



National flags for the Pacific Islands Forum/ABC

As Beijing vies for influence and steps up its campaign to isolate Taipei, other powers are also trying to boost their presence in the region

Pacific island countries have become a new diplomatic battleground as China and Western nations vie for influence in the region, and as Beijing ramps up efforts to squeeze Taiwan's international space.

That presence is expected to be more visible in the coming months, with Chinese President Xi Jinping planning a summit for regional leaders in Papua New Guinea in November - just before the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit is to be held there.

And with US President Donald Trump absent from the APEC summit this year - Vice-President Mike Pence will go in his place - analysts say Beijing will be trying to position itself to fill the leadership vacuum.

"It will certainly increase US allies' concerns about Washington potentially withdrawing its commitment to the region ... they may instead try to build relations with China," said Zhang Baohui, a political science professor and director of the Centre for Asian Pacific Studies at Lingnan University in Hong Kong.

"The region is close to key US strategic assets in the Pacific Ocean, like Hawaii and Midway Island ... although there is no evidence that Beijing has a naval agenda in the region as of now. If China is to pursue a policy of establishing naval bases in the region, the US will have profound concerns," he said.

There are just 2.3 million people living in the Pacific island countries, but the region is important for America's Indo-Pacific strategy and it also has geopolitical significance for China. Six of the 11 nations have diplomatic ties with Taipei but Beijing is pushing for them to switch recognition - both sides have been trying to win favour by offering aid and

support.

China's engagement in the region could also act as a barrier against America's Indo-Pacific strategy to contain Beijing, according to a report in June by the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission.

"If Chinese activities deter the US from carrying out its [military training and exercise] plans for Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, it will contribute to China's goal of weakening US military presence in the Indo-Pacific," the report by the US congressional commission said, referring to the US territory near Guam.

"Shrinking Taiwan's international space and expanding China's presence in the region – such development would negatively affect US interests in the Indo-Pacific," it said.

The jockeying for influence in the region and the diplomatic tussle between Taipei and Beijing has been on full display last week at a contentious Pacific leaders summit that wrapped up on Thursday. Speaking at the annual Pacific Islands Forum in Nauru, US Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke said Washington would spend US\$7 million on military financing for Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Tonga, with another US\$750,000 annually going to international military exercises in the region.

Taipei also pledged to [set up a US\\$2 million medical fund to help Pacific nations](#) at the forum, a day after [Beijing's delegation stormed out of a meeting](#) on climate change when Nauru's President Baron Waqa would not let its special envoy Du Qiwen take the floor.

The tiny island had earlier angered Beijing by refusing to stamp entry visas into its delegates' diplomatic passports, saying it would process only their personal travel documents – prompting threats from nations with official ties with Beijing to pull out of the forum.

Meanwhile, the United States is reportedly planning to increase its diplomatic staffing in Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia and potentially Fiji in the next two years. Australia is also expected to name its first high commissioner to Tuvalu within weeks, rushing to fill a post-Canberra decided to create just a few months ago, according to Reuters.

In addition, Britain is trying to boost its presence in the region, planning to open new high commissions in Vanuatu, Tonga and Samoa by the end of May next year, while French

President Emmanuel Macron is seeking to organise a meeting of Pacific leaders early next year.

Analysts say these moves reflect concern in the West about China's push in the Pacific islands, where it has dramatically increased its investment in recent years.

Beijing has spent US\$1.3 billion on concessionary loans and gifts to the region since 2011, becoming its second largest donor after Australia, according to Lowy Institute figures, and stoking fears that smaller nations could end up overburdened and unable to repay debts to Beijing - and ultimately "forfeiting" the region to China.

Graeme Smith, a fellow in the Pacific affairs department at Australian National University in Canberra, said although Beijing's influence over the region was somewhat limited, the security implications had some countries worried.

"Security establishments are deeply concerned about China's engagement" in the region, Smith said, giving the example of an undersea cable to be installed from the Solomon Islands to Australia. That project was to be carried out by Chinese firm Huawei Technologies, but Canberra has stepped in to help fund and build the telecommunications link instead.

Ralph Cossa, president of the Pacific Forum CSIS in Honolulu, said the jostling for influence in the region was likely to intensify in the future.

"To the extent that Washington perceives Chinese actions as trying to undermine its influence, the more the Indo-Pacific strategy will be aimed at countering these Chinese efforts," Cossa said. "China claims it is not trying to marginalise the US, but its actions say otherwise."

But he said Beijing was unlikely to change its approach to the Pacific islands, despite growing concerns about its assertiveness.

"China is spreading its influence worldwide ... Of course, a big part of the recent push is to increase the pressure on Taiwan and to remind Taipei that it is capable of pulling away some of its few remaining allies in the region," he added.

Six Pacific countries maintain diplomatic ties with Taipei - Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu - and observers say Beijing is applying pressure for them to switch allegiance in a bid to isolate Taipei in the region and beyond.

Beijing sees self-ruled Taiwan as a renegade province subject to eventual reunification, by force if necessary. Mainland China has ramped up pressure on the island - including a campaign to poach its allies - since Tsai Ing-wen became president in 2016 and refused to accept the one-China principle. It now has just 17 diplomatic allies left.

In the Pacific islands, Smith from ANU said Western countries could check China's influence by offering help where it was most needed.

"New embassies are welcome, but they are often constrained in their ability to engage with the local population and local media by an overly bureaucratic and risk-averse culture within the Western foreign services," Smith said.

"The most effective way for Western nations to maintain some level of influence is to take the concerns of Pacific island nations seriously - in particular on climate change, labour mobility and meeting critical infrastructure needs."

Lee Jeong-ho is a reporter at South China Morning Post. He wrote this piece originally for [SCMP](#)

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