

Defense bill mandates new steps to increase operations in the Arctic

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The [defense bill](#) enacted over President Donald Trump's veto on Friday authorizes six new icebreakers and a series of other efforts to ramp up operations in the Arctic, by elevating the region in military planning and requiring the Pentagon to identify possible locations for a more permanent American presence.

In a major victory for lawmakers, the legislation authorizes three additional polar security cutters, on top of three originally planned. All would have to be funded through the Department of Homeland Security and [the fiscal 2021 spending bill](#) enacted in December falls short, setting aside just [\\$555 million for a second vessel](#).

But the NDAA, which for the first time also includes the Coast Guard's 2020 Authorization Act, was cheered on by Alaska lawmakers and other advocates who have fought for more resources to counter Chinese and Russian influence in a region of growing strategic importance.

"This formal authorization of six polar icebreakers will send a strong message to the rest of the world: the United States is showing up in the Arctic," [said Sen. Maria Cantwell](#) in a statement when the NDAA was passed in December. The Washington Democrat authored the provision along with Republican Sens. [Roger Wicker](#) (Miss.) and [Dan Sullivan](#) (Ark.).

Icebreakers: The service has just two operational icebreakers, but [one is now docked while it undergoes repairs after catching fire in August](#).

The Coast Guard plans to acquire three new polar icebreakers through their Polar Security Cutter program, with the intent [to add up to three more polar icebreakers in the future](#).

The administration's fiscal 2021 request [funded a second new icebreaker](#), which got the greenlight as part of the [\\$1.4 trillion government funding measure](#) that averted a government shutdown.

VT Halter Marine Inc. was awarded [a \\$745 million contract to design and begin building](#) a new icebreaker in 2019. Construction on the vessel is expected to begin this year and is set to be delivered in 2024.

The 44-year-old Polar Star, one of two U.S. icebreakers, has faced numerous breakdowns. It's now on [a rare national security mission in the Arctic](#) after the Covid-19 pandemic forced U.S. Antarctica operations to be scaled back.

Greater focus on the Arctic at DoD: The NDAA also directs the Defense Department to add the Arctic to a deputy assistant secretary of defense's portfolio, elevating the status of the region in the Pentagon.

For the first time, "assignment of responsibility for the Arctic region" within OSD will be given to the DASD for the western hemisphere or any other DASD that the secretary "considers appropriate," according to the provision.

The defense bill also includes a wishlist item for three Republican Alaska senators, Sullivan, [Lisa Murkowski](#) and [Don Young](#): the "Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies," which will be the first of its kind for policy experts to study the Arctic.

"To address the rise of 'Great Power' competitors in the Arctic, the Ted Stevens Center will be a new focal point for strategic thinking," [Sullivan said in a statement](#).

Another provision directs the Pentagon to release a long-expected study this year that will pinpoint "potential sites for one or more strategic ports in the Arctic" to counter Russia's military-build up.

Congress [first ordered the Pentagon in the 2020 budget](#) to consider where it could build and maintain ports in the region, as polar ice caps there are melting at higher rates. But it has not been released.

Meanwhile, the Space Force, which launched [a new Arctic strategy in July](#) with the Air Force, is also authorized to start developing satellite capabilities in the High North that focus on “low- and medium-earth orbit communications.”

What’s next: Authorizing the new fleet of icebreakers does not guarantee that they will be fully funded.

The incoming [Biden administration is expected to keep a close eye on Russian and Chinese activity](#) in the High North. However, POLITICO has reported increases in funding for three more vessels beyond the current plans for icebreakers is unlikely.

Funding levels for the cutter program within DHS' 2022 budget request will be closely watched.