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Gaps and Bridges: The Case for American Polar Icebreakers

Peter Kikkert
NAADSN Coordinator

In his [remarks](#) to SOUTHCOM on 10 July 2020, President Donald Trump stated that his administration was working to secure an additional ten icebreakers “very fast” from a “certain place that has a lot of icebreakers.” As justification, he incorrectly noted that the U.S. has only one operating icebreaker (it has one heavy and one medium icebreaker), while Russia has forty – evoking long-standing concerns about an icebreaker gap. The president’s comments expand on his June [memorandum](#) asking for a review to “identify the optimal number and type of polar security icebreakers” required to “protect ... national interests” and to “retain a strong Arctic security presence.”

President Trump’s comments raise several questions. Did he really mean ten, or was he referring to the Coast Guard’s current plan for three heavy and three medium polar security cutters? If he meant ten additional foreign-sourced icebreakers, which country has the capacity to quickly deliver such an order? How will American shipbuilding companies respond to the president’s plan to circumvent the statutory requirement that all Coast Guard vessels be built in U.S. shipyards? As the 1984 *Interagency Polar Icebreaker Requirements Study* highlighted, “more than any other class of Coast Guard cutter, icebreakers are multi-mission vessels.”¹ Will leased or foreign-designed vessels be able to complete all of these tasks, including nine of the eleven statutory Coast Guard missions, scientific research, defense requirements, domain awareness, and the resupply and inspection of Antarctic bases?

These questions are difficult to answer without more information from the White House and the Coast Guard. What is clear is that while America requires new icebreakers, the case for their procurement needs to rest on firmer ground than a gap. History raises serious doubts about whether this tactic will sustain America’s interest in icebreakers for the time it will take to build the full fleet – particularly in the fiscal aftermath of COVID-19. Competition has pushed icebreakers onto the agenda in the past, but it has not kept them there.

The idea of an icebreaker gap first emerged in American political discourse in the late 1950s with the launch of the Soviet nuclear-powered icebreaker *Lenin* in 1957 – the first of its kind. To ensure that the U.S. would not lag behind Russia, Congress passed a bill the next year authorizing the \$60-million construction of an atomic icebreaker for the U.S. Coast Guard. President Eisenhower remained unconvinced of the need to close this gap and vetoed the bill, arguing that “in providing for a project which is not needed, [Congress] fails to take account of the present fiscal situation of the Government.”²

Arguments about an icebreaker gap between the U.S. and the Soviet Union (and even Canada) resurfaced in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the U.S. Coast Guard sought the funding that led to the construction of the *Polar Star* and *Polar Sea*. When Coast Guard officials stated the need for a fleet of five polar icebreakers, congressional hearings on the subject compared U.S. efforts to a Russian program that had produced seventeen vessels since 1955. Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Willard Smith objected to this comparison, explaining, “We haven’t looked at this in the way of going into a program to build more icebreakers than are presently being operated by the Soviets. They have quite a different problem than we do.” Given the USSR’s 24,140-kilometre Arctic coastline, reliance on cold water ports and polar routes for commercial shipping, and unique strategic concerns, Soviet icebreaking requirements were “altogether different” from those of the U.S., which had a smaller and far less busy Arctic coastline. “Neither the number of Russian icebreakers nor the particular type of propulsion they use affect our requirements,” Smith said. “What we have is not really a competitive situation, but a matter of two countries with different geographical considerations which govern their national priorities.”³ In short, comparing icebreaker fleet sizes with Russia was a meaningless measure. This argument resonates today: the unique geographic and economic characteristics of the Russian Arctic still demand a larger icebreaking fleet.

Instead, the Coast Guard built a comprehensive case for new icebreakers on their ability to facilitate research, deliver logistical support to military bases and projects, support socio-economic and community development in Alaska, provide an emergency and environmental response capability, enforce laws, and prepare for increased commercial and industrial activity in the Arctic. While acknowledging the role they could play in national security missions, the Coast Guard put more emphasis on cooperation than competition. They understood that icebreakers could act as bridges, providing the U.S. with the ability to meaningfully engage with Arctic communities, industry, its allies, neighboring states, and with the international community vis-à-vis the Antarctic. The Coast Guard’s extensive *Polar Transportation Requirements Study* (1968) justified new icebreakers by arguing that increased activity in the Arctic would require extensive cooperation and coordination between the U.S. and its polar neighbors, including the Soviet Union. “The aspect of common ground makes the Arctic seem to be an even more logical basis for future good will and understanding,” its authors concluded. “In such an area of harsh environmental conditions and general lack of knowledge it is

probable that the benefits to be derived from a free exchange of ideas and mutual assistance between different countries will eventually be more valuable than the considerable benefits of political pragmatism.”⁴

When Commandant Admiral James Gracey started the process to procure new icebreakers in 1984, he again focused on the wide range of bi-polar missions executed by the vessels to support plans for a fleet of four. He also framed the icebreakers as a bridge to an uncertain future in the polar regions. At this point, the Arctic was arguably the most strategic place in the world as the expansion and activities of the Soviet Northern Fleet acted as a magnet, drawing the American submarine fleet into the region. Meanwhile, the media predicted a Great Arctic Energy Rush as the U.S., Canada, Norway, and Soviet Union explored their offshore reserves in the region. In this context, Gracey explained that one of the great difficulties “in determining the size of an icebreaker fleet, a Federal icebreaker fleet, is the uncertainty of the kinds of circumstances which may arise in which one would need an icebreaker.” While “we can try to foresee things that are happening,” he noted, “we are aware that there are many kinds of potential for activities in the polar regions that are at the moment merely dreams or thought or ideas.” What was clear, Gracey argued, was that, “if one waits until circumstances arise that require the presence of a polar icebreaker and has not prepared for that, then by the time we get ready it is going to be too late to seize the opportunity or too late to correct the problem.”⁵

From the 1960s onwards, the U.S. Coast Guard built a strong case for American polar icebreakers based on the service’s traditional missions, the use of the vessels as platforms by other government departments, international cooperation, national security, and the possibilities of the future. Still, these arguments enjoyed mixed results. The 1970s saw only two of the desired four new icebreakers built (*Polar Star* and *Polar Sea*), while the push in the 1980s resulted in the approval of only one of the two vessels requested (USCG *Healy*, commissioned in 1999).

Still, even at the height of the Cold War, Coast Guard officials understood that to build the case for American icebreakers on the need to close a gap was to build on shifting sands – it was too easy for decision-makers to lose interest or get distracted in the face of competing priorities. For example, during congressional hearings on the need for new polar icebreakers in 1985, Representative Don Young from Alaska emphasized the “idea that there is an icebreaker gap,”⁶ but by 1989, had changed his tune to argue that he was “very concerned about the desire for an icebreaker, if [it came] at the cost of other programs, and at this time the other programs are of much and greater value.”⁷

In recent years, the discourse on icebreaker procurement has again linked them strongly to competition and security – highlighted by the rebranding of the Coast Guard’s Polar Icebreaking Program to the [Polar Security Cutter Program](#). Security, Commandant Admiral Karl Schultz has argued, “that’s what we’re talking about: we’re

talking about national sovereign interests up there, we're talking about competition." The fleet of three heavy and three medium icebreakers called for by the Coast Guard will serve as the "face of that competition," particularly as Russia and China continued to expand their interests and capabilities in the region. The icebreaker gap has again been a popular theme in Congress and the media. These arguments have had some success: construction on the first new polar security cutter has started, while the current budget includes full funding for another. Security and competition are easy to sell in the short-term, but this approach sets up a false dichotomy between conflict and cooperation in the Arctic that threatens to undermine the tradition of coast guard diplomacy in the region. In addition, it is reasonable to question whether this approach will foster bi-partisan interest in Washington over the years it will take to complete the icebreaker fleet, especially as political currents shift, new security and defense priorities emerge, and [commentators](#) continue to question [the logic](#) behind the icebreaker gap argument and highlight the strategic and tactical issues around linking icebreakers directly to [hard security and defence objectives](#),

Instead, framing icebreakers as bridges supporting U.S. engagement with the broader polar community remains a valid justification. Icebreakers will allow the U.S. to work with Alaskan communities to address mounting human and environmental security concerns in the region. Icebreakers will allow the U.S. to work more closely with its key allies, enhancing a long history of cooperation, often in the pursuit of safety and security interests. Icebreakers will facilitate American commitments in the Antarctic and those laid out in international treaties such as the Arctic Search and Rescue Agreement and the High Arctic Fisheries moratorium. The ships will provide the U.S. with a bridge to the uncertain future caused by climate change, allowing it to prepare for the possibility of increased commercial shipping through the Arctic Ocean, the Northern Sea Route, and the Northwest Passage. Perhaps most importantly, icebreakers can serve as a bridge between the U.S. and Russia in the Arctic – as they have in the past, for example, when the State Department asked two Soviet icebreakers to free three gray whales trapped in the ice near Point Barrow in 1988. Today, icebreakers will facilitate U.S.-Russian engagement in venues such as the Arctic Coast Guard Forum and in spaces like the Bering Strait.

For decades, the U.S. Coast Guard has made the case for a fleet of between four and six modern and capable polar icebreakers. If America wants to operate in the Arctic and Antarctic, it needs them, but history has proven that it is difficult to sustain political interest in their procurement. Momentum has been gained before for the construction of new heavy polar icebreakers – only to stall out. In 1988, Representative John Coble noted, "I fear the Polar regions because of their remote location, they become less tangible. And I think probably most Americans say, well what the heck, what's the big deal about being in the Arctic or the Antarctic?" In 1959, one of the supporters of the failed atomic icebreaker bill concluded that it was "just a matter of salesmanship." How do you sell decision-makers and the public on these unique vessels that pose tremendous design and

construction challenges, are difficult to operate and maintain, and come with a large price tag? What mixture of arguments will best sustain American interest in icebreakers?

When the Coast Guard began its plans to procure new icebreakers in the 1960s, they answered these questions by arguing that to have any chance of success in a tough fiscal environment they would have to link the need for the vessels directly to the nation's broader goals. Herein lies the problem: while it was clear that the U.S. had a "sincere interest in the polar region," it was also "evident that the goals and objectives of the nation in these regions had never been fully delineated." Icebreakers would remain a tough sell until they could be clearly and consistently tied to what the U.S. wanted to accomplish in the Arctic and Antarctic.⁸ These concerns ring true today. It is time for America's leaders to do the hard work of making a case for polar icebreakers – and sustaining long-term interest in their procurement. In so doing, they may finally articulate the country's goals and objectives in the polar regions. In that case, they should remember that building bridges is more productive than simply closing gaps.

¹ United States Coast Guard, *United States Polar Icebreaker Requirements Study*, July 1984, 1-4.

² Dwight D. Eisenhower, Authorizing Construction of Nuclear-Powered Icebreaker – Veto Message from the President of the United States, 12 August 1958, Congressional Record, House, 1958, 17189

³ Admiral Willard Smith, Hearing Before the Merchant Marine Subcommittee of the Committee on Commerce, U.S. Senate, Ninety-First Congress, Second Session, on S. 3473, 19 February 1970, pg. 29-30.

⁴ U.S. Coast Guard, *Polar Transportation Requirements Study Report: Vol. II*, November 1968, pg. A-41.

⁵ Admiral James Steele Gracey, commandant of the Coast Guard, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Navigation of the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, House of Representatives, Ninety-Eighth Congress, Second Session, on Domestic and Polar Ice-Breaking Operation, 9 February 1984, pg. 4-6, 14.

⁶ Representative Don Young, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Navigation of the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, House of Representatives, Ninety-Ninth Congress, First Session, 9 and 23 October 1985 and 4 December 1985, 256.

⁷ Representative Don Young, Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Navigation of the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, House of Representatives, One Hundred First Congress, First Session, 9 March 1989, pg. 2-3.

⁸ U.S. Coast Guard, *Polar Transportation Requirements Study Report: Vol. I*, November 1968, pg. 6-10.