

U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan (R-AK) Remarks to The Center for Strategic and International Studies holds its 6th Annual South China Sea Conference

**** As Prepared for Delivery****

Thanks to Dr. Hamre and CSIS for hosting me this morning at what has become an annual conference on the South China Sea. CSIS's leadership on this issue has been instrumental in shaping the debates about these important issues here in Washington and around the world. I want to thank CSIS for their incredible service and talent. As a Senator - who serves on Armed Services - CSIS's contributions have been incredible.

Once again CSIS is at the forefront of critical issues facing our nation and the world with today's timely and very important conference -- coming on the morning of the historic international tribunal ruling -- which the New York Times has already described as a "sweeping rebuke of China's behavior in the South China Sea."

This ruling, of course, presents opportunities and challenges for all countries involved, including the United States. We are at a crossroads, all of us, on how we react, but no country more so than China.

I say this as someone who has deep respect for China, its history, and its people. For over two decades, I've had the opportunity to view the U.S. China relationship through a variety of lenses, federal government official, working in the White House including economic, diplomatic, and even military.

- a. National Security Council// U.S. Assistant Secretary; Strategic Economic Dialogue with Secretary Paulson, I had many, many visits- leaders// Great to see the President continue that dialogue.
- b. Department of Natural Resources- Friends keep me => Huge Promise- AK biggest export about \$2 billion
- c. Militarily deployed for region- More on that later....
- d. (Strategic and Economic Dialogue- I have seen the promise and opportunity of the U.S. and China working together to solve difficult issues)

Now, as a U.S. Senator from Alaska sitting on the Senate Armed Services Committee, I'm very focused on our relationship with China, and have been working to ensure that our country acts in the ways that reflect today's urgent realities, particularly in the South China Sea.

- Asia- Pacific - traveled from region 3x => both Shangri La- Met with all the leaders- President Xi/Abe

Today, to set up the discussion, I will be addressing the importance that the U.S. attaches to Freedom of the Seas and how this concept is ingrained in our history. Second, I will speak on why I think China is challenging a rules-based order in the Pacific. Finally, I will state what the U.S., our friends, and our Allies should be doing to respond.

II: Importance of Freedom of the Seas

As a Pacific nation, the United States has a national interest in ensuring the current peaceful international order and a peaceful future across the vast maritime domain of the Asia-Pacific.

As a global power and a world leader, the foundation of the order rests in our resolute conviction to uphold freedom of the seas. Since our founding in 1776, freedom of seas and the promotion of international commerce have been core security interests for our country. Let me give you three examples:

1. The Declaration of Independence, signed 240 years ago -- THE foundational document for our great nation -- was written a direct response to a “tyrant” who “plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts;” a “tyrant” who wrote laws “for cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world.”
2. The first global development of the U.S. Navy and Marines was to defend freedom of the seas against the Barbary pirates. It’s etched into the first line of the Marines hymn - “from the Halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli.”
3. Article I, section 8 of the Constitution of the United States establishes enumerated powers for Congress. These powers include regulating commerce with foreign nations, punishing piracies and felonies committed on the high seas and offences against the law of nations, and providing and maintaining a Navy.

As you can see, freedom of the seas is a bedrock commitment ingrained into the marrow of our bones as a great power. It is not a choice for America, it is an integral part of who we are as a people.

Nowhere is Freedom of the Seas more important than in key routes for global commerce all over the world. Two such corridors are the South China Sea and the East China Sea, through which a significant portion of global commerce transits.

Further, there’s an attachment to more recent history in the region. Americans have not forgotten the great sacrifices made by American service members and my fellow marines and soldiers on islands all across the Asia-Pacific.

Those battles were hard fought and tens of thousands paid with their lives to create the current rules-based order. This is not something we can or should ever abandon. As Chairman John McCain recently said at this year’s Shangri-La Dialogue: (Shout to McCain, Family is intertwined with this history)

“Seventy years ago, out of the ashes of world war, America and our allies and partners built a rules-based international order - one based on the principles of good governance and the rule of law, free peoples and free markets, open seas and open skies, and the conviction that wars aggression should be relegated to the bloody past”

Fundamentally, I believe the best way to avoid conflict is to be strong. As president Reagan once said, “we maintain the peace through our strength; weakness only invites aggression.” I would add that inconsistency also invites aggression

Ensuring freedom of navigation is maintaining the peace through strength. It plays a critical role in preserving the rules-based order, and safeguarding the freedom of the seas for all lawful nations.

Now some here may know that I have a personal experience with this issue. I was a young Marine infantry officer on a ship during 1996, during what's now been referred to as the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. That's when President Clinton sent two Carrier Battle Groups to the region to once again show American commitment and resolve when China was shooting missiles over Taiwan during their first presidential election.

I was actually on a ship that got the orders – an amphibious helicopter assault ship with about 1000 Marines on it – to run the Taiwan Strait during that time to really show American commitment. And that was something that stayed with me for a long time, because now we do that on a regular basis with our allies. I think that's one of the lessons that we need to look at as we look forward.

III. Why Is China Challenging A Rules- Based Order

Over ten years ago my friend and mentor, Bob Zoellick, talked about our hope that China's rise would lead it to become a "responsible stakeholder." => Brilliant Speech.

Regrettably, in recent years, there have been disturbing signs that China has chosen to employ a policy of intimidation and coercion toward its neighbors in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and elsewhere, and is increasingly rejecting the idea of a responsible stakeholder.

A glaring example of this reclamation is Fiery Cross Reef in the South China Sea.

Since August of 2014, when reclamation began, China has reclaimed over 500 football fields of land of Fiery Cross Reef.

Total reclaimed land by China, across all the features, totals over 40 times that of all other claimants. To these features China has added military-sized runways large enough for all PRC military aircraft, port facilities capable of docking military ships, possible high frequency radar installations, and other military facilities.

A few months ago, some press reports stated that a "flotilla of barges" filled with reclamation equipment was on its way to another disputed territory, Scarborough Shoal.

During a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing with Secretary Carter, I put up this graphic [DS Strategic Triangle Graphic] and I pressed him on the importance of the shoal to forming a "strategic triangle" in the South China Sea.

To date, we've had to carrier strike groups -- the U.S.S. Stennis and the U.S.S. Reagan operate in and around the Philippine Sea. And, as far as I am aware, no Chinese reclamation has occurred at Scarborough Shoal.

I would like to commend Admiral Harris -- and for that matter -- Secretary Ash Carter for their recent persistence and perseverance in doing what they can to maintain freedom of the seas in the Asia-Pacific. They deserve the FULL support of the White House.

So what is China's end goal? It's sometimes difficult to discern.

No country has benefited more from the rules-based order of open seas and the free flow of good than China in the past several decades. In a single generation, China has become an economic superpower. President Xi came to Washington and told President Obama that he was not going to militarize the South China Sea. But China's actions on the ground tell a different story.

For a country that has a reputation for the long view and being able to see around the corner of history, China's aggressive actions seem to be alienating itself from every country in the region. China's dismissive rhetoric in reaction to today's tribunal will only further isolate itself. As Secretary Carter said in Shangri La this year, China risks erecting a Great Wall of self-isolation.

So what is China's end goal? It is sometimes difficult to discern. Many experts are here. Some argue that because of China's current economic situation, Xi is under pressure to demonstrate his nationalist credentials at home. Others say that China is reacting to moves by other claimants.

However, the rapid rise of China's maritime operations since 2009; the lightening construction of military airfields on reclaimed land; the complete disregard for opportunities to compromise or negotiate - all indicate that there is strategic intent in Beijing to gain denial and then control over the First and ultimately the Second Island Chains. This is what I believe is China's end goal. Regional hegemonic dominance of this critical cross-roads of international commerce.

Recognizing this does not mean we are heading to some kind of Thucydides trap - in Professor Graham Allison's phrase - where conflict can only be avoided by accommodating China's regional ambitions. President Xi has talked about the Thucydides trap a lot. Indeed, he mentioned this in his meeting with Senators earlier this year that I was a part of.

I also believe that China has moved with impunity in the past few years because the consequences of doing so have been minimal so far.

But there should be no mistake that the United States will stand by its alliance commitments and the preservation of an open and rules-based order in the Asia Pacific. The United States has been a Pacific Power for countries, committed to the principles of freedom of the Seas since our founding. We are committed for the long haul.

Congress has expressed serious and bipartisan support for this position recently. The evidence: Its support for the \$425 million dollar Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), the bipartisan group of Senators who went to last year's Shangri-La Dialogue, and the seven Senators who went to this one. This example raises a broader point.

All challenges presented opportunities: Two are apparent to me.

First, this is something that has strong bi-partisan support - Democratic/Republican, executive and legislative branches, which is not always the case with the Obama Administration. On this issue, we are closely aligned.

Second, in response to some of China's aggressive actions, a host of nations including Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines are embracing the U.S. like never before.

The United States already has strong networks of alliances throughout the Asia-Pacific, and our country has built the post- World War II architecture that has enabled this dynamic region of the world to thrive in terms of peace and in terms of prosperity.

The U.S. is already an ally-rich nation- one of our biggest comparative advantages- but China's actions are driving nations closer to the US. And we should fully embrace our new friends and our old allies.

IV. What the U.S., Our friends, and Our Allies Should be Doing to Respond

I would like to conclude by focusing on what specific actions should we, our friends and allies take in response. Let me provide a few suggestions.

Thus far, in my time as U.S. Senator, I have sought to encourage the Obama Administration to consistently reaffirm its Rebalance to the Asia- Pacific, and to back up its strong rhetoric with decisive actions.

In the Indo-Asia-Pacific, the President has sought to reassure allies like Japan and South Korea, expand military cooperation with nations like the Phillipines, and stabilize the region through U.S. military presence, most recently sending two U.S. aircraft carriers into the region.

What we are now doing is beginning to have a positive effect.

But I believe the United States must take a number of additional steps:

First, America must continue to maintain a favorable military balance in the Asia-Pacific region that secures our enduring national interests, upholds our treaty commitments, and safeguards open seas and open commerce. We cannot do this alone. We will continue to rely on our allies and partners across the region to provide our military forward access.

Second, as Secretary Carter has affirmed we will continue to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, as we have done here in the Western Pacific for more than a century. This must include regular operations by the U.S. military to challenge any excessive claim to a territorial sea around these features.

For example, in the coming weeks, the U.S. Navy should conduct a FONOP at Mischief Reef which the Hague Tribunal has determined is a low-tide elevation.

Additionally, my amendment would have prioritized operations against unlawful or excessive maritime claims, called for the use of military exercises and maneuvers beyond “innocent passage”, and encourage the inclusion of our friends and allies in the region.

Third, the United States government must clearly communicate our interests *before* Chinese activity begins, rather than waiting for China to initiate a “Gray Zone” maneuver that knocks us on our heels and limits our response.

As I believe we have done in the past three months, this should include diplomatically and military signaling to deter attempts to expel another country from disputed territory like Second Thomas Shoal, conducting further reclamation and militarization at strategic locations like Scarborough Shoal, or declaring an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in all or part of the South China Sea.

In fact, I believe that the Administration should further clarify Article 5 of the “Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines” to say that any attack on the Philippine vessels, troops, facilities, or territory would trigger America’s obligations under this Treaty.

Clarity promotes stability; ambiguity only invites aggression. We’ve got the back of the Philippines and they need to know that.

Fourth, the U.S. Navy must continue to maintain a regular presence of surface combatants and rotational aviation assets inside the first-island chain to uphold our commitment to freedom of the seas and respond in a crisis.

As part of this, I believe the next Administration should conduct a new global force posture review, including a fresh look at further steps to enhance U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Two aircraft carriers based in the region, as a CSIS report recommended is something we should look hard at.

Fifth, as noted already, we must strengthen our alliances and develop new partnerships with countries like India, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Additionally, we must continue to invest in the capabilities of partners and allies.

At the same time we need to deepen our engagement with China -- not let its actions become a self-isolating destiny. Re-double efforts. More members of Congress, encourage FDI here... Hard, frank discussions. I am ready -- hope to go soon -- renew my relationships and yes, friendships, that I have in that country. This is critically important. And as a Senator who as I noted has deep respect for China, I am certainly ready to lead this effort.

Finally, no matter what strategy we end up using vis-a-vis China and the Asia-Pacific region, we have to be strong against at home. They have this term now in Washington called “the new normal.” American growth rates have typically been at 3, 3.5, 4 percent of GDP growth throughout most of our history. Over the last 8 years, we can barely break the 2 percent GDP growth. This weakness hurts us at home, workers, middle class families, as well as abroad.

We have to unleash our economic might once again, which has been so dormant during the Obama Administration. If we do this, we can view the rise of China from a standpoint of strength, confidence, and opportunity -- not trepidation.

As Bob Zoellick mentioned over 10 years ago in his Responsible Stakeholder speech, “You hear voices that perceive China solely through the lens of fear, but America succeeds when we look to the future as an opportunity, not when we fear what the future might bring.”

Overall, a strong United States in a leadership role will continue to act as a stabilizing force for peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific as we have for decades, emphasizing with our allies, the freedom of seas for all countries.

The world knows where we stand and what we stand for. What’s important though is that we keep standing, and that we keep leading. 240 years and 8 days ago, on July 4, 1776, fifty-six brave men from thirteen American colonies stood up, fought, and led.

That kind of leadership is what we are as a country and a people.

It’s what our adversaries fear, what our allies desire, and what the American people expect.

###