

119TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. 4609

To require the Secretary of Defense to develop a strategy for crisis management in the South China Sea, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MAY 20, 2026

Ms. DUCKWORTH (for herself and Mr. CURTIS) introduced the following bill;
which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations

A BILL

To require the Secretary of Defense to develop a strategy for crisis management in the South China Sea, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Strategy for Crisis
5 Management Act of 2026”.

6 **SEC. 2. STRATEGY FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN SOUTH**
7 **CHINA SEA.**

8 (a) CRISIS DEFINED.—In this section, the term “cri-
9 sis” means an incident or situation that creates a condi-
10 tion of such national security importance that the Presi-

1 dent or the Secretary of Defense may consider a commit-
2 ment of the United States Armed Forces or Department
3 resources, or the initiation of activities by the Department
4 of Defense, to achieve or defend national objectives.

5 (b) STRATEGY.—The Secretary of Defense shall de-
6 velop a strategy for crisis management in the South China
7 Sea that—

8 (1) identifies the exact locations of the most
9 likely flashpoints in the South China Sea that could
10 lead to scenarios of crises short of war that would
11 require heightened interagency and international co-
12 ordination; and

13 (2) includes, for each major likely flashpoint, a
14 crisis playbook with sequenced response options and
15 a plan for coordination with foreign partners.

16 (c) OBJECTIVES.—The strategy required by sub-
17 section (b) shall be designed—

18 (1) to deny the aim of the People’s Republic of
19 China and deter further People’s Republic of China
20 provocation or actions that expand the crisis;

21 (2) to ensure the safety of United States citi-
22 zens and residents in the region and in the United
23 States;

1 (3) to ensure the safety of members of the
2 United States Armed Forces in the region, including
3 safety from accidents;

4 (4) to preserve United States economic interests
5 in the region, including protecting key trade and
6 commerce routes;

7 (5) to protect United States national security
8 interests, including by upholding treaty obligations
9 and protecting allies and partners; and

10 (6) to manage possible escalation into combat
11 operations by taking opportunities for de-escalation
12 and maintaining strategic stability.

13 (d) CRISIS PLAYBOOKS.—

14 (1) IN GENERAL.—Each crisis playbook re-
15 quired by subsection (b)(2)—

16 (A) shall be developed by the Secretary of
17 Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of
18 State, the applicable Chief of Mission, the Sec-
19 retary of Commerce, the Secretary of the
20 Treasury, and the head of any other relevant
21 agency; and

22 (B) shall be informed by the intelligence
23 community and relevant experts.

24 (2) ELEMENTS.—Each crisis playbook shall in-
25 clude the following:

1 (A) A list of specific indicators that would
2 elevate a scenario from a baseline of gray-zone
3 conditions to the level of a crisis.

4 (B) Not less than one planning scenario
5 that could lead to crisis, with clearly identified
6 assumptions, phases, and likely branches.

7 (C) Anticipated decision points and rec-
8 ommended options, sequenced across all identi-
9 fied phases. The Secretary of Defense shall con-
10 sider at least the following types of rec-
11 ommended options:

12 (i) Response options for Department
13 action, across the range of possible deci-
14 sions across the Department, including
15 force employment, military posture, De-
16 partment official statements or travel, en-
17 gagements or public announcements, capa-
18 bility demonstrations or tests.

19 (ii) Recommendations for types of on-
20 going Department activities to consider
21 ceasing, reducing, or changing in scale or
22 type.

23 (iii) Diplomatic and economic options,
24 developed in coordination with the Sec-
25 retary of State, the applicable Chief of

1 Mission, the Secretary of Commerce, the
2 Secretary of the Treasury, and the head of
3 any other relevant agency, to accompany
4 the options for the Department.

5 (D) Each option recommended under sub-
6 paragraph (C) shall include a cost-benefit-risk
7 analysis, specifically—

8 (i) the projected benefit of the option;

9 (ii) the assessed risk to members of
10 the United States Armed Forces;

11 (iii) the estimated financial cost;

12 (iv) the projected humanitarian im-
13 pact, including the impact on local civil-
14 ians;

15 (v) the projected impact to escalation
16 risk; and

17 (vi) any accompanying risk mitigation
18 strategies.

19 (E) A list of possible off-ramps, including
20 a description of indicators of such off-ramps
21 and recommendations of options for the Sec-
22 retary of Defense to take advantage of such off-
23 ramps.

24 (F) An engagement plan—

1 (i) for streamlined communication and
2 coordination with relevant foreign partners
3 during each phase of the crisis to design
4 collective diplomatic, economic and military
5 responses to People's Republic of China co-
6 ercion and avoid potential actions that
7 could unnecessarily provoke or exacerbate
8 a tense situation; and

9 (ii) that identifies recommendations
10 for specific immediate actions the Sec-
11 retary of Defense should take now to pre-
12 coordinate with foreign partners.

13 (e) SEMIANNUAL REVIEW.—Not less frequently than
14 semiannually, the Secretary of Defense shall review, up-
15 date as necessary, and validate each crisis playbook devel-
16 oped under subsection (b)(2).

17 (f) INTERIM REPORT.—

18 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 120 days
19 after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Sec-
20 retary of Defense shall submit to Committees on
21 Armed Services of the Senate and the House of Rep-
22 resentatives a progress report that—

23 (A) details the list of locations and sce-
24 narios identified under subsection (b)(1);

1 (B) provides a status update on the devel-
2 opment of the crisis playbook required by sub-
3 section (b)(2);

4 (C) sets forth a plan for the completion of
5 such playbooks not later than March 2027; and

6 (D) details the process by which such play-
7 books will be reviewed, updated as necessary,
8 and validated under subsection (e).

9 (2) FORM.—The interim report required by
10 paragraph (1) shall be submitted in unclassified
11 form but may include a classified annex.

12 (g) REPORT.—

13 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than one year
14 after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Sec-
15 retary of Defense shall submit to the Committees on
16 Armed Services of the Senate the House of Rep-
17 resentatives a report that summarizes the strategy
18 developed under subsection (b).

19 (2) FORM.—The report required by paragraph
20 (1) shall be submitted in unclassified form but may
21 include a classified annex.

22 (h) RULE OF CONSTRUCTION.—Nothing in this sec-
23 tion may be construed to require the options set forth in

- 1 a playbook developed under subsection (b)(2) to be the
- 2 only options considered or followed in a crisis scenario.

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