

US and Australia too late on Pacific

Written by Bill Sharp

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In his book *Pivot*, former US assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific Kurt Campbell says that the US has overlooked the South Pacific and failed to see its geostrategic relationship to the US defense posture in Asia.

The US has moved from the “pivot” toward Asia to the “Indo-Pacific strategy,” making the geostrategic importance of the region all the more significant — and one, similar to World War II Japan, that China sees as crucial to its defense.

It should come as no surprise that China endeavors to drive a hole in the Indo-Pacific strategy that would allow it to clear a path from the South China Sea deep into the Western Pacific, just short of Hawaii.

Flipping both the Solomon Islands and Kiribati away from Taiwan indisputably advances that goal. Kiribati is only located 2,897km from Hawaii and once hosted a Chinese missile-tracking station.

Australia’s security is also seriously challenged by the proximity of Pacific island states where it is feared that China wants to build military installations. Not only did the Solomon Islands and Kiribati break relations with Taiwan, but Tuvalu could well follow suit.

Concern abounds that a domino effect could ensue that would form a crescent of Pacific island nations heavily influenced by China. Such an eventuality could cut off Australian shipping lines to the US and other destinations, plus serve as a roadblock to US troops potentially coming to Australia’s aid.

The US and Australia could have both put greater effort into addressing the needs of the region. Only when faced with the possibility of the Solomons ending relations with Taiwan did the US talk about reopening its embassy in the country. The US embassy in Papua New Guinea covers the Solomons and Vanuatu.

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The late US and Australian effort to prevent the rupture in Solomon Islands-Taiwan relations was hypocritical. After all, both broke formal relations with Taiwan in order to establish them with China and were now pressuring the Solomons not to follow suit.

The US and Australian failure to address the No. 1 issue of South Pacific nations — climate change — also contributed to Honiara's and Tarawa's decisions to break relations.

Financially, during the period from 2011 to 2017, the US only contributed US\$98 million to the region. Australia offered the most financial assistance of any country during the period with contributions totaling US\$6.5 billion. However, there are long term, smoldering feelings about Australian arrogance and cultural insensitivity.

To persuade the Solomons to sever ties with Taiwan, China reportedly offered US\$500 million in loans and grants. Much of the amount was to be devoted to infrastructure projects that would be carried out by China Civil Engineering Construction Corp, and a certain amount was said to go to individual politicians.

Opinion in the Solomons was divided, with 80 percent of the population and 50 percent of parliamentary members opposed to the switch in relations. Given the lack of parliamentary support, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare extended parliament's recess until this month to prevent a vote against the decision. On the other hand, the Cabinet was strongly supportive, led by the newly elected, iron-willed Sogavare.

In 2017, Sogavare was forced out as prime minister amid allegations of accepting a Huawei bribe. He was re-elected to the post in April.

Knowledge about the pending passage in the US of the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI Act) and the punitive measures that it might levy on the Solomons or Kiribati did not deter them in ending relations with Taiwan.

On the other hand, the Solomon Islands man on the street benefited from Taiwanese scholarships, agricultural assistance, medical services, etc. Support for maintaining relations

with Taiwan was particularly strong in Malaita Province, which sought to declare independence from the Solomons upon the rupture in relations.

Due to political instability caused by the break, Sogavare called off his plan to attend the UN General Assembly and sent Solomon Islands Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeremiah Manele instead.

The lessons of the Solomons are not limited to South Pacific countries. Devastated by savage hurricanes, many nations in the Caribbean offer China an opportunity to spread its influence. China could next target Haiti to flip. The country is abjectly poor and in dire need of infrastructure development.

Given China's growing influence in the Caribbean, it could use Haiti to form a crescent-shaped wall extending from Cuba to the eastern tip of the Dominican Republic to protect access to the Panama Canal, and the canal that China talks about building across Nicaragua.

The US did the same thing, owing to its long history in Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, governance of Puerto Rico and control of the Panama Canal. The Chinese would simply be replicating the crescent-shaped wall that they are building to block access to Australia. Given Haiti's location in the heart of the US' soft underbelly, Chinese diplomatic relations with the country would become a security threat to the US.

The TAIPEI Act is toothless and makes the US look like a paper tiger. It is trade, money and attention to climate change that is going to undergird US security and promote the success of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Just as a Trans-Pacific Partnership, or some form thereof in the Pacific, is needed, a reinvigorated Caribbean Basin Trade and Partnership Act is required in the Caribbean.

The US also needs to be much bolder on climate change, instead of just making a 15-minute appearance at the UN Climate Action Summit.

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