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China's Push towards Pacific Islands: Implications for a Free World

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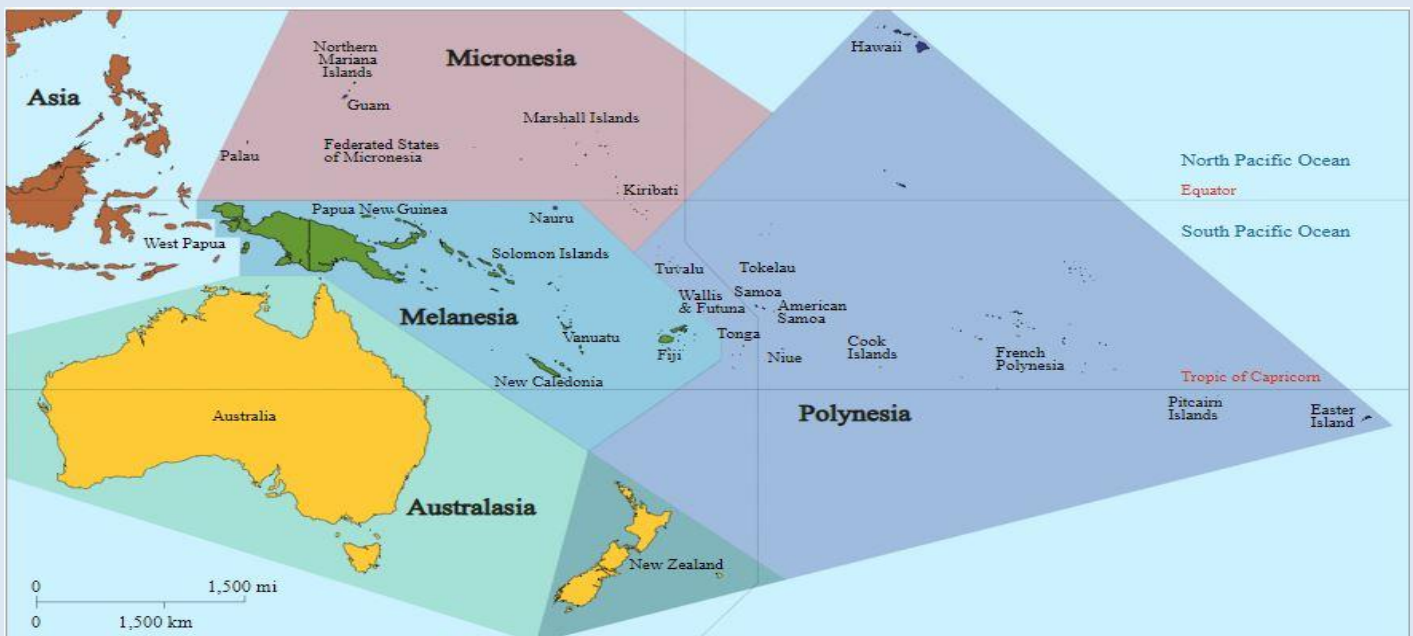


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While the West was busy supporting Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, China was making a geopolitical push in the South Pacific region. As part of its expansion beyond the 9-dash line, China has been looking at and courting the somewhat impoverished Pacific Islands. China has been wooing them with financial and infrastructure support, and in turn seeking the use of ports and other facilities for transit and security requirements. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi held talks with his counterparts from the 10 nations that are part of the Pacific Islands Forum¹, at Suva, Fiji's capital city. Only those nations that do not recognise Taiwan attended the meet. Ministers from Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Niue, and Vanuatu, besides Fiji took part, many through video link. Wang is visiting the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and Timor-Leste as part of his whirlwind diplomatic tour.² The meeting involved a significant increase in Beijing's economic and security interests and engagement in the South Pacific region. A little while earlier, the security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands had opened the door to a Chinese military presence in the southern Pacific.³ It has raised the eyebrows of the countries in South East Asia, Oceania, and the U.S. lead Western powers

President Xi Jinping had conveyed in advance that China's approach towards them would be that of "a good brother" and they would all work to improve their "common destiny". In a written address to the conference, President Xi said China will work with Pacific Island nations to build a "community with a shared future."⁴ President Xi also said that "regardless of size" equality and good faith will remain the guiding principles in developing friendly ties.⁵ On offer were cyber-security enhancement, support for hydrographic surveys for marine mapping, exploitation of natural resources, and training for police forces. Beijing would provide funding support for all this, and also offer access to the Chinese market for local merchandise. There were dissenting voices against the proposed Communique as it "threatens regional stability" with the region getting sucked into a great power rivalry. A draft communique and a five-year action plan sent by China were opposed by the Federated States of Micronesia.⁶ The countries are also concerned about the debt-trap that many Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) recipient countries have been facing. Most of these countries are too small in size and population to be able to take on China. Australia's new foreign minister has also warned of the adverse "consequences" of any such deal. There are fears that, with economic inducements, China could not only bring them into its fold but de facto rule them through proxies in due course of time. The only areas of general consensus were the need for economic recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic and the creation of centres for agriculture and disaster. Finally, the signing of the far-reaching Communique with sweeping trade and security implications was deferred. To address regional anxieties, China has decided to release a formal paper of its proposals for cooperation with Pacific island countries, which will become a guide for further discussions and consultations.

China's actions are also directly challenging the influence of the United States and its allies in the region. After China unilaterally usurped nearly 3 million sq. km of an economic zone in the South China Sea and built military infrastructure on the reclaimed islands, the West has been trying to stem Chinese expansion. The formation of Quad, AUKUS, and many other regional tri-laterals has all been to coordinate and act as a bulwark against Chinese expansionism. The West has also been warning these island nations to be careful of the Chinese trap. The new Australian Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, has the Pacific Islands as his first foreign policy priority. Some island countries like Palau, which maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan, have also cautioned that the agreement could mean a risk to peace and security in the region.

With China directly challenging the influence of the United States by extending the frontier into the South Pacific, the world must prepare for greater competition and conflict rather than collaboration. It is no more 'a wait and watch' situation. Australia, New Zealand, and the USA will have to lead the action. There will be greater diplomatic, economic and security engagement of the free world with these island countries. The island countries have to be supported to rebuff Chinese "poaching" initiatives. Their collective ability to resist China has to be strengthened. The ASEAN countries also have reason to worry about Chinese expansion as they are already affected by Chinese actions in the South China Sea.

India has significant relations with some of these island countries. These relations received a boost after the Modi government created the Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) in 2014. India plans to grant significant grant-in-aid through this forum. 38 per cent of Fiji's population is of Indian descent, and therefore there are strong cultural links. Many Tongans, including members of the Royal family, have attended military and technical training courses in India. Many Indian experts work in Tonga for developmental programs. In 2017, Papua New Guinea and India entered into an Economic Partnership Agreement with a focus on investments and infrastructure projects. Clearly, India has an interest in these island nations beyond just holding back China's expansion. With India locked in a face-off with China in Ladakh, any action by China that could challenge or affect India's interests needs to be monitored and countered.

NOTES

¹ News Agencies, “China eyes security pact in talks with Pacific islands in Fiji”, *Al Jazeera*, May 30, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/30/china-eyes-security-pact-in-talks-with-pacific-islands-in-fiji>. Accessed on May 31, 2022.

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³ Patricia M. Kim, “Does the China-Solomon Islands security pact portend a more interventionist Beijing?” *Brookings*, May 6, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/05/06/does-the-china-solomon-islands-security-pact-portend-a-more-interventionist-beijing/>. Accessed on May 31, 2022.

⁴ Reuters, “China is willing to work with Pacific Island nations for a 'shared future' - President Xi”, *Financial Post*, May 30, 2022. <https://financialpost.com/pmn/business-pmn/china-is-willing-to-work-with-pacific-island-nations-for-a-shared-future-president-xi>. Accessed on May 31, 2022.

⁵ Sutirtho Patranobis, “Setback for China as security and economic deal with Pacific islands falls through”, *Hindustan Times*, May 30, 2022. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/setback-for-china-as-security-and-economic-deal-with-pacific-islands-falls-through-101653903719484-amp.html>. Accessed on May 31, 2022.

⁶ Reuters, “China hosts Pacific islands meeting in Fiji, security ties in focus”, *Business Standard*, May 30, 2022. https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/china-hosts-pacific-islands-meeting-in-fiji-security-ties-in-focus-122053000281_1.html. Accessed on May 31, 2022.