

Opening Statement on Maritime Security Strategy in the Asia-Pacific
Chairman John McCain
Thursday, September 17, 2015

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets today to receive testimony on U.S. policy in the Asia-Pacific region. I want to thank our distinguished witnesses for appearing before us today and for your continued service to the nation.

America's national interests in the Asia-Pacific region are deep and enduring. We seek to maintain a balance of power that fosters the peaceful expansion of free societies, free trade, free markets, and free commons—air, sea, space, and cyber. These are values that we share with increasing numbers of Asia's citizens. And for seven decades, Administrations of both parties have worked with our friends and allies in the region to uphold this rules-based order, and to enlist new partners in this shared effort—an effort that now extends to states like Indonesia and Vietnam.

No country has benefited more from a peaceful regional order in the Asia-Pacific region than China. I am betraying my advanced age when I say that I still remember being in the Great Hall of the People on the occasion of the normalization between our countries. Since then, China's social and economic development has been remarkable, and it has added to the prosperity of the world.

Unfortunately, we increasingly see a pattern of behavior from China that suggests that some of our highest hopes for our relationship are not materializing, and that call into question for nations across the Pacific whether China's rise will in fact be peaceful. Indeed, many of these troubling activities have only increased under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, who will arrive here next week for a state visit.

China's military modernization continues, with its emphasis on advanced systems that appear designed to project power, counter U.S. military capabilities, and deny the United States the ability to access and operate in the Western Pacific. At the same time, cyberattacks against the United States are growing in scope, scale, and frequency. Billions of dollars' worth of intellectual property, including sensitive defense information, have been stolen. And many of those attacks—especially the recent breach at the Office of Personnel Management—are believed by everyone to have originated in China, despite the Administration's unwillingness to say so.

These growing threats are compounded by China's assertion of vast territorial claims in the East and South China Seas, which are inconsistent with international law. In 2013, Beijing proclaimed an air defense identification zone over large

portions of the East China Sea, including over territory claimed by Japan and South Korea. More recently, China has reclaimed nearly 3,000 acres of land in the South China Sea—more than all other claimants combined and at an unprecedented pace. Last month, China’s Foreign Minister said it had halted these activities. But recently released satellite images show clearly that this is not true.

What’s more, China is rapidly militarizing this reclaimed land, building garrisons, harbors, intelligence and surveillance infrastructure, and at least three airstrips that could support military aircraft. With the addition of surface-to-air missiles and radars, these new land features could enable China to declare and enforce an air defense identification zone in the South China Sea, and to hold that vital region at risk.

China is incrementally and unilaterally changing the status quo through coercion, intimidation, even force. Its goal appears clear: the assertion of sovereignty over the South China Sea, a key economic artery through which approximately \$5 trillion in ship-borne trade passes every year. As one Chinese admiral recently told a conference in London about the South China Sea, “It belongs to China.”

The United States has rightly rejected this view. As Secretary of Defense Ash Carter said in May, “turning an underwater rock into an airfield simply does not afford the rights of sovereignty or permit restrictions on international air or maritime transit.” Secretary Carter vowed that “the United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, as U.S. forces do all over the world.”

Unfortunately, it has been four months since that speech, but the Administration has continued to restrict our Navy ships from operating within 12 nautical miles of China’s reclaimed islands. This is a dangerous mistake that grants de facto recognition of China’s man-made sovereignty claims. And these restrictions have continued even after China sent its own naval vessels within 12 nautical miles of the Aleutian Islands as President Obama concluded his recent visit to Alaska.

After that incident, U.S. officials emphasized that the Chinese ships did not violate international law, which allows countries to transit other nations’ territorial seas under what is called innocent passage. That is true, but we have not been asserting our rights just as forcefully. We must uphold the principle of freedom of the seas, for commercial and military purposes—on, under, and below the water. The best sign of that commitment would be to conduct freedom of navigation operations within 12 nautical miles of China’s reclaimed islands in the South China Sea.

More broadly, the United States must continue to sustain a favorable military balance in the Asia-Pacific region. We must remain clear-eyed about the implications of China's rapid military modernization. We must take advantage of new and emerging technologies to preserve our ability to project power over long distances and operate in contested environments. We must invest in enhancing the resilience of our forward-deployed forces. And we must continue to help our allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region to build their maritime capacity—an initiative that this Committee seeks to further in the Fiscal Year 2016 National Defense Authorization Act. None of this will be possible, however, if we continue to live with mindless sequestration and a broken acquisition system.

All of us want to ensure that we avoid miscalculation. But we only encourage miscalculation when there is a gap between our words and our actions. And it is that gap that China has exploited to assert vast territorial claims, bully its neighbors, destabilize the region, and challenge the freedom of the seas.

Ultimately, we need to think anew about deterrence. When it comes to China's destabilizing activities, it is not that the United States is doing nothing. It is that nothing we are doing has been sufficient to deter China from continuing activities that the United States and our allies and partners say are unacceptable—the cyberattacks, the economic espionage and theft, the land reclamation, the coercion of its neighbors, and the assertion and attempted enforcement of vast, unlawful territorial claims. We need to develop options, and act on them, to deter these admittedly unconventional threats, or else they will continue and grow. And they will do so at the expense of the national security interests of the United States, the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region, and a rules-based international order.

With that, I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses today. Senator Reed.