

**Remarks at RSIS Distinguished Public Lecture
Chairman John McCain
Friday, June 3, 2016**

[As Prepared for Delivery]

Thank you to RSIS for hosting me today and to Ambassador Ong for that kind introduction. It is always great to return to the Lion City, especially for the Shangri-la Dialogue. Singapore continues to be an engine for diplomatic and economic leadership in Southeast Asia, and America is grateful to be your partner.

A number of Senators in our delegation are converging here in Singapore today after traveling to various locations throughout Asia this past week. Senators Sullivan, Gardner, and Ernst visited South Korea last weekend to discuss security matters with our alliance partners. They also visited Burma to lend their support to the promising democratic transition that continues to unfold in that country.

Senator Cotton and I came to Singapore today by way of U.S. Pacific Command in Hawaii, where we met with Admiral Harry Harris and our other commanders. I am pleased and grateful that the Admiral and his staff are here with us this afternoon. Harry is doing an excellent job, and he has the full support of the United States Senate.

After the Shangri-la Dialogue, our delegation of seven Senators will fly together to Taipei to see President Tsai and her new team. I am encouraged to see yet another peaceful, democratic transition in Taiwan, and a new leader as capable as President Tsai. It was the Congress of the United States that passed the Taiwan Relations Act. And nearly forty years later, we stand firmly behind our commitments to Taiwan, and look forward to this new chapter in our relationship.

So just consider: Here in Singapore, we have the largest congressional delegation ever to attend Shangri-la. We have the Secretary of Defense and other members of the President's national security team. We have the PACOM commander and the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral John Richardson. This collection of civilian and military leaders speaks volumes about America's enduring, bipartisan commitment to the Asia-Pacific region.

As a Pacific nation, the United States recognizes that much of the history of the 21st century will be written here in this region. Tremendous opportunities lie ahead. And I am confident we can seize these opportunities together if we stay true to the principles that brought us to this fortunate moment in the history of Asia.

Seventy years ago, out of the ashes of world war, America and our allies and partners built a rules-based international order—one based on the principles of good governance and the rule of law, free peoples and free markets, open seas and open skies, and the conviction that wars of aggression should be relegated to the bloody past. Put simply: These ideas have changed the fortunes of Asia forever.

An unprecedented era of peace and security has enabled hundreds of millions of Asians to lift themselves out of poverty and transform the economies of the region. Asia is now at the teeming center of the global marketplace. More citizens of Asia than ever before are now free to speak their minds and make their own choices. And as they secured these basic rights, Asians by the millions have voted to elect their own leaders, live under laws of their own making, and stand up democratic governments. Taken together, I believe this Asia—the peaceful, prosperous, democratic Asia—is the most remarkable rising power in the world today.

None of this was preordained. It is certainly true that a rules-based international order has succeeded because of the inherent appeal of its values and the material gains they foster. But good ideas need a champion. And that is what America and the nations of this region have done together. We have marshalled our power and influence. We have borne the costs and the sacrifices. We have made the choice to defend the principles of the rules-based order here in Asia. And now we must choose again.

Southeast Asia faces a choice. As a frequent visitor to this region, I have lived to see things I never thought possible. Singapore has transformed itself from a small port town to a global financial hub. The Philippines is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Burma is on a path to democracy. Indonesia has become an emerging regional leader. America and Vietnam have laid down the burdens of history and are building a new economic and security partnership. I could go on.

For too long, the nations of Southeast Asia were treated as objects in the game of great power politics. But no more. Acting together in ASEAN, Southeast Asia is setting the agenda for the region and for the world: knocking down trade barriers, protecting human rights, deepening security cooperation, and peacefully managing international disputes. The nations of Southeast Asia are earning a seat at the high table of global politics. But this pride of place comes with responsibilities, not just benefits.

The choice for Southeast Asia in the 21st century is not between the United States and China, as some would make it out to be. Instead it is a choice between two

futures—one in which the rules-based order is upheld and its benefits expanded to ever more people in Asia, or a darker future that resembles the past in this region and the world, where might makes right, and bullies set the rules and break them.

The rules-based order has not and will not enforce itself here in Southeast Asia. Nor can America, despite its great power, achieve this feat alone. It requires its stakeholders, including the nations of Southeast Asia, to uphold its principles, especially when they are challenged. America and the world are counting on the nations of Southeast Asia to recommit their power and resolve to upholding this system on which our shared security and prosperity depend.

A major test will come later this month when the Permanent Court of Arbitration is expected to rule on the case filed by the Government of the Philippines concerning disputed areas of the South China Sea. There is no principle more fundamental to the rules-based order than the rule of law. But its enforcement requires serious political will among defenders of the law. The legitimacy of this arbitration decision will be derived from the actions of nations that are not parties to the case, especially those in Southeast Asia. With the legitimacy and integrity of the rule of law now at stake, the world is looking to see what choice Southeast Asia makes.

Like Southeast Asia, China also faces a choice. No nation has benefitted more from the rules-based order than China. In just a single generation, China has become an economic superpower and a major player in international affairs. No nation in history has risen so high, so fast, and in so many different dimensions. And no nation has been a greater advocate for China's success than America. Let me repeat: No nation has done as much to contribute to what China calls its "peaceful rise" as the United States of America.

I had the opportunity to be present in the Great Hall of the People in 1978, in the early days of normalized relations between China and the United States. Deng Xiaoping was walking around the reception drinking toasts with all of the American visitors. It wasn't long before Deng was by far the most sober man in the room, and we realized that he had been drinking water the whole time. It is amazing and inspiring to see how far China has come since then.

Regrettably, in recent years, there have been disturbing signs that China is maneuvering toward a policy of intimidation and coercion—harassing fisherman from the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia...using trade as a weapon in disputes with its neighbors...using cyber to steal intellectual property from foreign businesses to benefit its own industries...conducting dangerous intercepts

of military aircraft flying in accordance with international law...and in the South China Sea, shattering the commitments it made to its neighbors in the 2002 Declaration of Conduct, as well as more recent commitments to the U.S. Government, by conducting reclamation on disputed features and militarizing the South China Sea at a startling and destabilizing rate.

The choice for China is how it uses its growing power and position. China could continue to coerce and intimidate its neighbors and unilaterally enforce its territorial claims. It could pursue mercantilist economic policies. And it could engage in a zero-sum game for regional power and influence. China could do all of this, and it would harm the interests of every nation in this region, including its own.

Alternatively, China could choose a better path. It could cooperate with its neighbors and manage disputes peacefully, consistent with the same international rules that have benefited China so greatly. It could expand free and open trade with the region and the world. And it could expand cooperation with other Pacific powers on regional security challenges, from piracy to stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Just as it is for Southeast Asia, the upcoming arbitration decision will be a test for China. This decision should not be viewed by China as a suggestion, but as a law that China must acknowledge, abide by, and uphold. The region and the world will be watching to see what choice China makes.

In short, China can choose to disrupt the rules-based order. Or it can choose to become a vital partner in maintaining it. I fear the consequences if China chooses the path of disruption. But I am confident that if China chooses the path of partnership and cooperation, China's growing influence will be welcomed by the international community. And the benefits of greater security and prosperity will extend to more citizens of this region than ever before, China's included.

Finally, America also has a profound choice to make—whether we will remain actively engaged in the world as the indispensable partner to countries that seek, as we do, to uphold the global security and economic order ... or whether we will not.

I know that many are questioning what choice America will make. And I understand why. America has its share of challenges these days—a difficult long-term fiscal situation, structural adjustments in our economy that have caused real

dislocation, the devastating impact that sequestration is having on our military, and a gridlocked politics that makes many of our hard problems even harder to solve.

Doubts about America's role in the world are not new. In fact, one of the great recurring themes of our history is how routinely America has been counted out, written off, and talked down. Indeed, even Lee Kuan Yew predicted in 1975 that the era of American influence in Southeast Asia was over. Fortunately, this was one of the rare instances in which my old friend got something wrong.

It was once said that God has a special providence for fools, drunks, and the United States of America. I hope so. But there are other reasons for America's staying power. Yes, we have had inherent strengths. We have them still. But ultimately, it came down to the choices we made: We chose to play a leadership role in the world, not to abandon our allies and partners, and to bear the costs of doing so.

That choice has, at times, been unpopular. But it was, and still is, the right choice. And you need to know that it is a choice that millions and millions of Americans—and many of us who speak on their behalf—are still prepared to make today.

America will continue expanding free markets and free trade for the simple reason that it works. It benefits us. And for that reason, I will continue to press for congressional ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the largest regional trade agreement in history. The TPP offers a historic opportunity to reduce trade barriers, open new markets, promote exports, and keep U.S. companies competitive in one of the most economically vibrant and fastest-growing regions in the world. Ratification would also be a vital demonstration of America's enduring commitment to prosperity in Asia and deepening our relationships with regional allies and partners. America must get this right. I will not rest until we do.

America will also continue to protect freedom of the seas, because it is a vital part of the rules-based order. But most importantly, we will do so because the freedom of the seas is in America's DNA. With our Declaration of Independence, America's Founding Fathers rebelled against a king that had "plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts" and "taken [our citizens] captive on the high seas." The first global deployment of the U.S. Navy was to defend freedom of the seas against the Barbary pirates. Freedom of the seas—and the other global commons—is not a choice for America. It is an essential part of who we are as a people.

I am confident that America will continue to maintain a favorable military balance in the Asia-Pacific region that secures our enduring national interests, upholds our

treaty commitments, and safeguards open seas and open commerce. We will continue to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, as we have done here in the Western Pacific for more than a century. The United States will soon have two aircraft carriers operating together in the Pacific, which is a strong statement about America's enduring commitment to regional security. And we will continue to maintain forward and ready forces in the Pacific while updating our posture to meet current and future threats. As part of this, I believe the next Administration should conduct a new global force posture review, including a fresh look at further steps to enhance U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

I am also confident that America will continue to strengthen our alliances and develop new partnerships. As we improve relationships, America will continue to do the important work of integrating these bilateral relationships into a broader network of regional partnerships based on common interests and shared values.

The Senate Armed Services Committee will continue to do its part. Last year, Senator Jack Reed and I worked together to create the Maritime Security Initiative. This half-a-billion dollar effort is enabling the Department of Defense to build the maritime capacity of our Southeast Asian partners. And I am happy to report that this year, the Committee acted in a bipartisan fashion to upgrade this initiative and provide new resources toward this effort.

My friends: America has faced far more profound problems in my lifetime than anything we confront today, and we not only made it through these earlier challenges, we came out stronger and better-off. We have consistently arisen to new and brighter mornings in America. America has been counted out before, but we've always proved the doubters wrong. No one has ever made money betting against America, and my friends, I don't think now is a good time to start.

I am an optimist about America's future. I am confident in America because our economy remains the most dynamic driver of global growth, and its capacity for reinvention and innovation is virtually limitless.

I am confident in America because new technologies are unlocking vast sources of energy in our country, and America is now on a path to becoming a net exporter of oil and gas.

I am confident in America because our institutions of higher-education are the envy of the world, because our society continues to reward risk-taking and an

entrepreneurial spirit, and because we continue to attract the best and the brightest talent from across the globe and integrate it into our diverse society.

I am confident in America because the U.S. military remains the most effective and combat-proven force in the world.

And though we Americans will always have plenty of spirited debates, I am confident in America because our political system still has the capacity to do big important things that are vital to America's future.

Winston Churchill once said: “You can always count on Americans to do the right thing—after they've tried everything else.” Perhaps there is something to that. But when it comes to the choice of whether to draw inward, or to remain engaged in Asia and the world, I believe the choice is clear. And I believe America will do the right thing to sustain our historic role as a Pacific power long into the future.

America is a democracy. As such, we sometimes have a tendency to be self-critical and to dwell on our own challenges and weaknesses. But this should not cause us to lose sight of our many opportunities and strengths. Nor should it cause us to forget that most countries in the world, including in Asia, face far more daunting problems that they would happily trade for the challenges we face in America. And we should remember that it is America’s democracy that gives us the flexibility and responsiveness to embrace a future of reform, renewal, and revitalization.

All that remains is for us to choose this future. I am confident we will.