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China-US Power Politics in the Pacific

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SABER SALEM, JUL 23 2020

The Pacific region is becoming a pawn in the game of power politics among traditional and regional powers over recent years. The assertive and bold Chinese behaviour in the region has triggered the US to make a strong comeback to its backyard waters. Regional powers such as Australia, New Zealand and Japan bandwagon with the US to curtail Chinese expansionism and threatening power posturing in the Blue Pacific in general and South China Sea (SCS) region in particular. China on the other hand has exploited the isolationist foreign policy adopted by the inward-looking US president Trump to expand its global reach as quickly and effectively as possible, especially during the spread of COVID-19. The outbreak of COVID-19, originating in China and causing a global pandemic, has brought the world to its knees with no signs of abating in sight. Nevertheless, the outbreak has created an opportune moment for the People's Republic of China (PRC) to flex its military muscles and expand its maritime reach particularly in the SCS and 'harass' its neighbours with Taiwan being particularly targeted. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) sunk a Vietnamese fishing trawler in March. Also in March, Beijing conducted military exercises in the SCS.

These renewed Chinese posturings comes at a time when both regional and extra-regional powers are grappling with the fast-pace outbreak of the COVID-19 and are intensively preoccupied to arrest the transmission of the disease. In April, US warships halted their routine operations in the Asia-Pacific waters after the outbreak of COVID-19 aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier where nearly 800 of its personnel were infected and one sailor died. Regardless of its strong denials the COVID-19 outbreak has provided PRC with the opportunity to ensure military gains beyond its continental shelf given that the US, would likely not react immediately due to the pandemic. For Beijing the situation was ripe to cast its net as wide as it possibly could given its close proximity to the region – giving it a comparative advantage over the US.

However, despite being in a disadvantaged position during the COVID-19 pandemic, the US has reacted strongly by rolling out technologically advanced weaponry and strategy in a bid to 'close a wide missile gap' with PRC. There are reports that the Trump administration is aiming to deploy 'long-range, ground-launched cruise missiles' to the Asia-Pacific region. It is also fast-tracking deployment of new 'long-range anti-ship missiles' in decades. These strategic moves has infuriated Beijing, which urged US to "be cautious in word and deed," and "stop moving chess pieces around" the region, and to "stop flexing its military muscles around China." It also warned that Beijing would "not stand by and firmly oppose that."

Sinologists on the other hand argue, during the Russo-US cold war ideological rivalry, China mostly laid low and remained off the US radar. During this long period the US largely stood by while Chinese military strategists significantly expanded its military fire-power and technological advancements, given that it was not party to the cold war Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INFT). The treaty banned the US and former Soviet Union from developing ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of 500 to 5500 kilometres. Now the PLA, China's armed forces, possess some of the most sophisticated long range missiles that arguably out range those of US and its regional allies. It is due in large part to this 'range war' that the US is ramping up its military arsenal to counter Beijing's upper hand in land-based cruise and ballistic missiles.

The Pacific region is becoming a microcosm of military confrontation between the two military giants. This begs the question as to why the PRC is interested in the Pacific. The first luring element is Beijing's strategic interest in

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showcasing its military might and as part of its 'island chain' defence strategy to get military and navel access in the region. It is also claimed that in the event of a war with the US, China could resort to its sea denial strategy, which is basically meant to approach US 'asymmetrically'. The region also provides an excellent opportunity for 'Signals Intelligence Monitoring'. Before switching diplomatic allegiance to Taiwan, China had built a satellite tracking station in Kiribati. However, in 2019 the Kiribati government once again switched its diplomatic recognition to China. It is alleged that a Chinese satellite stationed in Kiribati could be used to monitor US defence system test site in Marshall Islands.

Furthermore, Beijing's interest in the Pacific region also stems from its strategy to dislodge the United States as a dominant power. The geostrategic location of the Pacific islands have high strategic potential for the PLA to deny US military intelligence gathering and naval manoeuvring rights across the Indo-Pacific. Presence of PLA in this strategic location, which is link to second island chain, will threaten US military bases in the region as well as complicating its ability to operate unchallenged. In such an eventuality, the US activities will be severely curtailed and it would not remain a regional hegemon any more. It is in this spirit that PRC is using its soft power, foreign aid, with the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) to entrench its footprint there.

In addition, Beijing's 'dollar diplomacy', as it is commonly known, has been successful in alluring the cash-starved island nations to recognise and adhere to the infamous 'One China Policy' in the interest of sustainable inflow of Chinese aid. Besides aid, China has also hiked up its foreign direct investment and bilateral trade and commerce particularly with countries that have diplomatic relations with Taipei. Beijing considers Taiwan, staunch US ally, as its renegade province and hence aims to isolate it diplomatically. In 2019 two of Taiwan's diplomatic allies, Solomon Islands and Kiribati, switched side and opened diplomatic relations with PRC.

Soon after the opening of new diplomatic relations with Beijing, a Chinese company signed a secretive deal securing an exclusive development right in the strategically located island of Tulagi in the Solomon Islands. The Solomon government called it off later after perhaps realising its negative ramifications in the future. Prior to that, there were unconfirmed reports that Beijing was secretly negotiating the possibility of opening a naval base in Vanuatu after building a deep sea port on one of its strategic islands. Both governments later denied such a deal was in the making after it aroused a regional media frenzy particularly in Australia and New Zealand.

There is no doubt that PRC has grand global strategies. In recent years, Beijing has been projecting its economic power and military might in a quite brazen manner. Indeed, China likely has futuristic ambitions to become a global hegemon and introduce its own version of global order, which would significantly deviate from that of the current established Western version under the auspices of the US. Unlike the Western powers, which used their hard power to advance their ideological and territorial gains, for PRC it is the soft power, provision of much needed capital, to lead the way in expanding its ideational global reach. The Pacific developing and least developed island nations prefer to cooperate with China in a bid to secure its concessional loans and foreign direct investments – something that the traditional donors have largely neglected.

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