

Trump Orders Review of Polar Security Cutter Program



Crew members aboard the icebreaker Polar Star secure a brow after mooring the cutter to a pier at Coast Guard Base Seattle on March 11. The PSC program is the designated replacement for the aging Polar Star. U.S. Coast Guard/Petty Officer 3rd Class Amanda Norcross

ARLINGTON, Va. – President Trump has ordered a review of the U.S. Coast Guard’s icebreaking polar security cutter (PSC) program, with a focus on exploring options for nuclear power, heavy armament and leasing stopgap icebreakers.

In a June 9 memorandum from the White House to several federal departments, titled “Safeguarding U.S. National Interests in the Arctic and Antarctic Regions,” Trump ordered “a review of requirements for a polar security icebreaking fleet acquisition program to acquire and employ a suitable fleet of polar security icebreakers, and associated assets and resources, capable of ensuring a persistent United States presence in the Arctic and Antarctic regions in support of national interests and in furtherance of the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy, as appropriate.”

“Separately, the review shall include the ability to provide a persistent United States presence in the Antarctic region, as appropriate, in accordance with the Antarctic Treaty System,” the memo said.

The Coast Guard awarded a \$745 million contract to VT Halter Marine in 2019 to build the lead PSC and has requested funds to construct a second PSC in the 2021 budget. The lead PSC is scheduled for delivery in 2024. The sea service has a requirement for six new icebreakers, including at least three PSCs.

The Coast Guard has only one serviceable heavy ice breaker, the Polar Star, which was commissioned in 1976, available. The Polar Star makes an annual voyage to Antarctica to help resupply U.S. facilities on that continent.

Trump also directed officials to study “the comparative operational and fiscal benefits and risks of a polar security icebreaking fleet that consists of at least three heavy [PSCs].”

The study is to use the full range of missions that may be executed by medium PSCs so that the optimal number and type of PSCs needed to ensure a persistent presence in the Arctic and Antarctic regions.

The study also will assess expanded capabilities for the PSCs, including unmanned systems, space systems and sensors to achieve maritime domain awareness; secure communications and data transfer systems; and intelligence-collection systems.

The study also will evaluate “defensive armament adequate to defend against threats by near-peer competitors” such as China and Russia.

The PSC is slated to be armed with .50-caliber machine guns for close-in defense, but the Coast Guard has in the past said it is open to the idea up-gunning the armament to include heavier weapons, including cruise missiles.

The study also will look at the “potential for nuclear-powered propulsion” for the PSC fleet. The study also will identify at least two optimal basing locations and at least two international basing locations for the future icebreaker fleet.

In recognition of the Polar Star’s condition, the study also will look at options to bridge a potential gap between the end of the Polar Star’s worthiness and the commissioning of the PSC fleet, considering leasing options of commercial

icebreakers from partner nations.

“Further, and in advance of any bid solicitation for future polar security icebreaker acquisitions, the Secretary of State shall coordinate with the Secretary of Homeland Security to identify partner nations with proven foreign shipbuilding capability and expertise in icebreaker construction,” the memo said.

In the memo, the president directed that the secretary of Homeland Security and the director of the Office of Management and Budget shall ensure that the Coast Guard’s offshore patrol cutter acquisition program “is not adversely impacted.”