



Beijing Eyes Pacific Islands, Exploiting U.S. Strategic Vacuum

June 21, 2022 **Alexander B. Gray** *Foreign Policy*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Australia; China; Southeast Asia

In January, White House Asia tsar Kurt Campbell gave a public talk declaring that the Pacific Islands were the part of the Indo-Pacific most likely to witness a “strategic surprise” over the “next year or two.” It was an odd statement. That Beijing aims to develop dual-use facilities or military bases in the Pacific Ocean should surprise no one, as I wrote in *Foreign Policy* at the time, pointing to the various options China has been exploring in the region, including Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, Blackrock in Fiji, and Luganville wharf in Vanuatu.

In recent weeks, Campbell’s prediction seems to have been borne out, with much of Washington alarmed by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s whirlwind tour across eight Pacific Island nations, signing bilateral agreements with multiple countries and seeking an ambitious regional pact. Although Wang failed to achieve his hoped-for regional agreement, the scope and scale of Beijing’s ambitions in an area often ignored by Washington policymakers have sent shockwaves through the U.S. national security apparatus. There also remain many unknowns about China’s bilateral agreements, prompting legitimate concern that further shoes are waiting to drop. The specter of Beijing’s recent security agreement with the Solomon Islands, seen by many as the prelude to a Chinese military presence there, looms large.

With the Pacific Islands getting U.S. media attention for the first time in decades and the newly formed Australian government pledging enhanced resources for this critical region, now is the time for a comprehensive and ambitious strategy from the United States and its closest regional partners. The stakes are simply too high for business as usual—with, at most, a few high-level visits and policy proposals before Washington turns to the next global crisis. As Wang’s Pacific visit seems to have revealed to the U.S. foreign-policy establishment, the Pacific Islands are much more than just a minor component of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy: They can determine the ultimate success or failure of that strategy.

What is true today in the U.S.-China rivalry has been true from the 19th century’s European colonial competition to World War II and the Cold War. The Pacific Islands, astride critical sea lanes to and from Hawaii and the U.S. West Coast—and between Australia and New Zealand as well as the wider world—command extraordinary geopolitical significance. The control of or suasion over those islands directly impacts broader competition for mastery of East Asia, as was shown so brutally during imperial Japan’s conquests during the 1930s and 1940s.

Since evicting Japan from the “Second Island Chain”—as much of Oceania is often called—through a series of arduous amphibious assaults during World War II, the United States and regional allies Australia and New Zealand have enjoyed general freedom of movement across the Pacific Ocean. U.S. maritime strategy throughout the Cold War and post-Cold War era has taken this access for granted, which gradually led to a neglect of the Pacific Islands across official Washington. To the extent that the islands are even a topic in U.S. policy circles, they are seen through the lens of development, climate policy, or disaster response. Although these issues are important, focusing exclusively on them has obscured that the Pacific Islands are as essential and strategic to fundamental U.S. national interests as any other region of the world.

Should a rival great power gain military access to key Pacific Islands, whether through an overt base or a more nuanced, dual-use arrangement, the United States and its partners risk the erection of anti-access zones across key points of transit, both commercial and military. Not only does substantial civilian maritime traffic traverse the Second Island Chain, but the United States requires unimpeded access through much of Oceania to reinforce its prepositioned forces in South Korea and Japan as well as to address a kinetic scenario in the Taiwan Strait or South China Sea. Similarly, the Second Island Chain sits astride the maritime routes to Australia and New Zealand, threatening Canberra and Wellington’s eastern access. The ability to dictate access through the Pacific Islands is integral to the entire concept of Western defense in the Indo-Pacific. Simply put, there is no U.S. forward presence in maritime East Asia without access through the Pacific Islands from Hawaii and the U.S. West Coast.

China’s interest in the Pacific, beginning in the late 2000s and accelerating rapidly over the last decade, has begun to awaken some in Washington to the region’s growing threat. The former Trump administration undertook several notable high-level visits to the region, including by the vice president, secretary of state, and defense secretary. Then-U.S. President Donald Trump hosted the leaders of Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia at the White House in 2019 and devoted considerable effort to renewing the expiring Compacts of Free Association—agreements that trade U.S. financial support for full military access—with those three countries. But as the recent security deal between China and the Solomon Islands as well as Wang’s island tour show, China’s understanding of the region’s strategic significance appears to far outpace Washington’s.

It's time for a real strategy. Beijing is at work across the entire Pacific, deploying high-level diplomats to key postings, offering aggressive infrastructure packages (often laden with high-interest debt), bearing inducements for local elites, and regularly dispatching senior officials to the region. No less than a half dozen Chinese think tanks focus solely on the region, and prestigious Chinese defense and strategic journals frequently publish on the topic. There is little confusion in Beijing about the strategic significance of the Second Island Chain for its larger regional and global aspirations.

The United States and its key regional partners—Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Japan, France, and the United Kingdom—must begin countering this assault in earnest. It is past time for a series of proposals that move the Pacific from an adjunct subregion of the Indo-Pacific to the forefront befitting its strategic importance.

Renew the Compacts of Free Association: With the compacts between the United States and Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia expiring in 2023 and 2024, the Biden administration should expeditiously renew these critical agreements, which already enjoy substantial bipartisan support in Congress. Not only do the compacts permit the United States unrestricted military access to the three countries, but they also permit Washington to deny similar access to any other power. The financial requirements due to the three states are minimal. As renewal delays grow, Beijing is increasingly active in each nation in the hopes of undermining Washington's standing. Palau hosts a critical radar site, the Marshall Islands has substantial air and space facilities, and the Micronesian states are increasingly integrated into U.S. defense planning. Failure to renew the compacts quickly—and risk Chinese intrusion—would be a strategic error of epic proportions.

Expand the compacts to Kiribati, Nauru, and Tuvalu: As the smallest and most vulnerable of Pacific Island states, these three are ripe for Chinese interference and frequently targeted by Beijing. Kiribati, in particular, has drawn Chinese attention and is the site of a Chinese-supported airfield roughly 1,000 miles from Hawaii that analysts have speculated could have military purposes. With support from Australia and New Zealand, the United States should offer compacts to all three states, balancing their hard-won sovereignty with the protection and economic benefits of closer association with Washington, Canberra, and Wellington. The idea has been debated for decades; now is the time to ensure these critical islands retain their independence and sovereignty in the face of mounting Chinese pressure.

Add a U.S. diplomatic presence to every Pacific Island: Washington downgraded its diplomatic facilities in the Pacific at the end of the Cold War and has paid the price ever since. The administration should immediately present a proposal to the U.S. Congress to provide a U.S. diplomatic presence in every Pacific Island country within a year. Today, the embassy in Papua New Guinea also covers Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands while the embassy in Fiji has to stand in for Tonga, Kiribati, Nauru, and Tuvalu. The Biden administration has pledged to continue its predecessor's commitment to open an embassy in the Solomon Islands, but the U.S. State Department must pick up the pace. An accredited, experienced diplomat with a real team and a permanent presence are essential to compete with Beijing's relentless diplomacy.

Provide development assistance that U.S. partners want. Beijing's great advantage in many developing countries is the provision of infrastructure projects, often with hidden clauses that ultimately leave the recipient in debt and subject to Chinese coercion and political interference. But such projects are often wildly popular among both the general public and the political and economic elite. Washington has long moved away from big-ticket development projects in the Pacific, preferring to focus on smaller-scale programs in health, education, and good governance. Without significant investment in the projects island states need and want—such as roads, ports, airfields, and other infrastructure—Washington and its partners will continue to fall behind. To this end, the administration and Congress should establish a Pacific Islands infrastructure initiative. Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Taiwan should all be invited to participate, as should the private sector—though some of the most critical and strategic projects will likely lack sufficient return on investment to attract outside capital.

Speak the partners' language: Although Washington, Canberra, and Wellington understand the Pacific's strategic importance, they must enhance these strategic relationships by speaking in terms that resonate with the countries involved. The Trump administration began involving disparate U.S. government agencies, from the National Weather Service to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, to address issues like illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; rising sea levels; soil erosion; wildlife trafficking; and the impact of severe weather events. These issues impact the daily life of Pacific Islanders, and tackling them will build connections and long-term partnerships. A comprehensive Pacific Islands strategy, drafted by the National Security Council with input from across the U.S. government and with a public-facing component, is needed to frame Washington's commitment to the Pacific's security issues.

Wang's grand Pacific tour should be the alarm that wakes up Washington. With Beijing already increasing its influence in the Solomon Islands and growing ties in Kiribati, Vanuatu, Tonga, and Fiji, there is little time to waste. A forward-leaning U.S. strategy for the Pacific is not simply a global leader's reflex to leave no region untouched. It is essential to maintain what may be the most fundamental strategic imperative: unrestricted U.S. access to East Asia, where the 21st century will be decided.