

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 24, 2024

The Honorable Robin Carnahan
Administrator
General Services Administration
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Administrator Carnahan:

We write to bring to your attention a contracting delay with national security ramifications for the Nation's naval and technological competitions against the People's Republic of China (PRC). We respectfully request that you expedite issuance of the Navy's pending \$75 million Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) contract to Gecko Robotics for automated vessel inspection and maintenance—from its delayed Q2 2025 start date up to Q1 2025. This contract stands not only to bolster our national and economic security in the face of increasing Chinese aggression, but to create jobs and grow Navy business in Southwestern Pennsylvania, a region long known for its industrious workforce and ingenuity.

As stated in President Biden's National Security Strategy, "the PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the... power to do it."¹ The United States military must prioritize the Chinese threat across all domains of the competition, including naval capacity and the adoption of advanced technologies.

The growing buildup of the PRC's navy continues to strengthen its chances of winning a potential future war against the United States,² as larger fleets have won 89 percent of wars with significant naval combat³ Today, this shifting balance allows China to more confidently project power despite U.S. counterefforts.⁴ A competition against a state, China, controlling 230 times our shipbuilding capacity will require continued large-scale investments and a refocused strategy to address today's threats.⁵

¹ *National Security Strategy*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Oct. 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

² Alexander Palmer, Henry Carroll & Nicholas Velasquez, *Unpacking China's Naval Buildup*, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (Jun. 5, 2024), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unpacking-chinas-naval-buildup>.

³ Captain (Ret.) Sam Tangredi, *Bigger Fleets Win*, U.S. NAVAL INSTITUTE (Jan. 2023), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/january/bigger-fleets-win>.

⁴ Palmer, Carroll & Velasquez, *supra* note 2.

⁵ *Id.*

As part of the naval competition, the U.S. Navy must resolve its significant maintenance backlog and current inability, in the event of a conflict, to quickly repair damaged ships.⁶ Even if the United States had a navy with more vessels that are more powerful and hold more powerful weapons, we still would lose a war if those vessels were “in disrepair, tied to the pier, or in dry-dock.”⁷ Without this maintenance and repair capability, the U.S. Navy’s combat power has become only a fraction of its reported size. A 2023 GAO study confirmed this effect: Over the last decade across 10 different ship classes, hours of availability for operations and training have decreased as maintenance cannibalizations, delays, and costs have increased.⁸

Specifically, the United States must improve its naval maintenance planning processes, starting with a better understanding of its vessels’ condition.⁹ Experts have recommended that the U.S. Navy “invest in integrated [information technology (IT)] systems to document ships’ material condition properly,” as traditional methods of assessment take longer, cost more, and provide a much poorer understanding of a vessels’ maintenance needs.¹⁰

The Navy has identified its maintenance backlog as a priority and begun to execute on developing a technological solution to address that priority. To meet its spring 2024 availability timelines, the Navy worked hard to award a \$75 million IDIQ contract to Gecko Robotics. Based in Pittsburgh, Gecko Robotics uses robotic automation and digital baselines to help the military optimize maintenance processes and improve mission readiness. This contract would allow the Navy to move more quickly in addressing its maintenance backlog while saving taxpayer funds compared to existing vehicles.

Despite the contract’s strategic importance and prioritization by the Navy, it has stalled with GSA. Based on the Navy’s efforts, in December of 2023, a member of GSA informed Gecko Robotics that, “I’m confident we’ll have a contract in place by the end of February [2024].” In March of 2024 though, GSA backtracked, telling the Navy it could not support the contract until July. In April, GSA signed the requisite interagency agreement with the Navy, but by June, delays had worsened, leading a different member of GSA to inform Gecko Robotics that, “I don’t have a time frame when we would start the project.” In August, our staff learned from GSA that it does not plan to award the contract until Q2 of 2025, one year after it had originally planned.

⁶ Palmer, Carroll & Velasquez, *supra* note 2.

⁷ Elizabeth Barrett, et. al, *The Department of the Navy and Strategic Competition with the People’s Republic of China*, CENTER FOR NAVAL ANALYSES, 14 (Sep. 2023), <https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/09/The-Department-of-the-Navy-Strategic-Competition-PRC.pdf>.

⁸ *Weapon System Sustainment: Navy Ship Usage Has Decreased as Challenges and Costs Have Increased*, U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (Jan. 31, 2023), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-106440>.

⁹ Barrett, et. al, *supra* note 7, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/09/The-Department-of-the-Navy-Strategic-Competition-PRC.pdf>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

We understand that GSA has faced staffing turnover and a changing acquisition strategy, but in the meantime, the Navy's readiness has suffered and will continue to suffer. China is emboldened. While commercial demand for Gecko Robotics' capabilities is high, another young company in similar circumstances might have already gone out of business due to these delays. Difficulties generating revenue from contract delays like this will deter less mission-driven, innovative companies from even entering the defense market.

For the people of Southwestern Pennsylvania in particular, this contract is critical. It will bring more than 150 jobs to the region directly. It will help grow Gecko Robotics' defense business across other Navy platforms, other U.S. military services, and allied militaries, leading to further job growth. And, through workforce investments by Gecko Robotics, it will help traditional manufacturing workers in the area develop the advanced manufacturing skills and expertise necessary to compete in the global marketplace.

GSA must do better. The Nation's security demands it. We respectfully request that you expedite issuance of the Navy's IDIQ contract to Q1 of 2025. Thank you for your attention to our request. We appreciate your swift efforts to remedy this situation.

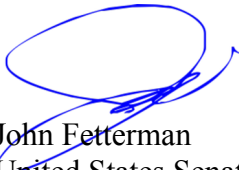
Sincerely,



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Guy Reschenthaler
Member of Congress



John Fetterman
United States Senator



Chris Deluzio
Member of Congress

Cc: The Honorable Kathleen Hicks, Deputy Secretary, Department of Defense
The Honorable Carlos Del Toro, Secretary, Department of the Navy
The Honorable Heidi Shyu, Under Secretary for Research and Engineering, Department of Defense