

# India's Pacific Islands Outreach

Understanding Regional Narratives,  
Geopolitics & Opportunities

Shruti Pandalai

MP-IDSA MONOGRAPH SERIES

No. 98 FEBRUARY 2026

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# INDIA'S PACIFIC ISLANDS OUTREACH

## UNDERSTANDING REGIONAL NARRATIVES, GEOPOLITICS & OPPORTUNITIES

SHRUTI PANDALAI



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR  
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

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ISBN: 978-81-994564-1-9

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First Published: February 2026

Price: Rs 275/-

Published by: Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies  
and Analyses  
No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram  
Marg, Delhi Cantt., New Delhi - 110 010  
Tel. (91-11) 2671-7983  
Fax.(91-11) 2615 4191  
Website: <http://www.idsa.in>

Cover Source: Image courtesy FIPIC (Forum for India-Pacific  
Islands Cooperation) Commemorative Issue, 2015.  
Postage Stamp released in honour of FIPIC Forum by  
Niuafono'u, Postal Authority, Kingdom of Tonga.

Layout & Cover by: Geeta Kumari

Printed at: Pentagon Press LLP  
206, Peacock Lane, Shahpur Jat  
New Delhi-110049  
Tel. (91-11) 26491568, 26490600  
Fax: (91-11) 26490600  
email: [rajan@pentagonpress.in](mailto:rajan@pentagonpress.in)  
website: <http://www.pentagonpress.in>

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## *LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS*

A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial
ANZUS	Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty
ANI	Asian News International
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
COFA	Compact of Free Association
COP	Conference of the Parties
DCP	Defence Cooperation Program (Australia)
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EU	European Union
FIPIC	Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation
FOIP	Free and Open Indo–Pacific
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOI	Government of India
G20	Group of Twenty
G77	Group of Seventy Seven
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MEA	Ministry of External Affairs (India)
ODA	Official Development Assistance

PALM	Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (Japan)
PICs	Pacific Island Countries
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PNG	Papua New Guinea
PRC	People's Republic of China
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
SLOCs	Sea Lines of Communication
SOFA	Status of Forces Agreement
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
US / U.S.	United States
WWII	World War II

## INTRODUCTION

For me, you are not Small Island States, but Large Ocean Countries. It is this vast ocean that connects India with all of you. The Indian philosophy has always viewed the world as one family.

—Indian PM Narendra Modi's opening statement at the Forum for India and Pacific Island Countries Cooperation (FIPIC) III Summit, May 22, 2023.<sup>1</sup>

### PM MODI'S VISIT TO THE PICs: WHY IT MATTERS

Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's visit to Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 2023, the first by an Indian PM to the Pacific Island nation, was momentous on many counts. The Pacific Island Countries (PICs), a strategic geography that is now at the frontlines of geopolitical contestations triggered by China's increasing assertive footprint, have welcomed India as a reliable development partner for the region. PNG PM James Marape, who honoured PM Modi with a traditional ceremonial welcome, told his national press, 'This is the leader of 1.4 billion people who decided to come and visit us, when he could have chosen to bypass us at a time when geopolitics is abounding ... We have an element of people respecting elders.... So he deserves this sort of respect as it coincides with his own culture'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> PM's opening statement at the FIPIC III Summit, May 22, 2023, at [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.html?dtl/36587/English\\_translation\\_of\\_Prime\\_Ministers\\_opening\\_statement\\_at\\_the\\_FIPIC\\_III\\_Summit](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.html?dtl/36587/English_translation_of_Prime_Ministers_opening_statement_at_the_FIPIC_III_Summit), (Accessed on May 24, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> 'Marape Describes Welcome Gesture to Modi as Sign of Respect', *The National*, May 24, 2023, at <https://www.thenational.com.pg/marape-describes-welcome-gesture-to-modi-as-sign-of-respect/>, (Accessed on July 01, 2023).



This acceptance by a country that is part of a region with complicated colonial and post-colonial geopolitical history is significant. Notwithstanding the sharpening contestation between the West and China, this geography is doubly important for New Delhi, given its widening lens of interests in the Indo-Pacific. The Modi–Marape meeting highlighted India’s strategic intent to diversify its engagement in the Pacific. So far, India’s engagement with the PICs has been driven by its focus on Fiji due to its sizeable Indian diaspora, relative political heft and economic strength in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)—the principal regional organisation of the PICs.<sup>3</sup> New Delhi has also seen growing trade ties with the PNG.<sup>4</sup> However with the third FIPIC forum and India’s specific announcements in terms of responding to regional asks, the growing alignment between India and the PICs is clear as they share common challenges of managing energy scarcity, combatting climate change and creating sustainable ocean-based economies.<sup>5</sup> India has incrementally built up its presence and outreach in these specific sectors over decades and assisted the region under the model of South–South cooperation.<sup>6</sup> Given India’s high-profile G20 presidency (November 2022–December 2023) and committed aim of being the voice of the Global South and its role as a ‘bridge builder’

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<sup>3</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, GoI, brief, ‘India-Fiji Relations’, at [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India\\_Fiji\\_Bilateral\\_Brief.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India_Fiji_Bilateral_Brief.pdf), (Accessed on July 01, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> ‘India-Papua New Guinea Bilateral Relations’, Ministry of External Affairs, at <https://www.hcipom.gov.in/page/india-papua-new-guinea-bilateral-relations/>, (Accessed on July 01, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Shruti Pandalai, ‘In the Pacific Islands and Indian Counter to China’, *Hindustan Times*, May 26, 2023, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/in-the-pacific-islands-an-indian-counter-to-china-101685024897111.html>, (Accessed on July 01, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> For more see: <https://indiaunfund.unsouthsouth.org/>. The India-UN Development Partnership Fund is supported and led by the Government of India and implemented in collaboration with the United Nations system. It supports Southern-owned and -led, demand-driven and transformational sustainable development projects across the developing world, with a focus on Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States.

between developed and developing nations, this meeting could not have come at a more opportune moment.<sup>7</sup>

Traps of zero-sum game comparisons are unhelpful. However, one could argue that if Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit sealing the security pact with Solomon Islands in 2022 shook up Australia, US and regional partners into stepping up their Pacific engagement, PM Modi's meetings with the PICs leaders reassured them that their concerns, voices and agency matters in shaping the destiny of their region.<sup>8</sup> The PICs interest in increasing cooperation with India for their development priorities reflects their agency in diversifying partnerships in the face of increasing strategic competition over resources and influence. India's participation in the Quad and close interaction with US, Australia, Japan and France under multiple platforms in the Indo-Pacific provide the country with an opportunity to work with these regional actors as a bridge builder. New Delhi can augment their resources to provide capacity and capability in niche sectors where it cannot undertake projects alone due to issues of scale.<sup>9</sup>

The convergences are many, but as analysts looking at India's strategic interests, it is important to go beyond the successful summit and understand the importance of this region for India and the extent of the challenges and opportunities it presents for New Delhi. If India wants to shape the discourse as a leading power in the Indo-Pacific, the PICs provide a strategic theatre to showcase New Delhi's vision to offer countries viable and sustainable choices across economic and development realms that go beyond binary-bloc-style competition.

## 1.2 SCOPE OF STUDY

In the next few sections, this monograph will try to briefly introduce the relevance of this contested geography to regional and extra-regional players. A deep dive into the complicated historical legacies, colonial experiences and relationships of regional actors with the PICs, while

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<sup>7</sup> See note 5.

<sup>8</sup> See note 1.

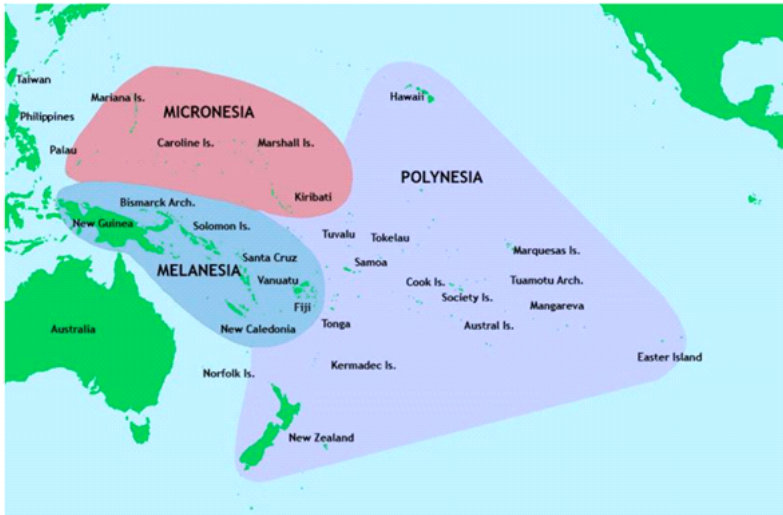
<sup>9</sup> For more, see note 5.

relevant, is beyond the scope of enquiry. This study will limit itself to unpacking the internal dynamics of regional tensions and examining the agency of PICs. It will expand on how China's actions are redefining geopolitics in the region and discuss these contested narratives. Within this backdrop, it will primarily explore how Indian engagement has been perceived in the region and conclude with prescriptive options of steps India could take including with regional partners to anchor meaningful presence.

This study is part of the scholar's larger work on looking at how discourse politics, in the backdrop of US–China strategic competition, informs Indo–Pacific geopolitics. The lens on the Pacific Islands from the Indian perspective has gained traction from the region's appetite for increasing New Delhi's footprint, as witnessed during India's G20 presidency; its interaction in FIPIC summits and the PICs' own re-evaluation of agency and management of great power politics. The lines of enquiry have been informed primarily by assessments of academics from the region who have spent decades looking at PIC geopolitics; official statements and agreements; testimonies from US Congressional hearings. Feedback from experts and stakeholders during fellow paper presentations at MP-IDSA; and roundtables organised on the invitation of sister think tanks, where the author presented her research also provided valuable insights from the participation of key representatives both from government and civil society from the PICs and regional powers. The author also benefited from conversations and interviews undertaken during two visits to Australia as part of exchanges facilitated by Australia's Department of Defence and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for emerging leaders in the Indo–Pacific. The recommendations made by this study have hence been informed heavily by these interactions.

### **1.3 THE PACIFIC ISLANDS: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION**

The Pacific Islands region spans 15 per cent of the world's surface area. According to data from the World Bank, 11 Pacific Island states have a combined population of about 2.3 million people living on a land area of 62,000 sq. km (23,938 sq. miles), roughly the size of the US state of Florida.

**Figure 1. The Pacific Islands**

**Source:** Map information based on ‘Vaka Moana: Voyages of the Ancestors - The Discovery and Settlement of the Pacific’, K. R. Howe (ed.), Wikimedia Commons, Pacific Culture, 2008, p. 57, first accessed in Dinoj K. Upadhyay, Vinod Kumar, and Aditi Gupta, ‘Advancing South–South Cooperation: India’s Development Partnerships with Pacific Island Countries’, 2021, Report for The Asia Foundation.

However, their combined Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) total 40 million sq. km, which just for perspective, experts say, is bigger than the surface of the moon at 38 million sq. km, or the entire continent of Africa at 30 million sq. km.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to remember that the Pacific Islands comprise a region of complex historical tapestry and, like many geographies, have been burdened by conquests, colonisations and immigration. While some

<sup>10</sup> Alister Doyle, ‘Islands, Rocks and Tuna: Pacific Nations Draw New Battle Lines Against Rising Seas’, March 11, 2021, Thomson Reuters Foundation, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/islands-rocks-and-tuna-pacific-nations-draw-new-battle-lines-against-rising-se-idUSKBN2B3053/>, (Accessed on July 01, 2023).

regions of Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia are considered as part of the Pacific Islands, not all of these countries are typically identified as such. Oceania is the oft-used inclusive descriptor.

The Pacific Islands region is divided culturally into three subregions:<sup>11</sup>

1. *Melanesia*: Comprising Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu;
2. *Micronesia*: Represented by Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau; and
3. *Polynesia*: Consisting of American Samoa, Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, Wallis and Futuna.

However, these cultural subregions do little to represent the political identities of these island nations, which vary from independent nations, to overseas territories of larger regional players and, in some cases, independent but bound them by a Compact of Free Association (COFA) with a larger country, while some continue to function as constituent territories of larger regional players. Even though the concept of spheres of influence is highly contested today, this region has seen an overarching involvement from the US, Australia, New Zealand, France, Japan and, to some extent, Germany and the United Kingdom for decades.

Historians<sup>12</sup> suggest ancestors of the *Polynesians* settled in the area between 2000 and 3000 years ago. Missionaries travelled around Polynesia in the late 1700s and spread Christianity, advanced by the arrival of British colonisers in the 1830s. Other colonial powers, such as France, Germany, Chile and the US, laid claim to parts of Polynesia.

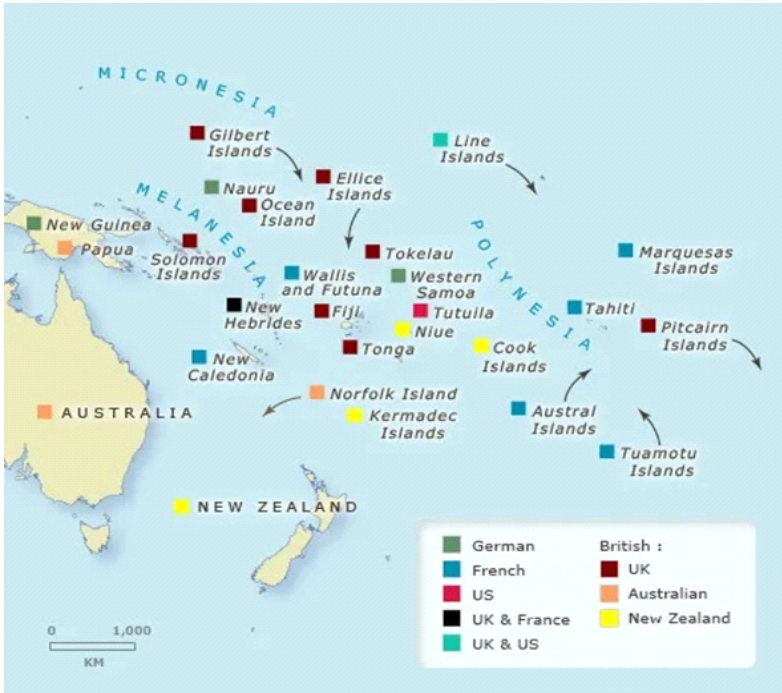
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<sup>11</sup> Analysis in this section is compiled from S. Foster and Francis James West, 'Pacific Islands', updated July 24, 2023, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Pacific-Islands>, (Accessed on July 24, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> S. Foster & Francis James West, at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Pacific-Islands/Early-period>, Ibid.

This is, in part, one of the reasons for the highly varied languages that are used and coexist across the Pacific Islands.

**Figure 2. The Contested History of the Pacific Islands**



**Source:** South Pacific Colonies in 1900 Map, from *Te Ara* – the official Encyclopaedia of New Zealand, at <https://teara.govt.nz/en/interactive/24236/colonial-control-in-the-south-pacific>, (Accessed on July 01, 2023).

The Pacific Islands region stretches from Fiji and Tonga to the west, Easter Island to the east, Hawaii to the North and New Zealand to the south. It has seen British, US and German occupation in the past. For instance, Tonga retained its independence and autonomy under the British in 1900, until it became fully independent in 1970. At the turn of the 20th century, the Samoan Islands were split into two, with the eastern territories becoming part of the US in 1904, in what is today known as American Samoa. The western flank—Western Samoa—passed from Germany to New Zealand in 1914, which administered it under the auspices of the League of Nations until the island's independence in 1962.

Micronesia comes from the Greek word for *small islands*, while Melanesia is derived from the Greek word *melas*, meaning ‘black’, which anthropologists referenced as alluding to the dark skin of the island’s original inhabitants.

Historically, Micronesians descended from seafarers who populated the island atolls between 2000 BC and 500 BC. Starting with the Portuguese and Spanish explorers, the islands have been colonised by various European and Asian countries and have a complicated history. For example, Pohnpei, an island state of the Federated States of Micronesia, ‘discovered’ in 1526, was named ‘New Philippines’ by the Spaniards. Spain later ‘claimed sovereignty’ over most of Micronesia. Germany then came in and colonised it before Spain regained its foothold in Pohnpei in 1866. Germany later ‘bought’ the island from Spain in 1899 after the conclusion of the Spanish–American War. Consequently, Japan annexed the island in 1914, and Pohnpei became a US territory after the defeat of the Japanese empire during World War II. In 1979, Pohnpei joined three other island states to become the Federated States of Micronesia. Micronesia today includes the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau (Belau), the US territory of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

History repeated itself with Palau too—it was discovered by Spain in 1700s, sold to the Germans and later annexed by Japan, only to become a part of the US-managed Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands after Japan’s defeat in World War II. The island of Guam, also a part of Micronesia, was ceded to the US by Spain in 1898. The three now exist in Compact of Free Association with the US. Melanesia saw Dutch forces colonise it in 1660, announcing sovereignty over New Guinea. Over the next several centuries, Britain, the Netherlands, Australia, Germany and Japan each established colonial claims to various parts of Melanesia. Colonial disruptions continued throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, with Japan, and Germany, laying claim to the northernmost parts of the Pacific Islands. Fiji was ceded to Britain in 1874 and later became an independent nation in 1970 and is home to a large Indian diaspora.

## ‘RETURN OF GEOPOLITICS’ TO THE PICs

### 2.1 CONNECTING THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

Dubbed by some historians as a ‘European artefact’, the ‘South Pacific’, as discussed earlier, was at the heart of imperial rivalry and geopolitical competition, as seen in the scramble for Pacific colonies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the Pacific War of the 1940s.<sup>13</sup> The naval campaign now synonymous with the Pacific War—The Battle of the Coral Sea, Guadalcanal Midway—between the US and Imperial Japan in World War II (WWII), saw thousands die and fierce fighting rage on even the smallest uninhabited atoll. That war in the Pacific theatre was brutal and bloody but essential for Americans, as strategist Mike Green notes, because ‘Commerce, faith and notions of self-defence drove Americans westward to ensure it became the pre-eminent power in Asia and the Pacific—not only across a continent but also a wide expanse of ocean’.<sup>14</sup> It is said when the US remembers WWII, it, in part, remembers the South Pacific.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Murray Chapman, *Mobility and Identity in the Island Pacific*, Department of Geography and Victoria University Press, New Zealand, 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon C. Chang, ‘The China Card. Also the India Card. A History of America’s Involvement in Asia and the Pacific’, book review of Michael J. Green, *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy And American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783*, Columbia University Press, *New York Times*, April 07, 2017, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/books/review/by-more-than-providence-michael-j-green.html>, (Accessed on July 05, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> Sean Jacobs, ‘What does the United States Need in its South Pacific Strategy?’, *Small Wars Journal*, July 24, 2022, at <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2022/07/25/what-does-united-states-need-its-south-pacific-strategy/>, (Accessed on July 05, 2023).



**Figure 3. The Security Imperative**

The three island chains as illustrated by John Foster Dulles and discussed in Andrew S. Erickson and Joel Wuthnow, ‘Why Islands Still Matter in Asia: The Enduring Significance of the Pacific “Island Chain”’, *The National Interest*, February 05, 2016.

However, US experts introspect that, following Allied victory in WWII, the strategic significance of the Pacific Islands gradually faded in US foreign policy discourse. Referring to US President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s comment in 1954 on the South Pacific being part of an ‘American lake’, they describe how this perception led to the region disappearing from Washington’s strategic radar, with the Soviet Union’s efforts concentrating elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> The US then increasingly leaned on its allies, Australia and New Zealand, to manage engagement in the Pacific, as observed in US President George W. Bush’s much-criticised comments in 2003, where he called Australia a regional ‘deputy sheriff’ acting on behalf of the US.<sup>17</sup> They counter that, while the Pacific Islands

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

region was in focus in US rhetoric, it was not considered as strategically significant, which is why Washington was unaware of the regional resentment in being used as a test site for nuclear bombs by the US.<sup>18</sup> Some historians of the region are candid when they say this neglect remained the case even when East Asian economic dynamism and growing trade and investment opportunities across the Pacific Ocean celebrated the arrival of the 'Pacific Rim' as the guarantor of integrated geo-economics in the post-Cold War era.<sup>19</sup> They argue that, in contrast, the South Pacific was often dismissed as (part of) an 'arc of instability', which took the sheen off an otherwise economically vibrant Asia-Pacific community.<sup>20</sup>

There is a reason why the 'return of geopolitics' rings particularly true for the PICs region. Today, with China's rise and increasing assertiveness, the liberal optimism underpinning Asia-Pacific regional integration has been replaced by a sense of realpolitik fear and anxiety over its intent.<sup>21</sup> The response has been the collective action of countries under the idea of the Indo-Pacific to both create viable alternatives and deter China. So today, the South Pacific is once again thrust into the geo-strategic limelight, becoming the focal point of a slew of new policies by countries as diverse as Britain ('Pacific Uplift'), Indonesia ('Pacific Elevation'), New Zealand ('Pacific Reset') and Australia ('Pacific Step-up'). The battle lines, however, sharpen under the lens of US-China competition. The South Pacific features prominently and has participated in China's *Belt and Road Initiative*, while simultaneously being elevated as 'key area of focus' of the US's 'free and open Indo-Pacific region' and its 'Indo-Pacific Economic Framework'. This lens amplifies the economic and strategic imperative to the jostling for the PICs.

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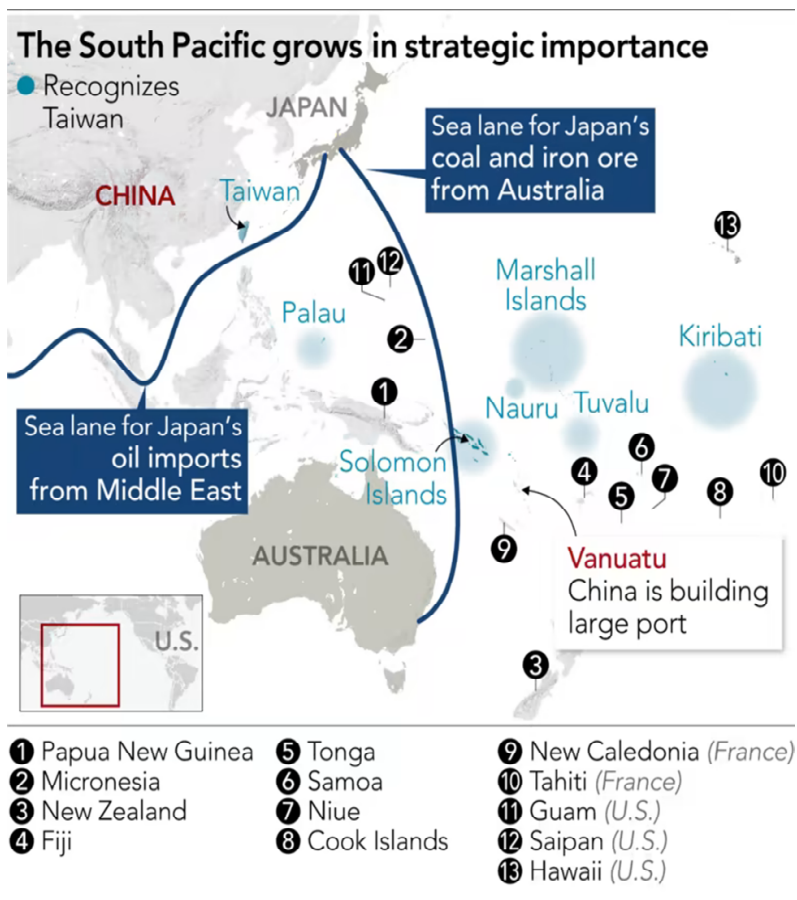
<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> C. Pan and M. Clarke, 'Narrating the South Pacific in and Beyond Great Power Politics', *East Asia*, 39, 1-11, 2022. at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-021-09383-w>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 4. Geo Economic Importance of the Pacific Island Countries**



**Source:** Nikkei Asia, “Japan, US and Australia Push Back on China’s South Pacific Expansion,” July 03, 2019, at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/politics/international-relations/japan-us-and-australia-push-back-on-china-s-south-pacific-expansion> (Accessed on, July 03, 2019).

## 2.2 ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC JOSTLING IN THE PICs

As a region, the PICs suffer from low levels of development and poverty, and have traditionally depended heavily on the West for their trade and security requirements. The economic significance of the PICs is heavily concentrated in their resource-rich EEZs, which are attractive

sources of natural and mineral resources like fisheries, liquefied natural gas (LNG), hydrocarbons and seabed minerals. However, intra-island trade in the region is very limited.<sup>22</sup> Significant exports from the island states to regional countries—Australia and New Zealand—include gold and crude petroleum from Papua New Guinea; gold, clothing, biscuits and bottled water from Fiji; and gold and timber from Solomon Islands.<sup>23</sup> Outside the PICs region, Europe remains a key destination for exports, particularly for processed tuna and agricultural exports from Melanesian states. Besides, other key trading partners include the US, Japan, Singapore and some Southeast Asian countries.<sup>24</sup> However, for many PICs, this has become an issue with them labelling trade with these partners as ‘resource exploitation’. During the Modi–Marape meeting, the PM of PNG said, ‘In the Global South, we have development challenges. Our resources are harvested by tonnes and volumes. And our people have been left behind’.<sup>25</sup> This feeling has made the PICs turn to China, which has used non-conditional aid to increase its economic footprint in the region and is gradually becoming an important trading partner, primarily in terms of imports and investment.<sup>26</sup> Experts argue that China gives PICs options, and in turn greater influence over, and attention from, traditional development partners, who have often treated PICs with a degree of benign neglect.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Pragya Pandey, ‘China and the South Pacific’, *ICWA Brief* 2023, at <https://www.icwa.in/pdfs/SHPChinaSouthPacificWeb.pdf> (Accessed on July 05, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> ‘We Are Victims of Global Power Play..., Papua New Guinea PM Says Pacific Islands Will Rally Behind India’, *ANI News*, May 22, 2023, at <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/pacific/we-are-victims-of-global-power-play-papua-new-guinea-pm-says-pacific-islands-will-rally-behind-india20230522091824/>, (Accessed on July 05, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Jian Zhang, ‘China’s Role in the Pacific Islands Region’, July 2007, [www.dkiapcss.edu](http://www.dkiapcss.edu), at <https://dkiapcss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/C3-China-Pacific-Zhang.pdf>, (Accessed on July 05, 2023).

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Pryke, ‘The Risks of China’s Ambitions in the South Pacific’, *Brookings Commentary*, July 20, 2020, at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-risks-of-chinas-ambitions-in-the-south-pacific/>, (Accessed on July 05, 2023).

Strategically, the tipping point for geopolitical competition was May of 2022, when the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, spent the better part of a week trying to engage with 10 Pacific Island nations to sign an encompassing trade and security agreement.<sup>28</sup> While the group failed to reach a consensus, the groundwork for future cooperation was laid out. China was also successful in securing several smaller bilateral agreements during the same tour, apart from the defence pact with Solomon Islands.<sup>29</sup> This deal apparently shocked Australia and the US, neither of whom appeared to have been aware how far along a deal was.<sup>30</sup>

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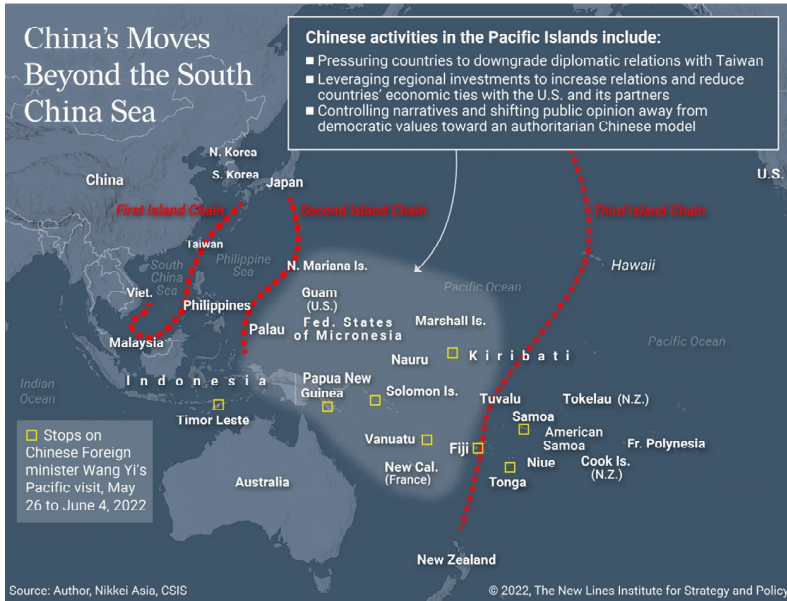
<sup>28</sup> Farrah Tomazin, 'We Need to do Better': US to Step Up Pacific Efforts After Solomons Pact with China', *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 10, 2022, at <https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/we-need-to-do-better-us-to-step-up-pacific-efforts-after-solomons-pact-with-china-20220510-p5ajw3.html>, (Accessed on July 05, 2023).

<sup>29</sup> 'Wang Yi: China's Cooperation with South Pacific Island Countries Having Diplomatic Relations with China Shows a Vibrant Situation of 'Two-Wheel Driving', Ministry of Foreign Affairs for PRC, June 03, 2022, at [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202206/t20220603\\_10698495.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202206/t20220603_10698495.html), (Accessed on July 05, 2023).

<sup>30</sup> 'Why US and China Compete for Influence With Pacific Island Nations', *Washington Post*, July 11, 2023, at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/07/11/how-us-china-seek-influence-with-solomons-and-other-pacific-island-nations/42e9279e-1fa9-11ee-8994-4b2d0b694a34\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/07/11/how-us-china-seek-influence-with-solomons-and-other-pacific-island-nations/42e9279e-1fa9-11ee-8994-4b2d0b694a34_story.html), (Accessed on July 20, 2023).

When you look at the map of the region, it is clear that for Australia and New Zealand, securing the Southern Pacific is and always has been about access to and from the rest of the world.

**Figure 5. China in the Pacific Islands**



**Source:** Alec Dionne and Maggie Sparling, 'A New U.S. Approach to the Pacific Island Countries', *New Line Institute*, October 13, 2022, at <https://newlinesinstitute.org/strategic-competition/a-new-u-s-approach-to-the-pacific-island-countries/>, (Accessed on July 05, 2023).

Australia's trade routes to Japan and South Korea run past Papua New Guinea, and any hostile military presence could leave Australia's exports vulnerable.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Joanne Wallis, Australia's Defence Relationships with Pacific Island Nations – The Pacific Islands: An Arc of Opportunity, Submission 2 to the Inquiry into Australia's Defence Relationships with Pacific Island Nations, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (Canberra: Parliament of Australia, July 2020), <https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=ac13b181-be65-4a20-a13b-36847ba73920&subId=678701>, (Accessed on July 05, 2022).

For the US, the Pacific is part of its ‘island chain’ security concept, which sees islands as part of defence lines between Asia and the US, as it did in the peak of the colonial wars, as well as WWII. Controlling access to this geography controls access to Hawaii and, furthermore, to the US West Coast.<sup>32</sup> John Foster Dulles is credited with the conceptualisation and naming of the islands in the 1950s. The ‘first island chain’ stretches from the Kurils, the Japanese home islands, and the Ryukyus to Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia. The second chain stretches from Japan through the Marianas and Micronesia, and the third is anchored in Hawaii. However, the chains are not officially demarcated, and there is debate regarding their boundaries—especially a difference of perceptions as understood by China.<sup>33</sup>

So for the US, Australia and New Zealand, Chinese military presence in this region is thus a direct threat to strategic interests. Most worrying for Canberra at that time was the proposition that if the draft deal went ahead, the Chinese Navy would gain a safe harbour just 2,000 km from the Australian coast.<sup>34</sup> These fears are further aggravated by worries about China’s dual-use infrastructure like deep-water ports, such as the large wharf in Port Villa, Vanuatu, and the use of strategic

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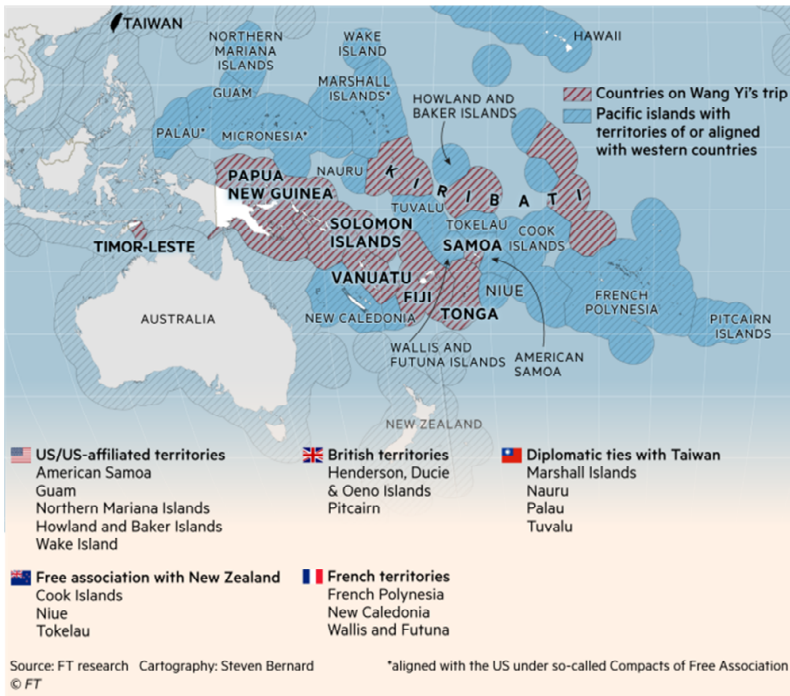
<sup>32</sup> Bruce Jones, ‘Temperatures Rising: The Struggle For Bases and Access in the Pacific Islands’, *Policy Brief*, February 2023, *Brookings*, at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/temperatures-rising-the-struggle-for-bases-and-access-in-the-pacific-islands/#:~:text=Executive%20summary,around%20employing%20hard%20power%20loom>, (Accessed July 05, 2023).

<sup>33</sup> Wilson Vorndick ‘China’s Reach has Grown; So Should the Island Chains’, October 22, 2018, [www.amti.csis.org](http://www.amti.csis.org), at <https://amti.csis.org/chinas-reach-grown-island-chains/>. Also see Andrew S. Erickson and Joel Wuthnow, ‘Why Islands Still Matter in Asia: The Enduring Significance of the Pacific ‘Island Chains’, *The National Interest*, February 05, 2016, at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-islands-still-matter-asia-15121>, (Both Accessed on July 05, 2023).

<sup>34</sup> Ben Wescott, ‘Chinese Naval Base in Solomons a ‘Red Line’, Australia Says’, *Bloomberg*, April 25, 2022, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-24/chinese-naval-base-in-solomons-a-red-line-australian-pm-says>, (Accessed on July 05, 2023).

islands for deployment of Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities.<sup>35</sup> Besides posing a threat to freedom of navigation, such Chinese capabilities can threaten key Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) between Australia and North America and bring China perilously close to Australian population centres. This fear motivates France too, which has significant stakes in continuation of the current South Pacific balance of power.

**Figure 6. External actors in the PIC.**



**Source:** Kathrin Hille, “Pacific Islanders Snub China by Rejecting Security Pact”, Financial Times, May 30, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/34b4842c-fafd-4144-b16b-3f379d82085d>, (Accessed on May 30, 2022).

<sup>35</sup> David Wroe, “The Great Wharf from China, Raising Eyebrows Across the Pacific”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 11, 2018, at <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/the-great-wharf-from-china-raising-eyebrows-across-the-pacific-20180411-p4z8yu.html>, (Accessed on July 05, 2023).



## 2.3 CONTEMPORARY PIC POLITICS: MULTIPLE ACTORS AND INTERESTS

A major impetus of the ongoing US–China rivalry in the PICs is tension over the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. However, the battle ground of the Pacific is also considered the ‘far seas’, the control of which will make China an effective Blue-Water-capable Navy—an essential prerequisite for becoming a superpower.<sup>36</sup> Given the rising stakes in the region, here is a brief lay of the land with regional actors and engagements:

1. **The US** has 11 territories in the PICs, of which 10 are unincorporated. It has an arc of bases across its own territories in Guam (a federated territory), Hawaii and Wake Island. Moreover, it has access rights in what are known as the Freely Associated States (the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau)—which, collectively, cover more territory than the continental US. This presence extends US access to 1,500 miles of Japan’s Okinawa Island to the northwest and within 1,600 miles of the Philippines to the west.<sup>37</sup> The US also operates military establishments on several Pacific islands, including those administered by independent states via Compacts of Free Association (COFA) that allow for exclusive basing of US troops. The US has been a longstanding development partner of the PICs, having established the South Pacific Tuna Treaty, which has been a pillar of political and economic cooperation for over three decades. Washington, as described earlier, has been accused of cycles of neglect and handling relations with PICs on an ad hoc basis, thus ceding ground for China to make inroads.<sup>38</sup> The Biden

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<sup>36</sup> Bruce Jones, ‘Temperatures Rising: The Struggle for Bases and Access in the Pacific Islands’, note 32.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Derek J. Grossman, ‘America’s Pacific Island Summit: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly’, *The RAND Blog*, November 07, 2022, at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2022/11/americas-pacific-island-summit-the-good-the-bad-and.html>, (Accessed on July 10, 2023).

administration had stepped up efforts to increase engagement with commitments to implement the Declaration on US–Pacific Partnership announced in the first ever US–Pacific Islands Summit held in Washington in 2022 and unveiling of the Partners of the Blue Pacific Initiative.<sup>39</sup> Under the Biden administration, the US has signed a defence agreement with Papua New Guinea, opened new embassies in the Solomon Islands and Tonga, and renewed COFAs with Micronesia and Palau.<sup>40</sup> However, the US Congressional budget impasse over COFA funding in 2024 had generated anxiety among the island states. Regional leaders cautioned Washington that failure or delay to approve the funding programmes would play directly into the hands of Chinese ambitions for the region.<sup>41</sup> Australia and New Zealand's ambassadors to the US also jointly lobbied the US Congress, underlining the importance of the COFA in securing mutual interests of the US and the two Pacific countries. While funding was finally approved, the broader congressional debates regarding international military and humanitarian assistance did leave an impact on regional narratives on US commitment to the region. The reduction of US development assistance to Pacific Island countries in early 2025 has exacerbated regional perceptions of American unreliability, characterised by cyclical engagement followed by abrupt withdrawal. Regional observers argue that The Trump

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<sup>39</sup> Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 'FACT SHEET: Roadmap for a 21st-Century U.S.-Pacific Island Partnership', *The American Presidency Project*, September 29, 2022, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/fact-sheet-roadmap-for-21st-century-us-pacific-island-partnership>, (Accessed on January 23, 2026).

<sup>40</sup> Derek J. Grossman, 'America is Winning Against China in Oceania', *Foreign Policy*, June 01, 2023, at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/01/china-south-pacific-oceania-solomon-islands-kiribati-papua-new-guinea-australia-new-zealand-geopolitics-military/>, (Accessed on July 10, 2023).

<sup>41</sup> Meg Keen and Mihai Sora, 'The US Funding Deal is Good for the Pacific. But the Key is What Happens Next', March 12, 2024, *The Guardian*, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/12/the-us-funding-deal-is-good-for-the-pacific-but-the-key-is-what-happens-next>, (Accessed on March 20, 2024).

administration's restructuring of USAID has resulted in the cancellation or suspension of several major initiatives, producing material and reputational costs in a strategically significant but demographically small region.<sup>42</sup> These developments coincide with growing Pacific agency and expanding Chinese engagement. Influence in the Pacific is increasingly determined by consistency in aid delivery, access to climate finance and partner responsiveness to local priorities. Continued volatility in US assistance risks accelerating a gradual erosion of US and allied strategic relevance argue experts.<sup>43</sup>

2. **France** controls a vast maritime domain in the Pacific.<sup>44</sup> Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), France controls 11 million sq. km of overseas EEZs, of which more than seven million sq. km is located in the Pacific Ocean. French possessions New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia and the uninhabited Clipperton Island are rich in resources. New Caledonia holds 20-25 per cent of world's nickel reserves. Tahiti in French Polynesia has an enormous EEZ spanning 4767,242 sq. km. France has also placed 2,800 French armed forces personnel at a theatre headquarters in the French Polynesian capital of Papeete and at the regional commands in the Department of La Réunion and New Caledonia, where it also hosts a French naval base with 10 ships. The French armed forces also actively participate in regional security within the framework of active and operational collaborations, including the South Pacific Defence Ministers'

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<sup>42</sup> Blake Johnson and Astrid Young, 'The US harms its image in the Pacific with aid cuts and tariffs', *The Strategist*, April 10, 2025, at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-us-harms-its-image-in-the-pacific-with-aid-cuts-and-tariffs/>, (Accessed on May 20, 2025).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> This section has been curated from information available in 'French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 'France's Indo-Pacific Strategy' at [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/france\\_s\\_indo-pacific\\_strategy\\_2025\\_cle04bb17.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/france_s_indo-pacific_strategy_2025_cle04bb17.pdf); Bruce Jones, 'Temperatures Rising: The Struggle for Bases and Access in the Pacific Islands', note 32, (Accessed on July 10, 2023).

Meeting. France is also part of the FRANZ Tripartite Agreement, bringing together France, Australia and New Zealand, which focuses on disaster relief in the region. Paris has a diplomatic presence in the region with embassies at Canberra, Wellington, Port Moresby, Suva and Port Vila, the most by any EU state. France's Indo-Pacific strategy lays out the framework of French outreach in the South Pacific region. Emmanuel Macron's visit to the region in 2023, the first by a French president, emphasised attempts to assure its territories that its future actions are no longer tainted by its colonial past. Macron even made veiled attempts to describe Chinese forays into the Pacific as 'new imperialism', warning of predatory tactics. France has tried to increasingly position itself as an alternative to the region, focussing on building and sharing science and technology initiatives to benefit the region. France is the founding member of the Pacific Community, the region's largest scientific and technological organisation supporting development, based in Nouméa, New Caledonia. They promote cooperation on the issues of biodiversity protection, marine resources, healthcare and agriculture. However, political instability arising from domestic tensions in New Caledonia has the potential to disrupt French efforts in the region.

3. **Japan** has steadily stepped up its engagement with the PICs, building on its historical ties and strategic interests in the region.<sup>45</sup> The wealth of these territories in fishery resources and raw materials, the crucial importance of the maritime routes, and the strategic geographical location of PICs in the context of Sino-American rivalry have been key factors behind Tokyo's expanding engagement.<sup>46</sup> Japan's outreach has been marked by extensive diplomatic, economic and

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<sup>45</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Why the Pacific Island Countries Are Important to Japan? Relations between Japan and the Pacific Island Countries, and Japan's Cooperation', at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/spf/palm2003/relation.html>, (Accessed on July 10, 2023).

<sup>46</sup> Céline Pajon, Japan and the Pacific Islands Countries: Longstanding Strategic Interests, Recent Strategic Engagement, *Asie.Visions*, no. 134 (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales [Ifri], March 17, 2023), PDF file, at <https://www.ifri.org/en/papers/japan-and-pacific-islands-countries-longstanding-strategic-interests-recent-strategic>, (Accessed on July 10, 2023).

aid relationships across the region. Japan also maintains a (civilian) space station in Kiribati in the central Pacific Ocean.<sup>47</sup> The Japan–Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM) process, initiated in 1997, provides an innovative multilateral framework to coordinate with the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) over economic cooperation, improve Japan’s overall relationship with the PICs and iron out tensions, especially on nuclear issues.<sup>48</sup> The incorporation of the PICs into Japan’s Free and Open Indo–Pacific (FOIP) vision cements their position in Tokyo’s efforts to preserve a rules-based international order and counterbalance China’s growing influence. Security issues pertaining to Asia have thus started to appear on the agenda of the PALM summits. In addition, Japan has stepped up its cooperation with its closest allies and partners—the US and Australia—as part of the operationalisation of an FOIP in the Oceania. Japan has stepped up naval diplomacy and defence dialogues in the region, in addition to being very active in maritime capacity-building as well as in humanitarian aid and disaster relief assistance.<sup>49</sup>

4. **New Zealand** is connected to the PICs by geography and has constitutional commitments to the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau. The New Zealand Realm comprises New Zealand, the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau. While often described as a “family” of states, the Realm is not a federation or union. Each member has a distinct constitutional status. The Cook Islands and Niue are self-governing states in free association with New Zealand. Tokelau remains a non-self-governing territory. New Zealand retains certain responsibilities across the Realm, particularly in defence and external

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘Japan’s Support for the Pacific Island Countries’, at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100214244.pdf>, (Accessed on, July 10, 2023).

<sup>49</sup> Céline Pajon, ‘Japan and the Pacific Islands Countries. Longstanding Strategic Interests, Recent Strategic Engagement’, [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org). See note 46.

affairs, but the extent of these responsibilities is politically and constitutionally contested. In addition, its sizeable Maori population (originating from the Pacific) underwrite New Zealand's claim to being not only 'in' but 'of' the Pacific. Even more importantly, *tagata Pasifika* ('Pacific peoples') constitute the country's fourth largest ethnic group, accounting for 8 per cent of the population in 2018.<sup>50</sup> *Pasifika* are also well represented in the Wellington Parliament, especially in the Labour caucus. A substantial domestic constituency for pro-Pacific policies thus exists in New Zealand. Having been accused of apathy in the past, under former Prime Minister Jacinda Arden, New Zealand advocated a 'Pacific Reset' in 2018 as a foreign and defence policy priority. Budgeted at NZ\$714 million, this was seen as a response to Chinese inroads and political pressure from US and Australia to push back.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, New Zealand's first National Security Strategy covers the 2023-2028 period and identifies Pacific resilience and security and maritime security among its core issues of concern.<sup>52</sup> Wellington concluded a *Status of Forces Agreement* (SOFA) with Fiji, which helps coordinate humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) activities, build interoperability and facilitate training of forces.<sup>53</sup> New Zealand also has SOFA

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<sup>50</sup> Patrick Köllner, 'Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific: The Difference is Migration Policy', *Devpolicy Blog*, June 21, 2022, at <https://devpolicy.org/australia-and-nz-in-the-pacific-difference-is-migration-policy-20220621/> (Accessed on July 10, 2023).

<sup>51</sup> Tim Fish, 'How New Zealand is Trying to Expand Military Relations with its Pacific Island Neighbors', *Breaking Defense*, July 24, 2023, at <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/07/how-new-zealand-is-trying-to-expand-military-relations-with-its-pacific-island-neighbors/> (Accessed on July 24, 2023).

<sup>52</sup> 'Roadmap for Future of Defence and National Security Released', August 04, 2023, at <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/roadmap-for-future-of-defence-and-national-security-released> (Accessed on August 04, 2023).

<sup>53</sup> 'New Zealand and Fiji Armed Forces Lock in Defence Deal', *Radio News New Zealand*, June 15, 2023, at <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/492046/new-zealand-and-fiji-armed-forces-lock-in-defence-deal> (Accessed on July 24, 2023).

agreements in place with Australia and France (which governs New Caledonia). There are Visiting Forces Agreements or similar arrangements with the Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu and Timor-Leste, and temporary stay agreements with Samoa and Tonga.<sup>54</sup> However tensions between Cook Island and New Zealand peaked in February 2025, when the Cook Islands signed a suite of agreements with China under a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. These agreements reportedly covered areas including infrastructure development, research cooperation, and resource governance. New Zealand's immediate response of suspending of aid and insistence on closer consultation signal a shift toward a more restrictive interpretation of the relationship, driven by geopolitical concerns over China, regional security, and critical seabed minerals.<sup>55</sup>

5. For **Australia**, the PICs represent a strategic neighbourhood. With geographic proximity, trade and investment links, tourism and defence assets, Canberra has exercised a dominant influence in the Pacific Islands region, particularly in Melanesia, for over four decades. According to the Australian think tank Lowy's aid map<sup>56</sup> for 2025, Australia is the largest donor to the PICs, having granted US\$ 1.3 billion in Overseas Development Assessment (ODA) loans. Despite this, Australia has a testy relationship with its neighbourhood. Much like India in South Asia, Australia has been acknowledged as the regional 'big brother' as well as the PICs traditional and indispensable security partner, but this does not

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<sup>54</sup> Tim Fish, 'How New Zealand is Trying to Expand Military Relations with its Pacific Island Neighbors', See note 51.

<sup>55</sup> Lucy Craymer, 'New Zealand halts Cook Islands funding over China row', June 19, 2025, *Reuters*, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/new-zealand-halts-cook-islands-funding-over-china-row-2025-06-18/>, (Accessed on September 22, 2025).

<sup>56</sup> Lowy Institute, *Pacific Aid Map*, interactive database tracking official development finance (2008–2023) to Pacific Island states, at <https://pacificaidmap.lowyinstitute.org>, (Accessed on November 24, 2025).

always translate to influence. PIC members are often heard saying, 'Everyone around here [the South Pacific] knows that Australia is needed. But that doesn't mean you'll ever be loved'.<sup>57</sup> Australian experts argue that Canberra's policies towards the PICs have been characterised by both incoherency and inconsistency. According to them, relatively generous development and humanitarian assistance 'coexists with policies that disregard interests and particularities and have fed the image of an overbearing and bullying Australia'.<sup>58</sup> Australia in the past has been accused of shying away from facilitating the permanent migration of Pacific peoples<sup>59</sup> and criticised for reluctance by previous governments in Australia to act on climate change.<sup>60</sup> However the Labour government, argues course correction has been attempted on many fronts.<sup>61</sup> Early visits by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to the Pacific Islands

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<sup>57</sup> Graeme Dobell, 'Putting Pacific People in Australia's Pacific Policy', Submission No. 21 to the Inquiry into Strengthening Australia's Relationships with Countries in the Pacific Region, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Parliament of Australia, April 11, 2020, at <https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=845f3711-8dee-4dc5-96d1-fec839a8a00b&subId=680368>, (Accessed on July 24, 2023).

<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Schultz, 'Theorising Australia-Pacific Island Relations', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 68(5), 2014, pp. 548-568, doi: 10.1080/10357718.2014.917271, (Accessed on July 24, 2023).

<sup>59</sup> Patrick Köllner, 'Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific: The Difference is Migration Policy', *Devpolicy Blog*, June 21, 2022, at <https://devpolicy.org/australia-and-nz-in-the-pacific-difference-is-migration-policy-20220621/>, (Accessed on July 24, 2023).

<sup>60</sup> Tiffanie Turnbull, 'Why Australia is Declaring a 'New Era' in the Pacific', *BBC*, June 05, 2022, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-61669954>, (Accessed on July 24, 2024) and note 58.

<sup>61</sup> Daniel Hurst, Kate Lyons and Lice Movono, 'Penny Wong tells Pacific nations 'we have heard you' as Australia and China battle for influence', *The Guardian*, May 26, 2022, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/26/penny-wong-tells-pacific-nations-we-have-heard-you-as-australia-and-china-battle-for-influence>, (Accessed on July 24, 2023).



Forum, and bilateral visits by Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Minister for International Development and the Pacific Pat Conroy, have conveyed the current administration's intent to 'listen' to the region.<sup>62</sup> Wong, who prominently uses the term 'Pacific family', has assured the region of a refreshed Australian commitment on climate change when Canberra hoped to host the COP31 talks with PICs in 2026.<sup>63</sup> However, in November 2025, Australia decided to drop its bid over an impasse and COP31 will now be held in Türkiye, with Australia's Climate Minister Chris Bowen presiding over negotiations, and a preparatory meeting in the Pacific. The compromise disappointed some stakeholders but Canberra hopes it will enable stronger climate diplomacy in 2026.<sup>64</sup>

Experts point out that if climate change represents the key point of contrast between Australia's new government and its predecessor, the question of 'China in the Pacific' is the area of strongest continuity.<sup>65</sup> Wong's description of the China-Solomon Islands security agreement as 'the worst foreign policy blunder in the Pacific since the end of World War II'<sup>66</sup> conveys the gravity of

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<sup>62</sup> James Batley, 'Australia and the Pacific: Now for the Hard Part', *The Strategist*, *ASPI*, August 24, 2022, at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-and-the-pacific-now-for-the-hard-part/>, (Accessed on July 24, 2023).

<sup>63</sup> 'Australia foreign minister visits Pacific islands with eye on China', *Nikkei Asia*, April 20, 2023, at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Australia-foreign-minister-visits-Pacific-islands-with-eye-on-China>, (Accessed on July 24, 2023).

<sup>64</sup> David Dutton, 'Cop That: Australia Trades Hosting For Climate Talks Presidency', November 20, 2025, *Interpreter*, Lowy, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/cop-australia-trades-hosting-climate-talks-presidency>, (Accessed on November 21, 2025).

<sup>65</sup> James Batley, 'Australia and the Pacific: now for the hard part', *The Strategist*, *ASPI*, See note 62.

<sup>66</sup> Penny Wong, 'Worst foreign policy blunder in the Pacific since the end of WWII', April 20, 2022 *ABC News*, at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-20/worst-foreign-policy-blunder-in-the-pacific-since/13847436>, (Accessed on April 20, 2022).

the China challenge that the Albanese government seeks to manage. Australia's defence relationships are some of its most enduring and influential in the region, and the country's defence assistance to the Pacific Islands is primarily delivered via the Defence Cooperation Program (DCP).<sup>67</sup> This includes the *Pacific Patrol Boat Program* (PPBP) and its replacement, the *Pacific Maritime Security Program* (PMSP), which primarily establish Australian presence in the region in coordination with PICs. It also has focused on building maritime surveillance capacity and coordinating surveillance support to Pacific Island states from Australia, France, New Zealand and the US through the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group and the FRANZ Arrangement between Australia, France and New Zealand.<sup>68</sup> Australia's Defence Engagement is described as aiming "to build a region that is strategically secure, economically stable and politically sovereign".<sup>69</sup> In 2013, the inaugural *South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting* also established a Cooperative Exercise Framework, known as *Povai Endeavour*, which provides a coordinating mechanism for military exercises in the region. Australia also participates in multinational activities, including the annual Pacific Partnership humanitarian operation and the biennial *Rim of the Pacific* military exercise.<sup>70</sup> HADR offers Australia an opportunity to conduct 'disaster diplomacy'. The opportunities for military education and exchanges under the DCP have also encouraged Australian and Pacific Islander military personnel to develop closer linkages. The tenth iteration of *Talisman Sabre* in 2023, marked a milestone, as several Pacific Island countries—including Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Tonga—participated for

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<sup>67</sup> Professor Joanne Wallis, See note 31.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Australian Government, Department of Defence, 'Pacific Engagement', program overview of Defence's strategic and cooperative initiatives in the Pacific region, at <https://www.defence.gov.au/defence-activities/programs-initiatives/pacific-engagement>, (Accessed on April 22, 2024).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

the first time in the biennial military exercise led by the United States and Australia with allied and partner forces.<sup>71</sup>

6. The former imperial powers also have a presence in the Pacific Islands.<sup>72</sup> Ironically, despite its long maritime dominance, Britain retains little of its former presence in the PICs, now possessing only the *British Overseas Territory of the Pitcairn Islands* (population, all of 49 people). London retains important military assets in Australia and New Zealand and, even more significant, its base in Singapore. Russia has less extensive ties, but its Pacific fleet is a frequent visitor to these waters, and Moscow maintains diplomatic relationships across the region. Australian specialists have highlighted that the deepening naval cooperation between China and Russia with increasing number of joint patrols and exercises could become a risk factor in its own right as the two countries seek to counter the AUKUS security pact.<sup>73</sup>

In summary, despite its complicated colonial and post-colonial history, this region was largely managed under the Australia–New Zealand–United States (ANZUS) trilateral military alliance signed in 1951.<sup>74</sup> Although the agreement has not been formally abrogated, the US and New Zealand no longer maintain the security relationship between

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<sup>71</sup> ‘Talisman Sabre 23 Reflects U.S., Allies’ Commitment to Indo-Pacific’, *DOD News*, July 31, 2023, at <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3476514/talisman-sabre-23-reflects-us-allies-commitment-to-indo-pacific/>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>72</sup> Bruce Jones, ‘Temperatures Rising: The Struggle For Bases And Access In The Pacific Islands’, note 32.

<sup>73</sup> Alexey D. Muraviev, ‘Australia Can No Longer Afford to Ignore Russia’s Expanding Naval Power in the Pacific’, *The Conversation*, December 20, 2023, at <https://theconversation.com/australia-can-no-longer-afford-to-ignore-russias-expanding-naval-power-in-the-pacific-217913>, (Accessed on March 20, 2024).

<sup>74</sup> ‘ANZUS at 70: The Past, Present and Future of the Alliance’, Report by *ASPI*, August 18, 2021, at <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/anzus-70-past-present-and-future-alliance/>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

their countries. Today the treaty remains a core component of wider and deeper relations between Australia and the US. Over the past half century, Australia and New Zealand together have provided development aid, political support and even domestic security to the PICs. When violence sparked by political tensions broke out in the Solomon Islands in 2003, Australia led a regional police force to help restore order.<sup>75</sup> Both have worked with Pacific leaders for decades and were among the seven founding members of the *Pacific Islands Forum* in 1971. However, US and Australia are often accused of militarising the region and not focusing on non-traditional security challenges that overwhelm PIC governments.<sup>76</sup> It is here that there have been critical divergences in the policies and practices of Australia and New Zealand, widely playing out on regional diplomacy, and New Zealand's *Pacific identity* as a driver of foreign policy, climate change and nuclear disarmament.<sup>77</sup> It is these undercurrents that many regional experts identify as having ceded space to the most effective and disruptive engagement by far in the region—China.

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<sup>75</sup> Anna Powles and Joanne Wallis, 'Shouldering their Fair Share? The ANZUS Allies in the Pacific Islands', *Interpreter*, Lowy, July 23, 2021, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/shouldering-their-fair-share-anzus-allies-pacific-islands>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

## THE CHINESE FOOTPRINT IN THE PACIFIC

### 3.1 THE 2022 INFLECTION POINT: FROM ACCIDENTAL PRESENCE TO CHANGING NARRATIVE OF INTENT

The scene setter for the hot takes on the return of geopolitics to the PICs may have been the 2022 China-Solomon Islands security accord, but China has always maintained a presence in the South Pacific.<sup>78</sup> Ethnic Chinese have resided in the region for centuries, running some of the region's oldest trading houses. Since 2006, China's trade, aid, diplomatic and commercial activity in the Pacific region has been on the rise.<sup>79</sup> In April 2006, Wen Jiabao became the first Chinese Premier to visit Fiji. He inaugurated the China-Pacific Economic Development and Cooperation Forum. In November 2014, President Xi Jinping visited Fiji, when the relationship with the PICs was elevated from friendly and cooperative relationship to that of a strategic partnership, and he returned to the region in 2018.<sup>80</sup>

As Pacific analyst Jonathan Pryke has often argued, it is not like China executed a Machiavellian scheme to build influence in the Pacific, it

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<sup>78</sup> Jonathan Pryke, 'The Risks of China's Ambitions in the South Pacific', July 20, 2020, *Brookings*, see note 27.

<sup>79</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 2022. "Fact Sheet: Cooperation Between China and Pacific Island Countries". Updated May 24, 2022, at [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531\\_11367460.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367460.html), (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

actually stumbled upon it.<sup>81</sup> Pryke identifies Chinese state-owned enterprises, largely in pursuit of economic opportunity and fuelled by Chinese lending, as first establishing presence in the region. These state-owned enterprises put down deep roots and today are engaged in commercial activity across the board in almost every PIC. He describes how Chinese labour, which arrived through these projects, and also through fishing vessels, ‘discovered paradoxically because of their size and remoteness that most PICs are actually really high cost economies despite their relatively poor states of development’.<sup>82</sup> This labour then stayed put, setting up trade stores across the region. This has resulted in Chinese engagement spreading across the spectrum—from the top end through high-end infrastructure investment and right down into the provinces and small towns.<sup>83</sup>

According to Western regional experts, China’s efforts are well-funded and follow a predictable playbook.<sup>84</sup> First, China establishes a commercial presence, with Chinese nationals who, according to China’s 2017 National Intelligence Law, are legally obligated to support the government’s intelligence operations.<sup>85</sup> There is a focused effort on targeting of key industries, such as fishing, lumber and mining. Beijing backs these efforts with highly publicised infrastructure projects and ‘gifts’.<sup>86</sup> This economic engagement usually includes two other elements: a focus on projects that give China a strategic edge, for example, ports,

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<sup>81</sup> Jonathan Pryke, ‘China’s Growing Presence in the South Pacific’, *Japan Review* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2020): Japan Institute of International Affairs, at [https://www.jiia.or.jp/eng/upload/eng/03JapanReview\\_4-1\\_summer\\_Pryke.pdf](https://www.jiia.or.jp/eng/upload/eng/03JapanReview_4-1_summer_Pryke.pdf), (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Cleo Paskal, ‘Preserving U.S. Interests in the Indo-Pacific’, (written testimony presented to the Congressional Committee) May 16, 2023, *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, at <https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/05-16-23-Paskal-Written-Testimony-FINAL.pdf>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

airports and telecoms; and corruption, which may in some cases include drawing forces from Chinese organised crime.<sup>87</sup> They argue that this intertwined approach of commerce, strategy and criminality often leads to the weakening of the rule of law and state institutions in the PICs. These experts warn that this ‘entropic warfare’ can contribute to political and social fragmentation, even chaos, and facilitates the rise of a domestic constituency ready to serve as PRC proxies and invites transnational repression.<sup>88</sup>

So now you have a situation where China’s trade volume with the 10 PICs increased more than 30 times from 1992 to 2021.<sup>89</sup> China is the Pacific Island Forum’s (PIF) third largest trading partner, after Australia and New Zealand. Its goods trade with these nations reached US\$8.2 billion in 2017, exceeding Australia’s US\$5 billion and New Zealand’s US\$1.6 billion.<sup>90</sup> China is also the Solomon Islands’ most important commercial partner. China is one of the top three lenders to the Pacific Islands, after the Asian Development Bank.<sup>91</sup>

While most PICs have signed up to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in recent years, The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs fact sheet claims “China has aided in accelerating PICs connectivity by completing several significant infrastructure projects, such as the Independence Boulevard in Papua New Guinea, the Malakula island highway in Vanuatu, and the reconstruction of the Tonga national road and the Pohnpei Highway in Micronesia.”<sup>92</sup> For the Solomon Islands,

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Shruti Pandalai, Akash Sahu and Shruti Sharma “The Pacific Islands and Geopolitical Jostling: Can India Play a Stabilising Role?”, *MP-IDS/ISA Issue Brief*, September 02, 2022, at <https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/The-Pacific-Islands-and-Geopolitical-Jostling-020922>, (Accessed on July 01, 2023).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Herve Lemahieu and Alyssa Leng, *Lomy*, quoted in 89.

<sup>92</sup> For more, see note 89.

logging has been the dominant focus of its economic and trade ties with China, which accounts for more than 90 per cent of its timber exports. China has pledged extensive training programmes for human resource development, including in such areas as public administration, agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, fishing and education.<sup>93</sup>

Chinese experts argue that all of Beijing's efforts aim to position itself as a responsible strategic partner at the forefront of South–South cooperation.<sup>94</sup> Beijing wants to create a China-led regional security architecture and propagates the idea that the US is not an Asian power.<sup>95</sup> At the multilateral level, as a dialogue partner, China is deeply involved in Pacific Island regional organisations.<sup>96</sup> On August 25, 2022, the PIF announced that the Government of China has handed over an annual funding contribution of US\$1.08 million to the PIF Secretariat under the China-Pacific Island Forum Cooperation Fund. PIF Secretary General Henry Puna said that 'over 80 per cent of China's funding contribution today will support the Pacific Trade and Invest China office to work with the private sector to develop, grow and promote business in the region by facilitating export opportunities with buyers and attracting foreign direct investments'.<sup>97</sup>

China's bid under its proposed 'China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision' and 'Five-Year Action Plan (2022–26)' includes doubling the volume of bilateral trade between China

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Denghua Zhang, 'China's Motives, Influence and Prospects in Pacific Island Countries: Views of Chinese Scholars', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 23(1), 2023, pp. 33–59, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcab019>

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> 'RELEASE: US \$1.08m for Pacific in China-Pacific Islands Forum Annual Development Cooperation Ceremony', *Pacific Islands Forum*, August 25, 2022, at <https://www.forumsec.org/2022/08/25/release-us-1-08m-for-pacific-in-china-pacific-islands-forum-annual-development-cooperation-ceremony/>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).



and its economic partners, which could potentially circumvent other regional initiatives such as that put forward by the US: for example, the Indo–Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity.<sup>98</sup> China also seeks to widen its engagement with the Pacific region, via the *China–Pacific Island Countries Ministerial Dialogue on Law Enforcement Capacity and Police Cooperation*.<sup>99</sup>

PICs until recently have been among the few countries that recognised Taiwan and maintained a strong diplomatic relationship. For decades, the region has been the playground for China–Taiwan influence battles, and PICs leveraged briefcase diplomacy between the two.<sup>100</sup> Until September 2019, six PICs—Palau, Tuvalu, Nauru, Kiribati, Marshall Islands and the Solomon Islands—recognised Taiwan, which soon dropped to three after the Solomon Islands and Kiribati and now Nauru severed their ties with Taipei.<sup>101</sup>

Hence, for most Pacific countries, it seems that China has almost by mistake built its trade, aid and investment ties to emerge as a significant geopolitical power in the Pacific. However, as rightly argued, even if ‘capability is the thing that takes time to build, and China has built capability really by accident in the Pacific’, analysts would caution ‘intent can change overnight’.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Miranda Booth, ‘Competing with China in the Pacific Will Backfire’, June 01, 2022, *Interpreter*, Lowy, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/competing-china-pacific-will-backfire#:~:text=China%E2%80%99s%20bid%20under%20its%20proposed,put%20forward%20by%20the%20United>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>99</sup> Denghua Zhang, ‘China’s Motives, Influence and Prospects in Pacific Island Countries: Views of Chinese Scholars’, see note 94.

<sup>100</sup> Jonathan Pryke, See note 27.

<sup>101</sup> ‘And then there were 12: Taiwan’s diplomatic allies’, *Reuters*, January 15, 2024, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/then-there-were-13-taiwans-diplomatic-allies-2023-03-26/>, (Accessed on January 15, 2024).

<sup>102</sup> Jonathan Pryke, ‘China’s Growing Presence in the South Pacific’, see note 81.

### 3.2 WHY THE PICs MATTER TO CHINA

It is argued that Beijing's heightened engagement in the region in recent years is largely driven by its interests in the following three areas: (1) promoting its diplomatic and strategic priorities; (2) reducing Taiwan's international space; and (3) gaining access to raw materials and natural resources for both industrial and military-industrial purposes.<sup>103</sup> One could add that PICs are fertile markets to push Chinese exports, BRI infrastructure, key strategic outposts for military ambitions of berthing assets to take on the Taiwan contingency as well as break out into the Pacific and project power.

Analysts underline that China's fears of remaining vulnerable to a 'distant blockade' of its essential sea-borne trade and a Taiwan contingency dominate Beijing's drive and ambition for the region.<sup>104</sup> If the US sought to blockade China, the Chinese Navy (PLAN) would aim to defeat that blockade in the Indian Ocean and the Philippine Sea.<sup>105</sup> In case Beijing were to exercise a military option against Taiwan, it would want to block US reinforcements outside the first island chain. All these interests make the Philippine Sea and Oceania essential to Chinese strategy.

The sparse research coming out on Chinese scholars<sup>106</sup> perception of Beijing's motives for the PICs are striking on two accounts:

- (1) Most identify diplomacy and economics as drivers of Chinese ambitions and are cautiously optimistic about the BRI in the Pacific. They expect China to both compete and cooperate with traditional powers in the Pacific in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>103</sup> Denghua Zhang, see note 94.

<sup>104</sup> Tom (Guorui) Sun and Alex Payette, 'China's Two Ocean Strategy: Controlling Waterways and the New Silk Road', *www.iris-france.org*, *Asia Focus*, issue no 31, May 2017, at <https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Asia-Focus-31.pdf>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Denghua Zhang, see note 94.

- (2) They believe that economic security drives the PLAN to ensure it is capable of consolidating Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), conducting and maintaining surveillance, projecting power further outwards, and deterring international threats.<sup>107</sup>

The goals of modernising the PLAN and expanding its zones of operation are not ends in themselves. Rather, they argue that PLAN's goals are subservient to that of the state's economic needs.<sup>108</sup> The logic in a nutshell being: through developing a deep-sea navy, China can gradually shift away from depending on foreign actors to protect its fleet of commercial ships and instead cement its economic security through the use of its own navy by protecting its maritime supply lines. Ultimately, the less the risk that economic security poses for China's economic system through SLOCs, which are dependent on foreign actors' protection and thus exposed to sanctioning, the less sociopolitical problems the Party has to contend with; and subsequently the more domestic political stability in China.<sup>109</sup>

### 3.3 POLITICAL WARFARE: BEIJING'S TOOLKIT IN THE PICs

To achieve Chinese design, there have been consistent political warfare methods deployed over time, including spending on ensuring a favourable Chinese narrative in the PIC. In a brief analysing China's Media Strategy in the Pacific, authors Denghua Zhang and Amanda Watson describe how Chinese government's media activities in the Pacific fall into five categories.<sup>110</sup> First, China has expanded the presence

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<sup>107</sup> Tom (Guorui) Sun And Alex Payette, 'China's Two Ocean Strategy: Controlling Waterways And The New Silk Road', See note 104.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Denghua Zhang and Amanda H. A. Watson, 'China's Media Strategy in the Pacific', *In Brief* 2020/29 (Canberra: Australian National University Department of Pacific Affairs, 2020), at <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/0b10cad3-ae25-4bdb-9b6d-de8ab9efd8fe/content>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

of its official media—the China Central Television’s English international channel (CCTV-9), China Radio International and news agency *Xinhua*—in the PICs. Second, Chinese diplomatic missions actively use local media for communication regarding key priorities. Majority of the articles published between August 2016 and September 2020 in regional news outlets—for example, the *Fiji Sun*, *Kaselelbie Press*, *Post-Courier*, *Samoa Observer*, *Matangi Tonga* and *Daily Post*—were all authored by the Chinese ambassador or provided by the Chinese Embassy. They focused on themes of Chinese development and Chinese assistance to PICs during COVID-19 to build a positive image. Chinese ambassadors cultivated Pacific journalists and organised press conferences to convey China’s official messaging on sovereignty issues regarding Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and the South China Sea. Other means included China sponsoring visits by Pacific journalists to China for training or exchanges, constructing media facilities and fostering ties with local Chinese media in PICs. For example, Pacific journalists attended capacity-training programs in China in August 2015, October 2016 and June 2018. In March 2019, China funded the construction of the press gallery in Fiji’s parliament. They have also pushed *Fiji Daily*, the largest paper in circulation in Mandarin Chinese and *Vila Times*, the first Chinese–English bilingual newspaper in Vanuatu to establish links and combine forces in ‘telling the China story well’.<sup>111</sup> Thus as Beijing deepens its engagement with the PICs, this competition for influence in the information space is likely to intensify.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> L. Dickey, E. Downs, A. Taffer and H. Holz, et al. ‘Mapping the Information Environment in the Pacific Island Countries: Disruptors, Deficits, and Decisions’, *Centre for Naval Analyses*, Report, 2019, at <https://www.cna.org/analyses/2019/12/mapping-information-environment-in-pacific>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

### 3.4 CHINA'S RISING PROFILE AS A SECURITY ACTOR IN THE PICs<sup>113</sup>

At the US–China Economic and Security Review Commission hearing on ‘Crossroads Of Competition: China in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands’ in March 2025, Greame Smith, an Australian strategic affairs expert, made a striking remark: ‘On the security side, everyone worries about bases, but the big shift is that China now pitches itself as the internal security partner of choice for the Pacific’. In his testimony, he argues that China’s increasing interest in doling out security deals to the PICs comes from its confidence of being able to offer an alternative model, of how people can be governed’. He adds that it is also very much about policing their own diaspora expanding that the policing deals are not just to further international gains but for also domestic stability reasons, given Beijing isn’t so trusting of its significant diaspora populations in many Pacific nations.<sup>114</sup>

Field research from experts such as Peter Connolly suggest China’s engagement with the Pacific Islands is increasingly defined by a dual-track strategy—leveraging economic instruments while embedding long-term security architecture that enhances both soft and hard power

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<sup>113</sup> Section based on Inputs from Hearing On ‘Crossroads Of Competition: China in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands’ Before The U.S.-China Economic And Security Review Commission, ‘One Hundred Nineteenth Congress First Session’, Thursday, March 20, 2025, at [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/March\\_20\\_2025\\_Hearing\\_Transcript.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/March_20_2025_Hearing_Transcript.pdf); Peter Connolly, ‘Competing for Access: China’s Growing Security Interest in the Pacific Islands’, in Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch (eds), *The PLA in a Complex Security Environment: Preparing for High Winds and Choppy Waters*, National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle, May 15, 2025, pp. 193-226; ‘Mapped: The Vast Network of Security Deals Spanning the Pacific, and What it Means’, *The Guardian*, July 09, 2024, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/09/pacific-islands-security-deals-australia-usa-china>, (Both Accessed on April 25, 2025).

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

capabilities.<sup>115</sup> Through the strategic deployment of police personnel, defence attachés and dual-use infrastructure, Beijing is positioning itself not only as a development partner but also as a security guarantor—a role that challenges the monopoly long held by Australia, New Zealand and the US.<sup>116</sup>

Chinese Major General Liu Yazhou reportedly argued in 2001 that Beijing should actively intervene in the internal affairs of Southeast Asian and Pacific Island nations to undermine Western alliances and cultivate political actors sympathetic to Chinese interests.<sup>117</sup> Such intervention, he argued, would prevent encirclement and ensure China's ability to exert control within its near-abroad. This geopolitical outlook has been reinforced at the highest levels of the Chinese government. Beijing's engagement with the Pacific Islands, particularly following the 2018 APEC Summit in Port Moresby, has increasingly evolved into a multidimensional strategy intertwining economic connectivity with deeper security ambitions.<sup>118</sup>

### 3.4.1 China's model of security statecraft

A discernible shift in China's regional posture emerged in late 2020, marking the onset of a more robust and multifaceted security presence in the Pacific Islands. Rather than relying solely on military force, China has adopted a model of security statecraft, using both uniformed personnel and civil-security tools to gain traction across the region.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Peter Connolly, 'Competing for Access: China's Growing Security Interest in the Pacific Islands', *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Peter Connolly, 'Grand Strategy: Inside China's statecraft in Melanesia', 2023, 42-65. *Australian Foreign Affairs*, at <https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/articles/extract/2023/06/grand-strategy>, (Accessed on April 25, 2025).

<sup>118</sup> For more see : 'Xi's full remarks at 26th APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting', *China Daily*, November 18, 2018, at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201811/18/WS5bf0dceda310eff303289588.html>, (Accessed on April 25, 2025).

<sup>119</sup> Peter Connolly, See note 113.

### *Defence attaché deployments and training*

The deployment of PLA defence attachés to key Pacific nations—such as PNG, Fiji and Tonga—signalled Beijing’s intent to establish persistent military-to-military dialogue and deepen bilateral defence ties.<sup>120</sup> These officials operate as strategic conduits, enabling the negotiation of security agreements, sharing of military doctrine and reinforcement of Chinese influence within Pacific defence establishments. Military officers from PICs are trained by the PLA. Officers from the four PICs with militaries—Fiji, PNG, Tonga and Vanuatu—have held bilateral meetings with their PLA counterparts. Furthermore, the PLA hosts a biannual forum for defence officials from the Caribbean and Pacific Islands. There is a component of military assistance and ship port calls in the relationship as well.

### *Police advisers and law enforcement cooperation*<sup>121</sup>

Perhaps more revealing of China’s evolving playbook is the dispatch of Ministry of Public Security (MPS) police advisers to nations including Fiji (2021), Solomon Islands (2022), Kiribati and Vanuatu (2023). These advisers engage directly with local police forces to provide training, logistical support and operational coordination, which is particularly

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<sup>120</sup> Denghua Zhang, (2021) ‘Pacific islands in Chinas security and future engagement’, *Development Bulletin (Canberra)*, 82, 2021, pp. 37-40. <https://doi.org/rmap/devnet/devnet/DB82-final-manuscript-23-02-21.pdf>, (Accessed on April 25, 2025).

<sup>121</sup> Section curated from: Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Isaac B. Kardon, and Cameron Waltz, ‘China’s Foreign Police Training: A Global Footprint’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 13, 2025, at <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Article/4332232/chinas-foreign-police-training-a-global-footprint/>; and Fact Sheet: Cooperation Between China and Pacific Island Countries, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, May 22, 2022, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531\\_11367460.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367460.html), (Both Accessed on December 20, 2025).

attractive to countries lacking traditional military structures.<sup>122</sup> While operating under the guise of cooperative policing, this approach allows China to build substantial influence over domestic security mechanisms, often without the scrutiny that military personnel might attract.<sup>123</sup>

Since 2017, China has expanded PRC-affiliated security training programs targeting Pacific law enforcement as part of a broader ideological and legal doctrine<sup>124</sup> known as the Foreign-Related Rule of Law (FROL, 涉外法治). Originally conceived as a legal counterweight to perceived Western extra-territorial overreach, FROL now underpins a strategic ambition: to extend Beijing's policing and legal influence beyond its borders under the guise of protecting overseas Chinese citizens.<sup>125</sup>

While FROL is often framed as a response to transnational crime—including scams targeting Chinese nationals—it potentially opens the door for more politically motivated interventions. These could include the monitoring of dissidents, suppression of local media criticism or exertion of pressure on business competitors of China's state-backed firms. By embedding itself in the domestic security apparatus of Pacific nations, experts argue, China is not only safeguarding its interests but

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<sup>122</sup> Kirsty Needham, 'Exclusive: Chinese police work in Kiribati, Hawaii's Pacific neighbour', February 23, 2024, *Reuters*, at [https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinese-police-work-kiribati-hawaii-pacific-neighbour-2024-02-23/?utm\\_](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinese-police-work-kiribati-hawaii-pacific-neighbour-2024-02-23/?utm_), (Accessed on April 25, 2025).

<sup>123</sup> See note 120.

<sup>124</sup> Zhiqiong June Wang and Jianfu Chen, 'China's Foreign-Related 'Rule of Law': The Evolution of an Idea', *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, published online April 27, 2025, at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40803-025-00249-4>, (Accessed on January 02, 2026).

<sup>125</sup> Matthew S. Erie, 'Foreign Policy Implications for China's Foreign-Related Rule of Law', *Orbis* 67, no. 4 September 2023, 565–578. at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0030438723000406?via%3Dihub>, (Accessed on January 02, 2026).



also shaping the region's internal governance frameworks, thereby consolidating soft power in strategic ways.<sup>126</sup>

China's plans are not one size fits all. Experts argue that although the Pacific Islands lack the border tensions that define China's security posture in Southeast Asia or the Taiwan Strait, Beijing has adapted its strategy to suit the region's unique vulnerabilities.<sup>127</sup> China's ambitions in militarised spaces like Guam or Micronesia contrast starkly with its efforts in Vanuatu or the Solomon Islands. Yet, across these contexts, a consistent trend emerges: The People's Republic of China is positioning itself as a trusted provider of internal security, particularly in states with limited defence capabilities or absent militaries.

### *Non-military security assets*

In parallel, China has enhanced its non-military presence through entities like the China Coast Guard and the pre-positioning of humanitarian and disaster relief infrastructure. Though presented as benign initiatives, these deployments provide Beijing with practical mechanisms for access and influence—expanding China's operational footprint in a region where soft power and logistical capacity can readily translate into strategic advantage.

## **3.5 STRATEGIC ACCESS, DUAL-USE FACILITIES AND THE BASE QUESTION**

China's intensifying security presence is not ad hoc but closely aligned with formalised PLA strategic objectives, particularly the dual mandates established in 2015 White Paper on Defence: (1) to engage in international security cooperation and (2) to protect Chinese interests abroad.<sup>128</sup> These aims are increasingly pursued through the integration

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<sup>126</sup> See note 121.

<sup>127</sup> See note 120.

<sup>128</sup> 'China's Military Strategy (full text)', May 27, 2015, *Xinhua*, at [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2015/05/27/content\\_281475115610833.htm](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm), (Accessed on April 20, 2025).

of political, economic, military and diplomatic instruments, tailored to maximise Beijing's leverage in a region traditionally shaped by US and Australian influence.

Of particular concern is China's subtle but deliberate pursuit of geostrategic access and basing rights. Although Beijing has publicly maintained a position against the establishment of permanent overseas military bases, internal discourse reveals growing support for more ambiguous concepts such as 'dual-use logistics hubs' and 'strategic strong points'. These facilities—often commercial ports or airfields developed by state-linked enterprises—are built to civilian specifications but engineered to host military assets when necessary. In practice, they allow for low-intensity force projection, enabling the PLA to support missions related to peacekeeping, evacuation or maritime surveillance while maintaining plausible deniability.

The strategic logic underpinning this infrastructure is twofold: it provides protection for Chinese citizens and investments in volatile environments, and it counters Western containment strategies by ensuring forward-operating options for the PLA. Some Chinese military theorists forecast the establishment of a permanent PLA presence in the South Pacific after 2025, signalling a new phase in China's global power projection.<sup>129</sup> Speculation over whether China is seeking a military base in the Pacific often dominates public discourse.<sup>130</sup> In 2019, the China Sam Enterprise Group made a failed attempt to secure a 75-year lease for the entire island of Tulagi in the Solomon Islands, a move widely interpreted as a bid to establish a strategic foothold for dual-use military and infrastructure purposes. While the plan ultimately collapsed, due in part to traditional landownership laws and civil society backlash, it revealed the extent of Beijing's leverage.

<sup>129</sup> Tom (Guorui) Sun and Alex Payette, *China's Two Ocean Strategy: Controlling Waterways and the New Silk Road*, *Asia Focus* #31 (Paris: Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques, May 2017), at <https://www.iris-france.org/en/95031-chinas-two-ocean-strategy-controlling-waterways-and-the-new-silk-road-2/>, (Accessed on April 20, 2025).

<sup>130</sup> Kirsty Needham, 'China denies military base ambitions in Pacific Islands', *Reuters*, July 03, 2025, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-denies-military-base-ambitions-pacific-islands-2025-07-03/>, (Accessed on October 22, 2025).

Nonetheless, there is a consensus among experts that exclusive focus on military basing risks missing the broader picture. China's security strategy in the Pacific is not necessarily about hard infrastructure. Instead, it centres on strategic access and influence through policing and law enforcement cooperation. This approach allows China to function as a de facto internal security guarantor, particularly in fragile or under-resourced states, without triggering the geopolitical alarm bells that accompany overt militarisation.

# GAME OF THRONES IN THE PICs

## 4.1 PACIFIC AGENCY: FROM DEPENDENCY TO LEVERAGE

Media reports in 2024 outlined that, in the backdrop of US–China strategic competition in the PICs region, over 60 security and policing agreements were in play in the region supported by US allies and regional powers like Australia and New Zealand besides China.<sup>131</sup> As the US, Australia and New Zealand recalibrate their Pacific strategies, the region itself is undergoing a recalibration of agency. Pacific Island governments are increasingly leveraging Chinese engagement to extract more favourable terms from traditional allies, signalling a shift from dependency to transactional diplomacy.

Table 4.1. Significant security and policing agreements in the Pacific

Country /Region	Partner	Summary	Type
Vanuatu, Solomon Islands	China	China–Pacific Island Countries Police Training Centre has provided training to police from Solomon Islands and Vanuatu in China.	Police, Infrastructure
Various Pacific countries	Australia	Pacific Maritime Security Programme provides infrastructure, training, and coordination to enhance maritime security across 15 Pacific Island nations.	Defence, Infrastructure

<sup>131</sup> ‘Mapped: The Vast Network of Security Deals Spanning the Pacific, and What it Means’, *The Guardian*, July 09, 2024, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/09/pacific-islands-security-deals-australia-usa-china>, (Accessed on July 10, 2024).

Country /Region	Partner	Summary	Type
Various Pacific countries	Australia	Pacific Transnational Crime Network (est. 2002) supports intelligence sharing and investigations to combat transnational crime.	Police, Security
Various Pacific countries	Australia	Pacific Police Development Programme deploys over 100 AFP officers across the Pacific to support local law enforcement with training and equipment.	Police
Various Pacific countries	Australia	Pacific Fusion Centre (based in Vanuatu) offers training and strategic analysis to regional leaders on security issues.	Security, Police, Infrastructure
Various Pacific countries	Australia	Pacific Policing Initiative includes a Queensland-based training centre and coordination of regional police deployments.	Police, Infrastructure
Solomon Islands	Australia	Royal Solomon Islands Police Force–AFP Policing Partnership Program (RAPPP) delivers operational and technical assistance from AFP.	Police
Tonga	Australia	Tonga–Australia Policing Partnership supports training, uniforms, and police facility refurbishments. Includes cooperation with Samoa.	Police
Vanuatu	Australia	Australia–Vanuatu security agreement (pending implementation) includes mutual policing, classified data handling, and ‘security dialogue’.	Security, Police

Country /Region	Partner	Summary	Type
Vanuatu	Australia, UK	Vanuatu Police and Justice precinct (opened 2023) built with Australian and UK support.	Infrastructure, Police
Vanuatu	Australia	Policing and Justice Programme (since 2017) includes vehicle, equipment and uniform donations from Australia to the Vanuatu Police Force.	Police, Infrastructure
Vanuatu	Australia	Cook and Tiroas Barracks redeveloped and handed over to Vanuatu in 2023–2024. Included new medical centres and armouries.	Infrastructure, Police, Security
Papua New Guinea	Australia	PNG–Australia security agreement spans police, defence, law and justice, cybersecurity, climate resilience and violence prevention.	Defence, Security, Police
Papua New Guinea	Australia	Australia delivered two PAC-750XL aircraft to PNG's air force under a bilateral defence agreement.	Defence
Papua New Guinea	Australia	Prosecutions Qualifying Program trains PNG prosecutors. In 2023, it supported 98 prosecutors.	Police
Papua New Guinea	Australia	PNG–Australia Policing Partnership offers operational support and training to PNG's police force.	Police

Country /Region	Partner	Summary	Type
Samoa	Australia	Australia–Samoa Bilateral Partnership Arrangement (2023) supports training, security dialogue, information sharing and cybersecurity cooperation.	Security, Defence, Police
Samoa	Australia	Subsidiary Arrangement (2017–2021 extension) supports CCTV installation, drone training and a family violence prevention initiative.	Police
Solomon Islands	Australia	Bilateral security treaty permits deployment of Australian personnel. Supported events include 2021 civil unrest, 2023 Pacific Games, and 2024 elections.	Defence, Security, Police

**Source:** Prianka Srinivasan and Virginia Harrison, “Pacific Security and Policing Agreements between Australia, China and Regional Countries,” infographic table in “Guardian Graphic | Mapped: the Vast Network of Security Deals Spanning the Pacific”, *The Guardian*, July 09, 2024, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/09/pacific-islands-security-deals-australia-usa-china>, (Accessed on July 10, 2024).

#### 4.2 AUSTRALIA LEADS REGION’S RESPONSE TO THE ‘PERMANENT CONTEST’

In 2024, Australia’s Foreign Minister Penny Wong said, ‘We’re in a state of permanent contest in the Pacific—that’s the reality’.<sup>132</sup> This realisation has spurred experts like James Batley to suggest that ensuring ‘integration’

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<sup>132</sup> Graeme Dobell, ‘The Permanent Australia-China Contest in the South Pacific’, *The Strategist*, *ASPI*, March 24, 2025, at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-permanent-australia-china-contest-in-the-south-pacific/>, (Accessed on December 20, 2025).

must remain the overarching theme for Australia's current Pacific policy.<sup>133</sup> This means not just providing aid or isolated security programs, but actively working to weave Pacific countries into Australia's (and New Zealand's) security institutions and frameworks. The idea is to foster a sense of a 'single security community' where sovereign decisions of PICs are understood to affect Australia's national security, and vice-versa. This integration aims to create a more cohesive and resilient regional security environment.<sup>134</sup>

**Beyond aid: A diversified security toolkit:** While development assistance remains central—accounting for AUD \$2.2 billion annually, or 43 per cent of Australia's overall aid program—the scope of engagement now encompasses a broader suite of tools that go beyond financial assistance.

**Mobility and societal linkages:** The expansion of labour mobility programs, with an estimated 30,000 Pacific workers currently in Australia, demonstrates a strategic effort to strengthen socio-economic ties and mutual interdependence. Similarly, the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV), which allocates up to 3,000 permanent migration spots annually to Pacific nationals, deepens community integration and contributes to long-term societal resilience.

**Treaty-based security guarantees:** Recent bilateral security arrangements, such as the Falepili Union with Tuvalu and the security agreement with Nauru, mark a qualitative evolution in Australia's strategic commitments. These agreements not only provide preferential migration pathways, but also grant Australia a consultative role—or even a form of veto power—over the security and defence decisions of partner states. This is designed to pre-empt third-party military or paramilitary engagement that could undermine regional equilibrium.

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<sup>133</sup> James Batley, 'Australia and the Pacific: A Stocktake', (talk presented for the *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, May 1, 2025), *YouTube* video, posted by Australian Institute of International Affairs, at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IVOU\\_LAVGw&t=1441s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IVOU_LAVGw&t=1441s), (Accessed on December 20, 2025).

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*



**Institutional and professional development:** Institutions like the Pacific Security College (PSC), hosted by the Australian National University, aim to foster a networked cohort of regional security professionals. Through strategic training in policy analysis, risk assessment and cross-border cooperation, PSC promotes shared norms and strengthens the decision-making capabilities of Pacific security elites.

Similarly, the **Pacific Policing Initiative** announced in 2023 offers tailored support for law enforcement across the region, including the establishment of Centres of Excellence, rapid-deployment police support groups and coordination mechanisms to address transnational threats. These initiatives also respond to non-traditional security challenges such as organised crime and social unrest.

Moreover, the **secondment of senior officers** from the PNG Defence Force and Fiji's military to the Australian Defence Force (ADF) helps foster interoperability, strategic trust and alignment at the leadership level.

**Expanding the concept of security:** Law enforcement and internal security support for policing has become central, particularly in addressing domestic instability and organised criminal networks.

**Cybersecurity:** As digital vulnerabilities grow in the Pacific, Australia is increasingly offering capacity support in cyber resilience—an area of acute strategic concern.

**Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR):** Australia's long-standing leadership in regional disaster response, including rapid deployment capabilities and logistical support, remains a cornerstone of its soft power and trust-building efforts.

The Australian overtures to remain the preferred security actor of the Pacific island nations proves that despite China's growing assertiveness, PICs are not passive actors. Many senior officials in the region exhibit a clear-eyed and cautious approach to China's overtures, prioritising their national interests. This has led to strategic hedging, where countries seek to balance relationships with China against traditional partners like Australia and the US (as shown in the infographic). Case in point is PNG's security agreements with both the US and Australia or Fiji's temporary re-evaluation of its police cooperation with China.

Furthermore, collective efforts, such as the rejection of China's proposed 'Common Development Vision' in 2022 by several Pacific states, demonstrate a unified stance against perceived attempts to control the region. At the grassroots level, local communities also exercise agency, sometimes pushing back against Chinese economic dominance and creating localised friction that can complicate Beijing's strategic objectives. While China continues to leverage opportunities, such as internal unrest, to enhance its security footprint, the diverse responses from PICs highlight the complex and evolving nature of engagement in the region.

### 4.3 IS CHINA SPLINTERING 'THE PACIFIC WAY'?

In the meta narrative of the crowded geopolitics of the Pacific, one can identify different strains that concur with the idea that regionalism in the Pacific has undergone fundamental transformation. Area experts point to three interrelated drivers: entrenched anti-nuclear sentiment; a widening disconnect between the hard-security threat perceptions of regional powers and the climate-induced existential insecurities confronting Pacific Island Countries (PICs), which has encouraged greater strategic agency and policy diversification; and the increasing involvement of extra-regional actors—most notably China—leveraged by island states as a hedging mechanism against regional hegemony.<sup>135</sup>

Most conspicuously, the antinuclear sentiment manifested in the breakdown of the defence cooperation between the US and its ally, New Zealand, and gave birth in the South Pacific to the world's third nuclear-free zone. With the AUKUS announcement between Canberra, Washington and London, many regional commentators have argued that the move towards nuclear submarines confronts the spirit of a nuclear-free zone that Pacific regional countries signed up to decades

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<sup>135</sup> Manon Leprince, 'Shifting Security Narratives in Oceania: Pacific Island Countries and the New Pacific Diplomacy'. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 5, no. 7 (November–December 2022), 122–141. ([www.airuniversity.af.edu](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu).)

ago.<sup>136</sup> This pact comes even as regional forums continue their about Japan's plans to dump treated nuclear waste water into the ocean from the Fukushima power plant that was damaged in the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. However, momentum around Pillar II of AUKUS, with Japan and New Zealand all being involved in consultations, has demurred the threat perceptions significantly.<sup>137</sup>

Clearly, the security prisms of the PICs and regional stakeholders like Australia and the US in particular seem unaligned. Experts argue that PICs are concerned with non-traditional security threats, such as climate change, partners US and Australia are focused on influence of external powers in the region. Thus PICs tend to be framed by larger neocolonial Western hegemonic narratives, where they are portrayed as helpless victims who need to be protected from hostile forces.<sup>138</sup> With their fate written off from their hands in these global narratives, the Pacific peoples are presented as spectators of their future rather than actors capable of shaping their own destiny. In fact, the Fijian Defence Minister, Inia Batikoto Seruiratu, said in the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue that the greatest threat to the region is not a conflict between China and the US, but rather the geopolitical effects of climate change. Increased diplomatic scrutiny could be their chance to get funding for expensive climate disaster mitigation infrastructure such as flood defences or reinforcing concrete building.<sup>139</sup> A case in point is the recognition of

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<sup>136</sup> Johnny Blades, 'Aukus Pact Strikes at Heart of Pacific Regionalism', *Radio New Zealand*, September 17, 2021, at <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/451715/aukus-pact-strikes-at-heart-of-pacific-regionalism>, (Accessed July 31, 2023).

<sup>137</sup> For more, see Shruti Pandalai, 'Australia's Quest for 'Strategic Equilibrium' in the Indo-Pacific', *MP-IDS A Issue Brief*, April 26, 2024, at <https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/australias-quest-for-strategic-equilibrium-spandalai-260424>, (Accessed May 20, 2024).

<sup>138</sup> Manon Leprince, 'Shifting Security Narratives in Oceania: Pacific Island Countries and the New Pacific Diplomacy', note 135.

<sup>139</sup> Joe Brock, 'Fiji says climate change, not conflict, is Asia's biggest security threat', *Reuters*, June 12, 2022, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/fiji-says-climate-change-not-conflict-is-asias-biggest-security-threat-2022-06-12/>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

PICs climate diplomacy as a key driver of the 2015 Paris Agreement, largely thanks to the Marshall Islands, which fostered and led a global coalition that secured the deal.<sup>140</sup>

To showcase their agency, the Pacific Island nations have come together in what they have described as 'new Pacific diplomacy'—a way for the island states to find their voice and assert themselves on the regional and international stage.<sup>141</sup> They use regional mechanisms like the *Pacific Islands Forum*<sup>142</sup> where in 2017 the idea of the 'Blue Pacific' was endorsed. It places the Pacific Ocean at the centre of the PICs identities, interconnections and as a symbol of collective cooperation. This frame deliberately seeks to challenge colonial depictions of the Pacific.<sup>143</sup> This narrative has pushed the forum and its dialogue partners (which include India) to highlight Non Traditional Security (NTS) issues. Adopted in 2022, the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* was formally endorsed by Pacific leaders at the 51st Pacific Islands Forum in Suva, Fiji (11–14 July 2022) and subsequently launched on the global stage at the *United*

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<sup>140</sup> See note 135.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> For more see E. Shibuya, 'The Problems and Potential of the Pacific Islands Forum', in J. Rolfe (ed.), *The Asia-Pacific: A Region in Transition*, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Honolulu, 2004, pp. 102-115. Shibuya argues, 'Since its founding in 1971, the PIF (formerly the South Pacific Forum, and usually referred to simply as 'the Forum') has been the major avenue for the small island states of Oceania to assert a collective voice on major international issues, thereby amplifying their voice and impact. It has been through the Forum that positions on nuclear testing, climate change, fisheries, and other security and/or environmental issues have been articulated and pushed in the international arena'. PIF consists of 18 countries: Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The five northern Pacific island states of Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau and Republic of Marshall Islands (commonly referred to as 'Micronesia').

<sup>143</sup> See note 135.

*Nations* in September of the same year.<sup>144</sup> Seventeen Pacific Island leaders committed to deepening regionalism as part of the strategy.<sup>145</sup> They have also through the PIF agreed upon an ‘expanded concept of security’ through the 2018 *Boe Declaration* (also known as *Biketama Plus*), which recognises climate change as the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific.<sup>146</sup> It reflects PICs prioritisation and conceptualisation of regional security that underpins human security as its core.

However, cracks began appearing in regional efforts even before the securitisation of the China threat. For example, during the August 2010 PIF meeting, Tuvalu and other PICs articulated the urgency of climate change for their security. In response, Australia pledged AUD500 million to fight climate change, while simultaneously expressing an unwillingness to examine its use of coal, seabed mining and extractive industries as major contributing factors, and calling out PICs–China relations.<sup>147</sup> In response, the PICs leaders promoted the ‘friends to all, enemies to none’ approach, where deepening the relationship between China and PICs is perceived as an opportunity and a positive development by most leaders in the Pacific.

While Pacific Island nations still consider China to be an important economic and development partner, there are strong competing world views between these countries and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that would make broader and more intimate cooperation difficult.

Some regional experts argue that the statements of Australian and New Zealand governments and much of the media commentary continue to interpret the Solomon Islands-China security deal entirely in the

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<sup>144</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, ‘2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. Suva: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat’, 2022, at <https://forumsec.org/2050>, (Accessed on July 21, 2023).

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Anna Naupa, Murray Ackman, and Patrick Tuimalealiifano, ‘Boe Declaration: Navigating an Uncertain Pacific’, *Interpreter*, Lowy, October 03, 2018, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/boe-declaration-navigating-uncertain-pacific>, (Accessed on July 31, 2022).

<sup>147</sup> See note 135.

context of geopolitical rivalries and fail to understand the domestic context.<sup>148</sup> Within the Solomon Islands government, the new China link is seen as a means of coping with urban unrest and as offering new development opportunities. However, others also point to the frustration within the PICs that the agreement was drafted without consultation. Civil society groups in Samoa, Kiribati and Solomon Islands also expressed concerns around how the proposed agreements impact press freedom, transparency and democracy.<sup>149</sup>

Similarly in June 2023, the Fijian prime minister signalled that his government is reconsidering a police cooperation agreement with China, with an eye to terminating it.<sup>150</sup> Signed in 2011, the agreement enabled Fijian police officers to be trained in China, and for Chinese police officers to be deployed in Fiji. In the same week, Fiji signed a defence pact with New Zealand, indicating that the Fijian prime minister sees values and compatible systems of governance as important to Fiji's foreign policy, and that he is more comfortable with Fiji's traditional security partners—Australia and New Zealand.

The most vocal criticism on Chinese heavy handedness came from the former president of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), David Panuelo, who wrote a letter—while still president—to his fellow leaders in FSM, which detailed what he described as 'political warfare' conducted by the Chinese government.<sup>151</sup> Panuelo viewed the behaviour

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<sup>148</sup> Jon Fraenkel and Graeme Smith, 'The Solomons-China 2022 Security Deal: Extraterritoriality and the Perils of Militarisation in the Pacific Islands', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 76, no. 5 (2022): 473–85, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10357718.2022.2085243>, (Accessed on July 25, 2023).

<sup>149</sup> Miranda Booth, See note 98.

<sup>150</sup> Nick Perry, 'Fiji Reconsiders Security Ties with China Amid Pacific Tensions', *AP News*, June 07, 2023, at <https://apnews.com/article/fiji-china-police-security-pacific-new-zealand-1f3adddf3f0441cf3abead860311f37a6>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>151</sup> Grant Wyeth, 'Has China Overplayed Its Hand in the Pacific?', *The Diplomat*, June 15, 2023, at <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/has-china-overplayed-its-hand-in-the-pacific/>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

of the CCP as amounting to bullying and disrespect, accused the Chinese ambassador of constantly harassing him (to the point of having to change his phone number) and claimed that he was being followed by operatives while in Fiji. He also accused China of encroaching in FSM's territorial waters and threatening FSM's patrol boats, and called out China's bribing of local politicians, commenting that CCP is a party that does not understand this is a reflection of poor behaviour, or does not care. Panuelo felt that China's behaviour in his country was so excessive that he needed to be blunt and public in his assessments.

### **Familiar Tensions at the Pacific Islands Forum**

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in September 2025 according to observers, again exposed enduring fault lines in regional diplomacy, even as leaders reiterated commitments to unity and cooperation.<sup>152</sup> Beneath the rhetoric of solidarity, tensions resurfaced over sovereignty, external partnerships, and competing definitions of security in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific.

At the heart of these frictions reportedly lay a persistent disconnect between Pacific priorities and the strategic preoccupations of larger partners. For Pacific Island countries, climate change remains the primary existential threat, demanding sustained financing, regional ownership, and resilience-building rather than episodic geopolitical engagement. By contrast, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States continue to frame their involvement through the prism of strategic competition with China, emphasising defence cooperation and deterrence narratives that often sit uneasily with Pacific threat perceptions.

The controversy surrounding restrictions on dialogue partners at the Forum underscored these dynamics. While framed as an assertion of sovereign decision-making, the move highlighted sensitivities around Taiwan, China's growing diplomatic influence, and the vulnerability of

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<sup>152</sup> Camilla Pohle, 'Familiar Tensions Emerge at the Pacific Islands Forum'. *The Diplomat*, September 24, 2025, at <https://thediplomat.com/2025/09/familiar-tensions-emerge-at-the-pacific-islands-forum/>, (Accessed on October 22, 2025).

Pacific institutions to external geopolitical rivalries. Although progress was made on initiatives such as the *Pacific Resilience Facility*, the Forum's broader challenge remains preserving Pacific agency—engaging major powers without allowing regional multilateralism to be subsumed by great-power competition.<sup>153</sup>

#### 4.4 A WAKE UP CALL TO THE REST?

It is clear that China now looms large in the politics of the Pacific Island nations. Experts argue that one would be hard pressed to recall an election in Australia 'where our relationships with Pacific Island countries have been hotly debated'.<sup>154</sup> However, the Solomon Islands—China security deal has 'triggered schoolyard taunting from [Australian] senior party figures on both sides of politics about who dropped the ball'.<sup>155</sup> In fact, when the PIF was on the verge of breaking up in 2021,<sup>156</sup> the reason for Kiribati's exit from the forum was alleged to be influenced by China due to rising geopolitical tensions.<sup>157</sup> While China denied this, media narratives pointed to Kiribati's signing of 10 trade agreements with China during the Wang Yi visit and cutting ties with Taiwan as possible motives. This narrative spiralled despite the fact that Kiribati had exited the forum on its dissatisfaction of the post of secretary general of the Forum not being equally rotated among Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian members. Experts say that 'offloading the blame on China not only fails to compellingly explain

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Mihai Sora, 'Australia Needs to Find the Right Role in the Pacific', *Interpreter*, Lowy, May 02, 2022, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/australia-needs-find-right-role-pacific>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Steven Ratuva, 'How Pacific Regionalism Fell Apart', *The Diplomat*, August 01, 2021, at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/how-pacific-regionalism-fell-apart/>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>157</sup> Martin Kwan, 'Was China Behind Kiribati's Withdrawal From the Pacific Islands Forum?', *The Diplomat*, July 19, 2022, at <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/was-china-behind-kiribatis-withdrawal-from-the-pacific-islands-forum/>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).



the incident, but it also distracts focus from the region's internal problems'.<sup>158</sup>

Despite the many competing narratives in play, what China's entry into the PIC politics has done, according to experts, is to make regional powers like Australia rethink their engagement and move beyond debates on aid budgets.<sup>159</sup> Australia remains the biggest aid donor to the Pacific. But, in contrast to China, Australian investments in the region are not always visible. This led to an increased focus on infrastructure investments and deliver on asks of the region with visible impact.

Both Australia and the US have recommitted aid and assistance to Pacific priorities under *Partners in the Blue Pacific* (PBP) initiative with Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the United Kingdom in 2022. With the introduction of PBP, the partner countries will be able to drive new climate change measures and, individually and together counter China's outreach in the region.<sup>160</sup>

Australia is also looking for opportunities to work with like-minded partners and as well as technology companies to deliver strategic infrastructure investments, cybersecurity and digital connectivity in partnership with Pacific countries. Some efforts are already underway.<sup>161</sup> The US, Australia and Japan have cooperated on efforts to provide alternatives, due to cybersecurity concerns, to Chinese investment in 5G telecommunications networks in the region. In 2021, the three countries announced that they would jointly fund an undersea

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Mihai Sora, See note 154.

<sup>160</sup> Jarrett Renshaw, 'U.S., Japan, Australia, New Zealand and United Kingdom Form Pacific group', *Reuters*, June 25, 2022, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-japan-australia-new-zealand-united-kingdom-form-pacific-group-2022-06-25/>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>161</sup> 'The Pacific Islands', US Congressional Research Service Report, January 11, 2022, at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11208/3>, (Accessed on July 01, 2023).

telecommunications cable that would boost internet access in Kiribati, Micronesia and Nauru. In 2019, Australia financed an undersea cable connecting PNG, the Solomon Islands and Australia, thereby precluding Chinese telecommunications firm *Huawei* from successfully competing for the project. The US is also working in separate formats with South Korea and Japan to deliver better access on climate finance for the PICs and reaffirmed support for their efforts to boost maritime security and fisheries protection. Under the aegis of the Quad, the US, Japan, India and Australia have focussed on increasing capacity for maritime domain awareness and scaling up communication links among themselves and the Island states.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> 'Quad Leaders' Summit Fact Sheet', *The American Presidency Project*, May 20, 2023, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/quad-leaders-summit-fact-sheet>, (Accessed on January 02, 2026).

## TRUMP 2.0, TAIWAN AND THE NEW NORMALS IN PICs GEOPOLITICS

### 5.1 TRUMP 2.0 AND STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTY IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

The second Trump administration has introduced a set of disruptive foreign and economic policies that directly impact the Pacific Island Countries (PICs), particularly the three *Compact of Free Association* (COFA) nations: Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). These policies have raised fresh concerns about the reliability of the US as a long-term strategic partner, and the narrative of US disinterest is getting more entrenched.

**Economic nationalism and tariff shocks:** In April 2025, President Trump launched the so-called ‘Liberation Day’ tariffs, imposing a sweeping 10 per cent baseline tariff on imports from over 180 countries. These included FSM and the Marshall Islands—despite their COFA status—while Palau was notably spared, alongside a select group that included Russia and North Korea.<sup>163</sup> The policy sent a mixed message to US partners in the Pacific, undermining trust and creating the perception that strategic allies are not shielded from the volatility of US economic nationalism.

**Weaponised trade policy and energy sanctions:** Trump’s foreign policy approach in his second term also utilised trade as a coercive tool. Though PICs were not direct targets, the executive order signalled

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<sup>163</sup> Jocelyn Fernandes and Swastika Das Sharma, ‘Trump’s Tariff Announcements and Global Reactions: A Comprehensive Guide’, *LiveMint*, April 03, 2025, at <https://www.livemint.com/news/us-news/donald-trump-tariff-announcements-and-global-reactions-a-comprehensive-guide-trade-war-us-news-full-trump-tariff-chart-11743670289338.html>, (Accessed on January 02, 2026).

a broader willingness to deploy economic pressure to shape geopolitical alignments, suggesting that even non-combatant states might face indirect consequences of US power projection.<sup>164</sup>

**Climate agreement withdrawal and diplomatic fallout:** The US retracted from the Paris Agreement for a second time in early 2025, a move that struck a particularly harsh chord among Pacific Island leaders. For states such as Palau, FSM and the Marshall Islands, arguably among the most vulnerable globally to sea-level rise and climate-related displacement, Washington's disengagement from multilateral climate cooperation reinforced perceptions of strategic neglect.<sup>165</sup>

**Erosion of strategic confidence:** These policies collectively reflect an erratic posture from Washington that threatens to erode decades of trust built under the COFA framework. While US military investments continue in the form of radar facilities in Palau and airfield upgrades in Micronesia, economic unpredictability and environmental indifference risk alienating local leaders and populations.<sup>166</sup> For countries whose diplomatic recognition of Taiwan has made them geopolitical targets of Beijing's influence campaigns, US disengagement is not simply a policy challenge—it is a potential national security crisis.

## 5.2 CHINA READY TO FILL VACUUM IN TRUMP ERA?<sup>167</sup>

Experts argue that China is waiting to fill the vacuum as US influence risks attrition. Its first demonstration came in when it held the China—Pacific Island Countries (PICs) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Xiamen

<sup>164</sup> Brian Moscioni, 'Three South Pacific Island Nations Navigating Diplomatic Ties Amid Growing Chinese Influence', May 13, 2025, *Harvard Centre for International Development*, at <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/cid/voices/three-south-pacific-island-nations-navigating-diplomatic-ties-amid-growing>, (Accessed on December 20, 2025).

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> This section is based on Shruti Pandalai, 'China's Strategic Advances in the Pacific, Courts PICs in Foreign Ministers' Meeting', *Strategic Digest*, 7(12), June 16, 2025, MP-IDSA, at <https://www.idsa.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Strategic-Digest-7-12-010625.pdf>, (Accessed on December 20, 2025).

in May 2025. As the third iteration of this summit—and the first to be hosted in China—marked a carefully orchestrated step in a broader geopolitical manoeuvre to position China as an indispensable partner to the region, both in contrast to the waning influence of the US and as a force for climate resilience and economic development.

**Climate and connectivity initiatives:** At the heart of the meeting was China's six-point plan aimed at 'building a community with a shared future between China and the PICs'.<sup>168</sup> A key component of this plan was the announcement of 100 'small and beautiful' climate projects over the next three years, focusing on disaster management, fisheries, health and maritime cooperation. These initiatives are designed to address immediate local needs, reinforcing China's image as a proactive partner in contrast to perceived inconsistencies in US climate policy. Additionally, China pledged US\$2 million to climate-related efforts and introduced a disaster response mechanism, aligning with the Pacific's top security concerns.

**Taiwan and strategic messaging:** A notable development was the explicit inclusion of 'Taiwan as 'an inalienable part of China's territory' in the joint statement—a first in such forums. However, the statement stopped short of endorsing reunification, opting instead for language suggesting 'understanding and support'. This nuanced phrasing reflects China's growing assertiveness and the Pacific Island nations' cautious approach to Beijing's stance on Taiwan. The absence of Taiwan's remaining allies—Palau, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands—from the summit further indicated China's diplomatic efforts to isolate Taipei.

**Narrative control and regional dynamics:** The Xiamen meeting was a carefully choreographed exercise in narrative dominance. By hosting the event in mainland China for the first time, Beijing was able to deploy the full pageantry of state diplomacy to Pacific representatives-

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<sup>168</sup> Kathryn Paik and John Augé, 'China Courts the Pacific: Key Takeaways from the 2025 China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting', Critical Questions, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 03, 2025, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-courts-pacific-key-takeaways-2025-china-pacific-island-countries-foreign-ministers>, (Accessed on July 15, 2025).

many of whom were visiting China in person for the first time. The event also conveniently coincided with a period of strategic uncertainty over US commitment to the Pacific. The US decision to impose high tariffs, reduce foreign assistance and disengage from multilateral climate efforts has left a vacuum that China says its committed to filling while 'presenting itself as a responsible, predictable, and generous partner'. The joint statement also acknowledged China's *Global Development*, *Global Civilization*, and *Global Security* initiatives, signalling Beijing's broader ambitions to influence governance and security frameworks in the Pacific. The framing of its development initiatives under the *Global Development Initiative*, and the emphasis on 'mutual respect' and 'non-interference', speak to Beijing's pitching appeal to PICs wary of Western conditionality or geopolitical entanglement.

China's outreach has not gone unnoticed by regional powers such as Australia, New Zealand and Japan. There is increasing recognition among them that absence or missteps of the US only sharpen the appeal of China's model. There is also a growing understanding that China is learning to recalibrate and has a pragmatic approach to its aid model to suit PICs needs.

**China's aid recalibration in the Pacific:** Over the past five years, regional observers illustrate that China has significantly adjusted its approach to development assistance in the Pacific.<sup>169</sup> Once known primarily for its loan-financed infrastructure projects, Beijing has shifted toward grant-based aid, with grants now comprising nearly two-thirds of its assistance to the region. This reflects a pragmatic recognition of the region's economic constraints and growing concerns over debt sustainability. A notable evolution in China's strategy is the expansion of small-scale, grassroots initiatives led by its Pacific embassies. By 2022, the volume of community-level projects—such as donations of vehicles, school grants and farming equipment—had tripled compared to a decade earlier. However, not all new aid flows promote

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<sup>169</sup> Riley Duke and Alexandre Dayant, 'China's Pacific Aid is Rebounding and Recalibrated', *Interpreter*, Lowy, November 21, 2024, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-s-pacific-aid-rebounding-recalibrated>, (Accessed on December 20, 2025).

transparency or accountability. Large direct budgetary contributions—such as to the Solomon Islands’ *Constituency Development Funds* and Kiribati’s *Social Stability Fund*—raise governance concerns and have coincided with diplomatic recognition shifts away from Taiwan. While overall lending remains below pre-pandemic levels, new large-scale loans to Vanuatu and Solomon Islands have reignited debt worries. However, China’s framing of ‘*small but beautiful*’ development aid has sent the message that China is recalibrating its strategy and solidifying its role as a flexible and assertive actor in Pacific development.

### 5.3 THE NEW NORMALS: THE PROJECTION OF FORCE

For long strategists have argued that apart from the diplomatic importance China places on the non-recognition of Taiwan by PICs, it is the relevance of this strategic geography for China in case of a cross-strait crises that has Beijing stepping up its security presence in the region. They argue that, for China, it is imperative to have a foot in the PICs: (1) To counter encirclement by penetrating the first island chain; (2) To expand the PRC’s strategic space beyond the second island chain by projecting power and influence; (3) To displace strategic competitors by deterring actions and denying strategic space; and (4) To posture for a potential future conflict, in which China would use its geo-strategic positioning to interdict and contain its adversaries.<sup>170</sup>

China had been testing the threshold for a while.<sup>171</sup> In February 2022, a Chinese warship targeted a *Royal Australian Air Force* P-8A Poseidon with a military-grade laser while it operated legally within Australia’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Arafura Sea—an incident Australia condemned as dangerous and provocative. In July 2023, a Chinese Dongdiao-class (Type 815) surveillance vessel monitored the

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<sup>170</sup> Peter Connolly, ‘China’s Quest for Strategic Space in the Pacific Islands’, Strategic Space, January 16, 2024, at <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/chinas-quest-for-strategic-space-in-the-pacific-islands/>, (Accessed on December 20, 2025).

<sup>171</sup> Domingo I-Kwei Yang, ‘China’s Dual-Use Infrastructure in the Pacific’, Coastwatchers 2.0 (Institute for National Defense and Security Research and Synopsis, April 14, 2025), at <https://sinopsis.cz/en/chinas-dual-use-infrastructure-in-the-pacific/>, (Accessed on December 20, 2025).

*Talisman Sabre* joint military exercises off the Queensland coast, employing advanced radar and communications systems. Though the vessel remained outside territorial waters, its presence signalled Beijing's intent to closely track allied defence activity. On September 25, 2024, China fired an intercontinental ballistic missile with a dummy warhead into the Pacific Ocean, showcasing increased situational awareness and strategic reach. This was followed in October by the first-ever deployment of China's advanced Type 055 and Type 052D destroyers to Vanuatu, underlining a deeper military push into the South Pacific.

However, the reality of Chinese intent hit home for the region when in February 2025, China conducted live-fire naval drills in the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand, marking its first such exercise in the region.<sup>172</sup> The operation, involving advanced warships and anti-ship missile systems, triggered significant concern in Canberra and Wellington due to the minimal prior notice and proximity to civilian air routes, forcing 49 aircraft to divert. Although the drills occurred in international waters and complied with *UNCLOS*, the lack of a formal *Notice to Airmen* (NOTAM) alarmed both governments. Australia only became aware via a commercial pilot's emergency radio alert. New Zealand raised the issue directly with Beijing, while Defence Minister Judith Collins warned of the PLAN growing capabilities. China dismissed the concerns, accusing both nations of overreacting. However, the incident highlighted gaps in international protocols for military transparency in high-traffic maritime zones. Strategically, the drills signified China's expanding naval reach and willingness to test regional thresholds, particularly amid a distracted US administration. Observers warned that similar unannounced exercises in the contested Indo-Pacific zones were on the anvil.

Those predictions were not wrong. In April 2025, China's PLA launched large-scale military exercises around Taiwan's northern, southern and eastern coasts. The drills, involving 71 aircraft and 13 naval vessels,

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<sup>172</sup> For more, see Shruti Pandalai, 'Australia and New Zealand Alarmed as China Conducts Live Fire Exercise in Tasman Seas' *Strategic Digest*, 7(05), March 01, 2025, at <https://www.idsa.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Strategic-Digest-7-05-010325.pdf>, (Accessed on December 20, 2025).



were described by Beijing as a ‘stern warning’ against separatism and followed US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth’s regional visit. The PLA simulated blockade operations, maritime strikes and air interdictions, though no live fire was reported. Taiwan responded by deploying warships and aircraft and activating missile systems, raising its readiness to deter escalation. China’s Eastern Theatre Command amplified the political messaging with propaganda videos depicting Taiwan’s President Lai Ching-te as a ‘parasite’, reinforcing psychological pressure alongside military manoeuvring. Beijing framed the drills as necessary to protect sovereignty, while Taipei condemned the exercises as destabilising. The US reaffirmed its support for Taiwan, emphasising opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo. These exercises reflect a shift in China’s approach to Taiwan, normalising coercive military activity without overt provocation.<sup>173</sup>

Coupled with these moves came the signing of the controversial China-Cook Islands agreement despite strong objections from New Zealand. The deal, which includes deep-sea mining and port infrastructure, enables China to shape maritime and economic agendas in the South Pacific.<sup>174</sup> Notably, news later broke that a Chinese drone had crossed into Papua New Guinea’s airspace while PLA frigates transited the Torres Strait and cruised down Australia’s east coast, culminating in military drills that disrupted civilian air traffic and alarmed both Canberra and Wellington. Beijing’s underlying message was unmistakable: Chinese naval forces can operate freely in these waters and will continue to do so. China’s Ambassador Xiao Qian bluntly dismissed concerns, suggesting

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<sup>173</sup> Joe Cash, Yimou Lee, and Ben Blanchard, ‘China Launches Military Drills Around Taiwan, Calls Taiwan President a Parasite’, *Reuters*, April 01, 2025, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-military-says-it-is-conducting-exercises-around-taiwan-2025-03-31/>, (Accessed on December 20, 2025).

<sup>174</sup> Kathryn Paik and John Augé, ‘China Courts the Pacific: Key Takeaways from the 2025 China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers’ Meeting’, *Critical Questions*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 03, 2025, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-courts-pacific-key-takeaways-2025-china-pacific-island-countries-foreign-ministers>, (Accessed on December 20, 2025).

that such exercises are normal, highlighting Beijing's willingness to challenge traditional power holders in their own strategic backyard.<sup>175</sup> These coordinated actions are clearly not isolated provocations, but part of a broader strategy. By projecting power near Australia and New Zealand and exploiting perceived US disengagement, China is asserting presence, testing reactions and signalling its intent to become the dominant force in the region.

Yet again, amidst these mind games for influence, came news of pushback from the PICs on being pushed to take positions by the bigger players. The Melanesian Spearhead Group—comprising Fiji, Vanuatu, PNG and Solomon Islands—had reportedly delayed finalising a regional maritime security agreement because they could not reconcile differing political positions on Taiwan.<sup>176</sup> The inter-government group, courted by Beijing, which funded its headquarters in Vanuatu, had previously said it would consider China as a security partner. However, now it has been reported that member states have not uniformly aligned with Beijing.<sup>177</sup>

As a Lowy report argued,<sup>178</sup> PIC leaders have understood while increased global attention and resources offer opportunities, they also highlight existing governance challenges and magnify the pressure on domestic systems. They are navigating external partnerships for leverage but their focus remains on safeguarding sovereignty while uniting for greater global influence.

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Kirsty Needham, 'Pacific Islands Delay Security Plan that Could Open Door to China', *Reuters*, June 26, 2025, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/pacific-islands-delay-security-plan-that-could-open-door-china-2025-06-26/>, (Accessed on December 20, 2025).

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Meg Keen and Mihai Sora, 'Looking through a Pacific Islands Lens: Access, Accountability, and Alignment in Global Engagements', *Lowy Institute's Geopolitics in the Pacific project report*, December 12, 2024, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/looking-through-pacific-islands-lens-access-accountability-alignment-global>, (Accessed on December 20, 2025).

## INDIA IN THE PICs: WHERE DOES IT FIT IN?

The delicate balancing of regional and global priorities by the PICs proves that, despite the rhetoric of the ‘return to geopolitics’ to the region, geography is not a mere chessboard for great power rivalry; it is home to vibrant, sovereign nations with their own aspirations and vulnerabilities. Their choices are not simply about picking a side but about securing their future. Thus for partners, including India, success hinges on demonstrating consistent, reliable and holistic engagement that prioritises the PICs needs, fosters genuine partnerships and respects their agency. The next section explores India’s enduring relationship with the PICs, nature of cooperation, drivers of current engagement and prospects for meaningful outreach.

### 6.1 A DEVELOPMENT-DRIVEN PARTNERSHIP LOOKING TO SCALE UP

**The enduring South–South Cooperation:** The tyranny of geography has never hindered India–PIC cooperation in the past; however, under the conceptualisation of the Indo–Pacific, the nations and their maritime peripheries matter more to each other than they did ever before. India’s earliest recorded interactions with the Pacific Islands began in 1879, when Indian workers were brought to Fiji to work on sugarcane plantations.<sup>179</sup> In 1948, India established a ‘Commission for the Government of India’ in Fiji, then a colony of the United Kingdom. When Fiji gained independence in 1970, India upgraded its diplomatic outpost to a High Commission. India’s interactions with PICs have

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<sup>179</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, GoI, ‘India-Fiji Relations’, Bilateral Brief, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Fiji-Aug-2025.pdf>, (Accessed on September 25, 2025).

primarily been driven by its strong historical and cultural links with the diaspora in Fiji. It was not until the early 1990s—when economic reforms expanded New Delhi's commercial and economic interests—that India broadened the scope of its external engagements with PICs under its Look East Policy. New Delhi has also interacted with the PICs in the Commonwealth, the Non-Aligned Movement and under the United Nations system.

India has maintained a lowkey diplomatic presence in the region, with permanent diplomatic representations only in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Fiji. India's High Commission in Fiji is accredited to Tonga, Tuvalu and Kiribati, and the one in PNG includes the Solomon Islands. The Indian High Commission in New Zealand is concurrently accredited to Samoa, Niue, the Cook Islands and Vanuatu. However, in 2021, India established an Honorary Consulate in Apia, Samoa, and appointed a Honorary Consul General in the Republic of Marshall Islands.<sup>180</sup> Interestingly, these PIC states (Fiji, PNG, Samoa and Marshall Islands) have seen highest demand for Indian exports and could be the reason for India expanding its presence.<sup>181</sup>

India's priorities in partnerships with the PICs were driven by how New Delhi defines its partnerships with other newly independent developing countries by sharing its own developmental experiences and providing developmental assistance in the spirit of South–South cooperation.<sup>182</sup> India's principles in this compact focus on mutual growth and non-interference rather than the enforcement of specific conditions onto beneficiary–partner countries. It promotes a

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<sup>180</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, GoI, Annual Report 2021-2022, at [https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/34894\\_MEA\\_Annual\\_Report\\_English.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/34894_MEA_Annual_Report_English.pdf), (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>181</sup> Dinoj K. Upadhyay, Vinod Kumar, and Aditi Gupta, 'Advancing South–South Cooperation: India's Development Partnerships with Pacific Island Countries', (*report prepared for The Asia Foundation*, 2021), p.28, table: Indian Exports to Five Largest PICs Importers, 2015-2019 (in USD Million).

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

comprehensive approach towards development activities and works in multiple levels, such as trade and investment, technology, skills upgrade, lines of credit (LOCs) and grants.

## 6.2 AN INCREMENTAL BUILDING OF PRESENCE

India's earliest engagement with the Pacific Islands as a development partner dates to 1973, when India donated clothes and medicines to Tonga. It built on its presence incrementally and in 2006, amidst a slew of initiatives, announced an annual grant of US\$100,000 to each of the 14 island nations. Under PM Modi's administration, India has stepped up its outreach to the PIC with the setting up of the *Forum for India and Pacific Island Cooperation* (FIPIC), under which the annual grants to each of the PICs has been doubled to US\$200,000.<sup>183</sup>

PM Modi's Fiji visit in 2014 flagged off the First FIPIC Summit, followed by the second iteration in Jaipur in 2015, which was attended by all PICs. Then in May 2017, under the umbrella of FIPIC, the Ministry of External Affairs organised the *India–Pacific Islands Sustainable Development Conference* in Fiji. PM Modi also convened the *India–Pacific Small Island Developing States* (PSIDS) meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2019. On this occasion, he announced a US\$1 million allocation to each PSIDS for high-impact development projects in the area of their choice.<sup>184</sup> His visit to Port Moresby in May 2023, which caught global media attention, proved that India was showing up came at a time when US President Joe Biden's visit to the region was cancelled due to domestic compulsions with the debt ceiling crisis. India's engagement with the PICs leaders and its willingness to listen was seen as the country's commitment to carving its space in the region as an alternative to countries who do not

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<sup>183</sup> Rani D. Mullen, 'India-Pacific Islands Brief', Centre for Policy Research, November 2014, at [https://cprindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/India-Pacific-Islands\\_Final.pdf](https://cprindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/India-Pacific-Islands_Final.pdf), (Accessed on July 31, 2023).

<sup>184</sup> 'Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation', Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) FIPIC portal, at <https://fipic.ficci.in/>, (Accessed on September 30, 2025).

want to get caught in the crossfire of binary choices in the Indo-Pacific. More importantly, PM Modi's mindful language—speaking about 'respecting [your] priorities' and acknowledging 'pride' about being chosen as a development partner of the PICs—has struck the right chord. It is a demonstration of an equal, open and inclusive vision for the Indo-Pacific that New Delhi vouches for.

### 6.3 DRIVERS OF CURRENT ENGAGEMENT

Today India is looking at the PIC as a strategic geography for multiple reasons.

*One*, India has been vocal about being the '*voice of the Global South*' during its 2022–2023 G20 presidency. The PICs are an important block, given the 'one country, one vote' principle, and their endorsement of India to 'emerge as a third power' is significant, given that India's G20 presidency is committed to being a bridge builder in a polarised global order. In the past, PICs have been important to India's efforts at UN Reform and Climate Change Negotiations.

*Two*, the region is also significant, given India's mainstreaming of the Indo-Pacific vision, wherein it hopes to build an equitable, inclusive multipolar global order where New Delhi plays the role of a leading power by providing viable options that go beyond binary choices. India's rising role as a development partner of choice, willingness to work on specific issues and its independent stance on bloc-style competition is seen as building strategic trust in the region.

*Three*, India is also motivated to check Chinese expansionism both in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In terms of threat perceptions, of course, India is not directly affected but concerns over basing facilities in Pacific islands are real. India has been wary of increasing deployments by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels in the Indian Ocean Region. It has hence collaborated with several Southeast Asian states to upgrade its intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) facilities along choke points that join the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In 2023, Indian Navy Ships, the *INS Kolkata* and the *INS Sahyadri*, docked in Port Moresby to 'enhance maritime cooperation and security in the

region’ and went on to participate in the *Malabar* exercises held under the aegis of the Quad framework.<sup>185</sup>

*Four*, and perhaps most importantly, the Pacific Ocean is rich in resources—gas, mineral, and energy sectors—which India also looks at harnessing.

## 6.4 INDIA’S RISING PROFILE AS A DEVELOPMENT PARTNER<sup>186</sup>

PM Modi, in his remarks at the Third FIPIC Summit, stressed on India’s role as a reliable development partner to the region. This statement carries a larger message. In an era where connectivity is contested and development aid weaponised, New Delhi is trying to extend help not in zero-sum game terms, but in a way that is both sustainable and in line with its capacity to deliver beyond rhetoric.

PM Modi’s 12-point plan at the FIPIC meet continues to emphasise its role as a development partner and capacity builder in the region with a slew of granular proposals. The forum which PM Modi started in 2014 for the 14 countries, in its third iteration, focused on specific asks of these nations, given rising problems of food and energy security and climate action in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war. India’s niche competencies in inexpensive renewable energy, solar power and climate-resilient infrastructure continue to be on the table. India’s support for Blue Economy as part of its Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative

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<sup>185</sup> ‘Indian Navy Ships Dock in Papua New Guinea as Interest in Pacific Sharpens’, *Economic Times*, August 02, 2023, at [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indian-navy-ships-dock-in-papua-new-guinea-as-interest-in-pacific-sharpens/articleshow/102350007.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indian-navy-ships-dock-in-papua-new-guinea-as-interest-in-pacific-sharpens/articleshow/102350007.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst), (Accessed on August 02, 2023).

<sup>186</sup> Information in this section has been curated from Ministry of External Affairs, GoI, Annual Reports 21-22 and 22-23, at [https://mea.gov.in/Annual\\_Reports.htm?57/Annual\\_Reports](https://mea.gov.in/Annual_Reports.htm?57/Annual_Reports), (Accessed on July 31, 2023) and reproduced from Shruti Pandalai, Akash Sahu and Shruti Sharma ‘The Pacific Islands and Geopolitical Jostling: Can India Play a Stabilising Role?’ *MP-IDS A Issue Brief*, September 02, 2022. See note 89.

complements the *Pacific's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. India, in the past, has also offered its space technology to help PICs in their inventory of land and water resources, marine ecology and management, weather, climate change and disaster management support. This effort now is being built upon in scale.

Noting PICs' goal to wean away from dependence on fossil fuels and expand to renewables to manage their underdeveloped energy sector, India's response-oriented assistance has focused on specific projects. For instance, India has committed to providing solar power to 2800 homes across 14 PICs; a grant worth US\$1.1 million to provide solar energy to an entire Kiribati district; and energy-efficient equipment worth US\$200,000 to Vanuatu. Indian Foreign Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar and Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka also launched a two-year project amounting to US\$1.3 million to install solar power systems in the official residences of Pacific heads of state in February 2023. India has made available a concessional Line of Credit of US\$150 million for PICs to undertake solar, renewable energy and climate-related projects based on their requirements and priorities.

India's expertise as a skill development partner for the region has seen customised programmes in IT and cybersecurity, solar electrification and training of hydrologists. Under the *Indian Training and Economic Collaboration* (ITEC) programme, Fiji's slots were increased to 110, while the slots for the other 13 countries were doubled from 119 to 238. While continuing with the 33 scholarships offered to Fiji, India offered two scholarships each to the other 13 PICs.<sup>187</sup> In addition to the training programmes, a two-week management training programme was offered at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore. India's transformational project of training rural women from the Pacific at *Barefoot College* in Rajasthan to become solar engineers, popularly known as the '*Solar Mamas*' project, has reaped rich dividends. These women with little to no education have gone back and empowered their communities to go green and combat looming energy crises in their islands.

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<sup>187</sup> Anil Wadhwa, 'India and the South Pacific', *ISAS Insights*, No. 562, April 29, 2019, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ISAS-Insights-No.-562-India-and-the-South-Pacific.pdf>, (Accessed on July 31, 2023).



India's solidarity with the Pacific islands on climate change mitigation has yielded results on the ground. India launched *Climate Early Warning Systems* in seven PICs in 2017. It assists with the consequences of frequent natural disasters that hit PICs, including relief and rehabilitation grants to Vanuatu, Tonga and Fiji. At the multilateral level, it has co-founded the *International Solar Alliance* with France to promote solar energy and the *Coalition for Disaster Resilient Initiative* (CDRI) to build resilience against climate change. In addition, India has launched the *Infrastructure for Resilient Island States* (IRIS) facility, a joint initiative with the *Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure* (CDRI) and *Small Island Developing States* (SIDS) on the sidelines of the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow in 2021. This mechanism is aimed at providing technical support on the multifaceted issues posed by infrastructure systems and promote disaster and climate resilience of infrastructure assets in SIDS, and sharing latest knowledge and learnings targeted to specific infrastructure sectors. India has capped all of these lines of effort by support to the PICs climate change advocacy; PM Modi assured the region, 'your interests will have the strength of our voice'.<sup>188</sup>

Similarly, FIPIC has been instrumental in helping PICs building niche markets and businesses in the small and medium enterprise (SME) sector learning from Indian successes. India has offered financial aid to these nations' SME sectors, assisting numerous small-scale entrepreneurs in developing their own businesses. The FIPIC trade office in Delhi now supports micro SMEs by building capacity for market access, and the purchase of machinery for coconut processing as well as enhancing rice and sugarcane cultivation.

Notably, India has doubled down on health infrastructure support to the region to overcome setbacks from the pandemic. India has prioritised healthcare in its assistance to PICs. Some initiatives in this regard announced at the 2023 FIPIC Summit include the providing sea ambulances to the region; constructing a 100-bed super speciality

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<sup>188</sup> Text of PM's closing remarks at Forum for India Pacific Island Countries Cooperation (FIPIC) Summit, Jaipur, August 21, 2015, at <https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=126259&reg=3&lang=2>, (Accessed on May 22, 2023).

hospital in Fiji; conducting *Jaipur Foot* camp for fitment of artificial limbs for PNG residents, followed by two camps annually in other PICs; and setting up dialysis units, apart from yoga and traditional medicine centres. A line of credit was offered for setting up a pharmaceutical plant in a hub like Fiji, in order to supply cheaper drugs to the Pacific Island states. It was announced that the Indian Navy will pay goodwill visits to the islands and undertake healthcare activities through medical camps. However, there is scope to do more. Establishing a state-of-the-art tertiary care hospital, training of healthcare professionals, provision of telehealth facilities, etc., are among the strengths of India's world-class but affordable healthcare system that can be extended to the PICs.

To make India more visible in the mind of the PICs, it now also provides gratis visas to the citizens of the region. Apart from setting up of e-libraries, India's broadcasting agency, *Prasar Bharti*, was tasked with providing gratis television and radio programmes in English and Hindi to these countries. India also provided the University of South Pacific a grant of US\$1 million through the Asian Development Bank for regional technical assistance (RETA) on 'The Creation of the Pacific Information Superhighway with The University of the South Pacific Network'.

This list of India's engagement is by no means exhaustive, but it does infer the reasoning that New Delhi sees these measures as way to anchor meaningful presence in the region and reassure support in a way that chequebook diplomacy cannot achieve.

## 6.5 THIRD-PARTY RESOURCES: THE SOLUTION TO INDIA'S DELIVERY DEFICIT?

Despite India's political will backing its strategic ambitions and outreach, there exist some obstacles that hinder India's development partnerships with other countries.<sup>189</sup> Due to the lack of presence on the ground on

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<sup>189</sup> Dinoj K. Upadhyay, Vinod Kumar, and Aditi Gupta, 'Advancing South-South Cooperation: India's Development Partnerships with Pacific Island Countries', Report for *The Asia Foundation*, 2021.

account of the large geographical distance, ensuring funding of projects and implementation without adequate monitoring mechanisms has been a challenge. Additionally, India's difficulty in being the sole funder of large projects also weighs it down.<sup>190</sup> As a developing country, India's resource constraints often impede its efforts, resulting in delays or withdrawal from infrastructure projects. While these projects matter to enhancing New Delhi's connectivity to the neighbourhood and the near abroad, lack of funds either due to shortage or re-allocation for competition priorities often derail efforts. The access to more internal and third-party resources would likely help meet growing demand for cooperation and facilitate the implementation of projects. Triangular cooperation where North and South donor capacities could be combined to streamline projects would be a good start. India could begin or do more work with other countries, such as Australia, Japan, France and the US, to deliver on regional asks.

For instance the India–Australia relationship—now perhaps in its strongest phase—could combine strengths in the areas of skill development and migration programs. India could also leverage Australia's financial aid through effective partnerships in several areas, especially capacity building and needs-based training programs. Given the increasing demand for ITEC cooperation from the PICs, India could collaborate on Australia—or New Zealand—funded capacity-building initiatives in Kiribati and/or other PICs interested in similar skill development programs.<sup>191</sup>

Similarly, France's 2021 Indo–Pacific Strategy discusses key areas for collaboration between India and the PICs. Given the exacerbating food crises in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, Indo-French Cooperation in Agro-processing Sector, which could benefit the net export earnings for Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu, could be pursued.<sup>192</sup> India and France could explore trilateral development cooperation through their collaboration in the *International*

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

*Solar Alliance* for the PICs.<sup>193</sup> Additionally under the newly announced India–France Indo–Pacific *Triangular Development Cooperation Fund*, increased collaboration on *Quick Impact Projects* could be explored. While India is already working with France under the CDRI for the Small Island States, it has scope to join the *Kiwa Initiative*, a multi-donor program designed to strengthen resilience to climate change and biodiversity in the Pacific through simplified financial support.<sup>194</sup> France can also considered inviting India to be an *Observer* at the South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting—India should be part of these conversations to project presence and sustained interest in the region.<sup>195</sup>

Japan and India are already working together on increasing maritime capacity and capabilities of PICs under the Quad-specific initiatives of Maritime Domain Awareness and laying of undersea internet cables in the Pacific. Joint exploration in critical tech, minerals and renewables as well as building cybersecurity capacities of PICs could be pursued.

While India worked with the US in multiple formats to enhance resilience in the Pacific, specific success stories in third-party cooperation should be extended to the PICs despite Trump's cuts to United States Agency for International Development (USAID). For instance, under the *Partnership for Food Security* in the past, the USAID efforts and India's food and nutritional security and adaptation programs have been combined to apply innovative, cost-effective solutions developed by India to farming challenges locally, regionally and globally.<sup>196</sup> Smaller PICs could benefit from such cooperation.

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<sup>193</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, GoI, 'India-France Indo-Pacific Roadmap', July 14, 2023, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36799/IndiaFrance+IndoPacific+Roadmap>, (Accessed July 31, 2023).

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Suggestion discussed during India-France closed room dialogue in MP-IDSA in February 2023.

<sup>196</sup> 'Agriculture and Food Security|India', USAID at <https://2017?2020.usaid.gov/india/agriculture?and?food?security>, (Accessed July 31, 2023).

Finally, India's engagement with the PIC will truly pick up when trade ties flourish. Experts say mutually beneficial areas where trade between India and PICs could be strengthened include Indian imports of fisheries, agriculture, oil and natural gas, and other minerals.<sup>197</sup> India should explore trade complementarities with the PICs to benefit from increased bilateral trade, the beginning of which can be made via Quad engagements as well.

## **6.6 INDIA'S 'SELECTIVE' SECURITY COOPERATION WITH PICs: A STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY ?**

In the many roundtable discussions held for this study with various stakeholders from India, the PICs and among regional partners, there were pressing suggestions made that India must now embed security cooperation more formally with the PICs, perhaps even within the FIPIC forum to complement development goals with maritime safety, resilience and regional stability. A calibrated security presence—anchored in training, HADR, MDA and cyber cooperation—would solidify India's image as a responsible and responsive power. In doing so, India can expand its Indo-Pacific footprint while respecting the sensitivities of its Pacific partners.

While India avoids overt militarisation in the region unlike the US or China it can strengthen its profile as a trusted, non-coercive security partner. Perhaps New Delhi's image as one without baggage of historical legacy would be welcomed by regional powers in the Pacific to contribute to capacity building for the PICs.

- 1. Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and information sharing:** India could offer the PICs assistance in improving their maritime situational awareness. Leveraging its Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), India could expand data-sharing arrangements with interested PICs. This would aid in tackling Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, a

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<sup>197</sup> *FICCI Leads*, India-Oceania Knowledge Report, October 2020, at <https://leads.ficci.in/pdf/India%20Oceania%20Knowledge%20Report.pdf>, (Accessed July 31, 2023).

chronic issue exploited by foreign fleets, including Chinese vessels. Enhancing satellite-based surveillance, early warning systems, and marine resource monitoring would serve dual purposes—securing Pacific waters and enhancing India's strategic goodwill. This initiative could be linked up with existing Quad mechanisms or in partnership with regional powers like Australia and Japan who are already participating members of the IFC-IOR initiative.

2. **Capacity building through naval diplomacy and HADR operations:** India's Navy is well-regarded for its humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) capabilities. PICs, highly vulnerable to natural disasters, would benefit from India's pre-positioned relief kits, rapid response capacities and joint HADR exercises. Regular port visits are already underway. Bilateral naval exchanges, combined drills focused on disaster response, maritime safety and search-and-rescue operations, if of interest to the PICs, could reinforce India's image as a benign security provider.
3. **Digital and cybersecurity cooperation:** With the PICs rapidly digitising but lacking cyber resilience, India could offer tailored cybersecurity support, especially for critical infrastructure and elections. The proposed India-Pacific Cybersecurity Hub, announced at FIPIC-III, could serve as a regional capacity-building centre. Cybersecurity cooperation offers India a non-controversial entry point into regional security frameworks, avoiding the optics of militarisation while addressing a clear regional vulnerability. Given the uptick in cyber scams and transactional crimes, regional powers like Australia and New Zealand might look at leveraging Indian capacity to build resilience within the PICs.

Unlike the US or China, India has been clear that it does not seek basing rights or security pacts in the Pacific. This makes its approach more acceptable to PICs wary of great power rivalry. By positioning itself as a development-driven maritime security partner, India offers a normative alternative—focusing on sovereignty, sustainability and non-interference.

## CONCLUSION

### 7.1 A MAZE OF OVERLAPPING INTERESTS AND NARRATIVES

It could be inferred from this analysis that the dominant narrative emerging from the PICs today is of a region torn between various visions and competing narratives of regionalism, the struggling discourse of security and development priorities and an innate urgency among the PICs to shape their own story and future in an environment of polarising interests. Lawrence Freedman argued in his essay, ‘Possibilities and Limits of Strategic Narratives’ that ‘Strategy looks forward but is still shaped by the here and now ... consider strategy as a story about power in the future tense’.<sup>198</sup>

Interestingly, experts Joanne Wallis and Czeslaw Tubilewicz in their paper ‘The Pacific Islands and Chinese Power as Presence, Influence, and Interference’<sup>199</sup> challenge the dominant rationalist interpretations of Chinese power in the Pacific that permeate Western academic and policy discourses. They argue that these accounts often portray Chinese influence as material, strategic and instrumental—relying on economic or military capabilities to extract compliance from Pacific Island states.

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<sup>198</sup> Lawrence Freedman, ‘The Possibilities and Limits of Strategic Narratives’, in B. De Graaf, G. Dimitriu and J. Ringsmose (eds), *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War* (1st ed.), Routledge, 2015, doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315770734>

<sup>199</sup> J. Wallis and C. Tubilewicz, ‘The Pacific Islands and Chinese Power as Presence, Influence, and Interference’, *European Journal of International Security*, 10(2), 2025, 271-292, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-journal-of-international-security/article/pacific-islands-and-chinese-power-as-presence-influence-and-interference/CA4520557916FC25A36C0126FBF5F29F>, (Accessed on December 24, 2025).

Such views frame power in unidirectional, zero-sum terms, privileging measurable coercion or inducement over more subtle, ideational forms of influence.

In contrast, they see that Chinese power in the Pacific is not solely coercive or transactional—it is also socially constitutive. Chinese statecraft shapes how Pacific elites and publics perceive their roles in the international system, including what is considered appropriate behaviour toward external partners. Wallis and Tubilewicz submit that, in this context, China is not simply competing for material dominance; it is also engaged in a long-term project of socialisation, where Pacific actors are increasingly exposed to and embedded within Chinese norms, rules and values.

They explain this dynamic, by proposing that Chinese power in the Pacific must be understood as consisting of three interlinked modes: presence (power as dormant capability), influence (power as socialisation) and interference (power as material incentives and inducement). While presence signals capacity and signals intent, influence fosters ideational alignment over time. Interference, meanwhile, reflects targeted efforts to shape elite behaviour—but often with complex and unintended consequences. This framework they argue, offers a corrective to dominant narratives that either overestimate or underestimate China's regional impact. On one hand, accounts that overemphasise China's capabilities tend to ignore the fragmented nature of Chinese engagement—across ministries, state-owned enterprises, military actors and non-state intermediaries—which limits coherence and predictability. These actors must also navigate Pacific countries' layered authority structures, traditional leadership and civil society institutions, which often mediate or resist external influence.

On the other hand, they argue that mainstream views often overlook the long-term normative effects of Chinese engagement. Through diplomatic language, elite exchanges, media partnerships, education programs and developmental aid, China is actively shaping ideas about sovereignty, development and international alignment. These practices may not yield immediate strategic returns, but they gradually normalise engagement with Chinese institutions and norms—potentially redrawing the boundaries of legitimacy in the region. In essence, for Wallis and Tubilewicz, Chinese power in the Pacific is not just reducible to



economic leverage or strategic encroachment. It is also an evolving practice of socialisation, contested by local actors, and shaped by competing visions of order. To understand China's role in the Pacific, analysts must account for its ideational and performative dimensions—not just its material ones.

## **7.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FRAMING INDIA'S OUTREACH TO THE PICs**

So going back to the crux of this enquiry, what more can India do, including with regional partners, to anchor meaningful presence in the region? This monograph submits a few ideas on how India's engagement with the PICs could be framed with the following imperatives.

- 1. Clear understanding of China's scale of intent:** China's recalibration on the economic and security posture in the Pacific reveals a deliberate effort to reshape the regional balance. China's growing presence is not accidental—it aligns with broader goals to secure influence and weaken US-led partnerships. Beijing's actions have intensified in response to Australia's 2024 policy shift exemplified by tailored agreements with Tuvalu, Nauru and Papua New Guinea that sought to exclude China from regional security frameworks. At the same time, China has recognised an opportunity: the erosion of US credibility. As the US cuts back foreign aid and reconsiders its global diplomatic footprint, it reinforces the perception that Washington is an unreliable, retreating power. In contrast, Beijing offers infrastructure, investment and visible diplomatic engagement, filling a vacuum with strategic clarity. For China, the cost-benefit analysis is increasingly favourable. A relatively modest investment in aid, infrastructure or naval deployments yields outsized strategic influence. Sending warships near Australia's coastline sends a pointed message not only to the Pacific Islands but also to Canberra and Wellington that Beijing can exert pressure, shape outcomes and challenge Western assumptions. The gains in influence, deterrence and regional sway justify the price. That is the narrative it is seeking to push, finance and socialise.

2. **Pitching partnerships in keeping ‘the Pacific Way’:** A key recommendation emerging on stakeholder discussions on shaping India’s outreach highlighted the importance of engaging with PICs through the ‘Pacific Way’—an approach grounded in respect for local political economies, cultural norms and development priorities. India’s strategy has so far kept these sensitivities in place. But various stakeholders doubled down on the need for New Delhi to actively emphasise inclusivity and centre the agency of the PICs. Building trust requires India to view these nations not as passive recipients but as equal partners with their own voices and strategic choices. Notably, a point was raised on engaging with the PICs *beyond the lens of the Indo-Pacific*, which, many from the region argue, does not reflect the region’s self-identification. Therefore understanding how PICs perceive India’s intentions and how they interpret its growing presence is essential and an exercise that requires systematic investment. Discussions also cautioned that India’s deeper involvement could potentially unsettle existing political dynamics. Therefore, any new initiative should be preceded by careful evaluation and dialogue. This monograph has highlighted examples of PICs agency in managing their complex relationships with major and emerging powers. A deeper dive as to how they share knowledge and experiences among themselves to maintain autonomy and cohesion in a competitive geopolitical environment will be essential for India’s future plans.
3. **Diplomatic leveraging of India’s historic ties and lack of colonial baggage:** A key outcome and perhaps dilemma for Indian policymakers that emerged from the discussion on the framing of Indian outreach in the PICs was the pros and cons of pursuing bilateral and regional cooperation. India’s policy of non-alignment and rejection of bloc-style politics with its anti-colonial past has lent it a favourable image in the PICs. When the US exited the Paris Agreement under President Trump, *Island Times*, a local daily published in Palau, reported that its leadership was looking at India and China to come in and fill the vacuum. This further substantiated the Indian view that, in certain projects, India needs to go it alone because it does not carry the historical baggage that other regional powers have to contend with. Stakeholders also highlighted the significance of the generational transition underway

in the PICs, emphasising the potential of youth to enhance external partnerships and drive development efforts. Additionally, the presence of a large Indian diaspora—especially in Fiji—was identified as a valuable asset that could be leveraged to strengthen collaborative initiatives in the region.

4. **Framing of trilateral cooperation needs caveats:** Given the importance of PICs in the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, countries like Australia and now France have increasingly sought out New Delhi to do more together in the region. However, New Delhi needs to remember that the West's approach to mitigating challenges of the PICs has been criticised as security driven and out of sync with the region's needs. India should work with like-minded partners in projects that further its demand-driven responses to the region and refrain from being sucked into meta narratives amplifying geopolitical anxieties. Leveraging multilateral platforms such as the G77 and G20 can serve as an effective channel for dialogue and cooperation. Emphasising 'Pacific solutions for Pacific challenges' can help shift the discourse away from a predominantly strategic or military focus and instead centre on local priorities. Cooperation within mechanisms like the Quad that cover everything from climate to critical tech, health and infrastructure should be leveraged to get to know the region better. It is recommended that, given the resource constraints, India builds on the success of triangular partnerships involving multiple stakeholders as a model to foster greater regional unity and diplomatic solidarity. India should also explore triangular partnerships—not just with its Quad partners and resident powers like France, but also with ASEAN nations acting as third-party donors—to strengthen its presence in the region. However, New Delhi must be aware that all countries will not be aligned to deliver at the granular level—issue-based and expertise-centric cooperation will have to be prioritised.
5. **Focus on capacity-building initiatives highlighting Pacific priorities:** Mitigating climate change and development of renewable energy are two critical areas where India can play a substantial role. India's ambitious COP26 energy and climate change commitments, together with the PICs *Blue Pacific Strategy*, can drive

a major climate-conscious and sustainably driven economy in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, India's initiatives like the *Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative* (IPOI) and its leadership in the *International Solar Alliance* (ISA) can help add value to the Pacific countries' fight on issues like climate change and renewable energy. Capacity-building efforts will require fostering collaboration at multiple levels—government-to-government (G2G), private sector engagement and civil society partnerships. Given India's goals to scale up local solutions for global good, particular emphasis should be placed on supporting PICs interest in technology transfer and the development of *Digital Public Infrastructure* (DPI). India's private sector, especially in healthcare and telemedicine, can play a key role in delivering tailored, impactful solutions. To maximise impact, the Indian government should consider introducing targeted incentives that encourage private sector actors to engage meaningfully in the region, enabling a more agile and responsive model of economic collaboration.

6. **Clearly defining India's strategic presence in the PICs:** Finally, India's priorities in the Indian Ocean will always have salience over its interests in the Pacific. To anchor meaningful presence, India should avoid strategic overreach. However, this does not mean that India cannot explore opportunities to deepen selective security cooperation in the PICs within a clear and defined ambit. India could deepen maritime and digital security cooperation with PICs through a non-intrusive, development-focused approach. It can enhance *Maritime Domain Awareness* (MDA) by expanding data-sharing via the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), supporting efforts to counter *Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated* (IUU) fishing and monitor maritime activity. Joint projects could be developed in coordination with Quad partners and regional actors like Australia and Japan. Simultaneously, India's Navy can strengthen its role in the region through capacity-building in disaster preparedness, HADR drills, and port visits, reinforcing its image as a reliable, non-militarised partner. India should also operationalise the proposed Cybersecurity Hub announced at FIPIC-III to offer tailored digital resilience support, particularly for election systems and critical infrastructure. Given rising cyber threats, this would be a strategic, low-risk area for regional collaboration. By focusing on humanitarian assistance, technological

support and respect for sovereignty—rather than military presence or basing rights—India positions itself as a trusted security partner offering an inclusive and non-threatening model that aligns with PIC priorities.

These measures not just anchor meaningful presence in the region they reassure support.

Oceania has transitioned from the margins of India's worldview to a key theatre of its vision for the Indo-Pacific. Across Australia, New Zealand, and the PICs, New Delhi learned to braid economics with security, and sovereignty with standards, without surrendering the habit of strategic autonomy. The United States *National Security Strategy 2025* sharpened this lesson: China managing may be a shared objective, but American realism and retrenchment needed to be dealt with by other leading powers in the Indo-Pacific. India's task therefore is to convert FIPIC goodwill, India Stack pilots, and mineral and food partnerships into visible capability. Minilateralism, including the Quad, should remain a scaffold for such capacity building. Equally, expanding India's diplomatic missions and regular participation in the Pacific Islands Forum will help it listen continuously to local narratives that remain wary of great—power games. The manuscript concludes that India can emerge as a steady partner of choice in a volatile order if it privileges transparent negotiations, pragmatic stakeholder management, and first—responder instincts as demonstrated in HADR responses. By matching ambition with consistent delivery, India will contribute to a more resilient, multipolar Indo-Pacific and recognise that in Oceania distance is measured less in nautical miles than in trust.

The narrative of 'the return of geopolitics' to the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) is gaining traction in the larger discourse of the Indo-Pacific, primarily driven by the anxiety over People's Republic of China's (PRC's) expanding engagement in the region. The exacerbation of international tensions, amplified by the Sino-US rivalry, comes even as the Islands navigate intra-regional frictions, challenges of economic development, illegal fishing, climate change and issues related to self-determination and decolonisation. India's renewed outreach to the PICs under PM Modi's leadership has found wide appeal, as was visible during his visits to the Pacific Islands and his interaction with leaders via the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC). Given this context, this monograph will attempt to briefly introduce the relevance of this contested geography to regional and extra-regional players. It will unpack the internal dynamics of regional tensions and examine the agency of PICs. It will expand on how China's actions are redefining geopolitics in the region and discuss these contested narratives. Within this backdrop, it will also explore how Indian engagement has been perceived in the region and conclude with prescriptive options of steps India could take, including with regional partners, to anchor meaningful presence in the PICs region.

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