

Statement of Senator Dan Sullivan
Before the House Committee on Homeland Security
November 29, 2023

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I commend the Committee's dedication to understanding the complexities of Arctic security and providing me the opportunity to speak about the increasing significance of the Arctic region to our nation's security.

The Arctic is undergoing monumental changes. Sea ice is receding, opening up an entire ocean that was previously unreachable. This allows access to a wealth of natural resources and makes available maritime trade routes that are thousands of nautical miles shorter than transits using the Suez or Panama Canals. The strategic importance of this region is unquestionable.. Arctic security is American security.

Despite that, we as a country are not properly postured to secure our interests in the region.

America is an Arctic nation because of Alaska. My state is at the forefront of Arctic competition and guards the United States against threats from our competitors. We are in a new era of authoritarian aggression. Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping are both running hostile regimes that seek to control access to the Arctic region. Alaska's proximity to both Russia and China requires that the state play a vital role in securing America's interests in the Arctic and Indo-Pacific. Alaska is the only place on earth with 100 5th generation fighters, long range discrimination radar, missile defense silos, and other strategic assets that are vital to the defense of our nation. Because of this, since I came into office in 2015, I have been pressing officials in Washington, D.C. relentlessly on the need to prioritize our capabilities in the Arctic. We need new and secure infrastructure like icebreakers and deepwater ports; we needed them yesterday.

In recent years, the Russian navy has stepped up the scale of its exercises near Alaska, including in the US Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). In 2022, a joint Russian and Chinese naval patrol was sighted near Alaska. That patrol was intercepted and monitored by a Coast Guard cutter to ensure the sovereignty of our territorial waters and the safety of our mariners. In August of this year, a group of 11 Russian and Chinese warships were operating together off the coast of Alaska in the Aleutian Islands. This time, we stepped up our response and sent four destroyers from the Lower 48 to intercept this joint Chinese-Russian flotilla. We must take this as a sign of things to come.. We not only need more Coast Guard assets, but also a Navy presence back in Alaska. We will need to be able to respond more rapidly in the future. That means places for Navy ships to refuel and refit in the Aleutian Islands and on Alaska's west coast near the Bering Strait.

Unfortunately, the bureaucracy within the executive branch has been slow to act on the growing threats in the Arctic. Thankfully, through countless hearings and legislative action, Congress has led the charge in growing America's presence in the Arctic. In the FY22 NDAA, I authored a provision that required the USNORTHCOM Commander to complete an independent assessment of the resources needed to implement the National Defense Strategy and the service-specific Arctic strategies. This year, I'm working through the NDAA conference process to pass the Arctic Security Initiative, which would require the Defense Department to enhance security in the Arctic region based on the results of that assessment.

The U.S. has not invested in Arctic infrastructure. Russia has over 50 icebreakers, many of which are nuclear powered. They have built ports and ice-hardened vessels. Even China's icebreaking capacity is on pace to surpass ours by 2025, despite them having no sovereignty over any Arctic waters.

The U.S. only has one operational heavy and one medium polar icebreaker. The Coast Guard Cutter HEALY recently transited near the Northern Sea Route outside of the Russian EEZ. I applaud the crew of the HEALY for making this transit. But we need to be able to do this consistently. We recognize the importance of freedom of navigation transits through the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. We need to do the same for the Northern Sea Route from Europe to the Bering Strait.

The Coast Guard is working to get more icebreakers. The Polar Security Cutter acquisition is underway but is not moving fast enough. The program has been continually delayed. This is why I have pushed for the Coast Guard to acquire a commercially-built icebreaker that is available today. Because of a provision in last year's NDAA, the Coast Guard has the authority to procure a commercially-available icebreaker and I am hopeful that we will secure the funding this year.

Icebreakers are only the beginning. The level of infrastructure development, domain awareness, and reliable communications are far from sufficient to support America's security needs in the region.

Congress has made progress. We have begun work on a deepwater port in Nome on Alaska's west coast, which will be critical component for Arctic maritime transportation, and serve as a staging area for search and rescue, pollution response, and security operations. This is a major step forward, but it cannot be the only step. We need a series of secure, strategic ports in the Arctic.

As infrastructure is built out in the Arctic, it will need to be protected from attack, both in the physical and cyber dimensions. Much of the Alaskan Arctic has limited cyber infrastructure, creating single points of failure that leave our systems vulnerable to outages. For example, just this summer a Quintillion fiber optic cable was severed by shifting ice, causing internet and cellphone outages in much of northern and western Alaska. The repair took months.

Arctic security necessitates a whole of government effort. We must bolster our presence, both military and civilian, to effectively respond to emergencies and enforce regulations. We must rely on partnerships between DHS and DOD to keep our nation safe. We must also work with nongovernmental partners and consult with Arctic communities as we expand our Arctic presence.

The Arctic is a key arena for 21st century security challenges. I urge the committee to support initiatives that bolster our Arctic capabilities and safeguard our national interests in the region.

Thank you for your time.