

## LCS and the Future of CNT Operations in 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet

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<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> The renewed interest in counter narcoterrorism (CNT) in the 4th Fleet AOR highlights the Coast Guard's problem with aging cutters and helicopters and underscores the Navy's lack of frigates. Deficits in both cutter and helicopter acquisitions in the Coast Guard have a direct and negative impact on the Coast Guard's presence in 4th Fleet. While the Coast Guard awaits new Medium Endurance Cutters and the Navy a new frigate, the DoN is sending the fledgling LCS to support CNT operations. Despite its many problems, the LCS is the ideal platform to reinforce the Coast Guard's presence and bolster the CNT mission. The LCS is fast, can be outfitted with an ASW mission module, and can carry Coast Guard law enforcement detachments (LEDETs) and Navy H-60 helicopter detachments. The LCS and its state-of-the-art ASW mission module could help combat the rising narco submarine and low-profile vessel (LPV) problem. Furthermore, while the Coast Guard faces increasing demand on their aging helicopter fleet, introducing either variant of the Navy H-60 to the CNT mission would relieve the burden. However, only the MH-60R helicopter has comprehensive ISR capabilities and ASW acoustic processing capabilities, making it the preferable asset to interdict surface vessels and LPVs. As narcoterrorists' tactics evolve, so must the Navy/Coast Guard team. The best way to support the Coast Guard and execute the CNT mission in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific is with ASW-equipped LCSs and MH-60R helicopters.						
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The character of geopolitics has changed drastically in recent decades. Consequently, the US Navy and Coast Guard have had to adapt to meet the challenges of new threats. The Navy has gone from Corbettian to Mahanian in character and back again. The Coast Guard has added to its law enforcement and regulatory responsibilities those of a full-fledged military branch. Although the character of the Navy and the Coast Guard is changing, the nature of acquisitions remains the same. Both the Navy and Coast Guard need small frigate- and cutter-sized ships to meet the various demands of their services. Despite the demand for smaller vessels, acquisitions are behind schedule. As such, the ability to rise to the challenge of the illegal drug trade from South America, for instance, is questionable.

The Trump Administration recently announced that it would be sending Navy ships to the Caribbean to increase the pressure on narcotraffickers from Venezuela.<sup>1</sup> The Department of Defense has had the counter narcoterrorism (CNT) mission on the back burner in recent years, so the announcement signals a marked shift in policy.<sup>2</sup> The renewed focus on CNT operations in 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet will require the Coast Guard and Navy to grapple with numerous issues that plague their services. First, the Coast Guard has been fighting the War on Drugs in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific alone. As the FFG vanished from the Navy's inventory, so did the Navy vanish from the AOR. The dearth of Navy ships in 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet highlights another of the Coast Guard's long-standing issues: their cutter and helicopter fleets are aging. As such, the Coast Guard will not be able to handle their current workload, let alone an increase in demand, without a stopgap or acquisition fix. However, the way ahead is not as bleak as it might seem at first glance. Although the Navy has begun looking into a new frigate, the FFG(X), they already have a small ship that

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Goodman, "Trump to Deploy Anti-Drug Navy Ships Near Venezuela," Time (Time, April 1, 2020), <https://time.com/5814148/trump-deploy-anti-drug-navy-venezuela/>

<sup>2</sup> Adam Isacson, Geoff Ramsey, and David Smilde, "Q&A: Putting U.S. Counterdrug Operations in the Caribbean in Context," WOLA, April 3, 2020, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/us-counterdrug-caribbean-venezuela-factsheet/>

could handle the mission: The Littoral Combat Ship (LCS). The LCS could help overcome the lack of jointness by being the platform that brings the Navy back to the theater. Additionally, it serves as the intermediary while both the Navy and Coast Guard wait for new frigates and cutters. Furthermore, as the Coast Guard struggles with the problem of their aging helicopter fleet, the LCS brings the added benefit of carrying Navy H-60 helicopter detachments.

Considering the Coast Guard's aging cutter and helicopter fleets and the challenge of countering a persistent drug trade, the future of CNT operations must be a joint venture between the Coast Guard and Navy in which the LCS and Navy H-60 helicopters play a prominent role.

Understanding the LCS solution requires an exploration of each problem's intricacies and how those problems combine to create a significant issue in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific. Decision-makers must understand the importance of the Coast Guard's presence in stemming the flow of illicit narcotics in the AOR and the Coast Guard's lack of reliable surface and air assets to cover that area. Further, understanding that the LCS is without a purpose as currently slated, they must comprehend that the introduction of the LCS to 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet provides the solution to all of the above.

### **The Rise and Fall of the CNT Mission**

Narco trafficking in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific has been on the rise for decades. Although the Coast Guard met that rise for a few years with a commensurate rise in cutter and helicopter coverage, their presence since 2013 has declined. Even before September 11, 2001, the Coast Guard knew that it needed low-cost, frigate-sized ships to meet the demand of its service.<sup>3</sup> The Coast Guard saw drug running and the implications of globalization as the reasons

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<sup>3</sup> Colin S. Gray, "Coast Guard and Navy: It's Time for a 'National Fleet'," Homeland Security Digital Library (Naval War College (U.S.), November 30, 2000), <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=550> pg. 115-116

for their increased demand.<sup>4</sup> Over a decade later, their concerns were proven prescient—the drug trade in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific represented the nexus of both of those concerns as it became a funding mechanism for international terrorist organizations. Recognizing this, Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) increased the Coast Guard’s presence in the Caribbean for CNT operations. In 2009, JIATF-S required 2,555 days of cutter coverage, the equivalent of seven cutters on-station for an entire year. The Coast Guard was able to provide 80% of that coverage. That rate of coverage was relatively steady through FY 2012.<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, the Coast Guard only achieved 67% of their planned coverage in 2013.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the Coast Guard met its cocaine removal goals that year.<sup>7</sup> In its report to Congress the following year, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the drug flow through the transit zone was reduced by 40% from 2009. However, the GAO attributed that reduction not to increased efficiency of Coast Guard cutters and aircrew, but to a reduced awareness of activity, in part, due to a reduced presence in the area.<sup>8</sup> The Coast Guard presence in 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet was waning in 2013 and has continued declining since—the 2018 National Defense Strategy “makes only one fleeting allusion to transnational organized crime.”<sup>9</sup> The numbers hint at a startling potential reality: Despite the reduced Coast Guard presence in the Caribbean and the eastern Pacific in recent years, the drug trade has continued apace. Given that potentiality, the United States’ revived interest in the CNT mission will require more ships patrolling the area to reach the same

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<sup>4</sup> Gray, “Coast Guard and Navy,” 127

<sup>5</sup> Stephen L. Caldwell, “Coast Guard: Resources Provided for Drug Interdiction Operations in the Transit Zone, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands: Report to Congressional Requesters,” GAO-14-527, Washington, DC, 2014, 13

<sup>6</sup> Ibid Abstract, 13

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 19

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 20-21

<sup>9</sup> Isacson, Ramsey, and Smilde, “Q&A: Putting U.S. Counterdrug Operations...” <https://www.wola.org/analysis/us-counterdrug-caribbean-venezuela-factsheet/>

coverage rate seen less than a decade ago. Daunting though the task of increasing coverage may be, more worrisome is the rise of submersibles and semi-submersibles, also known as low-profile vessels (LPVs).

Low-profile vessels have grown in prominence in recent years and pose a unique challenge to the CNT mission. Although expert at interdicting drug smugglers on the surface of the water, submerged smugglers still elude the Coast Guard. “The number of narco submarine incidents has risen sharply in recent years. 2018 saw 35 reported, and 2019 topped that at 36. For every sub stopped, many more get through.”<sup>10</sup> Simply increasing cutter and helicopter coverage in the AOR cannot be the answer as even the less demanding task of interdicting surface vessels “may be likened to a choreographed dance or a well prepared meal.”<sup>11</sup> Nor can the Coast Guard rely on better intelligence to solve the problem. The Coast Guard already relies heavily on keen intelligence as few interdictions are interdictions of opportunity. Combining the already challenging task of locating vessels with the fact that some of those vessels are invisible from the surface creates problems that not even intelligence can overcome. As traffickers increasingly see success with LPVs, assets executing the CNT mission will require anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities. Unfortunately, as currently configured, even the newest Coast Guard cutters are ill-equipped to deal with ASW threats.<sup>12</sup> More exasperating still, those new cutters are slow to arrive in the fleet.

As their presence has abated in SOUTHCOM, acquisition woes also frustrate the Coast Guard’s ability to meet the demands of their service. Today, the battle for a new Medium

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<sup>10</sup> H. I. Sutton, “U.S. Coast Guard Could Face A Narco Submarine Epidemic In 2020,” *Forbes* (Forbes Magazine, January 7, 2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/01/07/why-america-could-continue-to-face-a-narco-submarine-epidemic-in-2020/#7cd9be7c7369>

<sup>11</sup> Edward Westfall, Patrick Peschka, and Joseph DiRenzo, “Counter-Narcotics Tactics in the Western Hemisphere,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, September 2015, pp. 82-84

<sup>12</sup> Brian A. Smicklas, “Remaining Relevant: Historical Contributions, Civil-Military Challenges, and Anti-Submarine Warfare Capabilities on Coast Guard Cutters,” *National Security Affairs* (2018), 80

Endurance Cutter is ongoing. As of 2018, the GAO reported all of the Coast Guard's 210 ft. and 270 ft. cutters had reached their service life limit and were in the process of being 'SLEPed' (Service Life Extension Program). The report found that the cutters were being overused in response to shortages in the fleet, and hence were spending less time in planned maintenance cycles.<sup>13</sup> The planned SLEP would keep those vessels in operation until mid-FY 2023 at the earliest, and late FY 2036 at the latest as the new Offshore Patrol Cutters become operational.<sup>14</sup> The Coast Guard claims that the new Offshore Patrol Cutter "is the most affordable way to fill the service's need for long-term offshore capability to maintain current and future mission effectiveness."<sup>15</sup> Affordability notwithstanding, it will be more than a decade before a majority of those cutters are operational.<sup>16</sup> While SLEP is not a new phenomenon, the Coast Guard cannot expect that its current cutters will maintain their mission effectiveness rate with any fidelity in the meantime. With the increasing demand for coverage, the Coast Guard will need a ship that can fill the void that is sure to manifest.

Further vexing the coverage problem in 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet, the Coast Guard's H-60 and H-65 helicopter fleet is aging and entering SLEP. As drug runner tactics evolved from smuggling aboard large vessels to running high-speed cigarette boats at night, aircraft became vital to the CNT mission. A cutter alone is incapable of catching, let alone keeping up with, a "go-fast," nor are they well equipped to effectively track them over the horizon.<sup>17</sup> Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) are far more capable of open ocean search and tracking, while helicopters are critical to interdicting target vessels. Therefore, helicopters using Airborne Use of Force (AUF) tactics

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<sup>13</sup> Marie A. Mak, "Coast Guard Acquisitions: Actions Needed to Address Longstanding Portfolio Management Challenges: Report to Congressional Requesters," GAO-18-545, Washington, DC, 2018, 33

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 34

<sup>15</sup> Offshore Patrol Cutter, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.dcms.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Assistant-Commandant-for-Acquisitions-CG-9/Programs/Surface-Programs/Offshore-Patrol-Cutter/>

<sup>16</sup> Mak, GAO-18-545, 34

<sup>17</sup> Gray, "Coast Guard and Navy," 129

have become the primary asset for interdicting “go-fast” vessels. The nature of AUF requires helicopters to operate at the thresholds of their operating envelopes—at low altitudes, in salt-spray, near engine and transmission limits, and out-of-balanced flight profiles. Maintenance for a new airframe in those operating conditions is strenuous enough. Not only is the Coast Guard considering extending aircraft operating hours from 20,000 hours to 30,000 hours, but they are also considering using newer Navy H-60 helicopters as an alternative.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the issue the Coast Guard is facing is not as simple as increasing operating hours on an airframe. Instead, they will be asking older aircraft to perform more strenuous mission sets at a higher rate if Navy H-60s are unavailable. Aside from the potential increase in aviation mishap rates, the compounding effects of such strenuous operations can lead to increased maintenance hours and maintainer fatigue, leading to reduced area coverage and mission effectiveness.

### **The Trouble with the LCS**

The Navy’s acquisition issues vis-à-vis the LCS have had compounding effects that have derailed its employment. The LCS was initially designed to operate in “contested littoral waters” for ASW, MCM, SUW, and homeland defense.<sup>19</sup> However, the LCS program has become notorious for numerous reasons ranging from maintenance issues to cost overruns. According to a December 2019 Congressional Research Service report, problems stem from cost growth, design and construction issues, the ability to withstand battle damage, armament, and development and testing of the modular mission packages.<sup>20</sup> As a result of these and other concerns, the Senate and House Armed Service Committees have recommended numerous budget reductions, which will impact mission packages and over-the-horizon (OTH) weapons

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<sup>18</sup> Mak, GAO-18-545, 27

<sup>19</sup> Ronald O'Rourke, “Navy Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) Program: Background and Issues for Congress,” December 17, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL33741.pdf>, 2

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 3

systems.<sup>21</sup> Although there were many hopes for its future employment, only a handful of the 16 currently operational LCSs have forward-deployed thus far.<sup>22</sup> As a result, LCS crews lack operational experience.<sup>23</sup> With the Navy's new focus on the new FFG(X), the future of LCS in the Navy looks bleak. Regardless of its initial purpose, the complications surrounding the LCS have relegated it to a ship without a mission. Given all its issues, forward deploying the LCS to "contested littoral waters" for an extended period would be untenable. With that in mind, it is hard to see how the LCS could rise to the challenge of increased presence in 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet.

### **The LCS as the Answer**

Despite its many issues, the LCS is well suited for the CNT mission. The Navy could lend its platform and expertise to the Coast Guard to prosecute the CNT mission. The benefits of bringing the LCS to 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet are numerous. First, it increases the Coast Guard presence by providing a fast platform on which to employ Law Enforcement Detachments. Next, its ASW mission module could prove useful in countering the proliferation of narco submarines. Lastly, Navy ships bring navy helicopters, which are much-needed assets as Coast Guard helicopters age and the mission becomes more complicated.

Its speed and ability to employ Law Enforcement Detachments (LEDETs) make LCS the perfect platform to assist the Coast Guard in 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet. LEDETs are trained not only in high-risk CNT tactics (e.g., contested boardings), but also exceptionally well-versed in Maritime Law Enforcement procedures, hence their centrality to the CNT mission. LEDETs are largely dependent on Navy and allied vessels for coverage.<sup>24</sup> As such, 2013 saw decreased support to

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 12, 13, 15

<sup>22</sup> Megan Eckstein, "Navy Pushing More Littoral Combat Ships to Sea This Fall," USNI News, September 6, 2019, <https://news.usni.org/2019/09/05/the-state-of-lcs-navy-pushing-more-ships-to-sea-this-fall-as-class-matures>

<sup>23</sup> O'Rourke, "Navy Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) Program," 11

<sup>24</sup> Caldwell, GAO-14-527, 18

JIATF-S due to the Navy's reduced presence.<sup>25</sup> Given the steady decline and disappearance of the Navy's frigate fleet, one would reasonably assume that LEDET presence has also been on the decline. Nonetheless, any increase in demand for presence in 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet will require an increase in both Coast Guard vessels and LEDETs aboard Navy ships. "By deploying LEDETs on Navy and allied vessels, JIATF-S increases the resources it has available for apprehending suspected drug smugglers, their contraband, and their vessels."<sup>26</sup> Hence, by providing LCSs to JIATF-S, more LEDETs will be available to stunt the flow of illegal narcotics. Although LEDETs are dependent on Navy vessels, that dependence is due more to the seamanship capabilities than the warfighting capabilities of the platform. Typically, a Navy ship's only job is to support its embarked LE and air detachments by being a mobile, floating fortress from which to operate. However, a fast ship can get a RHIB-based boarding team to the scene quickly and help corral drug runners once they have become evasive. The LCS's max speed of 40 kts. beats the Navy's CRUDES by nearly 10 kts. and is twice the speed of the Coast Guard's Reliance- and Famous-class Medium Range Cutters.<sup>27</sup> Having a ship that proactively impacts the mission would mark a profound revolution in prosecution tactics.

The LCS's ASW mission module could be particularly useful in the evolving CNT mission as well. The Coast Guard has found itself at a disadvantage as LPV activity is on the rise. As currently configured, cutters have neither sensors, processors, nor the equipment, such as PRAIRIE, to limit self-noise.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the ASW mission module for the LCS is equipped with a state-of-the-art towed array and acoustic processor, which "will provide

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 24

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 17

<sup>27</sup> "Reliance class," Jane's, May 1, 2020, [https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/jfs\\_3678-jfs](https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/jfs_3678-jfs) ; "Famous cutter class," Jane's, May 1, 2020, [https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/jfs\\_3677-jfs](https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/jfs_3677-jfs) ; "Freedom class littoral combat ship flight," Jane's, May 1, 2020, [https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/jfs\\_6041-jfs](https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/jfs_6041-jfs)

<sup>28</sup> Smicklas, "Remaining Relevant," 81-82

revolutionary capabilities to the fleet.”<sup>29</sup> The new towed array boasts improved capabilities to detect targets at variable depths.<sup>30</sup> Rudimentary submarines and LPVs must operate close to the surface—known as periscope depth or P.D. An enhanced capability to detect targets throughout the water column, especially at P.D., will allow the Navy/Coast Guard team to interdict a substantial portion of those vessels that would have otherwise gone unmolested. Disrupting their burgeoning tactics will frustrate narcoterrorists and their distribution chains, tying up valuable resources as they attempt to adapt and overcome.

In addition to an ASW mission module, the LCS can carry one of the most valuable assets available to the CNT mission: helicopters. Helicopters are essential to interdicting non-compliant vessels (NCVs) in that they can get on-scene quickly, can stay on top of a maneuvering vessel, and can prosecute vessels using AUF tactics. In addition to AUF tactics, these airframes provide critical information to the recognized maritime picture (RMP) with their FLIR and, in the case of the MH-60R, onboard radar and ASW acoustic processing. The LCS can deploy with either an MH-60R or MH-60S detachment. Both of those detachments have the option of deploying with the MQ-8B Fire Scout UAV helicopter. LCS 7 deployed with an MH-60S and two MQ-8B Fire Scouts.<sup>31</sup> This compliment provides ISR capabilities via the Fire Scout platform and an interdiction asset in the MH-60S.<sup>32</sup> Deploying with an MH-60R detachment comes with additional benefits, as the 60R has surface search radar, negating the need for

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<sup>29</sup> “US Navy Receives Final Component of LCS ASW Mission Package,” Naval Today, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://navaltoday.com/2018/12/06/us-navy-receives-final-component-of-lcs-asw-mission-package/>

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Feller, “Raytheon Contracted for Changes to LCS Escort Mission Module,” UPI (UPI, August 6, 2019), <https://www.upi.com/Defense-News/2019/08/06/Raytheon-contracted-for-changes-to-LCS-escort-mission-module/2971565100248/>

<sup>31</sup> “USS Detroit Departs on Maiden Deployment,” U.S. Southern Command, November 1, 2019, <https://www.southcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/Article/2006530/uss-detroit-departs-on-maiden-deployment/>

<sup>32</sup> “Northrop Grumman RQ-8A and MQ-8B Fire Scout,” Jane’s, May 1, 2020, <https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Janes/Display/juav9179-juav>

supplemental UAVs.<sup>33</sup> The other benefit of the MH-60R is its ASW capability. Although the 60R would likely be stripped of its ASW prosecuting equipment (i.e., ALFS and sonobuoy launcher) to facilitate the mission, its acoustic processing equipment would otherwise remain in place. A crew would, therefore, be able to integrate and process acoustic data in tandem with an MPA that was in the process of tracking a submerged target. An on-scene helicopter able to provide a boarding team with near real-time position updates of an LPV would be a massive benefit to an interdiction. The drawback to this option is the MH-60R's weight. The MH-60S has far less onboard mission equipment than does the 60R, making it more fuel-efficient and better able to operate within safe engineering margins. Nonetheless, much of the MH-60R's mission equipment is removable, allowing operations well within the margin of safety. Although either option provides the Coast Guard with additional helicopter coverage, the MH-60R is the only helicopter capable of performing ISR duties singlehandedly. Furthermore, it is the only helicopter capable of adapting new techniques in light of the rising LPV threat.

### **Give the LCS to the Coast Guard?**

By no means is the LCS a perfect solution, nor is this solution without its faults. Some have argued that a military presence in 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet could be unwelcomed and perceived as escalatory.<sup>34</sup> As previously discussed, the Coast Guard is completely capable of performing this mission on its own and has been doing so almost exclusively for the past few years. As there are no near-peer competitors in the area, it makes sense that countries in SOUTHCOM might view a sudden shift from a law enforcement presence to military presence as unwarranted. Given this issue, one could argue that it makes more sense to give the LCS to the Coast Guard.

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<sup>33</sup> A1-H60RA-NFM-000, "NATOPS Flight Manual Navy Model MH-60R," December 15, 2016

<sup>34</sup> Dan Owen, "Let the Coast Guard Be the Coast Guard," U.S. Naval Institute, October 18, 2019, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2019/october/let-coast-guard-be-coast-guard>

Giving the LCS to the Coast Guard is undoubtedly an option, but it is by no means the best option. For starters, LCS already has a training pipeline established inside the Navy. Training a separate service's guardsmen to operate the platform will take time that the Coast Guard does not have—deployments are happening now. By contrast, a Navy LCS crew would require little, if any, training to perform the CNT mission. The mission, instead, is heavily reliant on a well-trained LEDET and helicopter detachment. Although the Coast Guard pilots and aircrewmembers from the HITRON are the AUF subject matter experts, giving away the LCS to the Coast Guard would preclude the participation of Navy H-60s.<sup>35</sup> Incorporating Navy helicopters would be a massive boon, relieving the stress of operating an already overtaxed and aging Coast Guard helicopter fleet. The more assets that are available, the more wide-spread and the better the coverage. Additionally, in the dynamic environment of geopolitics, the Navy may soon find itself in need of a nimble and modular ship close to home for reasons other than the CNT mission. A new frigate may be on the way, but the LCS is proof that the acquisitions process can be a lengthy affair. Although sending grey-hulled warships to an area in need of police action may be unpalatable to some, it is by no means unprecedented. Assuming regional alliances and partnerships stay intact, there should be no issue in sending more Navy ships to the area. Therefore, until the bulk of the new Offshore Patrol Cutters is operational, which occurs in roughly ten years, DoD and DHS have no better options when it comes to countering drug smuggling from the Caribbean and eastern Pacific.

## **Conclusion**

If history is any indication, the problem of the Caribbean and eastern Pacific drug trade does not seem to be going away. Instead, drug smugglers are using more advanced and covert

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<sup>35</sup> William H Thiesen, "U.S. COAST GUARD HITRON 20 Years of Hitting New Heights," *Wings of Gold*, 2017, pp. 28-28)

techniques. As the character of the drug trade transforms in the 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet AOR, it seems clear that the status quo is unsustainable. LCS 7 embarked on her maiden deployment in November 2019 in support of Operation Martillo.<sup>36</sup> As Navy leaders await lessons learned from that deployment, the Navy is gearing up to send more ships, including LCSs, down to 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet.<sup>37</sup> Although Navy leaders seem content to use the LCS for the CNT mission in the short term, it is not clear that they have considered the LCS as a long-term solution to drug smuggling from the south. The LCS is clearly the best asset to fill the void that the increase in demand on aging cutters is creating; the helicopters that they carry are likewise the best assets to assist aging Coast Guard helicopters. However, if the US continues to focus energy in the AOR to fight the drug trade, the CNT mission will have to adapt. Sending LCSs with Navy helicopters down to 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet may be enough to provide the coverage required. Nonetheless, without an ASW capability, the Navy/Coast Guard team might find itself at a disadvantage. Considering the growing use of LPVs in the drug trade, the CNT mission benefits not only from the LCS and Navy H-60s, but more specifically, from ASW equipped LCSs and MH-60Rs.

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<sup>36</sup> “USS Detroit Departs,” <https://www.southcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/Article/2006530/uss-detroit-departs-on-maiden-deployment/>)

<sup>37</sup> Caitlin M. Kenney, “Pentagon Deploys Ships, Aircraft and Troops to Caribbean, Eastern Pacific to Help Stop Drug Traffickers,” Stars and Stripes, April 1, 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/pentagon-deploys-ships-aircraft-and-troops-to-caribbean-eastern-pacific-to-help-stop-drug-traffickers-1.624515>)

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