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“Testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission”

“The Implications of China’s Naval Modernization for the United States”

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Statement:

Introductory Context

For this hearing on China naval modernization I have been asked to address five specific questions. Before I do that I want to provide the context that shapes my views.

Because Secretary of Defense Robert Gates straddles both the Bush and Obama administrations his comments at last years (2008) Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore provide an important element of continuity when considering US security interests in East Asia. In his speech, Gates defined the United States as “a Pacific nation with an enduring role in East Asia,” one standing “for openness and against exclusivity” and committed to “mutual prosperity.” Noting that American territory in the Pacific Ocean extended from the Aleutian Islands to Guam, Secretary Gates defined the United States as a “resident power” in the region.¹

While it is true that the United States is a “resident” Pacific power it is also true that the that the Asia-Pacific neighborhood they reside in *is in the midst of profound strategic change*. This is a major development for those who must construct US security policy since Asia’s security environment has been relatively stable and predictable since the end of the Vietnam War.

One of the most important reasons for this long period of stability is that a real military balance exists between the continental powers of China and Russia and the United States and its maritime oriented friends and allies. For a long time, the military capability of each side prevented any attempt by the other side to intrude in a militarily destabilizing way into the others domain. The continental powers were safe from invasion, thanks to large armies, vast territories and nuclear weapons. US friends and allies were safe from invasion and maritime blockade thanks to US and allied air and sea power, which is

¹Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, speech, Shangri-la Dialogue, Singapore May 31, 2008, www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1253 . The author attended this conference and heard this speech.

backstopped by the US nuclear arsenal.

This period of geo-strategic military stability, i.e., absence of major aggression, provided the opportunity for virtually all of the nations of the region to focus on internal political stability and on economic development. A significant new development is that this balance is in the process of change because of the economic development of China has introduced a self assured, rich, and increasingly powerful power into the Asian strategic mix--one that is interested in “moving to sea” in a militarily significant way.

As China improves its military capabilities in order to guarantee its security and field a military establishment worthy of a great power it is in the process of undermining the existing continental-maritime balance. For the first time in over two centuries, China is wealthy enough to finance a systemic and well-conceived modernization that has already made the PLA, because of its size, and pockets of excellence such as its submarine and missile forces, the premier Asian military.²

Because China has a number of unresolved sovereignty issues off its Eastern seaboard, Taiwan being the most significant, China has adopted a military concept of operations aimed at keeping an approaching force from closing to within striking range of the Chinese mainland and Taiwan Strait. Specifically, China’s concept is to deny the US military access to the region so it could not interfere with a PLA use of force to resolve many of its outstanding maritime strategic issues. The PLA Navy plays an important role in this concept, but it is important to keep in mind that this is a “joint” concept that also involves the PLA Air Force and the PLA Second Artillery Force.

To do this the PLA is knitting together a capability that is composed of a very effective open-ocean surveillance system to locate approaching naval forces so they can be attacked by land-based aircraft armed with cruise missiles, by submarines with both torpedoes and cruise missiles and eventually with conventionally tipped ballistic missiles that are able to hit maneuvering ships. Starting in 2001 the Department of Defense has characterized China’s approach as an “*anti-access*” operational concept.³

² For a comprehensive and authoritative discussion of Chinese military modernization see especially the Department of Defense’s, *Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the Peoples Republic of China*, the 2008 report along with pdf versions of the pervious seven years worth of reports can be found at www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/China_military_report_08pdf. Other official sources include the Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 6, 2006, www.defenselink.qdr/report/Report2006203.pdf

³ Anti-access is a US coined term, first introduced in the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review, that is now commonly used to characterize attempts to militarily defeat both US air forces that based within striking range of the Taiwan Straits and approaching US Navy Aircraft Carrier Strike Groups sailing to the defense of Taiwan. See for example, Ronald O’Rourke, “Chinese Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Order Code RL33153, October 18,2007. p. 1. According to the PLA’s *Science of Military Strategy* the Chinese characterization for what we term anti-access is “offshore defense” where both the PLA navy and Air Force play central roles. The PLA Navy is charged with developing the “strategy of offshore defense” while the PLA Air Force is charged with the “strategy of offensive air defense.” See also Michael McDevitt, “The Strategic and Operational Context Driving PLA Navy Building,” in Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell, eds.,

Question One: What are the Strategic Implications of PLA Naval Modernization on US National Security?

By gradually improving its capabilities to operate off-shore, in the maritime domain, albeit largely for strategically defensive purposes, China is beginning to “intrude” into the region that has been the preserve of the United States and its allies for the past half-century. Left unaddressed, this will have the effect of upsetting the decades-old balance of power that has been so successful in preserving stability in the region.

The efficacy of the US strategic position in Asia depends upon America’s ability to use the seas to guarantee the security of our East Asian allies and pursue American national interests. I suspect that the US will not stand idly by and permit its deterrent and projection capabilities to be called into question. American will ensure “it rises on the same tide” in terms of capabilities necessary to continue to assure access. As China’s capabilities improve so too must America’s.

As a result the US and China will be engaged in a long term “capabilities competition” that will pit China’s access denial capabilities against those that the US needs to assure access. If China is successful, or is perceived as being successful, in this competition China’s concept of operations will unhinge America’s long-standing East Asian security strategy that ultimately depends upon assured access to the region.

Question two: What effect is PLAN modernization having on the East Asian regional security situation?

The China factor in the evolving Asian security environment presents most of China’s neighbors with a strategic problem. By attempting to achieve security on its maritime frontier, Beijing is creating a dynamic that as its security situation improves, it is making the security environment for many of its neighbors worse because a central element of its strategy in case of conflict is to keep US power as far away from East Asia as possible.

The economic relationship that each nation has with Beijing is central to the economic well being of both all parties. Yet, at the same time Beijing’s military modernization presents a security challenge. For example, in the case of Japan the possibility that China’s anti-access capabilities, largely its submarine force, could isolate this island nation. This is a real strategic threat to Tokyo. For Japan this problem is not abstract, US submarine operations in WW II provided them with a real world lesson on vulnerability.

Similarly, South Korea worries about its sea lane security, and as a result is in the process of building a very capable blue-water navy. This is a real strategic departure for the Koreans whose modern military culture is, and has been, Army dominated because of the

Right Sizing the Peoples Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China’s Military, p 481-522, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA August 2007

conventional threat from the North. The growth of the PLAN and the ROK's dependence on maritime commerce has been a factor in ROK calculations that has justified a much larger share of the defense budget for the ROK Navy.⁴

Question three: How Does China's unique view on the EEZ impact on regional security?

By attempting to create a new legal reality in international law by confronting legitimate military/naval activities in and above its EEZ China is consciously creating dangerous encounters when its ships and aircraft depart from internationally accepted "rules of the road." At sea, these long established rules are intended to introduce predictability into the maneuvers that ships follow when they encounter one another on the high seas.

Chinese encounters with the USNS Impeccable and others have amounted to dangerous harassment. The Master of Impeccable had to deal with Chinese ships and craft maneuvering in unpredictable ways—a sure recipe for a collision. We have already been through one crisis of this nature when a PLA naval aviator badly misjudged and caused an air-to-air mishap with a USN EP-3 in 2001.

Any crisis of this sort is bad for regional security since it raises tensions and introduces a sense of military confrontation between the US and China at the very time that the most plausible Sino-US flashpoint, a confrontation over Taiwan, is growing less likely. It also reinforces the views of many in the region that ultimately China will use its new military capabilities to push its neighbors around; thereby undermining China's "peaceful development" public diplomacy campaign.

Question four: What is the strategic impact of PLAN surface fleet development on regional and US national security interests? Of PLAN submarine development?

The most obvious strategic impact of its surface force development is during peacetime, when both the US and other East Asian countries will increasingly encounter PLAN ships on the high seas throughout the region. The PLAN will be out and about.

In the not very distant future I expect to see the PLAN surface force engaged in the sorts of routine peacetime activities that the USN and other maritime powers have done for decades—showing the flag in support of Chinese diplomatic and strategic interests, responding to natural disasters with aid from the sea, providing humanitarian assistance to the region, and providing a tangible symbol of support to regional friends and allies in

⁴ The Government of South Korea has "discovered" the importance of SLOCs. They have come to appreciate that in the era of globalized economies, the ROK is a virtual island country. Today, the ROK is the world's 12th largest economy and 10th largest trading nation. Foreign trade represented approximately 70 percent of its 2006 GDP, and a whopping 99.7% of South Korea's trade is conducted via sea routes. Some 100 percent of its crude oil, 90 percent of its raw steel and 73 percent of its food comes via ship. A Korean colleague made the point to me that "It is no exaggeration to say that protection of South Korea's SLOCs is a life and death issue for the Republic."

case those third parties are under pressure from the United States or other regional powers.

In this last case, PLAN presence on the scene when Beijing and Washington disagree over the activities of countries that are considered friends of China, a Chinese maritime presence will complicate US strategic calculations and could very easily shape US courses of action. In other words, for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union US decision makers will soon have to take into account a potentially dangerous naval presence in proximity to US naval forces, or in the territorial seas of the third party, when Washington elects to use our Navy in a show of force.

PLAN submarines make this sort of scenario even more problematic. The very nature of submarine operations is intended to create uncertainty about the submarines location. Whereas PLAN surface ships are relatively simple to keep track of and do not pose much of a *wartime threat* because of their vulnerability to US submarines, PLAN submarines create an operational challenge which could have strategic implications because submarines are difficult to keep track of.

I recall presence operations in the Northern Arabian Sea to influence Iran during the 1980's that wound up dedicating an inordinate investment in operating tempo of USN ships, aircraft including helicopters, in trying to keep track of the single Soviet submarine that was operating in that area.

Finding and tracking submarines in peace or in war is hard, and takes lots of resources. That is why so many countries in Asia already have and are building more submarines.

Question five: Is there room for cooperation between the US Navy and the PLAN on global maritime security? If so, how?

Yes! This sort of cooperation is on going in the Gulf of Aden where PLAN ships conduct anti-piracy patrols. In these sorts of operations it is important to deconflict helicopter operations and to pass information on operations and intentions to prevent mutual interference.

While the PLAN is not a formal member of Task Force 151, which is the anti-piracy task force established by the Commander of the US Fifth Fleet, the PLAN does coordinate its activities with the other forces including the USN. PLAN ships and others in the Task Force exchange information via e-mail and bridge-to-bridge voice radio. In fact, the USN Admiral in charge of CTF 151 and his PLAN counterpart exchanged visits at sea.

It is a relatively straight forward proposition to coordinate peacetime activities at sea such as anti-piracy patrols if the political willingness to do so is present on both sides. The anti-piracy patrol is an example of an instance when the national interests of China and the US coincide. So long as national interests are complementary navy-to-navy cooperation is clearly feasible. For example, given the frequency of natural disasters along the East Asia littoral it seems reasonable to anticipate that at some point in the

future the USN and PLAN will both be involved in this type of mission.

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