

Window on Washington: Ice, Wind, and Fire

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Revisiting the Arctic

Over the last decade, the U.S. Federal Government has become keenly aware of the need to develop maritime infrastructure in the U.S. Arctic. Temperatures rising faster than elsewhere in the world have correlated to decreased sea ice, longer summer navigational seasons, opportunities for new commercial navigation across the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage, energy and mineral extraction opportunities, and more frequent presence by America's peer or near-peer competitors—particularly Russia and China.

The United States Committee on the Maritime Transportation System, composed of representatives from numerous Federal agencies and required by statute, estimates a 500% increase in Bering Strait traffic by 2025.¹ So far, however, the Government has been hesitant to invest in costly infrastructure necessary to safely access Arctic waters. This stems in part from a “chicken and egg” scenario in which users are unwilling to venture to the Arctic without infrastructure support, and Governments are unwilling to invest in infrastructure without sufficient user traffic to justify the investment. Climate change politics have at times intruded into the debate and distracted from a clear-eyed response to changing conditions. When former Commandant of the Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen (ret.) was once asked for his opinion on global warming while testifying before Congress, he deftly responded that there was water where there didn't used to be and he was responsible for it.

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