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On Thin Ice? Navigating the New North

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Jim Sciutto

We're talking about the Arctic, which is a personal interest of mine for some time and all three folks up on the stage know it very well. I'm going to start, and this is with permission of Senator Sullivan, with a different question because of what the Ukrainian President said just now. Notably, he appeared to blame the slowness of the counter offensive on the slow arrival of Western munitions weapons systems, and then the time to train up units to operate those subsystems. They're thereby giving Russia time to build up its defenses. And I wonder if you think that's a fair criticism.

Dan Sullivan

I do. I absolutely think it's a fair criticism, and I was just at the NATO summit, we had a codel of six senators, three Republicans, three Democrats, but to me, the Biden administration has, particularly on the NATO front, done a good job of keeping unity. I think the overall result this summit was important for a whole host of reasons. But one of their biggest flaws and it is a deep flaw is the weapon systems that the Ukrainians have been requesting. And it's a long list I can go through it Patriot timers, tanks, javelin Stinger stingers every time they request the NHI F 16. They requested the need for them. The administration worries about escalation, self deterrence in many ways. Congress in a bipartisan way Chris Coons was here a minute ago. We press them, we press them, we press them, and eight or nine months later, they get the weapon systems. I'll give you one specific example last summer last summer, I hosted a bunch of Ukrainian pilots in Washington, DC. These are these brave pilots. might remember the beginning of the war. There was a legend of the ghost of Kyiv. Right? Well, this was the ghost the key if it wasn't one pilot, it was a squadron, and it was them. And they were here asking for F sixteens. I had a meet with 10 other US senators. We all wrote a letter bipartisan letter to the Pentagon. And it's essentially taken a year. I was telling Jim I was on Meet the Press on Sunday. Jake Sullivan was before me three months earlier I was on Meet the Press. Jake Sullivan was before me and the F 16. Is came up three months ago, that one three months ago. He hemmed and hawed said, he couldn't we were not ready yet. And I said, this is the problem. And let me

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make a prediction. I bet three or four months later, they're gonna say yes. Well, that's what happened. But that's not helpful. So it's a big problem.

Jim Sciutto

Thanks so much for taking the question a little off piece so so to the topic of the Arctic, which is a which is a big one, Vice Admiral Trey Whitworth with the NGA. Big picture, is this, the location of the next great game as it were among the great powers before I do, I just want to give you a chance because I think it's always important even in a brilliant crowd like this, to tell folks what the NGA is and what it does.

Frank 'Trey' Whitworth

Absolutely. NGA is 15,000 strong. It is an intelligence agency, but it's also a Combat Support Agency. We've got 9000 People who are dedicated to this mission, which is effectively mastering the visual domain for intelligence. 9000 are in the Northern Virginia area. We've got 3500 who are in St. Louis, we have 500 actually are in this state. And then we've got the swing arm of almost 2000 people who were interspersed at all the combatant commands around the around the globe, who are actually listening to those commanders and assessing what he or she needs. And so it's a very driven group of people. We're responsible for some of the things that we're talking about during the course of this conversation or a conversation relative to Ukraine. We're responsible, especially for navigation and precision. So munitions to go where they're supposed to go, the precision of that of the GPS system. We established those standards, and that will be something we'll talk about here when we talk about navigability. So to keep the US standards of precision, that is something that our our people take very seriously.

Jim Sciutto

And why the Arctic, and is this where we're gonna see China, Russia and the US and its partners face off in ways that folks wouldn't have expected

Frank 'Trey' Whitworth

so understanding the world for us means understanding place where change is happening at a very rapid pace. And this is probably I think all of us up here would agree where it's happening where change is happening the fastest. And so for navigability purposes, this could actually be a very serious source of strategic competition. Our stake in us is to ensure everyone has knowledge and understanding of that domain up there. It's not a very Intel rich domain. And so the observations that we render are going to be the basis of what everybody uses to make decisions and to collaborate with us with our partners, especially

Jim Sciutto

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Esther this is something you study and write about frequently. Do you agree with that framing this is a playing field for the great powers with not just economic but national security consequences and danger?

Esther D. Brimmer

First good morning to everyone. Thank you for having this session on the Arctic. Indeed we call it America's fourth coast because just as we have Trans Pacific, transatlantic and hemispheric strategic interests, we have strategic interests in the Arctic. And indeed, it's actually appropriate that we're talking about this on Friday. Several of the major strategic trends that we are talking about come together in the Arctic. First, indeed, is the impact in so many ways of the war in Ukraine. That indeed, because of concerns of two historic near neutral countries have become or will soon become members of NATO, Finland, and we have soon to hope Sweden will be welcomed into the world's most important alliance, meaning that the Arctic and the high north and other countries, including our colleagues from Canada, and others, will be important strategic interests. So first, the impact of the war in Ukraine is felt in the Arctic as well. Secondly, a trend that we see across the globe is great power competition in our global spaces, and the global continents, whether it's oceans, whether it's outer space, and indeed, we you see, of course, the United States and the Russian Federation will always have contacts in the Arctic. We share responsibilities for the Bering Straits as I turned the record, particularly on that point, but also, we recognize that China is deeply interested as are other countries and resources and other aspects in the Arctic. And finally, I will note that underpinning all of this is the huge impact of climate change. This is one of the places where we see the intersection of climate change and national security so that the Arctic brings together so many of our fundamentally important strategic concerns.

Jim Sciutto

I do think that not just school kids, but adults should all be given a map of the world looking from the top too because whenever I do that, it just makes you reappraise those relationships on a number of fronts. Senator Sullivan, if this is the framing, new and I'm not even quite new, right because this has been going on for some number of years. I went on the Ice X extra ice X exercises a few years ago on a sub and already then, the attendance five years ago, the attention was highly focused on not just Russian activity, but Chinese activity up there. Who's winning? Because there are ways that the US falls behind me Russia has a whole phalanx of bases along its north coast. Russia has icebreakers we have, like two, right, so who's

Dan Sullivan

Two and one is broken? Right. Well, thanks for doing this panel. And by the way, we know that the Arctic is important and the great game is happening. And it was preparation for this panel.

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You may have seen the headline in the Washington Post yesterday in Arctic great game, as Russia and NATO Allies face off in the Far North. So if the Washington Post said, we know it's true, right, so that's to all my Washington Post friends who are here. Well, look, I think that what's happening is an awakening to your point and so I was really pleased to see that The Aspen Institute is hosting this panel. I would say that we you know, we Alaskans have known for a long time the strategic interests in the Arctic and its resources. The Arctic is a very rich area for natural resources, Oil Gas, critical minerals. I had my team when I was back in the day when I was the commissioner of natural resources and energy in Alaska. We did a study on critical minerals. If Alaska were its own country, we would be in the top 10 in the world and numerous critical minerals so we have enormous opportunities there transportation is the admiral mentioned, of course, the environment, strategic location, as Jim just mentioned, Billy Mitchell, the father of the US Air Force, called Alaska the most strategic place in the world. Because if you look at a map the way you just talked about, you can get to Asia to Europe, all over the place in a very short amount of time. So it's a strategic crossroads. And then finally, the interests of the people. I won't name names and when I got to the Senate, the commander of North calm back then I was pressing him on the Arctic on the Arctic. He was very uninterested, I will tell you, and the one thing he actually mentioned me and he was going the reasons why they weren't focused a lot NORTHCOM that's eight years ago, on the Arctic, and he literally said, Well, there's no one up there. I was like, damn, Admiral, my constituents are up there. Right. And so those are our strategic interests now. I love the military. No offense to the admiral here. I'm a colonel in the Marines, myself and the reserves. But the Pentagon has been the last agency in Washington DC to get that we have strategic interests in the Arctic, and it has been a source of enormous frustration. Eight years ago, we had the armed services hearing, Secretary of Defense was testifying, he brought out his arctic strategy pages, seven of which were pictures. Climate change was mentioned five times and Russia was mentioned once in a footnote. I held it up in a hearing looked at the secretary of defense and a sector with all due respect. This is a joke. This is not a serious defense. strategy. So here's the good news. Since that time, we've made enormous progress on a whole host of issues. We're building icebreakers. Finally, like I said, we have to one is broken, but at least we're building Russia by the way, it's 54. Many which are nuclear powered. They're weaponized. We have the Ted Stevens DoD Center for the Study of Arctic strategy. In Alaska. We're building finally, deepwater port in Nome. We have a buildup of the military that's going on in Alaska. That is very, very significant. So we are making progress on a whole host of areas in the Arctic. But I will tell you, when again, no offense to the Pentagon, every single one of these initiatives has been pushed by the Congress oftentimes at the reluctance or even opposition of the Pentagon. So we have a long way to go on recognizing the strategic interest in the Arctic. The good news is it's finally starting to happen.

Jim Sciutto

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Pause for applause,

Dan Sullivan

very unusually good applause for an Arctic issues.

Jim Sciutto

Vice Admiral, you're here as part of the IC but you're still wearing a uniform. Do you agree with that criticism, the senator said that the Pentagon was slow to adjust to challenges there.

Frank 'Trey' Whitworth

I don't think I'm in a position to actually have an opinion on that because he was certainly Senator was involved in these discussions much earlier than I was. I know in preparation for this forum I read some very serious work done by the Secretary and by OSD. I had a conversation with with OSD and and just even having it as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Arctic and resilience, global resilience to me, sends a strong message. Also, in terms of my discussions with the Navy and ensuring that I had the right points for this, I got the impression they were taking this very seriously. And if I could just offer nga for our purposes, both as a Combat Support Agency and as a member of the IC. I would like to tell you, we don't need to be prompted we really want to understand every inch of this earth but in in very real terms, what's happening above 60 North and, and so we have just announced this is new a digital elevation model. That had been very, I would say, difficult to get a hold of in academic circles as that baseline for three dimensional information as to what the baseline is for ice, permafrost even water. And that's going to be made available. We have worked with the National Reconnaissance Office, we have also worked with the National Science Foundation. And we have liberated that data which had been mired in just a weird contract now is actually going to be made available to academia writ large into the world. That was just put out yesterday and it's effective immediately.

Jim Sciutto

I'm glad you mentioned you mentioned before University of Minnesota gets it first. Is that right? But it's going to be publicly available?

Frank 'Trey' Whitworth

They're gonna post it so their their center will be posting it we will be posting as well and then at that point, it becomes kind of the world's academic comments.

Jim Sciutto

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Esther the the effects of climate change, appear to be accelerating. Which I imagine means that the effects on the Arctic will accelerate to less ice more corridors for for shipping etc. Is the US and our and its partners ramping up quickly enough to adjust to the new pace of change up there?

Esther D. Brimmer

Indeed, that the activities are moving much more quickly. I will note some things that are already underway in some areas for improvement. First, just to complement the conversation we just had. We should know that there are additional federal assets that are part of the United States presence in the Arctic. One of them is indeed that to say that they are polar security cutters, which are also operated by our clients in the Coast Guard which of course is part of the Department of Homeland Security. So that is one of the places where we have assets for the Arctic. The other of course is the Department of State and that Secretary Blinken when he was in the in the north ridge region recently, of course announced that we will return our diplomatic presence interim so as well, so again, we of course I doubt the will return our diplomatic presence interim so as well. So again, we have to play with all of us assets in terms of being involved in the in the Arctic. I would also note that it is helpful to have the data that you describe that what looking at climate change in particular, we want to be able to have some clear measurements and so that'll be a real asset to people who are following up on this issue in particular as well.

Jim Sciutto

I've got to work so whenever I speak to climate change deniers, I say just ask the Navy because it's on their website, right effects of climate change and how that has impacts on a number of national security challenges, etc. Anyway, I don't know if it works, but I try.

Esther D. Brimmer

And just to say that that then there's the question of the debate about what will navigation actually look like? That there's a lot of speculation about the opportunities for reducing the time for cargo moving from Asia to Europe, but they're important considerations again that that's still gonna be extremely treacherous. Again, I turned to the admin for this but to say that, that even with less ice, which of course is extremely dangerous with a planet that is still extremely dangerous. And so that's you know, we're all getting mailers. At least I am and my husband tell you that I'm gathering them up for sailing in the in the Arctic for cruises. I think we need to be rather sober minded about sending civilians in that area.

Jim Sciutto

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Swimming in the Arctic. Senator Sullivan, for a brief moment a few months ago the Arctic was very much in the news when a certain inflatable came across and over the north and over the US and basically anything that was floating in that space got shot down for about a week. It appears that there was a vulnerability if you want to call it that in near space that was exploited. Has the US military has the US plug those holes?

Dan Sullivan

No. And it's a great question because the issue of domain is another reason why the Arctic is so important the issue of domain awareness for any kind of weapons system that's going to be coming to potentially threaten the United States, every single one of those weapons systems if they're coming to threaten Chicago or Aspen or New York, or Miami, they traverse over Alaska. That's just the geography. That's ballistic missiles. That's hypersonics. That's cruise missiles. These are all threats. We have all the missile defense systems for the United States. Pretty much everything is based in the heart or in Alaska, the ground based missile interceptors, the radar system, we have a brand new long range discrimination radar site that's the most sophisticated in the world. And so we have been focused on ballistic of the orientation of missiles that do that, but not on hypersonics not on cruise missile capabilities. And believe it or not, not on spy balloons. And so we that was a wake up call with regard to domain awareness. And again, when people say, well, we don't need those systems just protecting Alaska. They don't just protect Alaska. They protect the whole country, the NORTHCOM Commander, the outgoing NORTHCOM commander, General VanHerk. I think has been doing a really good job on this. He has been raising the alarm bell on domain awareness in the Arctic and Alaska for the whole country. And I think this was a real demonstration of our vulnerabilities.

Dan Sullivan

I believe he spoke here last year on that topic. And question since you're a satellite guy. At the time, there was some question about what additional capability you get from that altitude versus being up in Earth orbit. Is that a space that obviously you're closer, right? How much of an advantage is it to be observing what do you gain in terms of communications intercepts etc At that altitude.

Frank 'Trey' Whitworth

Given the sovereignty issue of being over the United States, which is an advantage we don't want anyone to have. At the same time if you are closer, certainly from a resolution perspective and from some other forms of collection there are gonna be some advantages there. Where I think the NGA has a role I certainly in domain awareness is actually in the in the art of early warning. And so our people are looking at all of the places that could actually launch these things that we care about, so that we actually have a conversation and can do what we're

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supposed to do to prepare well in advance. And so I will tell you that whether it's for the northern latitudes, or it's for IW related to Russia, Ukraine and vertical escalation, I'm really proud of the people who go to work every day and every night, making no assumptions about anything,

Jim Sciutto

Is there with the advent of the return of great power competition. There's enormous amount of focus on potential flashpoints between the superpowers, of course discussion about whether there will be vertical vertical escalation, horizontal escalation from Ukraine. Taiwan. Does the US go to war over that. Esther. Is the Arctic a potential space for global power conflict? And could be accidental, right. I mean a ship runs into another ship a sub runs into a sub.

Esther D. Brimmer

Unfortunately, all areas, to some extent, pose a danger for escalation. And so that's why it's important that we try to have as many as much information as we can have, and channels for communication, that obviously it's with our adversaries that we have to have sub channels of communication. Now, I'll just note that what we've missed, many of the changing aspects in the Arctic is one concern about a loss and one of the places where we had that had a chance to communicate, and that's the Arctic Council, which again, does not focus on security issues. It does focus on scientific exchange and environmental issues, but it brought together all eight members of the archer regional those who have territory above it within the Arctic Circle, whatever the future of that particular body and we're glad that our allies Norway are now the chairs. Unfortunately, Russia was the chair during during the time of their invasion. I want to make sure that we still have those channels for a communication, and that we have multiple ways of avoiding conflict in the Arctic, because indeed, we have economic strategic interests. And we know that Russia, they have 25,000 miles of coastline in the area, they're going to be in the region. Obviously China is as well and that is a deep concern.

Esther D. Brimmer

Senator do you have thoughts. Did you want to?

Dan Sullivan

Well, I with regard to the great power competition that's occurring. Some of you may have seen last year, Russia and China conducted a joint naval operation off the coast of Alaska and it took us a long time to have assets and they were coastguard assets that could respond. But I'll just make one final point that I think it's an important one, Jim and it and it goes back to geography and your point about the map you know, it's not just the Arctic, but the Arctic kind of spills into indo PAYCOM. When you look at the combatant commands in the US military, that have



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oversight or a piece of the Arctic, essentially a piece of Alaska. It is a real kind of smash up derby. Admiral Aquilino was here a couple of days ago. He owns the forces in Alaska. We now have over 100/5 generation fighters. We have a new 11th airborne division, and we have a lot of assets. NorthCom obviously owns the ground. UCOMM focuses on the main threat for the Arctic right now, which is Russia and STRATCOM is very much focused on the missile defense. So you have right there four combatant commands that are play a critical role in the Arctic in some ways. In some ways that's good. And in some ways that's not good. Because then you kind of lose the focus and to me that the strategic location of our military forces, you know, the forces base a lot of people don't know this, you'd be amazed how many four star admirals and generals don't know this. The forces forces is based in Alaska, are closer to Korea closer to Japan, closer to the Taiwan Strait than our forces based in Hawaii than our forces based in Australia, so there's just a whole orientation that is often missed. When it comes to the Arctic. And again, to your point how strategic it is.

Jim Sciutto

And I will say on the communications point I was in Taiwan recently I was in Baltic prior to that, Eastern Europe and everyone mentioned to me that the channels between the western Russia and Western China just many of them just aren't there anymore and both at the diplomatic level but also at the middle node level which gives great concern about how you defuse you know, potential spots for escalation. If someone has the briefest question, I would love to go I just like to do it every time we do one of these because there are a lot of smart people here 30 seconds 30 second answer just out of respect and then we can move on to the next panel. Maybe gentleman right here.

Audience question

Thank you so much. How does Greenland factor into the United States's Arctic strategy?

Jim Sciutto

Who wants to take it?

Esther D. Brimmer

I'll say two quick things first, of course, the Greenland ice sheet is extremely important as a whole factor related to to climate change. The other is renewed interest in what we used to know from the cold the Cold War of the importance of the Greenland, Iceland UK gap and thinking about resupply from North America to Europe. Thank

Jim Sciutto

Submarines too.

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Dan Sullivan

And I would just add kind of more broadly, was already mentioned, but it was mentioned very much in this Washington Post story. The new membership of NATO with regard to Sweden with regard to Finland, the northern flank of NATO is a really important strategic area, which is the Arctic, and I think that we one of the many miscalculations that Putin did with his barbaric invasion of Ukraine is now his northern flank and our northern flank in the Arctic is much more strengthened. And that is going to be important for us as a country but for our allies as well.

Frank 'Trey' Whitworth

We don't talk much about intelligence sharing, but in this context, we should. So partnerships are key. And when you're talking about Geo and, and geospatial intelligence that which we observed and that's what we can put into context geospatially it becomes increasingly easy to have partnerships. Denmark is a great example given their responsibilities relative to to Greenland. And so I will just say that NGA is here to help in those teams board to be a leader, especially with the observables observing the behaviors, irresponsible or otherwise, and observables relative to the Earth and putting that message out.

Jim Sciutto

Admiral, fellow senator, thanks so much all of you. Appreciate you joining us.