

Ronald O'Rourke, a specialist in Naval Affairs at the Congressional Research Service, proposed moving forward with multiple icebreakers at once, potentially saving up to \$100 million due to economies of scale.

Following this discussion, Reps. Garamendi and Hunter indicated interest in adding a line in the National Defense Authorization Act or Defense spending bill to lay out a "block buy" to move forward with two icebreakers.

"I'm in the mood to write law," concluded Ranking Member Garamendi.

Sources: ABS Consulting, Alaska Dispatch News, E&E Daily, House.gov, Senate.gov, United States Coast Guard, Whitehouse.gov

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