



Icebreakers are niche vessels, but their security, diplomatic value is high

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On July 11, the White House [announced a vital national security decision to deepen cooperation with Canada and Finland on icebreaker shipbuilding](#). This could enable the United States to further strengthen technology, partnerships, and security in the polar regions which are increasingly challenged by climate change, geopolitical tensions, and economic pressures.

As one of eight Arctic countries, the United States has historically governed U.S. Arctic waters and had a presence in the pan-Arctic. The United States was also one of the original twelve countries to sign the Antarctic Treaty in 1959. The United States currently operates two polar icebreaking vessels based in Seattle which are growing in age and can have limited availability due to multiple demands on their services and maintenance.

The announcement of the *Icebreaker Collaboration Effort* or “ICE Pact” outlines three ways in which the U.S., Canada, and Finland intend to mutually support each other in developing and maintaining icebreaker shipbuilding capabilities. These include paving the way to share technical knowledge, supporting workforce development, and enabling avenues for like-minded allies and partners to purchase icebreaking vessels produced in U.S., Canadian, and Finnish shipyards.

Beyond sharing knowledge for each other’s mutual benefit, this North American-northern European cooperation also sets the stage for greater interoperability and engagement in polar operations, especially in the Arctic. This is a smart, proactive, and necessary move by Western Arctic nations that have become increasingly wary of Russian and Chinese activities in the region. Earlier this month, [Chinese naval vessels operated within the United States’ Exclusive Economic Zone](#) around the Aleutian Islands. Economic activities may also increase in the Arctic, including fishing, mining, energy production, tourism, and shipping, thus furthering the need for icebreaking vessels to contribute to safety and security in the far north.

Maintaining a strong industrial and knowledge base for building icebreaking vessels can be difficult because they are very complex ships designed to operate in unique environments. The market for them is a niche one, although they are essential for operating in ice-covered waters. Despite the fact [that Arctic sea ice has substantially diminished, the Arctic Ocean will remain significantly ice-covered](#) especially during cooler months for some decades to come.

Charting the way to work more closely on icebreaker building with one of its oldest allies – Canada – and one of its newest NATO allies – Finland – could bring substantial benefits to the United States, which has for years considered whether and how to grow and revitalize its icebreaking ships. [Efforts to design and build new icebreaking vessels in the U.S. have raised questions about costs and timelines.](#)

The [Coast Guard has said that it will require eight to nine polar icebreakers](#), consisting of four to five heavy polar icebreakers, presumably the Polar Security Cutters now under construction, and four to five medium polar icebreakers. It is this latter capability that probably stands to benefit most directly from access to Finnish and Canadian knowledge. Further down the line, the United States could also be better positioned to build these types of vessels for other partner countries.

What comes next could be even harder than cultivating this agreement. Developing memoranda of understanding and managing momentum in the context of national policies and politics can be significant undertakings and can limit the potential benefits from such agreements while potentially causing unintended consequences such as alienating other partners or drawing accusations that one party is reaping the most benefit at the cost of others.

Still, these potential limitations are not a reason to put on the brakes. In discussing the [updated Department of Defense Arctic Strategy](#) released on July 22nd, Iris Ferguson, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Arctic and Global Resilience, [described ICE Pact](#) as a “great example of cooperation that we should be leaning into.” Now that this agreement has been reached, it will be important to bear risks in mind but keep the momentum moving forward.

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