TRANSCRIPT
Event

“Thirteenth Annual South China Sea Conference”

Morning Keynote by Rep. Jennifer Kiggans (R-VA)

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FEATURING
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Member, House Armed Services Committee

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Good morning, Good morning, everybody. Thank you all so much for coming out and being punctual, I must say. Last year with our first return to in-person for this conference and things were a little vacant at the 9:00 a.m. start. They didn’t fill in until lunch. So, obviously, we’re all getting a little more used to commuting back down the Red Line first thing in the morning.

I am Gregory Poling. I direct the Southeast Asia program and the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative here at CSIS, which are the two programs that co-host this conference. As I said, this is our 13th Annual South China Sea Conference, which we are enormously proud. I’ve also been at CSIS for 13 years. So the conference and I grew up together. I feel very personally protective of it. I’m glad to see it back in full swing.

Just a little bit of housekeeping before I introduce our first keynote and we kick things off. As a reminder, everything that you hear over the course of the day is going to be on the record. It’s being streamed over our website and on YouTube. Those watching online you are encouraged to ask questions as well. You can type those in and all the moderators will be able to see them.

And the conference today is being made possible by support from a consortia of what we call like-minded partners, so the embassies of Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the Philippines, as well as the Foundation for EC Studies in Vietnam.

And I think that’s enough for me so why don’t I introduce the real star of the morning? Our opening keynote is going to be provided by Representative Jennifer Kiggans. Representative Kiggans represents the Second District of Virginia, which I just told her backstage includes my wife’s hometown of Virginia Beach.

Before entering the Congress, Representative Kiggans was a nurse practitioner. She was a former United States Navy helicopter pilot, including spending a significant amount of her professional career in Japan. So no stranger to the Indo-Pacific. And she currently serves on the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces and just wrapped up, I think, a pretty long markup of this year’s National Defense Authorization Act.

So with that, please join me in welcoming Representative Kiggans. (Applause.)

Well, good morning to everyone today. Thank you so much for being here on a Wednesday morning bright and early. I appreciate the opportunity just to talk a little bit about some of the work we’re doing from Congress
and the work specifically that we’re doing from Armed Services Committee.

So it’s great to be with you all for the 13th Annual South China Sea Conference. I just wanted to speak a little about – you know, about all the issues that divide us in Congress I feel like there’s one issue that is very unifying for us, especially on our Armed Services Committee, and that’s the issue of China and where the threat is at, where our potential adversaries are.

China is a challenging security threat. We’ve been – it’s the most challenging threat we’ve faced in 30 years. The CCP has demonstrated its desire to increase influence and aggression far beyond the South China Sea and it can’t go unchecked.

China’s ships are operating closer to Taiwan now. They’re more aggressive. Unsafe and unprofessional maneuvers in the air and sea, from the Chinese spy balloon that we saw pass over our country to 150-foot passes in front of our destroyers.

I ran for Congress last year and won a tough seat in Hampton Roads area and I ran because I represent a district that’s really the backbone of the Navy. You know, as a Navy veteran, I am married to a former F-18 pilot. I am the daughter of a Green Beret who served in Vietnam, the granddaughter of a Navy postman, and I have children who serve now.

I have a son who graduated two weeks ago from the Naval Academy and I have another son who’s Navy ROTC at VMI – Virginia Military Institute – and I have a daughter who will be entering Navy ROTC in the fall at Virginia Tech. So another daughter who said she’s going to be a literature professor so we’ll see where that goes.

But my children inherit this world. They inherit the military. They inherit my Navy. So there’s nothing more motivating than something that you feel like is putting your kids at risk, right, so I want to make sure that my kids and the children of so many other people who are serving our great nation that they are equipped, that they have the resources and the tools that they need.

So having a seat at that table is life changing. It’s so important. It’s a great privilege that I certainly do not take lightly. But I was worried, you know, about Congress’ spending priorities before I came here. I was worried about how we’re maintaining our national security, how we’re taking care of people who serve in the military and their families.
I’m worried about recruitment, retention, quality of life issues. It’s not just the ships and the submarines and the aircraft that we have in the Navy but how are we taking care of those people because none of those things will go anywhere without people behind it.

And we are starting a task force from the Armed Services Committee that will specifically look at those issues next month. So I’m excited to do that. You know, as a Navy wife, a Navy mom, and veteran I just think we need more voices who really can understand some of those issues as well.

But our Navy is the greatest in the world, right. We’ve come a long way since October 13th of 1775 when the Continental Congress voted to send out two sailing vessels armed with 10 carriage and swivel guns and manned by crews of 80 on a cruise of three months to intercept transports carrying munitions and storage to the British army in America. We’ve grown from those two sailing vessels to now. We hover right around 300 ships of which a third, about a hundred ships, are currently deployed at any time throughout the world.

In the Indo-Pacific region specifically we have around 200 ships in PACOM with a hundred and fifty thousand sailors and civilians. But we’re watching China because they have spent the past 20 years increasing the number of ships they have. Back in the early 2000s, they had about 37 ships. Today they are closer to 350.

We know they are outpacing us in their shipbuilding and their ship repair capabilities, and they’ve invested in their naval industry and infrastructure. They have a booming commercial shipbuilding industry. And we do so much trade with China. We’ve invested so much in them militarily. Listening to an admiral of Fleet Forces Command talk about, you know, it’s a terrible strategy we’ve adopted in the United States. We’ve been literally investing and paying our adversaries for decades, then to turn around and kick us in the behind.

So it’s not a great strategy. We have some room to make up for and that’s our job, really, in Congress to make sure that we are preparing and we are providing for our Navy. We know that the Indo-Pacific contains sea lanes where 50 percent of the world’s commerce transits. Now it’s free and open Indo-Pacific waters but we are watching China more aggressively police those.

We are watching their rocket capabilities and ranges. We’re watching China’s Belt and Road Initiative, the economic investment that they’re making throughout the world, Central and South America, faraway places, places not – and places next door to China but then other places,
too. We see them invest in choke point places like Djibouti in Africa and places that we need strategically as well.

So how are we competing with that? How are we keeping up with that? They’re adopting strategies that we’ve used for years, things like war gaming, things – those relationships, those partners that the United States does such a great job of building throughout the world we see them, the Chinese, adopting those same types of things. Exchange – civilian exchange programs, corporate exchange programs. They are learning from us. They are watching. They are copying.

So we are watching them. They’re also excelling in other places – their nuclear capacity, their cyber capacity, their space capability. You know, they’re forcing navies out of the China Sea, ignoring some of our international laws. So we know that we have some work to do. We know that we’re behind in the number of ships. We know that we’ve consolidated our shipbuilding and our ship repair industries after the Cold War.

We need more commercial and public shipyards. That’s an issue for me in my district where we are struggling. The infrastructure piece is a real challenge for us. We have spent money on some of these expensive – the toys we have, the ships, the subs, the aircraft, but we’ve neglected a lot of our infrastructure.

We look at the condition of our dry docks. We just closed four on the West Coast because of seismic concerns. That was the only West Coast aircraft – dry dock that was capable of repairing an aircraft carrier. So we’re down to one on the East Coast.

What are we doing to think outside that box to really restore those dry dock and that ship repair capability? It’s an important issue that has to be included in the discussion. Every time we talk about shipbuilding ship repair has got to be right there with it. But we got to keep our ships on schedule. We got to keep that ship repair schedule, you know, on schedule as well.

We look at the budget this year. That was one thing we did last week with the NDAA, the Defense Authorization Act. We had wanted – I had personally wanted a little more for our defense budget. What we got was a – was what the president wanted. It was a 3 percent increase from last year but – which was a total of $886 billion.

But inflation hovers around 6 percent so if you do the math, in my mind, that’s more of, like, a 3 percent cut when, again, I would like to see – I’d like to see not only more money but maybe some restructuring as well. I
think that we can do a little bit better spending money more efficiently and where are we prioritizing.

The Marine Corps specifically asked that we keep 31 amphibious ships. We’ve kept those – we’ve kept those ships for them. We’ve kept the 31 ships. The president had asked for us to decommission eight ships. We’re only going to decommission three. So but I’m very leery of – you know, we going on tours of some of the ships that are on this list of possible decons and, for example, the USS Vicksburg is in my district and that ship specifically has been in the yards for almost seven years so the taxpayers have spent $600 million and the repair work is so behind. I don’t know if we didn’t – Congress didn’t provide the oversight it needed, but I feel like we can do so much better than that.

So the Vicksburg is one of the ships of the three that are on the decom list for this year. It’s in a point where – and when you go and you talk to especially the leadership on the ship, I mean, they haven’t even welded in the technology that we put on the – and the technology is now out of date.

We need to do a better job when the U.S. Congress allocates that money to the Navy that the Navy actually is getting the work done, that the ship repair industry is staying on schedule and the Navy is staying on schedule.

So congressional oversight, I think, is something that we can certainly improve on, and as the representative from that district, along with a lot of other Virginia delegation and just our HASC members we need to do a better job at providing that oversight because we all know quantity has a quality of its own. We’ve heard that before and I believe that the U.S. is a formidable fighting force.

I know that our Navy is ready. I can say that wholeheartedly. We have 11 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers. They each have about 5,000 sailors on them. China has two diesel-powered aircraft carriers.

I have to put in my plug for naval aviation as a helicopter pilot and naval aviation family. But the work of the aircraft carrier is like no other. We’ve spent over a hundred years really perfecting how we can do naval aviation safety, bringing the fight, you know, to where it’s at.

It’s an amazing resource that I am very protective of. An air wing can deliver 150 strike or air-to-air sorties a day, and we can surge deliver 900 precision-guided munitions every day and every night, and we can repeat that. It’s very cyclic.
We’ve learned how to do it safely with a lot of practice and a lot of mishaps, but learning from our mistakes. That’s where – that’s where we excel. So that’s where I, again, am very protective of that capability.

You know, the submarine force is the silent service. We don’t talk about it as much and go into really what their capability is. But they are out there and they are doing a great job and they are certainly staying head to head with the Chinese and the Russians.

So I’m very proud of the work that we do, and our Special Forces in addition to the other branches of service.

One thing we do need to do in all of Asia is be mindful of our relationships with our allies there. Japan especially has been a longtime friend for us and they are worried about the threat of China. They are investing and helping us as much as we are invested in that fight.

The Philippines is also doing their part. They have – they are building four extra bases. They’re allowing us to use five. They are very much bought in to the mission there. India – we see what’s – India has invested in this as well. We had the prime minister from India here last week just reassuring us of that.

Guam – I had a Guam delegation in my office not too long ago that was talking about reopening World War II dry docks. They are invested with us.

We look at Australia, the AUKUS agreement that we have signed with them where we are selling them three nuclear-powered submarines. But then they will be building some of their – five of their own. They will be helping us. They are on some of our ships and submarines right now learning from us. That’s such an important partnership.

South Korea is invested, countries like Thailand, Singapore. We need our friends in Asia right now. We need to continue to invest economically just like the Chinese to stay head to head with those guys.

I think diplomacy is an important part of it. I know during our August break this year a lot of the congressional – the congressional delegations will be visiting different parts of Asia. I’m looking forward to going. But just reassuring those countries that the U.S. is – we are in the fight with them. We are invested just like they are.

Our main advantage I feel like that our country has over places like China and some of our adversaries are the people that make our U.S. Navy
work. This is something that – a big reason why I ran for Congress and something, again, I’m protective of and a loud advocate for.

We can do, I think, better than what we’ve done for some of our military men and women and their families. It’s something that I fight for every day, things like housing issues, things like childcare issues, spouse employment issues, health care, mental health care especially.

In my district we had some cluster suicides from ships that had been in port too long. We had taken those sailors out of their mission. Sailors that were in a limited duty capacity we saw a rash over the past couple years. So as a former nurse practitioner and someone that has been providing mental health care just as a profession it’s such an important issue to me. We can do better than this because we have to take care of our people if we want the people to be able to do the mission.

So that’s a great privilege to be able to be a voice for them. But I think our number-one priority needs to be that we have to be a deterrent, right? That’s how we – that’s how we keep world peace. If we want peace we have to prepare for war. I think that makes a big statement. Peace through strength – I’ve always been a big peace through strength girl. I will continue to do that.

We do so many good things in Congress and some debatable other things but without world peace nothing else matters that we’ve done in Congress or anywhere else. So that should be our priority. That should be our focus, whatever we can do, especially from Armed Services Committee, working together from a very bipartisan place.

I want to just remind everybody, that committee especially we do work together on both sides of the aisle. It’s one reason I love that committee probably best of all. I have the privilege of serving on Veteran Affairs and Natural Resources. Love those committees as well.

But important work to do out there. I just appreciate you all being here, being interested in the issue – you know, being interested in the work we’re doing for Congress.

Keep being a voice, a voice for our national security, a voice for our military, and just thank you. Thanks for having me today. I really appreciate it. (Applause.)

Mr. Poling: Well, thank you so much, Representative Kiggans, for helping us kick off the day with, I think, a clarion call and maybe a bit of warning.
I suspect I already know the short version of your answer, given your remarks. But just to put it out there, does the U.S. military have the platforms, the posture, that it needs for the competition with China?

Rep. Kiggans: Yeah, I believe it does but it's a constant and, I guess, annual fight when you look at the defense budget. We need to continue to remind people how much we do need. I know there’s a lot of spending priorities in Congress. I sit on a committee that’s very focused on the needs of the military. So it’s a struggle, right, especially when we look at where our economy is at and we look at some of the other things we've done in Congress.

We passed the Fiscal Responsibility Act that lowered that top line spending back to fiscal year ’22 levels so cutting some of the spending. We’ve spent – both sides of the aisle have spent a lot of money over the past few years and so now we’re at a point where we’ve really got to talk about where we’re reducing spending and when we reduce that top line number, you know, there’s a lot of voices out there of where we’re going to do that from.

I’m a person who – again, an advocate for the military. It has a lot to do with my district, but just for national security reasons. So using my voice. A lot of veterans sit on Armed Services Committee with me as well. We have five Navy SEALs in my class. We’ve got four helicopter pilots. There's three jet guys, a couple Green Berets, and we've got F-22 guys.

So there’s a lot of great – just great veterans that really care about, you know, our colleagues that we left in the military, that we’ll continue to be voices and fight for those spending priorities because there's only so much money we can spend as a country so I want to make sure we’re spending it in the right places.

Mr. Poling: If we look below the top line for the defense budget, what's the role of the Congress, in your mind, in making sure that the resources allocated actually go where they need to go and that we're not wasting them on, say, legacy platforms that are maybe jobs creators but not necessarily the things the services needs?

Rep. Kiggans: Yeah. Some oversight – I think that’s an important job of Congress. I think that we didn’t do a great job of oversight with – for the Vicksburg example. Congressman Rob Wittman, who also represents Virginia, who’s chairman of Tactical Air and Land, you know, we were talking the other day just about – I don’t know if we need to do more in-person visits but just to let ship repair and the Navy know that, hey, Congress is watching.
We gave you this pot of money – what have you done with it, and what you’ve done with it is not impressive and you’ve – it’s almost wasteful and we’re going to now have to decommission a ship that we’ve spent $600 million on. That’s not right. We gave you the money. The ship was working when it showed up here years ago. So what are we doing?

So I want to be more of an oversight role for me. I’ve got ship repair right in my backyard, PAE, you know – or BAE, MHI, so many great ship repair facilities. It’s easy enough for me to stop by in person but also for us to – and report back to my colleagues. But, you know, are we following up? Are we making sure we’re writing letters? We’re just keeping in – we’re making sure that they stay on schedule. If they stay on schedule then we don’t have to have these long deployment cycles.

We’re seeing our deployment cycles be nine-plus months. They routinely were six months. The longer we keep ships at sea it’s harder on the ships. It’s harder on the people, right? I mean, these are people that work – that run these ships and I know that very intimately just as a Navy family how hard that is for Navy spouses, for Navy kids.

So what are we doing to ensure that our deployment cycles are on time so that I don’t have to extend because I’m waiting for some other ship to get out of the yard. That’s how we keep people in the Navy. That’s how we retain a great and experienced fighting force. We look out for the people that serve on those ships. So that’s where we’ve got some work to do.

Mr. Poling: Given finite resources, as great as they may be for the U.S., they are finite. What is the role, in your mind, of allies and partners, of Japan and Australia and Singapore, maybe the Philippines, in maintaining U.S. posture and presence in the Pacific?

Rep. Kiggans: Yeah. We certainly can’t do this without our allies. We can’t be the deterrent that we need to be without our allies being bought into this. So I appreciate those relationships. We need to continue to foster them, develop them if that means economically, if that means, again, with military exchanges, corporate exchanges, civilian, student, you name it. I mean, any type of – that diplomacy building, we can’t forget that piece. It’s not too late. And world peace – we have world peace now. We need to – the name of the game is maintaining it. So how are we using our allies around the world.

But they are bought – again, my limited time – I’ve been here just over six months in Congress but to have the Australian ambassador visit, the Australian defense minister, you know, come to my office as a freshman in Congress and really discuss our relationship and how important that is
and thank me, you know, for what I’m doing to facilitate from Armed Services Committee that means a lot. That’s a big statement. To have the prime minister of India come and address a joint session of Congress last week, you know, that’s a big deal.

So those relationships are there. We need to continue to foster, make sure we’re investing in them. But we can’t do it without our allies so I’m very thankful for those relationships.

Mr. Poling: Thank you. Let’s open it up to the audience.

So for those in person we have a stand mic. I know it’s a long way away from this side of the room. If I can – wait for me to get over there. And for those online go ahead and type them in and I can see them on a very large Google doc here in front of us.

Let me read the first question that’s coming online from, I suppose, an anonymous asker.

Rep. Kiggans: (Laughs.)

Mr. Poling: I must also posit I think it’s directly behind the camera in front of me, so I can’t really see it.

Let’s see. Notwithstanding the administration’s talk of figuring out how to coexist with China, the U.S. Congress is being consumed by a focus on China that is skewed heavily toward military deterrence, yet the imperative is to avoid conflict. How are these approaches compatible?

Rep. Kiggans: Compatible with, I guess, our other missions throughout the world? I mean, we –

Mr. Poling: I suppose how do we coexist with China if the Congress is only focused on deterrence.

Rep. Kiggans: Yeah. And we’re not just focused on China. I mean, let me be clear. We still – you know, we just – to think we even have remotely peace in places like the Middle East, when we watch what’s happening right now in Russia and Ukraine, there’s a lot of – what’s happening with Israel – there’s a lot of instability out there that we’re not neglecting.

I think, you know, we’re a little hyper focused on Asia but that’s because we’ve seen more aggression especially right now and the Chinese have the economic capability to do that. They’ve been – and we see them, again, throughout the world investing and maneuvering and then we see them very blatantly – I mean, the spy balloon incident was just one, I
mean, but we see them in aerial maneuvers and in proximity to our ships that are deployed.

So much more aggressive behavior not just with our navies and our shipping but other countries as well. So because they are more aggressive than, perhaps, other places I think that’s kind of why we’re hyper focused. But we certainly need to be mindful of threats throughout the world and what we’re doing on all fronts of the military, not just the Navy.

I’m partisan to the Navy just because of my background and my district but, you know, the ground presence is so important in the Middle East still and we need to just make sure that we’re maintaining peace throughout the world, really.

Mr. Poling: All right. Let’s take our first question from the floor.

Rep. Kiggans: Yes, sir?

Q: James Caruso, CSIS.

How do we match our constrained capacity in shipbuilding with giving three or selling three nuclear-powered submarines to Australia?

Rep. Kiggans: Yeah. So the Australians are – there’s a monitoring – they are paying for some of – for the submarines but also for our work with helping them to train and whatnot and they’re also – they’re sending people to our country.

I asked that same question. I said, you know, we are behind in shipbuilding so how are we – how are you helping us with that problem? We’re workforce challenged. We’re supply chain challenged. So they know that, and from what they told me they’re helping with those things and sending people, sending parts.

You know, it’s a give and take. We’re still doing the – you know, our building at Huntington Ingalls, for example, and Newport News Shipbuilding, which is just outside my district.

But I want them to be armed and have the capability as well but I need them to be chipping in. It’s something – the workforce challenges, supply chain challenges, is not just specific to shipbuilding and that’s pretty much universal, probably. But any industry I talk to in this country those are the challenges they have.
So what are we doing to incentivize things like skilled trades, things like voc tech trades, because I need more workers. I need people back in the workforce. Big push in the state of Virginia for veterans. We have such a military presence. How can we incentivize them to want to go into those jobs so that we can build more ships, so that we can build ships for our allies and with foreign military sales.

So we need to expand. We're a little challenged. We're challenged with locations. We're challenged with people. We're challenged with supplies. So I think that we have to work on that not just from Congress but I need the states to do their part as well. So it's a work in progress.

But I hear you. Yeah, thanks for the question.

Mr. Poling: Anybody else? Shy this morning? We have one more online.

OK. Well, let me reinsert myself into the queue because I do have another one, and I hate to ask a Navy vet about the Coast Guard but what’s the role of the Coast Guard in pushing back against Chinese efforts to violate international maritime law in Asia and particularly – I mean, can you speak to the fact that the Coast Guard’s budget is relatively meager compared to the other services? And there’s been multiple attempts to cut it over the years.

Rep. Kiggans: Coast Guard’s budget is also not where it needs to be. We are relying on them more for international policing. They have a presence throughout the world as well, things like fishing – you know, making sure that fishing – no one’s violating fishing laws and then always still the drug trade and whatnot.

The budget is not – it’s more than what the president had asked for but it’s still not where it needs to be. It’s about $40 million less. We need to – again, I wish the whole thing was more and – but it’s a spending priorities discussion and Coast Guard is on the list. It will stay on the list. But we certainly need to look out for them, too.

Mr. Poling: OK. We have one last question.

Q: Thank you very much for your remarks.

My question related to the earlier questions and bring it into sharper focus. You mentioned that the U.S. has about 300 ships and China more than that. How would Congress address the asymmetric problem where the U.S. has spread its Navy all over the world while China can concentrate most of its ships in one area, South China Seas?
Rep. Kiggans: Yeah. So this divest to invest strategy that the U.S. has been talking about and wanting to decommission more ships than we’re building is a problem. We’ve got an old fleet of ships. We got to keep those ships at sea longer. It’s a ship – that becomes a ship repair discussion then.

But we need more and we need more faster. I worry about how long is that going to take. If we start to – God forbid, we do enter a conflict there will be repair work needed. So you’re stressing an already stressed industry. So as much as we can do to build up to that.

We don’t have the capacity. You know, if you look at maps of where China’s shipbuilding and China’s even repair capacity, it’s more than ours. So what can we do? We are thinking outside of the box, thinking – you know, relying on other countries like our allies to, again, reopen things like World War II dry docks and things.

But that’s kind of where we are and I think that’s where we need to be. We need to make that financial investment and making sure we can finance those things because that’s how we’re going to keep the peace. That’s how we’re going to continue to be that deterrent.

But I would love to see more. If you have a solution for where I can build more ships and get the people to do it and the supplies to do it, I’m all in. You know, I’m all into that and I think a lot of my colleagues in Congress are as well. But we’re working through those – working through those challenges. But that’s a concern and we watch it every day.

Thank you.

Mr. Poling: We’re going to have to cut it off there so the congresswoman can get to her next meeting.

A quick programming note. You’ve got a 10-minute coffee break and then please be back here for our first fantastic panel. And in the meantime, please join me in thanking Representative Kiggans. (Applause.)

(END)