

ISSUE BRIEF

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All Congressional Hands on Deck: Cutting Coast Guard Cutters Big Mistake

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The National Security Cutter (NSC) is the Coast Guard's flagship for the future. Commandant Admiral Robert Papp recently declared, "The NSC is proving to be a vital instrument for protecting American maritime security and prosperity."¹ Yet in his fiscal year (FY) 2013 budget request, the President cuts the two vessels that were supposed to complete the fleet. Congress should restore funding for these cutters to ensure that the Coast Guard can sail a fleet capable of protecting U.S. security.

NSC Provides Critical Capabilities. With capabilities for law enforcement, search and rescue, and defense missions, the NSC is an essential component of the Coast Guard's effort to protect the American public and ensure U.S. maritime sovereignty. Operating with higher sustained transit speeds

and greater endurance and range, the NSC enables the Coast Guard to implement the increased security responsibilities of the post-9/11 world. Unlike its 1960s-era predecessors,² the NSC is designed to tackle the evolving mission requirements of the 21st century.

The NSC improves the Coast Guard's effort to achieve maritime domain awareness by recognizing potential threats before they arrive in U.S. waters.³ The NSC's improvements in the safety, speed, and reliability of vessel screening and targeting enable the Coast Guard to better fulfill these responsibilities.⁴

Threats to National Security. One of the NSC's intended responsibilities is to serve in concert with the U.S. Navy. President Obama recently issued strategic guidance indicating the Department of Defense will shift its focus more toward the Asia-Pacific region. The NSC's long range and endurance would be well suited to operating in this geographic area. The U.S. will not be able to rely on a stunted fleet to fulfill this requirement.

This decision also sends a signal to adversaries that they can operate more boldly in the maritime domain. The Coast Guard's reduced patrolling capability may enable

drug traffickers to operate more easily. China's navy, which has recently displayed aggressive behavior, may become further emboldened as the U.S. cannot maintain a presence in the South China Sea and its own waters.

Spread too thin, America's sea services will not be able to confront all the threats they face. Whether the current Administration wants to acknowledge these varied threats is irrelevant. Congress should reverse the cut to the NSC fleet to ensure that the Coast Guard can fulfill its responsibilities amidst emerging maritime threats.

Overtaxing the Fleet. This is not the first time the NSC fleet has shrunk. The Coast Guard originally called for a fleet of 16 NSCs but eventually reduced that number amidst budget constraints to eight. Cutting two additional vessels, or one-fourth of the required fleet size, would put undue strain on the existing six cutters.

The NSC is meant to replace a fleet that is already working overtime. The Hamilton class high-endurance cutters (HEC) average 43 years old. Furthermore, the President calls for the decommissioning of two HECs in his FY 2013 budget request. This means the

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Coast Guard's capability is dwindling even more rapidly. Allowing the last two planned NSCs to slip out of the budget puts additional pressure on the remaining vessels and does not adequately address threats to national security.

Security Threats, Not Budgets, Should Drive Decision Making.

The Obama Administration has put forth little justification for reducing the NSC fleet. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano recently testified that the Administration made the decision "in light of what the Navy is doing."⁵ Since that hearing, no one from the Coast Guard or Department of Homeland Security has elaborated on what this means.

Napolitano's testimony may have implied that, like the Navy, the Coast Guard should trim its shipbuilding plans to fit budget cuts. This argument illustrates two problems with the Administration's decision making. First, Napolitano's justification that the Coast Guard should mirror the decisions made by the Navy vastly oversimplifies the purpose of both sea services. Second, a shrinking Navy means that the NSC's capabilities will be in higher demand in the future as the Coast Guard must cover

more water. With shrinking forces overall, the U.S. should not reduce this versatile fleet.

"Savings" Argument Is Questionable. The Administration's decision to cut the seventh and eighth NSCs from the projected fleet is extremely short-sighted. Budget materials do not explain the immediate savings realized by cutting advanced funding for the vessels. The Administration also does not account for the cost implication this cut will have on the entire fleet, both in materials and maintenance costs. The NSC program has already realized significant savings through increasing efficiencies and economies of scale. A cost analysis should be performed over the entire fleet to examine what effect these proposed cuts would have.

Admiral Papp explained in his recent address that "the Maritime Transportation System accounts for nearly 700 billion dollars of the U.S. gross domestic product and 51 million U.S. jobs."⁶ In this context, the NSC fleet would prove a wise investment. The platform's far-reaching capabilities would enable the Coast Guard to better defend against threats before they are able

to get within range of U.S. ports. The President's budget proclaims \$1.4 billion saved by cutting two NSCs. However, many argue that the Coast Guard actually provides an extremely cost-effective security force.⁷ Before cutting these vessels, Congress should consider the level of risk to maritime security the U.S. is willing to accept.

NSC Is a Crucial Asset to Maritime Security. The Coast Guard has not changed its requirement for a fleet of eight National Security Cutters, but President Obama continues to weaken America's security forces to feign fiscal responsibility. Coast Guard officials should continue the call for a capable cutter force, and in the coming budget cycle, Congress should weigh not just the cost of the NSCs but also what America is willing to risk by reducing its maritime security forces.

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