

U.S. Lacks Ice Hardened Ships, Repair and Refueling Ports for Arctic Ops

WASHINGTON – Unlike the South China Sea and other contested areas, the U.S. Navy does not have the capability to conduct freedom-of-the-seas operations in the icebound waters of the Arctic, a key Pentagon official conceded.

With only one heavy and one medium icebreaker and no Navy ships with hulls hardened against ice, “We do have limitations in the Arctic right now,” James H. Anderson, assistant secretary of defense for strategy, plans and capabilities, told a readiness subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 3 during a hearing on U.S. military readiness in the Arctic.

The subcommittee chairman, Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska), said he doubted the Navy could today follow the route across the Arctic that Allied supply convoys took to the Soviet Union in World War II. Sullivan noted that previous Defense Department Arctic strategies called for protecting “our sovereign territory, our sea lanes through Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOPS).”

The drastic decline of sea ice in the Arctic has opened sea lanes across the top of the world, sparking territorial disputes. Russia, Norway, Canada and the United States all have boosted their military presence

in the Arctic at a rate not seen since the Cold War.

Last year, Russia completed a large new base at Alexandra Island in the Franz Josef Land archipelago, while reopening and refitting seven former Soviet bases within the Arctic Circle. Russia also has modernized its powerful Northern Fleet. In response, the U.S. has reconstituted the 2nd Fleet, adding the North Pole to that fleet's area of responsibility. Last October, a U.S. aircraft carrier, the USS Harry S. Truman, entered Arctic waters for the first time since 1991.

Sullivan said the Navy has assured him that U.S. submarines are all over the Arctic, but "you can't see a sub. The whole point of a FONOP is to demonstrate presence."

When pressed at the hearing about conducting FONOPS in the large stretches of the Arctic still covered by ice, Anderson said the Navy had determined that to exercise its Arctic strategy, "they do not have a requirement for ice-hardened ships."

In addition to a deficit of ice-hardened hulls, Sullivan said the U.S. lacks a strategic port on – or even near – the Arctic Ocean that could handle repairs or refueling of large Navy or even U.S. Coast Guard vessels.

"Russia has close to a dozen or two dozen ports," he said, noting the closest viable port at Anchorage or Dutch Harbor, Alaska, was 1,000 nautical miles or more from Arctic waters. In addition to ports and military

bases, Russian President Vladimir Putin has 54 icebreakers, Sullivan said. "He's got all the cards."

Anderson, who is performing the duties of deputy undersecretary of defense for policy, for which he is expected to be nominated by President Trump, said the Pentagon, under the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2020, is assessing infrastructure needs in the Arctic to support operational flexibility and power projection. That includes an Army Corps of Engineers study of Nome as a possible large ship harbor. A draft report is expected in December, Anderson said.