The Pacific Island Nations and Japan-U.S. Alliance Cooperation

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, the world has been accustomed to using the term “Asia-Pacific.” As a geographical concept, it covers a large part of the world leading the economic growth of this planet. Those who live there now are increasingly conscious that they belong to the Asia-Pacific region. Their sense of community has grown, no matter whether they live in countries that are littorals of the Pacific or not.

One main reason for our use of the term “Asia-Pacific” was to indicate that the United States is integrated into the Pacific and to East Asia. Today, the United States is self-conscious that it is a Pacific power. In fact, in November 2011, when U.S. President Barak Obama visited Australia, he stated in his remarks to the Australian Parliament, “The
United States has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation.”¹ More recently in June 2019, the then U.S. Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan said in his speech at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, “The United States has a natural presence here: as Secretary Mattis said from this podium last year, we are a Pacific nation.”² Thus, the term “Asia-Pacific” region is consistent with this approach. Also, Australia, a staunch ally of the United States in the region is more inclined to be integrated into Asia. New Zealand is coming back to the U.S. alliance network and, along with Australia, remains a part of the Five Eyes community. While we do not overlook the importance of these two countries for the regional security, when we defined the “Asia-Pacific” concept we often overlooked the other small countries in Oceania.

Today, a new nomenclature, “Indo-Pacific,” is rapidly replacing the term “Asia-Pacific,” although its focus is more westward. While there is no unified and clear geographic definition of the new term, the focus is mainly on the Indian Ocean. For example, if you look at the region from India’s perspective, the scope of the Indo-Pacific often seems to stop at the western Pacific. Moreover, the term “Indo-Pacific” literally connects the two oceans and geographically the two oceans are connected by the South

China Sea, and accordingly the South China Sea seems a focal point of the new term. The Pacific island nations were not clearly included into the “Indo-Pacific” scope until recently.

However, if the Indo-Pacific is the “maritime underbelly of Asia,” the Pacific island nations are the underbelly of Hawaii, the home of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDO-PACOM), which is the locus of the U.S.-centered alliance network of the region, and the underbelly of Guam, which hosts U.S. strategic assets necessary for the maintenance of the regional order.

Today, the Pacific Island region is where national interests of a number of major powers are involved. Powerful neighbors, i.e. Australia and New Zealand; powers with a historical background of relations, i.e. Japan and the United States, in addition to the UK and France have been deeply involved. Then, the region has become a venue for the competition for a diplomatic relationship between Taiwan and China. The Pacific island region is being more integrated into the Indo-Pacific context. In fact, U.S. Vice-President Mike Pence said in his speech at the Hudson Institute in October 2018, “To advance our vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific, we’re building new and stronger bonds with nations that share our values, across the region—from India to Samoa (Italic added).” More recently, Acting Defense Secretary Shanahan stated in his Shangri-La speech, “I appreciate the important role the Freely Associated States play in enforcing sanctions against North Korea, upholding a free and open Indo-Pacific, and enabling U.S. regional presence.”

China’s influence in the Pacific Island region is growing. Economic aid, cultural exchange, presence of Chinese expatriates, and infrastructure investments—these are the main tools of Chinese operations. The top donor to this region remains Australia. The second and third biggest donors are China and New Zealand. The amount of aid from these two countries is roughly one sixth the amounts Australia donated, but the amount by Australia is declining, and in Fiji for example, the amount of aid from China is higher than that from Australia. For another example, although there are some countries in the region, such as Samoa and the Cook Islands, managing loans from China well, there are

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4 Masaaki Yatsuzuka, “Chugoku no taiheiyou-shokoku-eno shinsōsū-to ‘ittai-ichiro’ koso [China’s advancement to the Pacific Island nations and its ‘One Belt One Road’ Initiative],” NIDS Commentary, No. 73, May 25, 2018, p. 4.

5 “Remarks delivered by President Mike Pence on the administration’s policy towards China at Hudson Institute on October 4, 2018,” https://www.hudson.org/events/1610-vice-president-mike-pence-s-remarks-on-the-administration-s-policy-towards-china102018.

6 “Acting Secretary Shanahan’s Remarks at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2019.”


8 Yatsuzuka, “China’s advancement,” p. 3.
some other countries, such as Tonga, which have a significant debt problem with China. Cultural exchanges include one Confucius Institute in Fiji, one Confucius Classroom in Vanuatu, one Confucius Classroom also in the Cook Islands, one Confucius Institute in Samoa and two Confucius Institutes in Papua New Guinea. In terms of Chinese expatriates, twenty thousand people migrated to Fiji and ten thousand in Papua New Guinea out of total seventy thousands in the Pacific Island region. China's infrastructure investment in the region includes port facilities in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu, on which there is a growing concern about the potential for China's military use.

China's three main motives are considered to be the following. Firstly, China is trying to decrease Taiwan's international space. Taiwan maintains diplomatic relations with seventeen countries in the world, out of which six are Pacific island nations.

Secondly, China is trying to pursue its maritime interests, particularly fishery interests. The total EEZ of the Pacific Island nations is four times as large as Japan's. Fishing resources in waters near the coast of China have been depleted, and the Chinese have to depend more on fishing farther from home.

Lastly, geopolitical calculations are among China's motives. As mentioned earlier, the Pacific Island nations are located on the southern flank of INDO-PACOM. The geography of these nations is instrumental to complicating operations of U.S. military forces.

On the other hand, the Pacific Island nations have a bigger voice in the international discussion on climate change, and their viewpoint on this issue draws the international community's attention.

In other words, not only countries with traditional ties to the Pacific Island nations, but also several other countries in the world are paying attention to the region. Therefore, the Pacific Island nations have more opportunities and challenges in their relations with today's world.

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10 Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban) Website, english.hanban.org/node=10971.htm.
11 Yatsuzuka, “China’s advancement,” p. 3.
12 Ibid., pp. 1–2.
Implications of the Pacific Island Nations for Japan

After WWI, Japan held League of Nations mandates over Pacific Islands north of the equator. Japan fought against the Allied powers in WWII in this Pacific Island region. Although, during the post-war period, the region has been accepting a great deal of Japan’s economic assistance, the Japanese had not paid close attention to the region until recently.

The MSDF ship Shimokita docked in Palau.


The situation is in fact changing now. In Japan’s newest defense policy, the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), adopted in December 2018, there is an explicit reference to defense cooperation and exchanges with the regional countries. That is the first time that such a reference is included in the history of Japan’s defense policy. It states, “With island nations of the Pacific Ocean, Japan will promote port and airport visits by SDF (Self-Defense Forces) as well as exchanges and cooperation that utilize capabilities and characteristics of each service of SDF.”  However, this reference to the Pacific Island region has not appeared out of the blue. Japan’s naval force has been participating in the U.S. Pacific Fleet’s Pacific Partnership Program for years, and visiting the region.

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occasionally.\textsuperscript{15} The Ministry of Defense has been conducting capacity building assistance to Papua New Guinea since 2014.\textsuperscript{16} In March 2018, Fiji was invited for the first time to the Tokyo Defense Forum, an annual multilateral conference hosted by the Japanese Ministry of Defense.\textsuperscript{17} Nippon Foundation donated coast guard patrol boats to Palau in early 2018.\textsuperscript{18} Therefore, the above-quoted paragraph of the NDPG is an extension of these efforts. It is part of Japan's response to the rapidly shifting balance of power in the region and to the growing uncertainty in the international order, with the goal of shaping a desirable security environment for Japan.

Some parts of the region are located between the first and second island chains in the western Pacific. The southern end of the second island chain is Micronesia and Papua New Guinea. China’s growing influence in the region requires our closer attention to the Pacific Island nations. Geopolitical security interests are not the only consideration. Rich fishery resources and energy resources such as liquefied natural gas (LNG) are also important for Japan.

Japan has a series of common interests with the island nations, including natural disasters prevention and relief, protection of marine environment, and of fishery resources. The fact that Japan is also an island nation in the Pacific is an important source of common perspectives and interests between Japan and those countries. Japan can extend a helping hand toward these developing nations by various means, including infrastructure building, maritime security and safety capacity building, and human resource development.

\textbf{Japan-U.S. Alliance Cooperation in Relation to the Pacific Islands Nations}

Interest in this region is growing, as well as demand for investment. There are many rationales for cooperation with the regional countries. However, Japan cannot be alone in cooperating with these fragile island countries and addressing the diverse challenges they face, particularly in countering China’s advancement. Well-coordinated collaboration among like-minded countries is imperative. The region is strategically crucial for U.S. national security, and as the U.S. provides military security to Palau, the Marshall Islands,

\textsuperscript{15} As a part of this program, Japan sent medical personnel to Micronesia and Palau in 2018. (Ministry of Defense of Japan, \textit{Defense of Japan 2018}, 2018, p. 353.)


\textsuperscript{17} Yatsuzuka, “China's advancement,” p. 5.

and Micronesia through their Compacts of Free Association, so Japanese coordination with the United States is particularly important.

In conclusion, this paper makes four recommendations on Japan-U.S. cooperation:

- First, both Japan and the United States should continue to gain and enhance understanding and support of their shared vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific among the Pacific Island nations. In the Eighth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM8) held in Japan in May 2018, Japan declared its intention to commit more deeply to the stability and prosperity of the region based on the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy." The Pacific Island countries also shared the importance of the basic principles of the strategy and welcomed the strengthening of Japan’s commitment in the Pacific region under the strategy. Taking into account the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy," the PALM8 participants discussed free and open and sustainable oceans as the most important agenda item of the meeting. They also agreed on the importance of the rule of law in the seas, and agreed to promote cooperation in areas such as support for capacity building in the area of maritime security, including maritime law enforcement, and development of ports and harbors. This is a relevant development because the vision (or the strategy) is not only about fisheries or economic prosperity. Both the Japanese and the American visions are also about maintenance and enhancement of fundamental principles and values of the rules-based international order including the rule of law and freedom of the seas. Nonetheless, the vision is still an emerging strategic concept and not yet well articulated. Also, there is a difference of nuance between the Japanese vision and the American vision. Thus, continuous efforts to win their full understanding and support are indispensable.

- Second, in the process of promoting the vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, both Japan and the United States should be careful not to dictate the values and principles buttressing the rules-based international order to the Pacific Island nations. Although they need assistance, we must not treat them as our subordinates, but as

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equal partners. While the vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific has multiple facets, the most important thing in the vision is shared values and principles. It is important to win their support by promoting the vision in an open and transparent manner. A soft power approach is indispensable.

- Third, both Japan and the United States should understand the diversity of the challenges this region currently faces. While the regional countries, including Australia, New Zealand, and the United States are becoming increasingly wary of China’s advancements into the Pacific Island countries, China is not the only challenge the Pacific Island nations face. It is true that the region is a frontline in the power competition between China and the United States and is also a potential battle ground between China and Taiwan. As Taiwan’s survival is at stake in the face of China’s pressure and its international breathing space is shrinking, Taiwan’s position in the Pacific Island region is more important than ever. The United States and Japan should do whatever we can in the region to help our democratic friend. However, the two allies cannot ignore the different concerns the Pacific Island nations possess, which are both traditional and non-traditional challenges. If their concerns are ignored, those nations will seek to stay out of big power politics, in turn compromising American and Japanese interests.

- Finally, a whole-of-government approach is more important than ever because both the geopolitical and the geo-economic perspectives are necessary to shape the regional order in this connected world. This is not just about military security or economic development. It is about the two allies’ common way of life as a whole, of which we can be proud.

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