

Remarks at U.S. Naval Academy Commencement

As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, Annapolis, Maryland, May 27, 2016

Thank you, Ted. Good morning, midshipmen!

Great to be here. Ray, thank you, and thank you for those years of excellent service as our Secretary of the Navy. It's a pleasure to serve beside you. And Bob, there's Bob, John likewise. All our distinguished guests, the Academy faculty and staff, and so many family, friends all here to honor, to congratulate you, the class of 2016.

Now, every commencement is important. But those at our service academies have extra meaning. Today, you not only receive a degree that represents years of studying, striving – you take an oath to a life of service and sacrifice in the finest fighting force the world has ever known.

Indeed, you've chosen one of the noblest professions there is – a profession in which you'll be waking up every day to help defend this country and make a better world. Thank you for doing so.

And each of us on this stage, everyone sitting in these stands here, every American around the country is proud of you today. And in the years to come, all of us will be counting on you.

Based on your performances here, that faith is well placed.

As the first Annapolis class with cyber majors, you've hacked the Yard, and you're sending 27 new cyber operators into our force. You survived Hurricane Sandy in Bancroft Hall, you weathered a government shutdown. You've captured YouTube acclaim with "Naptown Funk." You've won back the Commander-in-Chief's trophy, and beat Army again and again and...again...and again. And you've earned Rhodes, and Mitchell, Truman scholarships, three Gates Scholarships, and even a sixth round selection in the NFL draft.

On that last one... on that last one, Keenan and Chris, you are cleared and approved to defer your service so you can pursue your NFL dreams. Go get 'em.

Now of course, I dare say, not every late night here was dedicated to studying; not every rough morning can be blamed on hard PT. So for those who may be

sweating a little extra under your choker collars this morning, I hereby grant amnesty to all midshipmen on restriction for minor conduct offenses. This is a one-time deal.

Let's also thank the parents, grandparents, the siblings, spouses, and friends of our graduates. Our military families serve too. Your love and support helped propel these men and women to, and through, the Academy. And your love and support will continue to be critical to them – and to our nation – in the years ahead. Graduates, let's take a moment and give your family and friends a much-deserved standing ovation. Thank you.

Midshipmen, your education and training at this Academy have prepared you to be officers, to lead, at a time of remarkable change for our military and our world.

You'll lead our Force of the Future, one that will be just as excellent as the force we have today, but that will also be different in some ways. As you all know, generations change, technologies change, labor markets change. That's why one of my responsibilities now – and also one of your jobs in the years ahead – is to make sure that amid all this change, we continue to recruit, develop, and retain the most talented young men and women that America has to offer...men and women like all of you. And we're going to do exactly that.

You'll also lead in a new strategic era. Indeed, today's security environment is dramatically different from that of the last generation, or even the generation before that. In this new era, you – and your generation – must meet no fewer than five major and immediate and evolving challenges.

You will counter the prospect of Russian aggression and coercion, especially in Europe. You will manage historic change in the Asia-Pacific...where China is rising, which is fine, but behaving aggressively, which is not. You will strengthen our deterrent and defense forces in the face of North Korea's continued nuclear pursuits and provocations. You will check Iranian aggression and malign influence in the Gulf, and protect our friends and allies there. You will accelerate the defeat of certain ISIL in its parent tumor in Iraq and Syria and everywhere it metastasizes around the world, as well as protecting our people here in the homeland. You will deal with all five of these challenges across all domains – not just see and air and land, but also in cyber, electronic warfare, outerspace. And, of course, when you look at history, you see that we have a near-perfect record of failure when it comes to predicting the strategic future, so you need to be ready and agile to contend with a complex and uncertain future where new challenges will almost certainly arise.

Now, the United States doesn't have the luxury of being able to choose among

these challenges – we have to do it all. And there’s plenty to say about each one. But because I don’t want to read of any complaints on Yik-Yak about commencement speech that goes on too long, my remarks are going to focus on just one of those five challenges...the region that is most vital to our future – home to nearly half the world’s population and nearly half the global economy – and the one that will likely define many of your careers: namely, the Asia-Pacific.

This Tuesday I will depart on my fifth trip to the region as Secretary of Defense. And before I go, I want to talk with you about the essential, pivotal role the United States has long played in the Asia-Pacific, and what we – and each of you – will be doing in the coming years to protect America’s interests and ensure that region’s principled future.

Last month, I laid a wreath at the American Cemetery in the Philippines, where 17,000 Americans are buried – many of them sailors and Marines, some who graduated from this very Academy. Each of those lost, and many others, helped win World War II.

They also won for the Asia-Pacific, and all its people and nations, the opportunity to realize a brighter future. And, for decades since, day in, and day out, American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines have worked to help ensure the region’s security and uphold a common set of principles for all countries there to follow...so that every nation and everyone there could rise and prosper.

That’s been America’s objective and practice for decades, and across strategic eras. Regardless of what else was going on at home or in other parts of the world – during Democratic and Republican administrations, in times of surplus and deficit, war and peace – the United States has played an essential and pivotal role in Asia-Pacific...economically, politically, and militarily.

And the history of the last century has taught us that the order upon which the Asia-Pacific’s security depends is anchored in those principles. American servicemembers, like you, have helped write that history, and you will contribute soon to its next chapter.

Think about it. Over the last two decades, tens of thousands of sailors and Marines aboard the USS JOHN C. STENNIS, for example, have sailed for over 300,000 miles, just around the Asia-Pacific region. They’ve launched countless sorties, made almost two dozen port calls, and worked with governments and militaries from Australia to the Republic of Korea, Malaysia to Japan.

Naval aviators have flown P-3s over the region since 1962...helping keeping vigilant watch during the Cold War, helping manage regional crises, and helping keep waterways open for international commerce.

Since 1981, thousands of American sailors and Marines have participated in more than 30 iterations of our bilateral exercise with the Philippines, called Balikatan, which has helped us stand shoulder-to-shoulder with one of our oldest allies in the region, and many observer nations with them.

And for decades, sailors aboard the U.S.S. LASSEN and other vessels have conducted routine, lawful, and consistent Freedom of Navigation operations around the world, including in the South China Sea.

Every port call and flight hour, every exercise and operation, and every sailor and every Marine has added a stitch to the fabric of the Asia-Pacific's security and stability. And they've helped uphold and defend important principles – like resolving disputes peacefully; ensuring countries can make their own security and economic choices free from coercion and intimidation; strengthening international and regional institutions; and preserving the freedom of overflight and navigation guaranteed by international law.

For sailors and Marines like you, and for a maritime region like the Asia-Pacific, that last one is particularly critical, because it allows ships, people, and commerce to travel in peace. And that's why the United States, throughout its history, has stood up for the freedom of the seas around the world. It's why our sailors and Marines have helped uphold and protect free and open maritime access to the Asia-Pacific's waterways. And it's one reason why we continue to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows: so others can do the same.

We will continue to do so, you will continue to do so...to help maintain freedom of navigation and stand up for all these specific principles in the Asia-Pacific. That's because we've seen what good they produce, and how they've enabled countries throughout the region to make incredible progress. Think about it, economic miracle after economic miracle has occurred there: first Japan, then Taiwan, South Korea, Southeast Asia, rose and prospered, and now, today, China and India are doing the same.

We want that positive trend to continue because it has been beneficial to the U.S. economy and our interests as well as to the people there. But that record of progress is all the more remarkable, especially when you consider that the region's shattered state in the aftermath of World War II and that its post-war stability and prosperity have never been maintained by a region-wide structure the way Europe had NATO. Instead, because our servicemembers have worked inclusively, in a principled and peaceful way, the United States has developed alliances and partnerships all over the region, from Japan and the Republic of Korea to India and Singapore. These relationships have long supported the Asia-Pacific's stability and prosperity, and they continue to do so today.

Of course, the Asia-Pacific continues to be rich in great opportunities for the United States. But challenges always accompany opportunities in times of change. And not all the change in the region has been positive. Indeed, in the South China Sea and elsewhere, there is a growing risk to the region's prosperous future – even though it's a future that many in the region have chosen, and are working toward together.

China has taken some expansive and unprecedented actions in the South China Sea, pressing excessive maritime claims contrary to international law. Its construction – and subsequent militarization – of artificial islands on disputed features far surpass all other land reclamation efforts by other nations there, all other combined. And when other aircraft, ships, and even fishermen act in accordance with international law near these features, China tries to some times to turn them away.

The United States is not a claimant in the current disputes, and we do not take a position on which claimant has the superior sovereignty claim over the disputed land features. But we are determined to stand with partners in upholding core principles, like freedom of navigation and overflight, free flow of commerce, and the peaceful resolution of disputes, through legal means, in accordance with international law.

We're committed to ensuring these core principles apply equally in the South China Sea as they do everywhere else...because only by ensuring that everyone plays by the same rules can we avoid the mistakes of the past, where countries challenged one another in contests of strength and will, with disastrous consequences for humanity. That is why we will not waver in our determination to uphold these core principles.

Our Freedom of Navigation operations there, by the USS LASSEN and other vessels, are not statements about sovereignty or preferences for any country's claims. They are not new to the last year. They are not confined to the South China Sea – we routinely conduct these operations all over the world. Rather, each is a principled act meant to uphold the rights of all nations – the United States, China, and everyone else – to the freedom of the seas.

In fact, what's new and unique to this region is the assertion of claims, dredging, land reclamation, and militarization of features by several claimants but overwhelmingly by China.

Now, our focus on upholding principles extends beyond the maritime domain. For example, China wants its companies that depend on the Internet to flourish in the global marketplace so it can lift its people's prosperity to globally-comparative levels after decades of poverty. And yet, China's cyber-actors have violated the

spirit of the Internet – not to mention the law – to perpetrate large-scale intellectual property theft from American companies. That’s why the President has been determined to develop international understandings of behavior in cyberspace.

China also wants and enjoys all the benefits of free trade and a free Internet, while sometimes restricting both as they apply to them.

In sum, on the seas, in cyberspace, in the global economy, and elsewhere, China has benefited from the principles and systems that others have worked to establish and uphold, including us. But instead of helping sustain those very principles and systems that have served all of us so well, for so long, instead of working toward what... quote, called the “win-win cooperation” that Beijing publicly says it wants, China sometimes plays by its own rules...undercutting those principles.

A model like that is out of step with where the region wants to go, and it’s counterproductive – it’s far from a “win-win.” The result is that China’s actions could erect a Great Wall of self-isolation, as countries across the region – allies, partners, and the unaligned – are voicing concerns publicly and privately, at the highest levels, in regional meetings, and global fora. Such a model reflects the region’s distant past, rather than the principled future we all want for the Asia-Pacific.

Now, America’s rebalance to the Asia-Pacific, which President Obama launched while you were in high school, is not about any one country. On the contrary, it was an affirmative investment in – and a U.S. Government-wide commitment to – an inclusive, principled future. For example, one important component is the Trans-Pacific Partnership, an agreement that will deepen regional trade relationships.

The Defense Department is operationalizing the defense part of the rebalance by sending our most advanced capabilities to the region. We’re doing this across the force, but let me give you some of our Navy and Marine Corps examples: we’re sending stealthy F-35 fighters, P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft, and our newest surface warfare ships, including our cutting-edge stealth destroyers, all to the Pacific.

DoD’s budget invests significantly in payloads and platforms critical to the rebalance, like the Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile, the Virginia-class submarines, new undersea drones, as well as in areas like cyber, electronic warfare, and space. And DoD’s planners and strategists are also developing new and innovative operational concepts.

DoD maintains world-leading capabilities because we have made incomparable investments over decades, and our budget this year does the same. It will take decades more for anyone to build the kind of military capability the United States possesses today. This strength is not simply about dollar figures – it's also about harnessing those dollars to a tremendous innovative and technological culture that only the United States has, and doing so to develop revolutionary technologies.

The U.S. military also has unrivaled – and this is important – and hard-earned operational experience over the past 15 years. No other military possesses this kind of skill and agility backed by experience.

On top of all this, our allies and partners in the region also are a major source of our strategic strength and influence in the Asia-Pacific.

And DoD is deepening and modernizing existing alliances and partnerships, developing new ones, and networking our defense relationships so all our countries can do more together. You can see this networking in trilateral mechanisms, like our deepening U.S.-Japan-Australia cooperation, U.S.-Japan-India cooperation, and other broader multilateral arrangements. And we're weaving these various partnerships together to more effectively ensure the region's continued stability and security.

This network, over all, demonstrates the United States' commitment to playing an essential and pivotal role in the Asia-Pacific for decades to come. By operationalizing the rebalance, by networking security with all the nations there, including China, and by continuing to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, we will continue to uphold and defend the principles and ensure security and stability in the Asia-Pacific.

Now, some in China have argued the United States is an outsider to the region. But, of course, we're a Pacific nation. Our treaty relationships, economic agreements, and long-welcomed military presence in the region have made us an Asia-Pacific stakeholder forever.

China has also suggested that we separate the issues involved in the South China Sea from our broader relationship. But the United States cannot do such a thing. China's actions there challenge fundamental principles, and we can't look the other way.

I want to be clear: our vision for the future of the region is not at odds with the interests of China or any other country. Indeed, we welcome the emergence of a peaceful, stable, and prosperous China that plays a responsible role in world affairs. The United States doesn't seek confrontation with China. We have many shared interests, and a productive and broad relationship, including long-standing

military-to-military ties. Ties, which...by the way, I hope to strengthen.

In recent years, through new confidence-building measures and multilateral exercises like this summer's RIMPAC, we've made great strides in forging more and better communication channels, and reducing the risk of miscalculations that could lead to crises. The United States and China have also worked together on issues related to North Korea's nuclear provocations, Iran's nuclear program, climate change, and other things.

And we want to do more good things together. As we encourage and work with China to address these concerns, we will continue to stand by – and stand up for – every country that sees its future and its freedom of choice threatened. We will continue to work toward greater cooperation. And as we have done many times throughout our history, we will continue to stand strong and united within our country and with our partners and allies as we keep our eye on the long game there.

One of the keys to our essential and pivotal role in the Asia-Pacific, our security network there, and our relationship with China, is our people...you, you, and all our sailors, Marines, and soldiers and airmen.

Our people are the most important asset America has in the Asia-Pacific. Right now, right now as we sit here, 365,000 American men and women in uniform are serving there, including nearly 109,000 sailors and more than 77,000 Marines. And because you know how critical the Navy and Marine Corps are in this region, most of you will serve there and operationalize the rebalance as Ensigns or Second Lieutenants, or as you move up the ranks.

As you do, you will not only meet your nation's call. You will also meet the call of our regional friends and allies, help defend and promote the principles that bind us all together.

One of the constant things I hear in my travels, particularly in the Asia-Pacific, is how great our people are. That's never a surprise to me. And it's a strategic advantage: you, and all our people, are reasons why we have all the friends and allies around the world, and our adversaries don't.

The United States is one of the only countries to prepare and educate our military officers for global missions. You've been trained here on the Yard to be principled leaders, to be ethical officers, to uphold our highest standards of honor and integrity. That's what I and the country expect from you.

But you're also some of the finest young men and women America has to offer. You're why the United States remains the security partner of choice in the Asia-

Pacific and around the world, and why our circle of allies and partners continues to grow.

Most important, you're respectful of other people, and they – militaries and citizens of countries around the world with whom we partner and fight – appreciate how you conduct yourselves. They've learned that you're there not to intimidate, coerce, or exclude, but instead that you inspire, cooperate, and include.

You draw people and countries to the United States, because each of you accepts your responsibilities with, as the Midshipman Prayer says, "a strong heart and a cheerful mind." You embody the values of this great country, the traditions of the Navy and the Corps, and the words of the oaths you're taking today.

Because of you, the United States will not only meet the five challenges we're facing in Russia and China and North Korea and terrorism, especially ISIL; we will overcome those challenges. We will also grab hold of the bright opportunities within our nation's reach, not only in the Asia-Pacific, but around the world.

It's said that security is like oxygen: when you have enough of it you pay no attention to it. But when you don't have it, that's all you can think of.

Yours is a noble profession because each of you, your fellow sailors, sailors and Marines, and all our soldiers and airmen, provide that oxygen, the security that allows millions upon millions of people – not just in America, but in so much of the world – to be safe, to raise their children, to dream their dreams, to live lives that are full.

Every day, our servicemembers put their lives on the line to do so. This isn't a new commitment. Some of you, with family who are serving or have served, grew up around it. You saw it in your teachers and mentors here. And I see it in each of you today.

In a new strategic era, and at a time of great change, the United States must – and all of you will – continue to ensure that ours is the finest fighting force the world has ever known. And you will continue to defend the security, stability, and prosperity that have meant so much to so many here at home and around the world.

To do so we will invest and innovate...we will change how we plan, how we operate, and even how we fight. But we'll never change what we're willing to fight for: for our safety and interests, for those of our friends and allies, and for the values and principles that have benefited so many for so long.

Because we do so, because each of you does so, the United States will continue

to meet the great responsibilities of our great nation.

Congratulations.