



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

The Northern Northern Border: Homeland Security Priorities in the Arctic

September 19, 2019

Under the current Administration, a great deal of attention has been focused on our southern border. One thing that I appreciate about this Committee, however, is our ability to simultaneously examine the vast range of security matters facing the homeland. Among these matters is the U.S. Coast Guard's mission to secure and protect the maritime domain—which includes U.S. Arctic waters. Many forget that the United States is, after all, an Arctic nation, given the geography of Alaska.

The vastness of U.S. Arctic waters results in national security demands on the Coast Guard that are evolving and pressing. They demand our attention. The Coast Guard has identified its responsibilities in the Arctic as ensuring “the homeland security, safety, and environmental stewardship of U.S. waters.” Executing this mission in the region is becoming more difficult, as the Arctic's strategic importance is growing, and maritime activity is increasing. Studies show this increase in maritime activity is linked directly to climate change, as global warming has caused an overall decrease in the duration and thickness of sea ice coverage.

Warmer temperatures are also inviting a rise in recreational activity and offshore exploration of natural resources. In addition to climate change, the Coast Guard has had to contend with the increased presence and aggression of geopolitical actors, like Russia and China, in the region. Both nations have identified increased presence in the Arctic as a strategic priority, motivated in part by the potential economic benefits that Arctic shipping routes could bring. Russia is increasing its military presence in the Arctic, building on what is already the world's largest number of icebreakers. With almost 50 icebreakers, Russia has the capabilities, personnel, and infrastructure needed to operate in the Arctic year-round.

China has likewise shown its Arctic ambitions, directing Chinese companies and government agencies to maintain an increased presence in the region to help create what it calls a “Polar Silk Road.” China has also announced its first domestically built icebreaker and plans for a nuclear-powered icebreaker. As we learn about the emerging capabilities of other geopolitical actors in the region, I am concerned about the Coast Guard's capability gaps in the Arctic—including a need for additional icebreakers and long-range patrol vessels. The Coast Guard currently has just one heavy polar icebreaker, the “Polar Star,” and one medium icebreaker, the “Healy.” The Polar Star is well past its service life and conducts missions in Antarctica—not the Arctic.

Thankfully, Congress has made significant investments in building new Coast Guard assets, including funds to begin construction on a new Polar Security Cutter. This first Polar Security Cutter will replace the Polar Star and its responsibilities in the Antarctic; only a second Polar Security Cutter to be delivered in 2025 or later would finally provide the Coast Guard with icebreaking capabilities in the Arctic. It is evident that the Coast Guard, and the U.S. government as a whole, has some catching up to do to be able to protect U.S. interests in the Arctic. Without increased attention and investment in the strategies, resources, and personnel needed to operate at our northernmost border, the Coast Guard will risk falling further behind.

I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses about homeland security priorities in the Arctic and how Congress can best support the government's critical missions in the region.

#

Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978