

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Thomas R. Carper:
“Securing the Southwest Border: Perspectives from Beyond the Beltway”
March 17, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Last month, our Chairman, Senator Sasse and I traveled to South Texas to see firsthand conditions along the border. We met with ranchers, talked to Border Patrol agents, and saw officers in action at a port of entry. We learned a great deal, and I’m pleased that today some of our friends from the southwest border have joined us here in Washington to continue the conversation that was begun down there.

I’ve made several such trips to both our northern and southern borders in recent years. Each time I came away impressed both by the dedication of our border security personnel and by the security and technological advances we have made. We’ve invested huge amounts of resources along our southern border in particular. A quarter of a trillion dollars over the past decade, and it shows.

In fact, last Congress, we held a series of border security hearings in this Committee and learned that overall apprehensions of undocumented migrants are at 40 year lows. We learned that crime rates in many communities near the border have also dropped dramatically. We also had experts tell us that the border is more secure than it has ever been. Many of those I’ve spoken to during my trips have agreed. Having said that, is there more work to do? You bet there is.

We know that while many border communities are among the safest towns in America, the drug cartels are a real danger and are growing more sophisticated, and often more violent, as well. Ranchers, in particular, face persistent and daunting challenges on their lands. We also know that our ports of entry need to be modernized. These border crossings have received far less attention and resources than the Border Patrol over the past decade, but they are just as important to our security and economy. And of course, we are all aware that the Rio Grande Valley last summer faced an overwhelming surge of Central American children and families arriving at the border. While some of these migrants tried to evade our agents, it’s my understanding that most simply turned themselves in.

Based on what I’ve seen and heard, I am convinced that we need to take at least three basic steps.

First, we need to continue to make investments at the border. But they must be smart investments. To me, that primarily means innovative technologies that can serve as force multipliers for the unprecedented number of agents we’ve stationed along the border. In fact, when Chairman Johnson, Senator Sasse and I were down on the border, we heard repeatedly, that ‘technology is the key to securing the border.’

Of course, what works in Arizona, may not work in Texas or along the northern border. In some areas, unmanned aerial systems with advanced radar technology or fixed-wing aircraft with sophisticated cameras may be what are most effective. In other places, it could mean surveillance systems on tethered aerostats or mobile towers. In still others, it could be a tamed wild mustang that lets an agent patrol remote or environmentally sensitive lands more effectively.

We also need to enable our ports of entry work more efficiently, so that we can better focus our inspections on potential threats rather than legitimate travelers. But as we make these investments to support our frontline agents, we must avoid the temptation here in Washington of being overly prescriptive.

Second, we must get to work on comprehensive immigration reform. This cannot and should not wait until we have achieved some elusive, perfect measure of border security. Congress needs to begin a real debate on a comprehensive and thoughtful 21st century immigration policy for our nation – a

policy that is fair, that will significantly reduce the nation's budget deficit, that will continue to slow the flow of immigrants to our border with Mexico, and that will strengthen the economic recovery now underway.

Last Congress, two-thirds of the Senate came together and overwhelmingly passed such a measure. It wasn't perfect, but it took significant steps to fix our badly broken immigration system while reducing our deficit by nearly \$1 trillion over the next 20 years and increasing our GDP by 5 percent. And by creating better legal channels for immigrants to come to our great country, we make it easier for border security officials to focus on the people or things that pose a true risk. Letting millions of undocumented people already living here – many for their entire lives – to step out of the shadows and undergo background checks is also good for local law enforcement. In short, comprehensive immigration reform is good for security.

Third, we must address the root causes of the challenges we face along our border with Mexico and not just the symptoms. In this case, that means helping to address the violence and desperation that has caused so many children, families and others to risk life and limb on a 1,500 mile journey across Mexico to come to our country. The leaders of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have embarked on an unprecedented collaborative effort, called the Alliance for Prosperity, to boost security and prosperity within their region. They have committed to investing their own money in the development of their infrastructure and workforce, and to making difficult changes to promote transparency, security, and the rule of law. We should be good neighbors and support them in this effort, just as we helped Colombia reverse its downward spiral with Plan Colombia in the 1990s. It is the right thing to do and the pragmatic thing to do. It's a much better approach than continuing to deal with the devastating and costly consequences of vulnerable children and others making the trip to our border.

I was pleased to see the President request \$1 billion dollars in next year's budget to partner with the governments of the Northern Triangle as they seek to address security, governance and economic challenges. For example, some of this funding would support better police training or the expansion of youth centers for those at risk of gang violence and recruitment; some of it would be used to attract foreign investment or support efforts to build a stronger court system and electric grid. Change in these nations won't happen overnight, and it won't be easy, but I believe we have a moral and fiscal obligation to help our neighbors in the Northern Triangle. After all, addiction in the U.S. to cocaine, heroin and other illegal drugs directly contributes to their misery. But, if we work together, progress can be made. They can do it – we can help.

With that, I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.

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