United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Senator Susan M. Collins

Statement of Senator Susan M. Collins

"The Global Nuclear Detection Architecture: Are We Building Domestic Defenses That Will Make the Nation Safer?"

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing continuing the Committee's work on nuclear terrorism.

The Global Nuclear Detection Architecture overseen by the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office (DNDO) is a vital component of our nation's defenses against a terrorist nuclear attack. That Architecture is an elaborate and expansive structure involving Departments of Defense, State, Energy, and Homeland Security.

Its operations encompass work by crews of Coast Guard vessels, Customs and Border Protection cargo screeners as U.S. and foreign seaports, and many others, all compromising a multi-layered defensive screen to detect nuclear materials.

The SAFE Port Act, which I co-authored, enhanced such efforts by requiring that all cargo containers be scanned for radiation at the 22 largest U.S. seaports, covering 98 percent of cargo coming to the United States. The law also strengthened the Container Security Initiative, which targets of high-risk cargo at foreign ports.

The Architecture's multi-layered, cross-departmental, international orientation against multiple and shifting threats relies on a "system of systems." Assessing the effectiveness of that approach is the purpose of this hearing.

Today's witnesses can give us valuable insights into the challenges that the DNDO confronts, and which Congress must consider, as we make additional decisions about structure, resources, and operations of our Global Nuclear Detection Architecture.

Detecting nuclear materials in transit, at seaports, and ports of entry before they reach target areas and can be detonated is obviously a high-priority. As the recent example of drug smugglers using submersibles to smuggle tons of cocaine demonstrates, our enemies will seek ways to avoid our efforts. They have many options: using all-terrain vehicles to cross the long stretches of wooded land borders in Maine and Minnesota, piloting small boats into isolated inlets in the Carolinas, or flying small aircraft low over unpopulated areas to land on fields in the Southwest.

Technologies and multi-layered defenses can help, but we can never be sure of blocking every path that determined enemies might select to reach targets in our homeland.

That sobering conclusion clearly underscores the need to keep intelligence and law-enforcement capabilities at high levels of skill and readiness. It also highlights the importance of reducing the chances that nuclear materials can ever be obtained by terrorists.

Our first line of defense must be working with domestic and foreign partners to ensure these nuclear materials are secured and accounted for, and to use our best diplomatic efforts to prevent or minimize nuclear proliferation. The more effectively we can pursue those efforts, the lighter will be the burden that rests on our Global Nuclear Detection Architecture.

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