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Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

Pacific Security Priorities of the 117th Congress

Abstract

On Tuesday, March 30, 2021, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA), in partnership with the U.S. Association of Former Members of Congress (FMC), hosted a virtual event titled, "Pacific Security Priorities of the 117th Congress." This event featured Representative Don Bacon (R-NE-02) and Representative Marc Veasey (D-TX-33), who are currently serving in the House Armed Services Committee. The event took place in the form of a Zoom Webinar where speakers discussed the key policy priorities of the 117th Congress and ways that the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) can address such issues. The Hon. Peter Roskam (R-IL, 2007-2019), Member of the Board of Directors of FMC, moderated the discussion and the Q&A.

Opening Remarks

To begin the event, both speakers provided opening remarks on their current policy priorities for the HASC, including Pacific security issues. Rep. Bacon spoke first by stating that his top priority is to hold defense spending equal to inflation. Additionally, he noted that the current defense spending levels are capable of maintaining U.S. readiness and ensuring the ability to modernize. Based on the advancements made by mainly China and Russia over the past 17 years, the second priority is to modernize U.S. deterrence capabilities, with the U.S. nuclear triad being at the top of the list due to the United States' decades-old technology in land, air, and sea deterrence. Rep. Bacon added that he would also like to see improvement in U.S. electronic warfare (EW) capabilities. According to Rep. Bacon, the United States has lost its EW superiority following years of defunding and Chinese recognition of the importance of and investment in EW capacities. Lastly, Rep. Bacon noted that although he supports U.S. bilateral agreements in Asia, he would like to see them transition to multilateral agreements, similar to NATO. He explained that he views the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India (otherwise known as the "Quad") as an important first step, but it should eventually expand to include more countries that share U.S. values such as Indonesia. Overall, Rep. Bacon said, the United States is the indispensable nation, but when it comes to defending democratic values the country can no longer do it alone.

Rep. Veasey spoke next and echoed Rep. Bacon's comments on spending by noting that the HASC needs to ensure money is being spent wisely in the defense space. He explained that, based on his time serving in the Tactical Air and Land Forces Subcommittee of HASC, it is clear that China will be working to dominate the United States in air, land, and sea. One opportunity Rep. Veasey provided to maintain U.S. dominance is to invest in the next generation of fighters that are increasingly versatile and decrease U.S. reliance on older platforms. Referencing a bipartisan trip he took to Djibouti in 2017, Rep. Veasey stated that it is clear that China is trying to show the world that it can be just as dominant as the United States. Therefore, China will continue to increase its strategic positions internationally. How the United States counters China without risking conflict will be very tricky and require a great deal of diplomacy, Rep. Veasey noted, but due to the wide-reaching implications of such conflict, steps must be taken to prevent conflict now.

The China Challenge

Following the opening remarks, Rep. Roskam took the opportunity to follow up on the speakers' points on China by asking them how HASC ensures there is a bipartisan commitment to areas of the Pacific impacted by increased Chinese aggression such as the South and East China Seas, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. In response, Rep. Veasey said that HASC has traditionally been very partisan and it is important that it stays that way so that a unified approach to China can be presented to the U.S. public. One example of this that Rep. Veasey described is the U.S. approach to Israel which has been overwhelmingly bipartisan. He stated that it will take a lot of money, time, and patience to counter China, but the United States must employ effective bipartisan public messaging to ensure widespread commitment, understanding, and avoids political contests on which party is tougher on China. Rep. Veasey concluded by explaining that the United States is currently at a disadvantage to China in many places internationally.

Rep. Bacon followed Rep. Veasey's comments by discussing how U.S. expectations in the early 1990s for China to gain economic strength, integrate into the world economy, and in time liberalize have proven to be inaccurate. Due to this occurrence, Rep. Bacon stated China cannot be allowed to use economic might or trade to take advantage of the United States and it is imperative that Washington acknowledge this capacity. To counter China, Rep. Bacon said, Congress can prioritize shifting bilateral relationships in the Indo-Pacific to a more multilateral grouping such as NATO. Rep. Bacon added to Rep. Veasey's earlier comments on next-generation fighters by stating that next-generation bombers, such as the B-21 with increased ability to cover long distances, will be key in future U.S. deterrence vis-à-vis China. Though China has a vast advantage in surface-to-surface missiles, the B-21 can deter this threat. Lastly, Rep. Bacon noted that China has the economic might to pursue cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, but U.S. values and liberal ideas continue to inspire people around the world and are, therefore, the most potent U.S. weapon.

Next, Rep. Roskam turned the discussion to China's economic might, noting China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); an initiative that has ensnared countries to a level of debt and obligation that they are unable to escape from. In response to this concern, Rep. Veasey first stated that Congress must work with business and labor communities to develop a path forward that creates a larger U.S. role in international trade. Already, U.S. inability to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) during the Obama administration enabled China to fill a void. Additionally, although U.S. values are important to many in the Indo-Pacific, economic growth is equally important and should be part of the U.S. strategy in the region. Rep. Veasey stated that the United States can address these issues through supply chains, both

for sensitive technologies and other industries such as pork. As China is a major manufacturing center, Rep. Veasey stated that supply chains must be diversified and brought home when possible, as being too heavily reliant on China economically has the potential to harm U.S. national security.

Rep. Bacon agreed with Rep. Veasey's comments, highlighting that COVID-19 has illustrated how supply chains are vulnerable to Chinese manipulation. Adding to Rep. Veasey's comments, Rep. Bacon stated that the United States must ensure strategic supplies, such as computer chips, are not heavily procured from China, but also noted that other supplies of seemingly lesser importance also require attention. For example, Rep. Bacon explained, one-fourth of all penicillin is produced in China, and other antibiotics are produced at a similar rate, so U.S. diversification of these supply sources is also necessary. Overall, Rep. Bacon agreed with Rep. Veasey that these supplies can be sourced domestically where possible, but if insourcing is not possible then the United States needs to increase allied-supported supply chain sourcing. Lastly, Rep. Bacon agreed with Rep. Veasey that absent U.S. support for the TPP was a mistake; the United States must be able to compete economically on a global scale. U.S. absence in the TPP has provided China great leverage to work more one on one with TPP countries which alienates the United States. Rep. Bacon concluded that to compete with China economically, the United States must be part of an alliance and it is not too late to get back into the TPP in some capacity.

Additional Challenges

Next, the conversation turned to address Russia and North Korea's sizable presence in the Pacific. Rep. Roskam asked the panelists to discuss how these countries fit into questions regarding deterrence and U.S. options in the region. Rep. Bacon responded by first noting that Russia is the pacing threat for strategic nuclear weapons as they have modernized two-thirds of their nuclear triad despite having a much smaller GDP than the United States. Outside of military capabilities, Rep. Bacon also stated that Russia has proven to be antagonistic due to its attempts to undermine elections in the United States, Japan, and throughout Europe. As for North Korea, Rep. Bacon explained that current estimates place North Korea's nuclear arsenal at around sixty warheads, which is the main aspect of consideration in dealings with the country. Overall, Rep. Bacon explained that while the United States is indispensable in countering these threats, the days of acting alone in the Pacific are coming to an end. It is paramount that the United States work with Japan and Australia in the short term, India and Indonesia beyond that, and eventually other potential partners such as Vietnam and the Philippines.

On the topic of sizable presence in the Pacific, Rep. Veasey added that Russian and Chinese threats are similar due to both countries wanting to show their prowess and undermine U.S. values. Both Russia and China, Rep. Veasey noted, seem to share the sentiment that multi-cultural democracy is ineffective and that their form of totalitarianism is what works. As for North Korea, Rep. Veasey stated that their goals are to increase their power and demonstrate that the Korean Peninsula can be reunited under the values of the north and they are determined to achieve that goal as evident by their accumulation of nuclear weapons. Rep. Veasey said that North Korea poses an existential threat to the United States in ways China and Russia do not because of the brazenness and instability of Kim Jong-un, evident by his actions to have his own brother assassinated to protect his claim to rule.

Fiscal Discipline and Burden Sharing

The discussion then shifted to examine the importance of fiscal discipline and burden-sharing with Rep. Roskam stating that President Trump's approach to burden-sharing was aggressive, brash, and off-putting for some people; however, some were in favor of his approach. So, on this topic, he asked the speakers to discuss their views on burden-sharing. In response, Rep. Bacon highlighted how the Trump administration succeeded in pushing NATO to increase military spending by \$135 million and persuading Japan and South Korea to commit to increases in their own burden-sharing. However, Rep. Bacon explained the method in which this was accomplished was concerning as discussions with allies should always be done privately to not weaken U.S. relations. In terms of fiscal discipline, Rep. Bacon noted that when he first joined Congress in 2017, the U.S. military was at its lowest readiness level since 1977. While the United States had been focused on Iraq and Afghanistan and cut military spending by 16% from 2010-2017, its adversaries had 20 years to modernize. Concluding, Rep. Bacon stated that to promote the health of the U.S. military, defense spending was increased by about 10% to its current level which is where it should remain in line with inflation.

Next, Rep. Veasey first agreed that defense spending is in a good spot now and that most Democrats in the House agree with the current levels. In terms of burden-sharing, Rep. Veasey agreed that the United States should not treat allies like adversaries and belittle them in public as this weakens the alliance. However, he said, U.S. allies need to pay their fair share, and moving forward as there is more scrutiny and demand from the U.S. public, allies will have to increase their defense spending. During the Cold War, Rep. Veasey explained, the U.S. public was so concerned with the spread of communism that most Americans were comfortable with shouldering so much of the defense burden. However, as the world has become more inward-looking, Rep. Veasey said that these views have changed.

Concluding, Rep. Veasey noted that domestic scrutiny of defense spending for allies is unfortunate at this point but as long as the expectation remains, Congress should continue to evaluate relationships on how they are beneficial to the United States from a fiscal standpoint.

Moderated Q&A with Attendees

Following the moderated discussion, Rep. Roskam opened the Q&A. The first question was addressed to Rep. Bacon regarding his comments on Indonesia and inquired about what a U.S.-Indonesia relationship would look like and what steps are needed to reach it. Rep. Bacon responded that he views a potential U.S.- Indonesia alliance as a future goal and that the immediate goal should be to strengthen U.S. relationships with Japan and Australia and to encourage Japan and Australia to increase their cooperation. The initial immediate goal beyond Japan and Australia, Rep. Bacon stated, would be to potentially include New Zealand or India, especially due to opportunities for collaboration with India through the Quad. Beyond these opportunities there is a possibility of increased work with Indonesia as it is a very large country, both in size and population, is a democracy, and is expanding its free-market system. Concluding his response, Rep. Bacon stated that by working with Indonesian officials, he has noticed that Indonesia increasingly shares U.S. outlook and values and the United States should therefore nurture the relationship.

Next, a question was asked concerning U.S. strategy in Southeast Asia and Congress' role in facilitating this strategy. Rep. Veasey recommended the United States look for economic and defensive ways to strengthen relations with partners in Southeast Asia, and it should be done quickly before China can dominate the region. He added that there is an opportunity to engage partners that do not necessarily share U.S. values, such as Vietnam, but overall, the United States must look to improve relations in the region to demonstrate how U.S. relations are beneficial to both parties. Next, Rep. Bacon stated that there are also opportunities for increased collaboration with the Philippines despite challenges from current President Rodrigo Duterte. Additionally, Rep. Bacon highlighted that Taiwan is an issue that directly impacts Southeast Asia and should therefore not be ignored. U.S. historical ambiguity on policy regarding Taiwan is present; however, he recommended it would be beneficial to be less ambiguous and ensure that Taiwan has the capabilities to field full self-defense with the intent of enhancing deterrence.

The next question was regarding whether the U.S. public would support going to war with China over Taiwan. First, Rep. Veasey highlighted a large number of Taiwanese-Americans for whom this is a major concern. Part of their concern is due to what is happening in Hong Kong, Rep. Veasey said, so they feel if

China ever has the opportunity, the same will be done to Taiwan. Therefore, it is vastly important to demonstrate to Taiwan that the United States stands with them and provides a chance to develop a long-term strategic partnership with the country similar to U.S.-Europe partnerships. As for selling the importance of Taiwan to the public, Rep. Veasey agreed that it would be difficult especially when looking at the experiences of the Korean War and Vietnam War, but the palatability of the prospect of a war to defend Taiwan is very debatable. Rep. Bacon then addressed the question by stating that deterrence hinges on capability and will, and that will in particular shifts from President to President so the United States must make its views on Taiwan clear. To prevent China from invading Taiwan, Rep. Bacon recommended strengthening U.S.-Taiwan economic ties and to provide Taiwan defensive capabilities to further deter China. Rep. Bacon concluded his response by noting that the United States has not lost the commitment of the two merging one day, but noted that it would have to be under a Democratic China that shares Taiwan's values, which does not appear to be closetoday.

The final question asked what U.S. action can be taken to stop violence in Myanmar, the effectiveness of sanctions, and the extent to which congressional leaders coordinate with the White House on these issues. In response, Rep. Veasey expressed concern about U.S. response having the possibility of pushing Myanmar closer to China. Due to the delicate nature of the human rights violations and the possibility of continued infractions, Rep. Veasey recommended that the United States continue to monitor the situation. Next, Rep. Bacon stated that most people are unlikely to support military intervention in Myanmar and that the United States should work with neighboring countries to isolate the country; the heart of the question lies in how to diplomatically isolate the military and clarify U.S. expectations on human rights. Concluding, Rep. Bacon noted that the United States does not use enough moral clarity with countries that have coups and mistreat their people.

Sasakawa USA is grateful to Rep. Don Bacon (R-NE-02), Rep. Marc Veasey (D-TX-33), The Hon. Peter Roskam, the Q&A participants, and attendees for the discussion on the Pacific security priorities of the 117th Congress.

The views summarized herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.

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