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The South Pacific chessboard: geostrategic competition through the Sino-Solomon Islands security pact

Abstract

In this article, I will attempt to define the geostrategic chessboard of the South Pacific in the context of power competition. To do so, I will delimit it to a set of countries that share a number of unique characteristics; I will examine the role played by each actor in this scenario, with an emphasis on the strategic interests and policies they have pursued in line with this competition. Finally, I will review the events that have triggered a new power competition in the South Pacific, arguing that the China-Solomon Islands security pact may be a turning point in the competition between the region's existing powers and what the implications and responses are.

Keywords

Pacific Islands, geostrategy, China, Solomon Islands, power competition.

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Introduction

The signing of the China-Solomon Islands security pact in April 2023 has rekindled the flames of competition between great powers in a region that, as discussed below, is unique in the world. In recent years, the US and China have engaged in a great power competition that is essential for defining the policies of not only these two actors, but also those of their partners and third parties involved. For example, the pressure currently being exerted by Washington to gain allies in its technology war against Beijing; or the principle of a single China, vital for accessing Chinese resources. Although the South Pacific has not attracted as much attention as the Indo-Pacific, the uniqueness of these micro-states enhances national policies regarding this new competition. In other words, the small size of these states contrasts with their ability to put national issues on the agenda of the powers, as in the case of the security pact.

With this in mind, this article will attempt to define the geostrategic chessboard of the South Pacific, with an emphasis on its geographical delimitation, the strategic interests of the actors and the relevant events that shape the region's present and future security architecture. For this purpose, I have structured the article in four blocks:

The first is the delimitation of the geostrategic chessboard of the South Pacific. In this block, I outline a historical overview of geostrategic competition in the Pacific, differentiating the South Pacific from the more usual Asia-Pacific scenario, and proposing a number of unique features that support my decision. In the second section, I analyse in more depth the particularities of the Pacific Island Countries (PICs), where I identify which of the PICs are most relevant in this scenario and their position on the chessboard. In the third, I provide a detailed analysis of the four major powers involved in the region: The US, China, Australia and New Zealand. In the fourth and final block, I look at whether the China-Solomon Islands security pact could be a turning point in the region.

Delineation of the geostrategic chessboard

In order to define the South Pacific as a geostrategic chessboard, one must first understand where it is located. Conceptually, it is the term 'Indo-Pacific' that is gaining popularity due to its analytical power and geopolitical implications. While this article does not aim to explore the implications of this concept and its geopolitical use, its definition is of great importance.

The Indo-Pacific is home to 60% of the world's population and has established itself in recent decades as the world's most dynamic region (International Monetary Fund, 2018). This dynamism has allowed the region's countries to enjoy economic and military growth that has enabled them to resist US influence more effectively. In other

words, given Asia's increasing relative weight, it is more difficult for foreign powers such as the US to articulate effective containment. Part of these dynamics have been dubbed the *Asianisation of Asia*¹.

Delimiting the board

That the Indo-Pacific is the world's most dynamic region (International Monetary Fund, 2018) and that its economic growth has somehow emancipated the geopolitical decisions of its 'players' offers some clues about the chessboard we are trying to define: the South Pacific. It is made up of the following sovereign states: Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Nauru, New Zealand (NZ), Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. There are also freely associated states, such as the Northern Mariana Islands with the US, and Niue or the Cook Islands with New Zealand. Table I shows that it does not appear to be a set of countries characterised by economic dynamism.

Country	PIB ₂₀₁₉	PIBpc ₂₀₁₉	$(X_{Ch} + I_{Ch}/X + I)_{2010}$	$(X_{Ch} + I_{Ch}/X + I)_{2019}$	$\Delta(X_{Ch} + I_{Ch}/X + I)$	Current Recognition	Year of Recognition
Australia	1491025	58781	0,202	0,322	59%	P.R.C.	1972
NZ	200743	40315	0,092	0,220	140%	P.R.C.	1972
PNG	24720	2817	0,099	0,228	131%	P.R.C.	1976
Fiji	5223	5869	0,053	0,104	96%	P.R.C.	1975
Solomon Island	1534	2290	0,404	0,465	15%	P.R.C.	2019
Samoa	887	4503	0,536	0,177	-67%	P.R.C.	1976
Vanuatu	870	2900	0,168	0,206	22%	P.R.C.	1982
Tonga	486	4653	0,054	0,132	146%	P.R.C.	1998
F.S.M.	332	2921	0,029	0,120	311%	P.R.C.	1989
Palaos	266	14755	0,019	0,144	640%	R.O.C.	1994
Marshall Island	212	3613	0,174	0,190	10%	R.O.C.	1998
Kiribati	196	1665	0,093	0,122	31%	P.R.C.	2019
Nauru	90	8326	<i>n.d.</i>	0,010	<i>n.d.</i>	R.O.C.	1980
Tuvalu	43	4455	0,097	0,206	112%	R.O.C.	1979

Table I. Prepared by author based on data from the World Bank and The Growth Lab at Harvard University. Data have been taken for 2019 as it is the last year of pre-pandemic economic normality. Key: X, Total exports; I, Total imports; Xch, exports to China; Ich, imports from China.

The South Pacific has a number of internal characteristics that differentiate it from the broader Indo-Pacific or Asia-Pacific vision, and which, in my view, make it worthy of its own strategic study. Four characteristics that make this board unique can be highlighted: first, the heterogeneity in tangible terms of these states; second, their homogeneity in intangible terms; third, their uniqueness in economic and geographic terms; and fourth, their special sensitivity to the effects of climate change.

First, South Pacific countries as a whole are very heterogeneous in tangible or real terms. In demographic terms the difference is abysmal. Australia has more than 25 million inhabitants, while Niue has only 1,600. In terms of development, Australia and New Zealand are two of the most developed countries in the world in terms of

1 (*) Italics added by the author.

GDP per capita, while the PICs are at the bottom of this list. Finally, there is a wide disparity in terms of natural resource reserves. On the one hand, Australia is a primary export power and, together with some PIC countries such as Papua New Guinea and Fiji, enjoys great natural wealth. On the other, most PICs are net importers and resource-poor. Access to fishing banks is worth mentioning. However, competition for fisheries in PICs is fierce and difficult for their economies to exploit.

Second, homogeneity in intangible or cultural terms. Australia and New Zealand share a set of beliefs with the PICs, mainly in their defence of Western values. In fact, the PICs include some of the world's youngest democracies. They also have strong Christian traditions, which is of utmost importance for their relationship with China.

Third, the uniqueness of these states. Most PICs are micro-states, which in itself infers a number of peculiarities to their economies, i.e. importing economies by definition and highly dependent on foreign humanitarian aid. PICs are also weak, poor and internally divided. These problems are usually derived from the artificial nature of their states. Even countries with highly hierarchical organisations such as the Kingdom of Tonga, which is a de facto absolute monarchy, are sensitive to political instability (Henderson and Reilly, 2003). Another factor is geography, as PICs typically have a very small land area but large maritime territories. For example, Kiribati's land area is only 726 square kilometres, but its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) expands over 2.5 million square kilometres, an area similar to that of India.

And fourthly, the sensitivity of PICs to climate change; this has been identified as one of the critical challenges for the Pacific as a whole. The unique vulnerability of PICs to climate change is determined by their geography, the fragility of their economic structures and demographics, and the interactions between these factors (Kumar *et al.*, 2020). I will develop this factor further below.

In conclusion, the region has a number of unique characteristics that allow its geostrategic setting to be isolated from the rest of Asia for further analysis. Especially since the PICs are unique and very different from the regional powers.

Pacific Island Countries

I have previously listed a series of characteristics that allow me to analyse the South Pacific as a geostrategic scenario of its own, and I will now delve deeper into this region at spatial, diplomatic, cultural, strategic and climatic levels. Finally, I will analyse the position of the most significant regional actors.

Spatially, we are accustomed to using the concept of Oceania, with a particularly geographical connotation, to designate the island continent of Australia. On the other hand, the South Pacific concept has a broader character. In contrast to the more monolithic definition of Oceania, this allows us to easily incorporate territories of other powers in the region and understand more ambiguous territorial dynamics. Even so, the territorial delimitation of Oceania is of paramount importance as it allows us to segregate

actors by territorial zones with some form of traditional Western influence. The territorial breakdown of Oceania is divided into three sub-regions: Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. Melanesia contains the majority of the region's land area and population, as well as extensive mineral and forest resources. Politically, most of Melanesia is inherently unstable given its ethnic fragmentation. Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the most important actor in this sub-region and Australia its representative protector. Polynesia, on the other hand, is characterised by being made up of micro-states, containing some of the world's smallest states such as Tuvalu, the world's smallest independent country with a population of ten thousand people. New Zealand is traditionally an influential player in Polynesia; in fact, Auckland is often called the largest Polynesian city in the world (Yang, 2009). Finally, Micronesia is historically linked to the US and is home to some of the US flag territories in the Pacific such as Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands.

At diplomatic level, PICs are wary of new Western strategic concepts, especially the 'Indo-Pacific' mentioned above. Samoa's prime minister highlighted in a speech the "real risk of privileging the Indian over the Pacific" (Sailele Malielegaoi, 2018). PICs have developed ideas such as *Blue Pacific* with the aim of acting homogeneously in the face of different challenges in the region (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2017). In fact, in recent years, PICs have participated en bloc in the international arena. Just as there is now a call for more strategic autonomy in Europe, it will come as a surprise to learn that this idea had already been developed further in the PICs. Meg Taylor, secretary general of the Pacific Islands Forum, went so far as to argue in 2017 that she hoped to see PICs "exercising greater strategic autonomy" (M. Taylor, 2017).

On a cultural level, I have previously mentioned the strong Christian traditions of the PICs, this may act as a brake on Chinese influence in two ways: the inherent opposition to communism derived from Christian values, and the fear of losing religious freedom (Yang, 2009).

At strategic level, although PICs have not historically been the scene of clear geostrategic competition, there are exceptions. For example, in the 1980s it briefly attracted the interest of the USSR and Libya as part of the Cold War (Hayward-Jones 2013). The Soviet case is interesting, as it can feel like *déjà vu* for the Americans and the Chinese question. In March 1987, the first Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, visited Australia. He asserted that Moscow had "no intention of penetrating the region, no bad intentions or hidden agendas" and that it was "only interested in commercial and diplomatic relations" (Langdon, 1988). The PICs already tried to exploit trade with the Soviets back then and this is exactly what is happening today. Different aspirants, same policies.

Finally, it is worth noting the impact of climate change on PICs, which I have already discussed. This is one of the key motivators in PIC decision-making, now and in the future. PIC leaders' concern about the consequences is palpable. For example, in 2021, Tuvalu's foreign minister gave a climate change awareness speech with Pacific Ocean water up to his knees (Handley, 2021). Their concern is not in vain, as PIC economies face catastrophic costs due to climate change. According to a study by the Asian Development Bank (2013), it is estimated that, under the business-as-usual scenario, climate change

could cost between 2.2 and 3.5% of Pacific island countries' annual GDP by 2050, and 12.7% by 2100 (Asian Development Bank, 2013). The agricultural sector was specifically identified as one of the most vulnerable, contributing 5.4% of annual GDP loss by 2100 under the high emissions scenario. The main problem for PICs is that their cost of adapting to climate change is significantly higher in relative GDP terms than that of larger countries, a phenomenon known as indivisibility in economics. For example, for the construction of a coastal protection structure, the unit cost per capita in PICs will be substantially higher than in larger countries with larger populations (Kumar *et al.*, 2020).

Following this overview of ideas, I will now briefly present the position of the most relevant actors on the South Pacific chessboard: Fiji and Papua New Guinea.

Fiji

Fiji is the fourth-largest economy in the South Pacific and is of undoubted strategic value to China. Fiji's strategic value is based on its privileged location in the centre of the South Pacific, making it a regional hub for communications and diplomatic relations. Through its location, Fiji plays a key role in PICs' international relations at regional and international level (Tarte, 2021).

Fiji's relationship with China has strengthened over the past decade, making it one of the largest recipients of Chinese aid in the region. It has been a classic arena of competition between regional powers, especially between Australia and New Zealand (Yang, 2011). This shift in foreign policy cannot be understood without the international isolation following the 2006 coup d'état.

In December 2006, Voreqe Bainimarama staged a coup d'état, Fiji's third since independence in 1970. The coup caused some international discomfort, especially with the 2009 abrogation of Fiji's constitution and the postponement of new elections for five years. The abrogation triggered Fiji's unprecedented suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in May 2009 and its subsequent suspension from the Commonwealth in December.

In the aftermath of the coup, various statements can be found by the Fijian regime about alleged Chinese support for Fiji. For example, Prime Minister Banimarama stated in 2009 that the Chinese authorities were "very sympathetic and understand what's happening here, [...] that we need to do things in our own way" (Komai, 2015). Subsequently, Fiji's foreign minister stressed: "Fiji will not forget that when other countries were quick to condemn us following the events of 1987, 2000, 2006, China and other friends in Asia demonstrated a more understanding and sensitive approach"² (Fiji Government, 2008).

² The original note reads: «Fiji will not forget that when other countries were quick to condemn us following the events of 1987, 2000, 2006, China and other friends in Asia demonstrated a more understanding and sensitive approach to events in Fiji».

This coup was the catalyst for Fiji's new foreign policy, initiated in 2010, the so-called *Look North Policy* (Tarte, 2021). This aimed at diversifying its diplomatic relations, especially with new economic partners (Fry and Tarte 2015). Several steps were taken, including joining the Non-Aligned Movement and announcing the opening of new embassies in South Korea, Indonesia, Brazil and South Africa. And of course, the improvement of relations with China. Their main motivation was to fill the gap left by their traditional donors, such as Australia and New Zealand, after the coup (Fry and Tarte 2015). Predictably, Fiji's prime minister described the relationship with China as "a fundamental part of our government's *Look North Policy* [and] crucial to Fiji's economic development" (Kubuabola, 2015).

The turning point in this relationship came in November 2014, when Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a two-day visit to Fiji. During his visit, he met with other PIC leaders to discuss key issues in the region; this was not his first time in the country, having visited in 2009 when he was still China's vice-president. This visit was interpreted as clear support for the Bainimarama government, causing Western dismay. During his visit, Xi Jinping set out a plan to intensify engagement with the PICs based on five diplomatic priorities: the first was to engage in a strategic partnership; second, to enhance bilateral trade; third, to deepen economic cooperation through the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative; fourth, to expand people-to-people exchanges; and fifth, to enhance multilateral cooperation through the PIF (Meick, 2018). The relationship between Fiji and China took a qualitative leap forward following Xi Jinping's visit. It acquired the rank of *Strategic Partnership of Mutual Respect and Cooperation*, a nomenclature that, according to the Chinese authorities, emphasises the long-term nature of the relationship (Xinhua, 2022).

Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a country rich in natural and mineral resources, producing a wide range of primary commodities, including crude oil, natural gas, timber, cocoa, coffee, palm oil, gold, copper, silver, nickel and cobalt (Avalos *et al.*, 2015). However, the country's orography, regulatory framework and infrastructure deficit make it difficult to exploit. This is why PNG is directly aligned with China's strategic interests; its entry into the BRI in June 2018 is a highly anticipated event.

Australia has been its traditional protector for the past decades, making it difficult for China to emerge as the winner of the competition in the country. Its late entry into the BRI indicates that Chinese investment and infrastructure projects are not likely to be driven by clear geopolitical objectives (O'Dowd, 2021). Even so, figures indicate the country's economic importance to Beijing. In 2020, just three BRI projects in PNG alone total US\$4.46 billion. These are: the *High Priority Economic Roads Project*; the *Goroka Town Water Supply Upgrade Project*; and the *PNG-China Integrated Agriculture Industrial Park* (Smith and Wesley-Smith, 2021). Outside the BRI framework, but with Chinese investment, the \$1.4 billion Ramu nickel mine project stands out (O'Dowd, 2021).

Given the magnitude of these projects, regional powers have expressed concern about PNG's financial stability. These criticisms tend to focus exclusively on the level of PIC debt to China. In 2020, Papua New Guinea's debt level stood at 47.1% of GDP (World Bank, 2022). In some cases, such as Tonga, with 49.4% debt to GDP in 2016 (World Bank, 2022b), it may pose a real threat to its smaller economy, but cases such as PNG and Fiji are much more complex. Indeed, PNG's debt risks are more linked to ineffective national policies than to the nature of Chinese loans (O'Dowd, 2021). Its debt level may not be ideal; there is no universal consensus on what percentage indicates sustainable or unsustainable debt accumulation (Roubini, 2001). However, in the case of a debt crisis at home, it is more likely to be caused by domestic negligence than by Beijing's hidden strategy.

Like the other PICs, PNG has an infrastructure deficit that the BRI can alleviate. It will depend on PNG's management whether the potential of the BRI is detrimental or beneficial to its economy, however much it may pain traditional humanitarian aid benefactors. Even with the potential of the BRI in the country, Chinese investment may aggravate the problems of corruption, public sector mismanagement and poor governance in PNG by offering less transparent funding opportunities.

In sum, PNG's internal needs are explicitly taken up with those of Beijing, which is a valuable asset for the BRI. Although Chinese moves are characterised by market dynamics rather than geostrategic competition, PNG's characteristics make it the true *jackpot*³ in the South Pacific. As such, it would be logical to expect strategic moves across the archipelago in the coming decade.

The powers

Having delimited the chessboard and the role of the PICs, I now turn to the position of the four powers most involved in the region. On the one hand, the United States and China, with the great power competition that has transferred new friction to the area, and on the other, Australia and New Zealand, which, although not great powers, their large size in comparison to the PICs and their historical commitment in the region make it essential to study them. For this analysis, I focus on the historical evolution of each power's foreign policy, its strategic interests and a series of key events that have shaped its posture. I also use the Chinese issue as a point in common with other powers' policies to facilitate comparison and evolution.

United States

At the end of World War II, the US emerged as the hegemonic power in the Pacific, including of course the board that concerns us, the South Pacific. During the Cold

3 (*) Italics added by author.

War, Washington designed a security structure for the region; in turn, it experienced how as Asia developed, it transformed the structure that had been created from Washington with it. US presence in the Pacific has gone from undisputed hegemony to decline and neglect, and now to a new awakening of interest in this vast territory.

In order to understand the current US position and the launch of new policies to counter China, it is essential to take a historical look at *Pacific Policy*. In the midst of the Cold War, Washington was determined to lead the first world and thus began bilateral relations with Asian countries in order to close its bloc of influence in the Asia-Pacific. To this end, it shaped the Pacific security architecture with its classic allies. In 1951, the US signed a number of bilateral treaties with various Asia-Pacific countries, see: the Mutual Security Treaty (MST) with Japan; the Mutual Defence Treaty with the Philippines; and the Australia-New Zealand-United States agreement (ANZUS). The network of alliances was later expanded to include South Korea in 1953; Taiwan in 1954, abrogated after the normalisation of US- China relations; and Thailand in 1962, with the Rusk-Thanat communiqué (Stuart and Tow, 1995). The result was the ‘San Francisco System’, as they were all signed in San Francisco.

The South Pacific, on the other hand, has always had a special character from the US point of view. Dwight D. Eisenhower called it the “Great American Lake” in 1954, in a manner similar to the South American *backyard*. However, the United States expressed commercial and security interests in the region dating back to 1825 (Stuart and Tow 1995).

Although the South Pacific has not been an arena of geostrategic competition between the US and the USSR, with a few rare exceptions, part of the US rapprochement towards the PICs was initially framed as a policy of *strategic denial* aimed at thwarting Soviet efforts to establish a naval presence in the region (Henderson and Reilly, 2003). As we approach the end of the Cold War, major changes are taking place in the South Pacific. This transformation is driven by several factors, of which I highlight three: the spread of anti-nuclear sentiment; the trend towards more resilient defence policies; and the penetration of external powers.

- First, anti-nuclear sentiment has been one of the most important factors in the estrangement between the United States and New Zealand. In the 1970s, New Zealand banned ships or aircraft capable of carrying nuclear weapons from entering its territory. This is diametrically opposed to official US policy, i.e., not to identify whether a ship has nuclear weapons or not. Within this trend, China rushed to sign the *South Pacific Nuclear Treaty* in 1987, securing a tactical victory by aligning itself with classic US allies.
- Second, greater resilience in allied defence policies. As we will see later when we look in depth at the position of Australia and New Zealand, since the 1980s there has been a (growing) trend towards more self-reliant defence policies. This was prompted by the Nixon Doctrine in 1969, which urged the Allies not to expect an automatic commitment of American forces to come to their aid.

- Third, the penetration of powers. During the Cold War, in the constant balance of power between the US and USSR, many PICs identified with the Western bloc and resisted Soviet influence. Nevertheless, some wanted to take advantage of trade with the Soviets far from falling into ideological spheres.
- Finally, with the collapse of the USSR and the consequent absence of a systemic rival, the existence of the *San Francisco System* no longer makes sense for the US. As Asia-Pacific has become the centre of world trade, ideological conflicts have been pushed into the background (Stuart and Tow, 1995). Also, their commitments on the periphery were expensive and without sufficient compensation. Public statements by the Bush and Clinton administrations claiming that they would maintain a military presence in the region is a good indicator of a regressive US trend in Asia-Pacific (Stuart and Tow, 1995).

Throughout the 2000s we can observe a total abandonment of the region. Although the turning point in the trend is the *Pivot to Asia*, there are important precedents. In 2011, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the US was in competition with China in the Pacific. Hillary's words are quite illustrative: "Let's put aside the moral, humanitarian and do-good side of what we believe in, and let's just talk straight realpolitik. We are in a competition with China" (Hayward-Jones, 2013).

It was not until 2012 that Obama officially launched the *Pivot to Asia*. This redefined US foreign strategy, putting the focus on the centre of the global production process. It was understood that this strategy needed economic institutions and the back up of military presence to endow it with credibility. That is why the *Trans-Pacific Partnership* (TPP) was created in 2016 and the US Navy's Seventh Fleet gained prominence. This strategic shift was short-lived. Encouraged by anti-globalisation movements and protectionist policies, Donald Trump pulled out of the agreement in 2017 (Solís, 2017). During his administration, the US toughened its stance on China, embarking on its biggest trade war to date. This is how the United States ultimately lost influence on the Pacific chessboard. In order to reverse this process, agreements such as AUKUS or the *Quad* have proliferated in recent years (Shoebridge, 2021; Kutty and Basura n.d.), which, contrary to the trend, are more geopolitical than geo-economic in nature. It is now time for Washington to fill this geo-economic vacuum through the *Indo Pacific Economic Framework* (IPEF).

During his trip to Asia, Joe Biden announced the launch of the IPEF. Participants include classic allies such as Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea, as well as other Southeast Asian states such as Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. As usual, Taiwan does not participate as a result of the famous US strategic ambiguity. The IPEF, along with previous initiatives such as Barack Obama's TPP, Donald Trump's *Blue Dot Network* (BDN)⁴, or the 'Build

⁴ Translation proposed by the author.

Back Better World' (B3W)⁵, was born with the clear purpose of offering alternatives to the BRI. Unsurprisingly, the IPEF and the BRI share a common essence, providing funding for major infrastructure in peripheral countries. However, the IPEF presents itself in the same way as the BRI, but with more robust and attractive standards, rules and principles than the opacity and *rule of men* offered by China as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon rule of law. According to the White House, the IPEF's objective is to confront

«21st century economic challenges ranging from setting the rules of the road for the digital economy, to ensuring secure and resilient supply chains, to helping make the kinds of major investments necessary in clean energy infrastructure and the clean energy transition, to raising standards for transparency, fair taxation, and anti-corruption» (Forough, 2022).

Despite US intentions, the IPEF faces several challenges before it even begins its journey. First, the very purpose of the IPEF overlaps with the BDN and B3W, both of which failed to come to fruition. Second, the Biden administration is already finding difficulties financing its *Green New Deal* energy transition⁶, so the political strength needed to provide credible funding for these projects is at least in doubt—for a more in-depth view (Galvin and Healy, 2020)—. Third, weak US social cohesion and anti-globalist sentiment in the Trump era may discourage the administration from engaging economically beyond its borders.

China

For most of its modern history, the People's Republic of China has been a poor and isolated country, thus conditioning its external relations. After decades of sustained and high economic growth following Deng Xiaoping's economic reform, the inescapable size of the Chinese economy forced it to rethink its position vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Beijing's foreign policy has therefore been adapting to its long-term development strategy.

In order to analyse the relevance of China's presence in the South Pacific, it is important to take a brief look at its foreign policy. This analysis focuses on the evolution of Chinese foreign policy, first by presenting the various conceptual manoeuvres on Chinese development; and second, applying these concepts directly to the South Pacific, through military modernisation, diplomatic competition with Taiwan and the instruments it uses in the region.

As far as conceptual development is concerned, it is short and simple. Beijing has always liked short and concise slogans, and despite the complexity of its policies they

⁵ Translation proposed by the author.

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can easily be summarised in different slogans over time. Since the reform era, China's foreign policy had been characterised by a 'low profile'⁷. Summed up in Deng Xiaoping's well-known phrase: "Hide your strength, bide your time, never take the lead"⁸, this policy advocated that China should steer clear of diplomatic friction arising from great power competition. Since 2003, China's foreign policy has been based on 'peaceful rise'⁹, or since 2004, 'peaceful development'¹⁰. Consequently, we can exemplify this transformation in the South Pacific with two cases: the modernisation of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and diplomatic competition with Taiwan.

- First, China's military doctrine in the Pacific is intimately linked to the modernisation of its navy. This modernisation was carried out under Hu Jintao, with the aim of training the naval force in 'far sea' operations¹¹, and thus improving its ability to project beyond its shores (Li, 2009). Renewal of the navy began in 1988 when Admiral Liu Huaqing published a study on how future maritime security conditions could be optimised through the concepts of island chains and the waters around them.

According to this doctrine, there are three island chains. The 'first island chain'¹² consisting of Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines; by 2010, the PLAN should be able to move freely in open waters up to this chain. Then, the 'second island chain'¹³, which includes Guam along with the Kuril Islands, the Mariana Islands, the Caroline Islands of Micronesia and Papua New Guinea. And the 'third island chain' that runs virtually from pole to pole, from the Aleutian Islands in the Bering Sea to Antarctica (Lanteigne, 2012).

The waters between the first island chain and the second make up the Mediterranean Seas. And from the second island chain to the rest of the Pacific

7 Concept to refer to Deng Xiaoping's *low profile diplomacy*.

8 This is the 韬光养晦 ('tao guang yang hui') concept. Transliteration from Chinese by the author. The translation of the quote comes from Osvaldo Rosales, in *El sueño chino: Cómo se ve China a sí misma y cómo nos equivocamos los occidentales al interpretarla*, Mexico, Argentina and Barcelona, Siglo XXI Editores/Anthropos, United Nations and ECLAC, pp. 85 (e-book version).

9 English translation of the Chinese term 和平崛起 or 'heping jueqi'. With few exceptions, transliterations and translations from Chinese into English are by the author.

10 English translation of the Chinese term 和平发展, or 'heping fazhan'.

11 Translation of the Chinese term 远海作战 or 'yuanhai zuozhan'. In English it is called *Blue Water*.

12 Chinese transliteration of the concept (第一岛链) is 'diyi daolian'. The translation has been extracted from this article from the digital edition of *Política exterior* magazine, 'Taiwán y el mar del Sur de China' by Josep Piqué, published on 1 September 2022. <https://www.politicaexterior.com/taiwan-y-el-mar-del-sur-de-china/> [last accessed: 10 November 2022].

13 Refers to 第二岛链, transliterated as follows: 'di'er daolian'. Translation of the author's term. The translation has been extracted from this article from the digital edition of *Política exterior* magazine, 'Taiwán y el mar del Sur de China' by Josep Piqué, published on 1 September 2022. <https://www.politicaexterior.com/taiwan-y-el-mar-del-sur-de-china/> [last accessed: 10 November 2022].

are far seas, and this is where the South Pacific is located. Following the proposed timetable, the PLAN is expected to be able to operate in the Mediterranean seas as early as 2025 and in the coastal seas by 2050 (Lanteigne, 2012).

US policy-makers are particularly concerned by the use of this strategy. This 'chain island strategy' is specially designed to work in symbiosis with an 'anti-access' and 'area denial' strategy, A2/AD in NATO terminology or 'fan jieru' (反介入) for Beijing. This quest to increase and maintain China's security bubble requires a complex web of surface-to-sea, surface-to-air and ballistic missile networks and intelligence gathering elements for their proper use. Ultimately, this would imply an increased Chinese naval presence in the Western Pacific to tacitly remove the US military from the region, or at least make it more difficult for the United States to operate freely on that side of the ocean (Ross, 2009).

In short, Beijing is executing its own Monroe Doctrine, by which it intends to drive the Americans out of the Pacific just as they drove the European powers out of South America in the 18TH century.

However, despite the introduction of naval air capability, the PLAN remains far from ready for a protracted conflict in such a vast space. An example of this could be seen in the difficulties experienced by the PLAN in participating in the international anti-piracy coalition off the coast of Somalia (Lanteigne, 2012). Given that China has no safe havens in the Indian Ocean, long-range operations off the African coast are particularly complex. In contrast, the US and its Diego Garcia base allows for a much faster and more efficient projection capacity in the Indian Ocean. An increased military presence in the South Pacific would face the same problems today.

- Second, diplomatic competition with Taiwan. At the turn of the millennium, China began to become more involved in diplomatic issues beyond its borders, for example, in some countries' recognition of Taiwan. This proactivity in the diplomatic arena coincides with the gradual abandonment of 'low-profile' diplomacy and the adoption of 'peaceful rise'. In 2000, 29 countries recognised Taiwan rather than mainland China (Harwit, 2000), of which the majority were Pacific states. At that time, Taiwan's recognition did not come at as high a price as it does now, i.e., giving up China's vast economic resources. Giving up on China was only within the reach of underdeveloped countries, with virtually no insertion in global value chains, of which China is a cornerstone. According to I. Taylor (2002) '[The countries recognising Taiwan] have only one thing in common: they are all extremely small geographically, or economically impoverished. In reality, most of them are both'. It was in the early 2000s that China and Taiwan engaged in a diplomatic competition for recognition within the PICs. Both used what is known as 'cheque diplomacy'¹⁴, by which they gained

¹⁴ In Chinese: 支票簿外交; transliterated: 'zhipiaobu waijiao'.

(or maintained) recognition from different PICs. This diplomacy consisted of establishing diplomatic relations on the basis of economic aid such as donations or low-interest credits (Lanteigne 2012).

‘Cheque diplomacy’ is aligned with one of Beijing’s main instruments for reaching out to the periphery: humanitarian aid. This can take various forms, including loans at below-market interest rates, debt relief or direct grants. Aid is unconditional, it is granted without any expectation of policy change by the aid beneficiary. This is known as the *no strings attached policy*. According to the *White Paper on Foreign Aid* published in 2011, ‘China never uses foreign aid as a means to interfere in recipient countries’ internal affairs or seek political privileges for itself’ (Information Office of the State Council The People’s Republic of China, 2011). This makes it particularly attractive for countries that are far from resembling Western democracies, such as the PICs. However, traditional donor powers such as Australia and New Zealand have noted that the effectiveness of their donations in influencing PIC policy has declined.

During this period several PICs pivoted their recognition to China, not without controversy. This competition would not end until 2008 when the Nationalist Party of Taiwan¹⁵ returned to power after eight years in opposition. The new President Ma Ying-jeou began a campaign to resume good relations with China in contrast to his predecessor, Chen Shui-bian. As a precedent of good faith, a tacit diplomatic truce was established. To mark this diplomatic truce, both Taiwan and China promised that they would not try to persuade states that already recognised the other to change their recognition (Hayward-Jones 2013). In recent years, however, the Pacific has witnessed new shifts in recognition that reignite diplomatic competition in the region. The case of Kiribati, and especially the Solomon Islands in 2019, show not only that the truce is over, but that the competition is no longer fair. PICs that continue to recognise the People’s Republic of China are finding it increasingly difficult to renounce PRC resources.

This competition can be interpreted as a test of China’s growing economic power in the diplomatic arena. The main reason is the powerful trade-off of PIC recognition for a relatively low price. Although PICs are small and poor, they are for the most part sovereign states, and as such enjoy voting rights in supranational organisations such as the UN. Furthermore, taking away some of Taiwan’s few remaining allies directly challenges its sovereignty, which is particularly attractive to Beijing. In other words, China’s South Pacific gamble pays good dividends and is relatively cheap.

Australia

After the United States gradually left the Pacific at the end of the Cold War, both Australia and New Zealand were destined to fill the vacuum. Australia, the largest

¹⁵ 国民党 or ‘Guomindang’.

economic power in the region, took it for granted that the Pacific islands would orbit around it. In fact, Australia has always perceived PICs in the same way as the US perceives South America as its 'environment of interest' (Varrall, 2021). Given that power competition is the *sine qua non* of understanding the Pacific chessboard, it is essential to understand the relationship between Australia and the new regional power, China.

Relations between Beijing and Canberra have historically been virtuous. Its geographical proximity makes Australia a natural economic partner for China. This relationship is mutual. Australia benefited from the processes of fragmentation and delocalisation of its productive activity to China. As China's economy gained momentum, interdependence became ever stronger.

Despite the inseparable economic ties between Beijing and Canberra, geostrategic tensions have eroded their diplomatic relations in recent years. In line with this, Australia has toughened its stance on China's presence in the Pacific. According to Graham (2018) 'Canberra is increasingly concerned about Beijing's intensified interest in the Pacific islands, including efforts to sway political elites and targeted pursuit of transportation infrastructure projects in locations across Melanesia' (Graham, 2018). This attitude is based on two pillars: the recognition of China as a strategic threat at various levels; and a deep understanding of the region, grasping the unique characteristics of the PICs (Varrall, 2021).

This hardening of the Australian position is easily observable through the various *White Papers* produced by the Australian government. Initially, the 2003 *Foreign Affairs and Trade White Paper* described China as an economic opportunity, with an emphasis on developing bilateral relations (Australian Government, 2003). It was not until 2013 that the *Defence White Paper* of the same year stated: '[China is] a major power with hostile intentions'. That document already foresaw the possibility of the establishment of Chinese military bases 'in its immediate neighbourhood [,] from which it could project power against us' (Australian Government, 2013). Finally, although China is not explicitly named, the statement in the 2016 *Defence White Paper* is revealing: 'newly powerful countries want greater influence and to challenge some of the rules in the global architecture established some 70 years ago [...] leading to uncertainty and tension' (Australian Government, 2016).

Accordingly, Australia defines its concerns about China's growing influence in the region in a number of ways, of which I highlight the following. First, the security of its national economy; second, the nature of PIC debt; third, the effectiveness of its humanitarian aid as a source of power; fourth, the rise of corruption; and fifth, the strategic military threat.

Firstly, economic security. The Australian and Chinese economies share a mutual interdependence, with Beijing being Canberra's largest trading partner since 2009 (The Growth Lab at Harvard University, 2022). Interdependence in industrial sectors such as mining, and in the service sector such as education and tourism, stands out (Varrall, 2021). Australia is therefore particularly sensitive to sanctions with 'Chinese

characteristics'; the country experienced this first-hand in 2019, when ports in northeast China blocked or slowed down Australian coal exports (Walker, 2019). There is a long history of such Chinese policies on bilateral trade with countries with which it shares a conflict of interest. For example, increased tariffs on Mongolian imports after the Dalai Lama's visit there in 2016; the suspension of Philippine banana imports after attempts to arrest Chinese fishermen in Philippine waters in 2012; or the cut in imports of Norwegian salmon after Chinese political activist Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010 (Varrall, 2021).

Secondly, the nature of debt has sparked much debate. Australia fears that an increase in the region's debt to China could increase its leverage. In this case, there are several PIC countries with GDP debt ratios that place them in a position of debt distress, being particularly vulnerable to external pressures. These include Kiribati, Marshall Islands, FSM, Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu. However, as Fox and Dornan (2018) point out, half of these countries do not recognise the People's Republic of China and maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan. In other words, they do not have access to financial resources from mainland China (Fox and Dornan, 2018).

Thirdly, Australia is a major donor of humanitarian aid in the Pacific. The traditional policy with regard to this type of aid was based on the principles of cross-compliance. By offering alternatives to this aid, China has undermined Australia's potential power to change certain PIC policies. For example, Chinese funding to Fiji has discouraged Australian efforts to pressure Fiji's military government to reinstall democracy after the 2006 coup d'état.

Fourthly, there are concerns about the relationship between Chinese presence and corruption. Evidence has been found of growing local corruption around Chinese projects in Africa. In this case, there is no direct economic impact, although there has been an impact on local norms and institutions. Such impact does not occur with other donors like the World Bank (Isaksson and Kotsadam, 2016).

Finally, and fifthly, the strategic military threat, an issue that has become particularly relevant. This threat is based on a *possible* qualitative leap in the Chinese navy's capabilities to project power against Australia and its allies. For Canberra, the associated consequences are unacceptable. These include: less time to respond to potential hostilities, motivating increased defence spending as a deterrent, reducing Australia's ability to exercise freedom of movement, and generating political polarisation within its borders (Wallis and Batley, 2020).

In response to the maintenance of its strategic interests, Australia has begun to articulate a series of mechanisms to secure its interests in the South Pacific. This ideology eventually crystallised in the 2018 phased policy. This set of laws brought forward by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison aims to prevent foreign powers from gaining influence, especially in the South Pacific (Synergia Foundation, 2019). The Australian government has sought to disassociate the *Step-up Policy* from a traditional geostrategic movement. Instead, three fundamental pillars are identified in

its policy: economic growth, peer-to-peer relations¹⁶, and cross-cutting security (Wallis and Batley, 2020).

In conclusion, Australia enjoys a privileged position in the South Pacific game; it knows its position on the board well. Through strong political will, it has been able to identify its interests and develop policies accordingly. Moreover, it has both the economic and natural resources to provide the capacity for such political will. Finally, it has a fundamental tool at its disposal, namely media control. Media outlets with the most coverage of the Pacific are Australian¹⁷. With this soft power, Canberra has the ability to influence fragmented Pacific societies more directly than China.

New Zealand

New Zealand is a minor player on the international stage. However, given that the South Pacific board is mainly made up of micro-states, it can exert considerable influence there. In other words, although it is not a power, it can act as one (Lati Lati, 2021). This is why it is worth studying its position on the board. Given its smaller weight, New Zealand's relationship with the Pacific is similar to Australia's, albeit on a smaller scale.

With respect to its relationship with China, New Zealand's trajectory is, as might be expected, similar to that of Australia. China's arrival in the South Pacific was initially celebrated by New Zealand. This new player was the most immediate way to counter Russia. A good example of the complexity of the system and the inherent difficulty of devising strategies to rebalance power in the region. In addition, New Zealand was the first OECD member country to sign a free trade agreement with China (Lati Lati, 2021); and as for Canberra, China is Wellington's largest trading partner, with annual exports valued at \$10.7 billion, about 28% of the total (The Growth Lab at Harvard University, 2022).

However, China's growing influence over PICs forced New Zealand to rethink its strategy. While New Zealand acknowledges that 'China is deeply integrated into the rules-based order', it believes that it has 'not consistently adopted the governance and rules championed by the order's traditional leaders' (New Zealand Government, 2018), and is therefore concerned about its rise. As previously mentioned, there are several scenarios for this rise. For example, China may not have any intention of challenging US hegemony, but its growing influence generates friction with the IRBO, of which New Zealand is an architect (Lati Lati, 2021). Ultimately, no matter which scenario we find ourselves in, New Zealand is not comfortable with any of them.

Thus, following in the footsteps of the Australian *step up policy*, New Zealand launched the *Pacific Reset* in March 2018. This reset represents a critical shift in New

¹⁶ With PICs.

¹⁷ See Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) or Fairfax Media.

Zealand's view of the South Pacific chessboard, which entails major funding¹⁸ and involves a rethink of diplomatic activities with its neighbours. In other words, the *reset* would imply a qualitative leap in the amount of investments, and a change in the diplomatic model, from donor-recipient to bilateral relations (Lati Lati, 2021).

It is important to note that this 'reset' shares certain characteristics with the *Step Up Policy*, but also differs in key respects. For example, similar to Canberra's strategic awareness, Prime Minister Winston Peters has expressed his concern for the Pacific. In his own words:

“[The Pacific] has also become an increasingly contested strategic space, no longer neglected by Great Power ambition, and so Pacific Island leaders have more options. This is creating a high degree of *strategic anxiety*¹⁹”.

On the other hand, in contrast to Australia's strategy, New Zealand has opted for ambiguity towards China. In fact, Peters has categorically denied that the *Reset* was designed “specifically to counter China” (Peters, 2018). Interestingly, this may suggest that Wellington feels *strategic anxiety* for other actors such as the US, Australia or Japan. This is obviously illogical.

All in all, the *Pacific Reset* represents New Zealand's acknowledgement of its negligence in the region. PIC loyalty to the regional architects was taken for granted for too long. In fact, the PIF (Pacific Island Forum) was formed specifically for the purpose of giving PICs greater autonomy from regional powers, including New Zealand (Lati Lati, 2021).

Ultimately, New Zealand's main characteristic that distinguishes it from other regional actors is that it considers itself to be a Moral Foreign Policy Driven Actor²⁰ (Lati Lati, 2021). This vision of itself allows it to clothe its ambitions in grandiloquence. As Peters points out:

“New Zealand's view is that we must be respectful of Pacific Island countries' and clear wish to manage their own international relations while at the same time retain New Zealand's traditional emphasis on human rights, the rule of law, transparency, good governance and the promotion of democracy” (Peters, 2018).

This moral superiority makes humanitarian aid New Zealand's greatest source of power. And like Australia, this aid is conditional, putting New Zealand at a disadvantage.

18 Funding through the *Official Development Assistance Fund* of 714.2 million New Zealand dollars, about 430 million euros.

19 Italics added to stress the importance of the concept.

20 Translation proposed by the author.

The Solomon Islands-China security pact has been a turning point for New Zealand. It has catalysed government concerns and forced the current prime minister, Jacinta Arden, to take a tougher stance. Arden met with Biden on 1 June as part of his Pacific trip. In its efforts to rejoin the Pacific board, the US is rewriting relations with its partners, and New Zealand is obviously a natural ally. In a joint statement, Biden and Arden said:

“The United States and New Zealand share a concern that the establishment of a persistent military presence in the Pacific by a state that does not share our values or security interests would fundamentally alter the strategic balance of the region and pose national-security concerns to both our countries” (Fildes, 2022).

In conclusion, the evolution of New Zealand’s South Pacific policy has followed in the footsteps of its *big brother*²¹, Australia. Despite their differences, they share a strategic awareness of the region that has been key to their policy-making. However, that New Zealand sees itself as a *Moral Actor* puts it in an extremely complex position. In contrast to the more bellicose Australia, Wellington must now balance between maintaining a friendly trade relationship with China and dealing with the possible militarisation of the region, all the while promoting democratic values among *reluctant* PICs.

South Pacific security pact, a turning point?

Geostrategic competition

Over the past decades, China’s presence in the South Pacific has been the subject of much debate in academia as to whether or not there is geostrategic competition in the region. While the general discussion on this issue revolved around a purely economic interest on Beijing’s part, the security pact with the Solomon Islands may crystallise the change in trend that has been observed over the last few years. Next, we will look at the classic arguments against the strategic approach; and in contrast, we will examine the pact itself and its implications.

To begin with, the arguments against this geostrategic approach are fourfold: the prioritisation of the Chinese agenda; Western neglect; the uniqueness of the PICs; and the context of diplomatic competition with Taiwan.

First, the South Pacific should not be high on the Chinese agenda. Beijing is facing too many foreign policy challenges. It must maintain good relations with the EU and the US, its main markets; relieve territorial tensions on the South China Sea with Japan and other Southeast Asian countries; this has recently been compounded by

21 (*) Italics added by the author.

the handling of relations with Russia in the context of the Ukraine war. Add domestic problems to the equation and it is hard to believe that geostrategic competition for PICs is high on Beijing's agenda (Hayward-Jones, 2013).

Second, Western neglect. China's arrival in the Pacific is perceived as filling a 'vacuum' left by Western powers. Since the end of the Cold War, the US and its allies have taken for granted the loyalty of Pacific countries, the so-called *Pacific loyalty*, and have progressively decreased the resources allocated to the region. After the collapse of the USSR, there was no longer a systemic rival to compete with, so since 1990 the US Pacific fleet has been halved (Henderson and Reilly, 2003). This progressive abandonment of the region by the United States has converted China into a regional power by default (Y. Zhang, 2007).

Third, the uniqueness of PICs. As noted above, the PICs share a number of unique characteristics that make them a differentiable board from the Asia-Pacific. With regard to geostrategic competition, PICs are too poor and too isolated to be assigned any relevant strategic value. For Wesley-Smith (2010), it is important that 'none of the island states are located close to the strategic sea lanes that serve the bulk of China's energy and commodities trade or, for that matter, to other important trans-Pacific maritime trade or military routes' (Wesley-Smith and Porter, 2010).

And finally, in fourth place, diplomatic competition with Taiwan. Over the past two decades, China's main thrust in the region has been directed at diplomatic rivalry with Taiwan. Despite a diplomatic truce in 2008, the region has experienced a revival in the competition in recent years, with major changes in recognition in 2019, such as Kiribati and the Solomon Islands.

So far, the general consensus is for China's purely economic interest in the region, disregarding geostrategic analysis. For example, Zhang (2007) argues that contrary to the popular line, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that China has a clear and well-coordinated strategy to fill the power vacuum in the Pacific (Y. Zhang, 2007). Yang (2009) also argues that the South Pacific should be a low priority region for Beijing in strategic terms (Yang, 2009). Or finally Hayward-Jones (2013), who insists that 'a geostrategic paradigm obscures a better understanding of both the benefits and drawbacks of China's [activities]. In that regard, it is important to be clear about the difference between normal economic competition and competition for strategic influence derived from diplomatic, defence and aid links' (Hayward-Jones, 2013).

In contrast, some arguments advocate that China's presence in the South Pacific is aligned with geostrategic interests. This line of argument is more diffuse, and in academic debate of previous decades focuses on China's ambition to become a major power. For example, Henderson and Reilly (2003) argue that 'China is not just filling a political vacuum created by Western neglect. It is incorporating the Pacific islands into its broader quest to become a major Asia-Pacific power' (Henderson and Reilly, 2003).

However, the evolution of actors' behaviour and the events that have unfolded in recent years indicate at the very least a change in trend in favour of this geostrategic approach.

The agreement

In April 2022, the Solomon Islands and China signed the security pact that is intended to be a turning point in the South Pacific security architecture. Although the official documents are not available, several conclusions can be drawn from the March leak. But first, it is important to put the situation in the Solomon Islands into context, and why the trend change mentioned above has materialised in these islands.

Key events that led to this pact are closely related to the revival of China's diplomatic competition with Taiwan. Consequently, this competition has been, and is currently, Beijing's main method of approaching the islands.

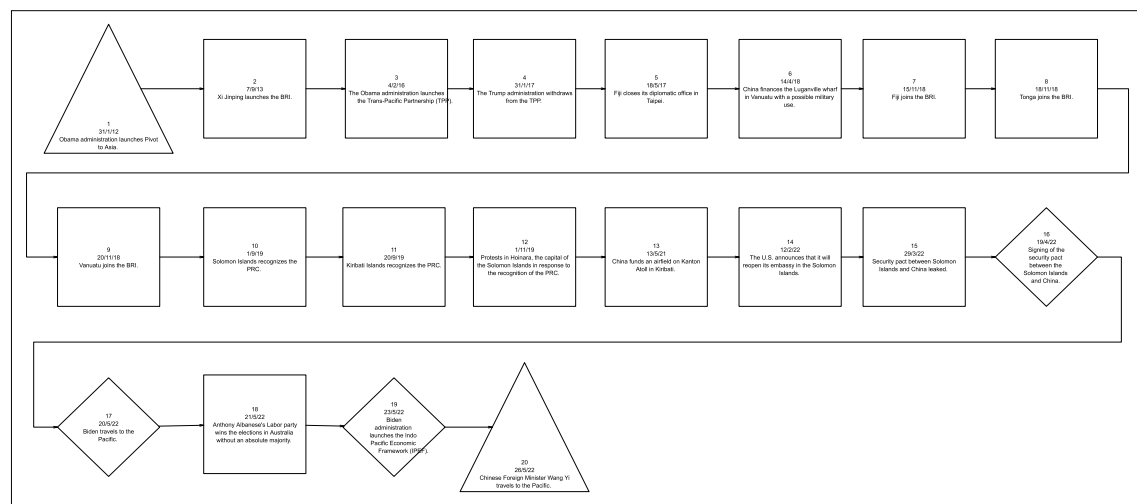


Illustration 1. Prepared by the author. Diagram of events leading up to the signing of the pact. Triangles indicate beginning and end, diamonds indicate key events, and squares indicate common events.

Such a continuation of events starts in September 2019, when Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare formalised relations with the People's Republic of China. At the time, the Solomon Islands was one of the few countries, mostly in the Pacific, that maintained relations with Taiwan. In return, this declaration was accompanied by a substantial increase in Chinese financial aid to the islands. In light of this, Tsai Ing-Wen, President of Taiwan, said: "We sincerely regret and strongly condemn [the Solomon Islands] government's decision to establish diplomatic relations with China" (Walden, Dziedzic, and Wasuka, 2021).

Subsequently, in November 2021, protests erupted in the Solomon Islands' capital, Honiara. The mobilisation began in the archipelago's most populous province of Malaita, encouraged by the province's president Daniel Suidani, who made public his rejection of the change in diplomatic recognition.

These protests led to violent altercations and deliberate attacks on Chinese-owned businesses. Indeed, one of the arguments underpinning China's growing engagement in the South Pacific is the protection of its diaspora (Yang, 2009). So these disturbances have been key to the signing of the pact. However, this is not the first time this has happened. On 18 April 2006, riots broke out in Honiara, unrelated to the recognition

of Taiwan. Again, several Chinese businesses were burnt down. In that year, after visiting the islands, Lu Weixiong, director of Overseas Chinese Affairs of Guangdong Province titled his internal report as 'Who is to blame for the cases of resentment against the Overseas Chinese' (Yang, 2009). It is worth noting that such events are recurrent in the Pacific, and 1998 saw major disturbances in Indonesia with bloody consequences (Henderson and Reilly, 2003).

Regarding this attack on Chinese interests, Sogavare's statements clarify how important they have been in the development of the pact. Sogavare states:

"Some countries and their publics may not take kindly to one country protecting infrastructure built by another country [...] But such an attitude makes us uncomfortable. We watched Chinatown burned to ashes and attempted vandalism of the Pacific Games infrastructure ... from our perspective any infrastructure built must be protected" (Dziedzic and Seselja, 2022).

Although the Solomon Island has a security cooperation agreement with Australia currently in place, the government doubts its effectiveness in protecting capital outside its interests. Still, on 29 March, Sogavare defended both the deal with Australia and China in the name of "diversification". Sogavare stated: "I would like to make it abundantly clear that the Solomon Islands' security arrangement with Australia remains in place, intact", "It is clear we need to diversify the country's relationship with other partners. What is wrong with that?" (Walden, Dziedzic, and Wasuka, 2021).

Paradoxically, it was the Solomon Islands' recognition of the Beijing government that triggered the protests that challenged Sogavare's rule, and it was ultimately this sense of insecurity that encouraged his government to enter into new security arrangements. In this sense, China has been both a cause and a consequence of the pact.

With regard to the features of the pact, assuming a certain consistency and credibility in the leak, a number of key points can be drawn from the text (Brady 2022). First, the Solomon Islands will be able to call on the Chinese People's Armed Police (PAP) for assistance in maintaining social order or fighting natural disasters; second, the Solomon Islands would allow logistical stops by Chinese military vessels in its ports; and third, China will be able to use its police force to protect its fellow citizens and Chinese property.

Although the pact does not explicitly mention any kind of military symbiosis, the PAP may set a precedent for the future. The PAP is the paramilitary force of the Chinese Communist Party, whose main mission is to maintain internal stability in China. Its functions include: being the first line of defence against natural disasters in mainland China; providing security for government buildings; and the arduous task of maintaining order in regions with complex security problems for Beijing such as Xinjiang and Tibet. Moreover, this is not the first time that the PAP could work outside national borders. Cases such as the fight against terrorism in Tajikistan or Afghanistan have already served as precedents (Kim, 2022).

The shift in Solomon's recognition towards China comes as a result of Taipei's inability to offer a real alternative in economic terms to Chinese aid. PICs have a serious infrastructure deficit, and financial support for their proper development is essential for them. A report by the Solomon Islands Congress ruled: "36 years of diplomatic relationship clearly illustrates that Taiwan will do nothing substantial in infrastructure development to support Solomon Islands' economic growth, [...]. The Solomon Islands should not rely on Taiwan's assistance" (D. Zhang, 2019).

Implications

Disputing Taiwan's international legitimacy is undoubtedly one of the strategic objectives of China's increased involvement in the Pacific. However, the implications of this agreement go beyond gaining influence in the UN.

As early as 1989, Biddick (1989) argued that 'in the long term, the PRC is likely to play a larger role as a Pacific maritime power, raising new questions for region of traditional Western influence'. In other words, even before the collapse of the USSR, there were fears that China would become a dominant presence in the region. However, in 2007 Zhang (2007) maintained that there was insufficient evidence to assert or refute that Chinese diplomacy in the Pacific was aimed at undermining Pacific Island countries' relations with the region's dominant powers and challenging US leadership in the Asia-Pacific in the long term (Y. Zhang, 2007). This is due to the consequences that a military escalation in the South Pacific would have for both China and the hegemonic powers in the region.

Such a military escalation would crystallise through a possible military base that Western analysts so often preach. Although the current focus is on the Solomon Islands, the debate over the consequences of a Chinese military base in the Pacific is more far-reaching. Referring to the case of Vanuatu in 2018, Charles Edel believes that once one base is installed, others will follow. This would allow the PLAN to block access to the region by the US and its allies, directly affecting Australian security (Wroe, 2018).

On the other hand, in this case a base in the Solomon Islands would be extremely costly for China. Maintaining supply chains from the Chinese mainland would be too complex and would divert the PLAN from its primary objective, naval supremacy in the South China Sea. Despite military modernisation in recent decades, the PLAN remains far from ready to engage in a protracted conflict in the vast South Pacific.

An example of this could be seen in the difficulties experienced by the PLAN in participating in the international anti-piracy coalition off the coast of Somalia (Lanteigne 2012). Given that China has no safe havens in the Indian Ocean, long-range operations off the African coast are particularly complex. In contrast, the US and its Diego Garcia base allows it a much faster and more efficient projection capability in the Indian Ocean. An increased naval presence in the South Pacific, even with a hypothetical base, would face the same problems today.

Moreover, China has not yet established any bases in the Pacific and Wang Yi has denied that there is any intention to build one in the Solomon Islands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Despite China's refusal, competition in the Pacific will eventually demand such enclaves. As Guillermo Pulido (2021) wrote, '[in the future] China could seize territories on islands in the Pacific or the Indian Ocean to turn them into missile bastions from which to radiate power', he continues, 'This is the usual mode of warfare in the Pacific, just as Japan did before World War II'.

In conclusion, the Solomon Islands security pact can be seen as part of China's Pacific strategy; as a measure to safeguard its direct economic interests, or as a moral obligation to protect its diaspora. Despite the different approaches and doubts about its 'short term' consequences, it is undeniable that this event has at least provided an incentive to follow the region more closely.

Responses to the pact

The Solomon Islands pact has reignited the power race, and the region has seen two visits at the highest diplomatic level in less than a month.

On 26 May, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi arrived in the Solomon Islands as part of his South Pacific tour. This was the first official visit of that rank since the two countries formalised diplomatic relations two years ago. It is accompanied by two key documents, the *China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision*²² and the *China-Pacific Islands Countries Five-Year Plan on Common Development*²³ which aim to draw the PICs into a broad multilateral compact. However, the PICs are reluctant to enter into such multilateral pacts (*The Phuket News*, 2022).

Even so, Wang Yi affirmed that China will firmly support the Solomon Islands in protecting its national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity, maintaining domestic solidarity and unity, accelerating the country's development and revitalisation. For his part, Solomon Islands Foreign Minister Jeremiah Manele has reaffirmed his adherence to the *One-China Principle* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). All of these fits with China's natural approach to the Periphery. As a *reward*, the two countries have reached agreement on the construction of 'flagship projects' within the framework of the BRI, as well as a more favoured country policy with 0% tariffs for Solomon Islands exports to China. Certainly a deal they could not refuse.

At almost the same time, on 20 May Joe Biden landed in Seoul as part of his Asian tour to reaffirm his alliances in the Indo-Pacific. Although he only visited South Korea

²² Translation proposed by the author.

²³ Translation proposed by the author.

and Japan, during his trip he announced the launch of the IPEF, which I discuss below. The IPEF essentially presents itself as an alternative to the BRI, and may be the star mechanism with which to compete economically with China in the South Pacific.

Conclusions

The South Pacific board is a unique space in the world in terms of both its problems and opportunities. After the vacuum left by Western powers at the end of the Cold War, the region has had to face major challenges such as underdevelopment and climate change on its own. To circumvent these challenges, PIC leaders have resorted to a high degree of strategic flexibility in accepting Chinese resources for their own benefit. During the early 2000s, China's presence was almost entirely explained by its diplomatic competition with Taiwan, which many authors have used as an argument to disprove a possible geostrategic competition in the South Pacific. However, a change in trend can be observed since the creation of the BRI. China's hunger for resources and the high profitability of its involvement with PICs accelerated its participation in the region, and with it Western concerns. The security pact has set a valuable precedent for China and its potential consequences may revolutionise the security sphere of powers such as Australia and New Zealand.

In conclusion, regional competition in the Pacific is set to intensify. In line with Chinese interests, we may soon see geostrategic moves around Fiji or Papua New Guinea.

Although China's domestic problems may cause it to lose momentum, it has already established itself as the alternative to traditional Western neglect. For its part, if the US wants to contain China, it needs to become more active on regional boards again. However, initiatives need backing, funding and future credibility, which the IPEF has not yet demonstrated vis-à-vis the BRI.

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