

US Congress receives warning of China's growing influence in South Pacific

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The US Congress last month received a 30-page report, “The Southwest Pacific: US Interests and China’s Growing Influence”, drafted by the foreign affairs, defense, and trade division of the Congressional Research Service (CRS), its public policy research arm.

The document provided a blunt assessment of Washington’s strategic interests in the South Pacific. It noted increasing opposition to Australian government interventions in the region and warned that the regional hegemony established by the US and its allies in the aftermath of World War II was being undermined by China.

Authored by Thomas Lum and Bruce Vaughn, specialists in Asian affairs with the CRS, the report was designed to provide members and committees of Congress with an overview of the Bush administration’s agenda in the region. Earlier this year, the State Department designated 2007 as the “Year of the Pacific” and pledged to reverse what it characterised as US “neglect” of the region since the end of the Cold War. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice hosted a meeting of Pacific governments in Washington last May and announced a number of new diplomatic initiatives.

“Although small in total population (approximately 8 million) and relatively low in economic development, the Southwest Pacific is strategically important,” the document argued. “Since World War II, the United States has sought to prevent any potential adversary from gaining a strategic posture in the South Pacific that could be used to challenge the United States.”

The report noted that various US foreign policy analysts had different interpretations of Beijing’s objectives in the Pacific. Some believed that China aimed to “garner influence but not replace the United States as the regional hegemonic power”, while others argued that “China has devised a comprehensive strategy to take advantage of waning US interest in the region since the end of the Cold

War”. The Congressional Research Service did not advance its own interpretation. Underlying the entire document, however, was the unstated assumption that Beijing was a potential adversary of the US and that its growing economic and diplomatic influence represented a strategic threat, irrespective of the Chinese government’s immediate intentions.

A striking feature of the paper was its frank elaboration of Washington’s interests. While sections of the document included pro forma declarations of US support for democracy, these were jettisoned when it discussed the key issue of intensifying regional great power rivalry.

“The Pacific Islands can be divided into four spheres of influence: American, Australian, New Zealander, and French,” the report declared, using language reminiscent of 1930s imperialist diplomacy.

The French sphere of influence was confined to its colonies, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. The direct American sphere of influence lay in the North Pacific Micronesian atolls. The Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau were nominally independent but came under Washington’s de facto control as “freely associated states” (FAS) of the US. The report described the FAS as a “vast buffer zone” for the Guam military base, “which serves as the ‘forward military bridgehead’ from which to launch US operations along the Asia-Pacific security arc stretching from South Korea and Japan, through Thailand and the Philippines, to Australia”.

The Congressional report paid particular attention to China’s encroachments into Australian and New Zealand spheres of influence—Melanesia (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu) and Polynesia (Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands) respectively.

The report noted that the US scaled back its presence in these areas in the 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR lessened their perceived strategic significance. The last

US bilateral development aid program ended in 1996, with the closure of USAID's regional aid mission office in Fiji. Diplomatic programs such as the Peace Corps missions were also scaled back, and a number of embassies in the smaller Pacific states closed or amalgamated.

“The People's Republic of China (PRC) has become a growing force in the Southwest Pacific as a result, some argue, of a political vacuum created by US neglect,” the document stated. “In order to garner political and economic influence in relation to Taiwan, the United States, and US allies, as well as to access raw materials, China has expanded its diplomatic and commercial presence in the region.... The PRC has opened diplomatic missions in all Pacific countries with which it has diplomatic relations and has provided bilateral assistance, embarked on high profile regional visits, and hosted lavish receptions in Beijing for Pacific Island leaders.”

The Congressional Research Service noted that the “US government has both tacitly and openly supported Australia's growing leadership role in the region” and that Washington “has relied upon Australia and New Zealand to help promote development and maintain political stability in the region”.

It went on to warn of increasing opposition to the interventions carried out by these US proxies. “Many Pacific Island leaders and citizens reportedly have viewed Australia's past and present leadership role and armed presence in the region with resentment or deep ambivalence,” it noted.

This resentment has been exacerbated by the Howard government's increasingly aggressive operations in the region over the past four years.

In July 2003, Canberra dispatched the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) to take over the Solomons' state apparatus. The neo-colonial operation followed immediately on the heels of the US-led invasion of Iraq, which marked Washington's open repudiation of international law and its resort to military force to overcome its declining world position relative to its European and Asian rivals through the seizure of the Middle East's energy reserves. The Howard government joined the “coalition of the willing” in return for the Bush administration's backing for its own operations in the South Pacific.

Canberra viewed the indefinite occupation of the Solomons as a model for similar interventions in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Vanuatu, among others. It has

responded to regional opposition by further intensifying Australian pressure and launching reckless and provocative “regime change” campaigns against recalcitrant governments, most particularly in East Timor and Solomon Islands. Australian troops have been dispatched to both countries during the past year, to boost the Howard government's control.

The Congressional Research Service report observed that China's presence in the South Pacific was making it increasingly difficult for Canberra to dictate terms to regional governments through threatened economic sanctions and the manipulation of aid programs.

“By some accounts, the PRC has become the third-largest source of foreign aid to the South Pacific, which it largely provides without the kinds of conditions or performance criteria—some say heavy handedness—that have engendered resentment among some Pacific Island countries toward their major benefactor, Australia,” the document stated. “According to many observers, financial and other benefits from Beijing and Taipei may overly influence the behaviour of Pacific Island leaders who preside over limited budgets or negate the incentives offered or sanctions imposed by major aid donors such as Australia.”

Canberra's response to the ability of the regional ruling elites to manoeuvre between rival powers has been to send in more troops. While the document presented to Congress warned of a potential backlash against this turn to militarism, no criticisms were made of the Howard government's strategy.

Drafted as a briefing, rather than policy paper, the report made no recommendations. Its very release, however—in tandem with the State Department's declaration of 2007 as the “Year of the Pacific”—indicates the extent of the Bush administration's determination to reassert its hegemony and shut out rival powers, above all China, in the South Pacific. The result will be further regional instability and escalating US-backed political and military interventions by Canberra.



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