



The United States' Indo–Pacific  
Strategy and a Revisionist  
China: Partnering with Small  
and Middle Powers in the  
Pacific Islands Region

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## **Pacific Forum**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The advent of the Biden administration brings with it an opportunity for the United States to take a fresh look at the Pacific Islands Region (PIR) in the face of new geopolitical realities. Since the end of the Cold War, the PIR has largely been viewed by the United States as a tranquil backwater with little need for attention. Traditionally, the attention Washington did give to the region was exclusively focused on Micronesia—a region which contains both the Freely Associated States (FAS) and US territories such as Guam. The remainder of the PIR, the sub-regions of Melanesia and Polynesia, were often left to close US partners such as Australia and New Zealand. Washington’s strategic neglect of the PIR—coupled with a clear prioritisation of the FAS over other regional states—has overlapped with a gradual encroachment by non-traditional partners in an area where the United States has traditionally been the principal external power. These non-traditional partners range from US friends and allies such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan to strategic competitors such as Russia and China. Of these non-traditional partners, China has distinguished itself as the most significant in the PIR.

In June 2019, the US Department of Defense released a major policy document that re-invigorated the Indo-Pacific as the United States’ priority theatre. The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (IPSR) was largely reflective of the Trump Administration’s consistent China narrative: China is a revisionist power seeking to displace the United States’ global pre-eminence and its rise must be contained. The report highlights a revisionist China as the first of four ‘trends and challenges’ in the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape. Whilst clear in its appreciation of China as a strategic competitor, the IPSR fails to give strategic weight to the PIR and fails to highlight Beijing’s growing influence in Washington’s backyard.

Recent initiatives such as the ‘Pacific Pledge’ have been a positive step towards revitalising the United States’ regional engagement and maintaining its influence within the PIR. Despite perceptions that US involvement in the PIR has waned since the end of the Cold War, the United States maintains a privileged position in shaping the regional information environment through its strong social, cultural, linguistic, and historical links to the PIR. Because of this, Washington has been able to leverage its soft power to build strong military-to-military ties and security partnerships in the region. Where the United States has failed, however, is in its focus on the North Pacific at the expense of the South Pacific; its weak diplomatic presence throughout the South Pacific; high-profile but inconsistent diplomatic engagement with Pacific Island leaders; and inconsistent financial aid. Additionally, many Pacific Island leaders are acutely aware of the strategic competition between the United States and China and do not want engagement to be framed in terms of competition with China.

On the other hand, China has established itself as a strong economic partner with a growing diplomatic network in the PIR. Although Beijing has certainly made in-roads through geo-economic endeavours such as the Belt and Road Initiative, it suffers from image problems that have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These image problems are rooted in the underlying ideological differences between a ‘Western-colonised’ and

predominantly Christian PIR and ‘Communist China.’ This has only become more pronounced with the immigration of Chinese labour to support Chinese-led infrastructure projects; environmental degradation from Chinese-led projects; perceptions of ‘criminality’, namely through Chinese organised crime; resentment against the relative success of Chinese diaspora-run businesses; and a willingness to corrupt local elites. Further exacerbated by the elite-to-elite bias seen in Beijing’s engagement, these image problems have at times culminated into anti-Chinese sentiment and violence.

Despite a growing focus on Sino-US geostrategic competition, the PIR is becoming an increasingly crowded geopolitical environment. A growing multitude of small and middle powers have a strong stake to claim in the region’s future. Former colonial powers such as Australia, New Zealand, and France remain heavily invested in the region. These Western powers are, however, gradually being displaced by Asian powers such as China, Taiwan, South Korea, India, and Japan. Rather than solely focusing on countering Chinese influence in the PIR in the name of geostrategic competition, Washington must embrace the region’s growing multi-polarity and seek opportunities to enhance its engagement in conjunction with like-minded powers such as Australia, New Zealand, France, India, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. Furthermore, these partners need to be better incorporated into the existing regional architecture. Doing so will demonstrate a respect for the sovereignty of PIR countries to choose their development partners, whilst also diluting China’s influence. To supplement and enable this cooperation, the incoming Biden Administration must also go beyond its focus on the FAS and ensure its diplomatic engagement with the entire PIR is more consistent. Washington must harness its key strengths—soft power and military-to-military relationships—and expand its diplomatic footprint across the region to better facilitate bilateral engagements. By doing so, the United States will demonstrate a genuine and long-term commitment that doesn’t simply fade away when other geopolitical imperatives arise.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

As the Cold War drew to a close, the Pacific Islands Region (PIR) was viewed by the United States as “...a tranquil backwater where essentially passive US interests required little attention.”<sup>1</sup> More recently and despite its deep connection to Guam and American Samoa, as well as its historic relations with the ‘Freely Associated States’ (FAS) of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the United States’ engagement with the region has been aptly described as “episodic at best.”<sup>2</sup> Washington’s strategic neglect of the PIR—coupled with a clear prioritisation of the FAS over other regional states—has overlapped with a gradual encroachment by non-traditional partners in an area where the United States has traditionally been the principal external power. Although Washington has often turned to close regional partners such as Australia and New Zealand to ‘hold the fort’ in the PIR, the region’s rapid decolonisation created a wave of agency that has spurred independent foreign policies which have drawn in state actors from far and wide. These non-traditional partners range from U.S. friends and allies such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan to strategic competitors such as Russia and the People’s Republic of China (‘China’ from hereon in). Of these non-traditional partners, China has distinguished itself as the most significant in the PIR.<sup>3</sup>

In June 2019, the Trump Administration released its Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (IPSR), building on its vision of a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP). Although the primary aim of the document was to reinforce the Indo-Pacific’s place as the United States’ priority theatre, the Trump Administration’s FOIP strategy was a clear response to what it saw as a geopolitical rivalry between two competing visions: a free world order led by the United States and a repressive world order led by China.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Chinese leaders believe that the US FOIP strategy aims to contain China’s rise.<sup>5</sup> Whilst clear in its appreciation of China as a strategic competitor, the IPSR failed to give strategic weight to the PIR and failed to highlight Beijing’s growing influence in Washington’s backyard.

To address these developments, this paper will seek to answer two central questions: what is the state of the United States’ influence in the PIR compared to China; and how can the Biden administration leverage the growing multipolarity of the PIR to balance China’s rise and maintain its sphere of influence? To answer these questions, this paper will first provide a brief overview of the IPSR with relevance to the PIR. Following this, the relative influence of both

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1. John Dorrance, “The Soviet Union and the Pacific Islands: A Current Assessment,” *Asian Survey* 30, no. 9 (1990): 909-910, [www.jstor.org/stable/2644529](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2644529)

2. Alan Tidwell, “Washington’s Pacific Islands strategy shouldn’t focus solely on China,” *The Strategist*, May 06, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/washingtons-pacific-islands-strategy-shouldnt-focus-solely-on-china/>

3. Joanne Wallis, *Crowded and Complex: The changing geopolitics of the South Pacific* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2017), 11.

4. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>

5. Kai He and Mingjiang Li, “Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific: US-China strategic competition, regional actors, and beyond,” *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 2, <https://doi-org.simsrad.net.ocs.mq.edu.au/10.1093/ia/iiz242>.

the United States and China in the PIR will be assessed using the DIME (Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economic) model of national power as an analytical framework. From this analysis, the implications of Washington's continued strategic neglect of the PIR in the face of a rising China will be discussed. The paper will then highlight the increasingly important role of small and middle powers in the region by examining the activities of like-minded actors such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, France, and India. Finally, this paper will provide recommendations for the incoming Biden Administration on how Washington can best respond to China's rise in the PIR. These recommendations focus on relevant, consistent, and targeted engagement in the PIR; not allowing geostrategic competition to completely drive engagement; and partnering with rising like-minded partners in the region to balance China's rise.

## 2. THE UNITED STATES' INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

In June 2019, the US Department of Defense released a major policy document that re-invigorated the Indo-Pacific as the United States' priority theatre. The IPSR represented a novel approach for US grand strategy, building on previous efforts such as the 1995 Nye Initiative to better incorporate the Indo-Pacific concept. The strategy was largely reflective of the Trump Administration's consistent China narrative: China is a revisionist power seeking to displace the United States' global pre-eminence and its rise must be contained. The report highlighted a revisionist China as the first of four 'trends and challenges' in the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape. The language used in the IPSR was reflective of a shift in Washington's policy towards China. Under the Barack Obama Administration, in which the United States' 'pivot to Asia' strategy was born, the "...the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China" was welcomed.<sup>6</sup> Whilst the Obama Administration accepted a small degree of competition in its relationship with China, the Trump Administration opted for a more forward stance. The IPSR paints a confronting picture of China, arguing that "...the Indo-Pacific increasingly is confronted with a more confident and assertive China that is willing to accept friction in the pursuit of a more expansive set of political, economic, and security interests."<sup>7</sup> While the Biden administration has yet to formulate its Asia or China policy, it is clear that the harder line approach toward China will continue, with bipartisan US support.

The ISPR is consistent with three other key policy documents released under the Trump Administration. The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) argued that China will "...continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific hegemony...."<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) affirmed that "China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region..."<sup>9</sup> Most recently, the Trump Administration released what can be considered a global and comprehensive China strategy which encapsulates the themes

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6. White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: White House, 2015), 24,

[https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy\\_2.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf)

7. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 7.

8. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), 2,

<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

9. White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), 25, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

within the NDS, NSS, and IPSR. *The United States' Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China* is a "...competitive approach...based on clear-eyed assessment of the CCP's intentions and actions, a reappraisal of the United States' many strategic advantages and shortfalls, and a tolerance of greater bilateral friction."<sup>10</sup> Although the IPSR was clear in highlighting the 'China threat' to the US-led international order, it was—for a document proclaiming to encompass the strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific in its entirety—overwhelmingly East Asia-centric. Likewise, the PIR only received a passing mention in the Trump Administration's *Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*.<sup>11</sup> Where both these strategies fail is in their lack of appreciation of the PIR's strategic weight and China's expanding strategic interests and influence in the PIR. Unlike East Asia, where a multitude of established middle powers such as Japan and South Korea are less likely to capitulate to coercion, the PIR is comprised of small island stands that have proven vulnerable to external exploitation.

There has been some interest in Washington on shining a greater light on China's increasing influence in the PIR. Despite the efforts of some, much of this has failed to gain traction in Washington. Less than six months before the US Department of Defense released the IPSR, the US Congress passed House Resolution 1157 entitled 'Reaffirming the strong commitment of the United States to the countries and territories of the PIR.'<sup>12</sup> The resolution explicitly highlights that "...China's increased influence in the South Pacific region and the possibility of a future Chinese military presence in [the] region could expand its monitoring and surveillance capabilities, threatening the United States military presence in the region." Unfortunately, this House Resolution never made it to the Senate. Likewise, in mid-2020, US congressman Ed Case (D-HI) introduced House Resolution 7797, also known as the BLUE Pacific Act. Standing for 'Boosting Long-term U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Act', it would see the establishment of a comprehensive and long-term US strategy for the PIR.<sup>13</sup> Whilst promising, the BLUE Pacific Act has yet to pass the House let alone the Senate. The lack of appetite for developing a strategy to counterbalance China in the PIR is not just evident in Washington, but also in the IPSR. To better understand what increased Chinese influence and the displacement of the US influence in the PIR would mean, it is worth examining their comparative level of influence.

### 3. ASSESSING US INFLUENCE IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS REGION

When the PIR is broken down into its constituent parts—Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia—US interests have traditionally been isolated to Micronesia.<sup>14</sup> This is due to the inclusion of two of its Pacific territories—Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands (NMI)—in Micronesia; its arrangements with the FAS of the RMI, the FSM, and Palau; and its military

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10. White House, *The United States' Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: White House, 2020), 1, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/U.S.-Strategic-Approach-to-The-Peoples-Republic-of-China-Report-5.20.20.pdf>

11. White House, *Strategic Approach*, 7.

12. Reaffirming the strong commitment of the United States to the countries and territories of the Pacific Islands region, H.R. 1157, 115th Cong. (November 12, 2018), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-resolution/1157/text>.

13. "Introducing the BLUE Pacific Act", Congressman Ed Case, July 30, 2020, <https://case.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=356>

14. Jian Yang, "China in the South Pacific: hegemon on the horizon?" *The Pacific Review* 22, no. 2 (2009): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512740902815292>.



bases in Guam and Kwajalein Atoll. In Washington’s eyes, this focus on Micronesia at the expense of the region as a whole is justifiable given Australia’s considerable degree of influence in Melanesia; as well as New Zealand’s throughout Polynesia.<sup>15</sup> To attain a wholistic appreciation of how the United States exerts influence in the PIR, the DIME (Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economic) model for understanding national power will be used as an analytical framework.<sup>16</sup>

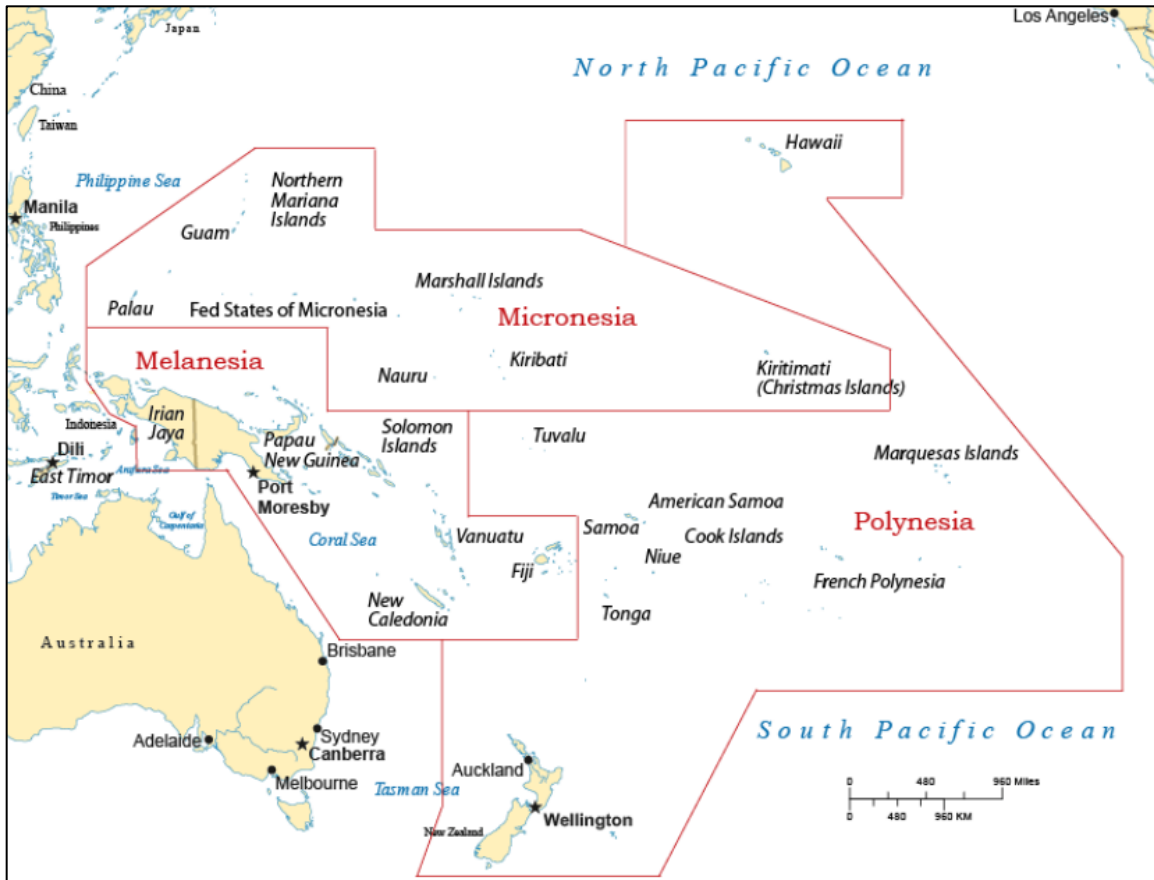


Figure 1. Map of the PIR: Pacific Island Countries and Cultural Areas<sup>17</sup>

## Diplomacy

US diplomacy in the PIR is being driven by two distinct goals: the preservation of its security arrangements with the FAS and fostering Western-aligned regionalism in the PIR. Both these goals fed into the Trump Administration’s FOIP strategy. The strategic weight placed on Washington’s security arrangements with the FAS is reflected in United States’ diplomatic footprint in the region. Of the six US embassies in the PIR, three can be found within the FAS.

15. Yang, “hegemon on the horizon,” 151.

16. For an in-depth explanation, see: Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine Note 1-18: Strategy*, JDN 1-18 (Washington, DC: US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018), 5-7, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=810221#:~:text=%22Strategy%20is%20about%20how%20nations,their%20national%20interests%20and%20policies.>

17. Thomas Lum and Bruce Vaughn, *The Southwest Pacific: U.S. Interests and China’s Growing Influence* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2007), 27.

Outside of this, the remaining US embassies are thinly spread across Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), and Samoa.<sup>18</sup> The US Embassy in Fiji services Nauru, Kiribati, Tonga, and Tuvalu; and the French territories of French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis & Futuna. Meanwhile, the US Embassy in PNG covers the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

In the Northern Pacific, US diplomacy has focused on securing its strategically invaluable military access to the air, land, and sea routes of the FAS. The FAS of the RMI, FSM, and Palau entered into ‘Compacts of Free Association’ (COFA) with the United States in the 1980s. The COFA are unique international agreements governing the bilateral relations between the United States and the FAS. Although the FAS are self-governing states with the capacity to conduct their own foreign affairs, they confer a degree of their autonomy in exchange for a US defence commitment, significant economic assistance, and a plethora of other benefits. Critically, the COFA allows for exclusive and unfettered military access to a sizeable portion of the Pacific Ocean.<sup>19</sup>

Looking towards the South Pacific, US diplomatic efforts have primarily been channelled through multilateral fora and high profile, yet inconsistent engagement. The primary regional grouping is the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). Established by Australia and New Zealand in 1971, the PIF brings together leaders from across the region on an annual basis and remains a driving force for Pacific regionalism. The United States—as well as China—is one of 18 Dialogue Partners that participates in a Post-Forum Dialogue (PFD).<sup>20</sup> Prior to the Obama Administration’s ‘pivot to Asia’, US representation at the PIF PFD was generally held by a mid-level State Department official. From 2009, this was bumped up to interagency delegations which were led by assistant and deputy secretaries. In 2012, then Secretary Hillary Clinton was the first US Secretary of State to attend the PIF. Her successor, Secretary John Kerry, met regularly with Pacific Island leaders, often through the United Nations and during a visit to the Solomon Islands in 2014. President Obama met with a number of Pacific Island leaders between 2011 and 2016 through various international fora such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting, the Paris Climate Conference, and the Pacific Island Conference of Leaders.<sup>21</sup>

The Trump Administration largely continued this tradition. After sending an inter-agency delegation led by Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt to the 2019 PIF, the US Department of State declared that “Under the Trump Administration, the United States has increased engagement with Pacific Island nations to unprecedented levels...” Despite these claims, there has been a very strong focus on Micronesia at the expense of the remaining PIR.<sup>22</sup> This is exemplified by the Trump Administration’s choice of the Secretary of the Interior as its PIF delegation-lead since 2018—the US Department of the Interior is responsible for

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18. Amy Searight, Brian Harding, and Kim Mai Tran, *Strengthening the U.S.-Pacific Islands Partnership* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2019), 15.

19. Derek Grossman et al., *America’s Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 14-15.

20. Searight, Harding, and Mai Tran, *Pacific Islands Partnership*, 8.

21. Searight, Harding, and Mai Tran, *Pacific Islands Partnership*, 14.

22. “Pacific Islands Forum – U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Islands,” Department of State, August 17, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/pacific-islands-forum-u-s-engagement-in-the-pacific-islands/>.

managing assistance to the FAS.<sup>23</sup> In May 2019, President Donald Trump held a historic Oval Office meeting with the three Presidents of the FAS. In July 2019, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie attended the inauguration of FSM President David Paneulo; and in August 2019, Secretary Mike Pompeo became the first US Secretary of State to visit the Marshall Islands and the FSM—announcing the United States’ intent to begin negotiations on the COFA.<sup>24</sup>

Conversely, the Trump Administration’s commitment to the region came under scrutiny when Vice President Mike Pence visited Papua New Guinea for APEC in late 2018 rather than President Trump himself.<sup>25</sup> Overall, there were apprehensions about the Trump Administration’s Indo–Pacific Strategy, with some in the PIR believing that they were an ‘afterthought’ for US policymakers given the overt focus on ‘securing the sea lines of trade’ and countering China’s growing influence.<sup>26</sup> These apprehensions have only been exacerbated by the few and sporadic visits by high–ranking US officials to the PIR and scepticism over the United States’ global commitment to climate change.<sup>27</sup>

## Information

The United States’ informational power is largely derived from higher education, media, entertainment and film, advertising, US online content, libraries, museums, non–governmental organisations, endowments and foundations, and the global status of the English language.<sup>28</sup> Within the PIR, the United States’ informational power is largely employed through the US Department of State’s public diplomacy programs and traditional media exports. The United States’ regional soft power—aided by Washington’s social, cultural, linguistic, and historical ties to the region—provides ready audiences for its public diplomacy programs. These programs generally focus on a small number of academic and professional exchanges such as the Fulbright and Humphrey scholarships; the International Visitors Leadership Program (IVLP); the Young Pacific Leaders Program; and the US South Pacific scholarship program.<sup>29</sup> However, the actual impact of these initiatives is quite low; for example, the 2017 Fulbright Scholarship Program brought only three students from the PIR to the United States for graduate study and the Young Pacific Leaders Program has struggled to find reliable funding.<sup>30</sup>

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23. “U.S. Engagement in the Pacific”, Department of State, September 3, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-engagement-in-the-pacific/>.

24. Department of State, “Pacific Islands Forum – U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Islands.”

25. Jacob Greber, “Donald Trump scraps Australia visit, snubs APEC,” *Australian Financial Review*, September 2, 2018, <https://www.afr.com/world/donald-trump-scraps-australia-visit-snubs-apec-20180902-h14trx>.

26. John Grady, “Pacific Island Nations Want More U.S. Engagement,” *USNI News*, May 15, 2019, <https://news.usni.org/2019/05/15/pacific-island-nations-want-more-u-s-engagement>.

27. Searight, Harding, and Mai Tran, *Pacific Islands Partnership*, 16.

28. Donald Bishop, “DIME, not DiME: Time to Align the Instruments of U.S. Informational Power”, *The Strategy Bridge*, June 20, 2018, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2018/6/20/dime-not-dime-time-to-align-the-instruments-of-us-informational-power>.

29. “U.S. Relations With Fiji,” Department of State, January 23, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-fiji/>.

30. Searight, Harding, and Mai Tran, *Pacific Islands Partnership*, 15.

From a traditional media perspective, the United States—alongside Australia and New Zealand—maintains a privileged role in shaping the regional information environment.<sup>31</sup> For example, regional television network Sky Pacific’s international channels come predominantly from the United States (18 channels compared to only three from Japan or Singapore). Digicel Play, which provides international content to customers in Tonga, has up to 25 US channels in comparison to China’s four. Unlike the plethora of US television media available in the PIR, there is an evident gap in US radio broadcasting. For example, the United States’ well known international broadcasting agencies Voice of America and Radio Free Asia are widely available in Asia but have no footprint in the PIR. There is a US military radio station available on Kwajalein Atoll; however, this would have little to no penetration across the broader PIR.<sup>32</sup> Recently, Washington’s 2020 Pacific Pledge has detailed plans to strengthen local journalism through training and providing PIR media outlets access to Associated Press content in English and New York Times content in English and Mandarin free of charge.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the US Department of State runs several programs offering exposure and dialogue for PIR media professionals such as the IVLP and the Edward R. Murrow Program for Journalists.<sup>34</sup>

## Military

US military interests in the broader PIR are overwhelmingly weighted in the North Pacific. This is of course not surprising, given the strategic value of US territories and the FAS to the United States’ defence posture. The RMI houses a US military facility on Kwajalein Atoll, serving as a critical node in global space surveillance and GPS, and also acts as the entry point for intercontinental ballistic missile testing. Additionally, the United States has long maintained a growing military presence in Guam.<sup>35</sup> In the South Pacific, US military engagement has traditionally focused on the only three militaries in the region: the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF), the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), and His Majesty’s Armed Forces of Tonga (HMAF). Military-to-military engagement is largely facilitated by the US Defence Attaché Office (USDAO) in Suva, Fiji, focussing on humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, peacekeeping, and international humanitarian law.<sup>36</sup> US commitment to engaging with these militaries was revitalised in 2018, with a substantial increase in assistance—some USD 7 million in foreign military funding (FMF)—being announced to support military training, equipment, and other security cooperation priorities in PNG, Fiji, and Tonga (see figure 2).<sup>37</sup>

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31. Lauren Dickey et al., *Mapping the Information Environment in the Pacific Island Countries: Disruptors, Deficits, and Decisions* (Arlington, VA: CAN, 2019), 55

32. “Submission to the Review of Australian Broadcasting Services in the Asia Pacific,” Supporters of Australian Broadcasting in Asia and the Pacific, accessed November 18, 2020, [https://www.communications.gov.au/sites/default/files/submissions/supporters\\_of\\_australian\\_broadcasting\\_in\\_the\\_asia\\_pacific.pdf](https://www.communications.gov.au/sites/default/files/submissions/supporters_of_australian_broadcasting_in_the_asia_pacific.pdf)

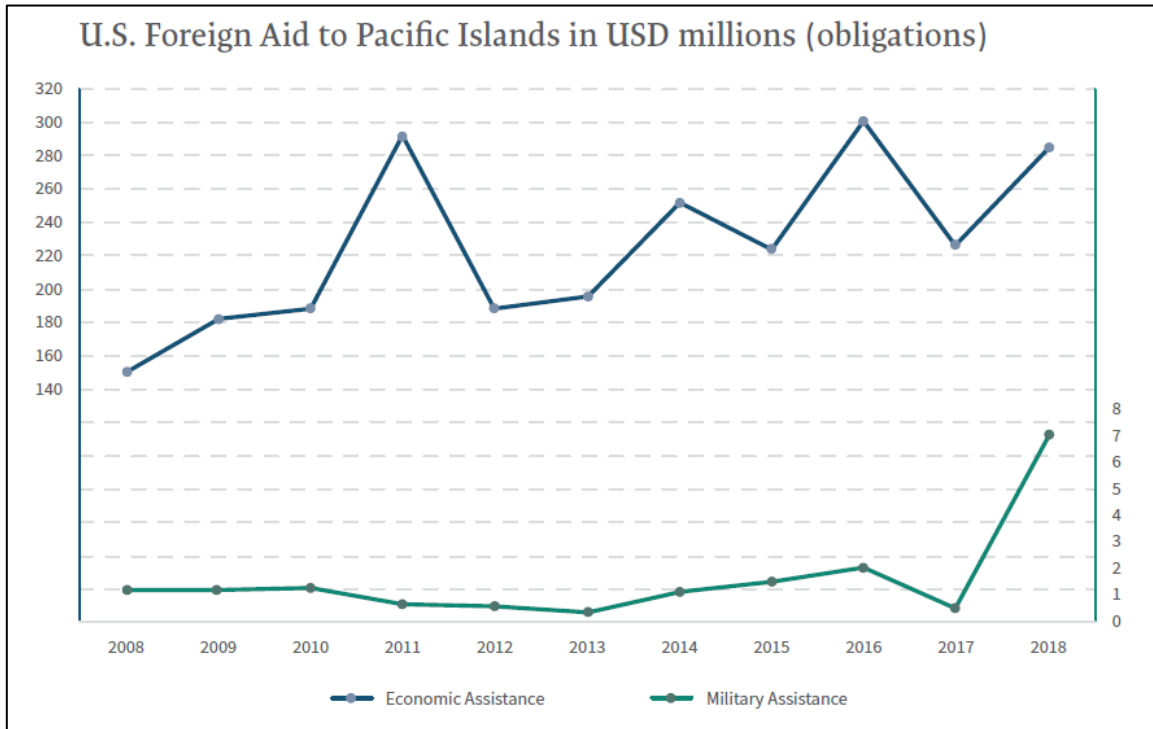
33. “U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Islands: 2020 Pacific Pledge,” US Department of State, October 1, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-engagement-in-the-pacific-islands-2020-pacific-pledge/>

34. Dickey et al., *Information Environment*, 21.

35. Searight, Harding, and Mai Tran, *Pacific Islands Partnership*, 13.

36. “Sections & Offices,” U.S. Embassy in Fiji, accessed June 25, 2020, <https://fj.usembassy.gov/embassy/suva/sections-offices/>.

37. Department of State, “U.S. Engagement in the Pacific.”



**Figure 2** US military assistance to the PIR<sup>38</sup>

Other than direct FMF, US military assistance is also channelled through International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs in Fiji, PNG, Tonga, and Samoa<sup>39</sup>—amounting to approximately USD 750,000 annually.<sup>40</sup> IMET programs are related to peacekeeping operations, strengthening national security, responding to natural and man-made crises, developing democratic civil-military relationships, and building military and police professionalism. IMET allows officers and senior enlisted personnel from PIR militaries to undertake professional military education and leadership development courses in the United States. For example, PIR government officials are offered the opportunity to complete US defence courses at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii.<sup>41</sup> This is complemented by small-scale joint training and exercises, as well as the establishment of State Partnership Programs. For example, the Nevada National Guard entered into a State Partnership Program with Tonga in 2014,<sup>42</sup> and Fiji in 2018 to further enhance joint training opportunities.<sup>43</sup>

Given the lack of established militaries in the PIR, maritime security engagement is a critical component of the United States’ engagement in the region—allowing it to extend its influence on nations without militaries such as Kiribati, Samoa, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. This engagement

<sup>38</sup> Searight, Harding, and Mai Tran, *Pacific Islands Partnership*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Lum and Bruce Vaughn, *The Pacific Islands* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), 2.

<sup>40</sup> Department of State, “U.S. Engagement in the Pacific.”

<sup>41</sup> “Sections & Offices,” U.S. Embassy in Fiji.

<sup>42</sup> “U.S. Relations With Tonga,” US Department of State, July 17, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-tonga/#:~:text=U.S.%2DTONGA%20RELATIONS,and%20development%20in%20the%20region>.

<sup>43</sup> Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 42.

is primarily realised through the US Coast Guard–led Maritime Law Enforcement (MLE) Shiprider Program and the US Navy–led Oceania Maritime Security Initiative (OMSI). The United States, through the US Coast Guard (USCG), has some 11 bilateral Shiprider agreements in the PIR. The MLE Shiprider Program and OMSI allows partnering nations’ military and law enforcement personnel to embark on USCG and US Navy (USN) vessels to observe, protect, board, and search vessels suspected of violating laws or regulations within their exclusive economic zones (EEZ) or on the high seas.<sup>44</sup> These programs are critical in fostering strong security cooperation between the United States and smaller states in the PIR, given the lack of maritime security capabilities; the vast EEZs that need to be patrolled; and the significant impact of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the region.

## Economic

The United States’ economic engagement with the PIR is not as mature as its military–to–military and security relationships. This is due to the small size of the economies in the region and a general lack of interest from US business investment and trade. There are some exceptions to this—for example, the heavy involvement of US energy and mining companies in PNG and strong US economic interest in the region’s fisheries.<sup>45</sup> The continued interest in the region’s fisheries has primarily manifested itself within the arrangements of the South Pacific Tuna Treaty (SPTT). Established in 1988, the SPTT provides US tuna fishing vessels access to fishing zones across the region. In return, participating states receive income generated from licencing fees, as well as fisheries–related economic assistance amounting to some USD 21 million per annum.<sup>46</sup> Aside from this, US economic engagement in the PIR is largely framed around developmental assistance.

US economic aid to the region is largely concentrated on the FAS, with more than 85% of US aid to the region going to these three countries alone between 2011 and 2016.<sup>47</sup> During this time, US assistance to the PIR also saw a significant drop from USD 230 million in 2011 to a mere USD 66 million in 2016.<sup>48</sup> Financial aid to the region began to increase in the 2018 fiscal year, with support for the FAS equating to approximately USD 274 million. The remainder of PIR states received approximately USD 15 million in financial aid in the 2018 fiscal year (this increased to approximately USD 33 million in 2019).<sup>49</sup> This upward trend seemingly continued under the Trump Administration’s revitalised engagement with the PIR and its ‘Pacific Pledge’. Following the end of the 50th PIF in August 2019, Washington announced an additional USD 36.5 million of financial assistance to complement the existing USD 350 million provided across the PIR. This was further increased by an additional USD 65 million after Secretary of State Pompeo met with Pacific Island leaders on the margins of the UN General Assembly in September 2019. To further facilitate the injection of this financial assistance, USAID is also

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44. Warren Wright, “Shiprider Program,” *The Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, January 27, 2020, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/shiprider-program/>.

45. Searight, Harding, and Mai Tran, *Pacific Islands Partnership*, 14.

46. Thomas Lum and Bruce Vaughn, *The Pacific Islands: Policy Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2017), 7–8.

47. Alexandre Dayant and Jonathan Pryke, “Pivoting to the Pacific,” *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, August 09, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/pivoting-to-the-pacific/>.

48. “Pacific Aid Map,” Lowy Institute, 2019, <https://pacificaidmap.lowyinstitute.org/>.

49. “Foreign Aid Explorer,” USAID, April 24, 2020, <https://explorer.usaid.gov/aid-trends.html>.

expanding its staff presence in Fiji, PNG, FSM, RMI, and Palau.<sup>50</sup> The recent threat of COVID–19 has also prompted several tranches of financial assistance to the PIR, totalling some USD 45.8 million.<sup>51</sup> In light of the COVID–19 pandemic, the Trump Administration also approved a second round of funding under the banner of the Pacific Pledge, bringing some USD 200 million in new funding for the region. Although the funding sees some allocation to countries such as PNG, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, and Samoa; the clear winners are the FAS.<sup>52</sup>

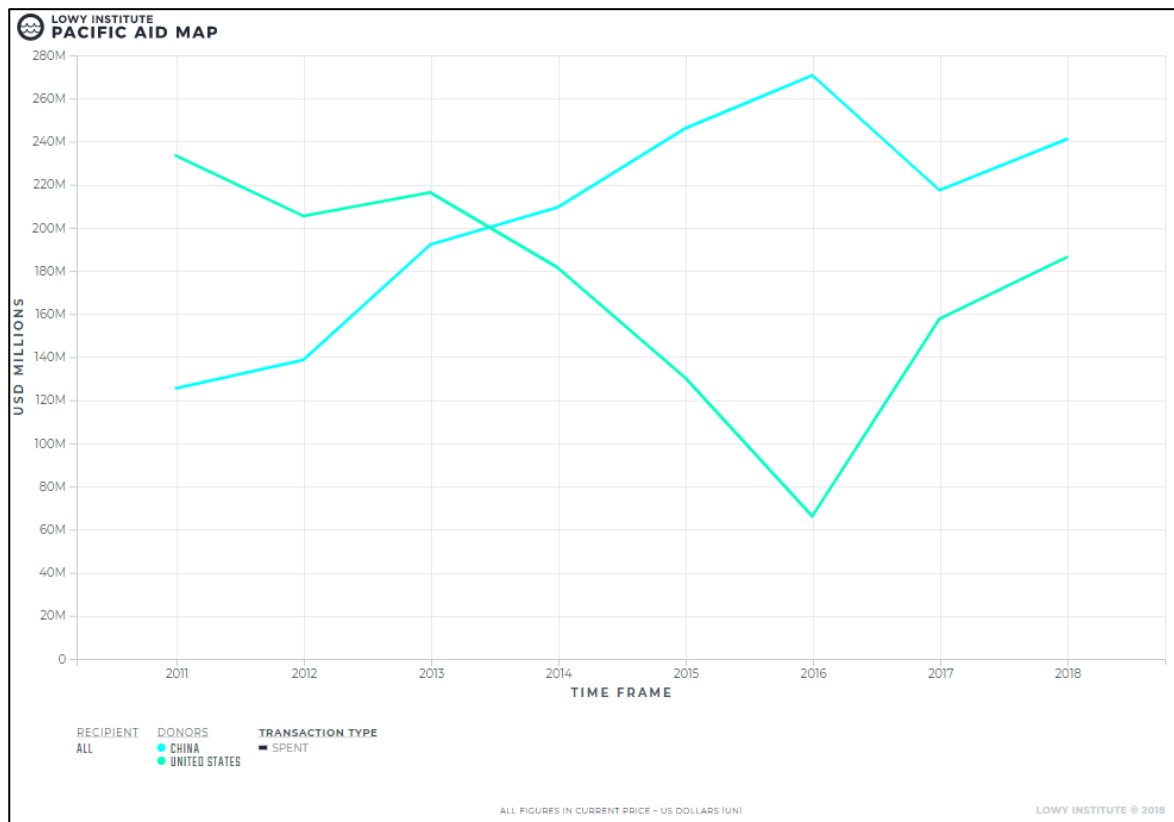


Figure 3 Financial Aid to the PIR, 2011–2018<sup>53</sup>

### Challenges for the United States in the PIR

The ‘Pacific Pledge’ of the Trump Administration’s Indo–Pacific Strategy was a positive step towards revitalising the United States’ regional engagement and maintaining its influence with PIR countries. Despite perceptions that US involvement in the PIR has waned since the end of the Cold War, the United States maintains a privileged position in shaping the regional information environment through its strong social, cultural, linguistic, and historical links to

50. “U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Islands: UN General Assembly Update,” Department of State, October 3, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-engagement-in-the-pacific-islands-un-general-assembly-update/>.

51. “U.S. Government Provides Additional US\$9.9 Million to Support COVID-19 Efforts in the PIR,” U.S. Embassy Suva, May 20, 2020, <https://fj.usembassy.gov/u-s-government-provides-additional-us9-9-million-to-support-covid-19-efforts-in-the-pacific-islands-region/>

52. “U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Islands: 2020 Pacific Pledge,” US Department of State, October 1, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-engagement-in-the-pacific-islands-2020-pacific-pledge/>

53. “Pacific Aid Map,” Lowy Institute.

the PIR. Because of this, Washington has been able to leverage its soft power to build strong military-to-military ties and security partnerships in the region. Where the United States has failed, however, is in its focus on the North Pacific at the expense of the South Pacific; its weak diplomatic presence throughout the South Pacific; high-profile but inconsistent diplomatic engagement with Pacific Island leaders; and inconsistent financial aid. The impact of the United States' inconsistent engagement is telling. For example, the significant decline in US financial aid to the region between 2013 and 2016 is precisely when Chinese financial assistance significantly increased (see figure 3). This has left many Pacific Island leaders questioning the sustainability of the United States' most recent enhanced diplomatic and economic engagement with the region.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, many Pacific Island leaders are acutely aware of the strategic competition between the United States and China and do not want increased US engagement to be framed in terms of competition with China. In the words of Fiji's former Ambassador to the United States, Naivakarurubulavu Solo Mara, Pacific Islanders have the impression that they "have been tacked on at the end" as an "afterthought."<sup>55</sup> The challenge for the Biden administration will be how it can expand its influence in a region where China is viewed as a welcomed external partner for economic development.

#### 4. ASSESSING CHINESE INFLUENCE IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS REGION

China's rising influence has been one of the most significant features of the Pacific regional order in the past decade.<sup>56</sup> This has manifested itself in a substantial expansion of Beijing's diplomatic, aid, and economic interactions with the region.<sup>57</sup> Scholars such as Stewart Firth argue that China's rising influence in the PIR is based on commerce, investment, development assistance, migration, and diplomacy rather than one of strategy or military power.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, much of China's interests in the region prior to 2008 were driven by its competition with Taiwan for diplomatic recognition.<sup>59</sup> There is, however, a growing threat-focused discourse on China's strategic and military ambitions past the 'Second Island Chain' (see figure 4). Some observers have noted that should Beijing wish to develop a military base in the region, several states in the PIR could serve as bases for Chinese vessels.<sup>60</sup> This concern has permeated through to the United States, as well as Washington's regional allies in Canberra and Wellington. The following sections will again apply the DIME model to better understand the current extent of China's influence in the PIR.

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54. Searight, Harding, and Mai Tran, *Pacific Islands Partnership*, 16.

55. Grady, "More U.S. Engagement."

56. Xiaochen Chen, "China, the United States and changing South Pacific regional order in the 2010s," *China International Strategic Review* 1 (2019): 332, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-019-00022-x>.

57. Jonathan Sullivan and Bettina Renz, "Representing China in the South Pacific," *East Asia* 29 (2012): 377-378, <https://doi-org.simsrad.net.ocs.mq.edu.au/10.1007/s12140-012-9177-0>.

58. Stewart Firth, "New Developments in the International Relations of the Pacific Islands," *The Journal of Pacific History* 44, no. 3 (2013): 288, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2013.812545>.

59. Jenny Hayward-Jones, *Big enough for us all: Geo-strategic competition in the Pacific Islands* (Sydney, NSW: Lowy Institute, 2013), 6.

60. Simon Shen, "From Zero-Sum Game to Positive-sum Game: why Beijing tolerates Pacific Island states' recognition of Taipei," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 95 (2015): 887, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1013378>.





Figure 4. China's Island Chains<sup>61</sup>

## Diplomatic

China's diplomatic engagement with the PIR is being driven by three key agendas: promoting its diplomatic and strategic priorities; reducing Taiwan's international space; and gaining access to the region's raw materials and natural resources.<sup>62</sup> To achieve this, China has successfully employed high-level visits diplomacy, an expanding presence in regional groupings, economic leverage, and emphasising state sovereignty over domestic affairs to expand its influence.<sup>63</sup> For example, in 2014, President Xi Jinping attended the PIF—the first such visit by a Chinese head

61. Michael Paul, *Maritime Nuclear Deterrence* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2018), 6, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2018C43\\_pau.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2018C43_pau.pdf)

62. Ethan Meick et al., *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2018), 4, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China-Pacific%20Islands%20Staff%20Report.pdf>

63. Denghua Zhang, "China's Diplomacy in the Pacific: Interests, Means and Implications," *Security Challenges* 13, no. 2 (2017): 45, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/26457717#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26457717#metadata_info_tab_contents).

of state.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, Chinese diplomacy has promoted mutual respect by routinely lavishing visiting officials from PIR states with the highest level of diplomatic courtesies.<sup>65</sup> This has been complemented by an increasingly large diplomatic footprint in the region. Unlike the United States—which accredits single embassies to multiple PIR states—China places greater weight on its bilateral relationships by maintaining some nine embassies in the region. Importantly, this provides Chinese Ambassadors with a higher frequency of access to the political elite within each respective PIR state in comparison to their US counterparts. To better understand China’s diplomacy in practice, it is worth examining how Beijing has rather successfully turned Taiwan’s diplomatic allies in the region.

The PIR has been an important arena for the decades-long rivalry between China and Taiwan. Since the 1970s, both Beijing and Taipei have been engaged in ‘check-book’ diplomacy using lucrative aid pledges to secure diplomatic recognition. For Beijing, this has entailed the use of economic enticement and economic coercion. For example, in 1998 Tonga switched recognition from Taiwan to China for economic reasons and out of fear that Beijing would veto its application to join the UN.<sup>66</sup> Palau—one of Taiwan’s remaining diplomatic allies—is heavily reliant on tourism to support its economy, with 50 per cent of tourists coming from mainland China. In 2018, Beijing banned state-run package tours to Palau, resulting in a significant drop in visitors.<sup>67</sup> Conversely, between 2004 and 2005, both China and Taiwan were accused of making payments of between USD 6,000 and USD 10,000 to individual politicians in the RMI.<sup>68</sup>

The region’s relatively large concentration of small island states—coupled with fragile and aid dependent economies—make it an attractive target for securing support in international fora on the matter of Taiwan’s sovereignty. Critically, China’s diplomatic endeavours in the PIR have been directly related to garnering support for the ‘One China’ policy—a key facet of Beijing’s national re-unification strategy.<sup>69</sup> Beijing has successfully used diplomatic courting and the ‘one country one vote’ principle in international organisations to pursue agendas that are in China’s interest. For example, Japan’s unsuccessful attempt to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2005 and Taiwan’s failed admission as a formal member of the World Health Organisation both involved concerted efforts between Beijing and certain PIR states.<sup>70 71</sup>

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64. Meick et al., *China’s Engagement*, 16.

65. Richad Herr, *Chinese influence in the Pacific Islands: The yin and yang of soft power* (Canberra, ACT: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019), 17.

66. Anthony Van Fossen, “The Struggle for Recognition: Diplomatic Competition Between China and Taiwan in Oceania,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 12, no. 2 (2007): 126, <https://doi-org.simsrad.net.ocs.mq.edu.au/10.1007/s11366-007-9008-0>.

67. Lauren Beldi, “China’s ‘tourist ban’ leaves Palau struggling to fill hotels and an airline in limbo,” *ABC News*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-26/china-tourist-ban-leaves-palau-tourism-in-peril/10160020>.

68. Van Fossen, “Struggle for Recognition,” 136.

69. Zhang, “China’s Diplomacy,” 35-36.

70. Shen, “Zero-Sum Game,” 888.

71. Toshitaka Takeuchi, “Japan’s quest for UN Security Council reform going nowhere,” *East Asia Forum*, February 26, 2016, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/02/26/japans-quest-for-un-security-council-reform-going-nowhere/>

This era of ‘rampant check–book diplomacy’ supposedly ended in 2008 when Taiwanese President Ma Ying–jeou proposed a diplomatic truce. This saw both Taiwan and China agree to no longer attempt to persuade states that already recognised the other to switch recognition.<sup>72</sup> This diplomatic truce was largely held intact between 2008 and 2016; however, Beijing ended this policy following the election of President Tsai Ing–wen, given Beijing’s longstanding animosity toward the Democratic Progressive Party. Most recently in September 2019, Taiwan lost two of its six remaining diplomatic allies in the PIR in the same week—the Solomon Islands followed by Kiribati. This leaves Nauru, the RMI, Tuvalu, and Palau as Taipei’s only remaining diplomatic allies in the region. Beijing has effectively moved to eliminate diplomatic recognition of Taiwan in Melanesia and most of Polynesia, leaving most of Taipei’s diplomatic allies in Micronesia.<sup>73</sup>

## Information

China’s increasing diplomatic and economic weight in the PIR has been complemented by an intensification in its penetration of the information domain. As a result, the privileged role of traditional partners such as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand in shaping the information environment is being directly challenged. There are four key means by which Beijing influences the regional information environment: filling deficits in media content; providing ICT infrastructure and services; providing media training and education; and an expanding public diplomacy campaign which aims to build China’s regional soft power. These actions directly support Beijing’s diplomatic and economic objectives in the PIR.

PIR states of the lower–middle–income economic bracket have traditionally lacked the resources and capabilities to possess and sustain a robust and diverse domestic media environment. Due to a lack of indigenously–produced media content in PIR states, domestic media actors are often left with little choice but to allow foreign broadcasters in, buy programming, engage in content–sharing agreements, and accepting foreign investment. Although Australia, New Zealand, and the United States have traditionally dominated this space, there has been a plethora of recent retrenchments in Western content. For example, in 2013 the Australian Associated Press—an important provider of newswires in the region—closed its Port Moresby branch, having previously shut down its Suva branch.<sup>74</sup> More recently in 2017, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) ended its 75–year history of short–wave broadcasting service, Radio Australia, to the PIR.<sup>75</sup>

China Radio International’s (CRI) ‘take over’ of some of the ABC’s short–wave frequencies some 18 months later is telling of China’s appetite to fill this apparent deficit in the information

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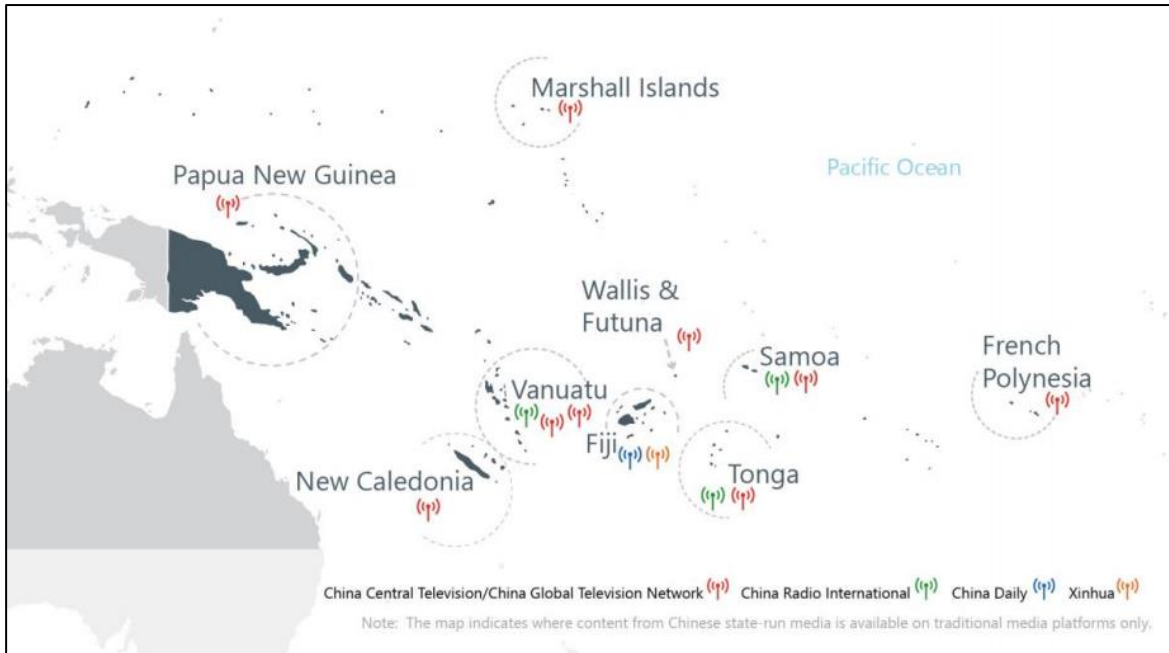
72. Hayward-Jones, *Big enough*, 6.

73. Shi Jiantao, “Taiwan’s last four Pacific allies pledge their loyalty after two nations switched to Beijing,” *South China Morning Post*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3030495/taiwans-last-four-pacific-allies-pledge-their-loyalty-after>.

74. Jade Bradford, “Pacific media react with relief over proposed sale reprieve for AAP,” *Asia Pacific Report*, June 8, 2020, <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2020/06/08/pacific-media-react-with-relief-over-proposed-sale-reprieve-for-aap/>.

75. Graeme Dobell, “Silencing Australia’s shortwave voice in the South Pacific,” *The Strategist*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/silencing-australias-shortwave-voice-south-pacific/>.

domain.<sup>76</sup> CRI is a state-owned international radio broadcaster that currently holds licences to broadcast over frequencies in Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu (see figure 5).<sup>77</sup> Additionally, CRI is able to broadcast via shortwave to other PIR states as this does not require repeater stations and covers a much larger distance than AM and FM waves—these have included Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, and New Caledonia. Although CRI broadcasts in English, French, and Chinese, there is reportedly little to no local interest in the shortwave broadcasts.<sup>78</sup>



**Figure 5.** Chinese state-owned media in the PIR<sup>79</sup>

Other major Chinese state-owned media organisations in the PIR include China Central Television/China Global Television Network (CCTV/CGTN), China Daily, and Xinhua. In terms of both print and online media, Xinhua—China’s primary state news agency—has an office in Suva, as well as content sharing arrangements with local news outlets. Across the region, local papers regularly feature news from China through Xinhua.<sup>80</sup> For example, *The Samoa Observer*, routinely runs two special sections in its newspaper: one section for news from China, and another for news from the United States. Additionally, the *Fiji Sun*—which has content sharing arrangements with both Xinhua and China Daily—prints a weekly Chinese language paper called the *Fiji Daily*.<sup>81</sup> In the digital information environment, CCTV/CGTN has established itself as a steady provider of news programming in the PIR. Although not available in regional languages, CCTV/CGTN provides content in English or, as is in the RMI and PNG, Chinese.<sup>82</sup>

76. Bill Bainbridge, Catherine Graue, and Christina Zhou, “China takes over Radio Australia frequencies after ABC drops shortwave,” *ABC News*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-06-22/china-takes-over-radio-australias-old-shortwave-frequencies/9898754>.

77. Dickey et al., *Information Environment*, 18.

78. Herr, *yin and yang*, 26.

79. Dickey et al., *Information Environment*, 17.

80. Herr, *yin and yang*, 26.

81. Dickey et al., *Information Environment*, 20.

82. Dickey et al., *Information Environment*, 16.

China has demonstrated an intent to fund and expand the PIR's underdeveloped ICT infrastructure—particularly through the provision of low-cost telecommunications and digital services.<sup>83</sup> These endeavours have been reinforced under the auspices of the 'Digital Silk Road Initiative', as part of the BRI. The initiative aims to finance and construct advanced ICT platforms around the world, including the PIR.<sup>84</sup> China currently ranks as the second most active donor in the PIR for ICT development projects, having injected some USD 218 million over eight separate projects between 2007 and 2019. These projects—spearheaded by the Chinese government-owned Huawei—have involved developing biometric identity verification systems in PNG; government broadband networks and government data centres in Vanuatu and Samoa; and e-government infrastructure in Fiji.<sup>85</sup> Previously, Huawei had signed agreements with the Solomon Islands in 2017<sup>86</sup> and PNG in 2016 to construct submarine cables which would improve each nation's connectivity.<sup>87</sup> Increasing pressure from Australia and the United States on the Solomon Islands and PNG to drop the agreements over security concerns resulted in an Australian company taking over the project.<sup>88</sup> Most recently, there have been renewed concerns over China's increasing 'digital footprint' in the PIR. These come after reports that the Chinese-government owned China Mobile had been conducting due diligence on the Pacific assets of mobile provider Digicel—the largest in the region—in what could be a USD 900 million takeover deal.<sup>89</sup>

China has increasingly been offering opportunities for media professionals from the PIR to receive training and other forms of professional education and exposure in China. These programs have, however, been noted as prioritizing a positive impression of China rather than addressing training and education deficits.<sup>90</sup> In this respect, China has been the most active in providing opportunities for PIR media professionals to undertake training overseas. For example, the Chinese government offers Fijian media professionals the 10-month China-Asia Pacific Press Centre Scholarship and the one-month Dongfang Fellowship Program Scholarship.<sup>91</sup> Although there are no known case studies of such training leading to the cultivation of 'pro-China' journalists in the PIR, it does provide Beijing with an additional avenue to promote its image and by extension its soft-power narrative.

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83. Danielle Cave, *Digital Islands: How the Pacific's ICT revolution is transforming the region* (Sydney, NSW: Lowy Institute, 2012), 6.

84. Dickey et al., *Information Environment*, 51.

85. Bart Hogeveen, *ICT for development in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra, ACT: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020), 42.

86. "Huawei Marine Signs Submarine Cable Contract in Solomon Islands," Huawei, July 7, 2017, <https://www.huawei.com/en/news/2017/7/HuaweiMarine-Submarine-Cable-Solomon>.

87. "Huawei Marine Helps Papua New Guinea Build a National Broadband Transmission Network," Huawei, October 11, 2016, <https://www.huawei.com/en/news/2016/10/Huawei-PapuaNewGuinea-Broadband-Transmission-Network>.

88. Liam Fox, "Australia, Solomon Islands, PNG sign undersea cable deal amid criticism from China," *ABC News*, July 12, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-12/australia-solomon-islands-png-sign-undersea-cable-deal/9983102>.

89. Andrew Clark and Angus Grigg, "Concern as China targets Pacific mobile networks," *Australian Financial Review*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.afr.com/companies/telecommunications/concern-as-china-targets-pacific-mobile-networks-20200513-p54sls>.

90. Dickey et al., *Information Environment*, 52.

91. Dickey et al., *Information Environment*, 27.

China's regional public diplomacy campaign is designed to expand Beijing's soft power through the use of cultural diplomacy, educational engagement, and scholarships.<sup>92</sup> Beijing's public diplomacy is a critical aspect of its attempts to build influence in the PIR, with a 2018 global review of Chinese public diplomacy finding that the region has attracted more public diplomacy interest from China than more strategically important nations such as Japan or South Korea.<sup>93</sup> Chinese cultural diplomacy consists of activities that promote awareness and sympathy for Chinese culture and values such as cultural events; cultural centres; Confucius Institutes or Confucius Classrooms; and sports, music, or dance exhibitions.<sup>94</sup> Of these, Confucius Institutes are arguably the most important conduits for Chinese cultural diplomacy.

Confucius Institutes are a non-profit, but government-run organisation, which aim to promote Chinese language and culture. Established in partnership with host-nation universities, Confucius Institutes—or Confucius Classrooms when part of a secondary school—have established themselves as a key component of Beijing's multi-faceted public diplomacy strategy. China's signature Confucius Institute in the PIR can be found at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Suva, Fiji. Another Confucius Institute has since been established at the USP's Lautoka Campus in Fiji and its Emalus Campus in Vanuatu.<sup>95</sup> Throughout the broader PIR, Confucius Institutes have expanded rapidly, with recent additions in both Samoa<sup>96</sup> and Papua New Guinea.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, there are aspirations to establish new branches in Tonga and within Beijing's newest diplomatic allies—Kiribati and the Solomon Islands.<sup>98</sup> Aside from promoting the study of Chinese, Confucius Institutes also act as cultural centres; hold cultural events, festivals, and exhibitions; facilitate Chinese government scholarships; and act as a bridge for visiting research and academic staff from China.

The importance of cultural diplomacy to Beijing's broader public diplomacy campaign has probably best manifested itself in Fiji—the home of the PIR's flagship Confucius Institute—where Fijian elites and government officials frequently attend Chinese cultural events such as festivals, museum exhibits, operas, and other public displays.<sup>99</sup> This is, however, telling of the elite-to-elite bias in Chinese public diplomacy, serving as a significant distinction between Chinese and Western approaches to soft power. Whilst Western partners tend to favour people-to-people ties and civil society relationships, China—with its lack of openness and civil society linkages—has struggled to overcome suspicions by local populations of its state-focused and politicised aid programs. At the people-to-people level, Beijing has traditionally struggled to influence public opinion. Rather, Chinese public diplomacy at the people-to-people level appears to focus on building understanding and respect for Chinese culture rather

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92. Meick et al., *China's Engagement*, 16.

93. Samantha Custer et al., *Ties That Bind: Quantifying China's public diplomacy and its "good neighbour" effect* (Williamsburg, VA: AidData and William & Mary, 2018), 20.

94. Custer et al., *Ties That Bind*, 3.

95. "Confucius Institute at The University of the South Pacific," University of the South Pacific, July 9, 2019, <https://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=10988>.

96. "Confucius Institute at National University of Samoa," Hanban, accessed May 25, 2020, <http://zhuanti.hanban.org/videolist/?cat=687&tag=en>.

97. Vanessa Niken, "China setting up centres," *The National*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.thenational.com.pg/china-setting-up-centres/>.

98. "144 students graduate from Confucius Institute," *Solomon Star*, November 16, 2015, <https://www.solomonstarnews.com/index.php/news/national/item/16565-144-students-graduate-from-confucius-institute>.

99. Custer et al., *Ties That Bind*, 35.

than garnering public support for its agendas.<sup>100</sup> This has resulted in pro–China leanings in Fiji’s political elites; however, a continued wariness of Chinese influence amongst the general populous and perceptions that Beijing is culturally “out of touch”, “disconnected”, and “godless and amoral”.<sup>101</sup>

## Military

China’s military and security engagement in the PIR is best framed within the context of the ongoing ‘soft–balancing’ behaviour between China and other actors such as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. The exertion of military power and ‘hard–balancing’ between states has not been a hallmark of the region.<sup>102</sup> As such, foreign powers such as China have predominantly focused on ‘soft power’ approaches rooted in diplomacy and economic engagement. However, there are increasing concerns about Beijing’s military intent in the region. To date, this increasing military engagement has focussed on senior defence official engagements; military aid, including training opportunities in the region and in China; and port calls. Military–to–military engagement is currently limited to PNG, Fiji, and Tonga as these are the only PIR states with standing militaries,<sup>103</sup> however, there has been some limited engagement with regional police forces such as the Vanuatu Police Force (VPF).<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, China has no known Defence Attachés within the PIR.<sup>105</sup>

Similar to the elite–to–elite bias seen in Chinese diplomacy, China’s military engagement is heavily focused on cultivating relationships with senior defence and security officials across the PIR. The PLA regularly provides training for PIR military officers in China and has been facilitating official meetings more regularly than in the past. Furthermore, visiting senior defence officials from the PIR often receive a grandiose ‘red carpet’ treatment with full military honours—for example, see the PNGDF Chief of Defence Force Gilbert Toropo’s visit to Beijing in 2016.<sup>106</sup> Under President Xi, senior PLA officers have held bilateral meetings with their counterparts from PNG, Tonga, and Fiji. Since 2013, the PLA has also hosted a biannual forum for senior defence officials from the Caribbean and the PIR.<sup>107</sup> PIR militaries have been relatively receptive to China’s military engagement, with Fiji sending its first Defence Attaché to China in 2007 and PNG establishing a Defence Attaché office in China in 2016. Whilst this approach has been somewhat effective—especially in Fiji<sup>108</sup>—it diminishes the depth of the

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100. Herr, *yin and yang*, 20.

101. Custer et al., *Ties That Bind*, 34.

102. Marc Lanteigne, “Water dragon? China, power shifts and soft balancing in the South Pacific,” *Political Science* 64, no. 1 (2012): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032318712447732>.

103. Meick et al., *China’s Engagement*, 17.

104. Cameron Hill, “China’s policing assistance in the Pacific: a new era,” *Parliament of Australia*, April 6, 2018,

[https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/FlagPost/2018/April/china-pacific-police](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2018/April/china-pacific-police).

105. Graeme Smith, “The top four myths about China in the Pacific,” *The Interpreter*, November 18, 2014, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/top-four-myths-about-china-pacific>.

106. “China, Papua New Guinea vow to enhance military cooperation,” Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, October 17, 2016, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2016-10/17/content\\_4748263\\_2.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2016-10/17/content_4748263_2.htm).

107. Meick et al., *China’s Engagement*, 17.

108. Steven Ratuva, “A New Regional Cold War? American and Chinese Posturing in the Pacific,” *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 1, no. 2 (2014): 412, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/app5.38>.

PLA's engagement at the grass-roots level, making it appear superficial at times. The lack of military-to-military engagement at lower levels is one of the most distinguishable features between the PLA's engagements in the PIR in comparison to the sophisticated and long-standing defence relationships with the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>109</sup>

China's military aid to the PIR generally comes in the form of financial aid, the donation of military equipment and vehicles, military infrastructure development, and scholarships for military education and training in China. The financial aid provided to PIR militaries has typically gone to the refurbishment of barracks infrastructure in Fiji, Tonga, and PNG.<sup>110</sup> For example, in 2007, the PLA provided PGK 1.5 million to renovate and upgrade the Taurama Military Hospital in PNG.<sup>111</sup> The majority of military aid comes in the form of 'gifts' of non-lethal military equipment and vehicles. In 2017, China provided the PNGDF with 62 military vehicles worth USD 5.5 million—this was following a donation of 44 vehicles in 2016.<sup>112</sup> Another significant donation—which was accompanied by four months of training by PLA personnel<sup>113</sup>—was a hydrographic and surveillance vessel, the *RFNS Kacam*, to the Fijian Navy.<sup>114</sup> Finally, China frequently provides scholarships for PIR military officers to be trained in China's military universities and academies.<sup>115</sup> Since 2004, the PLA has been accepting at least five PNGDF officers for training<sup>116</sup>—lasting up to three years—in China each year.<sup>117</sup>

Port calls have been one of the most publicised elements of Beijing's military engagement with the PIR. In 2010, two PLAN vessels—a frigate and a training vessel—made well-received visits to PNG, Vanuatu, and Tonga before continuing to Auckland and Sydney.<sup>118</sup> Most recently, the PLAN's hospital ship, the *Peace Ark*—which has 300 beds and is staffed by some 100 medical personnel—has been at the forefront of the PLAN's international engagement in the region.<sup>119</sup> After a successful tour through the PIR in 2014, Chinese naval ships conducted various port calls including the arrival of a PLAN training ship in Suva in 2016<sup>120</sup>; and the 25th Chinese

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109. Zhang, "China's Diplomacy," 40.

110. Hayward-Jones, *Big enough*, 12.

111. "Chinese army donate K1.5mil to upgrade Taurama Military Hospital," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Papua New Guinea, May 17 2007, <http://pg2.mofcom.gov.cn/article/bilateralcooperation/bilateralagreement/200705/20070504675934.shtml>.

112. Meick et al., *China's Engagement*, 17.

113. Helena Legarda, "China Global Security Tracker, No.5," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/research-paper/2019/08/china-security-tracker-jan-to-june>.

114. Ankit Panda, "China to Gift Hydrographic and Surveillance Vessel to Fiji," *The Diplomat*, July 18, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/china-to-gift-hydrographic-and-surveillance-vessel-to-fiji/>.

115. Zhang, "China's Diplomacy," 40.

116. Takahiro Motegi, "Don't Underestimate China's Political Influence on Papua New Guinea," *cogitASIA*, March 26, 2019, <http://www.cogitasia.com/dont-underestimate-chinas-political-influence-on-papua-new-guinea/>.

117. "Concern in PNG at defence training links with China", *RadioNZ*, May 19, 2008, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/177211/concern-in-png-at-defence-training-links-with-china>.

118. Lanteigne, "Water dragon," 29.

119. Bill Bainbridge, "China's floating hospital helping win hearts and minds in an increasingly contested Pacific," July 18, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-18/peace-ark-chinas-floating-hospital-in-the-pacific/10007894>.

120. Yao Jianing, "PLA Navy training ship Zhenghe berths at Port of Suva in Fiji," *China Military*, December 12, 2016, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-12/12/content\\_7403360.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-12/12/content_7403360.htm).



Naval Escort Taskforce's call on Honiara in 2017.<sup>121</sup> In July 2018, the *Peace Ark* made another successful tour through PNG, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Tonga. Whilst docked in Port Moresby, medical personnel aboard the *Peace Ark* treated some 4,000 people.<sup>122</sup>

## Economic

Much like China's diplomatic approaches in the region, its economic engagement has traditionally been driven by its diplomatic rivalry with Taiwan. Whilst this transactional relationship continues today, economic relations between Beijing and PIR states have matured to support China's growing commercial and resource interests. The threat of internal unrest or challenges to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) requires a continuation of economic growth, which in turn requires additional natural resources, trade, markets and investment opportunities.<sup>123</sup> These needs underpin Beijing's 'going-out strategy'—initiated in 1999—which has continued to develop, resulting in a growing number of Chinese state-owned-enterprises (SOEs) operating in the PIR.<sup>124</sup> China is no longer viewed as simply an 'alternative' aid partner to traditional Western powers—rather, China has become one of the dominant economic actors in the region, with its economic activities now focused on financial incentives such as grants, commercial loans, and concessional loans; infrastructure development; and trade and resource extraction. This has prompted concerns about debt sustainability and accusations that China is pursuing 'debt trap' diplomacy in the PIR.<sup>125</sup> These concerns have only intensified with Beijing's increasing economic interactions with the region since the establishment of the China–Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in 2006<sup>126</sup>—a platform from which Beijing has been able to promote the PIR as part of its 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative, a key component of President Xi's BRI.<sup>127</sup>

PIR states are among the most vulnerable countries in the world to potential debt sustainability problems and by extension possible 'debt trap' diplomacy. This is due to the difficult economic geography faced by the PIR, which in turn drives enormous developmental financing needs, unsustainable fiscal policies, and debt accumulation.<sup>128</sup> China has actively sought to fill financing deficits under the auspices of 'south–south cooperation', a framework in which developing states provide mutual assistance.<sup>129</sup> This has encompassed commercial loans, concessional loans, and grants. More than 80 per cent of Chinese aid to the region has been in the form of concessional loans—which come with long-term repayment periods and are typically used to fund infrastructure projects by Chinese SOEs—while the rest are grants.<sup>130</sup>

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121. "25th Chinese naval escort taskforce visits Vanuatu," *Loop*, June 29, 2017, <http://www.loopvanuatu.com/vanuatu-news/25th-chinese-naval-escort-taskforce-visits-vanuatu-61834>.

122. Bainbridge, "China's floating hospital."

123. Sullivan and Renz, "Representing China," 379.

124. Peter Connolly, "Engaging China's new foreign policy in the South Pacific," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 70, no. 5 (2016): 487, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2016.1194805>.

125. Roland Rajah, Alexandre Dayant, and Jonathan Pryke, *Ocean of debt? Belt and Road and debt diplomacy in the Pacific* (Sydney, NSW: Lowy Institute, 2019), 2.

126. Matthew Dornan and Philippa Brant, "Chinese Assistance in the Pacific: Agency, Effectiveness and the Role of Pacific Island Governments," *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 1, no. 2 (2014): 349, <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.35>.

127. Meick et al., *China's Engagement*, 3.

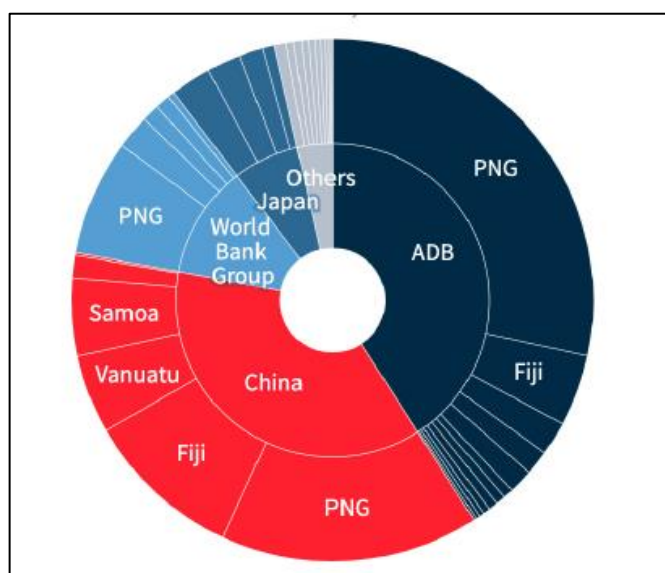
128. Rajah, Dayant, and Pryke, *Ocean of debt*, 5-6.

129. Zhang, "China's Diplomacy," 46.

130. Meick et al., *China's Engagement*, 12.

These concessional loans have generally been characterised as being quicker, more responsive to local elites, and having—unlike Western-backed aid—‘no strings attached’ to transparency and governance provisions.<sup>131</sup> Chinese state-owned banks such as the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM Bank) and the China Development Bank have become major overseas lenders under the BRI.<sup>132</sup>

China has since emerged as a major lender in the PIR, committing an estimated USD 1.7 billion worth of official loans in 2011–2017. This accounts for 37 per cent (placing it second to the Asian Development Bank at 41 per cent) of all official sector loans to region in 2011–2017 (see figure 6). Whilst China is the single largest creditor in Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu; Fiji, the Cook Islands, and PNG are also holders of Chinese debt. Furthermore, all PIR states officially signed up to the BRI in 2018.<sup>133</sup>



**Figure 6.** Cumulative loan flows by creditor–borrower (disbursements, 2011–2017)<sup>134</sup>

As previously noted, much of China’s financial assistance to the PIR comes in the form of concessional loans geared towards funding infrastructure projects. Although often framed as being ‘no strings attached’, concessional loans provided by the likes of EXIM Bank require contractors engaged in the related infrastructure project to be a Chinese company with at least 50 per cent of project materials being sourced from China.<sup>135</sup> Providing access to Chinese SOEs in markets with significantly underdeveloped critical infrastructure is a key facet of China’s ‘going-out strategy’ and the BRI. For example, shortly after signing up to the BRI in 2017, PNG approved a reported USD 4 billion worth of projects to be carried out by Chinese SOE China Railway Group for roads, agricultural industrial parks, and a water supply upgrade.<sup>136</sup> In

131. Rajah, Dayant, and Pryke, *Ocean of debt*, 5.

132. Rajah, Dayant, and Pryke, *Ocean of debt*, 4.

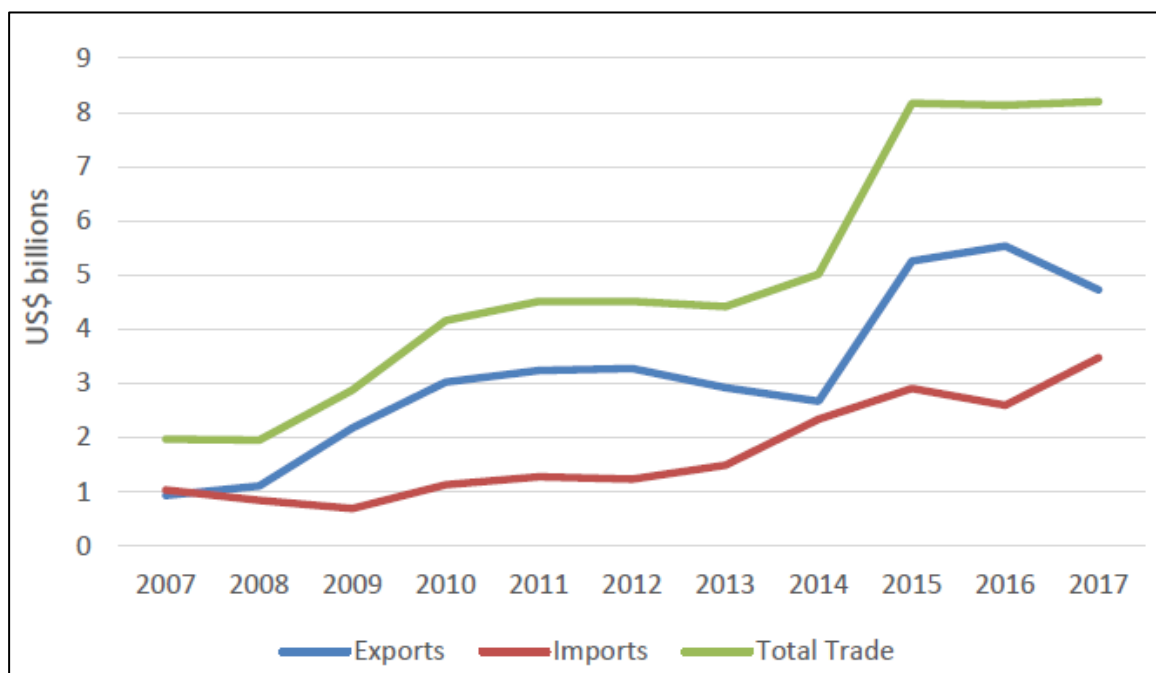
133. Rajah, Dayant, and Pryke, *Ocean of debt*, 3.

134. Rajah, Dayant, and Pryke, *Ocean of debt*, 10-11.

135. Meick et al., *China’s Engagement*, 12-13.

136. “China to build Papua New Guinea’s first national road system,” *Global Construction Review*, November 24, 2017, <https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/news/china-build-papua-new-guineas-first-national-road/>.

Tonga, the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation completed the Chinese financed USD 58.8 million reconstruction of downtown Nuku’alofa which was destroyed by rioters in 2006.<sup>137</sup> In Vanuatu, Chinese SOE Shanghai Construction Group was involved in the EXIM Bank funded USD 54 million redevelopment project of Luganville Wharf.<sup>138</sup> In addition to the development of strategic infrastructure in the transport, real estate, and energy sectors; Chinese SOEs have been also been heavily active in building high-profile government buildings and ‘white-elephants’ projects such as conference centres and justice ministries in Tonga and Samoa, a parliamentary complex and courthouse in Vanuatu; sports stadia in Fiji, FSM, and Samoa; and a courthouse and police station in the Cook Islands. Furthermore, since 2006, Chinese SOEs have built four governor’s mansions in Micronesia and spent USD 7.5 million on the governor’s residence in PNG.<sup>139</sup>



**Figure 7.** China’s trade with the PIR (2007–2017)<sup>140</sup>

The PIR is endowed with some natural resources; however, on the whole, it is not a resource rich region. Despite this, China’s trade with the PIR has quadrupled in the past decade, making it the region’s largest trading partner (see figure 7). In 2017, China’s exports to PIF countries reached USD 4.7 billion up from USD 2.7 billion in 2014. Similarly, Chinese imports from PIF countries increased from USD 2.3 billion in 2014 to USD 3.5 billion in 2016.<sup>141</sup> China has a

137. Kate Hannan and Stewart Firth, “Trading with the Dragon: Chinese trade, investment and development assistance in the Pacific Islands,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 95 (2015): 877, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2015.1013377>.

138. Jonathan Barret, “Sink or swim: Chinese port plans put Pacific back in play,” *Reuters*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pacific-samoa-china-insight/sink-or-swim-chinese-port-plans-put-pacific-back-in-play-idUSKCN1UX01I>.

139. Jerome McElroy and Wenwen Bai, “The Political Economy of China’s Incursion into the Caribbean and Pacific,” *Island Studies Journal* 3, no. 3 (2008): 236, <https://doaj.org/article/6f13a2cf1a174d169a62be53029cff71>.

140. Meick et al., *China’s Engagement*, 8.

141. Meick et al., *China’s Engagement*, 7-8.

demand for the natural resources found in the PIR, including fisheries, minerals, gold, copper, timber, and some hydrocarbons. The most cited example of Beijing's resource interests in the region was the USD 800 million Chinese-owned Ramu Nico nickel mine in PNG.<sup>142</sup> Devastatingly, the Ramu Nico plant—which was operated by the Metallurgical Corporation of China—was shut down in 2019 when 80,000 litres of toxic slurry spilled into the Basamuk Bay.<sup>143</sup> Other key natural resource exports to China include petroleum and rough wood from PNG and rough wood from the Solomon Islands.<sup>144</sup>

Aside from natural resources, the tourism sector represents a key component of China's economic relationship with the PIR. As a region highly dependent on the tourism industry, the PIR has become a small but important share of the estimated 145 million cross-border trips and USD 261 billion spent by Chinese tourists annually.<sup>145</sup> In 2017, some 143,000 Chinese tourists visited the PIR; however, approximately 80% of visitors were destined for either Fiji or Palau.<sup>146</sup> Beijing's creation of an 'approved destination status' list has allowed it to turn the dependence of PIR economies on tourism into a tool of geo-economic coercion. For example, the ban on Chinese tourism (some 50 per cent of inbound tourism) to Palau, had a devastating impact on the nation's economy (50 per cent of Palau's GDP derives from tourism).<sup>147</sup> China's 'sticky power'—when economic relations create one-sided dependency—in Palau allowed it to apply economic pressure against one of Taiwan's few remaining allies in the region.

### Challenges for China in the PIR

Whilst Beijing has certainly made inroads throughout the PIR, it suffers from image problems that have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These image problems are rooted in the underlying ideological differences between a 'Western-colonised' and predominantly Christian PIR and 'Communist China'; immigration of Chinese labour to support Chinese-led infrastructure projects; environmental degradation from Chinese-led projects; perceptions of 'criminality', namely through Chinese organised crime; resentment against the relative success of Chinese diaspora-run businesses; and a willingness to corrupt local elites.<sup>148</sup> The PIR is no exception to these image problems, with increasing flows of Chinese labourers into South-East Asia for infrastructure development projects harming local perceptions of China.<sup>149</sup> Further exacerbated by the elite-to-elite bias seen in Beijing's diplomatic and military engagement with the region, these image problems have at times culminated into anti-Chinese sentiment and violence. In 2006 for example, both Honiara and Nuku'alofa saw riots which targeted Chinese-owned businesses.<sup>150</sup> In 2009, the Chinese-

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142. Yang, "hegemon on the horizon," 144.

143. Bethanie Harriman, "Chinese-owned nickel plant in PNG shut down after toxic slurry spill," *ABC News*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-25/chinese-owned-nickel-plant-in-png-shut-down-after-toxic-spill/11636086>.

144. Meick et al., *China's Engagement*, 8.

145. Mata'afa Keni Lesa, "Talofa lava and welcome to "China ready" Samoa," *Samoa Observer*, August 9, 2018, <https://www.samoobserver.ws/category/editorial/25747>.

146. Meick et al., *China's Engagement*, 23.

147. Beldi, "China's 'tourist ban' leaves Palau struggling to fill hotels and an airline in limbo."

148. Yang, "hegemon on the horizon," 148-149.

149. Chee Meng Tan, "Infrastructure development and China's image problem in South-East Asia," *The Asia Dialogue*, March 13, 2020, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2020/03/13/infrastructure-investment-and-chinas-image-problem-in-southeast-asia/>

150. Lum and Vaughn, *China's Growing Influence*, 18.

owned businesses in the PNG cities of Port Moresby and Lae were looted amid simmering anti-Chinese sentiment.<sup>151</sup> Most recently amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic, China's Ambassador to PNG, Xue Bing, highlighted his concern for the safety of Chinese diaspora as a result of a surge in xenophobic attacks against ethnic Chinese.<sup>152</sup>

## 5. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

China's strategic interests in the PIR have largely been viewed as connected to its growing diplomatic and economic relationships. Both endeavours have been geared towards promoting Beijing's strategies priorities: reducing Taiwan's international space and gaining access to the region's raw materials and natural resources.<sup>153</sup> Although Beijing's strategic intent in the region is viewed with suspicion from the likes of Canberra, Wellington, and Washington; scholars such as Yongjin Zhang argue that there is no discernible evidence to suggest Beijing has a clearly articulated and well-coordinated strategy to become a hegemonic power in the PIR. Rather, Beijing's rising influence can be attributed to the decline or withdrawal of other traditional powers—giving it regional influence by default.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, according to Chen Xulong, the director of the China Institute of International Studies' Department of International and Strategic Studies, the PIR was largely "...inconsequential to Chinese geostrategy and security in the last century."<sup>155</sup> In line with Chen's assessment of China's security interests beyond the Second Island Chain, other scholars such as Jian Yang argue that the value of the PIR to China's national security should not be exaggerated.<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, others have highlighted the fact that none of the PIR states lie close to the strategic sea lanes that service the bulk of China's trade in energy and raw materials.<sup>157</sup>

Despite these dismissals, there is a concerning dialogue amongst Chinese analysts who view the PIR as being a 'natural barrier' to China's maritime expansion into the Western Pacific Ocean—thus making regional ties a key component of achieving 'maritime breakthroughs' past encircling external powers.<sup>158</sup> Such arguments are deeply rooted in two self-perpetuating and mutually antagonising beliefs: that the PLAN seeks to extend its presence past the third 'island chain' by 2050, and that the United States—through its military presence in the first, second, and third 'island chains'—is seeking to contain China.<sup>159</sup> Such beliefs have only exacerbated threat discourse vis-à-vis China's engagement with the PIR. These increasing concerns must

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151. Phil Mercer, "PNG riots hit Chinese businesses," *BBC News*, May 18, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8054924.stm>.

152. "Virus fears: Chinese embassy in PNG concerned about discrimination," *Radio New Zealand*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/409212/virus-fears-chinese-embassy-in-png-concerned-about-discrimination>.

153. Meick et al., *China's Engagement*, 4.

154. Yongjin Zhang, "China and the Emerging Regional Order in the South Pacific," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 3 (2007): 368, <https://doi-org.simsrad.net.ocs.mq.edu.au/10.1080/10357710701531537>.

155. Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies*, 29.

156. Yang, "hegemon on the horizon," 144.

157. Terence Wesley-Smith, *China in Oceania: New Forces in Pacific Politics* (Honolulu, HI: East-West Center, 2007), 15.

158. Qi Huaigao cited in Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies*, 30-31

159. Meick et al., *China's Engagement*, 4.

of course be seen in the context of China's increasing assertiveness on the world stage; the PLA's active force modernisation program under President Xi; and most critically, China's establishment of a PLA 'logistical support facility' in Djibouti and the 'securitisation' of the BRI.<sup>160</sup> Parallels have since been made based on examples such as China's 99-year lease on the Hambantota Port after Sri Lanka defaulted on its BRI-related debts to Beijing.<sup>161</sup> With Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Fiji, the Cook Islands, and PNG currently holding Chinese debt, concerns about 'debt-trap' diplomacy in the PIR have made traditional powers in the region highly sensitive and reactive to Chinese activity.<sup>162</sup>

The PLAN's ongoing force modernisation program makes it more and more likely that China will achieve at least part of its 'maritime great power dream' in establishing a true blue-water navy. Although yet to visit a foreign country after three years in service, the PLAN's first aircraft carrier, the *Type 001 Liaoning*, represents an important milestone in China's blue-water navy aspirations.<sup>163</sup> The commissioning of China's second indigenously designed aircraft carrier in late 2019, the *Type 002 Shandong*, and the current construction of a third aircraft carrier, only reinforce the PLAN's increasing maritime confidence.<sup>164</sup> Since at least the late 2000s, there has been debate among Chinese strategists over the necessity of overseas logistical supply bases to support PLAN ships conducting missions far from mainland China. Dispelling suggestions of overseas bases was the belief that it would send the wrong message and contradict China's long-held opposition to and criticism of the West's 'imperialist' and 'hegemonic' overseas military bases. By 2009, however, the increasing number of PLAN missions—including more than 10 years conducting anti-piracy patrols off the Gulf of Aden—and overseas visits made the establishment of overseas PLAN logistical nodes even more justifiable.

The growing role of the PLAN in protecting China's overseas interests, when coupled with Beijing's rising diplomatic and economic engagement with the PIR, make an increased PLA maritime presence past the second 'island chain' a stark reality in the decades to come. Although the PLA has no permanent maritime presence in the PIR, its ships have made several high-profile visits to the region in the past decade. Furthermore, China supports its space missions by deploying tracking ships in the region; uses transfer and supply stations in the region for Antarctic scientific expedition ships; and uses friendly ports for rest and replenishment while its navy transits the PIR.<sup>165</sup> As China's military and security engagement with the PIR expands, these visits may become more frequent as the PLAN's blue-water capabilities improve. Furthermore, in a region that is highly vulnerable to natural disasters and the impact of climate change, PIR states may—for domestic political reasons or otherwise—increasingly turn to

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160. Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China's Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* (2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1704994>.

161. Leah Dreyfuss and Mara Karlin, *All that Xi Wants: China Attempts to Ace Bases Overseas* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2019), 4.

162. Rajah, Dayant, and Pryke, *Ocean of debt*, 3.

163. James Maclaren, "With Its New Aircraft Carrier, Is China Now a Blue Water Navy?," *The Diplomat*, January 25, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/with-its-new-aircraft-carrier-is-china-now-a-blue-water-navy/>.

164. Kyle Mizokami, "Blue Water Navy Time: How China is Close to Overtaking America," *The National Interest*, January 28, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/blue-water-navy-time-how-china-close-overtaking-america-117916>.

165. Meick et al., *China's Engagement*, 4.

China for disaster recovery, thus giving the PLAN an impetus to expand and normalise its regional presence. The presence of Chinese diaspora in the region, whether they be generational ethnic-Chinese; recent mainland immigrants; or temporary workers, may provide the PLAN opportunities to engage in non-combatant evacuation operations in the event of natural disasters or civil unrest spurred by anti-Chinese sentiment. With there being many legitimate avenues for an increased PLAN presence in the region, the establishment of a ‘logistical support facility’ in a permissive PIR states remains a small possibility.

As it stands, the possibility of ‘hard-balancing’ through an increased US and Chinese military presence in the PIR is relatively low—largely due to the vast size of the region; the isolation of PIR states from strategic trade routes; and the United States’ already strong military presence.<sup>166</sup> The establishment of a PLAN logistical node in the PIR would, however, represent a significant shift from the status-quo. The strategic implications of such an event would be significant and would almost certainly trigger a ‘hard-balancing’ approach from traditional Western powers in the region. Firstly, a Chinese military footprint in the PIR would enable the PLAN greater force projection past the second and third ‘island chain’ and present a major signals intelligence collection threat to US military facilities, testing sites, and vessels.<sup>167</sup> This would complicate the USN’s freedom of movement in the PIR, as well as challenging its ability to maintain maritime predominance in the Pacific Ocean.<sup>168</sup> Increasing PLAN transits through the PIR—due to the establishment of a logistical node or increased military engagement—would transform a relatively benign region into a strategically contested space. This would almost certainly increase the risk of naval ‘near-misses’ between the USN—as well as the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and Royal New Zealand Navy (RNZN)—and the PLAN as seen in the South China Sea. Furthermore, should these ‘near-misses’ occur within the waters of a PIR state, there would undoubtedly be pressure on their governments to effectively ‘take sides’—shifting the region further away from non-alignment.

Others have highlighted the potential for China to erode the United States’ influence in the FAS and the NMI.<sup>169</sup> The COFA has played an immeasurable role in allowing the United States to deny a vast swathe of the Pacific Ocean to potential adversaries, as well as enabling the USN’s presence and power projection into the Western Pacific. Critically, the provisions within the COFA provide the United States the ‘right of strategic denial’, allowing Washington to reject the strategic use or military access to the FAS by third countries.<sup>170</sup> As Dean Cheng, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, has highlighted, “...if Beijing established a political foothold in these islands, it could persuade these states not to extend access to the U.S., as well as arrange for Chinese access.”<sup>171</sup>

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166. Lanteigne, “Water dragon,” 27.

167. Meick et al., *China’s Engagement*, 5-19.

168. Searight, Harding, and Mai Tran, *Pacific Islands Partnership*, 19-20.

169. Meick et al., *China’s Engagement*, 19.

170. Grossman et al., *America’s Pacific Island Allies*, 21.

171. Dean Cheng, *Countering Chinese Inroads into Micronesia* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2016), 2.

## 6. SMALL AND MIDDLE POWERS IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS REGION

The PIR is becoming an increasingly crowded and complex geopolitical environment.<sup>172</sup> Whilst much attention has been placed on the growing strategic competition between the United States and China, a multitude of small and middle powers—both old and emerging—have a strong stake to claim in the region’s geopolitical environment. Former colonial powers such as Australia, New Zealand, and France remain heavily invested in the region. These Western powers are, however, gradually being displaced by Asian and European powers such as Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, and Russia.<sup>173</sup> Whilst all these external powers have an important role to play in shaping regional dynamics and counterbalancing total hegemony by one external power, the role of the following actors in the PIR will specifically be examined: Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, France, and India. All are either directly part of the broader US-led Indo-Pacific ‘hubs and spokes’ security architecture or constitute potential like-minded partners.

### Australia

Australia, whilst ranked globally as a ‘middle power’, effectively acts as what could be considered a ‘regional hegemon’ in the PIR.<sup>174</sup> As a founding member of the PIF and the region’s largest aid donor (see figure 8), Canberra is able to exert its influence across the broader region; however, gives special emphasis to Melanesia due to its strategic proximity to Australia’s northern approaches.<sup>175</sup> Indeed, a number of Australian Prime Ministers (PM) have referred to the PIR as ‘our patch’<sup>176</sup> or ‘our part of the world’.<sup>177</sup> It is language such as this, however, that has spurred perceptions of Canberra’s ‘big brother’ syndrome in its lopsided aid partnerships with PIR states.<sup>178</sup> Such sentiments have been felt most heavily amongst Fiji’s political elite after an Australian-led sanctions regime (which has since been lifted) in response to the 2006 military coup.<sup>179</sup> Despite this, many PIR states still turn to Canberra for support during humanitarian crises and civil instability. For example, Australia played a crucial role during Bougainville’s peace process in the 1990s; led peacekeeping missions such as the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI); and responded to tropical cyclones in Vanuatu and Fiji through Operation PACIFIC ASSIST in 2015 and Operation Fiji Assist in 2016. Furthermore, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is highly active in the PIR, providing military training and aid

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172. Wallis, *Crowded and Complex*, 5.

173. Ron Crocombe cited in Charles Hawksley, “Australia’s aid diplomacy and the Pacific Islands: change and continuity in middle power foreign policy,” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 21, no. 1 (2009): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781150802659473>.

174. Charles Hawksley, “Australia’s aid diplomacy,” 115.

175. Yang, “hegemon on the horizon,” 151.

176. “Pacific leaders back Australia’s role,” *The Age*, August 9, 2004, <https://www.theage.com.au/world/pacific-leaders-back-australian-role-20040809-gdyf57.html>.

177. Prime Minister of Australia, “Address – “Australia and the Pacific: A New Chapter,” November 8, 2018, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-australia-and-pacific-new-chapter>.

178. The Senate, *Australia’s relations with Papua New Guinea and the island states of the southwest Pacific* (Canberra, ACT: Parliament of Australia, 2003), 158.

179. Liam Fox, “Australia to lift sanctions imposed on Fiji after 2006 military coup,” *ABC News*, October 31, 2014, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-31/australia-to-lift-sanctions-imposed-on-fiji/5856042?nw=0>.



to Pacific Island militaries and security forces. The ADF coordinates its military engagement through the Defence Cooperation Program (DCP)—one of Australia’s most effective levers of influence in the region.<sup>180</sup> Of note is the ADF’s AUD 2 billion commitment to the region over the next three decades to build the capacity of PIR states to patrol their waters.<sup>181</sup>

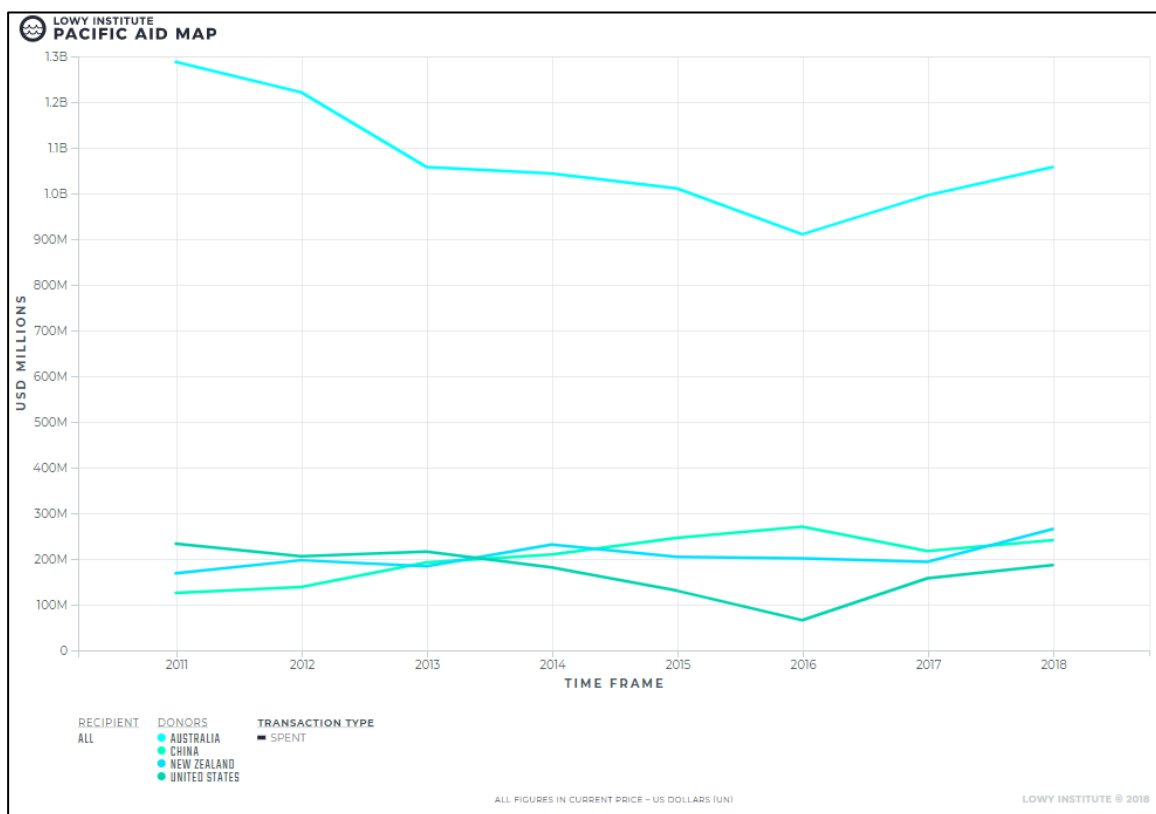


Figure 8. Key aid donors to the PIR<sup>182</sup>

Despite being one of the dominant powers in the PIR, Australia’s policies towards the region have been characterised as both incoherent and inconsistent<sup>183</sup>—with periods of apathy, interspersed with spikes of intense engagement during crises.<sup>184</sup> As the influence of external powers has risen in Australia’s ‘patch’, the past two Australian PMs have refocused attention to the PIR. In 2016, PM Malcolm Turnbull announced a “step-change” in Australia’s engagement with the PIR.<sup>185</sup> This was re-affirmed in the 2017 Australian Foreign Policy White Paper, which called for more ambitious engagement by Australia to “...integrate Pacific

180. Joanne Wallis, *Submission – Australia’s Defence relationships with Pacific Island nations* (Canberra, ACT: Australian National University, 2020), 7.

181. “Pacific Maritime Security Program,” Department of Defence, <https://www.defence.gov.au/annualreports/17-18/Features/Maritime.asp>.

182. “Pacific Aid Map,” Lowy Institute, 2019.

183. Jonathan Shultz, “Theorising Australia-Pacific island relations,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 5 (2014), 548, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2014.917271>.

184. Greg Colton, *Stronger together: Safeguarding Australia’s security interests through closer Pacific ties* (Sydney, NSW: Lowy Institute, 2018), 5.

185. Malcolm Turnbull, “Remarks at Pacific Island Forum – Micronesia,” September 9, 2016, <https://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/remarks-at-pacific-island-forum-micronesia>.

countries into the Australian and New Zealand economies and...security institutions...”<sup>186</sup> In late 2018, the current PM Scott Morrison announced a re-invigorated ‘Pacific Step-up’ which would launch a “...new chapter in relations with...[Australia’s] Pacific family”. As part of this ‘step-up’, Australia has established an ‘Office of the Pacific’ to enhance the whole-of-government coordination and implementation of the ‘step-up’.<sup>187</sup> Furthermore, the ‘step-up’ includes a record level AUD 1.4 billion in developmental assistance in 2019–20; a AUD 2 billion infrastructure financing scheme; a labour mobility scheme for Pacific Island workers; and the establishment of an Australia Pacific Security College and Pacific Fusion Centre.<sup>188</sup>

## New Zealand

New Zealand is considered to be Australia’s principal strategic partner in the PIR, playing a substantial role in Polynesia where its soft power is most visible.<sup>189</sup> Wellington’s connection to Polynesia is cultural and social, as well as political—it has relationships of free association with the Cook Islands and Niue, and holds sovereignty over the territory of Tokelau.<sup>190</sup> Although New Zealand lacks the economic and military weight of Australia and the United States in the region, its soft power is unparalleled. Unlike Australia and the United States, New Zealand’s connection to the PIR goes well beyond its colonial past. New Zealand’s ‘Pacific population’ has been growing rapidly, with increasing levels of migration from Samoa, the Cook Islands, Tonga, Niue, and Fiji. The changing demographics of New Zealand’s population has influenced a growing sense of its identity as a Pacific nation.<sup>191</sup> New Zealand’s soft power has allowed it to play a relatively neutral role in the region—Richard Herr describes it as playing the ‘good cop’ to Australia’s ‘bad cop’.<sup>192</sup> For example, New Zealand played a critical role in negotiations over the Bougainville crisis as it was viewed by both parties as having no vested interest in the outcome. The New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) also provided forces to RAMSI and deployed forces to Tonga in 2006 following days of rioting.<sup>193</sup> In recent years, perceived ‘underinvestment’ in the PIR on Wellington’s behalf has prompted a diplomacy and aid focussed ‘Pacific Reset’, which was announced in March 2018.<sup>194</sup>

## Japan

Although not as high-profile as other external powers in the PIR, Japan is viewed as a steady, responsible, and mutually-respecting partner by many in the region. Japan’s post-colonial engagement with the region began in the early 1970s when it began providing limited

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186. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra, ACT: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017), 8.

187. “Office of the Pacific,” Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/Pages/office-of-the-pacific>.

188. “Stepping up Australia’s engagement with our pacific family,” Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/stepping-up-australias-engagement-with-our-pacific-family.pdf>.

189. Yang, “hegemon on the horizon,” 151.

190. Herr, *yin and yang*, 9.

191. The Senate, *Australia’s relations with Papua New Guinea*, 227-231.

192. Herr, *yin and yang*, 9.

193. Colton, *Stronger together*, 7-8.

194. Grossman et al., *America’s Pacific Island Allies*, 50.

developmental assistance to both Fiji and Samoa.<sup>195</sup> Japan has since acted as an aid donor and trading partner, with a particular interest in the region's fisheries.<sup>196</sup> The primary platform from which Tokyo engages with the PIR is the Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM)—a triennial summit between Japan and PIR states to coordinate developmental and economic engagement priorities.<sup>197</sup> Japan also achieves engagement through the PIF PFD, the Pacific Islands Development Forum, and its nine diplomatic missions in the region.<sup>198</sup>

Between 2011 and 2017, Japan constituted the sixth largest aid donor in the region, having provided more than USD 1 billion for the PIR.<sup>199</sup> In 2017, Japan's trade with the PIR was worth some USD 4.6 billion, making it the region's fourth largest trading partner after China, South Korea, and Australia.<sup>200</sup> The RMI is Japan's overwhelmingly largest export market in the PIR, with PNG being the largest market for Japan's imports.<sup>201</sup> Driving Japan's strategic interests in the PIR are economic considerations based on a strong demand for tuna<sup>202</sup>, energy resources such as LNG, and opportunities for Japanese companies in the energy sector.<sup>203</sup> Additionally, Tokyo seeks to establish strong relations with PIR states that will vote in its favour for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.<sup>204</sup> To achieve this, Japan has successfully distinguished itself from other key donors such as China by concentrating on issues of key concern for the region: climate change and natural disasters. Most importantly, Japan has demonstrated that it seeks to be an equal partner with PIR states. For example, despite its strong demand for the region's tuna, Japan sided with PIR states against China and the United States in talks over the SPTT in 2017.<sup>205</sup>

## South Korea

Much like Japan, South Korea has been a long-standing aid donor and trading partner to the PIR. Since establishing diplomatic relations with PIR states in the early 1970s, Seoul has focused its efforts on capacity building, sustainability, fisheries, and maritime issues. South Korea's focus on matters such as climate change adaptation and natural disaster resilience are exemplified by its engagement and funding for the Green Climate Fund.<sup>206</sup> Since 1987, South Korea's

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195. Izumi Kobayashi, "Japan's Diplomacy towards Member Countries of Pacific Islands Forum: Significance of Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM)," *Asia-Pacific Review* 25, no. 2 (2018): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2018.1545491>.

196. Wallis, *Crowded and Complex*, 13.

197. Herr, *yin and yang*, 13.

198. "Japan," Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.forumsec.org/japan/>.

199. Michael Nguyen and Alexandre Dayant, "The underappreciated value of Japanese aid in the Pacific," *The Interpreter*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/underappreciated-value-japanese-aid-pacific>.

200. Meick et al., *China's Engagement*, 22.

201. "Japan," Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

202. Colton, *Stronger together*, 15.

203. Jenny Hayward-Jones, "Japan's Pacific Islands Strategy counters a rising China," *The Interpreter*, May 26, 2015, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/japans-pacific-islands-strategy-counters-rising-china>.

204. Herr, *yin and yang*, 13.

205. Colton, *Stronger together*, 15.

206. "Republic of Korea," Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.forumsec.org/republic-of-korea/>.

developmental assistance to the region has amounted to some USD 95 million.<sup>207</sup> In addition to its developmental assistance, South Korea has been providing the PIF with USD 1.1–1.2 million each year since it established the Republic of Korea–Pacific Islands Forum Cooperation Fund.<sup>208</sup>

Despite its relatively small diplomatic footprint in the region—South Korea maintains embassies in Fiji and PNG, as well as consulates in Guam and Palau—it was the region’s second largest trading partner in 2017. In 2017, South Korea’s total goods trade amounted to USD 8 billion, second only to China with USD 8.2 billion.<sup>209</sup> Since 2018, however, South Korean exports to the region have nosedived from USD 7.27 billion to USD 2.46 billion whilst imports to South Korea have doubled. South Korea’s Moon Jae-in government has since doubled down on its economic relations with the region, launching the Korea–Pacific Islands Trade and Tourism Promotion in March 2019, as well as initiatives such as the Korea–Pacific Islands Trade and Investment Forum.<sup>210</sup> The primary mechanism through which South Korea coordinates these initiatives is the PIF PFD. Since 2011, South Korea has also held the triennial Korea–Pacific Island Foreign Ministers’ Meeting and the more sporadically occurring Korea–Pacific Island Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM).<sup>211</sup> These mechanisms serve Seoul strategic interests in the PIR, which include trade and investment; securing votes in the UN; and responding to China’s rising influence.<sup>212</sup> Most recently, this has seen enhanced coordination of developmental assistance between the United States under its Indo–Pacific Strategy and South Korea under its New Southern Policy.<sup>213</sup>

## Taiwan

After losing two of its diplomatic partners—Kiribati and the Solomon Islands—in September 2019, Taiwan’s only remaining allies in the region are the RMI, Nauru, Palau, and Tuvalu. Aside from this, Taipei is able to conduct limited engagement with pro–Beijing PIR states through its

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207. “The ROK-Pacific Island Countries Relations,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, accessed June 21, 2020, [http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m\\_4903/contents.do#:~:text=The%20ROK%2DPacific%20Island%20Countries,political%2C%20economic%20and%20development%20cooperation](http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_4903/contents.do#:~:text=The%20ROK%2DPacific%20Island%20Countries,political%2C%20economic%20and%20development%20cooperation).

208. Lee Ho-Jeong, “A bright future for Korea in the Pacific Islands,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, November 10, 2019, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3070085>.

209. Meick et al., *China’s Engagement*, 22.

210. Lee Ho-Jeong, “A bright future for Korea in the Pacific Islands,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 10 November 2019, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3070085>.

211. “The ROK-Pacific Island Countries Relations,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, accessed June 21, 2020, [http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m\\_4903/contents.do#:~:text=The%20ROK%2DPacific%20Island%20Countries,political%2C%20economic%20and%20development%20cooperation](http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_4903/contents.do#:~:text=The%20ROK%2DPacific%20Island%20Countries,political%2C%20economic%20and%20development%20cooperation).

212. Lee, “A bright future.”

213. “Joint Fact Sheet by the United States and the Republic of Korea on Cooperation between the New Southern Policy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy,” Department of State, November 2, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-by-the-united-states-and-the-republic-of-korea-on-cooperation-between-the-new-southern-policy-and-the-indo-pacific-strategy/>.

status as an official ‘development partner’ of the PIF<sup>214</sup>, as well as its Trade Office in Fiji<sup>215</sup> and Economic and Cultural Office in PNG.<sup>216</sup> Taiwan’s reduced diplomatic space in the region can be attributed to the sheer volume of aid and investment provided by China—particularly for high profile and expensive infrastructure projects. Between 2011 and 2016, China’s aid to the PIR amounted to nearly four times Taiwan’s cumulative aid to the region.<sup>217</sup> Despite this, Taiwan continues to offer large aid and investment packages in the pursuit of its strategic interests. Whilst China has traditionally supported mega–infrastructure projects in the region, Taiwan has opted to focus on technical assistance in agriculture and health, as well as government scholarships and small–to–medium sized infrastructure projects.<sup>218</sup> Most recently, Taiwan presented USD 1 million to the PIF for the Taiwan/Republic of China–Pacific Islands Forum Scholarship Scheme and another renewable energy capacity building scheme.<sup>219</sup> Taipei has also begun coordinating with Washington on its aid programs in the PIR, with both co–hosting the inaugural Pacific Islands Dialogue in Taiwan in October 2019.<sup>220</sup>

## France

As the only remaining European power active in the PIR, France maintains a vested interest in the region through its territories in New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna. With the French Armed Forces, New Caledonia (FANC) based out of Noumea, France has played an active role in regional defence, disaster relief, and regional maritime surveillance in cooperation with Australia and New Zealand.<sup>221</sup> After receiving much regional and international scrutiny for its opposition to Vanuatu’s independence, self–determination in New Caledonia, and Paris’ nuclear testing in French Polynesia; France began re–engaging positively with the region towards the end of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, France signed the FRANZ Agreement with Australia and New Zealand to better coordinate responses to disaster relief operations.<sup>222</sup> France expanded its partnership with Australia in the region in 2017 through the *Joint Statement of Enhanced Strategic Partnership between Australia and France*, building on previous strategic partnership and defence agreements signed in 2012 and 2006.<sup>223</sup> These agreements are underpinned by the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group—a broad

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214. Ryan Drillsma, “China pushes Pacific island countries to pivot away from Taiwan,” *Taiwan News*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3642134>.

215. “Fiji government forces Taiwan trade office to change its name,” *Radio New Zealand*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/394499/fiji-government-forces-taiwan-trade-office-to-change-its-name>.

216. Stacy Hsu, “PNG demands new name for Taiwan office,” *Taipei Times*, June 2, 2018, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2018/06/02/2003694174>.

217. Denghua Zhang, “Comparing China’s and Taiwan’s aid to the Pacific,” *Devpolicy Blog*, January 20, 2020, <https://devpolicy.org/comparing-chinas-and-taiwans-aid-to-the-pacific-20200120/>.

218. Zhang, “Comparing China’s and Taiwan’s aid.”

219. “Taiwan/Republic of China – Pacific Islands Forum Scholarship Scheme and Regional Capacity Building Initiatives,” Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, February 21, 2020, <https://www.forumsec.org/2020/02/24/taiwan-republic-of-china-pacific-islands-forum-scholarship-scheme-and-regional-capacity-building-initiatives/>.

220. “Taiwan and United States set to hold inaugural Pacific Islands Dialogue in Taipei,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan), October 5, 2019, [https://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/News\\_Content.aspx?n=539A9A50A5F8AF9E&s=ACE8FB42E66EE14A](https://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/News_Content.aspx?n=539A9A50A5F8AF9E&s=ACE8FB42E66EE14A).

221. Hayward-Jones, *Big enough*, 13.

222. Colton, *Stronger together*, 8.

223. Herr, *yin and yang*, 10.

security focused body comprised of France, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>224</sup> France is also heavily involved in the South Pacific Community (SPC)<sup>225</sup>—headquartered in Noumea—a technical development agency founded by the six formal colonial powers of the region; and has also contributed to the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG).<sup>226</sup>

## India

India is a comparatively new external power to the PIR, having lacked a coherent and consolidated strategy for engaging with the region until recently. The conceptualising of the PIR as being ‘peripheral’ to India’s foreign policy interests has denied New Delhi the ability to capitalise on its natural affinities with the region.<sup>227</sup> As a result, India has found itself well behind in terms of influence and presence in the region. For example, India’s admission as a Dialogue Partner of the PIF occurred in 2002, well over a decade later than Japan’s entry in 1989 and China’s in 1990.<sup>228</sup> Additionally, India has a relatively weak diplomatic footprint in the region, with the High Commissions in Fiji and PNG being accredited to several PIR states. Both locations are, however, clearly strategic choices: Fiji has a large Indian diaspora and India has strong economic interests in PNG.<sup>229</sup> Additionally, India relies on its diplomatic missions in Japan and Australia to manage more far-flung PIR states.<sup>230</sup>

The PIR’s standing in Indian foreign policy, whilst still overtly peripheral, has seen a positive shift under Indian PM Narendra Modi’s ‘Act East’ policy.<sup>231</sup> In 2014, PM Modi became the first Indian PM to visit Fiji in almost three decades. During the ground-breaking meeting with Fijian PM Bainimarama, PM Modi launched the Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC)—a multilateral mechanism designed to enhance cooperation between India and the PIR.<sup>232</sup> During the visit, PM Modi called for closer relations, announcing a Special Adaption Fund of USD 1 million for climate change related technical assistance; a Pan–Pacific Islands E–network project; and annual grants of USD 200,000 for fourteen PIR states. The FIPIC has since seen another summit held in Jaipur in 2015; however, a third meeting—which was due to occur in Port Moresby this year—has yet to occur.<sup>233</sup> Since the second FIPIC summit in Jaipur, India also held an India–Pacific Islands Sustainable Development Conference in 2017 which focused on ‘blue economies.’<sup>234</sup> Most recently, the India and Pacific Islands Developing States (PSIDS) Leaders’ Meeting was held for the first time on the sidelines of the 74th UN General

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224. Colton, *Stronger together*, 9.

225. Searight, Harding, and Mai Tran, *Pacific Islands Partnership*, 10.

226. Herr, *yin and yang*, 11.

227. Tevita Motulo, *India’s Strategic Imperative in the South Pacific* (Colaba, Mumbai: Gateway House, 2013), 21.

228. Denghua Zhang, *China, India and Japan in the Pacific: Latest Developments, Motivations and Impact* (Canberra, ACT: Department of Pacific Affairs, 2018), 3.

229. Tevita Motulo, *India’s Strategic Imperative*, 21.

230. Ryan Mitra, “India’s approach to Oceania: Engaging the Pacific Island countries,” *Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 15, no. 2 (2019): 134, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09733159.2020.1712001>.

231. Pragya Pandey, “India’s Outreach to Pacific Island Countries,” *Diplomatist*, March 7, 2020, <http://diplomatist.com/2020/03/07/indias-outreach-to-pacific-island-countries/>.

232. Teesta Prakash, “Modi’s second term: what it means for the South Pacific,” *The Interpreter*, May 27, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/modi-s-second-term-what-it-means-south-pacific>.

233. Pandey, “India’s Outreach.”

234. Pandey, “India’s Outreach.”

Assembly. During the meeting—which was attended by 12 PIR heads of delegations—PM Modi announced a USD 1 million grant for developmental projects in the PIR and a concessional line of credit valued at USD 150 million for solar, renewable energy, and climate change related projects.<sup>235</sup> India's increased engagement with the PIR has been attributed to a number of its economic and strategic interests, namely: accessing the region's natural and energy resources; securing support for its bid to attain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council; developing launch sites for its burgeoning space program; promoting PM Modi's International Solar Alliance project<sup>236</sup>; and extending its new 'maritime-based' foreign policy to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>237</sup>

Fiji, which has established itself as a 'hub' for regional fora and a leader in the PIR, has drawn the most attention from India—which sees the strong cultural connections between the two nations as a natural conduit for its enhanced engagement with the region. Of particular interest is the increasing defence cooperation seen between the Indian and Fijian Navies. In 2017, both nations signed a Memorandum of Understanding on defence cooperation in defence industry; military training and humanitarian assistance; maritime security and naval cooperation; and disaster management.<sup>238</sup> Across the broader region, the Indian Navy has expanded its presence, conducting coastal surveillance and hydrographic surveys for PIR states.<sup>239</sup>

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The PIR can no longer be considered a 'tranquil backwater' where passive US interests require little interest.<sup>240</sup> Although the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy is aimed at the Indo-Pacific region more broadly, the PIR is just as crucial to maintaining a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' as the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, or the Indian Ocean. Notwithstanding its strategic proximity to the continental United States, the importance of the PIR to the United States' security has been underscored throughout history. The scramble of Colonial powers in securing important trans-Pacific sea lines of communication in the nineteenth and early twentieth century; Imperial Japan's penetration into Western Pacific as deep as modern-day Solomon Islands; and the uptick in external power engagement since decolonisation commenced in 1962 highlights the region's strategic value.<sup>241</sup> Most critically for the United States, any continuation or reappraisal of the Indo-Pacific Strategy by the incoming Biden Administration must focus on denying the use of the PIR to 'unfriendly powers' for military purposes, as well as denying the ability of external powers to interdict vital sea lines of communication from the continental

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235. "Prime Minister meets Pacific Island leaders," Ministry of External Affairs of India, September 24, 2019, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31854/Prime\\_Minister\\_meets\\_Pacific\\_Island\\_Leaders#:~:text=The%20India%2DPacific%20Islands%20Developing,sidelines%20of%20the%2074th%20UNGA](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31854/Prime_Minister_meets_Pacific_Island_Leaders#:~:text=The%20India%2DPacific%20Islands%20Developing,sidelines%20of%20the%2074th%20UNGA).

236. Ian Hall, "The Pacific in India's Indo-Pacific," *Griffith Asia Insights*, February 14, 2020, <https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/asiainsights/the-pacific-in-indias-indo-pacific/>.

237. Bhavya Gupta, "Indian aid to the Pacific," *DevPolicy Blog*, March 19, 2019, <https://devpolicy.org/indian-aid-to-the-pacific-20190319/>.

238. Losirene Lacanivalu, "Fiji and India Sign Defence Partnership," *Fiji Sun*, June 4, 2017, <https://fijisun.com.fj/2017/06/04/fiji-and-india-sign-defence-partnership/>.

239. Andil Wadhwa, *India and the South Pacific* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2019), 2.

240. Dorrance, "The Soviet Union," 909-910.

241. Dorrance, "The Soviet Union," 908-909.

United States to Asia.<sup>242</sup> A failure by Washington to deny such a course of action would also have severe implications for Australia and New Zealand, who rely heavily on US predominance in the region. Although it may seem counter-intuitive, the United States must—as part of its broader Indo-Pacific Strategy—embrace the increasing multipolarity of the PIR and look past the traditional division of labour between Australia, New Zealand, and itself in the PIR. In a region where rapid decolonisation has seen the rise of Pacific Island agency, the United States must harness like-minded small and middle powers to maintain a sphere of influence conducive to its FOIP strategy. The following section will provide recommendations for how the incoming Biden Administration can achieve this.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEW US ADMINISTRATION

### Relevant, Consistent, and Targeted Engagement

- **The United States’ must go beyond its focus on the FAS and ensure its diplomatic engagement with the entire PIR is more consistent.** An emphasis on the FAS, whilst warranted, has come at the detriment of Washington’s relationships in Melanesia and Polynesia. Furthermore, the United States’ episodic engagement—peaking with the Obama Administration’s ‘pivot to Asia’ and most recently with the Trump Administration’s ‘Pacific Pledge’—have resulted in lulls in US engagement. Raising the US delegation lead to the PIF back to Secretary of State level or higher—as seen when then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, attended in 2012—would demonstrate a positive step towards consistency. Fijian PM Bainimarama has already extended an invitation to President Biden to attend the 2021 Pacific Islands Forum—to be held in Suva in August 2021. Biden’s attendance would send a powerful signal to the PIR, especially if coupled with the re-joining of the Paris Climate Agreement. In the words of PM Bainimarama himself, “the climate emergency is an existential crisis in the Pacific, and we badly need American leadership back at the helm of the international campaign to limit global temperature rise.”<sup>243</sup>
- **The United States’ IPSR needs to better acknowledge the strategic importance of the PIR.** The 2019 IPSR does little to acknowledge the strategic importance of the PIR within its conceptualisation of a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’—taking up less than two pages in a 64-page document to cover at least 14 individual states. The 2017 NSS and the 2018 NDS make little to no mention of the PIR, let alone China’s rising influence within it. Furthermore, the Trump Administration’s *United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China*, gave only a passing mention of the PIR. Washington’s approaches thus far have given many in the PIR the impression that they are an ‘afterthought’ or simply being ‘tacked onto the end’ of the FOIP strategy.<sup>244</sup> The Biden Administration’s NSS should remedy these oversights. Finally, the FOIP strategy’s focus on sovereignty and freedom of movement has failed to properly

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242. William Tow, “The ANZUS Alliance and United States Security Interests,” in *ANZUS in Crisis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1988), 63.

243. “Fiji PM invites U.S. President elect Biden to attend Pacific Islands Forum meeting in 2021,” *Pina*, November 09, 2020, <http://www.pina.com.fj/?p=pacnews&m=read&o=3063356915fa8bcc4dfc358478ffa9>

244. Grady, “More U.S. Engagement.”



advance key agendas for the PIR: climate change, disaster resilience, and multilateralism.<sup>245</sup> The United States Indo–Pacific Strategy must acknowledge the PIR’s strategic weight and should focus on the aforementioned agendas rather than simply focussing on the sovereignty of PIR states—doing so will bolster its status as a security partner of choice.

- **The United States must harness its key strengths: soft power and military relationships.** The United States’ key strengths in the PIR are rooted in its strong historical, cultural, and linguistic connections to the region, as well as its military relationships. The United States can enhance these strengths through establishing:
  - **Labour mobility schemes.** The United States should consider expanding its existing arrangements with the FAS—which allows FAS citizens to work in the United States under special visa arrangements—to other PIR states. A similar model, called the Pacific Labour Mobility Scheme, has been employed successfully in Australia. The scheme allows workers from the PIR to work in Australia under special visa arrangements to fill labour shortages in rural and regional areas.<sup>246</sup> Such programs enhance economic integration, enhance mutual–understanding, and strengthen people–to–people links.
  - **Military training, education, and joint–exercises.** The United States should expand the number of joint exercises and training opportunities for PIR militaries. Furthermore, the United States should seek to expand its joint exercises and training opportunities to PIR states with security forces, but no standing militaries, such as Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. Engagement on issues such as peacekeeping, maritime security, humanitarian and disaster relief, and non–traditional security challenges would almost certainly be well–received. Allowing rising regional powers such as Fiji and PNG to lead or host such activities, but also providing logistical and monetary support where necessary, will foster perceptions of mutual respect.
  - **Regular military–to–island relationships.** The United States should expand the US National Guard’s State Partnership Program in the PIR. With relationships already established between the Nevada National Guard and Tonga and Fiji, this should be expanded to include partnerships with the PNDF, the Solomon Islands Police Force, and the Vanuatu Police Force/Vanuatu Mobile Force. In the pursuit of its international engagement objectives, the Australian Army has geographically ‘aligned’ its combat brigades for enduring relationships with specific partner nations. For example, the Australian Army’s 3rd Brigade has a habitual relationship with the PNGDF.<sup>247</sup> Doing so would provide a degree of continuity in military–to–military relationships; build long and enduring relationships between units; improve

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245. Searight, Harding, and Mai Tran, *Pacific Islands Partnership*, 21.

246. “Pacific Labour Mobility,” Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/engagement/pacific-labour-mobility/Pages/default>.

247. Clare O’Neill, “Training for the Enduring Human Dimension of War,” in *Beyond Combat: Australian military life in the battlefield* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2018), 74.

interoperability; and could help the United States achieve its desired status as ‘partner of choice.’

- **Expanded Defence Attaché network.** The United States currently only has one USDAO for the entire PIR, located in Suva, Fiji.<sup>248</sup> The number of USDAOs in the PIR should be expanded, with a particular focus on PNG and Tonga. An alternative option to this may be encouraging—and supporting—PIR states with militaries such as Fiji, PNG, and Tonga to establish Defence Attachés in Washington.
- **Expand VOA presence into the PIR.** Although internet penetration is improving across the region, radio broadcast remains an important medium for receiving information in the PIR due to its accessibility and low cost. The lack of VOA broadcasting in the PIR presents an opportunity for Washington to double-down on its strengths in the information domain. This should be a joint-venture with PIR countries to develop local language broadcasting on Pacific-focused issues.
- **The United States must expand its diplomatic footprint.** The United States’ six embassies in the PIR—three of which are within the FAS—give an unfortunate impression of the low level of strategic weight Washington places on the region. To provide a comparison, Japan maintains nine diplomatic missions in the region, not including its multi-accredited embassies in Australia and New Zealand.<sup>249</sup> The United States must expand its diplomatic footprint, especially in Melanesia and Polynesia. This will allow for stronger bilateral relationships with PIR countries and remove the need to go through Australia or New Zealand. Doing so will give more weight to the Biden Administration’s engagement with the PIR and demonstrate a stronger sense of commitment.
- **The United States should focus heavily on targeted engagement with rising regional powers such as PNG and Fiji.** PNG and Fiji have distinguished themselves as emerging activist regional powers in the PIR. Both nations have the highest GDP and populations and both field the region’s two largest militaries. During periods of instability in the Solomon Islands, both the PNGDF and the RFMF deployed contingents in support of RAMSI.<sup>250</sup> Most recently, both the PNGDF and RFMF sent contingents in support of Australia’s bushfire crisis in early 2020.<sup>251</sup> PNG’s growing resource-driven economy has seen it become a highly active voice in regional groupings such as the PIF and has also become an aid donor—making small climate adaption funds available to Kiribati, the RMI, and Tonga, as well as providing electoral assistance to Fiji. Fiji has assumed a strong leadership role in the PIR, acting as a ‘hub’ for many regional institutions: the University of the South Pacific, the PIF, and the Blackrock Rock Peacekeeping Training Facility. Although both PNG and Fiji have certainly

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248. “Sections & Offices,” U.S. Embassy in Fiji.

249. “Japan,” Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

250. “Combined Task Force 635,” Nautilus Institute, accessed June 25, 2020, <https://nautilus.org/publications/books/australian-forces-abroad/solomon-islands/combined-task-force-635/>.

251. “Fijian soldiers deploy to fight bushfires in Australia,” *Radio New Zealand*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/407835/fijian-soldiers-deploy-to-fight-bushfires-in-australia>.

explored more independent foreign policies and international activism in recent decades—making them somewhat harder to influence—this also makes them effective vectors of influence in the PIR.

### Avoiding a ‘False Dichotomy’ Trap in the PIR

- **Strategic competition with China may be the rationale for revitalised engagement, but it should not drive it.** PIR participants of a Center for Strategic and International Studies Conference held in 2019 made it clear that the region did not want the Trump Administration’s ‘revitalised engagement’ with the PIR to be framed within the context of the United States’ competition with China.<sup>252</sup> External powers such as China, and others such as India and Japan, are viewed as welcome economic partners in the PIR. The reality of Washington’s strategic priorities—and therefore the allocation of budgetary resources—is unlikely to see strategic competition with China being separated from ‘revitalised engagement’ with the PIR. Although strategic competition may serve as the rationale for this, it should not drive engagement with PIR. Rather than focusing on countering China in the PIR, the focus should be on encouraging, facilitating, and cooperating with like-minded partners to engage with the PIR—further diluting China’s influence. By encouraging multi-polarity, this will help avoid creating a ‘false dichotomy’ in the PIR, whereby PIR countries are seen to be choosing between just the United States or China.

### Embracing Multipolarity and Enhancing Regional Groupings

- **The United States needs to revisit the division of labour in the PIR.** The United States can no longer afford to rely on its informal ‘division of labour’ with Australia and New Zealand in the PIR. In doing so, Washington has neglected its relationships in Melanesia and Polynesia by focussing almost entirely on maintaining its arrangements with the FAS. This unstated yet well-established division of labour feeds perceptions of the United States’ indifference to the region and reinforces negative perceptions of Australia as Washington’s “deputy sheriff” in the PIR.<sup>253</sup> As a self-declared ‘Pacific nation’, Washington must take up greater responsibility in its own neighbourhood if its ‘revitalised engagement’ is to go beyond maintaining its defence and security arrangements in the FAS. To do this, Washington needs to develop its own strategy to engage with the region with the countries of the PIR rather than piggy-backing or deferring to Australia and New Zealand. The passing of the BLUE Pacific Act should be a priority for the Biden Administration’s approach to the PIR.
- **Engaging like-minded partners.** In the late twentieth century, Western analysts were concerned about engagement between PIR states and the Soviet Union. Pacific Island leaders often played the ‘Soviet Card’, allowing them to extract greater political and economic assistance from Western states. Encouraging several like-minded—not necessarily strategically aligned—partners to pursue a concerted FOIP strategy will make it more difficult for Pacific Island leaders to play the ‘China Card’ by diluting any

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252. Searight, Harding, and Mai Tran, *Pacific Islands Partnership*, 16.

253. John Pilger, “Australia builds its empire as John Howard becomes “deputy sheriff” of the US,” *New Statesman*, June 26, 2006, <https://www.newstatesman.com/node/192477>.

perceived China–US strategic dichotomy in the region and crowding Beijing’s engagement. Ultimately, PIR states are sovereign states with their own respective agency; however, harnessing like–minded small and middle powers such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, France, and India will help in filling gaps that the United States cannot commit to.

- **Ensuring good governance and engaging Taiwan.** Unlike many of the aforementioned like–minded powers, Taiwan has been actively courting the PIR for decades in its ‘cheque–book diplomacy’ with China. This has raised issues surrounding good governance principles such as the onset violence in the Solomon Islands in 2006 after a ‘pro–Taiwan’ PM was elected.<sup>254</sup> Although much of this activity has subsided, Washington should continue to seek out joint or even multilateral cooperation activities with Taipei in the PIR to ensure good governance principles are being upheld. Both the US–Taiwan Pacific Islands Dialogue and the Global Cooperation and Training Framework represent existing structures that can be harnessed to achieve this. With that being said, Washington must ensure that it does not engage in double standards. For example, recent reports of geopolitical motives behind a tranche of US funding for a single Solomon Islands’ province with separatist antecedents and strong anti–Chinese sentiments is concerning and counter–productive.<sup>255</sup>

**Emerging small and middle external powers need to be better incorporated into the existing regional architecture.** Many of the aforementioned external powers are already increasing their engagement with the PIR under their own regional strategies—for example, Australia and its ‘Pacific Step–up’, New Zealand and its ‘Pacific reset’, Japan’s ‘free and open Indo–Pacific’ strategy, South Korea and its ‘New Southern Policy’, Taiwan with its ‘New Southbound’ policy, and India with its ‘Act East’ policy. The United States must work with like–minded partners to ensure these strategies are not being engaged in competition with each other, but rather, in unison. Whilst some of these strategies—Japan’s ‘free and open Indo–Pacific’ strategy, Taiwan’s ‘New Southbound Policy’, and South Korea’s ‘New Southern Policy’—are already connected to the United States’ Indo–Pacific Strategy to some extent, more can be done to harmonise and coordinate engagement in the PIR. Existing groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Australia, United States, Japan, and India); the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group (Australia, New Zealand, France, United States); and FRANZ (Australia, New Zealand, France) provide a strong basis for such coordination. Consideration should also be given to consolidating these groupings where possible to maximise coordination and create a greater sense of unity. To better incorporate other emerging external powers from Asia, the United States could also consider expanding its OMSI program to involve navies from India, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

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254. “Violence fuelled by chequebook diplomacy between China and Taiwan,” *NZ Herald*, April 24, 2006, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/violence-fuelled-by-chequebook-diplomacy-between-china-and-taiwan/B5QFSITRXE6FSN65PD7VY4GYNA/>

255. Evan Wasuka, “The US denies geopolitical motives are behind a massive aid increase to the Solomon Islands’ Malaita province,” *ABC News*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-16/us-aid-increase-solomon-islands-china-independence-malaita/12765310>

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