



Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales  
Grado en Relaciones Internacionales

## TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

# **Power Dynamics In The South Pacific: Influences On Island Alliances, Economic Partnerships, And Diplomatic Decisions Amidst Global Polarization**

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**Abstract:**

This thesis explores the evolving power dynamics in the South Pacific, focusing on the strategic competition between China and the Western bloc—particularly the United States, Australia, and New Zealand—over influence in Pacific Island countries. It investigates how these dynamics shape the islands' diplomatic decisions, economic partnerships, and alliance formations in a world increasingly characterized by geopolitical polarization. Through a detailed examination of historical ties, current diplomatic relationships, economic engagements, and military strategies, the study reveals the multifaceted approaches by major powers to extend their influence in the region. The thesis underscores the strategic importance of the South Pacific in global geopolitics, highlighting the implications of these power contests for regional stability, development, and the strategic autonomy of island nations. It concludes with reflections on the future of regional dynamics, emphasizing the potential for increased cooperation and the need for further research on emerging security challenges.

**Key words:** South Pacific geopolitics, China and Western bloc rivalry, Pacific Island alliances, Economic partnerships, Diplomatic strategies, Global polarization

**Resumen:**

Este TFG explora la evolución de las dinámicas de poder en el Pacífico Sur, centrándose en la competencia estratégica entre China y el bloque occidental—particularmente Estados Unidos, Australia y Nueva Zelanda—por influencia en los países de las islas del Pacífico. Investiga cómo estas dinámicas moldean las decisiones diplomáticas, las asociaciones económicas y las formaciones de alianzas de las islas en un mundo cada vez más caracterizado por la polarización geopolítica. A través de un examen detallado de los lazos históricos, las relaciones diplomáticas actuales, los compromisos económicos y las estrategias militares, el estudio revela los enfoques multifacéticos de las grandes potencias para extender su influencia en la región. El TFG subraya la importancia estratégica del Pacífico Sur en la geopolítica global, destacando las implicaciones de estos concursos de poder para la estabilidad regional, el desarrollo y la autonomía estratégica de las naciones insulares. Concluye con reflexiones sobre el futuro de la dinámica regional, enfatizando el potencial para una cooperación aumentada y la necesidad de más investigación sobre los desafíos de seguridad emergentes.

**Palabras clave:** Geopolítica del Pacífico Sur, Rivalidad entre China y el bloque occidental, Alianzas de las islas del Pacífico, Asociaciones económicas, Estrategias diplomáticas, Polarización global

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and Context

In the current reality of an increasingly polarized world, the South Pacific Islands emerge as a region that is gaining strategic relevance (Mahendra, 2023). This expanse of ocean is characterized by a delicate balance of power, determined by the stride for influence of various actors including China and the Western block represented by states like the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Mahendra, 2023).

The South Pacific Islands encompass a diverse array of states, each with its unique cultural heritage, economic challenges, and geopolitical aspirations. From the vast archipelagos of Fiji and Papua New Guinea to the remote atolls of Kiribati and Tuvalu, these island nations face a myriad of socio-economic challenges (World Bank, 2023). Nevertheless, they also share common issues, including the substantial effects of climate change, amid the backdrop of increasing geopolitical competition (World Bank, 2023).

The Western block, namely the US, with longstanding ties to countries like Australia and New Zealand, aims to maintain a strategic foothold in the South Pacific, safeguarding their interests in trade, security, and regional stability, perceiving China's growing influence as a potential threat to the established order in the region (US-China Economic and Security Commission, 2018). However, their colonial history casts a long shadow over their relationship, a factor China is using in its favor when presenting itself as an alternative to the Western-centric approach to development and governance (Smith & Wesley-Smith; 2021).

Over the last decade, China has focused on strengthening its ties in the South Pacific through increased aid, development, diplomacy and security cooperation. In April 2018, rumors emerged surrounding Chinese and Vanuatu officials holding preliminary talks concerning the potential establishment of a Chinese military base in the country, which both denied (US-China Economic and Security Commission, 2018). And in 2022, the Solomon Islands signed a security agreement with China, sparking international concern over the possibility of Beijing building its first military base in the region (Sullivan;

2023). This triggered a reaction by the West, with the US reopening an embassy in the Solomon Islands after a 30-year absence (Sullivan, 2023).

With Taiwan as a focal point in the Indo-Pacific tensions, the South Pacific's geographical proximity and geostrategic importance in case of armed conflict, has turned it into a crucible for strategic moves by various regional and international actors (European Parliament; 2023). Diplomatic relations, strategic alliances and economic partnerships are crucial when considering the islands' geopolitical significance in terms of maritime trade routes and potential for military installations (European Parliament; 2023). Concerns about debt-trap diplomacy, environmental degradation, and the erosion of local autonomy underscore the complexities of navigating relations between the Pacific and external powers in a postcolonial context (World Bank; 2022). After decades of marginalization, the islands now have grounds to ask for increased cooperation in these areas (Grossman; 2022).

## 1.2 Objectives And Relevance Of The Topic To International Relations

Having considered these factors, the aim of this work is to offer an updated analysis surrounding the topic that takes current events, such as the recent elections in Taiwan, into account. Due to the everchanging reality of international relations, alliances within the Pacific are constantly shifting and recent developments such as the emergence of a more nationalistic government in Taiwan are prompting reactions by nations in the Pacific and are intensifying strategic moves by interested parties. By taking current events into account, this thesis aims to offer additional insights in the hope of contributing to the existing literature surrounding potential future developments in the region and other strategic aspects involving the different actors. Lastly, considering that the focus is usually centered around larger powers, such as China or the US, examining their objectives and foreign policy moves while putting a larger focus on the Pacific Islands' agency and perspective could potentially prove insightful.

The relevance of this topic to IR is multifaceted. The South Pacific is a lens through which to examine power dynamics, alliance-building, the strategic interplay between major and regional powers, and the influence of non-state actors. It serves as a vivid illustration of

the balance of power theory, the impact of geopolitics on smaller states, and the role of environmental and economic factors in shaping global politics. This region, with its history and current geopolitical challenges, marks the intersection of traditional and emergent issues facing the global community, making it a vital area of study for IR scholars and policymakers alike.

To navigate these topics, the study will first contextualize the South Pacific within the realm of existing research, identifying gaps that this work aims to fill. It will then advance a research question and hypothesis rooted in the latest geopolitical developments. Drawing on the theoretical aspects of realism and the role of hard power, the study will explore how these traditional concepts can be applied to the dispute's unique dynamics. The investigation will then move towards the South Pacific Islands themselves, offering a theoretical approach to the often-overlooked agency of smaller states in IR. Through a methodical examination that elaborates on historical and contemporary regional dynamics, the study will focus on South Pacific geopolitics. It will then scrutinize China's escalating influence and motives, juxtapose them with the Western bloc's engagements and objectives, and finally, assess how these global forces are perceived and managed by the Pacific Island countries themselves. This will culminate in a comprehensive understanding of the region's geopolitical contest.

### 1.3 Existing Research on the Topic and Identified Gaps

There are a variety of scholarly articles that examine the multifaceted role of hard power in shaping the relationships, alliances, and regional dynamics between the different actors, as the South Pacific Islands find themselves at a geopolitical crossroads, influenced by the strategic ambitions of China and the Western bloc. By dissecting strategic military interests, economic leverage, diplomatic maneuvers, and the responses of Pacific Island nations, this review aims to synthesize key scholarly contributions to understand the interplay of hard power in an increasingly polarized world.

The strategic military presence in the South Pacific is a critical component of hard power dynamics in the region. Grossman (2022) and Grossman et al. (2019) provide extensive analyses into the strategic military postures of China and the United States, alongside their allies in the Pacific. These works detail the establishment of military bases, security

partnerships, and the implications of defense agreements on regional security architecture. Lum and Vaughn (2007) offer an earlier perspective on the geopolitical significance of the Southwest Pacific, highlighting how the burgeoning influence of the US and China has catalyzed shifts in military alignments and security priorities.

While Grossman (2022) and Grossman et al. (2019) offer extensive analyses into the strategic military postures of China and the United States, there remains a need to synthesize and contextualize these insights within the broader geopolitical landscape. My thesis seeks to fill this void by providing a comprehensive examination of the evolving military dynamics in the region, considering not only the establishment of military bases and security partnerships but also the broader implications of these developments on regional security architecture. This work also pivots to the agency of Pacific Island Countries (PICs), investigating how these smaller states leverage their geostrategic position, navigate great power competition, and maintain their autonomy.

A different approach, economic initiatives and investments serve as a pivotal tool of hard power, employed notably by China through its Belt and Road Initiative and other aid mechanisms. Lei and Sui (2022), and Chen (2018) delve into the economic diplomacy strategies of China, emphasizing infrastructure development and financial aid as means to solidify Beijing's influence in the Pacific Islands. Conversely, Dupont (2021) discusses the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy, illustrating efforts to counterbalance China's economic inroads by forging robust partnerships with Pacific Island nations. These discussions underscore the strategic use of economic leverage to sway alliances and secure regional influence. This thesis aims to compare both parties' initiatives and to determine which approach offers advantages in which areas.

Diplomacy also plays a nuanced role in the contest for influence in the South Pacific. López Areu (2022) and Tarte (2018) explore the diplomatic engagements of China and Western powers, revealing how these efforts are intertwined with broader military and economic strategies. Hanlon and Powles (2021), along with Wesley-Smith and Porter (2019), further dissect the diplomatic landscape, focusing on the Pacific Islands' navigation amidst China's ascendance and the corresponding responses from the Pacific Islands and Western countries. These analyses highlight the complex diplomatic efforts, where gestures of goodwill, strategic partnerships, and international forums become

battlegrounds for influence. This thesis incorporates the historical context and explains contemporary shifts in diplomatic language, rhetoric, and public diplomacy in connection to tracing the evolution of diplomatic narratives.

Central to understanding the dynamics of hard power in the South Pacific is recognizing the agency and responses of Pacific Island nations themselves. Smith (2020) offers a detailed look at Australia's strategic approach to its Pacific neighbors, balancing its relations with both China and the United States. Fry (2019a) provides a broader lens on Pacific regionalism, illustrating how Pacific Island nations leverage their strategic value to navigate the great power rivalry, often seeking to maximize development aid and investment for their benefit. However, considering the everchanging reality of our current geostrategic landscape, more recent developments need to be acknowledged.

In general, the existing literature presents a complex picture of hard power dynamics in the South Pacific, characterized by a blend of military posturing, economic coercion, diplomatic outreach, and strategic autonomy exercised by Pacific Island nations, revealing a region that is not merely a passive recipient of great power rivalry but an active participant that seeks to leverage its strategic position for national development and sovereignty. However, certain areas leave gaps to be analyzed further and recent developments need to be considered when analyzing geostrategic claims surrounding the Islands. While the recent elections in Taiwan and shifts towards more nationalistic governments have been noted, the specific implications of these political changes on Pacific alliances remain underexplored. Moreover, the way in which emerging security concerns, such as maritime disputes and cybersecurity threats, are reshaping alliances and security arrangements in the region remains to be studied. Lastly, while there is some acknowledgement surrounding the agency of Pacific Island nations, there's room to expand on how environmental security and climate diplomacy shape their strategy.

#### 1.4 Research Question And Methodology

Transitioning from a comprehensive review of existing research and identified gaps, we now move towards the central inquiry that underscores the heart of this thesis. Amid the



evolving geopolitical landscape of the South Pacific, characterized by the strategic ambitions of China and the responses of the Western bloc, a pressing question emerges:

*What role do hard power factors play in influencing the relationships and alliances between the South Pacific Islands, China, and the Western bloc in an increasingly polarized world, and how do these factors impact regional dynamics, including economic partnerships and diplomatic decisions?*

This question invites a deeper exploration of the tangible and intangible elements of hard power—military presence and economic influence, and diplomatic engagements—and their collective effect on shaping the geopolitical fabric of the South Pacific. Through this lens, the hypothesis posits that hard power factors are not only central but decisive in redefining the contours of international relations within the region, dictating the terms of engagement, the structure of alliances, and the overall strategic balance.

To explore the influence of hard power factors on the dynamics between the South Pacific Islands, China, and the Western bloc, I adopted a methodology that combined a targeted literature review with a theoretical and empirical analysis. The literature review aimed to map out the scholarly landscape, identifying critical themes around military presence, economic strategies, and diplomatic initiatives in the region. This process not only highlighted the existing body of work but also pinpointed gaps where further research could contribute valuable insights, particularly regarding the nuanced roles and responses of Pacific Island nations to external hard power pressures.

Building on this foundation, the theoretical framework drew upon realism and theories of hard power to interpret the actions and motivations of the major actors involved, including China's assertive expansion and the strategic countermeasures of the Western bloc and Pacific Island nations. An empirical examination of recent geopolitical events and developments then grounded these theoretical insights in contemporary realities. This approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of how hard power—manifested through military expansions, economic inducements, and diplomatic engagements—shapes the relationships and strategic calculations of the states within this increasingly polarized region. This methodology ensured a comprehensive analysis, blending theoretical rigor

with empirical specificity to dissect the complex interplay of hard power factors in the South Pacific's geopolitical milieu.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Concepts and Theories: Realism and Hard Power in International Relations

The application of realism within the South Pacific context demands a granular approach that differentiates between its several iterations. Offensive realism, a theory prominently advanced by Mearsheimer (2001), posits that great powers are inherently driven by an anarchic international system to assert dominance and maximize their relative power. This lens is particularly pertinent when analyzing China's assertive moves in the South Pacific, where it appears to be engaging in power-maximizing behavior through military expansion, economic investments, and political coercion.

Conversely, defensive realism, advocated by scholars such as Waltz (1979), suggests that states are motivated by survival to attain a secure place within the system, thus prioritizing balance over outright hegemony. This aspect of realism is crucial to understanding the behavior of smaller Pacific Island nations and Taiwan's strategic calculations, which may be centered around maintaining autonomy and deterring potential aggression.

The strategic behavior of states in the South Pacific can be further dissected through the prisms of geopolitics and geoeconomics. Geopolitics, as studied by Cohen (2003), examines the influence of geographical factors on state behavior, which in the context of the South Pacific involves the control of sea lanes, strategic maritime checkpoints, and resource-rich areas. Geoeconomics emphasizes the use of economic resources and tools to achieve strategic objectives, a dynamic captured by Blackwill and Harris (2016), who articulate how states like China employ economic measures such as trade, investment, and sanctions to wield influence and reshape regional dynamics.

To incorporate the latest scholarship within the realist paradigm, contemporary theorists such as Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) offer insights into the enduring nature of state behavior under the structural constraints of the international system. Their analysis could shed light on the continuing relevance of traditional realist considerations, such as power

balances and alliance formations, in the face of evolving challenges like cybersecurity and climate change. Similarly, examining recent strategic behavior through the lens of Layne's (2006) concept of "offshore balancing" could inform the approach of external powers like the US, which may opt to balance against the rise of China in the South Pacific indirectly.

The incorporation of critiques within realism, such as those posed by Legro and Moravcsik (1999), who argue for a consideration of domestic politics and international institutions, can broaden the analysis. This approach would account for the influence of internal political dynamics within Pacific Island states and the role of regional organizations in shaping their foreign policies. Additionally, the notion of normative constraints, as discussed by Finnemore (1996), which includes international laws and moral considerations, plays a role in relation to Pacific Island nations' responses to great power maneuvers. Specifically, their actions may not only be driven by realist calculations of power and security but also by adherence to international laws, environmental protections, and the pursuit of social justice and human rights.

## 2.2 Small States and their role in International Relations

“Small State” is a widely debated concept that has been defined in a variety of ways in relation to their role in international relations (Ingebritsen, Neumann & Beyer; 2006). Due to their increasing significance in the international sphere, literature surrounding small states has proliferated in the past few years and includes many definitions for this category. According to Baldacchino and Wivel, they can largely be divided into three, ideal-type definitions (2020).

The first definition equates Small States to “**Non-Great Powers**”. Traditionally, large power status could be drawn back to the fact that a country maintained stability and wrote international law, while small states were rule takers, free of systematic responsibility. However, more recently, permanent membership of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, possession of nuclear weapons, or the deployment of an aircraft carrier have become the criteria used to identify great power status (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020). The issue with this definition lies in the fact that, if these criteria are used, Germany, a

country with indisputable political and economic significance would be left out of the “great power” category and included as a small state. Therefore, this definition could, alternatively, include those states that are neither great powers, nor consistently striving for middle power status (Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006, pp. 5–6).

Another ideal-type definition could be based on the material assessment of states, meaning that Small States are those lacking power, most notably **military capability**, a resource largely correlated to population size (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020). The argument behind this lies in the idea that military capability permits a projection of state power beyond its territory; creating the potential for military actions and building the capacity to defend the state in case of invasion (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020). Due to their inability to project military force, some small states have even chosen to dismantle their armed forces, reducing their security forces to basic and humanitarian, ‘search and rescue’ operative teams (Bartmann, 2007, p. 299). In the case of Pacific Islands, only Fiji, Tonga and New Guinea have small military forces.

However, this definition centered around material assessment raises the question of what metrics should be used to define military capability. Options include gross domestic product (GDP), resident population size or defense expenditure. And even if one or several of these are chosen, a second, follow up question to be answered becomes what the threshold within these metrics should be.

The last ideal-type definition, frames small states as a **political construct that results from the perceptions and preferences of the people and institutions** of the small state as well as those of other states (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020). More optimistic as to the role these states can exercise, it could prove too enthusiastic about the international role of these entities, neglecting to consider the existing security and power asymmetry. Baldacchino and Wivel pose the example of Norway, a rich, stable and democratic (albeit small) NATO member state that has more international influence potential than unstable countries such as Lebanon. In the case of Pacific Islands, while their power asymmetry with regards to other states is undeniable, their increasing geostrategic significance has allowed for them to make strong demands when it comes to climate change, which both China and the US, who are competing for influence in the area, will have to consider in their battle for dominance.

In terms of prominent categorizations by international organizations, the World Bank, includes those 40 states with a population of 1.5 million or less and ten others with a population greater than 1.5 million (with the largest being Jamaica with almost 3 million inhabitants) that share similar challenges in the Small States Forum (SSF) (World Bank). These challenges may include remoteness (many are island states), debt burden, smaller land areas, fragmentation, dispersion and vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change (World Bank). In the case of the Pacific Islands, the combined total population of the 15 independent Pacific Island nations totals to a mere 2.3 million by estimates of the World Bank. The region is made up of hundreds of small islands scattered over an area equivalent to 15% of the earth's surface, which is why fragmentation, small land size and remoteness also apply (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2022). Lastly, the pandemic has exacerbated their debt burden and their vulnerability to climate change has been strongly emphasized by the Pacific Islands Forum (Pacific Security Outlook, 2022).

Although their global significance is often overlooked, small states are “more visible and prominent than at any other point of world history” (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020). While physical security and territorial integrity used to be constantly threatened in the past (Løvold, 2004), ‘extantism’ – once a state, always a state – has become fairly standard in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with some exceptions that are heavily criticized within the international community (such as the invasion of Ukraine that took place in early 2022).

In terms of globalization, it has unfolded as a two-faced coin, bringing both advantages and disadvantages to small states. While interconnectedness and the resulting platforms for international cooperation (such as the Pacific Islands Forum) have given small states a larger voice and more visibility, globalization has also restricted their autonomy and applied more pressure on their limited and thinly stretched diplomatic and administrative resources (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020). Moreover, while it has allowed for them to exponentially increase trade and avoid poverty, they have become more dependent on larger powers, due to unconventional security risks that have emerged, including mass migration, terrorism, money laundering and environmental degradation, the last of which possesses special significance for Pacific Islands (Pacific Security Outlook, 2022).

With regards to recent global developments, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven especially damaging to Small States, exacerbating already high fiscal imbalances and debt vulnerabilities, with debt to GDP ratios increasing by 10 percentage points or more in around one-third of Small States (World Bank). Recovery has become more challenging due to higher fuel and food prices in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and inflation leading to higher international borrowing costs is disproportionately affecting highly indebted Small States (World Bank).

### **3. Analysis**

#### 3.1 South Pacific Islands: History and Current Regional Dynamics:

##### 3.1.1 Historical Geostrategic Relevance

Before the arrival of European explorers and colonizers, the Pacific Islands were home to diverse and vibrant indigenous cultures with extensive histories going back thousands of years (Campbell, 1989). Extending through a vast part of the Pacific Ocean, the islands were populated by different ethnic groups, with their own languages, traditions and social structures. The indigenous peoples of the Pacific Islands were proficient navigators, using elaborate seafaring techniques to journey through the ocean and establish connections between neighboring islands (Campbell; 1989). These societies lived on sustainable subsistence practices, relying on fishing, agriculture, and craftsmanship to support their communities. Characterized by a deep connection to the natural environment, many indigenous belief systems were tied to the land, sea, and celestial bodies (Dickie, 2005). Social organization varied, ranging from hierarchical chiefdoms to more egalitarian structures (Campbell; 1989).

The Spanish were among the first Europeans to explore and claim territories in the Pacific. Among the explorers, Ferdinand Magellan probably stands out as the most prominent one (Goldberg & Goldberg; 2018). They established colonies in the Mariana Islands (including Guam) and the Caroline Islands in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Goldberg & Goldberg; 2018). Somewhat later, in the 1600s, the Dutch, through the Dutch East India Company, established a presence in parts of the Pacific, including the East Indies (Indonesia). In the

18<sup>th</sup> century, British explorers, including James Cook, extensively explored the Pacific (Fisher; 2017). Cook claimed territories for Britain, including the eastern coast of Australia and parts of Polynesia (Fisher; 2017). French and German colonization took place in the 1800s, with French territories including New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna (Campbell; 1989). The German Empire claimed colonies like German New Guinea and the Marshall Islands (Fisher; 2017). The US was the last to expand its influence to the Pacific, and did so partly as the result of the decline of the Spanish empire. They annexed Hawaii in 1898 after the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy and Guam and the Philippines were ceded to the U.S. after the Spanish-American War in the same year (Goldberg & Goldberg; 2018).

Throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, Pacific Islands played a smaller role but were significant as colonies of larger players in terms of the balance of power between Allied and Central Powers. They served as important bases, naval stations, and coaling stations. For instance, the British Royal Navy and the German Imperial Navy fought for control of crucial sea routes and strategic positions as Germany had established colonies in the Pacific, including German New Guinea, Samoa, and parts of Micronesia, while Australia and New Zealand were part of the British Empire (Fisher; 2017). The control of sea routes was essential for the movement of troops and resources between the Pacific and other theaters of the war (Hiery; 1995). Japan, allied with the Entente Powers, took advantage of Germany's preoccupation in Europe to seize German-controlled territories in the Pacific (Hiery; 1995). Japanese forces occupied the Mariana Islands, Caroline Islands, Marshall Islands, and Palau during the war (Hiery; 1995).

In the early stages of World War II, Japan pursued an aggressive expansionist strategy in the Pacific, aiming to secure vital resources and establish a defensive perimeter (White & Lindstrom; 1989). This led to the occupation of numerous Pacific Islands, including the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island, the Mariana Islands, and parts of New Guinea (Fisher; 2017). The Pacific Islands were the stage for crucial naval battles between the U.S. Pacific Fleet and the Imperial Japanese Navy. The Battle of Midway in 1942, for example, marked a turning point as the U.S. inflicted significant losses on the Japanese fleet, altering the course of the war in the Pacific (White & Lindstrom; 1989). In general, the Allied forces, led by the United States, engaged in a series of island-hopping campaigns to recapture strategic islands occupied by Japan (White & Lindstrom; 1989). In addition

to the Midway battle, other battles such as Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa were pivotal in shifting the balance of power in the Pacific (Fisher; 2017).

Pacific Islands served as crucial air bases and forward positions for both offensive and defensive operations. Controlling these islands allowed for strategic bombing raids, reconnaissance missions, and naval operations. In some Pacific Islands, notably in the Philippines and parts of Southeast Asia, local populations engaged in guerrilla warfare against Japanese occupiers, contributing to the overall Allied war effort (White & Lindstrom; 1989). The conclusion of World War II in the Pacific was marked by the use of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Dower; 2000). The airbases on the Pacific Islands, such as Tinian and Guam, played a critical role in launching these devastating attacks (White & Lindstrom; 1989). In the end, Japan was demilitarized and underwent significant political transformations (Dowe; 2000).

Post World War II, the U.S. emerged as a major power in the Pacific, leading to the establishment of military bases on several strategic islands, including Guam and the Marshall Islands (Firth; 2019). These bases played a crucial role in the U.S. strategy during the Cold War, allowing for surveillance, missile testing, and projecting power in the region (Fisher; 2017). Moreover, in the aftermath of the war, the United Nations granted trust territories to certain nations for administration (Firth; 2019). The Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, comprising islands like Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands, was administered by the United States (Firth; 2019).

The Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union extended to the Pacific, with both superpowers seeking to gain influence in the region (Davidson; 2017). The U.S. presence in the Pacific Islands served as a strategic deterrent, and the region became a focal point for geopolitical competition (Fisher; 2017). Additionally, Pacific Islands, particularly French Polynesia and the Marshall Islands, became testing grounds for nuclear weapons during the Cold War (Davidson; 2017). From 1946 to 1996, over 300 nuclear tests were conducted in the Pacific by the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, leading to significant environmental degradation, health issues among local populations, and ongoing socio-economic challenges. These tests left a legacy of contamination, displacement, and health problems that continue to affect these island communities (Henning, 2020; Lutz, 2019).



The post-war period witnessed a wave of decolonization movements globally, including in the Pacific. Some islands gained independence, while others transitioned to different forms of governance. Notable examples include the independence of Western Samoa (now Samoa) in 1962, as the first, Nauru (1968) and Fiji in 1970. Papua New Guinea (1975), the Solomon Islands (1978) Tuvalu (1978), Kiribati (1979), Vanuatu (1980), the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau (1986) followed (Fisher; 2017). As Pacific Island nations gained independence, many joined international organizations such as the United Nations to assert their sovereignty and participate in global diplomacy (Hasencamp; 2016). Forum Islands Countries, established in 1971, became a regional forum for Pacific Island nations to address common concerns (Hasencamp; 2016).

As US interest faded in the region post-Cold War, China's interests became increasingly evident. China has been supporting a variety of developing economies through the Belt and Road Initiative, providing them with low interest infrastructure loans (Grossman; Chase; Finin; Gregson; Hornung; ... & Shih; 2019). This allowed for an expansion of Chinese influence in the region.

## 3.2 Current Perspective

### 3.2.1 Regional Dynamics, Cooperation and Challenges

Comprising 18 member countries, including Australia and New Zealand, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), is the main institutional frame for cooperation between Pacific Islands, addressing various issues, including economic development, climate change, and security. Recent efforts include *The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, endorsed by the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in 2022- a strong Pacific-led development strategy for the region (PIF, 2022).

Other subregional organizations include the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), founded in 1986, an intergovernmental organization that aims to foster economic cooperation, political dialogue, and cultural exchange among its member states, primarily within the Melanesian region of the Pacific (Gallen, 2015). Meanwhile, the Polynesian

Leaders Group (PLG), formed in 2011, consists of eight Polynesian nations and emphasizes cultural solidarity, sustainable development, and environmental conservation within the Polynesian Triangle (Gallen, 2015). Finally, the Micronesian Presidents' Summit (MPS), comprising the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Marshall Islands, and Kiribati, was initiated in 2013 to address common challenges and interests among Micronesian nations (Gallen, 2015). While each group operates with distinct regional focuses, they collectively contribute to Pacific regionalism and cooperation.

Moreover, there are several trade agreements in place in the Pacific region (Appendix 1). The primary framework for enhancing trade among the Pacific Island Countries, the Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA) established in 2001, plays a crucial role in facilitating intraregional trade, although additional agreements also exist (refer to Annex 1). In 2004, an amendment to include trade in services was agreed upon by the members of PICTA (Chen, 2016). Out of the 14 Pacific Islands Forum nations, 12 have endorsed PICTA, with 11 of these Pacific Island Countries (PICs)—excluding Micronesia—having ratified it (Chen, 2016). However, just six nations have declared their preparedness to enact the agreement. The timeline for tariff reduction is extended, spanning up to a decade for the more economically vulnerable members and 13 years for the three PICs engaged in the Compacts of Free Association with the U.S. (Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Palau) (Chen, 2016).

Despite PICTA's incomplete execution, the Melanesian Spearhead Group's subregional free trade pact, initiated in 1993 and including Fiji, the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front of New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, has made significant progress. Nearly full duty-free trading has been achieved by Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu (Chen, 2016). Nevertheless, protective measures for specific local sectors have been frequently employed (Duncan, 2008).

With regards to external trade, recent developments in the trade relationships of Pacific Island Countries (PICs) highlight significant shifts, particularly in their interactions with China and traditional partners like Australia (World Bank, 2024). While Australian-Pacific trade has seen stagnation despite efforts to enhance engagement, the trade dynamics between China and the PICs have experienced a substantial upswing. This is attributed to China's increasing economic influence within the region, which is evident

through a notable rise in both imports from and exports to China among the PICs (World Bank, 2024).

From the year 2000, there has been a significant twelve-fold increase in the value of exports from China to the Pacific region, highlighting a clear preference for Chinese goods over Australian products among Pacific consumers, likely due to more competitive pricing (Dornan & Muller, 2018) (Appendix 2). Conversely, Australian exports to the region have not shown significant growth, with their value in 2017 even dropping below that of 2004 (Dornan & Muller, 2018). Pacific exports to China have also surged, moving from \$46 million in 2005 to almost \$400 million in 2017, showcasing a dramatic increase in trade activity with China compared to Australia, whose export values have fluctuated without showing a clear upward trend (UN, 2018).

A key source of income for PICs, Chinese tourism has also increase significantly in the past few years, particularly to islands such as Fiji (Appendix 3 and 4).

The Islands' location has made them important for naval and air routes. Some islands serve as crucial waypoints for shipping and military movements between Asia, the Americas, and Australia. Moreover, they are rich in natural resources, including fisheries, minerals, and timber. Specifically, the fact that The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) grants countries the right to establish Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) extending 200 nautical miles from their shores, led to many Pacific Island nations having extensive EEZs, providing control over valuable marine resources such as fish and potential underwater mineral resources (Pacific Security Outlook, 2022) .

In spite these key positive aspects, most of them are developing economies that are still mostly forested, and there is only limited access to mineral resources. Subsistence farming is common, and their manufacturing capabilities are mostly underdeveloped and limited to processing seafood (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2022). Tourism plays an essential role in all of their economies, which is why the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on their small economies (World Bank; 2022) (Appendix 5 and 6). And the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to inflationary pressure that is already taking a firm hold on some Pacific countries (Pacific Security Outlook, 2022).

Moreover, climate change is becoming an increasingly apparent challenge in the region. An example of its devastating effects, the 2022 eruption of Tonga's undersea volcano and subsequent tsunami caused over \$90 million in damages and impacted 85 percent of the country's population (World Bank, 2022). Other examples include a drought which effected the entire Kiribati population, resulting in a State of Disaster declaration by the Kiribati Government in June 2022 (Pacific Security Outlook, 2022). The country faced water contamination, brackish water, and threats to water accessibility and availability (Pacific Security Outlook, 2022). Some of the most pressing climate change impacts in the Pacific is expected to include increased annual surface temperatures; sea level rise; saltwater intrusion; coastal erosion; and increased intensity of extreme weather events (Pacific Security Outlook, 2022).

## 3.2 China's Perspective

### 3.2.1 History

Despite the geographical distance separating China from the Pacific Islands, the historical and cultural ties between them have been longstanding and significant. According to Henderson and Reilly (2003), the ancestry of these connections can be traced back to approximately 5000 years ago, when languages spoken by the Pacific's earliest inhabitants were linked to regions in Taiwan, indicating early migrations and cultural exchanges. By the 1700s, European explorers found Chinese markets already engaging with produce from the Pacific Islands, suggesting an early economic interaction (Henderson and Reilly, 2003). The 19th century saw a notable increase in these connections, with a significant influx of Chinese migrants to the Pacific, employed as indentured laborers (Henderson and Reilly, 2003). This migration led to the establishment of small, yet influential Chinese communities across various Pacific nations.

Initially, China's engagement in the region was driven by a protective stance towards these workers during the 1800s and early 1900s, challenging recruitment practices and securing the right to deploy envoys for overseeing the welfare of Chinese laborers in 1875 (Yang, 2019). Despite these early connections, China's engagement in terms of trade was relatively restrained, not falling within the ambit of its Maritime Silk Road initiative

(Yang, 2019). It wasn't until the mid-1970s that China's foreign policy began to visibly extend into the Pacific, potentially spurred by a desire to counteract Soviet influence (Fray, 2019). This period saw China establishing diplomatic missions in Fiji and Western Samoa in 1976, contemporaneously with Soviet movements in the region, as indicated by China's public denunciations of Soviet actions (Fray, 2019).

### 3.2.2 China's Foreign Policy rationales in the 21st Century

China's 21st-century foreign policy has undergone a marked shift, adopting a more assertive stance under President Xi Jinping's leadership (López Areu, 2023). Historical events and ideologies, such as the "Century of Humiliation" and the principles of non-interference and peaceful coexistence, continue to influence China's foreign policy (Zhao, 2016). China's leadership is driven by a desire to restore its status as a major world power, while avoiding the pitfalls that led to past conflicts and interventions by foreign powers (Zhao, 2016). Moreover, under Xi's leadership, foreign policy has been elevated to a level of strategic governance, with the President personally overseeing the Central Foreign Affairs Commission (Zhao, 2023). This strategic approach is evident in the articulation of key concepts such as peaceful development, the Chinese Dream, and the Belt and Road Initiative, which are central to Beijing's contemporary foreign policy narrative (Zhao, 2023).

This new assertive stance is particularly evident in the Asia-Pacific region, where China's assertive diplomacy and increased military presence signal a strategic push to extend its influence. In the contentious South China Sea, China's construction of military bases on disputed islands represents a hard power approach, intensifying frictions with countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines (López Areu, 2023). China's strategy has so far been an attempt to achieve hegemony in these seas to transform them into "Chinese seas," aiming to prevent the strong US military presence in the so-called first island chain of the Pacific - Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines - from operating freely in the area (López Areu, 2023). All of this against the backdrop of the historic goal of reunification with Taiwan.

China steadfastly adheres to its "One China" policy, employing assertive non-warfare strategies to influence Taiwan. These include military maneuvers like frequent PLA

bomber and fighter jet sorties near Taiwan, alongside naval operations featuring warships and aircraft carriers in the Taiwan Strait to demonstrate military power (Kawakami, 2023). Concurrently, Taiwan faces persistent cyberattacks from China aimed at extracting sensitive information, with notable incidents of hacking into government platforms and email accounts since 2018 (Maizland, 2024). Diplomatically, China has cut key communication channels, suspending the main cross-strait link with Taiwan's liaison office in 2016 (Maizland, 2024). In the political arena, China has escalated its interventions in Taiwan's democracy by spreading misinformation, influencing media operations, and engaging local businesses and influential figures to manipulate public opinion, particularly evident during the 2024 elections (Iyengar, 2024).

Under President Tsai's leadership, beginning in 2016, Taiwan has shifted its economic focus towards diversification, bolstering trade with Southeast Asia and encouraging business relocations away from China. This strategy nearly doubled trade with the targeted regions, despite Taiwan's exports to China reaching an all-time high in 2021 (Shen, 2024). Prior to Tsai, during President Ma's tenure from 2008 to 2016, over twenty agreements were signed with China, including a significant 2010 economic deal that re-established direct connections (Maizland, 2024). However, despite Taiwan's efforts to expand its international trade footprint, China's diplomatic maneuvers have effectively blocked Taiwan from joining major trade partnerships such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (Maizland, 2024). China remains Taiwan's largest trade partner (Appendix 7).

On a related front, China has diligently enhanced its military power, concentrating on upgrading its naval, aerial, and missile systems. In the span from 1996 to 2017, China underwent a dramatic transformation, shifting from an outdated large military to a sophisticated and proficient force (Heginbotham, Nixon, Morgan, Heim, Hagen, Tao Li, Engstrom, Libicki, DeLuca, Shlaplak, et al., 2015). While it has not yet matched the technological and operational capabilities of the United States, China has been rapidly closing this gap (Heginbotham et al., 2015). Furthermore, over the past thirty years, China's military spending has surpassed that of any other country, with the exception of the United States, underscoring its commitment to bolstering its military prowess (Hille, 2024).

For 2024 the official defense budget is supposed to increase by 7.2%, the same rate as last year (Hille, 2024) (Appendix 8). However, as Xi Jinping seeks to transform the People's Liberation Army into a stronger force, experts, such as Nan Tian, a researcher who tracks Chinese military spending at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, suggest that actual spending could be 30-35% higher than the official budget (Hille, 2024). An announcement made by the PLA in August 2021, at a time when China's economy is facing considerable challenges, highlighted the pressing need to expedite the creation of military equipment that is not only of superior quality but also efficient, fast, and economically feasible, thereby underlining the importance of innovating its defense technology to maintain a balance between military advancement and economic sustainability (Hille, 2024).

This military buildup enables China to project power far beyond its immediate geographical area, including the South China Sea and into the Pacific. The development of military bases, such as those on artificially created islands in the South China Sea, serves dual purposes of asserting territorial claims and providing strategic depth for power projection. Additionally, this expansion reflects a strategic shift towards blue-water naval capabilities, allowing China to maintain a presence in critical maritime routes and influence distant geopolitical theaters (Smith, 2020). This not only challenges the regional balance of power but also necessitates a recalibration of security strategies by other Pacific actors and global powers (Jones & Zeng, 2021).

### 3.2.3 China's Motives, Influence, and Prospects in Pacific Island Countries

China's strategic interests and actions in the South Pacific illustrate a multifaceted approach aimed at expanding its influence, curtailing Taiwan's diplomatic presence, and integrating the region into its broader geopolitical and economic initiatives. This analysis explores China's motives, the means through which it exerts influence, and the prospects of its endeavors in the South Pacific.

China's engagement in the South Pacific is driven by several overarching goals, including the diminution of Taiwan's international standing, the expansion of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the establishment of a strategic foothold that could challenge the traditional power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region (Bane, 2023). The desire to isolate Taiwan and reduce its number of diplomatic allies reflects China's longstanding policy of promoting the "One China" principle on the global stage. The Pacific Island countries, some of which remain among the few nations recognizing Taiwan, have thus become battlegrounds for diplomatic allegiance between Beijing and Taipei (Bane, 2023).

Moreover, China's reference to the South Pacific as part of the "Maritime Silk Road" signifies its intention to weave these islands into the BRI framework. This effort aims not only to build economic dependencies but also to expand China's influence through a combination of soft and hard power tactics, including economic investments and potentially military engagements (Bane, 2023). Ye, Park, Li and He's detailed exploration into the synergies between tourism and trade underscores a strategic layer to China's approach (2020). By fostering closer economic ties through increased tourism and trade, China not only bolsters its economic presence in the South Pacific but also lays the groundwork for deeper political and strategic relationships.

China's influence in the region has been growing, as evidenced by the diplomatic switches of the Solomon Islands and Kiribati in 2019 from Taiwan to China. These shifts were not isolated incidents but part of a larger trend facilitated by China's "carrot and stick" approach, offering economic incentives for cooperation while also engaging in punitive measures against countries like Palau for their refusal to sever ties with Taiwan (Raza, 2023). The promise of Chinese investment and aid, particularly under the BRI umbrella, presents a compelling lure for Pacific Island nations, many of which are in dire need of economic development and infrastructure improvement (Raza, 2023).

The security agreement signed between China and the Solomon Islands in April 2022 marks a significant step in China's long-term strategy in the South Pacific. This agreement is just the beginning of a broader initiative to engage with the region more intensively. China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi's tour aiming to secure a major cooperation agreement with ten Pacific nations, dubbed "Vision for Common Development," indicates a clear



intent to establish a comprehensive sphere of influence covering economic, communication, and security aspects (López Areu).

China's actions in the South Pacific are indicative of an ambition to extend its reach beyond the first island chain—a strategy that serves both economic and military purposes. Economically, establishing trade agreements and becoming the primary commercial partner in the region would not only bolster China's economic stature but also translate into significant political influence. According to Zhang (2019), the trade volume increased nearly 10-fold since 2005 reaching US\$8.2 billion in 2017 from US\$834 million in 2005. China's imports increased from US\$414 million in 2005 to US\$3.48 billion in 2017 and the number of Chinese tourists to the Pacific jumped from 3,969 in 2008 to 143,398 in 2017 (Zhang, 2019).

China's aid activity in the Pacific region has also intensified since 2006, with the aim of creating dependencies or obligations that translate into political and strategic leverage. Moreover, specific aid tied to infrastructural projects in key areas such as telecommunications, enhances the donor's strategic mobility and access. According to Lowy Institute, China has dramatically increased its aid activities in the Pacific. Between 2006 and 2017, it has provided circa US\$1.5 billion in foreign aid to the Pacific Island countries through a mixture of grants and loans. As of 2017, China was the third largest donor to the Pacific, contributing 8% of all foreign aid to the region between 2011 and 2017. Lowy Institute's data indicates that China provided circa US\$1.76 billion in foreign aid to the Pacific Islands region between 2010 to 2020.

The other line of interest surrounding these islands focuses on military strategy: the potential development of a military presence in the South Pacific, though still uncertain, could feasibly occur in the medium term (López Areu, 2022).

In conclusion both economic and military strategies aim to position China as the dominant power in East Asia. The implications of military advances and further aspects regarding trade and aid will be analyzed further in terms of the geopolitical competition with the US (in part 4.3).

### 3.3 Western Block

#### 3.3.1 US, Australia, and New Zealand Historical Engagement with the Pacific Islands

##### 3.3.1.1 United States

The United States' historical engagement with the Pacific Islands is a multifaceted narrative that spans over a century, characterized by territorial acquisitions, strategic military considerations, and complex political relationships. This engagement reflects the broader U.S. foreign policy objectives of expanding its influence and securing its interests in the Pacific region.

The United States began its formal engagement in the Pacific in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the acquisition of territories. A pivotal moment was the annexation of Hawaii in 1898, which provided the U.S. with a crucial naval base at Pearl Harbor, enhancing its strategic military presence in the Pacific (LaFeber, 1993). Subsequently, the U.S. took control of Guam and the Philippines following the Spanish-American War of 1898, further solidifying its strategic positioning in the region (LaFeber, 1993). These territories were not only valuable for military reasons but also for their economic potential, serving as stations for the burgeoning U.S. trade with Asia (LaFeber, 1993).

During the Cold War, the strategic importance of the Pacific Islands to the United States intensified. The Marshall Islands, part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands administered by the U.S. after World War II, became the site of extensive nuclear testing. Between 1946 and 1958, the U.S. conducted 67 nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands, notably at Bikini and Enewetak atolls (Johnston, 1994). These tests had profound environmental and health impacts on the local populations, leading to displacement, contamination, and long-term health issues (Johnston, 1994). The legacy of these tests continues to affect U.S.-Pacific relations and remains a point of contention and negotiation regarding compensation and remediation efforts.

In the latter part of the 20th century, the United States formalized relationships with several Pacific Island nations through the Compact of Free Association (COFA) (US

Department of Interior). This agreement offered Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands independence in exchange for significant U.S. military and economic rights in the region (US Department of Interior). COFA allowed the U.S. exclusive military access and strategic advantages, such as missile test sites, while providing the island nations with financial assistance, access to U.S. services, and the ability for their citizens to work and live in the U.S. (Compact of Free Association, 1986). This arrangement underscores the ongoing strategic value the U.S. places on its presence in the Pacific, balancing military interests with commitments to aid and development in the region.

### 3.3.1.2 New Zealand

New Zealand's role in Samoa is a significant aspect of its Pacific history. After the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, Western Samoa (now Samoa) was placed under New Zealand's administration as a League of Nations mandate (Davidson, 1967). This period was marked by several critical events that have had a lasting impact on Samoan-New Zealand relations. The 1918 influenza pandemic, introduced to Samoa by a ship from New Zealand, resulted in the deaths of approximately 22% of Samoa's population, a devastating event that significantly strained relations between Samoa and New Zealand (Davidson, 1967).

The Mau movement, which emerged in the 1920s as a non-violent campaign for Samoan independence, faced harsh repression from the New Zealand administration (Field, 2006). The most notorious incident occurred in 1929, known as Black Saturday, when New Zealand police fired on a peaceful Mau demonstration, killing eleven Samoans including Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III, a leader of the Mau movement (Davidson, 1967). This event has become a pivotal moment in Samoan national memory, highlighting the struggles for independence from colonial rule (Field, 2006).

Beyond Samoa, New Zealand also administered the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau, extending its Pacific influence (Davidson, 1967). These territories were granted self-governance in free association with New Zealand, allowing them significant autonomy in internal affairs while New Zealand manages defense and foreign affairs, reflecting a

unique form of decolonization that sought to maintain ties while acknowledging the right to self-determination (Crocombe, 2001).

New Zealand's involvement in the Pacific during World War II further underscores its historical engagement with the region. New Zealand forces played crucial roles in the Solomon Islands and other Pacific campaigns, contributing significantly to the Allied efforts in the Pacific theater (McGibbon, 2000). This involvement not only highlights New Zealand's strategic interests in the region but also its commitment to the security and stability of the Pacific Islands during a critical period in global history (McGibbon, 2000).

### 3.3.1.3 Australia

One of the most significant aspects of Australia's historical engagement in the Pacific was its administration of Papua New Guinea (PNG). After taking over from the British in 1906, Australia governed PNG, initially as an external territory and later under a United Nations trusteeship after World War II, leading to PNG's eventual independence in 1975 (Denoon, 1983). This period of Australian rule is critical to understanding the complexities of the relationship between Australia and PNG, as well as Australia's broader role in the Pacific.

During its administration, Australia focused on establishing a colonial government structure, developing infrastructure, and introducing health and education services (Denoon, 1983). However, critics argue that Australian rule in PNG was marked by paternalism and a slow pace towards preparing PNG for self-governance. This has been a point of contention in assessing Australia's colonial legacy in the Pacific (Denoon, 1983).

The strategic importance of the Pacific Islands to Australia was starkly highlighted during the Pacific War (1941-1945) (Powell, 1976). The threat posed by Japanese advances into the Pacific brought the region's strategic significance to Australian security into sharp focus. Australian forces played a significant role in campaigns across the Pacific, notably in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and other territories (Powell, 1976). This period reinforced the strategic importance of the Pacific Islands to Australia and underscored the necessity of a stable, secure Pacific region for Australia's national security (Powell, 1976).

The post-war period saw a shift in Australia's engagement with the Pacific Islands, particularly with the transition of Papua New Guinea to independence in 1975 (Griffiths, 2014). Australia's role in supporting PNG's move towards independence, though criticized for its tardiness and lack of preparation, marked a significant moment in Pacific history and Australia's decolonization efforts (Griffiths, 2014). Following independence, Australia became a major source of development aid for PNG and other Pacific Island countries, focusing on economic development, health, education, and governance (Griffiths, 2014). This aid relationship has been pivotal in defining Australia's post-colonial engagement with the Pacific.

More recently, Australia and New Zealand have cooperated extensively on a range of security, diplomatic and economic issues in the region. For example, in 1997, New Zealand and Australia led a military Truce Monitoring Group to Bougainville, a secessionist province of Papua New Guinea (Hoadley, 2005). Further, in 1999, the governments of New Zealand and Australia, amongst others, deployed troops to East Timor to reinforce the process of independence from Indonesia (Hoadley, 2005).

### 3.3.2 US, Australia, and New Zealand Motives, Influence, and Prospects in Pacific Island Countries

#### 3.3.2.1 United States

The strategic landscape of the Pacific Islands Region (PIR) has become a focal point of U.S. foreign policy, especially in light of the rising challenge posed by China's increasing influence in this geopolitically significant area. The United States has historically concentrated its attention and resources in the Micronesian subregion, where it exercises control over Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, and maintains Compacts of Free Association with the Marshall Islands, Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia (Yang, 2011). However, the broader PIR, which includes Melanesia and Polynesia, had often been relegated to the sphere of influence of close U.S. allies, such as Australia and

New Zealand, until recent shifts in strategy prompted a reevaluation and renewed commitment by Washington (Dupont, 2021).

The reinvigoration of U.S. policy towards the PIR is largely motivated by the strategic challenges presented by a revisionist China, as identified in the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (IPSR) of 2019 under the Trump administration. This report positions China as the primary challenge among four key trends in the Indo-Pacific strategic environment. The growing presence of non-traditional partners, including China, in the PIR, has been perceived as a gradual encroachment into an area where the United States has historically been the principal external power (Dupont, 2021). In response, the U.S. has initiated a series of engagements and investments aimed at reaffirming its influence and commitment to the region's nations.

A key aspect of the U.S. strategy has been the Pacific Pledge, under which the U.S. announced more than US\$100 million in assistance to the region as part of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, signifying a broad effort to partner with the Pacific Islands on pressing challenges such as economic and environmental resilience, maritime security, and good governance (U.S. Department of State, 2020). This commitment was further underscored in 2020 with an announcement of more than US\$200 million in new funding, which includes significant support for the region's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in addition to the nearly US\$350 million that U.S. agencies invest annually in the PIR (U.S. Department of State, 2020). To a smaller scale, the U.S. engagement in economic and infrastructure development is also exemplified by the Electrify Papua New Guinea Partnership, announced in 2018. This initiative is part of the broader Indo-Pacific strategy to support sustainable development and economic growth in the Pacific Islands through investments in essential infrastructure, such as energy and digital connectivity, providing a counterbalance to Chinese-funded projects in the region (U.S. Department of State, 2018).

In terms of military engagements, in 2018, the United States, together with Australia and Papua New Guinea, announced plans to develop the Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea (Larter, 2018). Construction at Lombrum Naval Base commenced in mid-2020 (Australian Department of Defence). This strategic move aimed at enhancing maritime security and asserting a more pronounced military presence in the

Pacific, showcasing the U.S.'s commitment to regional security in the face of expanding Chinese military activities (Larter, 2018).

Addressing the critical issue of climate change in the PIR, the United States has been actively involved in environmental initiatives, including the Pacific Islands Climate Change Cooperative (PICCC). This program aims to assist Pacific Island communities in adapting to the impacts of climate change through conservation efforts, sustainable management of natural resources, and resilience-building projects, reflecting the U.S.'s commitment to addressing environmental security in the region (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2021).

The strategic engagement of the U.S. in the PIR also encompasses diplomatic efforts, most notably marked by former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's attendance at the PIF meeting in Rarotonga in 2012 (Wallis, 2017), and the establishment of a USAID Pacific Island Regional Office in Papua New Guinea and a regional defense, environmental, and labor hub at its embassy in Fiji. A significant move by the United States to enhance its influence in the PIR was the decision to reopen its embassy in the Solomon Islands in 2022. This decision came amid concerns over the Solomon Islands' security pact with China (Packham, 2022).

These moves illustrate a clear shift towards deeper engagement in the PIR, supported by collaboration with allies through mechanisms like the trilateral alliance with Australia and Japan, aimed at bolstering U.S. influence in the Pacific Islands (Kabutaulaka, 2021). And another recent example of U.S. diplomatic engagement in the PIR is the hosting of the first-ever U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit in September 2022. During this summit, President Biden announced new initiatives and funding to strengthen ties with Pacific Island nations, focusing on issues like climate change, maritime security, and economic development, marking a significant effort to deepen U.S. relations with the region (White House, 2022).

Despite these efforts, challenges persist, including the consistency of U.S. engagement and aid to the region, which has been critiqued for its sporadic nature (Dupont, 2021). Furthermore, the competition for influence with China in the PIR necessitates a sustained

and coherent U.S. strategy to effectively counterbalance Beijing's ambitions and to support the sovereignty and development of Pacific Island nations.

### 3.3.2.2 New Zealand

New Zealand's engagement in the Pacific Islands is deeply rooted in geographic proximity, shared cultural heritage, and historical ties. The country's connection with the Pacific Islands is further cemented by its significant population of Pacific Islanders and Māori, the indigenous Polynesian people of New Zealand (Carrick, 2002). This cultural closeness enhances New Zealand's soft power in the region, as it is often seen as having a profound appreciation for Pacific Islands cultural sensibilities, which is crucial in diplomatic and developmental relations (Carrick, 2002; Yang, 2011).

The concept of 'Tagata Pasifika', meaning 'people of the Pacific', reflects New Zealand's self-identification as a Pacific nation. This identity influences all levels of social, cultural, and political engagement, creating a sense of kinship and mutual understanding between New Zealand and Pacific Island countries (Köllner, 2022). Formal relationships with several Polynesian islands, such as the free association with the Cook Islands and Niue, territorial authority over Tokelau, and the Treaty of Friendship with Samoa, further solidify this bond (Köllner, 2022).

The New Zealand government's 'Pacific Reset' policy, announced in 2018, marked a substantial shift in its approach to the region. The initiative included a significant allocation of NZ\$714.2 million to New Zealand's Official Development Assistance fund, prioritizing the Pacific Islands, and the establishment of 14 new diplomatic posts (Iati, 2021). These actions demonstrate New Zealand's commitment to deepening its relationships and support for the Pacific region's development and stability (Iati, 2021).

Progressing from the 'Pacific Reset' to a 'Pacific Resilience' stance, New Zealand's focus is on constructing a robust and resilient Pacific capable of withstanding socio-economic upheavals and the severe ramifications of climate change. According to a speech by New Zealand Foreign Minister Mahuta presented at the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs (NZIIA), financial assistance has been vital within 'Pacific Resilience', especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting New Zealand's broader commitment



to supporting Pacific nations' aspirations for stability, prosperity, and resilience (Mahuta, 2021). This commitment is underscored by a shared responsibility for the guardianship of the Pacific Ocean and the broader environment (Mahuta, 2021).

### 3.3.2.3 Australia

For Australia, which has traditionally viewed the South Pacific as its primary sphere of influence, the increasing consolidation of China's presence in the region presents a substantial geopolitical challenge (Lopez Areu, 2022). This growing influence of China could exacerbate Australia's sense of geographical isolation and vulnerability (Lopez Areu, 2022). Such developments have potential implications for Canberra's stance towards Beijing. As a response, Australia has adjusted its policy with the Pacific 'Step-Up' initiative stating that the "Pacific is one of the highest priorities of the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper" (DFAT, 2018).

More recently, Australia signed a security, climate change and migration accord with Tuvalu, in which Australia commits to provide assistance to Tuvalu in response to a major natural disaster, to a health pandemic or to military aggression (Mercer, 2023). And even though the pact was called into question by Tuvalu's recent election outcomes, it was finally accepted by the country's new government. Moreover, it also made a security agreement with Papua New Guinea, designed to bolster the country's internal security through more assistance in policing, defense and the judiciary as the Pacific Islands' largest nation seeks to develop its economy (Needham & Hobson, 2023).

These later wins were brought about by a series of advances in the strategic competition by China. The Solomon Islands requested additional Chinese police presence for the Pacific Games, following changes in security agreements and considerations by Vanuatu, Fiji, and Timor-Leste with Australia and China (Bell, 2023). Timor-Leste also sought China's assistance in developing police and defense infrastructure, marking a significant shift in the security dynamics of these nations (Bell, 2023).

## 3.4 Geopolitical Contest and Diplomacy

### 3.4.1 Current Dispute Focus

In terms of the current dispute focus, there are a myriad of factors that impact the existing geopolitical competition and portray shifts regarding alliances of Pacific countries. The recognition of Taiwan, signing of security agreements, trade salience, diplomatic relationships and foreign aid are key aspects that players seek to influence as they determine the advancement of each party's military interests.

#### 3.4.1.1 The Role Of Taiwan

Taiwan is a focal point when it comes to this dispute. Up until the 1970s, Taiwan held the Chinese seat at the United Nations and was widely recognized as the legitimate government of China (Atkinson, 2010). In the South Pacific, several island nations established or maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan during the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st century (Atkinson, 2010). These relationships have often been driven by economic aid, investment, and the promise of development assistance from Taiwan. In return, these nations support Taiwan's participation in international forums and organizations. However, China's rising economic power and its Belt and Road Initiative have led to increased Chinese influence in the South Pacific (Atkinson, 2010). This has resulted in some countries switching their recognition from Taipei to Beijing. China's approach in the region typically involves infrastructure investment and development aid without the political conditions often attached by Western powers (Portada Lem & Paudel, 2020).

But not only does China offer investments, it has also been accused of incentivizing the Islands by bribing officials to switch allegiances. In a particularly striking instance, it has been claimed that members of the Solomon Islands' parliament were tempted with offers exceeding AU\$250,000 per person to shift their diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan to China (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). Such incidents have heightened public anxiety over the sway of the elite and the risk of corruption. Adding to these concerns, in March 2023, the then-outgoing President of the Federated States of Micronesia, David Panuelo, accused China of attempts to subvert political figures and influence key decision-making processes (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). He suggested that these efforts were part of a strategy

to pivot the FSM's traditional alliances from the United States to Beijing (Keen & Tidwell, 2024).

The Solomon Islands and Kiribati are recent examples of countries that switched recognition from Taiwan to China, in 2019 (Aqorau, 2021). Another recent switch is Nauru, to whom Beijing offered a deal worth more than \$100 million — more than half of Nauru's 2023-24 budget and more than 10 times what Taiwan gave Nauru annually in project-based aid (Miller, Kuo & Chiang, 2024). Nauru changed allegiances, shortly after Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party, a man Beijing considers a dangerous separatist, was elected the next president of Taiwan (Miller, Kuo & Chiang, 2024). These switches are significant blows to Taiwan's international presence and reflect China's growing influence in the region. Each time a country switches recognition to Beijing, Taiwan's international space narrows, limiting its diplomatic and economic engagement opportunities.

Taiwan's most important international backer, though it does not recognize it as a country since 1979, the US seeks to counter Chinese efforts to isolate Taiwan diplomatically (US Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2022). Taiwan is the United States' eighth-largest trading partner, and the United States is Taiwan's second-largest trading partner (US Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2022). Moreover, the Taiwan Relations Act, provides for Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability and mandates the U.S. to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character (US Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2022) (Appendix 9). The Six Assurances of 1982 further amplify long-term arms sales commitments to Taiwan (US Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2022).

The South Pacific has become a significant arena for the diplomatic competition between China and the U.S., with Taiwan at the center. The U.S. indirectly supports Taiwan's efforts to maintain and expand its diplomatic relationships in the region as a means of countering Chinese influence. Moreover, Taiwan's position in the first island chain offers strategic advantages for maritime surveillance and defense, making Taiwan a pivotal element in the U.S. strategy to counterbalance China's growing military and economic influence in the region (Zhang, 2019). As such, Taiwan's economic engagement in the South Pacific, including aid and investment, serves as a counterweight to China's Belt

and Road Initiative (BRI) (Zhang, 2019). The U.S. views Taiwan's presence in the region as beneficial for providing alternative sources of investment and aid that might help keep the South Pacific nations from falling completely under China's sphere of influence (Zhang, 2019).

In addition to Taiwan's diplomatic and economic significance in the South Pacific, the region has also emerged as a focal point for military strategists due to its potential implications for regional security. The prospect of China developing a military presence in the South Pacific raises concerns for the United States and its allies, as it could significantly alter the balance of power in the region (Zhang, 2019). The deployment of Chinese military assets in the South Pacific could have far-reaching consequences, particularly in terms of disrupting vital supply lines to the first island chain (López Areu, 2022). This chain serves as a crucial buffer zone for Taiwan's defense and is integral to regional security cooperation efforts among the United States, Australia, Japan, and other partners. Should China succeed in isolating this chain militarily, it would not only threaten the security of Taiwan but also undermine the broader strategic interests of the United States and its allies in the region (López Areu, 2022).

#### 3.4.1.2 Factors That Condition The Advancement Of Military Interests Of Both Parties

##### 3.4.1.2.1 Diplomatic and military aspects

Besides counting on Taiwan for diplomatic presence, the US has recently established new embassies in the Solomon Islands (SI) and Tonga, with plans to open embassies in Vanuatu and Kiribati (Brunnstrom, 2024). Additionally, in terms of military influence, the U.S. has a significant military presence in the Pacific, including in territories like Guam and American Samoa. Guam hosts Andersen Air Force Base and Naval Base Guam, which are crucial for U.S. power projection in the Asia-Pacific region (Congressional Research Service, 2024). The U.S. military has air and naval bases on Guam and operates the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site at Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands (Congressional Research Service, 2024). The Department of Defense is also building a high-frequency radar system in Palau. Moreover, the U.S.

military has ties with Fiji, PNG, and Tonga, the only PICs with regular armed forces (Congressional Research Service, 2024). In general, the Compacts of Free Association are key in shaping the US military presence in the region as they grant the United States the prerogative to operate military bases in the Pacific Freely Associated States (FAS) and to make decisions related to their external security. They also entitle the FAS to U.S. security guarantees and economic assistance (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

China has already established diplomatic ties with 10 Pacific countries but has no military bases in the area (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). The security agreement it signed with the Solomon Islands, however, grants Chinese navy the right to dock and replenish in the Solomon Islands, potentially laying the groundwork for a more permanent military facility in the future (Harding & Pohle, 2022). Several experts suggest that infrastructure endeavors by the PRC, such as the construction and enhancement of airports and seaports in nations like Kiribati, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, might be repurposed for military operations by the PRC (Harding & Pohle, 2022). In a strategic move in 2018, Australia successfully outperformed China in a bid to refurbish the Blackrock military camp located in Nadi, Fiji (Mudaliar, 2018). In the same timeframe, Australia and the United States decided to collaboratively upgrade the Lombrum naval base in PNG, aiming to head off PRC's financial involvement (Larter, 2018).

In terms of cybersecurity, The U.S. has initiated the Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership (DCCP), launched by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in Suva. This program aims to bolster digital access and connectivity across the Pacific, enhancing the secure, efficient delivery and use of digital services to foster a competitive digital economy in the region (USAID, 2023). It has also increased its engagement in the Pacific Islands through economic and security initiatives aimed at countering Chinese influence. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEFP) is an example of these efforts, which include a focus on cybersecurity as a tool to ensure regional stability (Runde, D. F., & Rice, B., 2022).

Between 2020 and 2021, the United States, Australia, and Japan joined forces to sponsor submarine telecommunications cables for Kiribati, Micronesia, Nauru, and Palau (Congressional Research Service, 2024). The collaborative efforts between the United

States, Australia, and Japan have been aimed at thwarting PRC's telecommunications ventures in the area, with the concern that these could introduce cybersecurity risks (Congressional Research Service, 2024). In an initiative to counteract such moves, Australia in 2019 funded a submarine telecommunications cable project linking PNG, the Solomon Islands, and Australia, effectively blocking the Chinese company Huawei from executing the project (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

Despite these efforts, in 2022, the Solomon Islands announced intentions to secure a loan of \$100 million from a PRC-based bank for Huawei to establish 161 cellular towers (Congressional Research Service, 2024). Moreover, China has launched cyberattacks on civilian infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific, which represent a significant escalation in cyber tactics, positioning these as part of wider geopolitical strategies (The Diplomat, 2021).

#### 3.4.1.2.2 Trade and foreign aid

Pacific Island Countries (PICs) prioritize maintaining a wide array of trade relationships, continuously seeking avenues to broaden their market reach (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). The Solomon Islands, for example, heavily depend on China for exporting their commodities. In contrast, nations like Fiji and Samoa find their economic ties stronger with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, highlighting a diverse approach to international trade engagements (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). Papua New Guinea stands out with its export markets being well-distributed across various global powers, showcasing an adeptness at navigating geopolitical complexities (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). Despite these varying alignments, all PICs share a common goal: to enhance their trade capabilities and improve service delivery (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). Reflecting this ambition to foster development and widen their economic horizons, ten PICs have aligned themselves with China's Belt and Road Initiative. This global development strategy underscores China's push for infrastructure development across participating countries, promising new opportunities for growth and connectivity within the Pacific region.

In 2020, the commerce between the United States and the economies of the Pacific Island amounted to \$968 million in total goods trade. The U.S. exported goods valued at \$548

million and imported goods worth \$420 million, leading to a trade deficit of \$128 million with the Pacific Islands for that year (USTR).

On the other hand, trade between China and the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) that hold diplomatic ties with it has surged from \$153 million in 1992 to \$5.3 billion in 2021, marking an average annual growth of 13% and a more than thirtyfold increase over three decades. These PICs have been consistently involved in the China International Import Expo (CIIE) is a trade fair held in Shanghai, China. The two-way investment has also been on an upward trajectory. Preliminary figures indicate that by the end of 2021, China's direct investment in PICs with diplomatic relations had reached \$2.72 billion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022).

In terms of aid, The United States Department of State annually extends support to the Pacific Island nations that are signatories to the South Pacific Tuna Treaty, emphasizing the importance of sustainable fisheries (Congressional Research Service, 2024). For the fiscal year 2023, this support was quantified at \$31 million. In a significant move, the Biden Administration has proposed to escalate this financial aid to \$60 million each year for the next decade (Congressional Research Service, 2024). This initiative is part of a larger commitment unveiled in September 2022, where the administration pledged a total of \$810 million to support various endeavors (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

In a parallel effort to bolster economic stability and development, the United States, through the Compacts of Free Association, has reinforced its commitment to economic assistance for its Pacific partners. Notably, in 2023, the U.S. signed bilateral agreements with three crucial partners in the Pacific: the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and Palau (Congressional Research Service, 2024). These agreements promise to extend the provision of economic aid for another two decades, amounting to a total of \$7.1 billion. Included in this package is a \$634 million allocation intended to ensure the continued operation of the U.S. Postal Service within these Free Associated States (Congressional Research Service, 2024). This suite of measures reflects a concerted effort by the United States to support sustainable development and economic resilience among its Pacific allies.

Moving forward with its strategic diplomatic initiatives, the Biden administration crafted the inaugural Pacific Partnership Strategy. This strategy is a roadmap for engagement, designed to align and synchronize efforts with allied nations and the Pacific Islands themselves, ensuring that actions are complementary and directly address the unique needs of the region (Keen & Tidwell, 2024).

Building on this strategic framework, the United States spearheaded the formation of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) in mid-2022. This coalition serves as a platform for enhancing economic ties and diplomatic relations with nations in the Pacific Island region, focusing on areas critical to the region's future—climate resilience, sustainable ocean management, and bolstering cyber defenses (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). The consortium brings together prominent international contributors, including Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). These nations collectively contributed approximately 77% of the total regional aid in 2021 (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). The PBP stands as a testament to collaborative finance and diplomatic efforts that reinforce existing bilateral relationships while fostering regional stability and cooperation.

China's role as a key development partner in the Pacific has been marked by significant infrastructure investments (Appendix 10). Notably, China's assistance in constructing the China-Samoa Friendship Park and the expansion of the Samoa Conference Centre – projects valued in the millions – demonstrate China's commitment to bolstering its presence and influence in the region through soft power strategies (Zhang & Smith, 2020). Other notable examples include the construction of the Independence Boulevard in Papua New Guinea, the Malakula island highway in Vanuatu, the renovation of Tonga's national road, and the Pohnpei highway in Micronesia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). In October 2021, China took further steps to deepen its engagement with the PICs by announcing the establishment of the China-Pacific Island Countries Poverty Reduction and Development Cooperation Center (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). This announcement came during the first China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting, signaling China's commitment to supporting the socio-economic development of the PICs. Alongside infrastructure investments, China has actively assisted PICs in developing their human



resources, contributing to capacity building and skill enhancement initiatives in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022).

As elucidated when addressing China's influence in the Pacific, negotiation tactics by the PRC in the Pacific have sparked alarm due to their approach, which typically involves engaging directly with high-level political offices or influential figures rather than working through the customary channels of development ministries (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). This practice has triggered fears about the undermining of institutional integrity.

Despite facing criticism for perceived inattention to the Pacific region, Australia remains the principal donor there, with substantial contributions to local institutions (Keen & Tidwell, 2024) (Appendix 11). In a bid to counter China's burgeoning aid and influence, former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in 2016 called for intensified engagement in the Pacific (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). His successor, Scott Morrison, furthered this commitment with the 2018 Pacific Step-up, encompassing security and development efforts, notably establishing the Australia Pacific Security College and the Pacific Fusion Centre, and allocating new resources for disaster readiness and digital infrastructure (Keen & Tidwell, 2024).

To tackle the region's significant infrastructure gap and provide an alternative to Chinese loans, in 2019, Australia launched the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), a fund with AU\$3 billion for infrastructure projects and AU\$1 billion in grants, focusing on critical sectors like transportation, energy, and digital infrastructure (Keen & Tidwell, 2024). To date, about AU\$1.2 billion has been allocated across the Pacific, affirming Australia's role as a key infrastructure partner (Keen & Tidwell, 2024), though still below the PRC. The AIFFP aims to offer transparent lending options and uphold regional standards for procurement and accountability, although it introduces another layer to an already extensive aid landscape (Keen & Tidwell, 2024).

#### 3.4.1.2.3 Security agreements

Recent agreements and developments underscore the interplay of alliances, strategic partnerships, and national interests. Tuvalu, for instance, has entered into a new security agreement with Australia, a move that has received the nod from its new leadership,

reflecting the region's ongoing geopolitical shifts (Bell, 2023). And Papua New Guinea (PNG) has also solidified its security relationship with Australia through a security pact, even as China proposed its own security deal to PNG, illustrating the intense competition for influence in the Pacific (Bell, 2023). Kiribati and Vanuatu represent further examples of the region's shifting allegiances. Kiribati has enhanced its security collaboration with China through a policing assistance program, following its diplomatic switch from Taiwan to China in 2019 (Needham, 2023). Meanwhile, Vanuatu has sought to reassess its security agreement with Australia, reflecting its new leadership's preference for a non-aligned policy and concerns over national sovereignty (Needham, 2023).

Fiji's security ties have traditionally leaned towards China, particularly highlighted by a memorandum of understanding on police cooperation signed in 2011, which saw Chinese police officers deployed on Fijian soil and the frequent visits of People's Liberation Army ships. In 2018, the PRC gifted the island a hydrographic survey ship (Bell, 2023). Other gifts included police vehicles, drones, and other surveillance and digital equipment. And in terms of aid, under China-friendly former Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, the Fiji obtained approximately \$300 million from Beijing between 2011 and 2018 (Bell, 2023). However, Fiji's current stance appears to be one of recalibration, as indicated by its decision to stick with the China police deal after a review, despite the initial suspension of the policing agreement by Prime Minister Rabuka (Nataro, 2024). Rabuka's tenure has also seen Fiji diversifying its security partnerships, including signing a defense agreement with New Zealand and securing an aid package from Australia, suggesting a nuanced approach to its international security relationships (Bell, 2023).

Timor-Leste's recent activities mark another significant development, with the signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership with Beijing, which includes military cooperation (Dziedzic, 2023). Moreover, Timor-Leste's President José Ramos-Horta has also requested Chinese assistance in building police and military infrastructure (Dziedzic, 2023). This comes after Australia signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement with Timor-Leste in 2022, which was built on the two nations' longer running Defense Cooperation Program and the joint Hari'i Hamutuk military exercise (Bell, 2023). In an attempt to navigate different strategic alliances, Ramos-Horta assured Australia that Beijing is respectful of its position (Bell, 2023).

The Solomon Islands have taken a decisive turn towards China, inviting additional Chinese police to support security for the Pacific Games after signing a controversial security pact with Beijing on areas including equipment donations, police training, and the temporary posting of Chinese officers in the Solomon Islands (Bell, 2023). This pivot comes against the backdrop of a long-standing partnership with Australia, highlighted by the Australian-led 14-year Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and the subsequent Solomon's International Assistance Force (SIAF) (Bell, 2023). The shift was brought about by criticisms from Prime Minister Sogavare regarding the undermining of the islands' sovereignty by Canberra.

### 3.4.2 Geopolitical Rivalry Surrounding Global Leadership

In the geopolitical context of the South Pacific, the influence of hard power—manifested through military might, economic leverage, and strategic diplomatic maneuvers—plays a pivotal role in shaping the contours of global leadership rivalry. The election of Taiwan's leaders with pro-independence leanings, such as Lai Ching-te, underscores a critical flashpoint in cross-strait relations, with Beijing intensifying its efforts to diplomatically isolate Taiwan (Miller, Kuo & Chiang, 2024). This development has far-reaching implications for the geopolitical equilibrium, as evidenced by China's economic inducements to Pacific Island nations like Nauru, aiming to sway diplomatic recognition in its favor (Aqorau, 2021). Such maneuvers highlight the application of hard power in international relations, where economic incentives are strategically deployed to influence diplomatic allegiances.

The strategic undercurrents in the region are further complicated by emerging security concerns, notably maritime security and cybersecurity. The Solomon Islands' security pact with China marks a significant shift, suggesting Beijing's intent to extend its military reach and influence in the Pacific, challenging the strategic interests of the United States and its allies (Harding & Pohle, 2022). This move, coupled with concerted efforts by the United States, Australia, and Japan to mitigate cybersecurity risks posed by Chinese technological ventures, illustrates the complex dynamics of hard power in shaping regional security architectures (Congressional Research Service, 2024). Such initiatives

highlight the strategic competition in both the maritime and cyber domains, emphasizing the importance of hard power in geopolitical rivalry.

Amid these strategic considerations, the environmental vulnerabilities of the South Pacific have emerged as a critical arena for international engagement (Appendix 12 and 13). The devastating effects of natural disasters, such as the Tonga volcanic eruption, underscore the urgent need for climate resilience and environmental security in the region (World Bank, 2022). In response, major powers have initiated specific climate resilience projects to extend their strategic influence. For example, China has launched the China-Pacific Island Countries Climate Change Cooperation Center, aiming to facilitate climate adaptation and mitigation efforts in the region (China's Ministry of Ecology and Environment, 2022). Similarly, the United States, through initiatives like the USAID Pacific Islands Climate Change Adaptation Project, seeks to enhance the resilience of Pacific Island nations to environmental challenges (Pacific Security Outlook, 2022). These efforts demonstrate the strategic incorporation of climate change into the broader geopolitical rivalry, where environmental support initiatives serve not only to address immediate vulnerabilities but also to bolster diplomatic ties and extend influence in the Pacific.

### 3.4.3 Island Nations' Perspectives on Indo-Pacific Geopolitics

The Pacific Islands Countries (PICs), while often seen as pawns in the grand strategy games of major powers, are not passive actors in the geopolitical contest unfolding in the Indo-Pacific region. They have, in fact, been actively navigating and, at times, exploiting this rivalry to bolster their autonomy, developmental aspirations, and regional solidarity, rooted in a collective identity and purpose (Bell, 2023). This assertiveness is particularly visible in how PICs leverage their collective voice on the global stage, especially in matters of environmental security—a domain where their vulnerability translates into a powerful diplomatic currency.

The strategic use of the 'Blue Pacific' identity and the Framework for Pacific Regionalism by PICs demonstrates a concerted effort to chart their own course. The 'Pacific Way' emphasizes collective agency and a united front in addressing challenges such as climate

change, which the Pacific Islands Forum leaders have repeatedly identified as the most pressing existential threat to the region (Dupont, 2021). The data from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP, 2020) on projected economic losses due to climate risks, and the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index, strongly highlight the disproportionate impact of climate change on PICs, further fueling their resolve in international climate advocacy (UN ESCAP, 2020).

Their success in securing the inclusion of the 1.5°C target in the Paris Agreement showcases the PICs' diplomatic agility and strategic coalition-building (Kuruppu & Willie, 2015). By doing so, they have secured global recognition of their unique vulnerabilities and persuaded larger powers to commit to more aggressive climate action (Kuruppu & Willie, 2015). The Nauru Agreement and the Vessel Day Scheme epitomize the PICs' capacity to use their natural resources, like fisheries, as bargaining chips to generate significant revenue, reflecting an acute understanding of the economic aspects of sovereignty and self-determination (Hanich, Wabnitz, Ota, Amos, Donato-Hunt & Hunt, 2018).

However, the narrative of PICs playing rival powers off against each other is not without its complications. The allure of immediate material gains from security partnerships must be weighed against the grave risks to sovereignty that such asymmetric arrangements can entail (Bell, 2023). The stakes are particularly high when external powers have significant interactions with the very state organs that uphold PIC governments and institutions (Bell, 2023). The key challenge, then, is managing these partnerships so that capability gains from security collaboration do not compromise PICs' sovereignty and agency.

An instance that illustrates the impact of overstepping in these relationships is the reaction in Fiji when Chinese police forcibly repatriated Chinese nationals without regard for local laws, a move that angered Fijian authorities and resonated across the Pacific (Bell, 2023). Such incidents can trigger a shift in allegiances, as seen when regional powers take liberties that are perceived to undermine local sovereignty.

The case of the Solomon Islands, where concerns about a proposed defense force raised questions about broader consultation with neighbors, exemplifies how long-term unbalanced partnerships can evolve into dependencies, challenging the autonomy of the

smaller states (Miller, Kuo & Chiang, 2024). The Solomon Islands' shift towards China due to the perceived threat of Australian-led RAMSI and SIAF partnerships into the country's sovereignty underscores the need for external powers like Australia not to overplay their hand (Bell, 2023). While Canberra's engagement is pivotal in countering Beijing's overtures, it must align its security objectives with those of PICs to avoid alienating them or provoking a regional backlash that could inadvertently benefit China.

In conclusion, while the PICs operate within an asymmetrical power dynamic, their strategic navigation of Indo-Pacific geopolitics reflects a sophisticated balancing act. They are actively shaping their engagements with larger powers to serve their interests, underscored by a deep understanding of the implications of climate change and the need to maintain sovereignty over their resources and future.

#### 3.4.4 Other Relevant Parties

In the dynamic geopolitical landscape of the Pacific, several players have historical, strategic, and economic stakes that influence the unfolding contest. While Asian powers like China, Taiwan, South Korea, India, and Japan are increasingly prominent (Dupont, 2021), traditional Western powers—namely Australia, New Zealand, and France—remain deeply vested (Yang, 2011), each maneuvering within the region to protect and advance their interests.

France, despite a waning presence post-nuclear testing, has resurged as a key player. With the ceasing of nuclear weapons testing in 1996 (Yang, 2011), France shifted its focus towards countering China's influence, mindful of its residual sovereign and economic interests tied to its territories in the region (Yang, 2011). The integration of New Caledonia and French Polynesia into the Pacific Islands Forum in 2016 reflects France's strategic intent to bolster its regional status (Wallis, 2017). Furthermore, France's diplomatic tact is apparent in its handling of Fiji post-coup (Wallis, 2017) and its proactive stance on climate change during summit meetings with PIF countries (Wallis, 2017). These actions, coupled with France's strengthening defense cooperation with Australia through agreements and joint statements of strategic partnership, illustrate France's multi-dimensional approach in the Pacific (Wallis, 2017).

Japan's engagement in the Pacific is informed by its geographical proximity and shared insular characteristics with the Pacific Island nations (Hayward-Jones, 2015). After World War II, Japan re-entered the region primarily through resource diplomacy, leveraging aid donations to further its interests in valuable natural resources (Fry, 2019b). In response to China's expanding footprint, Japan has opted for a different approach than direct competition in aid. It seeks to be the "partner of choice" by concentrating on significant regional issues and delivering assistance where it can be most impactful (Hayward-Jones, 2015).

As China's influence grows, Japan has aligned with Australia, New Zealand, and other democracies, aiming to provide a counterbalance (Hayward-Jones, 2015). This cooperative strategy emphasizes the importance of regional stability and the free navigation of trade routes (Hayward-Jones, 2015). Japan's diplomacy refrains from the "overt chequebook" approach and instead aims to develop partnerships based on mutual interests and respect, reflecting a more sustainable and potentially more influential form of engagement (Hayward-Jones, 2015).

#### **4. Conclusion**

##### 4.1 Findings and new perspectives

The strategic maneuvering within the South Pacific offers revealing insights into the successes and missteps of the major powers engaged in this arena. China's adept use of economic leverage through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and security agreements with nations like the Solomon Islands is a testament to its strategic acumen in extending influence. The economic incentives and infrastructure investments provided by China have realigned diplomatic recognition within the region, significantly impacting Taiwan's international presence (Aqorau, 2021; Harding & Pohle, 2022).

On the other hand, the United States and its allies, notably Australia and Japan, have shown a robust stance on cybersecurity and strategic military posturing, aiming to maintain regional stability and counter potential security threats (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

Environmental initiatives by both China and the United States, such as the China-Pacific Island Countries Climate Change Cooperation Center and the USAID Pacific Islands Climate Change Adaptation Project, have also emerged as pivotal in addressing the Pacific's environmental challenges (Pacific Security Outlook, 2022; World Bank, 2022). However, the effectiveness of these initiatives is contingent upon their relevance to the needs of Pacific communities and whether they empower local capacities without fostering dependency. And both China and the US remain major polluters, as the two largest CO2 emitters worldwide.

A nuanced understanding of the leading forces in this geopolitical contest reveals that while China has made significant inroads with its economic engagements, the United States and its allies maintain a strong strategic and military presence (Dupont, 2021). The real measure of leadership, however, may well be in the domain-specific influences: China's in economic engagement and infrastructure development and the United States and its allies' in military cooperation. Nevertheless, Pacific alliances in terms of security agreements remain everchanging.

The critical shortfall in this geopolitical contest is the potential neglect of the long-term sustainability and sovereignty of Pacific Island nations, a focus that might sideline the region's primary concerns like climate change and sustainable development (Baldacchino, 2010; Betzold, 2016). The geopolitical rivalry in the South Pacific, therefore, should not only be about vying for influence but also ensuring the welfare and long-term resilience of Pacific Island nations. A comprehensive strategy that respects the sovereignty and aspirations of Pacific communities is crucial for sustainable and mutually beneficial outcomes.

A more holistic approach to engagement, which includes the perspectives of like-minded powers such as Australia, New Zealand, France, India, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, can serve to dilute China's influence and show respect for the sovereignty of Pacific Island nations, allowing them to choose their development partners freely (Dupont, 2021). This alignment should be seen not as a response to short-term events but as part of a consistent long-term strategy that transcends changes in government and aims to maintain the delicate balance of power in the Asia-Pacific. Such a balance is pivotal to prevent any military escalation in the region, and it is this long-term strategic vision that will be



critical for constructing an attractive alternative for smaller states within the region (López Areu, 2022).

#### 4.2 Implications for Future Regional Dynamics

The geopolitical landscape of the South Pacific is poised for intensification in the competition for influence between China and the Western bloc, including key players such as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. This rivalry is multifaceted, encompassing diplomatic, security, economic, and environmental arenas. At the heart of diplomatic tensions are the Pacific Island Countries (PICs), which find themselves at a crossroads, often balancing their relations between China and Taiwan. Under President Xi Jinping's assertive foreign policy, China has seen success in shifting the diplomatic allegiances of countries like the Solomon Islands and Kiribati. This trend of shifting allegiances, highlighted by Taiwan losing Nauru's recognition to China, may well continue as China wields its economic and diplomatic influence.

This tug-of-war extends into economic and infrastructure investments, where initiatives like Australia's Pacific 'Step-Up' and the United States' Pacific Pledge aim to cement their commitment to the region. However, China's Belt and Road Initiative offers an enticing alternative for nations in dire need of infrastructure and economic growth, presenting a significant challenge to Western influence. The competition for economic engagement is likely to encourage PICs to seek the best opportunities to further their development goals, potentially altering the region's economic dependencies.

On the security front, efforts by the Western bloc to establish a presence through new embassies and military bases, like the Lombrum Naval Base in Papua New Guinea, signify a strategic endeavor to sustain influence. In contrast, China's ambitions, notably through its security agreement with the Solomon Islands, hint at a possible shift in the military balance, urging both the PICs and global powers to rethink their security strategies. And, as digital connectivity becomes increasingly essential, control over telecommunications infrastructure will become a new front in the geopolitical contest. The competition to build and manage these critical networks will have implications for national security, economic development, and even governance in the PICs.

The escalating adverse effects of climate change bring environmental and climate change initiatives to the forefront of geopolitical strategy. The eruption of Tonga's undersea volcano underscores the urgency of addressing climate impacts. Initiatives such as the US-led Pacific Islands Climate Change Cooperative and China's climate cooperation centers underscore the use of soft power in pursuit of geopolitical objectives, with the effectiveness of these initiatives likely to shape future regional cooperation and the PICs' environmental responses.

The emergence of informal groups and the involvement of non-state actors, exemplified by the 'Partners in the Blue Pacific' (PBP), illustrate a collaborative shift towards aid and development. This consortium, including countries like Australia, Canada, Germany, and Japan, aims to streamline assistance and fortify relationships, potentially influencing the balance of power in the region.

As marine resources become scarcer due to overfishing and environmental changes, PICs' Exclusive Economic Zones will gain heightened significance. A 'Scramble for the Pacific' could ensue, reminiscent of the 19th-century colonial race, but with a focus on underwater resources and biodiversity. This could lead to conflicts over maritime boundaries and resource entitlements, making the Pacific Islands even more of a geostrategic resource and intensifying the power competition.

The implications geopolitical contest in the South Pacific are far-reaching, impacting the future of the region's economic growth, security framework, diplomatic ties, and environmental policies. The interrelation of these factors will define the regional dynamics, potentially reshaping the foreign policies and alliances of the PICs. In this evolving geopolitical chess game, the actions of China and the Western bloc are crucial, with the PICs navigating their role as both significant players and, to some extent, pawns in a larger strategic contest.

#### 4.3 Areas in which to Conduct Further Research

As this geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, several areas emerge as crucial for further research to deepen our understanding and foresee future developments.

A significant domain that calls for further investigation is the integration of technology and cybersecurity within the geopolitical strategies of the South Pacific. The digital realm has become a new frontier of competition, where advancements in technology not only promise development opportunities but also introduce vulnerabilities to cyber threats. Exploring how Pacific Island nations navigate these challenges, alongside the influence exerted by major powers through digital infrastructure investments, could offer insights into the future of sovereignty and security in the region.

Closely related is the pressing issue of climate change, which poses an existential threat to the islands. The environmental security of the South Pacific is linked to its geopolitical stability. Future research could beneficially further examine how climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies are influencing regional alliances and power dynamics. This includes assessing the role of external powers in supporting or undermining the environmental resilience of island nations, and how these activities align with broader strategic interests.

Additionally, the concept of the blue economy presents a fertile ground for exploration. As island nations seek sustainable development paths, understanding the balance between economic growth and the preservation of maritime resources becomes crucial. This encompasses not just fisheries, but also emerging sectors like deep-sea mining and marine biotechnology. The strategic implications of these industries for regional autonomy and the involvement of external geopolitical actors in shaping the blue economy's future could provide valuable perspectives on the sustainable development of the South Pacific.

In navigating these areas, the role of regional institutions and multilateral cooperation in mediating the complex interplay of interests in the South Pacific cannot be understated. As such, an in-depth analysis of how these entities facilitate dialogue, foster cooperation, and resolve conflicts would illuminate the mechanisms through which Pacific Island nations assert their agency amidst global competition.

These suggested areas for further research are interconnected, each influencing and being influenced by the broader geopolitical factors shaping the South Pacific. Diving into these topics will not only contribute to our academic understanding but also offer practical insights for policymakers engaged in this dynamic region. As we look to the future, it is

clear that the strategic importance of the South Pacific will only grow, underscoring the need for continued scholarly attention to its evolving geopolitical landscape.

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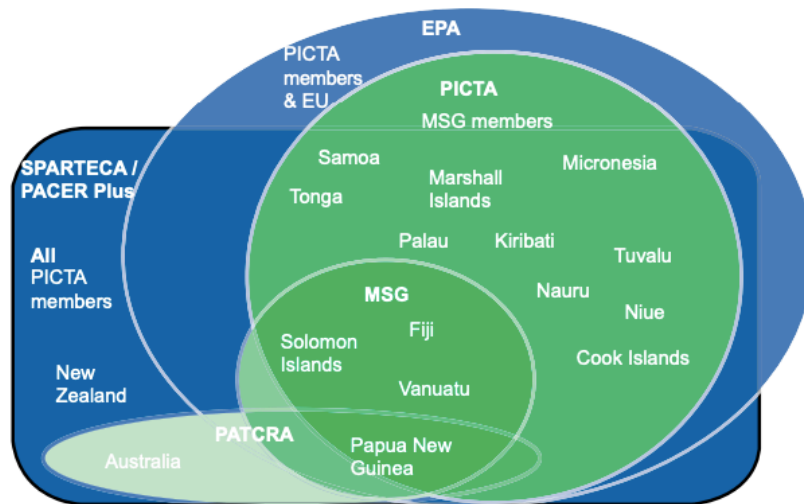
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## 6. Appendix

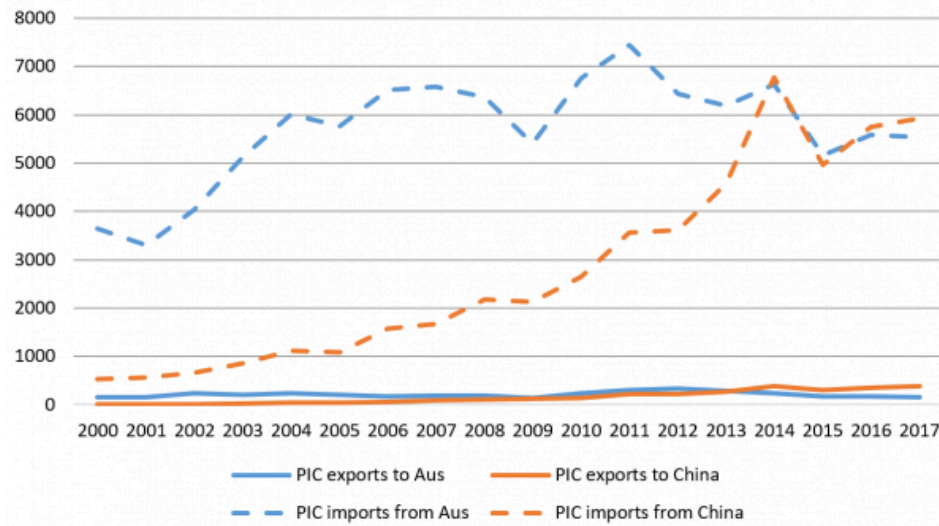
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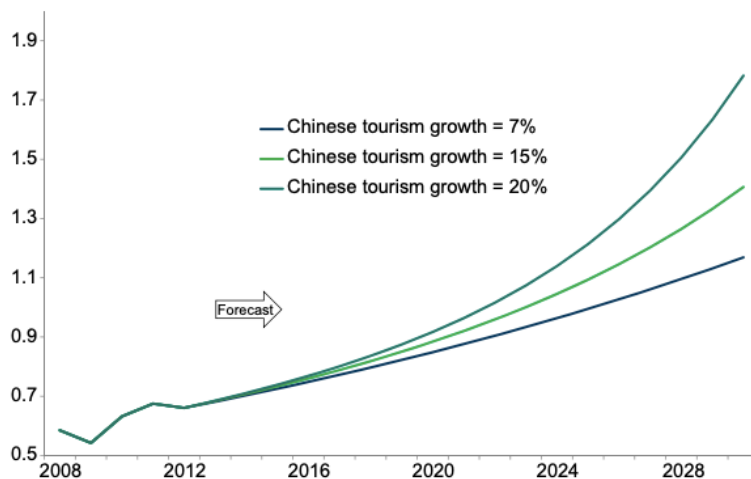
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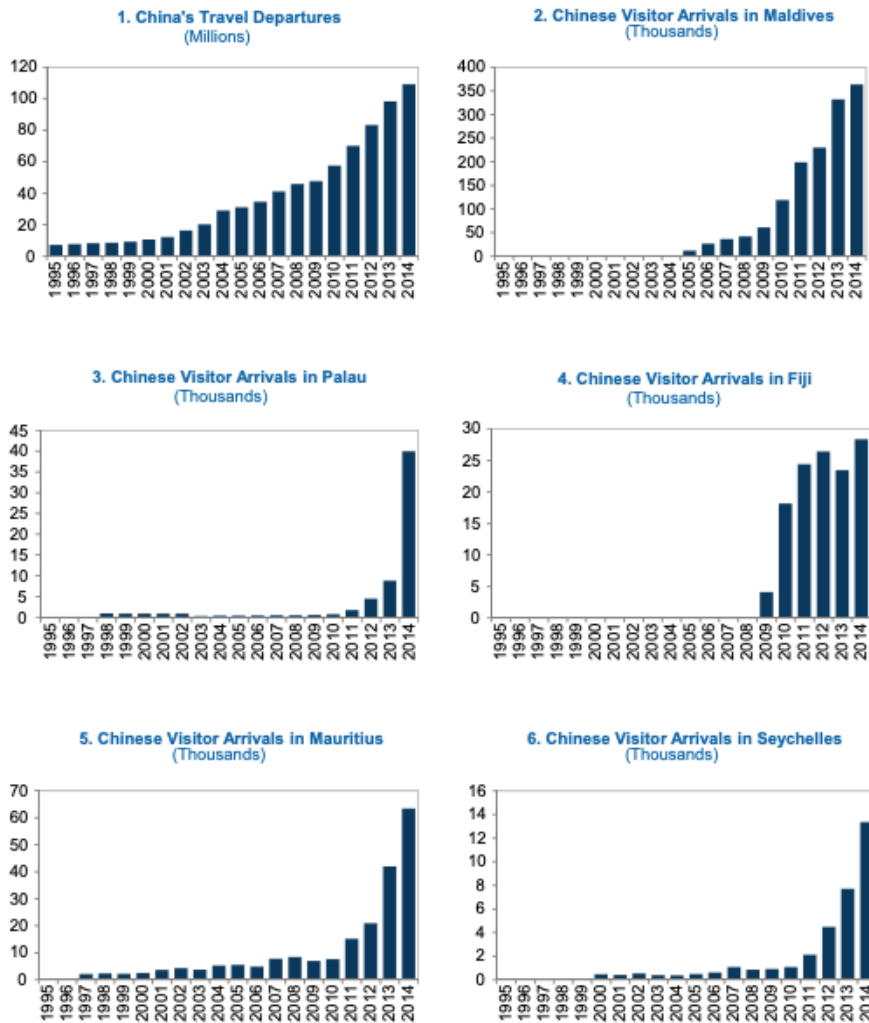
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Appendix 4:

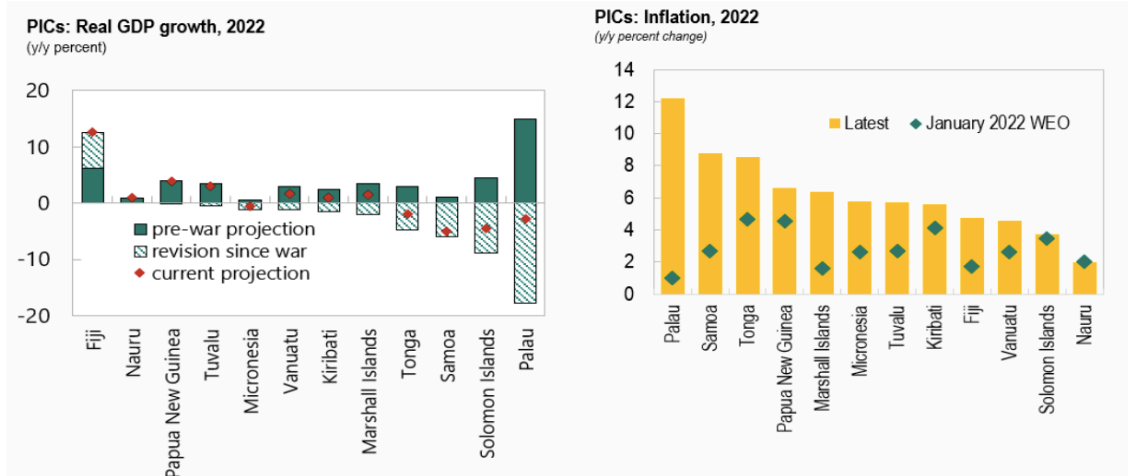
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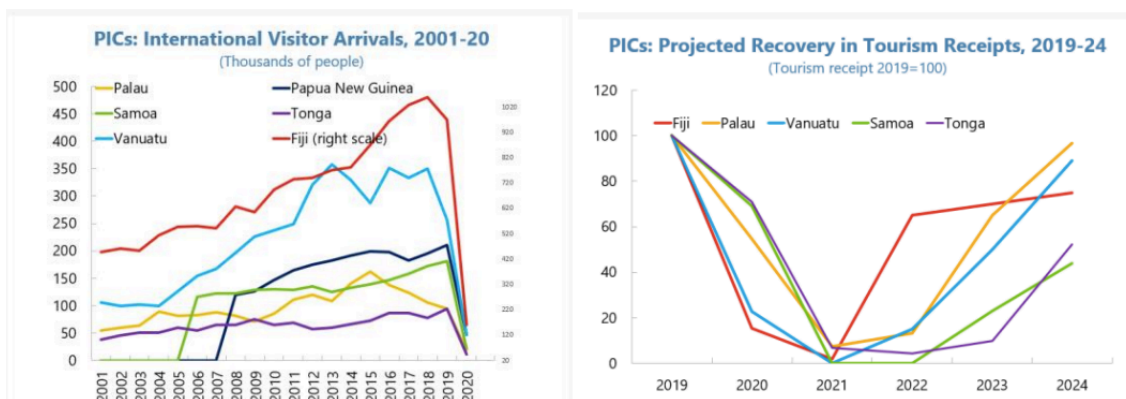
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Appendix 6:

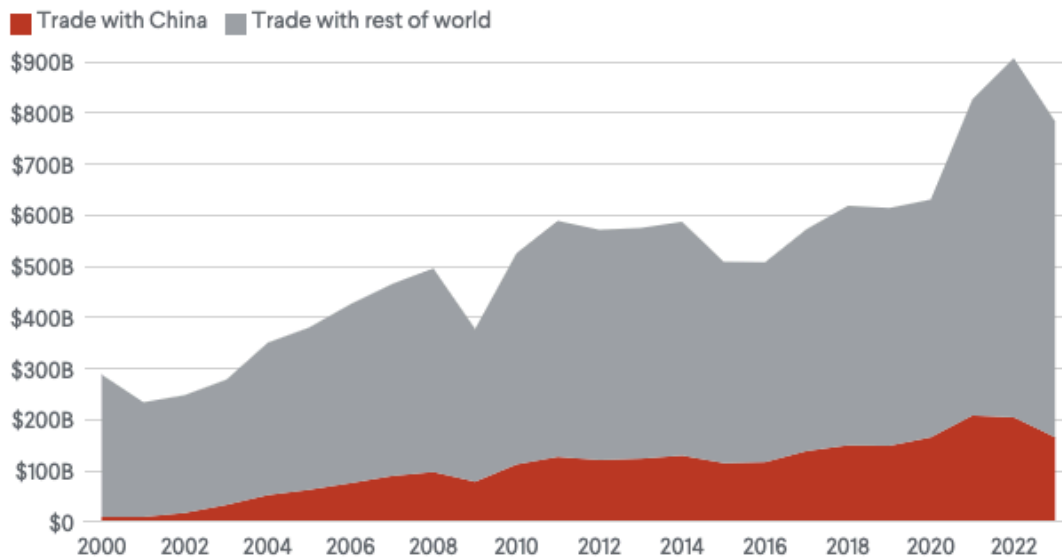
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### China Makes Up the Largest Share of Taiwan's Trade

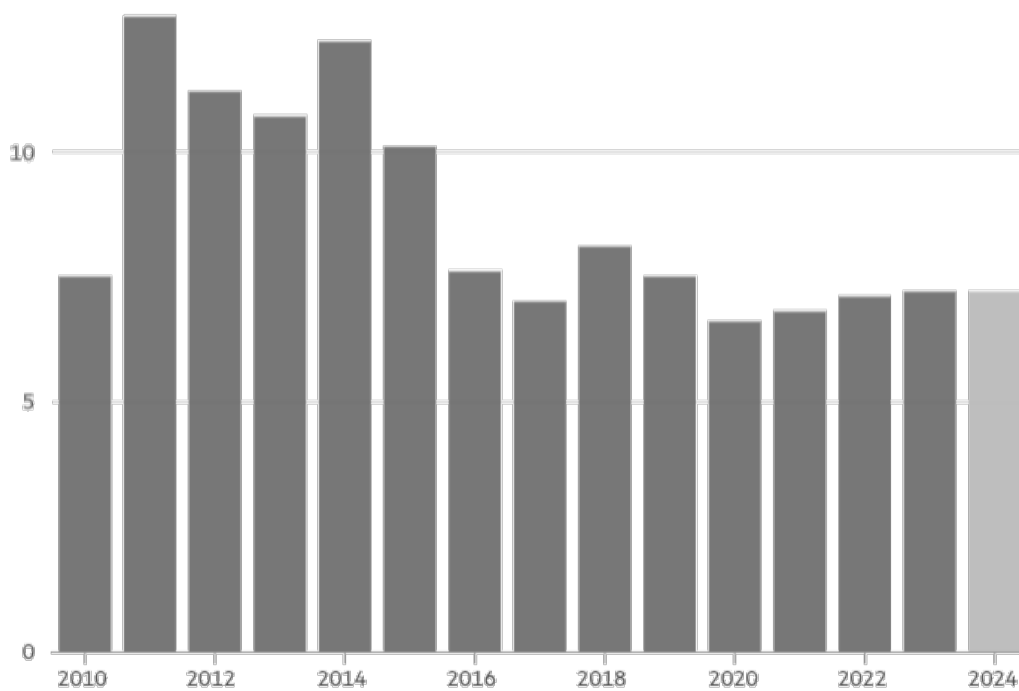


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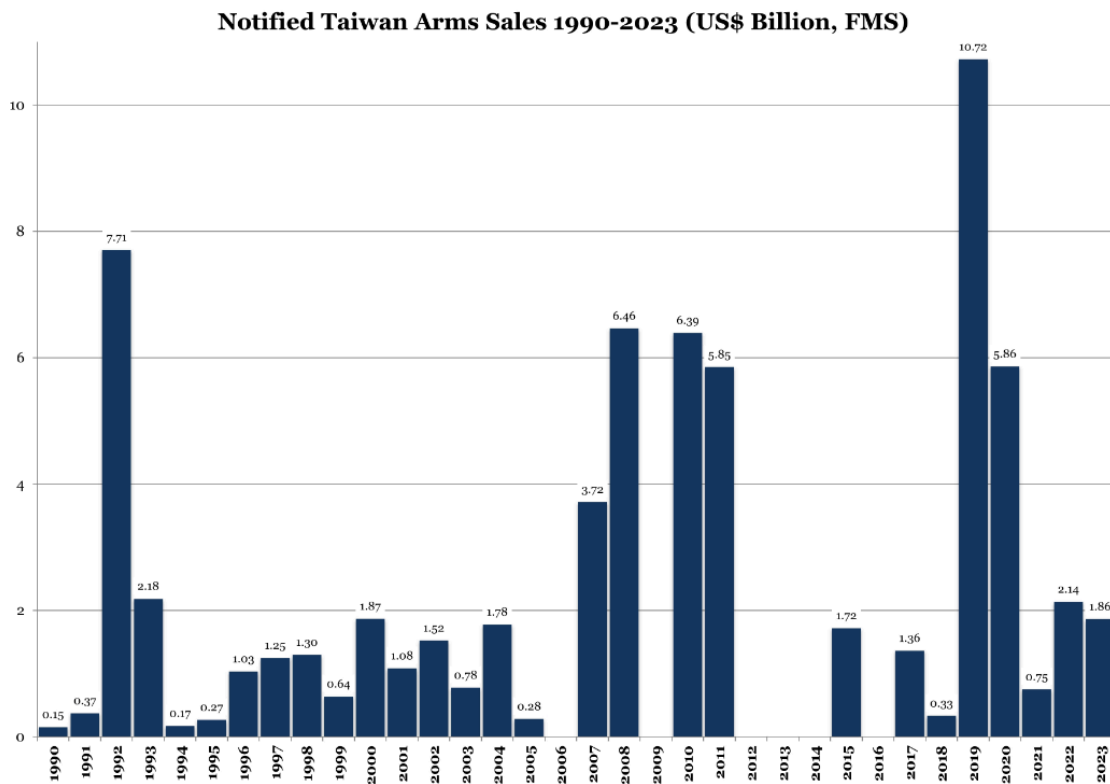
China’s official military expenditure will grow at the same pace as last year

Official defence budget, year-on-year change (%)



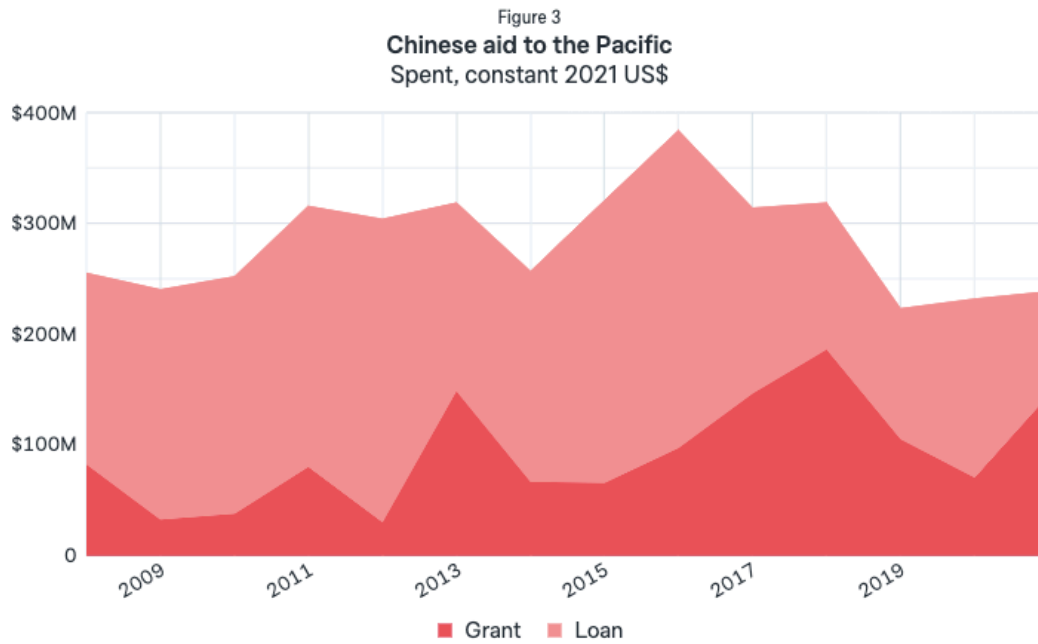
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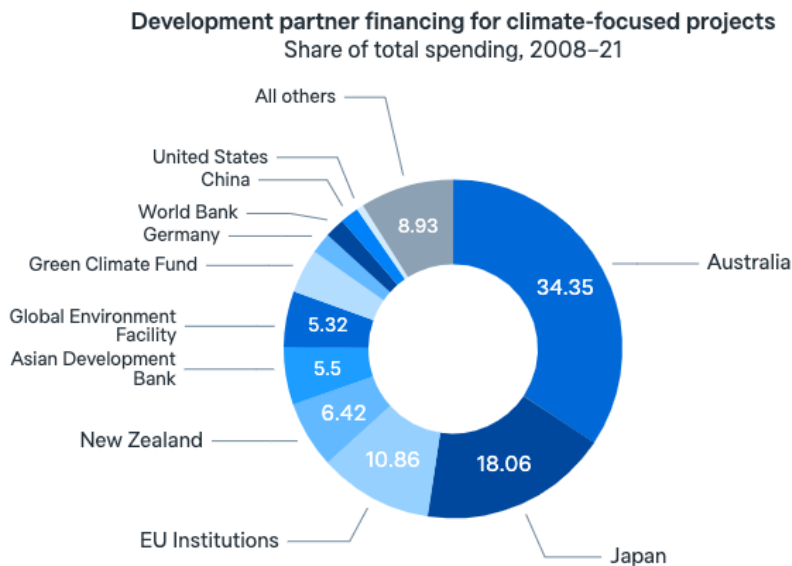
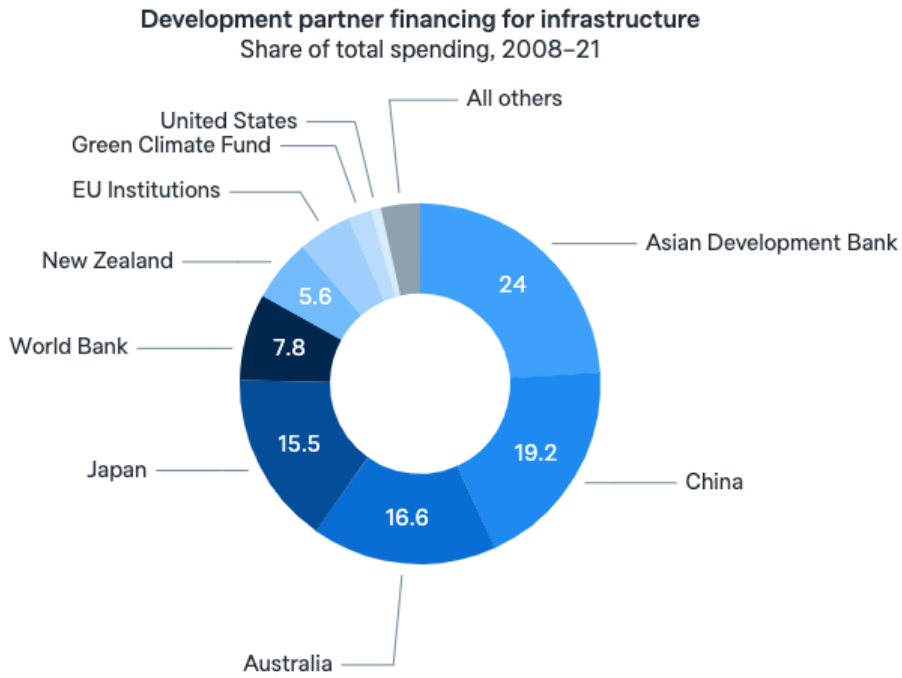
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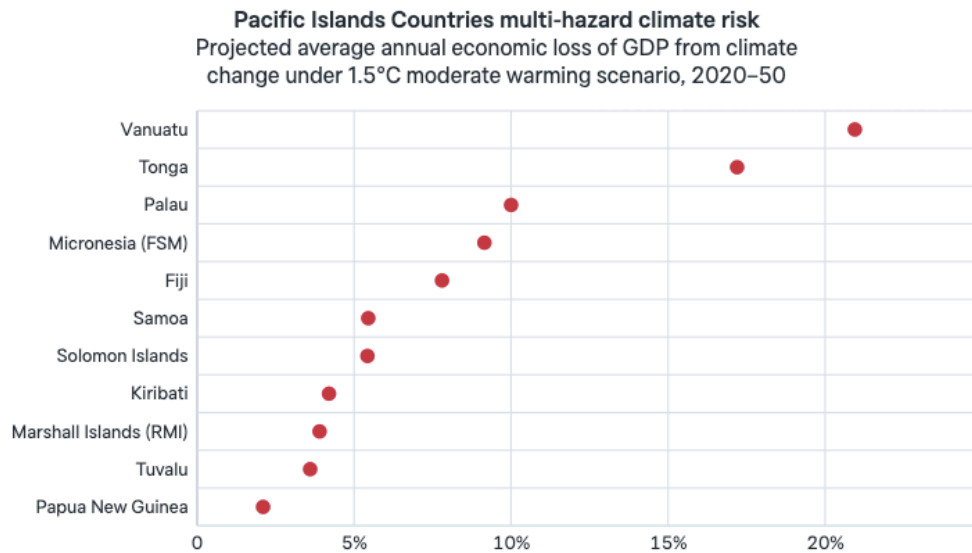
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Appendix 13:

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