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### US Strategy in the Pacific - Geopolitical Positioning for the Twenty-First Century

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# US Strategy in the Pacific – Geopolitical Positioning for the Twenty-First Century

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*This article seeks to apply IR theory to the US presence in the Pacific. It analyses the ways in which geopolitical considerations of position are at the heart of US security strategy in the Pacific. It argues that America's long-term security position in the Pacific is a basic geopolitical matter; be it in terms of traditional geopolitics (regional position as "location") and in terms of critical geopolitics (regional position as "power and aspirations"). In looking at US security strategy in the Pacific, three geopolitical features are noticeable: (1) Mahanian seapower tenets, (2) overlapping competitive US-China concerns focused around the two island chains in the Western Pacific, and (3) the internal balancing carried out by the US in the Pacific which is particularly focused on Guam.*

## INTRODUCTION

This article evaluates the ways in which geopolitical considerations of position are at the heart of United States (US) security operations and strategy in the Pacific. Such a study illustrates "the practical geopolitical reasoning in American foreign policy" discerned by O'Tuathail and Agnew with regard to the US Cold War discourse on the Soviet Union, but which can also be followed in the US post-Cold War discourse in the Pacific.<sup>1</sup> The Pacific is the largest expanse of waters in the world, with the largest cross-water trade flows. It is the venue for maritime geopolitics, and what geopolitical analysts call "mastering space" (Agnew and Corbridge) or "the struggle for space and power" (Strausz-Hupé).<sup>2</sup> Power shifts in the wider Asia-Pacific region, notably the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC), are pushing the US to reinforce its own position in the Pacific maritime reaches.<sup>3</sup>

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In terms of structure, this article goes from macro-level to micro-levels of analysis; from theory (geopolitics) to region (Pacific) to sub-region (western Pacific) to place (Guam). This article thus initially considers the dual application to the Pacific region of *classical geopolitics* and *critical geopolitics*. The article goes on to look more closely at the historical and continuing relevance of Alfred Mahan's classical maritime geopolitics in the Pacific. Such geopolitical theory, classical and critical, is further applied with regard to the island chains of the western Pacific. The article concludes with consideration of the geopolitical role emerging for Guam in US Pacific strategy. In terms of sources, this article uses, but also deconstructs, geopolitical language appearing from military and political figures, political discourse analysis in other words.<sup>4</sup> Their language exemplifies what Dalby calls "the persistence of geopolitics" in the "American security discourse".<sup>5</sup>

### GEOPOLITICS FOR THE PACIFIC

America's position in the Pacific is a two-fold geopolitical matter, in which classical geopolitics (regional "position" in terms of location) and critical geopolitics (regional "position" in terms of role) are both in operation. This reflects Grey's sense of "inescapable geography" in which "strategy is inherently geographical"; a dual application able to cover the Pacific's "physical reality" and its "strategic imagination", Pacific geopolitics considered "objectively as environment" and subjectively as constructed "imagined spatial relations", and involving "the matter of how geography influences combat style" and "the matter of the geography behind military cultures".<sup>6</sup> Both forms of geopolitics operate in the Pacific, with critical geopolitics linked to, underpinned by, and generated from classical geopolitics. The tangible geopolitical locational assets enjoyed by a state are what enable and generate subsequent aspirations and expectation, hopes and fears.

Classical geopolitics placed emphasis on geographical position and derived power – Mackinder on the Eurasian heartland and related land-power, Spykman on the Asian Rimland, and Mahan on the Pacific Ocean and related seapower.<sup>7</sup> These three classical geopolitical thinkers all stressed the basic linkage between geography and foreign policy, as does this article.

Amid his own reflections on the role of the South China Sea as an "Asiatic Mediterranean", and the role of Pacific Asia as a swing rimland zone, Spykman argued that "geographic location of a state" was "the most fundamental factor in its foreign policy", since "the facts of location do not change".<sup>8</sup> Spykman's argument that "in geography lies the clues to the problems of military and political strategy" was true enough when he wrote in 1942 about Japanese-American confrontation in the western Pacific, but is also true for US strategy (and any US-China confrontation) in the western Pacific in the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup>

Admittedly, some scholars of globalisation and interdependence have argued that such state-centred boundary-laden geopolitics is redundant for the twenty-first century:

Rampant economic globalization, the ‘hollowing out’ of the nation-state and the telecommunications revolution have conspired to render ‘classical geopolitics’ obsolete. In a hyper-integrated ‘borderless’ world . . . the tenets of twentieth-century statecraft – wherein dominant states sought to occupy and encircle strategically important areas of land, sea, and resources – make little sense at the dawn of the new millennium.<sup>10</sup>

In the twenty-first century, perhaps transnational capitalism is indeed re-making the rules of the game, and making geopolitics redundant?

Increasingly internationalized flows make national borders seem porous and national spaces harder to define and control . . . the political geographies of globalization may be seen in terms of the doctrine of the rising power of the global over the local (e.g., as in the global market versus the territorial state depictions).<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps we are faced with “the end of the nation state” at the hands of modern forces of regionalism, globalisation and internationalisation?<sup>12</sup> Perhaps global weapons of mass destruction, intercontinental missiles for example, make regional military matters and geopolitical location redundant?

However, global weapons of mass destruction have not ended the deployment of sub-global weapons systems and regional manoeuvres, which is where geopolitics comes back into play. The US state and its military machine, remains evident in and across the Pacific, where it operates in a noticeably geopolitical-informed way. The US, and others, still seek to control defined national spaces in the Pacific. Dominant states still seek to occupy and encircle strategically important areas of land, sea, and resources in the Pacific. Friedman’s exposition on globalisation contained the important reminder that although globalisation raises the cost of going to war, and constrains it to some extent, nevertheless:

Despite globalization, people are still attached to their culture, their language and a place called home. And they will sing for home, cry for home, fight for home and die for home. Which is why globalization does not, and will not, end geopolitics. Let me repeat that for all the realists who read this book: *Globalization does not end geopolitics.* (italics in original)<sup>13</sup>

In terms of the Pacific, despite its trans-Pacific webs of trade and production, it still remains an oceanic area where questions arise over what the US

is prepared to defend as a self-proclaimed Pacific power. At this point, in locational terms of where the US sees its interests as lying and where it sees its interests as being challenged in the Pacific, geopolitics regains its relevance.

Grygiel's study of *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* rejected globalisation theorists and their "premature death of geography" conclusions.<sup>14</sup> Instead, he explained:

My goal in this book is to show that geography and geopolitics are important, and that, as in the past, exclusive [state] control over routes and resources is a source of power that cannot be replaced by a [global] 'market' . . . my goal is to bring geography back into discussion of international relations.<sup>15</sup>

His sense was that "at the level of foreign policy, geography is a geopolitical reality, to which states respond by formulating and pursuing a geostrategy".<sup>16</sup> Grygiel's study centred on the past examples of Venice, the Ottoman Empire and Ming China; but we can apply his framework to the geopolitical reality faced by the US in the Pacific, which has generated its current geostrategy there.

On the one hand, figures like Luttwak argued that geoeconomics was replacing geopolitics in the "logic of conflict".<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, other figures like Sempa rightly argue that "geography still matters; that nations still struggle for power and territory; that military power still trumps economics (at least in the short run)".<sup>18</sup> In the Pacific, geopolitical considerations and military power are clearly evident in issues around the Korean peninsula, the East China Sea, Taiwan, the South China Sea, as well as in the pattern of military deployments and military exercises carried out in the western Pacific. Luttwak's shift "from geopolitics to geo-economics" is perhaps forced, since geo-economics' focus on control of and access to economic resources is a matter of geography, leaving geoeconomics as a branch of geopolitics. We can go from geopolitics to geoeconomics precisely because geopolitics underpins geoeconomics. It is no surprise that control and access to economic resources in the South China Sea, an example of "positional conflict over scarce resources" highlighted elsewhere by the *neoclassical realist* Schweller, has become a matter where naval power is increasingly being used by participants and onlookers to maintain their national interests, and where geopolitical consideration of locational advantage is noticeable.<sup>19</sup>

In the world of international relations, security strategies continue to be shaped and carried out within these bounds of geographical considerations, constraints and opportunities. Geography continues to explicitly inform US military and political figures, hence consideration of their rhetoric in this article. The then head of US Pacific Command (PACOM), Admiral Timothy Keating, was clear enough in 2007 that "we operate within a geopolitical

environment” in the Pacific, an environment which the US seeks to actively shape to its advantage.<sup>20</sup> Position continues to count in US strategy both in the classical and critical sense of geopolitics. PACOM’s chief told the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2011 that “forward-postured US PACOM forces are focused on deterrence and reassurance missions as they apply to China and U.S. allies and security partners in the region”.<sup>21</sup> Forward posture was another word for classic locational logic, the “deterrence” was meant for China and the “reassurance” was meant for allies also concerned about China.

US politicians also use geopolitical-laden language. In Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s words, “The United States has always been a Pacific power because of our very great blessing of geography”, a sense of leverage that IR *realism* would immediately recognise.<sup>22</sup> As Secretary of Defense (2006–2011) in both the Bush and Obama administrations, Robert Gates’s rhetoric was of “America’s interests as a Pacific nation . . . maintaining a robust military engagement and deterrence posture across the Pacific Rim”.<sup>23</sup> Gates’ language evoked geography and its consequences in the Pacific:

The United States is a Pacific nation with an enduring role. . . . There is sovereign American territory in the western Pacific, from the Aleutian Islands all the way down to Guam . . . the new [Obama] administration will also find strategic inspiration in America’s dual role – as a resident power and as the straddle power.<sup>24</sup>

The US is able to straddle precisely through its location as a Pacific Rim state that has possession of territory sprinkled across the Pacific, from north (Aleutians) to south (Samoa) and from east (California) to west (Guam), with Hawaii in the middle. It is also able to straddle across the Pacific through its alliances and understandings with other Pacific nations on the eastern (Canada) and western (Australia and Japan) flanks of the Pacific. Gates’s talk of the US role as a “resident power” and a “straddle power” was a descriptive terminology that classical geopolitics (and IR realism) would immediately recognise, but his talk of “strategic inspiration” points forward to critical geopolitics.

In critical geopolitics, “position” can be considered not just in terms of physical location (classical geopolitics), but also in terms of perceptions of status, power and aspirations for oneself and for others in that region. Such perceptual undertones of critical geopolitics (and IR *constructivism*) are reflected in a geopolitically charged vision which “has animated the American political imagination” since the middle of the nineteenth century, in which “the idea of the USA as a Pacific power has been inflected in US political and military discourse”.<sup>25</sup> Critical geopolitics involves self-perceived identity and aspirational role. This is what Agnew calls “geopolitical imagination”, a “constructed view” which has drawn the US into reaffirming and

pushing its Pacific linkages, and which also draws China into developing its own maritime visions.<sup>26</sup> Hence Passi's call that "researchers, for their part, should be ready to deconstruct the constitutive, at times mystified, elements of territory, territoriality, boundaries, and identity narratives. It is obvious that territoriality is to an increasing degree turning into a continuum of practices and discourses of territorialities".<sup>27</sup> In this article, it is a question of the US discourse of territoriality in play in the Pacific. Critical geopolitics brings with it a "discourse centred understanding of geopolitics".<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the political rhetoric (discourse) of politicians and military concerning the US role in the Pacific are very deliberately brought into this article.

Critical geopolitics' focus on aspirations-hopes also brings with it consideration of fears, and perceptions of threats and dangers.

The importance in geopolitical culture of the construction of threats to American national security, how these threats are mapped, and how such mappings structure strategic thinking, specifying important places and marginal places, and in turn the justifications for certain kinds of military forces best suited for dealing with dangers in these specific places.<sup>29</sup>

In the Pacific, "the invocation of specific geographies of danger linked to matters of military strategy, remains an important venue of contestation".<sup>30</sup> This is a perceptual issue with tangible consequences for deployment of forces in the Pacific by the US and others. This was why Hillary Clinton emphasised "our presence in the Pacific . . . we're here to stay . . . threats have evolved and the needs have altered. But we will be here and we will be very active".<sup>31</sup> Talk of evolving "threats" raises the question not just from whom, but also from where? Walt's *balance of threat* framework, derived from Middle Eastern examples can also be applied to the Pacific. His grounds of "geographical proximity" reflects undertones of classical geopolitics (and IR realism), but his criteria of "perceived offensive intentions" has undertones of critical geopolitics (and IR constructivism) through its perceptual trigger. Both grounds point to China.

Critical geopolitics concerns itself with questions of hegemony. In the case of the Pacific this may be a question of rival hegemonies, rival regional orders, and rival imperiums. The current US position was bluntly stated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2009: "The United States is not ceding the Pacific to anyone".<sup>32</sup> To talk of not ceding the Pacific indicates a sense of existing US pre-eminence, historically reflected in the post-1945 term of the Pacific as being an "American lake".<sup>33</sup> As to who the US might be reluctant to cede its post-1945 Pacific pre-eminence to, the answer is simple: China, the perceived security challenger at the state level for the US. Peter Rodman, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs and China in the Bush administration, argued that China was "a geopolitical problem", but one in which "we and our allies can shape the strategic environment in the Asia/Pacific region into which China is emerging, and to which China



will need to adapt”.<sup>34</sup> Ross’s 1999 study of “the geography of the peace”, a deliberate echoing of Spykman’s earlier exposition *The Geography of the Peace* (1944), reckoned that at the end of the twentieth century a land pre-eminence of the PRC on the East Asian landmass was being balanced by US maritime pre-eminence in the Pacific Ocean, in an elephant and whale stasis.<sup>35</sup> However, China’s push into Pacific waters may be changing such a geopolitical equilibrium, with the US now seeking in turn to strengthen its own position in the Pacific as an off-shore balancer.

At the macro-level, US naval thinking has been encapsulated in its *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, released in 2007.<sup>36</sup> It reiterated that “U.S. maritime forces will be characterized by regionally concentrated, forward-deployed task forces with the combat power to limit regional conflict, deter major power war, and should deterrence fail, win our Nation’s wars.”<sup>37</sup> The specifics were made clear:

Maintenance and extension of this Nation’s comparative seapower advantage . . . credible combat power will be continuously postured in the Western Pacific . . . to protect our vital interests, assure our friends and allies of our continuing commitment to regional security, and deter and dissuade potential adversaries and peer competitors.<sup>38</sup>

Friends and allies in the Pacific were identified in it as countries like Japan and Australia, with China left as a potential adversary, the “peer competitor”. Chinese commentary on it reiterated their view that the US re-emphasis on the Pacific was because it was “an important sea area in which the United States has implemented island chain defense . . . *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* has not changed the [US] strategic goal of dominating the world’s oceans”.<sup>39</sup>

In his commentary on the document, Admiral Timothy Keating, PACOM chief from 2007 to 2009, stressed that “the importance of traditional naval power, especially in the Pacific, is tough to over-estimate”.<sup>40</sup> The Pacific continues to be seen as American waters, for American forces to operate in freely and forcefully. Keating was explicit:

In the Pacific . . . the new maritime strategy must emphasize the absolute criticality of, and be designed to support, continued U.S. military pre-eminence. . . . We must maintain the effective over-match, the powerful over-match. . . . Our joint maritime force must retain the ability to dominate, in any scenario, in all environments, without exception.<sup>41</sup>

In short, dominance, or more diplomatically speaking pre-eminence, is sought by the Pacific Command. Keating argued elsewhere that “we want all of them [America’s challengers like China] to understand that it is folly to undertake military operations against the United States of America in the Asia Pacific region. We are the pre-eminent force . . . and we will so remain



for the near, mid and long term”.<sup>42</sup> In his testimony to the Senate Armed Forces Committee it was a question that “PACOM is a warfighting command committed to maintaining preeminence across the full spectrum of operations. We are ready to fight and win, and to dominate in any scenario, in all environments, without exception”.<sup>43</sup> As to who the US should maintain its advantage over in the Pacific, Keating highlighted particular concerns about China; as the “PLA Navy expands its activities in the Western Pacific . . . we must work to maintain our operational advantage in the face of fast-paced PLA-N modernization and ever-expanding area of operations”.<sup>44</sup>

How exactly is the US looking to achieve, maintain and extend such operational seapower advantage in the Pacific? A structural shift was announced in the Pentagon’s 2006 *Quadrennial Review* which considered “of the major and emerging powers, China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States”, reckoned that “the pace and scope of China’s military build-up already puts regional military balances at risk” in the Asia-Pacific, and announced long-term shift of forces from the Atlantic to the Pacific.<sup>45</sup> US logic was clear and geopolitical: “Stationing 60% of our attack submarines in the Pacific, as recommended in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review, will reduce critical response times in the Pacific”, precisely because of their location within the Pacific.<sup>46</sup> Within the Pacific, this US military build-up has been seen at several places: on the Californian coast, in Hawaii, in Alaska and the Aleutians, and most noticeably around Guam. It is also a question of US facilities enjoyed with allies and friends across the region, as with the *Pacific Vision* simulated exercise run in autumn 2008, which encircled China along the Pacific Rim. America’s Pacific posture is not then merely a matter of moving forces into the Pacific from outside; it is also a matter of dispositions and arrangements within the Pacific. These were exactly the concerns of Alfred Mahan a hundred years ago.

### MAHANIAN GEOPOLITICS FOR THE PACIFIC

Mahan’s maritime ideas not only serve as a historical example of geopolitical application into the Pacific and US foreign policy around 1900, they also reflect ongoing relevance, as features again shaping US policy a hundred years later.

Mahan’s focus on shaping a healthy regional balance of power through forward basing, a strong navy and alignment among the maritime powers remains as compelling today as it was in 1900 – technological revolutions, alliances, globalization, and the US Air Force notwithstanding.<sup>47</sup>

The interesting thing is that China’s geopolitically underpinned “turn to Mahan” not only poses a challenge to the US in the Pacific, it also reinforces a Mahanian logic for the US response.<sup>48</sup>

Mahan's general emphasis on "seapower" as a concept and as a policy imperative was underpinned by base requirements:

Bases of operations; which by their natural advantages, susceptibility of defence, and nearness to the central strategic issue, will enable her [America's] fleets to remain as near the scene as any opponent. . . . With such outposts in her hands . . . the preponderance of the United States on this field follows, from her geographical position and her power, with mathematical certainty.<sup>49</sup>

Writing in 1902, the "acquisitions of recent years" was warmly welcomed by Mahan:

By the tenure of them, and due development of their resources, the navy itself receives an accession of strength, an augmented facility of movement, by resting upon strong positions for equipment and repair – upon bases, to use the military term . . . facilities of this character add a percentage of value to a given mobile force, military or naval, for they by so much increase its power and its mobility.<sup>50</sup>

These comments came at the very moment when the US had reached across the Pacific; "for control of the seas . . . it is imperative to take possession . . . of such maritime positions as contribute to secure command. . . . It has its application also to the present case of Hawaii".<sup>51</sup> Hawaii, centrally located in the Pacific, had been incorporated into the US in 1899, in parts thanks to Mahan's political lobbying. If we turn to the twenty-first century, then Hawaii's Pearl Harbor remains as the best harbour in the Pacific, where the Pacific Command PACOM is based and controls US forces across the Asia-Pacific maritime reaches.

Mahan reckoned that the US required positions "far advanced in the Pacific Ocean", in which "the choice and maintenance of naval stations should be determined by strategic considerations".<sup>52</sup> As to how far the US should advance into the Pacific, Mahan not only argued for incorporation of Hawaii in the central Pacific, he also welcomed the 1898 annexation of Guam in the western Pacific, since "no situation in our possession equals Guam for protecting every [security] interest in the Pacific".<sup>53</sup>

Finally, at the US Naval Institute, James Holmes continues to highlight the "enduring tenets of his [Mahan's] philosophy".<sup>54</sup> Along with his colleague Yoshihara, Holmes continues to argue that "Alfred Thayer Mahan remains as relevant today in his logic and operational grammar as he was in the 19th century".<sup>55</sup> A further relevance of Mahan for them was how:

In today's parlance, he [Mahan] urged governments to 'hedge' against military conflict, keeping open the option of fleet engagements . . . carrying

his logic/grammar construct beyond the battlefield into the domain of peacetime diplomacy. . . . Acquiring strategic geographic features . . . was one way to bolster sea power in peacetime, as were efforts to gain access to markets and bases.<sup>56</sup>

A peacetime, and acknowledged, policy of strategic (and with it military) *hedging* is precisely what the US is currently attempting in the Pacific.

A further relevance of Mahan is his concerns about the presence of China in the Pacific. He opened his 1890 work *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* with the observation that “the history of Sea Power is largely . . . a narrative of contests between nations, of mutual rivalries”.<sup>57</sup> IR realism would recognise this competitive logic, then and now. Mahan pinpointed an emerging contest with China in the Pacific, albeit potential rather than actual:

It is a question . . . whether the Hawaiian Islands, with their geographical and military importance, unrivalled by that of any other position in the N. Pacific, shall in the future be an outpost of European civilization, or . . . of China. . . . Many military men abroad . . . look with apprehension toward the day when the vast mass of China, [when] China, however, may burst her barriers eastward . . . toward the Pacific. . . . By its nearness to the scene . . . our own country, with its Pacific coast, is naturally indicated as the proper guardian for this most important position. To hold it . . . implies a great extension of our naval power. Are we ready?<sup>58</sup>

Mahan’s fears of an emerging Chinese thrust into the Pacific and rivalry with the US was overblown in the 1890s, and affected by geocultural undertones; but a potentially expansionist China is precisely the same strategic challenge facing the US in the Pacific at the start of the twenty-first century. His sense where “it was clear enough in 1892 that we had to look out into the Pacific and toward China” is the naval issue that came to occupy US strategists a century later.<sup>59</sup>

Mahan’s name continues to be invoked by US officials. Not surprisingly this includes naval figures; for example, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jay Johnson’s comments on the “unchanging nature of seapower itself”, in which “the great naval strategist, writer and former president of this Naval War College, Alfred Thayer Mahan, used to refer to the sea as the ‘great common’ of mankind”.<sup>60</sup> However, awareness of Mahan is discernible in the wider political world. For the Deputy Secretary of Defense Gordon England, it was a look back in 2006:

The year 1890 was a pivotal point in America’s naval history. That was the year that Mahan published his path-breaking book, “The Influence of Sea Power Upon History”. His work is still read today in our school houses and war colleges . . . every day, proves Mahan’s point, about sea power’s profound and lasting influence.<sup>61</sup>

Michèle Flournoy the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, cited Mahan's ongoing relevance for questions of "stability in the global commons. Alfred Thayer Mahan was perhaps the first strategist to coin the term, describing the world's oceans as 'a great highway . . . a wide common' in his classic 1890 work, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*".<sup>62</sup> Robert Gates, the Secretary of Defense (2006–2011) under George Bush and Barack Obama, noted that US maritime activities "would no doubt leave Alfred Thayer Mahan spinning in his grave"; not in the sense of Mahan being horrified, but rather that Mahan would have been impressed by the far-flung extension of such activities around the oceans.<sup>63</sup>

Mahan's focus on seapower led him to emphasise pre-eminence and control of the Pacific through a "chain of maritime possessions" in the Pacific stretching from Hawaii in the central Pacific to Guam in the western Pacific.<sup>64</sup> Mahan's geopolitical logic had taken him to the island chains in the western Pacific, a logic which shapes current US strategy.

### THE ISLAND CHAINS OF THE WESTERN PACIFIC

One important geopolitical matter has been a continuing US concern to maintain its presence, and bases, in the island chains of the Western Pacific. This strategic framework was identified in 1949–1950, as the *forward defense perimeter* recently gained to be maintained for the future. Douglas MacArthur saw the context as one in which "now the Pacific has become an Anglo-Saxon [i.e., American] lake . . . our line of defense runs through the chain of islands fringing the coast of Asia".<sup>65</sup> US Secretary of State Acheson reiterated this geopolitical projection going "to the very western edges of the Pacific", which "runs along the Aleutians to Japan and then goes to the Ryukyus. We hold important defense positions in the Ryukyu Islands, and these we will continue to hold. . . . The defensive perimeter runs from the Ryukyus to the Philippine Islands".<sup>66</sup> The "important defensive positions in the Ryukyu Islands" were, and remain, the large US bases on Okinawa.

The geopolitical role of this forward defence perimeter was simple for MacArthur; "From this island chain we can . . . prevent any hostile movement into the Pacific".<sup>67</sup> This is the geopolitical position America still seeks to maintain with regard to hostile movements into the Pacific. However, MacArthur was sensitive to future dangers; "The holding of this littoral defense line in the Western Pacific is entirely dependent upon holding all segments thereof, for any major breach of that line by an unfriendly power would render vulnerable to determined attack every other major segment".<sup>68</sup> Here, MacArthur had the newly formed People's Republic of China in mind; "For that [geopolitical-security] reason, I have strongly recommended in the past, as a matter of military urgency, that under no circumstances must Formosa [Taiwan] fall under Communist control".<sup>69</sup>

The geopolitical problem for the US is that retention of its forward defence perimeter now comes up against an emerging Chinese drive to achieve maritime penetration of the same perimeter line, what China calls the “first island chain” (*diyī daolian*). US rhetoric and deployment continue to be geopolitically informed. This is why PACOM went on record in 2010 to warn:

China continues to develop weapons systems, technologies and concepts of operation that support anti-access and area denial strategies in the Western Pacific by holding air and maritime forces at risk at extended distances from the PRC coastline. The PLA Navy is continuing to develop a “Blue Water” capability that includes the ability to surge surface combatants and submarines at extended distances from the PRC mainland.<sup>70</sup>

In 2010, the deployment of Chinese naval units through and beyond the Ryukyu island chain in March (North Sea Fleet) and April (East Sea Fleet) was a significant step forward in such a Chinese drive beyond the first island chain. These concerns were why the PACOM chief continued to warn the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2011 that China “does seek to restrict or exclude foreign, in particular, U.S., military maritime and air activities in the near seas – an area that roughly corresponds to the maritime area from the Chinese mainland out to the first island chain”.<sup>71</sup> June 2011 saw further Chinese deployments through the first island chain, their naval units passing between the Japanese islands of Okinawa and Miyako. Indeed, these were the waters used in Kraska’s Battle of Okinawa scenario for 2015, a “defeat which ended 75 years of U.S. dominance in the Pacific Ocean” in the wake of Chinese naval success.<sup>72</sup>

PRC sources have argued that “to make a breakthrough into the chain is also the first step for Chinese Navy to achieve its blue dream”, in which “the first island chain has long acted as the first protective screen for the US maritime hegemony in the region . . . to prevent Chinese Navy from going blue and enhancing its clout in the Pacific waters”.<sup>73</sup> Their perspective is that “the island chains in the western Pacific cannot [be allowed to] block China from entering the open waters . . . the US must allow China space”.<sup>74</sup> This is classic geopolitical reasoning. These are the very same island settings present in the US forward defence perimeter, with Taiwan not only politically but also geopolitically at the centre for PRC strategists.<sup>75</sup> Amid these Chinese naval deployments in 2010 to waters east of Taiwan, PRC figures argue that “Taiwan, however, seems to be one of the more corroded [geopolitical] links in this island chain”, and that “the U.S. political elite should no longer view Taiwan as part of its sphere of influence in the western Pacific or as a strategic lever against China”.<sup>76</sup>

Further out, deeper into the western Pacific, is another geopolitical zone of encounter between the US and China. Here, running south from Japan is

the Bonin island chain, the Marianas, Palau and the Carolines. They are what China calls the “second island chain” (*di'er daolian*). These islands were previously occupied by Japan, but taken over by the US in 1945. The Bonin islands were returned to a friendly Japan in 1968. The Marianas became a *Commonwealth in Political Union* with the US in 1978, with the US retaining control over foreign policy and defence matters, including important military facilities on Tinian, Saipan and Kwajalein Atoll. Palau and the Carolines became independent (the Carolines as the Federated States of Micronesia), but both signed *Compacts of Free Association* with the US in 1994 and 1986 respectively, assigning their defence rights to the US, and with further US basing facilities maintained. Between the Marianas and Palau/Carolines lies Guam, US sovereign territory since 1898, although occupied by Japan during World War II. Chinese analysts are well aware of the geopolitical importance of these island chains; “From a purely military perspective, the ideal forward position of U.S. forces” is “the ‘second island chain’ . . . there they can avoid direct contact with Chinese forces while relying on the superiority of U.S. long-range striking power, thereby containing China more effectively”.<sup>77</sup>

However, the longer term challenge in US eyes remains what the Pentagon considers as “Beijing’s desire to protect and advance its maritime interests up to and beyond the second island chain”.<sup>78</sup> In 2009, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mike Mullen, publicly warned, “I am concerned about . . . their [China’s] clear shift of focus from a ground-centric force to a naval- and air-centric force that seems to, now, push off-island, if you will, beyond the first island chain and out to the second island chain”.<sup>79</sup>

The US is well aware of these geopolitical pressure points. It is no coincidence that Pentagon reports, during both the Bush and Obama presidencies, made a point of discussing the actual/potential challenge posed by China’s maritime presence in and around these two island chains in the western Pacific.<sup>80</sup> After all, claims in the PRC that “China does not hold any intention to challenge the United States in the central Pacific” still leaves the western Pacific as an area for challenge.<sup>81</sup> There, PRC sources argue that “the entire West Pacific is not the backyard of the US”.<sup>82</sup> In terms of the western Pacific, Guam’s position in the centre of the *second island chain* has become a crucial element in US security strategy.

## GUAM

Thomas Fargo’s judgement in 2004, given as the then PACOM chief to the Senate Armed Services Committee, was that “Guam’s geostrategic importance cannot be overstated” given “Guam’s increasing role as a power projection hub”.<sup>83</sup> IR realism commentators like Halloran have described Guam as “the pivot of a sweeping realignment of US forces in the Pacific”.<sup>84</sup> Elsewhere



at PACOM, the US 7th Fleet commander, Vice Admiral Jonathan Greenert, emphasised how “Guam is a hub. Guam has geography and that will be enduring . . . it is now becoming very important to us again. Guam will always be strategically important because of its geography alone”.<sup>85</sup>

In terms of Guam “again becoming very important”, it was precisely as political uncertainty over China mounted in the late 1990s, that Guam, in the middle of the second island chain, was identified as the emerging focus for US military strength in the western Pacific.<sup>86</sup> Guam’s geopolitical significance had been recognised, as already noted, by Mahan. On the eve of World War II, Guam was again being strengthened against threats from East Asia (Japan); the “geographic nub of the system of 23 new or expanded bases in the Pacific outlined by the Navy is the Island of Guam”.<sup>87</sup> In the 1960s, Guam served as an important link point for the US power projection onto the Pacific Rim during the Vietnam War. Post-Vietnam, Guam languished in relative obscurity but has been signally re-emphasised within US strategy. Guam is never officially or explicitly explained in China-centric terms, but unofficially and implicitly it is China concerns emerging in the 1990s which have primarily motivated this subsequent re-emphasis on Guam. The equipment and facilities being assembled there are not particularly relevant for operations against sub-state jihadists and pirates or even North Korea, but they are the sorts of assets needed to hold the geopolitical line against China. The PRC state media, rightly enough, has been quick to recognise Guam’s China-centric purposes.<sup>88</sup>

Re-emphasis on Guam was an early strategic decision by the Bush administration when it took office in 2001, with a raft of government, Congressional and military reports drawing out Guam’s locational advantages. The Obama administration maintained this Guam-centric strategy when it took office in 2009, perhaps not surprising given Obama’s own early years spent in Hawaii and Indonesia. His Deputy Assistant Secretary Robert Scher testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in July 2009, that “US forces will remain present and postured as the pre-eminent military force in the region”, and that “in this regard, the military build up on Guam is viewed as permanently anchoring the US in the region and cementing our ‘resident power’ status”.<sup>89</sup> Higher up in the Defense Department, the Deputy Secretary of Defense William Lynn explained in July 2010 that Guam’s military build-up reflected “the sheer logic of geography”:

As home to our most forward-deployed sovereign bases in the Pacific, Guam is centrally positioned. . . . Our realignment of forces here is the key to maintaining an effective presence . . . for our forces to be effective, they must be properly structured and appropriately located for the missions they have to undertake. Guam has an absolutely crucial role to play in this regard.<sup>90</sup>



The 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review* reiterated the US drive to “transform Guam, the westernmost sovereign territory of the United States, into a hub for security activities in the region”.<sup>91</sup>

Guam’s location (classical geopolitics) underpins particular US aspirations (critical geopolitics) in the Pacific. From a political point of view, Guam’s great advantage for Washington is that Guam is US territory, where the US is not faced with foreign sovereignty issues that complicate its deployment in allied countries like Japan, South Korea and Australia. Guam is the piece of territory enabling US politicians to use the term “resident power” and “sovereign power” with regard to the US in the western Pacific. Guam facilitates and eases the whole “geopolitics of access diplomacy” through using such domestic territory.<sup>92</sup>

From a locational point of view, in an east-west setting, Guam is the so-called *tip of the spear* which brings US power right over from California (eastern Pacific) and Hawaii (central Pacific) to Guam (western Pacific). In a north-south setting, Guam also links the Marianas with Palau/the Carolines, and indeed Japan with Australia. In terms of distance, Guam is around 3,300 miles west of Hawaii, 1,500 miles east of the Philippines and 1,550 miles south of Japan. Guam provides some safety of distance from attack from the Asian mainland (read China?), in a way that forward deployment in Okinawa does not. Yet Guam is close enough to effectively intervene around the western Pacific/Asian rim, including the forward defence perimeter/first island chain, in a way that Hawaii does not. In the US’s own words, Guam “overcomes what commanders call the tyranny of distance” faced by Hawaii-based operations.<sup>93</sup> Location is what makes PACOM consider Guam as the “cornerstone of continued US force projection capability”.<sup>94</sup>

As to the forces being projected, they are long range and offensive, and China-appropriate. On the naval front, fast attack nuclear-powered Los Angeles-class submarines have been deployed at Guam since 2002, enhanced stealth submarines since 2008, Virginia-class fast attack submarines since 2010 – with Apra harbour being deepened to accommodate transit aircraft carriers. On the airforce front, B-1 and B-52 long-range bombers have been deployed at Guam since 2003, B-2 stealth bombers since 2005, Raptor F-22 warplanes since 2008, and Global Hawk drone aircraft since 2010 – all flying out from Guam’s Anderson airbase which has the longest runway (11,185 foot, over two miles) in the Pacific. Various military exercises at Guam complete this picture of strengthened China-centric assets. These include the powerful unilateral US naval exercises (VALIANT SHIELD 2006, 2007 and 2010) held off Guam and complemented there by bilateral US-Japanese air exercises (COPE NORTH 2007, 2009, and 2010) and US-Australian exercises (TANDEM THRUST 2003, with US forces from Guam further tied into the TALISMAN SABER 2007, 2007 and 2011 exercises in Northern Australia).

The final military aspect of Guam's strategic development has been the decision taken in May 2006, under the *U.S.-Japan Roadmap for Realignment Implementation* agreement, to transfer the headquarters of the III Marine Expeditionary Force, along with 8,000 US Marines, from Okinawa to Guam, and further strengthen Guam's facilities. As Przystup noted, "While realignment issues [to Guam] are operational in nature, they are strategic in consequence".<sup>95</sup> The strategic undertones are all to do with the geopolitics of position. The *Record of Decision* (ROD) from the Department of Defense, was signed in September 2010. This represented the Obama administration's last formal piece of decision making on the Guam redeployment, and was again underpinned by geopolitical considerations – the stated need to "locate" and "position" US forces for maximum effect in the western Pacific.<sup>96</sup> Despite some Japanese hesitations, stronger than expected local resistance in Guam, questions in the US Senate and some financial funding cutbacks in the wake of the economic turndown in the US, the Guam redeployment goes on (albeit delayed from 2014 to 2016–2017, and with some talk in 2012 of scaling down to around 5,000 troops, though supplemented by added troop rotations through Darwin in Australia), funding and infrastructure is arriving, its geopolitical imperatives remain intact.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN SECURITY POSITION IN THE PACIFIC

American strategy in the Pacific has various concerns, for example transnational jihadism and piracy operating in Southeast Asia and instability on the Korean peninsula posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea. However, the biggest security challenge is the presence of China, or rather the rise of China. This poses challenges of both classical geopolitics (position as location) and critical geopolitics (position as aspirations, hopes and fears). Arguments continue to rage over how far China's maritime strength reaches.<sup>97</sup> Basic arguments continue over whether China is acting defensively or aggressively in its deployments and strategy. The 'peaceful rise versus China threat' debate continued to rage, as between David Kang and John Mearsheimer for example.<sup>98</sup> The geopolitical background to the US-China encounter is Pacific-centred; for Friedberg "a trans-Pacific contest for power and influence between a still-dominant America and a fast-growing China", reflecting the "powerful ideological and geopolitical forces impelling the United States and China toward rivalry".<sup>99</sup> Hegemony has been enjoyed by the US in the Pacific, but now it is under challenge from a rising China and its "naval nationalism", and with it the instabilities suggested by *power transition theory*.<sup>100</sup> US concerns about being pushed back in the Pacific are strengthened when hearing Chinese comments, made to PACOM in 2009:

A senior Chinese Naval officer during which he proposed, in his words, that as China builds aircraft carriers – he said plural – we can make a deal. You, the US, take Hawaii East and we, China, will take Hawaii West and the Indian Ocean. Then you will not need to come to the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean.<sup>101</sup>

These two flank states on the Pacific Rim are coming up against each other in a direct geopolitical sense. Hence Lee Kuan Yew's sense in autumn 2010 of "the start of a decades-long tussle between the US and China for pre-eminence in the Pacific".<sup>102</sup> The confrontation between PRC and US ships in the South China Sea, the *USS Impeccable* incident of March 2009, was one uncomfortable reminder for the Obama administration that geopolitically generated flashpoints lurk around the western Pacific Rim.

US strategy in the Pacific is hedging, some engagement alongside *internal balancing* and *external balancing*. Such a stance was embedded in the *National Defense Strategy* (2008): "China is one ascendant state with the potential for competing with the United States. For the foreseeable future, we will need to hedge against China's growing military modernization and the impact of its strategic choices upon international security".<sup>103</sup>

In continuing to hedge, the build-up of US strength at Guam (internal balancing), gives the US a reinforced maritime, air, and land presence in the western Pacific for the coming decades, in geopolitical terms giving it projection power. This US strategic security presence at Guam is underpinned by a wider "strategic triangle" under direct American control, in the shape of Hawaii, Alaska (including the Aleutian islands) and Guam, with Guam playing a particularly important forward apex role for the western Pacific in the second island chain.<sup>104</sup>

US presence, power and pre-eminence in the western Pacific is further buttressed by its external balancing carried out with a range of other Asia-Pacific states who are concerned about China's rise, and who encircle China. The US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) comes complete with military exercises carried out since 2007 in June 2010 in the waters off Okinawa, and in July 2011 in the South China Sea. A similar geopolitical logic is emerging in the north-western Pacific with the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral mechanism initiated in 2010. China's take on this shows the geopolitical locational aspects of these arrangements: "US-Japan-ROK triangle as the north anchor and US-Japan-Australia alliance as the south anchor . . . in the Pacific for the United States . . . to forestall and deter China".<sup>105</sup> Bilateral security arrangements continue with Taiwan, have been established with Vietnam, and renewed with the Philippines. Naval cooperation with India is starting to operate in the Pacific; in Clinton's words, "India, straddling the waters from the Indian to Pacific oceans, is with us a steward of these waterways".<sup>106</sup> Bilateral US-India naval exercises have been carried out in the western Pacific waters in-between Guam and Okinawa in 2007, 2009 and

2011. Trilateral US-Japan-India naval exercises took place off Okinawa in 2007 and 2010.

Such bilateral and trilateral arrangements in the western Pacific represent the most feasible way for the US to block China's advances around the first island chain. With the first island chain secured, for the moment with the help of others, US strength can be, and is, being held in reserve in the second island chain, especially at Guam, where its Pacific line has been drawn. If blocked in the western Pacific, China's energy-shaped strategic push may well turn southwards to the South China Sea and into the Indian Ocean.

Of course this geopolitically fashioned mixture of internal and external balancing could unravel. Other Asia-Pacific actors could decide to bandwagon with an emerging Sinocentric hegemonic order (Kang's "soft hierarchy") rather than balance against it with the declining hegemon the US. Chinese economic and soft power diplomacy further afield amongst the micro-states in the Pacific basin could outflank US military advantages in the second island chain. Meanwhile, both island chains present potential problems for the US. Chinese naval penetration of the first island chain is happening with growing frequency. Within the first island chain, the US grip could be further weakened by any Japanese backlash against the US presence on Okinawa and elsewhere, Taiwan could fall to the PRC, and the Philippines could give way to Chinese advances through the South China Sea. The US grip on the second island chain could be threatened by political backlash on the Marianas, Palau, and indeed on Guam itself where some calls for sovereignty and self-determination remain present even if muted. The advent of long-range Chinese missiles could render Guam more vulnerable, though that could be remedied by hardening its defences infrastructure and installing the anti-ballistic missile defence system mooted under the current redeployment plan.

Nevertheless, this US hedging in the Pacific "might" be buying time in three crucial ways: first, for balancing with other China-concerned actors to strengthen (IR *structural realism* combined with Walt's *balance of threat* imperatives); second, for regional cooperative institutions to solidify (IR *institutionalism-functionalism*); third, for internal democratisation of China to perhaps arrive (IR *democracy = peace thesis*). Amid these uncertainties, geopolitics, classical and critical, will continue to have relevance in understanding the changing circumstances of the Pacific and American policy in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>107</sup>

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