71st Student Conference on U.S. Affairs  
West Point, New York  
October 31, 2019

Addressing the China Challenge, DECISION MEMORANDUM
FROM: SCUSA 71st Roundtable on Foreign Policy Regarding China
SUBJECT: Freedom and Security in East Asia through Regional Empowerment

PURPOSE

WHEREAS the current escalation of hostility between the United States and China in the South China Sea risks economic insecurity and regional conflict, the United States must reduce tensions by fostering multi-lateral cooperation between Southeast Asian countries. The United States should create foreign policy that promotes local self-determination within the area of conflict and increase collaborative efforts. These policies serve to protect U.S. interests of security and prosperity in an open global economy.

BACKGROUND

China’s emergence has brought comprehensive demands contesting long-established international rules and norms, adding new challenges for the U.S. It has exercised assertion within their proposed “Nine Dash Line” through island building, militarization, and resource extraction in the South China Sea. China has violated the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Hague’s Permanent Court of Arbitration Ruling in 2016 by maintaining claims in other countries’ Exclusive Economic Zones, intimidating its neighbors, and threatening international trade routes. An estimated one-third of global shipping amounting to approximately $3.37 trillion passes through the South China Sea. $208 billion in U.S. maritime trade travels through the region, and impediments to these trade routes would cost the international community an estimated $2.8 billion.¹

Decades of the One Child Policy and a traditional preference for boys resulted in “30-40 million more men than women” in China as of 2019.² Some regional actors have made progress in addressing trafficking, but states such as China have not taken action.³ Natural disaster impact, exacerbated by East Asian topography and population distribution, could lead to an 11% decrease in regional GDP by the end of the century.⁴ Further, economic estimates predict 40% of global disaster losses will occur in Asia.⁵

United States’ policy toward China is underpinned by the current asymmetry in understanding between China and the United States: efforts made on the part of U.S. citizens to understand China fall relatively short in comparison to efforts made by Chinese citizens to understand the United States.⁶

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Building Regional Security: Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea

A conflict sparked by competing sovereignty claims would jeopardize trade within the region. The United States has a vested interest to maintain security in the South China Sea in order to defend our
substantial economic interests and to uphold the international laws and the rules-based order that has contributed to the advancement of free society in the modern era. The U.S. domestic economy thrives off of this world order, the degradation of which would lead to serious impediments on the American way of life. Deterring Chinese aggression and upholding international maritime law supports the economic and security interests of allies and trade partners in the region. American power is reinforced by the strength of our relationships with foreign entities, thus, we must invest in their development to advance our own.

China has continuously exhibited disregard for international law within the South China Sea, and current U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations has proved inadequate toward confronting China’s growing hegemony. Countries send vessels within a 12 nautical miles of China’s illegal artificial islands to clearly indicate adherence to the 2016 Arbitral Award and UNCLOS3, however, this has not deterred Chinese aggression. The development of China’s military and economic power poses an existential threat to countries’ sovereignty and U.S. interests in the Asia region, a challenge that will expand past America’s potential power projection if not confronted now. The United States must develop cooperation with local countries for fair passage through critical trade routes in the South China Sea in order to empower regional states to take the lead in establishing an Asia-led security structure.

Establishing Security Structures: Human Trafficking and Disaster Relief

Resulting from China’s one child policy and the uneven economic development of East Asian countries, human trafficking is rising in the region. This challenges international security and the basic principles of human rights. Similarly, climate change and natural disasters disproportionately threatens the health of national economies. The global impact of these issues creates the need for a coordinated international response, and the United States must strongly encourage cooperation against grave threats to the peace and wellbeing of humankind. These issues transverse borders and threaten the global economy; they offer opportunity for coalition building in pursuit of the U.S. national interest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. We propose that the United States develops a framework to invite Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Japan, and South Korea to join in Freedom of Navigation operations.
2. We recommend the United States ratify UNCLOS3.
3. We recommend the United States update and reform the 2015 “1,000,000 Strong” policy to match a population proportional level of Chinese students’ involvement within the United States. We also recommend that the United States fund collegiate level Chinese language programs to counter Confucian Institutes within the United States in accordance with the 2019 Permanent Subcommittee on Investigation report.
4. We recommend a coalition of stakeholders to provide a cooperative framework and encourage regional nations’ self-determination in confronting human trafficking and natural disasters.
5. In order of escalating severity, we propose that the U.S. should respond to aggressive Chinese action with: 1) increase joint military training exercises with cooperating regional stakeholders 2) codify a defense partnership with a coalition of these actors 3) provide for the dissemination of cutting-edge military equipment to cooperating partners 4) conduct joint operations with partner coalition to contest Chinese provocations within disputed territory.
Members: Reed Bauer, United States Military Academy; James Biggs, Stephen F. Austin State University; Mary Cerbone, United States Military Academy; Shenyun Chen, Teachers College Columbia University; Ashley Denney, Syracuse University; Caroline Duckworth, William and Mary; Aaron Kelley, Stephen F. Austin State University; Kelly Morris, Arizona State University; Garrett Posey, University of Maryland, Baltimore County; Dardrin Qin, United States Military Academy; Ryan Richardson, Western Kentucky University; Rowan Rockafellow, Colorado College; Stephen Schick, Reed College; Esme Stribling-Hough, Wellesley College; Tanner Towle, University of Maine; Pak Ho Wong, New York University; Jane Yan, United States Military Academy; Sixuan Yong, New York University; Yiming Zhang, Teachers College, Columbia University.


