

# URGENT NEED

**FOR NEW APPROACHES  
TO KEEP THE PACIFIC FREE**

Cleo Paskal





To get a sense of the motivations and stakes involved in the fast-evolving strategic shifts in the Pacific Islands – the geographic front line between Asia and the Americas – it helps to look at the region from a few different angles, including from China, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and most importantly from the Pacific Islands themselves.

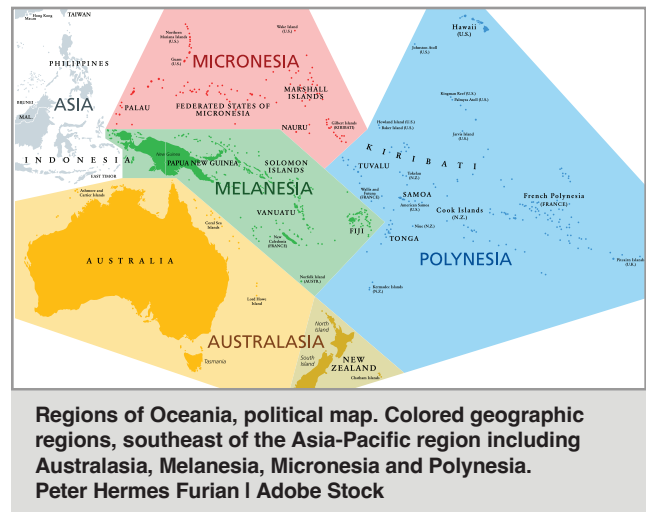
What emerges is that Chinese economic engagement is intertwined with power projection ambitions that are deep, extensive and serious – and helped along by corruption. This is having serious societal effects, including the undermining of democracy and rule of law, in some Pacific Island Countries (PICs). As a result, plans for development, resilience, and sovereignty in PICs requires two parallel tracks: *blocking* Chinese illegal, aggressive, coercive and deceptive activities (known as ICAD – a term coined by Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, General Romeo Brawner Jr.) while *building* economic growth and societal strength. One won't work without the other.<sup>1</sup>

**“The Pacific War covered a geographic expanse that roughly overlaps with areas where the PLA would likely fight in the coming years.”**

China openly wants to push the United States out of the Pacific, and that can only be done through pulling PICs so close into China's orbit they have no ability to resist – meaning a major loss of sovereignty. If that happens, it will be catastrophic for the people of the Pacific and for U.S. security.

#### VIEW OF THE REGION FROM CHINA

General Secretary Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has made clear his intention to take Taiwan, including by violence if necessary.<sup>2</sup> However, to hold Taiwan and secure the People's Liberation Army (PLA) ability to



freely deploy, the PRC also needs to ensure that the Pacific Islands are at least neutral – meaning not willing to host opposing militaries that could become a problem for China – and ideally on the PRC's side so that they can be used for further Chinese power projection.

The PRC has carefully studied the importance of the islands. In his 2023 report on “Chinese Lessons from the Pacific War: Implications for PLA Warfighting,” Dr. Toshi Yoshihara writes, “The Pacific War covered a geographic expanse that roughly overlaps with areas where the PLA would likely fight in the coming years. China's Rocket Force now boasts long-range missiles that can reach Guam while its diplomats are attempting to secure access across the Pacific Islands, the bloody battlegrounds of the Pacific War.”<sup>3</sup>

In 2008, Admiral Timothy Keating testified before the U.S. Congress that a senior Chinese official had suggested to him, “You take Hawaii east. We'll take Hawaii west. We'll share information, and we'll save you all the trouble of deploying your naval forces west of Hawaii.”<sup>4</sup>

Beijing wants Oceania. And, for at least the last two decades, China has been employing a wide range of legal and illegal methods to try to make that happen, including the deployment of hundreds of millions of dollars in loans, construction projects,



Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi co-hosts the second China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting with Fijian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Voreqe Bainimarama in Suva, Fiji, May 30, 2022. (Xinhua News Agency/Zhang Yongxing)

aid, training for regional civil servants, think tanks, scholarships, facilitation of migration from China, bribery, military-to-military cooperation, financial support to local media, and much more.<sup>5</sup>

In 2022, details of the PRC's comprehensive approach to gaining influence, if not control, in as many Pacific Islands as possible was evident in the texts of the PRC's proposed *China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision*, supported by its *China-Pacific Island Countries Five-Year Action Plan on Common Development* (2022- 2026).

The *Vision* and *Plan* include cooperation on law enforcement, customs, inspections, quarantine, network governance, cyber security, laboratory construction used for fingerprint testing, forensic autopsy, drugs, electronic and digital forensics, support for airlines to operate air routes between China and PICs, the possibility of a China-Pacific Island Countries Free Trade Area, thousands of government scholarships, and establishing a "China-Pacific Island Countries Disaster Management Cooperation Mechanism," that includes a prepositioned "China-Pacific Island Countries Reserve of Emergency Supplies."<sup>6, 7</sup>

Combined, the *Vision* and *Plan* are a roadmap for Chinese control in sovereign countries, and local leaders saw it as such. Discussing the *Vision* and *Plan*, then-President of the Federated States of Micronesia, David Panuelo, wrote in 2023: "All of this, taken together, is part of how China intends to form a 'new type of international relations' with itself as the hegemonic power and the current rules-based international order as a forgotten relic."<sup>8</sup>

Some elements of the *Vision* and *Plan* are already in place. As seen by the PLA's live fire exercises in the Tasman Sea in February 2025, the PRC is very publicly flexing its muscles well beyond the First, Second and even Third Island Chains.<sup>9</sup> The nearly concurrent signing of a strategic agreement between China and the Cook Islands (where the population holds New Zealand citizenship) shows a similar flexing on the political warfare front, much to Wellington's chagrin.<sup>10</sup> These developments show that the PRC has been clear about what it wants and is working to get it.

## VIEW FROM THE PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

If closer integration with Beijing were what the people of the PICs also wanted, it would be a



The former premier of Malaita province Daniel Suidani.  
Official Facebook

different matter, but in many countries there is serious concern about PRC activities. Often that concern isn't about grand strategic issues, but about what engagement with China means for the local populations. For example, as in the United States, China-linked criminals have been involved in drug trafficking in the Pacific. The results are increases in drug use that rips apart families and communities.<sup>11</sup>

Local leaders have also made their concerns about PRC engagement's negative effects explicit. In 2019, the government of Solomon Islands switched its recognition of Taiwan to the PRC. The Malaita Provincial Government (MPG) in Solomons had seen the behavior of PRC-linked businesses elsewhere – including methods of resource extraction that caused environmental and social damage – and didn't want them operating in the province. It issued the *Auki Communique*, stating that the government “strongly resolves to put in place a Moratorium on Business Licenses to new investors connected directly or indirectly with the Chinese Communist Party.”<sup>12</sup>

The *Communique* gave a range of reasons for this position, including that the MPG “acknowledges the freedom of religion as a fundamental right ... and therefore rejects the Chinese Communist Party – CCP and its formal systems based on atheist ideology.”<sup>13</sup>

Other concerns included “the need to be free from unwarranted interference of persons and therefore reject any notion of a police state” and that the extraction and use of resources must be fair, equitable and sustainable.<sup>14</sup> At the launch of the *Communique*, Daniel Suidani, the Premier of Malaita said:

“We all know that the government has not given the people of this country a chance to be heard on this important diplomatic decision. Let us remind ourselves that China or the People's Republic of China is no ordinary country like many other countries of the world. They have a global ambition to dominate the world. To allow them to reach such ambitions their practices around the world is one that has been questionable. For instance China overwhelmingly targets destitute countries like Solomon Islands that cannot pay their debts and loans. China has confiscated parts or entire seaports from countries that are unable to pay their debts. China forces countries to repay their loans in natural resources such as oils. These are the things we do not want to see happen to our place and thus the need to protect our place and its resources.”<sup>15</sup>

In spite of enormous ground level support for Suidani and his policies, PRC-linked proxies were involved in subverting his government, depriving him of his elected seat in February 2023, trying to block his access to medical care, and arresting him in October 2024.<sup>16</sup>

## VIEW FROM AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

For Canberra and Wellington, being seen as the entry point into the PIC region (especially the South Pacific PICs) for Five Eyes partners and others is a core part of their strategic identity and justifies their outsized roles in decision making and influence. As a result, they jealously guard their turf, even when their actions undermine regional security.



**“‘Integrate’ is a polite way to indicate Australia and New Zealand’s desire to have a say over Pacific countries’ economies and security postures – it is not as if Australia is going to give Pacific countries a say over Australia’s own foreign policy.”**

The key problem is that their fundamental approach still has colonial overtones. Australia in particular has made this explicit. In the words of Australia’s 2017 *Foreign Policy White Paper*, their goal is to “integrate Pacific countries into the Australian and New Zealand economies and our security institutions.”<sup>17</sup> “Integrate” is a polite way to indicate Australia and New Zealand’s desire to have a say over Pacific countries’ economies and security postures – it is not as if Australia is going to give Pacific countries a say over Australia’s own foreign policy. One could see that approach in action in 2024, when Australia signed treaties with Tuvalu and Nauru that seriously undermined their sovereignty.<sup>18</sup> For example, the agreement with Nauru included these two clauses:

“Nauru shall mutually agree with Australia any partnership, arrangement or engagement with any other State or entity on matters relating to Nauru’s security including maritime security, defence, policing, border protection and cyber security sectors, and Nauru’s critical infrastructure concerning banking and telecommunications.”

“Nauru shall consult with Australia on any partnership, arrangement or engagement with any other State or entity relating to Nauru’s other critical infrastructure such as ports, aviation, and energy infrastructure.”<sup>19</sup>

While some have equated this agreement to the Compacts of Free Association that the United States agreed with three independent PICs, Palau, Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia, the citizens of those countries voted in favor of accepting the Compacts.<sup>20</sup> In the Australia-Nauru

case, it was a government-to-government deal negotiated without public debate. China could use this precedent as a justification for its own deals with Solomon Islands and the Cook Islands.

Australia and New Zealand have largely had policies of dealing almost exclusively with the government in power in a given PIC. As a result, if the PRC gains influence through elite capture, as it did in Solomon Islands in the period leading up to and following its derecognition of Taiwan in 2019, it is PRC-aligned leaders that Canberra and Wellington will be dealing with.<sup>21</sup> This approach reinforces those elites and acts to stifle democratic opposition, resulting in amplified strategic gains for China and losses for democracy.<sup>22</sup>

So, in Solomon Islands, Canberra and Wellington prioritized dealing with (and in so doing reinforcing and legitimizing) the government in power at the national level, giving them a free hand to crush democratic opposition in Malaita. Neither Canberra nor Wellington offered effective support to the people of Malaita, or Suidani, as they tried to fight off



High detailed Australia physical map with labeling.  
pbardocz | Adobe Stock



The crew of Coast Guard Cutter Stone (WMSL 758) conducts a major counter-drug operation in the Eastern Pacific Ocean, interdicting four drug-trafficking vessels, Feb. 28, 2025. With support from the Coast Guard Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron and Tactical Law Enforcement Team Pacific, the crew seized approximately 11,000 pounds of cocaine, apprehended eight suspected smugglers and sank four vessels posing a hazard to navigation. | U.S. Coast Guard | public domain

PRC operations – while at the same time Canberra in particular was reassuring Washington that it had Solomons under control. The result was, once Suidani was removed – first as Premier through a vote of no confidence, then from his elected position by the central government in a move since judged illegal<sup>23</sup> – the PRC could advance its plans in Malaita unfettered, including with the installation of Huawei telecommunications towers that had previously been blocked by Suidani’s government.

Additionally, the PRC feeds off centralized power. If Canberra tries to put itself at the center of regional decision making, that can help Beijing achieve its goals in two ways. First, Canberra has weakened local power structures in the PICs, making them less able to resist pressure not just from Australia, but also from China – and China is likely ready to apply much more pressure than Australia. Second, if Beijing increases pressure on Canberra, Canberra may give the PRC what it wants in Oceania – to include some of the things listed in the Vision and Plan – in order to safeguard areas more important to Australia, such as trade. Indeed, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has publicly stated the importance he places on the “full resumption of free and unimpeded trade” with China.<sup>24</sup>

## WHAT TO DO? BLOCK AND BUILD.

The region urgently needs a new approach that builds up local sovereignty and protects freedom rather than undermining it, but to be able to build anything sustainable, It is necessary to block the forces that seek to undermine sovereignty and freedom. Therefore, a blocking *and* building approach becomes necessary.

For **blocking**, a foundational element is stopping (or at least limiting as much as possible) corruption. In many cases PRC activity is greased by bribes. Recipients of bribes – politicians, customs officers, journalists, etc. – want to spend their money in places like Australia or New Zealand on things like real estate, investments, medical care, and education. Simply going after the corruption laundered through Western banking systems, changes the cost-benefit analysis of taking Chinese money to sell out your own country, whereas there currently is little to no cost. Honest people like Suidani can’t afford health care for their family, but corrupt people can, and that needs to change. That is “blocking.” To provide freedom to the people of a place like Solomons during this political warfare phase, ten good investigators and lawyers are worth more than an aircraft carrier.

could mean new ‘building’ options for healthcare, education, and trade that are more economically and culturally compatible than Australian options, while also undermining the Chinese narrative that PICs need to sacrifice freedom for development.

In fact, it is their highly strategic locations that have made them of interest to China. Thought of in that way, it becomes clearer that for some Pacific Islands, the issue is competitive flights and visa access rather than remoteness. Such a shift in focus opens possibilities and gives a different and more manageable problem set to resolve. Bringing in new airlines and new routes to increase competitiveness and give Pacific Islanders access to countries where (unlike with Australia and New Zealand) getting visas isn't a long and costly process would create new options for trade, education, and health care.

Seen that way, one can better understand why, for example, PRC-proxies in Solomon Islands tried to delay for as long as possible the entry of the Indian High Commissioner.<sup>25</sup> Effective Indian engagement

The PRC has well-advanced plans for establishing influence that leads to control across much of the Pacific – plans that are essential if it is to achieve its other stated goals, such as taking Taiwan and pushing the United States out of the Pacific.

A detailed map of the Solomon Islands. The main island, Guadalcanal, is shown with its capital, Honiara, and other major towns like Port Vila, Victoria, and Nauru. To the north is Bougainville, with its capital, Buka. To the east is Malaita, with its capital, Mafate. Other islands include Choiseul, Santa Isabel, and the New Georgia group. The map labels the South Pacific Ocean to the north, the Solomon Sea to the west, and the New Guinea Sound to the east. A small inset map in the top right corner shows the location of the Solomon Islands within the Pacific Ocean region. A legend in the bottom left corner identifies symbols for the capital, major towns, and the country's border.

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influence across the region, freedoms are being extinguished, rule of law is being undermined, and strategic space is being taken over – as seen not only in with the security deals with Solomon Islands and Cook Islands, but with three countries abandoning Taiwan since 2019.<sup>26</sup>

This crucial region needs new ideas and approaches to blocking and building that can free it of PRC-driven corrosion. PICs need ideas that look to new partners, new paths to economic development, and new ways for the people of the region to get the tools they need to defend themselves from what looks to be the biggest assault on their freedoms since the end of World War II. Young practitioners willing to learn from and support Pacific leaders such as Suidani and Panuelo will be on the front line of this fight for freedom. If they get it right, they could help avert the next brutal battle for the Pacific.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Close-up of chinese yen bank notes and handcuffs. Chinese corruption. I Maxim I Adobe Stock

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