

## CAN TODAY'S GREAT POWERS AVOID A COLD WAR IN A WARM PACIFIC? FROM THE FULDA GAP TO WALU BAY

Josh Wineera

May 2012

For many Cold War warriors the Fulda Gap still evokes memories of the anticipated colossal clash between the former Soviet Union and American military forces. On the eastern side of the strategically important German lowland stood the powerful Soviet 8<sup>th</sup> Guards Army, opposing to the west the American V Corps. As Great Powers, the posture of the US and Soviet Union epitomised the predictable behaviour of bipolar, hard power competitors. Thankfully, the collision of men and materiel through the Fulda Gap did not eventuate, with the 1991 demise of the Soviet Union leaving the US as the global hegemony.

Half a world away, in fact some twenty years later, a new more subtle rivalry is developing. The mid-point of confrontation is centred on the warm tropical waters in the Fijian capital, Suva – at Walu Bay. To the north of Walu Bay lies the new American embassy, to the south the new Chinese embassy. While geo-strategists and political pundits try to figure out how to correctly pronounce *Walu*, let alone place it on a map, a new Great Power competition continues at an increasing pace.

The January 2012 announcement by President Barack Obama that the US would shift its strategic focus to Asia Pacific left little doubt as to a new foreign policy to contain China's so-called rise in the region. That the announcement was delivered at the Pentagon clearly signalled a new mission for the Department of Defence (Obama, 2012). While international observers focussed on the symbolism of an American President surrounded by his Admirals and Generals, several would have been alert to the domestic message of support to a relatively new Secretary of Defence implementing a reprioritisation of the defence budget. Less momentous, certainly in terms of media impact, but just as important, was a statement made by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton two months earlier. Clinton's "America's Pacific Century" (Clinton, 2011), conveyed the rationale and framework for a whole-of-government approach to ensure continued US leadership in the region. Combined, the two

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announcements illustrated the US Government's 3-D's concept of defence, diplomacy and development.

The South Pacific is one of the least densely populated regions on the planet. It is mainly home to a scattering of islands encased in the world's largest ocean, an ocean rich with marine and seabed resources. While major regional players such as Australia and New Zealand naturally take a keen interest in the area, it is the many tiny sovereign nations that actually sit squarely in the warm Pacific. Countries such as Niue, Tuvalu, Cook Islands and Vanuatu would be unfamiliar to many people outside the region but they, and others, occupy the vital ground. Although economic fishing zones extend from their sovereign territories the majority of the South Pacific remains international waters, uncontested spaces. It would be reasonable therefore to promote the need for maritime capabilities to help harvest and protect the fishing zones. In so doing, ensuring the unimpeded access to the sea lines of communication and maintaining the international system for global public goods. More importantly for America, there is an urge to curb Chinese influence in the region – cue the US military's potent Pacific Command.

The stage is certainly set for a new Great Power competition, a new Cold War. Two factors however, see the Chinese leading the race. First, the contest has already begun. In effect it has been going for over a decade with only one participant in the game. In this period China has been very active in the region. In contrast, the US has been somewhat absent, focussed on the Middle-East, Asia and Europe. Second, the preferred mode of engagement for China has been what Joseph Nye terms 'soft power' (Nye, 2004). No hard power, or coercive military might, has been exerted over the small Pacific Island countries. This has fostered new relationships that would have been deemed unlikely just 10 years ago. A good example is the Fijian 'Look North Policy' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012). Frustrated with some traditional alliances, Fijian leaders have opted to build economic and cultural bridges towards China. Benefits through Chinese development assistance and soft financial loans has manifested in to a close friendship. Little wonder that the US chose Suva as the new counter-balance *field*.

Fiji is not alone in its preference for Chinese help. Niuean Premier Toke Talagi's comments that "if development aid is not forthcoming [from New Zealand], I would request aid from

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China instead” (NZ Herald, 2009) confirms the attraction for many of these island nations. With tiny populations, economic and monetary stimulus need not be the injection of hundreds of billions of dollars, as has been the case of US investment in to Iraq and Afghanistan. In the Pacific Island context, tens of millions of development dollars can go a long way. The support from China funds many projects that official development assistance organisations such as AUSAID from Australia or NZAID from New Zealand have not considered real aid-focussed work – projects outside the remit of the UN Millennium Development Goals. This has created the gap for geo-strategic influence. Chinese funds have been used to build the Parliament House in Vanuatu, a new court house and Ministry of Justice in the Cook Islands, sports stadiums in Papua New Guinea and Samoa, and many more non-traditional development projects (Crocombe, 2007). For Beijing it has been more effective to use smart dollars to achieve influence, rather than simply buying an armada of warships. This strategy has been particularly effective given that military engagement and military hardware is of little interest to these small nations. Many simply do not have a military force.

China has been very astute in recognising the strategic cultures within the South Pacific. In taking great pains to present itself as a friend, China is emulating the behaviour of the Soviet Union towards many Third World countries in the 1960’s. Perhaps then it is more about the rise of America in the Pacific, rather than solely China that will impress future changes on to the geo-political eco-system?

With its vast array of military capabilities, the US strategy of coercion to contain China is a predictable counter. Hard power, as demonstrated against the Soviet Union, proved to be a very successful deterrent during the Cold War. But, is it appropriate today given the Chinese strategy has been to engage more with soft power to influence and draw favourable relations from the Pacific Island neighbourhood? Is this a symmetrical response? It would be very interesting to see which Great Power Navy would be more warmly welcomed to pay a shore visit.

US policymakers seeking to establish a Containment strategy towards China would be well advised to avoid the pitfall of a revisionist approach to the Cold War. Arranging policy objectives to duplicate the wrestle for power with the Soviet Union would be folly. A careful

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examination of China's posture in the Pacific would reveal a sophisticated interdependence of relationships. The bipolar struggle of today is not about a fight for power, but a struggle to share power.

Charles Gati's three phases of Containment in the Cold War; confrontation followed by confrontation and competition, and finally confrontation, competition and cooperation, (Gati, 1974) is a useful construct to determine where the current US-China relationship might lie. Gati's phases spanned over 30 years, however today's timeframes have been greatly compressed. We are already in the second phase – confrontation and competition. The key question is whether the direction yet to be travelled is forward or backwards? Ideally two more phases should be added to allow a de-escalation scale for a more positive outcome. Including the phases; competition and cooperation and finally cooperation alone could help build a more virtuous position to strive for.

To achieve cooperation in the Pacific, China and the US should be encouraged to do so through a regional governance structure. While they are Great Powers, Great Powers can become consumed and blinded with peer competition and confrontation. During the Cold War many countries were resigned to the role of spectators, acquiescent to the ideology of Washington or Moscow. For that reason a real challenge rests with the Pacific countries to be more assertive, to have the confidence to persuade Washington and Beijing that the Pacific environment is not a passive one. It is time to apply Pacific Power. The small nations within do have the ability to influence and manage the bipolar nature of the US-China relationship. It is obviously in their best interest to do so. Rather than being idle proxies of the Cold War era, countries like Samoa, Tonga and Kiribati can and should take an active role in accommodating both Great Powers. A Pacific-block of nations, as already established in organisations such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), are appropriate mechanisms by which the region can integrate Chinese and the American goals, thereby contributing to global governance. The PIF can become the fulcrum upon which the US-China relations balance and maintain equilibrium.

America has recognised the role of this *third player* in the Pacific bipolar environment. Last year the largest and highest level US delegation ever, led by Deputy Secretary of State Thomas Nides, participated in the 2011 PIF in Auckland, New Zealand. Astute followers of

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Pacific culture would have noted that Auckland has the largest Polynesian population of any city in the world, providing a unique insight to the opinions and perspectives of the other small Pacific nations. No doubt Beijing and Washington realise the value of their New Zealand embassies to report on the attitudes and feelings towards their respective countries from this source.

If the countries of the Pacific ultimately want to encourage affirmative Great Power relationships and behaviour then that narrative needs to be communicated consistently, constantly and unreservedly. Acknowledging that both the US and China are indispensable to the region would go some way towards mollifying strategic miscalculations.

For China, a choice would be to resist or respond to the US military overtures, its hard power. Certainly, it could engage in a contest to militarise and arm the Pacific. It has the economic means to do so. Such a policy however, would surely unravel all of the good relations that it has carefully cultivated and enjoyed as benefits of its soft power approach. As a result an attritional arms-race would be counter-productive. In whose interest is it to be perceived as the aggressor?

For the US to reassert its military presence in the Pacific, post Iraq and Afghanistan, is understandable. There will not however, be the overestimation of the utility of force with China. Smart power (Nye, 2004), the combination of hard and soft power, will undoubtedly drive the formulation of US policy for Asia-Pacific. For this to occur with any measurable success there would need to be a sharp and sustained rise in US diplomatic engagement and economic initiatives. The message would simply be “hey, don’t forget about us, it’s not all about China”. Ironically, while an arms-race in the Pacific would be dangerous, a development aid-race would not be without hazards. A Pacific awash with money might sound great to some, but it could quite easily destroy what are already delicate economies and financial systems.

A Cold War in the Pacific is avoidable. While the US and China might wrangle for dominance, for hegemony, it does so against a backdrop of nations that are quite accepting of both Great Powers. The notion of shared power in a bipolar environment may be inconceivable

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to some. To the people of the Pacific this would be a much preferred arrangement than one that becomes the flash-point for confrontation. No one wants another Fulda Gap.

Both China and the US are indispensable to the Pacific. There is the likelihood that multi-aligned diplomatic, economic and security relations will become more common. A security arrangement with China, in tandem with an economic agreement with the US, or vice versa, might form the foreign policy of a Pacific nation. In regional terms, the PIF could become the conduit for power sharing between China and the US. Perhaps even a model of political discourse for other international institutions grappling with the Great Power relationship. A third party in a bipolar world might appear implausible but if the effect is constructive dialogue and moderated behaviour then the prospects for post-hegemonic global governance are promising.

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*Josh Wineera is a lecturer at the Centre for Defence and Security Studies, Massey University, New Zealand. He is a member of the New Zealand forum of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific and recently completed a US State Department study programme on US National Security Policymaking. He is a serving military officer and PhD student. He can be contacted at [j.wineera@massey.ac.nz](mailto:j.wineera@massey.ac.nz).*

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