TRANSCRIPT
“A Conversation with U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan on Defending the Arctic”

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FEATURING
Speaker:
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U.S. Senator for Alaska

CSIS Experts:
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Transcript By
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Senator Dan Sullivan (R-AK): OK, good. Well, good afternoon, everybody, and thanks for waiting. Sorry we have a – kind of a hectic schedule on the Senate floor right now, so actually I’ll be talking a little bit about that because there’s a lot going on on the Arctic as we’re working on the defense appropriations bill right now.

But let me just begin by thanking Dr. Hamre and CSIS. And it’s not just the Arctic; it’s Asia-Pacific, it’s so many issues where you and your team lead. So I want to thank you for all you’re doing. I can guarantee you legislators like myself, we use the people here. We use the expertise here. I always jump at the chance to come and say a few words. So thanks again for the invite and thanks for all the great work that you are doing. And I know Heather’s not here, but she’s been doing fantastic work, Heather Conley and CSIS.

So there’s a running joke right now on the Armed Services Committee, the Senate Armed Services Committee, on which I sit – I actually chair the subcommittee in charge of readiness – is that no NDAA – that’s what we call the National Defense Authorization Act – markup is over until I bring in all my provisions on the Arctic. And we did that just a couple weeks ago in the committee, the closed committee markup, but I’ll talk quite a bit about that.

So what I wanted to talk about is just kind of my view. Mostly this is from the kind of military/Armed Services perspective of what I would consider three noteworthy trends as it relates to the Arctic.

First, that on the issues particularly as it relates to the military and our DOD policy, it’s Congress that is driving it. Unfortunately, the Pentagon is not, and I can get into that quite a lot. My remarks here say Pentagon is a distant second. I would say it’s, you know, a real distant second. And while the media often – this has been a kind of lament of mine – the national media likes to kind of focus on the conflict. I always say there’s a lot more going on in Washington that’s bipartisan that you see all the time.

I literally just came from a press conference where Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island and I just introduced our second version of the Save Our Seas Act. This is the Save Our Seas Act 2.0. It’s all about ocean debris, ocean plastics. Our bill last year got signed into law by the president. He was very excited about that. And just with regard to the NDAA, that came out of committee 25 to two. And that’s a big, important bill.
But in the area of Arctic, I will tell you that definitely a growing bipartisan focus on what we need to do and how we need to increase our focus in that area. So that’s very positive as well.

And then, third, there is a rapidly growing interest in the Arctic, whether it’s from other countries – China, to name a few; Russia – but federal agencies, think tanks, service secretaries. I’ll do a shout out to one in particular today. This topic is really starting to gain hold in Washington, and I think that that’s important.

So – and so is the media. So if you look at some headlines here from major news publications, just – how are we doing on our slides? There we go. This is just a little smattering. Heck, even 60 Minutes, you may have seen there’s a bunch of – there’s a lot going on here. And this is just in the last couple of months. So that’s also positive.

So where is all this headed? Well, you know, throughout the decades, as one of our last great frontiers, the Arctic certainly has captured the imagination of Americans. We purchased my wonderful state, the great state of Alaska, in large part because of dreams of that future in the Arctic, where the original – if you saw the Senate debates on the purchase, what’s called the Treaty of Cession, when we bought Alaska from Russia, there was talk about new trade routes, new riches, new resources, new alliances.

And in some ways that’s starting to happen. Whether we’ve gotten past the realm of just the Arctic and our imagination, it’s starting to happen where we’re finally beginning to take concrete actions to ensure a safe, peaceful, prosperous Arctic region. But we have a lot of work to do. We have a lot of work to do and a long way to go.

So I’m going to briefly talk about what’s at stake, where we are today, a little bit about the NDAA, and then kind of a vision for the future. But what I really want to do – and I mentioned this to Dr. Hamre – is get through this kind of quickly and really have a conversation, get your views on some of the things that we’re working on.

So overall, when you look at what’s at stake in the region, I like to kind of focus in five areas. And these don’t always get the focus that they need, but I think they’re the important ones: Resources, transportation routes, the strategic location of the American Arctic, which is Alaska, the environment, and, yes, people.
I can’t tell you how many times it seems to be an afterthought by some of our DOD senior officials, like, oh, wait, people live there. Yeah, people live there. They happen to be my constituents who live there.

So, first, resources. You know, I think some of you have seen these, but whether it’s particularly with regard to natural resources, the U.S. Geological Survey has estimated that the Arctic region has approximately 90 billion barrels of conventional oil, almost 1,700 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, 44 billion barrels of natural gas liquids. These are some of the largest deposits that we think of natural resources in the world. And that’s just natural resources with regard to oil and gas.

With regard to mining and minerals, like rare-earth minerals, some things that are very important – you know, I was the former commissioner of natural resources and energy in Alaska. We did an assessment that Alaska, if it were a country, would be top 10 in the world on 10 of the most important minerals in the world, just my state. So there are a lot of resources in the region.

Second, transportation routes; more important than ever with the receding sea ice. Vladimir Putin has called the Arctic transportation routes the new Suez Canal that Russia will control. That’s his vision. Recently, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo – some of you may have seen a very strong speech at the Arctic Council meeting in Finland – he also said that, quote, “Arctic sea lanes could become the 21st-century Suez Canal and Panama Canals.” He just didn’t mention the part about Russia controlling that. That’s a joke. (Laughter.) But I think we don’t want Russia to control that.

But the reality is this. Just a few years ago the Panamanian-flagged vessel the Nordic Barents sailed through the Northern Sea Route from Norway to China. According to news reports, it saved 18 days – 18 days – going that route as opposed to the traditional Suez Canal route, and just for that ship saved over $300,000 in terms of fuel costs in that 18-day transportation saving. So think about that. That’s the driver right there.

The third is the strategic location of the Arctic. And some of you –

MR.: I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t make it.

Sen. Sullivan: OK. You didn’t make that, OK.
Well, some of you know the father of the U.S. Air Force General Billy Mitchell referred to, in a confirmation – in a Senate hearing in the 1930s referred to Alaska as the most strategic place in the world because you can get to so many places in the Northern Hemisphere so quickly, whether it’s Europe, Asia, or North America. And a lot of Americans certainly don’t look at the maps like this, the map that we were going to have there that kind of looks at the world from the top of the world, but I’ll just give you one example. It takes about seven hours to get from Anchorage to Seoul via aircraft, and that trip is almost 12 hours from San Francisco. So that’s just one example.

Fourth, the environment. The environment in the Arctic is often described as pristine. Certainly, it’s important that we keep it and maintain it. By the way, Alaska has the highest standards on the environment of anyplace in the Arctic by far. But I would call the environment more rugged. And it’s certainly important to protect the environment, and as I mentioned we are very proud of our very, very high standards that we have in the Arctic, particularly as it relates to resource development relative to other countries.

And of course, the final of the five areas of strategic interest in the Arctic are the people. And they’re wonderful people, whether Alaskan native, non-native – brilliant, patriotic, resourceful. Some of the most resourceful people, I would say, on the entire planet. And I think one thing that sometimes gets lost when we talk about the Arctic is that people live there. And people need to have a healthy environment, but they also need to be able to have an economic future. And this is one area where I think the previous administration, the Obama administration, sorely forgot about, this element of the Arctic – the people and an economic – and their economic well-being.

So these stakes are certainly important. They’re increasing(ly) important. And what we’ve been trying to do is look at what are the challenges there and how do we address them.

Well, let me start to mention the first challenge, and that is with regard to what’s been happening in the Arctic. It is becoming increasingly – and this is mostly with regard to Russia, but – a much more militarized Arctic. When I first got to the Senate in 2015, I had asked the secretary of defense, Secretary Ash Carter, and General Dempsey in an Armed Services hearing about our Arctic strategy. And to be honest, there wasn’t much of a strategy from the Department of Defense’s position. It was a 13-page document, seven I believe of which were pictures. Russia was mentioned once in a footnote. And this was the strategy of the DOD. For our defense officials here or former defense officials here, this was not a serious strategy. And when I held it up, to the secretary’s credit he pretty much acknowledged that. And not only did he acknowledge that, but then General Dempsey jumped in and talked about the military buildup in the Arctic. Do we have that slide, Jason, for the –
MS.: It’s coming up right now.

Sen. Sullivan: OK. And if you look at what the Russians were doing, General Dempsey had mentioned that the Russians had recently announced that they were creating six new brigade combat teams, four of which would be in the Arctic. And that was in addition to the airports, strategic ports, and other military bases that they’ve been building in the Arctic. So not sure we have that slide, but maybe it’ll get up there in a minute. So to me, what we started to do was say, OK, here’s the challenge. We don’t really have a strategy. So how do we address this? So what we started to do – and, again, this is in a very bipartisan way, is each of the past five NDAAAs – National Defense Authorization Acts – we’ve been able to put in language and entire sections on the importance of the Arctic, and the increasing importance as it relates to our military.

So in the NDAA in 2016, we required an Arctic strategy from the secretary of defense. And we laid out what we wanted in it. Not fluffy pictures, but serious military strategy with regard to the Arctic. In 2017, I had a provision in there talking about the concept of a strategic Arctic port. So, again, we have a slide in here, hopefully we can pull up, that shows where we have infrastructure in the Arctic for the United States that can handle military vessels. The answer is essentially we don’t have any. We don’t have any. The closest one is Anchorage. This is the Russian Arctic buildup. (Laughter.) There you go. You get a sense. And there we have Alaska over there, and what we have there.

But if you go to the slide with regard to – there we go – with regard to the importance of a strategic port, you look at the eastern seaboard. Those are designated DOD strategic ports that can handle military shipping, it can handle military Navy vessels. In the Arctic, you have Anchorage. So anything within the Arctic Circle or the west coast of Alaska, we don’t have anything in terms of a strategic Arctic port. So we had a provision in there that had the secretary of defense, secretary of homeland security look to see if we needed this. We gave them a little bit of discretion. I’ll get back to that in a minute. And that was probably a mistake. (Laughter.)

The next couple NDAAAs we made significantly more progress with regard to Arctic capabilities, particularly with regard to missile defense. So one of the areas of strategic importance for Alaska, given our location, is that we are the cornerstone of our country’s missile defense. And we’ve been building that up in terms of radar, in terms of missile fields. And, again, that’s all been very, very bipartisan, which is a new development. Normally missile defense for the United States has been a partisan issue.

In the 2018 NDAA, importantly, we had about 10 additional Arctic-related provisions. But importantly we had the authorization of the first new Coast Guard icebreaker – polar-class icebreaker in almost four decades. The Russians have 40 icebreakers. They’re building 13 more, some of which are nuclear powered, many of which are weaponized. The United States of
America has two, and one is broken. (Laughter.) Literally. This is what I’m talking about, the blind spot on the Arctic. So we got one authorized. And then in last year’s NDAA we got six what the Coast Guard is now calling polar security cutters, which I like that term. So – and we required a joint force Arctic strategy with regard to the Pentagon. So we’ve been pressing on the icebreakers, pressing on the ports, pressing on missile defense, and pressing the Pentagon on strategy.

So where are we today? Well, as I mentioned, in the NDAA a couple years ago we gave the Pentagon the discretion to look at a strategic Arctic port. You see the need. It’s crying out. And in their great wisdom they came back and said, no need. This has been a frustration of mine, where I actually think the last organization in town to recognize the importance of the Arctic has been the Pentagon. So right now, as we speak, we’re debating the NDAA on the floor of the Senate. This year’s provision has a number of Arctic provisions, including a designation of a requirement for a strategic Arctic port – at least one, if not more – that can handle Navy ships up to the size of destroyers.

So there’s no more discretion. If this provision makes it through the entire NDAA, the secretary of defense will be mandated to do this. And we think, again, this is the Congress leading. This provision was something that we debated in the committee. But it was very, very strongly supported by almost all the senators on the Armed Services Committee. So I’m confident it will continue.

There’s many other things in this year’s NDAA that we’re focused on. For example, it strongly encourages the Department of Defense to designate a deputy assistant secretary for the Arctic. The reason this is needed – if you have the slide on seams – you know, the Arctic is one of the great kind of classic examples with regard to the military, where at the operational seams of so many different combatant commands.

So what do I mean by that? If you look at where Alaska is there, where the two blue dots are, we are in the northern – U.S. Northern Command is the DOD’s advocate for the Arctic. OK, so that’s the green. PACOM, U.S. PACOM actually has operational control over all the military forces in Alaska. EUCOM, European Command, NATO command, the red, is where, to be honest, the biggest strategic threat that relates to the Arctic – and that’s Russia – is. And then STRATCOM, which is not even mentioned here, has control of the missile defense. So we are on a classic seam. So what does that do for the defense strategists here? You know, sometimes that is an indication sometimes of importance. But it can also be an indication that nobody’s in charge, and that’s a challenge. So we have been encouraging the Pentagon to designate at least a DAS level DOD official for the Arctic.
Second in this NDAA, in addition to the strategic Arctic port and that designation, the NDAA includes a provision requiring the secretary of defense to provide a plan on how each military service will implement the Arctic strategy. And, third, learning from history, you may have seen the Norwegian cruise ship, the Viking Sky, that lost power off the rough seas in Norway a couple months ago. Thirteen hundred passengers, 24 hours to be evacuated. We are now requiring the Pentagon and the Coast Guard to have plans with regard to rescues in the Arctic. You may have seen that cruise ships are now doing the northwest passage as well.

So we are pushing on this. I will do a shout-out, though, to certain members of the Pentagon. I don’t want to be all doom and gloom with what is happening there. Secretary Spencer, the secretary of the Navy, I think has been someone who has been a strong advocate. He sees this. He recognizes this. Speeches actually here at CSIS where he mentioned the need for a strategic Arctic port in Alaska. And, importantly, has announced a few months back that the Navy is planning on one destroyer, possibly two, with Coast Guard, ships with it to do a transit of the northwest passage this summer.

Some might call that a freedom of navigation operation. I’m not sure that the Navy is going to use that term. But what it would be is over the pole, down through – by Alaska, and down over to New York City. The secretary will also be coming up to Alaska as we – he and I have toured the Navy base of Adak out in the Aleutian Island chain, which is an incredibly strategic location. Not only the gateway to the Arctic, but the gateway to the Indo-Asia Pacific. And right now the Navy and the Marines are planning a large-scale amphibious exercise for Adak as early as September.

So certainly the SecNav is starting to get it. We think that other members of the Pentagon are waking up to challenge. And importantly, so is our secretary of state. As I mentioned, you may have seen the secretary recently, in his speech at the Arctic, talked about how the Arctic is a potential avenue for expanded great-power competition and aggression spanning two key regions, the Indo-Pacific and Europe, and the U.S. allies and our homeland. And I commend Secretary Pompeo and others, like Secretary or General O’Shaughnessy, the Northern Command commander, who are finally viewing the Arctic in the strategic way in which I think most of us believe we’ve neglected for too long.

So I think we’re at a strategic inflection point here regarding the Arctic. There’s geopolitical challenges. The important regions – this important region, as it relates to the United States, is an area where the Congress is certainly focused. And as Secretary Pompeo recently stated, the world has long felt the magnetic pull towards the Arctic, but never more so than today, the region has become an arena for power and for competition, and the eight Arctic states must adapt to this new future.
We have great allies in this Arctic Council, some of whom share our views about the concerns of the militarization of the Arctic. But some countries that don’t share our interests, Russia and China, are also very, very active in this region.

So my bottom line is we’re making progress. It’s progress that we hope the Pentagon can start learning from. The progress is mostly coming from the Congress in a bipartisan way. But we have a long, long way to go to catch up, to recognize the importance of this critical area.

America is an Arctic nation because of the great state of Alaska. But the realization of that is finally starting to occur. We just need to accelerate it. And I look forward to working with CSIS and others to make sure we’re protecting our interests in the Arctic as an Arctic nation, working with our allies, and defending the sovereign territory of the United States in that region, which is so important to all of us.

So thank you very much. And I look forward to your questions, John. (Applause.)

Dr. Hamre: Thank you very much, Senator.

First of all, apologies to all of you. Heather Conley, who’s been running our Arctic program for 10 years, really is the expert. She wanted to be – had a death in the family, so she asked if I’d sit in. So I’ve been reading like crazy for the last two days trying to get up to speed here to not embarrass myself.

Sen. Sullivan: Well, it’s an honor to be sitting up here with you –

Dr. Hamre: Thank you.


Dr. Hamre: But I – we’re going to count on all of you. Heather did say that people that come to Arctic events are remarkably well informed. So we’re going to turn to them –

Dr. Hamre: – to get some questions.

Let me just get started, if I may, Senator. You know, I’ve talked to some friends before and I’ve had them say, you know, there’s just nothing strategic about the Arctic. It seems to me that’s a threshold issue we have to deal with.


Dr. Hamre: Because how do we motivate it? You see it. I see it. But, you know, our security establishment doesn’t really have that consciousness.

Sen. Sullivan: I think it’s a really important point. It’s a great point. It’s part of the reason, I think, that the – look, I’m a colonel in the Marine Corps Reserves. I love the military, right. I mean, I’ve been in for 26 years. I’ve got to run my PFT tomorrow morning, you know, bright and early. I’m probably going to not do so good on it. You know, this life is not necessarily conducive to being in good shape, like the Marines demand.

But there are times when I think – and I’ve mentioned this to the leadership in the Pentagon – particularly on the Armed Services Committee, you can tell where you have senators, you know, maybe grilling the admirals and the generals where there’s an element where you can see some of the defense establishment is looking at the Congress or the senators kind of like, oh, geez, these guys really don’t know what they’re talking about, or this is kind of annoying that I have to sit here and take it. And, you know, I recognize that. And I’m sure sometimes it’s true.

But there’s also times when, to be perfectly blunt, the Pentagon is so big, bureaucratic, groupthink, that they don’t always see it. And maybe the generals and the admirals are the last to get it. And, you know, there’s very big examples of that. Goldwater-Nichols is probably the most, you know, obvious, what happened there, where the Pentagon completely opposed the joint-force approach that the Congress essentially hoisted upon them.

And I think this is one of these examples where – again, I won’t name names, but my first year in the Senate, when I was trying to press this, I felt it was kind of a lonely crusade – me, Senator Murkowski, and Congressman Young on the House side. But you did have senior generals and admirals essentially saying, well – literally I had one: Well, Senator, there’s nobody up there. And I was like, well, actually there are people up there – (laughter) – and they’re my constituents. They’re Americans. They’re very patriotic. You know, Alaska has more veterans per capita than any state in the country. And the Alaska native population, which is almost 20
percent of the population, serves at higher rates in the military than any other ethnic group in the country. So we get it. We understand it. We have defended our nation.

But there’s – you know, there is – there is some hope here. I mentioned Secretary Spencer, the secretary of the Navy, but sometimes you have to be a little bit more forceful, right? When I got elected in – again, my first year in the Senate was in 2015. That was when the Obama administration was still – they had just announced they were going to cut an additional 40,000 active-duty Army troops, including – which was strategically ill-advised; I think everybody recognizes that now – but including the Fourth Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division, which was based at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, which is the only airborne brigade combat team in the entire Asia-Pacific and the only Arctic, cold-weather, mountain-trained unit. And it’s the reserve force for any contingency on the Korean Peninsula, and they were going to get rid of that. So I put a hold on some, you know, very senior Army officials for their confirmation and had lengthy discussions with them about the strategically ill-advised decision to do this. And after getting commitments from them, I lifted my hold. But the 4/25 is still in Alaska, right?

So this is a struggle. And again, you have great experience with the military, but I do think there is this notion, well, it’s expensive. I mean, you look at that picture with regard to Russia and, you know, you look at what the Chinese are doing in the Arctic, they’re up there for a reason, and it’s strategic. It’s the sea routes. It’s the resources. It’s the people. It’s the environment. It’s the strategic location.

And it’s not all doom and gloom. You know, the Pentagon, again, on the strategic location side, we’re going to have two squadrons of F-35s coming to Eielson, so Alaska by the end of 2020 will have over a hundred fifth-generation fighters located in Alaska, based in Alaska. That’s probably more than any fifth-gen fighters in terms of location of anyplace in the world. So – as I mentioned, the missile defense. But in terms of the infrastructure, particularly as it relates to the ports and the freedom of navigation operations – which are required now on those three different DOD strategies – we have a long way to go.

Dr. Hamre: I worked for seven-and-a-half years in the department, and trying to get them to do something they don’t want to do is like one person trying to move a queen-size mattress up the stairs. You know, it’s just – boy, it’s hard to grab it, hard to move it; you get caught.


Dr. Hamre: But it wouldn’t happen without your doing it.
But let me just drill into this. In part – you referenced it – but it really is the Unified Command Plan. You know, the institutions that do planning –


Dr. Hamre: The institutions that see threats and lay plans against them really come up from the way in which we decide how we’re going to take responsibility around the world. Nobody in the military is really taking responsibility for the Arctic.

Sen. Sullivan: That’s right.

Dr. Hamre: You know, you said you’re going to create a deputy assistant secretary level, and you know, it’s great to have a civilian do that, but it really needs to be grounded in a military organization that sees – right? How do you feel we could get on top of that?

Sen. Sullivan: Well, I actually think it’s changing in a positive direction, and I will name names on the positive side. I think that – so I mentioned that slide that had – that showed the seams of the different combatant commands, and that’s actually a really important slide because, again, it shows kind of the interest –

Dr. Hamre: Can we get that slide back up? Can you guys find that slide again for us?

Go ahead, sir. I –


Dr. Hamre: Or just – one more. It was the one you skipped over. There you are.

Sen. Sullivan: There you go.

But I do think that General O’Shaughnessy – he’s now the commander of U.S. Northern Command – at least in my tenure in the Senate the last three Northern – NORTHCOM commanders – now, that’s a big job, right? NORTHCOM is a big job. That’s the border. That’s – I mean, they have a lot of things they have going on. But they also are the advocates for the
Arctic. And I would say that General O’Shaughnessy is really starting to take this area seriously. He’s been up to Alaska a ton. He literally said in an Armed Services hearing recently that he, quote, “views the Arctic as the front line in the defense of the United States and Canada.” And so on a lot of these issues I think that that is starting to take place with regard to Northern Command, at least under General O’Shaughnessy’s leadership. But you know, you kind of get a one step forward, two step back approach.

I mean, again, it doesn’t even make a lot of news here, but just in the last couple weeks we had Bear bomber incursions into American/Alaskan airspace. We go intercept those Russian flights still now on a regular basis. But what we think is, is that when you look at the transportation routes, when you look at what other countries are doing, and when you look at the resources, there is a lot of strategic interest. And I think, unfortunately, the Pentagon seems to be really late to the game, but that’s changing. And Secretary Spencer deserves a lot of the credit, too, the secretary of the Navy.

Dr. Hamre: Well, I’m glad to hear you say that because that ultimately becomes the question: Where do you get someone who goes to work every day thinking about what we need – what we’re facing and what we need? And it’s really going to be in finding some kind of a resolution. I don’t know if we need a sub-unified command responsibility looking at the Arctic.


Dr. Hamre: I don’t know if you’re thought about that, or?

Sen. Sullivan: So I mean, again, that’s one of the reasons why we love coming to CSIS, because you guys have a lot of good ideas. So I haven’t looked at that, but now that you mention it I will.

Dr. Hamre: You know, maybe kind of like the Korea – the way the Korea – U.S. Forces Korea work with Pacific Command to do something.


Dr. Hamre: We’re going to have to get institutional focus because otherwise it’s – they just get ready to go up to a hearing to talk to you.

Sen. Sullivan: Correct. (Laughter.)
Dr. Hamre: You’ve experienced that.

Can I shift and just ask you, you know, if you look at that geography, we’re really quite dependent and partnered with Canada.


Dr. Hamre: Canada’s kind of – has its own complex political geometry about the Arctic.

Sen. Sullivan: They do.

Dr. Hamre: What would you say? How would you – help us understand the dialogue we’re having with Canada and how we should be working with them.

Sen. Sullivan: You know, I actually think it’s positive. I have a really good relationship with the defense minister – like, cellphone, texting. As a matter of fact, you may have seen Prime Minister Trudeau was in town just last week with his defense minister and foreign minister, and I had the opportunity to go to a reception at the embassy – Canadian embassy and had a really long chat, probably well over an hour, with all of them, and – including the, you know, prime minister, but in particular the defense minister. So he and I have talked a lot about, you know, the NORAD mission, for example, is still important. I just mentioned the intercepts.

And you know, it’s interesting, the NORTHCOM commander actually is somebody that needs the sign off, of course, of the president to be nominated, but also the prime minister of Canada. And the Alaska – so we do actually have a sub-unified command in Alaska. It’s called the Alaska Command. The deputy of that command is always a Canadian, usually a Canadian one-star. So up in Alaska it’s pretty integrated.

The one area where I’ve encouraged them – you know, respectfully, but – is on missile defense because, as I mentioned, we are doing quite a lot with regard to missile defense. And if there was ever a rogue missile shot from Kim Jong-un or somewhere else and it was headed towards either Toronto or Chicago or Seattle or Vancouver, we’re obviously not going to wait to figure out where it’s going; we’re going to shoot it down no matter what – Canada, America, we will shoot it down. That’s almost all based in Alaska. I think the Canadians are looking at doing more with us on that.
And then, you know, we’ve talked about the interoperability of our fifth-gen fighters in Alaska that have that NORAD mission. The Canadians have the NORAD mission in terms of protecting the northern flank. So making sure there’s interoperability there. I know they’re looking right now at the F-35s in terms of purchasing that. So there’s a lot of discussions.

And as I mentioned, just last week I was, again, in rather lengthy discussions with the very capable defense minister of Canada. And he has very good relationships with all of our defense secretaries, despite the fact that we’re kind of going through a number of them rather quickly.

Dr. Hamre: Yeah. You know, I looked at the – this Arctic strategy –


Dr. Hamre: – that the department produced. One thing stuck out, and I’m quoting from it: “DOD must be able to quickly identify threats in the Arctic, respond promptly and effectively to those threats, and shape the security environment to mitigate the prospect of those threats in the future.”


Dr. Hamre: How would we do that?

Sen. Sullivan: Well, we don’t – that’s the whole point. The plans are good, and that’s kind of the broader point –

Dr. Hamre: The vision.

Sen. Sullivan: – that I guess I was trying to make. The vision is good. That language sounds great. The resources –

Dr. Hamre: Yeah, there’s nothing there.

Sen. Sullivan: – to do it are severely lacking.
Let me just give you two examples. One, as I mentioned, is just the infrastructure of strategic Arctic ports, to be able to actually, you know, have a destroyer pull up and be able to resupply in a port like in Nome or some other part of Alaska. We need to be able to do that. I think everybody recognizes that, particularly when you look at what the Russians are doing just across the Bering Strait.

Secondly, though, the capability, particularly of previous – the first Arctic strategy talks about the vision, as you mentioned, but also of freedom of navigation. And it talks about freedom-of-navigation operations, FONOPs. So, you know, there’s a lot of focus on that in the South China Sea. But right now we do not have the capability to do freedom-of-navigation operations.

So in some open Armed Services hearings, I pressed the Navy and the CNO of the Navy on this. And, you know, at one point their answer was, well, we do a lot of navigation up there. It’s just via submarines. And my point was, well, the whole point about FONOP is to actually show your presence. It doesn’t count if it’s a sub under the ice.

And again, this goes to the issue of icebreakers we’re building. And I’ve been very, very supportive of a 355-ship Navy. But we need to look at a Navy – and we’ve had this in the NDAA for the secretary of Navy to look at the ice-hardening capabilities of some of that new fleet that we’re building.

So again, we have a lot of work to do, and we’re way behind with regard to capabilities, particularly on the Navy side, the strategic Arctic-port side. Again, the good news is having a secretary of the Navy who gets it and is an advocate is important. I think we do have that in Secretary Spencer. But as you mentioned, moving the whole bureaucracy – you know, that provision for a strategic Arctic port that we just debated in the NDAA, this is the one that doesn’t give the Pentagon discretion. They just need to go do it. They oppose that.

Now, fortunately, my colleagues on the Armed Services Committee voted for it overwhelmingly, Democrats and Republicans. But it was not because of the Pentagon’s support. It was despite the Pentagon’s support.

Dr. Hamre: I trust your staff is keeping track if you’ve got votes.

Dr. Hamre: So I think – let us know if we’ve got to pull him out.

Let’s start with some questions. Yes, sir, right here. Let’s bring the mic right down in the front. Thank you.


You mentioned at the outset of your speech Defense Appropriations. But you didn’t really say what Defense Appropriations is doing. You mentioned SASC and what they’re doing. But what are we going to see from the Defense Appropriations or what are you discussing towards, you know, providing maybe resources towards, you know, implementing some of your Arctic – your own Arctic visions here?

Sen. Sullivan: Well, the good news is that, as I mentioned, this has become a much more bipartisan issue. Senator Murkowski is on Defense Approps. As a matter of fact, she’s a senior member of that committee. She and I have kind of divided purposely our committees to kind of take care of broader Alaska, but national interests.

And I would say, at least in my four and a half years in the Senate, there’s been a growing increase in recognition in the need of some of these assets. Let me give you an example. Last year’s NDAA had the authorization for six polar security cutters. That’s in the NDAA authorized. Two years ago I had that provision in the Senate NDAA. It wasn’t in the House. It got stripped out in conference. Last year we were able to keep it in.

But you may have also seen in the supplemental Approps bill that came out in February there was full funding, appropriated funding, for our first icebreaker – one, but, you know, you’ve got to build the first one. So I think that was – and it actually was not just one, but a down payment for the next one.

So we’re starting in that area. There’s no funding right now on the idea of a strategic Arctic port. But what we did lay out in the – in the NDAA that we’re debating right now is just with regard to when we’re looking at – so the Corps of Engineers is looking at an Arctic port in Nome, Alaska. Well, what we are saying in the bill is that you have to be able to have certain dimensions. So it makes no sense to build an Arctic port if you can’t pull a Navy ship up to it. And the secretary of the Navy is supportive of that. But we wanted to get that into statute.
So it’s a great question. It’s kind of the – it’s the – I was going to say $64 million question, but it might be a lot more than that. But, again, I think that the trendlines on this, in a relatively short amount of time, are positive. And, as you know, with regard to DOD strategies, as Dr. Hamre’s saying, it can take a while to kind of turn the ship of the Pentagon. But we’re moving in that direction. But it’s a critical question, and we haven’t solved it yet.

Dr. Hamre: Yes, ma’am. Just right down here in the second row. And please identify yourself. Thank you.

Q: Oh, indeed. Thank you. My name is Anita Parlow. I am right now working as an advisor to the Port of Nome, and I hope I’m not going to embarrass them.

I’m just back from – in the last month – from China, the Arctic China meetings. And everybody was shocked about what Secretary Pompeo said about Russia and China, and mentioned for that –

Dr. Hamre: Pull that closer so we can hear you.

Q: Oh, sorry. Russia, China and Canada, for that matter, remarks that Pompeo said. Senator Murkowski was present. And then I was just two days ago back from Alaska working with respect to –

Dr. Hamre: So, your question, please?

Q: Say?

Dr. Hamre: Your question, please.

Q: So your remarks are incredible and extraordinary. I’m going to be a little bit contrarian, if I may. You mentioned the operational seas for combatant command and the strategic Arctic port necessity, and the necessity for it to be able to take a large naval ship, and then the FONOP point to show presence. And so the question that I have is, rather than – I’m going to make an assumption – rather than being all nervous about the developments that are going on with respect to China and Russia in terms of trade, in terms of oil and gas, in terms of shipping, even Russia’s closing, to some extent, or making more regs in terms of its northern sea route, which is the same classification of waters as Canada, might we view this – it’s good certainly to have operational seas for combatant command – but might we see this more in the context of what is usually the
case of the Arctic, which is cooperative approaches to life, rather than sort of setting up almost a NATO situation? You know, that it’s not necessarily –

Dr. Hamre: OK. I think we got the question. Thank you.

Sen. Sullivan: Yeah. I mean, I always say, look, particularly with regard to Russia in terms of cooperation, that’s – in my view, that’s up to the Russians. I mean, if you put that slide up there of what they’re doing in terms of their ports, their harbors, their bases, their new military commands, their entire new Arctic military command, and given their history, right? It’s not like they’re – if you ask the Ukrainians or the Crimeans, it’s not like they’re – or the Georgians – it’s not like they’re a country that always reacts peacefully. And when Vladimir Putin says that they want to make the Suez – the northwest passage in the Arctic the new Suez Canal, I take him at his word.

So I don’t – I’m not saying that we should – you know, there’s plenty of areas, science, search and rescue, that we can be doing in cooperation. I agree with you that the Arctic Council had traditionally been a peaceful, cooperative council. It includes the Russians and the United States. But you can’t turn a blind eye to this. That’s my view. And I think it would be great if we could have the rule of law, and freedom of navigation, and cooperation with regard to resource development and other things. I just don’t necessarily – I see a – I see a map like that, and I don’t necessarily get a warm and fuzzy about Russia’s real strong interest in peaceful cooperation.

Are they going to, you know, look to invade Alaska anytime soon? No that’s not going to happen. But I think we have interest in the Arctic that we’re not recognizing in that, from my perspective, the ability to have basic infrastructure, like ports, and the ability to conduct freedom of navigation operations and recognize we need search and rescue, we need oil spill cleanup because it’s going to be a much busier place given the increased commercial traffic. These are all things that aren’t necessarily related to the military, but they’re just related to an increased American awareness, presence, and resources that we need.

So I think that the secretary of state’s speech in Finland was a recognition that, hey, there’s a lot going on here, particularly as it relates to kind of some of the great power competition with regard to Russia and China. And, by the way, this is not just the Americans speaking. If you talk to the Norwegians, if you talk to the Finns –

Dr. Hamre: We have allies here.
Sen. Sullivan: – and others, we have allies who have very significant concerns about this map. And so that’s a strong point of ours, that we have these allies, longstanding allies that we can work with in these areas. But to – but there’s a lot going on, and we need to recognize that.

Dr. Hamre: OK. Yes, sir, right down here in the second row, please.

Q: Hung Tran from the Atlantic Council.

Senator, I want to ask the question about Russia and China which you have not mentioned. Do you see indications that they are cooperating with each other in rolling out their strategy? Or are they also competing amongst themselves?

Sen. Sullivan: Yeah, it’s a great question. And it’s a really good question. I think that – you know, like – I’ll give you an example where I think they’re cooperating. Russia’s a big energy producer and exporter. China is a country that needs natural resources in terms of energy. So I think that looks like an area. The transportation routes, perhaps there’s cooperation. So, again, to the earlier point, if there’s ways that we can cooperate with these countries in this area, I think that would be great. But as you know, Russia and China also have a long history of competition, and a long history of, you know, border disputes.

So I think there’s a little bit of both going on, to be perfectly honest. It’s a really important question to ask. And in the Arctic, you see signs where there is cooperation, and then you see signs where there’s more of a rivalry. And that might be, for example, as it relates to resources. But it’s an issue that it’s really important to keep an eye on, both on what’s happening in their relationship, whether it’s cooperation or competition.

Dr. Hamre: OK. Right there, we’ll go on the other side then.

Q: Thank you, Senator. Tyler Hoover, a recent graduate from Anderson University in South Carolina.

You kind of mentioned NATO as well as the Arctic Council, as well as the partnership that we have with Canada with U.S. NORTHCOM. What are some of the ways that you think we can better partner with some of the alliances we have in the area, whether it be bilaterally, whether it be through NATO, of which many of the Arctic Council members are also part of NATO. How can we better partner and move forward with some of those countries to increase our security, as
Sen. Sullivan: Yeah. It’s a great question. And I think deepening the cooperation with regard to NATO is certainly important. You know, I think we’ve been doing a number of them – actually, the U.S. Marines are very active in Norway with regard to – it’s been a traditional long-standing interoperability relationship. But I think it’s also – I think we need to continue to work through the Arctic Council with all the members there. You may have seen China’s actually been trying to become a member. I’m not sure how that works, but so far they’re not. But, again, I think that’s an indication of their interest.

But I think the ability for our work with regard to NATO, particularly the northern flank of NATO, is pretty much Arctic focused. But deepening the cooperation, whether it’s Norway or Canada, and a recognition of some of these interests that I laid out – the interests I laid out are the same interests that the Canadians have, the same interests that the Norwegians have, the same interests that the Finns have. So there’s a lot of common interests there. And both on the energy side, commercial side, but particularly the military side, I think it’s going to be increasingly important. And I think we’re starting to see that. I think we’re starting to see that. You know, our redeployment of forces, and – it’s not necessarily Arctic, but in the Baltics and in Poland I think is an important, important move.

Well, I want to – oh, one more. OK. OK, yeah.

Dr. Hamre: Yes, can we take one last question and then we’re going to – and then we’ll wrap it up.


Q: Thank you. Hi. I’m Debbie Atuk. I’m originally from Nome and live in Brooklyn, but I’m also on the Bering Straits Native Corporation Board.

One of the questions that occurred to me while I was watching your speech, this slide in particular, these Russian military bases weren’t developed overnight. And in the past, particularly immediately after and during World War II, Alaska had many more military bases.

So when did we stop spending on military in Alaska? And why do you think they made that decision?

Sen. Sullivan: Well, it’s a great – it’s a really good question. And you’re right about those, and Russia’s kind of – kind of building up, reopening up a lot of airfields and ports, as you mentioned. And you’re right, Alaska, particularly given that we were the – we were the jumping-off point for the Lend-Lease during World War II, have huge airfields and huge military installations, many of which over time we’ve closed.

I think there is a bit of a – and I’ll give you one example. I was out on Adak with the secretary of the Navy just last summer. And when you’re out there, for those who have been, this is a big naval base. It’s got a big airstrip. It used to be able to handle subs. It is so strategic. And the secretary’s even, you know, publicly announced that, you know, they’re looking at possibly warming that base up, maybe having the P-8 sub hunters that will be based there partially during certain times of year doing military exercises, as is already planned, with the Marine Corps and the Navy this September.

So I think there is a – look, I certainly believe that we in the 1990s – and you can understand why, but we kind of rushed to say, all right, we’re going to shut all these down, these Air Force bases throughout Alaska, the strategic Navy port of Adak. And relooking at some of those in terms of our ability to do what the Russians are doing I think is an important exercise, and I think particularly right now at Adak that’s starting to happen. And I think that that’s positive.

Dr. Hamre: We have to let the senator go. He’s got to get back up on the Hill.


Dr. Hamre: Would you please say thank you with your applause? (Applause.)


Dr. Hamre: Thank you. You were great.

Sen. Sullivan: Yeah, that was great. Thank you very much. (Applause.)