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Security Nexus Perspectives

U.S. OBSESSION WITH OLD DOGMA FACILITATES A CHINESE QUEST FOR PACIFIC CONTROL

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Abstract

Pursuing Sun Tzu's strategy of deception to win without waging war, China has not only risen but challenged US supremacy, especially in the Pacific region. Awoken from hibernation, the United States found it difficult to maintain freedom at sea following Mahan's sea control strategy. The United States was obsessed for decades with Huntington's theory that made Islamic countries its enemy. The U.S, discovered, however, that China had become a formidable power challenging the US Monroe doctrine that serves as a soft foreign policy guide.

Due to perceived feelings of frustration and desertion by the U.S., some Pacific nations did not trust Western powers to address their core concerns – climate change, economic development, and sea pollution. China took this opportunity to court Pacific state leaders and began making security and economic deals with Pacific nations to gain allegiance. China is resolute in extending its influence in the Southwest Pacific region and in becoming a leading power in that region. China has already attained political advances in the Indian Ocean Region, and now China aims to become dominant in the Pacific.

Summary

Pursuing Sun Tzu's strategy of deception to win without waging war, China has not only risen but challenged US supremacy, especially in the Pacific region. Awoken from hibernation, the United States found it difficult to maintain freedom at sea following Mahan's sea control strategy. The United States was obsessed for decades with Huntington's theory that made Islamic countries its enemy. The United States discovered, however, that China had become a formidable power challenging the U.S. Monroe doctrine that serves as a soft foreign policy guide.

Due to perceived feelings of frustration and desertion by the United States, some Pacific nations did not trust Western powers to address their core concerns – climate change, economic development, and sea pollution. China took this opportunity to court Pacific state leaders and began making security and economic deals with Pacific nations to gain allegiance. China is resolute in extending its influence in the Southwest Pacific region and in becoming a leading power in that region. China has already attained political advances in the Indian Ocean Region, and now China aims to become dominant in the Pacific.

Key Words: Pacific nations, core concern, climate change, obsession, great power, South China Sea.

Introduction

Once chagrined and determined to avenge, nations in the East rose stealthily, while the U.S. was ruminating about its hubris of past glories. Awoken from obsession, the U.S. watched in bewilderment as China not only rose but began challenging its mighty economic and military superiority. Misguided obsession of the West enables China's omnipotent presence all over the world. Confounding Western thinking, [69 countries](#), including several Pacific nations – Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and lately Vanuatu – backed a statement to the Human Right Commission in Geneva that announced that they considered issues concerning Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tibet to be China's internal affairs. It is a matter of deep regret and demands careful study then that China could win the support of one-third of the world's countries in favor of their crimes against humanity at the same time that [China's conduct](#) is labelled as "malign" by the West, and while defying U.S. security strategy and challenging U.S. policy.

With a long-term strategic plan to expand its sphere of influence, China was able to entice Pacific leaders to make unjust deals under the banner of "security and economic cooperation" during the West's investment vacuum in region while simultaneously addressing the Pacific nations' most concerning issues. China already established its dominance in the South China Sea (SCS), its primary gateway to the Pacific by claiming almost all of it and thereby intensifying the great power competition in the Pacific.

This article will address how U.S. missteps enabled China to become a great power that coerced Pacific nations to succumb to its economic coercion, and that now poses a severe threat to U.S. freedom of action in the Indo-Pacific region.

The U.S. Misguided Obsession with China's Rise

The United States and its allies were busy fighting so-called "Islamic terrorists" for almost three decades. Perhaps US strategists were too obsessed with Samuel Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilizations*, which was proved to be an "[intellectual catastrophe](#)." The book was published in 1996 and became one of the most influential of its time. Subsequently, the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, but while doing so the Pentagon did not consider that China would rise to pose a challenge to U.S. hegemony. Rather, [the United States helped China](#) to rise economically by allowing China to join World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. From hunger and poverty fifty years ago, China became the world's second-largest economic power and continues ascending economically and militarily.

Signals from the United States are also obfuscated in dealing with China. Before COVID-19, the United States and its allies wanted to [decouple from China](#) economically, but now the United States [wants competitive engagement](#) without conflict or confrontation. With this double-minded intention, how the United States will gain control of the great power competition with China has become an enigma. More so, these two great powers will find it difficult to coexist as Chinese Prime Minister Xi Jinping [touts](#)¹ socialism is superior to capitalism, [contrary](#) to Antony Blinken, U.S. Secretary of State, who said that these two systems can "coexist and cooperate". China's robust economy will enable it to build a formidable People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) that will pose more challenges to U.S. freedom in the Indo-Pacific. In June 2022, China launched its third 80,000-ton supercarrier (the Type 003, FUJIAN) capable of [operating 50 to 70 aircraft](#), the first carrier to firmly challenge the size of the U.S. Navy's Ford and Nimitz class carriers. Although Type 003 is conventionally powered, its fourth aircraft carrier is [expected](#) to be molten salt nuclear reactor powered.

The Monroe Doctrine has been a soft foreign policy of the United States for decades. However, all great powers have similar doctrines in their own spheres of influence. The United States has already started to feel the challenge of China's doctrine in the SCS. Stirred by Monroe, historian Alfred Thayer Mahan advocated for sea control and for creating naval deterrence. To the contrary, Chinese strategist Sun Tzu defined what has become enduring Chinese strategy in his book *The Art of War*. Contrary to Mahan's deterrence, Sun Tzu's "winning without fighting" strategy specifies mainly deception, and China closely follows his strategy prescription. For example, by bending the agreed rules of engagement regarding the use of arms at the Ladakh border, [China killed 20 Indian soldiers](#) in May 2021. Since the era of Deng Xiaoping's policy of economic reform, formulated in the 1980s when China was poor, China has also avoided conflict by using its leading economic power.

¹ The Elements of China Challenge, The Policy Planning Staff, Office of the Secretary of State, Page 5.² Indo-Pacific Action Plan – Part III.

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Following Mahan's theory, the United States, along with likeminded partners such as the United Kingdom, has added more ships in the Indo-Pacific to conduct Freedom of Navigations Operations (FONOP), which in practice accomplishes little strategically and has failed to win support of other Indo-Pacific states, particularly in the Pacific Islands. The economy, rising sea level, sea pollution, etc. are the most troubling issues that the West should have instead addressed. Instead, China was able to lure these nations into making deals using deceitful techniques, and thereafter, exerted influence over these nations using its economic leverage. Willingly or unwillingly, most of the littoral states tilted toward China. These states now continue doing so because of their growing fear of China's economic coercion.

In the present day, Monroe's doctrine or Mahan's theory may have been applicable with some modification, but Monroe and Mahan did not consider the tiny Pacific nations' significant roles and concerns. The islanders felt neglected for many decades and then forfeited their sovereignty to China, seeing the opportunity for economic development but without foreseeing the grave consequences regarding sovereignty.

Monroe's policy will fail to stop China from encroaching on US territories in the Pacific. Without providing confidence to the Pacific nations, the ships of the United States and its allies will become the [Chinese dragon's](#) fodder. There will be great difficulty in finding the strategic relevance of Mahan in simply carrying out FONOPs.

People's Perceptions vs Old U.S. Dogma

The future is always unpredictable, and as such, most scholars and thinkers failed to accurately predict the future. Rather, their inaccurate judgments provoked the United States to adopt an ineffective strategy for which the West suffered time and again, including the people of the United States. Today's general population is much more informed and cannot be duped for long. Other than a few propaganda machines, today, most believe that the United States attacked Iraq unjustly, that Afghanistan was devastated by invasion from both East and West, that Syria suffered from the clash of East and West, that America prefers kingship in Saudi Arabia rather than democracy, and that Yemen became the victim of realpolitik backed by the United States, and so on.

No one outside of China believes that China's rise is peaceful. The PLAN's aggressive deployment and militarization of the islands in the SCS are utterly hegemonic. Democratic values are severely challenged by dictatorial leadership, and the absence of democratic values will enable China to seek alignment from more Pacific nations as a further challenge to the United States. The United States, however, can turn the tide in its favor by addressing the real issues of Pacific nations.

If we believe "there is no permanent friend or foe in politics," then we also need to believe that the "axis of evil" states are supporting each other for the survival of their dictatorships, but that one day they will turn their back on one another and aim their nukes towards each other. The unfortunate lesson is that these states will not understand their proclivity to do so.

China's Viable Long-term Oceanic Strategy

China's sea routes through the Indian Ocean remains vulnerable due to the “Malacca Dilemma,” as [described](#) by Chinese President Hu Jintao in November 2003. As such, to avoid the Malacca Strait, China has planned two-pronged land connectivity in the Indian Ocean – one is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and the other is the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). To provide logistic support and security of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) through the Indian Ocean, China opened base facilities in Djibouti, Maldives (Feydhoo Finolhu), and in Sri Lanka (Hambantota Port). These strategic arrangements will provide, at minimum, a more comfortable Chinese play in the Indian Ocean in case conflict breaks out. The "[No Limit](#)" friendship between China and Russia might present China with more opportunities for using Russian base facilities near the Indian Ocean.

As an alternative to Indian Ocean sea lanes, China also appears desperate to break through the "Arctic Sea Route", [expected](#) to be ice-free by 2035. China's huge nuclear icebreakers would be able to [keep the Arctic route navigable](#) in case of need. Since China secured a strategic position in the Indian Ocean, it now wants to exert its influence over a relatively greater area within the Pacific Ocean.

Due to the existence of the First Island Chain in the East China Sea, the gateway to the Pacific through the East China Sea would become hazardous for China during conflict. These strategic difficulties compelled China to be more assertive in the SCS to keep its sea lanes secure in any situation. Parading its impressive naval power in the Pacific would enable China to assert a forceful influence in the region. Although China possesses a large navy, its capability and endurance are much less than the US Navy. As such, it needs Pacific nations' support – logistics, economics, bunkering, etc. In case of conflict, these nations would also provide valuable intelligence information.

Another Chinese aim of Pacific supremacy is to acquire the support of as many countries as possible in its favor. China's goal is the amalgamation of support in its favor such that the United States would acquiesce and ultimately Taiwan would slowly and steadily be subjugated to China without waging war in accordance with Sun Tzu's strategy.

China's Recent Activities in the Pacific

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 will have a perennial consequence in the Pacific region. The Pacific nations' fear of aggression will exponentially rise if Russia succeeds in the Ukraine. These nations would be enticed to take the side of preferred great powers due to fear of the absence of reliable security providers. The Pacific nations appear to be disenchanted with the West as the West has failed to address their most important issues for the last couple of decades, such as climate change. Lack of commitment among the great powers on climate and in keeping the global warming level to 1.5°C, has added more frustration to the Pacific region. Instead, China took this opportunity and began to pursue Pacific leaders through various economic and security engagements.

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[China's new facilities at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base](#) on the Gulf of Thailand for the PLAN stirred reminiscence of Henry Kissinger's infamous [saying](#), "A massive bombing campaign in Cambodia. Anything that flies on anything that moves." However, China has intentions throughout all of the Pacific.

The absence of a US embassy in Honiara, which was closed in 1993, paved the way for the Solomon Islands to shift its allegiance from Taiwan to China in 2019. Taking the relationship to the next level, in April 2022, China made a security agreement with the Solomon Islands. Although the deal was kept secret, it was revealed from a leaked draft document that the Solomon Islands might request Chinese police and military to the country in exchange for Chinese ship visits, logistical replenishment, and stopovers in the islands. There was a huge negative reaction in Australia and the United States, and subsequently, the United States decided to re-establish an embassy in the Solomon Islands after receiving reports from [a high-level U.S. delegation](#) that visited Honiara. How far the U.S. is able to revitalize the situation in its favor remains for debate, but the incident displays the impact of lack of U.S. presence and strategic thinking in region. In the absence of a U.S. embassy, China accelerated its efforts in making bilateral deals with many other Pacific nations.

The entente between the Solomon Islands and China needs careful consideration. Solomon Islands' Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare's [dudgeon against Australia](#) echoes pent-up frustration. It could be a stark reminder that the islanders did not forget that "white" Australia [deported](#) "black" Solomon Islanders from Queensland in 1904 who worked in the sugar plantation in the 1870s. The Solomon Islands Prime Minister appears unhappy with Australia despite [Australia's pledge](#) to engage the islands with programs of assistance.

Encouraged by the successful deal with the Solomon Islands, China sent its Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Pacific nations to secure a trade and security deal with 10 Pacific nations just after the Quad leaders meeting in Tokyo. Fortunately, they all [rejected](#) it while meeting with their counterparts in Fiji on 26 May 2022. It sends a clear message to the West that China has yet to intimidate the leaders of the Pacific but that these tiny nations need real friends who will address their concerns.

As the United States has [delineated](#) the responsibilities of AUKUS (Australia, the UK, and USA) and Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) in the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,² the AUKUS may come forward to address the Pacific security and at the same time, Quad may address the climate issue. Due to Australia's proximity, Australia needs to lead AUKUS in the Pacific region.

² Indo-Pacific Action Plan – Part III.

Conclusion

There is no such people's belief in a "peaceful rise." It has been proved during the reign of imperialist powers, and the United States is no exception. The United States needs to understand that the time has come to adjust its age-old dogma considering the real concerning issues of the Pacific Islands – climate change, economic development, sea pollution, etc. Further, the United States will have difficulty implementing Mahan's strategy by pouring additional hulls into the sea without addressing these issues. The United States needs to include them in its security umbrella to better compete in great power competition. Otherwise, China will gain influence by adopting a deceitful strategy over the Pacific nations and win without waging war.

China's continued assertiveness in the SCS suggests that China will not be dissuaded by the failed deal with 10 Pacific nations. China will keep trying to make deals with the Pacific islands to fulfill its quest for Pacific control.

As the Pacific leaders walked away from China's deal, it paved the way for the West to address their concerns before it is too late. Australia's continued economic aid, the prospect for the Pacific people to migrate to AUKUS countries, working opportunities, and above all, democratic values and freedom of expression put AUKUS in a much better and advantageous position which China cannot provide because of an opaque dogma of socialism.

The absence of reliable great power compelled the Pacific leaders to take the side of China. Trends of coattail benefit by leaders are rising in the Pacific nations in the absence of democratic values. People love democratic values and freedom of expression. Given this belief, Pacific nations still decide to take the side of China, which would infer a dismal failure on the part of the West, especially the United States.



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October 2022