



apcss.org/nexus

SECURITY NEXUS

A free, open access, international, peer-reviewed, online publication for the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies faculty and alumni.

Security Nexus Research

PERCEPTIONS OF INDIGENOUS SECURITY PRACTITIONERS ON CHINA'S GEOSTRATEGIC ACTIVITIES IN THE PACIFIC

By Dr. Deon Canyon *

Introduction

Micronesia, Polynesia and Melanesia are attracting an increasing number of international partners with uncertain motives, which is rendering the region's geopolitics more complex. Traditional external powers, such as Australia, New Zealand, United States and France, have had a long-term, big-brother-style relationships with Pacific Island nations that have deteriorated and resulted in new powers, such as China, Russia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Japan and India becoming more actively engaged in the region. Growing maturity in some Pacific economies and foreign policies is limiting the influence of traditional powers, with Papua New Guinea and Fiji emerging as regional powers that are more active in international spheres. Increasing regional activity by China and the increased United States focus on Oceania are already affecting regional stability, which is affecting nations that have a security relationship with traditional partners and an economic relationship with non-traditional partners, such as China.¹ Pacific Island nations understandably view geopolitical strategic competition for regional influence and resources as an opportunity to play competitors against each other and are taking advantage of increased access to aid, concessional loans, defense and security cooperation, business opportunities and international influence.

Key Points:

- Pacific Islands are struggling to rationally position themselves on a red line between the US and China, but the line is developing an edge.
- There is a dire need for the reinforcement of security infrastructure throughout the Pacific
- Pacific Islands must be proactive in preserving national sovereignty, ensuring that their international relations are only in their best interests, and protecting their limited resources

* Dr. Deon Canyon is a professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) in Honolulu, USA. The views expressed in this article are the author's alone, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the DKI APCSS or the United States Government.

Perspectives on China were informally solicited from security experts throughout the Pacific Islands and their views make up the bulk of this paper. All sources preferred not to be identified and many contacts preferred not to comment on this sensitive issue. As such, the text in this paper does not represent official government positions or policies in any manner, but they do represent the opinions of experienced security practitioners with considerable insight into national behaviors and decisions. The comments are organized in terms of pro and anti-China, however there are some that are neutral, which is a political stance advocated by some regional scholars and adopted by many Pacific Island nations.

Pro-China Sentiment

Views from Papua New Guinea

The orientation towards a pro-China stance has a few drivers. PNG sees China offering a better assistance and deals in areas in which they expected Australia to help them, and attributes economic advancement to China playing a stronger, more meaningful role in development. For instance, Chinese companies beautified the capital, Port Moresby, for the South Pacific Games and the APEC meetings, renovated the Defence Force Headquarters in Murray Barracks the Governor General's residence, and Huawei is now located within the Telikom headquarters of the state-owned telecommunication enterprise.

A large reason for this is that PNG feels that its primary traditional partner, Australia, has let them down in many ways. Some feel that Australia has only provided token monetary assistance that has not led to tangible development at the grassroots level. Some feel that Australia's abandonment of PNG after independence left it with a weak government that quickly became corrupt and self-serving. Some feel that Australia has used them for resource exploitation. Some feel that Australians are paternalistic, superior and even racist in their behavior towards Pacific Islanders. And some see Australia as complicit in corruption, since many funds misappropriated by PNG politicians are invested in Australia.

These narratives are growing stronger as an increasing number of PNG students who get tertiary education in China are returning with a strong pro-China and an anti-Australia view. Trade relations and foreign exchanges existed with China, Japan and the ASEAN countries before the pronouncement of PNG's significant 'look north' foreign policy shift circa 1993. It's recognition of the one-China policy has resulted in a growing relationship with leaders exchanging state visits, and officials and business expanding relations in politics, trade, security, economic, investment and development.

Many PNG politicians view China as *the* regional power and see benefit in more engagement. However, the nature of the relationship has placed the government in the precarious position of having to say "Yes" to almost everything China proposes. Decisions and policies compromise greatly in favor of Chinese companies over citizens. E.g. Slurry from the Chinese Owned Ramu Nickel Mine spilled into Basamak Bay in Madang province causing damage to the coastline, but the Papua New Guinea Minister for Environment, Conservation & Climate Change, Hon. Wera Mori covered it up on national television. In the same way, the Health Minister for Health & HIV/AIDS, Hon. Jelta Wongs ensured that overpriced drugs, bought cheap from an uncertified Chinese pharmaceutical company, continue to supply hospitals and health centers.

PNG has many security issues from border management to gun running, from trafficking to organized criminal activity, and from gross corruption to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. Asian business entities have a reputation for overstaying visas, forgery, importing and trading counterfeit goods and pharmaceutical products, piracy, human smuggling, money laundering, and harboring illegal migrants. PNG's traditional allies have assisted somewhat, but PNG sees a security vacuum that China is filling and will eventually take over. China has contributed immensely to PNG's development through economic, trade and investment, health and education, and defense. For instance, a peace-keeping mission under UN has always been a dream of PNG, but traditional allies have not assisted in ensuring Papua New Guinea has the necessary requirements to deploy a platoon under the UN banner. China is expected to fill this gap to improve relationships with the PNG military and government.

Although some believe that China's influence on PNG is narrowing due to the new Prime Minister Hon. James Marape's stated intent to focus on fair and free trade, China is expected to maintain its grip on PNG as a result of its massive richness in natural resources. Scholars and security experts believe this has had a significant effect on national security. The National Intelligence Organisation, within the Department of Prime Minister & National Executive Council and the Defence Intelligence Bureau within the PNG Defence Organization have been purposely incapacitated by certain government actors and are almost defunct. Similarly, law enforcement agencies lack manpower and financial resources. E.g. the Transnational Crime Unit has only twenty officers and funding that does not cover basic operations. Insiders conclude that this is due to corrupt foreign influence that ensures a lack of capacity persists.

Views from Vanuatu

The Vanuatu government has a generally positive view of China due largely to direct aid and assistance provided. They see the development potential as they debate how and where the aid will be spent. This freedom to decide how aid is spent is an important advantages of China's assistance compared to other countries like Australia, New Zealand, France and UK. Although there are differing views in government on how to view China through a security lens, both major parties view the relationship as positive because of how China has responding to Vanuatu security issues, especially in relation to logistics. Their long-standing issues on uniforms have been remedied by China, which has also supplied machines and trucks to the paramilitary.

Views from Fiji

In addition to variable, but generally good relationships with traditional partner nations, the current Fiji government has a positive view of China. Analysts expect it will remain in a close relationship with China because China does not require that nations are accountable with regard to democratic principles and values. For instance, China pays no heed to Fijian media having to self-sanction ever since the coup in 2006 in order to stay in business and avoid persecution. The government is well aware that the western world is cautious of China and even competitive, but it will always avoid actions that have the potential to antagonize China. Fiji's government has a productive relationship with China and will likely remain in China's shadow given that the western world has not provided a good enough reason to for it to change its

relationship with China. The longer this continues, the more Fiji will be emboldened to make up its own rules as it shores up its leadership role among the small Pacific island countries.

Views from Solomon Islands

China is a contentious issue for Solomon Islands. Having established diplomatic relations with Taiwan for around 30 years, the switch to China was a tough call. There is an elite group of powerful leaders who brought about the switch by manipulating the weak political system. To rule a government effectively, a political party needs a majority or else there will be a coalition. China knows that there are many gives and takes in a coalition and they used powerful Members of Parliament to exert their influence to get the government to switch from Taiwan to China. They completely bypassed due processes and procedures regarding the establishment of diplomatic relations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee were both ignored spectators to the whole process. The decision to switch was highly influenced by activities and lobbying. The government did consult with other Pacific nations who have diplomatic relations with China, but they were manipulated into sending a team of pro-China Members of Parliament to conduct the consultations.

The Office of the Prime Minister views traditional partners Australia, New Zealand and US as not doing enough in terms of security, particularly in security infrastructure. Solomon Islands shares maritime borders with all its neighbors and it has an active border with Bougainville (PNG). Maintaining law and order along the common border is a challenge due to a lack of resources and persistent border issues. On many occasions Solomon Islands has requested traditional partners to assist with the establishment of a permanent presence on the western border with PNG. These includes a second patrol boat base and infrastructure to house the law enforcement agency, which would help boost the visibility of border security. This was not forthcoming from the traditional partners, particularly Australia. Since the switch to China, Australia has agreed to fund the establishment of a second patrol boat base in the western province, but they already missed the boat. Australia was not proactive and Solomon Islands is now looking towards China to fill the gap in security infrastructure. Australia, NZ and US have to step up their assistance in terms of security engagement programs and assistance towards the security infrastructure development, particularly on the western border where a lot of illegal activities occur.

Views from Samoa and Tonga

Samoa and Tonga officially maintain a neutral view when it comes to China, but in Samoa, China is sometimes a divisive topic. The government tends to see China in a positive light as an alternative donor partner for projects and funding where traditional partners, such as Australia, New Zealand and US decline to assist. The private sector views China in a similar manner. They hold China and its vast markets in high regard in terms of private investment and as a trading partner. Chinese influence or behavior does not necessarily change Samoan government policy. The Prime Minister has been consistent in having it known that while China is considered a close friend of Samoa, it does not determine Samoan policies or affect the relations Samoa has with other traditional partners.

Regarding security, Chinese aid is predominantly geared towards infrastructure development, such as Samoa's new port project and recent expansion of the international airport. China plays a positive role in

economic security in terms of trade and transport. China also plays a positive role in developing law enforcement capacity in Samoa, which is a growing challenge. They responded favorably to a request by the government to finance a new police academy to train new recruits. This will improve deficits in surveillance, law enforcement, and capacity to deal with rising transnational crime and the mounting drug trafficking problem.

The Tongan government views China positively and the security sector does not have any serious issue with China. Chinese engagement does not change politics in Tonga. The Tongan military take care to manage their military relationships by maintaining traditional partnerships with New Zealand, Australia, US and France. China has been welcomed to this mix and Tonga is exploring new arising opportunities. China provided a lot of support with the rebuilding of Nuku'alofa after the 2006 riots, and it continues to assist in improving roads and contributing to many other initiatives that have improved the development of Tonga. China generously provides assistance through education and there is an increasing number of Tongan students who are recipients of Chinese scholarships. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have similar views, as China continues to provide funding for many community projects.

There is a lot of talk about debt that the government has with China. However, some say that this is not malevolent.² The Central Bank closely monitors the situation and consistently makes loan payments every year, not just to China, but to all other financial institutions with which the nation has debt. China is just one source of Tongan loans, with the World Bank being the largest creditor. Thus, Tongans feel it is unfair to say that they have a problem loaning from China. Many other nations have expressed identical sentiments.

Views from Niue

In general, Niuean's are cautious of China, but the government's view of China is positive. This was seen and felt during Niue's 45th Constitution Celebrations in October 2019. A large delegation from the Chinese Embassy in Wellington, NZ participated in the celebrations as well as brought with them, members of the Chinese National Symphony Orchestra which held a concert where they played the Niuean anthem and a Niuean song as well as handed out t-shirts and miniature panda's.

There are no pressing issues relating to China in Niue, at the moment it feels like China is trying to woo the country and its people and have been quite generous with gifts and providing assistance when Niue requests it. China's current behavior is slowly breaking down some of the barriers that people who work in government had towards China and their assistance. Their assistance, which currently seems to be without strings, is promoting more favorable feelings towards working with the Chinese.

Chinese influence in Niue has definitely grown in the last two years. The Chinese have been working hard to build and strengthen the relationship with the government and people of Niue. Next year is an election year so it will be interesting to see if the current government will get reelected seeing as during their term there has been a clear and positive support of China and their One-China policy.

Anti-China Sentiment

Views from Papua New Guinea

Development in the Pacific Islands is a constant concern and China is active officially through aid, grants and donations, and via business in the form of Chinese owned enterprise. They reach remote towns, districts and villages that traditional partners have abandoned since independence 44 years ago. PNG views this positively and thus ignores poor quality infrastructure, environment damage and poor working conditions. Since the 1990s, an influx of unscrupulous Asian businesses, especially Chinese from Fujian Province, have fostered suspicion and distrust. They traffic people, flout labor and business laws, sell poor quality goods, and operate businesses reserved for PNG citizens. While the PNG government is now trying to nationalize 90% of all small-to-medium size enterprises, these offenses go unchecked due to bribery and corruption. This economic colonization sparked widespread anti-Asian sentiments and riots across the country in 2009.

The old-Chinese have been living in the Pacific Islands since the 1960-70s are well accepted by indigenous populations because they are well integrated into society. However, this may change. They have established supply networks and often help the new-Chinese through financial support so that they can increase their network.³ The well-established grocery store becomes a hub, supplying many new small stores that wipe out all local competition. Thus, the old-Chinese are not a benign entity, but rather the factor that has enabled China's destruction of virtually all locally-owned commercial sectors throughout the Pacific.

Multinational corporations are frequently accused of causing corruption through bribery, illegal logging, illegal and unregulated fishing, and dumping of hazardous waste as well as economic crimes like transfer pricing and money laundering. Some companies import counterfeit goods, launder money and smuggle humans and small arms. An estimated 30-40,000 Asian foreigners are residing and working illegally in PNG. These breaches of national laws and regulations and the occurrence of transnational, economic, and environmental crimes are a significant danger to national security and regional stability.

Some PNG security scholars see China's push for dominance as a macrocosmic rerun of the all too familiar deceitful Chinese merchant and they fear for PNG if it mismanages this threat. They are deeply concerned about a number of senior politicians and bureaucrats who prefer Chinese soft loans because they lack accountability and make it easy to siphon off funds. This immoral group in leadership is driven by *what-is-in-it-for-me* and they lack any sense of obligation to PNG, and much less Australia or China. Security professionals are concerned about PNG losing control of key functions and systems as it reactively operates on an *ad hoc* basis when it responds to critical issues, and is frozen into inaction in the face of national emergencies and crises.

Migrants from Bangladesh and Pakistan are also illegally flooding into the country for commercial purposes. These immigrants have strong influence in some government circles. They tend to target undeveloped areas where there is little access to basic government services. Then they marry young local girls in exchange for traditional customary land on which to set up their businesses. Often, they offer other incentives and make promises of future benefits in return for the best land possible.

Views from Vanuatu

Vanuatu's indigenous general public (Ni Vanuatu) are quite negative about China. They hear about China's gifts and see the aid and logistics arriving, but discontent is breeding because almost nothing tangible trickles down to appear in their own pockets. They see Chinese assistance only focusing on huge unnecessary infrastructure projects and equipment and do not see anything of value in the policy arena. For instance, China has been completely silent on climate change and transnational crime.



Figure 1: Entrance of the Chinese township in Vanuatu called Rainbow City.

Economics is the backbone of all societies and Ni Vanuatu are slowly but surely being dispossessed of business ownership with many local businesses being bought out and taken over by Chinese migrants. Rather than protect local businesses, the government sold many passports to Chinese so that they have the right to own property and businesses in Vanuatu. The government has not even acted to reserve more accessible businesses for only Ni Vanuatu ownership. Locals are losing their retail shops, kava bars and tourist operations to high paying Chinese businessmen, which is a common reason for unrest and violence throughout the Pacific.

One of the businesses that the Chinese built and partly own was a tuna repacking plant. All the fish caught in Vanuatu waters are processed in the plant and sent to China, which is causing anger in the community. China's reputation for environmental negligence is reconfirmed here with waste from the plant causing an environmental nightmare for nearby populations.

When Vanuatu allowed China to build a huge port facility, it was clear that the port could cater for large commercial and military ships. Although Vanuatu denied allegations that the port was destined to become a Chinese military asset, other developments suggest that it may not be that far from the truth. China was given a large piece of land to create a mini township called Rainbow City (Fig. 1), but rumors suggest that there will be a military presence.

Views from Fiji

The indigenous Fijian population is opposed to China and any dealings the government has with China. The primary reason for this is that China targets the resource sector, which is owned by the indigenous people through clans and tribal ownership. Between 2006 and 2014, the military government unilaterally issued decrees which were later adopted as legislation. It then passed legislation from 2014 giving itself authority to sign deals and sell traditional resources such as minerals, forests, and sea produce. This has extended to overriding existing lease agreements between indigenous landowners and their business partners to allow Chinese businesses to take over lands, beaches and waterways. Indigenous Fijians suspect that the Fiji government will not meet its loan repayments to Chinese lenders, and will thus continue to bend to Chinese pressure. They believe this behavior by the government will continue and they will end up paying the price in lost sovereignty, depleted resources and a damaged environment.

Another reason the Fijian public is opposed to China is that indigenous Fijians are predominantly Christians and they see Chinese values, superstition and the way they conduct business as contrary to the values and ethics they hold dear. They see that when a nation opens its doors to China, they get the desired assistance, but that is accompanied by undesired dodgy deals, corruption, counterfeit, gambling, drugs, prostitution and crime at levels never experienced before. They observe the government and security sector becoming overwhelmed by these problems and a police force that is unable to cope.

The impacts of lower government standards are already visible. For instance, 60 Minutes, an Australian Channel 9 TV network show, reported twice that Fiji government officials received undisclosed payments from a Chinese company that is building a Casino that took an existing lease out from under an Australian business and the case has been swept under the carpet. Further, a Korean religious group was given acres of land, business licenses and diplomatic access despite evidence pointing to corruption, money laundering and dodgy deals. Further, a Chinese company was given an exclusive license to mine bauxite in the Bua province in Fiji's second biggest island of Vanua Levu with the condition that it deliver certain social obligations to that province. Once the company had extracted the bauxite, it left Fiji without meeting any of its social obligations. One question remaining in the minds of the Fijian public is, was this lack of deal enforcement by the Fiji Government intentional or was it due to a lack of enforcement capacity? If the former is true, the public has genuine fears concerning the extent to which the Fiji Government engages with Chinese businesses when Fiji's sovereignty is held hostage to Chinese interests.

Of more concern, China is negotiating a deal with Fiji to manufacture weapons and munitions that, while held in abeyance, is still on the table. Given that the law enforcement sector has limited operational capacity, this project, if it goes ahead, would throw Fiji into uncharted waters it may not be able to handle. Some Fijian commentators suspect that there is a Chinese interest in the burning down of the Great Council of Chiefs meeting house to suppress indigenous voices. They believe that part of China's long-term strategy supported by other interest partners is the eradication of indigenous identity, records and status in their own country!

To exacerbate these emerging concerns, containers of undeclared and unreported small arms are arriving in Fiji. According to officials, these containers are cleared secretly by elements high up in Government. Those officials that opened, inspected and reported these discoveries to the Police have been sacked. The fact that there has been no Police investigation indicates a coverup and that Fiji is in bigger trouble than it is prepared to admit. Some commentators fear that Fiji has evolved from being a transit point for transnational crime to arms dealing. They suspect that another paramilitary force is being primed to oppose the standing military government. A regime governing without accountability and transparency in a country in conflict with its own citizens is a custom-made field that further strengthens Chinese interests in Fiji with significant implications for the region.

Views from Solomon Islands

The switch to China was not welcome by the majority of the population and the Malaita Provincial government was vocal against the switch. The majority of the public have heard about how China has entrapped other nations with loans and they have negative perceptions of China. While formal positions

from the different sectors within government, private and civil society are not public, it is clear to most officials, that many people in these sectors fear what lies around the corner. All are aware of the growing need of China's industries for natural resources and their voracious appetite for conducting business.

The Central Bank advised against the decision to switch, fearing that most sectors in the country were not sufficiently prepared to deal with China. At least, to most people, Taiwan was more courteous and made an effort to understand local needs and challenges. Expectations are that this will be different with China. Once it starts pouring money into Solomon Islands there will be pressure to exploit limited resources to support China's growing economy. Fish, land, forestry will be affected. Corruption within these sectors will increase due to political interference. If Solomon Islands is not careful, the impacts of these will be felt in the not too far future, and although a new government could reverse the decision, the trap has already been set and the bait taken.

Views from Samoa and Tonga

Public opinion of China among the general Samoan populace is low due to unfavorable social media posts and recent colonialist narratives from news media coming from Australia. The opposition party in Samoa is more representative of public opinion and is known to be anti-China, but that platform has not been as favorable to them as China has continuously been assisting Samoa in projects that benefit the whole population such as the Pacific Games and fireworks.

Samoans generally see China as a threat to the local economy with small business owners unable to compete with the migrant flow and underhanded, corrupt business practices. This is happening all over the Pacific. In Samoa, some Chinese have married Samoan women to become Samoan citizens and gain the same rights a local citizens, while others work in partnership with locals. Thus the face of the business is Samoan, but the power behind the business and its ownership is more often Chinese. While the loss of Samoan ownership in local business is a problem that was often caused by Samoans, the government is ultimately responsible for strategic management of the populace and has failed to take protective steps to ensure local business do not shift out of local ownership. As a result, at least one village has banned new Chinese-owned businesses.⁴

Likewise, with the 'China will take over' narrative, the public views China as a colonialist power. The public separates the actions of private Chinese businesses from the Chinese government. Whatever the former does is associated with the Chinese government regardless if the government is involved or not.

Tonga is concerned that 'the Chinese will take over the running of the country in a few years time,' but also with balancing relationships with other Pacific Islands.⁵ For instance, Tonga will not seek to ask something of military value from China that has the potential to trigger an arms race with neighboring states. The government is very conscious about preserving its sovereignty and has strongly resisted the idea of allowing a foreign military base to be established in Tonga.

Conclusions

Many small governments with limited resources and large development deficits find China's disinterest in stringent terms of conditions in the areas of legitimate rule of law, accountability, transparency, ethical standards, and borrowing attractive. Such nations are more interested in buying and borrowing at the cheapest price from the most convenient markets and suppliers. China's political and economic backing does not require assisted nations to account for themselves, to change their narrative or system of government, allow for accountability in the use of public funds, and provide for genuine freedom of speech and press. These are usually required to receive support from western countries because they are the prerequisites for legitimate democratic processes and freedom. Governments around the world know that they can get away with a lot of things by sticking by China.

In some Pacific nations, close ties with Chinese entities have encouraged a 'whatever works' approach, tolerance of crime, and the idea that operating outside the law is acceptable if in support of government objectives and political aims. Many have voiced apprehension over the rise in transnational and local crime, including trafficking of persons and drugs, and the rise in Chinese organized crime and Triad presence. In a few Melanesian countries, there are armed gangs, private security and even government forces that act under the control of warlords and politicians to exert political pressure and conduct criminal activities. This is a worrisome trend reminiscent of political elitism and lawlessness in Haiti.

NGOs, including the Transparency International, the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs, and Partners with Melanesians, demand greater accountability and transparency and have repeatedly raised concerns about the lack of transparency in government dealings in Pacific Island nations and the corrupt practices of large foreign owned corporations that pillage the environment. The indigenous people need to stand up for their status, rights and resources. They must be more vocal and visible about their opposition to their government's behavior, deals and relationships with China. Social media is playing an important role in helping advocates for these values to become more aware, and more united as they increasingly speak with one voice.

Public oversight must apply more scrutiny to governance systems, and demand compliance with genuine democratic values and principles. They must insist that their governments uphold the legitimate rule of law, ratify the United Nations Convention of Indigenous Rights, and ask the UN Office of Human Rights and the International Association of Lawyers to conduct assessments of the human rights and rule of law. The United Nations must be selective in which countries they select to assist them in peacekeeping operations, else they risk condoning dictatorial rule, intimidation, physical abuse and torture of citizens and the general subversion of the rule of law.

The western nations and traditional partners need to work hand-in-hand with the Pacific Islands as they provide significant, tangible support to improve good governance, and democratic processes and transitions throughout the Pacific Islands. Indigenous populations need to be protected from the influx of foreigners into the Pacific and the Pacific nations need to be careful to work primarily with nation partners who have an excellent track record of dealing with their own indigenous populations or they risk further colonial manipulation and oppression.

The Australian government has taken several steps to address the growing influence of China in the region, but as revealed in the recent 'Pacific Perspectives on the World' report by the Whitlam Institute, Australia still has to contend with perceptions that its engagements lack quality, that Pacific Island values, norms and ways of doing things are often ignored, and that it is only one in a sea of possible partners.⁶ Adding to these are Australia's inconsistent approach to climate change, its failure to see that Indigenous Australians are uplifted and play a national role, barriers to Pacific people traveling to and working in Australia, and ensuring that Pacific Islanders are not trafficked into their labor schemes.

This will not be an easy course adjustment for as one interviewee explained, 'Australia never thought there would be new players coming into the Pacific in future. They viewed us negatively and not as partners. They should have stepped up long time ago. Now the Pacific will play them for their own national interests and gain.'

In 2011, Dr Hualupmomi wondered, how the Pacific Islands could rationally position themselves in the 'thin red line between the US and the phenomenal peaceful rising China in the east.'⁷ As Chinese strategic competition has increased on all fronts and nations find themselves sucked into China's economic vortex, the question has become more urgent and the answer remains elusive for many.

Currently there is a dire need for the reinforcement of security infrastructure throughout the Pacific. While China's actions thus far appear to mostly be opportunistic and economic in nature, they have shifted into creating dependency and alliance-building. Some fear that China now has sufficient citizenry, infrastructure, economic ties and diplomatic relationships abroad to provide a pretext for the use of hard power.^{8,9} Agencies on the forefront of transnational security, such as defense forces, customs, harbors boards, national intelligence organizations, immigration, departments of the foreign affairs and police need to take stock of their functional status, and explore how they might be reinforced and develop capacity through appropriate means. Above all, genuine indigenous leaders in these Pacific Islands must be proactive in preserving national sovereignty, ensuring that their international relations are only in their best interests, and protecting their limited resources.

References

1. Wallis J. Crowded and complex: The changing geopolitics of the South Pacific. ASPI 2017.
2. Anon. A trap of one's own: China tries to calm jitters about the 'Belt and Road' initiative. The Economist 2019;Apr 25, <https://www.economist.com/china/2019/04/25/china-tries-to-calm-jitters-about-the-belt-and-road-initiative>.
3. Herr R. Chinese influence in the Pacific Islands: The yin and yang of soft power. ASPI 2019.
4. Likou IL. Sava'i village bans Chinese-owned shops. Samoa Observer 2017;17 Feb.
5. Matangitonga, 2017 16 May, <https://matangitonga.to/2017/05/12/chinese-will-take-over-country-pm-pohiva-proclaims-while-digging-canals-popua>.
6. Cain TN, Cox J, Presterudstuen JH, Pacific perspectives on the world. Whitlam Institute 2020; <https://www.whitlam.org/publications/2020/2/13/pacific-perspectives-on-the-world>.
7. Hualupmomi F. Shifting dynamics in China-US foreign policy. PNG Attitude 2011;3 Apr, https://asopa.typepad.com/asopa_people/2011/04/shifting-dynamics-in-china-us-foreign-policy.html.
8. Shook B. Just how far would China go to protect its citizens? The Diplomat 2015;14 Apr.

9. Connolly P. Engaging China's new foreign policy in the South Pacific. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. 2016; 1-22. 10.1080/10357718.2016.1194805.

The views expressed in these articles are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of DKI APCSS, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

April 2020