Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 17, 2015

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Secretary Ashton B. Carter
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C.

Dear President Obama and Secretary Carter:

As you know, China's reclamation of nearly 2,000 acres of artificial formations in the South China Sea has destabilized the region and undermined key components of the international order that has prevailed in East Asia since the end of World War II. Among these fundamental principles are freedom of navigation, the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes, and adherence to international laws and norms. China's willful disregard of these precepts, which have done so much to ensure peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific, must be met with a firm response from the United States and its allies.

Although its claims are unprecedented in scale and ambition, China is not the first state to make excessive claims to international waters. For decades, the U.S. Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard have conducted freedom of navigation operations to demonstrate to all watchers that the United States supports the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea and air to all nations. As the Department of Defense recently noted in its first Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy, "the importance of these operations cannot be overstated."

We are therefore concerned to read media reports that the U.S. Navy has been prohibited from conducting freedom of navigation patrols on the sea and in the air in close proximity to China's artificial formations. While we appreciate the Department of Defense's statements reserving the right to conduct such operations, we are concerned that the continued failure to actually exercise that right could be interpreted as *de facto* acceptance of Beijing's destabilizing behavior. The longer the United States goes without challenging China's unfounded claims to sovereignty over these artificial formations—and to territorial waters and exclusive economic rights in the surrounding water—the greater the consequences will be for regional security.

Although China claims to have halted its reclamation efforts, there are many indications that China is in fact simply moving on to the next steps in a campaign to change the "facts on the ground" and establish *de facto*, if not *de jure*, control of the South China Sea. The 10,000-foot runways under construction on these artificial formations are clearly intended to accommodate military aircraft, and it seems highly possible that China will militarize its artificial features and deploy weapons systems to enable China to better project power and control these crucial waters. In a further step to consolidate its authority in the South China Seas, it seems China may declare an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), as it did in 2013 over the disputed Senkaku

Islands. Just this week, a Chinese admiral told the audience at an international naval conference that the South China Sea "belongs to China."

In order to deter these actions and prevent the further erosion of stability in the region, the United States must make clear that it is fully committed to maintaining freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. We believe that a firm response from the U.S. government, including the highly symbolic passage of American ships and aircraft through the waters and airspace illegitimately claimed by China, is needed to reinforce and sustain the international community's opposition to extralegal claims.

While we appreciate the enormous complexity of U.S.-China relations, we believe that the United States must stand by the principles that it fought to enshrine and uphold throughout the 20th century. China has repeatedly ignored the international community's objections to its provocative behavior. It is our belief that the Defense Department should act immediately to reaffirm the United States' commitment to freedom of navigation and the rule of law.

Yours Sincerely,

J. Randy Forbes

Mac Thornberry

Madeleine Z. Bordallo

Joe Wilson

Trent Franks

Robert J. Wittman

K. Michael Conaway

Stephen Fincher

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Mo Brooks

Doug Lamborn

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Jackie Walorski

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Michael R. Turner

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