

# TEMPERATURES RISING: THE STRUGGLE FOR BASES AND ACCESS IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

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## Executive summary

The Pacific island clusters of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia share a geopolitical reality: they lie in the main space that separates the world's two biggest powers. The United States has retained an arc of territories and bases across the northern reaches of Oceania, though it has at times neglected the underlying relationships that support this access. Recently, China has been trying to take advantage of that neglect by advancing its economic, resource, and diplomatic interests in the region. The Pacific Islands are particularly important to China's "counterinsurgency" strategy, which seeks to prevent reinforcement of the United States' position inside the first island chain — a string of islands that encloses the seas immediately off China's eastern coast. Beijing's tactics involve using presence, investment, diaspora, elite ties, corruption, and pressure to acquire diplomatic relationships and logistics access. Not all Chinese advances have been successful, but China is making inroads across the southern reaches of the region. While the United States, Australia, and Japan are undertaking robust (albeit belated) soft power efforts to dull China's expanding influence, questions around employing

hard power loom. The United States is still debating whether to reinforce its military presence inside the first island chain, under the shadow of Chinese missile trajectories, or fall back to the second chain — or beyond — in Oceania.

## Introduction

Without using clichés, it can be hard to convey the sheer vast scale of the Pacific Ocean: It encompasses a larger surface area than *all* the continents combined, to say nothing of the subsea space. The area's population is concentrated in Oceania, which runs from the Hawaiian Islands to the east coast of the Philippines and from Australia's eastern coast to Easter Island, straddling the equator. Oceania comprises almost 9,000,000 square kilometers of water and more than 10,000 islands (including the Pacific Islands) atolls, and other land features. These islands are divided into four zones: (1) Australasia, which encompasses Australia and New Zealand; (2) Melanesia, off the northeastern coast of Australia, and encompassing Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji; (3) Micronesia, encompassing the Northern Mariana Islands, the Federated

States of Micronesia, Guam, Palau, the Marshall Islands, and Kiribati; and (4) Polynesia, which stretches from Tonga to the Cook Islands to French Polynesia and Easter Island – and, technically, Hawaii.

Each Pacific island has a distinct history, culture, and politics, but they are all on the front lines of illegal and extrajudicial fishing and, more crucially, global climate change, which threatens some of these islands' very existence. They also share a common reality, as they lie in the increasingly contested waters that separate the world's two largest economies and military powers. A major impetus of the ongoing U.S.-China rivalry is tension over the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. But observers should also look to the farther reaches of the Pacific – most important of the “far seas” that drive China's strategic ambition.

## External presence

The United States has two types of presence in the Pacific Islands. It has an arc of bases across its own territories in Guam (a federated territory), Hawaii, and Wake Island. And it has access rights in what are known as the Freely Associated States (the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau) – which, collectively, cover more territory than the continental United States. This presence extends the American arc to within 1,500 miles of Japan's Okinawa Island to the northwest and within 1,600 miles of the Philippines to the west (where the United States still has formal basing rights and is exploring returning to the mighty Subic Bay that faces the South China Sea).<sup>1</sup>

The former imperial powers also have a presence in the Pacific Islands. Ironically, despite its long maritime dominance, Britain retains little of its former presence in the Pacific Islands, now possessing only the British overseas territory of the Pitcairn Islands (population, all of 49 people).<sup>2</sup> But London retains important military assets in Australia and New Zealand and even more significant its base in Singapore, which anchors the first island chain (though it is rarely referred to in those terms).

In Polynesia and the eastern reaches of Melanesia, France's presence is the most consequential. Territorial possessions in this region give Paris an exclusive economic zone of 6.8 million square kilometers surrounding Clipperton Island, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, and New Caledonia.<sup>3</sup> These areas host a total of 2,800 French armed forces personnel at a theater headquarters in the French Polynesian capital of Papeete and at the regional commands in the Department of La Réunion and New Caledonia. The latter also hosts a French naval base with 10 ships.<sup>4</sup>

Japan and Russia also retain a presence in these waters, but neither have bases there. Japan's presence is more significant, as the country has extensive diplomatic, economic, and aid relationships across the region. Japan also maintains a (civilian) space station in Kiribati in the central Pacific Ocean. Russia has less extensive ties, but its Pacific fleet is a frequent visitor to these waters and Moscow maintains diplomatic relationships across the region.

Two actors without overseas territories in the region also influence its external politics. Australia is a close second to Japan in aid flows to the Pacific Islands, and it has extensive commercial, diplomatic, and development ties across Oceania. It also has a military, police, and civilian presence in the Solomon Islands (under a United Nations mandate) and has most recently opened a new base (shared with the United States) in Papua New Guinea.<sup>5</sup> The second actor, India, is expanding its presence, both through its own commercial and diplomatic ties and through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad).

## ENTER CHINA

An essential driver of contemporary Chinese grand strategy is its geographical and commercial position, which is heavily dependent on sea-based commerce but constrained by limited and contested access to the seas.<sup>6</sup>

Having built up a defensive and offensive capacity in first set of waters around its shores during the 2000s and 2010s, China looked to secure those new capac-

ities themselves. At the same time, it sought to reach farther than its near seas, and to be able to secure its commercial and security interests in those farther waters.<sup>7</sup> It began to participate in both global counter-piracy operations and to develop a network of what have been best described as “strategic strong points”—clusters of port, infrastructure, and diplomatic relationships at useful locations alongside key waterways, from Djibouti on the Red Sea to Haifa on the Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup> All this, under the rubric of a “Far Seas” strategy designed to make China a competitive power in the Arctic, the Indian Ocean—and above all, in the wider reaches of the Pacific.<sup>9</sup>

In the Pacific, China has myriad interests. It needs access to the area’s vital fish stocks to meet the appetites of the burgeoning Chinese middle class. It also needs access to rare earth metals for both industrial and military-industrial purposes, and the central Pacific seabed appears to host a great quantity of minerals and metals.<sup>10</sup> Regarding China’s political interests, of the dwindling number of countries that recognize Taiwan as an independent country, four are Pacific Island nations.

What’s more, China remains vulnerable to a “distant blockade” of its essential sea-borne trade.<sup>11</sup> If the United States sought to blockade China, the Chinese Navy (PLAN) would aim to defeat that blockade in the Indian Ocean and the Philippine Sea. And were China to exercise a military option against Taiwan, it would want to block U.S. reinforcements outside the first island chain.<sup>12</sup>

All these interests make the Philippine Sea and Oceania essential to Chinese strategy. And the Philippine Sea is ringed, on its eastern edge, by Guam, the North Mariana Islands, and Palau, collectively described as the “second island chain” or, as it has insightfully been called, the “second island cloud.”<sup>13</sup> Just east are the Federated States of Micronesia and just south is the Manus Island of Papua New Guinea: In a full-blown confrontation between the United States and China, Beijing would seek to make these islands the first line of contestation. Although China does not yet quite have the net surface or submarine capacity to realize this objective, it is rapidly building toward it.<sup>14</sup>

FIGURE 1

### Second Island cloud



Credit: Map created by Andrew Rhodes, 2022.

## CHINESE EFFORTS AND RESULTS

In May-June 2022, then Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited eight Pacific island nations. Midway through the trip, he hosted a meeting with his counterparts from 10 countries across Oceania, where he sought collective agreement on a new set of regional trade and security arrangements. His proposal was not endorsed. But across the region, China has been making inroads.<sup>15</sup>

The Chinese playbook has been roughly as follows: build economic ties through investment and debt financing; build elite ties, both through diplomatic engagement and sweeteners; engage Chinese émigré communities and businesses; support the Pacific Islands' interests in global bodies on issues like climate adaptation financing; pursue deeper diplomatic ties and, where relevant, a reversal of Taiwan recognition; and seek rights for increased PLAN presence.<sup>16</sup>

This blend of tools has had the most success to date in the Solomon Islands. Since the late 1990s, the country has been wracked by civil conflict, making it ripe for diplomatic persuasion. It sued for help from Australia, which responded with a Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), backed by the United Nations Security Council. Leaving diplomatic niceties aside, RAMSI was an Australian-run transitional authority arrangement in which the sovereignty of Honiara, the capital of Solomon Islands, was de jure retained but de facto shared with Canberra. RAMSI ended in 2013, and the Solomon Islands signed a security and defense treaty with Australia in 2017.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the period, however, local resentment of the Australian presence was a constant factor in domestic politics. One politician long hostile to it was Manasseh Sogavare, and when he returned to power as prime minister in 2019, he moved to shift away from close relations with Canberra toward strengthening ties with Beijing. He withdrew the Solomon Islands' recognition of Taiwan in 2019. And in March 2022, he signed a memorandum of understanding with Beijing that allows for the deployment of Chinese police and security assistance personnel at the

Solomons' request to deal with internal unrest, as well as enabling an ongoing Chinese military and naval presence. Sogavare has said that the agreement does not permit a Chinese base, but it does appear to allow for rotational basing.<sup>18</sup> The memorandum effectively diminishes the role of Australia in providing security assistance.

China has sought similar arrangements with Vanuatu, located in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, though less is known about the status of Vanuatu-China ties. Certainly, no formal agreement has been announced, but China continues to advance its interests there. Following China's financing and construction of a major wharf in the city of Luganville, on Vanuatu's largest island Espiritu Santo, there was discussion about converting the wharf into a dual-use facility for the PLAN. Diplomatic pressure from Australia and the United States has been successful in fending off that development so far, but the wharf remains under Chinese ownership.<sup>19</sup> Australian analysts have argued that it is in effect a Trojan horse facility — one that is far larger and deeper than needed for commercial vessels.<sup>20</sup>

China has also had success in Kiribati. The country is, among other things, host to a spaceport owned by Japan's civilian National Space Development Agency. It's also the country most likely to be compelled to evacuate *all* its citizens due to sea level rises as a result of climate change — an issue the West has given little more than lip service.<sup>21</sup> In 2019, Kiribati dropped its recognition of Taiwan, reportedly in exchange for Chinese loans and funding to refurbish aircraft and ferries.<sup>22</sup> Then, in 2021, it announced that it had accepted Chinese financing for a project to upgrade an airstrip to more than 6,000 feet on the island of Canton.<sup>23</sup> If the project moves forward, the airstrip will give China its furthest east facility and increased capacity for maritime awareness in the central reaches of Oceania, near America's arc of presence.

However, not all Chinese efforts in the region have been successful. For example, Tuvalu, in the west-central Pacific Ocean, rejected Chinese efforts to reverse its recognition of Taiwan.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps China's most important failure to date occurred in

Papua New Guinea. There, Beijing sought to finance the renovation of an important port facility that could also host a PLAN presence. Instead, Papua New Guinea offered Australia and the United States a joint arrangement for the facility.<sup>25</sup> In October 2021, the U.S. Navy began refurbishment of Lombrum Naval Base on the islands. This will allow for Australian frigates to dock there, providing a hub on the southern shipping route — at the outer edge of the range of China’s missiles.<sup>26</sup>

## Better late than never: U.S. options and issues

The above analysis raises several essential questions: For instance, where should the United States concentrate its Pacific basing? And how can it secure its existing position in the Pacific Islands?

On September 28-29, 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden hosted the first-ever U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit. It was but one of a flurry of new diplomatic initiatives for the region: the White House released a Pacific Partnership Strategy, created the post of special envoy to the Pacific Islands Forum, announced three new embassies across the region, and reopened in Fiji an office of the United States Agency for International Development. The Pacific strategy highlights the major issues of concern to the region: legal negotiations over updated compacts with the Freely Associated States, illegal and extrajudicial fishing, climate change and sea level rise, marine conservation, and economic development. It invokes partnerships with the Quad; Partners in the Blue Pacific (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom); the Association of Southeast Asian Nations; and the Pacific Islands Forum. And it pledges greater engagement from the Department of State, Department of Defense, Coast Guard, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.<sup>27</sup> If fully funded and implemented, this strategy will lead to a significant upgrade in U.S. attention to the region.

U.S. and ally efforts to bolster their ties to, and presence among, the Pacific island nations have four core elements:

- Reinforcing the legal basis of U.S. compacts with the Freely Associated States and, where possible, expanding physical presence — notably through a new agreement for basing facilities in the Federated States of Micronesia.<sup>28</sup>
- Using the Coast Guard’s remote sensing technologies and building legal capacity to aid the Pacific Islands in combating illegal and extrajudicial fishing — including through the Quad’s new Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness.
- Increasing support for climate finance, development, and infrastructure.
- Increasing presence options, including reciprocal base access arrangements between France and India and between the United Kingdom and Japan.

These efforts are ambitious, but they are late. For much of the post-9/11 era, the United States neglected its relationships in the region and is now playing catch up. China’s overreach has spurred the United States to regain some lost ground more quickly, but the fact remains that a region long dominated by the U.S. Navy is once again being genuinely contested — in diplomatic terms and, at the present rate of developments, soon in naval terms.

The issue is becoming increasingly acute as China continues to strengthen the reach of its navy, air, and rocket forces inside the first island chain and, to a lesser degree, beyond. As part of the U.S. response, should America reinforce its posture inside the first island chain to deter Chinese aggression more convincingly, as the commandant of the Marine Corps has argued?<sup>29</sup> Or does that leave too much U.S. hardware within reach of Chinese missile attacks? Is it better, then, to reinforce the U.S. presence along the second island chain? It is true that this chain, including Guam, is within reach of

the longest-range Chinese missiles, but the greater distance increases American capacity to use cutting-edge naval information warfare tools to fool Chinese targeting sensors, divert Chinese missiles, and survive a first barrage.<sup>30</sup>

These options have pros and cons, but regardless of their merits, the choices narrow if the United States loses diplomatic ground in Micronesia — as it has begun to do in Melanesia. In the short term, a priority must be reinforcing the American arc of presence across northern Oceania. Working with Australia, Japan and, to some extent, France and India, the United States should also seek to slow Chinese gains across the southern stretches. A particular focus should be on Kiribati, in order to reverse China's recent gains or ensure that they do not translate into a "strategic strongpoint" just south of the arc of American bases. Finally, credible U.S. policy on climate adaptation should also be a priority.

Of course, bolstering the U.S. military presence in Australasia (on Australian territory itself) is an additional option. This will likely be the outcome of the Australia-U.K.-U.S. submarine, missile, and technology agreement of 2021.

## Conclusion

The Pacific Islands face an unenviable future. Rising sea levels, more frequent storm surges, and declining fishing stocks will likely lead to decreased livelihoods and other strains. In some cases, these challenges could threaten their very survival as inhabited nations. More Chinese commercial and strategic developments in these waters could be a potential source of revenue and support, as could renewed U.S. initiatives. But this could mean being increasingly squeezed between Washington and Beijing.

From the vantage point of China, the United States, and their respective partners, the Pacific Islands will only grow in importance. As China rapidly increases its military capabilities inside the first island chain, the second island cloud and beyond will become a central zone of competition and contestation. Basing rights or persistent access along both the northern and southern sea lanes of communication in Oceania look set to be a source of sustained tension. Further, Chinese successes in deepening its diplomatic relationships and logistical access across the southern arc of Oceania will complicate but not materially degrade U.S. access. But if the United States reverts to a pattern of neglect, or otherwise loses ground across Micronesia, its strategic position in the western Pacific — and thus Asia as a whole — will be measurably weakened.

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