



## 21st Century Pacific Island Security

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#### *Introduction*

Let me begin with an apology, customary in island societies. As you see, I am not a Pacific Islander, although I have spent nearly all of my adult life in the islands. Over the years I have developed strong views on the matter of relationships between the northern Pacific and the US, which I would like to lay out here for what they're worth. These I will attempt to lay out in my brief presentation.

#### *Century of the Pacific?*

The recently noted US tilt toward the Pacific is a recognition of the importance of the region, it is said. But this is no recent development.

Every century since the 16<sup>th</sup> has been the century of the Pacific.

- 16<sup>th</sup> century: struggle between Spain and Portugal for the spice trade and a slice of the New World
- 17<sup>th</sup> century: trade routes for access to the riches of the Orient (until European issues intervened)
- 18<sup>th</sup> century: contest between European powers (England and France) for naval supremacy, and the “discovery” of Hawaii
- 19<sup>th</sup> century: competition for China trade, whaling era in which the Pacific was “white with the sails of American whalers,” the growth of the US Navy and the opening of Japan, and the Spanish-American War, acquisition of Guam and Hawaii

- 20<sup>th</sup> century: the battle for the Pacific during World War II, followed by the Cold War and its consequences: Korean War and the Vietnam War
- 21<sup>st</sup> century: the war against terrorism and all that is implied.

After five centuries, is there any doubt of the growing importance of the Pacific, economic as well as military to world powers? For any world power, especially the US, every century has been and will continue to be the “Century of the Pacific.”

### *US Security Interests*

US has strong security interests in the area—they include military interests but go much beyond this: eg, drug routes, human trafficking, and terrorism, not to mention environmental concerns. US also has commercial interests that should be protected—shipping lanes and air routes to Asia and Australia.

Rather than enumerate these, perhaps we can broadly lump these security interests under two major headings: The US needs a buffer (eg, against drugs, terrorists, and other threats to its own nation); at the same time its long-range interests seem to require a pathway across the Pacific. Let’s assume that the value of the buffer against threats is obvious and briefly discuss the second basic need: the pathway across the Pacific.

By a pathway across the Pacific I mean a chain of islands across the northern Pacific that would welcome the US without embarrassment. The chain, of course, begins with Hawaii, one-third of the way to Asia, but has been extended the rest of the way through the US’s historical and continuing political ties with the various Micronesian entities: the Territory of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, as well as the independent nations linked to US through COFA. In effect, the pathway is already in place, but the US ought to be thinking about ways to secure this into the future. Once this has been addressed, I contend, other lesser US national security interests might easily fall into place.

Is a pathway necessary? Back in the late 1970s when the Trust Territory was seriously considering its future political status, some of us thought that such a pathway was an outdated residue of a past military age. In an era of intercontinental ballistic missiles, bases were a thing of the past. But the admiral from Guam who visited us to comment on the papers we produced said that logistics would always be essential—first, last and always. He was admonishing us never to lose sight of the importance of those specks of land that were known as islands.

The pathway has many uses, not simply military but economic besides. Perhaps the pathway and the buffer are one and the same in the end. In any case, the pathway and buffer might well allay many of the security concerns that are being addressed in this conference. But retaining this pathway would have to be done in such a way as to respect the island governments in our own post-colonial era.

### *Islands Security Interests*

How might Pacific Islanders respond to all this? Islanders have security interests of their own, which they may turn to global powers to address in return for their attempt to meet the interests of the US and other developed nations. What are these security interests?

The main issue for most Pacific nations, certainly for those in Micronesia, is economic survival. The first and foremost item on their agenda is how to pay the bills to keep the government running. Simply put, the agenda is driven by the need to obtain assistance in building an economy or, failing this, to secure the grants needed to supplement the revenues that the country is hard pressed to raise. Why should it be anything else? What other issue commands the attention of island countries like national survival?

Trafficking in drugs or humans barely registers on their scale of priorities today. Health issues are real, but not an imminent threat to a people who have survived the loss of half their population during the period of intense contact with the West during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sea-level rise, like the periodic disasters of typhoons and droughts, have had to be faced for centuries, so people were required to develop their survival strategies to cope with them. (Mass exodus from a stricken island to other islands has been taking place for hundreds of years.)

Let's not presume that the US's priority list of security issues is shared by the Pacific nations themselves. Island leaders might show compliance and so frame their concerns under whatever headings the US might propose, but you can be sure that their real concern has to do with retaining their national status in an uncertain future. And that comes down to figuring out how they will support themselves in a global economy when their natural resources are few and their donors are tired of writing checks.

The concern for supporting themselves is much more complex than that of feeding their

populations (so-called food security). It's a matter of providing their people with the jobs they require in today's world. Then, of course, there is the larger problem of financing the many services required in a modern nation state-education, health services, public safety, and infrastructure. Meanwhile, the ante is being raised all the time, as the international community pushes its Millennium Development Goals to elevate standards (and expenses) in the island nations.

FSM and the Marshall Islands, even Palau, are far from the goals of self-reliance. To become fully self-supporting, Palau would need to nearly double its present GDP, while FSM and the Marshalls would need to triple the size of their economies. The provisions of the current funding agreement between US and these nations related to the Compact of Free Association will carry them through the next eight years. But what do they do after that? Full self-support as a modern nation-state is unimaginable for these countries in the foreseeable future. The Compact permits islanders free access to the US to live and work-and the drain-off has been significant-but the nations must still support their expensive nation-state in the future.

The Trust Fund set up to help the Compact nations transition easily into the post-Compact funding era will come up well short of what it was expected to generate, thanks to the collapse of the economy a few years ago and other unforeseen factors.

Surveillance of fishing grounds is important since fish is the one valuable commodity the island nations have to trade. Yet, there are limits on how much money the sale of fishing rights can generate. FSM is currently receiving \$25 million yearly, but even if this figure were to double in the next ten years the nation would still be far from the self-reliance it seeks. Control of a vast EEZ is not a ticket to self-reliance, as we all know by this time.

For islanders, the issue comes down to this: how they can hope to support themselves in the future. Micronesians are seriously concerned with this, I can assure you. It's not something they take lightly. The intensity in the level of discussion when the end of the Compact funding is discussed in an island cabinet meeting is one indication. Another is the fiscal desperation that prompted government leaders in Yap to entertain the Chinese offer to remake that island into an Asian retirement colony.

### *Where the Security Interests Converge*

The independent nations under the Compact (FSM, Marshalls and Palau) are concerned with their economic future, as we have seen. Their viability as modern nation-states is the

paramount security issue for these three island nations. To be assured of donor support from the US in the long-term would ease these concerns.

Meanwhile, the political future of the two US-dependant entities (Guam and CNMI) is unresolved. After more than 100 years of US rule, they might either be given a chance to become independent or, perhaps a more appealing option, to be more fully integrated into the US. An initial step might be taken in this direction even before a final political status decision was made.

Placing these items on the agenda for the US would assure the US of its “pathway” across the Pacific and solidify the goodwill of the island populations. This would go a long way in providing for the type of security that the US will need for the remainder of the century and longer.

### *Possible Action Plan*

US and island interests, at least in the northern Pacific, seem to converge. Why not take advantage of this to secure the US pathway across the Pacific, which itself is the key to resolving many of the lesser security issues being discussed here.

US should provide guarantee of financial support in the future-not as a purchase price for island loyalty, but because of the inability of the island nations to support themselves fully in the future. There are historical ties and other considerations that would suggest that this a reasonable burden for the US to assume.

Future funding for the island nations (and the resolution of the ongoing political question for the territories) will ensure the goodwill of the island people. But the promise of such funding will also help redirect priorities within these nations, just as foreign aid everywhere does. The funding is always contingent on the compliance with commitments imposed by the donor nations. If the money were designated as foreign aid rather than simply Compact-related funding, this would make it easier for the US to use this funding not only to ensure compliance with US policies, but also to spur development in the islands as well. (Example of DOI involvement in the reform of public education in Chuuk; difficult to attach strings to Compact funding).

The result might be that in easing island concerns for their dominant security issue, the US

would be positioning itself to deal with whatever security issues it might have over time. Hence, rather than fighting many security battles at once, the US might direct its attention to resolving the major security issue of the islands. In this way, it would be laying the groundwork for handling a plethora of other security matters as they might arise in the future.

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