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A Search for Coherence: The Belt and Road Initiative in the Pacific Islands

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Introduction

In the summer of 2017, I sat down for a conversation with Zhang, a Chinese businessman, at his family-owned restaurant in Nadi, Fiji. Over lunch, I asked him to talk about his time as a migrant to Fiji since the mid-2000s. He explained how he had built successful restaurant and retail businesses and discussed his appreciation for the opportunity to create a life in Fiji. ‘The good relations between Fiji and China helped me get started here’, he said. Taking note of my interest in his comment, Zhang pressed on, ‘Of course, it took a lot of my hard work to make it all happen, but I wouldn’t be here without the support of family and the new policy to find opportunities abroad’. Changing the topic toward the future of Chinese investment in Fiji, he added: ‘It will be different, you watch, there will be more people looking for openings and all of it will be Belt and Road’.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) incorporates over 60 countries in a transnational network of anticipated trade routes centred on China. Comprising land- and ocean-based infrastructure corridors, the BRI connects China with Europe and Africa through the subregions of Asia. The inclusion of Oceania appears as an anomaly, as the region is not

usually thought of as a direct thoroughfare to the ports and cities of Europe and Africa. The growing scholarly literature on the BRI, particularly in political geography, has defined the BRI as anything from China's spatial fix for overcapacity in the domestic economy, to no less than a bid for global hegemony to sometimes both at the same time. In Pacific Island Studies, the discussion of the BRI's arrival in Oceania has revolved around the intervention as either an expression of Beijing's ascendancy in a region long influenced by Australia and the US or an opportunity for Pacific Island governments to assert agency over these traditional partners with China as the enabling factor (Fry and Tarte 2015).

In this chapter, using a variety of media articles and government statements, I argue that the BRI is a marker for a new discursive phase of Chinese activity in the Pacific Islands region. In addition to its often-stated material outcomes, the BRI is also a narrative vehicle that attempts to bring international and domestic coherence to China's overseas political and economic engagement. In the Pacific Islands region, the notion of a harmonising BRI counters claims, frequently emanating from Australian legislators and media, of China's erratic approach to economic interactions with the Pacific Islands. As a domestic instrument, the BRI harmonises and makes legible a variety of Chinese state and nonstate actors in Oceania under a single policy. This attempt at legibility not only captures Chinese political and economic activity in the region, but also exposes the actors involved to possible state discipline. As Smith et al. (2014) note in the context of China's aid programs in Pacific Island countries (PICs), perceptions of Chinese communities overseas have a bearing on the image of China. Conversely, Chinese officials have built BRI coherence on a broad interpretation of what the initiative constitutes, giving rise to the labelling of all manner of Chinese endeavours as under the BRI.

This 'flexible coherence' offers distinct advantages in creating an umbrella for the variety of activities Chinese actors undertake in the Pacific Islands region. Not all Chinese actors desire state legibility and many employ strategies of evasion or display indifference to state disciplining; however, some private actors have attached the Belt and Road label to their projects seeking political endorsements for their investments. Furthermore, an opaque BRI also opens opportunities for PICs to interact flexibly with the initiative and present the intervention as consistent with Pacific Island interests. Through visit diplomacy, memoranda of understanding, project branding, integration with Pacific Island government development

strategies and membership in alternative financing mechanisms, the BRI is increasingly defining Sino–Pacific Island engagement. In a section examining Fiji’s relations with China from the ‘Look North’ to the BRI, this chapter shows how Sino–Fijian discourses have become increasingly entangled through a co-constructed discourse that establishes continuity between the two countries’ frameworks. As a result, I argue that while attempting to convey a coherent global, regional and bilateral vision to the world, the BRI also presents opportunities for some governments, such as those of the Pacific Islands, to co-define the terms of their relationships with China, offering leverage and alternative options to traditional regional powers.

Incoherent, erratic, short-term: Chinese presence 2000–15

The presence of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is now an indisputable aspect of political and economic life in the Pacific Islands region. From 2006 to 2016, Chinese aid to Oceania totalled US\$1.8 billion (Brant 2016) and China is the region’s second largest trading partner (Zhang 2015). Migrants from China to the Pacific Islands region are more visible in PICs; nevertheless, Chinese people constitute less than 1 per cent of the population in any one PIC (D’Arcy 2014). The current engagement between China and Pacific Island governments and peoples fits in to a longer arc of Chinese presence in Oceania. Scholars have identified staged migrations traceable to the 19th century of Chinese traders, indentured workers and political refugees settling in the Pacific Islands (Willmott 2007).

The historical context of Pacific Island and Chinese relations is important to consider, as it demonstrates that exchanges are not only long-standing, but also evolving with political and economic conditions. With contemporary Chinese presence in the Pacific Islands region as his focus, D’Arcy (2014) provides a useful guide to understanding the current stage and its roots in the past. He wrote that the Chinese Government’s 1999 ‘Going Out’ policy (走出去战略), encouraging Chinese companies and individuals to invest overseas, initiated a new phase in relations given increased opportunities for aid, trade and mobility. D’Arcy added that analyses, generally external to the region, of this post-1999 phase have clustered into two narratives: fear and agency. Fear discourses characterise

China's economic and political interventions as potentially destabilising, while a somewhat contrasting body of literature has sought a more nuanced analysis reflecting the ways in which these interventions enable Pacific Island government agency. Both discourses suggest that Chinese presence has been neither coherent, consistent nor long-term. I use D'Arcy's post-1999 framework to critique fear and agency discourses to 2015 and suggest that the BRI presents a successor narrative indicating the Chinese state's push for a discourse of coherence.

Discourses of fear

The literature on China's post-1999 presence in the Pacific Islands region initially leant toward emphasising the threats posed by a 'new' power to the established economic and political interests of the US and Australia. Emanating from influential think tanks and a loud media, particularly in Australia, fear narratives singled out Chinese aid as a notable disruptive factor to these interests. Chinese largesse through unconditional loans and grants, primarily for infrastructure projects, undermined the long-term Australian goal of building good governance through conditional assistance. The 2006 Australian Senate's inquiry into Australia's relationship with China included testimony from several researchers, including Susan Windybank, Ron Crocombe, Benjamin Reilly and John Henderson, who would go on to write and speak about the negative aspects of renewed Chinese state interest in Oceania. Taking broad characterisations as a basis for analysis, the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade noted:

Being relatively poor and tending to lack the appropriate institutional mechanisms to ensure political and bureaucratic accountability, many Pacific Islands are vulnerable to financial influence and corruption (Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee 2005:175).

Furthermore, the committee highlighted how 'funds provided to local politicians or government officials without proper conditions attached can encourage fraudulent behaviour and undermine political stability' (ibid.:179).

Following the 2006 inquiry, two reports from the Lowy Institute also proved influential in circulating a narrative of Chinese aid as a disturbance to regional order. The first, published in 2009, stressed China's lack of coordination with in-country funding priorities and the so-called excessive secrecy of Chinese aid financing. In addition, maintenance or

repair budgets were frequently not included in loans and grants, and these costs ended up placing Pacific Island governments further in debt (Hanson 2009). The 2009 report concluded that embedded conditions, such as the procurement of labour and materials for infrastructure projects from China, encouraged anti-Chinese sentiments among Pacific Islanders due to the denial of employment opportunities (*ibid.*). The second Lowy Institute report, published in 2011, upped the risks facing Pacific Island governments who had accepted Chinese aid. Increasing levels of debt to China, especially in Samoa and Tonga, opened the possibility of political and economic pressure or demands from Beijing in exchange for debt forgiveness. The report added that the growing lawlessness of Chinese migrants needed to be addressed if the Pacific Islands were not to become incorporated into the territories of Chinese criminal gangs (Hanson and Fifita 2011). Crocombe (2007) arrived at a similar conclusion, voicing concern over how Chinese migrants were introducing startling levels of criminality to Pacific Island states through illegal gambling, prostitution and drug dealing; nevertheless, like Hanson and Fifita, Crocombe is unable to parse the Chinese state from Chinese migrants, simply labelling all Chinese presence as destabilising. Seib (2010) likewise conflated the Chinese state and migrants into a monolithic entity, claiming Chinese aid has opened the region to ‘streams of migrants’ who deny locals economic opportunities.

Chequebook diplomacy between China and Taiwan is often cited as a further source of inconsistent and opportunistic aid and investment. Since the 1949 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) victory in the Chinese Civil War and the Nationalist retreat to the island of Taiwan, the two administrations have sought legitimacy through diplomatic recognition. Beijing’s and Taipei’s search for diplomatic partners has fluctuated between contest and truce, leading to accusations of waning interest during times of *détente*.

Atkinson (2010) wrote of the incoherence and unscrupulousness of China’s and Taiwan’s assistance to the Pacific Islands, emphasising a lack of monitoring procedures and adding that ‘involvement is primarily due to the capacity of the Pacific Islands to accord diplomatic recognition, and only to a lesser extent the region’s economic and strategic characteristics’. He claimed that local elites tend to be the chief beneficiaries of chequebook diplomacy, describing kickbacks such as luxury cars and travel expenses. Falling back on a narrative strongly asserted in the Australian Senate inquiry, he concluded that ‘diplomatic competition between China and

Taiwan is destabilising island states in the South Pacific, making Pacific politics more corrupt and more violent'. However, there is little analysis of the strategic advantages China's interventions offer Pacific Island governments regarding leverage over traditional partners.

Discourses of Chinese presence in Oceania as part of a grand hegemonic strategy also mark the post-1999 period and illustrate how some scholars view Beijing's interest in the region as little more than an exploitative opportunity (Henderson 2001; Henderson and Reilly 2003). Aid and investment are not only tools to win diplomatic partners, but also means to achieve political influence regionally or globally. Chinese assistance is not coordinated with domestic priorities and PIC agency is relegated to irrelevance. Windybank (2005) wrote: 'The expansion of Chinese influence reflects more than a benign attempt to gain access to the region's abundant minerals, timber and fisheries. Strategic issues often have economic faces'. Shie (2007) took the logics of this argument further, adding that China's economic interventions will convert to military dominance in the Pacific Islands, an eventuality enabled by the 'passive' interest of the US and Australia in addressing this geopolitical shift.

Discourses of agency

In response to discourses of fear, a group of scholars emphasise the 'disingenuous' character of these analyses (Wesley-Smith 2007). China's augmented presence is neither a grand strategy nor imposed. Discourses of agency emphasise how PICs as sovereign entities are free to choose alternative economic partners, and rightfully so, given the damaging effects of neoliberal conditionality attached to aid from traditional donors in the 1990s. It was not that Australia and the US were passive in the Pacific Islands region, but rather that their harmful insistence on privatisation and deregulated markets opened new opportunities for China. Traditional donors' concern over the nature of relations between PICs and China as part of their own strategic fears also tend not to play well in Pacific Island capitals.

However, discourses of agency also underscore the lack of a systematic Chinese approach to political and economic engagement in Oceania. Chinese presence in the Pacific Islands is merely a byproduct of Beijing's increasing interests across the globe and the need for natural resources to drive its domestic economy (Yang 2009, 2011). In a sharp and justifiable critique, Wesley-Smith and Porter (2010) wrote that fear discourses tend

to concentrate on the supposed loss of Australian or US influence and ‘it is apparent that the condition of island states or the welfare of Pacific Islanders are, at best, of secondary concern’. Pacific Island governments’ positive responses to China’s interest have been driven by pressing contemporary needs such as upgrading or building infrastructure, the financing of which is unavailable in Australian social aid programming. In addition, evidence supporting the notion that traditional powers have lost significant soft or hard power in Oceania is lacking. Therefore, China’s predominant interests in the Pacific Islands region are quite modest: seeking new markets and opportunities for muting Taiwanese diplomatic initiatives, both of which mean Chinese officials pay significantly less attention to Oceania than other regions (Wesley-Smith and Porter 2010).

Discourses of agency challenge the myth of Chinese aid driven by a quid pro quo for resources and argue that the Chinese state was brought to the Pacific Islands region by Chinese contractors and Pacific Island governments seeking financing for infrastructure projects (Brant 2013). This practice does not indicate a long-term strategy, aid effectiveness or a systematic approach to development planning. Dornan and Brant (2014) make the important point that the responsibility for aid effectiveness sits not only with donors, but also recipients. In a comparison of Chinese interventions in Tonga, Vanuatu, Samoa and Cook Islands, Dornan and Brant found that ‘the way in which governments have pursued, overseen and implemented projects has differed considerably, and is an important determinant of the effectiveness and developmental impact of Chinese assistance’. Consequently, if projects should not (or even should) meet expectations, the Chinese actors involved are not the only accountable parties. Nevertheless, Sullivan and Renz (2012) showed the influential role of Australia’s and New Zealand’s media in promoting a narrative of Chinese presence in Oceania as offering little of lasting value, especially its aid assistance, noting: ‘China is seen as the cause of numerous ills affecting the island Pacific and unlikely to contribute to their solution’ (Sullivan and Renz 2012:388). Their examination of press coverage since 1999 concluded that the China-as-destabilising force discourse was linked to security anxieties in Canberra and Wellington rather than any alarm for Island societies. As Sullivan and Renz suggested, these findings reveal more about the self-interests of former and current colonial powers than the aspirations of the Pacific Islands region and its residents, as well as a retreat to well-trodden ‘yellow peril’ narratives, adding: ‘China and the homogenised Chinese people are represented as operating in an alien moral universe’.

Towards coherence: The BRI

In 2012, Wang Jisi, a professor at Beijing University, suggested a shift in China's foreign policy towards Eurasia. According to Wang, a 'march west' would offer China political and economic advantages as the US scaled back its presence in Central Asia and the Middle East and embarked on an Asia-Pacific pivot in 2011 (Wang 2012). Wang considered his proposal a transcontinental successor to the state-led development campaigns in China's northwest, such as 'Open Up the Northwest' (1992) and 'Western Development' (2000). This intellectual antecedent of the BRI is important to note because the initiative not only built on the Going Out policy of 1999, but also was driven by domestic development campaigns built on infrastructure construction and mobility. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping first proposed the 'One Belt, One Road' (一带一路) policy, officially renamed in 2016 as the Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI planned to reconfigure global trade and the governance of international finance through China. Encompassing the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (丝绸之路经济带) and the ocean-based 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (21世纪海上丝绸之路), the initiative would link China with Europe and Africa through infrastructure corridors across subregions of Asia.

The principal financing agency for the BRI is the multilateral Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) founded in 2013. Over 90 nations are currently members of the AIIB and initial capital was established at US\$100 billion, of which China provided 50 per cent. China holds the largest voting share in the AIIB at 28.7 per cent; the second largest voting member, India, holds 8.3 per cent. Given this dominance, some analysts claim the AIIB is an attempt to rebalance the limited influence Beijing exercises over the Bretton Woods institutions (Subacchi 2015). Other funding mechanisms for the BRI include the Silk Road Fund, a US\$40 billion investment fund created by Beijing, as well as other bilateral-lending entities, such as the Export-Import Bank of China and the China Development Bank.

China's purpose in initiating the BRI has not been fully articulated; however, the literature can be broadly divided into accounts offering internal motivations or overseas motivations. The BRI is mooted as a solution to an overheated domestic economy or as a geoeconomic strategy to confirm China's place as a global power. A more critical body

of research has examined the discursive aspects of the BRI, especially its comparisons with the Silk Road, through which internal and domestic motivations flow. The range of these analyses clearly indicates a lack of consensus on the motivation for and the goal of the BRI. However, this ambiguity of purpose is advantageous if viewed from the perspective of coherence building across the broad scope of China's overseas political and economic engagements. In sum, the assortment of ventures (infrastructure and social programming), financial mechanisms (multilateral, bilateral and, at times, private investment) and discourses form a catch-all project defying specific definition. As Shepard (2017) noted:

The vagueness, lack of institutionalisation, and very broad definition of the China's Belt and Road [sic] is probably one of its greatest strengths ... the initiative can be whatever China says it is in any given circumstance as they devise and adapt policies and trade deals to fit any given country, in any given situation, at any given time. Within this open framework, inconsistencies and even outright contradictions are not theoretical problems but standard operating procedures.

The open-ended character of the BRI has confounded some observers. One Center for International and Strategic Studies analyst called Beijing's BRI statements akin to 'Delphic utterances' (Clover and Hornby 2015). Graham (2018), however, while acknowledging the enigma of the BRI, claims 'it is also possible to see in BRI the clear contours of a thought-through, full-spectrum grand strategy for China, straddling economic, political, military and even psychological domains'. I argue differently. While the BRI certainly expands China's presence in regions and states across the globe through infrastructure projects, enhanced trade and alternative financing mechanisms, its discursive power also captures an array of domestic actors, state and nonstate, engaged in current and future enterprises with bilateral partners. It is not so much a blueprint for a grand strategy as it is a means of harmonising overseas relations with China's protagonists.

Overseas Chinese and coherence

Taking a discursive view of the BRI, Ferdinand (2016) reasons the initiative is a project of Chinese national rejuvenation. As such, it is an expression of President Xi Jinping's China Dream to harness the Chinese peoples' material and intangible aspirations into state revitalisation,

albeit encouraged through overseas economic cooperation. The 2015 Chinese Government white paper *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* mentions people-to-people contact five times as one of the integral aspects of the BRI. At the 2017 Belt and Road Forum, President Xi underscored how the human dimensions of the BRI are just as relevant overseas, claiming person-to-person relations as a cornerstone of BRI connectivity. At the opening ceremony to the forum, Xi remarked that “moving closer towards a community of shared future for mankind” is the ultimate goal of the Belt and Road Initiative’ (D. Zhang 2018:196). Ferdinand (2016) concluded that the success of a transnational BRI meant the China Dream must become that of the world. As such, mobility of not only Chinese capital, but also Chinese citizens would play an integral role in China’s revitalisation. Muttarak (2017:2) wrote that ‘the impacts of China’s growing presence ... go beyond the macro-economic effects ... Along with investments and trade—either state-owned or private—comes movement of labour, entrepreneurs, accompanying family members’. In a 2018 speech, Xu Yousheng, the Deputy Director of the United Front Work Department, outlined how overseas Chinese could as serve as facilitators for Chinese companies looking to start businesses outside of China, as well as, critically, ‘active promoters of mutual political trust and mutually beneficial relations between China and neighbouring countries’ (Lo 2018).

James To (2014) argued that there is little doubt over the Chinese state’s desire to exercise influence over diaspora communities. Through a study of the policies of Beijing’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (侨务), since merged into the United Front Work Department and a key indicator of strengthening coherence between China’s overseas agencies, To proposed the Chinese Government is purposefully organising new migrants (新侨) and established diasporas (老侨) to promote China’s political and economic interests overseas. The main objectives of this strategy are to secure resources for continued domestic economic growth and to improve China’s image with governments and people abroad. To supports this thesis with evidence of Chinese embassy support for community-driven Chinese cultural events and outreach into the organisations of established Chinese migrants. The purpose of the latter is to offer new migrants social support and financial capital, as well as encourage older generations to restore ties to China. To also claimed that China disciplines migrants once they are overseas and seeks to enhance their ‘quality’ (素质) through

education campaigns to represent China positively. Edney (2014) wrote that this process exemplified the Chinese state's aim to create cohesion, even in civil society, between domestic and overseas state narratives.

In sum, state and nonstate voices unify through rearticulating Chinese Government discourses. The umbrella of the BRI reterritorialises a diverse set of investors and labourers beyond China's borders as legible to the Chinese state and harnesses individual and collective enterprise under the China Dream toward national revitalisation. As such, the people-to-people discourses and the state promotion of investment outside of China under the BRI framework enmesh with the state disciplining of new overseas Chinese and existing diaspora communities to stage the BRI as a unifying project for an assemblage of Chinese presence abroad.

Liu and van Dongen (2016) challenge James To's top-down flow of relations between the Chinese state and overseas Chinese. The notion that migrants, new or old, are co-opted into state priorities does not present a complete understanding of the state-migrant interface. Chinese migrants are empowered in this relationship and frequently lead policy formation in state entities charged with overseas Chinese work (*ibid.*). In a study of the 'five overseas Chinese structures' (五侨) within the government apparatus, especially the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, Liu and van Dongen found that Chinese officials incorporated the recommendations and concerns of overseas Chinese into policy. Alternatively, Ong (1999) suggested the acquisition of second or third citizenships as a means by which Chinese migrants evade the state as an individual response to Chinese Government reterritorialising processes. Despite the Chinese Government's nonrecognition of dual citizenship, through naturalisation overseas, migrants not only open new commercial opportunities in host countries, but also circumvent the disciplining projects of the Chinese state. Though still disciplined by 'markets and families' (Ong 1999), Chinese migrants leverage citizenship toward personal, rather than state, benefit. As noted, interactions with the BRI's flexible coherence is contingent on position. The amorphous BRI framework offers advantages (or disadvantages) to a variety of Chinese state and nonstate actors. The following section examines the increasing dominance of the BRI as the basis of Sino-Pacific Island relations, demonstrating the harmonisation of China's regional approach at the state-to-state level. After this appraisal, the chapter surveys Fiji to highlight the capture of Chinese activity under the BRI umbrella, as well as how the Fijian state has developed the flexible coherence of the BRI to co-construct its own narrative of state revitalisation.

The BRI in the Pacific Islands

The People's Republic of China maintains diplomatic relations with 10 PICs: Fiji (since 1975), Samoa (1975), Papua New Guinea (1976), Vanuatu (1982), Micronesia (1989), Cook Islands (1997), Tonga (1998), Niue (2007), Solomon Islands (2019) and Kiribati (2019). Aid and investment to the region have notably grown in the post-Going Out policy period. Between 2006 and 2016, China dedicated an estimated US\$1.8 billion in loans and grants to its partners in the Pacific Islands (Brant 2016). This placed China as the third largest donor in the region after Australia (US\$7.7 billion) and the US (US\$1.9 billion). China committed US\$632 million to Papua New Guinea, the largest recipient, and US\$360 million to Fiji, the second largest. Aid was disbursed as grants, interest-free loans or concessional loans across a wide range of sectors, including education, transport and agriculture (Brant 2016). At the second meeting of the China–Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in 2013 China pledged US\$2 billion in commercial and concessional loans (Ministry of Commerce People's Republic of China 2013). Between 2000 and 2012, trade between China and its diplomatic partners in the region increased from US\$248 million to US\$1.77 billion with zero tariffs levied on 95 per cent of products from the Pacific Islands region (Taylor 2016).

At a 2014 meeting in Nadi between Xi Jinping and political leaders from the then eight PICs recognising China, the Chinese president welcomed the dignitaries to 'take a ride on the Chinese "express train" of development' under the framework of the Maritime Silk Road (Xinhua 2014). In the 2015 government white paper, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, China included the Pacific Islands region in the BRI network of trade corridors with the addition of the southern leg Maritime Silk Road (National Development and Reform Commission 2015). Maps displaying the BRI show the incorporation of the region with a line either south or north of Papua New Guinea. The addition was warmly received by regional leaders, leading to an outburst of BRI enthusiasm in 2017. In March of that year, then Pacific Island Forum (PIF) deputy secretary general Andie Fong Toy called the BRI 'a contribution to global economic leadership' (Pacific Islands Report 2017), and at the May 2017 Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, PIF representative in China David Morris noted the 'great potential of the Maritime Silk Road' to build regional infrastructure (ABC News 2017). Fijian Prime Minister Bainimarama, Pacific Islands Development Forum Secretary General

François Martel, as well as delegations from Tonga, Samoa and Vanuatu also attended the forum (Pacific Islands Development Forum 2017). In the same year, China took the BRI to its diplomatic partners in the region with a series of regional meetings, including the Belt and Road International Financial Exchange Cooperation Seminar in June and the Post-Forum Dialogue in Apia in September. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry report on the latter event, Chinese Special Envoy Du Qiwen introduced ‘China’s policies toward Pacific Island countries and the “Belt and Road” initiative’, and PIC attendees ‘expressed their willingness to actively participate in the “Belt and Road” cooperation’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2017). At meetings with PIC leaders prior to the 2018 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Port Moresby and in an op-ed published in the PNG press, Xi made the case for the BRI, writing:

I am convinced that the BRI will open up new pathways for Pacific island countries to enhance business ties and connectivity with China, among themselves and with the rest of the world, and for the island countries to take a greater part in economic globalization (Xi 2018).

Despite these impressive official declarations, observers have scaled the importance of this rhetoric. As a region representing only 0.12 per cent of China’s global trade volume, the Pacific Islands are of minor importance to China’s BRI priorities (Dornan and Muller 2018; Zhang, D. 2017). However, these observations have not prevented a renaissance in grand-strategy narratives. For example, in a 2018 report, the US–China Economic and Security Review Commission wrote:

Although the Pacific Islands receive less of China’s attention and resources compared to other areas of the world, Beijing includes the region in its key diplomatic and economic development policy—the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—which suggests China has geostrategic interests in the region (Meick et al. 2018:1).

The geostrategic intent behind the BRI is understood in the context of Beijing’s desire to establish a presence in the Pacific Islands in order to break free from containment on its eastern seaboard. To this end, Oceania will not be as peripheral as some observers argue (Lanteigne 2017). As one argument claims:

Inclusion within BRI of a maritime corridor through Oceania speaks to strategic intent, because there is no convincing economic case for China to invest in ‘connectivity’ infrastructure for small Pacific island states (Graham 2018).

However, such discourses dismiss Island agency in participation and the flexible interpretation of the Chinese state's opaque BRI narratives. Less dystopian analyses advance the possibilities the BRI offers in terms of infrastructure construction and greater access to markets through connectivity (Hannan and Firth 2016). Given the difficulties in participating in markets in the Asia-Pacific, the BRI makes sense to Pacific Islanders long restricted to trade with Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific states. Access to BRI financing mechanisms is critical in taking advantage of BRI opportunities. Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands and Vanuatu are all members or prospective members of the AIIB as of 2019.

Papua New Guinea

Bilaterally, BRI discourses have been enacted among PICs either through visit diplomacy, memoranda of understanding (MOU) or the development of material projects. In a November 2014 Beijing meeting, then Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O'Neill and Chinese President Xi Jinping declared the opening of a strategic partnership between the two states. Such arrangements are usually a means to demonstrate wide-ranging bilateral engagement; yet, on O'Neill's 2016 return visit to China, bilateral relations were staged under the BRI umbrella. In addition to signing concessional loan agreements for a variety of infrastructure projects, the leaders agreed to synergise the BRI with Papua New Guinea's Development Strategic Plan 2010–2030 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2016). A year after the November 2016 meeting, a third visit to Beijing saw Papua New Guinea formally sign on to the BRI and the announcement of a new round of Chinese-financed projects. These projects included a significant upgrade to the road systems on the mainland, New Britain and New Ireland, the construction of a US\$ 4 billion industrial park in Sandaun Province and the improvement of the water supply to Eastern Highlands Province. The US\$3.5 billion road project was penned with China Railway Group, a private entity whose major shareholder is the state-owned, and stock exchange-listed, China Railway Engineering Corporation. The Sandaun deal was agreed with China Metallurgical Group, the controversial majority investor in the Ramu Nickel mine. As Smith (2017) noted, these projects, especially the overhaul of the road network, could transform Papua New Guinea's economy and delivery of social services, all of which he called 'PNG's Belt and Road dream'.

Former prime minister O'Neill said these deals were the result of Papua New Guinea's new status as a location on the Maritime Silk Road, and talked up the benefits of market access through the BRI in April 2018 as then foreign minister Rimbink Pato was in Beijing to discuss the feasibility of a free trade agreement (Radio New Zealand 2018a). Two months later, O'Neill was in China for his sixth visit since assuming office and signed an MOU confirming Papua New Guinea's ties to the BRI and membership in the AIIB, calling the initiatives 'crucial to lifting the standard of living for our people' (ABC News 2018a). However, the lucrative and ambitious nature of Chinese projects in Papua New Guinea also points to corporate incentives for Chinese companies to interact with the BRI in the Pacific Islands region. In an interview with Xinhua, Wu Dongzheng, a senior official at China Railway International Group's South Pacific branch, stated that he had invited the Papua New Guinea Government to join the BRI (Parsons 2018). In a meeting with then prime minister O'Neill, Zhang Zongyan, President of China Railway Group, discussed how China Railway would:

actively implement the national 'Belt and Road' initiative, give full play to its advantages in capital, technology, talents and management, and contribute more to the economic and social development of Papua New Guinea (CREC 2018).

Smith reminded us that these corporate incentives do not always fit with the 'strategic designs of the Chinese central government' (2013:349).

Samoa

In 2017, Chinese and Samoan officials elevated BRI discourses into their bilateral relationship, beginning in May with a visit to Samoa by China's Vice Foreign Minister in charge of Oceania Affairs Zheng Zeguang and continuing in September through Samoan Minister of Commerce, Industry and Labour Lautafi Fio Purcell's presence at the China–Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum. At the latter meeting, Purcell highlighted the role of Guangdong Province in facilitating BRI cooperation, and the visit of a Samoa parliamentary delegation to Fujian underscored the importance of China's provincial governments in leveraging BRI financing (Government Press Secretariat of Samoa 2018; Purcell 2017). Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi's September 2018 trip to China strengthened Samoa's commitment to the BRI. The prime minister met with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang and signed an MOU agreeing to conduct future economic cooperation

with China under the BRI framework, as well as a pledge to synergise Samoa's national development strategy with the BRI (Government of Samoa 2018; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2018d; Xinhua 2018e). Samoa's prime minister told the Chinese media that Samoa's interest in the BRI was principally about market access (Global Times 2018). Discussions in the Samoan media indicate contrasting opinions on this positive-outcomes note. Mata'afa Keni Lesa, editor of the *Samoa Observer*, argued that the lack of alternatives to the financing opportunities available through the BRI means Samoa should make itself 'China ready' (Lesla 2018). In the same publication, journalist Alexander Rheeny (2018), mindful of Samoa's debt burden, tempered BRI expectations by stating the initiative represented a 'step into the deep unknown', especially since other countries are beginning to question participation in the initiative.

Tonga

Tonga's initial engagement with the BRI arose in October 2015 when a CCP delegation introduced the initiative's trade and financing benefits to then Tongan prime minister 'Akilisi Pōhiva and members of parliament. As in the case of Samoa, it took a visit by the nation's head of state to China to mainstream BRI discourses into the bilateral relationship. At a March 2018 Beijing meeting between Xi Jinping and Tongan King Tupou VI, the two leaders underscored the BRI as the basis for infrastructure construction financing in Tonga (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2018a; Xinhua 2018b). At a subsequent meeting, King Tupou VI and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang agreed to integrate Tonga's development strategy with the BRI, a now familiar policy outcome in the visit diplomacy to China of Pacific Island leaders (Y. Zhang 2018). Though Tonga did not sign up to the BRI, it was accepted as a member of the AIIB (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2018b). However, in December 2018, prior to the APEC summit in Port Moresby, Tonga formally committed to the BRI through an MOU and received a five-year deferment on concessional loans (ABC News 2018b).

Federated States of Micronesia

Visit diplomacy also dominates Micronesian engagement in the discourses of the BRI. In March 2017, Federated States of Micronesia President Peter M. Christian travelled to China and met Xi Jinping,

with Xi extending an invitation for Christian to participate in the BRI (Xinhua 2017a). Following up on the visit a month later, Li Zhanshu, Chairman of the National People's Congress, noted Micronesia's interest in joining the BRI and AIIB, however, no formal application to the AIIB had been made by 2019. Within the nuances of diplomatic protocol, and conceivably as an effect of the Federated States of Micronesia's status as a freely associated state of the US, Micronesia's engagement with the BRI initially appeared less enthusiastic than other PICs, and the possibility of an MOU on economic cooperation under the BRI framework was discussed with Chairman Li in May 2018 (Kaselehlie Press 2018). As if to press the issue, the offer to participate in the BRI was again extended to Micronesia in July 2018 by Huang Zheng, Chinese Ambassador to the Federated States of Micronesia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2018c), and once more by the ambassador in September 2018 at a region-wide seminar. On the latter occasion, the ambassador eagerly stated:

Let's hand in hand, work hard together, jointly pursue the Belt and Road international cooperation and the building of a community with a shared future for the humanity and jointly create a better future! (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2018e).

By November 2018, the Federated States of Micronesia and the PRC entered into an MOU on BRI cooperation, an event noted by the Chinese ambassador to Micronesia in a commentary piece for the local press (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Federated States of Micronesia 2019). In December 2019, the then new president of the Federated States of Micronesia David Panuelo visited China, calling Beijing Micronesia's key economic partner and Washington DC Palikir's leading security partner, an indication of how PICs balance the reintroduction of great power politics into the region (Tobin 2019).

Vanuatu

Vanuatu's engagement with the discourses of the BRI have been overshadowed since the 2018 uproar over the Shanghai Construction Group's construction of the Luganville wharf. In April, media articles circulated in Australia, and then globally, that claimed Canberra had raised alarm over a possible agreement the facility could be used for Chinese military purposes, an allegation denied by Vanuatu Prime

Minister Charlot Salwai (Bohane 2018). Salwai stressed that China's assistance was not imposed and was instead a response to requests from the Vanuatu Government. Nevertheless, the incident displayed regional sensitivities and the difficulties PICs are beginning to experience in managing competing bilateral economic partners.

Prior to the controversy, Vanuatu's attendance at the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017 was pitched at the ministerial level and Port Vila joined the AIIB on 6 March 2018 (Daily Post 2017). Johnny Koanapo Rasou, Member of Parliament for Tanna, captures the pragmatic view of the BRI in Vanuatu, writing:

We in Vanuatu must also be able to navigate in this policy and see what legislations and policy we need to have in place to take advantage of the opportunities that China has to offer and where we need to avoid and give opportunities for our own people to prosper (Koanapo 2017).

On the sidelines of the APEC summit in Port Moresby in November 2018, Vanuatu formally signed on to the BRI through one of seven MOUs signed with China (Radio New Zealand 2018e). Vanuatu Minister of Foreign Affairs Ralph Regenvanu underscored the open-endedness of BRI agreements, telling the media: 'It's very vague, and it doesn't really commit us to anything except cooperation. And that's fine by us' (Radio New Zealand 2018f). However, the MOU does contain some significant commitments—for example, that the resolution of conflicts should be conducted between the two parties without the possibility of an outside arbitrator (McGarry 2018).

Niue and Cook Islands

The two self-governing states in free association with New Zealand have also engaged with the BRI, which has generated some debate in Wellington about Chinese influence. Niue announced a US\$14 million road reconstruction project financed by China in 2017, and the following year Premier Toke Talagi signed an MOU with China on BRI cooperation (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in New Zealand 2018). However, despite Premier Talagi's subsequent statement that he 'was not in any rush for projects under the strategy' (Radio New Zealand 2018b), media in New Zealand have raised the spectre of Niue coming under China's political influence through the BRI. As a reflection of this, and in perhaps the world's first example of 'dumpling diplomacy', the Chinese

ambassador cooked for Premier Talagi and locals on Niue's Constitution Day celebrations, at which 'the New Zealand flag, controversially, was not raised' (Rosenberg and Rutherford 2018).

On 27 December 2017, Cook Islands joined the AIIB, with Finance Minister Mark Brown stating it could provide an alternative to financing infrastructure development (Harwood 2017). An announcement that Cook Islands would join the BRI followed in November 2018 (Radio New Zealand 2018d). In the same month, Cook Islands also attended the first China International Import Expo in Shanghai, a BRI mechanism to bring overseas companies to China to meet with domestic buyers (Radio New Zealand 2018c). New Zealand media alleged that China was offered a contract to construct a deepwater port on Penryhn in exchange for participation in the BRI. According to the government source in Wellington, Cook Islands would be 'the next Pacific domino to fall' (Scott 2018). The story drew a complaint from New Zealand's Office of the Prime Minister (*ibid.*).

Solomon Islands and Kiribati

In September 2019, Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. The move signalled a swing towards regional alignment with the PRC, leaving Taiwan with four Oceanic partners (Nauru, Tuvalu, Palau and Marshall Islands). In the case of Solomon Islands, the switch involved a drawn-out fact-finding process in Oceania and China to assess the potential benefits and drawbacks of recognising Beijing. Once Solomon Islands made the decision to switch on 21 September 2019, Kiribati soon followed on 27 September. By October, both states had signed on to the BRI following a state visit by Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and an announced visit of Kiribati's President Taneti Maamau to China in January 2020. In a post-recognition round of investment enthusiasm, China and Solomon Islands announced the initiation of several projects, including the multimillion-dollar revival of the Gold Ridge mine and construction of facilities for the Pacific Games. An attempt by a consortium of Chinese interests to lease development rights for the island of Tulagi was stymied by the Solomon Islands' attorney general, indicating not only limits to China-takeover narratives, but also how the exercise of Oceanic sovereignty remains a consideration for new Chinese economic interests.

The BRI in Fiji

The Look North and the BRI

The government of Fijian Prime Minister Bainimarama has been active in diversifying Suva's economic partners. The 2006 coup prompted the adoption of a Look North policy that aimed to attract investment from nontraditional bilateral partners, as Australia and the US imposed economic sanctions on the new administration. Prime Minister Bainimarama branded the Look North as an expression of Fijian agency shaped by Fijians for Fijians in a bid to link state and individual aspirations. Because of this policy setting, Chinese economic interventions and people have become more visible across the Fijian islands. By 2017, China was the largest bilateral aid donor and source of foreign direct investment to Fiji (Pacific Islands Report 2016).

On 12 November 2018, Suva inked a long-hinted-at MOU with China on cooperation with the BRI framework following an enthusiastic exchange of BRI participation pledges between Fijian President Jioji Konrote and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi the previous month (Xinhua 2017b, 2018f, 2018g). Since the introduction of the BRI into the Pacific Islands region, the Fijian and Chinese states have co-constructed a discourse of the Look North and the BRI as mutually compatible projects. This shift from a singular Look North narrative to an integrated discourse does not signal an overwrite of an indigenous policy framework; the thematic continuity from the Look North to the BRI indicates how some PICs are adapting the new paradigm to local conditions. This integrative process is also noted in the previous individual country profiles, as PICs combine the priorities of national development plans with the BRI, giving an impression of coherence between the BRI and domestic priorities.

In an analysis of Fijian and Chinese media and official texts on the Look North and the BRI, the integrative shift in Sino–Fijian economic relations began as early as 2015 (Szadziewski 2020). Clearly, this date overlaps with the formal announcement of the Pacific Islands region as a Maritime Silk Road corridor, as well as Prime Minister Bainimarama's Beijing meeting with President Xi Jinping in July of the same year. Prior to 2015, Look North narratives dominated media and official discussion of Sino–Fijian relations; however, by 2017, the swing toward the BRI framework appears absolute, with Look North mentions barely registering in Chinese and

Fijian sources. That year also coincided with Prime Minister Bainimarama's attendance at the Belt and Road Forum as the only PIC state leader. There is continuity in the claims officials make in both projects, including the creation of investment opportunities (potentiality) and the movement toward shared prosperity (mutuality) (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Fiji 2017a; Q. Zhang 2017). The BRI has not displaced Look North narratives, just repackaged them and underscored its integration and coherence with Fijian interests as articulated by Fijians in the Look North framework.

State legibility

The China–PICs economic relationship includes a range of Chinese actors, such as private investors, state contractors, state-owned enterprises, provincial and central government agencies, media outlets, academic institutions, community associations, migrants and labourers. Brant (see Wesley-Smith 2016) suggested the Chinese state is brought into the region by contractors responding to Pacific Island governments' requests for infrastructure project funding. I argue this is still the case, as more financing options are made available under the BRI; however, the Chinese state is not passive in these processes. The range of Chinese projects and activities labelled as Belt and Road in Fiji demonstrates a broad capture of Chinese actors under the BRI umbrella. Emblematic of the BRI's visibility in Suva is the construction of the Wanguo (WG) Friendship Plaza, which will house retail, hotel and office units. The project has been described as an 'inspiration from China's "One Belt and One Road"' and has visible symbolic value, as it is set to become the tallest building in the country (Bolanavanua 2017). The private investment of approximately US\$75 million is the first by WG International through a locally registered company. At the August 2017 groundbreaking ceremony, former Chinese ambassador to Fiji Zhang Ping told assembled dignitaries that the construction of the building 'reflects the confidence that Chinese companies have in the future of our bilateral relations' (ibid.).

Near Komave, 90 kilometres west of Suva, private Chinese investors have proposed a resort complex with a value of US\$240 million. Conditions for securing the land lease included financial aid to Komave residents and employment once the facility opens. The Silkroad Ark Fiji Hotel was announced as one of the first BRI projects in Fiji and construction was scheduled for 2018 using Chinese labour. However, on a visit to

the site in 2018, there was no visible sign of work underway and the project appears to have come to an end. In conversations with residents of Komave in 2017 and 2018, I documented conflicting responses to the intervention, especially concern over the import of Chinese labour for construction. As a goodwill gesture, the investors offered a scholarship for a Fijian scholar to study at Jinan University, and even though sponsorship came from the Silkroad Ark Investment Company, the award was labelled a Belt and Road enterprise (Kalouniviti 2017). The broad labelling of tourist visits from China to Fiji and the funding of students from Fiji to China as BRI activities is also evident in announcements made in 2017 and 2018 (Tuimasala 2018; Wang 2017).

Notable BRI-labelled construction projects involving state contractors include:

1. the US\$9.5 million redevelopment of the Suva Civic Centre under an agreement between Guangdong Province and Suva City Council, with the work contracted to the Nam Yue Group (Xinhua 2018d)
2. the US\$6 million construction of the Stinson Parade and Vatuwaqa bridges in Suva under a grant. China Railway 14th Bureau Group undertook the project, and its executive director told Xinhua upon completion of the project in January 2018:

As [a] Chinese company, we are proud of doing something like building the bridges to help promote the friendship between the two peoples and make contributions to the Belt and Road Initiative (Xinhua 2018a)
3. the completion of a US\$6 million medical training centre and emergency centre at Navua Hospital, as well as the handover of medical equipment donated by Guangdong Province. Construction was financed under a grant and contracted to the Yanjian Group. At the July 2017 opening ceremony, Zhang Ping said:

The cooperation between Guangdong and Fiji responds to the ideas of the 'Belt and Road' Initiative ... The B&R Initiative not only emphasises on infrastructure connectivity, but also on people-to-people bond (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Fiji 2017b)
4. the upgrading of the Nabouwalu/Dreketi Road on Vanua Levu. The project was funded with a US\$135 million concessional loan and work undertaken by the China First Railway Group

(CRFG) (Xinhua 2018c). CRFG are also contracted to build the new Fijian Holdings Limited Tower in Suva, another BRI-inspired project (Chanel 2018)

5. and the construction of the Panda Power Plant. Prime Minister Bainimarama proposed the deal at the 2017 Belt and Road Forum when he met with Su Huaisheng, the deputy general manager of Panda Green Energy Group. The prime minister situated the BRI and the project as potential measures in tackling the PIC priority of climate change (Panda Green 2017).

As an indicator of provincial authorities in China taking BRI opportunities to the region, in May 2017, the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade Guangdong Committee displayed in Suva over 30 companies specialising in manufacturing, tourism and real estate (CCPIT 2017). At the community level, the Belt and Road label has been applied to any number of events and projects, from art displays at the Chinese Cultural Centre in Suva to communal celebrations of the Mid-Autumn Festival (Vakaema 2018). Similarly, local groups such as the Chinese Association and state-linked entities such as the Confucius Institute at the University of the South Pacific's Laucala Campus have enacted the discourses of the BRI in their community engagement (China Daily 2018). In December 2018, the Chinese embassy held a symposium on its overseas Chinese work with over 40 representatives from the Chinese community in Fiji. The meeting indicated a readiness to harmonise state messaging with nonstate actors. Then Chinese ambassador Qian Bo explained new reforms in the government's administration of overseas Chinese affairs and commended the delegates on their role in 'promoting China–Fiji exchanges and cooperation' as well as the embassy's commitment to 'protect the legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese in Fiji' (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Fiji 2018). Then ambassador Qian also encouraged the community representatives to participate in the BRI as a means of realising their 'personal dreams' (ibid.).

Conclusion

China's bid for coherence in its approach to the Pacific Islands regions through the BRI is as much a domestic as an international project. The flexible coherence of a vaguely defined BRI not only counters narratives external to the Pacific Islands over China's so-called erratic interactions

with the region, but also harmonises a range of Chinese activities within the BRI framework. However, this discursive process has not put to rest questions, in some cases justifiable, over how projects play out on the ground and the seemingly strategic intent of the capture of Chinese economic activity under a singular state policy. Some familiar criticisms persist. Wallis (2017) argued that unmanageable debt to China may bring regional instability, and Pryke (2018) noted the lack of transparency in Chinese interventions. Drawing on extensive research of the finer details of Chinese economic interventions, Smith (2018) commented that ‘most large Chinese aid projects in the Pacific are reverse-engineered by a Chinese contractor and their Pacific partners, then presented to China Exim Bank as local initiatives’. The debate over Chinese influence that blew up in Australia in 2018 prompted an examination of increased Chinese presence in the Pacific Islands region, including accusations of projects as ‘white elephants’ and ‘roads to nowhere’ (AFP 2018; Wyeth 2018). The rhetoric of legislators and alarmist media in Australia indicates the arrival of the BRI in the Pacific has not dispelled fear discourses. In sum, while state discourses make for clean analyses for the purposes of this chapter, the ground-level outcomes are much messier, a theme widespread in analyses of Chinese interventions in Africa and Latin America (Narins 2016; Power and Mohan 2010). As such, the flexible coherence of a policy in which states and China can co-construct development narratives is a considerable advantage in building a ‘community of common destiny’ through the BRI (D. Zhang 2018). Discourses often cleanse untidy ground-level implementation of aid and investment projects. As a result, the urgency is clear for research into ground-level impacts of BRI projects and activities in Oceania to demonstrate the kinds of material, rather than discursive, changes that are in process through China’s BRI projects and to challenge the sweep of coherence narratives.

It is also important to emphasise that the BRI is not the only anticipatory geography currently on offer in the Pacific Islands region. The Pacific Islands Forum’s Blue Pacific framework, Australia’s Pacific Step-Up, New Zealand’s Pacific Rest, the US’s Pacific Pledge, Indonesia’s Pacific Elevation, the Republic of Korea’s New Southern Policy, Taiwan’s New Southbound Policy and Austronesian Forum, the UK’s Pacific Uplift and various iterations of the Indo-Pacific concept emanating from Washington DC, Canberra, New Delhi, Paris and Tokyo offer competing geopolitical futures. The emerging complexity of Oceania’s geopolitical map raises the critical issues of Pacific Island agency and where Pacific Island governments

and Pacific Islanders exert their own vision of a regional future. Even though, as Zhang, the Chinese entrepreneur in Nadi, stated, the BRI will come to define Sino–PIC engagement, this chapter concludes that it is not an imposed project and some of the narratives of its introduction to the region are co-constructed. Furthermore, China represents one of several bilateral engagements between Pacific Island governments and other states. While the BRI may represent Beijing’s proposal to the world on how it will conduct its global presence, it may also embody how the Pacific Islands intend to manage their interests on the regional geopolitical stage with many suitors.

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