



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

The Northern Northern Border: Homeland Security Priorities in the Arctic

February 5, 2020

Today's hearing will discuss U.S. homeland security priorities in the Arctic, following a productive hearing with non-government witnesses on this topic last September. Already we have seen the Arctic's climate changing – with diminishing ice opening up maritime activity in a part of the world that was largely unnavigable and untouched. It seems the Federal government is ill prepared for the changes brought about a warmer climate in the Arctic. I am very concerned about the number of aggressive actions of other nations in this region, primarily those of Russia and China. The United States has a long history of supporting an international rules-based order in the spirit of cooperation by all Arctic states. In recent years we have seen Russia expand its military installations and activities in the Arctic, investing heavily in assets to increase its maritime operations. Russia has a large icebreaker fleet of more than 50 icebreakers, with more on the way.

China, located 1,000 miles away from the Arctic, has declared itself a "near Arctic state" and is investing strategically in other Arctic nations to increase its presence and influence in the region. Russia and China's economic interests in the region rely on opening potential trade routes in the Arctic as ice shelves continue to diminish. A new Northern Sea Route would shorten the trip from East Asia and Western Europe from 13,000 miles to 8,000 miles. Such a route would allow China to ship goods to Europe two weeks faster than it can now. Furthermore, Russia has begun to demand a fee from ships to travel through international waters along the Northern Sea Route over which it claims ownership.

Along with new and additional maritime activities, melted ice in the Arctic will increase economic activities such as tourism, fisheries, energy exploration, and infrastructure development, presenting major challenges. We must ensure development is sustainable, with minimal environmental impact, that it supports local communities, including indigenous people. The Coast Guard's presence in the Arctic and the State Department's diplomatic efforts to protect international cooperation will both be critical to protecting U.S. interests in the region. The Coast Guard's missions in the Arctic include regulation of shipping and fishing, law enforcement, port security, search and rescue, and support of scientific research. The Coast Guard is responsible for maintaining a U.S. presence in our territorial waters and defending our security and economic interests in the region. Right now, the Coast Guard is hampered in its Arctic mission because it has only two polar icebreakers—only one of which is a heavy-duty icebreaker.

Congress provided funding in 2019 for the Coast Guard to begin construction of its first new Polar Security Cutter—a good initial investment in improving the Coast Guard's capabilities. But the Coast Guard has stated that six Polar Security Cutters will be necessary to successfully execute its missions in the Arctic. Congress must continue to prioritize supporting the Coast Guard's urgent needs, and we will continue to value the Government Accountability Office's assistance in ensuring appropriate oversight of these acquisition programs. 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. Additionally, the lack of adequate Coast Guard resources will make the State Department's diplomatic work all the more important. Unfortunately, just when American leadership and cooperation on the Arctic is needed on the international stage, the Administration has chosen to eliminate the State Department position of the Special Representative for the Arctic.

I look forward to hearing from the State Department how it is ensuring appropriate leadership on Arctic issues despite the loss of that position. We need to invest more in our capabilities in the Arctic—not less—in order to ensure that the Coast Guard, the State Department, and its government partners can secure the homeland at our northernmost border.

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