

House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats
Hearing on “China’s Maritime and Other Threats”

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Written Statement

By

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Chairman Rohrabacher, Ranking Member Keating, members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats on a topic of such national and geopolitical significance.

Turning to this topic, I would like to begin by considering the question of whether China’s recent behavior, maritime and beyond, should be construed as a “threat”. In so doing, the purpose is to draw attention to the obvious fact that China is an emerging regional and, possibly, global power and, in such a context, to determine what types of behavior and conduct are justifiable and commensurate with this increasing power. The need for clarification on this point will be of benefit in assessing the threats, if any, posed by China.

China’s military capabilities have clearly expanded in recent years, aided in large part through year-on-year double-digit increases in budget allocations. Within this, investment in the upgrading of the People’s Liberation Army Navy’s (PLAN) capabilities has been notable, with the launch of China’s first aircraft carrier viewed as a significant step forward. Moreover, speculation suggests that a second carrier is already underway along with the approval of designs for guided-missile destroyers (DDGs). Leaving aside the veracity of such reports, the prevailing view is that the PLAN is rapidly developing and is on course to be the dominant maritime power in the East Asia in the next 10-20 years. A couple of points can be interjected at this point, namely the full extent and seaworthiness of China’s vessels are difficult to accurately gauge, both due to a limited schedule of sea operations as well as a lack of engagement i.e. conflict. An additional consideration—hardware is an important aspect of naval expansion but not the only one—an extremely important part. Nevertheless, the significant investment in the

expansion of naval capabilities has raised concerns over China's intentions. For some, the conclusion to be drawn is that this expansion reflects an intention to exert regional dominance in the East Asia region. And while such a conclusion cannot be ruled out, it appears that the more likely explanation is that China's strategy in the near- to medium-term at least is primarily defensive in nature than offensive. The region in which China is located features historical grievances (e.g. Vietnam, Japan), competing (naval) powers (e.g. Taiwan, Australia, Japan) as well as unpredictable actors (e.g. North Korea). As such, China's naval expansion would appear to be more geared towards ensuring its own territorial security as well as ensuring Sea Lanes of Communication remain open for commercial interests, including trade and energy.

The above assessment does run counter to the prevailing orthodoxy concerning China in the past few years, in which it has repeatedly been labeled as "assertive". This has been particularly the case in its pressing of territorial claims in both the East China and South China Seas. Leaving aside the inherent ambiguity of such a label, it is possible to argue in both situations that China's behavior did not significantly deviate from past practices and that the role of other actors in these situations must be taken into account. In the case of the East China Sea and the dispute with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the decision by Japan to accede to the purchase of three of the islands from a private Japanese citizen was the most recent catalyst for action and reaction. Indeed, though the Japanese government's action did not, in practice, change anything i.e. Japan still administers the Islands and its territorial waters, it did, from the Chinese point of view, undermine the status quo. And while the Chinese response has taken the form of repeated incursions into Japanese waters, it has not determined the islands to be a "core national interest" while leaving open the possibility of negotiating the status of the Islands. That said, it seems clear that part of the strategy engaged in by Beijing is to successively undermine the legitimacy of Japan's claims over the Islands. The Islands themselves hold little intrinsic value, their ownership is being contested because of the location of energy reserves in the seabed adjacent to the islands and, from China's point of view, offering a strategic access point through the "first Island Chain" that would enable it to reach the Western Pacific Ocean. On the first point, negotiations have taken place on the possible joint exploration of the energy resources; however, on the second point, it is unclear what form a resolution will take, particularly given the current state of political relations between China and Japan. As for the South China Sea, the dispute in this region was prompted in part by the deadlines imposed by UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In its submissions, China's claims to the entire South China Sea region are not entirely new and not as comprehensive as commonly thought. Moreover, in response to the actions of other states, notably Vietnam and the Philippines, China maritime agencies has increased patrols of this area and engaged in acts including detention of fishing boats and the cutting of cables in survey boats. China's interest in this region appears to be both security- and commercially-related. Indeed, given that the South China Sea is a major shipping route for many countries, including the US, it is an area of

strategic significance. Considering the possibility of resolution, China's recent actions notwithstanding, it remains involved in the process to build on the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) that was signed between ASEAN and China in 2002.

As for the implications for the US in these regional developments, the area of particular concern from a security point of view is with the dispute between China and Japan in the East China Sea. The reasoning for this is twofold: firstly, the US has affirmed its commitment to defend Japan following the passage of the 2013 U.S. National Defense Authorization Act; and secondly, this leaves US security, to some extent, being determined by other actors, in this case China and Japan. As the comments by Prime Minister Abe in the Wall Street Journal over the weekend, this situation is still inflamed. Moreover, with increased incursions by China and Japanese responses, the likelihood for clashes, accidental or otherwise, is increased.