Questions for the Secretary of Defense-Designate: Asia Strategy in the Next Administration
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What are the United States’ leading national security interests in the Asia-Pacific Region?
Senators should interrogate to what extent the Trump administration will continue to hold traditional conceptions of U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific, including securing freedom of the seas, deterring conflict and coercion, and promoting adherence to international laws and standards. The next secretary of defense will take office during a perilous time for these interests as an increasingly assertive China challenges norms and U.S. presence in a region rapidly becoming the world’s economic and demographic center of gravity. Senators should also ask the designee hard questions over what interests Washington should be willing to fight.

What trends in U.S.-China military competition should drive the Pentagon’s strategy for the region? What are the implications for U.S. allies and partners, including Taiwan?
Regardless of who won the 2016 election, the United States was going to have to reckon with the growing challenge posed by Chinese military modernization and expansion. Beijing’s anti-access investments hold the potential to meaningfully contest American force projection and imperil U.S. assets and partners throughout the region. The issue has taken greater importance since Taiwan has returned to the forefront of Sino-American relations. On the campaign trail, the president-elect was skeptical of U.S. alliances, but has engaged in an early and visible embrace of Taiwan, suggesting that he may upend the longstanding “One China” policy. The new secretary of defense will need to clarify how he intends to engage in military competition with China and how this may depart from traditional U.S. approaches to China and allies alike.

What is the role of U.S. allies and partners in deterrence, defense, and broader national security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region?
Since his campaign trail rhetoric calling on allies to pay more for their own security, the president-elect has reversed course somewhat, reaffirming U.S. defense guarantees on phone calls and in meetings. American treaty allies have long been among Washington’s most vital interests in the region, and the United States’ standing in Asia – from its force posture, to its strategies for technological innovation, to its broader position of leadership – will be affected by how the administration views and treats its partners.

What do you expect to be the future requirements of American force posture in Asia and around the world? U.S. force posture, or the forward-deployed troops, platforms, and assets that comprise its ability to deter and prosecute conflict, have long been assumed to help blunt the impact of Chinese assertiveness in Asia. Permanent bases and rotational access agreements are the backbone of this posture, but relatively little is known about how this new administration intends to approach force posture in Asia or worldwide. Does the new secretary of defense expect that U.S. force posture in Asia will change significantly? With the U.S.-Philippines alliance in a precarious state, how will the administration assure its access to the bases granted under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement? Does the Trump administration intend to seek further expansion and diversification of its force posture in Asia? If so, where will it seek this? How might its demands for additional host nation support affect basing arrangements and realignment initiatives in South Korea and Japan?

What is the future of the Third Offset Strategy?
One of the driving forces behind Chinese military modernization – and its potential to contest U.S. influence and force projection in the Asia-Pacific – is the proliferation of precision-guided munitions. The Obama administration began what has come to be known as the Third Offset Strategy – an effort to renew American military technological superiority and counter the growing threat from Chinese precision-strike weapons, such as anti-ship missiles. The Third Offset has recently become more concrete as the Pentagon has begun to invest in associated platforms and capabilities and thought seriously about the intentions those may send to China. There is a strong case to be made that the Pentagon should continue to invest in innovative defense technologies that allow the United States to operate in a world of ubiquitous precision-guided munitions. The next secretary of defense will need to have a clear plan for where to take the Third Offset Strategy next, even if it continues under a different name. In what areas must the United States invest, what signals will this send to China and other competitors, and how will it incorporate allies? If the secretary of defense-designate sees no future for this initiative, he should have a clear argument for why this is and how the United States can protect its forces, platforms, and interests in its absence.

How will U.S. security assistance in Asia change under the Trump administration?
Since the end of the Cold War, the Pentagon has increasingly relied on security assistance programs, including foreign military sales, financing, education, and training. By building partner capabilities, Washington can help to provide for the defense of like-minded states in ways that may be more politically sustainable for both the United States and the target country. Yet U.S. security assistance programs vary widely across agencies and countries, have distinct (and sometimes even conflicting) goals, and relatively few metrics for measuring their success. The new secretary of defense will inherit the difficult task of coordinating Security Assistance across regions, programs, and agencies, and Senators should be ready to ask the secretary-designate about his plan to tackle it.