

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent events, such as the seaborne terrorist attack on Mumbai in 2008 and the pirate attack on the *Quest* in February 2011, highlight maritime threats to the United States. The maritime domain presents a range of potential security threats—including naval forces of adversary nations, piracy, and the use of vessels to smuggle people, drugs, and weapons—which could harm the United States and its interests. The Department of Defense (DOD) has also identified homeland defense as one of its highest priorities. GAO was asked to determine the extent to which DOD has (1) planned to conduct maritime homeland defense operations, (2) identified and addressed capability gaps in maritime homeland defense, and (3) made progress with interagency partners, such as the U.S. Coast Guard, in addressing information sharing challenges related to maritime domain awareness. To conduct this work, GAO examined national and DOD guidance and interviewed officials from DOD, Joint Staff, combatant commands, the military services, and others.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Fleet Forces Command develop a plan to support Northern Command and that responsible DOD organizations provide Northern Command with implementation plans for the actions identified by the Joint Requirements Oversight Council. DOD partially concurred and agreed to take actions on each recommendation.

HOMELAND DEFENSE

Actions Needed to Improve DOD Planning and Coordination for Maritime Operations

What GAO Found

U.S. Northern Command, as the command responsible for homeland defense for the continental United States, has undertaken a number of homeland defense planning efforts, but it does not have a key detailed supporting plan for responding to maritime threats. Northern Command requires supporting DOD organizations to develop plans to support its homeland defense plan. The current, 2008 version of the plan requires a supporting plan from the commander of U.S. Fleet Forces Command, who is designated as the joint force maritime component commander for Northern Command. Fleet Forces Command has undertaken some planning efforts, but has not developed a supporting plan. Because the Northern Command homeland defense plan is a concept plan, which are less detailed than operation plans, and because the command does not have naval forces routinely under its operational control, supporting plans provide critical details on how operations are to be conducted and allow Northern Command to assess the extent to which subordinate commands are prepared to support the maritime homeland defense mission.

DOD has identified maritime homeland defense capability gaps and determined actions necessary to address them, but it has not adequately assessed the extent to which those actions have been implemented. One way DOD identifies capability gaps that affect mission execution is through capabilities-based assessments. A 2008 assessment identified three capability gaps specific to the maritime homeland defense mission—such as engaging and defeating maritime threats—and eight other gaps that affect a number of missions, including maritime homeland defense—such as information management and sharing. The Joint Requirements Oversight Council reviewed the findings and requested relevant DOD organizations to take action to close identified gaps. However, the responsible organizations did not provide implementation plans or other documentation of actions taken or under way to address these gaps. Without documentation on progress in implementing recommended actions, Northern Command cannot be assured that it has full and accurate information about the extent to which other organizations have taken action to close these gaps.

National and DOD documents have identified challenges to the sharing of maritime domain information, such as international coordination, policy and processes, technology, legal restrictions, and cultural barriers. DOD and interagency partners, such as the Coast Guard, have efforts under way to address many of these challenges. One effort, the interagency National Maritime Domain Awareness Architecture, is intended to improve data management by establishing data standards, providing common terminology, and developing supporting technology. It is intended to leverage the interagency National Information Exchange Model, an effort currently under way to establish data standards, facilitate the accessibility of common data across the maritime community, and allow stakeholders to focus on configuring the display of information to best meet their specific missions, whether through data analysis capabilities or geographic displays.