

US-China battle for dominance extends across Pacific, above and below the sea

HONG KONG — A 1,005 sq km chain of U.S-controlled islands in the Pacific Ocean is shaping up to be a focal point in Washington and Beijing's ongoing jockeying for global influence.

The Mariana Islands in the north-western Pacific, comprising the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and Guam, were once seen as "the tip of the spear" of American power projection in the region — but China's influence is growing across the area through deep-sea research and what was once the world's most lucrative casino.

"Wars and conflicts never start on Fifth Avenue, they start in places of limited strategic consequence [such as the Mariana Islands]," said Patrick Gerard Buchan, fellow at the Washington-based think tank Centre for Strategic and International Studies. "That is where great powers rub up against each other."

The U.S territories— a 15-hour flight from California and just five hours by air from Beijing — are scattered across the Pacific along the western edge of the Mariana Trench, the deepest point on the planet.

"It is around these islands that the line of spheres of influence between the [U.S and China] are being drawn," said Lyle Goldstein, director of the China Maritime Studies Institute at the US Naval War College. "The question is where does the line switch."

"China's activity and influence in the region has increased significantly," said Jian Zhang, director of China engagement, UNSW Canberra at the Australian Defense Force Academy. "That will have far-reaching consequences for the region's politics and security. China has become very interested in the region which used to be called 'the American lake' or 'Australia's backyard.' "

Part of China's new-found interest is undersea exploration, giving it an exceptional degree of knowledge about an area that has been an important U.S.

military outpost since the Second World War.

More than a quarter of Guam is occupied by two U.S military bases, and its residents serve in the military at a rate three times higher than any U.S state. There has been a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense or THAAD anti-ballistic missile system on Guam since 2013 — the same system deployed in South Korea with U.S assistance in 2016, angering China — and the island has been periodically threatened as a target for North Korean nuclear weapons over the last five years.

In October, China's Tan Suo 1 deep-sea research mission returned from the Mariana Trench, where it successfully operated an unpiloted glider for 46 continuous days at a depth of 7,000 meters — an unprecedented duration, at an unprecedented depth, according to Chinese media.

The Tan Suo scientists also tested the first magnesium seawater fuel cell to operate at 10,000 meters below the sea, and live-streamed video from a robot at that depth. The tests indicate China's gliders can collect data useful in anti-detection efforts for its submarine fleet and help the People's Liberation Army Navy or PLAN address one of its biggest challenges — one that is made harder by the multiple island chains surrounding China's coast.

"This isn't an obscure issue, it goes to the very heart of China's nuclear strategy," said Goldstein, noting China's military has stated its ambition for the PLAN submarine fleet to operate globally, like the American and Russian fleets do.

Crucial to this strategy is the ability to navigate submarines undetected from the waters between the first island chain — Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines — and out to the second, which includes the Mariana Islands.

"I've been working in undersea warfare for 20 years and I've never encountered serious thinking about what a military would want to do at 5,000 meters or lower," Goldstein said, adding that sound travels in such a way at that depth to allow the tracking of other submarines from hundreds of miles away.

"Because China's military now has become more globally active, they'll need more supporting bases overseas, and it's very possible in the future they will have some bases in the Pacific island region," said Zhang from UNSW Canberra.

Chinese media has also reported plans next year to launch two underwater platforms to take samples on the bottom of the South China Sea and in the Mariana Trench.

“China is running research vessels everywhere,” said Goldstein. “One major impetus is for economic development. On the other hand, there are strong military and strategic reasons to pursue this course. China understands there is a very wide crossover between military and civilian technology when it comes to oceanography.”

Uncertain status quo

Though their strategic value has been at an ebb, the Mariana Islands and to their south, Micronesia, have been treated as military footholds across the Pacific for centuries. Before the second world war, the U.S. and Japan were vying for power across the islands, and which islands fell to which side ended up having an enormous impact on the conflict.

Evan Laksmana, senior researcher at the Jakarta-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies, said Indonesia’s preference was for the U.S. and China to work out their issues to the point that it didn’t raise military tensions in the region. “The status quo has been uncertain for a while,” he said.

Indonesia is also wary of parallels between the relationship the U.S. maintains with its Pacific territories and its own challenges with possible secessionist movements in West Papua. Laksmana noted that the Indonesian military had already begun a plan to rebalance the distribution of its forces towards the eastern part of Indonesia because of these movements.

Meanwhile, experts warn that the opacity of America’s presence in the Pacific is creating a vacuum in which China’s influence has grown.

“China’s goal isn’t to be the new superpower in the region, but they are interested in being the primary influencer of events,” said Robert Underwood, the former congressman from Guam in the U.S. House of Representatives. “The lack of clarity on the part of the U.S. is facilitating this.”

The status quo is not only changing under the sea. Experts have called attention to the fact that China has made significant investments in the infrastructure of

the islands, with an increasing amount of construction done by Chinese state-owned firms. Stepping into a vacuum left by lax labor laws and a slowing economy, Chinese-owned companies have become major players in the local business environment.

To jump-start the economy after garment manufacturing moved elsewhere, authorities in 2013 passed a law legalizing casinos. In 2014, Imperial Pacific, owned by Hong Kong billionaire Cui Lijie, won an exclusive contract to build the Best Sunshine hotel and casino complex on Saipan, the largest and most populous island in the CNMI.

Best Sunshine's 16 VIP tables turned over \$3.9 billion a month in 2016, according to a Reuters report, while the world's biggest casino, the Venetian Macao, managed about \$2.5 billion per month on 102 VIP tables at the time. But turnover has dwindled of late, and the recent departure of a series of key executives have left the casino's future in doubt.

"It is becoming clearer now that there is a strategic bent to a lot of these investments," said Jonathan Pryke, director of the Pacific Islands program at Australia's Lowy Institute. "China wants to expand their influence with the end goal of an expanded military presence."

Australia and the U.S seem to be looking at everything China is doing in the Pacific through a strategic lens, Pryke said.

Unpredictable future

Residents of the CNMI and Guam are U.S citizens by birth, but while they are subject to the whims of Washington they lack many of the benefits afforded to U.S. citizens living in the 50 states — including the right to elect a representative in the Senate.

Saipan is just 3,953km from Beijing but more than 12,500km from Washington. The U.S has applied a similar pattern of neglect to the Mariana Islands as it has to another territory at the fringe of its empire, Puerto Rico, where the administration of President Donald Trump has been slammed for its lackluster response to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Maria in 2017.

Young people in the U.S Pacific territories and neighboring Micronesia are

thinking about China as their future economic partner — and the U.S is not doing much to dissuade them, according to former Congressman Underwood. “In the Federated States of Micronesia, they are sending 40 students a year to China for college,” said Underwood, who is also the former president of the University of Guam.

“They learn Mandarin first. If you multiply that figure over 15 years, you have hundreds of people who are a little more open to those relationships than they would be otherwise. There’s no U.S counterbalance to that.”

Buchan from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies is firm on the need for the U.S to pay more attention to the region.

“Complacency is a luxury Washington does not have,” he said, though he notes that U.S.-China competition in the Pacific could have an impact on other contested areas, such as the South China Sea where both sides are trying to assert military dominance. During the cold war, to avoid catastrophic confrontation, little pressure valves were found for competition between the superpowers that relieved the overall tension outside of the main front, to reduce tension through competition.

“Perhaps this competition going on in the Pacific, if managed well, does in fact reduce overall tension [in the U.S.-China relationship], particularly in flashpoint places like the South China Sea.”

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