BEIJING RESHAPES ITS PACIFIC STRATEGY

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THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC of China (PRC) and traditional regional powers such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan are jockeying for influence in the Pacific. There are signs that China is now recalibrating its strategy in response to this newly energised competition, which was triggered by China's growing activities in the region. In the past, China's regional approach was largely limited to attendance at annual Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) dialogues, small donations to the PIF and the Pacific Tourism Organisation, and Chinese government scholarships (twenty per year) delivered through the PIF. Although China established the high-level China–Pacific Islands Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in 2006, it is not an annual event. So far, only three summits have been held, in 2006, 2013, and 2019.

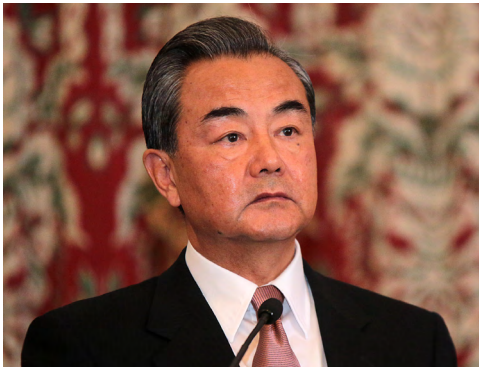
The recent recalibration presents itself in three main aspects. The first involves adopting a dual strategy of competition and engagement, with a focus on competition. In a rare move, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi convened two China–Pacific Foreign Ministers' meetings (in October 2021 and May 2022) in less than eight months.[1] The International Department of the

Communist Party of China (CPC) has also been busy establishing ties with major political parties in the Pacific and sharing ideas on enhancing state governance. These activities send a clear message that China is ramping up its competition with the traditional powers.

Interestingly, during his trip, Wang also said China was 'open-minded about carrying out more tripartite cooperation with other countries inside and outside the region'.[2] This is best interpreted as a temporary tactic to reduce traditional powers' concerns about China's activities in the region rather than a long-term policy change. Gone is the golden age of about a decade ago when China and traditional donor countries had a genuine interest in piloting trilateral cooperation in third countries, as typified by the Australia–China–Papua New Guinea malaria project and the New Zealand–China–Cook Islands water project. These experiments reveal that high-level political trust between China and traditional donors is a crucial element in China's trilateral cooperation, which is clearly now lacking.[3] Affected by the growing tensions in its bilateral relations with China, it has also become increasingly difficult for Australia to hold regular diplomatic consultations with China on Pacific affairs. Even when they do, such as the recent video conference on the subject in May 2022, it was more a formality than an opportunity to have fruitful discussions.

Second, China is piloting an approach of 'driving with two steering wheels' 双轮驱动, which includes both bilateral and regional engagement with Pacific Island countries, although bilateral engagement will remain the focus.[4]

During Wang Yi's visit, he proposed two broad agreements to the region's leaders: the *China–Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision* and the *China–Pacific Island Countries Five-Year Action Plan on Common Development (2022–2026)*. The agreements were intended to be the main achievement of the second foreign ministers' meeting and to represent China's new effort to boost its engagement with the Pacific. In the end, however, neither of the two agreements was adopted.[5] A possible reason is that Pacific Island states are becoming increasingly sensitive to policing and security cooperation with



Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi convened two China–Pacific Foreign Ministers' meetings in less than eight months
Source: Agencia de Noticias ANDES, Wikipedia

China in the context of heightened geostrategic rivalry in the region.[6] Such concerns are exacerbated by the China–Solomon Islands security pact signed in March 2022, which has caused concerns about its implications for regional security.[7] According to some reports, there was also inadequate consultation between China and the region on the two proposed agreements.[8]

The third aspect of China's recalibration of its approach in the Pacific is the creation of institutional structures for systematic engagement. In particular, Beijing will rely heavily on six new China–Pacific cooperation centres, as well as tasking three provinces with promoting its Pacific diplomacy.[9] The six centres will focus, respectively, on climate change, poverty alleviation, disaster prevention and mitigation, agriculture, *juncao* (fungus grass, 菌草) technology, and the reservation of emergency supplies. Although China has previously cooperated with the Pacific Islands in these areas, the establishment of the cooperation centres highlights its desire to deepen engagement with Pacific countries. For example, the Pacific research centre at Liaocheng University will manage the China–Pacific climate change centre, conduct related research, and promote exchanges and cooperation.

The Chinese government has also tasked the coastal provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, and Shandong with leading China's provincial diplomacy in the Pacific. Compared with other provinces, these three have rich experience, resources, and expertise in cooperating with

the Pacific. All have established Pacific research centres within their universities, including Sun Yat-sen University and Guangdong Foreign Studies University in Guangdong, Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University, and Shandong's Liaocheng University. These centres have established close relations with Pacific Islands through scholarships, volunteer teachers, and agricultural cooperation.

China has been adjusting its Pacific strategy in response to the growing determination of other powers — including the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and some Pacific countries — to counterbalance its influence in the region. The United States has responded to the China 'challenge' in a systematic way, including releasing its Indo-Pacific Strategy,[10] conducting diplomatic visits (Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Fiji in February 2022, White House Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell to Solomon Islands in April 2022, and Vice-President Kamala Harris's virtual address to the 2022 PIF in July and hosting of the first US–Pacific Islands Countries Summit in Washington, DC, in September), providing economic, financial, and technical assistance, and bolstering people-to-people links. To Beijing, these actions are aimed at containing China's rise — a challenge that must be met head-on. Xie Feng 谢锋, the Chinese vice-foreign minister in charge of China–Oceania relations, slammed traditional powers' opposition to the China–Solomon Islands security pact, asking: '[W]hat rights do these countries have to make unwarranted comments on China and Solomon Islands? How is Australia in any position to draw a "red line" between Solomon Islands 2,000 kilometres away and China ten thousand miles away?'[11] There is alarm among some traditional powers and the opposition party in Solomon Islands that the China–Solomon Islands security pact could pave the way for China to establish a military base in the islands. Despite this alarm, China is deepening policing cooperation with the country, including donating twenty-two police vehicles, thirty motorcycles, two police water cannons, eight police drones, and advanced close personal protection equipment.[12] In August 2022, the Solomon Islands government took out a ninety-six-million-dollar

concessional loan from the Exim Bank of China to contract Huawei to build 161 telecommunications towers, sparking further controversy about security and debt risks.[13] Some Chinese scholars suggest that in reacting to Australia's 'Pacific Step-Up' and to reduce pressure from Australia over its Pacific diplomacy, China should 'take advantage of the fundamental contradiction between Australia's Monroe Doctrine and Pacific Island countries' independent foreign policies'.[14]

Pushback from Pacific nations themselves to China's growing activities poses a further challenge to its Pacific policies. Pacific Island nations do not wish to be pawns in a geostrategic power struggle, but have their own agendas on climate change, marine conservation, and development. The growing tensions between China and traditional powers have made it an imperative for Pacific Islands to manage their relations with China in a more cautious manner. Many are seemingly comfortable with the existing security arrangements, including partnerships with powers such as the United States and Australia that date back to World War II. They want, in the words of the PIF Secretariat's *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, 'inclusive and enduring partnerships based on mutual accountability and respect'.[15] Pacific civil society stakeholders' views on China are complex and often divided.[16]

China is recalibrating its Pacific strategy to prevent Pacific Island nations forging closer links with its strategic competitors (including Taiwan). But Beijing is also aware of its limits. As China's economic growth slows and foreign reserves shrink, it is prioritising 'small but beautiful' 小而美 aid projects.[17] What remains unchanged in China's Pacific strategy is that Beijing sees Pacific Island nations in strategic terms, as more than just partners in areas like climate change or trade: for China, Pacific Island nations play an integral role in its South–South cooperation, which represents its attempt to strengthen relations with other developing countries to resist the pressure placed on it by the United States and others.

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