

Opening Statement of the Honorable **Ted Yoho (R-FL)**
Chairman of the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
Subcommittee Hearing: Checking China's Maritime Push
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(As prepared for delivery)

The People's Republic of China's aggressive and provocative behavior in maritime territorial disputes represents a threat to vital U.S. interests as severe as those from Russia, Iran, North Korea, and terrorism from the Middle East, according to the Heritage Foundation's 2017 Index of U.S. Military Strength. Since 2013, China has rapidly advanced its maritime capabilities and employed them to transform the South China Sea with artificial islands, place Japan under increasing pressure in the East China Sea, and attempt to restrict freedoms of navigation in its near waters. Unbelievably, China has suffered little if any cost for this maritime push.

In the South China Sea, China has built over 3,200 acres of land over disputed features in the Spratly Islands, complete with military-capable airstrips, ports, radars, and anti-aircraft weapons. Just last week, satellite imagery confirmed that China has installed surface-to-air missile silos on its artificial islands on Subi, Mischief, and Fiery Cross reefs. China also continues to press the Japan Coast Guard, the Maritime Self-Defense Force, and the Air Self-Defense Force around the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Uncommitted to existing global norms, China continually undermines attempts at a unified response to these activities from ASEAN and has attempted to use its economic influence to buy off other claimants.

The United States and our allies and partners recognize that our military presence in the Western Pacific has been a force for stability and for good across decades. But so far, we haven't acted with nearly the level of resolve that China has in its aggressive pursuit of its arbitrary claims. For example, officials from the last administration proclaimed the importance of freedom of navigation far and wide in response to China's efforts to restrict it. But this fundamental right, and the international law which protects it, was only hesitantly enforced with four freedom of navigation operations, none of which challenged China's tacit assertion that its artificial islands are entitled to territorial seas.

For nearly a decade, we have said much, and done little. While the South and East China Seas may seem distant, we have important national interests at stake. The disputed areas are key global economic and trade arteries. Nearly 30 percent of the world's maritime trade moves through the area. Domination of these routes might allow a regional power to use disruption as leverage.

The security of these areas is also essential for the energy security of key U.S. defense allies and partners. Most of the energy supplies of South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan come through the South

China Sea. Energy insecurity among our friends in the region could have serious implications for our ability to handle potential contingencies arising from North Korea and elsewhere.

Perhaps most importantly, the lack of U.S. resolve hasn't just allowed China to change the status quo on the ground, but contributes to worries among our allies and partners that the United States lacks sufficient commitment to the region, and feeds the narrative that China has been successful in degrading U.S. influence and global norms. The perceived potency of our military and diplomatic power is very much at risk. The South and East China Seas are strategic keys to East Asia, and acquiescence to restrictions on U.S. forces' freedom of operations there will undermine the U.S. security guarantee and degrade both regional and world stability.

We need a new strategy, and the entrance of the new administration represents a good opportunity to form and implement better policies to reassert U.S. strength in these critical areas. It may be time to consider a more assertive plan. As we have seen, endlessly backing away from conflict carries its own risks. China has taken advantage of U.S. acquiescence to revise the status quo, advancing its strategic interests in ways that raise the risk of conflict. Timidity hasn't de-escalated these maritime disputes; it has only raised the stakes.

Today, we will hear suggestions from our expert panel for defining U.S. goals in addressing China's maritime territorial aggression, as well as policy options to operationalize more effective U.S. engagement on this important issue.