

Pacific Islands in China's security and future engagement

Denghua Zhang, The Australian National University

China's military, known as the People's Liberation Army (PLA), has increased its engagement with Pacific island countries (PICs) in recent years. For example, in November 2019, General Li Zuocheng, Chief of PLA Joint Staff Department, visited Fiji and pledged to deepen military cooperation between the two countries and in December 2018, China donated a hydrographic and surveillance vessel to the Fijian Navy.

A closer China–PICs relationship has spurred traditional powers such as the US and Australia to strengthen ties with Pacific islands. The Trump administration was pushing Marshall Islands, Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia to renew the Compact of Free Association, a Series of treaties between these countries and the US that were partially established as compensation for the loss of life, health, and land resulting from nuclear testing conducted by the US on the Marshall Islands and Bikini and Enewetak Atolls from 1946 until 1958. The Compacts allow citizens of Micronesia to live and legally work in the US without a visa. In return, the US has sole access and a substantial amount of military and veto power over these islands. With the escalation of US–China tensions in the Indo–Pacific region, the China factor will feature more prominently.

Against the backdrop, this paper discusses two questions:

1. In what ways are PICs relevant to China's security?
2. What are the prospects of China-Pacific security engagement?

The term 'security' is used as a broad concept encompassing political, economic and military elements that are interconnected. Drawing upon public Chinese policy papers especially those of PLA, this paper provides a Chinese perspective of China-PICs security relations.

It is important to note at the outset that PLA's activities in the Pacific are just part of China's bigger engagement package which consists of foreign aid (soft loan dominated), diplomatic, trade, educational, cultural, tourism and other people-to-people engagements.

PICs' relevance to China's security

China's security is tied to its national interests that have been clearly defined by Beijing in recent years. For the first time, in 2011, the Chinese government articulated that its core interests include:

state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution, overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development (China State Council 2011).

In 2015, the PLA issued its first white paper on military strategies, stating that:

the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), as well as institutions, personnel and assets abroad, has become an imminent issue (China MoD 2015).

In the same year, the Chinese National Congress passed a security law that according to Article 2, China focuses its national security on issues such as:

the regime, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, welfare of the people, sustainable economic and social development, and other major interests of the state (China NPC 2015).

Based on these three official definitions, PICs, though geographically distant from China, are relevant to its security interests in the following aspects. First and foremost, the Taiwan issue in the Pacific is directly related to China's sovereignty, territorial integrity and reunification. Since its founding in 1949, the communist regime in Beijing has listed the reunification of Taiwan with mainland China on the top of its agenda and spared no effort in reducing international recognition of Taiwan. This has led to the decades-long diplomatic competition between China and Taiwan in the Pacific. The urgency to solve the Taiwan issue has increased in the Xi Jinping era. In October 2013, Xi told a senior Taiwanese delegation that the issue of political division between China and Taiwan cannot be postponed forever which was interpreted as Xi's growing impatience with the standoff. The tug-of-war has intensified since Tsai Ing-wen from the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party won the presidential election in Taiwan in 2016. In response, the Chinese government has taken a tougher stand on Taiwan. Xi Jinping highlighted in January 2019 that China would not abandon the option of using force if necessary to solve the Taiwan issue. With China's strong lobby efforts, Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched their recognition from Taiwan to China in September 2019, tipping the imbalance of power in China's favour. This setback makes Taiwan's remaining four allies in the Pacific (Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau and Tuvalu) more important to Taiwan and China's future relationship.

In addition, China needs PICs' voting support at international and regional institutions on other issues related to its sovereignty and territorial integrity such as in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and the South and East China Seas. For example, Papua New Guinea (PNG) supported China over the controversial Hong Kong Security Law at the UN in July 2020. PNG and Vanuatu expressed support for China's position on the South China Sea issue in 2016. China's economic stake in the Pacific is also increasing with a focus on mineral resources and fisheries. Since late 2014, PNG has exported two million tons of liquified

natural gas to China annually, which accounted for three per cent of China's total imports of 61.79 million tons in 2018. The Chinese state-owned enterprise CNFC Overseas Fisheries established its branch in Suva, Fiji in 1998. The tuna catches of the company's 42 longliners has now reached 14,000 tons annually. Deep seabed mining in the Pacific is another area that has received growing attention from China. Although it is still an uncharted territory, the massive reserves of seabed mineral resources in the vast Pacific Ocean hold great potential in the future. The China Ocean Mineral Resources Research and Development Association, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Natural Resources, has increased its research on the Pacific and its engagement with Pacific governments.

PICs also matter to China's space programs and military strategies. Chinese spacecraft tracking ships *Yuan Wang*, managed by the China Satellite Maritime Tracking and Control Department of PLA, have been conducting monitoring missions in the Pacific Ocean for China's space programs including its first manned space flight, Chang'e lunar probe and the Beidou navigation satellite system (equivalent to the US global positioning system). Furthermore, PICs, along with some islands of Japan, form the second island chain, which is a part of the vague 'three island chains' theory coined by late US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, in 1951 to strategically surround China. To break these island chains has long been a goal of PLA senior leadership over time. The strategies of PLA Navy have evolved from 'coastal defence' to 'offshore waters defence', and more recently to 'the combination of offshore waters defence and open seas protections'. PLA doctrines have also changed with a focus on maritime military capability. As the PLA 2015 white paper mentions explicitly:

The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests. It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power (China MoD 2015).

In line with this strategy, PLA has conducted reforms in recent years to streamline its line structure and devote more resources to the development of its Navy. All these shifts have contributed to the growing capability and confidence of the PLA Navy. This makes PICs more relevant to China's interest and security.

As a result, PLA has increased its engagement with its counterparts in PNG, Fiji, Tonga and Vanuatu in recent years, in the form of personnel training, material assistance (such as military uniforms and vehicles), grants for facility construction and exchanges of mid and junior level officers (Zhang 2020:1). Table 1 lists PLA visits to the four PICs in the past two decades. As of August 2020, PLA has organised four forums for senior defence officials from the Caribbean and South Pacific islands. Chinese maritime

research vessels such as *Haiyang 6* and *Xuelong 2* have also conducted scientific hydrographical activities in the Pacific, triggering concerns that the research results can be used for both civilian and military purposes.

Table 1. PLA visits to the Pacific since 2000

Fiji	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mar 2002, General Qian Shugen, Deputy Chief of PLA General Staff Department 2. Jan 2013, Major General Qian Lihua, Chief of Foreign Affairs Office, Ministry of Defense 3. Aug 2014, naval hospital ship Peace Ark 4. Dec 2016, naval training ship Zhenghe 5. Aug 2018, Peace Ark 6. Nov 2019, naval training ship Qi Jiguang 7. Nov 2019, General Li Zuocheng, Chief of Joint Staff Department, Central Military Commission
PNG	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Oct 2009, General Chen Bingde, Chief of PLA General Staff Department 2. Aug 2010, Zhenghe and frigate Mian Yang 3. Sept 2014, Peace Ark 4. Jul 2018, Peace Ark 5. Oct 2019, Qi Jiguang
Tonga	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Aug 2012, Zhenghe 2. Aug 2013, General Wu Changde, Deputy Director of PLA Political Work Department 3. Aug 2014, Peace Ark 4. May 2015, Lieutenant General Xing Shucheng, Deputy Commander of Guangzhou Military Region 5. Jul 2015, Major General Ci Guowei, Deputy Chief of Foreign Affairs Office, Ministry of Defense 6. Apr 2016, Vice Admiral Tian Zhong, Deputy Commander of PLA Navy 7. Aug 2018, Peace Ark
Vanuatu	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sept 2010, Zhenghe and Mian Yang 2. Jan 2014, General Wang Guanzhong, Deputy Chief of PLA General Staff Department 3. Sept 2014, Peace Ark 4. Jun 2017, PLA naval escort taskforce 5. Jul 2018, Peace Ark

Source: compiled by author based on public data

Prospects of China–Pacific security engagement

So far, the China–PICs security cooperation is limited in scope and depth compared with that between China and other regions, and between the US, Australia and Pacific islands. For example, PLA has established 130 military attaché offices overseas with none in the Pacific. However, it is expected that PLA will place more attention on the Pacific region in the future for two reasons. First, the military modernisation and building of more aircraft carriers have boosted PLA's confidence to extend its influence beyond the first island chain. The Chinese government led by Xi Jinping has ambitions to rejuvenate China as a great power under the 'China Dream' banner. Xi has shifted his focus from the '*taoguang yanghui*' strategy (buy one's time

and hide one's strength) held by his three predecessors, to 'you suo zuowei' (make great achievements). PLA has conducted extensive reforms especially the sweeping organisational reform in 2015–16 to increase the coordination of different units in modern warfare. The modernisation of PLA Navy has also accelerated under Xi Jinping. China's first homemade aircraft carrier *Shandong* was commissioned in April 2017. Another two are reported to be under construction. China's defence budget has maintained a steady growth, exceeding US\$178.6 billion for 2020 with a growth of 6.6 per cent from last year. With its growing capability, PLA navy fleets have frequently sailed through the Taiwan Strait and Miyako Strait which sit along the first island chain. Thus, in January 2017, China's official newspaper *People's Daily* confidently predicted, 'It is just a matter of time before China's aircraft carrier crossed the second island chain and reaches the Eastern Pacific' (Zhang 2017: 40). In this circumstance, small wonder that PLA will make greater efforts to strengthen its military ties with PICs in the future.

Second, the rapid escalation of the US–China rivalry is likely to stimulate PLA to develop more substantial security cooperation with Pacific islands. As some analysts argue, the US–China competition is a systematic one in nature between the existing hegemony and a rising superpower for leadership and status at global and regional arenas (Heather and Thompson 2018:115). PLA has expressed concerns over former President Obama's policy of pivoting to the Asia–Pacific, criticising it for aggravating regional tensions (China MoD 2015). In recent years, the US–China relations have soured on all fronts with the military sector included. The Trump administration has targeted the communist government in China as a revisionist power and the primary competitor of the US, and took counter measures. For example, the US government put forward the 'Free and Open Indo–Pacific' Strategy in 2017. In July 2020, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticised the previous administrations for their 'blind engagement' with China and pledged to contain China's expansionism (Pompeo 2020). In the face of mounting pressure from the US, Beijing has adopted dual strategies. Chinese top diplomats such as Yang Jiechi (Chinese communist party politburo member and former foreign minister), Wang Yi (incumbent foreign minister) and Cui Tiankai (ambassador to the US) have recently called for dialogues between the countries to solve the crisis. This goodwill gesture can be interpreted in part as Beijing's effort to occupy the moral high ground if the bilateral relationship goes from bad to worse.

On the other hand, the Xi Jinping administration has shown no signs of compromise on issues of its core interests. As a warning against a closer US–Taiwan relationship and the military drills of US aircraft carrier strike groups in the disputed South China Sea, PLA conducted counter-drills almost simultaneously in the Yellow Sea, Bohai Sea and the South and East China Seas in August 2020. PLA has also blamed the US for 'strengthening its Asia–Pacific military alliances and reinforcing military deployment and intervention, adding complexity to regional security' (China MoD 2019).

If the current US–China tensions get out of control and spiral into a cold war or even military confrontations (with the Taiwan issue and the South and East China Seas disputes as potential flashpoints), it could increase China's urgency to build closer military ties with PICs. Then it may be possible that China will seek to establish military bases in the Pacific to directly compete for influence with the US. Discussions have already started in the academic circle in China. Some Chinese scholars call for Beijing to consider building ports for civilian and military uses in PICs such as Fiji, PNG and Vanuatu (Zhang 2020:2). Should PLA proceed, the challenges are apparent. These plans will meet with firm opposition from traditional powers such as the US, Australia, France and New Zealand. Compared with China, these countries enjoy closer historical and security ties with PICs and can exert influence on the latter's security policymaking. To guard against China's rise in the Pacific, traditional powers have stepped up their engagement with PICs and strengthened internal coordination typified by the Australia–India–Japan–US quadrilateral security dialogue and the outbidding of China by Australia and the US to jointly fund the upgrade of the Lombrum military base on PNG's Manus island.

The close relations and shared cultures between PICs and traditional powers on one hand, and the growing PICs–China engagement since 2006 on the other, will make it extremely difficult for PICs to take sides in the US–China rivalry. Equally difficult, if not impossible, is that PICs will give the green light for China to establish military bases in their countries. Even if China succeeds in persuading a Pacific island country to accept China's proposal, it is likely that the Chinese base will be presented as a logistical support facility similar to its military base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. Completed in August 2017, this is China's first overseas military base and has been described by PLA as mainly providing logistical support to its escort missions in the Gulf of Adam (Cabestan 2019:736).

If the US–China tensions ease under a Biden administration, the development of US–China relations globally and regionally is a new question that deserves attention. As the existing superpower, the US will continue to strengthen its security relations with PICs to advance its interests. From China's perspective, as a rising superpower, if its economic and military power continue to rise, its security interest will undoubtedly expand. This could lead to a conflict of interest. In this case, can the US and China accommodate each other's security interest in the Pacific? Can they manage differences and share power to live in peace? These are subject to debate. Different models such as 'grand bargain' and 'a concert of powers' have been proposed by scholars (Glaser 2015; White 2012). These do not seem feasible in the current climate of growing rivalry between the US and China. For example, since 2018, PLA has been excluded by the US from the annual Rim of the Pacific exercise.

In addition to avoiding taking sides in the US–China rivalry, PICs will benefit if the two great powers can cooperate and shoulder responsibilities on the issue of climate change. Climate change is the largest single security threat

to PICs who are constrained by resources and expertise to tackle the issue. Currently the US and China have provided their own climate aid to PICs, but much more needs to be done at the global level led by the two countries and other major emitters of greenhouse gas.

Another scenario that deserves attention is whether PLA will be involved in future operations to evacuate Chinese diaspora stranded by social unrests in the Pacific. Guided by the 'Go Out' Strategy initiated by the Chinese government, millions of Chinese business people, either as staff of state-owned enterprises or private businesses, have gone overseas to seek commercial opportunities in the past two decades. This creates a new task for PLA. As the 2019 PLA white paper articulates:

overseas interests are a crucial part of China's national interests. One of the missions of China's armed forces is to effectively protect the security and legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese people, organisations and institutions (China MoD 2019).

In practice, PLA has sent its air force and navy vessels to evacuate Chinese citizens from war-ravaged Libya (2011) and Yemen (2015).

However, except for these two operations, the Chinese government has used non-PLA resources such as commercial charter flights to evacuate its citizens during the riots/conflicts in Timor-Leste (2006), Lebanon (2006), Chad (2008), Haiti (2009), Kyrgyzstan (2010) and Egypt (2011). Similar operations were conducted in the Pacific. The growing number of Chinese businesses and their dominance of the retail sector in the Pacific have given rise to local resentment. This sentiment contributed largely to the riots in Honiara and Nuku'alofa in April and November 2006 respectively with the Chinese businesses being the main target. Coordinated by the Chinese embassies in PNG (responsible for providing consular services to Chinese in Solomon Islands as the latter was Taiwan's ally at the time) and Tonga, the Chinese government came to the rescue of its citizens affected in the riots by organising charter flights to pick them up.

As the Xi Jinping administration is proactively rolling out its Belt and Road Initiative in the Pacific, China's economic interest and the number of business people will continue to grow. The Chinese diaspora could be trapped in similar social unrests in some PICs in the future. When this happens, the Chinese government may take different approaches in response. If the US-China relations have not broken down to open conflicts, it is likely that China will not involve PLA in the evacuation operations to avoid fuelling the security concerns of the US and other traditional powers. However, if the US and China slip into conflicts, there is more chance that PLA will be directly involved in the protection of Chinese business and citizens in PICs. This will exacerbate the traditional powers' existing mistrust of China.

Conclusion

To sum up, PICs are relevant to China's core interests and security strategies. China's military engagement with PICs has grown in the past two decades. With its confidence in breaking the first island chain, PLA will likely set its eyes on the Pacific. The escalation of China-US rivalry could be a catalyst for China to further increase its military engagement with PICs. More competition between China, the US and other traditional powers in the security sector is expected. This will put PICs in a difficult position. At the extreme, PICs will need to take sides.

PLA's military ambition in the Pacific will also be affected by China's available resources. China's economic wealth accumulated in the past four decades has enabled the steady growth of PLA budgets in the past two decades. However, trade wars with the US, COVID-19 and massive flooding present grave challenges for China's economy. How this will affect China's military spending in the future remains to be seen. A reduced budget will inevitably constrain PLA's activities in the Pacific.

References

- Cabestan, Jean-Pierre 2019, 'China's military base in Djibouti: A microcosm of China's growing competition with the United States and new bipolarity', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 29(125), 731-746.
- China MoD 2015, *China's Military Strategy*, Beijing: China Ministry of Defense (MoD).
- China MoD 2019, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, Beijing: China MoD.
- China NPC 2015, *National Security Law of the People's Republic of China*, Beijing: China National People's Congress (NPC).
- China State Council 2011, *China's Peaceful Development*, Beijing: China State Council.
- Glaser, Charles 2015, 'A US-China grand bargain?: The hard choice between military competition and accommodation', *International Security*, 39(4), 49-90.
- Heather, Timothy and William Thompson 2018, 'Avoiding U.S.-China competition is futile: Why the best option is to manage strategic rivalry', *Asia Policy*, 13(2), 91-120.
- Pompeo, Mike 2020, 'Communist China and the free world's future', 23 July. <https://www.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/>
- White, Hugh 2012, *The China Choice: Why America should share power*, Collingwood, Australia: Black Inc.
- Zhang, Denghua 2017, 'China's diplomacy in the Pacific: Interests, means and implications', *Security Challenges*, 13(2), 32-53.
- Zhang, Denghua 2020, 'China's military engagement with Pacific Islands', *In-Brief 2020/22*, Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University.