

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 23, 2026

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Trump,

We write to you regarding our deep concern over China's posturing in the South China Sea and its renewed island building campaign. For the first time in nearly ten years, China has converted a large reef called "Antelope Reef" in the northern part of the South China Sea into an artificial island that could house or support military and surveillance forces. We have deep concerns due to the strategic consequences of this campaign for the United States as well as our partners and allies in the region. We urge you to discuss the resumption of artificial island-building in the South China Sea at your upcoming summit on September 24th with President Xi.

The South China Sea is a strategic international waterway through which trillions of dollars of goods pass through annually.¹ China has claimed 90 percent of the South China Sea as its own territory, despite the ruling by the ad hoc Arbitral Tribunal that,² under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, there is no legal basis for China's claims. In addition to this ruling, the international community has strongly condemned such claims.³ For years, China has increased its claim over the South China Sea by building artificial islands, which house Chinese surveillance technology, long runways for military aircraft, and military bases, among other capabilities. From 2013 through 2017, China built or expanded more than 20 military outposts in the South China Sea that are able to hold military bases and house troops.⁴ While China had halted its campaign of island building from 2017 through this year, it has continued to outfit its existing artificial islands with long runways, large aircraft hangars, radar arrays, and surface-to-air missile garages, among other military capabilities.⁵

For the first time in nearly ten years, China is again undertaking large-scale dredging and land reclamation activities to convert the maritime feature, Antelope Reef, in the South China Sea's Parcel Islands. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) reports that Antelope Reef may now be the largest island in the South China Sea.⁶ The design of Antelope Reef would allow China to dock ships and construct a 9,000 foot runway for aircraft, as it has done on

¹ Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Troubled Straits: Analyzing Trade Chokepoints in the South China Sea," Brian Hart, Matthew P. Funaiolo, David Peng, Jasper Verschuur, Bonny Lin, and Leon Li, July 1, 2026. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-china-sea-trade-chokepoints#h2-key-takeaways>

² Permanent Court of Arbitration (Netherlands), "The South China Sea Arbitration," July 12, 2016. <https://docs.pca-cpa.org/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Press-Release-No-11-English.pdf>

³ The New York Times, "How China Is Building Its Next Outpost at Sea," Lily Kuo and Agnes Chang, April 22, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2026/04/22/world/asia/south-china-sea-island.html>

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ For example, The New York Times, "Blasting Bullhorns and Water Cannons, Chinese Ships Wall Off the Sea," Hannah Beech, September 23, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/23/world/asia/china-sea-philippines-us.html>

⁶ Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Antelope Reef Could Now be the Largest Island in the South China Sea," March 19, 2026. <https://amti.csis.org/antelope-reef-could-now-be-the-largest-island-in-the-south-china-sea/>

Woody Island, Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, and Fiery Cross Reef. In addition to the runway, analysts say that Antelope Reef could give China more missile facilities and additional surveillance installations.⁷

The construction of an artificial island at Antelope Reef presents several threats to the United States' commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific in several ways. A Chinese presence on Antelope Island could further reinforce its broad, sweeping territorial claims over the South China Sea in violation of international law and opposition to longstanding U.S. policy, reinforcing Beijing's vision of a "might makes right" world. Potential air and naval facilities on the island will provide the People's Liberation Army, China Coast Guard, and Chinese Maritime Militia, with another platform from which to intimidate, harass, and coerce our regional allies and partners. Experts have warned that the island will also likely be used to surveil and constrain U.S. naval activity in the South China Sea.⁸ As China claims greater control over the South China Sea, it has sought to limit the range and transport of U.S. naval vessels, such as happened in 2017 when China claimed a U.S. warship had entered its waters "without permission" as it traversed past an artificial island.⁹

In addition to the direct strategic threat China's renewed island building places on an open Indo-Pacific, Antelope Reef could give China an even greater position in a potential future conflict with Taiwan, as its location in the northern part of the South China Sea provides opportunities to station bombers in proximity to resupply from the mainland and protect its Hainan-based submarine fleet. Without a strong signal from the U.S. against China's renewed island building campaign at Antelope Reef, we are concerned China will feel emboldened to resume large scale island-building activities across the South China Sea, which could further threaten allies and partners in the region.

We are concerned that your administration appears to be ignoring this renewed island building campaign while pursuing diplomacy with China. The fact that China has chosen this moment to resume artificial island-building on your watch, after a decade of dormancy, indicates that your administration's efforts to bolster frontline states and deter Chinese maritime coercion in the South China Sea have, to date, proven insufficient. This runs directly counter to your own National Security Strategy, which identifies preventing "the potential for any competitor to control the South China Sea" as key to U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰ Our concerns were heightened when Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby failed to address the issue during his August 10 speech in the Philippines, which broke from the approach the U.S. government has taken in the past and reinforced impressions that the Trump Administration lacks sufficient resolve to support allies and partners in the region.

⁷ The Wall Street Journal, "China Is Building Another Massive Base in the South China Sea," Mike Cherney, April 1, 2026. <https://www.wsj.com/world/china/china-south-china-sea-military-base-3ebf3dc2>

⁸ Reuters, "China Completes First Stage Work Disputed South China Sea Reef, Images Show," Greg Torode, August, 19 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-completes-first-stage-work-disputed-south-china-sea-reef-images-show-2026-08-19/>

⁹ British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), "South China Sea: US warship sails close to disputed Mischief Reef," May 25, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40040231>

¹⁰ The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," November 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

We urge you to raise China's recent resumption of artificial island building in the South China Sea in your upcoming summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Specifically, we urge you to communicate that land reclamation, dredging, and militarization of disputed maritime features must cease, reiterate U.S. support for a free and open Indo-Pacific, and reiterate that the United States will continue to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows.

Sincerely,



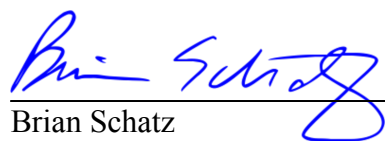
Andy Kim
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Brian Schatz
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator