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14. ABSTRACT China continues to make clear its determination to control the Western Pacific. It has repeatedly challenged freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and, thanks to infrastructure and development projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, China has succeeded in linking other nations' economies to its own. This economic interdependence is a pressure point for countries in the region and may discourage them from strengthening their alliances with the United States. This paper explores how the United States can weaken this interdependence and bolster the economies of Western Pacific nations by promoting the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Globalization demands that the United States views economic prosperity as a national security issue. Supporting Western Pacific countries' economic growth by encouraging an increase in female inclusion in their economies can lessen their unease about China's economic influence, giving them the space they need to act independently and align more firmly with the United States.							
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The Future Is Female:

Tipping the Balance in the Western Pacific with the Women, Peace and Security Agenda



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INTRODUCTION

With its insistence on ownership of all territory within the nine-dash line and aggressive construction of “islands” in the South China Sea, China is claiming sovereignty over the Western Pacific to destabilize Asia. Although several other nations in the region (e.g., Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines) have declared overlapping claims to the South China Sea, China – with its nuclear capabilities and the largest military force in the world – is a significant threat. Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States regularly conduct freedom of navigation exercises in the South China Sea. However, this will not be sufficient to counter China’s aggression or encourage Asian countries to ally themselves more firmly with the West. A recent RAND study of U.S. and Chinese influence in the Western Pacific notes that some Asian countries (the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam) are more concerned about China’s economic – rather than military – influence. Despite their shared interests with the United States, they believe that U.S. military influence is an ineffective counterweight to economic pressure from China and they do not want to be forced to choose between the two great powers.¹

How, then, can the United States gain an advantage and become the more attractive option for Asian nations? In addition to continuing to project military power in the region by conducting freedom of navigation exercises, the United States should leverage its diplomatic strengths to further promote economic prosperity – specifically for women. First, because women often face challenges entering or advancing in the labor market as employees or as

¹ Lin, Bonny, Michael S. Chase, Jonah Blank, Cortez A. Cooper III, Derek Grossman, Scott W. Harold, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Lyle J. Morris, Logan Ma, Paul Orner, Alice Shih, and Soo Kim, "Does the United States Or China have More Influence in the Indo-Pacific Region?" *Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific: Study Overview and Conclusions*, no. RR-4412-AF (2020). https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10137.html.

entrepreneurs, the United States should increase its support for programs – such as micro-lending, access to banking services, and training – that provide access. Next, the U.S. government can encourage changes to gendered laws and policies that disadvantage women. Finally, the United States must advance the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in international fora, encouraging partner nations to recognize women’s economic empowerment as a national security issue and a key component to regional stability. Put simply, the economy benefits when more women are in the workforce; more women in the workforce contributes to a country’s economic growth – thereby lessening its dependence on or fear of China’s economic might. The United States can tip the balance of power in its favor by lessening fears of China’s economic power, which will enable countries in the Western Pacific to freely choose alignment with the United States.

UNSCR 1325 - WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

On October 31, 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted the Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325), formally recognizing the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and children and acknowledging that women can and should play a role in conflict prevention and peace-building processes. UNSCR 1325 calls on all governmental and non-governmental actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all peace and security efforts.² The Resolution identifies four pillars under which actors can implement the WPS agenda:

- Participation: increased representation of women at all levels of decision-making in the areas of conflict prevention, conflict management, and conflict resolution;

² "What is UNSCR 1325? ," last modified September 14, https://www.usip.org/gender_peacebuilding/about_UNSCR_1325.

- Protection: protect women and girls during and after conflict;
- Prevention: improve strategies to prevent violence against women, such as strengthening women's rights under national law, prosecuting those responsible for violations of international law, and supporting women's peace initiatives and conflict resolution processes;
- Relief and Recovery: address women's specific needs in all aspects of conflict, from repatriation and resettlement to rehabilitation, reintegration, and post-conflict reconstruction.³

Although UNSCR 1325 does not explicitly highlight economic prosperity or women's economic inclusion as priorities, studies indicate that political stability and economic growth are directly connected.⁴ According to the World Bank, fragility, conflict, and violence (FCV) reduces GDP growth by an average of two percent, and countries experiencing FCV will experience severe recession.⁵ The World Bank's strategy to counter FCV includes enabling the growth of small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) – signaling its belief that economic growth is crucial to ensure success. Since female SME ownership lags men's (women own only one in three small, medium, and large businesses),⁶ an opportunity exists to increase economic prosperity and minimize conflict through the WPS agenda.

Fifty-three percent (103 countries) of UN member states have adopted WPS national action plans, including the Philippines (2010), the United States (2011), Australia (2012),

³ "Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security," last modified September 14, <https://peacemaker.un.org/wps/normative-frameworks/un-security-council-resolutions>.

⁴ Ifeanyi Mbukanma, Ravinder Rena and Kelechi Johnmary Ani, *The Relationship between Political Stability and GDP Growth: A Comparative Analysis of the Brics Nations*, Vol. 15, 2019), 18.

⁵ "People Peace Prosperity," last modified October 2, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/brief/people-peace-prosperity>.

⁶ "Women Entrepreneurs Needed - Stat!" last modified March 5, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/women-entrepreneurs-needed-stat>.

Indonesia (2014), and the Solomon Islands (2017) – all of which have an interest in stability in the Western Pacific. China – along with Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, the Maldives, and Taiwan – has not developed a national action plan.

THE UNITED STATES AND THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

The United States codified its commitment to the WPS agenda with the Women Peace and Security Act of 2017 and released its Strategy on Women, Peace and Security (the Strategy) in June 2019, noting that “...societies that empower women to participate fully in civic and economic life are more prosperous.”⁷ It underscores the linkage between stability and economic prosperity, noting that 14 of the 17 lowest-scoring countries on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) Index for Gender Discrimination have experienced armed conflict in the last two decades.⁸ The inclusion of women’s economic empowerment in two of its strategic objectives would be complementary:

- “Women are more prepared and increasingly able to participate in efforts that promote stable and lasting peace;
- Women and girls are safer, better protected, and have equal access to government and private assistance programs.”⁹

The Strategy’s lines of effort – to adjust U.S. government programming to ensure equality and to encourage partner governments to do the same – further support this premise.

The Biden-Harris Administration, in its National Security Strategic Guidance, acknowledges that globalization links the United States’ fate to global events, notes that the

⁷ U.S. President, *United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security* (Washington, DC: White House,[2019]), 2. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov>.

⁸ U.S. President, *United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security* , 4.

⁹ U.S. President, *United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security* , 5.

expansion of economic prosperity and opportunity is a national security priority, and reaffirms the United States' deep connection to the Indo-Pacific, pledging to invest in women and girls to build a more prosperous world. Further, the Administration's guidance states that advancing this agenda to drive inclusive, broad-based prosperity will enable the United States to win the strategic competition with China. Ensuring women have easier access to the labor market and economy to spur economic growth, promote political stability, and strengthen alliances is the logical next step.

INVESTING IN MICROFINANCE AND BANKING TOOLS FOR WOMEN

According to the World Bank, one-third of the decline in poverty and inequality in Latin America in the 1990s and early 2000s resulted from increased female labor force participation.¹⁰ In other words, a nation's economy benefits when women participate in the workforce. The United States has an opportunity to replicate this success in the Western Pacific by increasing its investments in women's economic prosperity. Programs that offer women microloans and enable access to financial literacy training and banking tools can catalyze women's economic advancement and contribute to economic growth. In developing economies, limited access to capital is one of the main factors restraining growth among female-owned small businesses, so small infusions of cash may be enough to increase their income and prosperity. In addition, when capital infusions – such as livestock – are combined with specific training, the results can be transformative. In Bangladesh, women transitioned from casual day labor to self-employment and significantly increased their earnings after receiving livestock valued at approximately \$140,

¹⁰ Sarah Hendriks, "The Role of Financial Inclusion in Driving Women's Economic Empowerment," *Development in Practice* 29, no. 8 (Nov 17, 2019), 1034. doi:10.1080/09614524.2019.1660308. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09614524.2019.1660308>.

intensive asset-specific training, and visits by a specialist.¹¹ These positive effects were still evident four years later.

Yet increased income has little long-term impact if women do not have access to the banking tools that enable them to control their earnings. When female micro-entrepreneurs (i.e., small business owners with fewer than nine employees) have their own savings accounts, they can invest a portion of those funds back into their businesses, reduce their reliance on short-term debt, and protect their earnings from family or community pressures to share them with others. In the Philippines, women with savings accounts reported increased decision-making ability and control over their assets.¹²

In the FY 2022-2026 Joint Strategic Plan, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Department of State (State) set a goal to “support inclusive and sustainable economic growth and opportunity for communities around the globe,”¹³ leveraging foreign assistance programs to level the playing field, build market-based economies, and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. The WPS agenda nests easily inside this strategic goal and, with U.S. missions in more than 180 countries worldwide, State and USAID are uniquely positioned to advance it.

According to the OECD, U.S. foreign assistance dedicated to bilateral programs with a principal objective of advancing gender equality is roughly 0.008 percent of U.S. GDP or \$1.5 billion per year.¹⁴ In contrast, U.S. Department of Defense outlays for FY 2021 were 3.3 percent

¹¹ Mayra Buvinić and Rebecca Furst-Nichols, "Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment: What Works?" *The World Bank Research Observer* 31, no. 1 (Feb 1, 2016), 64. doi:10.1093/wbro/lku013. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44650019>.

¹² Mayra Buvinić, "Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment: What Works?" 65.

¹³ U.S. Secretary of State and USAID Administrator, *Joint Strategic Plan FY 2022-2026* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2022), 3.

¹⁴ Mayra Buvinić, Cindy Huang and Charles Kenny, "Promoting WEP through US Foreign and Development Policy," *Center for Global Development* (September 6, 2016), 2.

<http://www.cgdev.org/publication/promoting-womenseconomicempowerment-us-foreign-development-policy>.

of U.S. GDP or roughly \$717 billion.¹⁵ Allocating an additional \$1 billion in funding could not only support programs that close the economic gender gap but also mobilize governments to take action to promote gender equality, such as extending financial tools to women and supporting girls' education. A minimal investment in the WPS economic agenda can result in economic prosperity for women and Indo-Pacific nations, pushing them closer to the United States and its strategic priorities.

ADDRESSING GENDERED LAWS AND POLICIES

According to the 2016 World Bank report, *Women, Business and the Law 2016: Getting to Equal*, gender-based discrimination is embedded into the law in more than 150 countries and perpetuates inequalities in pay, hiring practices, and professional advancement for women. The restrictions entrenched in legislation include obtaining a national ID card, registering a business, or signing a contract. In the Philippines, for example, married women face more difficulty getting a passport – a form of identification – than married men.¹⁶ As noted above, access to a savings account can have a significant impact on a woman and her family, but it is difficult – if not impossible – to open one without identification. The United States can augment existing mechanisms to help Indo-Pacific governments remove discriminatory laws and policies, giving women an opportunity to contribute to their countries' developing economies.

In many countries, laws prohibit women from acquiring, managing, or controlling property. Revising inheritance laws to give women equal access to property can have significant

¹⁵ “Defense Outlays and Forecast in the United States from 2000 to 2032,” Statista, accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/217581/outlays-for-defense-and-forecast-in-the-us-as-a-percentage-of-the-gdp/>

¹⁶ Sarah Iqbal, *Women, Business and the Law 2016: Getting to Equal*, Online-Ausg. ed. (Washington, D.C: The World Bank, 2015), 9. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-0677-3. <http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/book/10.1596/978-1-4648-0677-3>.

positive outcomes. For example, a 1994 revision of the Hindu Succession Act in India gave women and men the same inheritance rights and resulted in increased spending on girls' education. Moreover, researchers found that women affected by the revision were more likely to have bank accounts and acquired greater bargaining power in the home.¹⁷ More investment in girls' education gives young women the chance to continue – perhaps complete – their secondary school education, opening the doors to new employment opportunities. As active participants in the formal economy, these women contribute to their country's GDP and overall economic prosperity.

Gender diversity in the workplace can result in an average GDP increase of 35 percent in developing countries.¹⁸ Countries that exclude women from certain labor sectors or limit the number of hours they can work constrain not only women's earning potential but their country's potential for GDP growth. Removing restrictions like these enables women to bring new perspectives to the workplace and contribute to gains in productivity and growth.

In more than half of East Asia and the Pacific economies, employers assume 100 percent of maternity leave costs and, therefore, may be inclined to exclude women of childbearing age from hiring consideration.¹⁹ However, when parental leave schemes are fully or even partially publicly financed, women are less likely to encounter this disadvantage.

Given the Biden-Harris Administration's "whole of government" approach to women's empowerment and economic prosperity, it is appropriate to engage U.S. government agencies like the Department of Justice and the Department of Defense in the effort to eliminate the

¹⁷ Iqbal, *Women, Business and the Law 2016: Getting to Equal*, 13.

¹⁸ "Economic Gains from Gender Inclusion: Even Greater than You Thought," last modified November 28, accessed September 1, 2022, <https://blogs.imf.org/2018/11/28/economic-gains-from-gender-inclusion-even-greater-than-you-thought/>.

¹⁹ Iqbal, *Women, Business and the Law 2016: Getting to Equal*, 16.

gendered laws and policies that penalize women economically. The mandate of the Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training (OPDAT) in the Department of Justice is to “strengthen the link between security sector assistance and tangible law enforcement and *justice sector* outcomes [emphasis added].”²⁰ While the program has focused on criminal justice reform since its inception in 1991, no regulation prohibits the inclusion of civil legislative and policy reform. Pursuing justice reform through a gendered lens ensures the revision or removal of discriminatory policies that adversely affect women and ultimately hamper economic growth. The U.S. Department of Defense June 2020 WPS Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan includes two lines of effort that can justify civil legislative reform:

- “Adjust U.S. international programs to improve outcomes in equality for, and the empowerment of, women;
- Encourage partner nation governments to adopt policies, plans, and capacity to improve the meaningful participation of women in processes connected to peace and security and decision-making institutions.”²¹

The Department of Defense already funds some OPDAT gender-based violence (GBV) programming in Asia, which could be expanded to include the revision of gendered laws that prevent women from accessing the labor market.

The United States should double down on its “whole of government” pledge to advance the WPS agenda by increasing the allocation of funding to women-centered initiatives that will allow agencies like the Departments of State, Defense, and Justice to expand existing and establish new programs that support women’s economic inclusion.

²⁰ “Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training,” accessed October 4, 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/criminal-opdat>.

²¹ U.S. Secretary of Defense, *DOD WPS Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2020), 9.

ADVANCING THE WPS AGENDA IN INTERNATIONAL FORA

In 2021, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) released the *ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security*, which summarized its progress in advancing the WPS agenda. Only two of 10 ASEAN member states have a WPS National Action Plan. In December 2022 (more than two decades after UNSCR 1325), ASEAN published its WPS Regional Plan of Action (RPA), which links gender equality to sustainable peace and security in the region. This positive development may spur the remaining ASEAN member states to start drafting their own National Action Plans. As an ASEAN observer, the United States should partner with the ASEAN Secretariat to encourage all ASEAN member states to develop and implement WPS action plans. Most ASEAN nations implement WPS through the lens of peacekeeping and political participation – understandable since several of them have experienced or are experiencing conflict. The availability of female peacekeepers is vital during conflict, and female participation in government brings new and valuable perspectives to the political process, but peacekeeping and political participation will have little long-term impact if women are not included in their country’s economy. ASEAN member states may argue that other issues – such as Chinese aggression in the South China Sea – are more pressing. However, the United States and the ASEAN Secretariat have established a clear linkage between WPS, economic prosperity, and national security. Developing a WPS national action plan that calls for women’s economic inclusion can provide ASEAN countries the economic independence that will enable them to distance themselves from China.

In 2015, all 193 UN member countries committed to promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls, but at the current rate of progress they will need another 217 years

to achieve gender parity.²² As a member of the Group of 20 (G20), the United States can encourage fellow members to accelerate their efforts to attain gender equality; those members can then create a multiplier effect by leveraging their membership in other regional fora to further promote the WPS agenda. Indonesia – the only Southeast Asian country in the G20 – is uniquely positioned to promote the WPS agenda in the region. G20 economies – which account for 85 percent of the global economy, 80 percent of world trade, and two-thirds of the world’s population²³ – can significantly impact the WPS agenda.

In 2015, 200 million fewer women than men owned mobile phones.²⁴ In the developing world, where people use their mobile phones to access financial tools, this results in female exclusion from banking services and economic opportunities. Bridging the digital gender divide can provide new opportunities for women in education and technology. Developing economies cannot afford to sideline potential labor market participants because of gender if they want to realize GDP growth and greater economic independence.

A WOMAN’S PLACE IS IN THE HOME

Skeptics argue that efforts to empower women economically are counter to the religious cultures of Southeast Asia. At least 15 percent of the populations of four countries in the region identify as Muslim. Muslims are the majority in Indonesia²⁵ and Brunei;²⁶ Islam is the official

²² Marianne Dutkiewicz and Amanda Ellis, "Women's Economic Empowerment and the G20 Agenda," *Analysis from the East-West Center*, no. No. 135 (Feb., 2018), 2. doi:10.1057/9781137005236_11.

²³ Dutkiewicz, "Women's Economic Empowerment and the G20 Agenda," 2.

²⁴ Dutkiewicz, "Women's Economic Empowerment and the G20 Agenda," 2.

²⁵ "Indonesia," CIA World Factbook, accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/indonesia/#people-and-society>

²⁶ "Brunei," CIA World Factbook, accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/brunei/#people-and-society>

religion in Brunei²⁷ and Malaysia.²⁸ Misunderstandings of the Quran's teachings have led some to believe that Islam forbids women's participation in the economy. In fact, the reverse is true: Prophet Muhammad granted economic rights to women through dowry, inheritance, and employment.

According to Prophet Muhammad, women are a part of society and have the right to own property and manage their finances.²⁹ In fact, the Prophet's position on women's economic empowerment is visible throughout his teachings. The dowry in Islamic marriage law is "a mandatory gift from the groom *to the bride* [emphasis added],"³⁰ and is the wife's absolute property – not her husband's, not her family's. When a woman was left in poverty because her brother-in-law took all the inheritance after her husband's death, the Prophet fought for her inheritance rights in accordance with the Quran: "...for women, there is the right to share...from the inheritance of the mother-father and their relatives..."³¹ Quran 4:32 says in part, "Men shall have a share according to what they have earned, and women shall have a share according to what they have earned."³² A woman may choose to work inside the home or outside, and her husband has no right to take earnings without her permission. The Islamic faith views work as beneficial to the woman, her family, and her community. Even the Prophet's wives worked: one was a successful businesswoman in Mecca, another was a doctor, and two others were tradeswomen. The idea that Islam forbids women's economic empowerment is proven erroneous by Prophet Muhammad's teachings. Rather, Southeast Asian leaders can leverage the

²⁷ "Brunei," CIA World Factbook

²⁸ "Malaysia," CIA World Factbook, accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/malaysia/#people-and-society>

²⁹ Umma Farida, Abdurrohman Kasdi, Yuyun Affandi, "The Economic Empowerment of Women in the Hadith and Its Application in the Indonesian Context," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 24, no. 1 (July 2022): 3.

³⁰ Farida, Kasdi, and Affandi, "The Economic Empowerment of Women," 4.

³¹ Farida, Kasdi, and Affandi, "The Economic Empowerment of Women," 5.

³² Quran 4:32.

Quran's teachings to convince those resistant to embracing change and advancing economic opportunities for women.

CONCLUSION

Through its activities in the South China Sea and elsewhere, China continues to make clear its intent to become a global power. In the Indo-Pacific, China is flexing its muscles militarily and economically by challenging freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and advancing infrastructure and trade deals (such as the Belt and Road Initiative). While countries in the region may welcome opportunities for economic growth, they risk greater economic dependence on China. As participants in the global economy, their economic condition impacts the United States and its national security. Supporting women's economic empowerment in the region allows the United States to address three strategic priorities that impact U.S. national security: advancement of the WPS agenda, promotion of economic prosperity, and countering China's influence. Achieving these objectives will demonstrate to Southeast Asian nations that the United States is an effective counterweight against Chinese economic pressure, leading them to choose freely to strengthen alliances with the United States.

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