

# Alaska Dispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

Published on *Alaska Dispatch* (<http://www.alaskadispatch.com>)

[Home](#) > America is failing to meet challenges of a changing Arctic

Andrew Holland  
September 26, 2013

## Main Image:

[arctic\\_senate1](#) [1]

## Main Image Caption:

OPINION: The U.S. is not rising to the challenges and opportunities it faces in the rapidly changing Arctic. Failing to acknowledge the nature and scope of climate change in the Arctic has prevented quick action and will allow other countries to make crucial decisions for Americans.

America's Arctic, roughly the northern third of Alaska, is our country's last frontier. The harsh weather conditions, ice cover, and persistent darkness have made it difficult for us to take advantage of the vast resources and enormous opportunity of the region.

Today, the Arctic is changing faster than any other region in the world. Sea ice is melting quicker and the open ocean is lasting longer than at any time in human history. Open water is darker colored than ice, so it collects more heat, leading to further melt in a downward spiral. In 2012, summer sea ice retreated to its lowest recorded extent. While 2013's ice cover did not fall to the lows of 2012, it was still well below historical averages and maintains a downward trend. While scientists disagree on how soon it will happen, it now appears clear that the Arctic Ocean has passed a tipping point that will eventually lead to completely ice-free summers.

The cause of the ice melt is clear -- global climate change caused by the emissions of fossil fuels.

Although climate change will have devastating effects on certain regions, including to many of Alaska's ecosystems and the people who rely on them, the retreat of sea ice presents two main opportunities that could benefit the people of Alaska: increased access to energy resources under the water's surface and increased transportation through the Arctic Ocean.

It is ironic that the unprecedented changes in the Arctic, which are caused by global climate change, could actually have the effect of making more energy resources available -- the very same fossil fuel resources causing the warming.

The U.S. Geological Survey estimates that 90 billion barrels of oil, or 13 percent, of the world's undiscovered reserves are within the Arctic, fully one-third of those reserves are concentrated in Alaska's territory or in the federally controlled waters of our "Exclusive Economic Zone" (which extends 200 nautical miles from the coast).

The other major opportunity for Alaska is the opening of both the Northern Sea Route over

Russia and the Northwest Passage through Canada to connect the Pacific and the Atlantic. Eventually, when summer sea ice is completely gone, ships will sail directly over the pole. However they go, they will have to pass Alaska's coast on the Bering Strait.

A changing Arctic provides a new opportunity for the United States and for Alaska. But we have to plan for them. We have to put in place the policies that will allow for the exploitation of these opportunities. Moreover, we need to act fast before other countries define the rules in the Arctic without our input. Unfortunately, today, the United States is failing to meet the challenges we face in a rapidly changing Arctic.

In Alaska, there is insufficient infrastructure to ensure safe navigation north of the Bering Strait, with the closest deep-water harbor at Dutch Harbor, more than 700 miles south of Nome (which has a small harbor that can handle medium-draft ships) and 1,100 miles from much of the projected energy exploration activity in the Chukchi Sea. The nearest permanent Coast Guard presence is at Coast Guard Air Station Kodiak, and the commandant of the Coast Guard has characterized <sup>[2]</sup> their operations in the Arctic as "only temporary and occasional."

We should act now to establish heightened international standards for shipping in the Arctic through the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Without these standards, ships from around the world will pass through the Bering Strait without us being ensure their safety. This summer we saw that danger persists: The tanker Nordvik collided with an ice floe <sup>[3]</sup> along Russia's Northern Sea Route. Thankfully, no fuel was spilled, but we cannot trust solely to luck. The U.S. has thus far failed to push for strong standards at the IMO; meanwhile, earlier this summer, the Russian government hosted Koji Sekimizu, the Secretary General of the IMO, on a 5-day Arctic sea tour aboard a Russian icebreaker, with numerous senior Russian government and business officials present. In the absence of American action, Russia will certainly set the standards.

The United States has not fully claimed territory in the Arctic to the fullest extent of International Law because the U.S. Congress refuses to ratify the Law of the Sea Convention. The other four nations bordering the Arctic Ocean are submitting claims to extended Exclusive Economic Zones -- Russia has sought to bolster its claim by famously placing a flag on the ocean floor beneath the North Pole. They are party to decisions determining borders, while the U.S. is left out because some members of the U.S. Senate are afraid of the United Nations. We should ratify the Convention of the Law of the Sea so that we can have a role in determining borders within the Arctic.

Finally, we need a military presence in order to maintain the security in our sea lanes and to provide for disaster response. Today, neither the U.S. Navy nor the U.S. Coast Guard have the infrastructure, the ships, or the political ambition to be able to sustain surface operations in the Arctic (the Navy regularly operates submarines beneath the surface on strategic patrols). The United States Coast Guard only has one medium ice-breaker in service today, the Healy. The heavy icebreaker Polar Star is undergoing sea trials for its return to service after an extensive retrofit, but she is over 36 years old, well beyond her intended 30-year service life. The Coast Guard's proposed FY14 budget includes \$2 million for plans for a new icebreaker, but purchasing one could cost over \$800 million. In today's federal budget environment, even the \$2 million outlay is uncertain.

In contrast, Russia's defense commitment to the region is extensive; it controls the largest

icebreaker fleet in the world, and is currently constructing what will be the world's largest nuclear-powered icebreaker. Russia's largest naval fleet is its Arctic fleet, headquartered in Severomorsk off of the Barents Sea, and President Putin has publicly committed to expanding their naval presence.

Perhaps it is because of the political paralysis on climate policy in Congress and in state governments that it is impossible to have a rational debate about the impacts of climate change. So long as a large portion of our political system refuses to acknowledge the very existence climate change -- even in the face of clear evidence across Alaska, we will not be able to make the investments necessary to take advantage of a changing Arctic.

In 2015, the United States will assume the chair of the Arctic Council. If the inadequate preparation for the challenges of a changing Arctic are not addressed before then, we will have missed a great opportunity for Alaska and for the United States.

***Andrew Holland*** is the senior fellow for energy and climate at the American Security Project, a non-partisan national security think tank. He is the co-author of the recently-released report "*Critical Security Challenges in the Arctic*" <sup>[4]</sup>.

*The views expressed here are the writer's own and are not necessarily endorsed by Alaska Dispatch, which welcomes a broad range of viewpoints. To submit a piece for consideration, e-mail [commentary\(at\)alaskadispatch.com](mailto:commentary@alaskadispatch.com)* <sup>[5]</sup>.

**Source URL:** <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20130926/america-failing-meet-challenges-changing-arctic>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/image/arctic-senate1>

[2] [http://www.uscg.mil/seniorleadership/DOCS/Ice%20Diminishing%20Arctic%20Symposium%207\\_15%201430.pdf](http://www.uscg.mil/seniorleadership/DOCS/Ice%20Diminishing%20Arctic%20Symposium%207_15%201430.pdf)

[3] <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20130913/russian-tanker-loaded-diesel-fuel-collides-arctic-ice-floe>

[4] <http://americansecurityproject.org/featured-items/2013/the-arctic-five-critical-security-challenges/>

[5] <mailto:commentary@alaskadispatch.com>

---