

# Trump's icebreaker memo shows cracks, experts say

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President Donald Trump's first significant attempt to assess the state of U.S. icebreaking capabilities and infrastructure in the polar regions is a start, but it's unclear where the funding will come, while a proposal to lease from foreign allies could be risky, former government officials and experts say.

The memo from Trump [issued this month](#) directed [a multi-agency effort](#) to craft a new strategy for developing a fleet of polar ice-hardened vessels and nuclear-powered icebreakers, which only Russia has.

It also directs the heads of five agencies to identify two new U.S. bases and two international bases, outline how the fleet will operate in the poles, provide the number and type of polar security icebreakers needed and estimate costs for heavy and medium icebreakers.

The report is due by Aug. 9, with the goal of securing an operational fleet by 2029.

However, Arctic experts and former government officials are concerned that the U.S. is running out of time, and warn that leasing from other nations in the meantime could undermine national security. They also say the funding for any new plan is not allocated in any budget, which leaves questions about where the hefty cost of new vessels would come from.

"The good news is I'm delighted to have the White House taking seriously the issue of icebreakers and the Arctic. It's bad news because I am afraid it might derail the current plans and delay the delivery of the first new icebreaker by five years," Sen. [Angus King](#) (I-Maine) said in an interview.

King, who has [long sounded the alarm](#) on the U.S.' lack of Arctic policy, said he is worried that the "White House memo implies a sort of starting over" that could push back a plan already underway to deliver three new icebreakers, the first of which is set to be delivered in 2024.

"The memo really highlighted we have a lot of catching up to do, and it's unclear whether we have the money or the political will to catch up," said Heather Conley, senior vice president for Europe, Eurasia and the Arctic at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The White House, aiming to counter Russia and Chinese influence in the region, [reopened its consulate in Greenland](#), a day after the memo's release, as part of a larger Arctic push that has heated up since last year.

## Funding issues

It's unclear where Congress would get the money from for a new fleet, as well as a new strategic deepwater port directed in the memo, which will most likely be built in Alaska. Icebreakers cost \$500 million to \$1 billion apiece, and the Coast Guard [just received full funding this year for a second heavy icebreaker](#).

"They've always been reluctant to cough up the money, even in better economic times," said Julie Gourley, a former State Department senior Arctic official.

Conley suggested that a budget supplemental would be the only way forward, as an Arctic strategy is “not written into anybody’s budget.”

### **The leasing option**

The administration raised the idea of leasing icebreakers from “partner nations” to help fill the icebreaker gap between now and 2029. King said leasing is not viable as “a long term strategy.”

Conley pointed out the last time the U.S. tried to lease from an ally, it was a “wake up call that even leasing from another country has its limitations.”

The National Science Foundation has leased the Swedish icebreaker, the Oden, to do work connected to the McMurdo research station in Antarctica. But when weather conditions in the Baltic Sea continued to worsen, Sweden recalled the icebreaker because they needed it to go back and break ice.

### **Arctic policy shift**

The memo’s focus on boosting security capabilities marks a departure from Coast Guard icebreakers’ primary functions of conducting search-and-rescue and scientific research missions.

“I thought it was kind of surprising that they just flat out admitted that one of the functions of an icebreaker fleet would be intel collection,” Gourley said.

Most administrations have shied away from prioritizing the economic benefits of operating in the Arctic, Gourley said, so it’s a “pretty big step” including in the memo that “we need to have economic security in the Arctic with a consistent fleet of icebreakers out there for domain awareness.”

However, it’s unclear whether the U.S. is considering including putting weapons onboard the vessels, Conley noted.

### **What’s next?**

King recommended keeping with the Coast Guard’s icebreaker program and work on the next round of funding for a third vessel.

“2029 is an eternity in national security matters and we desperately need this capacity,” King said, stressing that it’s “embarrassing that the Chinese now have as many icebreakers as we do. ... We have to be aware of what our competitors are doing and not be flat-footed.”

“I still can’t imagine they’re going to get all this done in 60 days,” Gourley added, noting that a Biden administration would most likely not focus on the Arctic if Trump does not win reelection.