This In Brief is the second in a two-part series on the Pacific Island leaders’ speeches delivered at the 75th session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September 2020. While the first paper focused on Pacific leaders’ shared concerns, part two examines the special concerns (see Table 1 in part one) raised by some Pacific Island countries (PICs) and their relevance to regional geopolitics. In particular, this analysis will focus on China-related issues in the context of growing geopolitical competition between traditional world powers and China, including the US–China rivalry, China–Taiwan competition and the reform of the UN Security Council (UNSC).

**Special concerns**

The fast-growing US–China rivalry in the Pacific was mentioned by the leaders of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Marshall Islands and Palau. This is unsurprising as these three northern PICs are the focus of the US in the region. Under compacts of free association, the US has exclusive access to land and waterways of the three PICs, indicating their strategic importance to the US. These special arrangements have become a double-edged sword for the PICs. They serve as a solid foundation for the countries to foster cooperation, but hinder their efforts to develop a closer relationship with China, if they should so want, in the context of US–China competition. This is exactly what is occurring at the moment for FSM — and the three PICs are divided in their desire for relationships with China.

FSM President David Panuelo spent a whole section of his UN speech on the US–China issue, calling for a détente between the two powers. He warned that the competitive activities of the US and China: potentially threaten to fracture long standing alliances within our Pacific Family, and could become counterproductive to our collective desire for Regional solidarity, security, and stability.

Therefore, President Panuelo asked PIC leaders and external powers "to remain focused and true to the "collective goals" that UNITE us, and not unilateral interests that may surely DIVIDE us in the long term'. This position is sensible, as FSM has forged close ties with both the US and China, focusing on security and economic cooperation, respectively. It would be difficult for FSM to choose a side.

This quandary, however, has proven less difficult for Marshall Islands and Palau. As both countries have no diplomatic relations with China, siding with the US is a rational option. In his UN speech, Palau’s President Tommy Remengesau highlighted his country’s close relations with the US, Japan, Australia and southern development partners, excluding China. Similarly, President David Kabua pledged to deepen Marshall Islands’ security cooperation with democratic partners against ‘the forceful influence of larger powers’, alluding to China. He also slammed China implicitly over human rights, saying:

The Marshall Islands is particularly concerned that not all are held to full account for human rights obligations — and systematic violations, including those of the largest powers … we find unacceptable the persistent efforts to rewrite basic human dignity into an alleged ‘win win’ language which devalues individual rights.

The 2020 UN General Assembly debates provided an opportunity for Taiwan’s diplomatic allies to voice their support, as they do every year. Leaders from Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau and Tuvalu applauded the exemplary role Taiwan has played in fighting COVID-19, expressed appreciation for its assistance to the Pacific and supported its inclusion in the UN system. Meanwhile, FSM and China’s new allies in the Pacific — Kiribati and Solomon Islands — stated their appreciation to China for assistance. For example, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare thanked China (and Australia) for building Solomon Islands’ in-country COVID-19 testing capacity.

The issue of UNSC reform was brought up by leaders of FSM, Marshall Islands, PNG and Samoa, though each using a slightly different tone. Since 2005, Brazil, Germany, India and Japan have made consistent efforts in their bid as a group for permanent seats at a reformed UNSC and lobbied for support worldwide, including in the Pacific. In their UN speeches, the
prime ministers of PNG and Samoa called for the UNSC to increase its transparency, representativeness and accountability, but did not name the countries they will support. Samoa stressed the need to increase the number of both permanent and non-permanent members of the UNSC. Samoa and Marshall Islands also supported the move to text-based negotiations in a push for progress. In contrast, FSM explicitly supported Japan, Germany, Brazil and India to become the UNSC’s new permanent members.

Implications

Recent developments suggest that US–China geopolitical competition is likely to intensify in the Pacific. In August 2020, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper paid his first ever visit to Palau, a trip to showcase the US’s commitment to strengthened security cooperation with Palau and the wider region. In return, President Remengesau openly invited the US to establish a military base in his country. Negotiations between the US and the three PICs over renewing the economic provisions of the compacts of free association have received substantial support from the US government. The Trump administration has also increased security cooperation with like-minded traditional powers in the Indo-Pacific region. In early October 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with his counterparts from Australia, India and Japan (known as ‘the Quad’) in Tokyo and urged the group to guard against the Chinese Communist Party’s ‘exploitation, corruption and coercion’. All the ministers pledged to step up coordination to safeguard a rules-based Indo-Pacific in order to maintain regional stability. This conference was criticised by the Chinese for ‘forming exclusive cliques … targeting third parties or undermining third parties’ interests’.

China–Taiwan and China–US competitions are becoming increasingly interrelated. In recent years, the US government has deepened its cooperation with Taiwan. For example, Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar and Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Keith Krach visited Taiwan in August and September 2020, respectively, despite strong opposition from China. US officials have also opposed the switch of Taiwan’s diplomatic allies such as Solomon Islands to China. It is likely that the US will provide more open support to Taiwan in consolidating the latter’s diplomatic ties with Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau and Tuvalu. In response, China is likely to use its aid and trade programs to look for a breakthrough change in allegiance.

Brazil, Germany, India and Japan’s renewed campaigns for UNSC reform will be a new focus of competition between these countries and China. China’s main target will still be Japan, and probably India as well. Out of historical and strategic concerns, China has vociferously opposed Japan being granted a permanent seat at the UNSC. As such, it has lobbied actively against Japan in the Pacific. This competition could intensify in the near future. As the strategic competition between China and India has become more prominent in recent years, largely fuelled by their border disputes and India’s closer ties with the US, it is unclear whether China will change its position of not objecting to India’s bid. Such a change will undoubtedly intensify the two emerging superpowers’ lobby campaigns in the Pacific, which could increase PICs’ leverage but threaten regional solidarity. This will add to the complexity of regional geopolitics.

Looking into the future, PICs will be increasingly entangled in great power competition. While Taiwan's four allies (Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau and Tuvalu) have seemingly thrown their support behind the US and Taiwan (and other traditional powers), for the other 10 PICs, maintaining a balanced position between traditional partners and China will be a difficult task. It will involve a number of factors, including historical relations, economic benefits and strategic security. The aforementioned plea by FSM for the US–China détente could be one idea supported by some PICs, but if the US–China rivalry spirals into open confrontations, side-taking may be more difficult to avoid.

Author notes

Denghua Zhang is a research fellow at ANU’s Department of Pacific Affairs.