Gregory Poling: Hello! Good morning, everybody. Thank you all so much for being here. I know how hard it is to get folks in person into a room at 9:00 a.m. post-COVID. Everybody is used to still being in the top half a suit and sweatpants. I get it. Most of our audience today is online, but I am very, very happy that we have an in-person audience and, more importantly, all of our speakers today are going to be in person. This is the first return of our South China Sea Conference to this in-person format. Not that I didn’t enjoy boxes on the screen for the last two years, but you really can’t replace the give and take that you get from in-person experts arguing with each other up on stage. So thank you all so much.

As many of you probably know, my name’s Greg Poling. I direct the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative here at CSIS, as well as our Southeast Asia Program. And you are not here to listen to me. You’re here to listen to much smarter people talk about more important things. But I’m going to get a little bit of the housekeeping out of the way. Everything you hear today is going to be on the record. We’re streaming to most of our audience online right now through CSIS.org as well as YouTube. If you miss anything, we’ll get all the videos up. They’ll be there for posterity. For those of you who don’t have the time for that, we’re also live tweeting it through multiple CSIS accounts. The event today is made possible, as usual, by support from the embassies of Australia, New Zealand, and Japan here in Washington, as well as the Foundation for EC Studies in Vietnam.

And I think that’s all I have to say. You certainly don’t need me to tell you any more about the South China Sea. I do it far too often. What you do want to hear from is our opening keynote. So today to kick things off we have Representative Rob Wittman. Representative Wittman represents Virginia’s First Congressional District. He’s vice ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee and ranking member on the Sea Power and Projection of Forces within the subcommittee in the House Armed Services Committee. He also serves on the Congressional Shipbuilding Caucus and the U.S. Naval Academy’s Board of Visitors. And so with that, please join me in welcoming up Representative Rob Wittman. (Applause.)

Representative Rob Wittman (R-VA): Thanks so much. Well, Greg, thank you and good morning. What a great opportunity to be here with you today. I want to first start off, Greg, by thanking you and CSIS for this incredible opportunity. And I began some reading last night on what I think is a great book, and I would encourage everyone if you don’t have a copy to get one. It’s called “On Dangerous Ground: America’s Century in the South China Sea” – (audio break) – for today’s discussions.
Listen, the biggest challenge I think that not only the United States faces but also nations around the world is what is emerging with China. And China, as you know, has changed its behavior significantly over the past 40 years, from a time of somewhat passive behavior there in the INDOPACOM region, to increased activity in the South China Sea, to now taking reefs and building them into islands, and then militarizing those islands, and then asserting their efforts through the Air Defense Identification Zone by aggressively pursuing naval operations in the region, growing their strategic presence by building a navy that has an incredible amount of capability. I think all of those things weigh on folks’ minds around the world.

And if you listen to the comments by governing officials in China, I think it gives you a pretty good perspective on how they see the future. The Chinese foreign ministers said that – for foreign nations that the South China Sea was not a safari park, and that for major nations this was not going to be a fighting arena. So pretty much laying down the gauntlet and saying, hey, listen, this area in the South China Sea is really there under the sovereignty, again, asserted by China, for China. And we know that that’s not the case. We know it’s incredibly important to make sure that the concept of sovereignty in international waters has to continue.

We see that even General Milley has said that that’s incredibly important and that there has been seen by the Department of Defense an incredible increase in the aggressive behavior by China in the region, and I think we see where China’s playbook is going with their efforts there on the seas and not just in the South China Sea.

But if you look at China now asserting its naval power not just in the region, not just in the INDOPACOM, but now around the world, asserting themselves to be a world power, I think that, again, gives you a window into what their desires are.

You also see their aggressive behavior in the Air Defense Identification Zone, flying multiple sorties with both strategic and fighter aircraft into the area. Those things, I think, are incredibly telling about how China views themselves and how they view the region.

Sea power, I think, is going to be that lynchpin issue for the region in the years to come. China is building that capability at a record pace, building their navy in all different areas. From surface ships and the newest surface ships they’re building, the newest destroyers are incredibly, incredibly capable platforms. They’re now, on their own, building an aircraft carrier. Their ship-building capacity is extraordinary and the capability of their ships is something that needs to put us all in a place to understand the determination that China is placing out there.
I know as we look at issues on the Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee, we see the element of a growing Chinese navy, the efforts, too, of what we need to do to modernize and grow our Navy in relation to the efforts by the Chinese, and then understanding, too, that there’s a lot to not only what we do but how we do it. It’s not only the number of ships – and I argue the number of ships is incredibly important – but it’s also looking at what do we do in relation to operations not just here but around the world and then looking at how do we incorporate newer elements of technology, how do we incorporate unmanned platforms into that whole realm of our capability.

And again, our capability, I think, needs to be focused on deterrence and the best way to have a deterrent force is to have a force that, if needed, can strike, strike quickly, and strike decisively. That is a great, great deterrent force.

Again, force structure is a big part of that. Let me emphasize this, too. The United States can’t do it by itself. This region, I think, requires cooperative agreements with like-minded nations.

That’s why the Quad is so important – relationships with India – and I’ve had the opportunity to go to India and visit with their chief of naval operations, with President Modi, and looking at what they’re doing to modernize their navy; going to Japan, too, talking to leaders there about what the Japanese are doing with their navy and naval facilities there; as well as what’s happening here in the United States.

One of the things that I think is incredibly important for the Quad is to make sure the United States does what it says it’s going to do. You know, we’ve talked about the rebalance to the Pacific. As I’ve talked to leaders in those different countries they’ve said, hey, you know, listen, it’s great that you talk about the rebalance but we’d like to see a little bit more. We’d like to actually see that operationalized.

And, again, with what’s happening now with Russia and Ukraine and what’s happening in Europe, there’s another bit of uncertainty that’s crept in with folks in the INDOPACOM about how they see that effort unfolding. But those regional partnerships are incredibly important, making sure too that we understand our obligations and stand strongly by our obligations to other ASEAN nations as it relates to strategic and economic agreements, and then also to look at new frameworks.

I talked about the Quad, but AUKUS is a new framework that’s incredibly important with a lot of promise. We’ve met with the Australians. The initial conversations have been about the construction of nuclear
submarines. But I think some of the equally important discussions are about artificial intelligence, strategic-capability opportunities that can be grown by all three countries. I think those things are incredibly important.

So I am thankful to be here today to share some thoughts and ideas with you. I’m looking forward to being part of a congressional delegation that will travel to Guam, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Australia in August to have some very in-depth conversations with leaders in those countries, with the territory of Guam, as you know, that’s repositioning itself to be a conduit for United States military presence in the region. And we look forward to those conversations. I think they will be very timely and very meaningful as Congress pursues policies going into the future.

So, Greg, with that I am going to join you and gladly take some questions. (Applause.)

Mr. Poling: Well, thank you so much for giving us a strong kickstart to the day.

I’m going to use the prerogative of the moderator here to ask a few questions and give you all time to gather your thoughts. But then we’re going to be able to take questions from both the in-person and online audience. So those here in the room, raise your hand, just like we did in school. And those online, you should see a box that you can enter questions in, and it’ll pop up on a screen that I can see.

So with that, China claims the whole South China Sea. That’s illegal. Why do we care?

Rep. Witman: Well, first of all, we know China’s claim has not been upheld by the world court. The world court clearly says it doesn’t belong to China.

Why it’s important for the United States to be involved is this. First of all, there is a clear need to assert sovereignty for international waters. And those areas, by any measure, are they are not for China but for international purposes. And the efforts that China has undertaken to essentially turn reefs into islands too is highly objectionable, because that doesn’t belong to China.

And, you know, I look at this from another standpoint is from an environmental standpoint. You know, now you take a reef and then you turn it into an island – not a good thing.

And then, beginning in 2018, those islands are now militarized. So they have antiaircraft batteries on them, landing strips. So they are obviously
going from the accretion of land to now a strategic opportunity for China to assert itself in the South China Sea.

The United States is the only nation that’s pushed back, the only nation that does freedom-of-navigation operations in the region. I think that that’s incredibly important. And I want to make sure that we continue that role. China cannot be allowed to operate asserting its own sovereignty in areas where it doesn’t exist. And if the United States and others don’t push back, then by default China will then be able to say, well, listen, nobody’s objecting, so therefore, by default, the South China Sea is Chinese sovereign territory.

I think it matters. It matters for the United States from a strategic standpoint. It is also incredibly important from an economic standpoint, to have the opportunity for freedom of navigation through those areas, for commerce. Those things are incredibly important. If you don’t assert that, then all of a sudden China has the ability to interdict commercial vessels that traffic through the area. That’s not what needs to be happening.

So I think the United States role there is critical. And we are really the only nation at this point that has taken a very aggressive role in taking issue with China’s assertion of sovereignty in that area.

Mr. Poling: Thank you. And one of the nice things about having a monitor here is that the team can tell me when I’m wrong. So we’re not doing questions from the floor. If you have questions in the room, write them on the notecards and they’ll be run up here so I can alternate between online and in person.

Now, with that, we have an Indo-Pacific strategy. In fact, we’ve had a few of them over the last few administrations.

Rep. Wittman: (Laughs.) Yes.

Mr. Poling: And yet China continues to militarize the South China Sea. So what’s gone wrong? What’s gone right? What more do we need to do?

Rep. Wittman: Sure. Well, we see China’s aggressive behavior. And what they do is they never ask for permission. They just continue to move forward and asserting what they believe is their right to militarize and to assume greater and greater asserted sovereignty in the South China Sea. For us, it’s incredibly important, from a strategic standpoint, for the region to be able to counter that. China, I believe, has intentions not just in the South China Sea but around the world, and its – and its conduit is to show its prowess and ability to influence in the South China Sea.
And remember, this is all about a vision by the world that China’s able to counter the United States, so if it’s successful in pushing the United States out of the South China Sea, then their assertion will be, see, if we can do it there, then we can do it elsewhere around the world. So for the United States it’s, I think, a strategic imperative that we assert our dominance on the high seas there in the South China Sea. And listen, there’s going to be a lot of back and forth. As China grows its Navy, they’re going to look to also have capabilities there that will put the United States at risk. You know, our counter needs to be growing capability to also place Chinese assets at risk. I think that becomes kind of the chess game that we see in the future there, but that’s going to be important for us, and especially as we look to modernize our naval forces.

The question is, is what do we do in ways to not only create capability and capacity, but how does that capability and capacity hold the Chinese at risk? And I think that’s in all the different areas. But sea power is going to be the basis for that. Having sea power, in conjunction with allies in the region, is going to be incredibly important. As we look too at building our Navy and we look at some of our platforms here, we need to be aggressively pursuing strategic partnerships with other nations and it has to be more than just what’s written on a piece of paper; it has to be, how do we demonstrate that by helping those countries, like Australia, build a very, very capable asset like a nuclear submarine? How do we go to other nations and look at providing those nations a ship that maybe has some service life left in, like some of the LCSs that will be retired. How do we look at providing that to those nations and then have an agreement where we jointly train with their navies, we jointly exercise with their navies, and create more of a regional fabric of how we’re able to deter the Chinese?

Mr. Poling:
So we have a bit of a trend going with our congressional speakers, these last two CSIS South China Sea Conferences, which is Virginians on the sea power assessment with Representative Luria. I’m going to ask you the same question I last asked her, and I imagine the answers are a little similar. Are we building enough ships? Where does the U.S. shipbuilding program stand in comparison to the threat that we face?

Rep. Wittman:
Well, my answer would clearly be no, we’re not building enough ships and we are retiring ships faster than we’re building them. As you know, the proposal that came over from the administration is counter to what their assertion is about what the U.S. role should be in the South China Sea in the Indo-Pacific. The request that came over was to build eight ships – they say nine, but it’s only eight ships because one of the ones they have in their count was one that we counted last year – so eight ships and retire 24.
Listen, I’m not a mathematician, but you can’t do addition by subtraction, and if you follow that path, the United States Navy would be on track to be at 270 ships by 2027; by 2030 the Chinese will be at 460 ships. And I have my friends on the other side of the aisle, they say, well, Rob, you can’t use just those topline numbers; you have to look at the capability of those ships. And I would agree with them. You have to look at the capability of these ships. So let’s compare apples to apples. So if you look at the capability of Chinese ships across their entire navy and you look at the capability of ships in the United States, you see that the United States has about 167 ships that you could consider that are right at the cutting edge of technology, that have tremendous offensive and defensive capabilities. Now, do the same analysis, the same data points, the same requirements for the Chinese navy, and the Chinese navy’s at 285 ships of equal or greater capacity. So no matter how you do the analysis, if you do the 460 versus the 270, or the comparability of the capability of ships, the 167 to the 285, by any measure, China has much more capability than we have.

We must modernize our Navy. We need to do it with a sense of urgency. On the House side this year, through the House Armed Services Committee, we did change the calculus. We are on the plus side – not by much – but we’re going to be building 13 ships and retiring 12. I have an amendment that made its way into the NDAA that says of the LCS ships that we’re going to retire we should be looking at transferring them to strategic partners, specifically in the INDOPACOM to make sure that they have those enhanced relationships. I think that goes a long way to building strategic partnerships. So that’s where I believe we need to go.

Now, the Senate is going to be taking up their version of NDAA in September. In conversations there, I believe that they see the things that we’ve done and hopefully will follow suite in the efforts to build capability in the Navy and to make sure that we are modernizing. And we have to do that at a very vigorous pace. At the same time, we have to aggressively pursue strategic relationships with our friends in the Indo-Pacific.

Mr. Poling: Well, why don’t we go to the audience?


Mr. Poling: And, again, those who are online, you can type them in at the top of the screen there on CSIS.org, and we’ll get them here.

So, first, my colleague Christian Hyde here at CSIS says: What steps can Congress take to demonstrate meaningful commitment to the AUKUS...
partnership? What is needed to further advance this partnership into the future?

Rep. Wittman: Well, Christian, I appreciate the question. We have had some very, very specific conversations with folks in the Navy. Chairman Courtney and myself had conversations with Admiral Caldwell. As you know, naval reactors has a big role because they will be part of the effort for the Australians to build a nuclear submarine. Where it has to start is this: Australian sailors have to come to the United States and train in our New School. And they have to deploy on U.S. submarines. Can't do it any other way. You can't bring them over and say, well, we're going to give you a little dog and pony show. We'll give you a short course in nuclear science and nuclear engineering. They have to go through nuke school, they have to deploy on our nuclear submarines to understand what those deployments are about. Those efforts are underway.

Also, Australian shipbuilders can't just come here for a dog and pony show. They have to come here and work in the yards, both at Newport News and at Electric Boat in Groton. They have to be there on the yards. They have to actually be hands-on building those nuclear submarines. Their engineers and naval architects have to come here shoulder to shoulder with our engineers and naval architects. And the design of Virginia-class, they have to also understand what's going into SSNX as we look to design future class of submarines. Not any of the classified information, I want to be clear about, but what the principles of engineering and physics and naval architecture are, and how we go about that process. Those things, I think, are incredibly important.

And those things have to take place now, because the path for Australia to build a nuclear submarine is like this. It is straight up. And listen, the Australians, to their credit, have an incredible amount of desire. And in a nation with a population roughly the size of Florida, their big challenge is going to be workforce. How do they get the workforce there? How do they get the sailors that have that capability? And their desire is here. But right now, their capability is here. So what our job is, is to work with them to make sure the capability matches the desire. And listen, I believe that they can do that.

I believe it's going to be very difficult, though, for them to have a nuclear submarine built jointly with the Australians in the United States in time to be operational by the time that their conventional submarines that they have in place now are retired. I think there's going to be a little bit of a gap there. Australia's made some comments about saying, well, we're not worried about that. We'll just buy a couple of Virginia-class submarines. Well, it doesn't work that way. So we are going to make sure that we get them there as quickly as they can, let them understand the
magnitude of what they face. That’s why our trip to Australia’s going to be incredibly important in demonstrating to Australia the United States’ commitment, Great Britain’s commitment.

You know, we have worked with Great Britain for years in doing joint submarine design. And we know how to do that jointly. We know in designing missile tubes for Columbia-class and for what the Brits are doing on the Dreadnought-class. We know how to do that with the Brits. The question is, can we get it to the same place as quickly with the Australians? And I believe that we can.

Mr. Poling: Thank you. And I’m–something tells me AUKUS is going to come up in just about every panel today. But as a reminder, the fourth panel today is specifically about the role of Quad, AUKUS, and Europe in the South China Sea.

Our next question is from Barry. He’s a student at Georgetown University. He says: Which South China Sea claimants are the top-priority partners in mitigating China’s malign actions?

Rep Wittman: Gosh. I would say, you know, our partners that are immediately there in the region. Japan, obviously, is critically important. Vietnam, the Philippines–that’s why we’re going to the Philippines and Vietnam. They are incredibly important in the region. I know as we’ve had conversations with the Chinese and where there are islands, where there’s joint assertion about ownership in areas, they are like the Senkaku Islands. And I know that the terms are different in each of the countries, so I don’t want to get in the middle of how to identify those islands. But those are the things I think that we need to be mindful of and that we need to be working with those other nations to, first of all, understand what can we do to counter the claims by China. What can we do not only to counter the claims, but also what do we do to counter their malign actions and in the long run deter their malign actions?

I think–I think that’s the most important thing because China now is going to assert as much as they feel that they can get away with without exacting a cost on China. So if there’s no cost with that, they’re going to continue to do that. So what we have to be able to do is to say, hey, listen, there is a consequence to this if you continue these malign actions. And we have to do that in partnership with the countries–the South China Sea claimants, the countries that have the most at stake. And we’ve seen the world court rule on Philippines assertions in the Scarborough reef, to rule on Vietnamese assertions there in the Paracels, to rule on Taiwanese assertions there in the region. Those are the areas that we need to look to work most jointly with in the–in the months and years to come.
Mr. Poling: Charlie, a U.S. Navy vet, asks: With the Navy struggling for retention and overall recruitment at a low, as well as our fleet often being overworked and ships being pushed past maintenance periods, and new ships such as the Ford-class carriers constantly being delayed, what is the plan to maintain a healthy operational tempo in the Pacific for our ships as well as our sailors to continue to maintain our posture in the South China Sea?

Rep Wittman: Well, Charlie, that’s a great point. And I’m glad you brought that up because we can talk a lot about ships and shipbuilding, but the things that don’t make the headlines are ship maintenance. Because you can build the best ship in the world, but if you can’t maintain it and keep it on an operational tempo that’s reasonable and that assures the ship is fully operational when it goes to sea, I don’t care how great a ship you build, if you don’t maintain it, it doesn’t have the capability that you need.

And our ships are great, but you know what’s greater? Our sailors. We have the best sailors in the entire world. What makes our United States Navy what it is today, what makes our Navy-Marine Corps team what it is today are our sailors and our Marines. They do an incredible job and we ask a lot of them, and we put them on deployments many times that extend well past what the expected termination of the – of the deployment is. It’s tough on their families. It tough on sailors. That does lend itself to challenges on retention, especially when a sailor goes back home and their family says, wow, we thought that was going to be an eight-month deployment. It’s a 10-month deployment. You know, we were waiting two months back home for you. And a lot of times they’re moving around, quite a bit of uncertainty in their lives.

We have to create more certainty. The way we do that is to make sure ships meet their maintenance availabilities – that is, get into drydock on time, get out on time – which means we have to properly fund maintenance, which means we have to modernize our shipyards. Our shipyards are way behind in modernization, both public and private.

We have to make sure, too, that we do what we say we’re going to do in supporting sailors and Marines and their families. That’s the key. The old saying goes, is you recruit sailors and Marines but you retain families. If we aren’t doing the things necessary to support our Marines and sailors, then we’re not going to retain them because the family’s going to say, you know what, as much as we want to provide for the defense of this nation, you know, we got things at home to be able to look out after.

So recruitment and retention goes hand in hand with what we’re doing to take care of sailors. Listen, there are going to be some challenging conditions when they are on deployment. But when they’re back
stateside, we better be taking good care of them. There have been some recent incidents there in Norfolk where sailors have been forced back on a carrier that's undergoing a RCOH, and very tremendously challenging environments with noise and lack of sleep, and that's resulted in some pretty tragic events there for those sailors.

Leadership in the Navy better get it on track. And listen, they need to say, listen, we understand that recruiting and retaining sailors is about taking care of them. We can’t put them back onboard in these sorts of conditions. We have opportunities there dockside to put them in facilities where they can get the rest necessary under the right conditions and then – and then go back onboard the ship as it’s there for maintenance availability. So the Navy has to look at this in a broader perspective also.

Mr. Poling: Next up we have a question from here in the room: How do you view Japanese Prime Minister Kishida’s recent commitment to significantly increase defense spending? How will that impact broader regional security dynamics in the South China Sea?

Rep. Wittman: Well, I think Prime Minister Kishida sees the growing threat from China, understands too that all partners in the region have to increase their commitment to defense spending. Hopefully, the United States has set the example last year, pretty significant increase over and above the president’s budget. This year what’s come out of the House and the Senate, between 37 and 45 billion additional dollars. Those things I think send a signal hopefully to our allies to say we all have to increase that commitment.

To Japan’s credit, and Prime Minister Kishida’s credit, they have seen that this has to be a joint exercise, that Japan can’t do it by itself. Our partners in the region, South Korea, can’t do it by itself, the Philippines, and others. We all have to up our commitment. And we all have to work at how can we leverage our resources to a much greater degree than any one of us can do individually? I argue that this is not just about a strategic competition, but it’s also about how does the United States and its partners get more per our unit of currency – how does United States get more for its dollar than the Chinese get for their yuan, or, for that matter, for the Russians get per their ruble?

That is also incredibly important. You know, how do we do that? Because there’s a limited amount of resources. And whether it’s the United States, or China, or our allies, there’s a limited amount of resources there. So how do we make the most of our resources? And how do we get the most impact from our resources in defending the United States and deterring China?
Mr. Poling: We probably have time for one more question. We have another here from the floor. What do you think the surface navy could do better in developing new types? New types of ships, I presume.

Rep. Wittman: Listen, we’ve emphasized with the Navy to be on track now with SSNX, the next generation of attack submarines, to be on track with DDGX, the next generation of surface ships. You can’t wait to get on the design track for those ships. I argue you have to do that now. How do we get the most out of our money? If you look at where we’ve had hiccups with new ships – because remember, we don’t get to build a prototype in building a ship. You build the first ship. You learn on the first ship. It has some hiccups with it. You learn through that. And then the second ship gets better, and the third ship gets better, and the costs are reduced as we go through that.

I argue this: That the way we do a better job with the first ship in the class is to be more mature in the design before we go to construction. Because if you are only 40 or 50 percent complete in design when you go to construction, you’re still figuring out how you’re going to build the ship as you’re building it. So it’s kind of building it on the run. If you get to 85 or 90 percent complete in designing that ship, you have factored out a lot of uncertainty that occurs in shipbuilding, because that first ship is indeed the prototype.

So what we need to do is to start now. In this year’s budget there are some additional dollars that go into the development and design of the next class of attack submarines, the next class of surface ships. And to get that design done, I believe it needs to be at least at 85 percent before we begin construction. If we do that, we will reduce uncertainty and we will be able to reduce the overall cost of building that ship in that class. And also, remember, the cost is not just the initial construction, but the cost is on the maintenance side. So we have to work on the maintenance side to make sure we are modernizing our maintenance facilities, to make sure we have the workforce necessary to do the maintenance and get those ships in and out of maintenance availabilities on time.

Mr. Poling: Well, we have more questions, but we’re out of time. (Laughter.) Which is always a good sign. So could everybody please join me in thanking Representative Wittman for his time. (Applause.) We’re going to take a 10-minute break, and then we’ll be back for our first panel, chaired by my colleague Jude Blanchette, our China Chair. Thank you all very much.