

United States Senate

Hon. Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

August 2, 2024

Secretary Austin,

I am writing a follow-up to my letter on March 5, 2024 regarding increased aggression by the People's Republic of China (PRC) against the Republic of the Philippines. Recent developments in the South China Sea continue to raise significant alarm regarding both the sovereignty of the Philippines and broader regional stability.

As you are aware, the South China Sea is a focal point of territorial disputes involving multiple nations, including the PRC and the Philippines. The PRC's aggressive and unlawful actions, including the construction of artificial islands and the militarization of these outposts, pose a direct challenge to the Philippines' sovereignty and maritime rights. Despite the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in favor of the Philippines, which unequivocally invalidated China's "Nine-Dash Line" claims, the PRC has continued its belligerent actions.

The June 17th incident near the Second Thomas Shoal, where PRC vessels employed aggressive tactics such as the use of water cannons against Philippine ships and caused at least one Philippine sailor significant injury, underscores the increasing volatility of the situation. The U.S. State Department has rightfully condemned these actions as reckless and dangerous, emphasizing their threat to regional peace and stability.

As China and the Philippines work toward implementing the recent agreement regarding resupply missions for Filipino personnel stationed at the *BRP Sierra Madre* at Second Thomas Shoal, I am requesting a classified briefing from Department of Defense officials to understand the disposition of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the area and to assess the potential implications for U.S. interests and regional security. I request the briefing occur before September 26, 2024, and it should cover:

1. Implementation of the PRC-Philippines Agreement: An update on the recent agreement regarding Second Thomas Shoal between China and the Philippines.
2. Current Chinese Military Activities: An update on the PRC's military presence and activities in the South China Sea, particularly around contested areas like the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal.

3. Impact on Philippine Sovereignty: An assessment of the PRC's actions on Philippine sovereignty and maritime rights.
4. U.S. Military and Strategic Posture: Details on the current U.S. military posture in the immediate region, including any planned or ongoing operations to support allies and ensure freedom of navigation.
5. Regional Implications: An analysis of the broader implications for Southeast Asian regional stability and potential flashpoints that may require U.S. attention or intervention.

I look forward to your response, as well as working with the Department of Defense to ensure the Philippines has the requisite support to hedge against increased aggression by the People's Republic of China.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Eric S. Schmitt". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Eric" being the most prominent.

Eric S. Schmitt
U.S. Senator