

China as a Pacific Power

by

Dr. Michael R. Godley

Department of History

University of Hawaii at Hilo

Hilo College

Having attracted attention with a somewhat futuristic title, I wish to assure you that China is not about to become a "power" in the Pacific islands region in the terms we usually think of. While her naval forces are expanding, they will not pose a challenge to the United States or increasing Soviet presence in the area. Nor would China really be in a position to out-do the Japanese should that nation, as is likely, redevelop as a seapower. What is more, for a host of geopolitical reasons, China will take a stance in her home waters and the Northwest Pacific long before she ventures into the South Pacific region which concerns the majority of us at this conference. And when she does so, her most concentrated efforts will be reserved for the waters adjacent to the South China Sea. Likewise, whatever technology Peking develops to exploit marine resources will be applied first to her own continental shelf and not to the ocean depths. Nevertheless, as if to emulate some old Taoist maxim, China's very lack of conventional strength is apt to prove of considerable leverage in the newly independent Pacific. At any rate, it is this theme that I wish to comment upon today. On her terms, China will be a factor in the region.

In a recently featured editorial, People's Daily--the official organ of the party and government--affirmed China's determination to play a part in the South Pacific.¹ As might be expected, Peking portrayed the region as one

torn by Great Power struggle and particularly vulnerable to Soviet expansion and intrigue. But the author, in line with major changes in Chinese foreign policy since the Cultural Revolution, stressed China's commitment to support all Third World countries regardless of their social or political system. In an effort to combat Soviet--and American--expansion, Peking further urged regional cooperation and encouraged Australia and New Zealand to pursue an active role in the region.

China's interest in the Pacific has, of course, grown up almost overnight together with the mushrooming new nations. In most cases, this may prove an advantage for Peking which seeks to play up her own semi-colonial past. Moreover, by supporting economic cooperation, cultural exchange and the exclusive economic zone concept, China has rapidly gained friends. But, it is her pledge to resist Great Power hegemonism which seems to have struck the most responsive chord. Before belaboring the obvious to tell you of the appeals and also the dangers of any Big Brother approach to peoples so long ensnared in dependency relationships, let me sketch the short history of China's relations in the area.

The first hint of interest came in the fall of 1970 when Zhou Enlai offered his best wishes to a Fiji which had been promised independence.² Within two years, China had commenced diplomatic relations with Australia and New Zealand, entered the ping-pong era, and grown even more suspicious of Russian intentions.³ By the closing months of 1975, a South Pacific strategy was almost fully developed. In September, Zhou announced China's intention to recognize Papua New Guinea and established actual relations with Fiji and Western Samoa in November. In each instance, Peking pledged to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the new nations while introducing what may well prove to be the most critical themes: along with their peoples, the

Chinese belong to the Third World and must, inevitably, share in the struggle against imperialism.⁴ The strange yet important twist, however, was that the Fiji accord was signed in Canberra. But the logic of acknowledging Australia's natural role in the region was made clear the following spring when Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser visited an aging Mao and later, heard Hua Guofeng describe China's growing fear of "the other superpower" and its "expansionist ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region." As Hua continued, "We are both concerned for the security of the Asia-Pacific region and opposed to the seeking of hegemony by any country or group of countries."⁵

This strategy of supporting the regional powers as a means of thwarting greater opponents applied also to New Zealand. Prime Minister Robert Muldoon had, in fact, preceded Fraser in visiting Peking.⁶ When the Speaker of the House of Representatives paid a call nine months later, the line had hardened: "Situated in the Asia-Pacific region, China and New Zealand are both naturally concerned ... That very superpower is stepping up its infiltration and expansion in this region. We are very glad to see that the government of New Zealand and some other Oceanic countries are sharpening their vigilance against the superpower's expansionist ambition ..."⁷ In the fall of 1977, when Brian Edward Talboys who was carrying several portfolios for Wellington arrived in China, the United States had returned to the picture of a Pacific caught between two contending global powers but, once again, the "social imperialists" received top billing. And the New Zealander could not miss the message that his country was expected to lead the movement against outside intervention.⁸

For those who have followed Chinese foreign policy, Peking's dependency on the resolve of Australia and New Zealand, countries which have strong ties to Western Europe and America, is a dramatic shift of position but, as is usually the case, a change demanded by strategic considerations and explained

to the point of rationalization by the words of Mao. It was, therefore, understandable that the publicity surrounding Chairman Hill of the Australian Communist Party differed in content if not intent from that of his country's formal government when he turned up in Peking at the start of 1978. According to the Australian Communist organ, Vanguard, Chairman Mao's theory of the differentiation of the three worlds has now come to affect the course of revolution in Oceania: second world countries such as those ruled from Canberra and Wellington can be counted on to unite with smaller nations on certain issues and, most critically, share in the struggle to redesign the international order to preclude superpower domination.⁹

Part of the third world by self-definition, China has been on the lookout for common interests and issues.¹⁰ In the South Pacific area, the most obvious of these concern the sea. Throughout the various sessions of the United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea which commenced in June 1974, China has consistently supported the position of South Seas states. What has been at stake, according to Peking, has been nothing less than "a struggle to defend maritime sovereignty."¹¹ For her part, China has stood up for the 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone, also pushed by the South Pacific Forum, and held out for full international control over the extraction of deep seabed resources.¹² The goal, expressed in a recent issue of Beijing Review, while giving congratulations to the Gilbert Island Group upon its independence, is "all 6 million square miles of South Pacific waters under jurisdiction of relevant sovereign South Pacific States."¹³ Of course, with her own continental shelf to protect and disputed islands in both the East and South China Seas, the Middle Kingdom is concerned with more than either idealism or propaganda.¹⁴ Nevertheless, China's own interests in keeping the rich and technologically advanced nations from exploiting ocean resources genuinely correspond with those of a region

now riding a high tide of nationalism and can be used to foreign policy advantage.

Back in the 1950s and early 60s, other Third World countries were courted (and occasionally undermined) in an attempt to combat American encirclement. The principles of Peaceful Coexistence enunciated at Bandung in 1955 did make some friends in Asia, but courtship of formerly colonized nations took a back seat to the smoking rhetoric of paradoxically isolationist leaders during the Cultural Revolution. Once the Russians emerged as more than a sparring partner in ideological dispute, and with U.S. rapprochement leading to United Nations respectability, the early hints at a more positive form of world leadership took root. Today, having dropped talk of the "rural areas" spreading revolution to a North America and Western Europe prosaically described as "cities of the world," Peking has worked to create another United Front. This time, the principal enemy is the Soviet Union.

According to one editorialist: "The Developing Countries of the South Pacific region have strengthened their unity with second world countries in the struggle against hegemonism."¹⁵ In the final analysis, however, the ability of all the nations in the area to resist plundering by outsiders depends on the viability of their own regional economy. For this reason, China has attached great importance to the South Pacific Forum and the long-term goal of some sort of Pacific Common Market. As a visiting delegation from Western Samoa learned in Peking in March 1977, China also offers the lure of economic cooperation.¹⁶ New Zealand and Australia have already shown promise of becoming major trading partners with China,¹⁷ but Peking seeks commercial ties with far less lucrative markets. Indeed, the plan of attack sketched by the Chinese delegation before the U.N. Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific at its summer 1978, New Delhi meetings stressed trade

and the unity thus forged as critical factors in deterring further Great Power penetration.¹⁸ Meanwhile, back in Oceania, the Chinese put theory into practice with the opening of a trade fair at Suva, Fiji.¹⁹

Clearly, Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's Fiji is a special case, or rather, the model for the relationships China hopes to establish throughout the area. Embassies have been opened, athletic teams have exchanged visits, and economic cooperation has been stressed.²⁰ A People's Daily editorial welcoming diplomatic ties in the fall of 1975 pulled together the whole bag of foreign policy themes:

We have always maintained that all countries big or small should be equal ... Both China and Fiji belong to the Third World. Our two peoples have suffered from imperialist aggression and oppression and have always supported and sympathized with each other in the struggle against colonialism and imperialism ... We firmly oppose hegemonism and power politics pursued by the imperialists, the superpowers in particular.²¹

A real clue to the strength of the relationship came later, in early summer 1978, when Mara appeared in Peking for talks with Hua Guofeng and Vice Premier Li Xiannian.²² But the most gratifying news did not become public until after the prime minister returned to Fiji where he announced that his government intended to reject Soviet efforts to set up an embassy. Mentioning his recent trip to China, Mara was reported to have said that the Chinese were sincere and aboveboard while the Russians had only subversion in mind.²³ By the end of June, Fiji legislators concurred by an overwhelming majority which prompted a Chinese commentator to note that "Fiji does not want to become another Cuba."²⁴

China was similarly pleased when Tonga, together with Fiji, turned down the Soviet vice minister and commercial attache who toured the South Pacific in 1975 offering aid in an attempt to establish fishing bases.²⁵ And Beijing Review provided coverage of an incident that Papua New Guinea would probably

just as soon forget: the reported landing of "later-day tsarists" on an uninhabited island claimed by Somare's state.²⁶

Although Peking would like to build a Fiji-type relationship with Papua New Guinea, there are a number of considerations which have complicated the balance of power game. Indeed, the government in Port Moresby, responding to domestic criticism and always reluctant to give anti-communist Indonesia anything to become agitated about, has not yet given permission to either the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China to open embassies. Close to a decision in the spring of 1978, the whole matter has been deferred for at least a year.²⁷ It is not that Prime Minister Michael Somare has never played the China card. Fortuitously, the first foreign dignitary to arrive in China after the death of Mao, he was met at the airport by Hua Guofeng, flown to Hong Kong on a special Chinese jet, and apparently basked in the publicity given his infant nation by a Peking which emphasized its own affinities with the Third World.²⁸ There has also been some exchange of cultural groups,²⁹ and a steady, if small, parade of lesser governmental functionaries to rural China to observe the ways in which intermediate technology might be applied to agriculture in Papua New Guinea. What is more, the China trade is clearly on an upswing with Peking providing inexpensive consumer goods in exchange for copper, timber and cocoa. As one scholar of the area has noted, a China connection does offer Somare an opportunity to reduce his dependence on Australia and, despite some dangers, will undoubtedly experience controlled growth.³⁰

Elsewhere in the region, China remains eager for new friendships. In the summer of 1977, a Chinese acrobatic troupe touring Western Samoa drew 80,000 spectators during its stay.³¹ Even tiny Nauru's picture appeared in People's Daily³² and, when newly independent, the Solomon Islands were the

subject of a series of special articles.³³ Just last November, the Gilbert Islands had their turn.³⁴ In all these cases, the Peking press--so often the wellspring of diatribe in the past--was entirely objective even when it came to making reference to the colonial heritages. The virulent words are found elsewhere; these are directed not backward to the years before independence but toward "the late-coming superpower" who, with fitting marine metaphor, "wild with ambition is stretching tentacles everywhere in the world." According to these charges, the Soviet Union is using "every means to infiltrate this region under the signboards 'champion of national liberation' and 'friendly cooperation.'"³⁵ As a new and dangerous menace, this particular hegemonist must be excluded from the Pacific.

Although there are some who think that the Chinese are secretly eager for American bases to remain in the Pacific,³⁶ and this is probably true for colder waters, the use of one great power to check another will not sit well with the emerging nations to the South. At this stage, Peking does not seek a balance of power per se, but rather the restriction of Russian influence and maritime expansion. As long as American interests coincide, China will not press for U.S. ouster from either Micronesia or Samoa. The justification, as one Chinese editorialist tiptoed across a sensitive issue: the Americans are really only protecting their vested interests; the expanding Soviets pose a different kind of threat. While the South Pacific region does constitute a "new area of contention for hegemony between the Soviet Union and the United States," the present strategy calls for reliance on second world countries and unity amongst the islanders. Ironically, China even has kind words for Japanese and West German aid which it believes has "to a certain extent contained the infiltration of the Soviet Union in the South Pacific."³⁷ Thus, all of the former colonial masters have a role to play.

It is certainly no coincidence that the Shanghai Communique between the U.S. and China was the first bilateral statement to contain an anti-hegemony clause: "neither should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region and each is opposed to efforts by any other country or group of countries to establish hegemony." Since then, the Chinese have attempted to get as many nations as possible to add their names to the list so transparently designed to discourage Soviet expansion.³⁸

The warming of Sino-American relations has continued to carry the headlines. In December, the Australian prime minister and the general secretary of the French Communist Party, ordinarily strange bedfellows, found themselves quoted in the pages of People's Daily as supporters of U.S.-China friendship. While the first expectedly praised rapprochement as a step toward peace and prosperity, the second suggested that closer relations with the Americans provided additional means to combat "any hegemonist movement in the Asia-Pacific region."³⁹ Thus, while the United States as a superpower receives mixed reviews, Chinese leaders recognize the value of a powerful ally. It now seems strange to read the word "containment" in the Chinese Communist press, but the time-worn cliché is finding new spokesmen in Peking.

As a consequence, China has been paying particularly close attention to the arms race and the relative strength of the competing superpowers. She is visibly alarmed over Soviet naval superiority and expansion into the Indian Ocean and the Northwestern Pacific.⁴⁰ Ironically, Peking has also noted that the U.S. 7th Fleet is no match for the Russians,⁴¹ and has quoted no less an anti-communist source than U.S. News and World Report when statistics published therein confirmed fears.⁴² Balance of power is always a tricky business. Obviously, American strength is in China's interests inasmuch as it restrains another more dangerous foe. Peking's long-term security can,

however, be obtained only through military modernization and, quite possibly, the eventual extension of her own power overseas. While this speaker believes that China's present effort to help Pacific nations resist exploitation is genuine, it is not improper to speculate about a time when China may have the technological and military wherewithall to stake her own claims in the South Pacific.

There is no question that China, like Japan, is a potential giant in the area. At present the Chinese navy is large but almost exclusively defensive with little ability to project itself far from shore.⁴³ Although there are some who believe that China's 60 or more submarines (one or two are nuclear) could be used effectively in the insular Pacific, at least as a foreign policy statement,⁴⁴ the present international situation will keep these vessels close to home in the defensive front lines. Most experts agree, however, that China has not been utilizing her full shipbuilding capacity. As we move into the 1980s, she will be producing still more attack submarines and adding surface-to-surface missile equipped combat ships which, if constructed to the standards of existing prototypes, will be very much up to date.⁴⁵

The country's merchant marine is likewise expanding. When one counts the surprising number of ships registered under flags of convenience, China's fleet is second only to that of Japan in Asia and ranks 15th in global comparisons. By buying ships abroad (either new or mothballed in the case of much needed tankers), the Chinese can be expected to carry an even greater percentage of their Asian and Pacific trade in ships showing the Chinese flag.⁴⁶ Moreover, China's own shipbuilding industry has been producing dozens of seafaring transports in the 10,000 ton range since 1960 with ships four and five times that size beginning to be commissioned.⁴⁷

Growth in all these programs may have some spin-off effect in the South

Pacific when, having upgraded her fleets, China may wish to sell or lease smaller coastal vessels suitable for inter-island work. Even more likely, Peking may provide fast, modern, patrol boats to friendly states as a token gesture in defense of their independence and against Soviet advances.

Another area of likely Chinese activity is oceanographic technology. As she becomes more sophisticated at home, China will be capable of giving modest assistance. Ships with geological and scientific missions have already spent many days exploring the South China Sea and resource-rich northern waters, and on at least one occasion, two research vessels made a seventy-two day cruise crisscrossing the Pacific.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, as was the case with her submarines, it will be a full decade before Peking can divert equipment from areas close to home. The one exception to watch will be when China perfects a true ICBM and must test it over ocean swells. Then, as a perceptive scholar of the legal issues has already noted, it will be interesting to see the reaction in South Pacific capitals.⁴⁹

China's most immediate concerns, would, however, appear to be in the South China Sea. The Spratly and Paracel Islands which were targets of gunboat diplomacy back in 1974, are currently of far greater geopolitical importance. Off the coast of rival Vietnam and astride major seaplanes, these dots of sand are crucial outposts from which China can observe Russian movements, explore for oil, base fishing ships and look beyond to more distant waters.⁵⁰ Within range of Hainan island's fighter squadrons, the islands--if they can be held--will enable the Chinese to draw a defense net at least partway to the Philippines. In order to consolidate claims, Peking has announced irregular ferry service from Hainan to the Paracels,⁵¹ and more activity should be anticipated. Rumors that the Chinese have finally started to construct landing craft fits this as well as the familiar Taiwan situation.⁵²

In any case, as events begin to unfold regarding all of the offshore islands, we will learn a little more about China's capabilities at sea.

For the present, South Pacific nations have little to fear from the People's Republic and can expect Chinese support in international forums. They might, perhaps, keep another ancient Taoist saying in mind: "When a greater nation is humble before a lesser nation, it prevails over the lesser nation." But, then, American policy makers might heed the same advice.

NOTES

For the purposes of this paper, references will be kept simple and in the English language, whenever possible.

¹Renmin Ribao (RMRB), July 5, 1978. A translation is available in Peking Review (PR), September 22, 1978.

²PR, 10/23/70.

³For background, see Dillon, Burton and Soderland, "Who Was the Principal Enemy?" Asian Survey (May, 1977).

⁴PR, 9/26/75, 11/14 and 11/21. See also RMRB, 11/7 and 16/75.

⁵PR, 6/25/76 and RMRB, 6/20/76.

⁶PR, 5/7/76 and RMRB, 4/30.

⁷PR, 4/22/77.

⁸PR, 11/4/77.

⁹PR, 12/9/77, 1/13/78 and 4/7/78. RMRB, 7/5/78.

¹⁰For background, see Shao-chuan Leng, "Chinese Strategy Toward the Asian Pacific," Orbis (Fall, 1975); George T. Yu, "China and the Third World," Asian Survey (November, 1977) and Bruce Larkin, "China and the Third World," Current History (September, 1975). Also: PR, 8/26/77 and 11/4/77.

¹¹PR, 9/22/78. RMRB, 7/5/78.

¹²Consult Menno T. Kamminga, "Building Railroads on the Sea: China's Attitude Towards Maritime Law," China Quarterly (July/September 1974) and Johnson and Langdon, "The Impact of the Law of the Sea Conference Upon the Pacific Region" in Pacific Affairs (Spring 1978). China's position is made clear in RMRB 9/18/78 and PR, 7/29/77.

¹³Beijing Review (title change), 1/19/79.

¹⁴Martin H. Katchner, "The Spratly Islands and the Law of the Sea: Dangerous Ground for Asian Peace," Asian Survey (December 1977) and Hungdah Chiu, "South China Sea Islands: Implications for Delimiting the Seabed and Future Shipping Routes," China Quarterly (December 1977). See also: "The Legal Tussle for Asia's Seas" in The Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER), 5/20/74.

¹⁵PR, 9/22/78.

¹⁶PR, 3/25/77.

¹⁷PR, 11/4/77.

¹⁸PR, 9/8/78. RMRB, 7/12/78.

¹⁹RMRB, 9/6/78.

²⁰PR, 10/24/75, 11/14/75, and RMRB, 6/11 and 13/78 and 9/6/78.

²¹RMRB, 11/7/75, also cited in PR, 11/14/75.

²²RMRB, 6/10/78 and PR, 6/23/78.

²³RMRB, 6/29/78. Beijing Review, 1/19/79.

²⁴RMRB, 7/7/78.

²⁵PR, 9/22/78.

²⁶Beijing Review, 1/19/79.

²⁷FEER, 4/28/78 and 6/9/78.

²⁸See Ralph R. Premdas, "Papua New Guinea in 1976: Dangers of a China Connection," Asian Survey (January, 1977).

²⁹PR, 10/14/77.

³⁰Premdas.

³¹PR, 8/5/77.

³²RMRB, 7/3/78.

³³RMRB, 7/3, 7 and 8/78.

³⁴RMRB, 11/26/78.

³⁵PR, 9/8/78.

³⁶Richard A. Ericson, Jr., "The U.S. View of the Pacific Problem" in Gordon and Rothwell, eds., The New Political Economy of the Pacific (Cambridge, Mass., 1975).

³⁷RMRB, 7/5/78 or PR, 9/22/78.

³⁸See Joachim Glaubitz, "Anti-Hegemony Formulas in Chinese Foreign Policy," Asian Survey (March, 1976).

³⁹RMRB, 12/18 and 19/78.

⁴⁰RMRB, 6/13 and 15 and 11/21/78.

⁴¹RMRB, Year end summary of anti-hegemony struggle in the Asian-Pacific region, 12/27/78.

⁴²RMRB, 11/28/78.

⁴³Participants with only a passing interest should consult Stephen Uhalley, Jr., "China in the Pacific," Oceans (May-June 1978). Much of his material is already out of date, but the more serious student should carry the same word of caution to the specialized treatments below.

⁴⁴Muller and Ross, China and Japan: Emerging Global Powers (New York, 1975), 49; Harvey W. Nelsen, The Chinese Military System (Boulder, Colorado, 1977), 176; Angus M. Frazer, "Use of the PLA in Foreign Affairs," Problems of Communism (November-December 1975), 23.

⁴⁵Ibid. See also: John R. Dewenter, "China Afloat," Foreign Affairs (July, 1972); Leo Y. Liu, "The Chinese People's Liberation Army," Current History (September, 1978); and the testimony before the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress: "Allocation of Resources in the Soviet Union and China," Part I (July, 1975), II (June, 1976), III (July, 1977).

⁴⁶See the authoritative estimates by George Lauriat in FEER, 1/21/77 and 2/10/78.

⁴⁷Ibid., Uhalley and PR, 1/13/78. One of the latest statements of Chinese intentions is RMRB, 9/12/78.

⁴⁸PR, 8/12/77 and 2/3/78.

⁴⁹Kamminga, 557.

⁵⁰Refer to note 14. For the latest claim, RMRB, 12/29/78.

⁵¹RMRB, 12/27/78.

⁵²Leo Y. Liu, 58.