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“Diplomacy and Security in the South China Sea: After the Tribunal”

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Sherman, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on developments in and affecting the South China Sea and how the United States should respond to them. It is an honor to speak to you today on this matter of such importance to our nation and to the Asia-Pacific as a whole.

Put forthrightly, the United States should press back more firmly against China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea, both directly and indirectly, and Washington should be much less shy about doing so. The reason is that the costs of continued tepidness are greater than often recognized, while the benefits of such caution are frequently exaggerated. Conversely, firmer action is likely to yield greater benefits and be less risky than is often supposed. This is because such greater firmness is more likely to change Beijing’s calculus of how much it can push, and is therefore more likely to head off China’s progressive expansion of its influence over an area of considerable significance for the United States. At the same time, it is also more likely to demonstrate to allies, partners, as well as fence-sitters in the region that aligning with the United States in working to restrain China’s assertiveness is a reasonable and prudent thing to do.

Beijing’s Ambitions in – and Beyond – the South China Sea

The core problem is well known: the effort by China, Asia’s emerging behemoth, to establish an increasing degree of control and even dominance over a waterway of great strategic, economic, and geopolitical importance. It is true that the South China Sea is crisscrossed by a myriad of competing claims, that adjudicating the various claims is complex, and that the situation is fraught with the potential for miscalculation and escalation.

But these points should not obscure the heart of the matter. Beijing has set out tremendously expansive claims over the South China Sea in its “nine dash line”; forcefully advanced these claims through the use of quasi-military and military forces and an assertive and at times even aggressive diplomacy; built up and militarized features it has occupied; angrily denounced the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling that essentially wholly dismissed its claims; and demonstrated the interest and

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Innovative.

Bipartisan.

the ability to continue pressing its claims and degree of control in the Sea. China has now established increasingly significant military footprints not only on Woody Island in the Paracels but also on Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs in the Spratly Islands much farther to the south; initiated civilian flights to its new manmade islands; and considerably upped its military and quasi-military presence in the area. Having established a formidable military footprint in the South China Sea, Beijing now appears to be reckoning how and when to take additional steps in its pursuit of sway over the area. Such steps could include, for instance, the imposition of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the Sea or the militarization of Scarborough Shoal, which lies approximately 125 miles off the Philippine coast near Subic Bay. Indeed, news reports indicate that China may take advantage of U.S. inattention to foreign affairs during the general election campaign to make especially bold moves.¹

If Beijing is left unchecked in effort to gain ascendancy over the region, U.S. interests will suffer, potentially very seriously. The South China Sea is a vital waterway that abuts most of the countries of Southeast Asia, and is the maritime thoroughfare through which an enormous amount of East Asia's commercial traffic flows. The state or states that can govern or dominate the Sea would therefore have tremendous leverage over those who border it or rely on the goods that pass through its waters. If China can achieve this kind of control – which appears to be its goal – it would be able to influence and coerce by economic means regional and other states reliant on transiting traffic and the Sea's development through its ability to regulate, interrupt, or facilitate commerce and economic activity in the area. Given the kinds of economic, political, and other arrangements China has been pushing in recent years, its revanchist and often domineering approach to international politics, and the nature of its political system, Beijing would be likely to use such economic leverage to push the regional economic and political order in directions unfriendly and possibly even inimical to U.S. interests and the kind of international system we have built and sustained since the Second World War. Nor would the impact of such influence and its use be confined to the region. The Western Pacific is increasingly the leading center of global economic activity, and thus its fate exercises an outsized impact on the broader world system.

But the implications of such dominance would not be confined to the economic domain. If China can secure suzerainty over the South China Sea, it could turn it into a “Chinese lake” and use its growing military strength – including its ability to project credible and effective military power – to overawe states in the region, including U.S. allies like the Philippines and Australia, partners like Singapore, and other states with which Washington has solid or improving relations like Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. At the same time, it could use its military strength to shadow or even threaten or block the vital commercial traffic that passes through the South China Sea to key U.S. allies like Japan and South Korea or to Taiwan. And, in the worst case event of conflict with the United States itself, Chinese control over the Sea would give Beijing a formidable position from which to attack, harass, and defend against U.S. and allied forces, and would make U.S. strategies designed to prevail over Beijing, for instance through a distant blockade, harder. It could also provide a secure bastion for Chinese ballistic missile submarines to safely operate and threaten U.S. targets, further darkening the shadow of China's nuclear deterrent over any potential conflict.

¹ Harry Kazianis, “Beijing may be waiting for the perfect timing to strike in South China Sea,” *Asia Times*, September 15, 2016, <http://atimes.com/2016/09/china-may-be-waiting-for-the-perfect-timing-to-strike-in-south-china-sea/>.

It is therefore crucial for the United States, along with like-minded states, to prevent China from establishing control over the South China Sea. This is not only because ceding dominance there would significantly augment Beijing's ability to dictate the governance, the rules, and the nature of both international and domestic politics and economics in the region. Rather, China's ambitions in the South China Sea are very unlikely to end there, especially if they are easily realized. Instead, if Beijing can establish sway over the South China Sea, its ambitions are likely to expand farther outwards, into the broader Indo-Pacific and beyond. Indeed, it has been well noted that China's aspirations and interests have already expanded markedly in recent years.² This is not surprising – as countries' capabilities increase, so too are their ambitions likely to grow, just as individuals' wants and expectations are likely to expand as they grow wealthier and more powerful. China boasts, of course, a unique and distinctively great and proud culture, but Chinese state behavior is not immune from these normal tendencies of human beings and states. As anyone who has visited China can attest, contemporary Chinese society is not defined by a shy or retiring spirit. Rather, it is increasingly defined by what one of its most astute observers has called an “age of ambition,” as a generation raised on 10% annual growth rates and a world acclaiming China's rise comes to eminence.³ Why should we expect such a country to be abnormally restrained in its pursuit of what it deems its rightful place once it has the power to do so?

The Worsening Situation – and the Vital Role of the United States in Rectifying It

If China can establish dominance over the South China Sea, then, it would constitute a formidable blow to U.S. interests, a blow that we should very much strive to avoid. Fortunately, we are currently far from this dangerous eventuality – but not as comfortably far as many seem to think. This is primarily due to two factors. First, there is a fear that risks hardening into a conclusion in the region that the South China Sea is “going China's way” and that the United States is too reluctant or unwilling to take the actions needed to stem this trend. Second, China's militarization of the islands it occupies or has reclaimed and built up already pose a considerable military challenge.

Whether China will be able to establish dominance over the South China Sea is in large part a question of whether countries in the Indo-Pacific resolve to prevent it from happening. While China is very strong, it can be balanced and its behavior shaped by a coalition of countries in the region and the United States, primarily because these countries and especially the United States have and will have the power to balance a future PRC.⁴ Power in the contemporary world is largely a function of economic vitality, and China is already experiencing very serious and potentially grave challenges to its growth model, challenges that will be very difficult for the Chinese government to address and resolve. China's growth rate has already slowed, and it is likely to come further down to earth, leading not only to more constraints on its rate of increase in expenditures on defense but also to

² Ely Ratner, Elbridge Colby, Andrew Erickson, Zachary Hosford, and Alexander Sullivan, “More Willing & Able: Charting China's International Security Activism” (Center for a New American Security, May 2015).

³ Evan Osnos, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

⁴ Ashley J. Tellis, “Balancing Without Containment: An American Strategy for Managing China” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014).

internal tensions regarding how to manage the societal implications of this slowdown. At the same time, the U.S. economy remains a preferred destination for global capital and a rare outpost of relative growth in a slowing world economy. While the U.S. economy could certainly be doing much better and achieving such growth should catalyze substantial changes in U.S. domestic policies, U.S. long-term trends are relatively favorable.⁵ What seems likely is that the long-term competition in power between the United States and China is likely to be that – a competition. It is therefore reasonable to judge that the United States will have the power, especially in concert with established economies like Japan and rising ones like India, to balance China.

But the role of the United States is and will be crucial in this effort. No country in the region wants to be left exposed as the balancer, alienating Beijing and triggering its ire in ways that can have very concrete consequences, as the Philippines and Japan have found out. Thus, even as many countries fear Chinese dominance, each country in the region has an incentive to be very cautious about provoking Beijing's wrath. This is the classic problem of collective action: coalitions do not just spontaneously come together; rather, they usually form because a particularly strong power leans forward and thereby demonstrates that it is reasonable and prudent to affiliate with it to balance the rising, worrying, or threatening state. The only country that can plausibly play this role is the United States. No coalition to balance China will form without the active leadership of Washington, a leadership that shows countries that have to live next door to China that coalescing to constrain it is a reasonable bet.

Yet the perspective in the region is that U.S. leadership on this front has sounded a very uncertain trumpet. The United States sometimes uses strong language to call out Chinese behavior, but sometimes does not, and occasionally even seems afraid or ashamed to be frank about what Beijing is doing. Reports in the press go so far as to indicate that Washington discourages, if it does not suppress, more candid statements from officials who are inclined to speak more frankly. More importantly, the United States has conducted some freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), but fewer than might be expected, with less unabashed clarity about what they are doing and what their basis is, and with a more restricted purpose than our principles and interests would seem to dictate. Broadly, Washington seems highly concerned, and sometimes even fearful, about how Beijing will react to straightforward actions designed to demonstrate U.S. seriousness about its principles and its interests and those of its allies and partners. These fears seem to include anxieties about the potential for escalation in the region, deliberate and inadvertent, but also about how Beijing will respond with respect to the broader Sino-U.S. relationship on issues ranging from climate change to economic cooperation.

This evident anxiety does not appear to have been lost on Beijing, which seems to believe it can “rock the boat” in the South China Sea and that Washington will take pains to right it. As Washington appears more fearful of jeopardizing the broader relationship or of escalation than of failing to forcefully vindicate its interests and principles in the region, it is not particularly surprising that Beijing has continued its assertive policy. After all, it is paying dividends. Of course Beijing is

⁵ Elbridge Colby and Paul Lettow, “Have We Hit Peak America? The Sources of U.S. Power and the Path to National Renaissance,” *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2014, 54-63.

savvy enough to avoid directly confronting Washington, but “salami-slicing” tactics have already yielded China solid gains in the South China Sea and promise more unless countered.⁶

Moreover, if the situation seems too “hot” in the South China Sea, Beijing has evinced an ability to shift to pursuing its goals in the East China Sea, where Beijing lays claim to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands also claimed by Japan. In point of fact, China’s activities have markedly increased in recent months in the East China Sea. After a period of relative quiet there, Chinese aircraft and ships, including some that appear to be armed, have substantially upped their presence and activities around the islands. In early August, about fifteen Chinese Coast Guard vessels, some of them apparently armed, escorted over 200 Chinese fishing vessels to the vicinity of the Senkakus, where some of these ships reportedly penetrated the nautical territorial limit.⁷ This activity may have been aimed at deterring a more active Japanese presence in the South China Sea, particularly Tokyo’s participation in FONOPs with Washington. Further such activities in the East China Sea seem likely.

Nor is Washington’s reluctance noticed only in Beijing. Rather, it suggests to countries in the region currently reckoning how prudent it is to work with the United States to balance China that Washington is unwilling or believes it is or will be unable to stay in the region and lead an effort to restrain Beijing’s assertiveness. Beijing’s success in pressing its claims and the impunity with which it has done so, and the reluctance that Washington has exhibited in forcefully and concretely pushing back against these actions, in some ways has given China the political initiative and risks creating or confirming the perception that Chinese dominance of the area is inevitable. Earlier this month, new Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte bluntly expressed this sort of view: “China is now in power, and they have military superiority in the region,” as he announced the end of joint naval patrols with the U.S. in the disputed South China Sea, and expelled U.S. forces from southern Mindanao.⁸

This is particularly disquieting because the United States, despite Duterte’s comments, by almost all accounts still enjoys considerable advantage over Beijing in terms of national power, military and economic. So what does it suggest that Washington is as reluctant to press Beijing as it is today when it still enjoys a considerable margin of military and economic advantage? What does that portend for a future in which the power balance will be much more competitive? Concerns such as these make potential U.S. partners in the region open to more forthright and vigorous action or support much less keen to “stick their necks out.” This is why statements from Administration representatives that China is alienating the region and thus acting in a self-defeating fashion are not persuasive. Without more emphatic policy and action by the United States, China’s alienation of regional states may result more in intimidating and cowering rather than catalyzing them to press back against Beijing’s actions.

⁶ Elbridge Colby and Ely Ratner, “Roiling the Waters,” *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2014, 10-13.

⁷ Tim Kelly, “Japan says Chinese military activity in East China Sea escalating,” *Reuters*, June 30, 2016, and Ankit Panda, “Japan: 7 Chinese Coast Guard Ships, 230 Fishing Boats in Disputed East China Sea Waters,” *The Diplomat*, August 8, 2016.

⁸ Bryan Harris and Michael Peel, “Philippines pivots away from the US,” *Financial Times*, September 14, 2016.

The second reason that things are currently worse than many suppose is that China's militarization of its existing positions in the South China Sea and likely further efforts are considerably more significant than often admitted. This military progress is likely to give China added coercive leverage not only in the event of war but also in peacetime, as these forces not only constitute a considerable problem for U.S. forces but also represent a very serious potential threat to much-less capable regional states.

While there is much justified focus on the possibility for Beijing to militarize Scarborough Shoal, which would have major implications for the security of the Philippines, we should not forget that China has already occupied formations and established positions which few expect the Chinese to abandon. Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs are the most significant current Chinese bases. Each of these reefs is larger than often supposed; Subi is as wide as Pearl Harbor and Mischief as wide as the District of Columbia. Each is judged to boast 10,000 foot reinforced runways, deep water harbors, hardened hangars, impressive support facilities, housing for personnel, and the potential to host additional forces, personnel, and facilities. These reefs – now really manmade islands – could each house a fighter regiment; surface-to-air, anti-ship, and surface-to-surface missiles; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets such as radars and other sensors; and other military capabilities. China has already apparently deployed sophisticated surface-to-air missile batteries to Woody Island in the Paracels; there is no technical block to it deploying such or similar advanced systems to its reclaimed islands deeper south and east into the Sea.⁹

While it is true that U.S. forces could destroy or degrade these types of forces and facilities in the event of a conflict, it is also true that such forces could give China important military advantages in the event of such a war by providing significant strike and defensive capabilities against U.S. and allied forces and logistics chains in the air and space domains, at and under the sea, and on land in surrounding areas, ultimately forcing U.S. forces to have to fight in from farther out, and do so with considerably greater difficulty. Destroying such Chinese fortifications would certainly be feasible for U.S. forces, but it is unlikely to be as easy or as cheap as many seem to believe.¹⁰

Moreover, such facilities and capabilities do not only affect the United States. Rather, these bases will provide Beijing with significantly added and more prompt military capability against regional states, which lack the U.S. ability to penetrate Chinese anti-access/area denial umbrellas and conduct effective sophisticated precision strike campaigns. They will therefore cast a darker shadow of Chinese coercive leverage over states in the region.

The Outlines of a More Effective South China Sea Policy

Thus the situation in the South China Sea is serious, and increasingly so. What, then, should the United States do?¹¹ U.S. actions should be guided by two overarching principles: first, in the nearer-

⁹ I am grateful to Commander Thomas Shugart, USN, for much of this information, which is based on a working paper of his.

¹⁰ Elbridge Colby and Evan Montgomery, "Changing Tides in the South China Sea," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2015.

¹¹ For a view of this question in a broader context, see Patrick M. Cronin, "Power and Order in the South China Sea: A Strategic Framework for U.S. Policy" (Center for a New American Security, 2016)

term, to demonstrate greater resolve and willingness to risk escalation or the broader relationship with China, both to show to Beijing the perils of further assertiveness and to make clear to regional states that affiliating with the United States in such an effort is a safe course; and, second, to build up U.S. and allied military and economic strength to give Washington and its confederates as powerful a position as possible for the longer-term competition with China.

Demonstrating U.S. Resolve More Forcefully and Clearly in the Face of Chinese Assertiveness

Key policy initiatives to demonstrate U.S. resolve in the South China Sea include:

- **FONOPs and presence operations**
- **Shrinking the white hull loophole**
- **Deterring Chinese militarization of Scarborough Shoal**

FONOPs and Presence Operations: For the near-term, the United States should strive to rectify the perception that it is too timid about pushing back against Beijing's assertions in the South China Sea. At a minimum, this entails conducting more FONOPs, conducting them more clearly to challenge Chinese legal claims, and doing so with a more forthright and unabashed explanation of what the United States is doing and why. In addition to FONOPs, the United States should also conduct intense presence operations beyond those designed to vindicate U.S. legal positions in order to demonstrate U.S. interest, resolve, and ability to maintain its position in the region. At a minimum, the United States should maintain a DDG in the area and as frequently as tenable bring CVNs and associated naval vessels and air wings into the region as well.

At the same time, the United States should also encourage other states – both in the Asia-Pacific and beyond – to conduct FONOPs as well as other presence activities with the United States singly or with other like-minded countries designed to challenge or more indirectly undermine Beijing's expansive claims. Japan and Australia, for instance, have been commendably active in this respect both in the air and at sea, with Tokyo just recently announcing its willingness to conduct joint operations with the United States in the South China Sea (although its willingness to conduct FONOPs is less clear, and may be the object of Chinese coercive manipulation in the East China Sea).¹² India has also indicated an openness to lending its involvement to some types of such activities. But the United States should not only look to states in the region. France, for instance, has taken a leading role in making clear its willingness to conduct patrols in the South China Sea in order to show its support for international law and freedom of navigation. Paris has further laudably expressed its willingness to coordinate additional European patrols in the South China Sea.¹³ The United States should actively pick up and encourage opportunities along these lines to demonstrate

[forthcoming]).

¹² I am grateful to Matthew Pottinger for this observation.

¹³ Jean-Yves Le Drian, "The Challenges of Conflict Resolution" (Speech at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 5, 2016), and Yo-Jung Chen, "South China Sea: The French Are Coming," *The Diplomat*, July 14, 2016.

that Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea will not be met with quiescence but rather with – at a minimum – a significant international political cost.

Shrinking the White Hull Loophole: China has for several years exploited its advantages in the number and sophistication of its so-called “white-hulled” non-military but large and capable vessels – for instance operated by the Chinese Coast Guard and fisheries administration – to pursue its claims, demonstrate presence, and at times to take aggressive action against rival claimants. The classification of these ships as “non-military” and the acceptance of this categorization by other states has allowed China to minimize the risk of counter-escalation by the United States and others while enabling it to pursue very assertive tactics. Accordingly the United States should seek to blur the distinction between white and “gray-hulled” (or military) vessels by stating that it will respond to physical assault or coercion by any ship with the means it deems appropriate, including military means if necessary. China must not get a free pass by using technically non-military ships.

Deterring Chinese Militarization of Scarborough Shoal: China’s activities around the Scarborough Shoal have increased markedly in the last months. Recent reports indicate that Beijing may be considering militarizing the feature along the lines of what it has done in the Spratlys. Such an action would give China a highly valuable military outpost that could cover most of Luzon with surface-to-air missile and strike systems, and that lies just outside the major Philippine (and former American) naval base at Subic Bay. Scarborough’s militarization would therefore represent a significant threat to the security and integrity of the Philippines and to U.S. forces there. Fears that Beijing might take this step have been substantial enough to have led Washington at the highest levels to communicate to Beijing the gravity with which the United States would regard such a step and to the deployment of the USS *John Stennis* to buttress that message.¹⁴ Washington should continue sending such messages to ensure Beijing does not militarize Scarborough Shoal, and take additional steps such as conducting FONOPs and active presence operations as well as by encouraging international efforts to condemn any such act.

Washington should also consider the merits of formally extending the Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines to Scarborough, a step it has not yet taken, in part due to the legal uncertainty surrounding the competing claims. This would undoubtedly provoke Beijing and would expand Washington’s commitment to the Philippines just as Manila under the Duterte Administration risks undermining warming U.S.-Philippine ties. Accordingly, such a step should not be taken lightly or inadvisedly, or without Philippine support and interest. Nonetheless, if the implications of China’s militarization of the Shoal are as deleterious as some have suggested, it may well behoove the United States to formally include it in the ambit of the Treaty, especially given the clarity of the U.S. commitment to the Philippines and the increasing U.S. military presence there.¹⁵

¹⁴ Michael McDevitt, “Is it Time for the U.S. to Take a Position on Scarborough Shoal?” *USNI News*, July 19, 2016.

¹⁵ Dan de Luce, “At Scarborough Shoal, China Is Playing With Fire: Retired Admiral,” *Foreign Policy*, June 16, 2016, and Matthew Pennington, “ADM Dennis Blair: U.S. Should Protect Philippine’s Scarborough Shoal,” *Associated Press*, July 15, 2016.

Beyond Demonstrations of Resolve: Increasing U.S. and Allied Military and Economic Power and Leverage

While these demonstrations of resolve to vindicate our interests and assert our legal positions are important, they are not enough. They do not increase our strength or that of those who share our interest in constraining China's assertiveness. And ultimately the fate of the South China Sea will be highly influenced by the relative strength – especially the military and economic strength – of the states involved, including the United States. The United States must therefore do more than simply show resolve. Rather, it must build up its own capabilities as well as those of its allies, partners, and those who share our common goal. This will provide added leverage and deterrent power, which will be more likely to dissuade China and place less weight on our resolve, which is important especially given the manifold interests Washington has around the world.

Accordingly, the United States should work to:

- **Increase and extend U.S. military advantages and presence in the region**
- **Deepen alliances and partnerships, and encourage allied and partner efforts and initiative**
- **Maintain U.S. economic leadership by ratifying TPP**

Increase and Extend U.S. Military Advantages and Presence in the Region: Elemental to a successful U.S. strategy in the region is sustained U.S. military superiority in maritime Asia. Without that military advantage, Beijing could plausibly win a war against the United States in the region. If China gains the military edge, Beijing's incentives to push forward will dramatically grow and third countries' incentives to affiliate or work with Washington to constrain Beijing will dramatically decrease. While U.S. military superiority certainly cannot handle all problems generated by China's assertiveness, particularly challenges in the "gray zone," in its absence these challenges would become much more severe and difficult to handle. Indeed, should China be able to attain military superiority in the Western Pacific, U.S. options might be reduced to relying more on its or others' nuclear deterrent or to abandoning its position. Needless to say, this is an eventuality the United States should very much want to avoid – as, it should be clearly and plainly emphasized to Beijing, should China.¹⁶

Accordingly, the United States must prioritize sustaining its military advantages with respect to maritime Asia (which, it should be noted, will generally also be applicable to contingencies involving Russia). This means vigorously implementing, resourcing, and extending into the next administration the Pentagon's "Third Offset Strategy" and related initiatives, initiatives designed to leverage U.S. advantages in technology, innovation, and organizational and cultural adaptiveness to extend U.S. conventional superiority. It also means adequately funding and supporting the development of capabilities suited to deterring China, for instance by developing and procuring new and sufficient numbers of attack submarines and penetrating strike platforms like the B-21 and associated weaponry, novel technologies such as unmanned and autonomous systems, a more resilient and

¹⁶ Elbridge Colby, "Asia Goes Nuclear," *The National Interest* (January/February 2015), 28-37.

formidable space architecture, and the nuclear Triad and associated systems.¹⁷ This necessitates lifting the sequester caps and providing the Department of Defense with adequate funding to meet its increasingly pressing requirements as well as the spending and management flexibility needed to optimize its expenditures and efforts.¹⁸

Presence is also important. It is not lost on regional countries that, while the United States may currently enjoy advantages at the level of large-scale, high-end conventional warfare, U.S. forces in the region are smaller in number and more rarely seen, while China's increasingly capable forces are present and prepared to butt heads with rival claimants, as Vietnam discovered in its 2014 altercation with Chinese vessels over the placement by Beijing of an oil rig in disputed waters. The United States should therefore continue shifting forces, especially high-end forces, more to the Asia-Pacific, but also look for innovative and creative ways to increase presence operations in the Western Pacific and the South China Sea in particular. This could include homeporting an additional U.S. aircraft carrier as well as associated carrier air wings in Japan, moving more SSNs to Guam, undertaking further Air Force and Navy rotations to Australia and the Philippines, and conducting more port visits and rotational ship deployments to Vietnam. The United States should also ensure its forward presence capabilities are combat-credible, since a force that is prepared to fight and prevail is more likely to achieve the deterrent purposes of forward presence than one that is vulnerable and largely symbolic.¹⁹

Deepen Alliances and Partnerships, and Encourage Allied and Partner Efforts and

Initiative: A particularly vital step is to capitalize on opportunities to deepen military and other security links with existing allies and partners, and to expand such relationships with others in the region of like mind about the challenge from China, such as Vietnam and potentially Indonesia. This will not only enable the United States to better work with these states but also encourage them in their efforts to help balance China and help give them the means to do so.

This means following through and expanding on the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the Philippines, despite the current political turbulence in our relations with Manila; on opportunities for rotational deployments and broader access arrangements with Australia; and on increasing interest in and capability for presence and operations in the region on the part of Japan. It also means the United States should look for opportunities to deepen engagement with Vietnam and with India; in both of these militarily significant countries there is a substantial sense of the value of deepening security relations with Washington in order to help balance China's growing power. The United States should also explore opportunities to work with countries like Indonesia that have expressed concern about Beijing's behavior and intentions but have been less active in their

¹⁷ Robert O. Work, "The Third U.S. Offset Strategy and its Implications for Partners and Allies" (Speech at the ACT-CNAS Transatlantic Forum, Washington, D.C., January 28, 2015); and Shawn Brimley, "Arresting the Erosion of America's Military Edge," Statement to the Armed Services Committee, U.S. Senate, October 29, 2015.

¹⁸ See, for instance, William J. Perry, John P. Abizaid, et al, *Ensuring a Strong U.S. Defense for the Future: The National Defense Panel Review of the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review* (United States Institute of Peace, July 2014).

¹⁹ Elbridge Colby and Jonathan F. Solomon, "Avoiding Becoming a Paper Tiger: Presence in a Warfighting Defense Strategy," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 82 no. 3 (July 2016), 24-32.

response. It also means encouraging deeper cooperation among these states, rather than insisting that all roads lead through Washington.

U.S. efforts should particularly focus on building up regional state capacity to resist or complicate Chinese assertiveness. The Maritime Security Initiative offers a commendable example of this type of initiative. U.S. focus should concentrate on helping regional states deal with Chinese gray zone challenges through better maritime and aerial domain awareness, such as a common operating picture in the South China Sea, and more and better vessels and aircraft to respond to such activities.²⁰ The United States should be able to sell more patrol boats, for instance, to the Philippines and Vietnam, and should pursue the concept of establishing a region-wide training center for such activities, potentially on Guam. But U.S. efforts should also selectively include sales or transfers of or support for acquisition of higher-end military capabilities that can help capable allies, partners, and other regional states build up anti-access and area denial capabilities of their own against Chinese higher-end forces, such as those operating from Beijing's new facilities in the South China Sea.

Washington should also encourage efforts by countries such as Japan in their own initiatives to build friendly state capacity and capability. This is especially significant given the liberalization of Tokyo's defense export restrictions.

Maintain U.S. Economic Leadership by Ratifying TPP: The success of any U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific cannot and will not, however, derive only from diplomacy and military means. Rather, economic steps are likely to be as, if not more, important, given Asia's level of development and the region's broadly shared view of the centrality of economics. Fortunately, the United States still enjoys a great deal of respect, leverage, and attraction in Asia as a trading partner, destination for and source of capital, example of successful business and innovation, and the like.

But China has sharply eroded that traditional advantage through its own growth and development as well as through conscious policies designed to create and enable the exercise of economic power for political or strategic ends, such as the "One Belt One Road" initiative. This power is not at all lost on regional states, many of which are fearful of Chinese ambitions and strength but also do not want to lose out on the chance to share in China's growing wealth and investment. This is true not only in places like Indonesia and Malaysia but also within established U.S. allies like Australia and the Philippines. Indeed, any coalition designed to constrain China, however loose, is likely to involve states – including the United States – sensibly seeking to balance that objective against the desire or need for positive commercial relations with China. We no longer live in the highly bifurcated, segregated world of the Cold War or the interwar period, in which rivals had little commerce or interaction with one another. Rather, contemporary international politics is likely to resemble traditional international politics, in which rivalry and competition coexisted with substantial commercial and other intercourse.

²⁰ Van Jackson, Mira Rapp-Hooper, Paul Scharre, Harry Krejsa, and Jeff Chism, "Networked Transparency: Constructing a Common Operational Picture of the South China Sea" (Center for a New American Security, March 2016).

Crucial in this world, therefore, is for the United States to have as much economic influence, credibility, and leverage of its own in the Asia-Pacific as possible. The Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) is the cornerstone of this effort. TPP has been exhaustively negotiated among twelve countries and the terms of the pact appear, according to the bulk of respected authorities on this subject, to be net beneficial for the U.S. economy.²¹ But its strategic impact is clear. Although TPP is obviously a consensus document, it is also a product of American leadership, and reflects our established approach to markets and international trade, including in ways that demand sacrifices from other signatories as well as ourselves. Its ratification by the United States would signal the continued commitment of the United States to deep engagement with the Asia-Pacific. Moreover, it would create a large and powerful bloc of trading countries whose influence and common commitment to the pact would promote the adoption of its rules, standards, and values among those interested in becoming a part of it or of conducting commerce with its members.

Conversely, rejecting TPP would deal a blow, perhaps a very formidable one, to the U.S. position in the region, as friendly leaders such as Prime Ministers Abe of Japan and Lee of Singapore have emphasized. The United States would thereby abdicate any pretense to leadership in the region on trade and setting the rules and norms of economic engagement, potentially ceding that role to China. Moreover, it would signal that the United States might well not be as deeply and enduringly committed to its role in Asia as Washington has proclaimed so consistently, giving greater weight to incentives for regional states to accommodate China and its assertive approach.²²

The Congress should therefore provide its advice and consent to the ratification of TPP as expeditiously as possible.

Conclusion

We live in a time in which many Americans are vigorously questioning the value of maintaining our post-war strategy of deep engagement abroad. This is not in and of itself unjustified or unfounded. Indeed, it is vital that U.S. foreign policy serve the interests of the American people, and that that connection be explained, not just assumed. Foreign policy is not missionary work, in the old phrase, and many things that happen abroad do not justify or require the commitment of U.S. forces, credibility, or money.

But such deep and sustained engagement, albeit of a more focused and balanced sort, remains worthwhile and indeed crucial.²³ If the United States withdraws from its key commitments in the most important regions of the globe, it is very likely to find that the world and the international order that results far less friendly and quite possibly more hostile and chaotic than if we had stayed

²¹ Greg Mankiw, “An Open Letter,” Greg Mankiw’s Blog at gregmankiw.blogspot.com, March 5, 2015, <http://gregmankiw.blogspot.com/2015/03/an-open-letter.html>.

²² See, for instance, the speech of Prime Minister Abe to a joint session of Congress on April 29, 2015, and the remarks of Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long available at <http://warontherocks.com/2016/08/this-asian-leader-just-made-the-best-case-for-tpp-and-americas-role-in-asia/>.

²³ Elbridge Colby and Jim Thomas, “The Future of Alliance,” *The National Interest* (July/August 2016), 32-40.

involved. Moreover, we are quite likely to be pulled back into involvement even if we try to extricate ourselves, but with our credibility dashed and our ties dramatically weakened. Accordingly, an intelligent and sustainable strategy of engagement remains the best long-term course for our country; it is the strategy of “enlightened self-interest”: long-term gains resulting from short-term sacrifices and risks.

This does not mean things should not change. Rather, in a more competitive and contested international political environment, we must be more selective and focused in how we spend our political and economic capital, and in how our nation elects to employ military force. Moreover, we must insist on greater assistance and burden-sharing from our allies and partners. But this also means we must show strength, resolve, and staying power in the face of rising powers that are increasingly interested in challenging us, our allies and partners, and the system we have jointly constructed and maintained.

In such a world, we must, however, prioritize. The United States faces manifold threats and challenges, but not all are of equal moment. China is the only country or force that has the power and potentially the will to upend the established order in the world’s wealthiest region and perhaps globally, and the only one that could plausibly generate the military power to project significant armed might beyond its immediate environs and the economic power to cow or coerce major states. It is therefore crucial that the United States and other like-minded states ensure that China sees that restraint and respect for our interests and for established, albeit updated, norms and rules is the more prudent course. The only way to do that is through a consistent, long-term policy that balances engagement and cooperation with firmness, strength, and deterrence.

The South China Sea is and will be a central part of all of this. If the United States and other states fail to stop the expansion of China’s power over such an important area, Beijing’s strength and ambitions are only likely to grow. Conversely, if the United States and its partners succeed in constraining such expansion, then it is far more likely that a stable and enduring balance is likely to result. Accordingly, the United States must get the South China Sea right. The steps offered here should help to achieve this.