

US to Form Icebreaker Fleet for the Arctic. “Polar Security Cutter”

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In the past few months, the United States has tightened its policies in the Arctic, as several measures show. For decades, Washington has not been concerned with strengthening its military presence at the poles, giving greater focus to other regions of the planet, such as the Middle East. Due to this lack of attention to the Arctic, the US does not yet have a fleet of icebreaker ships, far behind its rivals such as Russia and China. Now, the American government intends to change this attitude.

On June 9, Donald Trump announced that he plans to create a fleet of icebreakers by 2029, according to a statement made to several departments. The fleet would be used in the Arctic and Antarctica. The project already has a name: Polar Security Cutter. The goal is to replace the only two American icebreakers, USCGC Polar Star and USCGC Healy, with a new, more modern and equipped fleet, capable of meeting the new objectives of the American strategy for the poles.

The main US ally in this project is Canada. The neighboring country, despite being militarily much inferior to the USA, already has a very capable icebreaker fleet, with more than 10 operational ships and three others under construction, in addition to planning to build another 4 in the near future. Together, the USA and Canada intend to face the growth of the Russian and Chinese fleets. China, even without direct access to the Arctic, has a small fleet of four icebreakers and plans to build two more ships soon. The Russians, however, are the most equipped. The Russian fleet consists of 53 ships, with another 6 under construction and another 12 scheduled to be built soon.

The American program is the result of a partnership of the US Coast Guard with the company VT Halter Marine Inc., signed in the amount of US \$ 746 million. The contract was signed in April 2019, although the details of the cooperation have only been made public recently. There are interests beyond national defense involved in the project. Among the objectives of the program there is the use of the Coast Guard for the safety of commercial ships in the polar zones.

An important point is that the project also aims to replace diesel-powered ships with nuclear powered ships. Diesel-powered propulsion ships are less powerful and less efficient in breaking ice, but currently only Russia has nuclear powered icebreakers, which makes the dispute fiercer. In fact, the United States has all the necessary resources to build nuclear icebreakers, but this will certainly start a “nuclear era” in the Arctic, with the beginning of a new industrial-military race for the modernization of ships.

However, whether or not building nuclear icebreakers, the US will not reach the capacity of the Russian fleet anytime soon. For this reason, the project seems to make it clear that the

initial objective, from a realistic perspective, is to undermine Chinese growth. The Chinese presence in the Arctic is the initial target of the cooperation between the USA and Canada, with Russia being a “further step” – and, perhaps, unattainable, considering the immense superiority of the Russian military presence in the Arctic.

It is likely, however, that the project’s slowness will hinder the US government’s claims. The estimated nine-year period for completing the project is long and in this time many things can happen on the international stage and in the Arctic in particular. Russia and China may further increase or modernize their fleets in that time and the United States will remain far behind its “targets” in this dispute. It is unlikely that Washington will be able to assemble a fleet of icebreakers strong enough to face Russia in the near future. The Americans’ dispute will continue to be with China – which already has a big advantage.

To compensate for its weakness in the Arctic, the United States is likely to begin a series of increasingly aggressive and provocative military training aimed at disguising its weakness with a smoke screen. The most strategic, viable and acceptable attitude for Washington would be to stop investing in projects of militarization of the Arctic and start more elaborate national recovery plans for the end of the pandemic, which affects the country drastically. Freezing military spending, withdrawing troops scattered around the world in regional conflicts and focusing on a policy for internal problems would be the best way to deal with the current American situation. However, Washington insists on maintaining a heavy-handed international policy and military presence in all areas of the planet.

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