

CONTENDING SECURITY INTERESTS IN OCEANIA

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Abstract- The small island states of Oceania are enmeshed in a multifaceted security scenario involving not just their own immediate concerns, concerning basic human security issues, but also the strategic interests of larger actors bordering the region - mainly the US, Japan, China, Australia and New Zealand. The EU, too, has a considerable interest in the region, although it is less directly concerned with traditional security matters. Specific French interests add a further dimension to the security scenario, as does Indonesia. This policy brief provides an overview of the contending and intersecting interests of the various actors involved and their impact on the outlook for Oceania's small island states in the new security environment with particular attention to climate change issues.

Key findings

- Security concerns for the small island states of Oceania are primarily oriented to human security issues although the overall security environment is mediated by the contending interests of Pacific Rim powers in particular. Even so, coalition strategies will enable Pacific small island countries to maximize their agency in global politics.
- The ocean is a key resource for all the small island states of the region and protecting their exclusive economic zones as well as maintaining marine biodiversity remains a significant security challenge.
- The major long-term security threat comes from climate change. While assistance with adaptation and mitigation has been forthcoming from traditional Western partners, some of these have also been among the least cooperative in international efforts to limit global warming.

Executive summary

The twenty-two small island states and territories of Oceania are located within the three major sub-regions of the Pacific Ocean, viz., Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, which are surrounded in turn by the larger Pacific Rim countries. Key developments characterizing the



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'new security environment' in Oceania include the rise of China and increasing interest from countries like Indonesia. To date, the small island states have been oriented primarily to Western powers. This orientation is because of, rather than in spite of, their colonial history. The 'pivot' or 'rebalance' to Asia by the US was therefore largely welcomed by the island states although specific, positive, tangible outcomes remain elusive. Overall, however, aid flows from Western donors remain the most significant source of assistance, and security for the small island states generally is obviously linked closely to development. Links with traditional Western partners, and especially the US, Australia and New Zealand, are further reinforced by the fact that considerable migration to these countries has taken place. In addition to strengthening personal ties, remittances now contribute a major income stream for island communities.

Some observers perceive important shifts with the small island states now actively seeking linkages outside their traditional sphere and asserting a more independent stance in regional and world affairs. *Whether, and for whom, this is a problem is a moot point.* It is clearly in the interests of traditional Western powers to maintain their prime position as partners of first choice for the small island states of such a vast, and strategically important, region. For the island states, however, at least some of their interests may now be better served by extending and deepening ties in other spheres. More extensive diplomatic and other relations enable small island states, when acting both individually and collectively, to widen their own sphere of influence. This is of prime importance in pursuing strategies aimed at preserving ocean resources – which range from maintaining marine bio-diversity to protecting fishing stocks and grounds – as well as in combatting the devastating, multi-dimensional security implications of climate change.

Analysis

Shifts in the global security landscape from a 'post-Cold War' era to a loosely defined 'new security environment' has been marked by intensified great power competition which includes China's increasingly assertive claims in the East and South China Seas. These developments present challenges for NATO members as well as for countries of the Asia-Pacific, or what is increasingly referred to as the Indo-Pacific region. The latter term was originally conceived as a biogeographic region but is now used as a geostrategic marker to recognise the importance of the Indian Ocean as the world's busiest trade corridor linking Africa and the Middle East (or West Asia) to centres of economic power further to the east, including South, Southeast and East Asia, and stretching across Oceania from Australia to the Americas.

The small island states of Oceania are encompassed by the 'Pacific Rim', a term which references the larger countries bordering the Pacific on its eastern and western shores. The Pacific Ocean is of course the world's largest geographic feature and contains around 25,000 islands. The strategic importance of developments in this region, and especially the growing influence of China, was the key driver for the US 'pivot' or 'rebalance' in 2011 – an attempt to reassert a regional presence following a decade in which so



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many resources had been absorbed (or squandered) in the Middle East. This should be seen as at least prefiguring the new security environment.

In geographic terms, Oceania includes all the small island countries of the sub-regions of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, plus New Zealand and Australia. The latter is a middle power in global politics but, from the perspective of Pacific Island countries (hereafter PICs), is often regarded as possessing hegemonic status. Security concerns in Oceania are linked to those of the larger powers in terms of both conventional and non-conventional considerations, and have been for some time. The attendance by the then US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, at a session of the annual meeting of Oceania's principle regional organization, the Pacific Islands Forum in August 2012, appeared to signal renewed interest in PICs after a period of 'benign neglect' following the end of the Cold War.

The US re-balance was largely welcomed by PICs which have historically been oriented to the Western security umbrella by virtue of the legacy of European colonialism in the region as well as the experiences of World War II. In this context, it is noteworthy that the first major regional organization, the South Pacific Commission or SPC (now the Pacific Community but still known as the SPC) was founded in 1947 largely on the instigation of Australia and New Zealand and with their own post-war security concerns in mind. The other major colonial powers in the region – the UK, US, the Netherlands and France – were also founding members but steered issues away from formal security concerns to development and technical assistance, although these programs also had a security dimension.

Close relations through aid and development saw these Western powers maintain a strong presence in the islands following decolonization. PICs became SPC members in their own right but continuing prohibition on discussion of political and security matters, enforced by the French in particular, saw a new regional body emerge in 1971 – the South Pacific Forum (now Pacific Islands Forum) – open only to independent states and with an explicit political remit. Despite remaining aligned with traditional Western partners, and including Australia and New Zealand as full members, the Forum became a principal critic of French nuclear testing. Times have changed and the French territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia were admitted to full membership in 2016, despite lacking independent status. This may be seen, at least in part, as a response to Oceania's new security environment in which enlargement of its premier regional organization in a way that links it directly to a significant European power is seen as an advantage.

Membership of the SPC, which remains dedicated to scientific and technical assistance, still includes the US, Australia, New Zealand and France. The Netherlands departed the scene in 1962 after the Indonesian takeover of West Papua. Rather than Indonesia replacing the Dutch in the SPC, West Papua became excluded from 'the Pacific'. A West Papuan separatist movement, identifying strongly with Melanesia and receiving support from some Pacific island states and other international actors concerned with human rights, has remained an internal security concern for Indonesia. This has prompted Indonesia to attempt to strengthen its relations with PICs. Closer relations with Fiji and Papua New Guinea, the latter having its own concerns with separatism in Bougainville, have seen Indonesia become an associate member of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG),



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one of the most important sub-regional organizations, although this has created tensions within the group.

The UK withdrew from the Pacific Community in 2005 after which membership of the EU, along with the Commonwealth, provided the major organizational links. The sole remaining British territory in the Pacific is Pitcairn. Following Brexit, UK involvement in the region through the EU will obviously cease and if it intends to remain involved in Pacific affairs, then it will need to reconfigure its diplomatic links in the region. This has been foreshadowed by a recent announcement that the UK will establish three new diplomatic posts in the islands as part of a post-Brexit security strategy – a move welcomed by those concerned with increasing Chinese influence in particular.

The Cold War had seen increased Russian activity in the Pacific which meant sustained US attention over nearly five decades, especially in Micronesia. While the US has maintained a strong military presence in the latter, the end of the Cold War ushered in a period of benign neglect. Even so, aid flows from all major donors remained significant and the larger metropolitan powers in particular have contributed to a range of vital services with important security dimensions, such as assisting with patrolling exclusive economic zones.

At the same time, China has established extensive aid and trade relations. Although often seen as designed to enhance its status vis-à-vis Western powers, China's Pacific strategy has also been driven by competition with Taiwan, noting that six PICs give Taiwan diplomatic recognition. China's relations with PICs remain almost exclusively bilateral and it therefore has no formal role in multilateral regional activities, although it is a post-Pacific Islands Forum dialogue partner along with sixteen others. It clearly has ambitions to assert a stronger presence in the region, although reports that it has been in confidential talks with Vanuatu about establishing a permanent military base there are unconfirmed. In the meantime, Chinese investment in the region shows no sign of diminishing, and will be watched closely by Australia and New Zealand in particular.

In the post-Cold War period, both the UK and the US assumed that Australia would serve as something of a proxy power in Oceania. Given their mutual interest in maintaining the Western alliance this is scarcely remarkable. But the idea that Australia would assume the role of America's 'deputy sheriff' in the region – an idea encouraged by conservative Australian prime minister John Howard in the late 1990s and reinforced under George W. Bush's administration – attracted much derision both within Australia as well as among some of its neighbours. With the Trump administration, it may now seem unthinkable. Even so, one can scarcely deny that Australia and the US have common security interests in the region that transcend Trump, and that Australian and US policy approaches mesh closely. In addition, despite various criticisms of the US and Australia over various issues including failure to address their responsibilities as major greenhouse gas emitters, PICs are accustomed to links with the Western alliance and enjoy substantial benefits from aid funding as well as remittance, as noted above. Thus there are strong historical, social, economic and personal linkages between most PICs and key countries of the Western alliance that underpin security relations in Oceania. These are likely to continue in the new strategic environment even as they come under pressure from China.



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For the smaller island states, however, climate change and its accompanying effects, which range from adverse weather patterns (including severe droughts and extreme tropical cyclones and flooding) to increasingly acidic oceans and rising sea levels, is the most serious long-term security issue, especially for those countries whose land areas consist largely of low-lying atolls barely a metre above the existing sea-level. At least eight small islands, mainly within Micronesia and parts of Melanesia, appear to have been submerged already. Severe tropical cyclones have taken an enormous toll in recent years, causing both short-term and long-term damage with recovery costs running into billions of dollars. For small island states in a post-colonial setting, struggling to achieve human security goals and greater self-sufficiency to enhance their sovereignty, such events occurring on a regular basis are devastating. Fallout from climate change generally requires significant investment in adaptation and mitigation to build resilience and policy measures directed to these require coordination between and among PICs on the one hand and all donor organizations on the other. In this respect, Oceania's key regional organizations have a major role to play although bilateral projects as well as extended diplomatic engagement with non-traditional partners also have their place.

Conclusion

The vital security concerns of PICs are mediated by a complex strategic environment in which great power rivalry remains a significant dynamic. The very small size of most PICs, however, does not mean lack of agency in the international sphere. The Pacific Small Islands Developing States (PSIDS) group is now engaged in concerted coalition building and expanded diplomatic activity, mostly around the climate change agenda but with the potential to pursue other causes as well. More generally, coalition strategies enable small island states, in the Pacific and elsewhere, to maximize their agency in global politics at a time when their very survival faces an unprecedented threat.



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