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What Island Nations Have to Say on Indo-Pacific Geopolitics

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Kurt Campbell, the U.S. National Security Council coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, recently identified the Pacific as the theater where Washington is most likely to see a "strategic surprise" from China.[1] Campbell's comment alludes to Washington's concerns that China is seeking to acquire military facilities in the Pacific, limiting U.S. influence in the region.[2]

The comment also reflects an underlying U.S. concern regarding China's rise in the Indo-Pacific. Over the past several decades, China has sought to gain military, economic, and political influence over small states and islands throughout the Indo-Pacific, creating a competition that Beijing warns could escalate to tensions akin to those in the Cold War.[3] The United States and its regional partners—Australia, France, Japan, and India, for example—are concerned that China's increased presence in the region could threaten security interests in the region. Such concerns are not unfounded. However, there has been little effort to understand the perspectives of the islands and small states that are caught in this struggle for power. Often, the geopolitical priorities of islands and small states are discussed by bigger powers without much consultation or representation from the states in question.

To capture some perspectives and voices of island states on the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Tokyo held in September 2021 the inaugural islands forum, "Ocean Nations: An Indo-Pacific Islands Dialogue."[4]

Although the islands of the Indian and Pacific Oceans are separated by vast oceans, the forum highlighted common themes in the challenges they face (see map 1). This article brings those themes—from climate change and the blue economy to the so-called China challenge—into focus and discusses their place in great power competition in the Indo-Pacific.

Geography of the Indo-Pacific Islands

SECURITY: MORE THAN GEOSTRATEGIC POWER

The most prominent theme from the Islands Dialogue was the island nations' prioritization of an expanded definition of security.[5] While bigger powers like the United States, India, and Australia are concerned about unsustainable Chinese financing of possible dual-use infrastructure projects like the port project in the Sri Lankan town of Hambantota, island nations prioritize different issues.[6] Islands are concerned with nontraditional security threats; participants were unanimous in identifying climate change; illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing; piracy; plastic pollution; and oil spills as the biggest security threats in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. These issues rarely make it to the top of the list of security concerns for major powers in the region. The gap between how these two groups of countries conceive of Indo-Pacific security limits both of their successes.

If small states asking for security assistance and major powers offering solutions are divided by their conceptions of security, then the policies and frameworks constructed in Washington, New Delhi, Canberra, Tokyo, and Paris will fail to resolve regional concerns. This shortcoming also harms U.S. interests, as key partners and allies are located throughout the region. Stability in the Pacific is critical to U.S. strategic and security interests, but Washington's focus has narrowed to military and strategic competition. Similarly, India and China have focused on strategic competition in the Indian Ocean, neglecting the islands' broader conceptions of security in the region. Acknowledging this discrepancy, Ahmed Khaleel, minister of state for foreign affairs in the Maldives, said, "For a lot of other countries, the threats [such as IUU fishing and climate change] are on the margins. But for a country like the Maldives, it's life or death itself."[7]

The impact of this discrepancy can be readily seen in the development of regional infrastructure projects, in which major powers provide financing support to island nations. Such projects often miss the nuance in the demand for climate resilient and environmentally conscious infrastructure. While ports and airports are welcomed by the island nations, the environmental impact of such projects are of paramount importance. Disasters such as the 2021 oil spill in Mauritius and the cargo ship fire in Sri Lanka highlight the vulnerability of island ecosystems, which are critical to island economies.[8] Atsushi Watanabe, senior research fellow with the Ocean Policy Institute at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, said it is "important to consider the tourism in island nations, [tourism that] is characterized by its dependence on the marine and coastal environment. . . . Fishing and tourists are particularly important as sources of income, and sustainably securing these sources of income is essential for economic and food security."[9] Thus, a focus on developing infrastructure that protects the blue economy would provide better solutions to infrastructure problems in the region.[10]

To emphasize the islands' perspective on security, Teburoro Tito, the permanent representative of Kiribati to the United Nations (UN), asserted, "Security to me is an outside concept, created by people from outside our shores. Security for me is drought within the island; the problem is people from outside [who] come to our islands and turn our oceans and islands into battlegrounds."[11]

CHINA: A NEW OPPORTUNITY

The dialogue also highlighted the islands' unique perception of China and its role in the Indo-Pacific. While nations in both oceans acknowledged the importance of their partnerships with traditional players such as Australia, France, India, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States, they were sympathetic to Beijing and its interests. Not only do the islands recognize China's newfound interest in their regions as an opportunity, but they also acknowledge that China's attention has facilitated renewed focus on the region from traditional players, too. For example, when the

Indian prime minister visited Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka in 2015, it was the first time in twenty-eight years that an Indian leader had gone to these islands.[12] Similarly, the U.S. secretary of state's visit to Fiji in 2022 was the first by someone in this position in thirty-six years.[13]

Rather than be leveraged as proxies in great power competition, the islands seek to break away from relying on a singular security partner. When discussing the geopolitical tension between China, the United States, and India, Foreign Secretary of Sri Lanka Jayanath Colombage stated, "We don't want to be a part of it. . . . And honestly, we don't like to see a single power becoming a hegemonic power in the Indian Ocean. . . . We wish to remain neutral in the game."[14] Similarly, Khaleel noted that the "Indian Ocean may become a key threat for strategic competition between major rival powers. But our hope is that the Indian Ocean will not witness a security dilemma in which activities by larger outside powers to enhance their own security interests create insecurity for others in the region."[15]

To understand island nations' perspective, it is also critical to note that China does not have any territorial disputes or controversial legacies with island nations in either the Indian or Pacific Oceans. Further, it was not China who conducted nuclear tests that impacted Pacific shores, but it was the United States and France.[16] Nor was it China who allegedly committed war crimes on Pacific islands, but Japan has been accused of such.[17] Similarly, India and Australia are viewed as dominating powers by their neighboring islands, who depend on New Delhi and Canberra for economic and military security. Compared to these actors, Beijing is a new partner that carries considerable economic weight and offers opportunities to island nations who are scrambling to make their voices heard. While the West perceives Beijing's debt financing as unsustainable, such views are not shared by island nations. While this difference in perception may place island nations in the middle of a tug-of-war between bigger powers, islands recognize the need for different partners to address different solutions, keeping economic and military collaborations separate. Addressing the different perceptions on projects funded by Beijing, Colombage noted, "I think what we [island states] really want is to maintain sovereignty [and] independence of our individual countries."[18]

One the other hand, islands are also sometimes viewed as playing one regional power against another to maximize their growth and opportunities. For instance, Kiribati has switched its diplomatic position on Taiwan as a sovereign nation, a sensitive issue for Beijing, multiple times.[19] And Tito describes this strategy as "economics of survival." He elaborates that the strategy has more to do with economic aid and that "it is not about [the] military; we have no investment there."[20]

As island nations address the aftermath of the ongoing pandemic, they are likely to see regional competition intensify. When borders shut down across the globe in 2020, island nations that relied on tourism were hit hard. The World Bank noted "a year-over-year contraction of nearly 30 percent in 2020" for the Maldives.[21] Similarly, Fiji's economic growth contracted by 19 percent.[22]

Coronavirus pandemic recovery and revitalizing the tourism industry are priorities across island governments. Collaborations on vaccines, resilient infrastructure, and maintaining the blue economy will become critical junctures for the international community to engage with island nations and address regional security.

THE MULTILATERAL WAY

As small nations with limited to no military force, island nations across the Indo-Pacific highlighted the importance of multilateral platforms and the UN in conflict resolution and governance. While bigger nations advocate for the need to adhere to international norms and rules, it is the smaller nations who value and respect international norms and principles more closely. Even if small in size economically, politically, and militarily, each nation at the UN is awarded one

vote, giving all sovereign nations an equal voice. While the UN's relevance in enforcing norms and principles, especially among larger powers, can be debated, island nations maximize the opportunities at the UN by voicing their concerns and highlighting challenges. The UN reinforces small island nations' independent voice, and it remains a critical platform through which to engage with them. Permanent Representative and Ambassador to the UN for Fiji Satyendra Prasad notes, "We look to multilateralism for global governance . . . and we look to the multilateral system to provide us with the rules through which we negotiate and mediate our interest and protect our interest in global systems."[23]

Voicing similar support of the UN, Colombage stated that in the Indian Ocean, "there is a huge asymmetry of capacities and capabilities among the countries. . . . [The way to] overcome the asymmetry in this international domain or regional domain is by having rules, because if there are rules, everyone abides by [them and] no one tries to dictate terms on the other."[24]

Islands such as Mauritius also expressed the need for larger powers to not only advocate for principles and norms but also abide by them. J.D. Koonjul, the permanent representative of Mauritius to the UN, cited the example of the advisory opinion of the UN International Court of Justice on Chagos Archipelago.[25] The archipelago is home to the island of Diego Garcia, which hosts a joint U.S.-UK military and which Koonjul said had been "unlawfully detached from Mauritius by the UK in 1965." The UK was ordered by the international court and a UN General Assembly resolution to withdraw its administration from the islands, but London (supported by Washington) continues to remain on the island, ignoring and disregarding the rulings. Offering a longer lease to Washington than the one currently in place and recognizing the importance of the base for Indian Ocean security, Koonjul urged Washington to follow the very same laws and principles that it advocates for and that it prides itself on and to be a responsible member of the international community. Both London and Washington continue to remain on the island, ignoring repeated UN rulings with no direct consultation with Mauritius.

While the Indo-Pacific island nations respect and value the platform the UN provides, they recognize the challenges the organization faces to generating actionable solutions. The Islands Dialogue forum itself was held on the eve of the UN high level debate; island nations were determined to bring large powers to the table on commitments to fight climate change. However, island nations at the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) walked away frustrated, without having gained strong international commitments on maintaining global temperatures.[26]

As nations continue to explore productive means for collaboration with island nations to protect their own security and strategic interests, climate change will move front and center. Despite the difference in security perceptions, players in the Indo-Pacific will have to seriously consider climate change as a key security issue in order to secure cooperation from island partners.

THE GREAT POWER PERSPECTIVE

The dialogue also invited regional security providers including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States to share their perspectives and priorities in the region.[27] The countries acknowledged climate change as a threat to island nations and noted various challenges—such as capacity and location—to collaborating with island partners. Specifically, each of these major powers has unique interests and geographic priorities within the Indo-Pacific. For instance, Australia's Pacific Step-up policy naturally focuses on South Pacific islands, prioritizing its immediate neighbors.[28]

As such, islands face a dilemma where nontraditional security challenges continue to rise while larger powers prioritize traditional geostrategic competition. Moreover, when posed against military challenges such as a possible crisis over Taiwan, the India-China border

conflict, or Russia's invasion of Ukraine, climate change becomes perceived as a less immediate threat. Due to red tape and bureaucratic limitations to financing important projects in the Indo-Pacific, great powers often struggle in implementing large projects in the region. Many of the traditional players have announced a series of new initiatives and projects aimed at offering solutions to the region; however, certain challenges of strategic inertia from larger powers toward the region still remains from the previous decades.

Finally, perhaps the most critical challenge lies in framing the narrative for bureaucrats sitting in capitals thousands of miles from the Indo-Pacific islands. There appears to be a tendency to see the region through the singular lens of competition with China. While Beijing's presence across these islands has highlighted regional challenges, there is also a need to assess frameworks and initiatives from the point of view of islands. If not, countries such as Australia, India, the United States, and others will continue to find themselves caught up in reactionary policies that fail to improve their long-term objectives in the region. Commitments and priorities toward island nations must survive beyond the news cycle.

CONCLUSION

As highlighted above, there are serious differences in perceptions and priorities between island nations and larger powers in defining regional challenges and priorities. Strategic competition further complicates regional dynamics, undermines sovereign choices, and limits options for sovereign islands. Tito underlined that those who "really [want] to help us [will take] the time to listen to what's happening from our own experience."[29]

As Anna Powles, a senior lecturer in security studies at Massey University in New Zealand, notes, "There needs to be [a] far deeper understanding of the security concerns in the Pacific Islands region, rather than just simply viewing them through a lens of strategic competition."[30] This fact remains true for regional dynamics in the Indian Ocean islands as well.[31] While the world is reorienting its attention back to the islands for geostrategic reasons, there is a need to understand island perspectives and voices after years of neglect and inertia. Without this perspective, bigger nations will continue to miss the granular details on the ground, leading to ineffective and disconnected frameworks of cooperation.

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