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SAFESEAS COMMENTARY



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THE ‘ICEBREAKER-GAP’ – HOW US ICEBREAKERS ARE ASSIGNED NEW, SYMBOLIC ROLES AS PART OF AN ESCALATING MILITARY COMPETITION IN THE ARCTIC

Under construction: “The largest icebreaker in the world”

In the high summer of 2020 [U.S. President Donald J. Trump](#) suddenly spoke enthusiastically about icebreakers:

we have, under construction right now, the largest icebreaker in the world. And we’re going to be trying to get, if we can, an extra 10 icebreakers. We only have one. Russia has 40; we have one.

The remarks on icebreakers came as part of a list of new defense acquisitions which the president claimed to have secured funding for – almost single-handedly – with the aim of rebuilding “the entire United States military”. But why are icebreakers counted as a defense item, when their main tasks are civilian in character? Icebreakers are [primarily used](#) in support of research efforts and infrastructure access at the poles, as well as search and rescue missions in ice-covered waters.

If icebreakers are mostly used for civilian purposes, why does it matter how many icebreakers Russia has? Why must the US icebreakers be the largest “in the world”? Was Trump just being his own competitive self, making sure America is also first when it comes to icebreakers? Or is this [escalating ‘icebreaker-race’](#) a symptom of something larger and longer-lasting than

President Trump? The answer is a cocktail of the particular geographic and climatic aspects unique to the Arctic region, and growing global geopolitical rivalry.

Operating in polar climates (still) requires icebreakers

Only a [handful of states](#) have active icebreakers at their disposal, including the United States, Russia, China, Canada and Finland. The largest and most powerful fleets belong to Russia, Canada and Finland. A common denominator for these three states is that they have ice-covered coastal areas at high latitudes. Russia and Canada, in particular, have extensive Arctic coastlines inhabited by their own citizens, and with a variety of icebreaking needs. Russia also envisions a [booming economic development in its Arctic territories](#), based on oil and natural gas deposits in the Russian Arctic, as well as maritime traffic through the Northern Sea Route. This also requires a significant number of icebreakers. The US and China each have two semi-functioning icebreakers (in the US recently re-named "[polar security cutters](#)"), which are engaged in missions both in the Arctic and the Antarctic.

What is clear from the above is that icebreakers serve important functions at the highest latitudes of the globe – i.e. in the cold, ice and snow-covered areas of the Arctic and the Antarctic. They are indispensable for breaking and maintaining sea lanes at both poles. They are the only vessels that can clear passages through meters of thick sea ice, even though they sometimes [struggle to do so](#). Despite the fact that accelerating climate change [is causing dramatically diminishing sea ice in the Arctic Ocean](#) (and also affects the maritime areas surrounding the Antarctic continent), icebreaking is still necessary for operating at the poles.

The Arctic and the Antarctic: 'At opposite poles' politically

Distinguishing the Arctic from the Antarctic region are two important, and interconnected, aspects: geography and politics. In [catchy terms](#), the Arctic is "an ocean surrounded by continents, while the Antarctic is continent surrounded by oceans". These geographical differences matter for how politics play out at the poles. Antarctica is uninhabited, apart from a small number of scientists, and governed by the [Antarctic Treaty System](#) of 1959, which set aside prior territorial claims, and established the continent as [a site full of scientific endeavors and free of military activity and installations](#). [For the time being](#), this peaceful political configuration is intact.

The Arctic, on the other hand, is not uninhabited, but [home to almost four million people](#) who live in the eight [Arctic states](#). It is governed by a number of international agreements, such as the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#) (UNCLOS), and a number of inter-state [cooperative agreements](#), negotiated under the auspices of the region's most prominent intergovernmental forum, [The Arctic Council](#). Large parts of the seabed and subsoil of the Arctic Ocean are claimed by one or more of the Arctic States, under article 76 of UNCLOS. And importantly, there is no treaty prohibiting military activity or installations in the Arctic.

Great power competition enters the Arctic

Global rivalry between the US and China is brewing – a rivalry that also involves Russia. This [great power competition](#) is increasingly affecting political dynamics in many parts of the world, including [the Arctic region](#), which is – despite decades of peaceful cooperation following the end of the cold war – not bound by any Antarctic-like treaties, shielding it from security politics.

In the past couple of years, the US has been increasingly turning its attention to the Arctic diplomatically, economically and militarily. However, many argue that the US is [a little late to the Arctic party](#) in terms of political attention, resource allocation and strategic direction from the top levels of government. Proclaiming Russia's Arctic behavior "[aggressive](#)" and warning against China's Arctic

intentions ahead of the Arctic Council meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland, in 2019, the US view on the Arctic, however, took a defining turn, ignited by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

The US now sees itself in a great power competition also in the Arctic, but finds itself [lagging behind](#) especially Russia in terms of Arctic military infrastructure, training, and equipment. And this is where icebreakers re-enter the story. The icebreakers, being not only operationally necessary to the polar regions, but to some extent also symbolic of the challenges inherent to the polar climates, suddenly become an effective vehicle for showcasing arctic capabilities and 'arcticness'. In this way, icebreakers – despite their mostly civilian tasks – are drawn into the Arctic chapter of a growing great power competition, which is increasingly military in character. In this competition, the clearest sign of the icebreakers being assigned an important symbolic role, extending beyond their practical functions, is the widespread talk of a growing "[icebreaker-gap](#)". The echo of the cold war [missile-gap](#) is anything but accidental. President Trump's enthusiasm for icebreakers should be seen in light of this; constructing more American icebreakers is to compete with Russia and China in the Arctic.

Symbolically breaking the US into the Arctic

With icebreakers being particular to the polar regions, the North Atlantic witnessing [heightened geopolitical tensions](#), and the US-Russia-China geopolitical rivalries starting to infiltrate the Arctic, icebreakers become ripe for taking on new symbolic 'assignments' in the Arctic. The icebreakers are being re-assigned as symbols of US hard-power in the Arctic, despite their institutional home being the US Coast Guard, and their practical functions mostly being in search and rescue missions, or in supporting roles to polar research. In this way, icebreakers are taking on two very different types of assignments – one practical, the other symbolic. Recently President Putin has also begun subscribing to the idea of an icebreaker-race by directly linking [Russian superiority in the Arctic](#) with presence in the form of a "unique icebreaker fleet", which must also be strengthened and updated. Despite not being very good at war, icebreakers are increasingly drawn into an escalating military competition in the Arctic. The icebreakers – both existing ones and the ones 'under construction' – are tasked with symbolically breaking the US into the region, and the icebreakers themselves become an important symbolic parameter of what it means to be a present, competitive, engaged and strong Arctic power.