Ports Seen as ‘Vital Resource’ for National Security



Rear Adm. John Mauger, Coast Guard assistant commandant for prevention policy, makes a point during a port security panel discussion at Sea-Air-Space 2022. *LISA NIPP*

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. — The economic role U.S. ports play can’t be overstated because they are a vital resource, a Coast Guard official said in an April 6 panel discussion at Sea-Air-Space 2022.

“Twenty five percent of U.S. GDP and employment for one in seven Americans are generated because of port-based activity,” said Rear Adm. John Mauger, assistant commandant for prevention policy. “We also know this is a vital resource for our national security. It’s how we project power and [provide] humanitarian aid around the globe.”

Tony Padilla, a senior adviser for maritime trade and development at the U.S. State Department, agreed on the importance of ports.

“International trade in our nation’s ports support the employment of nearly 31 million people, provide about $1.5 trillion in personal income and generate over $5.5 trillion in economic activity, thereby accounting for one quarter of the nation’s GDP,” Padilla said. “Many of our ports safeguard government owned vessels and commercial sealift vessels, so our military can project power abroad. Simply put, without seaports, our economy would be crippled.”

There’s also a dark side to ports that is difficult to monitor said Christopher Hickey, a senior systems engineer at the Naval Research Laboratory.

“There are about 250,000 ship tracks worldwide on a good day,” Hickey said. “But you have to add in the hundreds of thousands of dark ships – the ships not emitting AIS [automatic identification system] – that traverse the globe. While a fair amount of illicit maritime activity takes place aboard AIS-compliant ships, it is these dark ships, or dark targets, that typically pose the greatest threats.

“Domestically, the United States has long maritime borders that for the most part are not monitored on a 24/7 basis, creating a permissive environment that enables massive amounts of illicit goods and cargos to be imported and exported. Drugs. Money. Weapons. And, worst of all, the trafficking of people – all of this moving illegally across our maritime borders every day,” he said.