The politics of development in Palau

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Abstract

Purpose – The Republic of Palau in the Micronesian region of the Pacific illuminates the complexities of how the political geography of development is shaped through diplomacy, defense and migration policy. The Compact of Free Association (COFA) between Palau and the US has been a topic of debate and for some resistance.

Design/methodology/approach – Through discursive analysis of grey literature and post-development and political geography frameworks, this paper analyzes the way in which development, through unconventional pathways, is used to exert power by Palau's largest donor, the US.

Findings – The donor–recipient, government-to-government framework fails to explore the ways in development is used as power through military operations, zonal capitalism, redefined citizenship and tourism as new aid modalities. These graduated sovereignties in Palau show that political geography is taking shape through new pathways of development, which has resulted in more actors, institutions and discourses.

Originality/value – With limited research on the region of Micronesia and particularly the politics of development, this paper contributes important analysis to the lead up to the COFA renewal negotiations between the US and Palau in 2024.

Keywords China, Compact of free association, US development, Micronesia, Pacific, Oceania

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Today's aid regimes are far more than what appears on the surface. In fact, many donor–recipient relationships speak to the shifting realities of political geography. The Republic of Palau in the Micronesian region of the Pacific illuminates the complexities of what many understand as simple donor—recipient relationships and provides insight into how the geographies of development are shaped through diplomacy, defense and migration policies. Palau's largest donor, the US, provides an opportunity to analyze the ways in which development, through unconventional pathways, is used to exert power in varying spaces. Looking at the US–Palau relations, this paper will explore how development has come to shape sovereignty at different levels and alter political geography.

The diplomatic relationship between the US and Palau is defined in a Compact of Free Association (COFA). The agreement grants full authority for security and defense matters to the US in exchange for direct economic assistance and immigration privileges for Palauan citizens (Gootnick, 2016). There are three countries in Micronesia that have COFAs with the US: Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and the Republic of Palau. Although the COFAs are quite similar, the diverging paths of ratification and implementation make Palau a standout case of resistance. While the COFA with RMI and FSM was enacted in 1986, the COFA with Palau did not enter into force until 1994 (Gootnick, 2016). Palauan resistance at the civil society and governmental level has

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characterized the relationship between the US and Palau since the disintegration of the UN Trust Territory, which was the former political arrangement post-Second World War. This resistance allows for greater analysis of the ways in which actors at different levels involved in development shape political geography beyond the typical donor–recipient framework.

Although financial assistance and immigration privileges are major pieces of the COFA for the people of Micronesia, there are clear US interests in maintaining the political arrangement. For this reason, the RMI ambassador has argued against the US calling the COFAs "foreign assistance" and supports "foreign relations" as a more fitting term (Friberg and Holen, 2001). This is further to the conclusion of this paper that the rules of development are much more complex than one wealthy country sending aid to a poor country, and particularly so in the case of the US and Palau. In many cases, such as this, the complex dynamics of the relationship function to shape and reinforce patterns of sovereignty and political geography.

These underlying dynamics are made visible through a post-development theoretical framework. Post-development asserts the problematic nature of conventional development, which exacerbates inequality and privileges influence and perspectives from the Global North (Simon, 2017). Practically applied, post-development works to tackle the development systems that perpetuate inequality and operates in a space of diverse possibility and political empowerment (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Only by embracing and understanding the political contexts in which development occurs can the gross inequalities between and within countries be addressed. This paper also leans on political geography to highlight the place-based nature of development and resistance to neo-colonialism (Webster, 2006). In this manner, breaking down the complexity of the Palau–US relationship will illuminate areas in which power can be challenged to address inequity in international development.

The Republic of Palau

Palau is a series of islands in the northwestern Pacific in the region commonly known as Micronesia. Its status, in free association with the US, often groups Palau with its neighboring states, RMI and FSM. The grouping is not only of geographic convenience but also of a shared history. During the Second World War, many islands were transformed into battlefields as a part of the Pacific front. After Second World War, the newly created United Nations granted the region, the UN Trust Territory of the Pacific, to the US (Bay-Hansen, 2011). The islands were used by the US military to test nuclear weapons during the Cold War. One of the nuclear tests, which was approximately 700 times more powerful than the atomic bomb used in Hiroshima, caused radioactive fallout to spread to several nearby atolls (Pevec, 2006). Islands in the region were forced to group together in politically convenient arrangements to determine their respective relationships with the US and consequently, the US military. What resulted were states and territories of several different political statuses ranging from US overseas territories to independent states linked by free association agreements (Figure 1).

The geographic context of Palau is significant. The space known as the region of Micronesia has been questionably defined since it was coined in 1987 by a French explorer (Kupferman, 2011). To this day, the region is continually defined by what it is not. Micronesia was defined by the size of the islands, and in essence, by not being Polynesia or Melanesia (Kupferman, 2011). Additionally, the historical context of nuclear testing, displacement and ongoing US military strategic denial have shown Micronesia repeatedly defined by its absence. Compounded by the perception of Micronesia-as-absence, it is also largely absent from scholarship. The result of this is essentially the strategic denial of perception, which *obfuscates* the problematic relationships between the US and islands in

Figure 1.
Palau is located in the northwest Pacific. Hundreds of islands make up the archipelago

the region. It also ignores the agency of Micronesians in shaping their own political geography. Palauans, in particular, are notorious for their agency.

The path to free association with the US was laid out for quasi-independent Palau as it was for the other nations in the former UN Trust Territory. However, the Constitution of Palau required a referendum to pass the COFA with at least 75 per cent approval from Palauans, many of whom took issue with the US military's use of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons (Bedor, 2015). Amidst this US pressure and the consequent pressure from the US-backed Palau Government, there were 22 women whose court case in support of the original Constitution of Palau managed to hold off the Compact for seven years (Bedor, 2015). It took seven referenda and several expressions of the US imperial power to finally pass the COFA (Bedor, 2015). The Compact was eventually enacted in 1994.

Aid regimes, geopolitics and variegated sovereignties

To place the specific example of Palau in the wider context, we must note the history of donor–recipient relations in aid regimes and how they have been constructed. The way aid has changed over time correlates with shifts in development ideologies. The self-determination movements post-Second World War saw a temporary rise in development as a national project (Sidaway, 2007). With the goal of economic growth in terms of GDP, many developing countries adopted economic models suggested by wealthy countries (Murray and Overton, 2016). Political decisions were influenced by the Cold War politics of the era with capitalism and communism head-to-head vying for geographic power around the world. This was the period in which the UN Trust Territory of the Pacific came under the US administration (Bay-Hansen, 2011). As the Cold War closed with a win for capitalism, development shifted toward neoliberalism with donor countries running conditional aid

programs with the goals of widespread economic liberalization, privatization and a reduction in the role of the state (Murray and Overton, 2016).

At the same time, post-development scholars began to raise questions about the ethics and effectiveness of these neoliberal approaches to development (Simon, 2017). The twenty-first century brought a new interest in poverty alleviation with the Millennium Development Goals, but aid programs were still built on trickle-down theories of economics leaving inequality and the redistribution of wealth as major gaps still perpetuating global poverty (Potter and Conway, 2017). The 2008 global financial crisis (GFC) sparked a further evolution in mainstream development ideology marked by a clear shift back to economic growth over poverty alleviation (Murray and Overton, 2016). Although many post-development scholars argue that development has always supported the goals of the wealthy, aid programs from donor countries post-GFC have become more overt in their self-interested agendas including direct links between aid and security (Murray and Overton, 2016).

In the case of the US, security, characterized by military hegemony, is consistently an agenda item in their development programs. After September 11, development became a key feature of security policy alongside defense and diplomacy for the US (de Haan, 2009). In the context of evolving aid regimes, the political structures of the US governing aid are also telling. The US aid program for most countries is run by United States Agency for International Development, which arguably represents an institution intended to be supported by development professionals more independent of political influence (de Haan, 2009). Aid in the freely associated states including Palau, however, is under the authority of the Department of the Interior, with no illusion of political independence.

Palau is clearly a key security interest for the US, and the US Government is weighing just how important it is. In 2017, the US passed the National Defense Authorization Act calling for a strategic assessment of the importance of the freely associated states leading up to the Compact renewal negotiations in 2023 and 2024 (NDAA, 2018). Security is deeply intertwined with aid in the US–Palau relations, but as seen by the historical relations between the two countries, it is never as simple as government-to-government relations. That said, analysis of the political geography of development in Palau must be centered on the "intermingling of global relations, nation-states, and local and regional movements and oppositions" (Slater, 1993).

While realist geopolitical approaches observe the tangible decisions made by states typically related to security and economic interests, critical geopolitical approaches analyze the discourses around these decisions and how states construct conflict and their own strategic priorities (Purcell, 2006). Both approaches are useful; however, political geography adds important elements in understanding the complexity of US–Palau relations. Framing issues with a geopolitical approach is frequently territorializing. Given the spatial complexity of US–Palau relations, the concept of political geography is more useful in broadening the lens (Essex, 2013). With "spatial-analytic, political-economic and postmodern perspectives," political geography de-territorializes relationships and incorporates the social constructivism that reinforces political structures and activities (Webster, 2006).

Mainstream development assessments of aid flows or even military policy analysis could provide some insight into the impact on security in the region and the effectiveness of development assistance; however, "development is increasingly expressed in a heterogeneous and disparate array of interlaced and bounded spaces and projects defying easy categorization" (Sidaway, 2007). The political geography of US–Palau relations has evolved so significantly that a mainstream development approach could miss some of the

obscured features. Fundamentally, sovereignty can no longer be understood in terms of a state's power over its own population. Neoliberalism in the globalized market has given rise to variegated sovereignties in spaces around the world. One example of this is, graduated sovereignty, which is "the differential state treatment of segments of the population in relation to market calculation, thus, intensifying the fragmentation of citizenship already performed by social distinctions of race, ethnicity, gender, class and region" (Ong, 2000). This essay will explore the political geography of Palau through a post-development lens looking, specifically, at the ways in which graduated sovereignties are created and resisted.

"Security" and resistance

The trade-offs for the US in the COFA have been made extremely clear in recent years. Following a series of North Korean ballistic missile tests in 2017, the US informed the Palau Government of its intentions to construct several radar towers in Palau within its Compact rights (Leis, 2017). What followed was a meeting in Honolulu, between US and Palau representatives resulting in the US, pushing the renewal of the Compact and actually authorizing aid funding that had not been authorized since 2009 (Office of the Vice President, 2017). This Compact Review Agreement was approved via the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act, which also included a study on the importance of the COFA for US defense and foreign policy interests (NDAA, 2018, s 1259). In the next situation, when the US needs military access in Palau, whether it is the COFA renewal negotiations in 2024 or an urgent security crisis before then, the NDAA will likely provide support for whatever it takes to maintain that access.

The discourse around the US military actions in Palau reference Palau's security and protection of territorial waters including the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Office of the Vice President, 2017; Leis, 2017). However, the need for these security measures have roots in the US military and economic interests. Further militarization of the Pacific is a persistent priority for the US even beyond of American overseas territories. In a high-level meeting in Tonga in 2012, US representatives discussed not only the expansion of the Tongan Defence Services in combating illegal fishing in Pacific waters but also to expand international peace-keeping operations (Firth, 2013). This example of variegated sovereignties through development is twofold. The creation of EEZs is a product of neoliberalism as an example of the zonal capitalism that produces uneven growth, and still, largely benefits wealthy countries (Sidaway, 2007). Second, the consequent need for security of these areas demonstrates the expanded share of US sovereignty through military power.

Although the US clearly benefits from expanded militarization, the discourse around the Compact often reinforces the conventional donor–recipient relationship particularly with defense provisions that "protect Palau." Palau, however, would not be a target for nuclear attack without the presence of the US military and the EEZ would not need protection without the neoliberal agenda that promoted its creation. In fact, in 2015, the Government of Palau closed 80 per cent of its EEZ to establish a national marine sanctuary (Kotaro, 2017). This speaks to the actual security concerns of Palau, which tend to involve climate-related concerns exemplified by the recent declarations of emergency due to climate-induced water scarcity (Kotaro, 2017). Even then, culpability can be tied to wealthy countries like the US in contributing to climate change, the effects of which are disproportionately felt in poorer countries like Palau.

Regarding the actual interests of Palau, Palauan resistance has been stronger than any other freely associated states, particularly on the issue of nuclearization. The initial Compact hit several points of resistance at both the governmental and civil society level in Palau (Bedor, 2015). At the front lines of the resistance against the US military and nuclearization

was a group of 22 Palauan women (Bedor, 2015). Although the Compact prevailed in the end, these women peace activists held strong for over a decade which kept the US military from its desired universal access to Palau's land and waters (George, 2011). Their efforts were nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1988 (George, 2011). This resistance changed the political geography of Palau and made a statement in the US–Palau relations.

Another way the US expresses governing practices in graduated sovereignties is through the Compact migration policy. Under the Compact, citizens of Palau are able to claim "habitual resident" status at any time, but with important caveats (Gootnick, 2016). The terms and privileges for COFA migrants have been dictated primarily by US negotiators. In the context of increased security alertness post-September 11, negotiators made security a key agenda item for negotiations of immigration provisions. During the 2003 amendment negotiations, they mandated for the first time that passports be used upon entry to the US and demanded that the freely associated states use Compact funds to develop a machine-readable passport scheme for their populations (Underwood, 2003). Further, a US Court of Appeals case (US *v. Terrence 1997*) ruled that the Attorney General has the authority to deport any COFA migrant, who is deemed to be an expense to the public (Dema, 2012). This expression of power is particularly problematic because many citizens of the freely associated states have suffered deleterious health effects caused by the US nuclear testing, lack of health promotion through US aid flows, and US food imports (Ciammachilli *et al.*, 2014).

Further, the rights of COFA migrants are influenced by the security agenda of the US as habitual residents, COFA migrants are not able to access all of the benefits of US citizens, including the access to many social services and enfranchisement, but they are able to serve in the US military (Ciammachilli *et al.*, 2014). A key pathway to full US citizenship is through military service. US citizenship processing is available to non-citizen service members, who have demonstrated "honorable service" for at least one day on active duty during a designated period of military hostilities (Sexton, 2008). If a non-citizen is killed in active duty, their family members are then given the opportunity for citizenship processing (Sexton, 2008). That is to say, one way to be deemed deserving of US citizenship is to risk one's life for the same country, whose military activities function to regulate their own national sovereignty.

"No, I want to be their donor": regional competition for Palau as a geopolitical chess piece

Although incredibly influential, the US is not the only actor involved in development in Palau. The increasing presence of China in the Pacific, along with Japan and Taiwan, has created a geopolitical game of chess around the islands of Palau, and it plays out in spaces far beyond military intervention. The geographic importance of Palau is widely understood. With the history of Second World War and the ongoing conflicts in the South China Sea and tension with North Korea, the Pacific is still very much the Pacific theater for regional hegemons.

The military context is commonly understood in traditional concepts of sovereignty, but the actual competition over Palau plays out through aid, trade and diplomacy, and the Palau Government is keenly aware. For example, at the signing meeting for the Paris Climate Agreement in April 2015, Palau President Remengesau publicly thanked Japan and Taiwan; specifically, for their emergency aid relief in response to a recent drought (Kotaro, 2017). This was a diplomatic gesture to the US and China demonstrating the other offers of aid available to Palau.

With regard to trade, tourism is Palau's largest industry, and it also represents elements of graduated sovereignty through areas of enclaved capitalism (Sidaway, 2007). As Figure 2 illustrates, China accounts for the largest number of tourists to Palau. Aside from a downturn in tourism due to the droughts in 2016, there are diplomatic games behind these numbers. The Chinese Government controls tourism through their approved destinations list for travel agencies. In November 2017, travel agents were reminded that Palau, although popular, is not on the approved list and that agencies would be reprimanded for bookings made to the destination (Beldi, 2018). The move targeted Palau, as one of the few countries still friendly with Taiwan, in hopes of them severing their diplomatic ties (Master, 2018). However, the long-term patterns of Chinese investors and the Belt and Road Initiative tell a different story. Some argue that this pressure on the Palauan tourism industry is an attempt

Figure 2.
Palau's proximity to the South China Sea makes it a strategic base location

to strong-arm Palau into a relationship with China having the 2024 COFA negotiations on the horizon (Master, 2018) (Figure 3).

Beyond the geopolitical games, the response from Palau forces us to think in terms of post-development. President Remengesau has expressed the resistance and sovereignty of Palau by highlighting that despite the economic harm, reduction in tourist arrivals will actually help protect Palau's natural resources (Beldi, 2018). In an interview with Reuters, he said, in regard to the decreased tourism, "it actually made us more determined to seek the policy of quality versus quantity" (Master, 2018). Actions speak even louder than words, given that 80 per cent of the fishing EEZ was made into a marine reserve and the largest tourist attraction, Jellyfish Lake, was closed in 2017 due to the impact of tourists on the aquatic life (Kotaro, 2017; Master, 2018). Palau is a reminder to development and geography scholars that poor, recipient countries are not without agency.

Tourism is not the only unique space in which countries are vying for influence in Palau. There has been a rise in new aid modalities such as language and international student programs characteristic of recent aid regimes (Murray and Overton, 2016). For example, Taiwan's International Cooperation and Development Fund has sponsored Mandarin teachers at the Palau Community College (Shuster, 2012). Japan is also a part of an international student exchange with Palau that appears to be expanding (Office of the President, 2018). These new aid modalities aim to build goodwill and allegiance to the respective donor countries (Murray and Overton, 2016). Although official development assistance can be telling, it is important to look at how and where development is actually taking place. Aid regimes are increasingly self-interested and function outside of the commonly observed aid *paradigm*. It is essential to assess these pathways, as they have ramifications for political geography.

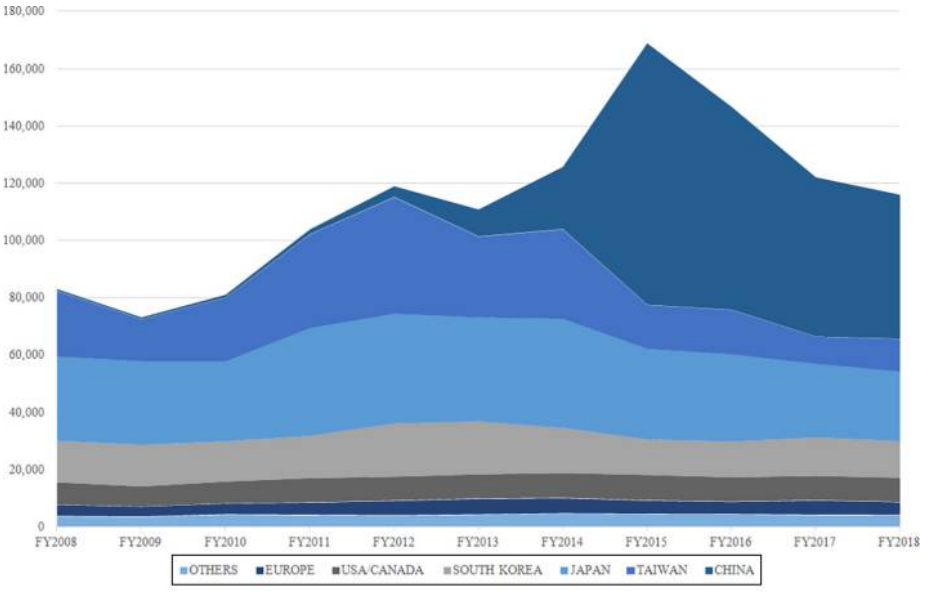

Figure 3.
The Republic of Palau, visitor arrivals 2008-2018

Source: Bureau of Immigration, MOJ, Palau Visitors Authority, and Bureau of Budget and Planning, MOF

Conclusion

Under the Obama Administration's "Pivot to Asia" foreign policy, there was a reassertion of regional dominance throughout the Pacific through military agreements, aid and diplomatic visits (Firth, 2013). In a 2011 speech to the Australian Parliament, President Obama described it best by claiming that "the US is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay" (Firth, 2013). This begs the question of where in the Pacific, how, and in what specific spaces the US is claiming this power, particularly, through development. The donor–recipient, government-to-government framework fails to explore the ways in development is used as power through military operations, zonal capitalism, redefined citizenship, tourism and other new aid modalities. These graduated sovereignties in Palau show that political geography is taking shape through new means of development, which has resulted in more actors, institutions and discourses.

Through the COFA between the US and Palau, it is clear that political geography has been shaped primarily by the politically powerful US Government. These shifts, however, have also met resistance from both the Palauan Government and civil society. The US investigation as a part of the NDAA, 2018, will likely reveal how important Palau and the other freely associated states in Micronesia, are to US interests. The 2024 Compact renewal negotiations will be more of a level playing field than they were in the 1980s and 1990s when the Compact was initially negotiated. New aid modalities and spaces for political influence via graduated sovereignties provide more opportunities for Palau to resist and demand greater sovereignty in whatever will come of the 2024 negotiations.

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