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CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

**Beijing as an Emerging Power in
the South China Sea**

**Testimony before the
Committee on Foreign Affairs
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My name is Peter Brookes. I am a Senior Fellow at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

The following serves as my written testimony in support of this hearing on “Beijing as an Emerging Power in the South China Sea”:

With reduced political tensions across the Taiwan Strait between Beijing and Taipei and the military balance having firmly shifted in the direction of the mainland, Beijing feels it can turn its attention to some of the other regional challenges it faces, including those in the South China Sea.

It is doing so for several reasons. The first is that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) believes, based on its wide-spread diplomatic recognition in the international community, it has rightfully inherited the sovereignty claims in the South China Sea-- known widely as the “9-“ or “11-dashed line”--from the Republic of China, whose own claim reportedly dates back to the late 1940s. (It is worth noting that Taipei retains its claim to the South China Sea, too, dating from the same Kuomintang (KMT) cartographic work from the 1930s.)

Second, being the world’s largest energy consumer, Beijing is also deeply interested in the oil and natural gas which may lie beneath the South China Sea seabed. According to some estimates the energy resources beneath the seabed may be substantial. The PRC’s interest in fishing rights in the South China Sea is also strong.

Third, Beijing is concerned about the security of its sea lines of communications (SLOC) in the South China Sea that carries its commerce in energy, natural resources and goods. China’s anxiety about this is sometimes referred to as the “Malacca Strait dilemma,” noting its concern about the vulnerability of its seaborne trade, which transits the world’s busiest waterway and often sails through this major maritime chokepoint that connects the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Fourth, some in the Chinese elite view the United States as a declining power, which will ultimately be replaced by the PRC in the region and atop the international system. While the United States has been engaged over the last ten years in the Middle East and South Asia, the PRC has sought to fill perceptions of a growing power vacuum in Asia, especially in South East Asia.

Lastly, China has made great strides in developing the tools of national policy and power necessary to become more assertive in the South China Sea, based on its increasingly powerful economy, political stature, and military might, especially its navy.

For these reasons, it is not surprising that we—and others--are facing Chinese challenges in the South China Sea.

If unchallenged, Beijing's assertiveness will have potentially wide-ranging repercussions in the region—and beyond. First, Chinese actions in the South China Sea could threaten freedom of the seas in a region vital to international commerce, affecting the global economy.

Second, acquiescing to Chinese claims could impinge negatively on the security of allies and friends in East Asia, undermining American interests. Third, a failure to provide the necessary leadership to meet the China challenge will have an effect on our international standing in both East Asia and globally.

Finally, acceding to Chinese claims in the South China Sea will undermine widely-accepted navigational and sovereignty guidelines, contained in such documents as the Law of the Sea Treaty, setting a troubling legal and practical maritime precedent.

Perhaps the issue which has emboldened Chinese behavior in the South China Sea the most is developments involving the Chinese military—or People's Liberation Army (PLA). China is developing the capabilities to project power seaward with the advent of modern surface, subsurface, air and missile platforms. Though China has chosen to demonstrate resolve over its claims in the South China Sea using state civilian rather than military assets, regional players are well aware of the growth in strength of the PLA-Navy (PLAN) and other power projection forces. PLA developments will lead to additional arms purchases by regional powers and could lead to an arms race involving states that are capable of competing.

Interestingly, while the PLA has hewed closely to a comprehensive military modernization program which highlights asymmetric capabilities such as cyber and ballistic missiles, it also appears willing to challenge the United States on one of its long-standing naval strengths: the aircraft carrier. Though a fully-capable Chinese aircraft carrier with an embarked air wing may be in the future, it would eventually provide Beijing with a significant power projection platform to assert its interests along its periphery—and maybe eventually beyond.

While the PLAN is still inferior to the US Navy, there are questions about that assessment in the out-years due to defense budget cuts, especially the impending sequestration mandated under the Budget Control Act. Under this scenario, it is reasonable to wonder whether our maritime forces will be able to meet its global commitments—and the rise of China—even with the rebalancing of U.S. forces envisioned by the Obama administration.

Of course, the PLA operates under the direction of the Chinese civilian leadership, which is involved in its once-every-decade transition. Despite this, it is unlikely that Chinese policies in the South China Sea will change dramatically in the short-term. While avoiding a military conflict, Beijing will continue to assert its claims in the South China Sea using political, economic, legal, and

rhetorical persuasion. This likely policy consistency is based on a couple of reasons.

First, the new leadership will face some of the same significant domestic challenges Beijing's current leadership faces and may be unwilling to take risky moves abroad that would undermine its credibility at home. Second, it is likely that the current civilian leadership, while stepping down from more visible positions, will retain influence over the activities of the PLA through the Central Military Commission (CMC).

In the end, Chinese policies and activities in the South China Sea have the potential to set a troubling precedent if Beijing is not effectively opposed. In the absence of any Southeast Asian nation capable of opposing Chinese assertiveness, a weak US response will enhance the chances of China achieving its apparent goal of hegemony over the strategic South China Sea. The Chinese could potentially realize this end state without the use of force. Of course, misperception and miscalculation could lead to a major crisis with significant, but unintended, consequences.

Further, how the issue is dealt with will also have an impact on the disputes that exist in the East China Sea, involving other major powers with more capable militaries that could increase the opportunity for armed violence. While Beijing's machinations in the South China Sea undercut its self-promoted notion of a peaceful rise, the results Beijing is hoping for--that is, acquiescence to the PRC's claims--may well outweigh the bad public relations, resulting in further emboldening additional Chinese behavior of this sort elsewhere on matters of importance to U.S. interests.

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