



THE MYTH OF TAIWAN AS A PACIFIC NATION

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The views expressed are their own.

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"The US has begun to reimagine itself as a Pacific nation. Taiwan would be wise to explore the merits of following suit. This could unlock benefits that entail from a shared identity."

- Michael Walsh and John Hemmings, *Taipei Times*,
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The Taiwan government must find a way to [deter and derail](#) the existential threat posed by the People's Republic of China. To achieve these outcomes, Taipei will need to maintain a strong and enduring partnership with the United States. At present, this strategic bond is reinforced by a number of shared identities. As pointed out by Walsh and Hemmings, the myth of being a Pacific nation is not one of them. Per their suggestion, Taipei should [explore the merits](#) of reimagining itself as a Pacific nation too.

The United States has long toyed with the idea of being a Pacific nation. President Barack Obama

inflected a major shift toward that identity when he [declared](#), "the United States has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation." Framing his assertion as a "fundamental truth," President Obama set into motion the reimagination of America as a Pacific nation through a combination of rhetoric and narrative. On the backs of Asian immigration and fallen soldiers, the Obama Administration constructed a persuasive story about how a "[complex and intricate mix of history, ideas, and interests](#)" had transformed into a Pacific nation long ago. In this way, a mental image was formed that eventually rooted in the collective consciousness of American thought leaders. Now, many American policymakers accept the claim that America is a Pacific nation as a statement of fact. It has started to become a [Thorsonian myth](#).

Throughout the world, few places have struggled with the concept of collective identity like Taiwan. For decades, the question of what demonym to use for the people of Taiwan has been at the forefront of [national debates](#) and the cause of [international concern](#). After a multi-decade struggle for the preservation of autonomy from the People's Republic of China, attitudes have somewhat shifted on the idea of being Taiwanese. Many still cling onto the identity of being Chinese. There remains no consensus on what should be the Taiwanese identity. A strong [affinity](#) has been forged around several other identities, however. These include the ideas of being a democratic state and East Asian state. While being a democratic state is an identity shared with the United States, being an East Asian state is not. If there was another regional identity jointly held by both partners, then this gap would lose much of its significance. It is therefore somewhat surprising that Taipei has not explored further whether becoming a Pacific nation could bridge that divide.

If the Taiwan government took a closer look at the merits, then Taiwan policymakers would find that it is not difficult to craft a persuasive story about Taiwan being a Pacific nation.

Their first glance should be geography. As Walter Lippman [once said](#) "the world that we have to deal with politically...is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined."

That is why “[cognitive frameworks](#)” drawn from “geographic considerations” have such a profound role to play in domestic and foreign affairs. Fortunately, Taiwan is gifted with the “[blessing of geography](#).” Composed of a set of islands in the Western Pacific that are situated at approximately the same latitude as the Hawaiian Islands, Taiwan lies proximate to what is commonly referred to as the Pacific Islands Region. Taipei is a full [~1,000 miles closer](#) to Koror than Los Angeles is to Honolulu. If American policymakers can draw a mental map around Pacific nations that is inclusive of the United States, then surely Taiwan can do the same.

Their second glance should history, culture, and language. The connections between Taiwan and the Pacific nations extend far beyond geographic happenstance. The historical ties between the Taiwanese aborigines and other Pacific Islanders are well documented. Although the history of the Austronesian and Lapita cultures remains the subject of debate, there is evidence that the Neolithic period expansion of Austronesian-speaking peoples can be traced back to an [Austronesian homeland in Taiwan](#). Either way, the [Austronesian family of languages](#) continues to provide a linguistic bridge between the indigenous communities of Taiwan and their Pacific Islander cousins.

Taipei has been taking steps to protect that connection. In 2017, the [Indigenous Languages Development Act](#) was promulgated to “achieve historical justice, further preserve and promote the indigenous languages, and guarantee that the languages are used and passed down.” But language is only part of the story. The revival of Taiwanese indigenous culture [has become a touchstone topic](#) among the majority Han Taiwanese population. This has created additional space to emphasize Taiwan’s Austronesian roots on the national stage. Although often overlooked, Taiwan’s experiences with colonization and conflict provide another common ground with the Pacific nations. At various times, the territory of Taiwan has been possessed by the [Netherlands, Spain, and Japan](#). This mirrors the colonial experiences of many Pacific Island countries. Moreover, Taipei was heavily [bombed by foreign militaries during WWII](#), although that story is not widely acknowledged in

contemporary discourses. These experiences provide a shared platform on which to construct the story of Taiwan as a Pacific nation.

The third glance should be common security and political interests. Taiwan and the Pacific nations share traditional security concerns. In close partnership with the United States, Taiwan seeks to deter invasion by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), which [has not renounced the use of force](#) in its pursuit to reunify Taiwan with the Chinese mainland. While Pacific Island countries may not fear imminent invasion by the PLA, they wish to [avoid getting caught in the middle](#) of US-China competition.

The outbreak of open hostilities between these superpowers would endanger not only the core interests of Taiwan, but those of Pacific Island Countries as well. Consider the [Compacts of Free Association \(COFA\)](#) states. Under the terms of those agreements, the United States has full authority and responsibility for security and defense. Such conflict would involve the [distributed network of military bases](#) currently under construction across the COFA states. It could also draw in [other military bases](#) located in other Pacific Island Countries. Then, there is the issue of the citizens of Pacific Island Countries who are [part of](#) the United States Armed Forces. In any US-China conflict, these Pacific Islander servicemen and servicewomen would be expected to join the fight. Pacific Island Countries therefore share a compelling interest in deterring major power combat.

While traditional security interests often get top billing, Taiwan and Pacific nations also share a myriad of non-traditional security concerns. This includes the existential threat posed by climate change. Pacific Islands Countries [have made clear](#) that “climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific.” They are not alone. Taiwan is facing significant problems posed by climate change impacts. In 2021, Taiwan experienced its [most severe drought period in 56 years](#). This was due to the [unusual lack](#) of typhoons passing over the main island. These typhoons play a critical role in recharging reservoirs and the economic outcomes of their absence were significant. The drought [negatively impacted](#)

[Taiwan's production](#) of semiconductor chips among other painful impacts including lost agricultural yields and water rationing for households and businesses.

Of course, not all natural disasters arise from climate change and not all non-traditional security concerns involve natural disasters. On a perennial basis, Taiwan faces the risk posed by earthquakes, volcanic activity, and tsunamis. It also has to contend with threats posed by infectious diseases, drug trafficking, organized crime, transnational migration, supply chain insecurity, or cyber threats. Many Pacific Island Countries face similar concerns as evidenced by the [natural disasters](#) that recently struck Tonga and the cyberattack that recently [disrupted internet services](#) in the Marshall Islands.

Beyond security concerns, Taiwan and many Pacific nations also share a desire to preserve the rules-based international order and a preference for democratic political systems. At the Indo-Pacific Leaders Dialogue, President Tsai Ing-wen [declared](#) that Taiwan shares a commitment “to upholding the rules-based international order,” “employing transparency and accountability as the basis for cooperation,” and promoting the “values of democracy and freedom” with Australia. Similarly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently [affirmed](#) that “United States, Taiwan, and Palau share a strong commitment to democracy, to a free and open Indo-Pacific, and to advancing the peace and prosperity of the region.” In the Blue Pacific Strategy, the member states of the Pacific Islands Forum not only [warned](#) that the “established rules-based order for peace and security as set out in the Boe Declaration faces increasing pressure, and the Pacific region is not immune.” They also [proclaimed](#) that “the Blue Pacific Continent remains committed to principles of democracy.” While the declarations of countries and actions of their leaders sometimes pull in [different directions](#), there is significant common ground to be found between Taiwan and Pacific nations on these political matters.

When Washington took a closer look at the merits of reimagining the United States as a Pacific nation, American policymakers found that it was possible to craft a story through a [“complex and intricate mix of history, ideas, and interests.”](#) While there are

significant differences in the history, ideas, and interests of Taiwan and the United States, Taiwan policymakers could use a similar narrative framework to craft their own story about Taiwan as a Pacific nation. Such an approach begs several follow-on questions. The most immediate are: who needs to be persuaded? How difficult would it be to conduct outreach? What are the potential benefits, costs, and risks? Taipei should start exploring these questions to better understand the merits of reimagining Taiwan as a Pacific nation. And it should make that a priority.

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