

Opening Statement of Dr. Michael Sfraga
Nominee for Ambassador-at-Large for Arctic Affairs
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
March 7, 2024

Thank you, Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished Members of the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today as a nominee for the position of Ambassador-at-Large for Arctic Affairs.

I am grateful for the trust and confidence President Biden and Secretary Blinken have placed in me to represent a region in which I live – and have dedicated most of my career. I would also like to thank Senator Murkowski for her gracious introduction and support.

I come before you as a humble example of the American dream, the American promise, the American dividend. I am the son of working-class Italian Americans who came to this country at the turn of the last century and worked too many hours, for too many years to ensure our family had our most basic needs met; they created the path that led me to this chair.

I am the first in my family to attend to college, to earn a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and a PhD. I am a proud native of Brooklyn, New York and resident of Fairbanks, Alaska. My story compels me – requires me – to serve our nation.

My family could not be with me today, but I thank them for their love, support, strength, and humor. My father, a high school graduate and blue-collar worker passed away in November, but I know he is relishing in this moment – as his son sits before you as a nominee to serve our country.

The Arctic is undergoing profound change, including an increasingly challenging geopolitical environment. Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine has rendered cooperation with Moscow virtually impossible, including in the Arctic.

The PRC is attempting to reshape the global rules-based system in its favor and increasingly working with Moscow to elevate and advance its presence and influence in the Arctic. And at the same time, the impacts of climate change are disproportionality impacting the Arctic environment and its people.

These realities have resulted in a renewed unity among likeminded Arctic nations:

1. To reinvigorate and expand the transatlantic Alliance, motivating Finland and Sweden to join NATO and making 7 of the 8 Arctic nations members of the most powerful *defensive alliance* in world history.
2. To combat climate change.
3. To work closely to bring about more economic, social, and cultural opportunities across the region.
4. And to strengthen the international rules-based order.

These four points are in line with the U.S. National Security Strategy that states, “*The United States seeks an Arctic region that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative*” and mirror the four pillars of the 2023 U.S. National Strategy for the Arctic Region:

1. Security
2. Climate Change and Environmental Protection
3. Sustainable Economic Development
4. International Cooperation and Governance.

If confirmed, I commit to supporting the Strategy’s implementation while advancing U.S. interests through the following six priorities:

1) Strengthen cooperation with likeminded Arctic and non-Arctic Allies and partners in efforts to keep the Arctic a region of peace, stability, and prosperity, and expand international and sub-national cooperation especially across the North American Arctic.

2) Leverage the tools of government to increase commerce through sustainable economic growth. This includes expanding Arctic infrastructure and connectivity, and the responsible development of essential commodities, such as critical minerals.

3) Promote U.S. leadership and interests while countering geopolitical competitors’ ambitions; ensuring Arctic governance is reserved for Arctic nations; and leverage the region’s unique position to strengthen the international rules-based system.

4) Address the impacts of climate change and build more resilient Arctic communities.

5) Empower U.S. Arctic rights- and stakeholders, especially Indigenous and local communities, through regular meaningful consultations, to inform policy and support their participation in international fora.

6) Advance domestic and international understanding of the importance of the Arctic region and help build the next generation of Arctic leaders.

I know the President’s decision to create the position of Ambassador-at-Large for Arctic Affairs, in close consultation with the Congress, will enhance and elevate the nation’s Arctic leadership.

If confirmed, I will ensure the Ambassador’s office projects and reflects U.S. Arctic policy, brings value and support to the many offices within the Department with Arctic equities; creates one focal point within the Department of State to inform, lead, facilitate, and coordinate Arctic efforts and policy directives; and serves as a resource and partner for our bilateral Ambassadors, interagency colleagues, and international partners.

I am honored to have been nominated for this position and, if confirmed, I look forward to working with this Committee, the Congress, and the Administration - with a sense of urgency and purpose - to achieve these important goals. Thank you.