China's Long-Range Missiles, Russia's Arctic Bastion, and the Alaskan Gap

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Published: September 24, 2026

The Cold War made the High North a proving ground for nuclear strategy. Even though the powers and weapons have changed, the same geography matters again. China now fields long-range conventional and nuclear missiles capable of reaching Alaska and the American West Coast, while Russia is reinforcing its sea-based nuclear deterrent throughout the Arctic. Washington should no longer treat the Arctic as a periphery to monitor for missile warnings. Instead, it must insulate the American homeland from threats that traverse both the Atlantic and the Pacific.

Alaska sits at the center of this shift. It hosts the bulk of America's homeland missile defense infrastructure and, according to Senator Dan Sullivan, is undergoing its largest military buildup since World War II amid rising Chinese and Russian activity along its coastline.

China, Russia, and Strategic Cohesion

The Pentagon's 2025 China Military Power Report confirmed that China has fielded the DF-27, an intercontinental ballistic missile with an estimated range of 5,000 to 8,000 kilometers. Analysts writing in Maritime Executive noted that the missile makes China the first nation to field an operational, conventionally armed (non-nuclear) ICBM, one capable of striking Hawaii, Alaska, and much of the West Coast without crossing the nuclear threshold. The DF-27 supplements a broader high seas program that includes the JL-3 submarine-launched ballistic missile, carried aboard Jin-class submarines, and extends China's deterrent well into the Pacific.

China also pursues a dual-use strategy in Arctic waters. In July 2026, the Coast Guard tracked the research icebreakers *Xue Long* and *Xue Long 2* as they transited the U.S. exclusive economic zone and the extended continental shelf in the Bering Sea, prompting the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Munro* to shadow them under Operation Frontier Sentinel. The transit itself was lawful, but the vessels carry equipment capable of mapping the seabed and acoustic conditions, which can later be used for enhanced submarine navigation.

Russia, meanwhile, is deepening its own bastion. The 2026 Annual Threat Assessment found that the Kola Peninsula now hosts roughly two-thirds of Moscow's second-strike nuclear capability, including seven ballistic-missile submarines armed with Sineva and Liner missiles that can reach open waters in under a day, thereby evading the historical chokepoint at the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom gap. Russia has also commissioned its first armed icebreaker, the *Ivan Papanin*, which Maritime Executive reports can mount containerized launchers for up to eight potentially nuclear-armed Kalibr cruise missiles, concealable within ordinary shipping traffic along the Northern Sea Route. In short, the two oceans that once insulated the U.S. from a two-front conflict are becoming a liability as Russian and Chinese submarines evade conventional detection by operating at higher latitudes.

This coordination extends to joint operations. In July 2024, Russian Tu-95 bombers and Chinese H-6 bombers flew their first joint patrol near the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone, where NORAD fighters intercepted them. Neither nation violated American or Canadian airspace, but such patrols, along with a joint Chinese and Russian coast guard patrols observed in the Bering Sea, signal a deepening willingness to operate near the American homeland.

U.S. Response

Washington has made investments to close these gaps. Boeing has completed twenty additional Ground-Based Interceptor silos at Fort Greely, bringing the total to sixty. Congress is integrating the site into the larger Golden Dome missile defense architecture, which the Congressional Budget Office estimates could cost roughly $1.2 trillion over twenty years. The Army Corps of Engineers has also awarded a $399 million contract for the first phase of the nation's first Arctic deep-water port at Nome, intended to eventually deepen the harbor from eighteen to forty feet and host Coast Guard cutters and icebreakers. Icebreaker production is expanding through the trilateral ICE Pact among the United States, Canada, and Finland. The disparity remains stark, the Coast Guard currently operates only two Arctic-capable icebreakers, compared to dozens fielded by Russia. NORAD has paired these investments with Arctic Edge 2026, a multinational exercise that tested cruise missile defense across Alaska and Greenland. Nonetheless, these measures remain reactive, and the United States still trails its rivals in the Arctic domain.

Policy Implications

The combined weight of Chinese missile innovation, a hardening Russian Arctic bastion, and growing coordination between the two nations means Alaska can no longer be treated as an unexposed flank. Interceptor silos at Fort Greely address only part of the problem, since the system was designed to counter a limited North Korean-style threat rather than the hypersonic and maneuverable warheads China now fields. Chinese icebreakers currently outpace the U.S. Coast Guard in undersea surveillance, while Russian submarines increasingly route around NATO's traditional Arctic barrier. A sustained U.S. funding for the Nome port, additional icebreakers, and persistent maritime patrol aircraft would close the detection gap more effectively than interceptors alone, helping reduce the threat.

Policymakers should treat the Arctic and North Pacific as a single, interconnected theater, as China and Russia already appear to be doing. For the first time in its history, the U.S. is watching the geographic assets of two oceans turn into a liability as its Arctic posture atrophies.

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