



## The Pacific War's Lessons for the Continued Strategic Importance of Oceania

By Lucas Myers

Although seemingly remote and underpopulated, the 38.7 square mile Yap Island in the Central Pacific's Caroline chain—today a part of the U.S.-associated Federated States of Micronesia—triggered a pivotal diplomatic dispute between the United States and Japan in the lead up to World War II. The controversy arose soon after Japan received Germany's Oceanic colonies, including the Caroline Islands, in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles as compensation for participation in the Great War. This sudden Japanese expansion into the Pacific Ocean soon proved unacceptable to the American policymakers.

The United States harbored designs on Yap Island due to its strategic location and subsequently protested against Japan's award. [As shown in a 1921 legal argument](#), the crux of the U.S.-Japan dispute lay in Yap's undersea telegraph station connecting East Asia to the United States. It also became apparent that Japan's new island mandates provided ample anchorage for military vessels and submarine bases that "[would be a perpetual menace to Guam and would also jeopardize any fleet operation undertaken for the relief of the Philippines.](#)" In response, the United States proffered that Yap Island and its undersea cables

be internationalized and neutral. Several years of difficult negotiations resulted in a provision within the 1921-1922 Washington Naval Conference wherein the United States and Japan decided to share access to the island's cable and radio installations. Despite its peaceful resolution, this dispute [triggered a confrontational turn in U.S.-Japanese relations](#), [demonstrated](#) the threat posed by Japan in the Pacific, and previewed the vital strategic importance that access to the previously geopolitically unimportant Pacific Islands would later play in World War II.

Today, Oceania's geography once again enters the realm of great power competition. With the U.S.-China rivalry escalating across numerous issue areas, the Pacific Islands seldom receive the same attention crises in the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, China-India border, or Hong Kong. However, the Chinese government has [steadily increased its investments](#) in the Pacific and [availed itself of opportunities to oust the United States and Australia](#) from the region. Understanding the relative importance of contemporary Oceanian competition to these other flashpoints necessitates an examination of the region's World War II experience.

With the Yap Island dispute serving as a diplomatic predecessor to the armed conflict over Oceania in the Pacific War, Japanese forces battled Allied troops—predominantly consisting of Americans and Australians but also New Zealanders, Indians, indigenous Oceanians, and others—throughout the South Pacific from December 1941 until the very conclusion of the conflict in 1945. Lacking in population and not as resource-rich as the [true prize of the Dutch East Indies' oil reserves](#), the geopolitical value that rendered Oceania's islands worthwhile for Japanese and Allied militaries lay in their role as basing from which [air forces](#) and naval units could reach out in a wide radius and control the supply lines vital to Allied trans-oceanic

communications. Although technological and geopolitical changes seemingly alter this calculus in the modern era of long-range ballistic missiles, the Pacific War experience reminds us of several enduring lessons: the Pacific Islands' geography remains of vital strategic importance to the U.S.-Australia competition with China, the preferences and agency of Oceania's countries will impact the balance of power, and securing access and basing in the Pacific islands for a future conflict has once again emerged as a crucial geopolitical objective.

## The Lessons of the South Pacific Campaigns

During the early days of Japanese expansion from 1941 to 1942, Oceania witnessed intense fighting over strategically-placed airfields and naval bases within range of Australia. Following its string of lightning victories in Malaya, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies from December 1941 to January 1942, [Imperial Japan, operating from its base on nearby Truk, seized Rabaul on the island of New Britain in January 1942](#). Japanese control of islands in the Solomon chain, ports in Papua New Guinea, and elsewhere in the Central Pacific early in the conflict threatened Australia from both air and sea and even forced the United States to [shift military priorities away from the preferred "Europe First" strategy](#) to the bloody campaign in the Solomon Islands.

The [overall strategic goal of Japan's defense perimeter](#) in the South Pacific was to prevent American access to Japan's core holdings, isolate Australia, and force the U.S. Pacific Fleet into a decisive engagement in unfavorable conditions. [Contemporary observers worried](#) that Japan could erect an impenetrable aerial and naval barrier preventing Allied forces from linking up and retaking Japan's resource-rich conquests in East and Southeast Asia. Each island to fall under Japan's control further solidified their position and moved the perimeter outwards.



In support of their overall objective, the South Pacific islands provided vital basing and anchorage for Japanese air and naval forces. If Japan had achieved uncontested control over the South Pacific islands, Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) and Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) air forces could have intercepted and strangled the sea lines of communication between the United States and Australia, as well as enjoy the advantage of land-based air units and local logistics depots against any outside naval expeditionary force. Japan quickly demonstrated the potential of forward island basing when [its air forces reached out and bombed Darwin, Australia](#) from 1942 to 1943. Although many of the Japanese planes launched from aircraft carriers, the control of the South Pacific islands provided forward protection for the Imperial Japanese Navy's primary pre-war operating base on Truk and [enhanced the asymmetric naval operations](#) that had become Japan's specialty. By controlling Oceania's island bases, [Japan hoped to isolate and starve Australia](#) with regionally-based air and naval units, thus obviating the need to invade the continent itself.

Due to its prime geographic location and aerial and naval basing, the heavily-fortified Rabaul soon became the focal point of the regional struggle. As John Miller, Jr. argues in [United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific](#):

Well-situated in relation to Truk and the Palau Islands, Rabaul possessed a magnificent harbor as well as sites for several airfields. Only 440 nautical miles southwest of Rabaul lies the New Guinea coast, while Guadalcanal is but 565 nautical miles to the southeast. Thus, the Japanese could advance southward covered all the way by land-based bombers. And since none of the islands in the Bismarck Archipelago-New Guinea-Solomon area lay beyond fighter-

plane range of its neighbors, the Japanese could also cover their advance with fighters by building airstrips as they moved along.

With the island serving as a defensible hard point, Japan could reach out with locally-based air forces and strike at Australian and American shipping at will. As pointed out by historian Francis Pike in [Hirohito's War: The Pacific War, 1941-1945](#), the IJN, operating from Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, could cut Australian supply lines; seize the now-isolated Polynesian islands of New Caledonia, Samoa, and Fiji; and "deny airfields to the Allies, which could potentially threaten Japan's major regional garrison at Rabaul."

Despite their early defeats, however, Allied forces [blunted the renewed Japanese offensive](#) against the Australian-administered Papua New Guinea by mid-1942 at the Battles of the Coral Sea and Kokoda Track before [moving to address the threat from Rabaul](#). American troops advanced island-by-island through the Solomon chain during the Guadalcanal campaign, while Australian forces [simultaneously battled to force back](#) Japanese forces on Papua New Guinea. [Both campaigns' operational objectives aimed to reduce](#) the threat from the Japanese naval and air base on New Britain: "The immediate aim...was, not to defeat the Japanese nation, but to protect Australia and New Zealand by halting the Japanese southward advance from Rabaul toward the air and sea lines of communication." To accomplish this, Allied forces would have to capture nearby islands within bomber range. As the Japanese were by now dug in and adept at defensive warfare, seizing these islands proved exceptionally bloody and protracted on land, air, and sea.

Within the Guadalcanal campaign, the struggle over the control of Henderson Airfield further demonstrates the strategic significance of the



South Pacific islands to regional air and naval superiority. Although constructed by Japanese troops, the airfield was quickly seized by American Marines after their landing on Guadalcanal. A brutal struggle followed in which Japanese and American forces fought for control of the island and its “[center of gravity](#)” at Henderson Airfield. The successful American seizure of Henderson ultimately provided crucial air support and interdiction of IJN forces by the Cactus Air Force and greatly contributed to the overall victory on land and sea in the Guadalcanal Campaign.

The Guadalcanal and Papua New Guinea campaigns also impart lessons as to the importance of local actors in the post-independence era. During the conflict, the people of Oceania played key roles as intelligence gatherers, guides, carriers, guerilla troops, and regular combatants. The [Allies relied heavily upon](#) indigenous peoples in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands for intelligence gathering. [Success in the Guadalcanal campaign relied substantially](#) upon the assistance of local Solomon Islanders and the European-led Coastwatcher teams that operated behind enemy lines and proved vital for alerting Allied forces of Japanese movements.

Despite this assistance to the Allies, Oceania’s experience of the war is complicated by its history of colonial exploitation by the Allies and Japan. [In Papua New Guinea](#), Japan and Australia both employed the forced labor of indigenous populations, and poor conditions fostered post-war resentment amongst Papua New Guineans. Administered by Australia at the time, the war experience for Papua New Guineans [is not easily combined into a unified national narrative](#) due to the inherent complexities of this experience. However, despite this colonial exploitation, Oceania’s people played a vital role for the Allied war effort in unfamiliar and hostile territory. With

indigenous aid and an increasing concentration of military forces, the Allies gradually retook the Solomon Island chain by the fall of 1943 in Operation Cartwheel.

Once the United States and Australia pushed back Japanese forces to within bombing range of Japan’s key base at Rabaul in later 1943-1944, the focus of Allied strategy shifted to other areas in the Pacific, such as the Philippines. [Although the initial plan was to take Rabaul](#), heavy bombing raids, naval sorties, and successful “island hopping” further north in the Central Pacific forced Japan to withdraw its naval and air forces to leave behind a [dug-in garrison](#). As soon as Rabaul’s capacity as an air and naval base was eliminated, its strategic importance evaporated as well, and the Allies safely bypassed the remaining Japanese troops. Later in the war in 1944, Allied forces repeated this aerial bombardment strategy at Truk to [nullify Japan’s most formidable Pacific base](#). The strategic threat to the Allies in the South Pacific ended with the neutralization of the aerial and naval capabilities of Rabaul and Truk, and the Allies could safely continue their advance towards Japan and the end of the war.

Ultimately, the decisive blow against Japan may not have been dealt in the South Pacific theater, but the initial Japanese danger to Allied supply lines threatened to undermine the overall war effort to the extent that the single-mindedly Europe-focused Roosevelt administration was forced to divert significant resources to the Pacific in 1942. With this in mind, policymakers should remember that the islands’ geographic location assumed an importance to the Pacific War seemingly beyond their levels of population or natural resources. In addition to this lesson, it is important to remember that actualizing the value of Oceania’s strategic geography was greatly facilitated by the local people who provided valuable assistance to the Allies.



## Lessons Applied: China's Contemporary Involvement in Oceania

Comparisons to the Pacific War experience can be drawn between the ongoing [competition](#) of the [Americans and Australians](#) with [China](#) to acquire influence and access in the region and the Japanese attempt to besiege Australia and New Zealand via control over regional airbases in World War II. It is important to remember that Japan, whose successful 1941-1942 campaigns in the South Pacific and the Philippines launched from Truk and Palau, [acquired these launching pads in the Treaty of Versailles](#) prior to the war, along with Yap Island. Although China still has a long way to go in Oceania, regional governments remain open to Chinese involvement and neither the United States nor Australia can become overly complacent.

China under President Xi Jinping has embarked on an expanded and aggressive foreign policy, a project which extends into Oceania. In 2018, [Xi personally hosted](#) a side meeting with Pacific Islands' leaders at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, [while President Donald Trump delegated Vice President Mike Pence](#) to attend in his stead. More recently, China [opened an embassy on Kiribati](#)—one of only three countries to do so—following Kiribati's newly pro-China government's decision to [de-recognize Taiwan](#). [President Xi Jinping soon promised](#) Belt and Road Initiative investments in the under-developed country. Additionally, reports have emerged of Chinese businesses pursuing the [purchase of land](#) on Vanuatu, while [Papua New Guinea](#) is increasingly indebted to China. A Chinese state-owned firm also proffered a local government in the Solomon Islands [to lease](#) the entirety of Tulagi, a strategically important island during the Pacific War. The effort failed amidst

local political controversy, but Chinese interest in this underdeveloped region continues. Overall, China has [achieved inroads](#) in the Pacific Island countries through its Belt and Road Initiative and other foreign-direct investments. [Although not yet a "core interest" of the type covering its own territorial disputes and sovereignty](#), Chinese interest in the Pacific Islands looks set to increase, particularly if the "three-island chain" theory still holds sway in the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).

The "father of the Chinese Navy," Admiral Liu Huaqing, first articulated what is now termed the "three-island chain theory" in the 1980s. According to [this concept](#), China's PLAN must progressively attain control over and breach three island chains to achieve regional dominance in the Pacific Ocean vis-à-vis the United States by the mid-21st century. The first chain stretches from Japan to the Philippines, the second centers upon Guam (and covers the South Pacific islands), and the third hinges on Hawaii. Most intriguingly, [some analysts identify parallels](#) with Imperial Japan's "southward turn" towards the Pacific Islands.

Although not so much a concrete plan as a guiding spirit, the three-island chain theory [can be viewed](#) as influencing China's ongoing involvement in the Indo-Pacific. Isolating the United States from the first two chains constitutes a strategic goal for China, and military basing on islands in the Pacific would enable forward operations while also effectively outflanking American and Australian forces operating closer to China's vital national interests in Taiwan or the South China Sea. As China scholars Andrew S. Erickson and Joel Wuthnow [explain, China views the "island chains" of the Pacific as "barriers," "springboards," and "benchmarks"](#)—all key geopolitical conceptions indicative of viewing island chains as relevant for competition with the United States and its regional allies.



In a future conflict with the United States, China hopes to “[contest control of the second island chain](#),” and China wields an increasingly deadly array of conventional and nuclear-capable missile forces suited to this purpose. In recent years, the PLA’s Rocket Force has [embraced](#) “a powerful conventional missile arm capable of conducting precision attacks at a medium range.” Already [stationed in the South China Sea’s Spratly Islands](#), PLA missiles located at a geographically closer base on Tulagi, Bougainville, or Vanuatu would be well within comfortable striking distance of American forces at Guam and most of Australia. Lest we draw out the comparisons to the Pacific War too far, modern ballistic missiles have much further range than any World War II-era fighters and bombers could have hoped to achieve. [As analyst Malcom Davis points out](#): “A [Chinese] DF-26 fired from Hainan Island could just reach Darwin Harbor” and “a DF-17 missile carrying a hypersonic glide vehicle deployed into the Spratly Islands could reach Darwin and also RAAF Base Tindal.” However, even considering this longer range, islands throughout Oceania will more likely than not play a pivotal basing and logistics roles for a PLAN dedicated to operating in the second island chain. Commensurate with this, China has also invested heavily in modernizing and expanding its [amphibious capabilities](#). Thus, extended range does not alter the geopolitical importance of Oceania, but instead shifts which islands prove most strategic.

## The American and Australian Response to Renewed Competition in Oceania

Recognizing Oceania’s strategic role in great power competition, American and Australian policymakers increasingly place the region within the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” concept. In 2018, Vice President Pence’s [speech at the APEC CEO Summit](#) highlighted the region, while the U.S.

State Department [reported](#) in 2019 that the United States provides over \$350 million in investment and development aid per year and aims to increase this amount by \$36.5 million. This [comes on top](#) of the \$500 million in aid promised by Australia, historically the primary security provider along its “[frontier zone](#)”—most notably demonstrated in its interventions in East Timor in 1999 and the Solomon Islands in 2003. Increased Chinese involvement has spurred Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to [expand Australian investments and development aid](#) in the South Pacific.

From a military perspective, the United States recognizes Oceania’s geographic importance. The United States and Australia [plan](#) to jointly develop a naval base on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. The 2019 American withdrawal from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) treaty [enables it](#) to station more ballistic missile capabilities in the region. To that end, the Trump administration [appears willing](#) to consider several locations for a planned increase in its standoff cruise missile deployments in the Indo-Pacific—perhaps Guam or [Palau](#). [Reports](#) also indicate that the U.S. military seeks to enhance its “layered missile defense system” on [Wake Island](#), the site of an early Pacific War battle.

For its part, Australia’s [2020 Defense Strategic Update reports](#) on its military’s increasing focus on Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands. Without basing closer to China, possibly in the South Pacific, the majority of Australia’s air force likely [could not reach](#) a potential battlefield in the South China Sea. As such, the *Update* also stipulates that Australia will “prioritize our immediate region for the ADF’s geographical focus the area ranging from the north-eastern Indian Ocean through maritime and mainland South East Asia to Papua New Guinea and the South West Pacific,” and it highlights how “strategic competition, primarily between the



United States and China, will be the principal driver of strategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific.” To meet the threat, Australia [will also invest in long-range ballistic missile capabilities](#).

## The Strategic Alignment of Oceania

Despite these Chinese and U.S.-Australian initiatives, the strategic alignment of the Pacific nations remains in flux due to the preferences and agency of Oceania’s independent countries. Considering their autonomy as independent nations, Oceania’s countries and people will arguably play an even more pivotal role in great power competition today than they did in the Pacific War. In a distinct mirror to the Yap Island dispute from 1919 to 1922, the great powers of the contemporary Pacific already struggle in peacetime over influence and access.

Local politics and interests can significantly alter the balance of power. In December 2019, voters on the Pacific island of Bougainville [overwhelmingly returned a vote in favor of independence](#) from Papua New Guinea. Although the voting outcome of a small island riven with a history of internal conflict appears strategically unimportant, this island is once again a [key battleground](#) in [international competition between China and the U.S.-Australia alliance](#). Recognizing the risk of unchecked Chinese influence in Bougainville, the United States [moved quickly to fund](#) the island’s independence vote. Even so, the coming independence of the island [offers potential leverage and opportunities](#) for Chinese [investments in infrastructure](#) down the road.

Elsewhere in Oceania, China has gained ground. Some islands, incensed at the United States’ withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, [cite climate change as a driver of alignment with China](#). Even in the American-associated Marshall

Islands, poor relations [threatens](#) greater avenues for Chinese involvement. Over the past few decades, [China has fostered ties and economic investments in the U.S.-aligned Freely Associated States](#) of Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands, thereby presenting a long-term threat to American access. In September 2019, a [secretive deal](#) between a Chinese company close to the CCP and the local government on Tulagi Island, a constituent part of the Solomon Islands, provided an exclusive lease on development rights to the island. The agreement specified that the Chinese company could construct several facilities, including an airport and petrochemical terminal. After local outcry and concern from the United States, the Solomon Islands central government [announced the illegality of the deal and its termination](#), a move that [China accepted despite its criticism of the United States’ role in the affair](#). With its [concerted diplomatic and political campaigns](#), China continues to undermine the United States and Australia in the region and gain victories, most notably the [loss of two](#) of Taiwan’s few remaining allies in 2019.

At the same time, increasing Chinese investment in the region does not guarantee political alignment or future military outposts ala the [Djibouti base](#). For instance, [long-term instability](#) in the Solomon Islands may seemingly open up avenues for Chinese advantage, but [widespread anti-China riots](#) in 2006 demonstrate the risk of upsetting local populations. At the 2018 Pacific Islands Forum, a Chinese delegate [demanded precedence in speaking over Tuvalu’s prime minister](#), an act that prompted allegations of [bullying and criticism from Nauru’s President Baron Waga](#). A risk-averse and nationalistic China could unwittingly become alienated if not careful.

Although New Zealand [largely avoids directly confronting China](#) due to strong bilateral ties and signed a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#)



in 2014, New Zealand's role in Oceania is also important to consider in the context of great power competition. [In regional defense and national security policy](#), New Zealand has been less willing to acknowledge the security threat from China, and ongoing differences with Australia and the United States remain roadblocks to closer military ties. However, New Zealand, [like Australia](#), [increasingly deals](#) with the [threat from Chinese influence](#) and [has moved to address it quietly while maintaining cooperative ties](#) with China. Additionally, the government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has [enhanced New Zealand's already-significant involvement and development aid](#) in the Pacific. During the COVID-19 pandemic, New Zealand pledged to retool its substantial—[\\$2.2 billion NZD from 2018 to 2021](#)—aid program in the Pacific [to address public health](#). As a Pacific power, a member of the Five Eyes intelligence grouping, and a longstanding ally of the United States and Australia, New Zealand will potentially find itself drawn into the burgeoning great power competition over Oceania and can play a crucial role as a primary supporter of regional development.

Ultimately, as [Oceania increasingly exerts its agency and works together as a regional grouping](#) to advance local policy interests and development goals, the strategic alignment of the Pacific Islands remains in flux. Looking back towards the Pacific War experience, China, the United States, and Australia will have to remember and recognize Oceania's own preferences and interests to a greater extent than in the 1940s if they wish to find the necessary support for their geopolitical ambitions from within the region. As illustrated with the Yap Island controversy in the early twentieth century, the struggle for influence and access amongst great powers begins long before any armed conflict.

## Looking Back to Go Forward

Looking back to the Pacific War experience in Oceania, Imperial Japan caught the US and Australia flat-footed in 1941, and Xi's China threatens to outmaneuver them again in the struggle for predominance in the Indo-Pacific. The advent of long-range standoff missiles greatly extends the geographic extent of the Pacific battlespace compared to World War II, but Oceania's islands will likely once again play an increasingly important role as strategic basing locations. Furthermore, Chinese [consolidation](#) in the South China Sea and its rapidly expanding capabilities indicate the frontlines of U.S.-Australian competition with China could reach into the second island chain within the coming decades. China clearly understands the importance of the Pacific Islands, and American and Australian policymakers would do well to remember the region's lessons from the Pacific War. Despite its remoteness and relative lack of population, Oceania's geography and the assistance of their people could provide pivotal advantages in a potential Pacific military conflict. In 1919, the dispute over Yap Island heralded the island-hopping of the Pacific War. In 2020, Bougainville, Kiribati, Tulagi, or Vanuatu could warn of future conflict between the U.S.-Australia alliance and China.

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