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GUAM: AN INCIPIENT PULPIT OF STRATEGIC RIVALRY

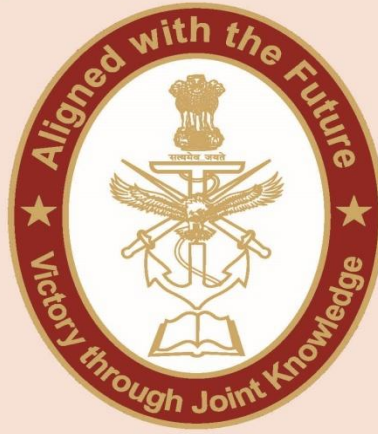
MS RITIKA SHARON

Short-range
missiles

Mid-range
missiles


Guam

CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

GUAM: AN INCIPIENT PULPIT OF STRATEGIC RIVALRY



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Introduction

The Guam (Guåhan) Island is an integral part of US' presence in the Pacific Ocean as it became a territory in 1898 placing it under the US Navy.¹ The island's strategic location, historical operations and proximity to the Asian continent provides the US access to various fronts making it an indispensable location in the Pacific Ocean for US Airforce and Navy facilities, with a major front for power projection. The recent Chinese provocative activity and US's inhibitions in the region, makes the island a hotspot for an analysis about their future relations. This 'tip of the (American) spear'² is lately undergoing an ineluctable sharpening.

Its proximity to the Asian continent makes it a vulnerable spot from China, especially. Considering China's claims and regular patrolling across the South China Sea, Guam is definitely a location they would use to disrupt, and engage the US. Recently, there has been a huge influx of Chinese tourists in the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI)³, which is a cause of concern for the US, as Guam is the southernmost island of Mariana archipelago. The naval base's operational capability and its distance

from the mainland US makes the latter somewhat uncomfortable, recognising its vulnerability. Even, the recent ballistic missile interception over Guam⁴ has thrust the island to the geopolitical spotlight, and it could be considered a vital point of contention accounting for the investments of the US in the stronghold of Guam.

The critical US military presence, Guam being an important chokepoint for underwater sea cables, its rich marine ecosystem and its strategic location apart from being a tourist spot which is one of the most important local sources of income- makes the island a high value target.

This paper will also try to cover the impact of Guam being in the midst of Beijing-Washington tensions due to South China Sea escalations, and its likely ripple effect for the latter's geopolitical ambitions in the Indo Pacific, eventually affecting India.

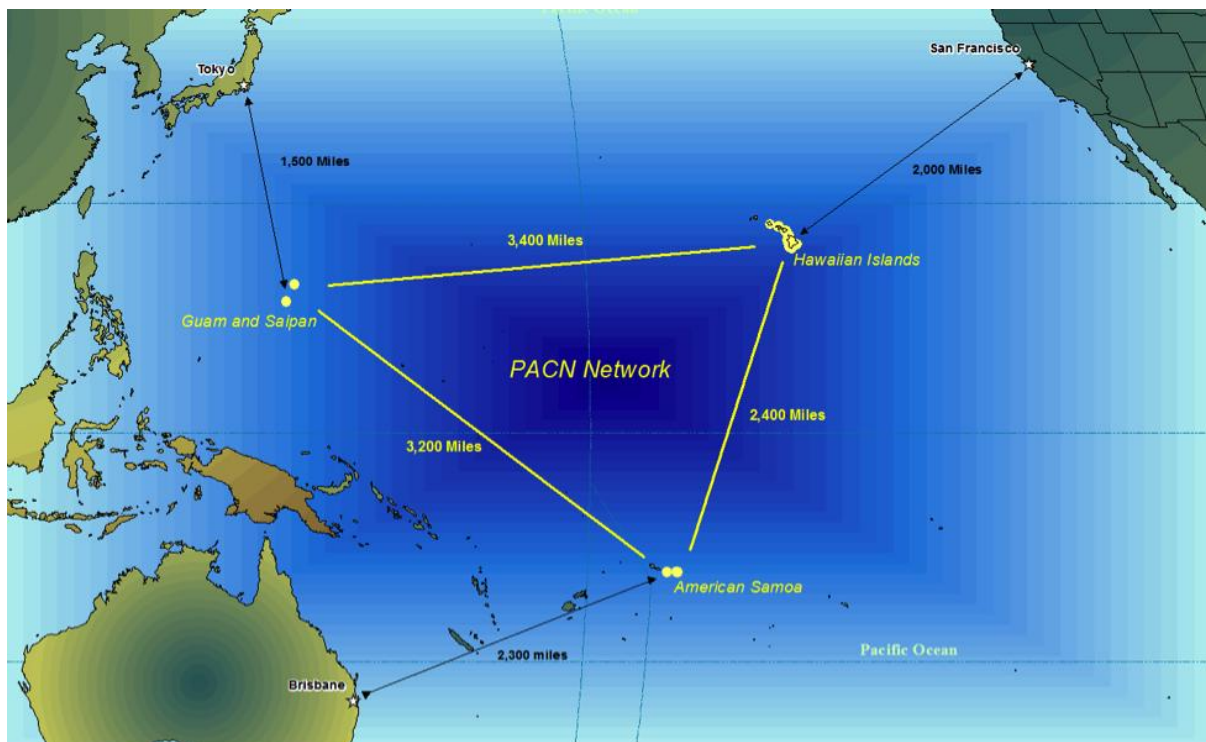
Lighthouse for the US

The US last year concluded Agile Reaper, an Agile Combat Employment exercise on Guam and Tinian which is defined as a “strategic and important exercise that is meant to rehearse capabilities in increasing survivability while generating combat power”.⁵ Tinian is the infamous island from where ‘Fat Man’ and ‘Little Boy’ were once launched⁶, so it holds a historic and slightly complex power projection significance for the US. Its location poses a threat to critical infrastructures on the island, but provides enough geographical leverage for the US to gauge its presence near its allies in the South China Sea.

In the middle of the ocean, Guam is part of the Pacific Area Communication Node (PACN) network under the Defence Information Systems Network (DISN), further under Defence Information Systems Agency (DISA) which enables information superiority and critical communication, the island is considered a core of Department of Defence (DOD) Information Network (DODIN)⁷. This network is responsible for supporting government conversations and helping the internet run smoothly. This ecosystem of complex infrastructure is essential not only for the US but for its mission partners to gain vantage over the adversary in full spectrum of various military operations across all domains.⁸ Hence, Guam's strategic location and existing facilities

is integral to relaying data, communication and network connectivity across the Indo-Pacific.

Washington's involvement in the recent wars has not only overwhelmed its resources but has also instilled a fear amongst its allies like Taiwan, Philippines and Guam as to how far will the former go to protect its interests. The recent political shift and Trump 2.0's vision could very well consider to renege said dependents under the garb of prioritising domestic economic interests citing the monetary involvement in global affairs. Guam might remain unaffected until the high value target is compromised, and subsequently the regional instability would be unfathomable.



Source: Pacific Island National Parks⁹

Guam is also a natural hub and gateway for most extensive trans-Pacific telecommunications infrastructures.¹⁰ It is a vital point of underwater sea cables connecting Asia with the US. Google too has plans to land subsea cables on the island¹¹ making this digital hub a larger target for internet disruptions which can bring any nation to a halt.

This network underscores the strategic significance of the area making it a compelling target for disruptions. With the advancements in Chinese missile development, it is only natural for the US to become wary that it could be a target if push comes to

shove.¹² The Pacific Deterrence Initiative is a key subset of the efforts that US plans to undertake to strengthen deterrence against PRC explicitly.¹³ With this, the US plans to emplace missile defences in the region over the next decade which will now begin hastily.

Hotspot for China

Chinese tourists have been allegedly visiting the region as part of a “birth tourism” destination¹⁴ which is how the demographics of a region has been historically changed favouring a certain nation. These tactics can later be flagged as a security threat by the US, until then it works in favour of China and can be leveraged as information gathering points. Let alone, the incremental increase of military presence in the region which already concerns the US and its allies.

Even though, US-China relations will determine the course of say, communication lines, we also need to pay attention to other South Asian stakeholders and their determination to prioritise their digital agendas. Strategically, the underwater sea cables are a vital global infrastructure by the lens of national security.¹⁵ US’s inhibitions are already taxing for the industry, as it insists on rerouting from South China Sea, while it also tries to lobby hard to dissuade countries from opting for Chinese suppliers.¹⁶ Recently, Chinese vessels have been notoriously involved and considered prime suspects for allegedly cutting internet cables in the Baltic¹⁷, which if repeated near the Pacific Islands should not come as a surprise. China is well aware and as recent reports suggest, ever more prepared to counteract US’s initiations from the region to rescue Taiwan if things were to escalate.

Amid delays in recent negotiations between the United States and Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands on the terms of the renewal of the Compacts of Free Association (COFA), the regional power balance has tilted in favour of China as a reliable, stable developmental partner.¹⁸ Chinese investments and consistent presence would in turn, have dramatic geopolitical ramifications.

Look ‘Further’ East for India

From “Look East” to “Act East”, the Indian foreign policy has made it very clear that it certainly, cannot “look away”. The Pacific Islands were not given due attention mainly because of the distance, but as globalisation picked up some pace, India can be seen diversifying its interests. One of the most significant engagements includes the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), a multilateral platform established by India in 2014 to enhance cooperation with the Pacific Island countries. India considers these nations as part of its vision in the Indo Pacific. India’s low economic footprint is the main reason for the increased engagement in the region.

While Guam has the potential to be a point of contention someday, India will only be affected indirectly. Apart from remoteness, India has less stakes beyond the South China Sea. Albeit, the region facilitates for 55% of India’s trade¹⁹ which consequently risks being jeopardised. Globalisation thrives on trade routes, hence securing them, when the world watches Guam being compromised should be the paramount concern for India.

India’s commitment to Quad members was showcased by INS Shivalik visit to Guam for RIMPAC in 2024.²⁰ It furthers India’s engagement and preparedness in the Pacific Ocean as a reliable military power. These occasional outreach efforts project maritime capabilities to enhance “Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)” hinting India’s readiness for “Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HADR)” which is a confidence-building instrument.

On the diplomatic front, PM Narendra Modi’s landmark visit broke the dry spell with the region²¹ renewing India’s regional position. This will definitely have a lasting impact in shaping regional security. Since then, the 12-step action plan to propel India’s partnership with PIC is a step in the right direction.²² Furthermore, India is evidently committed to catalyse clean energy supply chains in the Indo-Pacific. This includes Fiji in a Project Implementation Agreement (PIA) signed with International Solar Alliance (ISA)²³ fostering implementable climate action in the region, while encouraging for space research and satellite monitoring. Hence, India has managed to identify and engage with the region effectively.

Moving forward at upcoming FIPIC Summits, a broader crosscutting discussion on technology highlighting the safety and integrity of underwater sea cables would prove to be the perfect intersection of foreign affairs and climate crisis. India hopes to gain some footing with the Pacific Islands with focused engagements beyond QUAD, which can be on marine resources. India's development is tilting towards a trade-based approach which is reliant on deeper global engagements hence, it cannot ignore the Pacific Island nations and can work towards building a dedicated climate crisis focused ecosystem.

Conclusion

The US-China rivalry is not deep into Guam at the moment, but the island has the potential of turning into a likely flashpoint. The US' vulnerabilities in the island are not easy to tap into, but there are various steps that China can take to distract US which would delay its response and eventually, cause instability in the region.

Not entirely specific to Guam but in the region, India can identify and communicate submarine cables as critical infrastructures, because it is the backbone of connectivity and communications. Guam acts as one of the most important focal points for these connections, hence investing around it to secure this chokepoint can be considered as the foundation of strategic gravity. Active handholding of renewable energy plants under the FIPIC agenda can also help ensure better relations in the region while maintaining a close proximity in times of instability to best leverage soft power diplomacy.

With the changing nature of warfare, US-China rivalry also seems to evolve. If US tries to intervene protecting its allies through Guam, to what would be considered a third-party involvement by China in its backyard, we can only assume how it will impact the global supply chain primarily, and then the inevitable global financial implosion could be better analysed. This topic would then remain redundant if Guam is compromised, and only the ripple effect moving further would be a better indicator of the unfolding dynamics in the world.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

Endnotes

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