

Containing China? The United States in the South Pacific Since 2011

Written by Matt Stansfield

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MATT STANSFIELD, FEB 25 2015

Introduction

In November 2011, U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, stated that one of the United States' most significant foreign policy goals in the next decade would be to increase diplomatic, economic and strategic engagement with the Asia-Pacific. This overarching foreign policy goal of paying more attention, or 'rebalancing' to the Asia-Pacific, has attracted significant scholarly attention but the majority has been focused on the United States' engagement with other states in East Asia. But, what about the 'Pacific' half of Asia-Pacific? This paper aims to bring the Pacific Island Countries into the discussion on the rebalancing and will proceed in two parts. Firstly, it will briefly outline some of the United States' more significant commitments to the Pacific Islands since around 2011, and secondly, it will analyse the dominant argument that the U.S. has returned to the region to counter China's influence. Overall it will suggest that there is insufficient empirical evidence for this, as it misinterprets both China's regional ambitions and the United States' response. Instead, it will emphasise that rather than attempting to isolate China, the United States' refocusing on the South Pacific is informed by a wider shift in U.S. foreign policy from West to East, as an attempt to take on a greater leadership role in the Asia-Pacific. This represents a more optimistic approach that is more about competitive engagement than containment and fits into the wider overall debate on the United States' Asia-Pacific rebalancing, but also the role of China in the South Pacific.

Post-2011: Pivot to the Pacific

Although the South Pacific formed an important part of the United States' strategic denial policy during the Cold War, the twenty years or so after its end saw the U.S. withdraw a number of its resources from the region (Porter and Wesley-Smith, 2010: 13-15; Lum and Vaughn, 2007: 11-12). However, since around 2011, the Obama Administration has again strengthened its ties with the South Pacific, firstly through engaging with the major regional powers – Australia and New Zealand – and secondly, through engaging with Pacific Island countries, which is what this essay is more concerned with. In August 2012, Hillary Clinton became the first U.S. Secretary of State to attend the Pacific Islands Forum's annual meeting; a symbolic move that suggested the U.S. considers the Forum to be an important institution, while also representing a wider commitment to the region. Here, Clinton addressed concerns that the South Pacific was being ignored as part of the rebalancing, stating that the United States recognised the region was continuing to become more important globally (Clinton, 2012). Additionally, the U.S. has expanded its diplomatic posts in the region, for example it opened the region's largest embassy in Fiji in 2011 and has also expanded its aid. In October 2011 it opened a new USAID office in Papua New Guinea, the first since its Fiji office closed in 1994. At the 2012 Pacific Islands Forum meeting, Clinton pledged US\$32 million to spend on issues the Forum prioritised. U.S. exports to the Pacific Island countries surpassed US\$1 billion for the first time in 2012 and had increased by over 50 percent since 2010.[1]

Motivations for the U.S. Return: Containing China

So, what has prompted the United States to return to the region? The most prominent explanation is that it is a consequence of China's increased presence in the region. Since beginning its move towards capitalist development

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in the 1970s, and especially since the late 1990s, China has strengthened its ties with Pacific Island countries. This has come through increased aid, loans, 'visit diplomacy,' and the building of a satellite tracking station on Kiribati in 1997 – the only facility of its kind outside China at the time. In 2006, the first China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum Ministerial Conference was held in Fiji, opened by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao who announced a US\$250 million aid package of annual grants and US\$374 million loans, making China one of the region's top aid donors (Crocombe, 2007; Wesley-Smith, 2007: 10-13). These stronger connections between China and the Pacific Islands have led to the argument that it is trying to fill a strategic vacuum left after the U.S. appeared to withdraw from the region at the end of the Cold War, with Susan Windybank arguing that China poses "a threat to the strategic status quo" by challenging Western soft power (2005: 28-29). This explanation is significant because it is supported by high-ranking diplomats and policymakers. For instance, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd argued that the pivot was a "necessary corrective" and that

"Without such a move, there was a danger that China, with its hard-line realist view of international relations, would conclude that an exhausted United States was losing its staying power in the Pacific" (Rudd, 2013: 9-15).

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Although this is a very influential argument, there are a number of reasons why it is misguided. Firstly, it is hard to see China displacing traditional players in the region in even the distant future. Despite alarmist claims, there is no evidence to suggest that China is engaged in any military-related activities in the South Pacific, with no military bases and even though suspicions were raised that the satellite tracking station on Kiribati was used for spying on the U.S., there is no evidence that the facility was used for anything other than tracking satellites (Wesley-Smith, 2007: 16). China has found it hard to close the military gap between it and the United States, with a 2014 estimate that the U.S. spends more on defence than the next eight nations combined (PGPF, 2014). Finally, there is nothing to suggest that the South Pacific is a region of special importance to China, with China pursuing the same policies there as it does elsewhere in the developing world – vying for political influence and gaining access to raw materials to cope with domestic demand (Yang, 2011: 47-48).

But how does the United States *perceive* China's regional influence? The second point this essay will make is that the U.S. does not appear to view China as a threat to its regional interests. Yes, Hillary Clinton has recognised that the U.S. and China are in competition (Reuters, 2011). Yet, she was more circumspect at the 2012 Pacific Islands Forum meeting, stressing, "the region is big enough for all of us," and that the U.S. "[welcomes] the opportunity to work with [regional] development partners," including Japan, the European Union and China (Clinton, 2012). Although the United States has increased its military presence in the South Pacific, this does not necessarily indicate a containment policy against China. Despite stationing 2,500 U.S. troops at Darwin – relatively small compared to the 35,000 troops it has in Japan, Obama has been clear that they are there to form a part of the United States' global transformation to engage more in soft power missions – including its participation in the Pacific Partnership, which facilitates maritime cooperation between Pacific states, as well as humanitarian assistance.

Furthermore, the United States' rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific is based on a number of pillars. For instance, the President's National Security Advisor noted that the rebalancing "harnesses all elements of U.S. power – military, political, trade and investment, development and our values" (Donilon, 2013). The China-threat discourse generally over-emphasises the military and security elements of the rebalancing. For instance, the United States' rebalancing can be seen as influenced by an attempt to engage with a region where economic growth will happen. Proof that the U.S. wants to remain economically engaged comes through its enthusiastic support for the TPP, which, if successful, would facilitate U.S. access to growing Asian markets and create a common interest between Asia-Pacific powers (Manyin et al, 2012: 22). Although China is currently not a party to the TPP it has been welcome to join the negotiations, if it undertakes certain domestic reforms, while other TPP members already have a heavy stake in trade with China (Basu Das, 2013). On a broader level, there is economic interdependence between the United States and China on a level not seen during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. This is because of China's integration with the global economy, and consequent of the globalisation of supply chains. For example, there are strong connections between the U.S. and Chinese economies, with this economic interdependence helping to underpin U.S. economic and national security.

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Although the Pacific islands are not party to the TPP, in July 2013 Pacific trade ministers noted that they wanted to begin discussions with the U.S. to develop a trade agreement (Garrett, 2013). This aligns with other economic and development initiatives taken by the U.S. in relation to the region. At the 2012 Pacific Islands Forum meeting, Clinton announced US\$32 million of aid projects to protect biodiversity and marine ecosystems, expanded ship rider programs to provide U.S. Coast Guard support to combat illegal fishing, and focus on helping women in the Pacific (Clinton, 2012). More recently, at the 2013 Forum meeting, Secretary of the Interior, Sally Jewell, offered U.S. support in helping Pacific Island countries combat climate change under the Majuro Declaration by announcing US\$20-24 million funding for the Pacific American Climate Fund (Jewell, 2013).

The final point this essay will consider is that China is not alone in becoming more involved in the South Pacific. There are a number of external players who are becoming increasingly involved in the region. This includes investments by Western multinational corporations and non-Chinese Asian investors (Hayward-Jones, 2013: 8-9). In June 2013, Fiji expanded its ties with Russia when Frank Bainimarama became the first Fijian leader to visit Moscow, where he signed an agreement on military and technical cooperation, and improved trade and economic relations. Bainimarama also invited senior Russian officials to attend the inaugural Pacific Islands Development Forum meeting in August 2013, a forum co-sponsored by China, Russia and some Arab states (Fox, 2013). In November 2014 we saw the new Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visit Fiji, where he announced a \$75 million investment in the country's sugar industry. November 2014 also saw the European Union offer Fiji \$67.7 million in development assistance, while South Korea hosted a meeting with Pacific Island Forum foreign ministers in order to forge a closer regional relationship. Arguing that the United States' return to the South Pacific is because of China is simplistic, in that it elides the increasing involvement of other countries in the region.

Conclusion

There is nothing inevitable about a clash between China and the United States. If anything, China's presence in the South Pacific should be seen as an opportunity for the U.S. to *cooperate* with China. There is little evidence to suggest that the U.S. is fearful of a Chinese threat in the region. Instead, we should view the United States' re-emergence in the South Pacific as a consequence of its purported reduction of commitments towards the Middle East, where much U.S. foreign policy has been focused since the end of the Cold War, and a renewed focus on the Asia-Pacific. Since beginning to withdraw from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. has found a greater capability to engage with parts of the world it has paid less attention to in recent decades. In a November 2011 article in *Foreign Policy*, Clinton noted that

"the future of geopolitics will be decided in Asia, not in Afghanistan or Iraq and the United States should be right at the centre of the action" (2011: 56).

Such an approach includes recognising that as Asian countries become more powerful, the U.S. should cooperate with them in order to manage a global economic and political framework. Yet, it wants to remain in control of this framework and the return to the South Pacific can be seen as part of its desire to remain a global leader. None of this is to say that the U.S. does not compete with China – it does, yet there appears to be a dichotomous approach whereby the U.S. recognises the opportunities for regional and global growth that China and other powers present. This approach suggests that the United States' rebalancing towards the South Pacific is less about containment, and is more about competitive engagement.

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Endnotes

[1] United States Census Bureau, www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/

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