

**“Lasers and Water Cannons: Exposing the CCP’s Harassment in the South China Sea”**  
**Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Lindsey W. Ford**  
**House Foreign Affairs Indo-Pacific Subcommittee**  
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Chairwoman Kim, Ranking Member Bera, and distinguished members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to testify today on how the Department of Defense (DoD) is working with allies and partners to strengthen our common vision for peace and stability in the South China Sea.

As you have heard from leaders across the Department, our network of allies and partners is one of the United States’ greatest strategic advantages and the center of gravity for the Department’s 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS). As the NDS clearly states, close collaboration with our allies and partners is foundational to our ability to sustain and strengthen deterrence. We cannot confront complex and interconnected challenges alone, and the South China Sea is no exception.

**The People’s Republic of China’s Assertiveness in the South China Sea**

Over the last decade, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has continued to expand its military and law enforcement presence in the South China Sea, harass the legitimate economic activities of other claimants, and interfere with the ability of other states to exercise navigational rights and freedoms under international law.

The PRC’s broader efforts to expand its overseas military footprint are felt acutely in the South China Sea, where the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has constructed multiple military outposts on occupied and reclaimed features, despite prior public commitments not to militarize the South China Sea. Over the past decade, the PRC has added more than 3,200 acres of land to its seven occupied outposts in the Spratly Islands, which now feature airfields, berthing areas, and resupply facilities to support persistent PRC military and paramilitary presence in the region. Since early 2018, we have seen the PRC steadily equip its Spratly Island outposts—including Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, and Fiery Cross—with an increasing array of military capabilities, including advanced anti-ship cruise missiles, long-range surface-to-air missile systems, J-20 stealth fighter jets, laser and jamming equipment, and military radar and signals intelligence capabilities.

The PRC uses these outposts to support People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) vessels, People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) deployments, and China Coast Guard (CCG) operations in the South China Sea, including routine harassment of Southeast Asian nations’ vessels and assets, undermining these nations’ sovereign rights under international law. We’ve witnessed a sharp uptick in coercive and risky operational behavior by the PRC, threatening the safety not only of U.S. forces, but of allied and partner forces operating in the South China Sea. In recent years, the PRC has sunk Vietnamese fishing vessels, used military aircraft to harass Malaysian offshore energy exploration, cut across the nose of Australian P-8s conducting routine and lawful overflight activities, flown within twenty feet of U.S. aircraft, and deployed water cannons and military-grade lasers to block and target

Philippine resupply boats headed toward Second Thomas Shoal. These are not isolated incidents. These actions demonstrate a pattern of increasingly risky and coercive behavior, a manifestation of the PRC's growing willingness to use its military instrument of power to achieve its foreign policy objectives.

In addition to an expanded presence and forward-deployed capabilities, the PRC has sought to undermine international law and enforce its invalidated maritime claims in the region using extra-legal mechanisms. In 2020, the PRC announced the creation of two new administrative districts covering the Paracel and Spratly Islands to advance PRC claims to these areas. In 2021, the PRC enacted legislation that explicitly authorizes the CCG to use lethal force against foreign vessels infringing on PRC sovereignty. That same year, it also updated its Maritime Traffic Safety Law to require all foreign vessels to notify PRC maritime authorities, carry required permits, and submit to PRC command and supervision when entering what the PRC claims as its "sovereign waters." And just last month, the PRC released a "standard map" reaffirming its claim to almost the entire South China Sea, while also claiming territory around Taiwan and India.

### **Strengthening a Common Vision for the South China Sea Region**

Over the past year, an unprecedented number of states—including the United States—have enhanced efforts to support the rule of law and assert the importance of sovereign rights in the South China Sea, despite the PRC's aggressive attempts to assert further control of the region.

The Marcos administration in the Philippines has been increasingly vocal about publicizing PRC coercion, including recent water cannon and lasing incidents, as well as launching new information campaigns to raise awareness of the 2016 UN Arbitral Tribunal ruling that invalidated the PRC's nine-dash line. The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) has strengthened its presence in the South China Sea, conducting more sorties and deploying additional vessels to protect the country's fishermen. Earlier this week, the PCG defended Philippine sovereignty and traditional fishing rights by removing a floating barrier installed by the CCG near Scarborough Shoal. And despite repeated incidences of harassment, the Philippines has continued to defend its right to resupply its garrison at Second Thomas Shoal—or Ayungin Shoal—a low-tide elevation that lies within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone.

Earlier this month, members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) released statements reaffirming the principles of freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, emphasizing the imperative to resolve maritime disputes peacefully, and in accordance with international law, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. And, most recently, a chorus of governments, including Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam, publicly objected to the PRC's aforementioned "standard map."

Southeast Asian nations are also working together to peacefully resolve their own overlapping disputes in the South China Sea and defend their rights to energy exploration. Last year, Vietnam and Indonesia settled a maritime boundary dispute after years of clashes over fishing rights. And last month, the Philippines and Vietnam began discussions on a similar

maritime agreement to facilitate cooperation in contested waters. Despite PRC threats and intimidation, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam are expanding their offshore energy exploration, deploying their own vessels to defend these efforts and challenge PRC encroachment.

Condemnation of the PRC's behavior in the South China Sea and support for international law also extends well beyond Southeast Asia. In May 2023, Quad partners criticized the militarization of disputed features and the dangerous use of coast guard vessels and maritime militia in the region. In August 2023, Australia, Canada, Japan, the European Union, and the United Kingdom joined the Philippines in protesting aggressive PRC maneuvers against the Philippines at Second Thomas Shoal. At the Camp David Summit last month, Japan and South Korea joined the President in explicitly condemning the PRC's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea. And just last week, members of the G-7 opposed the PRC's militarization of the South China Sea and called on the PRC to uphold the principles of the UN Charter.

### **Strengthening Partner Capability and Capacity**

Ultimately, bolstering the self-defense capabilities of our allies and partners is among the most important things the United States can do to help them counter and deter PRC coercion in the South China Sea, and we are committed to delivering.

As the world has learned from Ukraine, deterrence doesn't require directly matching competitor capabilities. New low-cost and commercially available technologies offer a broader toolkit of options that can provide a country asymmetric advantage in self-defense and deter coercion by a larger opponent—especially in the maritime domain. These technologies range from ground-based radar and sensors to unmanned platforms that enable allies and partners to improve their persistent situational awareness and increase their operational effectiveness across the South China Sea.

Since 2016, the Department has used its authorities, such as the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), to allocate over \$475 million in capabilities that enable Southeast Asian partners to sense, share, and contribute to regional maritime security. The Department has provided increased maritime domain awareness by fusing all sources into a common maritime picture; provided platforms to sense and respond to suspect activity in allies' and partners' sovereign maritime and air spaces; and used enduring training and exercises to improve partners' maritime operational effectiveness both bilaterally and multilaterally. Our specific investments include intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets; unmanned aerial systems; excess defense article High Endurance Cutters; radars; secure communications systems; and maritime detection and monitoring equipment.

Moving forward, DoD is exploring providing regional allies and partners with unmanned surface and subsurface systems for situational awareness, mesh networks for at-sea communications, undersea sensing, and expeditionary logistics capabilities, such as 3D printing and modular at-sea resupply, among others. Delivery of these systems will be complemented with system-specific training, tactics, techniques, and procedures for creative employment options. The Department has taken a deliberate approach to identify these capabilities, using table-top exercises and other analytical methods to assess the best mix of systems and platforms.

We have already seen this process begin to bear fruit through specific capability procurement requests from partners.

Among the myriad capability enhancements the Department is pursuing, we are particularly focused on enhancing our ability to work with allies and partners to deliver ISR capabilities to the region, and thinking more intentionally about how we manage and share information and use transparency for greater effect. For example, the new Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative with Australia, Japan, and India uses commercial, space-based frequency data to provide enhanced maritime domain awareness capability to allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific region. In 2022, we launched IPMDA as a pilot program in Southeast Asia, and we are continuing to expand the program across the region, alongside Quad partners. IPMDA has delivered on a long-standing goal to build a common operating picture in the region that will greatly enhance the ability of regional states to monitor and police their own waters.

### **Strengthening U.S. Regional Presence**

Beyond the investments the United States is making in the region, we maintain a robust tempo of military operations in and around the South China Sea—often with allies and partners—increasing our interoperability, strengthening deterrence, and highlighting our shared resolve against coercive behavior. Together, these efforts support a common vision shared by our allies and partners for a region where disputes are resolved peacefully, where ideas and commerce flow freely, and where the rule of law is the rule of the day. In January and February 2023, for example, the *Nimitz* Carrier Strike Group conducted multicarrier, multidomain operations in the South China Sea, including joint exercises with the 13<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit. Then in June 2023, ships from the navies of Canada, France, and Japan joined the USS *Nimitz* and the USS *Ronald Reagan* in the South China Sea for a large multinational exercise featuring flight operations, air defense exercises, and simulated strike scenarios. The USS *Ronald Reagan* conducted a successful port visit to Vietnam in June, the third-ever carrier visit to the country and a clear signal of our growing military relationship. And earlier this month, we conducted our first joint bilateral sail since 2016 with the Philippines in the South China Sea.

We've also expanded the scope, scale, and complexity of our annual bilateral and multilateral exercises in the region across the board and brought together new constellations of partners. Exercise GARUDA SHIELD with Indonesia, for example, has become one of the largest multilateral exercises in the region, with over a dozen participating nations and thousands of forces. Exercise BALIKATAN with the Philippines included more than 17,600 members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the U.S. military, and Australian forces, featuring cyber defense, coastal defense, and littoral live-fire exercises with High-mobility Artillery Rocket (HIMAR) systems, F-35s, and F-16s. Finally, in June of this year, the coast guards of the United States, Japan, and the Philippines launched their first-ever trilateral drills in the South China Sea, in what is becoming a steady drumbeat of coast guard deployments to the region.

In addition to our regular operations and exercises, we are diversifying our presence in the South China Sea to ensure we remain postured to respond to any crisis or contingency. In Singapore, we maintain regular rotational deployments of U.S. P-8 aircraft and littoral combat

ships. With the Philippines, we have agreed to four new sites that U.S. forces will have access to under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), expanding where we operate to new strategic locations. EDCA supports combined training, exercises, and interoperability between U.S. and Philippine forces that will enable us to help build the maritime defenses of our Philippine ally and respond more effectively to a range of crises across the region. Just last month, we used one of these EDCA sites in Northern Luzon to provide humanitarian support alongside our Philippine allies following Typhoon Egay.

### **Strengthening Regional Security Networks**

Finally, the Department remains deeply encouraged by the work that U.S. allies and partners are doing together. Over the last several years, the Department has made a concerted effort to support multi- and mini-lateral coalitions of allies and partners, strengthening a networked security architecture of likeminded nations working in concert to defend our common interests.

In May, India and Singapore co-hosted the inaugural India-ASEAN maritime exercise in the South China Sea, demonstrating that Indian and ASEAN navies can operate as an integrated force. Last month, in their first-ever bilateral meeting, the coast guards of India and the Philippines signed a memorandum of understanding for enhancing maritime cooperation and committed to conducting joint exercises. We were also pleased to see Australia and the Philippines elevate their bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership and commit to conducting joint patrols during Prime Minister Albanese's recent visit to Manila. Earlier this month, Australia and the Philippines also conducted the first-ever Exercise ALON, a bilateral amphibious exercise in the South China Sea that enhanced interoperability between Philippine and Australian counterparts and included 120 U.S. Marines. And, finally, just this month, all ten ASEAN states held the first-ever ASEAN-only joint military exercise in the South China Sea, a significant step for the grouping and a signal of ASEAN resolve to enhance regional stability.

We've also been encouraged by the progress of new trilateral coalitions. At the U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral defense ministers' meeting in June 2023, our three nations resolved to support states exercising their rights and freedoms in the region, and just last month we held a joint navy drill off the coast of the western Philippines to underscore our shared commitment to the rule of law. A relatively newer initiative that is equally promising is U.S.-Japan-Philippine cooperation. During their first joint talks in June 2023, our three national security advisers agreed to strengthen trilateral defense cooperation and discussed opportunities for joint naval exercises in the region.

### **Conclusion**

Chairwoman Kim, Ranking Member Bera, distinguished Members of the Committee, and colleagues: let me conclude by stating that the United States remains clear-eyed about the stakes of coercive PRC behavior in the South China Sea. In the face of these challenges, I am proud to report that we are doing more than ever alongside our allies and partners across the region in support of a common vision for peace, stability, and prosperity for our peoples. We have begun to see these efforts bear fruit—and the Department welcomes the partnership of this Committee

and the entire Congress as we work with our colleagues across the U.S. Government to continue delivering results. Thank you for inviting me to testify on this important issue, and I look forward to your questions.