

## Chapter 2

# The Regional Security Environment and Architecture in the Pacific Islands Region

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### **Executive Summary**

- The debate is intensifying on the question of whether China's rising power and influence in the Asia-Pacific region will continue largely peacefully.
- Concerns about wider regional and global developments associated with China's rise cause nervousness in the Pacific Islands region.
- China's intentions in the Pacific Islands region are viewed increasingly as being more to demonstrate and strengthen its power status in the region rather than any malevolence towards the South Pacific.
- Countries of the region, including New Zealand, are increasingly engaging with China on development cooperation and in other fields.

### **Introduction**

The most significant aspect of today's regional security environment in the Pacific Islands region is the rise of China as a major power. The respected political scientist, Joseph Nye of Harvard University, has described the power shift as the twenty-first century's most consequential development.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Nye, "The Old World's New Roles," Project Syndicate, July 10, 2014, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/joseph-s-nye-believes-that-europe-must-fulfill-some-key-responsibilities-vis-a-vis-a-rising-china>.

It is being felt globally. Some in remoter parts of the Pacific Islands region may hope their environments remain unaffected; they will be disappointed for two reasons. First, as Nye indicated, the development is a global one, with potential impact on the global security environment. Secondly, the Pacific Islands region is, of course, a sub-region of the wider Asia-Pacific, China's home region. China's rise and the reaction to it of other Asia-Pacific powers will almost certainly reshape the Pacific security environment, even though it's almost impossible to see precisely what the new security environment will look like.

To avoid being surprised by developments that call for deliberate and carefully planned responses rather than knee-jerk reactions, we need to understand today's major trends and the forces driving them. This chapter looks at China's ambition to resume what it sees as its rightful place as not only the predominant Asia-Pacific regional power, but also a major global power...as the driving force behind changes in the Pacific Islands security environment. Given the current role and place of the United States in the region and, indeed, in the global security environment, this raises the question of how China's emergence in the region will play out.

## **Divided Perspectives**

One group of observers, the so-called "realists," see real grounds for extreme nervousness in the present international security situation. John Mearsheimer, of the University of Chicago, drawing on lessons from history, not least the run-up to the first World War, asserted emphatically, "To put it bluntly: China cannot rise peacefully."<sup>2</sup> A number of observers, both politicians and political scientists, agree with Mearsheimer.

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2 Julian Sneider, "Mearsheimer's big question: Can China Rise Peacefully?," *The Interpreter*, April 15, 2014, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/04/15/Mearsheimer-Can-China-rise-peacefully.aspx?COLLCC=781054369&>

Not everyone agrees, however. Some countries in Southeast Asia, which have generations of experience dealing with competing major powers in their region, are less pessimistic. Singapore's foreign minister has said: "The world and Asia are big enough to accommodate a rising China and a re-invigorated United States."<sup>3</sup> Similar optimism is heard from Malaysia and Indonesia. None of these countries sees the need to protect itself by joining a China bandwagon or seeking a security treaty with the United States.

Of course, some countries have to be optimistic. Several, Australia and New Zealand are examples, aim to get on well with both the existing superpower, the United States, and the emerging one, China. They have to do this because Australia's and New Zealand's biggest trading partner is, by far, China, while their traditional security partner has been the United States. Australia is a major U.S. ally, and has tended to give priority to that relationship. New Zealand, in contrast, has used its smallness and reputation for independent thinking to give emphasis to its relationship with China.

Do China's leaders indicate their future plans for their nation's role in the world? In many ways they do. After what they have termed their "century of humiliation," in which Western powers and Japan subjugated much of China for their own benefit, leading Chinese officials speak of the nation resuming its rightful role as a world leader, a position which it held for many centuries before Western and Japanese interventions. There is little doubt of their determination to achieve what has been called the "Chinese dream."

Many observers believe this aim doesn't involve global or regional subjugation. But it does require of other countries the provision of both respect and the geopolitical space appropriate for a great power. Like other great powers before it, it does not like to be challenged, particularly in its home region.

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3 David Kang, "PacNet #64 - Is America Listening to Its East Asian Allies?," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 18, 2012, <http://csis.org/publication/pacnet-64-america-listening-its-east-asian-allies>.

For small powers, including those in the Pacific Islands region, security nervousness will rise or fall depending on two factors:

- First, the extent to which China demonstrates in its dealings with other states a respect for international law and the established international order. Many observers are concerned on this point due to recent developments in the East and South China Seas.
- Secondly, the extent to which the West, the United States in particular, is prepared to share power and give China the geopolitical space it seeks. Here, too, many observers see stronger grounds for pessimism than optimism. Within Asia itself, however, stalwart allies of the West, such as the Republic of Korea, have indicated they will have nothing to do with any Western plans to contain or obstruct China's emergence as a great power.

The head of Australia's foreign affairs department, Peter Varghese, spoke carefully on this point in terms that apply not only to Australia, but also to a number of other Asia-Pacific countries. He related:

*“Australia does not want to be put in the position where we have to choose between the U.S. and China...China has every right to seek greater strategic influence to match its economic weight. The extent to which this can be peacefully accommodated will turn ultimately on both the pattern of China's international behaviour and the extent to which the existing international order intelligently finds more space for China.”<sup>4</sup>*

Against these criteria, the outlook for peace and security in the wider Asia-Pacific region seems somewhat doubtful. The risk of full-scale con-

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<sup>4</sup> Hugh White, “America wants to know whose side Australia is on: Could the US and China share equal billing?” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 5, 2013, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-opinion/america-wants-to-know-whose-side-australia-is-on-20130304-2fgr9.html>.

flict between major powers might not be great. But if it should occur, consequences for the wider Asia-Pacific region, including the Pacific Islands region, would be devastating. Some nervousness is understandable. But, does China pose any more of a direct challenge to peace and security in the Pacific Islands region?

## **China's Regional Objectives**

I have discussed already the possible impact of China's rise and its ambitions on the global or Asia Pacific-wide security environment. Is there a direct impact on the Pacific Islands region? What, if any, are China's specific objectives in relation to the region and how do they affect the region's security environment?

Today, there is more Chinese activity in terms of movement of people, trade and cultural exchanges in our Pacific region than ever before. It raises a legitimate question of whether China might have additional objectives beyond its resumption of great power status; objectives which could impact specifically on the region's strategic environment.

Is the prime driver of China's policy in the Pacific, as elsewhere, the pursuit of trade, as many Western business people believe? Or, is it perhaps the acquisition of resources to keep the fires of China's engines of growth burning, as some economic strategists maintain? Or, is China seeking to challenge American geostrategic supremacy in the Pacific? Some academics have asserted this and claim that the Pacific Islands region could be a focus for this competition. This argument first attracted attention several years ago with the publication of a powerful polemic entitled "Dragon in Paradise: China's Rising Star in Oceania."<sup>5</sup>

Some of these factors undoubtedly play a role, if not the predominant one, in shaping China's Pacific objectives. But, I have no doubt that China's

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5 John Henderson, Benjamin Reilly, and Nathaniel Pepper, "Dragon in Paradise: China's Rising Star in Oceania," *The National Interest*, Summer 2003, 72.

prime consideration and highest priority in the region is much simpler: to demonstrate its major power status throughout the wider Pacific region.

While proponents of the “Dragon in Paradise” thesis contend that China’s intentions in the region are more malevolent than benevolent, this may not now be the common view. New Zealand has demonstrated its belief in the opposite view by cooperating practically with China in a symbolically significant development project in the Pacific Islands.

## **The Negatives**

Despite all this, there have been aspects of China’s involvement in the Pacific that have not been welcomed. A decade ago, China and Taiwan were engaged in an intense and bitter competition in the region for diplomatic recognition. The competing campaigns involved significant bribing of politicians, resulting in serious destabilization in one Pacific Island country in particular. New Zealand and Australian foreign ministers spoke out against what they called “check book diplomacy.” Fortunately, the election of a new president in Taiwan, one more inclined to cooperate with Beijing than compete, solved the problem...for the present at least.

As China becomes more involved in the Pacific, inevitably Chinese criminals become increasingly involved, too. I have clear recollections of problems caused by dishonest traders and fraudsters in the past — often individuals from Australia, New Zealand or the United States.<sup>6</sup>

There has been natural apprehension about whether China’s hunger for raw materials to sustain its thriving economy might result in resource depletion in the Pacific and possibly environmental degradation. A combination of rapacious business practices by some Asian timber companies and weak

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6 When I first visited Tuvalu back in 1980 to present a letter of credentials as New Zealand’s high commissioner, I found that the only other guests at the Funafuti hotel were three members of the Ku Klux Klan from Texas. They quite openly said their purpose was to persuade Tuvalu’s Finance Minister to invest the country’s financial reserves with the Klan. Fortunately, the minister at the time, the late Sir Henry Naisali, was never likely to take up their offer.

governance in some Melanesian countries has caused considerable harm in these areas.

Chinese fishing fleets join those from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, United States and Europe in harvesting the Pacific's tuna resource, the largest in the world. Some fishing is done by Pacific Island countries, but the bulk is done by foreign interests. It is regulated by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Convention. While the long-term sustainability of the tuna resource is far from certain, China itself has generally observed its obligations under the convention.

Jian Yang, a Chinese New Zealand academic, and now a politician, has written the most comprehensive study so far of China's objectives and policies in the Pacific Islands region. In "The Pacific Islands in China's Grand Strategy: Small States, Big Games," he emphasizes the significance of the fact that China's presence and role in the Pacific Islands is increasing dramatically.<sup>7</sup> But he does not believe that Beijing has specifically aggressive or threatening attitudes towards the region's governments or peoples. Nor does he believe there is any intent to challenge the United States in the Pacific Islands region, dismissing the "Dragon in Paradise" thesis. Yang believes that China will play an increasing role in the evolution of the regional order. It will insist that it plays a role at least as significant as, and possibly greater than, any other major power. Very clearly, this includes the security field as well as others.

## **Security Environment Impact**

Since Yang's book was published in 2011, tensions have risen over disputed islands in the northern Pacific, specifically in the East and South China Seas. Debate continues as to whether these rising tensions arose in reaction to, or were a cause of, the American pivot, or "rebalance," to Asia.

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<sup>7</sup> Jian Yang, *The Pacific Islands in China's Grand Strategy: Small States, Big Games* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

China has certainly been flexing its muscles in its disputes with Japan and nearby ASEAN<sup>8</sup> neighbors. This is clearly affecting the North Pacific security environment, not least because the deteriorating China/Japan relationship risks involving the United States directly because of its security treaty obligations to Japan.

None of this is impacting directly on the Pacific Islands at this stage, but it certainly could if hostilities should break out, which is a real possibility. Security arrangements and architecture in the Pacific Islands region clearly have to take this risk into account. Nervousness will be fed by uncertainty whether the United States and China are, or will finally become, strategic partners or competitors. Most likely, their relationship will continue to involve a mix of partnership and competition, justifying a watchful wariness on the part of other players in the Asia-Pacific region, including the Pacific Islands.

There is increasing recognition in the region that most immediate challenges to the security environment arise from governance inadequacies within the region itself. And with that recognition, new thinking is being given to the promotion of good governance, with less emphasis on universal, largely Western values and norms, and more emphasis on indigenous customs and traditions.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, new thinking is going into the region's physical security architecture, and how it is changing and hopefully being improved. Other chapters in this book elaborate on that.

## **Regional Architecture Evolution**

Since Pacific leaders and elders first began to face the challenges of independence half a century ago, they demonstrated their capacity to create whatever regional architecture, formal or informal, was necessary.

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8 Association of Southeast Nations

9 Elise Huffer and Ropate Qalo, "Have We Been Thinking Upside Down?" *The Contemporary Pacific*, 16(1), 2004, 87-116.

Historically, this should not surprise us. Back when several Island countries were still colonies, and the Pacific Islands Forum was not even a gleam in Ratu Mara's<sup>10</sup> eyes, the only regional meeting at the governmental level was the South Pacific Commission (SPC) — now renamed, of course, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community. Some SPC meetings had politicians from just-independent or soon-to-be-independent territories among the delegates, but only colonial or metropolitan powers had full rights at these events.

Early Pacific leaders resented their lack of power at the conferences. Plenary discussion of political issues was not allowed, and this policy was strenuously policed by the old colonial powers, including the French and Americans. Future Pacific leaders used to go along, because they valued the opportunity to get together privately with their peers, usually in the evenings. They shared stories about their respective journeys into independence, asked each other's advice, and enjoyed each other's company. Albert Henry, of the Cook Islands, and his ukulele would often bring the evening to a close with his distinctive rendition of "Pearly Shells."<sup>11</sup>

It may seem a long step from ukuleles and "Pearly Shells" to the Biketawa Declaration and the Melanesian Spearhead Group and the several similar groupings today; a long step perhaps, but historically a very logical one.

Not surprisingly, soon after most Island countries gained independence, the idea of a South Pacific Forum, later called the Pacific Islands Forum, was promoted. It included the Island countries, and Australia and New Zealand, but not the more foreign colonial powers. After a period in which Australia and New Zealand are thought to have thrown their comparative weight around in PIF meetings, it is perhaps natural that Island countries should today be seeking forums in which their own views are predominant and don't have to be negotiated with the region's two developed countries.

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<sup>10</sup> Fiji's first prime minister, serving from 1970 to 1992. He formed the Pacific Islands Forum in 1971.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Johnson and Michael Powles, eds., *New Flags Flying: Pacific Leadership* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2012), 6-7.

## Conclusion

After many years living and traveling in and among Pacific Island countries, I have become aware of an optimistic attitude, a positive Pacific spirit, among Pacific Island peoples, even during difficult or uncertain times. I think it was best expressed by the revered Tongan philosopher and artist, the late Epli Hau'ofa, who described so well the Pacific spirit.

Hau'ofa, who had had his fill of foreign denigration of Pacific Islanders, their communities and their universe, stated:<sup>12</sup>

*“[T]he surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it...and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas. Their world was anything but tiny. They thought big and recounted their deeds in epic proportions... Islanders today still relish exaggerating things out of all proportions. Smallness is a state of mind... Theirs was a large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers....”*

*“Today’s economic reality [led] people to shake off their confinement and they have since moved, by the tens of thousands, doing what their ancestors had done before them: enlarging their world as they go, to Australia, New Zealand, Hawai’i, mainland USA, Canada and even Europe; they strike roots...all across their ocean, and the ocean is theirs because*

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<sup>12</sup> Epli Hau'ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands* (Suva, 1993).

*it has always been their home. Social scientists may write of Oceania as a Spanish Lake, a British Lake, an American Lake, and even a Japanese Lake. But we all know that only those who make the ocean their home and love it, can really claim it theirs. Conquerors come, conquerors go, the ocean remains, mother only to her children. This mother has a big heart; she adopts anyone who loves her.”*