Senator: SECNAV ‘Gets It’ on Importance of Arctic

WASHINGTON –
Alaska’s junior senator, a member of the Armed Services Committee, is critical
of the Pentagon’s lack of support for a strategic Arctic port but is pleased
that the nation has a Secretary of the Navy who understands the need for the
Navy to have the infrastructure to sustain a presence in the Arctic region.

“The good
news is having a Secretary of the Navy who gets it and is an advocate,” said
Sen. Dan Sullivan, chairman of the Subcommittee on Readiness and Management
Support on the Senate Armed Services Committee, speaking June 26 on Arctic
defense issues to an audience at the Center for Strategic and International
Studies, a Washington think tank, noting that Congress, not the Defense
Department, is usually driving the efforts to strengthen U.S. strategic presence
in the Arctic.

Sullivan,
also a colonel in the Marine Corps Reserve, said he was concerned about Russian
hegemony in the Arctic, noting that Russian President Vladimir Putin said that
the Arctic is “the new Suez Canal that Russia will control,” and that Russia is
devoting four of six new brigade combat teams to the Arctic

region.

He noted that Russia fields 40 icebreakers and is building 13 more, while the Coast Guard has only one heavy icebreaker. He is pleased that the Congress has authorized six icebreakers, including three polar security cutters (PSCs), and has funded the first PSC and made a down payment of a second.

Sullivan said the Navy will be sending one or two guided-missile destroyers along with Coast Guard assets to the Arctic this summer and in September will be conducting exercises from the former naval air station on Adak, an Aleutian island, as well as operating P-8 maritime patrol aircraft from Adak for part of the year.

The Arm Corps of Engineers is studying the challenges of building a strategic port at Nome, Alaska, he said.

He pointed out that the Navy currently does not have the capability to conduct freedom of navigation operations in the Arctic, noting that submarines, being covert under the ice, do not count as a ‘presence.’

Sullivan also said the Navy needs to consider ice-hardening some future ships.

“I’m very supportive of a 355-ship Navy, but we need to look at the Navy

and we've had
this in the NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act] for the Secretary of the
Navy to look, the ice-hardening capabilities of some of that new fleet that
we're building, so 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,"
he said.