

U.S. Senator Mark Begich
5th Symposium on the Impacts of an Ice-Diminishing Arctic
on Naval and Maritime Operations
10:40 a.m.; July 17, 2013; Navy Memorial, Washington, D.C.

Thanks for that introduction (Dr. Clemente-Colon).

I'm pleased to speak at this 5th Symposium.

As usual, there is an impressive line-up of speakers. Even the list of participants is pretty impressive. There's a lot of Arctic expertise in this room today.

This is the third time I've had the opportunity to speak at this ongoing series of discussions about the implications of the changing Arctic.

In the past, I've outlined my frustration about the lack of progress in dealing with the rapidly changing Arctic.

Today, I'm pleased to say a great deal has been accomplished over the past year. But as the Arctic ice continues to melt, the task before us remain enormous.

First, let's take stock of what we've accomplished.

At the urging of Alaska's delegation, the Administration issued its Arctic Strategy, amplifying the existing national policy in presidential and homeland security directives.

The strategy is still a work in progress – a template that needs to be fleshed out. But it's an important start that shows the Administration's interest in – and commitment to –the Arctic.

The Coast Guard issued its own strategy to ensure essential maritime governance in the Arctic and conducted its operation Arctic Shield based out of Barrow last summer.

Arctic Shield is back again this summer, this time based out of Kotzebue and focusing on the Bering Strait and the increasing vessel traffic through that critical gateway to the Arctic.

The Coast Guard's *Polar Star* is out of drydock and sailing again.

We're still behind the curve on the icebreaker front, but that's twice as many icebreakers since I spoke to you last.

And speaking of ships, the Alaska Region Research Vessel *Sikuliaq* was launched and is now being prepared for sea trials in advance of its mission of Arctic research over the coming decades.

The federal Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee recently issued its five-year research plan, informed by the goals and objectives established by U.S. Arctic Research Commission.

It identifies seven key research areas focusing on the changing Arctic climate, ice, and ecosystems on land and in the water.

NOAA has developed its Arctic Nautical Charting Plan to begin to update the regions woefully inadequate charts.

The Arctic Council has reached legally binding agreements on Search and Rescue and oil spill prevention and response.

They have task forces working on business development and enhanced scientific cooperation in the region.

The Council now has a permanent secretariat and welcomed several other nations as observers.

And the U.S. is preparing to assume chairmanship of the Council in 2015.

Energy development is underway in the Arctic, with top holes drilled by Shell in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas last summer.

Of course, we all know things didn't go exactly according to plans.

In fact, there were serious problems and that activity is on hold for this summer. But overcoming formidable obstacles is no surprise to people versed in the Arctic.

That exploratory work will restart in our waters next summer as it happens elsewhere throughout the Arctic.

Meanwhile, the ice pack continues to diminish, setting a record ice low last summer, and opening new sea routes through the Arctic.

In 2010, just four ships carrying just over 100 thousand tons of cargo crossed Russia's Northern Sea Route.

Last year, 46 ships did, 10 times as many, carrying one and a quarter million tons.

This year a German cruise line is booking tours through the Northwest Passage atop Canada.

Nome to Iceland in three weeks. Book now if you've got 50-thousand dollars burning a hole in your pocket.

I'm guessing they'll be booked full. That's a trip that is quite literally "over the top."

So there's been a lot of progress since we last spoke but there's still a lot more that needs to be done.

Let's start with research. Despite the good planning of IARPC (eye-ARE-pik) and the Research Commission, we need more invested in scientific work in the Arctic.

My Arctic Research, Monitoring and Observing Act, S.272, would increase Arctic research funding by 20 percent using an existing, but underutilized endowment for Arctic research.

Critics say it undercuts their plans. I say when changes in the Arctic are occurring faster than the scientific models predict, we're not doing enough.

Just this week, a new study was published which predicts an ice-free Arctic by the middle of this century, less than 50 years from now.

That's why my bill also funds Arctic oceans observing, the baseline data that underpins other research and one of the key research areas identified by IARPC.

The fund source is an endowment set aside by the settlement of litigation over Arctic oil and gas leasing.

It would help fund needed research for the Department of Interior to meet its responsibilities for OCS development and BIA obligations to manage critical subsistence resources.

I have proposed other legislation to address sorely needed issues in the Arctic, including health and adaptation concerns.

My Arctic Ambassador bill would put the U.S. on equal diplomatic footing with most other nations before the Arctic Council and other bodies and help in exercise U.S. leadership and vision in Arctic policy.

I greatly appreciate the attention to Arctic issues paid by the Administration so far.

Secretary Kerry's personal involvement in the recent Arctic Council ministerial in Sweden continued the attention to Arctic issues paid by Secretary Clinton in recent years and is much appreciated.

I also recognize the work on Arctic issues by Ambassador David Balton, and Julie Gourley, our representative before the Arctic Council.

Yet, I still think the changes we see in the Arctic warrant taking the next step to heighten our diplomatic presence at the top of the globe.

Six of the eight Arctic nations already have Ambassador-level diplomats representing their interests before the Arctic Council.

Japan and Singapore now have Ambassadors to the Arctic.

And they were joined by China, South Korea, India, and Italy in gaining observer level status before Arctic Council.

I welcome their participation. But as the world increasingly turns its attention toward the Arctic, the United States must continue to exert strong leadership at the top of the globe.

And that requires a U.S. Arctic Ambassador.

Earlier this year I wrote President Obama saying our nation has both a historic opportunity and challenge in the Arctic.

We have to balance protection of the natural environment and those who rely on it with the economic needs of our nation.

In my letter to the president, I listed some specific areas I believe warrant his special attention:

The Coast Guard will be a key player in the Arctic but the opening of this “Fifth Ocean” greatly expands their area of responsibility.

We cannot expect them to expand their operations without additional resources.

We need to keep the Coast Guard’s fleet recapitalization efforts on track, while ensuring we have adequate icebreaking capabilities.

That's why I'm deeply concerned by the Administration's proposed cut of the service's acquisition budget by about 40 percent.

I have a hard time understanding how the administration can roll out a new, national Arctic strategy which relies so heavily on an expanded Coast Guard role in the same year it proposes such drastic cuts to a service already behind the curve on recapitalization.

We need a forward operating base in the Arctic to support marine and aircraft operations, as well as Arctic-capable aircraft to execute all of the Coast Guard's important missions in the region.

We need strengthened communications and vessel tracking systems to monitor the increasing maritime shipping through the Bering Straits.

It's not enough for our nation to assert a strong maritime presence – when Russia, China, and now even India are building icebreakers.

I appreciate the administration is putting funding into scoping needs for a new polar class icebreaker. But I'm pushing them to do it faster.

It's good to have the *Polar Star* back in the water but we need to have a new polar class icebreaker ready when the *Star* is ready for retirement.

And I want to see whether the *Polar Sea* still can't be used to fill those needs, rather than being scrapped.

In short, we can no longer afford to have the Coast Guard be perpetually at the back of the line when we are funding our national and homeland security agencies.

I also told the President that other federal agencies – NOAA and the Department of Interior – need support for the necessary hydrographic surveys, mapping sensitive habitats and collecting meteorological data.

Both NOAA and Interior have excellent but woefully underfunded climate research and adaptation programs.

I also asked the President for a more coordinated and streamlined permitting process for future economic development in the Arctic.

We must ensure oil and gas permit applications receive a robust but fair and efficient review by the many federal agencies involved.

The administration has worked with me to make strides toward this.

But we need to pave the way for further improvements by ensuring NOAA, EPA, Interior and other agencies involved in permitting be fully funded to efficiently carry out their responsibilities.

Likewise, we need to make sure industry follows through on its commitments.

Last year ended with the drilling rig *Kulluk* on the rocks off Kodiak.

Fortunately, the crew was safe and no oil spilled. But this accident postponed drilling activity for a year and raised legitimate concerns about industry's ability to operate in the Arctic.

I think they can, and they must to meet the growing energy demands of the world.

The Coast Guard inquiry into that grounding wrapped up last month and I look forward to their recommendations on how to address the lessons learned in 2012.

It's important to remember the Kulluk grounding was, at its heart, an incident related to safe shipping, not drilling.

We need to strengthen Arctic shipping safety. I am following the United States' role in developing the Polar Code at the IMO closely.

A robust polar code will be key to protecting the Arctic. But we also need to improve our maritime domain awareness and ability to respond to problems—an area where cooperation between industry and the Coast Guard will be key.

Lastly, any discussion of Arctic governance has to include the Law of the Sea.

I was greatly disappointed by the failure of the U.S. Senate to act on the Law of the Sea Treaty last year.

The treaty provides a basic governance structure to resolve claims for high seas resources.

Most importantly, the Law of the Sea allows nations to claim the seabed – and its petroleum and mineral resources – beyond the 200-mile limit if they demonstrate a natural extension of their continental shelf.

Preliminary findings indicate this area above Alaska may be huge - some say twice the size as California.

Other Arctic nations already are mobilizing to take full advantage of their resources. But until we ratify the Law of the Sea, we don't have a seat at the table.

Ratification means we can move toward the national comprehensive energy policy we so desperately need, creating greater economic and national security.

Failure to act with the fast-changing Arctic could leave billions of dollars and thousands of jobs on the table.

Regrettably, a small number of senators blocked a vote on this important treaty. But this fight isn't over yet.

I remain a strong supporter of the Law of the Sea and will continue working for its ratification.

(Pause)

A few months ago I spoke at a conference in Seattle on the Promise of the Arctic.

Humans have dreamed of the promise of the Arctic for over 500 years.

They've explored the margins of the polar icepack in ships, and tried to push to the pole in dogsleds and balloons.

Many, like the Franklin Expedition, ended in disaster.

That was news for the Inuit and other indigenous peoples of the Arctic who knew the promise of that region and lived off its resources for millennia and created a vibrant culture.

But the changes we've seen over the past decade have made the Arctic more accessible in a way that others only dreamed about.

And not unexpectedly, it's attracting interest from around the globe.

At this critical juncture, our nation has a responsibility to take full advantage of this promise and assert our leadership in the changing Arctic.

That will take significant time, intelligence and investment.

While I don't have to convince you, I charge you with helping spread that word, so others understand the importance of the Arctic and America's rightful role in its leadership and governance.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about the Arctic and my vision of what's needed as we move forward.

I know your agenda touches on these and other critical matters affecting Arctic maritime and related issues.

I hope to be able to attend the next symposium in 2015 and report on the further progress we've made together to respond to challenges and take advantages of the opportunities we have in the Arctic.

Thank you.