Deterring China in the South Pacific
Send in the Seabees

CDR T O D D M O U L T O N, US NAVY

Abstract

This article contends that the US Navy should increase investment in “soft” capabilities such as civil affairs and the Seabees to effectively deter China in the Pacific. It asserts that the expanding influence of China in the South Pacific poses a threat to US military logistics and access. The author proposes the revival of Navy civil affairs units to establish connections with Pacific island nations through infrastructure projects and partnerships, thereby countering China’s growing regional influence.

Furthermore, the article advocates for the expansion of the Seabees, emphasizing the construction of civilian infrastructure to enhance island economies while simultaneously establishing austere bases to support US forces in potential conflicts. The article underscores that allocating resources to these softer capabilities offers a cost-effective strategy to mitigate China’s ambitions and reinforce US deterrence. The combined approach of outreach and infrastructure readiness is depicted as crucial for effective strategic competition.

***

The US Navy ought to increase investments in “soft” naval capabilities to deter China in the Pacific. China’s growing ties to governments in the South Pacific could weaken the Navy’s ability to project “hard power” by allowing China to disrupt logistical support to US forces. The Navy’s dependence on long-distance logistics for engaging with China in conflict would necessitate relying on regional nations. The refusal of the Solomon Islands to permit a US Coast Guard vessel entry into its port indicates a potential future where China’s influence restricts US “hard” power. Alongside building and deploying naval platforms, the US Navy should revitalize its civil affairs capabilities and expand the Seabees. These groups’ presence in the Indo-Pacific area would serve dual purposes: constructing infrastructure, cultivating rapport with local populations, and countering Chinese influence. Civil affairs and the Seabees would build edu-

cational, economic, and military related-infrastructure, and interact and grow goodwill with indigenous groups, demonstrating the United States’ commitment to the region. Concomitantly, the two groups could scout and construct austere bases to enable the joint force to rapidly move throughout the region during conflict and frustrate Chinese attempts to target the force with antiship and ballistic missiles.

Over the past 16 years, Beijing’s trade, aid, diplomatic, economic, and military outreach to the South Pacific steadily grew, expanding China’s regional influence. China’s bilateral trade with the South Pacific now surpasses Australia’s economic exchanges. Moreover, Beijing channeled close to USD 1.5 billion aid dollars into the Pacific islands via grants and loans, which accounted for 8 percent of all foreign aid these island nations. While this percentage does not elevate China to the status of a prominent foreign donor for the region, Beijing’s approach to aid focuses on investing in substantial infrastructure projects through concessional loans. This approach stands out among Pacific Island foreign donors and could potentially put host countries and other regional players at a disadvantage. This strategy aligns with China’s global employment of “debt trap diplomacy,” a practice where China entices countries with substantial loans for various projects. Often, these loans are difficult for countries to repay, enabling China to gain control over crucial national assets, such as power grids or ports. Notably, three Pacific nations—Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu—rank among the most indebted countries to Beijing. China’s gradual expansion in the region raises concerns for the economic ties of the United States and its allies with the South Pacific.

Though China’s recent overtures through the country’s “Chin-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision” yielded little success, the country continues a steady encroachment into the region. Washington noted Beijing’s decade-long overt influence campaign and announced the United States’ commitment to open Kiribati and Tonga diplomatic missions along with reopening the US Embassy in Solomon Islands. Additionally, the United States signaled its intent to triple the nation’s aid to the region, send an inaugural envoy to the region’s Pacific Islands Forum, and reestablished the US Agency for International

3 Pryke, “The Risks of China’s Ambitions in the South Pacific.”
4 Pryke, “The Risks of China’s Ambitions in the South Pacific.”
6 Rajah, Dayant, and Pryke, “Ocean of Debt?”
Development mission in Fiji.\(^8\) The Navy should align with the US diplomatic push through reinvigorating the service’s civil affairs capabilities to counter Chinese influence and cultivate relations with the indigenous peoples.

Military civil affairs' missions have evolved over time, yet their core competencies remain concentrated on integrating between military and nonmilitary spheres. Civil affairs significantly contribute to civil-military operations, encompassing tasks such as population and resource control, foreign humanitarian assistance, nation assistance, support to civil administration, and civil information management.\(^9\) Historically, civil affairs entered areas after conflicts to reestablish order and enable host countries to rebuild institutions and economic livelihoods.\(^10\) However, in the strategic competition paradigm, especially in the South Pacific, civil affairs should collaborate with US diplomatic efforts to establish relations with friendly or neutral countries well before any conflict, thereby regaining US influence. Due to the maritime elements in the region, naval civil affairs is the ideal candidate to deploy en masse, initiating interactions with local officials to maintain and develop what RAND’s Derek Grossman termed as the region’s “benefit of the doubt” toward US intentions.\(^11\)

In 2014, the Navy disbanded the Maritime Civil Affairs and Security Training (MCAST) command, transferring its responsibilities to other Department of Defense agencies.\(^12\) The command had a 300-person force, evenly divided between active and reserve duty, and had most recently operated in Afghanistan to aid local officials in rebuilding civil institutions and fostering relations with leaders.\(^13\) The Navy provided minimal public justification for disbanding MCAST and shifted the generation of maritime civil affairs forces to a request for forces (RFF) model. Under this paradigm, commanders needing civil affairs support could request a tailored package for their missions. They could also rely on the Army or Marine Corps for civil affairs assistance.\(^14\) Neither scenario is advantageous for the maritime-centric South Pacific as the United States seeks to rapidly counter China’s advances in the region.

\(^8\) Grossman, “China’s Pacific Push Is Backfiring.”
\(^10\) Zakem, “Charting the Course for Civil Affairs,” 2.
\(^13\) Zakem, “Charting the Course for Civil Affairs,” 6.
Developing maritime expertise in civil affairs takes time, and relying on an RFF model to maintain a continuous presence would strain the naval reserve. Additionally, this RFF approach could likely constrain the ability of reserve individuals to redeploy, hindering the establishment of enduring rapport with local populations as they try to transition back to civilian life. The Navy needs a substantial level of institutional knowledge to ensure preparedness for competition against China in operations beneath the threshold of war. The reestablishment of naval civil affairs provides the Navy with an excellent capability to gain influence and access strategically important ports and facilities, all at a fraction of the cost of constructing a new aircraft carrier. Moreover, civil affairs would probably enhance the favorability and receptiveness of South Pacific host countries toward the United States due to the units’ softer military demeanor and inclination to contribute positively to local lives. These strengthening and warming ties could serve as a core element of Washington’s deterrence strategy against Chinese expansion in the Pacific Ocean.

Furthermore, while dependence on the Army and/or Marine Corps remains feasible, their expertise lies outside the maritime environment. Naval civil affairs would be well-suited to aid South Pacific governments, which heavily rely on the sea for economic and societal sustenance. Maritime civil affairs would tackle a distinct set of challenges compared to their land-based counterparts, focusing on the development and maintenance of fisheries and aquaculture. Additionally, naval civil affairs would concentrate on maritime economic growth, including assisting countries in establishing and refining their shipping and extractive industries. The units could also support the implementation of host nation search-and-rescue capabilities and the creation of tsunami warning systems. Another domain where naval civil affairs could aid South Pacific nations is environmental management and the safeguarding of sensitive maritime ecosystems from military activities and unregulated economic practices. Although the Army and/or Marine Corps possess capabilities for these activities, they would likely struggle to provide native populations with the same level of maritime expertise as Navy personnel trained for nautical environments. While Navy civil affairs could engage directly with South Pacific nations, embedding civil affairs with the Navy Seabees could amplify goodwill toward the United States to an unprecedented level.

The Navy Seabees played a pivotal role in the South Pacific during the US campaign to defeat the Japanese throughout World War II. Amid the conflict, the Seabees repaired airfields following enemy attacks, converted inhospitable marshlands into deep-water harbors, and constructed supply roads to facilitate the transportation of men and material to frontline units fighting the Japanese. By the war’s conclusion, the Seabees, numbering 325,000 members who served from
1941–1945, had built 111 major airstrips, 441 piers, and more than 400 advanced bases in Europe and the Pacific, at a cost equivalent to 180 billion in today’s dollars.\(^{15}\) In comparison, the Seabees now consist of 8,546 individuals and represent only a small fraction of the Navy’s budget.\(^{16}\) Returning to the Seabees’ World War II levels is unnecessary to support a soft deterrence strategy against China in the South Pacific. However, by canceling one future Arleigh Burke-class destroyer and subsequently reinvesting the funds into additional Seabee construction battalions and associated resources for aiding South Pacific nations, the Navy could expand US regional influence and significantly hinder or reverse Beijing’s advances, surpassing the impact of a single ship. The United States could channel the Seabees and embedded civil affairs’ efforts toward constructing civilian and economic infrastructure. Civil affairs could assess local governments’ needs to enhance the livelihoods of native populations and then employ the Seabees to conduct these requested projects. Such US initiatives would likely foster goodwill within the communities, alleviating the trust deficit resulting from years of US neglect toward the region. Furthermore, these enhancements to civilian institutions and infrastructure would facilitate the integration of these nations into the global economy and enable more comprehensive engagement with global institutions and trade.

Concurrently, the Seabees and civil affairs could build or renovate maritime- or air-related lines of communication to serve US military requirements in the event of a conflict with Beijing. The Chinese are probably aware of the primary military bases the United States would operate from during hostilities between Beijing and Washington. However, the Seabees and civil affairs could enhance the US Marine Corps’ (USMC) Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) or US Air Forces’ (USAF) Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concepts by constructing austere bases and ensuring the integrity of supply lines for USMC or USAF use during a war.\(^{17}\) The EABO and ACE designs center on the requirement to quickly set up and breakdown Spartan bases to enable operations and avoid detection before Chinese sensors identify these forces. The Seabees would


also need to concentrate on logistical nodes to ensure the Navy could resupply its frontline ship with fuel, stores, and ammunition. The Seabees and civil affairs efforts to create hundreds to thousands of bare-bone outposts ready for EABO and/or ACE use throughout the South Pacific would also complicate Beijing’s ability to monitor, track, and target US forces prior to and during hostilities. The dual-track employment of maritime civil affairs and the Seabees, with their emphases on maturing relations with native people, while preparing to facilitate rotational basing for wartime, would make them a vital cornerstone to employ US soft power to deter China’s diplomatic or military maneuvers.

The US Navy can align with Washington’s South Pacific diplomatic reengagement and construct military infrastructure for a potential regional conflict through the resurrection of Navy civil affairs and the augmentation of the Seabees. These organizations possess the capacity to cultivate positive and symbiotic relationships with various South Pacific countries by constructing governmental and economic infrastructure and institutions. The goodwill established by building new schools, roads, ports, and other vital governmental and economic projects would likely aid the United States in curbing China’s advances in the region. Moreover, these island nations offer the potential for the United States to establish hundreds, if not thousands, of small forward operating bases to execute the military’s various war-fighting strategies in a conflict with China. Civil affairs and the Seabees represent a softer and more cost-effective approach to enhancing the US image in the South Pacific and deterring Chinese ambitions.

The military’s preoccupation with hard power to counter Beijing’s Pacific aspirations is precarious due to the challenges posed by distance and the United States’ dependence on well-established supply and repair hubs, as well as extended logistical lines. The Navy must transcend its fixation on constructing ships and aircraft and incorporate alternative approaches to dissuade the Chinese, approaches that would likely yield greater impact at a lower cost.

**CDR Todd Moulton, US Navy**

Commander Moulton is the officer in charge at Joint Reserve Intelligence Center near Detroit, Michigan. He is also an Information Warfare (IW) Warfare Tactics Instructor (WTI). He is a graduate of the Air Command and Staff College OLMP, National Intelligence University, Seton Hall University, and University of Michigan.

**Disclaimer:** The views and opinions expressed or implied in the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.