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**WINDS OF CHANGE:
PACIFIC ISLANDS AND THE SHIFTING
BALANCE OF POWER IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN**

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Winds of Change: Pacific Islands and the Shifting Balance of Power in the Pacific Ocean

As China becomes more powerful, it is challenging American regional military predominance in Asia, but also in the western Pacific and increasingly in the Indian Ocean. In response to this challenge, the US and its allies are investing in ‘offshore balancing’ strategies, which entail greater security cooperation amongst maritime democracies in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. As a corollary to these strategies, new mental maps of the region have been drawn up. Increasingly, America and its allies are replacing the concept of Asia-Pacific with that of the Indo-Pacific. More than a simple change in nomenclature, this shift is part of an intensifying ‘hearts and minds’ contest for influence, the likes of which has not been seen since the end of the Cold War. This paper is concerned with the implications of this shift in strategic thinking for Pacific island states.

Pacific island administrations find themselves drawn into the geostrategic designs of other powers, as they clamber to cement existing security relations or to develop new ones. Australia, for example, has launched a Pacific ‘step up’, a new policy of engagement intended to consolidate Australia’s influence in the Pacific. However, Pacific island states are not without agency of their own. Long accustomed to dealing with great power competition in their ocean, Pacific island country leaders are asserting their own identity as an oceanic continent: the ‘Blue Pacific’. They are also demanding action to tackle the Pacific’s own security concerns, particularly climate change. It is clear that renewed geopolitical competition represents an historic opportunity to engage with Pacific island states on their own terms.

Part one of this paper discusses changing geopolitical conditions in the Pacific Ocean, with a focus on the implications of a more powerful China, and reactions of other regional players. Part two considers how changes in the broader ‘Indo-Pacific’ region have raised geostrategic anxieties in Canberra which have, in turn, shaped a ‘step up’ in Australia’s engagement with Pacific island countries. Part three considers the ways that Pacific islanders are looking to assert their own interests in the context of a return to geostrategic competition in the Pacific Ocean.

Part One: A shifting balance of power in the Pacific Ocean

For 70 years, the overarching balance of power across the Pacific Ocean has been a settled matter. At the end of the Second World War, strategic planners on the Pacific Rim viewed the whole of the ocean, from the beaches of California to islands fringing the mainland coast of Asia, as a maritime domain shaped by American power. In 1949, US General Douglas MacArthur explained the Pacific had ‘become an Anglo-Saxon lake’ (cited in Scott 2012:617). Today however, winds of change are again ruffling the world’s largest ocean. There is growing ‘strategic anxiety’ among countries on the Pacific Rim. Many are concerned the status quo – underpinned by American naval power – is under strain. As the locus of power in the world begins to shift, there is uncertainty about prospects for the existing regional order. Will the rules and norms of international affairs change? Will countries large and small still be able to pursue their interests? What are prospects for cooperation, and for conflict?

Considering the rise of China

At the core of growing unease is a rising China. Rapid economic growth in that country, and a corresponding investment in military technologies and naval capabilities, together with a more assertive foreign policy, has begun to tip the balance of power from the eastern rim of the Pacific to its western edge. It is worth considering the scale of the economic shift that is underway. The overall size of China’s economy surpassed that of the United States (US) in 2014, and it is set to power ahead. The IMF estimates that, in 2019, China’s economy will grow to be 20% larger than the US (cited in Allison 2017:10). By 2030, the Australian treasury estimates China’s economy will be nearly twice the size of that of the US, at \$USD42.4 trillion and \$USD24 trillion respectively (Australian Government 2017:26).

With economic growth comes an enhanced capacity to influence international affairs, including in the Pacific. For Pacific island countries, China is an increasingly significant donor and lender, contributing over the decade from 2006–16 nearly USD1.8 billion to the region (Pan et al. 2018:2–4). During that time, China overtook Japan and New Zealand to become the second-largest aid donor, after Australia, to independent island nations (Lowy Institute 2018). Trading relations are also intensifying dramatically: between 2000 and 2017, Chinese exports to Pacific island countries increased twelve-fold, and while Chinese imports from island states increased from a low starting point, they did so by a similar magnitude (see Dornan and Muller 2018). More broadly, China has initiated a new multilateral bank, the ‘Asian Infrastructure Investment

Bank’, and launched an ambitious multi-trillion dollar program intended to reshape economic geography in its near abroad, the so-called ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. Encompassing significant new Chinese investment in hard infrastructure projects – including ports, roads, railway and energy – the Belt and Road Initiative intentionally echoes historic ‘Silk Road’ trading links between China and the West. It also reaches into the Pacific Ocean, as part of a geographically-amorphous ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’, initially intended to build trading links and economic connectivity between China and maritime nations in South-East Asia, the Indian subcontinent, east Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe. Chinese maps issued in 2015 extended the reach of the Maritime Silk Road to include parts of the South Pacific (for discussion see Blanchard and Flint 2017:226–27).

As China’s economy grows, so too does investment in military capacity, particularly in naval technology. In recent times, China has begun to modernise its navy and develop an ocean-going, ‘blue water’ fleet. Gradually, this has seen a strategic rebalancing as China begins to challenge US naval predominance in the western Pacific Ocean. Since the Second World War, the US has sought to maintain a ‘forward defence’ posture in the region. Military planners have viewed Oceania as a maritime space across which the US might project force into Asia, both to deter potential adversaries, and to reassure allies (Scott 2012:617). Key to US strategy has been a series of island chains, running north-to-south, on which the US maintains bases, making it easier to launch military operations both by sea and by air.¹ For its part, China tends to view these island chains as a series of ‘foreign fortifications designed to “contain” Chinese force projection’ (Erickson and Wuthnow 2016:11).

Over recent decades, China has developed capabilities that would ‘make it difficult for the US and its allies to operate close to China’ (Roggeveen 2018:2). In military circles, these are referred to as ‘Anti-Access Area Denial’ (A2AD) capabilities. Furthermore, since 2015, China has been constructing islands on disputed reefs and shoals in the South China Sea, and in 2018 fortified these islands with anti-ship cruise missiles, surface-to-air missiles, and equipment designed to jam military communications (Panda 2018 and 2018a). These developments have increasingly ‘pushed’ US military supremacy further away from mainland China; from the

¹ The ‘first island chain’ runs south from Japan, through Okinawa, Taiwan and the Philippines, while the ‘second island chain’, to the east of the first, runs south from Japan through the Bonin island chain, the Marianas, Guam, Caroline Islands and Palau (for discussion see Erickson and Wuthnow 2016; Scott 2012).

‘first island chain’ to the ‘second island chain’ located further into the Pacific and Indian Ocean.²

As China rises, the United States responds

Even as China presents a challenge, the US has been signalling it intends to remain a force in Asia. In 2011, US President Barack Obama announced a rebalance of US forces to the broader region and declared ‘the US is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay’ (Obama 2011). Speaking in the Australian parliament, he announced US aircraft and marines would be permanently based in northern Australia. The following year, as part of the much-heralded ‘Pivot to the Pacific’, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attended the annual Pacific Islands Forum where she reiterated the message, telling Island leaders: ‘don’t count the US out’ (Clinton 2012). In surprisingly blunt language Clinton also explained the US was competing with China for influence (and access to resources) in the Pacific islands.³

In recent times, the US has become increasingly overt about geostrategic competition with China. The 2018 US National Defence Strategy labelled China a ‘strategic competitor’ that is looking to ‘coerce neighbouring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage’ (Department of Defense 2018:2). The US now sees Chinese strategy as one aimed at ‘regional hegemony in the near term and displacement of the US to achieve global pre-eminence in the future’ (Ibid). Pursuing a strategy of outright competition with China represents a shift from a decades-long period marked by mixed strategies of both engagement: encouraging China to join multilateral institutions and to play by the ‘rules’ of the US-led international order; and containment: attempts to ‘manage’ China’s rise and encourage cooperative behavior (for discussion see Hall 2018).

² As Wesley (2016:26) explains: ‘China’s raising of risks for US forces in the western Pacific has motivated the dispersal of these forces so that now the US and its allies have developed a dispersed defense perimeter in places such as Guam, Diego Garcia – and Australia.’

³ As Clinton explained to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee: ‘Let’s put aside the moral, humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in and let’s just talk straight, realpolitik. We are in a competition with China. Take Papua New Guinea – huge energy find. Exxon Mobil is producing it. China is in there every day in every way trying to figure out how it’s going to come in behind us, come in under us ... They have brought all of the leaders of these small Pacific nations to Beijing, wined them and dined them ... I mean, if anybody thinks that our retreating on these issues is somehow going to be irrelevant to the maintenance of our leadership in a world where we are competing with China, that is a mistaken notion.’ (Quinn 2011, cited in Hayward-Jones 2013:3).

Intensifying competition with China has seen a build-up of US forces in the western Pacific. Central to this strategy is Guam, home to the US' most 'forward deployed sovereign bases' in the Pacific (Scott 2012:620). Since the early 2000s, the US has consolidated long-range military capabilities in the island territory – including nuclear-powered submarines, long-range bombers and drone aircraft – and has deployed an anti-ballistic missile defense system. More than 4,000 marines are expected to relocate from Okinawa to Guam in the near future. In 2017 the US announced new missile-tracking radar systems would be built in Palau, to the southwest of Guam. In November 2018, the US and Australia announced plans for a joint naval base in Manus Island in northern Papua New Guinea, a move seen by some as further bolstering the US' 'second island chain'.⁴

Despite a rebalancing of US forces to the western Pacific (and rhetoric from the White House about remaining a Pacific power), maintaining geostrategic supremacy in Asia will come at an increasingly high cost to the US. Some suggest that in the medium-term American core interests will not be sufficiently engaged to meet those costs (see White 2017 and 2015). For its part, China plans to dramatically increase investment in a 'blue water' navy. Australia's Department of Defence suggests that, by 2035, China's overall defence spending will match that of the US, with much of this increase directed toward a modern, ocean-going, navy (Australian Government 2016:49). Indeed, China may be building what Roggeveen (2018:2) describes as a 'post-American' navy; one designed 'not to confront US naval predominance in the Pacific, but to peacefully inherit this predominance as the US baulks at the increasing cost of continued regional leadership'.

The election of Donald Trump, and his assertion of an 'America First' approach to foreign policy, has added to uncertainty about US intentions in the western Pacific, and America's broader commitment to the rules-based multilateral order, largely designed and shaped by US power in the aftermath of World War Two (for discussion see Layne 2018). Taken together then, developments on both the east and west of the Pacific Ocean have seen US allies in Asia and the Pacific develop more activist international strategies of their own (though it should be

⁴ Head of the National Security College at the Australian National University, Rory Medcalf, explained the announcement that the Australian and US navies will work with Papua New Guinea on an upgraded base on Manus island was of 'big military significance': 'In one move, this could let Australia guard its northern approaches, outflank possible future Chinese bases in the South Pacific, and help Japan and the United States secure an island chain – linking Okinawa, Guam, Palau and Manus – to limit Chinese naval force projection in a crisis'. (Medcalfe 2018b).

noted these strategies are aimed – at least in part – at ‘anchoring’ continued US engagement in the broader region).

Offshore balancing in the Indo-Pacific

Increasingly, governments on the Pacific Rim are grappling with the prospect that China – an authoritarian, and profoundly undemocratic state – is on track to displace the US as the predominant power in Asia, and is developing the capacity to project force into the western Pacific Ocean. Australia’s 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper for example acknowledges that, at least in parts of South East Asia, ‘China’s power and influence are growing to match, and in some cases exceed, that of the United States’ (Australian Government 2017:25). In stark language, some prominent analysts contend that, in the not-too-distant future, ‘America will cease to play a major strategic role in Asia, and China will take its place as the dominant power’ (White 2017:1).

Of course not everyone sees the future regional order of the Asia-Pacific as one shaped by China. Some suggest that, while the age of US preponderance in Asia may be entering its twilight era, the near future will be marked not by Chinese hegemony but rather by regional cooperation, at least amongst ‘like-minded’ states, and a balance of power (see Shearer 2018:121, Green and Madeiros 2018:95, Rose 2019:20). Other powers – notably Japan and Australia, but also France and the United Kingdom – are increasingly playing a more prominent role in regional affairs as they look to actively *shape* the region’s balance of power in ways that reaffirm key norms of the existing regional order, and constrain a potentially-revisionist China. As the former secretary of Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Peter Varghese put it in late 2017, Australia wants to work with others to ‘shape a balance of power which finds room for China but which also favours the region’s democracies’ (Varghese 2017). He also explained that ‘if the alternative to US strategic predominance is Chinese strategic predominance then it is not an attractive one for Australia, for as long as China remains an authoritarian state’ (*Ibid*).

Increasingly key to strategies intended to shape the regional balance of power is the concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific’. Used by strategic thinkers on the Pacific Rim in place of the term ‘Asia-Pacific’, this label alludes to a recast role for maritime democracies in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (see Medcalf 2018 and 2014; Scott 2012). In this framing, maritime democracies – particularly the US, Australia, Japan, and India – will increasingly work together to maintain

‘balance’ in the regional order and bed down commitment to the principles and values on which the regional order should be based (see also Hall 2018; Hemmings et al 2019). This cooperation will entail combined naval power projection, and will emphasise cooperation to maintain maritime security. To underscore the point, in May 2018 the US ‘Pacific Command’, based in Hawaii, was renamed the ‘Indo-Pacific Command’. This new Indo-Pacific framing of the region is linked to attempts by the US and its allies to develop a shared maritime ‘counterweight’ to a more powerful China, and specifically to a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, first launched in 2007, intended to promote greater military cooperation between the US, Australia, Japan, and India.

Over the past decade, the US has sought to enlist both Australia and India in a broader strategy of ‘offshore balancing’ in the Indo-Pacific. In 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton introduced the concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as she explained the US would increase engagement with the Indian navy in the Pacific (Clinton 2009). The following year, as part of a broader ‘Pacific Pivot’, she explained the US would expand its alliance with Australia ‘from a Pacific partnership to an Indo-Pacific one’ (Clinton 2010). That year Australia agreed to host regular rotations of US marines and military aircraft at a US base in Darwin. In 2016, naval cooperation between India and the US intensified when New Delhi agreed to allow the US access to Indian military bases in return for weapons technology ‘to help narrow the gap with China’ (Miglani and Torode 2016).

By 2017, as concern about a more assertive China grew, the concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ was increasingly adopted as a descriptor of the broader region, particularly by policymakers in Australia, Japan and the US. For its part, Australia emphasised the ‘Indo-Pacific’ in Defence White Papers released in 2013 and 2016,⁵ while Japan advocated a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ strategy. In 2017, the Trump Administration adopted the same language, developing its own ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ strategy.

Contending regional visions

While fundamentally concerned with hard power projection, the ‘Indo-Pacific’ framing is also about soft power; a hearts-and-minds contest for influence. Indeed for some analysts, relations

⁵ The 2013 Australian Defence White Paper, for example, explained that ‘a new Indo-Pacific strategic arc is beginning to emerge, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia’ (Australian Government 2013: 7).

among countries in Asia, and among Pacific Island countries, can increasingly be reduced to two, contrasting, visions: China's 'Belt and Road' vs the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' of the US and its allies. As the head of the National Security College at the Australian National University, Professor Rory Medcalf (2018a) explains:

Today we are seeing the great contest of ideas in the mental maps of Asia can be simplified to the big two: China's Belt and Road versus the Indo-Pacific, championed by Japan, India, Australia and gradually, as it gathers its wits, the United States. Other nations are seeking to understand both concepts and identify how they can leverage, evade, or influence them.

Whether the messy realities of international relations across Asia and the Pacific really can be reduced to a contest between China's 'Belt and Road', and a competing vision for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' is debatable. But there is little doubt increasingly sharp competition between the US and China is reshaping regional politics. In November 2018 for example, APEC leaders meeting in Port Moresby were unable to finalise a regional statement amid heated disagreement between the US and China – the first time in the 25-year history of the summit that leaders have failed to agree on declaration text. Despite this, Chinese leader Xi Jinping met with Pacific Island leaders and announced a number of island states had joined the Belt and Road Initiative.⁶

For their part, Australia, Japan, and the US sought to compete with the Belt and Road initiative, announcing new infrastructure finance of their own. In mid-2018 they formed a trilateral partnership intended to mobilise investment in infrastructure, and to 'foster a free, open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific' (US Embassy Canberra 2018). Then, at the APEC summit in November all three nations (and New Zealand), also announced an ambitious project to roll out electricity and internet to communities across Papua New Guinea (currently just 13% of the country has access to reliable electricity, and the new plan aims to extend power to 70% of the population). US Vice President Mike Pence used the occasion to argue the US and its allies were a better source of infrastructure finance, explaining: 'we don't drown our partners in a sea of debt, we don't coerce or compromise your independence ... we do not offer a

⁶ By November 2018, a number of Pacific Islands had joined the Belt and Road Initiative, including the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, and Vanuatu.

constricting belt or a one-way road' (Yong 2018). In the lead up to the APEC meeting in Moresby, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison also announced a \$2 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific.

For Pacific Island countries this renewed contest for influence in the region has seen a frenzy of diplomatic activity, the likes of which has not been seen since the end of the Cold War. Australia announced new diplomatic missions in five Island states (the Cook Islands, Marshall Islands, Niue, Palau and Tuvalu) and in French Polynesia (Morrison 2018); New Zealand pledged a dramatic bump in aid to the region as part of a 'Pacific re-set' and announced 14 new diplomatic positions across seven Pacific Island countries (Radio New Zealand 2018); and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe hosted Island leaders and tried to win support for his 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy (MOFA 2018).⁷ From further afield, French President Emanuel Macron travelled to the region to declare support for the Indo-Pacific, and explicitly highlighted the need to 'balance' a rising China and to avoid 'any hegemony in the region' (Smyth 2018). Even the UK announced it was diving back into the region, with three new diplomatic posts to be opened in Pacific Island countries (Newton-Cain and Powles 2018).

China's challenge to the naval predominance of the United States in the Western Pacific ocean, and the intensifying courtship of Pacific island governments as part of a broader contest for influence in the 'Indo-Pacific', precipitated a significant response from the Australian government, which in late 2017 launched its own Pacific 'step up', intended to reinforce Australian influence amongst Pacific island countries (Australian Government 2017:25; see also Batley 2017). Australia's Pacific 'step up' is considered in greater detail below.

Part 2: A return to strategic denial? Australia's Pacific Step Up

A renewed contest for influence among the Pacific island states reveals a truism of international affairs in the region: Pacific islands matter most to powers on the Pacific Rim as a source of potential threat (however distant that threat might be). Australia in particular has long held,

⁷ A summit between the Japanese Prime Minister and Pacific Island counterparts is held every three years. At the 2018 PALM Summit, Abe attempted to win support from the Island states for Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy but was not entirely successful. The 'overview of results' from the summit reads: 'Japan declared its intention to commit more deeply to the stability and prosperity of the region based on the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" and the Pacific island countries shared the importance of the basic principles of the strategy and welcomed the strengthening of Japan's commitment in the Pacific region under the strategy' (MOFA 2018).

but only periodically implemented, a policy of ‘strategic denial’ – sometimes referred to as Australia’s ‘Monroe Doctrine’ – aimed at limiting access to islands in the South Pacific by other, potentially hostile, states (see Tate 1961; Herr 1986). This overarching security imperative has long meant that, when regional strategic anxieties are heightened, Australia looks to shore up its own position in the Pacific (and, at times, to limit the influence of others). Recent geostrategic anxieties, driven by a more powerful China, have again seen Australia look to cement a pre-eminent place in the Pacific islands.⁸

Limiting access to the Pacific: A long preoccupation

Australia’s pre-occupation with limiting access to Pacific islands is driven by a defence and security imperative; namely to limit potential threats in the maritime approaches to the Australian mainland. This preoccupation has long historical precedent. In the late 18th Century Britain annexed Norfolk Island and Lord Howe Island, driven by concern about the islands’ proximity to its new penal colony on the Australian mainland (in particular Britain wanted to deny them to the French). A century later, concerned about German designs in the region, Australian politicians implored British authorities to annex other islands in the southwest Pacific (see Tate 1961). This lobbying saw Britain assume control of British New Guinea, the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, and the New Hebrides (jointly administered with France).⁹

World War One led to more direct Australian control of Pacific island territories, as both Nauru and German New Guinea were transferred to Australian administration during post-war negotiations held in Paris. At those talks, Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes argued a security case for Australian administration, suggesting that ‘strategically the Pacific Islands [like New Guinea] encompassed Australia like fortresses ... the islands were as necessary to

⁸ As Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop explained in early 2018, “We want to be the natural partner of choice” in the Pacific, a region which she explicitly described as “our sphere of influence” (Wroe 2018).

⁹ Of course, other great powers *were* also interested in Pacific islands. By the close of the 19th Century, the United States had become a Pacific power, after annexing Hawaii and gaining control over Guam and the Phillipines during the 1898 war with Spain. United States’ interest in the Pacific Ocean was significantly influenced by the naval strategist Alfred Mahan, who argued the US ought to annex Hawaii in order to exercise control over the central Pacific Ocean, and to mitigate against the possibility that China may at some point ‘burst her barriers eastward’ (Mahan 1893). For its part, Germany controlled Samoa, German New Guinea and Micronesian islands to the north of New Guinea. France annexed New Caledonia and the island groups that make up French Polynesia (and with Britain jointly administered New Hebrides).

Australia as water to a city ... If they were in the hands of a superior power there would be no peace for Australia' (cited in Harper 1987:30).

Of course during the Second World War, a hostile power *did* threaten Australia when Japan invaded islands to the north and east, and from there launched air raids against the Australian mainland. After the war, as a critical security priority, Australia sought to shape a stable regional order in the Pacific islands, working closely with other states, particularly the US and New Zealand. In 1947 Australia convened a meeting of Pacific colonial powers in Canberra to establish the South Pacific Commission (SPC), intended to promote cooperation in administering their dependent territories, and to provide for the welfare of Pacific islanders. Then, in 1951 Australia signed the ANZUS treaty with the US and New Zealand, which anchored security cooperation between all three states in the broader Pacific region.

The post-war establishment of the United Nations saw a wave of decolonisation the world over, as European empires were, for the most part, relinquished. However, successive Australian governments in the 1950s and 1960s tried to 'hold back the tide' of decolonisation in the South Pacific, worried that island territories would not make viable nation-states and that independence may ultimately present a security threat to Australia (Waters 2013). Indeed the 1950s is described by Goldsworthy (1995) as a decade of 'Australian mini-imperialism', as cabinet ministers seriously debated assuming responsibility for nearby British territories and fusing them into an Australian-administered 'Melanesian Federation'. Even while considering the assumption of sovereignty in nearby Pacific islands, its clear Australian officials viewed the region through the lens of its own security concerns. In 1954, a senior official at the Department of External Affairs described Australian policy in the islands as being: 'to exert dominant political influence in the area with a view to maintaining Australian security behind a peripheral screen of islands' (cited in Goldsworthy 1995:356).

During the 1960s ANZUS states considered the security implications of moves toward decolonisation in the South Pacific firmly in the context of the Cold War. As Waters (2013:197) explains 'great power politics, not concern for the welfare of local peoples, drove this renewed interest'. After an ANZUS meeting in Canberra in 1962, US Secretary of State Dean Rusk explained privately that the US was determined that 'not one wave of the Pacific should fall under Communist influence' (cited in Waters 2013). In 1963 an ANZUS 'study group' – comprising officials from Australia, Britain, New Zealand and the US – concluded

that full independence was not likely to be viable for smaller Pacific territories, and for larger islands ‘where independence is the final solution the greatest care should be taken to ensure that the maintenance of security in the area will not be placed in jeopardy after the transfer of power’ (study group report cited by Waters 2013:199) Thus ANZUS powers sought to maintain control over the Pacific’s regional security order into the post-independence era.

During the 1970s and ‘80s, as a growing number of Pacific island states did gain independence, ANZUS states provided financial support for regional institutions in order to maintain privileged relationships with newly-formed island governments. Australia and New Zealand were, for example, the only metropolitan powers admitted to join the South Pacific Forum when it was formed in 1971 (now the Pacific Islands Forum). In lieu of formal defence pacts, Australian policymakers argued that funding regional cooperation in the Pacific was a means of maintaining ‘a favourable strategic posture in the face of Soviet and Chinese approaches to the new states of the region’ (Fry 1981:480). During the late 1970s a coherent policy emerged of funding regional aid programs, complemented by bilateral aid, as a means of ‘ensuring that the Soviets could not “buy” their way into the South Pacific’ (Herr 1986:175).¹⁰ This policy was dubbed ‘strategic denial’, and constituted Australia’s South Pacific contribution to the US’ broader containment policy toward the USSR. This version of strategic denial in the Pacific lasted until the end of hostilities between the US and the USSR in the late 1980s.

The close of the Cold War saw something of an interregnum as, for a period, major powers neglected to pay close attention to the Pacific islands. Indeed in the early 1990s there was significant concern that, in the absence of strategic interest in the Pacific, aid to the region would stall, and Pacific islands would ‘fall off the map’. As it was, the United States *did* close its aid offices in the South Pacific in the 1990s. To be sure, during this time Pacific islands were still afflicted by significant conflict – including a civil war in Bougainville and major unrest in the Solomon Islands – but these security threats were not of significant interest to

¹⁰ Funding regional cooperation in order to mitigate the influence of external powers, was put to the test during a so-called ‘Russian scare’ of 1976 (Herr 1986: 174). When Australia rejected a request from Tonga for finance to expand the country’s international airport, Tonga proceeded to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Reports also surfaced that Tonga was considering offering the Soviet Union a fisheries fleet base in return for support to expand the airport (Dorrance 1990: 913). This provoked an immediate response from Canberra. Not only did Australia agree to finance construction works at the international airport, but Australia increased its aid to the whole Pacific islands region ‘by a factor of four’ (Herr 1986:175). Subsequently, when the Soviet Union approached the South Pacific Regional Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) to fund a marine science package in the early-1980s, this was countered by a proposal from the ANZUS allies.

external major powers. They were in the main seen as ‘local struggles’ (though some would characterise the 2003 Australian-led military intervention in Solomon Islands as a contribution to the US’ global ‘War on Terror’, for discussion see: Wallis and Wesley 2015:29).

Shoring up Australian influence in the Pacific, and limiting China’s

In the early 21st Century, even while Pacific islands figured relatively less in global security affairs, Australia’s overarching security goals in the region remained similar to what they always had been.¹¹ Australia’s 2016 Defence White Paper again set out a ‘quasi-Monroe Doctrine in the Pacific’ (Batley 2018) by committing Australia to work ‘to limit the influence of any actor from outside the [Pacific] region with interests inimical to our own’ (Government of Australia 2016). By this time Australia was facing pressure from the United States to help counter the influence of a rising China in the South Pacific.¹² Analysts in Canberra were also increasingly worried that Chinese aid to the region could undermine Australia’s long-held status as pre-eminent aid donor to Island states.¹³ Even more pointedly, they were concerned that Chinese aid and infrastructure projects – ports, airports, and telecommunications – might constitute ‘dual use’ investments (useful for achieving both commercial and strategic goals) which might serve as the ‘bridgehead for a threatening presence in years to come’ (Wesley 2016:27).

In late 2017 Australia released a Foreign Policy *White Paper* which explained that China was challenging US predominance in the Indo-Pacific, and surmised that China would ‘seek to influence the region to suit its own interests’ (Government of Australia 2017). While not explicitly linking Australian policy in the Pacific with the rise of China, the *White Paper* also indicated that Australia would ‘step up’ and ‘engage with the Pacific with greater intensity and ambition’ (*ibid*). This ‘step up’ would come with a greater investment of resources in the region. However, it was also clear that any new attempt at strategic denial, intended to counter

¹¹ As Australia’s 2013 Defence *White Paper* explained: Australia seeks to ensure that our neighbourhood does not become a source of threat to Australia and that no major power with hostile intentions establishes bases in our immediate neighbourhood from which it could project force against us (Government of Australia 2013:25).

¹² As Wesley and Wallis (2015:35) explain, Australia had ‘for some time tried to calm US anxieties about China in the Pacific ... [a] region where Chinese attention seems still rather distracted and uncoordinated’, nonetheless the US remained suspicious that ‘any decline in Canberra’s influence in the South Pacific constitutes a direct gain for China’.

¹³ As Wesley (2016:27) explains, China’s engagement in the South Pacific ‘calls into question Australia’s traditional deterrent posture in its northern approaches and the South Pacific: that of being the primary provider of outside support to these often fragile states’.

Chinese influence in the Pacific islands, could not be as simple as increasing Australian aid in order to outcompete China (an unlikely prospect, given China's immense economic clout). It was in this context that some analysts suggested Australian officials should instead convince Island administrations that Chinese aid might come with risks they had not considered.¹⁴ During 2018, a number of Australian politicians expressed increasing concern about Chinese aid to the South Pacific, arguing that it might not meet 'appropriate standards' and that loans to island governments might constitute 'debt-traps' that could undermine Pacific island sovereignty, or worse, serve as a pretext for China to establish a military base in the region.

Throughout 2018 Australian officials publicly expressed concern about China's aid to the Pacific islands. In January the Australian minister to the Pacific, Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, bluntly suggested China was building 'useless buildings' and 'roads to nowhere' (Wyeth 2018). Foreign minister Julie Bishop said Chinese loans to island nations could undermine their sovereignty if they struggled to repay their debts, and suggested Chinese-funded projects "in our sphere of influence" ought to meet "appropriate standards" (Wroe 2018). In April 2018, a story broke in Canberra (citing unnamed Australian security officials) that China had 'approached Vanuatu about building a permanent military presence in the South Pacific' (Wroe 2018a). Australia's then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said he 'would view with great concern the establishment of any foreign military bases in those Pacific Island countries and neighbours of ours' (Crowe 2018). Despite strenuous denials from the Vanuatu government that any such base was being considered, the story made headlines around the world. Throughout the year concerns were raised periodically that China was 'considering' a military base somewhere in the South Pacific – including in Papua New Guinea,¹⁵ Solomon Islands,¹⁶

¹⁴ As the head of the Australian National Security College, Rory Medcalf, explained in May 2018: 'When it comes to the new geoeconomics – the strategic consideration of investment and infrastructure in the [South Pacific] region – Australia should not compete with China in terms of scale. Instead we should focus on standards, on best practice, on education, not so much offering alternatives to Chinese investment and money but rather building the institutions in smaller countries that will make those states more attuned to distinguish risk and opportunity, more resilient and more informed about the ways they may choose to question or utilise others' apparent largesse' (Medcalf 2018).

¹⁵ Paul Maley and Primrose Riordan, 2018. 'PNG port plan stokes fears of China military build-up'. *The Australian*. August 28, 2018. Accessed online: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/png-port-plan-stokes-fears-of-china-military-buildup/news-story/f0fa6fc36a1dbfc8d8acfe2bb4ea2907> Accessed on: December 20, 2018.

¹⁶ Primrose Riordan and Rowan Callick, 2018. 'China's Pacific investment push lands in the Solomon Islands'. *The Australian*. May 1, 2018. Accessed online: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/foreign-affairs/chinas-pacific-investment-push-lands-in-solomon-islands/news-story/9c85024e3245ed8e163763c15ab0d812> Accessed on: December 20, 2018.

Vanuatu,¹⁷ Fiji,¹⁸ Samoa¹⁹ and even French Polynesia²⁰ – and that Chinese loans might be used as leverage to secure a ‘base’. It is likely these reports contributed to increased concern, at least in some parts of the Pacific, about Chinese influence, and Chinese-funded infrastructure projects (see for example Hill 2018).

A renewed focus on security in the Pacific islands

As it turned out, the only nations that did commit to building a military base in the South Pacific in 2018 were Australia and the US. Both nations announced the development of a naval base at Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, while Australia also announced an upgrade for a military base in Fiji.²¹ Indeed, as part of the Pacific ‘step up’, Australia’s military presence in the region increased dramatically, including a new rotational Australian Defence Force mobile training force for the region; an increase in security spending in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji; and plans for a new annual Joint Heads of Pacific Security Forces to be hosted in Australia (see Annex 1: Elements of Australia’s ‘Pacific Step Up’).

Australia’s ‘Pacific step up’ also coincided with a new regional security declaration endorsed by Island leaders (the 2018 ‘Boe Declaration’) which bundled together previous security statements and committed island states to ‘develop national security strategies’ and to ‘strengthening the regional security architecture’ (Pacific Islands Forum 2018). In an apparent reference to Australia’s concern about Chinese ‘debt diplomacy’, the declaration asserted the right of island states to conduct their affairs ‘free of external interference and coercion’. However, in the main, the Boe Declaration actually reflected Pacific island countries’ concern with ‘non-traditional’ security threats. As such, it encompassed an “expanded concept of

¹⁷ David Wroe, 2018. ‘China eyes Vanuatu military base in plan with global ramifications’, *Sydney Morning Herald*. April 9, 2018. Fairfax Media. Accessed online: <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/china-eyes-vanuatu-military-base-in-plan-with-global-ramifications-20180409-p4z8j9.html> Accessed on: December 20, 2018.

¹⁸ Primrose Riordian, 2018. ‘Australia beats China to Fiji base’, *The Australian*. September 7, 2018. Accessed online: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/australia-beats-china-to-funding-fiji-base/news-story/60d05ca8eb2bec629080c2c844255bbd> Accessed on: December 20, 2018

¹⁹ Rory Callinan 2018. ‘China’s Samoa plan a concern’, *The Australian*. September 7, 2018. Accessed online: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/foreign-affairs/chinas-plan-to-develop-samoan-port-a-regional-security-concern/news-story/ede01bfe7ac23d97e2872a3ff6a07368> Accessed on: December 20, 2018

²⁰ David Wroe, 2018. ‘China casts its net deep into the Pacific with \$2bn fish farm’. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Fairfax Media. Accessed online: <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/china-casts-its-net-deep-into-the-pacific-with-2b-fish-farm-20180518-p4zgg69.html> Accessed on December 20, 2018.

²¹ The Blackrock military camp outside Nadi will host a training centre for Fijian soldiers participating in UN Peacekeeping duties and serve as a regional Humanitarian and Disaster Relief Centre (Turnbull 2018).

security”; including issues such as climate change, water security, violence against women, urbanisation, inequality and youth unemployment (see Ackman, Naupa and Tuimalealiifano 2018). Australia complemented the Boe Declaration with the announcement of a new Australia-Pacific Security College, which will also be supported by the United States, and a new Pacific Faculty of Policing at the Australian Institute of Police Management.

During 2018 Australia also worked with other states, including the US, Japan and New Zealand, to ‘outcompete’ Chinese investment in strategic infrastructure in the Pacific islands. In mid-2018 for example, Australia effectively blocked the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei from laying an international submarine internet cable that would have linked Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands with the Australian mainland (Fox 2018; Matsumoto 2018). In a decision driven by national security concerns (Huawei had already been banned from tendering for Australia’s domestic National Broadband Network in 2012), Australia would instead cover most of the cost of laying an undersea cable linking with PNG and Solomon Islands. In June 2018, on the same day he announced a new bilateral security agreement with the Solomon Islands, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull also indicated Australia would outbid Huawei to finance a domestic cable network linking outer islands with the Solomon Islands’ capital Honiara (Turnbull 2018). In November 2018, Australia, Japan, and the United States, also tried to block Huawei from building a domestic submarine cable network in PNG by offering their own telecommunications infrastructure package, which was described by the US’ top diplomat in Canberra as a ‘counter-offer’ to the arrangement with Huawei (Reuters 2018). However Papua New Guinea, which had already inked a deal with the company in 2016, decided to allow Huawei to continue to build the national network. Papua New Guinea’s minister for state investments, William Duma, described the counter-offer as ‘a bit patronising’ (Cave, 2018). As mentioned earlier in this paper, in mid-2018 Australia, the US and Japan also formed a trilateral partnership intended to mobilise investment in infrastructure in the region, and to ‘foster a free, open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific’ (US Embassy Canberra 2018). Furthermore, Australia announced its own \$2 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific.

In addition to a focus on infrastructure, Australia’s Pacific step up focused on *maritime* security. In late 2018 Australia announced a new large naval ship that will operate ‘semi-permanently’ in the southwest Pacific and help respond to disasters (Wroe 2018c). Australia would also continue to implement a \$AUD 2 billion Pacific Maritime Security Program, which

would see increased aerial surveillance of the Pacific Ocean and 21 new military patrol boats donated to island states. The first of these patrol boats was delivered to Papua New Guinea in December 2018. Australia also revealed plans for a new Pacific ‘Fusion Centre’ that would collate information from various security and fisheries agencies across Pacific island countries to provide more comprehensive ‘Maritime Domain Awareness’. The Fusion Centre looked set to be modelled on Australia’s own Maritime Identification System, which bundled together data from defence forces, intelligence agencies, law enforcement, immigration, maritime safety and fisheries agencies (Brewster 2018). In effect, the centre would help extend the scope and reach of Australia’s own maritime ‘domain awareness’ far into the Pacific Ocean.

Australia’s emphasis on maritime security cooperation in the Pacific islands occurs in a broader context of the ANZUS alliance, and US leadership. In mid-2018 for example, US marines were deployed on Australian warships as they visited island capitals, as part of operation ‘Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2018’. In the same month, an inaugural ‘Pacific Security Cooperation Dialogue’ was held in Washington between officials from Australia, New Zealand and the US (Department of State 2018). Then, at ministerial consultations in Washington in July, both Australia and the US emphasised the importance of information sharing, maritime security and domain awareness in the Pacific islands (US Embassy, Canberra 2018a). To bolster maritime domain awareness capacity, Australia and New Zealand also purchased from the US seventeen cutting edge, and expensive, maritime surveillance and anti-submarine aircraft (the Boeing P-8 Poseidon).

Australia’s new Pacific ‘step up’ can be understood as new attempt at strategic denial in the Pacific islands. While it is too early to say whether this approach will be effective, there is little doubt Australia is looking to shore up relations with island governments, while limiting China’s influence, in a region seen by many in Canberra as Australia’s own ‘sphere of influence’. Furthermore, Australia’s ‘step up’ can be understood as a contribution to geographically broader ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ strategies, adopted by the United States and allies as a means of balancing a more powerful China. While it is clear that Pacific islands are again considered strategically significant to major powers, it is also important to acknowledge that Pacific island countries have their own interests, and their own security concerns. Furthermore, island policymakers have proved adept at leveraging geostrategic competition in the Pacific Ocean to secure their own goals. The agency of Pacific island states is considered in part three of this paper.

Part 3: Asserting island interests in the ‘Blue Pacific’

There is little doubt that the recent resurgence of geopolitical interest in the Pacific is driven by strategic calculations. There is a danger that this focus on the strategic value of Pacific islands risks *de-emphasising* the ideas, interests and agency of Pacific islanders themselves. This is because the security imperatives driving a renewed interest in the region are not self-evidently the imperatives of island administrations. Pacific islands, and their governments, again ‘matter’ to states on the Pacific Rim in the context of renewed competition between the US and China (including competition for naval predominance in the western Pacific Ocean). Ultimately, Pacific islands again ‘matter’ insofar as they enable or inhibit the ability of others to launch operations across the ocean in the event of a crisis. This tendency of external powers - to neglect Pacific islands until direct national self-interest is piqued - has long been decried by Pacific leaders and scholars.²² The reality is of course that Pacific island states matter in their own right. Island administrations are sovereign over a huge swathe of the world’s surface. Furthermore, in the decades since decolonisation, they have leveraged their collective stewardship of ocean resources, and their significant voting bloc at the United Nations, to successfully pursue their own interests. Indeed, far from being small and inconsequential, Pacific island states have begun to exercise *global leadership* in areas that matter to all of humanity, particularly multilateral cooperation to tackle climate change and to protect the world’s oceans. In recent times Pacific island countries have sought to reposition themselves as ‘large ocean states’ (rather than small island states) and have endorsed a ‘Blue Pacific’ strategy to work together as one ‘oceanic continent’. Pacific countries have long been adept at navigating great power competition toward their own ends, and they have exploited the renewed interest in their region to demand action to tackle *their own* security concerns, particularly those associated with climate change.

‘Aqua Nullius’: The Pacific Ocean as maritime theatre for power projection

A tendency to view the Pacific Ocean as a maritime ‘theatre’ of competition is not a new phenomenon. For centuries major powers have struggled for naval supremacy in the Pacific. Pacific islanders have seen the Spanish, British, French, Dutch, Germans, Japanese, and

²² As the late Tongan scholar Epele Hau’ofa said of Australia and New Zealand: ‘these countries display a strong chameleonic tendency; they have a habit of dropping in and out of the South Pacific region whenever it suits their national self-interests’ (1998:400).

Americans all vie for control of their ocean, and these contests have indelibly marked the region, none more so than the Second World War (WWII).

In the decades following WWII, even as decolonisation occurred in the Pacific, strategic thinkers continued to view Pacific islands through the lens of maritime power-projection; as strategic waypoints on an ‘empty’ ocean, or as ‘unsinkable aircraft carriers’ and naval ports of value to more-powerful states. When, for example, Kiribati negotiated a fisheries access agreement with the Soviet Union in 1985 (during the latter stages of the Cold War), this rang alarm bells in Washington, Canberra and Wellington. Australian prime minister Bob Hawke told his Kiribati counterpart he was worried a fisheries deal might lead to a land-base, allowing the USSR a military presence in the region (Willis 2017:273). Officials from the US, Australia and New Zealand exerted ‘significant diplomatic pressure’ on Kiribati in an attempt to prevent it from finalising a deal, despite the fact New Zealand itself had a fisheries agreement with the USSR (*ibid*). This angered Kiribati President Ieremia Tabai, who denied a Soviet base would ever happen, and accused Western states of neo-colonial behaviour.²³

In recent years, as a more powerful China increasingly disturbs the status-quo of US naval predominance in the Pacific Ocean, analysts on the Pacific Rim have again come to see Pacific islands through the lens of maritime power projection. It is in this vein that Australian journalists warn island-nations like Vanuatu might serve ‘as a stationary aircraft carrier and a permanent port’ that would ‘allow Beijing to project its naval forces into the Pacific’ (Wroe 2018d). Strenuous denials from the Vanuatu government that it would ever consider a military base with China or anyone else (similar to denials made by the Kiribati government a generation earlier), have done little to dampen speculation that Vanuatu, or other island nations, might become ‘prey’ to Chinese coercion.

Viewing the Pacific region through the lens of great power naval competition risks framing of Pacific island nations as bystanders to the action, as they lack the material basis for power

²³ Tabai explained: The main concern I see [coming from other nations regarding the Russian fishing pact] is that we are so poor that we will allow the Soviets to establish a base in Kiribati. Well, we are not so poor as to lack principles ... We are not pro-Russian, we are pro-Kiribati and we believe in our capacity to pursue our national interests to achieve self-reliance. The colonial mentality is still around – that we are an appendage of the colonial countries ... Since 1979 we have ceased to belong to any other nation. We are only 64,000 people but we don’t belong to anyone... I have told these countries that we will continue to pursue our national interests (cited in Willis 2017:275).

projection themselves. It also exacerbates a tendency to see Pacific islands as ‘small’ and ‘isolated’, a perspective at odds with the reality that Pacific islanders in fact have sovereign rights over a huge swathe of the Earth’s surface. It just so happens that much of their domain consists of the sea. In the Western cultural imagination, the ocean is typically conceived as a blue ‘void’, or ‘force field’, between the terrestrial spaces which ‘really matter’ (for a detailed discussion of Western social constructions of the Ocean, see Steinberg 2001). Over centuries, norms of international law have been established (derived largely from European precedent) which hold that nation states have exclusive sovereignty tied to defined areas *on land*, or in waters immediately adjacent to land masses. By contrast, the open ocean is owned by no-one. The ocean, and particularly the ‘high seas’, has been imagined as a space across which navies might roam, and merchant ships might travel unhindered, and over which no-one holds exclusive control. The ocean is seen as an ‘unpeopled’ space, a form of *aqua nullius* (for pertinent discussion see Deloughrey 2007:30-41).

Key thinkers from the Pacific have long sought to explain that Pacific islanders have a different conception of their place in the world, one that is defined by connections across the sea, and by the vastness of the ocean itself. As the Tongan philosopher Epeli Hau’ofa (1998:403-405) explains, Pacific islanders are amongst the ‘proportion of Earth’s total human population who can truly be referred to as “Oceanic peoples”’. He suggests that over millennia Pacific islanders developed an oceanic cultural heritage based on centuries of isolation from ‘continental’ cultures,²⁴ and furthermore that Pacific islanders developed *shared*, pan-oceanic identities, through relationships and trade across the ocean.²⁵ Differences between Western and Pacific cultural understandings of the ocean are subtle, but profound. Hau’ofa suggests that while ‘continental men’ have tended to see only ‘small islands in a far sea’, Pacific peoples in fact live in a vast and interconnected ‘sea of islands’ (Hau’ofa 1993).

²⁴ Hau’ofa (1998:404) writes: “Before the advent of Europeans in our region, our cultures were truly oceanic in the sense that the sea barrier shielded us for millenia from the great cultural influences that raged through continental land masses and adjacent islands. This prolonged period of isolation allowed for the emergence of distinctive oceanic cultures with no nonoceanic influences...”

²⁵ Hau’ofa (1998:404) writes: “Although the sea shielded us from Asian and American influences, the nature and spread of our islands allowed a great deal of mobility within the region. The sea provided waterways that connected neighbouring islands into regional exchange groups that tended to merge into one another, allowing the diffusion of cultural traits through most of Oceania.”

A 'sea of islands': Reclaiming the Pacific's ocean continent

After the Second World War, Pacific islanders increasingly sought to reassert a 'pan-oceanic' identity, and to reclaim for themselves a larger place in decisionmaking over their own domain. By this time, connections across the ocean had become more limited, as inter-island travel was discouraged (or banned outright) by colonial administrations and Pacific islanders were cut off from each other. Long distance voyaging was increasingly rare, and in many cases ocean-going technologies had fallen into disuse.²⁶ However, in the late 1940s, even as colonial powers sought to shape a regional order that would protect their interests, some suggested that key to Pacific islanders gaining control of regional decisionmaking would be a process of 'reclaiming' an oceanic identity. As Albert Norman wrote in 1949:

Southern Oceania, that Pacific "continent" which mainly is under water, is unique as a "reclamation" project. Not an inch of soil will be reclaimed. The task is to reclaim something quite different, something that has been submerged by the chauvinistic policies of Europe ... the peoples inhabiting this submerged "continent" occupy the higher ground. Separating each "island" group are the waters of the South Pacific which tend to create the impression that this society is broken up and hopelessly separated from its essential parts. This geographic illusion has been heightened by the occupying European nations who, over the centuries, have "claimed" for their own the visible peaks of the land. It was thus that the political and meaningless divisions of Europe became arbitrarily superimposed on Oceania ... The first step in "reclamation" has been to free the land of these bonds, to restore the essential regional viewpoint and unity, to overlook the dividing waters, to see the land and its people as united ... it will be the task of the South Pacific Commission to ... promote the social reclamation of the world's seventh 'continent' and its people (Norman 1949: 22).

This 'reclamation', and assertion of a shared regional Oceanic identity, would prove a recurring theme in the decades following decolonisation. As Pacific islanders gained national independence, they also sought to gain control of their *regional* diplomatic agenda. During the

²⁶ Deloughrey (2007:104) writes: "Across the Pacific, long-distance indigenous voyaging was discouraged and criminalised by nineteenth-century European missionaries, traders, and colonial administrations who had a vested interest in maintaining a local tax-paying, church-going, and plantation-working population. The remnants of voyaging practices were further circumscribed by German, Japanese, British, French, and U.S. prohibitions during the Second World War."

1960s Pacific islanders took greater control of decisionmaking at the South Pacific Commission, where they had initially been relegated to a triennial ‘advisory’ conference (for discussion see Fry 1981). Then in 1971, Pacific island leaders established a regional political organisation of their own – the South Pacific Forum – which would become key to collective diplomacy. During the 1970s and 80s, Pacific island countries worked as a bloc (largely through the South Pacific Forum), to secure their shared objectives in Oceania. Even in the context of the Cold War, they were able to take on major powers – and prevail. Facing opposition from the US, Britain and others, they secured recognition of their Exclusive Economic Zones under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Indeed to achieve recognition of their sovereign rights to ocean territory, countries like Fiji broke with centuries of legal norms and asserted an identity ‘as a country of water interspersed with islands, and claim[ed] jurisdiction over a block of ocean, far from any continent (Andrew 1978:50). Subsequently Pacific island states also took on Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, by banning driftnet fishing in the South Pacific. Taking on the United States (up to and including impounding fishing vessels), they successfully negotiated a regional access agreement for American boats fishing for tuna in their waters.²⁷ Much to the consternation of the French, in 1986 they also successfully had New Caledonia added to the UN list of territories to be decolonised.

More recently, Pacific leaders have again asserted a pan-oceanic identity, and a willingness to use collective diplomacy strategies to pursue their interests. Over the past decade, Pacific island states have embraced a ‘New Pacific Diplomacy’: consisting of shared strategies to pursue Pacific island interests in a range of areas, including oceans management, fisheries, climate change, sustainable development, decolonisation, seabed mining, and trade (for detailed discussion of the New Pacific Diplomacy see Fry and Tarte et al. 2016, see also Tarte 2014). These strategies have yielded significant successes. Pacific island states have secured much greater financial returns from their collective sovereign control of tuna resources (see Aqorau 2016; Tarai 2016). Pacific island countries lobbied successfully for an ‘Ocean agenda’ as part of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (Quirk and Hanich 2016). In 2013 Pacific island states successfully lobbied to have French Polynesia added to the UN list of territories to be decolonised (MacLellan 2016).

²⁷ For discussion of Pacific collective diplomacy during the Cold War see Fry 1994 and 1993.

It is not a stretch to say that Pacific island states have, in recent times, begun to assert global leadership in key areas. Island nations have demonstrated they are prepared to leverage their collective oceanic presence – and UN votes – to shape multilateral initiatives that have implications for all states. Most pointedly, Pacific island countries are leading global efforts to tackle climate change and to protect the world’s oceans. The Marshall Islands patiently fostered, and then ably led, a global ‘High Ambition Coalition’, which secured the historic 2015 Paris Agreement, which remains key to global efforts to tackle climate change.²⁸ In 2017, Fiji assumed presidency of global climate talks at the UN. Fiji also co-hosted (with Sweden) the inaugural UN Ocean Conference in New York, and Fijian ambassador Peter Thomson was appointed the UN Special Envoy for the Ocean.

Working together as the ‘Blue Pacific’

Pacific administrations are looking to build on recent successes of collective diplomacy. To do so island leaders have endorsed a ‘Blue Pacific’ strategy that called for inspired leadership and a long-term foreign policy commitment to act as one ‘Blue Continent’ (Pacific Islands Forum 2017). Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi explained that the ‘Blue Pacific’ strategy

...seeks to re-capture the collective potential of our shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean based on an explicit recognition of our shared “ocean identity”, “ocean geography” and “ocean resources” ... It aims to strengthen collective action as one “Blue Pacific Continent” by putting “the Blue Pacific” at the centre of the policy making and collective action’ (Pacific Islands Forum 2017a).²⁹

²⁸ As former US President Barack Obama put it: ‘we could not have gotten a Paris Agreement without the incredible efforts and hard work of the island nations’ (Obama 2016).

²⁹ Malielegaoi emphasised the shared cultural heritage of Pacific island states, joined by their connection to the ocean. He argued: “The Pacific Ocean has provided our island communities their cultural and historical identity and attachment since time immemorial. It has been the major influence in the history of Pacific Island communities. Throughout the region, customary association with the sea forms the basis of present day social structures, livelihoods and tenure systems and traditional systems of stewardship governing its use. Pacific leaders urge the world to recognise the inseparable link between our ocean, seas and Pacific island peoples: their values, traditional practices and spiritual connections’ (Pacific Islands Forum 2017a).

In 2018, the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, Dame Meg Taylor gave a significant speech in Canberra explaining the origins of this ‘Blue Pacific’ concept, arguing it draws on ‘a rich history of thinking about the possibilities of an Oceania continent’ (Taylor 2018).³⁰ Following her speech, Taylor told Australian media that leaders of the Pacific are ‘embracing a narrative of identity, a narrative of our own strengths, rather than always giving this sentiment that has been articulated for us, that we are just these smatterings of islands in the Pacific and that we are totally incapable of doing anything for ourselves’ (see Mottram 2018). She argued that island states possess significant resources – including votes at the United Nations, and the world’s largest tuna fishery – and that a Blue Pacific strategy to work together as an ocean continent would help secure greater value from these resources.

An added impetus for Pacific island states to demarcate the physical boundaries of their ‘ocean continent’ has been provided by sea-level rise (driven by unprecedented warming of the world’s ocean and atmosphere). Pacific island governments are working together to make ‘permanent’ the outer edges of their Exclusive Economic Zones, using fixed coordinates rather than coastal features of the islands themselves, which are likely to shrink as coastal features become inundated (Frost et al. 2016). In describing the importance of securing collective maritime boundaries, Dame Meg Taylor again suggested Pacific island states were looking to assert a shared ‘ocean continent’:

Leaders are taking very seriously the demarcation of the maritime boundaries and are making sure all EEZs [Exclusive Economic Zones] are finalised ... There is a determined focus to have that done. It’s not unrealistic. Look, right back in the early days before the formation of the South Pacific Commission, in the [19]40’s, there was an articulation about the ‘seventh continent’. Just because it is water, doesn’t mean it doesn’t have legal boundaries, if we can secure them. (Taylor 2018)

Pacific island leaders continue to insist the greatest threat they face is from climate change. For decades they have lobbied for the UN Security Council to recognise that changes to the climate,

³⁰ Taylor (2018) explained that: “In essence, all of these appeals to Oceania, of who we are, respond to an awareness of the missed potential of our ocean continent, or as [Eveli] Hau’ofa describes it, the way the hoped for era of autonomy following political independence has not materialised. In response they all seek to reframe the region away from the enduring narrative of small, isolated and fragile, to a narrative of a large, connected and strategically important ocean continent” (Taylor 2018).

driven by the burning of fossil fuels, represent a security threat. In 2018, as they considered a regional security declaration, island leaders were adamant it should emphasise challenges they face from global warming; including monster cyclones, dying coral reefs, ocean acidification, sea-level rise and coastal inundation (see Morgan 2018b). The Boe Declaration – endorsed by Pacific island nations and Australia and New Zealand – reaffirmed climate change as the ‘single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of peoples of the Pacific’ and reaffirmed a commitment to ‘progress implementation of the Paris Agreement’ (Pacific Islands Forum 2018).

At present, most Pacific Rim powers are doing little to tackle the Pacific’s key security threat. China is the world’s largest coal producer; the US has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement; Japan is promoting coal-fired power; and Australia is the world’s largest coal exporter (and is planning to increase coal exports). This commitment to coal does little to endear Pacific Rim powers to island administrations. Dame Meg Taylor has explained that Australia’s promotion of coal-fired power is out of step with other Pacific Islands Forum members and places the ‘wellbeing and potential’ of the region at risk (cited in Hasham 2018, see also Taylor 2018).³¹ In December 2018, Tuvalu’s Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga, also speaking in Canberra, warned explicitly that Australia’s climate policies risked undermining its Pacific ‘step up’.³²

The return to naval competition in the Pacific Ocean means that Pacific island countries again ‘matter’ to great powers. Nations on the Pacific Rim are looking to cement existing security relations with island states or to develop new ones. Driven by their own strategic anxieties, there is a risk that the ideas and interests of Pacific island countries themselves are being overlooked. However, recent history suggests island states are more than capable of articulating, and pursuing, their own interests. In all likelihood, island states will continue to work together as a ‘blue continent’, and to demand other powers take their concerns seriously.

Conclusion

For decades, if not centuries, world powers have tended to view the Pacific Ocean through the lens of naval power projection, as a maritime theatre across which great power competition

³¹ Australia is the largest, most populated, and wealthiest member state of the Pacific Islands Forum.

³² Mr Sopoaga explained: ‘We cannot be regional partners under this step-up initiative - genuine and durable partners - unless the government of Australia takes a more progressive response to climate change’ (cited in Dziedzic 2018).

might be played out. Certainly, policymakers in Australia have long considered the Pacific Ocean as a potential source of military threat (distant though that threat may be). In turn Pacific islands have long been considered a ‘peripheral screen of islands’ behind which Australia might maintain its own national security (see Goldsworthy 1995:356). Today, as China challenges the naval predominance of the United States in the western Pacific Ocean, analysts in Australia, and elsewhere on the Pacific Rim, are again considering the Pacific islands through the prism of sea power. As Medcalf (2018) argues, the South Pacific is ‘now a theatre of strategic competition, whether we like it or not, for the first time since the 1940s’. However, much has changed in the decades since World War Two. Then, thousands of inhabited islands across the Pacific Ocean were administered as far flung posts of colonial empires. Today, the Pacific Ocean is home to 14 sovereign island nations who have their own national interests, and independent foreign policy. Furthermore, Pacific island countries are working together, as a bloc of nations, to pursue their shared interests on the global stage.

Today, Pacific island nations are looking to assert themselves as an ocean continent: as the ‘Blue Pacific’. Island leaders have formally endorsed a Blue Pacific strategy, which explicitly builds on a regional ‘ocean identity’ as the basis for pursuing collective diplomacy (Pacific Islands Forum 2017). Far from being small and insignificant, Pacific island nations have sovereign rights across a vast swathe of the world’s surface, and together have significant economic resources, including control of the world’s largest tuna fishery. Island states also represent a significant voting bloc at the United Nations. In the decades following decolonisation Pacific island countries have steadily reclaimed a pan-oceanic identity and doggedly pursued their interests through collective action. Even in the face of opposition from major powers, island states have had major successes, including recognition of their exclusive economic zones under the UN Law of the Sea, and securing greater economic returns from tuna caught in their waters. Furthermore, Pacific island states now exercise *global* leadership in multilateral efforts to tackle crucial environmental challenges, such as climate change and protecting the world’s oceans.

Renewed geostrategic competition in the Pacific Ocean presents an historic opportunity to engage with Pacific island countries on their own terms. Even while Pacific island states are again implicated in the geostrategic designs of others, it is clear that Pacific islands have distinct interests and foreign policy goals. In response to a more powerful China, the United States and key allies in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, have developed ‘offshore balancing’ strategies

which are intended shape the regional context in which China is rising, and to reaffirm key rules and norms of the broader Indo-Pacific. In contribution to these efforts, Australia has launched a Pacific ‘step up’ intended to shore up Australian influence amongst Pacific island administrations, while limiting China’s. However, there is a risk that this increased engagement with Pacific island states will continue to be driven by the security imperatives of Pacific Rim powers themselves.

If other powers want Pacific islands to endorse their normative visions for the broader Indo-Pacific they will need to take the security concerns of island states seriously. Here a key challenge will continue to be climate policy. Pacific island states have long lobbied, at the UN Security Council and elsewhere, for recognition of climate change as a security threat. In 2018, Pacific island leaders reaffirmed climate change as the ‘single greatest threat’ to the region (Pacific Islands Forum 2018). It is not hard to see why. A changing climate will likely entail catastrophic impacts for Pacific island nations and threaten the very survival of low-lying countries. Whilst Pacific Rim powers are today investing resources in geostrategic competition, their continued failure to seriously address climate change may prove a stumbling block to alignment between the Blue Pacific and any other vision for the broader Indo-Pacific. As it is, Pacific island nations look set to continue asserting their own vision for international relations in the Pacific Ocean. One thing is for sure, the days when major powers could take Pacific island countries for granted, are long gone.

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###

Annex 1: Elements of Australia's 'Pacific Step-Up'

Political engagement

- A regional security declaration endorsed by Pacific Islands Forum leaders: the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*.
- A new \$2 billion *Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific* (and an additional \$1 billion for Australia's export credit agency)
- A new *Office of the Pacific* established by the Australian government to ensure a 'whole of government' approach to the Pacific region (housed at DFAT, but including staff from the Australian Federal Police, Defence, Department of Home Affairs, and the Attorney General's Department.)
- Announcement of six new Australian embassies in the region (Palau, Marshall Islands, Cook Islands, Niue and French Polynesia)
- A trilateral Australia-New Zealand-United States *Pacific Security Dialogue* (inaugural meeting held in Washington in May 2018)
- A trilateral partnership – between Australia, Japan and the United States – intended to mobilise investment for infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific.
- Australia-Vanuatu bilateral security treaty (negotiations launched in June 2018)
- Australia-Solomon Islands bilateral security treaty (signed in August 2017)
- MoU between Australia and Papua New Guinea relating to Cyber Security Cooperation (signed in April 2018)

New security investments in the Pacific Islands

- A new *Australian Defence Force Pacific Mobile Training Team*
- Announcement of a new *Australia Pacific Security College* (supported partly by the US)
- A new *Pacific Fusion Centre* (focused on maritime security and transnational crime)
- A new *Pacific Cyber Security Operational Network*
- A new 'Pacific Faculty' at the Australian Institute of Police Management
- Proposed joint Australian-US Naval Base on Manus Island (with PNG Defence Force)
- Plans for new Australian soldier rotations in Papua New Guinea
- Negotiations commenced regarding development of a regional military base at Black Rock in Fiji (with Republic of Fiji Military Force)
- New security cooperation arrangement with Vanuatu (including a 'significant infrastructure upgrade' for the Vanuatu Mobile Force, leadership training for the Vanuatu police force, and a 'Defence Advisor in Vanuatu' – announced November 2018)
- Almost doubling of funding for the Australian Defence Cooperation Program in Papua New Guinea (from \$29 million in 2016–17 to nearly \$43 million in 2018–19)
- Almost doubling of Defence Cooperation Program funding for wider South Pacific region (from \$43.6 million in 2016–17 to \$84.9 million in 2018–19)
- A new \$2 billion 'Pacific Maritime Security Program' (including 21 new patrol boats to Pacific Island countries and two new aerial surveillance planes)
- A new 'large naval ship' that will operate semi-permanently in the South Pacific.

###

List of SGDIA Working Papers

Briefs

Hugh Govan (2018) *From Locally Managed Marine Areas to Indigenous and Community Conserved Oceans*. Working Paper No 3, SGDIA, USP, February 2018.

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