

The importance of Pacific Islands nations for Japan

Interview with Mie Oba



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Question 1: What role do the Pacific Islands play in Japan's geopolitical and security strategy?

In Japan, part of the political elites and intellectuals involved in foreign policy have had a strong interest in the Pacific region for various reasons. Among these factors one can mention Japan's historical relationship with the region, maritime security concerns, the region's anti-nuclear position, fisheries issues, and the effects of climate change.

In the overall context of Japanese diplomacy, however, the South Pacific has not been a major focus. This is not to say that the South Pacific was not strategically important to Japan. The security of this large maritime area to the east and southeast of the country, the internal stability of the islands and of inter-island relations are vital to Japan's security. However, the strategic importance of the South Pacific to Japan has not been seriously recognized in the mainstream of the Japanese policy-making community. Japan did not perceive itself as needing to be proactive in promoting stability in the region as Japan's ally (the United States), quasi-ally (Australia), and another like-minded country (New Zealand) have maintained strong ties with the South Pacific countries and supported the stability of the

region for several decades after the end of World War II. These circumstances were enough to make the Japanese political elite believe that the South Pacific region did not need increased involvement on the part of Tokyo.

In recent years, however, the region's strategic importance to Japan has grown enormously. This is because significant changes in the South Pacific have made the regional strategic balance less positive for Japan. China's growing influence is the most important factor contributing to this changing situation. The PRC (People's Republic of China) is increasing its influence through economic aid and increased political and security cooperation with some of the countries in the region. Each of the South Pacific nations has its problems, such as economic development and climate change. An increase in aid and investment including coming from China should be appreciated both by these countries and Japan, which wants to see stability in the region. However, China's strategic intentions and the impact of its expansion on the regional order, and ultimately on the international order, should be carefully considered for the following reasons.

First, one of the goals of China's expansion in the South Pacific is to reduce Taiwan's international presence. At one time, six countries in the South Pacific had diplomatic relations with Taiwan, but due to economic assistance or diplomatic pressure from the PRC, Kiribati and the Solomon Islands successively broke links with Taiwan and established diplomatic relations with China in 2019. In January 2024, Nauru did the same. Secondly, since China is not a member of the OECD development assistance committee (DAC), the overall picture and modalities of its aid lack in transparency. Thirdly, as is typical in countries such as the Solomon Islands, China is trying to expand its political influence by intervening in domestic political conflicts.

Japan also needs to stabilize its relationship with China and to avoid a direct confrontation. On the other hand, it should make further efforts to ensure a free, open and stable order in the South Pacific region.

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Question 2: How does Japan use its partnerships with the Pacific Islands to enhance its diplomatic influence and global standing?

Historically, the countries of the South Pacific have had a significant relationship with Japan. In particular, the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau were administered by Japan under the League of Nations mandate system before World War II. Japanese troops occupied Papua New Guinea and Nauru during World War II. These are not happy memories for either side, but nevertheless, because of this historical background, there is a group within Japan that values relations with the South Pacific nations. Again, however, it cannot

be said that interest in the South Pacific or relations with countries in the region have been a high priority for Japan.

Nevertheless, some developments suggest that Japanese diplomacy is now taking a greater interest in the South Pacific due to the aforementioned Chinese expansion into the South Pacific and common problems such as dealing with climate change, marine pollution, and fisheries resource management. For example, in a policy speech entitled “The Future of the Indo-Pacific” he delivered in New Delhi in March 2023, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida identified the South Pacific Islands nations as partners who should share the vision of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP).

This policy speech has also been noted as the expression of a renewed Japanese FOIP vision. One of the key elements of this new vision is the promotion of a new type of official development assistance (ODA). This follows the “Development Cooperation Charter” approved by the Cabinet in June 2023. One of the main features is “offer-type” development cooperation (or “co-creation for a common agenda initiative”). Under this new type of development cooperation, Japan will not simply wait for requests from recipient countries as it has done in the past, but will create an attractive menu that draws on its strengths and proactively offers it to recipient countries. ODA led by such proactive offers from Japan is well adapted for promoting assistance to South Pacific island countries that are vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters such as climate change, marine pollution, infectious diseases, and volcanic explosions, and will contribute to strengthening development cooperation in this region.

Furthermore, in addition to ODA, Japan introduced Official Security Assistance (OSA) in April 2023. This is a new framework for granting assistance that responds to the security needs of countries in the region, including the provision of equipment and infrastructure development, with the military as the beneficiary. This can be used as a future cooperation program for South Pacific countries. In FY2023, Fiji became one of the recipients of the OSA, with the signature, in December 2023, of an agreement with Japan regarding OSA with a grant amount of 400 million yen. This agreement specifically provided for the provision of ships and other equipment to the Fiji Navy. Japan sees this cooperation as contributing to maintaining and strengthening maritime security in Fiji’s waters and in the Indo-Pacific region by enhancing the Fiji Defense Force’s alert surveillance and disaster response capabilities. The OSA is scheduled to be upgraded to equip a division from FY2024.

In addition, Japan has hosted the Pacific and Pacific Island Leaders’ Meeting (PALM) with Pacific Islands countries every three years since 1997. The 10th PALM is scheduled to be held in 2024. While it is commendable that PALMs have been held regularly, South Pacific Islands countries have expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that discussions have become stale and have yet to result in effective cooperation. At the 10th PALM, Japan must clearly demonstrate how much it is willing to contribute to the stability in the South Pacific and the development of the countries in the region, and what resources it is willing to allocate for this purpose.

Question 3: What future cooperation, for example on fisheries and climate change and humanitarian disasters, is possible with other resident powers such as France?

There may be ample room for cooperation with the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand in areas such as fisheries, climate change, and humanitarian disaster relief. However, the interests of these countries are not necessarily aligned in addressing fisheries issues and climate change. In addition, cooperation on humanitarian disaster relief when it occurs requires regular communication and coordination of potential operational responses. Defense cooperation among allies, such as the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-Australia schemes, and among indirect allies, such as Japan and Australia, has broadened and deepened. A mechanism for foreign and defense ministers' meetings (2+2) already exists between France and Japan, the seventh meeting of which was held in May 2023. Thus, it is possible and necessary to discuss the future of cooperation in the South Pacific among the countries concerned, taking advantage of the newly formed and strengthened mechanisms for communication and deepening cooperation. It may also be necessary to consider a new multilateral framework in the future.

I would like to conclude this interview by adding my assessment of Japan's South Pacific diplomacy. In the above, we have mentioned possible ways and schemes to strengthen Japan's outreach to South Pacific countries, as well as possible cooperation with other countries such as France. These indicate that such potential exists, and it is true that China's expansion into the South Pacific has increased interest in the South Pacific in Japanese policy circles.

However, in my view, I am skeptical about the extent of Japan's involvement in the South Pacific. Nevertheless, Japan has launched new initiatives such as ODA and OSA, and there is no doubt that the South Pacific Islands are among the target countries and partners of these initiatives. In that context, we believe that there is a possibility that Japan's future efforts in the South Pacific will increase significantly.

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