***A Path Across the Pacific–and More***

Everyone by this time surely agrees that the Pacific, however much it may have been eclipsed by events in the Middle East over the past decade or two, is of major strategic value for the US. It will only become more important in the future, we can be sure.

The 21st Century was to be the “Century of the Pacific,” we were assured. But those of us who have had the leisure to ponder its place in geopolitical world of today wonder just what century has not been the “Century of the Pacific.” World War II was a striking example of how an otherwise obscure area can become headline material in a hurry. My father’s generation recognized immediately the names of those insignificant islands: Angaur, Peleliu, Saipan, Truk, Tinian, Kwajalein and Guadalcanal. Barely had that war ended when another broke out (the Korean War) and then another (in Vietnam).

But other wars, not all of them military, had been fought for centuries before these. The Spanish-American War, which ended with Spain’s dispossession of its Pacific colonies, created something of a rift between State Department and Navy, with the latter arguing that the US needed not just a lone outpost, the single island of Guam, but a cluster of islands to serve as a protective screen. During the entire Nineteenth Century, of course, the Pacific had been the battleground of another kind of war: a commercial struggle for the whales that produced the oil that kept the lamps of the world’s largest cities lit, the time when the Pacific was described as “whitened with the sails of American whaleships.” Even before this there was the contest along the sea lanes across the ocean to China for the silks and teas and porcelain that country produced.

There is a never-ending list of “wars” fought in the Pacific over the centuries. Spain and Portugal were the earliest contestants in the battle for discovery and colonization of the New World; then Spain and Netherlands for maritime control of the sea lanes. France and England got into the act a bit later as the battles fought between them on two continents expanded to the Pacific. It’s hard to imagine a time that the Pacific has not been a major arena in the struggle between world powers–economic, military or both.

*US Security Interests*

It’s not surprising, then, that the US should have strong security interests in the Pacific. What major power in today’s world, especially one that borders the Pacific, would not wish to have a major stake in the ocean: who sails and overflies it, what they carry, how they utilize its resources, and what their intentions are. Hence, the US’s security concerns look well beyond the access of other nations’ military forces to the Pacific and include forestalling the movement of drugs, human sex or labor slaves, and items or individuals used to promote terrorism, not to mention protecting commercial shipping lanes and ensuring that environmental standards are honored.

Rather than spell out all these security needs, perhaps we can broadly lump these security interests under two major headings: The US needs a buffer (against drugs, terrorists, and other threats to its own nation); at the same time its long-range interests seem to require a pathway across the Pacific to Asia. Let’s assume that the value of the buffer against threats is obvious and briefly discuss the second basic need: the pathway across the Pacific.

By a pathway across the Pacific I mean a chain of islands across the northern Pacific that would welcome the US without embarrassment. The chain, of course, begins with Hawaii, one-third of the way to Asia, but has been extended the rest of the way by virtue of the US’s historical and continuing political ties with the various Micronesian entities: the Territory of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, as well as the independent nations linked to US through the Compact of Free Association. In effect, the pathway is already in place. The US ought to be thinking about ways to secure this well into the future. Once this matter has been addressed, I contend, other lesser US national security interests should easily fall into place.

Is a pathway necessary? Back in the late 1970s when the Trust Territory was seriously considering its future political status, some of us thought that such a pathway was an outdated residue of a past military age. In an era of intercontinental ballistic missiles, we argued, bases were a thing of the past. But the admiral from Guam who visited us to comment on the papers we produced as part of the political education program our church-based research institute was conducting corrected our naive view of the matter. He told us that logistics would always be essential–first, last and always. He was admonishing us never to lose sight of the importance of those specks of land in the mid-Pacific that were known as islands–stepping-stones to Asia for the US, but home for the islanders who lived there.

Such a pathway has many uses, as a number of the speakers at the recent Pacific Island Security Workshop made clear in their presentations. Besides offering military and economic access to Asia, the pathway would allay many of the security concerns that were being addressed in the workshop. Indeed, this pathway and the buffer might be one and the same in the end. But retaining the pathway would have to be done in such a way as to respect the island governments in our own post-colonial era. Anything less would be to betray the very ideals that the US proudly trumpets to the world.

*Islands Security Interests*

Pacific Islanders have security interests of their own, which they may turn to global powers to address in return for their attempt to meet the interests of the US and other developed nations.

The main issue for most Pacific nations, certainly for those in Micronesia, is economic survival. The first and foremost item on their agenda is how to pay the bills to keep the government running when there are so few natural resources, such tiny a wedge into the world marketplace, so little chance of developing a national economy strong enough to generate what is needed to provide basic government services. Simply put, the agenda of most island nations (not just those in Micronesia, it should be noted) is driven by the need to secure the grants needed to supplement the revenues that the country itself raises. Why should it be anything else? What other issue commands the attention of island countries like national survival?

Trafficking in drugs or humans, one of the US security concerns, barely registers on the scale of island nations’ priorities today. The health issues discussed at the recent workshop may be real, but surely not an imminent threat to a people who have survived the loss of half their population during the period of intense contact with the West throughout the Nineteenth Century. Sea-level rise is a real enough specter for people born on low-lying atolls, as the Ambassador of the Federated States of Micronesia movingly stated. Yet, the people of his country and its neighbors have had to face periodic disasters brought on by typhoons and droughts over the centuries, and so they were required to develop their survival strategies to cope with them. Mass exodus from a stricken island is no new nightmare for islanders; it has been taking place for hundreds of years now.

Let’s not presume that the US’s priority list of security issues is shared by the Pacific Island nations themselves, then. Island security is viewed very differently by those who call those islands home. Island leaders might show compliance and so frame their concerns under whatever headings the US proposes, but you can be sure that their real concern has to do with retaining their national status in an uncertain future. And that comes down to figuring out how they will support themselves in a global economy when their natural resources are few and their donors are tired of writing checks.

The concern of island nations for supporting themselves is much more complex than that of feeding their populations (a topic that came up repeatedly under the heading of “food security”). It’s a matter of providing their people with the jobs they require in today’s monetized world. Then, of course, there is the larger problem of financing the many services required in a modern nation state–education, health services, public safety, and infrastructure. Meanwhile, the ante is being raised all the time, as the international community pushes its Millennium Development Goals to elevate standards (and expenses) in the island nations.

The three independent Compact nations–Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and even Palau–are far from the goal of self-reliance. To become fully self-supporting, Palau would need to nearly double its present GDP, while FSM and the Marshalls would need to triple the size of their economies. The provisions of the current funding agreement between the US and these nations related to the Compact of Free Association will carry these nations through the next eight years. But what do they do after that? Full self-support as a modern nation-state is unimaginable for these countries in the foreseeable future. The Compact permits islanders free access to the US to live and work–and the drain-off has been significant–but the nations must still find a way to support their own governments in the future.

The Trust Fund set up to help the Compact nations transition easily into the post-Compact funding era will come up well short of what it was expected to generate, thanks to the collapse of the economy a few years ago and other unforeseen factors.

Surveillance of fishing grounds is important since tuna is the one valuable commodity the island nations have to trade. Yet, there are limits on how much money the sale of fishing rights can generate. FSM is currently receiving $25 million yearly, but even if this figure were to double in the next ten years the nation would still be far from the self-reliance it seeks. Control of a vast EEZ is not a ticket to self-reliance, as we all should know by this time.

*Where the Security Interests Converge*

If the independent nations under the Compact (FSM, Marshalls and Palau) regard their viability as modern nation-states as the paramount security issue, as I maintain here, then assurance of donor support from the US over the long-term would greatly ease these concerns. The dividends paid on this investment would be significant in providing the pathway to Asia that the US needs.

Meanwhile, the political future of the two US-dependant entities (Territory of Guam and Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands) remains unresolved. Both have played roles in safeguarding the military and commercial interests of the US since World War II–and much longer in the case of Guam. Both are self-governing to a great extent, but neither has been fully integrated into the US. In an age that has low regard for colonialism, the US might consider offering them an opportunity to resolve their political status once and for all–either by becoming independent or, perhaps a more appealing option, by becoming more fully integrated into the US as a new state of part of an older one.

There is an undeniable convergence of security interests here, even if the security priorities of the Pacific islands differ from those on the US list. In seriously entertaining the concerns of the islands, and resisting the temptation to assume that the two lists were identical, the US would be investing in its own needs for the future. It would assure the US of its “pathway” across the Pacific even as it solidifies the goodwill of the island populations. It would go a long way in providing for the type of security that the US will need for the remainder of the century and longer.

*Recommended Action Plan*

US should provide the nations bound to it by the Compact some assurance of financial support in the future–not as a purchase price for island loyalty, but because of the recognized inability of the island nations to support themselves fully in the future. There are historical ties and other considerations that would suggest that this a reasonable burden for the US to assume.

Even as the future funding for these island nations would serve to strengthens the relationship between them and the US, it could also help redirect priorities within these nations, providing the funding were offered as foreign aid rather than as Compact-related funds. Like all foreign aid, the funding would be contingent on compliance with commitments imposed by the donor nations. In addition, this would also make it easier for the US to use this funding to spur development in the islands without incurring the charge of infringing on sovereignty. (It can be very difficult to attach strings to Compact funding, as we are currently finding as the US attempts to leverage funding to achieve the reform of the public education in Chuuk.)

In the case of Guam and the Northern Marianas, the issue might revolve not so much around financial support as political self-determination. At the present time, neither has fully resolved the matter of final political status, although the Northern Marianas chose to accept Commonwealth status in the mid-1970s when it was offered a choice on the ballot. Guam was never offered even this measure of self-determination, as Dr. Robert Underwood observed in his keynote address at the recent workshop. Appointment of a political status commission to address this issue and ensure that the people of Guam were offered this most basic of political rights would go a long way in assuaging any lingering resentment and assuring the people that in the eyes of the US they themselves count as much as the land the island furnishes for military bases.

At some point in the not too distant future, the US should offer both Guam and the Northern Marianas the opportunity to settle their political status question: Will they become separate nations, perhaps under the same terms as the Compact-related nations? Or would they rather be more fully incorporated into the US as a state of part of one? No matter which way they answer, there is no reason to believe they would resist the opportunity to become links in the pathway across the northern Pacific that the US hopes to maintain.

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