



The Pacific Shouldn't Be a 'Strategic Surprise'

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White House Asia czar Kurt Campbell recently declared that the United States is most likely to see a “strategic surprise” in the Pacific Islands “over the next year or two.” Campbell, speaking at a Washington think tank, specifically mentioned the possibility of China gaining a military base as the type of “strategic surprise” he had in mind.

Yet Beijing's intent to develop dual-use facilities or even outright military bases across the Pacific Ocean should be entirely unsurprising to U.S. policymakers. Over the past several years, China has explored a variety of options that would give its military basing access to the region, from Manus Island in Papua New Guinea to Blackrock in Fiji to Luganville wharf in Vanuatu. Thus far, often through intensive diplomacy by the United States and its partners in Australia and New Zealand, Beijing's efforts have not borne fruit.

If China's ambitious goals for expanding its footprint in the region, often called Oceania, sound familiar, it is because they are. Beijing's focus on securing key strategic nodes across the Pacific toward Hawaii and the U.S. west coast and down the “second island chain” toward Australia and New Zealand are eerily similar to those of imperial Japan before and during World War II.

Indeed, in December 2021, China announced the deployment of “police advisors” to the Solomon Islands following popular riots against the pro-Beijing government. The site of the legendary Battle of Guadalcanal, where thousands of U.S. and allied troops died halting Japan's imperial ambitions, the Solomon Islands does not even host an U.S. Embassy. After helping coerce a shift in diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019, Beijing has steadily increased its control over the strategic chokepoint, located just hours from the Australian coast.

Beijing is seeking a repeat of its Solomon Islands success in Kiribati, an archipelago of 32 atolls stretching over 1.4 million square miles in all four hemispheres. After securing a switch in recognition of Taiwan in 2019, Beijing has begun insinuating itself deeper into the nation's affairs. A recent announcement that China is planning to build an airfield on Kanton Island, around 1,600 miles from Hawaii, seems to have rattled Washington and its partners.

None of this should have caught the United States and its partners by surprise. The Pacific Islands and their vast expanse of ocean remain as strategically significant as they were in the early days of the American republic, when former U.S. President John Quincy Adams urged the construction of an American Navy capable of protecting Washington's interests in these far away locales. Throughout the centuries, the logic remains that for the United States to send substantial numbers of ships, aircraft, and personnel to conflicts in East Asia, they must pass through seas controlled by or proximate to the Pacific Islands. It is not a surprise that Beijing, like imperial Japan and the European colonial powers before it, would seek a presence there.

Former U.S. President Donald Trump understood both the strategic importance of the Pacific Islands as well as the United States' historic and cultural ties to the Pacific. Multiple members of the president's cabinet, including the vice president and secretaries of state and defense, visited key Pacific partners. Significant increases in the U.S. military posture in the Pacific Islands were announced during the administration, including a critical radar site in Palau. A commitment was made to open additional diplomatic facilities across the region, and great strides were made on environmental resilience, disaster mitigation, and countering illegal fishing, all issues that resonate deeply in the Pacific. In 2018, the National Security Council established, for the first time ever, a directorship focused entirely on the Pacific Islands. And, most notably and for the first time, Trump hosted the leaders of Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia at the White House.

What is surprising, given the threats faced and the record left by its predecessor, is that U.S. President Joe Biden's administration appears to have taken a lackadaisical approach to some of the world's most strategic geography. The United States continues to lack embassies in half of the 12 independent Pacific Island countries and relies heavily on Australia and New Zealand to act in its stead. U.S. Navy and Coast Guard vessels only rarely visit, along with few senior officials. Although Canberra and Wellington are important partners in the region, they cannot compensate for an absent America.

The recent devastation of a volcanic eruption and tsunami in Tonga is a case in point. Already lacking an U.S. Embassy on the ground, Washington pledged a low six-figure aid contribution and issued press releases. Australia and New Zealand mobilized considerable military resources, and China quickly contributed more than \$3 million, a message amplified across the Pacific. Creative statecraft, like the United States' response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, was surely called for, including the deployment of a U.S. Navy hospital ship and other military assets. It is also the right moment to publicly announce a permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in Tonga.

Most concerning of all is the administration's failure to make substantial progress renewing the Compacts of Free Association (COFAs) with the United States' strongest partners in the region: Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia. These agreements provide the United States unrestricted military access to key strategic geography across the North Pacific—as well as the right to deny foreign militaries similar access—in exchange for economic assistance and a commitment to provide for COFA states' defense. These agreements are expiring in 2023 and 2024, and Beijing has begun expanding its presence in all three countries. A bipartisan congressional coalition has urged the administration to prioritize the renewal; failure to do so represents an extraordinary strategic error.

As the Biden administration prepares its key strategy documents, including a forthcoming National Defense Strategy, it has an opportunity to reassess and regroup on its approach to the Pacific. Its growing partnership with Australia, cemented by the so-called AUKUS agreement, provides a firm foundation for greater engagement in the region. But it also requires a recognition that the traditional, often unstated delineation of responsibility in the Pacific—with Australia focused on Melanesia, New Zealand on Polynesia, and the United States on Micronesia and the North Pacific—is unsustainable and antiquated in the face of Beijing's relentless ambitions. Washington, Canberra, and Wellington—in collaboration with key regional players like Japan, Taiwan, France, and the United Kingdom—will need to operate together as well as independently to uphold the free and open Indo-Pacific that has prevailed since 1945.

The growing bipartisan consensus in Washington is that great-power competition with China will be a generational challenge. The United States is seeking to relearn the lessons of such statecraft after decades of focusing on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. As it does so, Washington's policymakers should consult their maps, reread their history books, and seek to avoid unnecessary surprises in a region that is essential to the success of the United States' broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

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