



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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Hearing Statement of Transportation and Maritime Security Subcommittee Chairman Lou Correa (D-CA)

The Northern Northern Border: Homeland Security Priorities in the Arctic, Part I

September 19, 2019

Today's hearing will discuss a changing Arctic and U.S. strategic interests in the region, specifically priorities for securing the homeland. A changing climate has already led to diminishing sea ice, opening up parts of the Arctic for increased economic and maritime activity. Sadly, our government is ill-prepared for this new reality, and I am concerned that the aggressive actions of other nations, namely Russia and China, threaten to undermine international order. Russia has expanded its military installations and footprint in the Arctic, investing heavily in a large icebreaker fleet—consisting of more than 50 icebreakers—reviving Cold War bases and deep water ports, and solidifying infrastructure in the region. China has also made its Arctic ambitions clear, declaring itself a “near-Arctic state” despite being located almost 1,000 miles away and investing strategically in economic activity in key geographic areas in the region. China is investing in a “Polar Silk Road.” Russia and China both stand to profit significantly from trade routes that will become increasingly passable as ice shelves continue to recede. According to the Washington Post, the Northern Sea Route, shown in orange, traverses 8,000 miles from East Asia to Western Europe—about 5,000 miles shorter than the current route, shown in blue.

The Northern Sea Route would enable China to ship goods to Europe about two weeks faster than it can now, and it would provide Russia opportunities to charge ships a fee to travel through waters over which it claims jurisdiction. Along with new shipping routes, melted ice in the Arctic will allow for increased tourism, fisheries, energy exploration, and infrastructure development. With these new opportunities come major challenges. First, we must ensure Arctic development is sustainable, with minimal impact to the environment and supportive of local communities, including indigenous people. Next, we must ensure the U.S. Coast Guard is prepared to execute its multifaceted missions in this changing region. The Coast Guard's missions in the Arctic include port security, search and rescue, regulation of shipping and fishing, law enforcement, and support of scientific research. The Coast Guard is also responsible for maintaining a U.S. presence in our territorial waters and defending our security and economic interests in the region. The Coast Guard, however, has constantly been asked to do more with less. For example, the Coast Guard has a major icebreaking capability gap. Currently, the Coast Guard has two polar icebreakers—only one of which is a heavy-duty icebreaker—and neither of which is dedicated to Arctic operations.

The Coast Guard has stated that six polar security cutters will be necessary to successfully execute its missions in the Arctic. Congress has made significant investments in modernizing Coast Guard assets, including Fiscal Year 2019 funds to begin construction of its first new Polar Security Cutter. It will not be until the delivery of a second Polar Security Cutter in 2025 or later, however, that the Coast Guard will have heavy-duty icebreaking capabilities in the Arctic. In the meantime, the Coast Guard will need to use other resources and capabilities to meet its Arctic mission to the best of its ability. This Committee works hard to ensure the Coast Guard and its DHS partners have the authorities and direction needed to protect the homeland. Sadly, the current Administration consistently makes DHS's mission more difficult. In fact, the Coast Guard's mission is often overlooked and deemed as a “secondary status”

The President has repeatedly attempted to raid the DHS budget to pay for a southern border wall above all else—ignoring critical security needs throughout the country, including at our maritime borders. Additionally, at a time when international cooperation and leadership in the Arctic is sorely needed, the Administration has failed to prioritize diplomacy in the region, scrapping the State Department position of Special Representative for the Arctic. We need to invest more in U.S. government capabilities in the Arctic—not less—in order to ensure that the Coast Guard and its partners can secure the homeland at our northernmost border. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about the scope of homeland security priorities in the Arctic and recommendations to address them. I also look forward to holding a “Part 2” hearing at a future date so we can hear directly from the Coast Guard and other government partners on this topic.

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