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PERMANENT SELECT COMMITTEE  
ON INTELLIGENCE

HVC-304, THE CAPITOL  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515  
(202) 225-4121

GABRIEL NELSON  
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September 20, 2016

The Honorable Ashton Carter  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Carter:

I write to express my deepening concern regarding the strategic posture of U.S. forces at Lajes Field on Terceira Island, Azores, Portugal. As you are aware, Lajes Field is a crucial enabler of U.S. operations in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, and it remains a strategic outpost in the Atlantic to counter increasingly aggressive actions by our adversaries.

The Department of Defense has significantly reduced the U.S. presence at Lajes Field over the past few years, leaving only a skeleton crew that undermines the capabilities of the base. Despite what the Department has presented to Congress, Lajes Field remains a large, capable facility with significant operational benefits and support infrastructure, including robust housing, low cost-of-living, and redundant communications capabilities. These facilities make Lajes Field an optimal location for a variety of national security missions, including suggestions from Congress for air-to-air training, naval forces, or intelligence functions, which the Department has rejected out of hand based upon factually incorrect data and without legitimate analysis.

The U.S. Navy is already reversing previous drawdowns in Iceland to counter increasing Russian submarine activity in the Atlantic, and it will only be a matter of time before the Department similarly regrets the closures at Lajes Field. Unfortunately, the reductions at Lajes Field will not be as easily reversed, as they are also forcing Portugal to choose between loyalty to the United States and the well-being of its citizens as it looks for new tenants for the site.

As many in Congress have previously warned, several high-ranking Chinese officials have visited the Azores in recent years, and I now understand that China has sent a delegation there of nearly twenty officials, all fluent in Portuguese, on a several weeks-long fact-finding expedition, to culminate in a visit by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. The Chinese delegation is reportedly in negotiations to expand China's investments and its overall presence on the islands, including in the shipping port on Terceira, and they have also expressed interest in using the runway at Lajes Field.

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China has spread its influence through similar infrastructure investments in Djibouti, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere around the globe. It is now using the same tactics to establish a foothold in the Azores which, if successful, will be used for a logistics and intelligence hub that could ultimately be expanded for other military purposes, adjacent to critical U.S. military facilities. Effectively, we are divesting from billions of dollars worth of infrastructure at Lajes Field that is likely to end up in the Chinese government's possession.

While the Department has consistently downplayed the importance and value of a strong military presence at Lajes Field, warning that "mild temperatures make sunburn a hazard" and asserting that Lajes Field is an "unsuitable place for many defense activities," it is increasingly obvious that the Chinese government disagrees.

While the U.S. Congress has warned of the risks of shuttering Lajes Field for years, the expanding Chinese engagements with Portugal highlight the urgency of this matter. Allowing China to establish a sustained presence in the Atlantic would be a strategic blunder, and I ask that you respond to this imminent threat to our security by taking immediate action to improve the U.S. strategic posture in the Atlantic.

Sincerely,



Devin Nunes  
Chairman

Copies to:

The Honorable Mac Thornberry  
The Honorable Adam Smith  
The Honorable Richard Burr  
The Honorable Diane Feinstein  
The Honorable John McCain  
The Honorable Jack Reed  
The Honorable Marcel Lettre  
General Curtis Scaparrotti