

Canada, US and Finland form trilateral icebreaker-building pact to counter Russia and China in the Arctic

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Under conditions of a rapidly escalating NATO-Russia war in Ukraine, Canada, the United States and Finland have announced a trilateral agreement to build new fleets of icebreakers. The agreement, dubbed the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort or ICE Pact, was announced July 11 on the sidelines of the recent NATO summit in Washington.

The agreement underscores the critical geostrategic importance of the Arctic in the context of a new drive of the imperialist powers to re-divide the world. At the summit, which took place July 9-11, NATO boasted that with the recent addition of Sweden and Finland, it now includes “all” Arctic nations—with the notable exception of Russia. In a provocative escalation of the war, NATO also unveiled the creation of a permanent office in Ukraine, which could serve as a “trip wire” for the deployment of troops if it comes under attack, and that weapons supplies to Kiev will henceforth be managed directly by NATO from its facilities in Germany.

In addition to the war on Russia, the ICE Pact is also a product of the growing conflict between the NATO imperialist powers and China. The NATO summit dedicated much of its proceedings to preparations for war against China, including moving to formalize an anti-China “partnership” with Indo-Pacific nations. The summit communiqué, in extraordinarily bellicose language, condemned China as “a decisive enabler of Russia’s war against Ukraine.” China, which has recently declared itself a “near Arctic power,” is an explicit target of ICE.

While not themselves vessels of war, icebreakers are critical to transportation and supply chains in the Arctic, including for military operations. Climate change is leading to a rapid retreat of sea ice at the poles, opening up new sea lanes. As a result, the quickest routes for sea travel between North America, Asia and Europe now pass through the Arctic and may within little more than a decade be navigable all year round. The extraction of rare earth minerals, oil, gas and other critical resources—including from the Arctic Ocean sea floor—is another motivating factor behind the scramble for the Arctic. One that, from the standpoint of the NATO powers, further highlights their need to assert supremacy over the Arctic and its sea routes.

According to a White House statement, in pursuit of icebreaker fleet modernization, the ICE Pact has three main strategic objectives: “enhanced information exchange” between the trilateral partners concerning icebreaker shipbuilding technology; collaboration on “workforce development” in order to train personnel; and obtaining contracts from other NATO allies to purchase icebreakers built in US, Canadian or Finnish shipyards. The partnership is projected to

produce up to 90 icebreaker ships in order to counter Russian and Chinese inroads into the Arctic.

The initiative represents the second trilateral partnership on maritime technology and production announced by US President Joe Biden, after the establishment of AUKUS with Britain and Australia in 2021. AUKUS, an agreement of an entirely different order of magnitude, is an openly anti-China alliance initiated in order to supply Australia with nuclear-powered submarines. Canada is actively seeking admission into AUKUS to pursue its own imperialist ambitions against China and likely sees the ICE Pact as a potential stepping stone into the alliance. At the same time, Ottawa’s extensive interests in the Arctic are a major concern in their own right.

The establishment of the ICE Pact follows a series of announcements by both Canadian and US imperialism of plans to vastly expand their military presence in the Arctic. Central to this militarization drive is the “modernization” of NORAD, the joint Canada-US aerospace and maritime defence command established at the height of the Cold War. NORAD’s modernization will be accompanied by Canada’s procurement of new fleets of fighter planes, warships, and submarines, and other instruments of violence. At the NATO summit, Canada also committed an extra \$500 million in military assistance to Ukraine.

The joint statement of the three ICE Pact signatories explains that “in the Arctic, new, faster shipping lanes hold the potential to create new economic opportunities and drive down shipping costs.” In a separate comment, a senior American security official spelled out even more clearly the aims of the program:

ICE Pact will reinforce the message to Russia and China that the United States and its allies intend to ... doggedly pursue collaboration on industrial policy to increase our competitive edge in strategic industries like shipbuilding, to build a world-class polar icebreaking fleet at scale. Without this arrangement, we’d risk our adversaries developing an advantage in a specialized technology with vast geostrategic importance, which could also allow them to become the preferred supplier for countries that also have an interest in purchasing polar icebreakers.

Directly following the announcement, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a statement of his own:

As leaders of Arctic nations, Canada, Finland and the United States, recognizing the enduring importance of the region to our collective economic, climate and national security, ... resolve to deepen our cooperation to ensure the polar and Arctic regions remain peaceful, cooperative and prosperous. Over the next six months, we also will jointly develop an implementation plan for this collaboration to build these highly complex and critical vessels for our allies and partners with interests and responsibilities in the Arctic and Antarctic regions.

Because the long-overlooked Arctic has become a new arena of strategic competition and conflict, aging fleets of icebreakers have become a source of anxiety among the American and Canadian ruling classes. Eight years ago, a report completed for Transport Canada warned the Liberal government that the country's coast guard fleet was falling apart and was in desperate need of new ships. In January, the US Coast Guard made a similar warning, claiming that it was in need of new icebreakers as soon as possible. Specifically, the Coast Guard claimed it would need between eight to 10 new icebreakers. Between them, the US Coast Guard and the US Navy reportedly have only two functioning icebreaking vessels remaining. The US has not constructed a new icebreaker since the 1970s.

Russia, which is much more dependent on the Arctic for its economic growth, has a fleet of 40 icebreakers and more currently in production. China, likewise, has initiated a major program to construct icebreakers.

The North American trade union bureaucracies, in keeping with their pro-war, anti-working class orientation, have been enthusiastic cheerleaders of "countering" China. The United Steelworkers (USW) and other North American unions, for example, have provocatively called for a probe into China's "unreasonable and discriminatory" practices in the maritime, logistics and shipbuilding sectors. Undoubtedly, the Biden, Trudeau and Orpo governments will increasingly rely on the unions to artificially suppress working class resistance to the war drive of the NATO powers. Indeed, Biden recently referred to the trade unions as his "domestic NATO."

Davie Shipbuilding, based in Lévis, Quebec, will play a leading role in the NATO powers' icebreaker fleet construction program, aided by Vancouver-based Seaspan. Davie recently purchased Finland's Helsinki Shipyard Oy, which up until the imposition of Western sanctions on Moscow had been a major supplier of icebreaker hulls for Russia's nuclear-powered fleet. A press release from Davie welcoming the ICE Pact said that "while adversaries' shipbuilding industries operate on an effective war footing, Western allies markedly lack sufficient icebreakers and other specialized ships. No single nation can solve this challenge alone, but trusted allies with common goals and advanced shipbuilding can." Davie went on to note that its Helsinki shipyard has built more than half the world's icebreaker fleet.

In the US, Bollinger Shipyards (Lockport, Louisiana) has begun work on the first of three Polar Security Cutters, a type of multi-mission icebreaking vessel. In May, the US Congressional Budget Office estimated that the three vessels alone would cost a whopping \$5.1 billion USD to construct. A Biden administration official said that the entire Polar Security Cutter program could cost as much as \$10 billion USD "to fully deploy the fleet that we want."

The Arctic plays an increasingly important role in the imperialist

powers' drive to repartition the world for several reasons. First, it is a region rich in key raw materials, including oil and gas, and rare earths that are crucial for the rapidly expanding "clean energy" economy. Competing territorial claims to the Arctic Ocean seafloor will play a major role in determining which powers can lay claim to and seize these natural resources. Secondly, the Northwest Passage on Canada's northern coast and the Northern Sea Route along Russia's Arctic coast are quickly becoming viable trade routes that would massively reduce freight transport times and costs between Europe and Asia. Thirdly, control over the Arctic and its approaches would offer crucial military advantages during a third world war. Missiles fired by North America's imperialist powers against Russia and China could swiftly reach their targets by traversing the Arctic.

The militarization drive is not limited to the Canadian Arctic alone, but rather has come to involve Canada's Atlantic Region as well. This is certainly true of Newfoundland, which due to its position as North America's easternmost land mass and proximity to the Gulf of the St. Lawrence, served as a critical staging ground for British and American imperialism for the military/strategic supply of Europe during the First and Second World Wars. Today, St. John's, the provincial capital and one of the major "gateways" to the Northwest Passage, is becoming a pivotal stopover point for Canadian and US military forces on their way to the Arctic. In the context of a rapidly escalating conflict with Russia, the province is being viewed with increasing interest by the Canadian ruling class as a forward base for future military conflict.

Canadian imperialism's bellicose plans for its Atlantic Provinces were underscored by a July 1 ceremony involving the repatriation of the remains of an "unknown soldier" at the war memorial in downtown St. John's, Newfoundland. Justin Trudeau, who attended the widely publicized event, shed crocodile tears over the senseless slaughter of 1914-1918 while claiming that it represented the first time Canadian imperialism "showed the world that we could punch above our weight." The remains of the soldier, who likely died in 1916, had been left untouched in Belgium until now. As the world hurtles toward a third global conflict, the timing of the event could not have been any more revealing. Couched in Canadian nationalist and Newfoundland provincialist rhetoric, the ceremony was aimed at whipping up militarist sentiments in the populace against Russia and China.



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