

National Maritime Intelligence-Integration Office addresses impact of geopolitical and technological factors on maritime conflict, threats to critical maritime infrastructure

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National Harbor, Md. – April 28, 2021. The National Maritime Intelligence-Integration Office (NMIO) briefed participants at the Defense Strategies Institute's 9th Annual Border Security and Intelligence Summit on how the Intelligence Community is protecting the homeland in an era of increased competition with China and Russia.

Mr. Lyston Lea, Principal Advisor to the Director of the National Maritime Intelligence-Integration Office (NMIO), was a guest speaker on Day 1 of the Defense Strategies Institute's (DSI) 9th Annual Border Security & Intelligence Summit, discussing maritime issues that impact U.S. border security. The high volume of commercial traffic at sea, and rapid changes in technology, creates challenges for governing the maritime domain due to the complexity of detecting, identifying, and tracking suspicious maritime activities.

Mr. Lea focused on 1) The changing character of maritime conflict, which includes hybrid and grey-zone activities, as well as advanced technologies such as automation through artificial intelligence; 2) Threats to maritime critical infrastructure; and 3) Threats to sea lines of communication.

"Great Power Competition" is the backdrop that frames the challenges and threats to U.S. maritime border security. China and Russia are increasingly engaging with Latin and South America, hoping to gain greater access in the Western Hemisphere. Additionally, China and Russia are taking advantage of the social instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in this region.

Negative impacts from global maritime issues like Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing activities, present new challenges. IUU fishing, and particularly IUU fishing conducted by China's Distant Water Fishing Fleet, have crippled local Latin and South American coastal communities that rely on local fish stocks not only for food security, but also for the promises of regional prosperity and jobs. Studies already show potential for diminished fishing habitats due to issues related to overfishing and changing climate conditions.

"These conditions create a fragile political situation in this region that opens the door for external state actors like Russia and China to advance their own interests, both sinister and legitimate, making this challenge even more complex," said Mr. Lea.

The threat to U.S. maritime critical infrastructure is pervasive, persistent, and a significant national security concern. Adversaries include not only foreign intelligence services and their surrogates, but also terrorist groups, cyber intruders, malicious insiders, transnational criminal organizations, and international industrial competitors. Technological advances have enabled

adversaries to broaden the data pools they use and to tailor their approach to subvert U.S. defensive measures. According to Lea, “In the digital age, this invites harm by trespassing our information systems, stealing sensitive data, and potentially degrading our instruments of national power.”

NMIO creates initiatives designed to foster partner engagement to tackle IUU fishing and climate issues and to retain a United States global competitive advantage. NMIO continues to collaborate with partners to improve maritime domain awareness to mitigate threats and to protect critical infrastructure and sea lines of communication.

Mr. Lea concluded the event by emphasizing “...only together can we mitigate the threats from the changing character of maritime conflict, to our maritime critical infrastructure and sea lines of communication. We are indeed stronger together.”

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