

Hawaii, Guam raise profiles in Pacific

Islands grow in importance as U.S. shifts military, political and economic strategies

By James Kent and Eric Casino
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U.S. Dept. of Defense Photo via AP

The relocation of thousands of Marines from Okinawa to Guam will give the U.S. territory, along with Hawaii, a new strategic importance in the Pacific and Asia. Above, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates took an aerial tour of Guam during a visit to its Anderson Air Force Base in 2008.

The necessity for reconceptualizing Hawaii and Guam as convergence zones is the fact that China is fast becoming a major player through the use of social and economic alignments with the countries

known as "the first island chain" while positioning itself for action in the "second island chain." The first island chain consists of the Korean Peninsula, the Kuril Islands, Japan (including the Ryukyu Islands), Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia and Australia. The second island chain includes the U.S. territories of Guam and the northern Marianas, which are within the forward defense arc of the U.S. military in the Pacific.

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These two maritime constructs are not simply linear descriptions of the layout of islands but ones with value-added undertones for American geo-strategists in the Pacific Rim. Because of their critically important geographic positions at the heart of the Pacific, Hawaii and Guam are historically poised to become beneficial centers to the nations of the Western Pacific, the way Singapore serves countries around the South China Sea. In the 19th century, Hawaii was the "gas and go" center for whalers. In the 20th century it was the mobilization center for the war in the Pacific.

This geographic center for Pacific trade, resource mobilization and communications can be recaptured and enhanced with wise action. It requires recognizing the principle that geography trumps politics in dealing with a competing power such as China.

This shift to a new economy and political reality must be based on meeting citizen expectations to participate directly in the actions needed to capture, benefit from and give leadership to this Pacific century. Citizen action has shown itself as a critical component in the amazing political transformation sweeping the Middle East. It is time to change the old world of dominance and control by the few — to the participation and freedom for the many. The people of Hawaii and Guam will need to navigate these historic shifts with bold and creative rethinking.

The planned move of a part of the Marine Corps base must take place in a manner that builds Guam into a full social and economic participant in the power realignments and not just a military outpost for repositioning of American forces. Citizen unrest in Guam would sap U.S. energy to remain strategic and undermine its forward defense security.

Similar innovative thinking must accompany the Navy's energy conversion plan toward alternative energy sources. The Navy, with its large bases, ships and air stations, is putting enormous resources into research and production of alternative energy to become free of Middle East Oil. This presents unprecedented opportunities for Hawaii and Guam to piggy-back onto the Navy's actions for parallel applications in civilian enterprises.

The Pacific Rim is fast becoming a major player in world affairs as the Chinese nonmilitary soft approach to spreading its influence indicates. The impending mobilization of Marine and Navy resources offers citizens, governments and private enterprise a new foundation to remake Guam and Hawaii as commercial, scientific, education and renewable energy innovation centers for stability and security in the Western Pacific.

James A. Kent is an analyst of geographic-focused social and economic development in Pacific Rim countries; he is president of the JKA Group (www.jkagroup.com). Eric Casino is a social anthropologist and freelance consultant on international business and development in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.