

Opening Statement on PACOM, USFK, and the FY17 Budget
Chairman John McCain
February 23, 2016

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to receive testimony on U.S. Pacific Command and U.S. Forces Korea in review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2017 and the Future Years Defense Program.

I am pleased to welcome Admiral Harris and General Scaparrotti back to this Committee. We thank you both for your decades of distinguished service and for your leadership in an increasingly uncertain time.

Over the past several years, China has acted less like a “responsible stakeholder” of the rules-based order in the Asia-Pacific region and more like a bully. China’s increasingly assertive pattern of behavior calls into serious question whether China’s rise will in fact be peaceful. Despite U.S. efforts to rebalance to the Asia-Pacific, U.S. policy has failed to adapt to the scale and velocity of the challenge we face.

For example, the Administration has insisted that China must cease its “reclamation, construction, and militarization” in the South China Sea and that it will “fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows.” But after more than a year of this rhetoric, China’s reclamation, infrastructure construction, and militarization have all continued.

Last week we saw press reports that China had deployed the HQ-9 surface-to-air missile system to Woody Island in the Paracel Islands. And yesterday, satellite photos made available not by the United States Government, but by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, appear to show a high-frequency (possibly over-the-horizon) radar on reclaimed land on Cuarteron Reef in the Spratly Islands. If true, this deployment would represent a blatant violation of Xi Jinping’s September 2015 commitment to President Obama in the Rose Garden that China did “not intend to pursue militarization.”

Admiral Harris, I would like to ask today if you can confirm the reported militarization of Woody Island, the radar at Cuarteron Reef, and if you can reveal to this committee any further examples of militarization now occurring in the South China Sea that you are aware of.

As China continues to use force and coercion to unilaterally change the status quo and challenge the rules-based international order, the credibility of the Administration's commitments to regional security has diminished. Indeed, China's reclamation and militarization in the South China Sea, together with China's rapid military modernization and expansion, are making it more difficult for the United States to defend our allies and our interests from military aggression.

Simply put, the Administration's policy has failed. Beijing has been willing to accept a high level of risk to achieve its strategic goals. Meanwhile, the White House's risk aversion has resulted in an indecisive and inadequate policy that has confused and alarmed our regional allies and partners.

The United States must now consider fresh options to raise the costs on Beijing's behavior. Shaping rather than reacting to Beijing's actions will mean adopting policies with a level of risk that we have been unwilling to consider up to this point.

The Administration must initiate a robust 'freedom of the seas campaign,' flying and sailing wherever international law allows. This should include Freedom of Navigation Operations designed to challenge China's excessive maritime claims as well as joint patrols and exercises with our allies and partners that span the First Island Chain.

We must also maintain our commitment to continued Sensitive Reconnaissance Operations, which are critical for gathering military intelligence in the Western Pacific. Despite China's protests and growing ability to threaten our aircraft, the pace and scope of these operations must continue uninterrupted.

Giving the shifting military balance, we also need to take a hard look at what the future U.S. military posture in the region should look like. While the Department has initiated a European Reassurance Initiative in Europe, it is clear to me that a similar Asian Reassurance Initiative should be considered. Building off the recent CSIS report, we should consider further steps for enhancing posture, improving infrastructure, funding additional exercises, prepositioning additional equipment and munitions, and building partner capacity throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Beyond my concerns about sustaining freedom of the seas, I am also concerned China may seek to attempt to expel another country from disputed territory, such as Second Thomas Shoal, or build new infrastructure at a location like

Scarborough Shoal. Given this, we should consider clarifying how the United States will respond to an attack on the territory or armed forces of the Philippines under the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense.

Finally, I believe it is time for the United States Government to explore the appropriateness of sanctions against Chinese companies involved in the reclamation that has destabilized the South China Sea and caused massive environmental destruction across this maritime domain.

While China's assertiveness poses a major long-term challenge, North Korea's destabilizing behavior continues to present a real and rising risk of conflict. Over the past two months, it has defied the international community by testing a nuclear device and launching a long-range missile. These calculated cycles of provocation continue to pose a risk of violent escalation on the Korean Peninsula.

That is why I am so thankful for the close cooperation with our partners in Seoul and between U.S. Forces Korea and the ROK Armed Forces. I applaud the leadership of President Park for choosing to finally close the Kaesong Industrial Region, which has enriched the North with hundreds of millions of dollars in the last decade. I am also proud to have supported new congressional sanctions on North Korea. Despite the deficit of leadership from Beijing on this issue, these two steps will bring increased pressure on the North Korean regime and its supporters.

I am very encouraged by the joint U.S.-Republic of Korea statement that our two countries will begin the process of consultation for deploying the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to the Korean Peninsula. The deployment of this system by the alliance is a critical step to providing a further layer of defenses against North Korean provocations. I look forward to hearing General Scaparrotti's perspective on the utility of the THAAD system and other ideas to enhance the US-ROK relationship and deterrence on the Peninsula.