Hearing on "Rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific Region and Implications for U.S. National Security"

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Smith, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the Administration's rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region and its implications for U.S. national security. It is an honor to sit beside my distinguished co-panelists. Today, I would like first to discuss whether the trends in the Asia-Pacific justify a "rebalance" to the region; next, analyze what we know of the policy itself; and finally question whether or not the Administration's goals can be met by the resources it intends to commit to the policy.

The question of rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific is part of a larger debate over America's role in the post-war on terror era. Since the September 11 terror attacks, America's security community has been largely focused on Iraq and Afghanistan, with good reason. Yet as the Administration draws down its presence in

Afghanistan, after ending military operations in Iraq, and attempts to limit its future military activities in the Middle East, there is vigorous public discussion over the future of America's global military posture. In many ways, this policy debate mirrors the one that occurred at the end of the Cold War, just over two decades ago, and pits the same sets of competing preferences against each other.

One the one hand are those who believe the United States can or should no longer play the same type of dominant role in the world. Some analysts, like Richard Haass, would like to dramatically reduce America's military presence abroad and instead focus on problems at home. Similarly, Charles Kupchan and others believe that a new international order of rising nations, such as China, Turkey, Brazil, and the like, will spontaneously coalesce to uphold the liberal norms of the post-World War II world. On the other side of the spectrum, conservative internationalists, like Charles Krauthammer, argue that America must remain engaged in the world, continuing to provide military and security guarantees to allies, and attempting to limit the disruptive impact of powers like China and Russia. Robert Kagan has also written on the return of authoritarianism and the risk it portends for continued stability around the globe. For conservative internationalists, American power retains its central role and is the basis for our ongoing global influence.

For the past decade, our war against Islamic extremism had the perhaps unintentional effect of relegating much of the rest of the world to a second-tier security concern, despite continued evolution in various security environments.

Because we have maintained our permanent forward-based military presence in East Asia, however, and due to the rise of China and the continued North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile threat, the Asia-Pacific region has been kept somewhat higher on Washington's priority list than might otherwise have been the case. Without those conditions, it is likely that fewer resources, whether material or intellectual, would have been committed to upholding America's role in the region. Of course, those two trends – our military presence and the specter of instability from China and North Korea – were mutually reinforcing, in the sense that the rationale for keeping hundreds of thousands of military personnel in the Pacific was strengthened by concerns over China and fears of North Korea.

The question is, then, does today's security environment in the Asia-Pacific mandate a rebalancing. That question actually has two parts: the first, are there new or qualitatively different threats to the Asia-Pacific than in the past; and second, is the current U.S. military posture inadequate for the tasks set it, in light of those changes?

The Asia-Pacific presents a unique challenge to security analysts. On the one hand, there seems little doubt that it has become a more unstable, even more unpredictable, place. The security environment that held throughout the Cold War has been upended in just twenty years, thanks primarily to the unprecedented rise to power of China and the continued threat to stability posed by the totalitarian government of Kim Jong Un, in North Korea. For the past two decades, China has

increased its defense budget by double digits every year, and now spends over $100 billion per year, and perhaps several times that amount. In doing so, it has developed modern weapons systems, including intercontinental ballistic missiles, attack and ballistic missile submarines, advanced fighter jets, and more recently its first aircraft carrier. North Korea, of course, has developed a nuclear weapons program at the same time it has attempted to perfect ballistic missile capability. Pyongyang has violated every norm of international law and conduct, in the face of U.N. sanctions and international opprobrium, attacking its neighbor South Korea twice in 2010 and continuing to test missiles and set off nuclear explosion.

These facts alone would lend credence to the belief that Asia is changing for the worse, and that threats to stability are growing. Yet it is in addition a region riven by territorial disputes among all its major nations. These disputes are both land-based and maritime in nature. Beyond the major divisions of the Korean peninsula and across the Taiwan Strait, these disputes pit giant nations like China against smaller nations in Southeast Asia, as well as against large states like India and Japan. Indeed, as China has developed its military capabilities, it has adopted over the past several years an increasingly assertive, some would say aggressive, stance over contested territory with its neighbors, particularly Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. China is not alone, however, in having seemingly irreconcilable disputes with nations around it. Japan, too, is set against all its neighbors, primarily Russia, China, and South Korea, while smaller nations have their own disagreements. These disputes

are one reason, among others, why the Asia-Pacific region has never developed a political community even remotely resembling the European Union.

In light of these facts, the Asia-Pacific has become for the Administration its internationalist cause. While remaining committed to multilateral mechanisms and dialogue, the Administration has also figuratively drawn a line in the waters of the western Pacific, asserting not merely a continued role for the United States in the world’s most populous and dynamic region, but an increased one. On the face of it, there is good reason for the Administration’s stance, given Asia’s importance. Asia of course contains two of the world’s three largest economies, the world’s two most populous nations, the world’s largest militaries, and some of its most stable democracies. It is a region crucial to American and global prosperity, and it is one in which tens of millions of people have moved from authoritarianism to democracy in the past generation.

It is too early to say, however, that Asia today faces qualitatively different challenges or threats. For all the talk of China attempting to rewrite rules of international behavior in the South and East China Seas, there are counterarguments that other nations have also attempted to change the status quo. Of course those states, such as Japan or Vietnam, argue that it is Chinese actions that have undermined the status quo and raised their fears of losing control over long-claimed territory. Such is the level of distrust and animosity rampant in Asia. Despite this, no Asian state has

attempted seriously to interfere with regional and global trade, whether in crucial waterways such as the Strait of Malacca or larger bodies of water, such as the South China Sea. North Korea, while unpredictable and dangerous, remains a fragile state whose foreign policy is largely bluster and quick backing down from the brink. Few respectable analysts would claim that conflict is imminent or even likely to break out, except due to miscalculation or accident.

That then raises the second part of this first question: is the current U.S. military posture and policy in the Asia-Pacific sufficient to influence the outcome of events and continue to maintain stability? For the most part, I would argue the answer is yes, if only because our alliance guarantees are still taken seriously by the region’s states and only because no other nation in Asia can yet qualitatively challenge U.S. military strength. The 325,000 military personnel of U.S. Pacific Command and their ships, planes, subs, and the like remain a credible deterrent in today’s environment. The continued U.S. commitment to our five treaty allies (Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand) largely precludes the possibility of major war breaking out, and both China and North Korea continue to take seriously Republican and Democratic Administrations’ repeated assertions that the U.S. nuclear umbrella remains in force. Moreover, as allies such as Japan and South Korea slowly but steadily build up their own defensive capabilities, the calculus for any potential aggressor is further complicated.

A further, yet potentially more debatable, reason that our current military posture is sufficient is due to the fact that there is little evidence that any power in Asia wants unilaterally to change uncontested borders or to control vital trade routes. Beijing’s claim that the entire South China Sea is Chinese territory is not only unenforceable, it is dismissed by every other nation in the region. As of yet, there is little acquiescence by Asian nations in China’s attempts to intimidate them over contested territory, despite their fears of Beijing’s military strength. It is always easy to claim that one’s current military strength is sufficient in largely benign conditions, but the current environment does not support more dire interpretations of the dangers to peace and prosperity in Asia.

That is not to say, however, that we should be dismissive of the potential for a significant deterioration in Asia’s security environment. Indeed, America’s military presence in Asia is often likened to an “insurance policy,” with Washington “underwriting” regional security through its alliances and other vague guarantees. That means that Washington must be acutely sensitive to the actuarial tables of international relations (to continue with the insurance analogy). Older international systems are a greater risk of breaking down than younger ones. Rising challengers introduce a level of instability and often danger into areas where they are more powerful than other states. Exhaustion on the part of the regional security guarantor both emboldens those who seek to challenge the existing rule set of regional or international norms, and introduces an element of uncertainty regardless of the intentions of the guarantor.

From one perspective, the key role the United States plays in Asia is akin to a “broken windows” approach. The more that regional security norms are chipped away, the more uncertain and unstable the environment becomes. There is an enormous terrain between maritime bullying and full-scale war, but the gradual erosion of a sense of stability and security often leads into a spiral of greater tension and worsening relations. Indeed, it is fair to say that the Asia-Pacific is currently in the early stages of that spiral. While I have found few in the region who seriously fear the outbreak of war, they are nonetheless concerned that the region today is less stable than yesterday and that tomorrow it will be worse. Thus, while they push themselves to spend ever more amounts of money on defense, what they expect from the United States is a constant presence and a clear response to those acts that serve to undermine general security. Here, they are concerned, as am I, that what the United States lacks in Asia is not capacity, but political will. The past decade has seen ongoing attempts by China to test the boundaries of acceptable behavior, and to probe the response of Washington and its allies to outlandish claims, provocative actions, and support for rogue regimes. The perceived lack of response by Washington, and certainly public response, raises concerns in their minds that our commitment to stability is wavering, despite our continued presence.

In particular there is deep concern over Washington’s refusal to take a stronger stand on the region’s maritime disputes. Both Japan and the Philippines have explicitly requested greater U.S. support in the spirit of our alliances, and other

nations wonder why Washington refuses to make clearer its opposition to China's intimidation of smaller states, if not actually move to help them with greater shows of U.S. naval presence, information sharing, joint training, and the like. Limited step such as the recent U.S.-Vietnam maritime exercises send short-term signals that do not alleviate fears that Washington's policy is all words and little action.

The same goes for North Korea, perhaps even more so. While the North Korean threat may be limited largely to South Korea and Japan, the fact that successive U.S. administrations have regularly returned to the negotiating table, and have repeatedly failed to impose any type of cost on North Korea for its aggression, has undermined the credibility of Washington in the eyes of many in Asia. All understand that there are few good options for reining in Pyongyang, but America's diplomatic failure to denuclearize the North as well as punish it for past actions leaves Asian nations fearful of an unending and growing threat from the unpredictable Kim regime.

The second question I would like to discuss naturally follows from the first: if the Administration has concluded that security conditions in the Asia-Pacific warrant a rebalance, what does that policy look like? The Administration's rebalance, initially labeled the "pivot," is generally dated to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's July 2010 speech at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi, in which she announced that peaceful, multilateral settlement of territorial disputes in the South China Sea was in America's national interest. While the Administration has repeatedly

attempted to describe the evolution of the rebalance as a whole-of-government approach, it is the military component of that rebalance that has received the most attention.

President Obama's November 2011 visit to Asia is seen as the formal codification of the rebalance, particularly his speech in Darwin, Australia, where he announced that up to 2,500 U.S. Marines would be rotationally deployed for training purposes at a base there. This was followed by news that the Singapore would allow four new Littoral Combat Ships to be rotationally ported at Changi Naval Base, and that Washington was actively exploring the possibility of temporary basing access in the Philippines, which would mark a return of U.S. forces to the islands after having been ejected in 1992. Finally, at the 2012 Shangri-la security conference in Singapore, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta attempted to more fully explain the rebalancing strategy. He noted that, in addition to the moves noted above, the U.S. Navy would move 60 percent of its global assets to the region, and would embark on more exchanges and visits throughout the area, including in the Indian Ocean.

These military moves were supplemented by a diplomatic and economic push by the White House ostensibly to increase American engagement with the Asia-Pacific region. The President attended the East Asia Summit in both 2011 and 2012, becoming the first president to do so since the summit was inaugurated in 2005. In addition, the Administration belatedly embraced the Trans-Pacific Partnership as a

major free trade initiative, and moved to expand it by encouraging the addition of members such as Japan, Canada, and Mexico. Taken together, these efforts were labeled the 'rebalance,' and portrayed as a new commitment on the part of the United States to maintain and expand its role and influence in the world's most dynamic region.

This brief review of the Administration's stated rebalancing policy raises a third, and final question: can the policy achieve the goals set for it by the Administration? This naturally raises a subsidiary question of just what the Administration hopes to achieve. There has been no clear answer provided to this question. Is the rebalance to counter China's rise? The Administration assures observers such is not the case, but that is disbelieved by most nations in the region. Is it to forge a community of liberal interests? There is no evidence of such a desire. To argue that "America is back," as many Administration officials have put it, is not a particularly compelling policy goal, just as it is to ignore the constant engagement with Asia by the Bush Administration, at least at a par with the attention paid by the Obama White House. Thus, we are left without a clear rationale for the rebalancing policy, though countering China's growing influence is obviously the most parsimonious explanation.

That returns us to the main question: can it be achieved? From what we know of the security-oriented aspects of the rebalance, it would seem to be more of a rhetorical change than a substantive one. While Secretary Panetta touted the fact that 60

percent of the U.S. Navy's assets would be moved to the Asia-Pacific region, in reality, the Navy had already repositioned to the region. Given that half of America's aircraft carriers and over 50 percent of the Navy's cruisers, destroyers, and submarines (both attack and ballistic missile) are already in the Pacific, the announced move is not what could be considered a major increase in force posture. Similarly, the U.S. Air Force already rotates F-22s, B-52s and B-2s throughout the region, primarily in Guam and Okinawa, and there are few more planes that can be sent on a regular basis. Moreover, it will be years before the F-35 is operational in sufficient numbers to forward-base enough squadrons to make a qualitative difference in the air domain. None of the Administration's plans call for increasing the number of U.S. Marines or Army troops in the region, despite the elevation of the commander of U.S. Army Forces Pacific to a four-star rank. If, then, the Administration is concerned both about the size and assertive nature of China's armed forces, the rebalance as currently planned is not likely to make much of a difference in either operational terms or in sending strategic messages over the long-term.

From a budgetary standpoint, moreover, it would appear that the Administration is attempting to eat its cake and have it too. The significant cuts to the U.S. defense budget are hard to square with a policy that relies on an increased military presence for much of its credibility. According to the Department of Defense Comptroller, cuts to the Navy and Air Force's operations and maintenance accounts and to procurement accounts average eight percent. While those have yet to be translated

into specific cuts for Pacific-based forces, there will undoubtedly be an effect over time. In March, Admiral Samuel Locklear, Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, testified before this Committee that sequestration had already forced him to cut back travel by 50 percent, and reduce both ship deployment and flight training hours. In a recent visit to Honolulu, I talked with senior uniformed officers who indicated their concern that in any contingency in the Pacific, there would not be support forces from CONUS available to allow them to sustain operations. This dynamic will only become more apparent as sequestration deepens and tougher trade-offs have to be made to keep within budget limits.

All this matters if quantity is assumed to have a quality of its own, as uniformed leaders like to say. The quality of U.S. forces is undisputed, though in some manner will be affected by reduced training and maintenance schedules. Yet with fewer than ten combat air squadrons in Asia, and with only 23 ships of the 7th Fleet forward deployed to Japan and Guam, America’s daily presence is coming under increased pressure as China increases its activities in the East and South China Seas, as Russia rebuilds its strength in the northern Pacific Ocean, and as North Korea continues to keep tensions on a hair-trigger. Further cuts to O&M accounts, as well as declining acquisition trends in the out decades, means that America’s margin of error for maintaining a credible military posture in the vast Asia-Pacific region is steadily shrinking.

What, then can be done? First, the Administration needs to more clearly articulate both the rationale behind the rebalance and its goals. Once it is clear what it wants to accomplish, and why it feels it cannot do it with today's force posture, a rational plan of increasing America's military presence in Asia can then be crafted. Alternately, such an exercise may reveal that our current forces are sufficient for the goals the Administration prefers.

Second, the Administration needs to publicly address how projected defense spending cuts under both the Budget Control Act and sequestration are likely to affect America's military readiness and capacity in the Asia-Pacific. What are realistic projections of force strength in 2020 and beyond? Can a smaller U.S. military carry out the missions assigned to it in the Pacific, or is it likely that those mission sets will have to be redefined and reduced?

Finally, the rebalance must be understood as part of a larger U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific. Does the Administration see our role in Asia as a perpetual balancer? Or, does it envisage a gradual hand-off of security responsibilities to allies and partners? Should America play more of a cop-on-the-beat role than it does today, or is it better to remain the ultimate guarantor of stability? Does it desire the emergence of a functional community of liberal interests that can uphold freedom of navigation and the like, or does it trust in the development of pan-Asian multilateral mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum or the East Asia Summit, to

maintain stability through dialogue, confidence building measures, and eventually some type of cooperative security architecture?

While China's linear growth cannot be predicted with certainty, especially in light of its current economic slowdown, clearly it will remain the largest Asian power for the next generation. It will likely seek to play an ever-larger role in the region's commons and attempt to increase its influence, as all rising powers do. It has so far shown little inclination to provide public goods in Asia or bear any burdens that do not have as their end the extension of Chinese power. It has become more assertive as it has become more powerful, and appears to continue to view the world with suspicion. As China and its neighbors continue to tussle over disputed islands, the chances of miscalculation or accident leading to conflict rise.

All of this will challenge America's conception of its role in the Asia-Pacific region, and even may have a negative impact on our interests. International relations never take place in a vacuum, and today, Washington must grapple with rapid changes in the Asian security environment that may well call into question its credibility as a Pacific power. Lacking a clear set of goals and reducing the means available to achieve them, the Administration risks winding up with the worst of all outcomes: a policy adrift in a sea of change and few resources available to draw on to correct the situation.

I look forward to any questions you may have.