

The South Pacific: Microcosm of Future US - China Competition?

Written by Joanne Wallis

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JOANNE WALLIS, SEP 19 2012

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's decision to attend the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in late August 2012 suggests that the South Pacific's strategic importance in the broader Asia-Pacific region is increasing. Indeed, the South Pacific may become a microcosm of how the Asia-Pacific's changing power structure could develop, as it provides a small-scale and relatively low-risk testing-ground where the United States and China can explore their capacity to project power, judge each others' responses, and potentially develop mechanisms for cooperation, rather than competition.

The theme of the 2012 Pacific Islands Forum meeting was 'Large Ocean Island States – the Pacific Challenge',[1] which highlighted that the islands of the South Pacific between them hold sovereignty over 20 million square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean. These islands lie across vital sea lines of communication between the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Southeast Asia. Therefore, they could offer strategically-important locations for military and naval access.

The South Pacific consists of three broad geographic and cultural areas: Melanesia, which comprises the arc of islands to the immediate north and east of Australia; Polynesia, which comprises the triangle of states above New Zealand and stretching up to Hawaii; and Micronesia, the band of islands to the north of Melanesia.

The United States' focus in the region is in Micronesia, where it controls Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. It also has Compacts of Free Association with the Marshall Islands, Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia, according to which it is obliged to provide public services, security and defence support. In Polynesia the United States also controls American Samoa. Most significantly, the United States has the Anderson Air Force Base on Guam, and the Ronald Reagan Missile Defence test site at its base on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

During the Cold War the United States engaged in strategic competition with the Soviet Union for influence in the South Pacific. However, after the end of that war the United States largely withdrew its presence in the region. Consequently, it reduced its aid program, halved the number of Peace Corps volunteers and closed aid and diplomatic posts.[2]

In contrast, China has been increasingly active in the South Pacific in the last few decades. China's interest was initially driven by its competition with Taiwan for diplomatic recognition. Although a truce (of sorts) has held since 2008, this competition has seen China and Taiwan engage in 'chequebook diplomacy' to win the favour of South Pacific states, and has resulted in China becoming the third-largest aid donor in the region, behind Australia and the United States.[3]

China's more recent interest may be due to its desire to access the South Pacific's natural resources, which include fisheries, timber, mineral and hydrocarbon deposits. And, regardless of their small size, each independent South Pacific state has a vote in international organisations, which China can seek to persuade them to use in pursuit of its interests. China also appears to have strategic interests in demonstrating its ability to project power in the region,

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and in potentially obtaining military and naval access as part of its 'island chain' defence strategy.[4] Although China will remain militarily inferior to the United States long into the future, there are claims that in the event of conflict China could use locations in the South Pacific to approach the United States asymmetrically, perhaps as part of a sea denial strategy.[5] The region also offers opportunities for signals intelligence monitoring, and China has already constructed a satellite tracking station in Kiribati (although it later had to be dismantled after Kiribati switched diplomatic recognition to Taiwan), which it is alleged to have used to monitor missile defence system tests in the Marshall Islands.[6]

China's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Cui Tiankai, declared at the recent Pacific Islands Forum meeting that China is 'here in this region not to seek any particular influence, still less dominance'.[7] Despite this, China has invested heavily in diplomacy, and is now said to have the highest number of diplomats in the region.[8] High-level Chinese officials have also undertaken a number of visits to the region, which have been reciprocated by South Pacific politicians and officials. China has also used tools like language training, student exchanges and tourism to build links. It also engages in military assistance and capacity-building programs.[9] China also seized the opportunity created by Australia's and New Zealand's attempts to isolate the military regime in Fiji by building links with the Melanesian Spearhead Group, in which Fiji is an active member.

Clinton has admitted United States' concern about China's increasing presence. For example, in her testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in March 2011 she stated: 'let's just talk... straight Realpolitik... We are in a competition with China. Take Papua New Guinea, huge energy find... ExxonMobil is producing it. China is there every day in every way trying to figure out how it's going to come in behind us, come in under us'.[10] At the 2012 Pacific Islands Forum meeting Clinton was more circumspect, and in response to questions concerning China's presence in the region, declared that 'the Pacific is big enough for all of us'.[11]

However, the fact that Clinton attended the Forum meeting highlights Washington's increased sensitivity to growing Chinese influence in the South Pacific. Consequently, the United States has resumed a more active role in the region. Senior officials have conducted tours, the United States has bolstered its diplomatic presence and it has opened a USAID office in Papua New Guinea. It has also increased its military presence, with the relocation of marines from Okinawa to Guam, and via the expansion of its 'shiprider' program, under which ships and aircraft from the United States Coast Guard (and now Navy), host law enforcement officers from South Pacific states and patrol their sovereign waters.[12]

Given the United States' and China's increasing focus on the South Pacific, the region might become a microcosm of broader emerging strategic rivalry between the two powers. Pessimistic analyses would predict that China and the United States (and its ally Australia) will engage in a zero-sum competition for regional influence, as occurred during the Cold War. Robert Kaplan has argued that it is 'not hard to imagine... a replay of the decades-long Cold War, with the center of gravity not in the heart of Europe but, rather, among Pacific atolls'.[13] If this competition took on a military dimension it could come to a head if there is a clash between China's island chain strategy and the United States' presence in Micronesia. Military bases in the region might also mean that South Pacific states could be dragged into a conflict elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific, such as in the South China Sea.

But there may be room for optimism. Clinton has argued that, although 'there are those who see America's renewed engagements... perhaps as a hedge against particular countries... the United States welcomes cooperation with a number of partners, including... China'.[14] There is potential for the United States (and its ally Australia) to try to draw China into a more cooperative approach to development and security, particularly by working through regional multilateral institutions. They could also encourage China to carry out joint projects with Western states, to ensure the effectiveness and coordination of aid. Until recently China has been reluctant to do so, but Tiankai has agreed that China is 'ready to exchange views, to compare respective practice and where possible and feasible, we're open to work with them [Western states] for the benefit of the recipient countries'.[15] Reflecting this new approach, China has taken up observer status on the OECD Development Assistance Committee. It has also agreed to partner with New Zealand to improve water provision in the Cook Islands.[16] Clinton welcomed the announcement of the China-New Zealand partnership, declaring that 'New Zealand sets a good example for working with China'.[17]

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Evidence of an emerging willingness by China, the United States and other Western states to cooperate in the South Pacific may suggest that proposals for the United States to engage and cooperate with China, perhaps in a 'concert of powers' model,[18] could succeed in the future. These proposals could be developed on a relatively small and low-risk scale in the South Pacific, so that the lessons learnt and the confidence gained may benefit broader Asia-Pacific stability and security.

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[1] Henry Puna, 'Large Ocean Island States – the Pacific Challenge', letter to Pacific Island Forum leaders from the Prime Minister of Cook Islands, available from: <http://www.forumsec.org/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/Forum%20Theme%202012.pdf>.

[2] Thomas Lum and Bruce Vaughn, *The Southwest Pacific: U.S. Interests and China's Growing Influence*, CRS Report for Congress RL34086, Washington, Congressional Research Service, 6 July 2007.

[3] Fergus Hanson and Mary Fifta, 'China in the Pacific: The New Banker in Town', Policy Brief, Sydney, Lowy Institute for International Policy, April 2011.

[4] David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002.

[5] Stratfor, 'Island Strategy: Why Fiji May Matter', 12 June 2000, <http://www.stratfor.com>.

[6] Joel Atkinson, 'China-Taiwan diplomatic competition and the Pacific Islands', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2010, p. 407-427.

[7] 'China in Pacific for common development: Chinese vice FM', *People's Daily Online*, 1 September 2012.

[8] Graeme Dobell, 'China and Taiwan in the South Pacific: Diplomatic Chess versus Pacific Political Rugby', CSCSD Occasional Paper Number 1, May 2007.

[9] Tamara Renee Shie, 'Rising Chinese Influence in the South Pacific: Beijing's Island Fever', in Anne-Marie Brady (ed.), *Looking North, Looking South: China, Taiwan and the South Pacific*, Singapore, World Scientific Publishing Company, 2010.

[10] Reuters, 'Clinton says China seeks to outflank Exxon in Papua New Guinea', 2 March 2011.

[11] Hillary Rodham Clinton, 'Commemorating U.S. Peace and Security Partnerships in the Pacific', speech at Tamarind House, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 31 August 2012.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Robert D. Kaplan, 'How We Would Fight China', *Atlantic Magazine*, June 2005.

[14] Hillary Rodham Clinton, 'Commemorating U.S. Peace and Security Partnerships in the Pacific', speech at Tamarind House, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 31 August 2012.

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[15] 'China in Pacific for common development: Chinese vice FM', *People's Daily Online*, 1 September 2012.

[16] 'NZ to build Pacific assistance with China', *China Daily*, 30 August 2012.

[17] Hillary Rodham Clinton, 'Remarks with New Zealand Prime Minister Key', New Zealand High Commissioner's Residence, Cook Islands, 31 August 2012.

[18] Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power*, Collingwood, Black Inc., 2012.

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