Visiting China at the start of this New Year indicates the importance of the U.S.-China relationship to both of our nations, to the Indo-Pacific region, and to the world. The United States seeks a constructive and results-oriented relationship with China.

Naval forces are unique and represent every element of national power. Navies are, first and foremost, military forces that stand ready to defend their nation at a moment’s notice. However, Navies throughout history have also conducted diplomacy. We take our ships — our sovereign territory — thousands of miles from our shores to host important dialogues and exchanges.

Navies are also integral to the economic prosperity of nations. A large proportion of global trade — the engine of our economies — moves by sea. Both the U.S. and China benefit from economic activity enabled by access to the sea, as do all nations in this region and across the globe.

So while my visit today is primarily focused on our navy-to-navy relationship, I am very mindful of the intersection of military, diplomatic, and economic affairs.

The Department of Defense and the PLA promote stable relations through multiple lines of effort that: 1) manage our military-to-military relationship, 2) manage and maintain communications, 3) manage crises, and 4) promote future dialogue.

I also came here because there is no substitute for a direct, face-to-face dialogue; communication is essential, whether we agree or have differences to address. Communication reduces risk, helps avoid miscommunication, and prevents miscalculation. It also helps us understand each others’ intent, which builds understanding that can lead to trust.

Acting Secretary Shanahan intends to follow through on commitments our leadership discussed during the November 2018 Diplomatic and Security Dialogue.
At a navy-to-navy level, I was pleased to discuss security, order, and prosperity with Vice Admiral Shen and more than one hundred other Heads of Navy at the International Seapower Symposium last September. There was broad consensus that national prosperity is the direct result of a secure and orderly maritime domain -- an environment that is enabled by and strengthened through partnerships of like-minded navies. We continued our dialogue in December via a Video Teleconference, which was productive. A transparent and rules-based maritime order has helped to secure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific for decades, and I will continue to travel the region to discuss the benefits of this order with our allies and partners. China has been a major beneficiary of this order, but recent activities now threaten the stability of this order, particularly in the South China Sea. I would like to reinforce the U.S. position that it is important for all of China's maritime forces -- including the PLA Navy, China Coast Guard, and maritime militia -- to operate in a safe, professional manner in accordance with international laws, norms and standards.

To bolster stability, the United States and China should commit at the operational command level to preventing miscommunication and miscalculation and affirming the sufficiency of long-standing Rules of Behavior at sea.

U.S. Navy vessels operate globally with the approval of our national command leadership, and are under the trusted direction of our operational commanders. We place a tremendous amount of responsibility on our Commanding Officers to abide by the Rules of Behavior, and as long as both sides abide by these norms and rules, there should be no cause for concern.

The United States seeks a constructive relationship where prosperity and security grow together based on fairness and reciprocity. The U.S.-China relationship should move forward in a way that acknowledges and manages differences. No single nation can change the international order, and actions must match words.

Visits like these go a long way toward enhancing our communication, and I am pleased with the program of events arranged for my delegation in both Beijing and Nanjing.
Ahead of Spring Festival celebrations, a time for family and reflection, I wish health and good fortune to you and your families. The traits of the incoming Year of the Pig – diligence and generosity – are fine themes for our continued engagement. In that spirit, let me close by thanking you for your hospitality. I look forward to continuing a constructive dialogue between our navies and between the United States and China.