**China in the South Pacific**

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The US compulsion to contain and manage the phenomenal rise of China is getting starker, grimmer and more urgent by the day. US efforts to circumscribe its sphere of influence and concomitant strategic reach across the globe appear to be floundering. China, on the other hand, riding high on its rampaging BRI, has effectively moved across Eurasia into Western Europe, is well established in the SCAR (BRI-CPEC) and is making substantial ingresses into the GMER and Africa.

Now, it seems to be out-maneuvering US efforts to encircle and confine it to the Indo-Pacific. In a bold stratagem, of grave geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic import, it has moved stridently into the South Pacific. It has broken free of the psychological shackles that the policies of the US and its allies’ (US Island Chain Strategy, QUAD, AUKUS) ostensibly wanted to lay on it. It is fast emerging as a major player, an alternate center of power in the South Pacific too.

This multipronged Chinese onslaught at the global level is causing serious concern to the US as it scrambles to retain its increasingly challenged global hegemony. The Ukraine crisis may help it deal with the BRI in Europe/Eurasia, albeit temporarily. It has mustered India to its ranks and their national interests converge generally in the SCAR, broadly against China and specifically against the BRI-CPEC moving through Pakistan. In the Indo-Pacific it has created the QUAD, (Australia, India, Japan), through which it intends to confine China to within manageable limits.

To be really effective, the QUAD will have to inevitably acquire a significant military avatar and a tangible political will to employ it. AUKUS, Five Eyes and NATO (?) may need to focus more intensely on the South Pacific too. It is thus here that the US and its allies are now moving in decisively to not only halt this Chinese juggernaut but to deny it any major foothold in this very critical region. Some reports indicate that South Korea and Japan could become part of the QUAD and the AUKUS, respectively.

Deep geopolitical maneuvering to dominate, control and manage the South Pacific is now the new normal there.

The South Pacific, aka Oceania comprises at least ten thousand islands. The major sub-regions are Australasia (Australia, New Zealand), Melanesia (Vanuatu, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea), Micronesia (Micronesia, Palau, Kiribati, Nauru, the Marshall Islands, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Wake Islands), Polynesia (New Zealand, Hawaii, Samoa, Tonga, French Polynesia) et al.

Of most importance is not the size of these islands or their populations but the enormous EEZs they command – a whopping 7.7 million square kilometers of vast, open, rich, ocean space! Furthermore, their crucial geostrategic locations make them indispensable for any major power which has pretensions to dominate the region, as was amply demonstrated in WWII.

China’s ingress into the South Pacific gives it immense advantages at the geopolitical level. It has made serious overtures to some of the major South Pacific Island states/subregions and engaged them in diplomatic, economic, climate change, trade, tourism, agriculture, security, investment and other related domains.

Climate change is of immense concern for these Island States as rising sea levels threaten their very existence. FM Wang Yi is on a whirlwind tour of the South Pacific to develop mutually beneficial relationships with them. This Chinese move presents options to these Island States other than those traditionally provided by US-led Australia, New Zealand and Japan. Furthermore, China is successfully encouraging them to switch to a one-China policy, further crystallizing its evolving sphere of influence.

At the geostrategic level, this Chinese maneuver wholesomely nullifies the US Island Chain Strategy – a maritime containment plan first conceived during the Korean War to restrain the erstwhile USSR and PRC; still valid and applicable. It proposed surrounding the USSR and the PRC with a series of military/naval bases in the West Pacific on three parallel chains of islands, intending to project power and restrict sea access (area denial, anti-access!).

Furthermore, two island chains are also being considered in the Indian Ocean to reinforce this strategy. The Chinese view this as maritime encirclement at the strategic level and appear to have broken through it. In one fell swoop, they have changed the dynamics and paradigms of the US Island Chain Strategy and the region’s geostrategic environment. By penetrating deep into the South Pacific, they have enhanced their strategic reach very considerably and raised possibilities of acquiring military/naval bases in the region too.

That portends to expanding the potential Pacific theatre of war substantially, causing a pull on the US-led forces in the Indo-Pacific, bringing the vital SLOCs in the region under its oversight and positioning itself well to exploit the enormous riches of the South Pacific Ocean! Chinese bases on the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea now allow its strategic bombers to penetrate even deeper into the South Pacific. China’s emergence as a genuine Pacific/South Pacific Ocean power is thus inevitable.

At the geo-economic level, China is making a very profound and unequivocal push into the resource rich, strategically crucial region. It seeks newer markets and access to the enormous fishery, raw material and mineral resources of the region. It is a win-win position for both China and the Pacific Island States. Bilateral trade, climate change, investments, infrastructure development, tourism, etc are the vehicles for this relationship to develop further. Some analysts see Beijing’s inroads into the region as stepping stones to the Americas and Antarctica as well. Thus, an economic stake is being developed for the Pacific Island States in China’s presence in their region.

The Chinese foray down under might have irked the traditional Pacific Ocean powers. However, if a free and open Indo-Pacific is a sine qua non for co-existence there then the same paradigms must be applied here too; China and the Pacific Island States must develop their ties peacefully and without undue external interventions/influences.

The South Pacific must become a region of development, peace and stability and must never be allowed to degenerate into yet another potential Theatre of War!

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