

## 46<sup>th</sup> WORLD AFFAIRS INSTITUTE FOR STUDENT LEADERS

*A Community Service Project of Rotary International and World Affairs Council of Pittsburgh*

### Foreign Policy Scenario:

#### Dispute in the South China Sea

##### Background

Since 2014, China has been rapidly creating artificial islands on top of reefs and rocks throughout the Spratly Island archipelago in the South China Sea. China claims rights to the sea and the archipelago, but Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines also claim certain areas of the archipelago. These conflicting claims and China's recent island building have created more tension in these already militarized regions.



The Spratly Islands are positioned in an area that could be militarily strategic, and may have reserves of natural resources like oil and gas around them. There are concerns that China may be trying to establish an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which is when a country has special rights to the exploration and use of marine resources within 200 nautical miles of an island that is part of that country's territory. EEZs are established and recognized by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, an international agreement, which China is a part of, that defines the rights and responsibilities of nations with respect to their use of the world's oceans. Under the Law of the Sea, reclaimed land (such as the islands that China is building) does not qualify for an EEZ.

However, the newly created and enlarged islands may allow for China to have more control in exclusive economic zones that belong to other countries, and heightens the Chinese military presence in the Pacific. China has stated that the island building is just like any other public construction project, but neighboring countries are concerned that with these islands, China will attempt to make new maritime and territorial claims in the face of international law. In fact, the international arbitral tribunal has concluded that building these artificial islands violates international law and has caused severe harm to the marine environment.

Japan has been engaging in island building and expanding its territory claims since 1987, and has consistently stated that China's island building is a problem for the region. However, Japan has stated that they are committed to using peaceful dialogue as a means to encourage China to cease island building activities.

### **The Crisis – March 2017**

In the first 90 days of the Trump administration, tensions are running high as China's extensive effort to build artificial islands in the South China Sea continues. Two weeks ago, a fishing vessel from Japan unknowingly sailed into the territory of one of these artificial islands in China-claimed territory and a Chinese naval ship fired two warning shots at the vessel. No one was harmed, but Japan has deemed this an act of aggression and has sent several Japanese naval ships to within 12 miles of the artificial island. On top of this, Japanese Maritime Self-Defense surveillance planes and Chinese People's Liberation Air Force fighter jets have repeatedly come in dangerously close contact in the airspace near the island.

Presently, the Chinese and Japanese forces are at a nonviolent standstill in the waters off the coast of the artificial island, and both refuse to give ground, claiming their militaries are operating legitimately in accordance with international law.

Neighboring countries have heightened concerns that Japan and China may inadvertently end up in an armed clash due to the changing balance of military and economic power in Asia, growing distrust between the two nations, and deep dependence on the sea lanes for access to energy resources and trade. Miscalculation by their militaries or an unforeseen incident provoked by other fishing vessels or activists could trigger a crisis. Pressure is put on Washington because of the U.S. – Japan Security Alliance, which allows the U.S. to have military stations in Japan to help defend Japan, and also to enable the U.S. to defend other allies in the Asia-Pacific. Because the use of force between China and Japan would likely lead to U.S. involvement, Washington has a stake in deterring and dissuading aggression by either party.

The United States needs to assess ways in which this dispute might affect its national security interests. Of particular relevance is the question of how U.S. allies, as well as governments and nonstate actors that have a stake in what happens, would perceive various U.S. responses to the crisis. A U.S. intervention might have an effect on other pressing interests that require the cooperation of China or Japan, including nuclear nonproliferation, global economic growth, measures to combat climate change, and the safety of Americans abroad.

**Your Task**

The Obama administration’s stance on island building has been to take no position on territorial disputes in the South China Sea, while calling for an immediate end to land reclamation. As the Trump administration considers how to proceed, various groups and individuals in government, media, and politics have weighed in on the situation. Your job is to help inform the White House on the issue and to sway the Trump administration to agree and support your particular stance regarding whether or not the U.S. should support Japan, and how that support would look.

Key Questions to Consider:

- What are the special interests of your organization or agency in this situation?
- What are the United States’ foreign policy options with regards to China and Japan? Consider the benefits and consequences of each option.
- How might this affect foreign policy in the region and beyond?
- What might be the impact of the U.S. using hard power (such as the military) or soft power (such as diplomacy) in handling this issue?
- In what ways can your organization or agency effectively convince the new administration to make a decision in line with your stance on this issue? Consider the position and authority of your group.

<b>Key Players</b>	
Department of Defense	Department of the Treasury
Shanghai Cooperation Organization	ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations
Department of Commerce	APEC – Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
National Security Council	United States Trade Representative
Department of State	United Nations
Department of Homeland Security	Department of Energy
Environmental Protection Agency	

*This year’s policy scenario was adapted from the Council on Foreign Relations.*