

South China Sea (CSIS) – July 10, 2014

Thank you Ernie for that kind introduction, and thank you all for the opportunity to speak today on such an important and timely topic.

It's always a pleasure to work with a great institution like CSIS. CSIS plays a key role in the policy process in Washington, and has been a great resource for me and the other members of the House Intelligence Committee to help us think through difficult problems.

With all that is going on in the world in Iraq, Ukraine and Syria, it is easy to miss what China is doing in the South China Sea and the East Sea. Once one focuses on it though it is hard to miss why this is critically important to America's interests.

It seems hardly a month goes by these days without another example of China's steady efforts to change the status quo in the region to benefit their economic and security interests. Just in the last few months, a Chinese state-owned company deployed an oil rig the size of a football field in Vietnamese waters off the Paracel Islands and started drilling. China has also been busy moving sand onto reefs and shoals to create several new artificial islands in the Spratly archipelago in territory claimed by Vietnam and the Philippines.

These provocations must be seen in the larger context of China's increasingly aggressive posture in Asia. Beijing has chosen in recent years to use its new found power to to bully and intimidate neighboring countries in a transparent regional power grab. This kind of destabilizing behavior is more reminiscent of the colonialism of 19th century than the way nations should behave in the 21st century.

For the moment, Beijing seems to be getting away with it. It's not hard to understand why some might want to avoid a confrontation over each Chinese move on the board and miss Beijing's larger effort to wear down international resolve and change the facts on the ground one island or reef at a time. The longer this goes on, the harder this will be to unwind.

China is engaged in similarly aggressive behavior in the East Sea with the recent declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over territory claimed by Japan and South Korea.

These reckless efforts to acquire new territory in a quest for natural resources isn't all that different from China's relentless economic cyber espionage campaign against the world's developed economies to steal our innovation and the jobs that come with it. A nation cannot prosper or sustain growth in their economy by merely stealing the trade secrets and natural resources of other nations.

It begs the question, how does this end? Will the world stand by and let China continue to absorb these absurd territorial claims in the South China Sea step by step as Beijing changes the map in Asia via this "death by a thousand cuts" strategy? Or can the U.S., Japan and the other regional powers work together to change Beijing's calculus?

Already we can see some initial signs of nations in the region standing up to Asia's bully. Look at the innovative legal action the Philippines has taken recently, and there are indications that Vietnam may pursue a similar route. China's behavior in the East Sea has also added momentum to Prime Minister Abe's efforts to reinterpret Japan's constitution to relax some of the restrictions on the use of the Japanese military. These are positive developments for regional security but they likely are not enough change Beijing's calculus.

American leadership in Asia is now more important than ever, and the U.S. will need to help fortify the nations in the region to defend their interests and push back against China. We must re-examine our security agreements and review our allies capabilities and legal authorities with our regional allies to ensure there is a significant cost for China's behavior.

The U.S. is already doing some great work with countries in the region, and enthusiasm among those nations about cooperating with the U.S. has certainly increased along with the level of Chinese aggression. There is still much work to be done, however, in terms of intelligence sharing and helping those nations build capacity to defend their territory from Chinese encroachment.

A great example of this kind of cooperation is the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed by the U.S. and the Philippines in April. This important agreement provides a framework for increased cooperation between our two nations to help build interoperability and the defense capacity of the Philippines armed forces.

Japan is also willing to help build capacity among some of China's neighbors to defend their territory and stand their ground against Chinese aggression. We should work to better coordinate our efforts in this regard.

The U.S. and our allies often tread lightly to avoid offending Beijing's delicate sensibilities on issues like China's territorial disputes with its neighbors. The U.S. has also worked very hard to engage China over the last three decades both diplomatically, as well as through military to military engagements. Beijing does not appear to appreciate these earnest efforts to build good will and events in Asia suggest that we are not getting a very good return on these investments. Perhaps it is time to "rebalance" our diplomatic efforts in the region to take better care of our friends and allies, and worry less about offending Communist Chinese officials.

There is a lot of room for more direct and honest conversations with the Chinese and in the way U.S. officials talk publically about our disagreements with Beijing over issues like the South China Sea. If Beijing doesn't like that they can start acting like a more responsible player on the world stage.

The good news is I do not believe that a military conflict with China and the U.S. is inevitable. The U.S. and the world would welcome the rise of a China that is willing to play a more productive role in the world if they adopted the responsibilities that come with it..

At the end of the day, however, Beijing should not doubt American resolve to defend its interests in Asia. China should not doubt American resolve to defend our key national interests if they are threatened and the Administration should make very clear that the freedom of commerce and navigation in East Asia is high on our list of core national interests. Freedom of navigation, including the U.S. Navy's freedom to operate in and over those international waters, is vital to the security and prosperity of the U.S. and the world.

Just as importantly, an aggressive military power that uses threats and intimidation to undermine regional and global stability is a threat to fundamental U.S. interests.

At the core of the South China Sea issue, and at the center of everything that will be discussed at this conference, is China's absurd claim on islands and reefs that lay hundreds of miles beyond any reasonable or legally defensible definition of Chinese territory. This is nothing more than a naked and gluttonous attempt by Beijing to control territory and resources, and the world should not stand for it.

40% of the world's trade travels through the South China Sea. Clearly, free and open trade through this region is in America's core national interest. And exerting that starts with the United States of America saying it loudly and often – and standing beside our allies.

Thank you for your time this morning.

