

# How worried should Canberra be about China's security interests in the Pacific?

Perspectives from PRC and Pacific interlocutors

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## Executive Summary

- Persistent distrust in relations between Canberra and Beijing makes meaningful security engagement in the Pacific between the two countries unlikely.
- Military objectives in the Pacific are a low priority for Beijing, although the People's Republic of China (PRC) has expanded its regional security presence – primarily in non-traditional areas. PRC experts see Pacific engagement primarily through the lens of broader strategic interests, such as cultivating ties with the Global South. The PRC prefers bilateral engagement with Pacific Island countries (PICs), often bypassing Australia.
- PICs welcome the PRC's contribution to their development. However, they remain cautious about PRC's security presence and continue to view Australia as their preferred security partner. Still, they also see real benefits from engaging with the PRC, and do not fully share Australia's concerns about the PRC's objectives.
- Australia should adopt a comprehensive assessment of the PRC's regional security presence that does not immediately dismiss PRC and PIC perspectives as a threat to Australia's interest. Rather than a blocking strategy, Australia's interests would be better served by a multipronged approach that supports independent PIC diplomacy, one that grounds its responses in evidence-based assessments.

## Introduction

Since taking office in 2022, the Albanese government has emphasised 'stabilising' relations with the PRC. Canberra has expressed interest in collaborating with Beijing in areas that enjoy bipartisan support like trade, as well as climate change initiatives. However, beyond participating in defence-related dialogues, it has drawn firm boundaries around joint activities related to regional security. Even port visits by People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels, which occurred in 2019, now appear to be a step too far.

The Pacific is a core region of Australia's security. Following developments such as the PRC's 2022 security agreement with the Solomon Islands, Foreign Minister Penny Wong described Australia as being in 'a state of permanent contest' in the Pacific, while Minister for Pacific Island Affairs Pat Conroy said the goal is to be the 'security partner of choice' for neighbouring Pacific countries. Canberra has strived to block PRC attempts to grow its security presence; the Australia–Tuvalu Falepili Union treaty in 2024 is just one example.

This report examines the PRC's security ambitions in the Pacific. While this is not the first study to tackle the topic,<sup>1</sup> the findings are based on the author's

<sup>1</sup> For example, Denghua Zhang, 'China's motives, influence and prospects in Pacific Island countries: Views of Chinese scholars,' *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 23 (2023): 33-59; Denghua Zhang, 'China's security interest in the Pacific region: Chinese and Pacific perceptions,' in *Power and Influence in the Pacific Islands: Understanding Statecraftiness*, ed. Joanne Wallis et al. (London: Routledge, 2024), 158-72; Michael Wesley, 'What should Australia do about... PRC activities in the South Pacific?', *China Matters Explores*, China Matters, April 2021 <<https://chinamatters.org.au/policy-brief/policy-brief-april-2021/>>; Joanne Wallis et al., 'Framing China in the Pacific Islands,' *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 5 (2022): 522-45; Anna Powles, 'How strategic competition is shaping security cooperation in Solomon Islands,' in *Navigating Strategic Pathways in Melanesia: Options for U.S. Engagement*, ed. April A. Herlevi (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2024), 33-44.

extensive fieldwork in late 2024 and early 2025 at institutions across the PRC, and in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, as well as exchanges with current and former Australian officials. The interviews conducted cannot represent the full range of views within these countries. However, these recent face-to-face interviews with PRC and Pacific Island interlocutors do offer timely insights and a diverse range of perspectives to enrich the policy debate in Canberra on Australia–PRC relations in the Pacific.

The report emphasises that while Australia has valid concerns about the PRC's security activities in the region, Beijing's regional ambitions are complex and military objectives are a low priority. This raises the question of whether Australia should stick to its current policy approach, which is overwhelmingly focused on contestation and blocking. The report ends with actionable recommendations that would constitute a more layered approach and better serve Australia's interests.

## Australia's assessment of PRC security motives in the Pacific

*'There is not much of a place  
for China in the region's  
security landscape'*

- Former Australian diplomat in the Pacific

The Australian government does not view the PRC as a trusted security partner. This mistrust stems from the deterioration of Australia–PRC relations since 2017 – marked by, among others, foreign interference legislation that was deemed necessary to combat malign Chinese activities in 2018, and a call for an investigation into COVID-19's origin in 2020 that was perceived in Beijing as Canberra aligning with Washington to launch a political attack. While economic and trade ties began to stabilise after 2022, Canberra remains suspicious of PRC's security motives.

Australia's assessment of PRC presence in the Pacific is shaped by its strategic concerns around the role the PRC is playing in the broader Indo-Pacific region. This has included coercive actions against other claimant states in the South China Sea, and a number of encounters with Australia's defence forces that Canberra has described as 'unsafe and unprofessional'. The 2024 National Defence Strategy and the 2025 Snapshot of Australia in the World state that such actions by the PRC run counter to regional peace and stability.

While Australia has a longstanding interest in preventing hostile powers from establishing a foothold in the Pacific,<sup>2</sup> Canberra's concerns are more fundamentally rooted in anxieties about PRC's rise. As a former Australian diplomat in the Pacific put it, 'There is not much of a place for China in the region's security landscape'. 'Australia needs to ensure that PRC's military presence is limited,' he added. Another senior Australian diplomat noted ongoing 'barriers for engagement due to uncertainty about China's intentions in the Pacific'. An experienced Australian foreign policy expert remarked that discussions on expanding engagement, especially in areas like maritime security or the Pacific, are seen as 'overly ambitious'.

These perspectives reflect ongoing concerns among Australian security experts about PRC's potential to expand its military presence. For instance, in 2018, rumours emerged that the PRC had approached Vanuatu to build a military base. Although the Vanuatu government swiftly denied the claim, many

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of Australia's strategic interests in the Pacific, see Joanne Wallis, "Australia's statecraft towards its 'Pacific family,'" in *Power and Influence in the Pacific Islands: Understanding statecraftiness*, ed. Joanne Wallis et al. (London: Routledge, 2024), 123-39; Joanne Wallis and Genevieve Quirk, "Australia's involvement in maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands," in *Pacific Maritime Security Cooperation: Views from the Pacific and its Partners* (Stretton Institute, University of Adelaide, 2024), 24-27; Joanne Wallis, *Pacific Power? Australia's Strategy in the Pacific Islands* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2017); Rebecca Strating and Joanne Wallis, *Girt by Sea: Re-imagining Australia's Security* (Collingwood: La Trobe University Press, 2024).

*Australia did engage with the PRC in the Pacific prior to... 2022.*

Australian experts viewed it as part of PRC's efforts to establish a security foothold in the Pacific. To date, no such base has been built. Other key developments include the 2022 Solomon Islands–PRC security agreement, the PRC offer of internal security support to Papua New Guinea in 2023 and PLAN naval exercises in the Tasman Sea in 2025.

It is worth noting that Australia did engage with the PRC in the Pacific prior to the Solomon Islands–PRC security agreement in 2022. An Australia–PRC Development Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2013 to promote aid collaboration. The two countries cooperated in the Trilateral Malaria Project in Papua New Guinea in 2016. Prior to 2022, both countries exchanged views on regional priorities, including climate change, COVID-19 recovery, fisheries issues and infrastructure development. However, dialogue stalled after 2022 when Australian officials raised concerns over a lack of transparency in the PRC's engagement and negative impact on regional security and stability.

## How does the PRC see its security-related activities?

Historically, Beijing's Pacific engagement focused on countering Taiwanese diplomatic efforts. Since 2019, it has established or re-established diplomatic ties with the Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Nauru. To date, the PRC has not released a policy paper outlining its Pacific strategy. Consequently, there are diverse interpretations among PRC scholars about Beijing's ambitions, security or otherwise. Some view the lack of a policy paper as proof that the Pacific is seen by Beijing as peripheral.

### The PRC's role in the Pacific

PRC scholars generally perceive the PRC as an 'outsider' in the region. A Beijing scholar suggested that PICs do not fall within the PRC's traditional 'sphere of influence'. As such, discussing a distinct Pacific strategy in the PRC holds 'limited significance'. Consequently, Pacific engagement is often seen through the lens of broader strategic interests, particularly in terms of cultivating ties with the Global South, rather than a standalone regional strategy.

While the PRC has been a Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue Partner since 1990, interviewees suggested that PRC engagement with the Forum has been 'selective' and 'irregular'. This is largely due to two factors: three PICs continue to recognise Taiwan, and Beijing remains wary of Australia and New Zealand's influence within the Forum following the 2017 downturn in bilateral relations. Beijing prefers bilateral engagement with PICs. The PRC has hosted meetings without inclusion of Australia such as the China–Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum, and China–Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting – inaugurally hosted in Beijing in May 2025.

### Security presence in the region

It is evident that the PRC is increasingly interested in expanding security-related cooperation with PICs. The PLAN conducted humanitarian missions in 2014, 2018 and 2023; the security agreement with the Solomon Islands was signed in 2022, and memoranda of understanding with Cook Islands in 2025. Interviews with officials in Fiji and the Solomon Islands indicate growing PRC engagement in areas like police training and equipment provision. A Fijian naval officer disclosed that PRC survey vessels have operated within



*Many PRC analysts told the author that the establishment of a military base in the Pacific is highly unlikely.*

Fiji's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and occasionally docked in Suva, complying with international maritime laws while doing so. There have also been unconfirmed reports of the PRC proposing joint coast guard patrols with individual PICs.

### Potential military base

Australian security experts perceive the PRC as strategically expanding its military presence in the Pacific by developing dual-use facilities with potential military applications.<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2020, the PRC helped Papua New Guinea repair the Kumul Submarine Cable Network. In 2021, the PRC supported Kiribati in upgrading an airstrip on Canton Island, approximately 3,000 kilometres southwest of Hawaii.

However, based on the author's multiple interviews in the PRC, it is premature to conclude that the PRC has concrete military objectives in the region. As a Shanghai-based scholar stated, while the PRC certainly holds strategic interests in the Pacific—spanning economic, developmental and security dimensions—military engagement is not a priority.

Many PRC analysts told the author that the establishment of a military base in the Pacific is highly unlikely. The region does not represent a critical sea line of communication for the PRC. Over 64 percent of PRC's maritime trade transits through the South China Sea.<sup>4</sup> This has made the Pacific a low strategic priority for the PRC military. As several PRC scholars consistently suggested, having a military base is 'beyond China's interest at the moment' and 'not within China's current capacity'.

Moreover, while the PRC has invested globally in port infrastructure, very few projects in the Pacific are viable for military use. The only port in the region that has potential strategic value and in which the PRC has over 50 percent ownership is located in Newcastle, Australia.<sup>5</sup> Interviews conducted in Fiji and the Solomon Islands confirm that while some state-owned enterprises have invested in commercial port projects, these ventures have faced local resistance. As one PRC scholar said, 'The PRC is not widely regarded as a trusted security partner in the Pacific'.

Instead, most PRC military engagement with PICs has consisted of vessel donations, personnel training and official visits. Notable examples include a donation of a hydrographic survey vessel to the Fijian Navy in 2018 and a US\$1.5 million grant to Cook Islands in 2024 for procuring a second-hand shipping vessel. PRC officials regularly invite Pacific officers to the PRC for ministerial meetings and military education. A Pacific officer was invited to a deep-sea mining conference hosted in the PRC. According to him, the event was part of a broader PRC strategy to garner support for its deep-sea mining agenda.

Nevertheless, Beijing's limited understanding of regional sensitivities has occasionally led to diplomatic miscalculations. A few PRC scholars from Beijing and Guangzhou suggested that the government initially underestimated Australia and New Zealand's response to the Solomon Islands security agreement but later acknowledged the need to factor in regional sensitivities.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> James Laurenceson, *Do the Claims Stack Up? Australia Talks China*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 29 2018 <<https://www.uts.edu.au/news/2018/10/do-claims-stack-australia-talks-china>>.

<sup>4</sup> China Power Team, 'How much trade transits the South China Sea?', Center for Strategic & International Studies, August 2 2017 (updated January 25 2021) <<https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Zongyuan Zoe Liu, 'Tracking China's control of overseas ports', Council on Foreign Relations, August 26 2024 <<https://www.cfr.org/tracker/china-overseas-ports>>.

<sup>6</sup> See also Lu Sun, 'Zhongguo shenhua yu taiping yang daoguo hezuo de jiyu yu tiaozhan: yi zhongguo yu suoluomenqundao qianchu anquan hezuo xieyi wei li [Opportunities and challenges for China to deepen cooperation with the Pacific Island countries], *Heping Yu Fazhan [Peace and Development]*, no. 6 (2022): 133-52.

## Non-conventional security

Many PRC scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds note that the PRC's security interests in the Pacific are mostly non-military. In maritime security, for instance, they describe the PRC as a responsible partner that supports sustainable marine resource use. They point to shared interests with PICs in areas like fisheries, environmental protection and climate change.<sup>7</sup> These goals align with the Boe Declaration on Regional Security and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, which is primarily non-traditionally security driven. This framing enhances the PRC's appeal in the region, suggesting to PICs that its engagement is focused on development interests rather than strategic competition.

Fishery management is a key focus of PRC engagement in the region, given its interests in a distant-water fishery industry. For example, in 2023, it hosted two major meetings in Nanjing, the China–PICs Forum on Fishery Cooperation and Development and the China–PICs and Third-Party Cooperation Forum. At these events, PRC and Pacific representatives discussed illegal fishing and resource monitoring.

The PRC also takes part in regional fishery organisations like South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation and Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). In 2024, PRC registered 26 coast guard vessels for inspection duties under the WCPFC.<sup>8</sup> During a regular session of the WCPFC Technical and Compliance Committee, the PRC introduced a delegation paper for the first time, raising questions about boarding procedures and enforcement rules.<sup>9</sup> While these discussions remain technical, some scholars in Australia and New Zealand have expressed concern.

Furthermore, the PRC is involved in other policy sectors in the Pacific, including climate change, disaster management, policing and management of transnational crime. According to Pacific scholars in the PRC and officials in the Pacific, these areas of cooperation reflect mutual interests. For PICs, they are central to their development and governance priorities; for the PRC, they reflect efforts to implement President Xi Jinping's Global Security Initiative on common and cooperative security and deepen PRC–PICs cooperation under the 'shared future' framework.<sup>10</sup> This engagement also aligns with the PRC's broadly framed national security interests, including cybersecurity (such as combating cyber fraud) and overseas security concerns, such as protecting diaspora businesses by maintaining local law and order.

## The PRC's assessment of Australia–PRC relations in the Pacific

PRC scholars are sceptical about engaging with Australia in the Pacific. First, some PRC international relations scholars misattribute Canberra's growing interest in the Pacific to influence from the US, which aims to contain the PRC's presence. A Shanghai-based scholar said that 'if the US was not increasingly

*PRC scholars argue that direct engagement is more pragmatic, given that many PICs align more closely with the PRC on development priorities.*

<sup>7</sup> Jiarui Liang, *Nan Taipingyang haiyang zhili ji qi dangdai yingxiang [Ocean Governance in the South Pacific and its Contemporary Impact]* (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2021); Danfeng Guo and Xianghong Lin, 'Zhongguo-taipingyang daoguo lanse huoban guanxi: jichu, lujing yu jianyi [China-Pacific countries blue partnership: Foundation, paths and proposals]', *Guoji Guanxi Yanjiu [International Relations Research]*, no. 6 (2022): 47-69.

<sup>8</sup> Western & Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, 'HSBI: China Coastguard vessels will be entered on the WCPFC Register of Authorised Inspection Vessels', accessed March 2025 <<https://www.wcpfc.int/node/53889>>.

<sup>9</sup> Technical and Compliance Committee, 'Twentieth Regular Session, 25 September - 1 October 2024, Pohnpei, FSM - Summary report', Western & Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, November 24 2024 <<https://meetings.wcpfc.int/node/24513>>.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Special Envoy for Pacific Island Countries Affairs of the Chinese Government Qian Bo attends the launching ceremony of the China-Pacific Island Countries Center for Disaster Risk Reduction and Cooperation', February 23 2023 <[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xw/wjbxw/202405/t20240530\\_11343284.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/wjbxw/202405/t20240530_11343284.html)>.

concerned about China's presence, Australia would not be putting in such effort'. This perspective reflects the scarcity of Chinese academic literature on Australia's engagement in the Pacific.

Some PRC scholars of Australian politics refer to the Pacific as 'Australia's backyard'. These scholars draw a parallel between Australia–Pacific ties and PRC's own claims in the South China Sea. This suggests both a recognition of PRC's outsider status in the Pacific and an expectation of reciprocity—that Australia should respect PRC's maritime sovereignty in East and Southeast Asia. A Guangzhou-based scholar said: 'Unless Australia respects PRC's sovereignty in its maritime domain, meaningful engagement between the two countries in the Pacific will remain unlikely'.

Second, PRC scholars recognise that fundamental differences in national security outlooks hinder cooperation. According to a Beijing-based expert, the PRC recognises Australia's tendency to view even non-military activities as strategic threats. Therefore, even though there are potential areas of collaboration, the PRC lacks an incentive due to Australia's distrust. As suggested by an area studies scholar in Beijing, Australia and the PRC 'have different understandings of national security and geopolitical strategy, which makes cooperation difficult'.

Third, as a rising great power, the PRC generally believes that it can engage with the Pacific directly through bilateral relationships and bypass Australia. PRC scholars argue that direct engagement is more pragmatic, given that many PICs align more closely with the PRC on development priorities. As one area studies scholar in Beijing commented, this preference for bilateralism is reinforced by the deterioration of Australia–PRC relations since 2017.

## How do the PICs understand the PRC's security-related motives?

Concerns are growing in Canberra over perceived deepening ties between PICs and PRC. However, interviews with scholars, officials and journalists in Suva and Honiara revealed less alarm. Although these conversations cannot capture the full complexity of PICs–PRC relations, they do reveal that PICs are cognisant of the PRC's security-related interests and strategically engaging to enhance their own international standing amid geopolitical shifts.

### Relationship with the PRC

In a 2025 speech, Solomon Islands National University Vice-Chancellor Professor Transform Aqorau identified development assistance as a key driver behind the region's growing engagement with the PRC.<sup>11</sup> For some Pacific Islanders, 'development is the top priority', a statement frequently echoed in the author's interviews with government officials and diplomats from PICs. Given the scale of PRC investment, the rationale for engagement is clear. As one Solomon Islands official said, 'There is a strong economic reason for us to engage with China'.

The 2024 Fiji Foreign Policy White Paper similarly notes that 'there are areas of economic development where China can make a positive contribution to Fiji's development'.<sup>12</sup> In Honiara, citizens express admiration for the PRC's donation of the Solomon Islands National Stadium and the construction of a new hospital. Likewise, officials from Fiji and the Solomon Islands show

<sup>11</sup> Transform Aqorau, 'Navigating the currents of change: The Pacific in an era of geopolitical fluidity', 2025 PIPSA Conference, February 20 2025 <<https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/strategic-studies/news/css-news-items/navigating-the-currents-of-change-the-pacific-in-an-era-of-geopolitical-fluidity>>.

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Fiji, *Foreign Policy White Paper*, September 23 2024 <<https://www.foreignaffairs.gov.fj/foreign-policy-white-paper-2/>>.



particular interest in PRC development models, especially its e-commerce initiatives and rural revitalisation strategies.

At the same time, some PIC leaders remain mindful of geopolitical tensions. The Fiji Foreign Policy White Paper notes that 'the largest challenge facing the Indo-Pacific is the construction of a stable balance' to manage US–PRC competition. Professor Aqorau similarly observes that PICs 'find themselves in a rapidly evolving geopolitical theatre' where multiple powers are vying for influence.<sup>13</sup>

Despite great power competition, some Pacific leaders characterise their foreign policy as one of 'friends to all, enemies to none', focused on local priorities. PICs have historically favoured a non-aligned approach in managing great power relations since the Cold War. Today, they seek to diversify their partnerships and ultimately achieve greater self-sufficiency. A Solomon Islands official explained, 'Our goal is to let Australia, China and other countries help us to build our own capacity, instead of letting them to build their own capacity or influence in the region'. From this perspective, the PRC is one partner among many, albeit one with significant resources and capacity. A Fijian Ministry of Defence official noted, 'China is not a threat, but one of the sovereign nations that partner with us'. Although this comment may not reflect the position of the entire Pacific region, it offers an alternative perspective of how Pacific Islanders view the PRC.

### Assessment of the PRC's security presence

As one 2024 report noted, PICs show a clear preference for traditional partners, particularly Australia, when it comes to security assistance.<sup>14</sup> Interviews by the author with officials in Suva and Honiara reaffirmed a cautious stance toward PRC security engagement.

First, concerns persist around transparency. A Fijian scholar remarked, 'The PRC has a poor reputation in democracy... Their deals with our government are sometimes left in the dark with no access of the information'. In another interview, a Fijian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official said that they were closely watching the PRC's coastguard and maritime militia activity in the South China Sea. While these activities are not seen as an immediate threat to the region, concerns are growing about the increasing frequency of PRC research vessel visits, particularly due to the limited information provided by Beijing.

Second, deep trust between PICs and the PRC is limited. A Solomon Islands official remarked that the bilateral relationship remains relatively new: 'Since we only made the switch in 2019, we are still learning how to deal with China'. This lack of trust-building engagement contributes to PICs' wariness regarding closer security ties with Beijing. When asked which partner they would prefer to work with, the answer is frequently unequivocal: Australia.

Third, to many PICs, Australia is a more reliable partner in security as the relationship is more comprehensive and long-standing. Australia provides more investment, aid and assistance programs compared with the PRC.<sup>15</sup> Building on the Pacific Patrol Boat Program, Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Program supports 16 regional partners with patrol boats, surveillance and

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<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Fiji, *Foreign Policy White Paper*, September 23 2024 <<https://www.foreignaffairs.gov.fj/foreign-policy-white-paper-2/>>. See also Reuters staff, 'Fiji prime minister warns against US and China attempts to 'polarise' Pacific', *The Guardian*, August 25 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/25/fiji-prime-minister-warns-against-us-and-china-attempts-to-polarise-pacific>>..

<sup>14</sup> Meg Keen and Alan Tidwell, 'Geopolitics in the Pacific Islands: Playing for advantage', Lowy Institute, January 31 2024 <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/geopolitics-pacific-islands-playing-advantage>>..

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Alexandre Dayant et al., 'Pacific aid map: 2024 key findings', Lowy Institute, November 20 2024 <<https://pacificaidmap.lowyinstitute.org/analysis/2024/key-findings/>>.

regional coordination. Long-term programs such as the Police Development Program and the Law Enforcement Cooperation Program, provide training, equipment and support to address local and transnational crime. As one Fijian naval officer noted, 'Australians are just doing all the little things'. He contrasted this with the PRC's donation of survey vessels, which lacked translated operating instructions and ongoing maintenance support. A Solomon Islands Royal Police officer added, 'The Australians have a better understanding of our needs'. Australian diplomats in the Pacific also affirmed the strength of these ties. They describe Australia as being a 'solid partner of choice' and suggest that 'China's activities did not affect Australia's presence in the region'.

Fourth, although the PRC prefers to engage bilaterally, many PICs express a preference to interact with Beijing through regional mechanisms. This approach allows them to amplify their collective voice and align with broader efforts to rationalise regional governance structures—particularly under the ongoing Review of the Regional Architecture in the Pacific Islands Forum. As a Pacific Islands Forum officer suggested, the Forum's central goal is to ensure that 'all dialogue partners are treated equally'. For example, in discussions about potential joint patrolling in the EEZ, PIC officials indicated a strong preference for such initiatives to be channelled through regional mechanisms rather than bilateral arrangements.

While PICs view Australia as their most trusted security partner, they are not necessarily convinced by Australia's framing of the PRC as a regional security threat. Importantly, many believe that Australia does not have a natural legitimacy to speak for the region. To some extent, the PRC's principle of 'non-interference' has made Beijing a more attractive balancing partner for some PICs. They interpret Australia's narrative as an attempt to pressure PICs into taking sides. There is a strong sentiment that Australia is not in a position to dictate PICs' external engagements, which is seen as infringing on their sovereignty. In multiple interviews in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, officials expressed frustration over a perceived Australian double standard. As one Fijian interviewee put it, 'If Australia has China as their top trading partner, why can't we [PICs] engage with China?'. From their perspective, it is unacceptable for Australia to include a 'China-free clause' in its aid to PICs as they view it as interference in their foreign policy. 'We will not sign [the agreement];' the interviewee added.

Evidently, PICs are not passive players in geopolitics. Rather, they are strategic actors seeking to navigate a complex environment in ways that can work best for their development and security interests. If there is a choice, they know who to approach.

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

This report argues that while Canberra is right to be concerned about the PRC's increased security presence in the Pacific, it should avoid overreacting by framing the PRC as a military threat. Rather, Australian policymakers should take into account that military engagement is a low priority for both the PRC and most PICs. PICs continue to prefer security assistance from their traditional partners. Moreover, Australia is neither entitled to speak on behalf of the entire

<sup>16</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 'REPORTS: Communique of the 53rd Pacific Islands Leaders Forum, 2024', Pacific Islands Forum, August 30 2024 <<https://forumsec.org/publications/reports-communique-53rd-pacific-islands-leaders-forum-2024>>.

<sup>17</sup> Fiji Government, 'Hon PM Bainimarama speech at the China-Fiji 40th Anniversary Diplomatic Relations Symposium opening', November 5 2015 <<https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/Speeches/English/HON-PM-BAINIMARAMA-SPEECH-AT-THE-CHINA-FIJI-40TH-A>>.



region regarding PRC's intentions, nor to obstruct the growing PRC–PICs engagement across various sectors.

Therefore, this report recommends that the Australian government adopts a more multi-prolonged approach to the PRC's expanding security presence in the Pacific. At the multilateral level, Australia should continue to reinforce regional architecture that reflects most PICs' regional security priorities, such as climate change, disaster management and environmental sustainability.

Rather than viewing PICs–PRC bilateral relations in binary terms of alignment or threat, Australia should take a context-driven approach. First, Canberra should be open-minded about bilateral security dialogues and military visits by the PLAN, as these do not necessarily indicate strategic alignment. Instead, a flexible approach would show Australia's respect of PICs' sovereignty and support of their independent diplomacy.

For non-conventional security, Australia should carefully assess potential security risks alongside its own capabilities. While it is neither realistic nor sustainable for Australia to address all security challenges in the Pacific on its own, trilateral cooperation with the PRC and PICs is not viable due to the lack of trust between Canberra and Beijing. Therefore, Australia needs to accept that PICs choose to cooperate with the PRC on certain issues, especially climate change and humanitarian assistance.

In more sensitive areas such as policing and patrolling, Australia should continue to leverage its comparative advantages by providing quality training programs, vessel maintenance and operational support to PICs' security forces. When evaluating the PRC's growing security presence, Canberra should assess activities based on compliance with international law, respect for sovereignty and alignment with regional interests—using evidence-based assessments rather than assumptions.

Finally, Australia should sustain and deepen its investment in infrastructure development, particularly in the port sector, to ensure that PRC involvement in critical infrastructure remains limited. Since PICs are more likely to approach Australia first, there is no need for overreaction. Imposing 'China-free' conditions on aid will likely trigger local pushback. Instead, Australia should act with confidence in its longstanding and trusted partnerships across the region.

Overall, Australia has been a solid partner of choice for Pacific Island nations, and it should continue to be that, without overreacting.

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**About the Fellowship:**

An initiative of China Matters in partnership with the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI), the China Matters-UTS:ACRI Fellowship is an investment in the next generation of Australian China specialists.

The Fellowship was established to support Australian early career researchers in the field of China Studies examining issues of particular relevance for Australia, and to provide an opportunity to undertake policy-relevant research in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Research outputs from the Fellowship will foster policy-relevant China knowledge and the community of Australia-China relations study.

The Fellowship is an opportunity for an early career Australian researcher to conduct research in the PRC with feedback and mentoring provided by UTS:ACRI under the guidance of Professor James Laurenceson, UTS:ACRI Director, and Ms Linda Jakobson, former founding director of China Matters.

The maximum total value of the Fellowship is AU\$40,000, for the duration of the Fellowship: one year.

*The author is grateful to four anonymous external reviewers for feedback on an earlier draft.*

## Appendices

**Table 1:** The PRC's diplomatic relationship with PICs

(Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China)

Pacific Island Country	Year	Relationship
Cook Islands	2014	Strategic partner
	2018	Comprehensive strategic partner
Fiji	2014	Strategic partner
	2018	Comprehensive strategic partner
Kiribati	2019	Diplomatic tie
Marshall Islands	N/A	No diplomatic ties
Micronesia	2014	Strategic partner
	2018	Comprehensive strategic partner
Nauru	2024	Diplomatic tie
Niue	2014	Strategic partner
	2018	Comprehensive strategic partner
Palau	N/A	No diplomatic ties
PNG	2014	Strategic partner
	2018	Comprehensive strategic partner
Samoa	2014	Strategic partner
	2018	Comprehensive strategic partner
Solomon Islands	2024	Comprehensive strategic partner
Tonga	2014	Strategic partner
	2018	Comprehensive strategic partner
Tuvalu	N/A	No diplomatic ties
Vanuatu	2014	Strategic partner
	2018	Comprehensive strategic partner

**Table 2:** Pacific Islands countries' leaders visits to the PRC (2013-2025) (Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China)

Country	Year	Month	Leader
Cook Islands	2025	February	Mark Brown
Fiji	2013	May	Frank Bainimarama
	2015	July	Frank Bainimarama
	2017	May	Frank Bainimarama
	2024	August	Sitiveni Rabuka
Kiribati	2020	January	Taneti Maamau
	2025	May	Taneti Maamau
Marshall Islands	N/A	N/A	No known visit
Micronesia	2013	November	Manny Mori
	2017	March	Peter Christian
	2019	December	David Panuelo
	2024	April	Wesley Simina
Nauru	2024	March	David Adeang
Niue	2013	November	Toke Talagi
Palau	N/A	N/A	No known visit
Papua New Guinea	2013	November	Peter O'Neill
	2014	November	Peter O'Neill
	2016	July	Peter O'Neill
	2018	June	Peter O'Neill
	2019	April	Peter O'Neill
	2022	February	James Marape
	2023	October	James Marape
Samoa	2013	November	Tuilaepa Sailele
	2018	September	Tuilaepa Sailele
Solomon Islands	2019	October	Manasseh Sogavare
	2023	July	Manasseh Sogavare
	2024	July	Jeremiah Manele
Tonga	2013	July	Lord Tu'i'vakanō
	2013	November	Lord Tu'i'vakanō
Tuvalu	N/A	N/A	No known visit
Vanuatu	2013	September	Moana Carcasses Kalosil
	2013	November	Moana Carcasses Kalosil
	2014	August	Joe Natuman
	2015	September	Sato Kilman
	2016	September	Charlot Salwai
	2019	May	Charlot Salwai
	2024	July	Charlot Salwai

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**Table 3: PRC leaders' visits to Pacific Island countries (2014-2024)**

(Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China)

Country	Year	Month	Name	Title
Cook Islands	2015	October	Du Qiwen	Special Envoy for the China-Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue
	2023	July	Qian Bo	Special Envoy for Pacific Island Affairs
	2023	November	Qian Bo	Special Envoy for Pacific Island Affairs
Fiji	2014	November	Xi Jinping	President
	2018	October	Wang Yi	State Councillor and Foreign Minister
	2022	May	Wang Yi	State Councillor and Foreign Minister
	2023	April	Ma Zhaoxu	Vice Foreign Minister
Kiribati	2019	October	Wang Xuefeng	Special Envoy for the China-Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue
	2022	May	Wang Yi	Foreign Minister
	2023	March	Tang Wenhong	Deputy Director, China International Development Cooperation Agency
	2023	July	Qian Bo	Special Envoy for Pacific Island Affairs
Marshall Islands	N/A	N/A	No known visit	N/A
Micronesia	2015	July	Wang Hong	Director of State Oceanic Administration
	2019	July	Yang Chuantang	Vice Chair, National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
	2023	July	Tang Renjian	Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs
Nauru	N/A	N/A	No known visit	N/A
Niue	2014	October	Du Qiwen	Special Envoy for the China-Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue
	2015	October	Du Qiwen	Special Envoy for the China-Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue
	2017	July	Du Qiwen	Special Envoy for the China-Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue
	2023	November	Qian Bo	Special Envoy for Pacific Island Affairs
Palau	N/A	N/A	No known visit	N/A
Papua New Guinea	2016	February	Zheng Zeguang	Vice Foreign Minister
	2016	September	Zhang Baowen	Vice Chair, Standing Committee of the National People's Congress
	2018	July	Zheng Zeguang	Vice Foreign Minister
	2018	October	Wang Yi	State Councillor & Foreign Minister
	2018	November	Xi Jinping	President
	2019	June	Wang Xuefeng	Special Envoy for Pacific Islands Forum
	2022	June	Wang Yi	State Councillor & Foreign Minister
	2023	March	Qian Bo	Special Envoy for Pacific Island Affairs
	2024	April	Wang Yi	Foreign Minister
	2024	June	Hu Chunhua	Vice Chair, National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
Samoa	2014	September	Zhang Yesui	Vice Foreign Minister
	2015	August	Qi Xuchun	Vice Chair, National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
	2016	September	Zhang Baowen	Vice Chair, Standing Committee of the National People's Congress
	2017	May	Zhang Zeguang	Vice Foreign Minister
	2019	October	Hu Chunhua	Vice Premier
	2022	May	Wang Yi	Foreign Minister
	2024	April	Qian Bo	Special Envoy for Pacific Island Affairs

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**Table 3:** PRC PRC leaders visit at Pacific Islands countries (2014-2024) *Continued*

(Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China)

Country	Year	Month	Name	Title
Solomon Islands	2022	May	Wang Yi	Foreign Minister
	2023	November	Cai Dafeng	Vice Chair, Standing Committee of the National People's Congress
	2024	April	Qian Bo	Special Envoy for Pacific Island Affairs
	2024	June	Qian Bo	Special Envoy for Pacific Island Affairs
Tonga	2014	March	Wang Jiarui	Vice Chair, National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
	2016	April	Tianzhongzhong	Vice Admiral
	2016	February	Zheng Zeguang	Vice Foreign Minister
	2018	December	Guo Yezhou	Deputy Director, International Liaison Department
	2019	August	Zheng Jianbang	Vice Chair, National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
	2020	January	Ding Zhongli	Vice Chair, Standing Committee of the National People's Congress
	2022	June	Wang Yi	State Councillor and Foreign Minister
	2024	July	Hu Chunhua	Vice Chair, National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
	N/A	N/A	No known visit	N/A
Vanuatu	2014	January	Chen Yuan	Vice Chair, National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
	2015	July	Xu Luping	Deputy Director, International Liaison Department
	2016	March	Guo Yezhou	Deputy Director, International Liaison Department
	2017	January	Arken Imirbaki	Vice Chair, Standing Committee of the National People's Congress
	2017	May	Zheng Zeguang	Vice Foreign Minister
	2019	March	Han Changfu	Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs
	2019	July	Zhou Liujun	Deputy Director, China International Development Cooperation Agency
	2022	May	Wang Yi	State Councillor and Foreign Minister
	2023	May	Wang Lingjun	Vice Minister, General Administration of Customs
	2024	June	Hu Chunhua	Vice Chair, National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference