Hearing on "Part of Your World: U.S.-China Competition Under the Sea"

March 2, 2026

Opening Statement of Vice Chair Mike Kuiken

Thank you, Chair Schriver, and I want to thank all of our witnesses for sharing their expertise with us today.

There is a book by Russell Shorto called The Island at the Center of the World. It tells the story of how, four centuries ago, Dutch settlers arrived at a wilderness island called Manhattan and built New Amsterdam—a free-trading colony that would become New York City and, eventually, one of the most powerful places on earth. Manhattan was the island at the center of the world.

Today, there is a different island at the center of the world—and it is Taiwan.

Consider what is powering this hearing right now. The lights shining in our faces, the microphones in front of us, the cameras recording this testimony—all of them run on foundational semiconductors that almost certainly come from Taiwan. The iPhone in your pocket, the infrastructure behind whatever conversation you had with Claude or ChatGPT this morning—those run on advanced semiconductors that almost certainly come from Taiwan too. Foundational or advanced, these chips are the lifeblood of virtually everything around us.

President Xi has directed the People's Liberation Army to be capable of taking Taiwan by 2027. Look at the calendar. That is nine months away. We do not know whether capability will become intent—but we do know where the first signals will

appear. Space, cyber, and the undersea domain are almost certainly the first places we will see indications and warnings as to whether Beijing intends to move.

So today's hearing is, in an important sense, about Taiwan—and about the undersea domain that surrounds it, connects it to the world, and defends it from adversaries.

But this hearing is about more than military competition beneath the waves. The undersea domain matters in three critical ways, and our panels today will address each of them.

First, it is a military domain—and for more than 80 years, the United States has held an enduring advantage here. Our stealthy, nuclear-powered submarines provide a key pillar of deterrence. China understands this and is investing deliberately to narrow the gap.

At the strategic level, Beijing has elevated the deep-sea domain to stand alongside space and cyberspace as a national security priority. This is not rhetorical positioning—it is reflected in concrete capability development. President Xi has directed the PLA submarine force to become an elite service, signaling Beijing's intent to strengthen its sea-based deterrent. Over the past five years, China has accelerated production of nuclear-powered submarines, launching 10 in the last five years compared to just three in the five years before that.

China's efforts extend beyond traditional submarines. Drawing lessons from the war in Ukraine, Beijing is exploring how unmanned underwater systems could offset U.S. advantages, particularly inside the First Island Chain. Last September, the PLA unveiled two new extra-large uncrewed underwater vehicles, adding to its asymmetric capabilities. Chinese researchers are also copying DARPA UUV designs to develop a long-range armed reconnaissance capability.

Second, it is an economic and communications domain—and this is the part most Americans never think about. Right now, roughly 600 fiber-optic cables—each about the width of a garden hose—sit on the ocean floor. They carry 99 percent of intercontinental data. More than $10 trillion in financial transactions cross these cables every single day. That data is the feedstock of the global economy. It is what

enables payments for household goods, financial transactions between New York and Tokyo, and the vast flows of information that power everything from artificial intelligence to international commerce.

Anything that severs or compromises these cables is not merely a communications disruption—it is a direct threat to the circulatory system of the global economy. And China has both the means and the opportunity. Beijing has developed cable-cutting tools capable of operating at extreme depths and maintains a fleet of deep-sea research and commercial vessels operating near critical undersea infrastructure in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. Although framed as scientific and commercial platforms, these vessels possess capabilities with clear dual-use potential. Undersea cables have connected continents for nearly 170 years, since the first transatlantic telegraph cable in 1858. The technology has evolved, but the vulnerability has only grown as our dependence on what flows through them has become total.

Third, it is a strategic resources domain. China is racing to dominate seabed mining, securing more exploration contracts than any other country and striking deals across the Pacific to tap offshore critical minerals. The resources beneath the ocean floor are vast and largely untapped. Seabed mining as an arena of competition is both old and new—but the economic opportunity below the ocean floor will undoubtedly become a focal point of economic statecraft in the coming years and decades.

Taken together, these three dimensions—military, economic, and strategic resources—represent a coordinated effort by China to challenge what has long been a decisive American advantage. Beijing is working simultaneously to close the military gap, compromise the communications infrastructure, and dominate the resources. Maintaining American advantage across all three will require sustained attention, investment, and strategic clarity.

To help us understand these challenges, we have assembled three panels of witnesses today. Our first panel will offer perspectives on the growing threat to U.S. undersea military superiority. Our second panel will examine China's strategy and growing undersea capabilities. And our third panel will address undersea infrastructure and strategic resources.

With that, I will turn the floor over to our first panel, and we thank you all for joining us.