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Is the US Pivoting Back to the Pacific Island Countries?

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SYNOPSIS

Recent steps towards a stronger American diplomatic, security and development re-engagement in the Pacific region reflect the wider geopolitical competition between China and the US. The US needs to be present to underline its commitment to the region.

COMMENTARY

US President Joe Biden's abrupt cancellation of his highly anticipated whirlwind stop in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea (PNG), was not good news for the blossoming and delicate US-Pacific Island countries relationship. His three-hour stop-over was supposed to be the first ever visit to a Pacific Island country by a US President and the visible culmination of American efforts to regain political traction in the Pacific.

President Biden was also to meet 15 Pacific Island heads of government. President Biden and PNG Prime Minister James Marape intended to sign bilateral defence cooperation as well as maritime surveillance agreements. The choice of PNG for his visit was not coincidental. With a population of 9.4 million, it is the most populous of all the Pacific Island countries and also has considerable natural resources such as oil, gas, gold, copper and timber and a booming mining sector.

Chinese President Xi Jinping had already made a state visit to PNG in 2018 underlining the growing Chinese-PNG economic and political ties. As early as 2014, he had visited three other Pacific countries.

China-Solomon Islands Security Pact got the Ball Rolling

But it was the surprise security pact between China and the Solomon Islands in May 2022 that rattled the US and its allies, Australia and New Zealand and goaded all three countries into stepping up their engagements in the Pacific.

The security pact was followed by a Chinese US\$66 million loan to the Solomon Islands for a Huawei telecommunications project and a multimillion-dollar contract with a Chinese company to upgrade the port of the Solomon Islands capital, Honiara. Concerns about the geopolitical ramifications of a stronger Chinese engagement in the Pacific Islands region caused a frenzy of US activities reflecting the wider geopolitical competition between China and the US.

Already in February 2022, the Biden administration had released its Indo-Pacific Strategy which set the framework for mitigating Chinese influence, maintaining America's traditional strategic dominance in the region and the wish of the US to play a bigger role in the wider region. One of the tools was to re-invigorate and strengthen overlapping minilateral partnerships and alliances in the region, such as AUKUS – the trilateral security pact between the US, UK and Australia – and the quadrilateral Quad group with Japan, India, the US and Australia. Others were newly created such as IPEF, “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity”, with regional leader Fiji as the only Pacific member country.

US: Waking Up and Increasing its Footprint in the Pacific

The US also kickstarted its hitherto rather dormant diplomacy and engagement with the Pacific Island countries with a number of high-ranking political and military visits to the Pacific. Among them was the trip of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the first visit of a US Secretary of State in 40 years, and that of US Vice President Kamala Harris, who attended the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) summit in July last year.

This was followed by President Biden hosting twelve PIF heads of government at a US-Pacific summit at the White House in November 2022 during which the US announced a Pacific aid programme of US\$800 million, spread over 10 years, and a Pacific Partnership Strategy. The latter's four-goals aim was to strengthen partnerships and regionalism with the Pacific Island countries as well as to combat climate change and build climate resilience. The US pledged to support the Pacific in future in one of the region's major problems, the control of illegal fishing, with the US Coast Guard assisting to strengthen local capabilities, especially in PNG.

The historically close political and economic ties between the US and three independent Pacific countries, Palau, Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Marshall Islands, had been tested during the negotiations for the new 2023 “Compact of Free Association” package. After hard bargaining by the three Pacific countries, the US agreed to an unprecedented economic package of more than US\$7 billion over 20 years, which awaits approval by the US Congress. The US is hoping that this assistance will convince the respective governments to stay within the US sphere of influence.

The US also increased its diplomatic presence in four Pacific countries by reopening its embassy in the Solomon Islands after 30 years, opening an embassy in Tonga in May, and planning to have embassies in Kiribati and Vanuatu. It was Kiribati and the

Solomon Islands which in 2019 had switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to Beijing. President Biden also appointed a special envoy to the Pacific Islands Forum.

Is the US Re-Engagement Sustainable?

The US' return to the Pacific Island countries is late but maybe not too late, although there appear to be a number of potential pitfalls for the US. It had neglected the Pacific for too long and was not visible. Apart from its history of cooperation with the Marshall Islands, Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia, it had reduced its aid programmes (the fifth largest donor to the region according to the Lowy Aid Map). America's trade with the region (except for the Compact states) remains minimal – compared to China which has become the biggest trading partner for most of the Pacific countries. President Biden's no-show in PNG will disappoint many in the region and potentially play into China's hand.

The competition between the US and China will crowd the Pacific scene more – with many other players having been active there for a long time such as Australia, New Zealand, the Asian Development Bank, Japan and the EU. America's closest ally, Australia, has intensified its relations with the Pacific, substantially increased its aid to the Pacific (especially to PNG), concluded security and investment agreements, and slightly improved its previously unambitious domestic climate policy. This recent increase in US and Australian aid and new financing of infrastructure projects will be seen in contrast to China which has reduced its aid to the Pacific since about 2018, focussing now mainly on Kiribati and the Solomon Islands.

As for the Pacific Strategic Partnership announced by the US during the Pacific summit last November, the US government could have used a more consultative and less top-down approach with the Pacific Island countries. That would have ensured a more sustainable partnership with the regional players.

The PIF countries had already, in 2019, rejected the notion that the region needed to choose between the US and China. They fear to be drawn into a potential regional conflict between the US and China. The persisting memories of American and French nuclear tests in the Pacific also explain some recent negative reactions to the latest AUKUS developments. The concern that the South Pacific could become the thoroughfare for nuclear-propelled US (and in future also Australian) warships is real. Without careful consultations, this might create divisions between Pacific Island and AUKUS member countries.

Most important are the existential concerns about the climate crisis in the Pacific countries. Like Australia, the US needs to check its own domestic and international climate policies in order to stay credible with Pacific Island countries. It was therefore politically unwise of the US not to support Vanuatu in the UN General Assembly vote last month to bring about a landmark UN resolution sponsored by 130 countries, which will seek the opinion of the International Court of Justice on countries' obligations to address climate change.

The new American engagement in the Pacific will be ultimately judged not by visits of an American President, but by the willingness of the US to sincerely address the

region's major concerns such as climate crisis and contribute towards sustainable prosperity and peace in the region.

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