

Questions from Rep. Westerman for Mr. Dean Cheng, Senior Fellow, Potomac Institute
for Policy Studies, Arlington, VA

Q1: How is the flow of narcotics into the Pacific territories from PRC tourists and PRC criminal organizations affecting the safety of Americans on the islands.

[Response]

I regret that I am not sufficiently conversant with the issue of narcotics flows into the Pacific territories from the PRC to be able to answer this question.

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2. The PLA's Navy is increasing their strength and their ability to conduct operations at greater distances. What is the threat level posed by the PLA's Navy to the Pacific territories?

a. How does this specifically put Americans in the Pacific territories at risk?

[Response]

The growing capabilities of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) are detailed in the annual report by the Department of Defense to Congress "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China." The latest iteration of that report, which was mandated by Congress in the FY2000 National Defense Authorization Act may be found here:

<https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>

Because of the growing capabilities of the overall PLA, and not just the PLA Navy (PLAN), the ability of US forces to operate within the "first island chain" stretching from Japan, through Okinawa, the Senkakus, Taiwan, and the Philippines to the Straits of Malacca is becoming increasingly challenging. China fields a growing array of systems, including anti-ship ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, surface and sub-surface combatants, unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as various aerial platforms, that can hold US forces at risk throughout the east Asian littoral.

Consequently, US military planners are increasingly looking to the "second island chain" to sustain any conflict in the INDOPACOM area of responsibility. The "second island chain" encompasses the island groupings of the central Pacific, including Guam, the Federated States of Micronesia, Yap, Palau, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and are essential as fall-back positions, as well as to provide essential logistical support and basing options. The PRC is well aware of these efforts, and is therefore taking steps, in turn, to counter American diplomatic and military efforts in this region.

Much of this effort is in the diplomatic and economic domains, including Chinese investments, outreach, offers of academic scholarships, and other means of wooing the populations of these island groupings. In addition, though, there is a steady growth in Chinese military ability to threaten the islands and their populations. China is currently developing an array of missiles, including intermediate range ballistic missiles as well as longer-ranged air-launched cruise

missiles, that can strike the islands. It is also alleged that Chinese hackers are responsible for a range of cyber intrusions that have penetrated the information systems of various critical infrastructure on Guam and likely elsewhere in the region. This includes the Volt Typhoon hacking group, which is believed to be a state-sponsored PRC hacking group.¹

A physical attack against military targets on Guam or the CNMI would obviously place American citizens in jeopardy. However, an attack against critical infrastructure on Guam or the CNMI would pose an even greater threat. Whereas kinetic attacks might be solely undertaken against purely military targets (e.g., Andersen Air Force Base facilities), the Volt Typhoon hackers, for example, are targeting power and water systems which serve both military and civilian customers. Volt Typhoon activities have been identified against the Guam Power Authority, which is the only supplier of electricity to the island, supporting both military and civilian customers.² Attacking communications, water, power, and transportation systems on these islands would therefore threaten the lives of the entire population, not just those who are on military facilities.

¹ <https://www.cisa.gov/news-events/cybersecurity-advisories/aa24-038a>

² Anton Shilov, "U.S. uncovers hacking campaign targeting Guam's critical infrastructure — suspected Chinese Volt Typhoon hacks could disrupt the defense of Taiwan," Tom's Hardware (January 5, 2025) <https://www.tomshardware.com/tech-industry/cyber-security/u-s-uncovers-hacking-campaign-targeting-guams-critical-infrastructure-suspected-chinese-volt-typhoon-hacks-could-disrupt-the-defense-of-taiwan>

3. What problems will Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported fishing cause the Pacific territories if left unaddressed

[Response]

Illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing obviously poses an environmental and economic threat to the various central Pacific island groupings, including both independent nations such as Palau and Yap, as well as the American territories of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. In addition, however, they also create a potential line of military risk as well.

The Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) includes not only its active duty elements, which now constitutes the largest navy in the world, but also the People's Armed Force Maritime Militia (PAFMM). The PRC fields one of the world's largest fishing fleets, involving literally thousands of fishing boats. While most of these are only capable of operating near the PRC's shores, the PRC does have distant water fishing (DWF) fleets capable of operating in any of the world's oceans. While these fishing fleets largely operate for commercial and aquaculture purposes (i.e., supplying seafood to domestic and foreign customers), the PAFMM elements within them also can be called upon to support PLAN operations.

PAFMM elements have played a central role in the 'gray zone' activities in the South China Sea, harassing foreign vessels and helping assert Chinese maritime sovereignty claims. The USNS Impeccable incident of 2009 was undertaken in part by what would now be considered PAFMM elements.

The presence of Chinese fishing vessels undertaking IUU fishing activities in the waters around Guam and the CNMI would therefore provide the PRC with important military as well as commercial and fishing benefits. Such vessels, for example, could provide early warning to PRC military commanders of air operations from Andersen Air Force Base. Similarly, they could be undertaking oceanographic surveys, or providing cover for other vessels that are doing so. Given their past history, they may also be employed to undertake harassment of US Navy vessels.