Admiral John M. Richardson, Chief of Naval Operations
Press Engagement
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Admiral Richardson: I made a commitment to come down here a little bit more regularly and engage, and I am following up on that commitment.

And since I was last down here from the Navy standpoint, lots has transpired, so we’ve got Version 2 of the Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority out. So that’s out and the message behind that is really we’ve got to continue to address this great power competition with a sense of urgency and laid out a number of specific goals, really along the same lines of effort as Version 1 did.

I also took an international trip. Literally a trip around the world. So we started in China, then Japan. Stopped in the Middle East really just to get out to Stennis, so we spent a day on the USS John C. Stennis, then stopped in Rota on USS Ross on the way back. Maybe just a couple of highlights about that trip and then we’ll turn it over to your questions.

If there was a word to describe our stop in China, it’s to really stress the importance of, I would say, consistency was the theme. Our actions in this relationship must be consistent with our words, so we made the point that President Xi made a commitment in the Rose Garden that he would not militarize those features in the South China Sea, and so they should behave accordingly, consistently with that commitment.

Our actions are consistent with international law. In fact, they advocate for international law. We would ask that both sides of the relationship -- the Chinese side and the U.S. side -- behave in accordance with international law, not make any excessive maritime claims.

Our actions are consistent with our interests and our policy, particularly with respect to Taiwan. So our policy with respect to Taiwan has not changed. It’s guided by the Taiwan Relations Act and the three Joint Communiques. We made the point that we would object to any unilateral action on either side of the strait that would upset that status quo, if you will, that consistency.
Then we’ll continue to be consistently transparent in what we do. Again, we’re going to be consistently present in the Pacific. We are a Pacific nation. Our presence there has been a consistent factor for the last 70 years at least and really hasn’t really varied a whole lot, our force levels there and what we do has been again, consistent.

Clearly, the Chinese and the U.S. don’t agree on all of those things, so as we work through those disagreements we’ve got to make sure that we consistently do so in a way that reduces risk. Minimizing the risk of some kind of a miscalculation. Our ships are meeting on the high seas. This is what happens. Their navy is getting bigger, ours is getting bigger. It just makes sense that as we spend more time at sea we’re going to run into each other. So again, let’s behave consistently with the rules of behavior that govern those encounters, consistently with the Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea which is a communication framework, and let’s make it easy for our commanding officers to pass each other with minimal risk. Let’s not behave in a way that makes it more difficult. So let’s not pass in front of one another. This applies not only to their Navy but to their Coast Guard and to their maritime militia, and certainly we’ll behave on our side.

That was China.

Right after China we stopped in Japan, just a chance to reinvigorate, continue to progress, a very strong alliance with a terrific partner who is willing to do more and more all the time. We got a chance to speak with my counterpart, with the Deputy Minister of Defense, because the Minister of Defense was here speaking with Secretary Shanahan at the time. Again, just an indication of how strong that relationship is. I spoke with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and also had some time with Prime Minister Abe. That’s the third time he’s made time to see me when I visited. So that’s always terrific.

I had a chance to stop in Yokosuka, talked to the 7th Fleet Commander. I really wanted to put eyes on how things are progressing down there. I was gratified that they’re making tremendous progress there in Yokosuka.

We left and went around, spent a day on Stennis. As you know, we’re doing things differently now with I would say naval operations. We got very good for a number of years of leaving the continental United States and taking strike groups to the Gulf and then coming back. We got excellent at that. We
optimized ourself to do that for the lowest cost. We’re doing things differently now. We’re moving naval power, naval force elements around the world a lot more dynamically. This is the exercise of this concept called Dynamic Force Employment. So you saw that with the Truman which went up north of the Arctic Circle for the first time since 1991. You saw it with Stennis where we are back into the Gulf for the first time in a while, and now Stennis in 7th Fleet. So naval forces as a maneuver force element, getting after that in real ways.

Stennis was doing great. They made some significant contributions to the war against ISIS and are off doing other business right now.

The next stop was Rota. We got a chance to visit our forward deployed naval force in Rota, Spain. Four DDGs that are there. Other force elements. Very good partner there as well. What a tremendous host nation Spain is. Everybody really enjoys serving there. They show great support to our forces there. Those DDGs, we stopped on USS Ross, had a chance to just talk through what they are going through in an increasingly dynamic Mediterranean, particularly the Eastern Mediterranean as the Russians get back to sea in considerable numbers there.

Then we came on home.

That outlines the trip. I think it’s just now that my body clock is starting to get a good night’s sleep for the first time in the last couple of nights. That can really beat you up.

How about if I stop there and I’ll be happy to open it up to questions.

**Media:** You mentioned you brought up with the Chinese the militarization of the islands. It’s clear that they’re not stopping. So what exactly can the U.S. do beyond talking to make sure that that doesn’t continue?

**Admiral Richardson:** Again, we have to be consistent in terms of our approach. We need to make sure that we remain present there and continue to work through this disagreement.

**Media:** To follow up, obviously the theater level of engagement with the Chinese continues, but there’s a sense that the lower level engagements have sort of decreased or slowed down. Is that the sense that you’re getting in the Navy? Or is it something that’s been consistent?
Admiral Richardson: I would say that as we’ve continued to progress this relationship forward, I think we’ve got to maintain communication between senior leaders. We’ve got to be very mindful about other types of interactions outside of that. Very thoughtful about that. So it’s truly a reciprocal type of arrangement where both sides benefit.

Media: On China, what was China’s response to the message that there needs to be a formal code of conduct, some form of mechanism for run-ins and --

Admiral Richardson: There already is. It’s in place. It’s called CUES -- Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea. And by and large, the Chinese abide by that. The Decatur was a departure from that, a significant departure. So as we talked about that, we would hope that that would continue to be an outlier in terms of behavior. But for the most part our ships, both sides, abide by that rules of behavior and Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea.

Media: Did you find out what was behind that incident? The Decatur? And also who of our allies is helping with these FONOPS? I know the British are, but who else?

Admiral Richardson: I think in general there’s a growing sense that this is a matter of international law, and something that’s of interest to the international community. So we look for opportunities to work with our international partners in that regard.

Media: As you know, the U.S. just pulled out of the INF Treaty. I’m wondering if that was something that came up in your discussions with senior leaders in the Pacific. Are they expressing concerns about a potential buildup or thinking about a potential buildup of long-range missiles that could potentially put some of their assets at risk?

Admiral Richardson: It did not come up. It wasn’t mentioned at all. It really wasn’t part of my agenda just because it was still a very dynamic situation at the time.

Now that the President’s made the announcement he did, I think that most of the allies and partners realize that you just can’t be the only one to abide by a treaty. That’s not a meaningful agreement. So they understand that going forward.
Media: What does, if I could just follow up, what does it mean for the Pacific? What are the ramifications? Is there going to be some kind of --

Admiral Richardson: It’s hard to say. It’s hard to predict the future on that.

Media: Can you say anything about the options you’re considering?

Admiral Richardson: No.

Media: During your stop in Japan you mentioned there was some discussion about the potential of moving certain ship types through the Taiwan Strait, particularly an aircraft carrier strike group.

Admiral Richardson: Actually, they asked me if there is any reluctance or prohibition about sending any ship types there. Right? So they asked me about future plans, I said consistently, we don’t talk about future plans. But those are international waters. So any ship that can sail in international waters can sail through those waters.

Media: A quick follow-up, sir. Was there any discussion as far as some of the comments President Xi has made regarding potential use of military assets to address the situation in the Taiwan Strait and Taiwan?

Admiral Richardson: We just did a Taiwan Strait transit in the immediate aftermath of our visit, all the behavior there was professional.

Media: Do you, after being in the region for a while, do you see any additional militarization of the islands? Do you think it’s sort of a lull? Sort of kind of peaked out? Or are there areas that you’re looking at that you foresee are likely new places where more militarization will take place?

Admiral Richardson: It’s hard to predict the future.

There’s been a steady increase, and I think it’s been reported in the press that the weapons systems have been getting increasingly sophisticated. So something we’re watching very closely.
**Media:** What about other areas? Other sections of the South China Sea and the region? Do you see new construction anywhere or new movement anywhere?

**Admiral Richardson:** Nothing beyond what we’ve reported.

**Media:** You were talking about the dynamic force employment, and you’re standing up 2nd Fleet. I’m wondering if you can explain, Admiral Lewis explained it as well, you’ve got two maneuver arms with 7th and 3rd Fleet. You’ve got two maneuver arms in the Atlantic with 2nd and 6th Fleet. I’m wondering if you could explain a little bit more about how the command and control works there and what the impetus behind having maneuver arms -- it’s a different way of thinking about than we necessarily have been talking about.

**Admiral Richardson:** If you think about the ability to respond particularly for high-end maritime operations and combat if required. The standup of the 2nd Fleet was designed to be able to command and control high-end military operations, particularly theater ASW and strike group types of operations, mostly focused in the North Atlantic.

Now I think what you’re asking is, in terms of command and control, how does that stitch together with 6th Fleet that was already out there. You know, we’re going to have to find that out. Right? So lots of wargames and tabletop exercises to stress these two maneuver arms, if you will, how they interlock. The same in the Pacific as well. So how do 3rd Fleet and 7th Fleet collaborate to command and control that immense operational or battlespace out there.

So you just have to learn our way forward. We have some rough ideas. We’re going to test those ideas on wargames and sharpen our thinking.

**Media:** Admiral, is the Navy going to change its rule that prevents officers from being commissioned if they had cancer surgery in the wake of this linguist’s death in Syria?

**Admiral Richardson:** That’s a DoD rule, and so I think you’re talking about Chief Kent? The first thing, we ought to make sure that we honor Chief Kent for her tremendous sacrifice and her commitment to her oath to support and defend the constitution. We want to be mindful that we’re standing and communicating with her family first and foremost as we work through this. So I just want to leave it there out of respect.
Media: I’d like to ask you about the USS Stennis Group in the Gulf. In addition to the role to counter ISIS, do you see any message in regards to what Iran is doing, securing the Strait of Hormuz, for example?

Admiral Richardson: When we send naval forces— one of our consistent messages with our naval force there is to message all of the countries, the nations in the region, including Iran.

Media: To follow up on Rita’s question, is the U.S. looking to expand or add additional Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea?

Admiral Richardson: I’m not going to comment on future operations.

Media: Another on South China Sea. Since over a trillion dollars of trade goes through those waters, I’m wondering as the U.S. and China wrap up their trade discussions if you’ve noticed any of these disputes trickle into any of your discussions?

Admiral Richardson: I’ll tell you, that’s one of the reasons we have tremendous interest in the South China Sea, is because all of that trade. Ninety percent of the world’s trade is conducted by sea. The goods move by sea. And as you said, a tremendous amount of that moves through the South China Sea. Something like a third of the world’s trade goes through those waters. A lot of that is ours. That’s why our naval force is present there. It’s a big part of our mission.

We talk a lot in the Navy that certainly we are contributing to the military element of national power at sea, maritime power. But we are also big contributors to the economic dimension of national power by virtue of protecting those sea lanes, protecting access to those markets that are overseas.

Media: Have you seen a heightened intension?

Admiral Richardson: Well nothing more than we’ve already talked about. I think this is all kind of manifesting itself in terms of the behaviors we’ve seen. So we’ve got big interests there so we’re going to remain there.

Media: Admiral, a question about your discussion with China. Did they lay out anything that they would consider sort of can’t
do it or in terms of their mind that if you do this this is an automatic escalation on our part?

Admiral Richardson: No, they really didn’t point out anything like that. It was a very frank discussion. It was clear where we had disagreements in terms of how we view the South China Sea. They were clear about they’ve got a vision for Taiwan. There was no kind of flinching from having that honest discussion. Which is I think productive. We want to make sure that these discussions lead to greater understanding of each side, and we only do that by being as honest as we can.

Media: What was your position on Taiwan? What did you lay out as the American position on Taiwan?

Admiral Richardson: The American position on Taiwan has been consistent and it’s not changing.

Media: What was their vision? You just said they laid out a vision on Taiwan?

Media: Did you leave China with any agreement to talk again? Or hold any type of exercises?

Admiral Richardson: There’s a consistent agreement. We’ve got a plan for the year. We talked about some potential ways to increase this dialogue in more productive ways between senior commanders, but no real commitment quite yet.

Media: Can you say like what types of --

Admiral Richardson: There’s nothing really committed to, so I’d rather wait until the discussions get a little further mature.

Media: Is the U.S. seeking joint patrol with the Indians in the Indo-Pacific region?

Admiral Richardson: I’ll tell you, the relationship with India, particularly between the Indian Navy and the United States Navy is one that continues to grow. We’re looking for more, I mean Exercise Malabar has grown in its both magnitude and complexity, now including Japan often. We’re looking possibly for humanitarian assistance type of exercise between our two navies. Just looking to do business more and more with the Indian Navy as we spent more time in the Indo-Pacific region.

Media: But no joint patrol together?
Admiral Richardson: Nothing like that, no.

Media: Yesterday Tod Harrison, the Defense Budget Analyst at CSIS said that even with a $750 billion top line, the services will still have to make tough tradeoffs. He said that he believes the 355-ship fleet goal is "out the window". So I wonder if you have any response to that? Do you believe that goal is going to be reflected in the upcoming budget request?

Admiral Richardson: We’re on a path to grow the Navy. The last force structure assessment which was done about 18 months ago or so put out this 355-ship number. There’s structure within that 355, so sometimes people don’t recognize that. That it’s not just 355 of anything. There’s some structure in there to get to the most capable naval force.

We’re undergoing, in light of the new National Defense Strategy and changes in the security environment since that was put out, we’re doing a new Force Structure Assessment so we’ll see where that goes. There’s a lot of really dynamic things happening throughout the Defense Department. I can speak most closely about the Navy. Right now we’re on -- that 355 number came about by a number of studies that were conducted both inside the department and outside the department that consistently advocated for a stronger naval force, more naval power. And they all converged around something in the mid to upper 300s in terms of numbers of platforms. So there was a real kind of tight grouping, if you will, of that conclusion. We did our analysis as well, and it was very consistent with others in terms of the numbers of platforms.

Going forward, we’ll take a look at it. I will tell you, the security environment has only gotten more sporty, so we’ll take that into account. Technology is starting to come to play, so what counts as a naval platform is going to be an interesting discussion in this new Force Structure Assessment.

We want to make sure that we are moving forward in a very deliberate way, in an evidence-based way, I would say, so that we’re not counting on something that hasn’t been relatively proven when it comes to the security of the nation. But we also want to make sure that we’re moving fast and we don’t get disrupted.

Media: So you’re reviewing that number and you may not hold to that --
Admiral Richardson: We’ll get a new number. We may hold to it, we may not. The analysis is in progress.

Media: When is it due?

Admiral Richardson: I think it’s later this year is what we’re looking at.

Media: The U.S. recognized government in Venezuela mentioned possibly the U.S. sending another hospital ship down to that region. Have you made plans for that to occur?

Admiral Richardson: Nothing to date.

Media: And no plussing up of your ships in that region given the instability?

Admiral Richardson: Nothing to date.

Media: Admiral, when you were in Japan did you discuss your idea about trying to move more ballistic missile defense ashore?

Admiral Richardson: Japan has already I think made an announcement that they’re going to be doing Aegis Ashore. They’re moving forward with that program. So they’ve already adopted that as an approach as well.

Media: Have you had any support from Congress or higher defense leaders about your idea of moving more missile defense ashore?

Admiral Richardson: Well the idea is such that missile defense, obviously a very important mission. We’ve got ships that can meet that mission. But for a protected asset that’s on land, and there’s going to be a long-term commitment, probably the best thing to defend that asset is not a multi-mission ship that’s designed to steam around the world’s oceans. And so if we’re going to have a long-term commitment to defend some particular place on land, we should probably build a land facility. But we’re just starting that conversation.

Media: Two questions on two different topics.

Now that the Navy and the Marine Corps are seeing ten-year highs in suicide, for the Department of the Navy, what are you working on, what new ideas or additional ideas do you have to try and control, get a handle on that problem?
Admiral Richardson: It’s such a difficult problem, Barbara. I’ll tell you, there’s been tremendous efforts in the Navy to try and do better in this area. We have a number of programs.

The ones that show the most hope are those programs where we really get down to small unit cohesion. So that our Sailors all feel like no matter what the situation they may be confronting -- a professional challenge, a personal challenge, whatever -- that they are part of some kind of a team and they can rely on their team members, their peers, their immediate leadership, for some kind of support. They can go to them with these trials, tribulations, and get support. So that’s the center of gravity of our approach.

We’re also supplementing that with more, moving more of our counselors and those sorts of things down to the waterfront, like the point of contact. We’ve seen some good benefit from that in terms of numbers of unplanned losses due to psychological types of concerns, and so we’re hopeful of that.

But we’ll continue to try every trick in the book to try and get this under control.

Media: My other question on a completely different subject, why do you think since the nomination has now gone to the Senate for Admiral Ronny Jackson to get his second star yet again, why did the Navy put him up again for a second star? Can you help us understand what the thinking is on that? Why does he deserve a second star? And what job does he currently have? I mean he’s a flag officer of yours, so I’m --

Admiral Richardson: He’s assigned to duties at the White House. The White House Military Office manages his day-to-day schedule. I don’t have insight into what he’s doing day-to-day over there. But he’s assigned to the White House.

The White House is the one who resubmitted his nomination with the new Senate, so we’ll see. There’s an investigation going on, that’s in progress. So all these things have to culminate to see where we go.

Media: Can you just explain one thing to me? When you say the White House resubmitted his nomination, would he just not have gone through a Navy two-star promotion board though? Would it not have come through the Navy? I just don’t understand the
process. He went back before, a nomination was submitted to SASC for two star. But wouldn’t that --

Admiral Richardson: Let me get back to you on the details of that, Barbara if I can, Okay?

Media: Maybe the Information Office doesn’t feel comfortable answering anything.

Admiral Richardson: I’ll make sure you get some information.

Media: You mentioned more supportive security environment. I was wondering if you’d had a chance to talk to your Japanese and South Korean counterparts about increased intensity and incursions between those two navies?

Admiral Richardson: I haven’t talked to my South Korean counterpart. We’re hosting him here in the near future. I don’t know the exact date. I can get you the date. We did touch on it in Japan, and just really made it clear that from our perspective we’re much stronger when we act as a team to enhance the security of the region. We look for both sides to get together in a transparent and open environment that at the end of the day enhances and builds trust between those two navies and two nations and resolve this dispute.

Media: What do you think is behind it? It seems like, do you think it was intentional? The close air actions?

Admiral Richardson: I’m not exactly sure what you’re talking about, but you have to analyze each one. You get the data there and take a look at it and deconstruct it time by time. The specifics matter.

Media: But what do you think was behind it?

Admiral Richardson: I don’t know. It’s hard for me to say what’s behind it. Even to try to guess.

First of all, I’m not exactly sure what happened. So given the facts on the table is an important first step.

Media: Did the Chinese offer an explanation for the Decatur incident?

Admiral Richardson: No.
Media: Admiral, can you offer any insight on the two-carrier buy that was announced yesterday? What that means for you.

Admiral Richardson: It’s going to mean two more carriers.

Media: How are you going to ensure that it remains on track and --

Admiral Richardson: We’re talking about it much further down the road in terms of the Ford aircraft carrier program. So I would say, as you know, we’re wrestling a lot of the last technical issues down, we’re wrestling those to the ground, fixing those. I’m going to go down there on Tuesday just to visit the ship and see what’s going on, make sure we’re staying on track. I would say that by the time we’re starting to build these two ships this program will be very much under control, very predictable, very efficient. In fact, the fact that we can make some bets, buy two of them at a time, as you saw, we’re saving $4 billion on that buy by virtue of being able to get material and personnel and all those things in place. I think it’s indicative of how we can reduce risk in that program by buying things like this, and the savings that we thought possible.

Media: And just to follow up real quick, considering kind of the FY20 budget situation right now, is there any concern about either the BCA caps and whatever happens with them affecting this program?

Admiral Richardson: Huge concern about that, right? It’s not just this thing. I wouldn’t isolate the impact of BCA caps. If we go back down to those force levels. I think all services are starting to recover readiness and have made some good, solid, measurable progress in the recovery of readiness, really starting in ’17 with the request for additional appropriations. ’18 was a great year. ’19 even better because it came on time for the first time in a decade or so. But that is all progress that could be reversed and we would go right back to where we started if the BCA caps. So a big and important message, that we’ve got to try and avoid that at all costs.

Thank you all very much, and we’ll look to do this more often. We’re going to be down in Newport News, as I said, taking a look at Ford, talking to the team down there and seeing how that program is progressing, and I look forward to talking to you maybe after that. Thanks a lot.

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