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The Honorable Chuck Hagel
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

The Honorable Robert O. Work
Deputy Secretary of Defense
1010 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1010

Dear Secretary Hagel and Deputy Secretary Work:

I am writing to you regarding the military relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC).

I have observed the U.S.-China relationship closely since I was first elected to Congress in 2001 and agree that a sustained and substantive relationship with the PRC is one of the core objectives of U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific region. The rise of the PRC presents one of the most challenging geostrategic questions of this generation, and one that the Department of Defense will play a leading role in helping to shape. I do not subscribe to an alarmist school about the emergence of a strong PRC, but I do believe China has the potential to pose the greatest challenge to the liberal-international order since the end of the Cold War. This demands continued attention, coordinated guidance, and sustained oversight across our government.

Like with the rest of our government's policy towards China, I understand that the DoD relationship with the Chinese government and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is a complex one that requires a balanced set of policies. There is no denying that the possibility of conflict with China remains an impolitic subject to address. However, I believe it is the primary duty of the Pentagon to think about such possibilities and to plan for them. Doing so will only make a future crisis less likely. In addition, I recognize that the Department can work to avoid a confrontation or miscalculation by directly engaging the PLA in substantive discussion and finding areas of common interest. Mechanisms like the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), Strategic Security Dialogue (SSD), Defense Consultative Talks (DCT), and the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) serve this objective well.

While these dialogues offer important venues by which our two sides exchange views on pressing security issues, I have a growing concern with the overall trajectory of the military-to-

military relationship. More specifically, I believe that the Department currently lacks the thorough guidance and oversight mechanisms necessary to maintain a consistent mil-mil policy that best serves U.S. national security objectives over the 'long-haul' of the emerging U.S.-China peacetime competition. I am aware of multiple examples where the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), Joint Staff, Service Chiefs, the Pacific Command (PACOM) Commander, or the component commands at PACOM were pursuing multiple, divergent mil-mil engagement objectives.

The criticism of mil-mil policy with China in the past was that it had become an end in itself, serving little policy outcome other than its continuation. Far more concerning, in recent years I have witnessed an overestimation of the ability of our military engagement to actually shape Beijing's behavior in a direction favorable to U.S. interests. Rather, it is increasingly clear that Beijing's goals and interests in East Asia are in many ways inconsistent with our own. This is expected of most rising economic and military powers. However, there is no indication that more engagement has helped to shape Beijing's actions in a positive direction consistent with U.S. objectives. To the contrary, as we have increased our mil-mil engagement over the past two years, China's actions have only turned more coercive. As our military chiefs have increased their relationships with their counterparts (individuals who can, at any time, order Chinese vessels and aircraft to stand down from taking provocative actions), reckless incidents at sea and in the air have continued to occur and China has resorted to new forms of coercion against its neighbors in the East and South China Seas.

When asked, military leaders frequently tell me they view the objective for our mil-mil relationship with China to be to 'engage the PLA as much as possible' in order to avoid a future crisis and prevent incidents at sea and in the air. I see this as a flawed approach that seeks an operational-level answer to a strategic-level problem. The expansion of activities within areas of cooperation with the PLA seems to increasingly lead to engagements that the Chinese shape to their needs and test the legal limits of our policy. Additionally, while our engagements demonstrate our military capabilities to China, enhancing our deterrent to a degree, I am concerned that they also have the potential to decrease China's uncertainty about possible responses to their actions, which may only cause China to conclude that it can take more risks.

Instead, the first question the Department should be asking regarding each engagement is how it stands to serve America's interest based on the context of the overall relationship. What American objective does it achieve? What are the potential negative implications? Will this engagement serve China's strategic narrative? How can it serve our own narrative? We need to move beyond generic efforts to build confidence and avoid misunderstandings and focus on exchanges that manage competition with the PRC - at the strategic level. A valuable strategic dialogue should focus on all of the most challenging aspects of our relationship - nuclear forces, offensive cyber, counterspace, escalation control, and crisis stability. To be clear, the overall quantity of engagements is not my concern. Instead, I believe we lack a clear policy framework for mil-mil engagement with the PLA that is aligned with an overarching strategy towards China.

Given the scope of U.S. security interests in the Indo-Pacific, mil-mil engagement is an area where I believe strong DoD civilian leadership is necessary to construct a detailed set of objectives, generate specific guidance and plans for pursuing these ends across DoD, and then

follow-up with sustained oversight of this plan. To this end, I would respectfully request that you initiate a review of the Department's current mil-mil engagement policy with China, ideally as part of a larger DoD review of U.S security objectives in the region.

I am in agreement with the current legal limitations guiding military engagement with China, established in the Fiscal Year 2000 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). However, as China has grown stronger and more coercive in the last 15 years, and given the concerns I have expressed above, I feel it has become necessary to review the current policies and assumptions that informed the legal limitations established in the FY2000 NDAA process. I plan to work with incoming HASC Chairman, Rep. Mac Thornberry, to proceed with an oversight effort on this topic in 2015. I look forward to working with the Department of Defense in this effort.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue and your continued commitment to U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific region.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J. Randy Forbes". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

J. Randy Forbes
Member of Congress