

Thinking strategically on the Pacific Islands by David W. Hamon

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The Pacific Islands are given little attention and rarely make the news unless there has been a natural disaster of some sort. This is a mistake since these islands are of critical importance to any US strategy to counter Chinese adventurism in the Pacific and maintain the peace. Not only are the US affiliated islands an important source of basing for logistic infrastructure (should there be a military conflict with China), but they are also important to US Pacific Command for training, contingency and forward basing, the deployment of potential strike weapons, and deterrence.

Any “island strategy” must not be solely a military strategy but include interlacing development, diplomatic, economic, and culture strategies. At a minimum, islands in the Compact of Free Association States (Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Palau), US Territories Guam, American Samoa, and the Marianas (CNMI) should be the target of key investment initiatives in health education, nontraditional security (for example, maritime security and energy security), and economic development in order to strengthen island societies as a whole and as part of a wider, foundational, and sustained US strategic approach.

From Hawaii to the first island chain, compact states and US territories form a natural and strategic pathway for US forces that must be strengthened, maintained, and integrated within any Asia rebalance initiative. But sadly, within the US government’s Asia rebalance initiative, the Pacific Islands are not viewed through the same strategic lens as, for example, the countries of Southeast Asia. The islands were given more resources in the first Obama administration in various US government programs, spread across many agencies, including defense security assistance. However, given the vast challenges faced across the Asia Pacific, there is little renewed attention from Washington on the island communities and virtually no focus on preparing for a strategic future.

The US has a special obligation and shared cultural ties to the islands stemming from the end of World War II and throughout the Cold War. This cultural legacy should be fully recognized, reaffirmed, and maintained. Any perceived lack of US interest in island development/welfare becomes an opportunity for China. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Fiji in November 2014 and hosted a meeting with regional leaders where he announced that ties would be upgraded to a ‘strategic partnership.’ China has invested \$1.4 billion in island development since 2006.

During a 2015 conference at the National University of Samoa, “China and the Pacific: The View from Oceania,” Chinese participants specifically countered misperceptions among attendees about China’s aid and development program and role in the region. Professor Liu Hongzhong of the Centre for Oceanian Studies at Peking University, a presenter at the event, stated: “China has a big population and people will have doubts about the motives and whether they’re going to take the lead or change the rules, or whatever. So why don’t we just take China as another traditional member of the donors?” she asked.

The island nations/communities have a Pacific regional architecture with standing bodies and are to be commended for their work in addressing common development and social problems. There is the Pacific Island Conference of Leaders (PICL), Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the oldest regional organization, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), of which the US was a Founding Member and provides 17 percent of the core budget. Rounding out this group is the Council on Regional Organizations of the Pacific (CROP) with 10 member organizations. A new regional body – the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) – was inaugurated at an international conference organized and hosted by the Fijian government in 2013. “Leadership, Innovation and Partnership for Green/Blue Pacific Economies” hammered home the aims to advance the vision of a “United, Distinctive and Sustainable Pacific Society.”

What is missing in public reports and declarations by these organizations is recognition that economic and social development must have a foundation of security, both traditional and nontraditional. Without security, problems like disaster preparedness and recovery, illicit trade (international criminal activity in general), IUU fishing, public health, and climate change, among others, will disrupt and destabilize development, education, and good governance goals, divert valuable resources, and contribute to the “brain drain.” Aiding islanders in addressing security is the lynchpin of a comprehensive strategy requiring the strength and attention of US leadership.

A comprehensive Pacific Island strategy must include allies, friends, and “donors,” especially Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, the European Union, and other international organizations. Australia, the single largest aid donor to island nations, and New Zealand have a regional “island strategy” of their own working closely with island nations in the South Pacific. Like-minded donors must also include the private sector.

To take a leadership role in a more productive and proactive view of the islands, Washington should consider creating a standing Pacific Island Strategic Council, or similar type of organization, permanently focused on engaging island

states in developing a strategy for the interwoven and crucial issues of defense, nontraditional security challenges, diplomatic engagement, development, emergency preparedness and resilience, and governance. A strategy, part comprehensive blueprint, part plan, and part ongoing dialogue, will be a future-oriented solution that reflects a long-term commitment to those often overlooked states.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.