



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Hearing Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)**

***The High North: How U.S. Arctic Strategy Impacts Homeland Security***

**November 29, 2023**

I appreciate the Committee holding today's hearing on Arctic security and its implications for the homeland. When I served as Chairman, the Homeland Security Committee held multiple hearings and briefings on Arctic security, and I am glad to see the current Majority continuing to conduct oversight on this critical topic.

As I have said previously, it is imperative that the Committee carry out its oversight responsibilities on the many, varied threats facing the homeland. To be certain, the Arctic is a region of increasing importance to homeland security, and it is one area where I believe there is opportunity for bipartisan cooperation. Time is of the essence. With climate change, Arctic waters are increasingly open to maritime activity like shipping, energy exploration, fishing, and tourism. Adversaries like Russia and China are trying to gain strategic advantage, and the U.S. must be ready to assert and protect its interests in the region.

The Coast Guard is central to the United States' efforts and activities in the Arctic, but its capacity is severely limited by a lack of icebreakers. Currently, it has only one heavy polar icebreaker, the *Polar Star*, which was commissioned in 1976 and is well past its expected service life. The vessel is focused on work related to our research station in Antarctica, making it difficult for the Coast Guard to maintain a presence in the Arctic. Meanwhile, Russia has more than 50 icebreakers and has been building more, increasing its military presence in the region by opening new bases, reopening old ones, and enhancing its communications capabilities.

In response to the dire need for more icebreakers and maritime assets built for the Arctic, Congress appropriated historic funding to begin construction of new Polar Security Cutters or "PSCs." The Coast Guard awarded contracts for the first two of these PSCs in 2019, with delivery originally expected late next year. Unfortunately, construction has not yet begun due to a variety of factors and delivery will be delayed. I hope to hear from the Coast Guard today about the plan going forward and the new timeline and cost estimate for the Polar Security Cutters. This acquisition program will be a long-term effort, so Congress must help ensure shipbuilding stays on budget and meets critical deadlines.

In addition to addressing the icebreaker shortage, the U.S. has to strategize for the long-term, since conditions in the Arctic will continue to change and nations like Russia and China will try to leverage those changes to their advantage. Indeed, China has already declared itself a "Near-Arctic State" – despite having no geographic connection to the Arctic – and will undoubtedly continue to try to continue to exert its influence in the region.

In recognition of the need for a whole-of-government strategy, the Biden-Harris Administration published the *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* just over a year ago – an important step toward ensuring U.S. interests are protected. The *Strategy* includes four pillars, the first of which is security, stating quote "we will deter threats to the U.S. homeland and our allies by enhancing the capabilities to

defend our interests in the Arctic...” and “will exercise U.S. government presence in the Arctic region as required to protect the American people and defend our sovereign territory” unquote.

The *Strategy* also rightly focuses on addressing climate change and environmental protection. We must follow the science on climate change and plan accordingly for the effects of warming temperatures and reduced sea ice in the region.

Additionally, the *Strategy* highlights the importance of engaging with indigenous communities in the Arctic. The Coast Guard has established relationships with Alaska Native communities, and we must broaden and deepen those relationships going forward.

Finally, the *Strategy* recognizes that the U.S. must engage our international allies and partners on Arctic issues to strengthen our position in the region. Engaging like-minded countries and working together on areas of common interest will be critical going forward.

In recognition of the important work to be done, in August 2022 the Biden-Harris Administration announced the establishment of an Ambassador-at-Large for the Arctic Region. The Ambassador-at-Large is charged with advancing U.S. policy in the Arctic, engaging with counterparts in Arctic and non-Arctic nations as well as Indigenous groups, and working closely with domestic stakeholders. President Biden’s nomination has been pending in the Senate since February 2023. This fall, the Government Accountability Office reported that the new Ambassador-at-Large position could help advance U.S. priorities in the Arctic region. I hope this position will be confirmed without further delay.

Today, I look forward to the witnesses sharing their expertise about homeland security priorities in the Arctic and what Congress can do to support those priorities and your efforts to protect them.

Before I close, I want to express particular appreciation to the Government Accountability Office for their work on Arctic issues and to our witness, Ms. Kenney, for her willingness to testify on extremely short notice just after the Thanksgiving holiday.

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