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U.S. House of Representative**

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Mario Diaz-Balart, Member of Congress

Testimony Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation and the U.S. House of Representatives Committee  
on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security

“Port Safety, Security, and Infrastructure Investment”

April 5, 2024

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Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal, Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member Thanedar, and Members of the Subcommittees:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss port safety, security, and the future of infrastructure investment for our nation’s seaports. Before I begin, I’d like to thank Chairman Daniel Webster, for his leadership and his staunch support of the U.S. Coast Guard and maritime transportation across our country. Many of you may or may not know, Chairman Webster served as Speaker and then Majority Leader in the Florida State Legislature and has nearly forty years of transportation experience, proving to be an invaluable asset to our Florida Congressional delegation and to the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. Thank you for always fighting for our mariners, and ensuring our waterways are safe for the American people. Additionally, I’d like to thank Chairman Carlos Gimenez with the Committee on Homeland Security for the kind invitation today as well. Chairman Gimenez has worn many hats over the years: firefighter, fire chief, and as Mayor of Miami-Dade County. Chairman Gimenez extensive knowledge of transportation and maritime issues facing South Florida, specifically PortMiami as former Mayor, proves to be an invaluable asset to the United States Congress.

Our nation’s seaports are huge drivers of economic growth, supporting 31 million jobs, and generating nearly \$5.4 trillion in economic activity. Here in Florida, we are lucky to have some of the best and busiest ports in the country. Our seaports support nearly 900,000 jobs and contribute \$117.6 billion in economic value to our state. For 2023, Florida’s system of seaports handled 114.25 million tons of cargo, shattering the 2022 record-high 112.5 million tons of cargo moved<sup>1</sup>.

One such seaport is PortMiami, which contributes \$43 billion annually to our local economy while supporting more than 334,000 jobs. Over a million containers of cargo come through PortMiami each year, much of it containing fruits, vegetables, and flowers from South America. Compared to most seaports on large plots of land, PortMiami is limited to a relatively small space, which creates some challenges. For example, the USDA charges a flat fee for fumigation of fruits and vegetables arriving from international destinations. In PortMiami, only a fraction of goods could be fumigated at the rate of larger seaports. This made imports to PortMiami more expensive, and therefore, PortMiami was less competitive compared to other seaports.

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<sup>1</sup> [“Florida Seaports Set Back-to-Back Record-High Cargo Growth, Proving Florida Is America’s Supply Chain Solution.”](#)  
*Florida Ports Council, Florida Ports Council, 30 Jan. 2024,.*

This problem was only going to get worse as competition was increasing, and supply chain vulnerabilities were being exposed. I knew that there must be a better solution.

## **Addressing Critical U.S. Port Infrastructure Needs**

For years I have worked to improve our states seaports, both during my time in the Florida State Legislature, and now as a Member of Congress. In the U.S. Congress, I had the privilege of serving as Chairman, Ranking Member, and now member of the Transportation, Housing and Urban Development Subcommittee of Appropriations. Our seaports must compete for funds under large, more visible infrastructure programs under the direction of the Department of Transportation. Seaports must compete among airport, road and bridge projects in major metropolitan areas, multimodal projects, and many other sectors of our national transportation system, making it challenging for seaports to obtain sufficient funding and receive the attention that they so desperately need.

As Ranking Member of the Subcommittee when drafting the Fiscal Year 2019 Appropriations bill, I created the first dedicated account specifically for our seaports, which totaled \$293 million. The Port Infrastructure Development Program, also known as the PIDP, has aided in addressing critical infrastructure needs to ports across our country, as well as in my home state of Florida. As a result, PortMiami received \$44 million to help construct a 100,000 square foot state-of-the-art fumigation facility that will ensure the Port remains competitive and efficient, rivaling the ports in the Northeast. The PIDP program is critical for our seaports to have the ability to address necessary infrastructure needs and address supply chain vulnerabilities.

## **Bolstering American Competitiveness and Readiness**

In addition to securing critical port funding, I was also able to solve a problem for our merchant shipping fleet. More than 70 percent of U.S. Coast Guard-licensed officers stem from one of six state maritime academies nationwide<sup>2</sup>. These state maritime academies rely on at-sea training in deck seamanship, navigation, and engineering. This training provides life-saving expertise in safe ship practices, operations, and maintenance.

Regrettably, our future merchant mariners have been training on outdated ships, some of which have obsolete steam-powered propulsion systems, that do not reflect the current world-class vessels in the national fleet. As a fiscal hawk, I have fought to reduce wasteful spending, cut wasteful bureaucracy, and bolster the safety and security of the American people. House Republican Appropriators have fiercely worked to spend less and change the trajectory of federal spending, without shortchanging critical investments to our national security interests at home and abroad. Improving our American competitiveness and readiness on the national stage begins by preparing our future mariners at home. With our national security interests in mind, I secured a total of \$1.6 billion in funding for the replacement of the aging school fleet to the new National Security Multi-Mission Vessels (NSMV). These vessels serve a critical role in providing necessary hands-on training for those serving in the maritime industry that cannot be accomplished in a classroom. The next generation of domestic mariner training ships must be more cost effective while also utilizing creative solutions to generate the highly trained and capable mariners. It may be these very mariners who answer the call to serve future U.S. war efforts by transporting shipments of supplies to military bases around the world often being enlisted to transport vehicles, guns, bombs, gasoline, food, and medicine while fully supporting other U.S. logistical needs.

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<sup>2</sup>Alfultis, Michael A., et al. "[State Maritime Academies- Educating the Future Maritime Workforce.](#)" *The State of the Maritime Workforce*, Jan. 2017,

This initiative alone has revitalized shipyards across our country supporting almost 1,200 shipyard jobs during construction and additional jobs at-sea and ashore once completed<sup>3</sup>. Just late last year, the first NSMV was delivered to SUNY Maritime College, named *Empire State VII*. These new vessels have state-of-the-art navigation equipment, which in turn will prepare the academies to have a standardized and purpose-built training platform for years ahead. The next training vessel is slated delivery to the Massachusetts Maritime Academy later this year. The National Security Multi-Mission Vessel program contributes to our national security interests at home and abroad as we increase the ranks of our well-trained maritime workforce and bolster critical American sectors of our economy.

## **Confronting our National Security Threats and Guarding our U.S. Ports**

Any discussion of port and maritime safety in South Florida is incomplete unless we address a serious threat to our national security in our hemisphere, which are those in Communist Terrorist Regime in Cuba. I was outraged when I learned that the U.S. State Department, in coordination with the Department of Homeland Security, approved a visit for members of the Cuban regime's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of the Interior, which is currently under U.S. sanction for human rights abuses, to the Port of Wilmington in North Carolina. I also note that our colleague who represents the district that includes that port, Representative David Rouzer, roundly condemned on the House Floor the Biden Administration's decision to invite representatives of a U.S.-designated State Sponsor of Terrorism to his district. To our distinguished members of the Coast Guard here and those working hard to keep Americans safe every day, you deserve better. I was further incensed by the State Department spokesperson's defense of the visit that, "The Cuban delegation is meeting with [U.S. Coast Guard] counterparts and joining supervised tours of port facilities in North Carolina... The U.S. Coast Guard and Cuban Border Guard have had a collaborative relationship for decades that focuses first and foremost on maritime safety."

First of all, the Cuban regime's operatives are not "counterparts" to members of the U.S. Coast Guard. The members of the U.S. Coast Guard serve with honor to protect the American people and are charged to show compassion to all who they encounter. In sharp contrast, the Cuban regime's thugs who perpetrated the horrific Tugboat Massacre of 1994 that killed dozens of innocent people including children, the chaos of the Mariel boatlift of 1980, and the purposeful ramming of a boat off of Bahia Honda in October 2022 which killed five people, are not your "counterparts." The regime's operatives which were caught smuggling cocaine in 2016, or who were caught smuggling weapons to North Korea, are not your "counterparts." It is an insult to compare our honorable service members as though they are even in the same league as the murderers, weapons smugglers and narcotraffickers of the regime in Cuba. Second, it is patently absurd to engage in maritime safety and port security visits with a terrorist dictatorship that has no respect for human rights, and no respect for the human life. They are not our Coast Guard's "counterparts," and they certainly do not prioritize maritime safety. It collaborates with the terrorist states of Iran and North Korea, as well as Communist China, provides thousands of intelligence agents to keep Maduro in power in Venezuela, sends soldiers to train in Belarus while other Cubans fight for Russia against Ukraine, and harbors terrorist individuals such as Joanne Chesimard and aids terrorist organizations such as the ELN. It is a dangerous mistake to assume that the anti-American, malign regime in Cuba shares our goals related to port security and maritime safety.

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<sup>3</sup> "[MARAD National Security Multi-Mission Vessel Program](https://www.maritime.dot.gov/marad-national-security-multi-mission-vessel-program)." *Maritime Administration*, Department of Transportation- Maritime Administration, [www.maritime.dot.gov/](https://www.maritime.dot.gov/). Accessed 2 Apr. 2024.

These dangerous adversaries are seeking ways to harm Americans, and the threat from Communist China might be the most insidious. Whether through cyberattacks targeting our critical infrastructure, purchasing land near military bases, and stealing valuable technology, the threat from Communist China is the challenge of our time. Due to the Biden Administration inaction and weakness in confronting multiple foreign adversaries, the Republican Majority is acting. In the Homeland Security Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2024, I championed language prohibiting the Department of Homeland Security from entering into contracts or other agreements with entities connected to the Chinese military. This prohibition should not have been necessary, it is just plain common sense. But under the Biden Administration, we must prohibit even the absurd. This language also strengthens cybersecurity at ports by requiring the Departments of CISA, CBP, the Coast Guard, and other related agencies to submit risk assessment reports by the mandatory deadlines, and also to brief the Congress on risks to U.S. ports and the agency efforts to mitigate them. My colleagues and I will continue to remain firm in countering these national security threats.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, I'd like to thank Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal with the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and Chairman Carlos Gimenez, Ranking Member Thaneder with the Homeland Security Committee for the invitation to testify at today's joint field hearing on Port Safety, Security, and Infrastructure Investments. We have some difficult challenges ahead of us, due to the increasing technological capabilities of our adversaries, and their determination to circumvent our security strategies. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today, and I look forward to working with my colleagues, and other authorizers, to ensure that the United States is able to counter these threats, strengthen vulnerable supply chains, expand the competitiveness of our farmers and other businesses, and protect the American people for generations to come.