

# RECONNECT CHINA

## POLICY BRIEF 31

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### China's strategy toward Pacific Island countries: Countering Taiwan and Western Influence

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Over the past decade, China has deployed a diplomatic strategy toward the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). This strategy pursues two main objectives: countering Taiwan's diplomatic influence in the region and countering the influence of liberal democracies in what Beijing refers to as the "Global South."

Initially, Beijing adopted a cautious and discreet approach, but it shifted to a more assertive stance from 2021 onward, with varying degrees of success.

A central driver of China's strategy is reducing Taiwan's diplomatic presence. Beijing has successfully persuaded countries such as the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and Nauru to switch recognition from Taipei, while pressuring PICs to limit Taiwan's participation in regional fora. Nonetheless, resistance persists, and upcoming Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leadership may reopen space for Taiwan.

China has also increased its military footprint through naval deployments, port calls, and security cooperation. However, the region's logistical constraints and strong ties with Australia limit Beijing's defense influence. Public security agreements—especially with the Solomon Islands

and Vanuatu—raise concerns about political interference.

Despite China's growing aid and presence, Australia remains the dominant development and security partner.

Amid China's growing influence in the South Pacific and the US retreat from multilateralism, the European Union (EU) has a role to play in:

- Strengthening support and coordination with Australia and New Zealand, as well as with France, to enhance maritime security, climate change resilience, and multilateral governance.
- Using European space-based assets to contribute to monitoring the Pacific region for both security and environmental outcomes.
- Supporting the G7 expansion to Australia to promote multilateralism and rules-based international order.

## CHINA'S OUTREACH TO PICs

President Xi Jinping has made two tours of the South Pacific since assuming power in 2012. In November 2014, he paid state visits to Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji. In November 2018, he attended the APEC summit in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and met with PICs leaders on the sidelines, including those from the Federated States of Micronesia, Samoa, Vanuatu, the Cook Islands, Tonga, Niue, and Fiji.<sup>1</sup>

However, there was a clear acceleration after 2021, under the leadership of Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi, with mixed success. In October 2021, during the pandemic, Beijing hosted the first China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting online, which was followed by a second one only eight months later, in Fiji in May 2022.

2022 marked a turning point in traditional powers' perception of China's ambitions in the region. First, Beijing and the Solomon Islands signed an undisclosed security pact that was leaked to the press.<sup>2</sup> A few months after the revelation of the pact, Wang Yi embarked on an unprecedented 10-day tour in the South Pacific in May 2022. He visited eight states—Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, PNG, and East Timor—and held virtual exchanges with three more: the Federated States of Micronesia, the Cook Islands, and Niue.

The tour concluded with the second China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Fiji. Wang Yi presented the *China-Pacific Countries Five-Year Action Plan for Common Development*, which he expected to be adopted by all of China's diplomatic allies in the region during the meeting.

However, the offer was immediately rebuked. This attempt highlighted China's diplomatic overconfidence and lack of consideration for PICs. First, Wang Yi proposed a multilateral agreement that had not been collectively negotiated but was instead drafted unilaterally by Beijing. Second, China ignored the central role of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in adopting decisions through consensus among member states. China's approach was seen as an attempt to bypass the PIF,

where it would likely have faced resistance from Australia, New Zealand, and Taiwan's allies: the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Tuvalu.

This strategy mirrored China's approach toward Central and Eastern Europe from 2012, where Beijing held annual summits under the "16+1" (later "17+1") format, excluding Western Europe and EU institutions. This approach, multilateral in appearance but bilateral in practice, was often criticized as a "divide and rule" strategy.<sup>3</sup>

After the Action Plan failed to gain approval, China repackaged it as a *Position Paper on Mutual Respect and Common Development with Pacific Island Countries*, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>4</sup>

The security pact with the Solomon Islands and the Chinese Action Plan sparked a lively debate in the region and beyond about the risks and opportunities for PICs in deepening ties with China. Concerns included the risk of dependence and interference, the context of rising US-China competition, and historical memories of the region as a battleground during World War II. David Panuelo, then-President of the Federated States of Micronesia (in free association with the US), articulated these concerns in a letter to Pacific Island leaders on May 20, 2022.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this setback, China continued its outreach to the Pacific, with mixed results.

In January 2024, **Nauru** severed ties with Taiwan and recognized the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>6</sup> In August 2025, it signed a AU\$1 billion socio-economic development project with the state-owned China Rural Revitalisation and Development Corporation (CRRDC).<sup>7</sup> However, the new relationship lacks a security dimension and is balanced by Nauru's renewed partnership with Australia. In December 2024, Nauru and Australia signed a comprehensive treaty providing financial support to the Nauruan banking system and government budget, as well as cooperation in law enforcement, defense, and cybersecurity.

**Papua New Guinea (PNG)** is a privileged partner for Beijing. As the largest, most populous, and

resource-rich state in the South Pacific, PNG also occupies a strategic location between Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. In October 2023, PNG Prime Minister James Marape paid a state visit to China and attended the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing. During the visit, he met with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang and signed a joint statement.<sup>8</sup> In April 2024, Wang Yi made a rare single-state visit to PNG. In May 2025, PNG's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Justin Tkatchenko, attended the Third China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Xiamen.<sup>9</sup> In September 2025, President Xi sent his Special Envoy and Minister of Ecology and Environment, Huang Runqiu, to represent him at PNG's 50th independence anniversary celebrations.<sup>10</sup> Yet, China's efforts to court PNG were insufficient to counter Australia's influence in the security realm, as the two countries signed a Mutual Defense Treaty in October 2025.<sup>11</sup>

**The Cook Islands** (a state in free association with New Zealand) signed a series of agreements with China in February 2025, including the *Action Plan 2025–2030 for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*<sup>12</sup> and the *Memorandum of Understanding on Deepening Blue Economy Cooperation Partnership*.<sup>13</sup> While these agreements did not include an explicit security component, they raised concerns in both the Cook Islands and New Zealand. Opposition parties and citizens protested in Avarua, criticizing the government's lack of transparency and failure to consult New Zealand, as required by their free association agreement.<sup>14</sup> Prime Minister Mark Brown faced a no-confidence motion in Parliament following his trip to Harbin, China, where he signed the deals. He survived the vote, with thirteen MPs opposing the motion and nine supporting it.<sup>15</sup>

#### COUNTERING TAIWAN'S INFLUENCE IN THE PACIFIC

China's strategy in the South Pacific is largely driven by the goal of reducing Taiwan's diplomatic recognition. Taiwan has only twelve diplomatic allies worldwide, including three in the South Pacific: the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Tuvalu. Taipei has lost three allies in the region in recent

years: the Solomon Islands (2019), Kiribati (2019), and Nauru (2024).

Beyond formal recognition, Beijing pressures PICs to halt cooperation and dialogue with Taiwan. For example, in March 2023, Fiji's new government, led by Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, reinstated the former name of Taiwan's representation in Fiji as the "Trade Mission of the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the Republic of Fiji" and restored diplomatic privileges to its staff, reversing a 2018 decision to downgrade it to the "Taipei Trade Office in Fiji."<sup>16</sup> However, under pressure from Beijing, the government backtracked in June.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, mention of Taiwan was removed from the 2024 Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders' communiqué after objections from Beijing's special envoy for the Pacific, Qian Bo.<sup>18</sup> Although PIF leaders yielded to Beijing's pressure, the PIF secretariat stated that the "1992 Leaders' decision on relations with Taiwan/Republic of China" remained unchanged.

Interestingly, there is a widespread belief that Taiwan is a "development partner" of the PIF, following the 1992 leaders' communiqué in Honiara. However, the communiqué established a "Taiwan/Republic of China-Forum Countries Dialogue" as a "formal consultative arrangement with those Forum countries which wish to participate."<sup>19</sup> This creates ambiguity: while Taiwan used to be a "Dialogue Partner" according to the Honiara Declaration, it is not listed on the official list that includes 21 countries, such as Canada, France, Japan, the PRC, and the European Union. It is unclear when Taiwan was first designated as a "Development Partner", but this seems to indicate a compromise between keeping the dialogue going without formally putting Taipei on an equal footing with "Dialogue Partners", like the PRC. Yet, as a matter of fact, Taiwan and the PIF countries have maintained a dialogue on the sidelines of the Forum since 1992.

In May 2025, China hosted the Third China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Xiamen, chaired by Xi Jinping. The meeting included PICs except for US allies Australia and New

Zealand, and Taiwan's allies Palau, Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu. The nine-point joint statement, which primarily promoted China's concepts and interests, included a paragraph on Taiwan stating: "All parties recognize that there is but one China in the world, that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory."<sup>20</sup>

At the 2025 PIF, host country Solomon Islands decided not to invite the Forum's dialogue (and development) partners, citing an uncompleted review process of engagement with partners.<sup>21</sup> Most sources believe that Solomon Islands Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele yielded to Beijing's pressure to exclude Taiwan from the Forum's subsequent dialogue with partners.<sup>22</sup> The PRC Embassy in Tonga denied any interference, but it also claimed that Taiwan "has never been admitted as a PIF dialogue partner or observer from the outset, and has no qualification or right to participate in Forum activities whatsoever,"<sup>23</sup> contradicting the Honiara declaration. It further argued that the "Taiwan-related content in the 1992 Forum Communiqué violated the one-China principle in the first place" and that "it is now time to correct the erroneous Taiwan-related content in the 1992 Forum Communiqué."

These examples illustrate China's relatively successful efforts to marginalize Taiwan in the PICs. However, Taiwan's ally Palau will host next year's PIF and may invite Taiwan and dialogue partners back to the Forum.<sup>24</sup> China's assertive approach could prove counterproductive, as it did in 2022. PICs, which describe themselves as "friends to all, enemies to none," have an interest in cooperating with all partners and do not want external political disputes to destabilize their region.

#### CHINA'S MILITARY FOOTPRINT IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

China's growing military presence in the South Pacific has attracted significant attention in recent years. In particular, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) deployed a three-ship flotilla for a month-long mission circumnavigating Australia from February to March 2025. The flotilla comprised one Type 055 11,000-ton destroyer, one

Type 054A frigate, and one Type 903 replenishment ship.

The deployment, conducted in high seas, included a first-ever live-fire drill in the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand on February 21–22. While the drill was lawful, Australia and New Zealand criticized China for unsafe, unprofessional maneuvers and failure to notify neighboring states in advance, as is customary. The flotilla only warned ships and aircraft in the area, forcing 49 civilian aircraft to divert course.<sup>25</sup>

Australia-based analysts interpreted the exercise as a response to Australia's regular transits in the South China Sea and to the AUKUS security partnership between Australia, the UK, and the US, which is often regarded as an anti-China coalition. The drill also signaled the PLAN's ability to operate beyond the second island chain and project significant military power south of Australia.<sup>26</sup>

In 2024, the PLAN sent at least two destroyers to the South Pacific: a Type 052D to attend the 50th anniversary of the Tonga Royal Navy in July,<sup>27</sup> and a Type 055 that made a port call in Port Vila, Vanuatu, in October.

In September 2024, China conducted a rare intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test over the Pacific Ocean. The DF-31AG missile, carrying a dummy warhead, landed near French Polynesia's exclusive economic zone.<sup>28</sup> China typically conducts such tests over its own territory, so this unusual test can be explained as an effort to reaffirm its nuclear deterrence credibility following months of purges and scandals within the PLA Rocket Force, which oversees both conventional and nuclear ballistic missiles.<sup>29</sup>

In 2023, the PLAN hospital ship *Peace Ark* made an extended deployment to the South Pacific, visiting Kiribati, Tonga, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and East Timor to provide free medical services to local populations.<sup>30</sup>

China also regularly sends intelligence-gathering ships near Australia, particularly to monitor the biennial multilateral exercise Talisman Sabre, led by Australia and the US.

While China's growing military footprint in the South Pacific is notable, its operational capabilities should not be overestimated, considering peacetime and wartime contexts. Sending vessels to Tonga or the Tasman Sea for peacetime patrols is nothing extraordinary for a country with a permanent patrolling presence in the Indian Ocean since 2008. Additionally, no one ignores China's ambition to build up a blue water navy. Training sailors to embark on long missions across different oceans is therefore natural. Such missions are lawful and largely legitimate, as long as they do not pose risk to safety and stability.

However, sustaining multiple large military assets in the region would require logistical support, which China currently lacks. Beijing has no military bases in the South Pacific, though it can access civilian ports for friendly visits and refueling. Some analysts argue that Chinese-constructed and renovated ports and wharves across the Pacific serve strategic purposes. According to Dr. Domingo I-Kwei Yang, "Port leases, wharf upgrades, and covert fishery facilities secure key chokepoints" in Papua New Guinea, Australia, Vanuatu, Samoa, and Nauru.<sup>31</sup> While these facilities may enhance China's influence and intelligence-gathering, their military operational benefits are limited, especially in wartime.

For example, Honiara in the Solomon Islands is roughly 6,000 km from mainland China. To reach it, a PLAN vessel must pass through the first island chain via the Japanese or Philippine archipelagos, both US allies, and then cruise near Guam, a US territory and military base, before entering the Solomon Sea, about 1,500 km from Australia, another US ally. In short, while peacetime operations in the South Pacific are feasible for the PLAN, they would become far more challenging in wartime due to the presence of competing powers and the unlikely prospect that PICs would allow China to use their territory for military purposes out of fear to become a target, like during WWII.

Although China is seeking to deepen defense and security ties with PICs, Australia remains the preferred defense partner in the region. For

example, even though **Nauru** has come closer to Beijing with the severing of ties with Taiwan in 2024, the Australia-Nauru Treaty signed in December the same year covers security and defense cooperation (training, equipment, vehicles, maritime support).<sup>32</sup> In particular, the treaty provides that:

*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.<sup>33</sup>*

In **Fiji**, During a Press Club event in July 2025, Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka made clear that while he did not believe China was interested in building military bases in the South Pacific, he "would not welcome" such a development and would encourage other Pacific countries to reject it as well.<sup>34</sup> Like Nauru, Fiji and Australia are discussing upgrading their "Vuvale Partnership" (signed in 2019) to a treaty.

Similarly, in October 2025, **PNG** and Australia signed a mutual defense treaty (the "Pukpuk Treaty"), which the PRC Embassy in Port Moresby vehemently criticized as it may "undermine [PNG's] legitimate rights and interests".<sup>35</sup>

In November 2023, **Tuvalu** and Australia signed the "Falepili Union," granting migration rights to Tuvaluans in Australia (in the face of rising waters), and increasing Australian defense access to Tuvalu's maritime and airspace.<sup>36</sup>

**Tonga's** security and defense cooperation with Australia is longstanding as well, with Canberra providing patrol boats and training.

#### PICs PUBLIC SECURITY COOPERATION WITH THE PRC

Public security cooperation with China, while less strategic than military cooperation, raises concerns about Chinese interference in PICs' domestic

politics and society. The security pact with the Solomon Islands is a prime example.

While we don't know the content of the final agreement between **Solomon Islands** and China, the leaked draft provides that China could, with the Solomon Islands' consent:

*make ship visits to, carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands,*

*and the relevant forces of China can be used to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands.<sup>37</sup>*

In addition, the draft stated that Honiara may:

*request China to send police, armed police, military personnel, and other law enforcement and armed forces to the Solomon Islands to assist in maintaining social order, protecting people's lives and property [...].<sup>38</sup>*

The pact raised particular concerns because it followed violent unrest in Honiara, partly in protest against Prime Minister Sogavare's decision to recognize the PRC in 2019.<sup>39</sup> Some interpreted the pact as an agreement between Sogavare and Beijing to protect him from potential future unrest.

In **Vanuatu**, Australia was traditionally the closest defense and security partner, but relations have soured due to tensions over Vanuatu's cooperation with China. Port Vila delayed signing a bilateral agreement with Australia—the Nakamal Agreement—which includes a maritime policing component. In November 2025, Vanuatu's Minister of Internal Affairs, Andrew Napuat, traveled to Beijing, where he met with the Minister of Public Security, Wang Xiaohong. He announced that the two countries might soon sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on police assistance programs.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, Vanuatu's government recently announced that all foreign advisors embedded in its national security administration would have to leave government buildings.<sup>41</sup> While this applies to all nationalities, it

will likely most affect defense and security cooperation with Australia and New Zealand.

In early 2024, Foreign Minister Justin Tkatchenko announced that **PNG** was in early talks with Beijing on a potential security and policing deal, which raised concerns in neighboring Australia.<sup>42</sup> However, this has not materialized. Instead, PNG just signed the Pukpuk Mutual Defense Treaty with Australia.<sup>43</sup>

**Fiji** maintains a policing MoU with China, but Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka decided in March 2024 to remove all Chinese police officers from the Fijian police force. Fijian police officers will continue to receive training in China, but no Chinese police officers will be stationed in Fiji.<sup>44</sup>

Security cooperation with PICs is mostly handled on a bilateral basis; however, Beijing also holds a multilateral Ministerial dialogue on police capacity building with the PICs. The fourth edition of this dialogue was held in Lianyungang, China, last September and was chaired by Chinese Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong.<sup>45</sup>

Police cooperation is a key component of China's growing partnership with PICs, in order to reduce or replace Australia and New Zealand's role in this realm. This is even more evident with the Global Security Initiative (GSI), which Xi Jinping announced in April 2022 as a new framework for security cooperation. While PICs are aware of this trend, they seek to benefit from it, whether for national interests or leaders' personal gains as seen in the Solomon Islands, or to leverage stronger commitments from Australia and New Zealand.

## DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE STRATEGY

The competition for influence in the South Pacific also extends to Official Development Finance (ODF). According to the Lowy Institute's Pacific Aid Map, China is increasing its Official Development Assistance (ODA) to PICs.<sup>46</sup> In doing so, it has shifted away from its previous loan-heavy approach, as it did in Africa and South Asia during

the 2010s. However, countries like Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu still face significant debt repayment obligations to China.

The Lowy Institute notes that the Pacific Islands region is less affected by the abolition of USAID under the Trump administration than commonly assumed, as US development aid to the region primarily flows through the Compact of Free Association Agreements, not USAID. Nonetheless, Beijing has gained a reputational advantage over Washington.

Despite China's growing role as an ODF provider in the South Pacific, Australia remains the largest contributor by far, accounting for 43% of the total. Australia has compensated for the decline in ODF from the US, the UK, New Zealand, and Europe.<sup>47</sup> Yet, the EU remains the third-largest ODA provider to the region.

ODA is crucial for the region's development and modernisation, which has strategic impact on the relationships a power seeks to build with PICs. By constructing infrastructure—such as ports, roads, airports, and green energy projects—and improving connectivity through submarine cables and space-based internet, as well as developing services like health and security, long-term ties and trust can be forged. This is precisely what Beijing's strategy aims to achieve, and why Europe should catch up.

## CONCLUSION

China's strategy toward the Pacific Island region is clear and often effective. PICs see value in cooperating with China, as it provides material benefits and allows them to leverage their partnerships with traditional powers like Australia and the US. This approach is known as "hedging strategy," whereby small and middle powers with limited resources seek to maximize their gains from great power competition in peacetime. By developing partnerships with both China and the US, PICs can offset the risks of becoming overly dependent on a single actor. However, hedging is a delicate strategy that carries the risk of

unintentionally aligning too closely with one side or the other.<sup>48</sup>

Amid China's growing influence in the South Pacific and the US' retreat from multilateralism and ODF, the EU has an important role to play in supporting sovereignty and multilateralism in the Pacific Islands region, particularly through the Pacific Islands Forum and the Pacific Community, which the EU is Permanent Observer and one the first contributors of.

Given its limited resources and to avoid multiplying initiatives, the EU should prioritize coordination with its main regional partners—Australia and New Zealand—and, to a certain extent, France, which is a regional stakeholder through its territories of New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and French Polynesia.

In the security domain, the EU should contribute to strengthening maritime domain awareness to combat illegal fishing and maritime trafficking, areas where France is already active with its military assets in the region.

European space-based assets, such as the Galileo constellation (for global navigation and positioning) and the Copernicus program (for Earth observation), can play a significant role in monitoring the Pacific region for both security and environmental outcomes. In terms of connectivity, the Eutelsat OneWeb constellation could also enhance internet access for remote islands.

In terms of ODF, the EU should increase its support for the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), which has offices in Fiji, PNG, and Vanuatu. The AFD's regional budget has been increased fivefold to reach €200 million by 2027. Notably, the AFD's Kiwa Initiative, funded in part by the EU, supports climate change resilience in the Pacific.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, to counter great power competition that could undermine multilateralism and rules-based international governance, the G7 European member states (France and Germany) and the EU itself should support expanding the G7 to include Australia. As France will chair the G7 in 2026, it could advance this proposal.

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