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Statement of Senator Jim Webb, D-VA
U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
Hearing on "The Implications of China's Naval Modernization
for the United States"
June 11, 2009

Chairman Bartholomew, Vice Chairman Wortzel, hearing co-chair Commissioner Videnieks and other distinguished Commissioners, I regret that I could not be at the hearing with you today. However, given the importance of this issue, I wanted to submit this statement, and commend you for examining the implications of the People's Liberation Army's naval modernization in China. With China's growing economic and military power and its willingness to use it, I see a real challenge for the United States in maintaining its strategic presence in Asia. The United States is fundamentally a naval power and an Asian nation, and we must develop a long-term comprehensive strategy to protect our legitimate security interests in the region.

For more than twenty years, I have been a keen observer of China's military modernization, in particular its naval developments. The harassment of the *USNS Impeccable* this past March is only one example of a growing assertiveness in the Chinese navy. If you look at events such as this over the past three decades, you will see an incremental encroachment into the South China Sea that is intended to intimidate smaller countries, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, that also claim territory and continental shelf rights in such places as the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands. We need to view these activities not as singular, tactical events, but as a concerted, calculated effort by the Chinese Communist Party and its military to enlarge China's strategic space in the region.

When China challenges the freedom of passage rights of U.S. surveillance aircraft or ships in the South China Sea, it impacts not only U.S.-China relations, but also regional and global security. China is laying claim to maritime territories along vital sea routes in the region—areas that are also believed to have significant oil and gas deposits. By using the PLA Navy to assert these claims, China is taking its territorial disputes beyond a legal or diplomatic debate by demonstrating a willingness to assert its claims through the use of military intimidation. In taking a long-term view, the United States should demonstrate its willingness to respond to such pressures, just as clearly as it has in recent decades demonstrated its willingness to defend, and operate within, the Taiwan Strait. In order to do so, we must be prepared militarily and diplomatically to engage an increasingly self-confident PLA Navy in this region.

I commend the Commission for investigating these issues and reporting to the Congress its recommendations for improving U.S. security and diplomacy in Asia. We need to ensure that while the U.S. government pursues deeper engagement in China, we do not do so at the expense of our own security and interests in the broader Asia Pacific region. Thank you, and I look forward to the findings of this hearing.