

**FRONTLINE DEFENDERS: HOW THE COAST
GUARD'S DEPLOYABLE SPECIALIZED FORCES
COMBAT NARCOTERRORISTS AND OTHER MAR-
ITIME THREATS ON THE HIGH SEAS**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
TRANSPORTATION AND MARITIME
SECURITY
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION
FEBRUARY 3, 2026
Serial No. 119-37

Printed for the use of the Committee on Homeland Security



Available via the World Wide Web: <http://www.govinfo.gov>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

63-776 PDF

WASHINGTON : 2026

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FRONTLINE DEFENDERS: HOW THE COAST GUARD'S DEPLOYABLE SPECIALIZED FORCES COMBAT NARCOTERRORISTS AND OTHER MARITIME THREATS ON THE HIGH SEAS

Tuesday, February 3, 2026

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND
MARITIME SECURITY,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:03 a.m., in room 310, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Carlos A. Gimenez (Chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Gimenez, Crane, Biggs, Van Epps, and Carter.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security will come to order. Without objection, the Chair may declare the subcommittee in recess at any point.

The purpose of today's hearing is to examine the capabilities, readiness and operational demands of the Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces as they confront increasingly complex maritime, narcotrafficking, smuggling, and other homeland security threats on the high seas.

I now recognize myself for an opening statement.

Good morning everybody, and thank you to our witnesses for joining us today. I appreciate you both being here despite a partial shutdown, including Department of Homeland Security. I am hopeful that we can reach a deal this week to reopen DHS so they can return to their important work protecting and serving the American people.

Today's hearing will focus on the Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces, and particularly, their role in halting maritime narcotrafficking, smuggling of illicit goods, and related threats from communist dictatorships.

For far too long, Venezuela's export of sanctioned oil and drug cartels has prolonged the regime of Nicolas Maduro, arming both the Venezuelan people and the security of the United States. On January 3, Operation Absolute Resolve marked a turning point in dismantling Venezuela's regime with the swift capture of Nicolas Maduro and his wife.

This powerful operation begins to restore democracy for the people of Venezuela and upholds the rule of law. I commend President Trump, our military, and diplomatic leaders for their coordinated efforts to complete this successful operation. This decisive action sent a clear message to adversaries worldwide. The United States must not be trifled with.

This operation is personally significant to me, as my family fled to America from the Cuban communist regime over 70 years ago—actually, 65 years ago. The United States is the shining light of democracy, and through its operation, can support a future of democracy in Venezuela. America is a leader in peace through strength and must continue to confront threats around the world.

Cuba must be considered next. Just the other day, I echo President Trump's Executive Order to impose strict tariffs on all countries that—and—or send oil to Cuba's dictatorships to end the Castro's regime once and for all. I have called for the immediate end of oil shipments to Cuba that fund the corrupt communist regime and crush the Cuban people.

It's why I'm eager to hold today's hearing on the Coast Guard's role in protecting our homeland from Venezuela's actions which helped pave the way for the success of Operation Absolute Resolve. Securing our maritime front by halting and disrupting these sanctioned oil tankers from Venezuela is key to unlocking security and freedom in our corner of the Western Hemisphere.

We are grateful for the Coast Guard's bravery and exceptional tactical operations to properly conduct these wide visitation boardings and seize vessels found in violation of U.S. and international law.

This hearing will highlight the Deployable Specialized Forces historic drug interdiction results, seizing nearly 510,000 pounds of cocaine in fiscal year 2025. We have also the opportunity to hear how the Deployable Specialized Forces have become one of the most tactically capable maritime forces of the United States and what their future holds amid an ever-increasing maritime threat landscape.

We appreciate GAO for being here to testify to its review of the Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Forces and areas for improvement. Congress should consider GAO's recommendations and provide further direction with a future of the Coast Guard.

We should also consider the initiatives laid out in the Coast Guard's recently released Force Design 2028 which calls for a Deployable Specialized Forces command. We are grateful to have witnesses here today to discuss this important topic and also appreciate the Coast Guard's willingness to work with us in order to continue this dialog in a Classified setting in the near future so Members can learn more about the specifics of these oil tanker seizures off the coast of Venezuela.

Hearing directly from operational leaders from the Joint Interagency Task Force South would be beneficial for Members to receive further details on operational impacts, emerging threats, and any on-going challenges.

Thank you.

[The statement of Chairman Gimenez follows:]

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN CARLOS A. GIMENEZ

FEBRUARY 3, 2026

Good morning, everyone, and thank you to our witnesses for joining us today. I appreciate you both being here despite a partial shutdown, including for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). I am hopeful we can reach a deal this week to reopen DHS so they can return to their important work protecting and serving the American people.

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This hearing will highlight the Deployable Specialized Force's historic drug interdiction results, seizing nearly 510,000 pounds of cocaine in fiscal year 2025. We also have the opportunity to hear how the Deployable Specialized Forces have become one of the most tactically capable maritime forces of the United States, and what their future holds amid an ever-increasing maritime threat landscape.

We appreciate GAO for being here to testify to its review of the Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces and areas for improvement. Congress should consider GAO's recommendations and provide further direction for the future of the Coast Guard. We should also consider the initiatives laid out in the Coast Guard's recently released Force Design 2028, which calls for a Deployable Specialized Forces Command.

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Thank you, and now I recognize the gentleman from Louisiana, Mr. Carter, sitting in for Ranking Member McIver today, for his 5 minutes for an opening statement.

Mr. GIMENEZ. I now recognize the gentleman from Louisiana, Mr. Carter, sitting in for Ranking Member McIver today, for his 5 minutes for an opening statement.

Mr. CARTER. Good morning. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this hearing. Thank you for also recognizing me to provide

opening remarks as Ranking Member McIver, regrettably, could not be here today.

I also would like to thank our witnesses for joining us today. Rear Admiral Barata, I recognize you are joining us amid a shut-down affecting the Coast Guard and other branches of the Armed Forces. Thank you for your incredible service.

To state the obvious, our military service members deserve to be paid for their service, and I hope you can come—we can come together quickly to pass funding for the Coast Guard, along with reforms desperately needed at the Department of Homeland Security.

Today we are here to discuss Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces. These specialized forces compromise—comprise some of the Coast Guard's most elite, highly-trained units. Their activities exemplify the Coast Guard's wide range of critical missions as they deploy to conduct some of the most important services at high-risk operation across a variety of challenging environments.

Specialized forces missions vary from advanced interdiction and boarding against hostile targets to responding to oil spills and hazardous material releases. These specialized forces dive underwater to repair ships in harsh environments of remote polar regions, chase down narcotic traffickers on the high seas, and help protect national security events, like United Nations General Assembly.

Last year maritime safety and security terms were among the most—the Coast Guard forces that deployed to my home city of New Orleans to help protect Super Bowl LIX. I want to thank you and the hard-working Coast Guard personnel who helped make that event safe and successful, along with all of the work you do for Louisiana to ensure the community of maritime commerce and the safety of my constituents are always held at its highest.

Most recently, the Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces have conducted a series of high-profile, high-risk boardings of sanctioned oil tankers near the coast of Venezuela. While I strongly disagree with the Trump administration's operation last month to deploy forces on land in Venezuela without Congressional authorization, as well as his bombing of alleged drug boats, which are not only illegal but undermine the Coast Guard's efforts to encourage international maritime cooperation, in contrast, these oil tanker boardings represent a legal and effective way to enforce sanctions, enforce international maritime laws, and exert U.S. influence.

The Coast Guard should be commended for conducting these high-risk boardings without incident, demonstrating the skill and training of the service's specialized forces.

The Deployable Specialized Forces are critical to the Coast Guard's success as a service. We must ensure that the Coast Guard has the resources, personnel, training, and strategies, and authorities to utilize these units effectively.

The Government Accountability Office has done vital research to help the Coast Guard grow smarter, leaner, and more effective across its many missions. I look forward to hearing from both of our witnesses about the capabilities of the Coast Guard's specialized forces and how our committee can help the services come to grow to fruition and give you the absolute most state-of-the-art tools to do your jobs.

I thank the witnesses for joining us. Mr. Chairman, I yield.

[The statement of Honorable Carter follows:]

STATEMENT OF HONORABLE TROY A. CARTER

FEBRUARY 3, 2026

Rear Admiral Barata, I recognize you are joining us amid a shutdown affecting the Coast Guard and other branches of the armed forces. To state the obvious, our military service members deserve to be paid for their service, and I hope we will be able to come together quickly to pass the reforms and funding our country desperately needs.

Today, we are here to discuss the Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces. These specialized forces comprise some of the Coast Guard's most elite, highly-trained units. Their activities exemplify the Coast Guard's wide range of critical missions, as they deploy to carry out some of the service's highest-risk operations within a variety of challenging environments.

Specialized forces' missions vary from advanced interdictions and boardings against hostile targets, to responding to oil spills and hazardous material releases. Specialized forces dive underwater to repair ships in the harsh environment of remote polar regions, chase down narcotics traffickers on the high seas, and help protect National Special Security Events like the United Nations General Assembly.

Last year, Maritime Safety and Security Teams were among the Coast Guard forces that deployed to my home city of New Orleans to help protect Super Bowl 59. I expect some of these teams will deploy again this weekend to help ensure another safe and successful Super Bowl. Most recently, the Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces have conducted a series of high-profile, high-risk boardings of sanctioned oil tankers near the coast of Venezuela. I strongly disagree with the Trump administration's operations last month to deploy forces on land in Venezuela without Congressional authorization, as well as its bombings of alleged drug boats, which are not only illegal but undermine the Coast Guard's efforts to encourage international maritime cooperation. In contrast, these oil tanker boardings represent a legal and effective way to enforce sanctions, enforce international maritime laws, and exert U.S. influence.

The Coast Guard should be commended for carrying out these high-risk boardings without incident, displaying the skill and training of the service's specialized forces. The Deployable Specialized Forces are critical to the Coast Guard's success as a service. We must ensure the Coast Guard has the resources, personnel, training, strategies, and authorities to utilize these units effectively.

The Government Accountability Office has done important work to help the Coast Guard grow smarter, leaner, and more effective across its many missions.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you, Mr. Carter.

Other Members of the committee are reminded that opening statements may be submitted for the record.

[The statement of Ranking Member Thompson follows:]

STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER BENNIE G. THOMPSON

FEBRUARY 3, 2026

Coast Guard service members carry out a broad range of critical missions every day, from search-and-rescue activities to drug interdictions and maritime security. The Coast Guard helps respond to disasters, protect maritime commerce, defend seaports and other critical infrastructure, and secure National Special Security Events. In each of these missions, the Coast Guard's efforts are enhanced by its Deployable Specialized Forces.

These elite teams represent some of the service's most skilled and highly-trained units. With 11 statutory missions and a global footprint, the Coast Guard relies on the readiness and expertise of its specialized forces to deploy quickly and respond to crises effectively.

If a cutter is stuck in ice in the Arctic or Antarctic and requires repair, the Coast Guard will call upon its specialized forces. If an oil spill threatens environmental disaster, the Coast Guard will call upon its specialized forces. If an advanced tactical team is needed to conduct a high-risk interdiction of a suspected drug trafficking vessel, the Coast Guard will call upon its specialized forces—at least, that is, if it is allowed to do so. Under the Trump administration, the Coast Guard is not getting enough calls.

The Trump administration has chosen to illegally and immorally bomb alleged drug boats instead of allowing the Coast Guard's specialized forces to safely interdict narcotics traffickers and turn them over for prosecution. These attacks fly in the face of international law, and though they may deter drug trafficking in the short term, they undermine the Coast Guard's long-term efforts to advance international maritime cooperation and law enforcement.

How can the Coast Guard convince international partners and allies to assist with maritime law enforcement and information sharing when other branches of the U.S. military are illegally blowing boats out of the water? The administration must cease these war crimes immediately. Accountability is coming.

The administration has shown that at least some of its lawyers do in fact understand maritime law, as the Coast Guard's specialized forces have been deployed to conduct a series of successful boardings of sanctioned oil tankers off the Venezuelan coast. These operations stand in contrast to the illegal drug boat attacks—as well as the illegal deployment of U.S. armed forces into Venezuela to depose its president—as the boardings are at least rooted in internationally recognized rules and practices.

The Coast Guard's specialized forces deserve significant credit for carrying out these difficult and dangerous operations without incident. As the Coast Guard works to build upon the successes of its specialized forces, Congress must ensure the service supports its personnel and mission needs with capable vessels and aircraft.

Recently, through their One Big Ugly Bill, Republicans gifted the Coast Guard with \$25 billion—a much-needed investment that unfortunately was paid for by gutting Medicaid. This money was provided with few strings attached, and the Coast Guard has not yet shared its spend plan with Congress.

In the past, the Coast Guard has struggled to manage large acquisitions programs efficiently and effectively. As the Coast Guard works to support its specialized forces and other units with this large investment, the service must act as responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars and ensure money is not wasted.

I look forward to working with GAO and my colleagues in Congress to hold the Coast Guard accountable as it invests in its Deployable Specialized Forces and other units.

Mr. GIMENEZ. I am pleased to have a distinguished panel of witnesses before us today on this critical topic. I ask that our witnesses please rise and raise their right hands.

[Witnesses sworn.]

Mr. GIMENEZ. Let the record reflect that the witnesses have answered in the affirmative. Thank you, and please be seated.

I would now like to formally introduce our witnesses. Rear Admiral David Barata serves as deputy commandant for operations policy and as commander, 8th Coast Guard District overseeing Coast Guard operations across 26 States, including the Gulf of Mexico, adjacent offshore waters, and major inland waterways, such as the Mississippi and Ohio River systems. Previously, he served as commander, Coast Guard Personnel Services Center, where he led human resource policy and work force management for nearly 45,000 active-duty and reserve members.

A 1993 graduate of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, Rear Admiral Barata holds a Master of Arts in national security and strategic studies from the Naval War College and served as senior military fellow at the Center for a New American Security.

I also misstated something. You are overseeing Coast Guard operations across 26 States, including the Gulf of America. Right? OK.

Heather MacLeod is the director in the Homeland Security and Justice team for the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Ms. MacLeod joined GAO in 2002. During the last 22 years, Ms. MacLeod has worked on a range of public policy issues at GAO. She currently leads the Coast Guard in maritime security issues

portfolio in conducting a variety of reviews addressing issues such as Coast Guard work force and strategic planning efforts and maritime port and supply chain cargo security.

Prior to joining the Homeland Security and Justice team, Ms. MacLeod led reviews covering a broad range of topics in transportation policy, including aviation safety, airline competition, transit programs, and highway bridge management.

Ms. MacLeod has a master's degree in public administration from the University of Washington and a bachelor's degree in international relations from American University.

I thank each of our distinguished witnesses for being here today. I now recognize Rear Admiral Barata for 5 minutes to summarize his opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF REAR ADMIRAL DAVID C. BARATA, DEPUTY
COMMANDANT FOR OPERATIONS POLICY AND COMMANDER,
UNITED STATES COAST GUARD**

Admiral BARATA. Good morning, Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I request that my written testimony be submitted for the record.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Without objection.

Admiral BARATA. Thank you.

The United States is a maritime nation, and the Coast Guard stands as a vital instrument of national power, a military service, a Federal law enforcement agency, and a member of the intelligence community, tasked with controlling, securing, and defending our maritime borders and their approaches, facilitating commerce vital to economic prosperity, and responding to crises and contingencies that often arise with little or no warning.

Our Nation faces significant and evolving threats, including narcoterrorists and transnational criminal organizations that smuggle deadly drugs, traffic people, bring violence to our communities, and use illicit cash through sanctioned oil to buy influence throughout the hemisphere.

The Coast Guard is on the front line of these fights, pushing our borders out and targeting these networks where they are most vulnerable. The dedicated men and women of the Coast Guard are at the forefront of our efforts to defend our homeland. At the tip of the spear are the service's Deployable Specialized Forces. These highly-skilled teams provide operational commanders with a versatile and rapidly-deployable toolkit to address ever-changing and asymmetric threats.

For instance, our maritime security response teams provide the Nation's only Federal maritime counterterrorism capability, and our tactical law enforcement teams embed with naval partners to execute dangerous drug interdictions. Our Deployable Specialized Forces are prepared for the most demanding missions.

Their rigorous training, often with the Department of War colleagues, ensures that they can deploy globally at a moment's notice, bringing unparalleled skills to bear against terrorism, weapons proliferation, piracy, transnational crime, and other domestic contingencies.

Most recently, our operators conducted several law enforcement boardings aboard dark fleet tankers to enforce sanctions at sea and uphold international law. These highly capable units are a crucial and adaptable force, ensuring the Coast Guard cannot only patrol our waters but dominate the maritime environment where the Nation needs them most.

Employing well-organized force packages in fiscal year 2025, the Coast Guard achieved the largest annual maritime drug interdiction results in service history, seizing over 511,000 pounds of narcotics valued at more than \$3.8 billion. This stopped over 193 million potentially lethal doses from reaching American communities.

Over the past year, the Coast Guard has hardened and sustained our border to control and secure and defend that border and our maritime approaches starting with the Southern Border where the President declared a national emergency. For example, along the Rio Grande Valley, Operation River Wall has already supported the apprehension or deterrence of over 300 individuals illegally trying to cross since it began in October of 2025, and Operation Border tried—increased interdictions of aliens along the Southwest Border by 44 percent over the previous year.

Our enhanced enforcement presence at our borders and maritime approaches protects the country against transnational criminal organizations and illegal aliens attempting to unlawfully enter the country, upholding our national sovereignty. To effectively meet these dynamic threats, the Coast Guard is pursuing a bold modernization of its people, assets, and capabilities through Force Design 2028.

Coupled with the historic investments made through the One Big Beautiful Bill Act and the support of this subcommittee, we are transforming our service into a more agile, capable, and responsive fighting force to protect the American people and advance our national security.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and allowing me to speak on behalf of the Coast Guard's men and women who have volunteered to serve the Nation. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Admiral Barata follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF REAR ADMIRAL DAVID C. BARATA

FEBRUARY 3, 2026

INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member McIver, and distinguished Members of the subcommittee. I am honored to be here today to discuss the U.S. Coast Guard's efforts to deliver peace through strength to control, secure, and defend America's borders.

The United States is a maritime nation. With more than 95,000 miles of shoreline, 361 commercial ports, and 25,000 miles of navigable waterways, the maritime domain fortifies our national security and economic prosperity. Over 90 percent of overseas trade enters or leaves the United States by sea, facilitating more than \$5.4 trillion in maritime commerce annually. The security of this domain is not optional—it is foundational to our national and economic security. The Coast Guard is the Nation's leading agency in this domain.

In the Department of Homeland Security, the Coast Guard serves as the Nation's finest maritime fighting force. We are one of the six Armed Services, a Federal law enforcement agency, and a member of the intelligence community. The Coast Guard controls, secures, and defends the U.S. border and maritime approaches; ensures the

safe and secure flow of commerce vital to economic prosperity; and responds to crises and contingencies that often come with little or no warning.

Under the leadership of President Trump and Secretary Noem, the Coast Guard is changing and growing to meet the needs of Americans. This effort is Force Design 2028, a bold blueprint to build a stronger, more agile, and responsive fighting force. Under the leadership and vision of Secretary Noem, this effort directly enhances our ability to enforce the law, secure maritime approaches, protect commerce, and respond to crises. By expanding our workforce and deploying advanced assets and technologies, the Coast Guard is better postured to secure our Nation's maritime borders and sovereign interests against these persistent threats.

DEPLOYABLE SPECIALIZED FORCES

Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Forces are elite teams capable of rapid worldwide deployment and a wide array of missions. These teams are trained for high-risk scenarios such as direct action; counter-narcotics; operations in chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear environments; and disaster response—providing specialized capabilities to the Coast Guard, Department of Homeland Security, Department of War, and other interagency partners.

Maritime Security Response Teams are the Coast Guard's premier units for counterterrorism and high-risk law enforcement. Trained in conducting direct action and advanced interdiction missions, they specialize in opposed boardings against hostile targets, including in chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear environments. They also possess canine explosives-detection teams and can conduct counter-unmanned aircraft systems operations.

Tactical Law Enforcement Teams are the Coast Guard's law enforcement experts specializing in counter-trafficking operations at sea. They provide highly-skilled, deployable teams for counter-narcotics and maritime interdiction from U.S. and allied vessels. Their mission set also includes alien migration interdiction. These teams can conduct both compliant and non-compliant vessel boardings.

Maritime Safety and Security Teams are anti-terrorism and force protection units responsible for safeguarding strategic shipping, high-interest vessels, and critical port infrastructure. Their capabilities are focused on waterborne security, non-compliant vessel pursuits, and the use of canine teams for explosive detection. As a rapid response force, these teams can be deployed globally to meet evolving maritime security threats.

Port Security Units are expeditionary security units, primarily comprised of reservists, that provide sustained force protection for seaports of disembarkation and critical infrastructure. They can deploy within 96 hours of a crisis and establish full operations within 24 hours of arrival, offering both waterside and shoreside security.

The National Strike Force is a highly specialized rapid response unit equipped to handle major oil discharges, hazardous material releases, and Weapons of Mass Destruction incidents. The National Strike Force provides technical expertise, specialized equipment, and incident management support for complex environmental and security crises. The force is a critical national asset, capable of worldwide deployment to mitigate threats, manage containment and clean-up efforts, and provide crucial technical support to Federal on-scene coordinators.

Regional Dive Lockers provide full-time diving capabilities for a variety of missions, including the security of ports and waterways, maintaining aids to navigation, and conducting ship husbandry and repair, often in extreme environments like remote polar regions.

In a complex and evolving maritime environment, Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Forces are critical to America's national and economic security. Most recently, these forces, supported by the Department of War, are combatting the threat of "dark fleet tankers," used to illegally transport sanctioned oil. In these high-stakes, at-sea operations, these forces are prepared to execute complex opposed boardings.

In the Western Hemisphere, these teams are also leaders in drug interdiction, a mission that accounts for a significant portion of their operational focus. Teams frequently deploy on U.S. and allied naval vessels to intercept a variety of drug-smuggling conveyances. These range from high-speed "go-fast" boats to sophisticated, hard-to-detect, self-propelled semi-submersibles. The interdiction of these vessels is a core component of the effort to dismantle the powerful transnational criminal organizations and foreign terrorist organizations that threaten American communities.

MARITIME DRUG INTERDICTION

Maritime drug trafficking remains one of the most direct threats to U.S. homeland security and public safety. As directed by the President, the Coast Guard is

on the front lines securing the global supply chain against drug trafficking and reducing the availability of illicit drugs that devastate American communities. Narcoterrorists exploit maritime routes to move drugs, generate enormous profits, and fuel violence, instability, and crime. These revenues are increasingly leveraged by hostile actors and transnational networks to fund human trafficking, weapons smuggling, sanctions evasion, and other malign activities that destabilize regions and drive illegal migration. The Coast Guard is often the only agency with the authority, capability, and presence to act at sea. The Coast Guard interdicts more illicit drugs than all other Federal law enforcement agencies combined.

Since January 2025, the Coast Guard seized over 511,000 pounds of cocaine from the maritime domain—representing over 189 million potentially lethal doses. This all-time historic high more than doubles the amount of cocaine removed in fiscal year 2024 and nearly triples the removals from fiscal year 2023. These seizures save American taxpayers over \$10 billion in social programs, including over \$2.3 billion in health care costs from cocaine interdictions alone.

Combating fentanyl and its illegal precursor chemicals remains one of the administration's top priorities, and the Coast Guard has taken significant action in this effort. Fentanyl is the leading cause of U.S. drug-related deaths since 2016, accounting for approximately 70 percent of drug overdose deaths in 2023. Mexican narcoterrorists are the primary source of the synthetic opioid flow into the United States. Accordingly, the Coast Guard leverages its broad authorities to seek out and interdict both fentanyl and its precursor chemicals. On January 31, 2025, Commandant Admiral Lunday directed immediate action to bolster these operations, focusing on interdicting precursor chemicals and disrupting the revenue streams that fund fentanyl trafficking.

ILLEGAL MIGRATION

The Coast Guard also secures 220 river miles along the Rio Grande, from the Gulf of America to West Texas, part of the U.S. Southern Border, and the maritime approaches to San Diego. These areas continue to experience a sustained and above-average rate of illegal maritime migration. This vector presents a persistent threat characterized by continuous smuggling attempts and is targeted through the Coast Guard's Operation Border Trident, on the southwest maritime border, and Operation River Wall, along the Rio Grande in Texas, both of which seek to achieve 100 percent control of the southern maritime border. Trafficking organizations in this region primarily utilize high-speed boats, jet skis and other personal watercraft, and additional makeshift watercraft. Although a variety of nationalities are encountered, the overwhelming majority of those interdicted are Mexican nationals.

The maritime approaches to the southeastern United States are also a leading vector for illegal maritime migration. Most of the migrants encountered originate in Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, or the Dominican Republic, utilizing established transit corridors. Cuban and Haitian migrants typically journey toward Florida, either directly or through the Bahamas. Meanwhile, Dominican and some Haitian groups often cross the Mona Passage to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. They attempt these journeys on a wide array of vessels, from coastal freighters and high-speed "go-fast" boats to dangerously crude, homemade rafts.

The National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy have a parallel focus to control migration, stop drug flows, and strengthen stability and security on land and sea in the Western Hemisphere. Under the direction of the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Coast Guard maintains a robust and forward-leaning posture to combat illegal immigration. In 2025 we interdicted, deterred, or transported 11,713 aliens illegally attempting entry. This was 120 percent more than in 2024. Our persistent presence both serves to deter departures from countries of origin and enables a rapid response to suspicious vessels, in close coordination with our international, Federal, State, and local partners. To enhance this posture, we utilize advanced unmanned systems, such as long-range unmanned aerial systems, surface drones, and small aerial drones launched from our over-the-horizon boats, to provide persistent surveillance and support shore patrols.

CONCLUSION

Maritime drug trafficking, illegal migration, and dark fleet tankers are distinct challenges, but they share a common feature: each exploits the maritime domain to evade law enforcement and accountability. Through its unique and enduring law enforcement authorities, the Coast Guard directly confronts these threats—securing and defending the Nation's borders and maritime approaches every day.

These threats are evolving, and the demands placed on the Coast Guard continue to increase. The Coast Guard's layered security model—leveraging forward presence,

elite capabilities, an exceptional workforce, and unmatched legal authorities—allows us to address risks far from U.S. shores before they reach our homeland.

The changes under way through Force Design 2028 are already accelerating enduring change and showing measurable results. By empowering our workforce and enhancing the ways we conduct our patrols and inspections, recent operations resulted in the seizure of more than 511,000 pounds of cocaine valued at more than \$3.8 billion. These outcomes demonstrate both the effectiveness of our authorities and the return on investment they provide.

Since 1790, in peace and in war, a ready Coast Guard has been an indispensable element of national security. With continued Congressional support, the Coast Guard will remain prepared to meet today's challenges and build a more resilient and capable Service for decades to come.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today and look forward to your questions. Semper Paratus.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you, Admiral Barata.

I now recognize Ms. MacLeod for 5 minutes to summarize her opening statement.

STATEMENT OF HEATHER MACLEOD, DIRECTOR, HOMELAND SECURITY AND JUSTICE TEAM, GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Ms. MACLEOD. Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member Carter, and Members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss GAO's work, examining Coast Guard maritime security operations.

These operations may be carried out by specialized forces units which have the training and capabilities needed to handle drug interdiction, terrorism, and other threats. My testimony today focuses on persistent challenges Coast Guard faces in carrying out missions, including those involving specialized forces units and actions that GAO's work has identified to help Coast Guard address them.

We have made dozens of recommendations to the Coast Guard to help address key challenges, like staffing shortfalls, declining availability of vessels and aircraft, and acquisition issues.

Regarding Coast Guard staffing shortfalls, in recent years the Coast Guard has raised concerns that its mission workload has outpaced its work force levels. Staffing gaps, particularly in specialized units like tactical law enforcement teams, can hinder drug interdiction efforts, counterterrorism operations, and missions.

While the service recruited more enlisted service members than it lost in 2024, that had not been the case in years prior. In April 2025, we reported that, even with the increase in recruiting, the service remained short of its enlisted work force target. As a result, the Coast Guard was operating below the work force level it deemed necessary.

We made three recommendations to help address these challenges, including that the Coast Guard develop a clear plan to support its retention initiatives. Specific to specialized forces, in 2019 we reported that the Coast Guard has taken steps to create a maritime law enforcement career path which helped them retain qualified personnel.

We also reported that the Coast Guard might not have the right mix and number of specialized forces to meet mission demands. For example, we reported that officials from some specialized forces

units were underused, while others were so busy that they had to turn down operations.

In November 2024, the Coast Guard acknowledged that significant overlap in mission and mission capabilities related to specialized forces exist. Continued analysis remains important, as the Coast Guard needs to establish a Deployable Specialized Forces command as part of Force Design 2028.

Another challenge I would like to highlight is vessel and aircraft availability, assets that specialized forces are often deployed from. The condition of Coast Guard assets has been in a state of decline for decades. Our work has shown a concerning trend that the cost of maintaining these assets is increasing at the same time that their availability is decreasing.

For example, in June we reported that operation availability of cutters that the Coast Guard relies on for its maritime security operations declined. We also reported that increasing maintenance challenges have led to cutters missing patrol obligations. These readiness challenges are not limited to cutters.

In a separate report, we found that Coast Guard aircraft were not available for missions as often as the service deemed necessary. We made 10 recommendations in these reports to address cutter and aircraft challenges.

Finally, our work has noted that acquisition program delays have been a long-standing challenge for the service and continue to affect the availability of Coast Guard assets.

For example, the Coast Guard's newest cutters, the offshore patrol cutter and the polar security cutter, are intended to support maritime security operations. But we found that combined these two programs are years behind schedule and billions of dollars over their initiative cost estimates. We have made dozens of recommendations on how Coast Guard can better manage acquisition programs.

In conclusion, the Coast Guard specialized forces units include a range of capabilities that are vital to the service's ability to fulfill its missions. However, the Coast Guard faces significant challenges that can hinder its maritime security operations.

Addressing our recommendations in these areas will help to ensure the Coast Guard is effectively and efficiently using available resources to carry out these operations and support national interests.

This completes my prepared statement, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Ms. MacLeod follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HEATHER MACLEOD

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2026

COAST GUARD.—ACTIONS NEEDED TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES THAT HINDER MARITIME SECURITY OPERATIONS

GAO-26-108901

Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member McIver, and Members of the Subcommittee: I am pleased to be here today to discuss GAO's work examining Coast Guard maritime security operations and challenges. The U.S. Government has identified transnational and domestic criminal organizations as a significant threat to the public, law enforcement, and national security. The Coast Guard—a multi-mission, mar-

itime military service within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—is the Nation’s lead Federal maritime law enforcement agency. To help carry out certain maritime security missions, the Coast Guard maintains Deployable Specialized Forces (Specialized Forces) units with the capabilities needed to handle drug interdiction, terrorism, and other threats to the U.S. maritime environment.¹ These units deploy from their home locations, such as major U.S. port areas, to conduct operations in U.S. coastal waters and internationally. Certain units can carry out operations from vessels, such as Coast Guard cutters and Navy ships, or air assets, such as Coast Guard helicopters.

According to the Coast Guard, its presence—vessels, aircraft, and Specialized Forces—serves as an enforcement mechanism and deterrent to illicit activity that contributes to instability throughout the Western Hemisphere. Figure 1 shows Coast Guard personnel conducting a drug interdiction operation that included a Specialized Forces member boarding a foreign, semi-submersible vessel, which resulted in seizing 17,000 pounds of cocaine.

Figure 1: Coast Guard Specialized Forces Personnel Conducting a Drug Interdiction Operation



Source: U.S. Coast Guard. | GAO-26-108901

My statement today discusses challenges the Coast Guard faces related to its maritime security operations and actions that could help address those challenges. This statement is based primarily on seven GAO reports published from November 2019 to January 2026.

For the reports we cite in this statement, among other methodologies, we analyzed Coast Guard policies, documentation, and data, and interviewed officials from agency headquarters and selected field units. More detailed information on our scope and methodology, including analyzing data and determining a sufficient level of reliability for our reporting, can be found in the reports we cite in this statement. For this statement, we also reviewed information on the status of agency implementation of selected recommendations through January 2026. (See appendix I for related open recommendations as of January 2026.)

We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted Government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

¹ See 6 U.S.C. § 468(a) (Coast Guard missions).

SEVERAL CHALLENGES HINDER COAST GUARD EFFORTS TO CONDUCT ITS MARITIME SECURITY OPERATIONS, WHICH THE SERVICE HAS YET TO FULLY ADDRESS

Our prior work has identified several longstanding challenges that have hindered the Coast Guard's ability to meet its mission demands, including those conducted by Specialized Forces. These include: (1) staffing shortfalls and workforce planning, (2) availability of vessels and aircraft, and (3) acquisition of new assets.² The Coast Guard received nearly \$25 billion in supplemental funding in fiscal year 2025 for various acquisitions and in support of efforts to modernize operations and capabilities and faces the difficult decision of determining how best to invest these resources.³ We have made recommendations to help the Coast Guard address these challenges and effectively and efficiently use its resources.

Staffing Shortfalls and Workforce Planning

Our prior work has shown that staffing shortfalls and poor workforce planning have affected the Coast Guard's ability to meet its mission needs, including for maritime security missions that Specialized Forces support. While the service recruited more enlisted service members than it lost in fiscal year 2024, it experienced net enlisted staffing losses from fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2023. In April 2025, we reported that even with the increase in recruiting, the service remained approximately 2,600 service members, or 8.5 percent of its total enlisted workforce, short of its enlisted workforce target at the end of fiscal year 2024.⁴ As a result, the Coast Guard was operating below the workforce level it deemed necessary to meet its operational demands. We made 3 recommendations, including that the Coast Guard develop a clear plan to support its retention initiatives. The Coast Guard agreed with our recommendations, and we continue to monitor their implementation.

Specific to Specialized Forces, in November 2019 we reported that the Coast Guard had taken steps to improve retention of these personnel.⁵ Prior to a 2007 reorganization, active-duty Coast Guard personnel working in Specialized Forces units could not remain in those units and be competitive for promotions, according to Coast Guard officials we interviewed for that review. Officials told us that this was because the Coast Guard has certain requirements for career progression, including personnel working in various assignments within a given career path. After the reorganization, the Coast Guard created a maritime law enforcement career path within Specialized Forces in response to challenges the service faced in retaining law enforcement personnel. Coast Guard officials we spoke with told us that the career path has helped them retain qualified Specialized Forces personnel. According to the Coast Guard's Force Design 2028 plan, retention of Specialized Forces remains a priority.⁶

Further, we have previously reported that the Coast Guard might not have the right mix and number of personnel relative to the mix and number of operations where Specialized Forces are needed to meet mission demands. For example, in November 2019 we reported that officials from some Specialized Forces units we interviewed indicated that they experienced periods of underutilization.⁷ An official at one unit described efforts to increase the number of operations the unit conducted by asking other Coast Guard units to request them for specialized assistance. Officials at another unit conducted similar outreach, including passing out flyers describing Specialized Forces capabilities and contact information should the other Coast Guard units need assistance. In contrast, similar units turned down operations because of a lack of available personnel. For example, officials from a different Specialized Forces unit described instances where they had to decline operations because they did not have enough personnel to meet the demand.

²GAO, *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Address Persistent Challenges Hindering Efforts to Counter Illicit Maritime Drug Smuggling*, GAO-24-107785 (Washington, DC: Sept. 19, 2024). GAO, *Offshore Patrol Cutter: Coast Guard Should Gain Key Knowledge Before Buying More Ships*, GAO-26-107583 (Washington, DC: Nov. 25, 2025).

³Pub. L. No. 119-21, tit. IV, § 40001, 139 Stat. 72, 127 (2025). These funds are available for obligation through fiscal year 2029.

⁴GAO, *Coast Guard: Enhanced Data and Planning Could Help Address Service Member Retention Issues*, GAO-25-107869 (Washington, DC: Apr. 23, 2025).

⁵GAO, *Coast Guard: Assessing Deployable Specialized Forces' Workforce Needs Could Improve Efficiency and Reduce Potential Overlap or Gaps in Capabilities*, GAO-20-33 (Washington, DC: Nov. 21, 2019).

⁶U.S. Coast Guard, *Force Design 2028 Execution Plan Summary* (July 2025). Force Design 2028 is a U.S. Coast Guard strategic initiative aimed at modernizing the service into a more agile, capable, and responsive maritime force to meet evolving operational demands by 2028. It focuses on 4 key areas—People, Organization, Technology, and Contracting/Acquisition.

⁷GAO-20-33.

As a result, we made two recommendations. We recommended that the Coast Guard conduct a comprehensive analysis of its Specialized Forces' workforce needs and that it assess the extent to which unnecessary overlap or duplication exist. We reported that without an analysis of the Specialized Forces units as a whole, the Coast Guard did not have reasonable assurance that it has the requisite number of personnel in the right units to conduct the required missions. While the Coast Guard agreed with the recommendation to conduct a comprehensive analysis of its workforce, it did not agree to assess the extent to which unnecessary overlap or duplication exists. Nevertheless, the Coast Guard contracted a study in 2022 to conduct an analysis of Specialized Forces' ports, waterways, and coastal security mission. This addressed both of our recommendations by providing the service with better information for that mission priority.⁸ However, in November 2024 the Coast Guard acknowledged that its study did not address all missions or Specialized Forces units, and that significant overlap in mission and mission capabilities exist. Such continued analysis remains important, particularly as the Coast Guard moves to establish a Deployable Specialized Forces Command to optimize Specialized Forces' unique capabilities as part of Force Design 2028.

Regarding Specialized Forces' deployment with Coast Guard cutters and helicopters, we have also identified gaps in cutter and aircraft workforce planning. Figure 2 shows Specialized Forces conducting vertical deployment training from a Coast Guard helicopter.

⁸RAND Corporation, *Mission Analysis of U.S. Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Forces* (Dec. 2022).

Figure 2: Coast Guard Specialized Forces Conduct Vertical Deployment Training in Florida, September 2025



Source: U.S. Coast Guard. | GAO-26-108901

In June 2025, we reported that cutters often deploy without a full crew due to personnel shortages.⁹ We recommended that the Coast Guard collect and assess data on staff availability for the cutter workforce. DHS did not agree with this recommendation, but we maintain that it remains valid and could help ensure the Coast Guard is fully considering the workload faced by cutter crews and support personnel when making decisions on personnel assignments. We also previously reported on Coast Guard resource shortfalls and incomplete workforce planning for its aviation workforce. As a result, we recommended that the Coast Guard assess and determine the aviation workforce levels it requires to meet its mission needs. DHS concurred with this recommendation and stated that the Coast Guard would con-

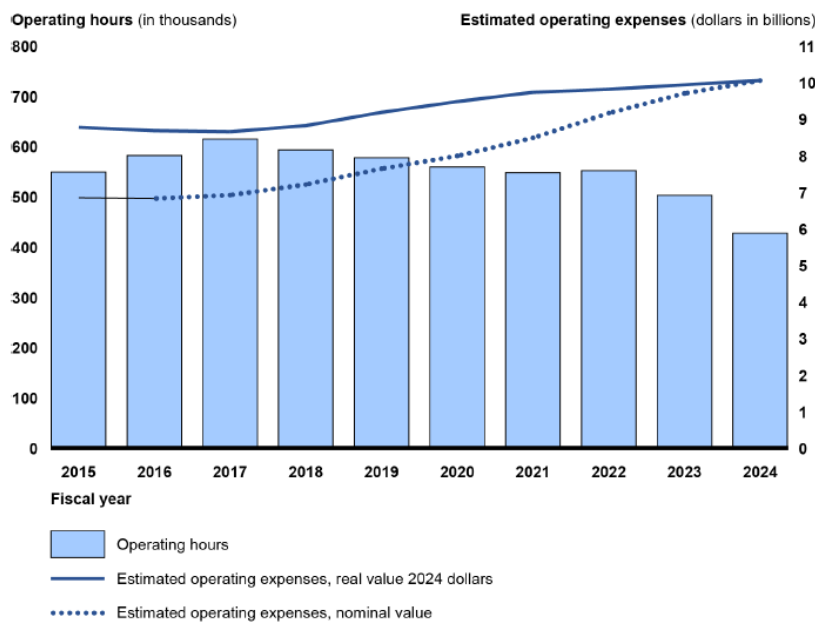
⁹See GAO, *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Address Cutter and Maintenance Workforce Challenges*, GAO-25-107222 (Washington, DC: Jun. 25, 2025). Specifically, our analysis showed that 1,104 cutter crew and support positions were vacant (about 13 percent) in fiscal year 2024. This is an increase from fiscal year 2017, in which 401 cutter crew and support positions were vacant (about 5 percent).

duct workforce analyses for its air stations by June 2026.¹⁰ Until such analysis is completed, the Coast Guard will not fully understand the resources it requires for its aviation units.

Vessel and Aircraft Availability

The Coast Guard's vessels and aircraft have faced availability challenges and have been in a state of decline for decades, which can limit the ability of Specialized Forces to conduct their missions.¹¹ Overall, the total number of operational hours generally decreased, and the total estimated operating expenses generally increased from fiscal year 2015 through fiscal year 2024, as shown in figure 3.

Figure 3: Coast Guard Vessel and Aircraft Operational Hours and Estimated Operating Expenses, Fiscal Year 2015 through Fiscal Year 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-26-108901

Note: Coast Guard operational hours include the use of aircraft, cutters, and boats for its 11 statutory missions. See 6 U.S.C. § 468(a). They do not include the time personnel may spend on missions without using vessels or aircraft. We do not include hours expended for support activities or for training. According to the Coast Guard, the service estimates its operating expenses for each mission by (1) multiplying operations and maintenance costs for supporting a vessel or aircraft by the operational hours and (2) using survey data to estimate additional personnel costs for nonvessel or aircraft-based operations.

In June 2025, we reported that the operational availability of the Coast Guard's Medium Endurance Cutters, which the Coast Guard relies on for its law enforce-

¹⁰GAO, *Coast Guard: Aircraft Fleet and Aviation Workforce Assessments Needed*, GAO-24-106374 (Washington, DC: Apr. 9, 2024). The Coast Guard agreed with our recommendation. We also made four other recommendations in the report and the Coast Guard concurred with all four. As of August 2025, four of the five recommendations remain open. We will continue monitoring Coast Guard's efforts to address these recommendations.

¹¹Vessel and aircraft availability challenges hinder the Coast Guard's ability to meet mission demands. For example, in January 2026, we reported that during fiscal years 2015 through 2024, the Coast Guard generally did not meet its drug or migrant interdiction goals. We also found that the service did not fully share information about lessons learned from maritime migrant interdiction with Federal partners. We made two recommendations to DHS to address these issues and will monitor Coast Guard actions to fully address them. See, GAO, *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Improve Maritime Interdictions*, GAO-26-107440. (Washington, DC: Jan. 13, 2026).

ment missions, declined from fiscal year 2020 through fiscal year 2024.¹² We also reported that the Coast Guard was experiencing increasing cutter maintenance challenges, and that those increasing challenges, such as equipment failure and resulting unplanned maintenance, have led to cutters missing patrol obligations. For example, Coast Guard operational reporting documents indicated that unplanned maintenance, among other things, had significantly reduced the capacity of Medium Endurance Cutters to conduct missions. Further, due to delays in receiving critical parts needed for repairs, the Coast Guard cannibalized cutters by moving working parts between cutters. According to Coast Guard data, there were 194 cannibalizations completed across the cutter fleet from February 2022 to September 2024; 145 of these involved National Security Cutters—which mostly support the drug interdiction mission. As a result, in June 2025 we made five recommendations to address cutter maintenance and workforce challenges. For example, we recommended that the Coast Guard systematically collect and assess data on instances where previously deferred maintenance may have caused cutter equipment failures and develop mitigation strategies as appropriate. DHS agreed with this recommendation and described steps the Coast Guard plans to take to improve its processes to document, develop, and validate the efficacy of a new cutter maintenance metric, which it plans to use to develop the recommended assessment. DHS estimates completing these efforts by June 2027. We will continue to monitor the status of this and the other recommendations.

The Coast Guard's asset readiness challenges are not limited to its cutters. In April 2024, we reported that the Coast Guard's aircraft generally did not meet its 71 percent availability target during fiscal year 2018 through fiscal year 2022.¹³ Coast Guard officials attributed the aircraft fleet generally not meeting availability targets to maintenance and repair challenges. As a result, we made five recommendations, including that the Coast Guard assess the type and number of helicopters, and aviation workforce size, needed to meet its mission demands. In response, in August 2025, the Coast Guard told us an analysis of alternatives and a fleet mix analysis are being ordered. It anticipates completing these steps by December 2027. We will continue monitoring Coast Guard's efforts to address these recommendations, as well as the other recommendation that remains unaddressed.¹⁴ See appendix 1 for more information on open GAO recommendations to DHS pertaining to Coast Guard personnel and assets, as of January 2026.

Acquisition Programs

We have previously reported that the Coast Guard's declining asset availability is exacerbated by persistent challenges it faces managing its planned \$40 billion acquisition programs to modernize its vessels and aircraft. For example, in September 2024 we reported on the declining availability of the Coast Guard aircraft fleet and found that the Coast Guard's cutter program faces persistent challenges including capability gaps from schedule delays.¹⁵ Furthermore, officials told us that they would not be able to increase mission activity without acquiring more assets, but acquisition delays have been a long-standing challenge for the service. Furthermore, according to officials, the acquisition process is lengthy, as it can take several years from initial request to final delivery of an asset.¹⁶

One of the Coast Guard's highest-priority programs—the Offshore Patrol Cutter—has experienced delays that will exacerbate maritime capability gaps.¹⁷ According

¹² GAO-25-107222.

¹³ GAO-24-106374. We further reported that the Coast Guard was embarking on a significant operational change from a largely short-range helicopter fleet to a medium-range fleet. However, we reported that its related planning efforts raised serious questions, including how the medium-range helicopters will interact with cutters for its drug interdiction operations.

¹⁴ The Coast Guard has addressed one of the five recommendations. In April 2024, we found that the Coast Guard's air stations do not have complete data for the Coast Guard to assess service-wide readiness. We recommended that the Coast Guard should establish procedures to uniformly collect and maintain air station readiness data. The Coast Guard concurred with this recommendation and in April 2025 updated its operational reporting manual to, among other things, help standardize the collection of air station readiness data. The manual requires air stations to report periods when they cannot meet readiness requirements and provides examples on how to do so. By issuing updated guidance requiring air stations to uniformly collect and maintain aircraft readiness data, the Coast Guard can help ensure it has complete and accurate information on Coast Guard-wide air station readiness.

¹⁵ GAO-24-107785.

¹⁶ GAO-26-107440.

¹⁷ In June 2023, we found that the Coast Guard's management of its Offshore Patrol Cutter acquisitions continued to face challenges we had previously identified. We made five recommendations to the Coast Guard, including that it develop a technology maturation plan and update its acquisition policy to require programs to complete routing of distributive systems as

to the Coast Guard, it urgently needs Offshore Patrol Cutters to replace aging cutters that conduct law enforcement and search-and-rescue operations.¹⁸ However, in November 2025, we reported that the Coast Guard’s plan to acquire 25 Offshore Patrol Cutters was delayed by more than 5 years.¹⁹ Notwithstanding delays, ship design remains incomplete, and continued delays and cost overruns are likely.²⁰

As a result, we made four recommendations in November 2025, including that the program stabilizes design before starting construction of additional ships. Incorporating the knowledge gained from testing—as well as other shipbuilding leading practices—into the procurement process could help the Coast Guard make better investment decisions. It could also improve the timeliness of future ship deliveries. While the agency agreed with two of the four recommendations, we maintain that all four recommendations are warranted and will continue to monitor their implementation.

In summary, the Coast Guard’s Specialized Forces units include a range of specialized capabilities that are vital to the service’s ability to fulfill its missions, including those pertaining to maritime security operations. The Coast Guard received nearly \$25 billion in supplemental funding in fiscal year 2025 for various acquisitions and in support of efforts to modernize operations and capabilities and faces the difficult decision of determining how best to invest these resources.²¹ We have identified long-standing challenges with the Coast Guard’s management of its programs and tradeoff decisions among its mission priorities and have made recommendations to help address these challenges. Addressing our 20 open recommendations pertaining to the Coast Guard’s workforce and assets would help ensure that the service efficiently uses its resources to carry out its maritime security operations—including those carried out by Specialized Forces—and support national interests.²²

Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member McIver, and Members of the subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

APPENDIX I.—RELATED OPEN RECOMMENDATIONS

Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Improve Maritime Interdictions. GAO–26–107440. Washington, DC: January 13, 2026.

- *Recommendation.*—The Secretary of Homeland Security should ensure the Commandant of the Coast Guard implements performance measures for the migrant interdiction mission that effectively measure the service’s efforts.
- *Recommendation.*—The Secretary of Homeland Security should ensure the Operation Vigilant Sentry task force implements a process to identify and address lessons learned following real-world events and exercises with all relevant Federal partner agencies, and shares relevant information with those partners.

Offshore Patrol Cutter: Coast Guard Should Gain Key Knowledge Before Buying More Ships. GAO–26–107583. Washington, DC: November 25, 2025.

- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the Offshore Patrol Cutter (OPC) program demonstrates that the stage 2 design is stable prior to authorizing construction of additional stage 2 OPCs by (1) completing basic and functional design, including routing of major distributive systems that affect multiple zones of the ship, in a 3D model with reliable vendor-furnished information and (2) successfully testing an integrated prototype of the davit in a realistic environment, consistent with shipbuilding leading practices.
- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard, in collaboration with the Navy, should develop a memorandum of agreement to clarify and document agreement on how the evaluation of deficiencies and on-going surveillance of

part of functional design prior to lead ship construction. Two of the recommendations have not yet been fully addressed. See, GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Offshore Patrol Cutter Program Needs to Mature Technology and Design*, GAO–23–105805 (Washington, DC: Jun. 20, 2023).

¹⁸ Admiral Linda L. Fagan, Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard, testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, 118th Cong., 2d sess., July 24, 2024.

¹⁹ GAO–26–107583. We also reported that the program is at risk of not meeting its cost goals, in part, because the program used outdated cost information to establish them.

²⁰ The Coast Guard plans to acquire the 25 Offshore Patrol Cutters in four phases. In July 2025, the Coast Guard terminated two of four ships from the first phase contract for default.

²¹ Pub. L. No. 119–21, tit. IV, § 40001, 139 Stat. 72, 127 (2025). These funds are available for obligation through fiscal year 2029.

²² We made 26 recommendations in the reports covered by this statement. The Coast Guard implemented four of these recommendations, 20 remain open, and two were closed as no longer valid.

Austal's EVM system will be coordinated between the Coast Guard and SUPSHIP throughout the duration of the OPC program.

- *Recommendation.*—The DHS Secretary should ensure that the DHS Under Secretary for Management directs the Coast Guard to revise the OPC acquisition program baseline to include cost goals for each stage.
- *Recommendation.*—The DHS Secretary should ensure that the DHS Under Secretary for Management directs the Coast Guard to document a plan for acquiring stage 3 OPCs that identifies (1) how results from operational testing of OPC stages 1 and 2 will be incorporated into stage 3 procurement activities, such as developing the request for proposals, and contingency plans if this testing is delayed; and (2) how leading practices for ship design will be incorporated into stage 3.

Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Address Cutter Maintenance and Workforce Challenges. GAO-25-107222. Washington, DC: June 25, 2025.

- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should systematically collect and assess data on instances where previously-deferred maintenance may have caused cutter equipment failures and develop mitigation strategies as appropriate.
- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should complete Ship Structure and Machinery Evaluation Boards for all cutter types at the intervals prescribed by policy.
- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should systematically collect and assess data on which parts and systems across the cutter fleet are or will become obsolete and develop mitigation strategies as appropriate.
- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should systematically collect and assess data on cutter days lost due to unplanned maintenance issues.
- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should regularly collect and analyze data on staff availability for cutter crew and support personnel positions, including which cutter workforce positions are temporarily empty across the cutter fleet, and use this information to inform personnel assignments.

Coast Guard: Enhanced Data and Planning Could Help Address Service Member Retention Issues. GAO-25-107869. Washington, DC.: April 23, 2025.

- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the Office of Workforce Requirements, Systems, and Analytics implements additional mechanisms to increase response rates for its Career Intention Survey.
- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the Office of Workforce Requirements, Systems, and Analytics analyzes the potential for nonresponse bias in its Career Intention Survey results.
- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the Talent Management Transformation Program Integration Office develops a clear plan, including how retention initiatives align with strategic objectives and time frames and milestones for implementation, to track progress and gauge program performance.

Coast Guard: Aircraft Fleet and Aviation Workforce Assessments Needed. GAO-24-106374. Washington, DC: April 9, 2024.

- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should establish a process to regularly evaluate Coast Guard-wide air station readiness data.
- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should assess the type of helicopters the Coast Guard requires to meet its mission demands, as part of an analysis of alternatives.
- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should assess the number of helicopters the Coast Guard requires to meet its mission demands, as part of a fleet mix analysis.
- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should assess and determine the aviation workforce levels it requires to meet its mission needs.

Coast Guard Acquisitions: Offshore Patrol Cutter Program Needs to Mature Technology and Design. GAO-23-105805. Washington, DC: June 20, 2023.

- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that OPC program officials develop a technology maturation plan for the davit prior to builder's trials. This plan should identify potential courses of action to address davit technical immaturity, including assessing technology alternatives should the current davit continue to face development challenges, and a date

by which the Coast Guard will make a go/no-go decision to pursue such a technology alternative.

- *Recommendation.*—The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that OPC program officials test an integrated prototype of the davit in a realistic environment prior to stage 1 builder's trials.

RELATED GAO PRODUCTS

Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Improve Maritime Interdictions. GAO-26-107440. Washington, DC: January 13, 2026.

Offshore Patrol Cutter: Coast Guard Should Gain Key Knowledge Before Buying More Ships. GAO-26-107583. Washington, DC: November 25, 2025.

Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Address Cutter Maintenance and Workforce Challenges. GAO-25-107222. Washington, DC: June 25, 2025.

Coast Guard: Enhanced Data and Planning Could Help Address Service Member Retention Issues. GAO-25-107869. Washington, DC: April 23, 2025.

Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Address Persistent Challenges Hindering Efforts to Counter Illicit Maritime Drug Smuggling. GAO-24-107785. Washington, DC: September 19, 2024.

Coast Guard: Aircraft Fleet and Aviation Workforce Assessments Needed. GAO-24-106374. Washington, DC: April 9, 2024.

Coast Guard Acquisitions: Offshore Patrol Cutter Program Needs to Mature Technology and Design. GAO-23-105805. Washington, DC: June 20, 2023.

Coast Guard: Assessing Deployable Specialized Forces' Workforce Needs Could Improve Efficiency and Reduce Potential Overlap or Gaps in Capabilities. GAO-20-33. Washington, DC: November 21, 2019.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Thank you, Ms. MacLeod.

Members will be recognized by order of seniority for their 5 minutes of questioning. I will recognize myself for 5 minutes of questioning.

Ms. MacLeod, your report is quite troubling, and so I would like to get to the root causes of this on staffing. Are you saying that the Coast Guard—the Coast Guard has a number of authorized positions, right? I mean, this is the number of people you should have, and are we short on the authorized positions, or do we need more authorized positions or both?

I mean, what is your estimate of what we need in order to get the Coast Guard up to its strength, the strength that is needed in order to carry out its mission? More authorized positions or we just need to fill the ones that we have?

Ms. MACLEOD. At the time of our review, the Coast Guard was short of its authorized positions. Since then, in Force Design 2028, the Coast Guard has plans to increase authorized positions, which we envision would have—they would have the same challenges in recruiting and retention with even more positions to fill.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Are they short right now recruiting up to their authorized positions?

Ms. MACLEOD. At the time of our review, yes.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Do you know that is still the case?

Ms. MACLEOD. The Coast Guard reported its highest recruiting numbers last year, and then it's on track to meet its targets.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Which means filling every authorized position?

Ms. MACLEOD. Correct.

Mr. GIMENEZ. OK. So now if we have the number of people that we need, the problem then becomes to the assets that they need in order to carry out their mission, which are the ships and the aircraft of the Coast Guard, correct?

Ms. MACLEOD. Yes.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Right. So you're talking about ships and aircraft. Is it due to age? Is it due to the ships and the construction of them themselves? Is it due to the fact that we don't have enough maintenance personnel?

What is causing the deficiency in the readiness of these assets?

Ms. MACLEOD. Our work has shown more recently the maintenance challenges facing these older cutters and aircraft are increasing.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Because we don't have enough people or it's just a matter they're old and they're just breaking down more often?

Ms. MACLEOD. The age of the cutters. Some of the parts are unavailable, obsolete parts and things like that.

Mr. GIMENEZ. And the—you're saying that the plan to replace these assets is way behind schedule and billions of dollars over?

Ms. MACLEOD. Yes.

Mr. GIMENEZ. OK. That calls for another hearing, I guess.

All right. So, Admiral—I got a couple of minutes left—what percentage of the sanctioned oil vessels that are out there, what percentage of them do you think that you actually, you know, interdict?

Admiral BARATA. Chairman, good morning. A very small percentage, frankly. We estimate that there is probably about 6- or 800 sanctioned dark fleet vessels in and about—between Iran and Venezuela, China and Russia. We have interdicted about 7, 8 over the last 2 months.

Some other countries are starting to chip in. I think over in the Mediterranean, we've seen the British and the French do some things, but it's a very small percentage. They operate out of the rule of law and on a consistent basis.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Six-to-eight hundred of these ghost ships?

Admiral BARATA. That's what we estimate operating around the world.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Wow. OK. What makes it so difficult to spot, interdict, et cetera? Just assets or can you spot them or are they just completely off the radar?

Admiral BARATA. It's a combination of things, Chairman. They are—they obfuscate their position a lot of times. You know, all of our large commercial foreign vessels are required to use an automatic identification system. Many of these vessels have the means to easily have two or three sets of AIS aboard and kind-of project their position somewhere else.

They use false documents, they use false ownership. They claim the numbers of vessels that have already been destroyed and taken apart in other places so that they look like they're another vessel. So even when we contract them, though, they are very hard to interdict.

For instance, some of these vessels that we've seen in Venezuela, if they're coming from the Middle East or the Far East, they'll go around the south—the southern tip of Africa and go right into Venezuela.

So without the right assets and the reasoning to board them on the high seas, it's very hard to get aboard. I think you've seen us do a lot of counter drug interdictions on smaller vessels and even in dhows over in the Middle East.

You know, some of the vessels we're going on right now are 1,100 feet long, very large crude carriers, very hard to interdict at sea without some support from the Department of War or other assets.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Fair enough. Thank you. I yield now.

I now recognize Mr. Carter from Louisiana for his 5 minutes.

Mr. CARTER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Admiral Barata, let's discuss the recent boardings of oil tankers. First, I want to note that this committee has requested a Classified briefing on these operations, and we haven't received one yet. I hope we can work to make that happen in the near future.

My question concerns the video that administration has posted on some of these operations. I understand it may be good PR, but I want to make sure that we're not broadcasting sensitive tactics or the identities of our special operators to our enemies, putting them in harm's way.

Is the Coast Guard being given the opportunity to review, and, if necessary, redact or block any of these videos before they share it with the world?

Admiral BARATA. Ranking Member, good morning. We see a lot of this footage before it goes out, not all of it. It depends. Some of it is Department of War footage, some of it is Department of Homeland Security, but it's all being processed through the White House.

I think they are taking a close look at protecting the identity and the tactics that our teams use.

Mr. CARTER. I think the best way to do that, obviously, is to have you guys involved. I won't put you in the middle of that, but, Mr. Chairman, I would ask that we, where possible, request that the administration has heightened sensitivity of the protection of our men and women who are carrying out these highly-sensitive operations, just to be sure that in our haste to bring public awareness that we don't put our service men and women in harm's way.

As you know, one of the oil tankers the Coast Guard recently targeted, the Bella 1, later renamed the Marinera, was able to bypass U.S. forces and escape into the Atlantic. While the Coast Guard—while the Coast Guard pursued it, Russian military reportedly began repositioning naval assets as a submarine to protect the ship from seizure.

Thankfully, U.S. forces eventually intercepted the tanker without incident, but the episode raises some questions about the potential impacts of these boardings. While enforcing sanctions is important—and we all can agree we do not want to inadvertently escalate into direct hostilities with nations, including Russia—what contingency plans are in place when the Coast Guard is pursuing these vessels and might encounter foreign military vessels?

What are the rules of engagement your forces are operating under, and would you please, if you run out of time, if we can back this up with some written documentations on the actual policies that we have for the rules of engagement?

Admiral BARATA. Ranking Member, thanks for the question there.

I—as far as the risks and the protocols and the contingencies in place, we put stringent security measures, stringent contingency measures in place. In the case of the Bella 1, we worked closely with our Department of War partners over at EUCOM. You know,

as far as Russian assets—Russian military assets, deployers, we ensured that we weren't at risk of anything happening there. We were never, you know, concerned at the risk level with Russian deployers impacting our ability to conduct those law enforcement activities.

We can give you a little bit more—you mentioned a Classified briefing, sir. We'd be happy to do that, and we've prepared that, and we can set up a time; we'd like to come over and talk to you a little bit more about it.

Mr. CARTER. That would be great.

So without going into anything that might be confidential or might be—that we should do in a more secure setting, the contingency plan of what happens in the case of meeting some other resurgence that may have bigger power or anticipated—maybe even an ambush, we should always, obviously—and I'm preaching to the choir, but talking from a Member of Congress' standpoint. We want to make sure that we're giving you all the tools that you need in our quest to capture these illegal vessels, that we never put at risk our men and women in uniform who are out doing an incredible job.

I can't thank you enough for the incredible work that you do, not just when the cameras are rolling, as they've been doing most recently, but when no one is watching. Rather, it is search and rescue or capturing these tankers, we know that the work of the Coast Guard is vast. You guys have been phenomenal partners for us in Louisiana, particularly in the aftermath of these horrific storms that we continue to have facing our communities.

You're sitting before Congress. Tell us, what can we do—and my time is already up. But if you could just finish, tell us what we can do to arm you better. If you had a magic wand that you could wave today, recognizing that this committee, particularly this one in a bipartisan vein, wants to give you the tools that you need to carry out your functions safely.

Admiral BARATA. Ranking Member, I think the No. 1 thing that you can give us is resources. I think under the Reconciliation Act, we have tried to get after some of the things that Ms. MacLeod highlighted, assets.

What we need on an annual basis is the O-E money, the operating funds to hire more personnel to operate these ships to do our Deployable Specialized Forces missions and also sustain those assets as we move forward. We really appreciate your support.

Mr. CARTER. Thank you, Rear Admiral.

Mr. GIMENEZ. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize the gentleman from Arizona, Mr. Crane.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank the witnesses for showing up to this subcommittee on front-line defenders, how the Coast Guard's Deployable Special Forces combat narcoterrorists and other maritime threats on high seas.

Admiral, when we talk about Deployable Specialized Forces, are we primarily talking about VBSS?

Admiral BARATA. We're talking about a group of teams, which includes our Maritime Security Response Team, our—both forces team that deploy domestically and internationally, our Port Secu-

rity Units that do expeditionary. There's a number of units that fall under that category for us.

Mr. CRANE. OK. Thank you, Admiral. I have a little bit of experience with VBSS myself. I was on a VBSS team on the USS Gettysburg a couple decades ago. My last job in the Navy was in the SEAL teams. My job was to train and coach SEALs on the West Coast on how to do VBSS. So a little bit of experience with what you guys are doing, and I appreciate—I know that's a very complicated mission set, and I appreciate all the hard work that you guys do.

Admiral, I want to ask you if you believe that the President of the United States, the Commander in Chief, under Article II of the Constitution has broad Executive powers for maritime security? Do you recognize that, sir?

Admiral BARATA. Yes. Yes, I recognize that.

Mr. CRANE. Do you recognize that the President made direct maritime interdictions when enforcing sanctions or national security measures, Admiral?

Admiral BARATA. Yes, I do. We follow that.

Mr. CRANE. OK. So one of the things that's concerned me as a former service member myself is a video that was made by Senator Mark Kelly and several other Senators who just a couple months ago, they made a video to tell service members that they don't need to follow unlawful orders.

Admiral, are you familiar with this video?

Admiral BARATA. I have not seen the video itself. I was following the news story, obviously, and the escalation of the dissension.

Mr. CRANE. It made national news, did it not, Admiral?

Admiral BARATA. It did, indeed.

Mr. CRANE. Did you or any of the other high-ranking Coast Guard officers that you work with fear that a video like that might undermine your chain of command?

Admiral BARATA. From my standpoint, I have found that our service members will follow lawful orders if they—you know, as given.

Mr. CRANE. You know, I find it interesting, Admiral, that I didn't see any videos made like that from Members of Congress during the Biden administration.

I want to submit an article for the record. This is from CNN. "Biden finalizes new rules for U.S. drone strikes." President Joe Biden assigned a long-awaited Classified policy tightening the rules for the CIA and Pentagon to carry out deadly drone strikes and commando raids conducted outside of traditional war zones, U.S. officials said on Friday. This was October 7, 2022.

Did you notice that no Members of Congress, including Senator Kelly, made any videos during this time, Admiral?

Admiral BARATA. I was—I'm not familiar with that article.

Mr. CRANE. But you didn't see any videos, did you? I didn't.

Admiral BARATA. Not that I recall, no.

Mr. CRANE. As service members, we tend to follow these types of things, right?

Admiral BARATA. Yes.

Mr. CRANE. I found that very interesting, that they weren't making videos during that time frame about whether or not service members follow lawful orders or not.

I think we all know that, right, Admiral? Don't we get that training in basic training, that we are not supposed to follow unlawful orders?

Admiral BARATA. Absolutely. At all the session sources, that is what we train our personnel.

Mr. CRANE. So did you find that video a little bit odd, knowing that we all know that?

Admiral BARATA. I find that it's—you know, for me, as I reflect on it, I think it's unnecessary. I think our personnel will know to follow lawful orders and to question unlawful orders.

Mr. CRANE. Yes. That's what I thought, too.

Admiral, you guys—Congress delivered for you guys in a pretty big way during the reconciliation package. Is that correct?

Admiral BARATA. That is absolutely correct.

Mr. CRANE. We gave you about \$25 billion. Is that correct?

Admiral BARATA. Yes. Generational change for the Coast Guard, Congressman.

Mr. CRANE. You guys had about \$7 billion in maintenance backlog for infrastructure. Is that correct?

Admiral BARATA. Yes, that's correct.

Mr. CRANE. How do you see the Coast Guard deploying that money to make sure that the Coast Guard is ready to carry out the Nation's national security and homeland security needs in the next couple years?

Admiral BARATA. We—under Force Design 2028, Congressman, we have reorganized to ensure that the Coast Guard can obligate all of those funds quickly. We're not waiting for the 5 years that they are available to us. We want to spend those right away on maintenance, on shore infrastructure to get after the problems that we have.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you. My last question for you, Admiral, is do you feel in the last couple months with the boat strikes and everything else going on, do you feel like you have given orders to your men to carry out any of these—any of these strikes, any of these interdictions that have been deemed unlawful?

Admiral BARATA. The Department of War has had to lead for these kinetic strikes. The Coast Guard has not been involved with them. So I can answer that we have not. I have not felt that way at all.

Mr. CRANE. Thank you, Admiral.

I yield back.

Mr. GIMENEZ. I thank the gentleman from Arizona. Are you submitting that report for the record?

Mr. CRANE. Yes.

Mr. GIMENEZ. Without objection.

[The information follows:]

BIDEN FINALIZES NEW RULES FOR US DRONE STRIKES

*Oct 7, 2022**By Katie Bo Lillis*

President Joe Biden has signed a long-awaited classified policy tightening the rules for the CIA and the Pentagon to carry out deadly drone strikes and commando raids conducted outside of traditional war zones, US officials said on Friday.

With only Iraq and Syria still considered by the US to be so-called areas of active hostilities—or conventional war zones—the new policy is geared toward countries like Somalia, Yemen and now, Afghanistan, where the US continues to carry out counterterrorism strikes from afar.

In practice, the new policy signals that the US is limiting its reliance on drone strikes, once a ubiquitous counterterrorism tool that has drawn increased criticism in recent years in the wake of a series of high-profile revelations about civilian casualties.

The new policy requires the president's approval before a lethal drone strike or commando raid can be launched on a particular counterterrorism target, according to a senior administration official—and that individual must be named, although the policy does allow the president to waive that and other requirements at his discretion. The president must also approve which groups in which countries are considered to have potential targets as members.

The New York Times first reported on the new rules.

It also institutionalizes a series of standards for taking action against a target, including that counterterrorism operators must establish with “near certainty” that there will be no civilian casualties in the strike, and that the target poses a continuing, imminent threat to the United States.

The policy also requires operators to obtain permission from the State Department's chief of mission in the country in question, the senior administration official said.

White House Homeland Security adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall, who spearheaded the nearly 2-year review which led to the new policy, said in a statement that the guidance “directs [the Biden] Administration to be discerning and agile in protecting Americans against evolving global terrorist challenges” and “requires that U.S. counterterrorism operations meet the highest standards of precision and rigor, including for identifying appropriate targets and minimizing civilian casualties.”

In Syria and Iraq, where the US maintains a military presence, commanders in the field will continue to have more discretion on operational decisions.

Biden had quietly put in place many of the limitations that the new policy now formalizes when he took office. The policy now officially reverses a loosening of Obama-era rules under then-President Donald Trump, which had pushed authority for approving lethal strikes down the chain of command.

“I think this is overwhelmingly a return to a rigorous process, to an intel-heavy consideration of targets and [an] intense role for the president himself in approving the use of this particular tool,” the senior administration official told CNN.

Some counterterrorism operators and analysts have likely chafed at the tightened restrictions, sources familiar with the deliberations over the new rules say. But the broader shift in US priorities away from counterterrorism and toward competition with China and Russia—and the increased political scrutiny on civilian casualties—to a certain degree makes the changes inevitable, these people said.

The new policy follows a separate Pentagon initiative announced in August designed to help reduce the number of civilians killed and injured by US military operations, particular drone strikes.

The US military has been criticized for years for killing civilians in drone strikes but came under increased scrutiny after the military conducted a botched strike during the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan last August that killed 10 civilians, seven of them children.

The department also faced criticism over a 2019 airstrike in Syria that killed multiple civilians. The military acknowledged the deaths in that strike in November 2021, after The New York Times reported them. The department ultimately held no one accountable for the 2019 strike.

The Pentagon action plan is tasked with building a framework that will put people who are trained to consider civilian harm issues throughout the military, both in combatant commands and at more senior levels of the Defense Department.

US military drone strikes have dramatically decreased in recent years in many of the countries that the new policy impacts. According to data maintained by the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, there have been no US drone strikes

in Pakistan and Yemen since 2018 and 2019, respectively. In Somalia, US drone strikes in Somalia have dropped precipitously since Biden took office.

But although the military is required by Congress to disclose data about its counterterrorism strikes, including civilian casualties, the CIA is not—making it much more difficult to judge how its operations have shifted over time.

Some former intelligence officials take it a step further, claiming that CIA drone strikes kill far fewer civilians than the military's—but because the agency's figures aren't public, and outside groups that track drone strike casualties say the US military routinely undercounts its collateral deaths, an accurate comparison is difficult to draw.

Mr. GIMENEZ. I now recognize the gentlewoman from South Carolina, Mrs. Biggs, for her 5 minutes.

Mrs. BIGGS. Thank you so much. Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

I'll direct my first question to Admiral Barata. So Force Design—and I may overlap a little bit with Congressman Crane, but hopefully it will kind-of go in a different direction.

So the Force Design 2028 outlines a plan to modernize the Coast Guard and to expand deployable capabilities. So how does Force Design 2028 aim to expand the recruitment of DSF personnel and set up training centers to equip the future of the DSF work force? For instance, some—does the Special Mission Training Center have the capacity to support that growth?

Admiral BARATA. Congresswoman, good morning. So under Force Design 2028, we do intend to expand our work force by 15,000 personnel. That will include personnel to man the ships that you've helped us acquire, the aircraft, but it will also be operators for our unmanned systems and also our Deployable Specialized Forces.

So we intend to grow, and we envision a very agile, adaptable work force that includes a lot of Deployable Specialized Forces. The Special Missions Training Center is a real valuable part of that. Our MLEA Academy in Charleston is also a big part of that for our baseline law enforcement, and then the FMTC is more of our advanced tactics.

You know, we'll—we plan to make some investments there. We need some assistance with the infrastructure there, the number of personnel who are training, the type of training that we do, some of these vertical insertion tactics that we use for VBSS.

So those type of things are the ones that we need, Congresswoman.

Mrs. BIGGS. Thank you. My second question, what are the details on the Coast Guard's standup of a DSF command, and why is it necessary and what value does it add?

Admiral BARATA. Congresswoman, I appreciate that question.

For us—and in response to Ms. MacLeod's work at GAO and her colleagues, we have taken a look at DSF, and we think we need to unify the command structure for all of our forces there. We have seen functional commands work over in Department of War, like SOCOM and JSOC and some of these other functional commands. We have seen it work for us as well for our Coast Guard Cyber Command.

So we think that unifying these elements will help us man, train, equip, deploy our specialized forces in a better way, equip them in a better way, you know, whether that's, you know, travel money, whether that's funding for weapons, specialized tactics, all of those things.

We think that putting that under one header will help us be a lot more efficient.

Mrs. BIGGS. Great. I'll go a little bit further. What is the anticipated size of the command, and where might it be located?

Admiral BARATA. Congresswoman, we're still early in that. We are hoping by October to have a location.

We do have a team put together that's making some proposals, and we're going to base some of the factors on, you know, can we deploy out of there, can we command out of there, can we support the operational commander, but we have not narrowed that down.

The exact size still is to be determined. We don't plan to move any of our current units, any of our Deployable Specialized Forces, the units themselves. What we do expect is a command element that can focus on the training, that can focus on the funding and the equipping, and how we deploy them.

Mrs. BIGGS. Well, I'll just end since my time is about to expire. But I thank you for your service and for what you do. I have a huge respect for you and am very grateful. So thank you.

Admiral BARATA. Thank you, Congresswoman.

Mrs. BIGGS. I'll yield back.

Mr. GIMENEZ. The gentlewoman yields back.

I now recognize the gentleman from Tennessee, Mr. Van Epps.

Mr. VAN EPPS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Admiral Barata and Director MacLeod, for being here today.

The United States has the best Armed Forces in the world, and as we've heard already, the Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces are one of the most agile. Seeing their work in the public eye recently has been gratifying, and I want to thank you, Admiral Barata, for the part the Coast Guard has played in making our country and the waters around us safer.

The DSF is often the tip of the spear in actions that can quickly become interagency operations. When a DSF unit boards a vessel, for example, the service members may need to quickly loop in interagency partners as they find illegal cargo.

Admiral, can you walk us through the maritime operational threat response process used to manage the moving pieces of interagency coordination between the Coast Guard, Department of Justice, State, and the Department of War and others?

Admiral BARATA. Congressman, good morning. Yes. So the—our process there for counter drug for these dark shadow fleets are very similar.

Once we get aboard, the first thing we do is we want to establish the nationality of the vessel, and we then have to call back to the motor process. The motor process, what that involves is the entirety of the interagency, Department of State, Department of Justice, other elements, maybe even in the case of the tankers, Department of Energy, up to the White House. So that we ensure that we are following international law and that we are able to exercise U.S. law and authorities aboard the vessel.

So, for instance, when we board a drug vessel, we'll call back to the motor process, and we'll either engage one of our bilateral agreements that we have or we will go back to the Department of State to call that individual country and assess whether or not they

agree, concur with the vessel's claim, or they're allowing us to operate on a vessel that's under their—subject to their authority.

So on the tankers we're doing something similar. Once we do that, we know we're in a good position to follow the law.

Mr. VAN EPPS. Great. Thank you. Are there gaps that exist between the Coast Guard and these interagency partners when conducting operations, and is there anything we can do in Congress to help close any of those gaps?

Admiral BARATA. We've found that it's been very successful in practice. As I've said, we had our largest counter drug year last year in fiscal year 2025, 511,000 pounds over 3 times some of our previous years. Our tanker operations, I will tell you the motor process has been vital for us—for our success here.

But there's no gaps that I can see right now, Congressman.

Mr. VAN EPPS. Great. Thanks. Thanks, Admiral. Pivoting here, the Trump administration has prioritized Western Hemisphere security and law enforcement, such as enforcing sanctioned Venezuelan oil, and the Coast Guard has been a crucial part of the overall approach. In the past year, it has seized huge amounts of illicit substances and disrupted criminal networks.

Admiral, can you talk about how criminal organizations are adapting to increased law enforcement operations in the Caribbean and East Pacific?

Admiral BARATA. Congressman, I can give you a couple examples. We've talked about the dark fleet tanker operations. You know, the use of those—of those that have—the funds and revenue that come from the oil that's being sold overseas is then replicated back in and put into the organizations. So we have seen that.

We've seen that revenues from illegal fishing, from illegal arms sales, human smuggling. Those are all being used to feed drug networks. They're being used to then come back and rearm and re-resource some of the traffickers for semi-submersibles and those type of assets that are—that they know are really hard to find at sea. So we've had to adjust our tactics as we go.

Mr. VAN EPPS. One follow-up to that. How are the Coast Guard's maritime on your—to that note, how are your maritime drug interdiction operations changing, and what do you need to continue adapting to new trends?

Admiral BARATA. I think what we need is exactly what Congress has given us, and we need to obligate those funds. We need more cutters, we need more unmanned systems, we need more intelligence programs.

You know, I think what last year showed us, you know, for Operation Pacific Viper over in the Eastern Pacific, that when we have a cutter like a national security cutter that has a hitch arm, a helicopter on the back with precision marksmen and the right small bullets over the horizon, the right intelligence, and the right tactical teams aboard to gather the evidence that we need, we are very effective in stopping the drug traffickers.

Mr. VAN EPPS. Admiral, thank you so much. Thank you for what you do.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. GIMENEZ. The gentleman yields back.

I thank the witnesses for their valuable testimony. The Members having no further questions, the Members of the subcommittee may have some additional questions for the witnesses, and we would ask the witnesses to respond to these in writing pursuant to Committee Rule VII(E). The hearing record will be held open for 10 days without objection.

The subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 10:50 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

