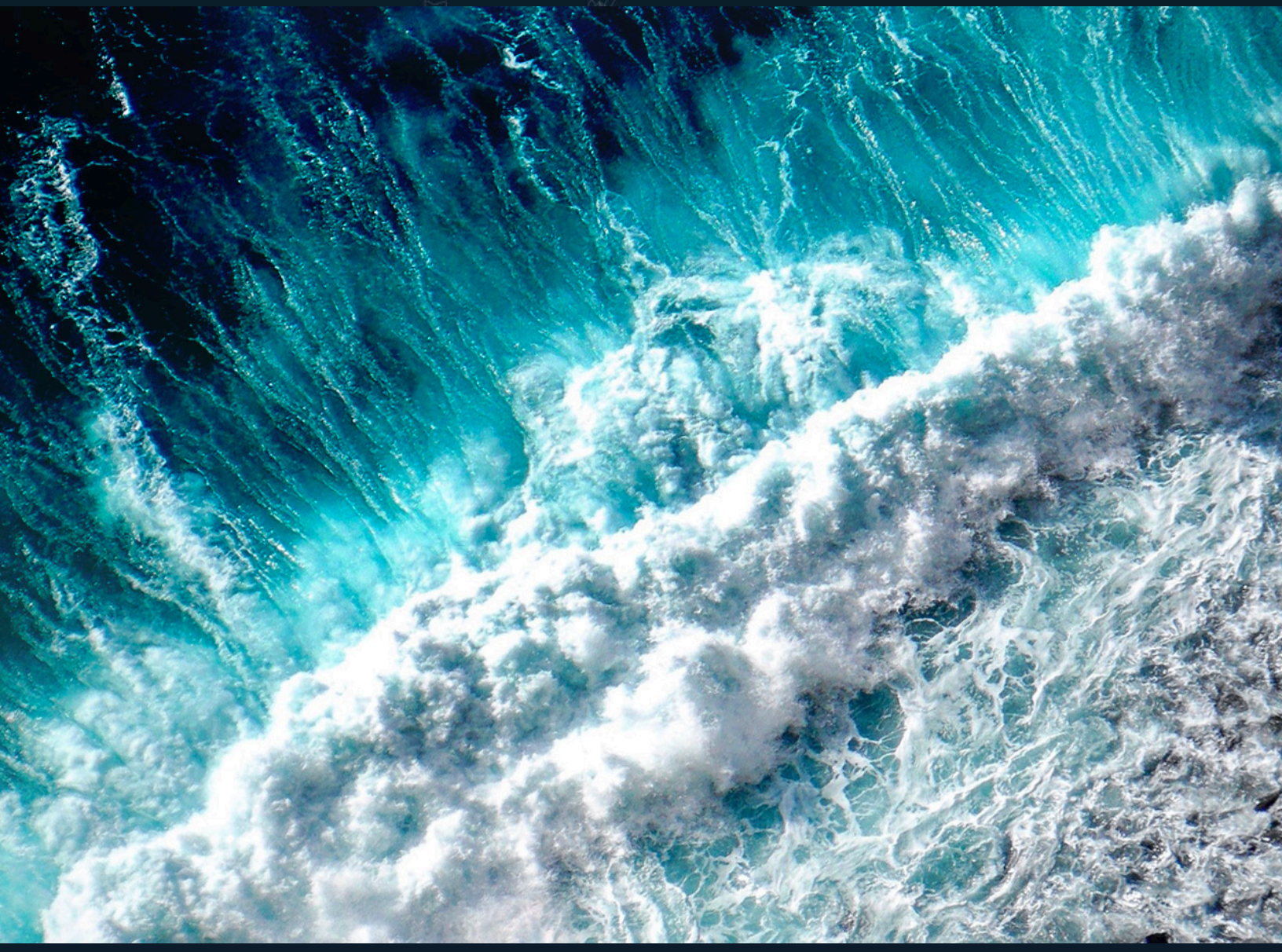
CFE-DM

CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE
IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT & HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

CHINA'S MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH TO GAIN INFLUENCE IN OCEANIA

FOUR-PART SERIES



CHINA'S MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH TO GAIN INFLUENCE IN OCEANIA

Four-part Series

Part 1 China's Foreign Humanitarian Assistance as a Tool of Strategic Influence in Oceania
By Emilio E. Moreno

Part 2 The People's Liberation Army Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Operations in Oceania
By Emilio E. Moreno

Part 3 The Belt and Road Initiative in Oceania: Understanding the People's Republic of China's Strategic Interests and Engagement in the Pacific
By Carol Li

Part 4 How China Messages its Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: A Case Study of Tonga
By Lillian Dang

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In addition to the contributing authors, the Editor thanks the following people whose efforts contributed to this publication: Dr. Alberto Morales Jr., Steve Castonguay, Casey Johnson, and Leigh Sholler.

August 2022

Disclaimer

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About the Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance

Overview

The Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance (CFE-DM) is a United States (U.S.) Department of Defense (DoD) organization comprised of nearly 30 subject matter experts that provide academic research, civil-military coordination training, and operational insights to support decision making before, during, and after crises. The Center is designed to bridge understanding between humanitarians, civilian, and military responders. CFE-DM partners with a diverse group of governmental and nongovernmental actors, as well as academic institutions to increase collaborations and capabilities in humanitarian assistance and disaster response. While maintaining a global mandate, the Indo-Pacific region is our priority of effort and collaboration is the cornerstone of our operational practice. The Center is a direct reporting unit to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) and is located on Ford Island, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii.

Vision

The Joint Force, allies, and partners are fully prepared to conduct and support foreign humanitarian assistance.

Mission

CFE-DM builds crisis response capacity in U.S. and partner militaries, enhances coordination and collaboration with civilian and foreign partners, and strengthens those relationships to save lives and alleviate human suffering before, during, and after humanitarian crises.

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Preface

The full scope of China's ambitions in the Pacific came into focus in late May 2022 when a communique outlining a regional economic and security arrangement with ten Pacific Island Countries (PICs) was leaked to the international media. This follows a controversial bilateral security agreement signed between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Solomon Islands a month earlier. China's increasing security cooperation with PICs and its implications for regional security has drawn greater U.S. and international attention to Oceania. The five reports in this collection examine China's growing diplomatic, military, economic, and strategic communication efforts in Oceania as it relates to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) and explains the implications for strategic competition in the region.

China has diplomatic ties with ten PICs, after gaining official recognition from Kiribati and the Solomon Islands in 2019. In his report, 'China's Foreign Humanitarian Assistance as a Tool of Strategic Influence in Oceania', Emilio Moreno anticipated that China would seek to form a pro-China bloc among the ten PICs with which it has diplomatic relations. He reports on how PRC has used foreign assistance including humanitarian assistance to pave the way for diplomatic gains in Oceania. Moreno's second report in this collection, 'The People's Liberation Army Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Operations in Oceania,' forecasts that HA/DR missions will enable the PRC to expand its military presence in the region.

China's economic expansion in Oceania has accelerated with the roll out of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2018. Caroli Li in her report, 'The Belt and Road Initiative in Oceania,' cautions that accusing the PRC of "debt-trap diplomacy" is not useful as it generalizes the region and patronizes PIC leadership. Li argues that understanding the BRI's disorganized nature, due to initiatives from both state and non-state actors and learning from the initiative's successes and failures can place the U.S. in a better position to compete and meet the needs of PICs.

Finally, drawing from a more recent example of China's HA/DR mission in Tonga, Lillian Dang's report, 'How China Messages its Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief: A Case Study of Tonga,' explores the relationship between China's strategic communication and HA/DR. Dang argues it is important to not over-estimate the PRC's HA/DR capacity and reach and, conversely, to not underestimate the degree to which Chinese narratives and political sway have taken hold.

In addition, included as an Appendix is Taylor Tielke's report, 'The Evolving Nature of China's Humanitarian Assistance.' The report was prepared in 2018 and some aspects may have evolved since the time of writing. Thus, it is included as an appendix to provide background and context on the leadership, structures, and policies that shape and drive China's HA/DR.

China's Multi-pronged Approach to Gain Influence in Oceania Part 1 of 4:

CHINA'S FOREIGN HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AS A TOOL OF STRATEGIC INFLUENCE IN OCEANIA

By: Emilio E. Moreno
Edited by: Lillian Dang and Leigh Sholler

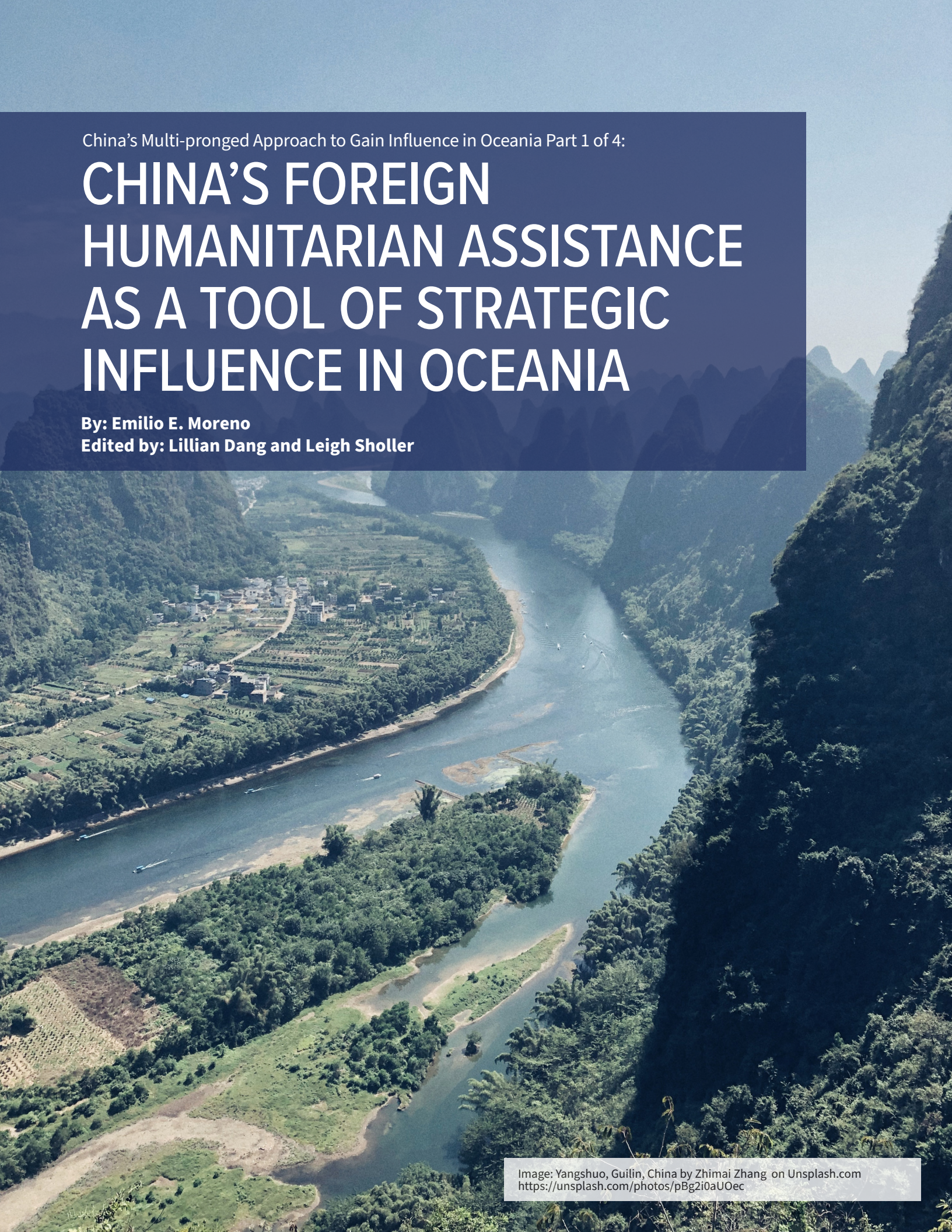


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Executive Summary

Purpose

This paper examines how the People's Republic of China (PRC) has used foreign assistance, including humanitarian assistance, to pave the way for diplomatic gains and to expand the Chinese presence in Oceania. It highlights the ten Pacific Island countries (PIC) that China is engaging and the regional forums that China has established to extend its strategic influence.

This is part of a series of research papers examining strategic competition between the United States (U.S.) and PRC in Oceania. The series seeks to inform U.S. military decision-makers, planners, and forces on multiple facets of the PRC's strategic influence efforts in the region, particularly as it concerns humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR).

Key Takeaways

- China has expanded its diplomatic presence in Oceania and China is engaging its partners bilaterally and through regional forums as it extends its influence in the region. China deploys more diplomats to the region than any other single country does.
- For its efforts, China has made significant inroads in Oceania. China has established diplomatic relationships with ten PICs,[1] including gaining official recognition from Kiribati and the Solomon Islands in 2019. The development of a security pact between China and the Solomon Islands and China's upgrading of an airstrip in Kiribati have raised concerns about the future presence of China's armed forces in these countries in proximity to Australia and the U.S.
- Despite China's preference for bilateralism, it has established regional mechanisms such as the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum (CPICEDCF), whose members include China and the ten PICS with which it has diplomatic ties. With the 2022 launch of the first China-PIC foreign ministers meeting, some experts believe that the PRC is seeking to build a pro-China block among its partners.
- Foreign humanitarian assistance (FHA) as a subset of China's overall foreign assistance has been a key component of the PRC's diplomatic efforts in Oceania. However, in recent years Chinese n the region has declined from its highest levels in 2016. In 2019, China was the fourth largest donor of foreign aid to the Pacific, behind Australia, New Zealand, and Japan although China was the third largest donor of FHA during the period 2013-2017. Chinese foreign assistance is not publicly reported and is difficult to trace.
- Despite concerns among regional powers of an expanded Chinese presence in the Pacific, the region has only recently emerged as a top-level priority for Beijing in comparison to diplomatic efforts in Africa and Asia. There remains room for broader engagement by the U.S. and her allies.
- There are indications of pushback to PRC influence among PICs. One recent example is Samoa's cancelling of a Chinese port project after Samoa's leadership cited excessive costs. Another is

1 The Cook Islands, FSM, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu.

the Federated State of Mircronesia's (FSM) criticism of the China-Solomon Islands' security pact with warnings that, if the pact goes ahead, it will escalate U.S.-China geo-political tensions in the region.

- Finally, PICs wary of being the objects of U.S.-China strategic competition have sought to promote a Blue Pacific regional narrative, a concept that seeks to carve a path to development that is independent of U.S. and Chinese interests.

U.S. and China Strategic Competition in Oceania

China has expanded its presence in Oceania and has moved earnestly to engage with PICs. Through soft loans, scholarships, immigration, commercial activity, military-to-military cooperation, and diplomatic engagements, China has widened and deepened its influence among PICs (Pascal, 2018). Recently, China's diplomacy surrounding the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has included grants, information sharing, and engagement by Chinese philanthropic organizations, communities, and medical teams in PICs (Zhang, 2020). For its efforts, China has made significant inroads in Oceania. China has established diplomatic relationships with ten PICs, with some experts suggesting the PRC is seeking to build a pro-China block among its partners (Song, 2021). China is also engaging multilaterally through regional forums and sub-regional venues. For instance, having been a dialogue partner with the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Beijing established the China-PIF Cooperation Fund in 2000 to support trade and investment between China and PIF members; sponsored the establishment of a PIF trade office in Beijing in 2002; and has developed close relationships with other sub-regional groups such as the Melanesia Spearhead Group (MSG) (Zhang, 2020). In 2006, China established the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum (CPICEDCF) to promote trade, investment, aid, and technical cooperation with Oceania. The thrust of China's engagement appears primarily to be gaining the support of PICs on a range of political issues, such as the One-China Policy, challenging the U.S. presence, and isolating regional players such as Australia and New Zealand (Wesley-Smith, 2007). China's expanded presence is filling a strategic gap in the region and forcing the U.S. to pay greater attention to avoid a further erosion of its influence in a geographic sphere that, until recently, had been largely aligned to the West.

Increasing and prolonged competition between the U.S. and China in Oceania poses several challenges for political stability in PICs and for security in the region. Growing diplomatic ties between China and PICs are becoming a driver of political instability as the relationship with Beijing has become an area of political contention in states such as the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu (Wesley, 2020). Indeed, China's influence in national politics was among the sources of grievance that led to violent protests in the Solomon Islands in late November 2021. The grievances concerned Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare's decision in 2019 to withdraw the country's longstanding recognition of Taiwan in favor of closer diplomatic ties with Beijing (Zhuang, 2021).

China's staunch promotion of a "One-China Policy" makes recognition of Taiwan a key issue for PICs seeking closer ties with China. Along with the Solomon Islands, Kiribati terminated recognition of Taiwan in 2019 in order to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing, a move that left only four regional countries –Tuvalu, Nauru, Marshall Islands, and Palau – among the world countries who still recognize Taiwan (Tiezzi, 2020). Diplomatic recalibration towards China has yielded tangible results as PICs have received immediate benefits in the form of increased trade and foreign assistance after switching recognition (Azizian & Cramer, 2015; Zhang, 2015). Taiwan's dislodgment from the region as China advances is forcing the U.S. to clarify its position towards Taiwan and to become more vocal in its support of the self-ruled island (Tiezzi, 2020).

China's diplomatic expansion is coupled with its growing military presence, which poses security challenges for the U.S and allies in the region. U.S. allies and "Five Eyes" intelligence-sharing partners, Australia and New Zealand are being drawn into a difficult balancing act as they seek to buttress their security ties with the U.S. while maintaining their robust economic relationship with China, the largest trading partner for both countries. Australia and New Zealand have been subject to PRC interference in their domestic politics (Brady, 2017). Australia's assertive pushback of China's interference resulted in Beijing's diplomatic freeze since 2020, a freeze that includes the suspension of high-level visits, criticism from China's state media, and the imposition of a range of trade sanctions (Kassam, 2020). In addition to these direct consequences for Australia and New Zealand, the development of a security pact between China and the Solomon Islands, which came to light in late March 2022, has raised concerns about the stationing of People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy vessels in proximity to Australia (Green, 2022). The presence of China's PLA in the Solomon Islands will have direct implications for Australia's defense operations in the Pacific. And Australia and New Zealand are not alone in expressing their concern. The President of FSM has urged the Solomon Islands to reconsider the agreement and stated that the deal would put the Pacific at the center of a geopolitical conflict between China and the U.S (Green, 2022).

Yet, despite China's expanded presence in the region, Oceania has only slowly become a PRC priority as China's history and ties in the region are neither as long nor deep as are China's ties with African or Southeast Asian countries. Experts monitoring the region observed that in a special COVID-19 meeting in November 2020 between Beijing and PICs, it was China's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs responsible for North America, Oceania, and Latin America, Zheng Zeguang, who attended the talks and not Foreign Minister Wang Yi (Tiezzi, 2020). Moreover, when Wang did visit the region in May 2022, a mooted PRC-PIF multilateral security pact was loudly rejected by several PIC leaders who specifically pointed to a desire not to become pawns in U.S.-PRC geo-political competition (Reuters, 2022). This pushback followed a July 2021 announcement by the newly elected Samoan Prime Minister, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, when she delivered on her election campaign promise to cancel a China-backed port project initiated by her predecessor; she cited excessive costs. Prime Minister (concurrently Foreign Minister) Mata'afa was then notably absent from the first-ever China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting in March 2022; she sent a junior representative in her stead (Katsuri, 2022). Furthermore, China's aid to the Pacific has declined in the past decade. The Pacific accounted for 3.7% of estimated total Chinese aid globally during the period 2013-2018 whereas it

accounted for 4.2% in 2010-2012. Africa and Asia remain the largest recipients of Chinese aid, together receiving more than 80% during the period 2013-2018. Nonetheless, PICs recognize the region's increasing importance in the U.S.-China strategic competition. In 2017, PICs launched the "Blue Pacific narrative" of regionalism, a concept that seeks a path to development among PICs that is independent of both U.S. and Chinese interests (Taylor, 2019). This has been followed by the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Continent, which further articulates a framework for PIC-led regionalism (PIF, n.d).

China's Foreign Aid as a Tool of Influence in Oceania

Foreign aid to PICs has been a key means of strategic competition deployed by China in Oceania. China's foreign aid generally takes the form of grants, interest-free loans, and concessional loans (CFE-DM, 2021). China's foreign aid to the PICs has attracted increasing attention since 2006, when at the 1st CPICEDCF China announced US$492 million in concessional loans to the region. In 2013, China announced a further US$1 billion in concessional loans at the 2nd CPICEDCF (Dornan & Brand, 2014). To clarify, these are Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-linked, low-interest concessional loans that tend to be for big infrastructure projects and are provided directly by the Export-Import Bank of China (EximBank) (Lynch, Andersen & Zhu, 2020). China's foreign assistance has been coupled with trade opportunities for PICs. For a region with low economic growth and structural constraints – distance from markets, small productive base, and high transport costs – the opportunities to upgrade infrastructure through concessional loans and to develop trade relationships with China are compelling. China has become an important market for exports from PICs, particularly for fisheries, wood products, and mineral commodities (Dominguez, 2022).

In practice, China has spent less on foreign assistance than what it has committed to provide in the region. However, China's foreign assistance is notoriously difficult to trace due to a lack of public accounting. According to the latest data available, the Lowy Institute's Pacific Aid Map estimated that China spent US$169.59 million of the US$1.03 billion committed in 2019. This ranks China as only the fourth largest donor of aid to Oceania, after Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. China's aid spending in the Pacific rose steadily from 2009 to its highest level of US$287.30 million in 2016. However, from 2017 China's aid spending in the region has steadily declined (Lowy Institute, 2019). Given that most of China's aid is given in the form of concessional loans, China is ranked as the third largest lender in the region after the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank, respectively. From 2010 to 2016, China was the top lender, but it has been eclipsed by higher lending by the ADB and World Bank in recent years (Lowy Institute, 2019). Figure 1 shows China's aid contributions to the Pacific in the form of grants and loans during the period 2009-2019 (Pryke & Dayant 2021).

In 2019, the top recipient of Chinese aid was Papua New Guinea, followed by Vanuatu, Fiji, Cook Islands, and Samoa. Figure 2 lists the top five PICs who are recipients of Chinese aid and the amount of Chinese Humanitarian Assistance to Oceania

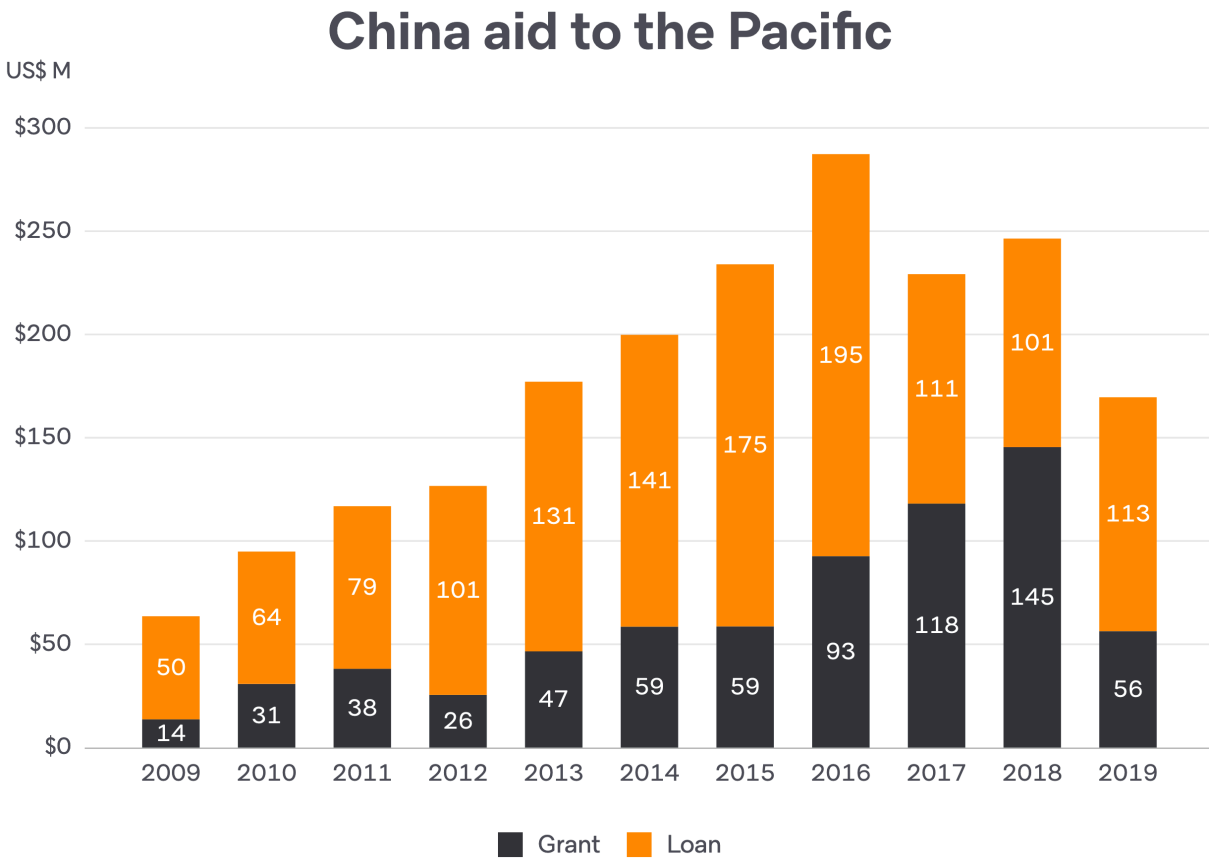


Figure 1. China's foreign aid contributions in the Pacific 2009-2019 (Source: Dayant & Pryke (2021), China's declining Pacific aid presence, Lowy Institute, *https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-s-declining-pacific-aid-presence*).



Figure 2. Top five recipients of China's foreign aid in the Pacific in 2019 (Source: Pacific Aid Map, Lowy Institute, retrieved 28 March 2022, *https://pacificaidmap.lowyinstitute.org/dashboard*).

Chinese Humanitarian Assistance to Oceania

Though it is less discussed relative to the other forms of Chinese development assistance, Chinese foreign humanitarian assistance (FHA) has soared over the past two decades. China has been one of the top five providers of FHA among non-Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee countries since 2000, and its FHA reached an estimated US$131.2 million in 2014 alone. Since 2004, China has conducted more than 300 humanitarian aid programs globally, at an annual growth rate of 29.4% (Zhang, 2019). In Oceania, for the period 2013-2017, China's humanitarian aid contributions totaled US$34.3 million, an amount that placed China as the third largest donor of humanitarian aid after Australia and the U.S. China's contributions are relatively minor in comparison to the US$132.9 million provided by Australia and US$78.8 million contributed by the U.S. in the same period. The top recipients of Chinese FHA were Samoa, Fiji, Vanuatu, Tonga, and Micronesia, a list that suggests that major recipients of Chinese FHA may differ from major recipients of Chinese development assistance (Humanitarian Advisory Group et al, 2019).

China's delivery of FHA as a component of its strategic expansion in Oceania is worth examining to better understand the scope of China's FHA as well as the implications from China's investments. FHA represents one of the nine "forms" of foreign aid provided by China globally, according to its January 2021 Foreign Aid White Paper (a rare release of information on China's opaque development cooperation activities). The White Paper outlines China's Emergency Humanitarian Assistance as comprised of six sub-categories: Emergency Disaster Relief, Public Health Emergencies (including COVID-19 response); Food Aid/Famine Relief; Disaster Recovery and Reconstruction; Disaster Preparation and Mitigation (including efforts undertaken under the BRI rubric); and Migrant/Refugee support (CFE-DM, 2021).

The White Paper states China's commitment to multilateral efforts within Oceania to be executed within the framework of South-South Cooperation to promote economic and social development through foreign aid, humanitarian assistance, and other means (Chen, Calabrese & Willitts-King, 2021). The White Paper also indicates China's support to the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as part of its overarching goal to assert itself in the international system (PRC New Era White Paper, 2021; Voluntary National Review Panel, 2021). The White Paper further highlights how the BRI will guide China's aid in the future; indeed, China has already used aid as a key tool for promoting the BRI in the Pacific Region where PICs will play a decisive role in shaping the outcomes of any strategic competition.

The White Paper points toward a more comprehensive organizational framework for FHA. Its subsection on "responding to global humanitarian challenges together" may indicate a higher degree of operational involvement and resource allocation in dealing with humanitarian issues as a priority. It details China's role in COVID-19 response as well as in disaster relief and recovery, support to refugees, and food security. This not only reflects China's growing interest in engaging humanitarian action to compliment foreign policy and economic priorities, but it is also a means for China to create an image

of being a responsible humanitarian state actor (Chen, Calabrese & Willitts-Kings, 2021).

The driver of expanding aid, including FHA, is China's deepening soft power penetration of the region. Some scholarship posits that Beijing is utilizing FHA to construct an image of itself as a "responsible global leader" although other research indicates China also seeks to achieve other policy goals through the provision of foreign aid including FHA. Such policy goals include furthering the One-China policy and challenging U.S. primacy in the Pacific (Moroney & Tidwell, 2021). Moreover, China's willingness to contribute to humanitarian responses, while politically motivated, has been encouraged by other humanitarian stakeholders. In 2017, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) recommended China's BRI add a humanitarian dimension to its far-reaching development agenda (ICRC, 2017; Kurtzer & Gonzales, 2020). Additionally, Germany, a major donor state, has called on China to assume a larger role in addressing humanitarian crises (Chadwick, 2020). China is on track to spend ever more on humanitarian aid as was demonstrated in Beijing's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the total figure of Chinese spending on pandemic assistance is difficult to determine due to China's opaque accounting, it is approximated the Chinese government donated US$1.9 million in cash and medical supplies to PICs to mitigate COVID-19 (Moroney & Tidwell, 2021; Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

Moreover, as China's economic stakes in BRI-participating countries grows, it is in China's own interest to facilitate and contribute to effective humanitarian response. As PICs are prone to natural disasters, especially cyclones, earthquakes, and climate change related challenges, opportunities are rife for PICs and China to deepen cooperation (Chen, Calabrese & Willitts-King, 2021). Utilized appropriately, FHA strengthens links between foreign policy and development, extends Beijing's operational reach, and strengthens China's diplomatic presence among PICs.

Unlike other major donors, China prefers a bilateral approach to humanitarian assistance, often opting out of international standards of multinational cooperation and coordination for the advancement of FHA in Oceania (Watters & Triplett, 2021; Westley-Smith, 2007). It also conceptualizes humanitarian aid as part of its core development aid and prioritizes humanitarian needs that are not politically sensitive such as natural hazards, food crises, and infectious diseases (Feltman, 2020). As such, the absence of complex conflicts in the Pacific makes it a permissive environment for Chinese humanitarian assistance. China's unorthodox approach has the potential to disrupt long agreed standards and hinder communication and coordination within the humanitarian assistance community. On the other hand, China's approach has the potential to create momentum for re-investigating established norms and practices and initiating reform in the areas of localization, bridging the humanitarian-development divide, and diversifying resources (Humanitarian Advisory Group et al, 2019).

Considering the strategic competition space, China's engagement needs to be understood in the context of security priorities impacting PICs. An important statement of these priorities is demonstrated in the Boe Declaration made at the 2018 PIF leaders' meeting (Wallis, 2021). In the declaration, leaders articulated an expanded concept of human security challenges faced by PICs including humanitarian needs, environmental security, and regional cooperation in building resilience to disasters and climate change (Boe Declaration, 2018). In view of this, China is seeking to become

a major actor in providing FHA resources for PICs, a response derived from Beijing's attempt to turn humanitarianism and the COVID-19 crisis into diplomatic opportunities to enhance China's capacity in Oceania, specifically among PICs. Against this backdrop, PICs can maximize aid as they endure the impacts of natural disasters and economic hardships exacerbated by COVID-19 through reciprocity with the BRI, the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, and humanitarian assistance. Thus, China's White Paper fills a gap through defining integration and cooperation within the international humanitarian landscape (Zhang, 2021; PRC China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era, 2021, 2021).

China's Pacific Panorama

For its efforts, China has gained significant inroads in Oceania. China currently has diplomatic relationships with ten PICs – the Cook Islands, FSM, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu. China's diplomatic efforts directed at the PICs are focused on gaining diplomatic partners as a way of implementing President Xi Jinping's New Era Principle to "Strengthen International Exchanges and Tripartite Cooperation." Beijing seeks to expand its influence in the region and encourage diplomatic exchanges, and it has increased its diplomatic presence both bilaterally and in regional organizations to execute engagements and cooperation initiatives in tandem with Pacific Island sub-regional groups (PRC China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era, 2021). In support of its foreign policy objectives, China deploys more diplomats to Oceania than any other single country does (Zhang, 2015). In October 2021, China launched the first China-Pacific Islands foreign minister meeting. Some experts have suggested that the meeting marks the starting point of a new effort by Beijing to build a "pro-China bloc" in the Pacific. Beijing compared the meeting to other milestones in China-Pacific relations such as the 2006 CPICEDCF, which launched China's diplomatic expansion in the region. The meeting identified areas of top concerns for the PICs including COVID-19 response, climate change, nuclear-related issues, development, and marine environment and resources. Climate change is an area where PICs see a need for the U.S. and China to collaboration (Song, 2021).

Bilateral Engagements

China currently engages bilaterally with ten PICs in the region. The following are examples of China's diplomatic engagements in each state.

Cook Islands: China and the Cook Islands established diplomatic relations in 1997 when the Cook Islands recognized China's One-China Policy (PRC Embassy in New Zealand, 2003). China is the second largest aid donor to the Cook Islands behind New Zealand (Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map, 2019). China, New Zealand, and the Government of the Cook Islands conducted the country's first tripartite

aid project, Te Mato Vai, which involved a three-phase plan to provide safe public water supply in Rarotonga, the largest of the country's islands. China, through the state-owned EximBank, provided a soft loan of around US$16 million for the first stage, which was built by the China Civil Engineering and Construction Company (CCECC). New Zealand committed around US$10 million in grant aid for the second stage (Smith, 2019). In 2005, China provided around US$20,000 for disaster relief to the Cook Islands following Cyclone Olaf (PRC Embassy in New Zealand, 2005).

FSM: China and FSM established diplomatic relations in 1989. In terms of diplomatic and security engagements, China is increasing its footprint through participation in high-level visits and pandemic diplomacy efforts. Multilateral meetings often enable the funding and support necessary for assistance in key disaster area vulnerabilities. Such engagements are characterized by high-profile, senior-level visits. These high-level visits are officially orchestrated, broadcast by media, and include public handover ceremonies of Chinese relief materials. As an example, China's delivery of generators, water tanks, and food rations as a response to FSM's suffering during the 2015 El Niño-driven drought was heavily publicized to validate Beijing's reputation as a responsible actor in the international humanitarian assistance arena (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in FSM, 2016; Relief Web, 2016). In 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, China's Ambassador to FSM took the opportunity to publicly present the donation of medical supplies and a cash donation of US$100,000 to assist FSM. In line with China's strategic communication approach, the Ambassador expressed optimism that it would dispatch a second shipment of medical supplies to include ventilators for FSM (Relief Web, 2020). Experts argue that these latter actions demonstrate that Beijing is promoting acceptance of Chinese good will, and they suggest that China has influence based on positive features that make South Pacific countries want to accept it as a trustworthy friend and partner (Herr, 2019).

Fiji: China has increased its diplomatic investment in Fiji since the 1970s when China started official relations with Fiji. China's aid pledges have appealed to Fijian politicians because of the country's small and fragile economy. This, in turn, was solidified by Fiji's diplomatic recognition of Beijing. In 2006, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Fiji and inaugurated the CPICEDCF where he announced China's commitment to elevate the friendly and cooperative relationship to a strategic partnership (Zhang, 2017). FHA activities in Fiji have included a Chinese donation of US$500,000 to Fiji in support of the Fijian Government's rebuilding and recovery works in the aftermath of Severe Tropical Cyclones Yasa and Ana (Relief Web, 2020). In this instance, the Fijian Prime Minister publicly acknowledged China's assistance as a complement to the Fijian government's disaster recovery efforts that built climate resilience (The Fiji Times, 2021).

Kiribati: In 2019, Kiribati severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC. China's plans to upgrade an airstrip and bridge on one of Kiribati's remote islands located about 3,000 kilometers (1,864 miles) southwest of Hawaii, have raised concerns in the U.S. and also among Kiribati's political opposition. It is unclear whether the effort is part of the BRI. China is also providing technical assistance to help Kiribati develop a commercial farm on land in Fiji that was purchased by Kiribati as a refuge from rising sea levels (Pala, 2021).

Niue: The PRC established diplomatic ties with Niue on 12 December 2007. On 23 July 2018, the PRC and Niue signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the BRI. The island of Niue is located in Polynesia, east of Tonga and northeast of New Zealand. Niue is a self-governing state in free association with New Zealand, an arrangement dating from October 1974. Niueans are New Zealand citizens, and approximately 90% of Niue's population lives in New Zealand. The resident population in Niue was estimated at 1,618 in 2019.

Papua New Guinea: Papua New Guinea (PNG) and China formally established bilateral ties in 1976, a year after PNG gained its independence from Australian administration. China was the third-largest trading partner for PNG between 2011 and 2013 (Kerangpuna, 2019). In 2017, China was PNG's fourth-largest export and import partner after Australia, Singapore, and Japan. For China, PNG was the PRC's second-largest trading partner and largest investment destination in the Pacific. In November 2018, China's President Xi Jinping travelled to PNG, and the country signed up to the BRI with the first project launched in April that year. BRI projects in PNG have focused on the transport sector, real estate, and metals (O'Dowd, 2019).

Samoa: Samoa has a long-standing relationship with China with diplomatic relations established shortly after Samoa's independence in 1962. The Samoan government engages with China on a range of bilateral and multilateral platforms that focus on development, culture, trade, and investment within the BRI framework. Grant-based assistance has been directed towards post-tsunami reconstruction (US$5.8 million, 2011-2014) and refurbishment of facilities for the Pacific Games (Dornan & Brant, 2014). According to data from Australia's Lowy Institute, China advanced US$285 million in loans and US$152 million in grants to Samoa between 2010 and 2018, a total that makes Samoa one of the most heavily indebted island countries in the region (Rajah, Dayant & Pryke, 2019).

Solomon Islands: In September 2019, the PRC and the Solomon Islands established diplomatic ties after the Solomon Islands severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan. However, Malaita Province, the country's most populous province, rejected ties to the PRC. In 2020, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) granted US$25 million for a development program to be based in Malaita; it would begin with a sustainable forestry project. Also in 2020, the U.S. re-established the Peace Corps' presence in Solomon Islands. In late November 2021, protests related to the Solomon Islands' government's decision to recognize China took place in the capital, Honiara, and turned violent. In response, Australia sent 100 police and soldiers, and 50 peacekeepers, in response to requests from the Solomon Islands government (Needham, 2021). In December 2021, the government announced that China would send police officers to the country to train local police forces (Green, 2021). In late March 2022, information emerged about the development of a security pact between the PRC and the Solomon Islands, a pact that could lead to the future stationing of China's PLA's Navy in the country and eliciting concerns from Australian defense officials (Green, 2022).

Tonga: The PRC and the Kingdom of Tonga established diplomatic relations in 1998. Beijing paid great attention to Tonga after it was impacted by Cyclone Gita on 12 February 2018. To help Tonga recover, China provided US$500,000 in emergency humanitarian assistance to the Tongan Government. The Red Cross Society of China also offered US$100,000 in emergency humanitarian assistance to the Red Cross Society of Tonga. The Chinese Embassy in Tonga also donated US$40,000 for relief work (Relief Web, 2018). In response to the January 2022 volcanic eruption and tsunami that struck Tonga, China's Red Cross Society provided US$100,000 in cash assistance and other emergency supplies including drinking water and food. China's media reported it was the first country to send relief items to Tonga in the aftermath of the disaster (Reuters, 2022).

Vanuatu: The PRC and Vanuatu established diplomatic relations in 1982. China has provided robust development assistance to Vanuatu with much of the aid focused on high-profile infrastructure projects. China has built various infrastructure and buildings, including the Vanuatu Prime Minister's office complex, a stadium, and a convention center. It also plans to upgrade Vanuatu's international airport, a project that will help expand Chinese tourism to the country (Meick, Ker & Chan, 2018). Reported discussions about a potential Chinese military base in Vanuatu have been rumored and fueled regional observers' concerns. Although the size and scope of a potential military base in Vanuatu is unclear, a strategic PLA outpost beyond the second island chain would expand the PLA Navy's operational reach and serve as a replenishment point to conduct FHA and other missions (Wesley, 2020).

Multilateral Engagements

In view of Beijing's policy goal of burnishing its image as a responsible stakeholder through FHA missions in Oceania, China leverages regional forums as part of its diplomatic efforts. As discussed earlier, China established the China-Pacific Island Cooperation Fund and sponsored the establishment of a PIF trade office in Beijing to promote trade and economic cooperation with PICs. China has also created its own multilateral platform to engage with the region, in the form of the CPICEDCF, which is comprised of China and its ten regional diplomatic partners. The inauguration of the CPICEDCF in 2006 was attended by then-Premier Wen Jiabao, the first visit to the region by a Chinese Premier in history (Zhang, 2017). The CPICEDCF focuses on developing economic engagement for China's PICs partners. The 2006 and 2013 forums resulted in approximately US$1.5 billion in total aid to partners. Moreover, since 2007, China has deployed a special envoy to the PIF Post Dialogue, the only annual multilateral organization that includes all PICs in the region (Meick, Ker & Chan, 2018).

In 2014, President Xi Jinping traveled to Fiji to attend the PIF where he outlined five key diplomatic priorities: (1) Building strategic partnerships, (2) Enhancing high-level exchanges, (3) Deepening economic cooperation through the 21st century Maritime and Silk Road Initiative, (4) Expanding people-people exchanges, and (5) Increasing multilateral coordination through the PIF and Pacific Islands Development Forum as part of China's South-South cooperation approach (Meick, Ker & Chan, 2018). This type of senior official visit inherently signals China's willingness to deepen engagement in the region.

Beyond regional forums, Beijing has developed close relationships with sub-regional groups, such as the Melanesia Spearhead Group (MSG), to expand its maritime and economic profile (Pham, 2017). China undertook the funding of the building of the MSG headquarters in Vanuatu and paid the salary of the MSG director general for an initial three years. In terms of land and resources, experts have suggested Melanesian countries, particularly PNG, are the dominant forces in Pacific Island politics and are largely responsible for the growing Chinese interest in the Pacific (May, 2011; Embassy of the PRC in Papua New Guinea, 2003).

Table 1. Summary of China's participation in key regional and sub-regional forums.

Regional Organization (Year Established)	Organization Level (Frequency)	Other Participants (headquarters bolded)	China Involvement and Support
PIF Dialogue (1989)	Ministerial level (annual)	All PIF members (Fiji hosts event), Canada, Cuba, European Union (EU), France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, China, Philippines, South Korea, Spain, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom (UK), U.S.	Official dialogue partner since 1990; since the establishment of China-PIF Cooperation Fund in 2000 Beijing has confirmed approximately US$1 million annual funding contribution.
Pacific Islands Development Forum (2013)	Senior level and Ministerial level (annual)	Fiji (host), FSM, Kiribati, Nauru, Marshal Islands, Palau, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu 2019 Observers include: Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, China, India, Indonesia, Kosovo, Malaysia, New Zealand, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, UK	Observer and panelist; provided financial support to South-South cooperation; development support through BRI.
Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) (1988)	Senior level and Ministerial (Since 1986 biennial)	Vanuatu (host), Fiji, New Caledonia's Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS), PNG, Solomon Islands 2019 Observers include: Australia, Belgium, Indonesia, New Caledonia	Funded construction of headquarters secretariat building in Port Vila, Vanuatu; funded the salary of the director general for an initial three years.
China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum (CPICEDCF) (2006)	Senior-level (meeting held in 2006, 2013, 2019)	China (host), Cook Islands, FSM, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu	Established organization focused on developing economic engagement with China's Pacific Island diplomatic partners; 2006 & 2013 forums resulted in some US$1.5 billion total in aid.

Conclusion and Recommendations

China's foreign aid activities, including humanitarian assistance, in Oceania are part of a broader effort to secure strategic influence among current and future diplomatic partners. In return, China nowhas diplomatic ties with ten PICs with the inclusion of Kiribati and the Solomon Islands in 2019. Through its diplomatic expansion, China is paving the way for a broader PLA presence in the region, a potential development with direct security implication for the U.S. and regional allies such as Australia. For example, the development of a security pact between China and the Solomon Islands and China's upgrading of an airstrip in Kiribati have raised concerns about the future presence of the PLA in these countries in proximity to Australia and the U.S. There were also some indications leading up to the 2022 China-PIC foreign ministers' meeting that China is seeking to build a pro-China bloc among its ten PICs. Yet, despite concerns among regional powers of an expanded Chinese presence in the Pacific, the region is only slowly emerging as a priority for Beijing when comparisons are made to diplomatic efforts and foreign assistance activities in Africa and Asia. There is room for broader engagement by the U.S. and her allies. There are also indications of pushback by some PICs to growing Chinese influence. PICs wary of being the objects of U.S. and China strategic competition are promoting a Blue Pacific narrative to regionalism, a concept that seeks to carve a path to development that is independent of U.S. and Chinese interests.

Drawing on the key takeaways and insights gained from this paper we offer the following recommendations:

- Demonstrate U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's commitment to the Oceania region by expanding initiatives like Pacific Partnership and Task Force Koa Moana to include broader and deeper engagements with PICs.
- Increase the U.S. government, non-military presence in the region by augmenting existing U.S. embassies beyond the regional hub of Fiji and by including a greater number of political and economic affairs officers and USAID mission personnel based in PICs to deepen bilateral relationships.
- Focus a greater share of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad") activities, exercises, and engagements within the Oceania region. Three Quad countries – i.e., Japan, Australia, and the U.S. – are already the largest donors in the region, and multilateral engagement through an existing mechanism would be preferable to the creation of new fora.
- Deepen understanding within U.S. Indo-Pacific Command of Chinese soft power activities in Oceania and increase understanding of PICs' political, economic, and security priorities through research, expert engagements, and preparation of analytical products.
- Top-level regional priorities for PICs and areas for further U.S. government engagement are climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. Although this is an area where PICs would like to see both U.S. and Chinese engagement, the U.S. has so far established a better track record of supporting climate initiatives and could stand apart by increasing investments in climate-related activities.

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China's Multi-pronged Approach to Gain Influence in Oceania Part 2 of 4:

THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF OPERATIONS IN OCEANIA

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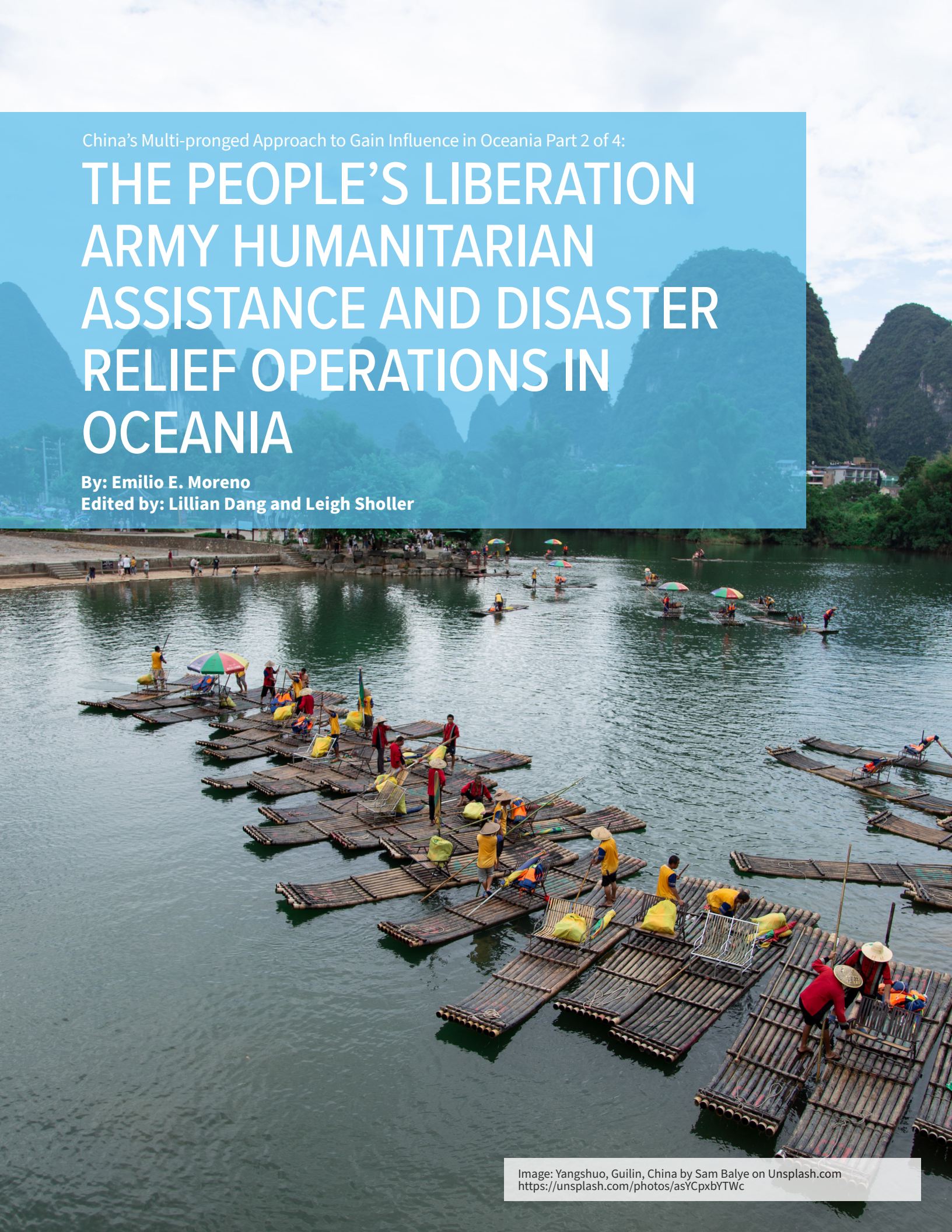


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Executive Summary

This paper examines the People's Republic of China's (PRC) People's Liberation Army's (PLA) expanding humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) missions in Oceania. In particular, the paper highlights the significance of a provision for HA/DR in a security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands.

This paper is prepared as part of a series of research examining United States (U.S.) and China strategic competition in Oceania. The series seeks to inform U.S. military decision-makers, planners, and forces on multiple facets of the PRC's strategic influence efforts in the region, particularly as it concerns HA/DR.

Key Takeaways

- China's political warfare gives context to the role of the PRC's HA/DR missions as an instrument of strategic influence and an opportunity to enhance PLA operational capabilities.
- In the same way that the BRI has enabled the PRC to expand and deepen its diplomatic and economic relationships with Pacific Island countries (PIC), HA/DR missions will enable the PRC to expand its military presence in the Pacific region.
- Although the PLA is proficient in conducting HA/DR operations, the recent PRC HA/DR response to the 2022 Tonga volcanic eruption and tsunami highlighted some gaps in PLA capabilities, namely limitations in PLA air capabilities and ongoing lack of coordination on the part of the PRC/PLA with other foreign responding states during multinational HA/DR missions.

Strategic Considerations

- The China-Solomon Islands security agreement includes HA/DR as one of the main areas for security cooperation. This presents the PRC with an opportunity to justify the PLA's presence in the Solomon Islands to, for example, plan for HA/DR scenarios, to conduct HA/DR-relevant exercises, and to deploy a forward force to respond to HA/DR needs.
- Increased PLA presence justified for HA/DR action risks raising geo-political tensions, militarizing U.S.-China strategic competition, and polarizing regional and national politics.
- Recognizing that multinational HA/DR coordination is beneficial to optimal humanitarian aid delivery and that military-military engagements with the PLA may no longer be viable, other avenues for coordination could be explored through Chinese non-government organizations (NGO) and the Chinese diaspora, who also play a key role in PRC HA/DR missions.
- Climate change is one area where U.S. policy permits continued engagement with China and could be the focus of future U.S. Government (USG) civilian-civilian and people-people efforts.

Introduction

There has been a hardening of U.S-China strategic competition since the articulation of a tougher line against the PRC in the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy (Sutter & Limaye, 2020). The 2021 Interim National Security Strategy reiterates this firm stance and further outlines how the U.S. plans to out-compete a more assertive and authoritarian China. The PRC seeks to become a regional and global power and is deploying political warfare to increase its comprehensive national power and to challenge the U.S. and her allies. PRC political warfare is offensive and defensive in nature, takes the form of unrestricted warfare short of kinetic warfare, and is being conducted on an international scale (Gershanek, 2021). According to Indo-Pacific expert Pascal (2022), Oceania is on the front line of Chinese political warfare. It is a region that the PLA Navy must control if it is to have dominance in the Indo-Pacific region.

China's political warfare gives context to the role of the PRC's HA/DR missions as an instrument of strategic influence and an opportunity to enhance PLA operational capabilities. HA/DR missions typically involve a blend of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) capabilities, enabling the PRC to extend influence on multiple fronts (Watters & Triplett, 2021). HA/DR missions have enabled the PRC to burnish an image of itself as a responsible global power, enhance the operational capabilities of the PRC's PLA, and extend diplomatic influence over other countries (Southerland, 2019). HA/DR missions will enable the PRC to extend its DIME capabilities in the Pacific.

Since 2006, China has expanded its economic and diplomatic presence in the Pacific through soft loans, scholarships, immigration, commercial activity, military-to-military cooperation, and diplomatic engagements (Pascal, 2018). Through the rollout of the BRI in the Oceania since 2018, China is deepening its diplomatic and economic relationships with PICs. China has diplomatic ties with ten PICs after gaining official recognition from Kiribati and the Solomon Islands in 2019. Both countries switched recognition from Taiwan to the PRC, in line with the PRC's insistence on adherence to the "One-China" policy (Tiezzi, 2020). All ten countries have signed up to the BRI starting with Papua New Guinea (PNG) in June 2018 (Wroe, 2018). Kiribati's proximity to Hawaii and the Solomon Islands' proximity to Australia, a U.S. "Five-Eyes" intelligence-sharing partner, has raised concerns that China's diplomatic presence could expand to a military presence in the two countries.

The PRC's diplomatic relationship with the Solomon Islands has culminated in a bilateral security pact, signed in late April 2022 and that could pave the way for a PLA presence in the Solomon Islands. Although at this time the text of the security agreement has not been made public, the PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, has stated that the agreement covers maintaining social order, protecting lives and property, and HA/DR. The inclusion of HA/DR in the security agreement, whether at Beijing's instigation or Honiara's, establishes a compelling justification for a PLA presence in the Solomon Islands. HA/DR is a widely accepted military mission in the Pacific. The region suffers from a high number of natural disasters and the absence of kinetic wars. Indeed, HA/DR is a typical mission for the U.S. military and other militaries operating in the Pacific. Whether the PRC will seek to establish a military presence in the Solomon Islands on HA/DR grounds is worth monitoring. Any increased PLA presence for the purpose of conducting HA/DR missions in the Pacific risks raising geo-political

tensions, militarizing the U.S.-China strategic competition, and polarizing regional and national politics.

China's HA/DR

China defines HA/DR as 'emergency humanitarian aid' and as a component of its 'development cooperation,' the PRC's preferred term for describing its foreign aid. The nature of PRC foreign aid including its emergency humanitarian aid is opaque with a lack of public reporting about funding levels, decision-making structures, and policy goals beyond vaguely stated principles outlined in a series of Foreign Aid White Papers (2011, 2014, and 2021). PRC foreign aid is implemented by up to 33 different agencies (Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, 2022). PRC HA/DR responses to significant international HA/DR events is most likely led by the Leading Small Group, headed by President Xi Jinping and consisting of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo Standing Committee members responsible for national security issues in the State Council and various state ministries that are responsible for national security (Hirono, 2018). Most day-to-day decisions on HA/DR action is made by state agencies, including the Ministry of Commerce Department of Foreign Aid (MOFCOM), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Chinese International Development Cooperation Administration (CIDCA), the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA), and the Ministry of Emergency Management (MEM) (Hirono, 2018; Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, 2022). The MEM was established in April 2018 as part of an effort to overhaul the PRC's domestic disaster management system. Considered a "super ministry," the MEM took over the disaster management powers and resources that were spread over 13 ministerial departments including MOCA's disaster relief responsibilities domestically (Yue, 2020; Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, 2022). Although the MEM's Department of International Cooperation and Rescue has taken over the international cooperation activities on disaster management previously conducted by MOCA, MOCA remains important to China's foreign aid as the number of Chinese NGOs working on overseas humanitarian assistance continues to grow.

The PRC's conception and implementation of HA/DR differs from traditional humanitarian actors including the U.S., European Union (EU), Japan, and other members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC). China defines humanitarian assistance as a core part of its development aid, rather than treating development assistance and humanitarian assistance separately like many traditional donors. China ties humanitarian assistance to long-term development, viewing development assistance as fundamental to resolving humanitarian issues. China has also avoided deep engagements with international humanitarian structures and processes and is not a member of the OECD-DAC or the United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Donor Support Group, nor is it a part of the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative (Hirono, 2018). Additionally, China adopts a state-centric and bilateral approach, often opting out of international standards of multinational cooperation and coordination for the advancement of HA/DR (Watters & Triplett, 2021;

Westley-Smith, 2007). Furthermore, the majority of China's humanitarian assistance funding has been spent on responding to natural disasters rather than complex emergencies. Three reasons have been offered for this emphasis. The first is that natural disasters are less politically controversial than complex emergencies involving conflicts. China lacks experience in many areas of conflict and China's peripheral diplomacy has focused on countries in East Asia more likely to suffer from natural disasters than conflict. Congruent to this is a greater empathy among the Chinese public for victims of natural disasters due to a shared experience with natural disasters (Hirono, 2018).

PRC political and military goals have overridden humanitarian considerations in PRC HA/DR missions. According to the Overseas Development Institute, China's diplomatic interest in countries is considered the most important factor guiding its aid. This connection is evidenced by the fact that African countries that vote with China at the UN get an average of an 86% increase in aid, as shown by the AIDData initiative at the College of William & Mary's Global Research Institute (Lieberman, 2018). China's initial reluctance to provide humanitarian aid to the Philippines in response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, likely due to tensions related to a territorial dispute in the South China Sea, is another example. Overall, China contributes funding to a very limited number of humanitarian crises per annum, prefers to provide funding bilaterally rather than through the UN and other multilateral agencies, and during 2002-2015 was ranked between 19th and 26th on the global list of donors (Hirono, 2018). However, experts have warned that because the PRC understands Western metrics for foreign aid and prefers to keep funding details out of the public view, China may be giving more than what can be measured through publicly available data (Pascal).

The PLA and HA/DR

The PLA plays a major role in PRC HA/DR missions alongside actors such as China International Search and Rescue (CISAR), the Red Cross Society of China, Chinese NGOs, and the Chinese diaspora in affected states. The PLA conducted one of its first HA/DR missions in 2002 when it delivered relief materials to Afghanistan after an earthquake (Southerland, 2019). In a 2004 speech, then President Hu Jintao outlined 'New Historic Missions' for the PLA, which expanded traditional security priorities to international issues including counter terrorism, peacekeeping, piracy, and HA/DR (Tielke, 2018). Over the past two decades, the PLA has expanded its involvement in HA/DR missions abroad. The PLA has increased both the range of HA/DR operations it performs and the number of personnel and types of assets it deploys, as well as its involvement in HA/DR exchanges with other militaries (Southerland, 2019). The PLA's HA/DR tasks include Disaster Relief (flood, typhoon, epidemic, emergency supplies, etc.), Earthquake Response/Relief, and the Logistics of Medical services (Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China Annual Report to Congress, 2021).

The PLA's expansion of HA/DR missions dovetails with its own organizational reform and enhanced operational capabilities. In 2015 and 2016, President Xi publicly launched the most ambitious reform and reorganization of the PLA since the 1950s. In 2017, Xi set goals for the PLA to "generally achieve mechanization" by 2020, to "basically complete" military modernization by 2035, and to "transform"

the PLA into a "world-class" force by 2049—the same year by which Xi envisions China achieving "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." The PLA is improving its capabilities in every domain of warfare, have superior capabilities to other regional militaries in many areas, and is eroding U.S. military advantages in certain areas (Congressional Research Service, 2021a). According to the U.S. Department of Defense (2020), the PLA in 2020 had "already achieved parity with—or even exceeded—the United States" in areas such as shipbuilding, land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, and integrated air defense systems. The report also stated, "The PLA's evolving capabilities and concepts continue to strengthen the PRC's ability to counter an intervention by an adversary in the Indo-Pacific region and project power globally" (Congressional Research Service, 2021b).

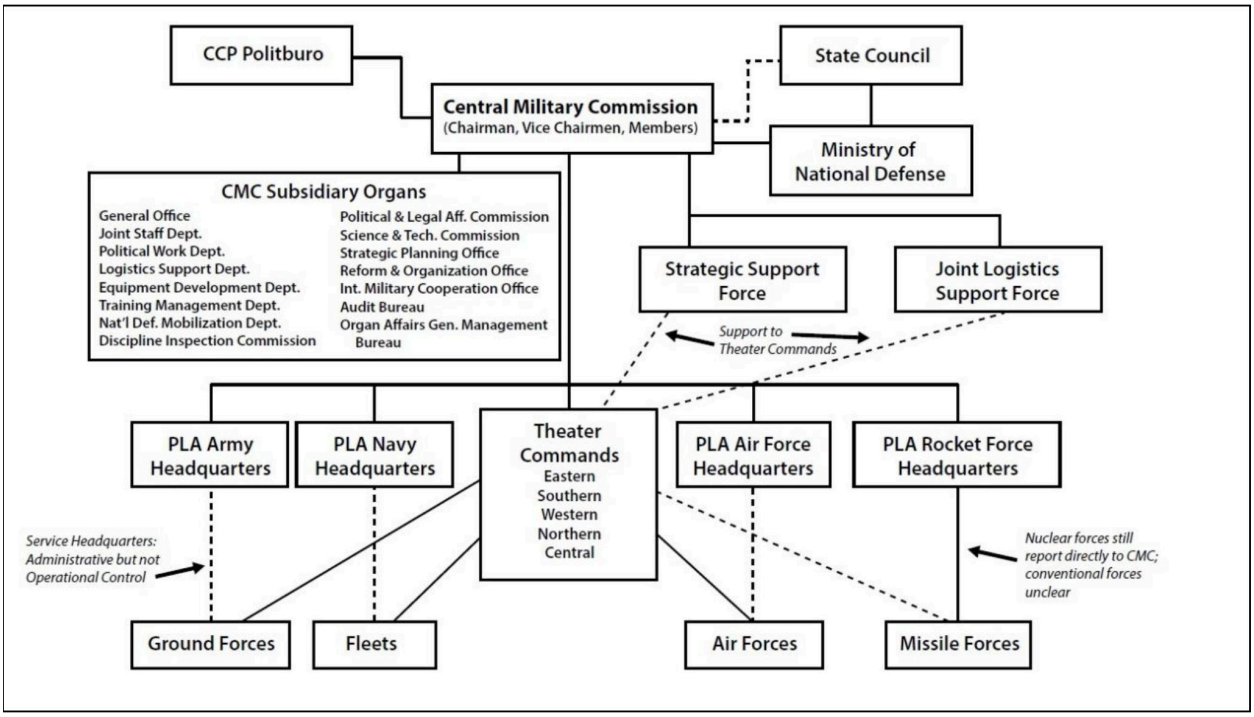


Figure 1. PLA Organizational Structure. Source: Congressional Research Service, China's Military: The People's Liberation Army (PLA), 4 June 2021, 13.

The PLA views HA/DR as a means to test and enhance its operational proficiency and ability to operate overseas. Like combat operations abroad, HA/DR missions abroad require operational flexibility; the transport of troops, equipment, and materials; and the sustainment of the deployed force (Southerland, 2019). As an example, the 2013 edition of The Science of Military Strategy, an authoritative text published by the PLA's Academy of Military Science, states, "Military operations other than war are an important means to enhance the military's operational capabilities." The text further explains that there are many similarities between the requirements for these operations, which include HA/DR, and combat operations, including in information and logistics support, and it argues that the PLA can use them as an opportunity to test its organizational and command capabilities and examine and enhance its combat readiness. Other authoritative textbooks published by the PLA on non-combat operations and joint operations have echoed these themes on HA/DR (Southerland, 2019).

Participating in HA/DR activities requires enhancements in equipment and doctrine to keep up with the requirements of conducting HA/DR outside of China's borders. China seeks to support this evolution through the coordinated use of the PLA's Navy (PLAN) and the PLA's Air Force (PLAAF) assets such as the *Peace Ark* hospital ship (Conan, 2018). Expansion of the HA/DR mission set for the PLAAF is achieved by acquisition of large cargo aircraft capable of long-range flights; these include Il-76 aircraft from Russia and Chinese manufactured Y-20 aircraft for the delivery of humanitarian equipment and supplies, as carried out in the PLA's first HA/DR mission to Afghanistan in 2002 (Garafola & Heath, 2017). The existence of the *Peace Ark* and long-range cargo aircraft reflect the growing capabilities and the increased operational reach of the PLA. With these growing capabilities, the PLA will likely increase the frequency of interregional port calls and increase its involvement in nontraditional missions such as HA/DR operations (Kamphausen & Hines, 2015).

PLA Navy's Peace Ark

The PLAN is the world's largest naval force by number of ships, with approximately 350 battle force ships. The U.S. Navy, by comparison, has 293 battle force ships. Although PLAN's early focus was on coastal defense and "offshore defense" of China's maritime periphery, PLAN has taken on new roles as China's interests have expanded geographically. These new missions include sea lane protection in places like the Indian Ocean, naval diplomacy, and nontraditional security missions such as search and rescue and HA/DR (Congressional Research Service, 2021b).

The PLAN's *Peace Ark* hospital ship, modeled off the US Naval Ship (USNS) Mercy has been at the forefront of China's HA/DR missions (see Figure 2). The idea of building the *Peace Ark* emerged in the early 2000s when China was eager to develop and expand its HA/DR capabilities. This was arguably because China was well-equipped with hard power but realized soft power is the way to build its image which otherwise was clouded by deep suspicions about authoritarianism. Moreover, it served as a conduit to promote Chinese culture and enhance people-to-people exchanges. The *Peace Ark* has about 300 hospital beds and 120 medical personnel and was first deployed in response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013 (Southerland, 2021).

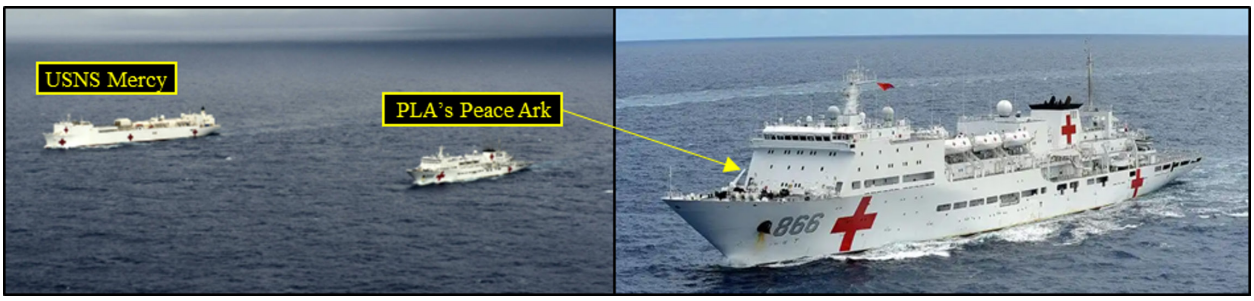


Figure 2. The USNS Mercy and the PLA's Peace Ark transit the Pacific Ocean during RIMPAC Exercise 2014. Source: Left: U.S. Navy Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Pyoung K. Yi. Right: Navy Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Shannon Renfroe.

Since 2014, the *Peace Ark* has carried out medical assistance tours to the Southwest Pacific and other regions. *Peace Ark* tours in the Pacific have won public statements of appreciation from the Prime Ministers of Tonga and PNG (Archana & Li, 2018). Diplomatic opportunities have, then, fueled other *Peace Ark* missions like a 2018 tour of South Pacific islands (Conan, 2018). During the mission, Chinese medical professionals provided free medical treatment to more than 4,000 people in PNG's capital, Port Moresby, 4,500 people in Vanuatu, 6,000 people in Fiji, and more than 5,500 patients in Tonga (Archana & Li, 2018).

The *Peace Ark* is instrumental in enhancing China's influence as a provider of a humanitarian good. The fact that *Peace Ark* is welcomed in countries like Fiji (in 2014 and again in 2018) is another case in point. These China-Fiji exchanges reflect a pattern of diplomacy that underscores its increasing priorities, which provide opportunities to bolster key diplomatic, economic, and strategic objectives for both sides. This is manifested in Beijing's involvement and support of Fiji's hosting of the annual Pacific Island's Forum (PIF) and Pacific Islands Development Forum, via which China can maintain a relative degree of diplomatic leverage. Indeed, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Lu Kang, commented that *Peace Ark*'s assistance to other countries is China's way of promoting international humanitarianism and practicing peace, development, and cooperation.

In addition to large hospital ships, large amphibious ships and large transport aircraft increase the PLA's ability to conduct HA/DR missions globally (see Figure 3). Indeed, since 2014, the PLAN has deployed three large amphibious ships, Yuzhao-class landing platforms docks (LPD, Type 071), named Kunlunshan, Jingganshan, and Changbais-han. These Yuzhao-class LPDs are capable of amphibious, logistical, and HA/DR operations, and are equipped to support expeditionary operations and nontraditional security missions around the world, such as delivering equipment, supplies, and personnel. An expanded set of missions such as HA/DR missions, survey voyages, and goodwill port visits have increased demands on the these vessels. This builds toward the PLA's secondary focus on nontraditional security missions, which require, according to Chinese leaders, the complete modernization of the PLA by 2035 to execute overseas joint operations (Congressional Research Service, 2021c).



Figure 3. Yuzhao (Type 071) Amphibious Ship. Estimated displacement of more than 19,855 tons; for comparison, the U.S. Navy's new San Antonio (LPD-17) class amphibious ship has an estimated displacement of 25,000 tons. Source: Congressional Research Service, China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress, Updated 27 January, 2021, *https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153/248*.

PLAAF

China's air power resides primarily in the PLAAF and the Naval Aviation branch of the PLAN. China's air forces constitute the third-largest in the world and the largest in the Indo-Pacific region (Congressional Research Service, 2021b). The PLAAF's more expansive role encompasses both defensive and offensive air operations at greater distances from China's land borders. PRC strategists and leaders frequently refer to the PLAAF's transformation into a "strategic air force," reflecting the rise of the PLAAF's status among the PLA services, the expansion of its capabilities, and growing expectations for its contributions to China's overall national security (Congressional Research Service, 2021b). According to the 2013 Science of Military Strategy, missions assigned to the PLAAF include conducting defensive and offensive operations against threats emanating from the maritime southeast (primarily Taiwan); conducting homeland air defense; safeguarding China's maritime interests; conducting humanitarian disaster relief, domestic stability, and other emergency operations; and participating in international operations such as peacekeeping, international rescue, escorts and evacuations, and military exercises with foreign militaries (Congressional Research Service, 2021b).

Large cargo aircraft capable of long-range flights enhance the PLAAF capability. These include O-76 aircraft from Russia and Chinese manufactured Y-20 aircraft (Cole, 2015). Despite these acquisitions, experts suggest substantial improvements to PLA capabilities are still needed, including increases in sealift and airlift assets. Moreover, PLAAF transport crews have had few opportunities to operate in distant regions aside from non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) and foreign military exercises (Wuthnow, Saunders & McCaslin, 2021).



Figure 4. China's PLA Y-20 cargo plane. Source: Liu Xuanzun and Guo Yuandan, 'Spotting of six Y-20 cargo planes in Serbia displays China's strategic transport capabilities,' Global Times, 10 April 2022, accessed 21 April 2022, *https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1258931.shtml*

The PLA's Tonga HA/DR Mission

The recent PRC response to the Tonga volcanic eruption and tsunami on 15 January 2022 highlighted some gaps in PLA capabilities, namely its air transport capabilities. The first batch of Chinese aid to Tonga was carried by two PLAAF Y-20 heavy transport aircraft (see Figure 4), which departed from the PRC's humanitarian platform in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou and stopped three times in Indonesia, PNG, and Fiji to refuel to complete the journey of about 10,000 kilometers (6,200 miles) to Tonga. Two PLAN vessels brought the second batch of aid, also setting off from Guangzhou. PLAN's landing platform dock Wuzhishan and replenishment ship Chaganhu carried more than 1,400 tons of aid, which included "mobile homes, tractors, generators, water pumps and purifiers, food and medical equipment" (Waidelich, 2022). Waidelich (2022) noted that the need for the PLAAF Y-20 to make frequent stops could motivate the PLA to gain overflight access or refueling agreements with more Indo-Pacific countries in the near term. In the longer-term, the PLA may seek to establish one or more bases in the Pacific islands (Waidelich, 2022). The China-Solomon Islands security pact alludes to the possibility of a military base in the Solomon Islands, a development potentially justifiable for HA/DR missions.

The PRC's lack of willingness to coordinate with other foreign countries during multinational HA/DR missions is another gap in its HA/DR capabilities and has implications for optimal humanitarian assistance delivery. During the Tonga response, the PLA did not coordinate with the HA/DR International Coordination Cell established by Australia's Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQJOC) (Waidelich, 2022). However, this should not come as a surprise to other responding nations. The PRC's preference to coordinate only bilaterally with the host government and the Chinese diaspora in the affected state, and not with other responding foreign countries, has been well noted since the multinational response to the 2015 Nepal earthquake. According to Southerland (2019), when foreign militaries were assigned lead sectors, the PLA "treated their sector like sovereign territory, rather than an area where they would lead the coordination of response." In some cases the lack of coordination on the PRC's part has undermined the ability of other nations to deliver humanitarian assistance. For example, during response efforts to Tropical Cyclone Harold in Vanuatu in 2020, a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) plane carrying aid to Port Vila was unable to land when an A320 charter flight from China was running late unloading its humanitarian cargo at Port Vila airport (Needham 2020). The incident highlighted how a lack of coordination and miscommunication can impede the effective delivery of relief during multinational HA/DR efforts.

The PLA's Military-Military HA/DR Exercises

For the PLA, participation in bilateral and multilateral military-military HA/DR exercises functions as a channel to foster cooperation with other countries, enabling the PLA to create a learning platform to develop HA/DR best practices, procedures, and operational capacity to respond to future natural

disasters. The U.S. and China conducted an annual Disaster Management Exchange (DME) from 2005 through 2020. The DME was an annual U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) disaster risk reduction event with China's PLA. The last U.S.-China DME was held virtually 11-14 November 2020 and was attended by approximately 50 military personnel from the U.S. and China. The three-day online seminar covered topics on humanitarian assistance and disaster risk reduction. The U.S. and allies' efforts to engage with China in HA/DR exchanges reflects a concerted effort by international HA/DR actors to avoid politicization of humanitarian aid and to promote coordination for the benefit of optimal HA/DR action.

Since 2011, the PLA has expanded its network of HA/DR exchange partners, conducting bilateral exercises with Australia, Cambodia, Germany, India, Malaysia, and New Zealand (Southerland, 2019). Some bilateral exchanges have expanded to multilateral exercises.

For example, Exercise Cooperation Spirit was first undertaken as a bilateral exercise between Australia and China in 2011 and was subsequently expanded into a quadrilateral exercise including Australia, China, New Zealand, and the U.S. These exercises have included seminars and table-top exercises based on a fictitious scenario of cyclone damage, earthquake response, and flooding in a South Pacific nation (Australian Government Department of Defense, 2012). A PRC Defense White Paper noted that as the PRC's regional and international interests grow more complex, the PLA's international engagements would likely continue to expand (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020).

While these exercises and exchanges are designed to strengthen HA/DR cooperation and interoperability, China has exploited HA/DR exchanges to learn combat skills from and gather intelligence on advanced militaries, particularly the U.S. and its allies and partners (Southerland, 2019). Southerland (2019) reported, "Although U.S. law prohibits exchanges that would enhance PLA combat capabilities, the PLA has sometimes been able to practice skills that are directly applicable to combat operations during HA/DR exercises with other countries, which occasionally have included U.S. participation." With the hardening of the U.S.-China strategic competition, military-military exercises such as the DME with China are no longer taking place.

Conclusion

In the same way that the BRI has enabled the PRC to expand and deepen its diplomatic and economic relationships with PICs, HA/DR missions will enable the PRC to expand its military presence in the Pacific region. The China-Solomon Islands security agreement includes HA/DR as one of the main areas for security cooperation. This presents the PRC with an opportunity to justify the PLA's presence in the Solomon Islands to, for example, plan for HA/DR scenarios, to conduct HA/DR-relevant exercises, and to deploy a forward force to respond to HA/DR needs. An increased PLA presence for the purpose of conducting HA/DR missions in the Pacific risks raising geo-political tensions, militarizing the U.S.-China strategic competition, and polarizing regional and national politics. The U.S. and partners have sought to avoid the politicization of HA/DR through continued bilateral and multilateral exchanges. However, U.S.-China military-military HA/DR exchanges may no longer be tenable due to

the opportunity that these exercises present to China's PLA to test and enhance combat capabilities. Recognizing that multinational HA/DR coordination is beneficial to optimal humanitarian aid delivery, and that engagements with the PLA may no longer be viable, other avenues for coordination could be explored through Chinese NGOs and the Chinese diaspora, who also play a key role in PRC HA/DR missions. Climate change is one area where U.S. policy permits continued engagement with China and could be the focus of future civilian-civilian and people-people efforts.

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China's Multi-pronged Approach to Gain Influence in Oceania Part 3 of 4:

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN OCEANIA: UNDERSTANDING THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE PACIFIC

By: Carol Li
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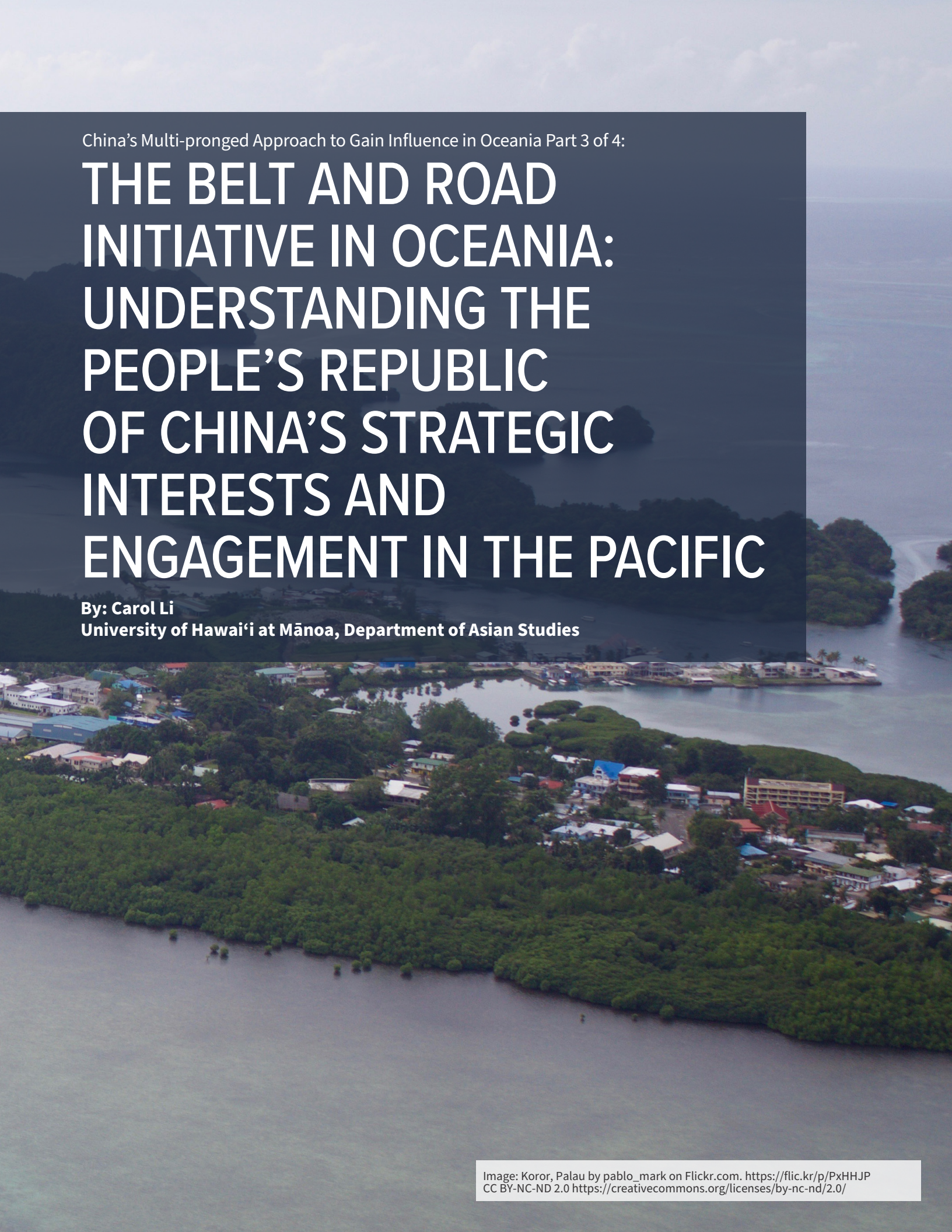


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Executive Summary

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and how the People's Republic of China (PRC) is using this framework to enhance its diplomatic and economic engagement in Oceania. Many Pacific Island countries (PIC) have signed on to the BRI to accelerate Chinese investment, trade and development in their islands. The number and scope of these bilateral engagements will continue to increase, which will affect the ability of traditional partners, such as the United States (U.S.), Australia, New Zealand and especially Taiwan, to project influence in the region. This report is intended to assist policymakers and personnel in formulating strategies of engagement in Oceania given the climate of growing competition with China by analyzing how the BRI fulfills the political and economic goals of both the PRC and the PICs. The "China threat" narrative is not a useful way of approaching or addressing the problems Pacific Island nations face and the U.S. can compete with China by addressing local interests and concerns. To effectively respond to Chinese influence in Oceania, the U.S. needs to have a nuanced understanding of the nature and process of BRI projects in the Pacific while prioritizing the perspectives of Pacific Islanders.

Key Points

- The BRI serves as a centralized and coordinated policy framework for marketing the PRC's bilateral engagement with other nations. It aids in labelling and accelerating the PRC's state-led economic engagement that was already happening in the Pacific. The goal of these projects is to strengthen relationships between the PRC and each PIC.
- Most BRI projects are infrastructure projects and were contracted by the China Railway International Group (CRIG) and the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC). Many of the other agencies leading the projects are state-owned enterprises (SOE) and from China's coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian.
- Debt to the PRC in the region varies by country, with countries such as Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu owing significant amounts. However, accusing the PRC of "debt-trap diplomacy" is not useful as it generalizes the region and patronizes PIC leadership. Understanding the BRI's disorganized nature, due to initiatives from both state and non-state actors and learning from the initiative's successes and failures can place the U.S. in a better position to compete and meet the needs of PICs.
- The PRC's strategic bilateral negotiations and economic engagement has affected the regional influence of the U.S. and many of its allies, especially Taiwan. By supporting Pacific regionalism, agency and solidarity, while ensuring that re-engagement efforts are complimentary and collaborative, the U.S. can respect the sovereignties of the nations in Oceania while empowering them to make the best decisions for their region.
- The greatest security threat to Pacific Islanders is not the PRC. It is climate change. Because many island countries do not wish to be stuck in the middle of geopolitical conflict, if the U.S. can find avenues to collaborate with the PRC to tackle this issue, while promoting the importance of

environmental protection and indigenous practices, the U.S. can show good faith and genuine re-engagement in the region while bringing light to certain projects on the BRI that are not good investments in the long run.

Recommendations

- Recognize the diversity of Pacific Island nations and address each Pacific Island country and Chinese investment project on a case-by-case basis.
- Create channels for Pacific Island countries to export goods to the U.S. and for a variety of U.S. government agencies and private companies to invest in Pacific Island countries to promote steady but sustainable economic growth.
- Invest in human resource development and local-level projects.
- Support Pacific regionalism and coordinate efforts to solve issues with allies.
- Find ways to collaborate with the PRC, especially in climate change initiatives.

Methods

This paper analyzes the existing literature on the BRI and Chinese economic statecraft in Oceania to provide an in-depth understanding of the current geopolitical landscape in the region. To identify areas of intervention, I examine a sampling of projects from ten PICs - i.e., Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu - who have signed on to be a part of the BRI; the analysis will grasp the nature, scope and impact of these BRI projects.

Belt and Road Initiative Overview

China's Belt and Road Initiative (see Figure 1), which was originally called One Belt, One Road (OBOR, 一带一路, yidai yilou), has garnered significant attention from around the globe as it is seen to have the potential to reorient global trade towards China, bolster the PRC's international influence and perhaps even reconfigure the current world order. With the BRI, the PRC's foreign policies facilitate the construction of a series of infrastructure projects to integrate ideas, interests and institutions across Eurasia and Eastern Africa (Freymann, 2021, 2).

To date, more than 130 countries have signed on to projects or indicated interest in doing so (see Figure 2). The sheer scale of the BRI has made it an ambitious project with which the world must reckon. However, the BRI cannot be seen as a single policy, even though the PRC markets it that way; rather, it is a complex network that is centered around the PRC. This network of projects enhances and frames the PRC's diplomatic and economic engagement in ways that make this engagement more visible to observers in the region and the world.

Coordinating and Centralizing Interests

In theory, the PRC conceptualized the BRI as a framework to coordinate its shared interests with



Source: Author/CIGI

Figure 1. Geography of the Belt and Road Initiative (He, 2020)

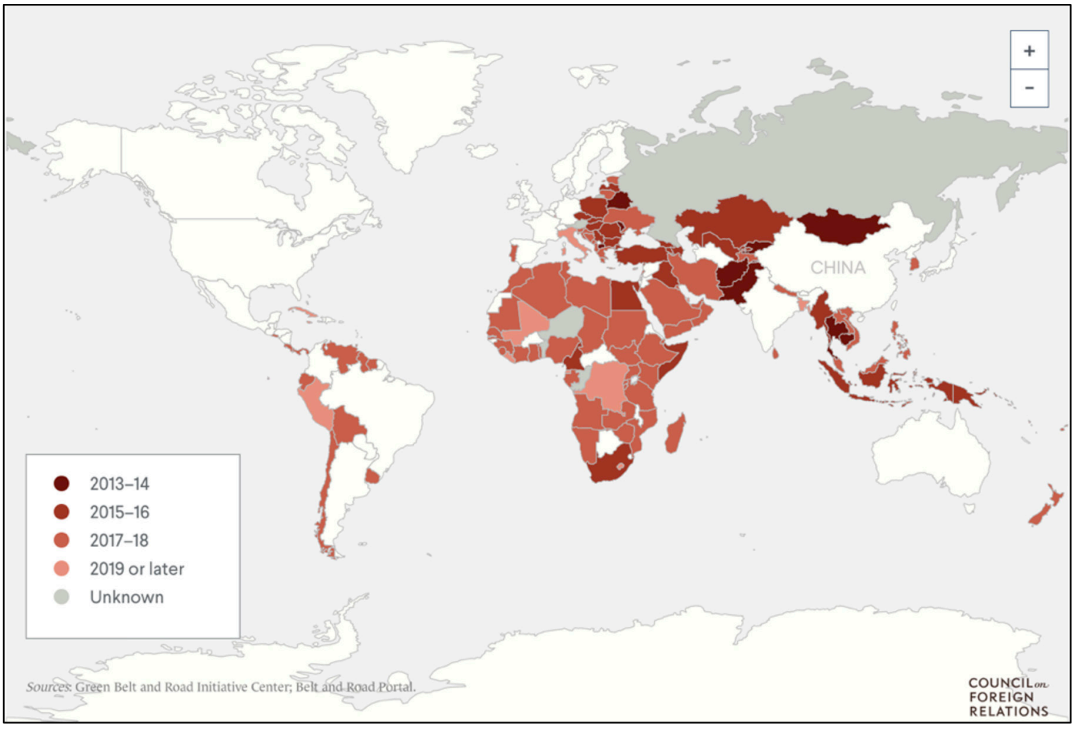


Figure 2. Countries that have Signed on to the BRI (as of 2021) (Sacks, 2021)

developing nations to secure collective outcomes for cooperative economic and cultural exchange. China states that it respects the diversity of social models, cultural differences and national sovereignties of partner countries (Liu & Dunford, 2016, 336). This initiative positions China as an "open, peaceful, and forward-looking country" while simultaneously labeling a cacophony of diverse projects as part of an overarching global network (Freymann, 2021, 11). The PRC promotes this type of brand for itself partially because China has had trouble crafting an attractive image and exercising "soft power" in countries that follow liberal norms since the PRC has been accused of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong (Wesley-Smith & Smith, 2021). Thus, the BRI is marketed as China's premiere network through which other nations, especially those facing development challenges, can access aid and investment to grow their own economic capital and political prestige.

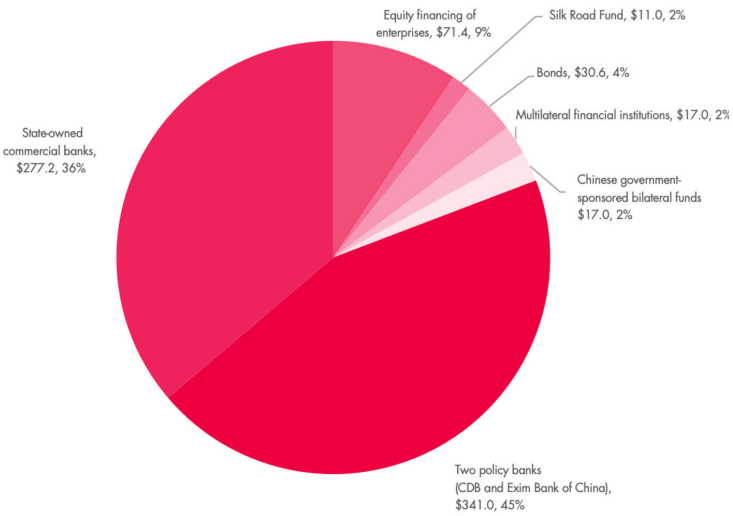
However, even though the BRI is designed in such a way that countries who are participating will have "significant potential gains," there is no denying that "the BRI is clearly a project from which China can gain" both economically and politically (Liu & Dunford, 2016, 337). Although there is a perception that China is "going out" because it simply can and wants to, it also can be argued that China has a more compelling economic incentive for the BRI as it needs to shift from an export-oriented economy, and thus seeks a more active role in global markets to ensure a more stable and sustainable domestic economy (324). At the same time, this grand-scale project can serve as a political "multiplier" to fulfil the goal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of realizing the "great rejuvenation of the nation" (Wang et al., 2021).

Yet, the PRC's and President Xi's goals are often contested or unclear. To some, President Xi's policies seem revisionist, a reflection of his purported belief that the current world order and dominant neoliberal economic system are incapable of solving the world's most serious issues and his wish to fundamentally change the international system through active state intervention. China's leadership also asserts that China can rise peacefully without harming the international system or weakening their own domestic national consensus (Rolland, 2020; Ngo & Hung, 2020). If implemented successfully, the BRI would streamline imports and exports to and from China, all while appreciating China's renminbi (RMB) as a currency and strengthening the confidence of China's domestic population in President Xi Jinping's ability to continue managing the country's upward economic and political trajectory. In sum, China is indeed the main benefactor of this new, centralized global framework, but the BRI is designed to bring great economic benefits to other nations in the form of foreign investment, trade and development, which is why so many are signing on.

Disjointed and Disorganized Implementation

Despite the grand rhetoric and vision of a seamless, centralized global system of economic, political and ideological exchange, the implementation of the BRI has proven to be far messier. Official data of the BRI is not very accessible and there is no concrete number of the amount of funds being invested. This adds to the suspicion of other countries who feel the PRC is not abiding by international rules and norms. Even though the BRI is presented as a coordinated state initiative, implementation has been disjointed as there are many different components, actors and entities under the BRI umbrella.

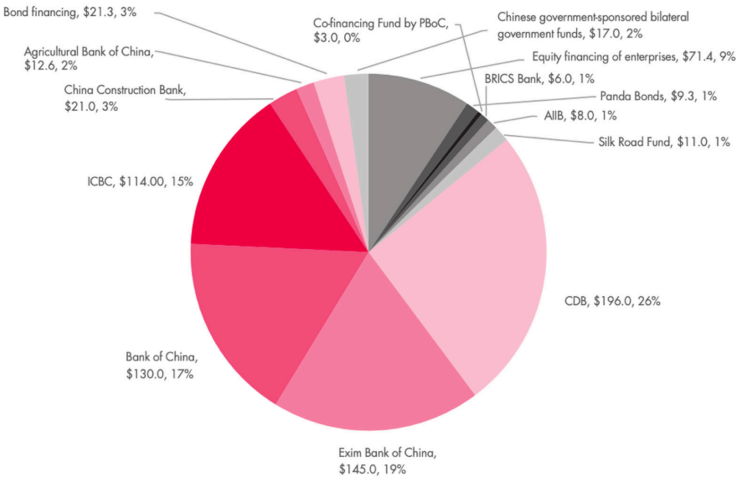
For example, there are a wide range of project types, including top-priority industrial policy ventures, independent private investments, traditional infrastructure projects executed by SOEs and other miscellaneous projects approved by the National Development Reform Commission with funding by state policy banks. The four major sources of funding so far have been China's state-owned banks, government-owned investment funds, multilateral financial institutions, and bonds (He, 2020). As of 2018, China's state-owned policy banks and state-owned commercial banks accounted for more than 80% of total BRI funding (see Figure 3).



Data sources: The State Council Information Office of China, www.scio.gov.cn; CDB (2017; 2018); Xinhua, www.xinhuanet.com/fortune, www.xinhuanet.com/money; Bank of China (2018); ICBC (2017; 2018); www.ccb.com; https://finance.sina.com.cn/money/bank; www.china-asean-fund.com, www.china-ceefund.com; www.china-eurasian-fund.com; www.sinoceef.com; 21st Century Business Herald, https://m.21jingji.com; Belt and Road Energy Cooperation, http://obor.nea.gov.cn; Russia-China Investment Fund, https://cn.investinrussia.com; MOFCOM, www.mofcom.gov.cn; China-LAC Cooperation Fund, www.clacfund.com.cn; www.the paper.cn; yicai.com; Shanghai Securities News (2019); AIIB (2019); NDB (2018); PBoC (2019); Economic Information Daily, www.jjckb.cn; Climate Bonds Initiative, https://cn.climatebonds.net; www.eximbank.gov.cn;[7] www.ce.cn;and https://zaobao.com
Note: The number of Chinese government-sponsored bilateral funds is estimated. To avoid double counting, the renminbi overseas funds for the BRI are excluded from the figure as the major issuers of these funds are Chinese financial institutions listed here, and the renminbi overseas funds are already included in the numbers by these financial institutions.

Figure 3. BRI Funding by Source Type at the End of 2018 (USD billion) (He, 2020)

Of this 80%, the lion's share comes from the state-owned policy banks; the China Development Bank (CDB) has thus far provided US196 billion in loans, and Exim Bank has supplied more than US$145 billion to fund some 1,800 Chinese projects (see Figure 4). In addition, the four major commercial banks—the Bank of China, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (IBC), the China Construction Bank (CCB) and the Agricultural Bank of China (ABC)—together contribute approximately 46% of BRI funds. The Silk Road Fund, with over US$40 billion in assets, is a government-owned investment fund that was established in 2014 to exclusively focus on BRI investments (He, 2020, 155). The BRI's fragmentation contributes to difficulty in tracking investments and outcomes, and thus the lack of transparency.



Data sources: Ibid
Note: The number of Chinese-sponsored bilateral government funds is estimated

Figure 4. BRI Funding by Source at the End of 2018 (USD billion) (He, 2020)

Not only are there disaggregated avenues of funding for the BRI, but there is "fierce competition" among PRC government agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Ministry of

Commerce (MOFCOM) for influence in decision-making on aid (Zhang, 2021, 260). In addition, BRI projects are implemented through both top-down and bottom-up processes. Projects are increasingly proposed, approved and implemented on the ground, where private Chinese business owners negotiate directly with local politicians and private businesses and then go to the Chinese embassies to get their projects approved. Also, enterprises and investments may not start as BRI projects but can be retroactively labelled as such. The PRC has recognized the existing disorganization and has attempted to streamline projects and be pickier about which ones can be funded by state banks (Freymann, 2021). All this suggests that "China is not in control as is sometimes portrayed" and there is an increasing amount of private business to state interactions for the BRI (Kabutaulaka, 2015, 223). To compete with China, other nations such as Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S. could potentially offer other much more organized investment opportunities from both state and non-state actors so that countries and communities who have invested in BRI projects can have their issues addressed on a case-by-case basis.

BRI in Oceania

China's Aid and Economic Engagement in Oceania

Analyzing China's historical and incremental economic engagement in the Pacific is key to understanding the fact that the BRI is not simply a stand-alone grand plan that suddenly emerged to reconfigure the current global order as is commonly perceived. The BRI serves to accelerate economic activity that was already happening in the Pacific. China and Chinese non-state actors have a long history of engagement in the Pacific. In fact, "the history of the relationship between China and the South Pacific is longer than the history of China's relationship with Europe and America" (Liu, 2016, 53). Once the PRC gained admission to the United Nations in 1971, this opened an opportunity for the country to establish diplomatic relations with countries in the Pacific, including Australia (1972), New Zealand (1972), Fiji (1975), Samoa (1975), Papua New Guinea (1976), Vanuatu (1982), Micronesia (1982), Cook Islands (1982), Tonga (1982), and Niue (1982) (54). During this process, many Pacific Island nations switched diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China/Taiwan to the People's Republic of China.

In the 1970s, the PRC gradually began to increase its economic activity internationally, including in the South Pacific, as it implemented its reform and opening-up policy (改革开放, gaige kaifang). However, it was not until the mid-2000s that the PRC began a policy of assertive engagement in Oceania. Several cooperation forums were held to build the PRC's regional engagement. The inaugural meeting of the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum was held in Nadi, Fiji, in April 2006, and was attended by ministers from Australia, the Cook Islands, Fiji, FSM, New Zealand, Niue, PNG, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao announced that the PRC would "provide 3 billion yuan [about US$374 million] in preferential loans in the next three years to boost cooperation," "give zero-tariff treatment to the majority of exports to China from

the least developed countries in the region," "provide training to 2,000 government officials and technical staff," and "formally approve PNG, Samoa and the FSM as destinations for Chinese tourists" (Xinhua News Agency, 2006). This forum was the pivotal starting point for the PRC's bilateral political and economic engagement in the region. In 2008, Chen Deming, the PRC's Minister of Commerce, announced at the Investment, Trade, and Tourism Ministerial Conference of the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum that China would double bilateral trade to US$3 billion by 2010, encourage investment through "competent and reputable Chinese enterprises," seek government loans and commercial credit for joint projects in "infrastructure, telecommunications, agriculture, forestry and fishery," promote "two-way cooperation" in tourism development, prioritize collaborative clean energy projects, and conduct technology exchanges (Deming, 2008). At the opening ceremony of the second meeting of the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in 2013, Vice Premier of the State Council of the PRC, Wang Yang, stated that China would provide US$1 billion in concessional loans to PICs that maintain diplomatic ties with China and that the China Development Bank would offer special loans equaling US$1 billion to support infrastructure development in these countries (Yang, 2013). China also stated that it would support PICs by giving zero-tariff treatment to 95% of products, provide 2,000 scholarships over the subsequent four years, encourage Chinese tourism, develop health and medical programs and facilities, and support agricultural production as well as environmental protection and disaster prevention and reduction measures.

Under the Xi administration, PRC policy in Oceania has become even more proactive and assertive. The "One Belt, One Road Initiative" was announced in 2013 and the following year, President Xi himself traveled to Fiji to meet with Pacific Island leaders from Cook Islands, Fiji, FSM, Niue, PNG, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu. He referenced the 21st century Maritime Silk Road and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and invited the PICs to ride on the Chinese "express train" of development, which he claimed would provide PICs with infrastructure, scholarships, medical teams, tourism, and communication in areas such as climate change and human security issues.

Since then, Chinese aid and investment have grown to be important for the economic well-being of many of these PICs (Wesley-Smith & Smith, 226). The PRC increased its aid spending in the Pacific by US$160.64 million (from US$126.66 million in 2012 to US$287.30 million in 2016), while continuing to contribute over US$200 million per year in 2017 and 2018 (see Figure 5). However, it is important to note that by 2019, after many countries signed on to the BRI, the amount of Chinese aid declined significantly from its 2016 peak (see Figure 5). This could indicate that governments are weaning themselves off direct government aid and that there is an increase in Chinese private sector investment and contracts, which was one of the goals of the BRI. China has also opened itself up to the Pacific Islands as a large export market for their products. For example, Shan Yuqiang, general manager of the Fiji International Trade company, saw China's demand for world-class skincare products, so he began facilitating sales of Fijian skincare products to China (Silk Road Briefing, 2019).

As many scholars have pointed out, Chinese investments are attractive to PICs because they do not come with the "stringent pre-conditions" that governments of Western countries and Western-based international financial institutions attach to their aid and loans (Kabutaulaka, 2015, 221). In

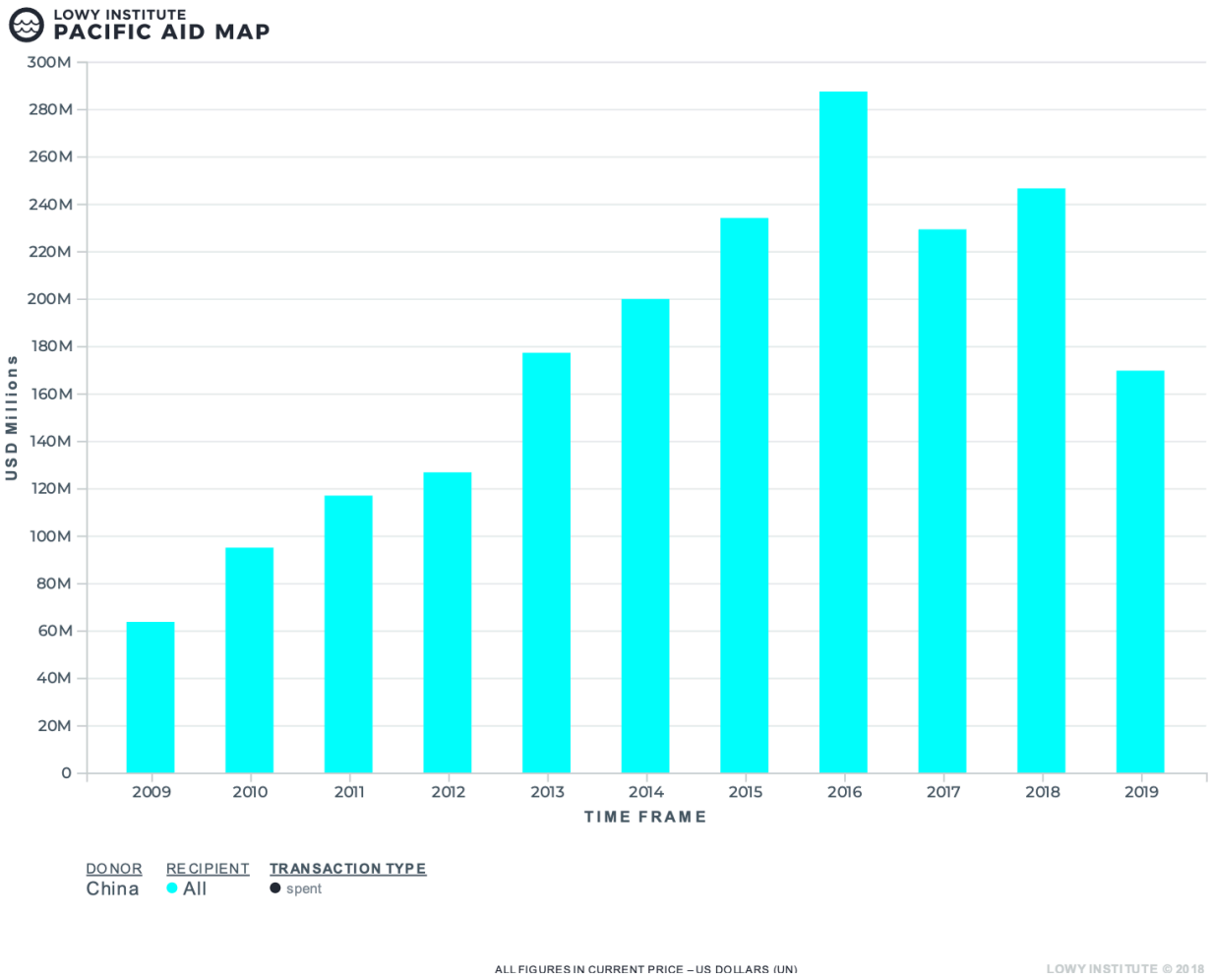


Figure 5. Overview of Chinese Aid Spent in the Pacific (Lowy Institute, 2020)

addition, this wide-open bottom-up component of the BRI makes signing on attractive to PICs as non-state actors and informal negotiations can streamline investment opportunities and projects into the country. Many players in these developing economies can be linked to the giant Chinese market (Morris, 2020). Reciprocally, China's pursuit of a stronger economic and geo-strategic relationship with PICs has the potential to fulfill several economic and security goals for the PRC, including ensuring safe maritime transport through sea lanes in the South Pacific, developing the Chinese navy, gaining diplomatic recognition among countries that once recognized Taiwan, and showcasing its ability to "rise peacefully" (Yu, 2016). Thus, it is the combination of mutually beneficial state interests and loose, bottom-up non-state processes that has made the BRI an ongoing initiative in Oceania. The BRI acts as supplementary financial aid that has already been provided elsewhere.

BRI Projects

All PICs that have diplomatic ties with the PRC have signed bilateral memoranda of understanding (MoU) to be a part of the BRI. The list includes Cook Islands, Fiji, FSM, Kiribati, Niue, PNG, Samoa,

Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu (Zhang, 2021, 270). Most of the PICs signed on to the BRI in 2018; the two exceptions are the Solomon Islands in 2019 and Kiribati in 2020 when they switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China shortly before signing on (see Table 1). The signing of MoUs by state officials signals the two states' bilateral partnership and commitment to this initiative; more specifically, it indicates that all ongoing and future infrastructure and investment projects can be categorized under the BRI umbrella and thus are eligible to receive funding and support from the PRC. This also can lead to more bilateral free trade agreements and increased foreign direct investment from private Chinese firms. For example, bilateral trade between China and PNG increased by 25% between 2020 and 2021 (from US$3.21 billion in 2020 to US$4.02 billion in 2021), and a free-trade agreement is in the works (Silk Road Briefing, 2022).

Table 1. Pacific Island Countries (PICs) Signing on to the Belt and Road Initiative (Zhang, 2021)

PICs	Time, Venue and Occasion
PNG	June 2018, Beijing, During form prime minister Peter O'Neil's visit to China.
Niue	July 2018, Niue, signed by the Chinese ambassador to New Zealand (also accredited to Niue) and Prime Minister Sir Toke Talagi
Samoa	September 2018, Beijin, during Prime Minister Tuilaepa Malielegaoi's visit to China.
FSM	November 2018, Port Moresby, during the meeting between form president Christian and Chinese President Xi Jinping.
Vanuatu	November 2018, Port Vila, signed by the Chinese ambassador to Vanuatu and the Government of Vanuatu.
Fiji	Novermber 2018, Suva, signed by the Chinese ambassador to Fiji and the permanent secretary of the Office of the Prime Minister of Fiji
Cook Islands	November 2018, Wellington, signed by the Chinese embassy in New Zealand with the Government of Cook Islands.
Tonga	November 2018, Port Moresby, during the meeting between former Prime Minster 'Akilisi Pohiva and Chinese President Xi Jinping
Solomon Islands	October 2019, Beijing, during Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare's visit China.
Kiribati	January 2020, Beijing, during President Taneti Maamau's visit to China.

Several trends can be detected among the many BRI projects in the Pacific. First, the majority are infrastructure projects—the construction of roads, bridges, and highways—to alleviate traffic congestion and facilitate trade by providing access to central markets and areas (see Figure 6). Many projects, such as airports and hotels, were built to facilitate an increase in tourism, especially Chinese tourism, to the islands. Additionally, the healthcare, education, and agriculture sectors have been key BRI beneficiaries across the Pacific Islands. Most of the infrastructure projects have been contracted to two state-owned firms: the China Railway International Group (CRIG) and the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC). Many of the other agencies leading the projects are SOEs and from China's coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian.

Another key part of the BRI is fostering educational and cultural exchange opportunities through scholarships for Pacific Islands students to study in China and learn about Chinese history, culture and the BRI. For example, in 2019, the Zhuhai City Foreign Affairs Bureau and Huafa Education Group

hosted eight students and two teachers from the Cook Islands and Niue. The teachers and students visited Rong Hong Academy (容闳书院, ronghong xueyuan) in Zhuhai to participate in a six-day youth student winter camp to tour China and experience traditional Chinese culture (see Figure 7). China's Ministry of Education also approved the Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) to teach Pacific languages to students in China. The languages taught include Bislama (an official language in Vanuatu), Cook Islands Māori, Niuean, Samoan, Tok Pisin (an official language in PNG) and Tongan. Other universities, such as Liaocheng University, invited Samoan academics to teach Samoan culture and language after a Confucius Institute was opened at the National University in Samoa (Zhang and Setope So'oa'emalelagi, 2019).



The opening ceremony of the Chinese-aided project for Stinson bridge and Vatuwaqu bridge in Fiji. /Courtesy of Lesieli

Figure 6. Chinese-Aided Construction of the Stinson and Vatuwaqu Bridges in Fiji (Talei, 2019)Initiative (Zhang, 2021)



Figure 7. Cultural Exchange in Zhuhai with Students from Cook Islands and Niue (Huafa, 2019)

In short, the Belt and Road Initiative in the Pacific encompasses both central state-led projects and local and provincial-led projects designed to strengthen relationships between China and each Pacific Island involved. These projects range from large-scale physical infrastructure projects to soft-power cultural and student exchanges. Table 2 highlights several specific examples of BRI projects in Oceania.

Table 2. Example BRI Projects in Oceania (Szadziewski, 2021)

Country	Projects	Companies and Agencies Involved (if identified)
Federated State of Micronesia	• Construction of roads in Chuuk (US$50 million) • Agricultural pilot farm in Madolenihmw • Construction of Pohnpei Secondary Road and Bridge (US$14.3 million) • Construction of New Chuuk State Office Buildings Complex Construction of the National Convention Center	• China Railway Construction Company • Yen Tai Construction Group • China Construction Steel Structure Corporation • Guangdong International Engineering Consulting Corporation
Fiji	• Construction of Stinson Parade and Vatuwaqu Bridges (US$6 million) • Upgrade of Nabouwalu Dreketi Road (US$135 million in concessional loans) • Redevelopment of Suva Civic Centre (US$9.5 million) • Construction and medical equipment for Navua Hospital Medical Training and Emergency Centre (US$6 million) • Construction of Panda Power Plant • Construction of sports facility for Marist Brothers' High School (US$16 million)	• China Railway 14th Bureau Group • China Railway First Group • Guangdong Province, Suva City council and Nam Yue Group • Guangdong Province and Yanjian Group • Panda Energy Group • Guangzhou No. 1 Construction Company Limited of China
Kiribati	• Construction of bridge connecting Bouta and South Tarawa	• China Railway First Group
Niue	• Student cultural exchange winter camp in Zhuhai • Upgrade of Ring Road Highway (US$13.68 million)	• Zhuhai Foreign Affairs Bureau, Zhuhai Huafa Group • Ministry of Commerce in China (MOFCOM), China Railway First Group
Papua New Guinea	• Construction of Industrial Park in Sandaun Province (US$4 billion) • Upgrade of road systems on mainland, New Britain and New Ireland (US$3.5 billion) • Upgrade of International Convention Center • Construction of Poreporena Freeway in Port Moresby • Construction of Tari Airport in Hela Province • Construction of Butuka Secondary School • Juncao and Upland Rice Technology • Kamil Submarine Cable project (US$234.93 million) • Construction of Enga Provincial Hospital	• China Metallurgical Group • China Railway Group • Ministry of Commerce in China (MOFCOM) • China Harbor Engineering • China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) • Shenzhen City • Fujian Province • Export-Import Bank of China (Eximbank), Kumul Holdings (KHC), Papua New Guinea State Treasury, China National Machinery Import & Export Corporation (CMC), Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd., PNG DataCo Ltd.
Samoa	• Establishment of Confucius Institute at the National University in Samoa • Donation of COVID-19 medical supplies	• China Foundation for Peace and Development
Solomon Islands	• Construction of seven facilities for the 2023 Pacific Games	• China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation
The Cook Islands	• Student cultural exchange winter camp in Zhuhai • Delegation to attend Guangdong International Tourism and Cultural Festival	• Zhuhai Foreign Affairs Bureau, Zhuhai Huafa Group • Zhuhai Municipality of China
Tonga	• Sidewalk construction in downtown Nuku'alofa (approximately US$5.5 million) • Construction of St. George government building (US$13.31 million) • Construction of solar plant (approximately US$4.28 million) • Scholarships for Tongan students	• Dongguan City • Shanghai Construction Group Co. • Zhuhai Singyes Green Building Technology Co. Ltd.
Vanuatu	• Malapoa College Extension Project to build classrooms, dormitories and labs (US$12.3 million) • Tanna and Malekula Road Rehabilitation Project (approximately US$52 million in concessional loan)	• Yanjian Group Ltd., China Northeast Architectural Design and Research Institute Co Ltd. • China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation, Ministry of Finance and Economic Management of Vanuatu

BRI Implementation

While the PRC often promotes these investments as "win-win" cooperation deals, several projects have raised local concerns about whether these bilateral projects are truly equal wins for both parties involved. The two concerns that have received the most international attention have to do with the environmental and financial consequences of Chinese investment. For example, in 2019, a pump failure at the Ramu Nickel mine spilled 200,000 liters (52,834 gallons) of a toxic mix of nickel, cobalt and magnesium waste into a bay in Papua New Guinea's Madang province. This mine is owned by the Metallurgical Group of China (MCC) and even though Ramu Nickel's vice-president, Wang Baowen, apologized, this incident drew attention to concerns about the poor environmental and labor standards of Chinese investors (Fox, 2019). There is also a great deal of concern over what many call China's "debt-trap diplomacy," the idea that the PRC is entrapping smaller nations to agree to these unbeneficial deals so that it can exert influence if the loans cannot be repaid. Many small nations take on a great deal of financial risk when signing on to these concessional loans. If the investments do not yield gains, these loans become a burden on the country's economy. This situation has raised concerns among leaders in the Pacific. For example, in 2018, Tongan Prime Minister 'Akilisi Pohiva publicly urged the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to collectively lobby China to forgive hundreds of millions of dollars in debt (Radio New Zealand 2018), bringing attention to ongoing anxieties regarding whether these countries, particularly Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu, can pay off the high levels of debt they have incurred to China in recent years (see Figure 8).

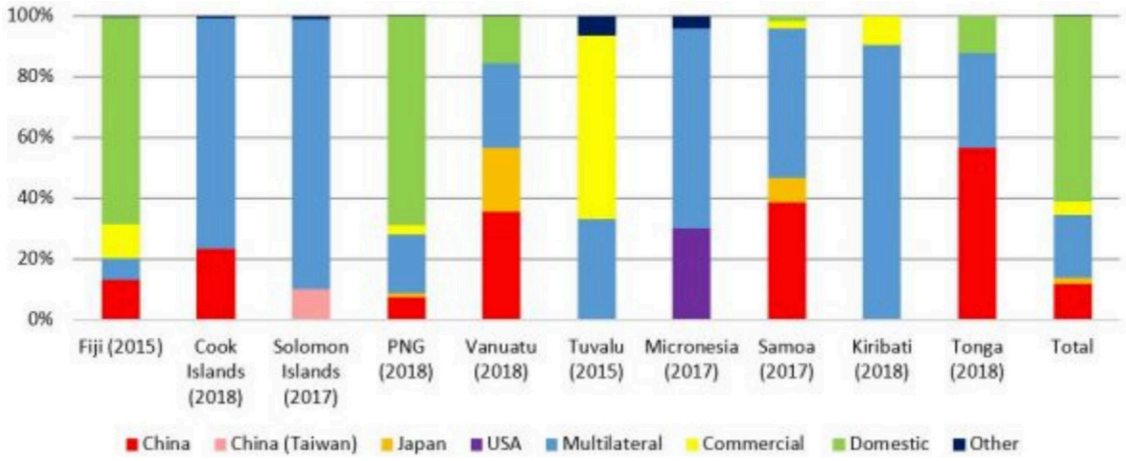


Figure 8. National Debt Owed, by Lender (Fox, 2018)

Despite the likely truth that some countries will not be able to repay, it is crucial to acknowledge the agency of the leaders in host countries to make decisions about how Chinese investors operate and whether to sign on to or reject Chinese investment offers and BRI projects (Kabutaulaka, 2015). For example, Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa of Samoa confirmed that, due to the enormous debts that Samoa already owes China, she will cancel the construction of a US$100 million port for which her predecessor, Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi, accepted Chinese funds (Barrett, 2021). Many Pacific Island leaders resent the assertion that they must choose between China and traditional partners as it portrays Pacific Island nations as "passive collaborators or victims of a new wave of

colonialism" and that implies that they are not capable of understanding the economics involved in signing on to different deals with China (Taylor, 2019). For Pacific Island nations, China provides access to "markets, technology, financing and infrastructure" which is "access to a viable future." To compete with the PRC, the U.S. needs to convince Pacific Island governments that it has full confidence in their autonomy and ability to make their own decisions about the advisability of accepting Chinese investments.

Another set of concerns about BRI projects has to do with a lack of return on investment. The PRC is known to build grand infrastructure projects, but there are several well-publicized cases in which projects have been left incomplete for years. For example, the 28-story Wangguo (WG) Friendship Plaza in Suva, Fiji, was supposed to be the tallest building in the South Pacific and to employ hundreds of Fijians. However, due to transport restrictions during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, construction was delayed (Szadziewski, 2020). The multi-million-dollar project was stopped by the government of Fiji because of safety concerns (Cave, 2022). Similarly, the Silkroad Ark Hotel, a project worth US$240 million, which promised to create more than 1,000 Fijian jobs, is another project that remains incomplete (273). The lack of return on investment of these projects has led many locals to develop negative perceptions of the Chinese presence and investments.

However, the PRC is beginning to realize that grand, large-scale projects are not the only way to help PICs develop. In fact, at the third Belt and Road Construction Symposium, President Xi Jinping emphasized the importance and priority of cooperating on "small and beautiful projects" (小而美, xiao er mei) along the BRI that can "touch people's hearts" (心联通, xin liantong) and impact people's everyday livelihoods (Overseas Network, 2021). An example of a "small and beautiful" project is the "Juncao and Upland Rice Technology" (菌草和旱稻技, juncao he handao ji), which is shown in Figure 9 and includes the introduction of new crop and new farming technologies into upland PNG. Juncao, which literally means "fungus grass," is a plant developed by Chinese scientists and that the PRC government touts as a "multifunctional agricultural resource" that can be used for livestock feed, growing mushrooms, preventing desertification and enriching the soil to enable rice production (Feifan). Another example of a "small and beautiful" project is the bridge connecting North and South Tarawa in Kiribati, which is shown in Figure 10 and has enabled goods to be transported much more easily (Xinhua News Agency, 2022).



Figure 9. Juncao and Upland Rice Technology Project Training in Papua New Guinea (Overseas Network, 2021)



Figure 10. Bridge Construction in Kiribati (Xinhua, 2022)

According to Xinhua News, thirty locals from Bouta village were hired, and they built the bridge in 9,000 hours. This created jobs for locals and facilitated technology transfer, as Chinese workers passed on their technical skills to the local workers. In this sense, China's BRI continues to shift and adapt depending on the interests of both the host countries and the PRC.

Implications of the BRI in Oceania for the U.S. and its Allies

For the United States, there is concern that the PRC's increased economic activity could lead to the increased construction of military bases, and the combination of economic and military clout could eventually overturn the post-World War II rules-based order from which the U.S. has benefited. According to political scientist Yu Chang Sen, the construction of military bases would make sense as a way for the PRC to ensure "safe maritime transport through the South Pacific Sea Lanes," to protect its projects and economic assets, and continue developing its navy (Yu, 2016). From the perspective of the United States and its allies such as Australia, however, a Chinese military foothold in the Pacific could pose a serious security threat. Efforts to maintain a "free and open Indo-Pacific" and U.S. strategic interests would be compromised (Ashish, 2020).

To counter the PRC's influence in Oceania, the U.S. has already developed new initiatives such as the Pacific Pledge, which granted over US$500 million dollars to PICs to support "economic and environmental resilience, maritime security, and good governance" as well as additional aid, such as COVID-19 relief, which was added later (U.S. Department of State Office of the Spokesperson, 2020). On top of the Pacific Pledge, in July 2022, Vice President Kamala Harris announced strengthened partnerships and renewed commitment in the region by stating that the U.S. pledges US$350 million in annual assistance to the Pacific. To continue competing with the PRC's efforts in the region, the U.S. needs to continue providing financial support to its Pacific partners until they can become economically resilient on their own. However, in its efforts to re-engage PICs, the U.S. can benefit from closer work with its allies, especially Australia. Through alliances and partnerships such as the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among Australia, India, Japan and the U.S.) and AUKUS (trilateral security pact among Australia, the United Kingdom and the U.S.). Australia can provide important assistance as the U.S. re-engages with PICs, especially in the Southwest Pacific.

Australia is still the largest aid donor in the Pacific; it is also a member of the PIF and shares security concerns with the United States in terms of China's increasing presence in the region. However, because Australia is in closer geographic proximity to many of these islands, it stands to lose its status as the biggest presence in the region if the PRC outcompetes it. Thus, Australia has already responded to Chinese economic engagement with its "Pacific Step-Up" plan, which includes AUD2 billion for the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), AUD500 million over five years to support renewable energy, climate change, and disaster relief, the Pacific Labour Mobility Scheme, the Coral Sea Cable, the Australia Pacific Security College, and the Pacific Fusion Center (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). However, China is still Australia's own biggest trading partner so unless Australia diversifies its trade with other countries, Australia will be reliant on China to sustain its assistance programs.

Compared to Australia, New Zealand has taken more of a hedging position, as it has also signed on to the BRI. However, New Zealand has also come out with a Pacific re-engagement plan called "The Pacific Reset," which not only focuses on fostering existing regional and cultural partnerships but also grants NZD300 million over the course of four years for climate change infrastructure and NZD180 million over three years as part of a "Strategic International Development Fund." In addition, New Zealand plans to focus on improving labor mobility, education, healthcare, human rights, women's empowerment, and good governance (New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade | Manatū Aorere, 2018). New Zealand's values align with the U.S. and Australia in this realm, but due to its hedging position, any escalated geopolitical conflict or instability in the region will negatively impact New Zealand.

The stakeholder that will be most adversely affected by China's BRI and increased economic engagement in Oceania is, arguably, Taiwan. This is because any country wishing to gain access to the BRI must adhere to the "One China Principle," by recognizing the PRC as the one true and legitimate government of China. On one hand, the PRC's increased economic and diplomatic engagement in the Pacific poses a potential threat to Taiwan's sovereignty and security as the PRC utilizing its economic leverage to build a consensus of countries which agree that Taiwan is not a sovereign nation-state. If there is enough support, the PRC's path to unification will be much easier and better received globally. Since the initial China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in 2006, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati have switched diplomatic relations from Taiwan to the PRC. Niue also switched diplomatic relations in 2007 but this shift occurred before it signed on to the BRI. On the other hand, with fewer diplomatic partners in the region, Taiwan can focus its energy and resources on the countries that matter the most. Palau, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Nauru are the four remaining PICs that maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Tuvalu's foreign minister, Simon Kofe, has expressed unwavering support for Taiwan and has rejected offers from the PRC to build artificial islands worth US$400 million, citing concerns about debt-sustainability (Lee, 2019). Taiwan will likely continue to deepen its diplomatic relationships with its remaining allies in the Pacific.

One effect of China's rising presence in the region has been a growing regional sense of solidarity and assertiveness among Pacific Island nations, especially those formerly colonized by European powers. The Chinese presence has provided an alternative to continued dependence on ex-colonial powers, providing these countries with "greater bargaining power," enabling them to diversify their sources of support and become less fractured along lines drawn by now departed colonial powers (Wesley-Smith and Smith, 2021). This sense of solidarity has been institutionalized in new regional frameworks and initiatives. In 2017, the PIF leaders endorsed "the Blue Pacific" strategy that states that Pacific Island nations are committed to doing all they can to protect the well-being of Pacific peoples as well as their surrounding marine and terrestrial resources (Taylor, 2019). Some shared interests include responding to climate change, increasing ocean governance and promoting sustainable development (Tong, 2015, 24). This growing regionalism and assertion of shared resources and sovereignty in Oceania places an emphasis on a collective decision-making among the different Pacific Island states.

Yet the bilateral nature of China's economic engagement as well as the different economic and development policies of each country continue to shape how they interact with China. Multilateral entities such as the PIF will be key to keeping the PRC in check and addressing the region's biggest security threats and development challenges. Many Pacific Island nations do not wish to be caught in the crossfires of geopolitical conflict and hope for a collaborative future. In sum, the BRI is already affecting the U.S. and many of its allies in the region, but it has also prompted meaningful re-engagement on the part of the traditional powers and new alliances among the Pacific Island nations.

Recommendations

1. **Recognize the diversity of Pacific Island nations and address each PIC and Chinese investment project on a case-by-case basis.**
   Given the complexity and the bilateral nature of the PRC's economic engagement in the Pacific, the U.S. should give attention to each individual country and implement projects to tackle issues on a case-by-case basis. Although China treats the Pacific as a single entity at its forums, each Pacific Island nation has its own unique relationship to China as well as its own challenges. If, for example, a BRI project remains unfinished to the detriment of a given Pacific Island country or people, it is important to understand which actors may be involved and what has caused the delay so that proper policy measures can be taken. For example, providing aid and investment to Tonga, Samoa and Vanuatu, which are island nations with smaller gross domestic products (GDP) and that are more indebted to China, will foster stronger relationships in the long run.

2. **Create channels for PICs to export goods to the U.S. and for a variety of U.S. government agencies and private companies to invest in PICs to promote steady but sustainable economic growth.**
   One reason that the PRC is outcompeting the U.S. in terms of economic engagement in Oceania is because it can provide, in a streamlined fashion, multiple channels of investment capital, from both state and non-state sources. At the same time, the primary concern for most PICs is to achieve a level of sustainable economic growth that will reduce their dependence on outside powers and enable true independence. The U.S. can create channels for PICs to export their goods and products to the U.S., while encouraging more U.S. investment in the Pacific Islands, especially from the private sector

3. **Invest in human resource development and local-level projects.**
   The PRC's "small and beautiful projects," which shift the focus from large-scale to local-level projects, and from physical infrastructure to technology and human resources, have boosted the BRI's profile in recent years. The U.S. can compete and engage by funding more on-the-ground projects that impact the local population long-term. Currently, China offers many more scholarships to Pacific Islander students than the U.S. does. From 2006 to 2018, the PRC had awarded a total of 1,371 scholarships to students from China's Pacific partners (Zhang and

Marinaccio, 2019). Meanwhile, the U.S. South Pacific Scholarship funded 93 Pacific Island scholars in total from 1995 to 2022 (Lynch, 2022). Nonetheless, the U.S. has some of the most sought-after education institutions in the world as well as a large Pasifika diaspora. The U.S. government needs to invest in scholarships for Pacific Islander students to study in the United States, and to train U.S. citizens (especially those of Pacific Islander heritage) in the languages, histories and cultures of the region so that they can engage in people-to-people diplomacy in the Pacific. With this kind of capacity-building, Pacific Islanders can build their own infrastructure, as well as strong economies with a well-trained, innovative and creative workforce.

4. **Support Pacific regionalism and coordinate efforts to solve issues with allies.**
   Given the historical legacy of colonialism in the Pacific, PICs place an enormous premium on sovereignty. It is of utmost importance to respect their agency and grant them the full confidence to make the best decisions for themselves. There are already initiatives within the PIF to involve actors across all sectors and levels in policymaking. If the U.S. supports these efforts, there will be strong multilateral institutions in place to address concerns regarding China. Many of the initiatives put forth by other allies, such as Australia and New Zealand, are in alignment, so it is vital to coordinate these efforts to avoid perceptions that aid and investment are only for geopolitical gain.

5. **Find ways to collaborate with the PRC, especially in climate change initiatives.**
   For PICs, many of whom live on low-lying atolls, climate change is far and away their biggest security threat. Many PICs are already experiencing the adverse effects of climate change, and many may not even have islands to live on in the next few decades. This crisis dwarfs any concerns about geopolitical great-power competition. Although China is undeniably the main competitor for the U.S. in the region, from the perspective of Pacific Islander peoples, it is vital for these two great powers to collaborate, share knowledge and take concrete steps toward climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a framework to enhance the diplomatic and economic engagement of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Oceania. The BRI is intended to serve as a centralized and coordinated initiative through which to label, publicize and accelerate the PRC's engagement, and a means through which other nations, especially those facing development challenges, can access aid and investment. However, the BRI is much more fragmented and disjointed than it seems. Because the "China threat" narrative is not a useful way of approaching or addressing the problems Pacific Island nations face, the U.S. needs to have a nuanced understanding of the nature and process of individual BRI projects in the Pacific while prioritizing the perspectives of Pacific Islanders to effectively respond to Chinese influence in Oceania.

The U.S. has already begun re-engaging economically in the Pacific. In 2022, Fiji, one of China's biggest partners in the Pacific, became the first PIC to join President Biden's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) (Reuters, 2022). In addition to strengthening existing alliances with Pacific Island nations and regional institutions, the U.S. must welcome China into multilateral efforts to address key issues such as climate change. The U.S. also needs to make better use of the most important strategic advantages the U.S. has over China - i.e., its educational, cultural and financial institutions and a large population of Pacific Islanders who want what is best for their ancestral homelands. Fostering opportunities for Pacific Islanders to connect with cultural, educational and financial institutions in the U.S., Australia and New Zealand will enable Pacific Islanders to build their own capacity and autonomy while reinforcing the strong ties that have long existed between Oceania and the U.S. In sum, the BRI is appealing to so many because it provides a compelling vision of a web of intertwining connections around the globe that can be mobilized for collective prosperity. To compete, the U.S. needs to demonstrate its commitment to the prosperity, well-being, autonomy and equality of Pacific Islander nations and peoples.

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China's Multi-pronged Approach to Gain Influence in Oceania Part 4 of 4:

HOW CHINA MESSAGES ITS HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF: A CASE STUDY OF TONGA

By: Lillian Dang



Image: View of Nomuka, Tonga, taken by a Royal New Zealand Air Force P-3K2 Orion during a reconnaissance flight on 17 January 2022 following an underwater volcanic eruption and tsunami on 15 January. Source: New Zealand Defence Force, https://www.nzdf.mil.nz/nzdf/significant-projects-and-issues/tonga-response/#images-and-videos

Executive Summary

Purpose

To understand how the People's Republic of China (PRC) is employing strategic communication to promote and normalize its humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) action in Oceania and the implications for strategic competition in the region.

Methodology

A review of primary literature including media reporting and key source documents; secondary literature on China's United Front work, propaganda, and HA/DR; and interviews with three subject matter experts, who are knowledgeable about China's political warfare, Indo-Pacific strategic issues, and China's HA/DR, during March to June 2022.

Key Points

- China intends to become a lead responder in HA/DR in Oceania. The PRC's goal was clarified in May 2022 through a leaked communiqué detailing a regional cooperation arrangement that China sought to enter into with the ten Pacific Island countries (PICs) with which it has diplomatic ties (Cook Islands, Federate State of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu).
- China's HA/DR mission in response to the January 2022 volcanic eruption and tsunami that struck Tonga enabled the PRC to project its HA/DR capabilities in the South Pacific and normalize HA/DR as an area of China-Pacific cooperation. China's assistance and response received effusive praise from the Tongan government in contrast to the United States (U.S.), Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and other assisting states, who provided more in the way of assistance but received much less acknowledgment. The high degree of recognition that China received reflected the closeness of the China-Tonga diplomatic relationship and the Chinese embassy's leveraging of a multilayered strategic communication strategy to promote its HA/DR action.
- China is implementing a global strategic communication strategy to promote its narratives, to shape public opinion, to suppress critical media coverage, and to spread disinformation. The strategy reflects a blending of China's United Front work and propaganda systems – including using overseas media to promote Chinese narratives, content sharing, co-production, localizing, buying local media, using prominent local voices to echo Chinese narratives, and more recently, censorship and disinformation.
- A case study of Tonga reveals China is implementing many of its global strategic communication strategies, in particular the PRC is using local voices to promote Chinese narratives, leveraging people-to-people relationships, cultivating local media outlets and journalists, and saturating local media with China Party-State narratives through promoted content.

Strategic Considerations:

- China's HA/DR in Oceania lags considerably in quantity and quality in comparison to Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., and Japan. Yet, the PRC's limited efforts to date are receiving outsize acknowledgment from national politicians and media. The case of Tonga is a prime example. In Tonga, China was able to amplify its HA/DR mission in response to the January 2022 volcanic eruption through its close diplomatic relationship with the Tongan government and by leveraging a manifold strategic communication approach. China was not the first country to respond with substantial relief items, nor the largest donor, but it was praised effusively. **It is important to understand this dynamic in order to not over-estimate PRC HA/DR capacity and reach in the region and, conversely, to not underestimate the degree to which Chinese narratives and political sway have taken hold.**
- China has invested significantly in its diplomatic, economic, and people-to-people relationships in Tonga and in other PICs. There are eight Chinese embassies in the ten PICs with which China has diplomatic ties (with the exceptions of Niue and the Cook Islands, which are served by China's embassy in New Zealand). Chinese diplomats are actively engaged in key leader engagements, writing opinion articles in national media, and organizing public/media events. Chinese embassies also support an array of people-to-people exchanges, enterprise-to-enterprise exchanges, and cultural and community organizations in each country. By comparison, the U.S. has five embassies covering the same ten countries.[1] **A lack of presence inevitably limits U.S. engagements, messaging, deepening of diplomatic ties, and the ability to understand and push back on China's narratives.** Competing with China in Oceania will require greater, permanent U.S. Government presence at the country-level across the region, particularly in the diplomatic and development spheres.
- United Front work is at the core of China's overseas influence efforts. There is an elaborate network of actors tied to, and cultivated by, United Front work. **Understanding PRC United Front work, its goals, bureaucracy, decision-making structures, and methods are necessary not only for engagements with China, but also for engagements with PICs that have diplomatic ties with China.** In particular, recognizing United Front vectors and mechanisms, i.e., Confucius Institutes, overseas Chinese community organizations, wealthy proxies, political elites, people-to-people exchanges, consulting agreements, etc., can help inform U.S. Government response and mitigation strategies, including supporting PICs to strengthen their political systems against covert, coercive, and corrupting influence.
- Thus far, Chinese influence on and through local media in Oceania is non-coercive; the focus has been on propaganda through op-eds, translating and pushing Chinese language news, and cultivating local journalists through all-expenses-paid trips to China. **However, as Chinese entities increase their commercial interests in Oceania, expect them to use economic leverage to silence critics, censor media coverage they do not like and provide greater and more direct support to friendly elites.** To the extent that these nations have pluralistic political traditions and healthy opposition parties, expect this more active Chinese meddling in domestic affairs to embolden PRC allies, raise the political stakes, and fuel instability. Strong institutions

and healthy multi-party democracy in these nations will be the biggest check on Chinese influence going forward.

Introduction

China intends to become a lead responder in HA/DR in Oceania. This was clarified in a leaked communiqué detailing a regional cooperation arrangement titled 'China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision' which China sought to enter into with the ten PICs with which it has diplomatic ties.[2] The PICs are Cook Islands, Federate State of Micronesia (FSM), Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu. The communiqué was intended for endorsement by the PICs at the second China-PICs foreign ministers meeting held in Fiji on 30 May, a stop on Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's Pacific tour in May 2022.[3] The document confirmed what had been suggested for some time – that China intends to create a regional bloc in Oceania among the PICs with which it has diplomatic ties, and the PRC plans to link its economic cooperation with security cooperation.[4] The President of FSM, David Panuelo, voiced the most public rejection of the document by writing to 21 countries and leaders in the region (including Australia, New Zealand, and the Governor of Hawaii) ahead of Wang's visit, to warn that signing on to such a regional arrangement would "bring a Cold War era at best, and a World War at worst."[5] The communiqué ultimately was not endorsed, with a lack of consensus among PICs surmised as having scuttled it for the time being.[6] Nevertheless, the events clarified China's intentions in Oceania. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has published a factsheet on its website summarizing many of the issues covered in the communiqué, confirming that disaster prevention and mitigation will be a priority area in China-PICs cooperation.[7]

China's overseas HA/DR mission in response to the January 2022 volcanic eruption and tsunami that struck Tonga enabled the PRC to project its HA/DR capabilities in the South Pacific and normalize HA/DR as an area of China-Pacific cooperation. This mission marked the second time China had responded to a disaster in the South Pacific and the first time it responded with military assets. For its 2015 HA/DR mission in response to Cyclone Pam, which struck Vanuatu, China sent chartered planes with relief items but did not use military assets.[8] China's HA/DR mission in Tonga received effusive praise from the Tongan government in contrast to the U.S., New Zealand, Australia, Japan, and other assisting states, who provided more in the way of assistance but received much less acknowledgment. The high degree of recognition that China received reflected the closeness of the China-Tonga diplomatic relationship and the leveraging by the Chinese Embassy in Tonga of a multi-layered strategic communication strategy to promote China's HA/DR action.

China is implementing a global strategic communication strategy to promote its narratives, to shape public opinion, to suppress critical media coverage, and to spread disinformation. It is an approach that reflects a blending of the PRC's United Front and propaganda systems. China's overseas propaganda activities grew after the 1989 democracy crisis, when the PRC sought to promote a positive image of itself to the world, and these activities have further expanded with the spread of China's international media presence. China's overseas media activities are directly tied to the United

Front work of the Chinese Community Party (CCP). CCP United Front work is more than propaganda and influence operations and it is not simply public diplomacy. It can veer into action that is "covert, coercive, and corrupting" according to the former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull who was speaking in 2018 at the time Australia passed several laws to restrict Chinese influence.[9]

A global, multi-platform strategic communication strategy to promote the CCP agenda is one of the major components of China's United Front work overseas. Strategies include using overseas media to promote China's narratives, content sharing, co-production, localizing, buying local media, using prominent local voices to articulate China's messages, censorship, and disinformation. In Tonga, many of these strategies are being employed to promote an array of pro-PRC narratives, including the message that receiving HA/DR assistance is "one of the benefits of closer diplomatic ties with China."[10]

A Global, Multi-platform, Strategic Communication Strategy

One starting point for understanding the nature of China's global influence is the CCP's United Front work,[11] also referred to as political warfare, influence operations, sharp power, or people-to-people relations.[12] United Front work is more than propaganda and influence operations and is an organizing principle deeply entrenched in CCP bureaucracy[13] in which China's global strategic communication efforts are embedded. Anne-Marie Brady, a prominent scholar of China, has identified the establishment of a global, multi-platform strategic communication strategy to promote the CCP's agenda as one of the four categories of United Front work prioritized under the leadership of General Secretary of the CCP and PRC President, Xi Jinping.[14] United Front work and its historic origins are discussed in depth in an Appendix to this paper.

In 2014, Xi launched China's new media management strategy, which he described as a "new-type mainstream media" that is "powerful, influential, and credible."[15] According to Sarah Cook in a 2020 report for Freedom House, this global, multi-platform, strategic communication strategy enables China to promote its own narratives through various forms of propaganda, suppress critical viewpoints through direct and indirect censorship, and obtain control over key content-delivery systems.[16] In a 2020 report to the U.S. Congress, the White House wrote, "China's party-state controls the world's most heavily resourced set of propaganda tools. Beijing communicates its narrative through state-run television, print, radio, and online organizations whose presence is proliferating in the United States and around the world."[17] Today, hundreds of millions of people around the world are consuming content that comes in multiple languages and that has a China Party-State connection without those consumers being aware of it because the origins of the content have been obfuscated or laundered through other sources.[18] While Chinese strategic communication is essentially propaganda, the term propaganda, "xuanchuan" in CCP usage, is not negative.[19] It is also referred to as "publicity."

Strategic communication, media warfare, or public opinion warfare is one of the "Three Warfares" sanctioned by the CCP. The other two are psychological warfare and legal warfare. The "Three

Warfares" were introduced in 2003 when the CCP revised the "Political Work Guidelines of the People's Liberation Army [PLA]." However, conduct of the "Three Warfares" does not fall solely to the PLA. The aim of the "Three Warfares" is to enhance the CCP's political power, and thus, it is a tool of the CCP for political warfare.[20]

The PRC has been building its global media platform over 30 years. Motivated to change global public opinion of China following the 1989 democracy crisis, the CCP expanded its foreign influence efforts under CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin (1989-2002). In 1991, the State Council Information Office (SCIO), which is also known as the Office of External Propaganda (OEP) under its Chinese nameplate, was set up to better promote China's policies to the world.[21] China Central Television (CCTV; re-branded as CGTV in 2016) launched its first English-language channel during this period.[22] Under CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao (2002-2012), China made large investments to expand its media reach. CCTV set up a global, multi-platform network, CCTV International, and China Radio International (CRI) and Xinhua News Service also expanded their global presences.[23] In April 2009, the English-language version of China' nationalist tabloid, Global Times, was launched. In the same year, the Chinese government reportedly allocated US$6 billion to the global expansion of its state media with major investments in CCTV, Xinhua, and the People's Daily.[24] China scholar David Shambaugh estimated in 2015 that China was spending as much as US$10 billion per year on enhancing its "soft power," including its state media.[25]

In the Xi-era (2012 to present), emphasis has been placed on information control, both inside of China and in terms of how overseas media and academia comment on China.[26] China is dominating the global information space by controlling the key nodes of information. Under Xi, foreign propaganda activities are conducted through commercial transactions funded through the formation of large media conglomerates and commercializing media endeavors.[27] China's strategic communication strategy is global, and no country is too small for investment.[28]

United Front Entities

United Front work is undertaken in both domestic and foreign settings and is the task of all CCP agencies and members. This section provides a brief description of key United Front entities; a detailed discussion of each can also be found in the Appendix to this paper.

Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)

The CPPCC is the platform to bring together all relevant United Front actors inside and outside the party including party elders, intelligence officers, diplomats, propagandists, military officers and political commissars, United Front workers, academics, and businesspeople.[29] The current CPPCC Chairman is Wang Yang, the fourth-ranking Politburo Standing Committee member, suggesting the CPPCC plays a significant role in the Party's United Front system.

United Front Leading Small Group (LSG)

In 2015, Xi established a United Front LSG, an informal body comprised of senior Party leaders, likely headed by Xi.[30] The last time the Party formed a United Front LSG was in 1968 under the leadership of Xi's father, who is considered a master of United Front work. The United Front LSG functions as platform to coordinate and elevate the status of United Front work across the bureaucracy.[31]

United Front Work Department (UFWD)

The UFWD is the executive and coordinating agency for United Front work and has been revitalized under Xi. In 2015, Xi removed its head and appointed senior party leader, Sun Chunlan, a member of the Politburo and a State Council Vice Premier.[32] In 2018, the State Ethics Affairs Commission, State Administration of Religious Affairs, and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office were subsumed under the UFWD as part of efforts by Xi to centralize the United Front system.[33] The themes covered by these entities – ethics affairs, religious affairs, and overseas Chinese – point to the focus of China's United Front work.

International (Liaison) Department and Central Foreign Affairs Commission

The International Department (formerly International Liaison Department) handles the CCP's relationships with more than 600 political parties and organizations as well as individuals, who are generally political elites.[34] The International Department joined with the Central Foreign Affairs Commission in March 2018. [35] The Commission, headed by Xi, is the apex body for foreign affairs matters.[36]

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)

The MFA and its diplomats overseas are connected to United Front. The CCP has a long tradition of party and government personnel "double-hatting" – i.e., holding roles within multiple agencies. UFWD personnel often operate under diplomatic cover as members of the MFA, using this role to guide United Front activities outside China, working with politicians and other high-profile individuals, Chinese community associations, and student associations, as well as sponsoring Chinese language, media, and cultural activities.[37]

PLA Political Work Department

The PLA Political Work Department replaced the General Political Department, which was dissolved during the reorganization of the PLA in November 2015. The Liaison Bureau of the Political Work Department leads the PLA's United Front work. It operates much like an intelligence service with officers using official and non-official cover. It focuses on strategic targets relevant to military operations.[38]

Propaganda Entities

An array of Party-State organs has input into the content of foreign-directed media and journalist exchange programs that relate to issues under their purviews.[39] The following are some of the entities that shape China's overseas strategic communication or propaganda activities.

CCP LSG for Propaganda and Ideological Work

China's foreign propaganda agenda is set by the CCP LSG for Propaganda and Ideological Work, made up of the most senior officials from Party and State institutions in the propaganda sphere.[40] The LSG supervises the Central Propaganda Department, which is also sometimes referred to as the Publicity Department.

Central Propaganda Department (CPD)

The CPD has been a core part of the CCP since the Party's founding.[41] The CPD functions as the nerve center of the propaganda system by integrating the work of the PLA, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, China Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), People's Daily (Renmin Ribao), New China News Agency (Xinhua), and the State Administration for Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). The PLA's Head of Political Warfare, the Minister of Culture, the Minister of Education, and the SARFT director are dual-hatted as CPD deputy directors.[42]

The CPD is tasked with managing any sensitive news stories on topics such as foreign embassies, diplomats in China, overseas Chinese businesspeople, foreign students, foreign travelers, and residents of Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. The CPD also guides the Chinese media during any major events regarding Tibet, Xinjiang, ethnic minorities, religion, human rights, democracy movements, internal and external terrorist activities, and Falun Gong. For extremely serious incidents, only Xinhua News Agency is allowed to report on the matter and all other Chinese media must use the Xinhua report word for word.[43]

The CPD exercises its powers indirectly through 'guidance.' However, the CPD and its provincial branches have the power to authorize the hiring and firing of senior managers in the media and other propaganda-related sectors. More direct forms of control are sometimes applied, such as oral instructions via meetings or phone calls to editors.[44]

State Council Information Office (SCIO)/Office of External Propaganda (OEP)

Traditionally, the PRC distinguished between internal propaganda and external propaganda. The CPD oversees internal propaganda, while its brother organization the SCIO/OEP, oversaw matters relating to external propaganda.[45] The SCIO/OEP was responsible for guiding the foreign propaganda activities of the multiple government offices whose portfolios touch on foreign matters. In particular, SCIO/OEP was in charge of "clarifying and refuting" any stories forbidden from being covered in China but which were reported in foreign media.[46] In 2014, SCIO/OEP was absorbed into the CPD but continues to carry out activities under its nameplate.[47]

Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Education

Propaganda is also carried out through China's foreign culture diplomacy, under the purviews of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education. Activities include cultural exchanges designed to dispel prejudices about China while fostering warm feelings toward the country.[48] In 2004, China began opening Confucius Institutes, which teach Chinese language and culture in universities/colleges around the world. Confucius Institutes have come under scrutiny in recent years for their connection to United Front work, alongside other vectors for influence activities such as community organizations, wealthy proxies, exchanges, and consulting agreements.[49] The establishment of Confucius Institutes is part of China's proposed regional arrangement with PICs detailed in the draft communiqué, China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision.[50]

MFA

The MFA in recent years has started carving out a more public role for itself in China's overseas propaganda work through more aggressive Twitter engagements. This has given rise to the "wolf warrior" diplomat persona, a reference to an ultranationalist Chinese action film franchise. During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, wolf warrior diplomacy became a shorthand expression for a new, assertive brand of Chinese diplomacy with action ranging from storming out of international meetings to shouting at foreign counterparts and even insulting foreign leaders.[51] In October 2020, Brookings reported that over 170 Chinese diplomats bickered with Western officials and commentators on Twitter, promoted conspiracies about COVID-19, and engaged in trolling behavior.[52] Despite the new aggressive posture, Chinese diplomats' use of social media is relatively new. The MFA was slower than other parts of the Chinese government to adopt social media, especially Twitter.

Moreover, it must be noted that, although Chinese diplomats deliver the messages, they do not shape it, which is the purview of the CPD. As such, Chinese diplomats are limited in the content they can deliver. The primary audience of wolf warrior diplomacy is the MFA and leaders in Beijing rather than Western audiences or even Chinese domestic audiences. For Chinese diplomats, Zhao Lijian, the MFA spokesperson, set the example for an expedited path to promotion through wolf warrior diplomacy. Zhao rose to prominence for his aggressive Twitter style as a diplomat in Pakistan and was rewarded with further promotions within the MFA.[53] As such, China's wolf warrior diplomacy, an innovation of the diplomatic cadres, will continue to be the dominant approach in the MFA for a long as Party leaders endorse it.[54]

PLA External Propaganda LSG

The PLA External Propaganda LSG was established in 2006. The PLA's then General Political Department (now Political Work Department), External Propaganda Bureau was formed in 2007 to function as the LSG standing office. It also functions as the Ministry of National Defense (MND) International Communication Bureau. According to a report by Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao of Project 2049 Institute in 2013, both the External Propaganda Bureau and the Liaison Department were engaged in "public opinion warfare" and the division of work between the two entities was unclear. Stokes and Hsiao speculate that the External Propaganda Bureau is responsible for "white"

propaganda in the form of public diplomacy, including the management of routine dissemination platforms and content, and the PLA's Liaison Department is responsible for "gray," "black," and Taiwan-related propaganda.[55] This analysis pre-dates the 2015 reform of the PLA but may still be helpful for speculating about the division between United Front entities and propaganda entities working on China's HA/DR action, at least within the PLA.

PLA Media Center

The PLA News Media Center is responsible for integrating PLA-controlled media outlets. It was created in 2012 to integrate traditional and new media, with triple-hatted positions in the Center helping to promote this integration. For example, the head of the PLA News Media Center's Internet Department is also editor-in-chief of both the MND website and China Military Online. China Military Online is the most authoritative website for PLA news and a portal to access other authoritative publications, such as the Chinese military's official newspaper, PLA Daily.[56]

China's Strategic Communication Strategies – A Blending of United Front and Propaganda Systems

China's strategic communication strategies reflect a blending of its United Front and propaganda systems. Experts such as John Garnaut have described it as a "messaging orchestra" that is designed to condition audiences into believing the PRC's narratives.[57] According to Garnaut, China generally messages permutations of three narratives: China is inherently peaceful and beneficent, the growth of Chinese power is inexorable, and China is vengeful and dangerous if provoked. Leaders, diplomats, and state propaganda deliver the first two messages openly. The third however, is usually delivered via back channels with plausibly deniable connections to China's Party-State, by PLA "hawks," specialist military hardware websites, academic forums, personal meetings with top leaders, or editorials in the Global Times.[58] The example illustrates the integration of United Front and propaganda techniques, with the effect not solely attributable to any singular method.

This section describes some of the strategic communication strategies currently employed by China to promote its message globally.

Government spokesperson system

The government spokesperson system is the most routinized method that China employs to interact with foreign audiences. The spokesperson system began in the early 1980s, through an initiative of the External Propaganda LSG, suggesting a close link between the spokesperson system and foreign

direct propaganda. The spokesperson system has been adopted across every government ministry and extends across lower levels of government. Each ministry or local government has its own internal spokesperson system specific to that organization.[59]
The MND established its spokesperson system in 2008 and began conducting regular monthly press conferences in 2011. Foreign reporters were allowed to attend these briefings from 2014. The MND Information Office, akin to the SCIO for the PLA, releases "important military information" through regular or irregular press conferences and written statements. In 2016, the PLA established new theater commands, and the Southern Theater Command spokesperson is often quoted in authoritative English and Chinese-language PRC media when responding to an event, and the MND often reposts the statements on its website. The spokesperson system is the most direct way in which Beijing conducts foreign-directed media outreach.[60]

Expanding overseas presence and localization

All of China's most prominent state-owned media outlets have an international presence across multiple formats including a growing social media presence. The six most notable media outlets are China Global Television Network (CGTN), the global service of state broadcaster CCTV; the English-language newspaper China Daily; the CCP mouthpiece People's Daily; China Radio International (CRI); and two news agencies, Xinhua and China News Service. These outlets have a constellation of bureaus overseas and distribute content in multiple languages. For example, Xinhua has at least 180 overseas branches, including seven overseas headquarters across 142 countries and regions.[61]

Along with an expanded presence overseas, China's media outlets overseas are also localizing, hiring foreign media professionals, and tailoring content to local audiences. The six major outlets all broadcast or publish in multiple languages. For example, CGTN broadcasts in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish; the China Daily is available in Chinese, English, and French; and Xinhua is available in Arabic, Burmese, Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Thai.[62] One aspect of localization has been tailoring content to the sensitivities of foreign audiences. For example, unlike the formulaic and stilted Party-speak, the Global Times, a nationalistic commercial subsidiary of the People's Daily, has tailored its style to appeal to foreign audiences, for example by presenting multiple perspectives on an issue and employing an approach that is intended to convey a sense of balanced reporting. The intended effect is for audiences to find the content credible. Furthermore, the Global Times and news outlets like Xinhua are using infographics, cartoons, and charts to draw in foreign readers and to lend credibility to their content.[63]

Using foreign media to promote China's narratives

Another major strategy for communicating with foreign audiences is through the policy known as "borrowing a boat to go out to sea." This strategy refers to the use of foreign communication channels, often well-known foreign media outlets (the "boats" in the Chinese analogy) to deliver Chinese

perspectives to foreign audiences ("going out to sea").[64] Given foreign audiences' wariness of Chinese media Party-State affiliations, this strategy helps China to promote its narrative through trusted, mainstream foreign media outlets.

Free content sharing has been one of the common methods under this policy to insinuate Party-State official views into foreign mainstream media. China has set up strategic partnerships through content-exchange agreements, memoranda of understanding (MOU), paid agreements, and other forms of cooperation with foreign newspapers, TV, and radio stations to provide free content.[65] A target for this strategy is the formerly independent Chinese-language media overseas.[66] Brady reported in 2017 that New Zealand's local Chinese-language media platforms (with the exception of the pro-Falun Gong paper, The Epoch Times) have content cooperation agreements with Xinhua News Service, get their China-related news from Xinhua, and participate in annual media training conferences in China.[67]

However, these cooperation arrangements are not only targeted at overseas Chinese-language media. In 2016, Australia's Fairfax Media started running the monthly China Watch, a paid news-like advertising supplement prepared by the China Daily, in the country's leading newspapers, the Sydney Morning Herald, The Age, and the Australian Financial Review.[68] China Watch has also appeared in the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Los Angeles Times.[69] The U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act disclosure reveals that China Daily spent US$11.4 million between November 2016 and April 2020 on advertising in North American media.[70]

Australia and New Zealand have been at the forefront of China's Oceania media outreach. During the launch of China Watch in Australia, China Daily's deputy editor-in-chief Kang Bing was reported as stating that Fairfax Media's presence in both Australia and New Zealand "means the influence of China Daily will be spread to cover the two most important countries in Oceania" and China's "soft power could drive the wheel of its friendship with Australia and New Zealand."[71]

Cultivating foreign media

Chinese diplomats and other officials invest heavily in developing "friendly" relations with private media owners and reporters, encouraging them to create their own content that promotes key narratives favored by the CCP. This strategy reflects a blending of China's United Front and propaganda systems. Chinese diaspora outlets and media owners are incentivized with advertising, lucrative contracts for other enterprises, joint ventures, and even political appointments.[72] Another element of this strategy has been to subsidize trips or "trainings" in China to cultivate foreign journalists directly. Participants on these trips are then made to understand that their hosts expect them to reciprocate for the well-funded events by producing content that promotes the CCP's preferred narratives.[73]

For example, in Samoa, China has cultivated a relationship with the country's leading newspaper the Samoa Observer. The newspaper's editor-in-chief met at the Chinese Embassy in Samoa in 2016. The meeting read-out highlighted the paper has a cooperation arrangement with China's Xinhua News Agency for free content, has published the news-like placement China Today, and has sent journalists to training programs in China.[74] In 2018, the Samoa Observer published a report quoting then Prime Minister Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi, a PRC ally, as stating, "the future of the world lies with China and the Asia Pacific."[75]

Chinese ambassador opinion articles

Many Chinese ambassadors write opinion pieces in host country national media to convey Chinese narratives to local audiences.[76] CNA's Elizabeth Bachman's analysis of Chinese ambassadors' opinion pieces in PICs between 2013 and 2020 shows a spike in opinion pieces in Samoa in 2016 around the time of the national elections that brought PRC-ally Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi to power (see Figure 1).

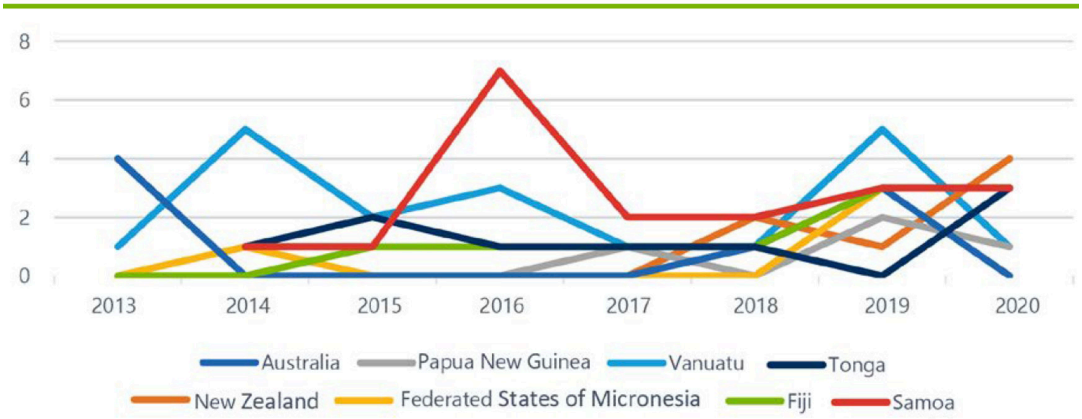


Figure 1. PRC Ambassador Opinion Pieces in Pacific Island Countries, 2013-2020. Data for Samoa and Tonga were unavailable prior to January 2014. Source Elizabeth Bachman, "Black White and Red All Over: China's Improving Foreign Directed Media", CNA, 39.

In 2019, China's Ambassador Chao Xiaoliang published an opinion piece in the Samoa Observer where he announced the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); Samoa became one of the first PICs to sign on to the initiative (see Figure 2).[77] These ambassador opinion articles, which appear regularly in Pacific national media outlets, have the effect of saturating the country-level information environment with Chinese narratives.[78]


Belt and Road initiative injects new vitality to China-Samoa cooperation

CHAO XIAOLIANG
CHINESE AMBASSADOR TO SAMOA

On 1 April, the 2019 China-Pacific Island Countries Tourism Year was launched in Samoa.
As the new Chinese Ambassador to Samoa, I accompanied Chinese Minister of Culture and Tourism Luo Shugang on his visits to some of the famous tourist attractions in Samoa such as Robert Louis Stevenson Museum, Samoa Cultural Village and To Sua Trench.
Together with us were journalists from major Chinese media agencies and big Chinese travel agents. The picturesque sceneries, splendid culture and friendly people of Samoa have enchanted all of us.
Soon afterwards, growing interest in Samoa formed a wave of "Samoan heat" in Chinese media, Internet and social media.

SAMOA/CHINA RELATIONSHIP: Prime Minister Tuilaepa Dr. Sa'ilele Malielegaoi with Chinese President Xi Jinping during a recent meeting.

behind is that as an embodiment of the traditional Chinese wisdom-a man of virtue will seek to establish others while establishing himself, it is in line with the global trend of peace and development, and upholds the golden principles of extensive consultation, joint contributions and shared benefits. More importantly, it has brought real benefits to the countries and people along the BRI.
The total trade volume between China and the BRI countries has exceeded $1T56 trillion, with more than $US80 billion having been invested. The 82 cooperation parks jointly built by China and other participation countries have created about 300,000 jobs and tax revenue worth of over $US2 billion for host countries. The latest studies by the World Bank and other international institutions indicate that the BRI cooperation will cut the cost of global trade by 1.1 percent to 2.2 percent, and increase the growth rate of the 2019 global economy by at least 0.1 percent.
As remarked by Chinese President Xi Jinping, "the BRI may be China's idea, but its opportunities and outcomes are going to benefit the world". The BRI has brought new development opportunities to Samoa and other Pacific Island countries. According to a World Bank study, the BRI will increase the GDP of East Asian and Pacific developing countries by 2.6 to 3.9 percent on average.
There is huge potential and great prospects for China-Samoa cooperation under the BRI framework, especially in terms of

Figure 2. Opinion piece by China's Ambassador to Samoa to launch the BRI in Samoa. Source: Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Independent State of Samoa, 1 May 2019, *http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zsgx/201905/t20190505_22225.htm*

China develops relationships or "friendships" with current or former officials in foreign countries; these officials benefit professionally or financially for providing prominent voices to deliver Beijing's talking points. A case that brought home to the Australian public the extent of Chinese influence among Australia's political class involved a popular former Labor Senator, Sam Dastyari, who recited Beijing's South China Sea talking points while standing alongside a Chinese donor at a public event. Dastyari

went as far as counseling the donor to set his phone aside to avoid the Australian government's surveillance of his remarks.[79] The influence gained by China over an Australian politician went beyond the realm of public diplomacy and veered into what then Prime Minister Turnbull characterized as "covert, coercive, and corrupting" action.[80] Dastyari was forced to retire, and as discussed earlier Australia enacted laws to restrict Chinese influence in its political system.

Another element of this strategy is using foreigners to write opinion pieces in local media to lend credibility to CCP narratives. China Daily, People's Daily, and CGTN regularly publish opinion pieces by U.S. and British expats employed by these outlets to promote positive messages on China and rebuttals of Western criticisms of China. The China Online, an official PRC portal site run by the SCIO/OEP and China International Publishing Group, has an overseas commentary team of about 250 experts and commentators across 69 regions.[81]

Purchasing foreign media outlets

In recent years, the policy of "borrowing a boat" has transformed into one of "buying the boat," or purchasing stakes in foreign media enterprises. China's Party-State media companies are engaging in strategic mergers and acquisitions of foreign media and cultural enterprises. The approach extends beyond overseas Chinese-language media and has included radio stations in Hungary, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe. In particular, China is seeking to become a leading force in digital television in Africa.[82]

Censorship

The PRC has a multilayered system for censoring unwanted information and suppressing dissent within China. In the past, the PRC's censorship of external media was focused mainly on international outlets operating within China and Chinese-language outlets overseas (including Hong Kong and Taiwan). Efforts to influence foreign media were generally through propaganda. However, this approach seems to be changing.[83] As Chinese entities increase their commercial investments overseas, Chinese officials have begun to increasingly use economic leverage to silence negative reporting or commentary in local-language media. This element of the PRC's censorship strategy comprises four main categories: direct action by Chinese government representatives, positive and negative incentives for self-censorship, indirect pressure through proxies, and physical or online attacks.[84]

Social media

All of China's major state media outlets have accounts on Twitter and Facebook, and some are also active on YouTube and Instagram, all of which are blocked inside China.[85] Three of the ten media accounts on Facebook with the largest number of followers were Chinese state media as of December 2019.[86] CGTN's English account had 90 million followers—the largest for any media outlet on Facebook during that period. Often these accounts do not reveal their state ownership or CCP editorial control.

For example, the People's Daily, the CCP's official outlet, describes itself simply as "the biggest newspaper in China"; CGTN presents itself as "China's preeminent 24-hour news channel"; and Xinhua refers to itself as "the first port of call for the latest and exclusive China and world news."[87]

China's social media strategy is nascent but maturing. China has adopted Russia's approach of capturing audience share through viral content, mixing Beijing-friendly messaging with click-bait content meant to attract followers, from viral memes to panda videos.[88] However, China lacks its own established network of proxy influencers, so has instead taken the approach of amplifying the state media outlets and official government accounts of Russia, Venezuela, and Iran, among others, in order to push anti-Western messaging that is broadly aligned with its own narratives.[89]

Disinformation

Disinformation is also a new part of Beijing's media warfare. Cook found when looking at CCP disinformation efforts in Taiwan and Hong Kong around 2019, that "[t]he Chinese authorities' overseas use of social media disinformation may have been relatively crude to date, but they are learning fast." Three features of China's disinformation were notable. First, most but not all content was in Chinese, indicating a key target audience is the Chinese diaspora. Second, social media accounts used for disinformation were often bought on the black market rather than cultivated from scratch, which the Russians tend to do. Lastly, disinformation campaigns were less psychologically sophisticated and have at times appeared hastily assembled.[90]

Overseas Chinese-language media

Beijing has taken over Chinese-language media outside of the PRC to the point where it is nearly impossible for an independent Chinese-language outlet to exist without being either directly or by proxy controlled by the CCP.[91] Nevertheless, there are still Chinese-language media seeking to operate independently of Beijing. For example, in Australia, Chinese-language media can be categorized into three groups. The first consists of outlets that rely on the Chinese government and Chinese commercial ties for revenue. These outlets tend to echo and take their cues from state-run mouthpieces. The second are media directed by religious groups aimed at exposing China's political, educational, and socio-economic situation while promoting human rights and religious freedom. The third is independent of any political and religious influence and seeks to pursue Western ideals of journalism. The last category has struggled to withstand pressure from Beijing.[92]

Belt and Road News Network (BRNN)

Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as One Belt, One Road or the New Silk Road, is Xi's signature foreign policy initiative. The BRI represents a vast collection of development and investment initiatives stretching from Oceania to Europe and has significantly expanded China's

economic and political influence globally.[93] In April 2019, China launched the Belt and Road News Network (BRNN), headquartered in Beijing and chaired by the People's Daily. BRNN's leadership includes 14 members from China and 26 others from 24 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, and the Middle East. The network reportedly publishes news in six languages. The BRNN has held media workshops in cooperation with the SCIO.[94]

China's HA/DR Messaging in Oceania

Overseas HA/DR missions enable the PRC to project influence, promote a narrative of itself as a responsible global power, and undertake military operations other than war (MOOTW). The use of MOOTW terminology has been applied by Beijing when referring to missions carried out by the PLA to provide disaster relief, humanitarian aid, escort, and peacekeeping, and to safeguard China's national sovereignty, security, and development interests.[95] In June 2022, Xi signed an order to promulgate a set of "trial outlines" on MOOTW, suggesting a further expansion of the PLA's MOOTW activities.[96]

There are already indications of China's expanding HA/DR action Oceania. In December 2021, the PRC officially launched the China-PICs Reserve for Emergency Supplies in Guangdong province.[97] Then in April 2022, China and the Solomon Islands signed a security cooperation agreement that includes HA/DR as one of the main areas for cooperation.[98] The controversial agreement drew international attention as it was perceived as a means to pave the way for PLA basing in the Solomon Islands, in proximity to Australia, a U.S. Five Eyes intelligence-sharing partner and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue member.[99] Moreover, in May 2022 China and Tonga signed an MOU to cooperate in the area of disaster risk reduction and emergency response.[100] The MOU followed China's January 2022 HA/DR mission to Tonga in response to the volcanic eruption and tsunami that rocked that country. HA/DR is a widely accepted MOOTW within the Pacific region, which has a high number of natural disasters and the absence of international kinetic wars. Indeed, HA/DR is a typical mission for the U.S. military and other militaries operating in the Pacific. By normalizing HA/DR as an area of China-PICs cooperation, China is able to justify a future PLA presence in the Solomon Islands or other PICs as a means to plan for HA/DR scenarios, to conduct HA/DR exercises, and to deploy a forward-force to respond to HA/DR needs. The draft 'China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision' communiqué included a provision for China to establish sub-reserves of emergency supplies in PICs.[101] It is likely these supplies will be transported to the region by the PLA from Guangdong.[102]

Decision-making regarding the CCP's United Front work and overseas HA/DR probably resides with Xi Jinping as head of the United Front LSG and the Central Commission on Foreign Affairs; Wang Yang, the Chairman of the CPPCC; and State Council Vice Premier, Sun Chunlan, who has a United Front portfolio and is a former head of the UFWD.

When it comes to HA/DR in Oceania, the Foreign Affairs Office in Guangdong also plays a role. According to Cleo Paskal, an expert on Indo-Pacific strategic issues, the PRC largely delegates Oceania outreach to its coastal province of Guangdong for three reasons: "[s]uccess in Oceania became important for leaders in Guangdong, who wanted to prove their worth to their bosses in Beijing; the

climate was similar; and it was easier to develop a dedicated network of Chinese business people and academics in Guangdong who would build relationships over the long-term with people of the region."[103] There is evidence of this outreach in Tonga. Among the many bilateral agreements signed during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's May 2022 visit to Tonga was an MOU for grant-aid assistance from Dongguan City, Guangdong province.[104] Moreover, the PLA has a Liaison Sub-Bureau in Guangdong province that focuses on United Front activities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. The PLA Liaison Sub-Bureau in Guangdong is likely responsible for Oceania given the province's focus on the Oceania region.[105]

Another province that will play a role in Oceania affairs is Shandong Province. In April 2022, the PRC officially launched the China-Pacific Island Countries Climate Change Center in Shandong's Liaocheng City. The center is a joint effort by the MFA, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, and Shandong Province, and was created to promote South-South cooperation on climate change, to make greater contributions to enhancing PICs' capacity to cope with climate change, and to build a closer China-PICs community.[106] The center was included in the draft 'China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision' communiqué as a mechanism for cooperation in addressing climate change in the region.[107]

A Case Study of Tonga

On 15 January 2022, an eruption from the underwater Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai volcano caused a tsunami and ash fall that affected over 84,000 people among Tonga's total population of 105,000 (2022 est.), and the impacts were felt throughout the Pacific region.[108] The eruption created a five-kilometer (km; 3.1 miles) wide plume of ash, steam, and gas, which rose 20 km (12.4 miles) above the volcano.[109] Nuku'alofa, Tonga's capital, was covered with a two-centimeter (0.78 inch) thick layer of volcanic ash and dust.[110] Tonga's government requested international assistance and issued a State of Emergency on
19 January (commencing 16 January and running to 13 February).[111] The eruption and tsunami constituted the most devastating disaster in Tonga's recent history.

Australia's Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQJOC) coordinated a multinational HA/DR response by establishing a new International Coordination Cell that brought together defense personnel from Tonga, Australia, Fiji, France, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (UK). China carried out its HA/DR mission bilaterally with Tonga's government.[112]

The following is a brief timeline of the international HA/DR response:

17 January: Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) P-8 Poseidon aircraft and a Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) P-3K2 aircraft collected imagery of damage to Tongan infrastructure to inform the Tongan government's damage assessment.[113]

19 January: **China's embassy in Tonga donated food packs in CGTN televised handover ceremony.[114]**

20 January: First relief flights from New Zealand and Australia (RAAF C-17A Globemaster III) arrived and provided contact-less delivery of relief items including water containers, generators, and communications equipment.[115]

21 January: Two New Zealand naval vessels, HMNZS Aotearoa and HMNZS Wellington, arrived in Tongan waters. HMNZS Aotearoa docked at Nuku'alofa port.[116]

22 January: Second relief flight from New Zealand (RNZAF C-130 Hercules) and first Japanese relief flight (C-130 aircraft) arrived.[117]

25 January: The U.S. Navy's USS Sampson arrived in Tongan waters.[118]

26 January: New Zealand's naval vessel, HMNZS Canterbury, arrived in Tongan waters.[119]

27 January: Third New Zealand relief flight arrived. Australia's naval vessel, HMS Adelaide, arrived in Tongan waters (after a COVID-19 outbreak onboard).[120] **Chinese fishing vessels arrived with relief items.[121]**

28 January: **Two Chinese relief flights (Y-20 aircraft) arrived.[122]**

9 February: Japan's naval vessel arrived in Tonga waters.[123]

15 February: **Two Chinese naval vessels, Wuzhishan (Hull 987) and Chaganhu (Hull 967), arrived at Nuku'alofa port and were greeted by Tonga's Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni in a welcome ceremony.** Australia's second naval vessel, HMS Supply, arrived in Tongan waters.[124]

1/2 March: Australia's third naval vessel, HMAS Canberra, arrived in Tongan waters and is greeted by Tonga's Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni in a welcome ceremony.[125]

By 10 February 2022, the United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Pacific Humanitarian Team had received pledges of US$32 million in financial assistance to relief, early recovery, and reconstruction in addition to in-kind contributions. Pledges were received from the Asian Development Bank (US$10.5 million), World Bank (US$8 million), Papua New Guinea (PGK10 million or about US$2.8 million), the **U.S. (US$2.6 million)**, Japan (US$2.44 million), Australia (AU$3 million or about US$2.1 million), New Zealand (NZ$3 million or about US$2.1 million), European Commission (EUR 200,000 or about US$228,000), India (US$200,000), **China (US$100,000)**, Norway (US$50,000), and Canada (CA$40,000 or about US$31,000) [emphasis added].[126]

Although the timeline would show that New Zealand and Australia, due to their proximity to Tonga, were the first nations to respond, and OCHA's reporting indicates substantial contributions from the

U.S., Papua New Guinea, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, China was able to amplify its HA/DR action through key leader engagements and consistent messaging of its "timely assistance" in local media and via prominent local voices. China's message was echoed at the highest level by Tonga's Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni when he greeted the Chinese naval ships alongside Foreign Minister Fekita 'Utoikamanu and the Chinese Ambassador Cao Xiaolin at Nuku'alofa port on 15 February 2022. In thanking the Chinese delegation for their assistance, Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni said:

> *"Again, on behalf of the government and the people of Tonga, I would like to express our sincere appreciation and gratitude to the peoples and the government of China for all their assistance,* ***their timely assistance*** *during this very difficult time for the Kingdom of Tonga."*[127] *[emphasis added].*

New Zealand's HMNZS Aotearoa did not receive a similar welcome ceremony when it docked with relief stores two weeks earlier, although Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni did greet Australia's third naval vessel, HMAS Canberra, when it arrived on 1 March. Japan received a low-profile handover ceremony at its Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Resident Representative's Office on 28 February with the CEO of Tonga's Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change, and Communications (MEIDECC).[128]

China has promoted a narrative that it was the first country to provide assistance to Tonga. It initially stated this claim through its English-language tabloid, the Global Times on 20 January. On 24 May the assertion was officially stated on China's MFA website in a factsheet on China-PIC cooperation.[129] This assertion is based on the donation of food items on 19 January, the day before relief flights from New Zealand and Australia began arriving in Nuku'alofa. China's fishing vessels that brought relief items from Fiji did not arrive until 27 January, after missions from New Zealand, Australia, Japan, and the U.S. had arrived in Tonga. China's relief flights did not arrive until 28 January, and its navy arrived on 15 February, well after the arrival of the New Zealand, Australian, and U.S. navies.

For its efforts, China was one of the first donors acknowledged for its contributions by Tonga's National Emergency Management Office (NEMO), the government's lead disaster management entity. NEMO began acknowledging donor contributions in its 7th situation report on 20 January. Only two donors were recognized – China and New Zealand. This list grew to include Australia, Fiji, France, Japan, and the UK by the 13th report on 31 January. The U.S. was not acknowledged until the 14th report on
3 February, even though the USS Sampson had arrived in Tongan waters during the prior reporting period. The oversight may be due to a lack of U.S. diplomatic presence in Tonga and the U.S.'s support role in a multinational HA/DR mission, led by Australia's HQJOC. Conversely, China's HA/DR mission received a high degree of recognition from the Tongan government and national media. The response can be attributed to earnest Chinese investments over two decades in deepening the China-Tonga diplomatic relationship, economic ties, and people-to-people relations. Moreover, during and following the HA/DR mission, the Chinese Embassy in Tonga pushed a consistent messaging

campaign, directly or through proxies, that China was the "first" country to give assistance to Tonga or China's "timely assistance" was given, and that receiving HA/DR assistance is one of the "benefits" of closer diplomatic ties with China.[130] China's promotion of its HA/DR action culminated in a 31 May 2022 MOU between Tonga and China to cooperate on disaster risk reduction and emergency response.[131] The MOU signals China's intention to take a lead role in HA/DR assistance in Tonga.

The diplomatic relationship between China and Tonga is relatively young but is growing. The two countries established diplomatic ties in 1998 and have been deepening the relationship since 2006 through diplomatic engagements, economic cooperation, scholarships and educational exchanges, and foreign assistance. Tonga signed onto the BRI in 2018 and has led the promotion of the BRI to other PICs.[132] Tonga was instrumental in establishing the Pacific-China Friendship Association (PCFA), an umbrella organization of Pacific-Chinese friendship associations, whose membership includes Australia and New Zealand amongst other PICs.[133] The PCFA, located in Tonga, has been identified as a hub for the promotion of the BRI in the Southwest Pacific.[134]

China's HA/DR mission in Tonga received effusive acknowledgment from the Tongan government although China was not the first country to respond nor was it among the biggest donors. The high degree of recognition that China received reflected the closeness of the China-Tonga diplomatic relationship and the Chinese embassy's leveraging of a multi-layered strategic communication strategy to promote China's HA/DR action.

China's Strategic Communication in Tonga

China is promoting its narratives in Tonga through a blend of United Front and propaganda methods. The most discernible strategies include using prominent local voices to promote Chinese narratives, elite-relationship building and people-to-people exchanges, cultivating Tonga's media, restricting local media access, and saturating local media with Chinese promoted content.

Using local voices to promote Chinese talking points

In 2006, Pesi Fonua, the Editor of Matangi Tonga Online, Tonga's leading news site, wrote an editorial following the closure of the British High Commission in Tonga; in it, he predicted that China would seek to fill the diplomatic vacuum created by the UK's departure.

> *"There are signs that they have already converted the rising apex of Tongan royals, Crown Prince Tupouto'a, Princess Pilolevu, and Prince 'Ulukalala Lavaka Ata. There is no doubt that China intends to fill the vacuum that has been left by the British, but only time will tell whether or not they are able to win the favour of the rest of the population."*[135]
> *- Pesi Fonua, Editor of Matangi Tonga Online, Editorial on 12 March 2006*

Fonua described elite relationship building that is a common method in China's United Front work. Among the Tongan royals named in the 2006 editorial, Princess Pilolevu Tuita would later become the

President of the Tonga-China Friendship Association (TCFA).[136] TCFA's Secretary General, Col. (Ret'd.) Siamelie Latu, is a former Ambassador to China, and regularly writes pro-China opinion articles, including for Matangi Tonga. In 2019, Latu wrote a lengthy article for Matangi Tonga in which he refuted criticism of China's debt trap diplomacy. The article reflected Chinese talking points in tone, style, and content, and included a hypothetical formula for loan repayment scenarios that reads like a PRC-prepared policy document.[137] In 2020, Latu wrote another lengthy opinion article in Matangi Tonga about China's role in the UN; the piece hit key Chinese talking points on the One-China Policy, Tibet, Taiwan, and South-South Cooperation, among others issues.[138] More recently, in March 2022, Latu wrote a feature article for online news site, Nepituno, in which he highlighted China's HA/DR action in response to the January 2022 volcanic eruption as one of the benefits of closer diplomatic ties between Tonga and China.[139] The article amplified China's narrative that it was the first country to provide aid to Tonga.[140] The article also detailed the role of China's Y-20 military aircraft and the Combined Task Group (CTG 987) of the PLA Navy in delivering relief items and included images of the aircraft and two vessels as well as a day-by-day and item-by-item accounting of China's assistance that closely resembled PRC messaging published in Chinese state-affiliated media.[141] Latu's position as head of the TCFA likely requires him to promote China's narratives, including sticking to its messaging on the One-China Policy, Taiwan, Tibet, and Falun Gong, among others issues. His authorship of numerous opinion articles on an array of themes, in different outlets, suggests China uses prominent local voices to promote multiple narratives across different sites and platforms.

Elite relationship building and people-to-people exchanges

Princess Pilolevu Tuita has played a key role in supporting people-to-people exchanges between Tonga and China, and between China and other PICs, through the establishment of the TCFA in Tonga and then the umbrella Pacific-China Friendship Association (PCFA).[142] The PCFA was established in Tonga in 2016 and lists 15 members on its website; they include China Friendship Associations/ Societies from American Samoa, Australia, Fiji, FSM, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tahiti Nui, and Vanuatu.[143] An expert on China's United Front work, Anne-Marie Brady has identified the PCFA as China's main point of contact for rolling out the BRI in the Southwest Pacific. According to Brady, the Friendship Association is a hybrid Party-State organization with three "mothers-in-law" – MFA, the CCPPC, and the International Department – entities that play a key role in CCP United Front work.[144] Brady explains that the Pacific branch in Tonga has been instrumental in the expansion of the BRI into the Southwest Pacific after a 2018 meeting of Friendship Associations from the Americas and Oceania in Hainan, China, where Princess Pilolevu Tuita proposed establishing a Pearl Maritime Road Initiative.[145] Shortly after the meeting, PICs with diplomatic ties with China signed agreements on the BRI, with infrastructure development being the main theme.[146] The role of the PCFA in building strategic alliances with China friendship associations/societies in the Pacific and in promoting Beijing's narrative, suggests that Tonga is at the center of China's people-to-people exchange efforts, or United Front

Cultivating Tonga's media

China is cultivating Tonga's media along with journalists from other PICs. In 2017, twelve Pacific journalists from leading media outlets were invited to China for a tour of Beijing and Guangdong Province. As discussed earlier, Guangdong leads on diplomatic efforts in Oceania, including development aid, infrastructure, agriculture, fishery, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges in Tonga.[147] Among the group of journalists invited on the tour was a photojournalist from Matangi Tonga, Linny Folau, who would go on to write a favorable article about the visit as a dispatch from China.[148] The inclusion of a journalist from Matangi Tonga indicates at the very least, that Beijing views the news site as Tonga's leading media outlet and intends to use it as a platform for promoting its narratives.

Although journalism exchanges/tours are common in the Pacific, and Pacific journalists have been invited to countries such as Japan and New Zealand for informational tours – past participants of the China tours have warned about the expectations of their hosts for reciprocal favors. For example, journalists from Pakistan and Sri Lanka have reported being made to understand that their hosts expect them to reciprocate for the well-funded program by producing content that promotes the CCP's preferred narratives.[149] Other experts have flagged these paid trips as a risk because they erode journalists' independence and create a sense of obligation to the sponsor. The risk is more pronounced in China than other countries because of the PRC's record of restricting media freedoms and the right to information at home and around the world.[150]

Restricting media access

In late May 2022, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi toured the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea, as well as Timor-Leste (not a PIC), and signed a number of bilateral agreements with these countries. At the mid-point of his trip, local journalists in the Solomon Islands and Fiji began raising concerns that they were being restricted by the Chinese delegation from covering meetings between Wang and their respective government officials. According to Kate Lyons of the Guardian (UK), Wang was not answering any questions from local journalists.[151] Local journalists were also restricted from covering the events through an array of tactics, from receiving instructions via their foreign ministries that no questions would be taken by the Chinese delegation, to having media passes revoked without explanation, and being physically blocked by local police or Chinese officials from filming or asking questions.[152] In the Solomon Islands, the Chinese delegation stage-managed a media briefing, allowing only two questions – a question from a national journalist to be directed to the country's Foreign Minister, and a question from Chinese journalists, to be directed to Wang. The Media Association of Solomon Islands boycotted the event in response to the restrictions on press freedom.[153]

In Tonga, no question appears to have been asked by any Tongan journalists of the Chinese delegation during Wang's visit. Matangi Tonga photojournalist, Linny Folau, the same journalist who attended the 2017 China tour by Pacific journalists, covered Wang's visit. Folau wrote two articles published on the same day. The first report covered Wang's meeting with King Tupou VI. The second report covered the six bilateral agreements that were signed by Tonga's Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni. The latter simply listed the titles of the bilateral agreements signed with no elaboration on matters

of public interest, such as the potentially controversial plan to establish a China-supported police fingerprint examination laboratory, which would initiate the first law enforcement cooperation between China and Tonga.[154]

These examples illustrate that China's restrictions on local journalists reporting on events that are occurring in their countries has the effect of exporting China's authoritarianism and its suppression of press freedoms and freedom of information wherever China is present.

Saturating local media with promoted content

The Chinese Embassy is employing a strategy of saturating the local media with content that promotes China's narratives. For example, Chinese Embassy-promoted content appears regularly in Matangi Tonga. To distinguish promoted content from news, Matangi Tonga assigns tags such as "sponsored promoted content," "sponsored article," or "sponsored advertising content." Matangi Tonga publishes the Chinese Ambassador's opinion articles as well as the pro-China opinion articles of TCFA's General Secretary Latu with these tags. This also appears to be a common practice for opinion articles from other embassies. For example, an opinion article by Australia's High Commissioner in Tonga on the Australia-Tonga relationship is also tagged as sponsored content.[155] The Chinese Embassy also produces Tongan-language articles that are tagged as sponsored content.[156]

Promoted content that is more difficult to discern are Matangi Tonga news reports covering China where often the source is either the Chinese Ambassador or a Tongan government official. These types of reports echo rather than re-state PRC messaging, but the usage can be attributed to PRC statements. For example, a news report on 31 May 2022 by Linny Folau provided a summary of China's recent disaster relief assistance to Tonga. Folau wrote:

> *"Earlier this year, China had dispatched **two Chinese Navy Ships, two Chinese fishing vessels** and two **Y-20 military aircrafts** to deliver relief items to assist with the restoration of the Tongan people's lives after the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcanic disaster on January 15." [Emphasis added].*

The accounting and naming of the military or state-linked assets that were deployed echo China's reporting of its HA/DR action in its state-affiliated media such as CGTN and Global Times.[157] Nonetheless, the publication of promoted content as news is likely not restricted to Chinese-promoted content. A perusal of news reports on Australia suggests some adoption of Australian embassy press releases into Matangi Tonga news reporting.[158]

Multilayered strategic communication

China's strategic communication in Tonga reflects an overlaying of multiple strategies and approaches drawn from both the United Front and propaganda toolkit. These strategies are interconnected and work in tandem. For example, elite relationship building enables the Chinese Embassy to use prominent local voices to promote Chinese talking points even as it censors criticism

or discussions of no-go issues, such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Uighurs. Cultivating national journalists enables the Chinese Embassy to promote its talking points through favorable news reporting and positive images and to saturate local media with content promoting Chinese narratives. These positive narratives enable the Chinese Embassy to expand its elite relationships particularly when voices of prominent national leaders lend credibility to Chinese narratives. Chinese messaging in national media and other country-level forums is consistent and frequent. Rather than treating public events as one-off key leader engagements or stand-alone media events, China consistently messages the same narratives across all engagements and platforms – adherence to the One-China policy, China is a developing country like Tonga, China is a friend to Tonga, China is a global economic power, China provides economic assistance without any political strings, and diplomatic ties with China bring economic benefits and well-being to Tonga.

Conclusion and Strategic Considerations

China's HA/DR in Oceania lags considerably in quantity and quality in comparison to Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the U.S. Yet, the PRC's limited efforts to date are receiving outsize praise from national politicians and media. The case of Tonga is a prime example. In Tonga, China was able to amplify its HA/DR mission in response to the January 2022 volcanic eruption through its close diplomatic relationship with the Tongan government and by leveraging a multilayered strategic communication approach. China was not the first country to respond with substantial relief items, nor the largest donor, but it was praised effusively. **It is important to understand this dynamic in order to not over-estimate PRC HA/DR capacity and reach in the region and, conversely, to not underestimate the degree to which Chinese narratives and political sway have taken hold.**

China has invested significantly in its diplomatic, economic, and people-to-people relationships in Tonga and in other PICs. There are eight Chinese embassies in the ten PICs with which China has diplomatic ties (with the exceptions of Niue and the Cook Islands, which are served by China's embassy in New Zealand). Chinese diplomats are actively engaged in key leader engagements, writing opinion articles in national media, and organizing public/media events. Chinese embassies also support an array of people-to-people exchanges, enterprise-to-enterprise exchanges, and cultural and community organizations in each country. By comparison, the U.S. has five embassies covering the same ten countries. **A lack of presence inevitably limits U.S. engagements, messaging, deepening of diplomatic ties, and the ability to understand and push back on China's narratives.** Competing with China in Oceania will require a greater, permanent U.S. Government presence at the country-level across the region, particularly in diplomatic and development sphere.

United Front work is at the core of China's overseas influence efforts. There is an elaborate network of actors tied to, and cultivated by, United Front work. **Understanding PRC United Front work, its goals, bureaucracy, decision-making structures, and methods are necessary not only for**

engagements with China, but also for engagements with PICs that have diplomatic ties with China. In particular, recognizing United Front vectors and mechanisms, i.e., Confucius Institutes, overseas Chinese community organizations, wealth proxies, political elites, people-to-people exchanges, consulting agreements, etc., can help inform U.S. Government response and mitigation strategies, including supporting PICs to strengthen their political systems against elite capture.

Thus far, Chinese influence on and through local media in Oceania is non-coercive; the focus has been on propaganda through op-eds, translating and pushing Chinese language news, and cultivating local journalists through all-expenses-paid trips to China. However, as Chinese entities increase their commercial interests in Oceania, expect them to use economic leverage to silence critics, censor media coverage they do not like and provide greater and more direct support to friendly elites. To the extent that these nations have pluralistic political traditions and healthy opposition parties, expect this more active Chinese meddling in domestic affairs to embolden PRC allies, raise the political stakes, and fuel instability. **Strong institutions and healthy multi-party democracy in these nations will be the biggest check on Chinese influence going forward.**

Appendix: China's United Front Work

The starting point for understanding the nature of China's global influence is the CCP's United Front work.[159] United Front is also referred to as political warfare, influence operations, sharp power, or people-to-people relations. In the lexicon of the PLA it is referred to as liaison work.[160] United Front work is more than propaganda and influence operations, and it is not simply public diplomacy. Experts who study China's United Front work have described it as "a methodology and strategic framework for exploiting the internal divisions of adversaries."[161] It is a tool for political warfare. United Front is also an organizing principle that is deeply entrenched in CCP bureaucracy – there are not special orders explaining what to do to achieve objectives – United Front work is integrated into the day-to-day work of the CCP.[162]

China's global strategic communication efforts are embedded in the CCP's United Front work. PRC political warfare expert, Kerry Gershanek, has described CCP United Front work as "integrally engaged with media warfare."[163] Anne-Marie Brady, a prominent scholar of China, has identified the establishment of a global, multi-platform strategic communication strategy to promote the CCP's agenda as one of the four categories of United Front work prioritized under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The other categories are strengthening of efforts to manage and guide overseas Chinese communities and utilizing them as agents of Chinese foreign policy; a re-emphasis on people-to-people, party-to-party, plus PRC enterprise-to-foreign enterprise relations with the aim of coopting foreigners to support and promote the CCP's foreign policy goals; and the formation of a China-centered economic and strategic bloc.[164]

United Front work originated as a Leninist tactic of strategic alliance building. The CCP itself can be viewed as a product of Lenin's international United Front efforts, originating as a chapter of the 1921 Soviet Communist International.[165] CCP strategists adapted Lenin's tactics to Chinese circumstances and culture from the mid-1930s onward.[166] United Front efforts are credited as having been instrumental in winning the revolution that brought the CCP to power.[167] During the 1950s, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency described United Front work as an effort to essentially control, monitor, and mobilize the masses outside the party.[168] During the Cold War years, until the PRC's 1971 international recognition with a UN seat, the CCP's foreign affairs and thereby United Front efforts were focused on reaching out to the overseas Chinese population and managing relations with foreigners.[169] Under the leadership of Xi, United Front work has gained renewed importance. At a 2015 Central United Front Work Meeting, Xi stated that United Front is one of the three "magic weapons" for the CCP's political warfare, on par with Party building and the military.[170]

United Front work is undertaken in both domestic and foreign settings. Overseas United Front work has two main features. The first is surveillance of the Chinese diaspora or what the CCP describes as people-to-people relations.[171] An aspect of this effort is checking whether individuals have connections back in the PRC that are potentially problematic or provide a way to transmit dangerous ideas back into the system; and keeping individuals away from political activities such as support for human rights, Tibetan issues, or Uighur issues. Party-State action within this sphere is generally targeted at overseas ethnic Chinese and Chinese students studying abroad. The second feature is to shape the

discussion about China among non-Chinese policymakers and influential voices in the media and academia.[172] It is an effort to co-opt and manipulate elites, influential individuals, and organizations to shape discourse and decision-making. This particular feature of the CCP's overseas United Front efforts has garnered greater attention in recent years, with rising concerns over foreign interference activities around the world.[173] Countries such as Australia have lately discovered influence activities targeting its political elites and have singled out this aspect of United Front work as particularly problematic (although awareness of Chinese surveillance of ethnic Chinese communities in Australia and Chinese students at Australian universities date back to the early 2000s).[174] The CCP's United Front activities differ from the action of states to gain influence through public diplomacy because it is not done in the open. Australia's former Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull described United Front work as action that is "covert, coercive, and corrupting" and "the line that separates legitimate influence from unacceptable interference."[175] In 2018, Australia passed several laws (national security and electoral reforms) to restrict foreign interference in its political system.[176]

The CCP's United Front differs from the Soviet model in that it does not reside in the realm of intelligence agencies but is bureaucratized under the United Front Work Department (UFWD) and UFWD's outward facing analogue, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), as well as under other Party-State entities.[177] Notably, CCP United Front work is the task of all CCP agencies and it is a task of every CCP member.[178] The CCP's United Front approach differs from Russian influence operations in several other ways. According to China expert Peter Mattis, there are three key distinctions. The first difference is that the Chinese approach is human or relationship-centric while the Russian approach is operations or effects-centric. The Chinese approach focuses on shaping the "personal context" rather than "operational tricks." Unlike the Russians, Chinese intelligence plays a secondary role in influencing external actors and events. Chinese United Front activities such as exchanges organized by United Front groups are rarely carried out by intelligence officers, but by party elites who understand the party's foreign policy goals and are trained in engaging with foreigners. So, whereas Russia relies on intelligence officers for influence operations, China prefers to use gatekeepers who facilitate inroads and make connections to open doors for relationship building, with a focus on cultivating political and business elites.[179]

The relationship-centric nature of CCP United Front work makes the line between influence and interference efforts difficult to discern. One feature of the approach is the use of inducements and threats to shape the relationship. The modus operandi is to offer privileged access, build personal rapport, and reward those who deliver on CCP priorities. Relationships are built based on common interests and are conditioned into one of dependency. Adding to the complexity of the approach is that influence often takes the form of guidance rather than direction.[180] These relationships of dependency and common interests enable the CCP to exert other forms of influence, including censorship and propaganda.

United Front Entities

This section provides a description of key Party-State entities involved in United Front work.

Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)

The CPPCC is the platform to bring together all relevant United Front actors inside and outside the party including party elders, intelligence officers, diplomats, propagandists, military officers and political commissars, United Front workers, academics, and businesspeople.[181] The current CPPCC Chairman is Wang Yang, the fourth-ranking Politburo Standing Committee member, suggesting the CPPCC plays a significant role in the Party's United Front system. Figure 3 shows the CPPCC sitting in parity with the National People's Congress under the PRC state structure.[182]

United Front Leading Small Group (LSG)

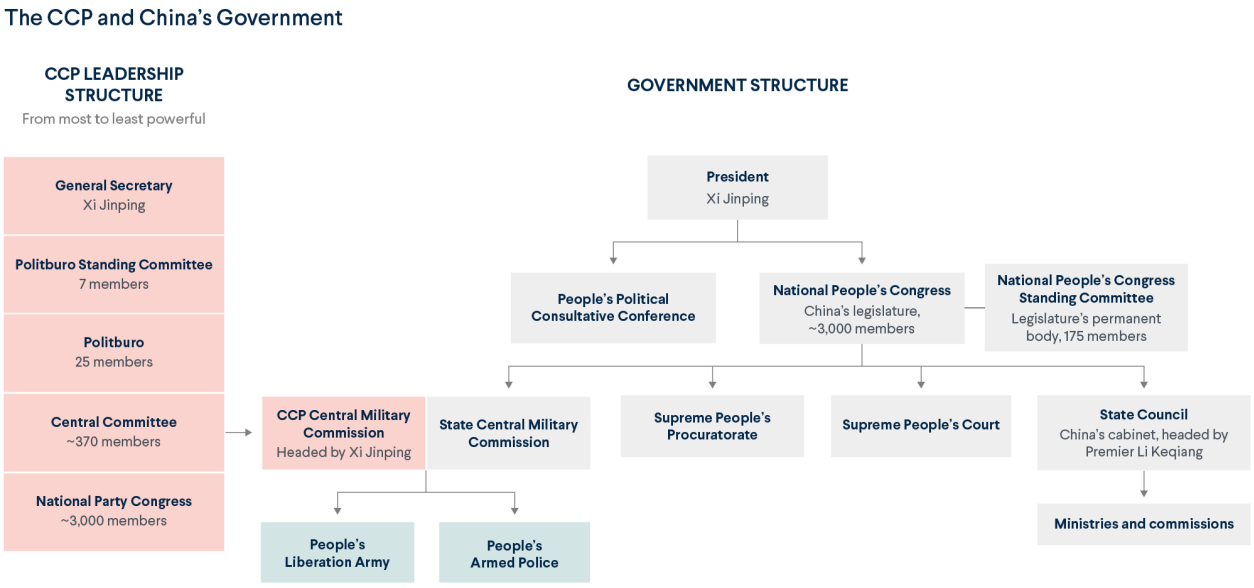


Figure 3. The CCP and China's Government Structure. Source: Eleanor Albert, Lindsay Maizland, and Beina Xu, "The Chinese Communist Party," Council on Foreign Relations, Updated 23 June 2021, *https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinese-communist-party*

In 2015, Xi established a United Front LSG, an informal body comprised of senior Party leaders, likely headed by Xi.[183] The last time the Party formed a United Front LSG was in 1968 under the leadership of Xi's father, who is considered a master of United Front work. The United Front LSG functions as platform to coordinate and elevate the status of United Front work across the bureaucracy.[184]

United Front Work Department (UFWD)

The UFWD is the executive and coordinating agency for United Front work and has been revitalized under Xi. In 2015, Xi removed its head and appointed senior party leader, Sun Chunlan, a member of the Politburo and State Council Vice Premier.[185] In 2018, the State Ethics Affairs Commission, State Administration of Religious Affairs, and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office were subsumed under the UFWD as part of efforts by Xi to centralize the United Front system.[186] The themes covered by these

entities – ethics affairs, religious affairs, and overseas Chinese – point to the focus of China's United Front work.

International (Liaison) Department and Central Foreign Affairs Commission

The International Department (formerly International Liaison Department) handles the CCP's relationships with more than 600 political parties and organizations as well as individuals, who are generally political elites.[187] The International Department joined with the Central Foreign Affairs Commission in March 2018. [188] The Commission, headed by Xi, is the apex body for foreign affairs matters.[189]

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)

The MFA and its diplomats overseas are connected to United Front. The CCP has a long tradition of party and government personnel "double-hatting" – i.e., holding roles within multiple agencies. UFWD personnel often operate under diplomatic cover as members of the MFA, using this role to guide United Front activities outside China, working with politicians and other high-profile individuals, Chinese community associations, and student associations, as well as sponsoring Chinese language, media, and cultural activities.[190]

Community Organizations

Other entities connected to United Front activities include the China Overseas Friendship Association, the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification, the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, the Western Returned Scholars Association, the Forum on the Global Chinese Language Media, and the Chinese students and scholars associations, among other provincial chapters and sister state groups.[191]

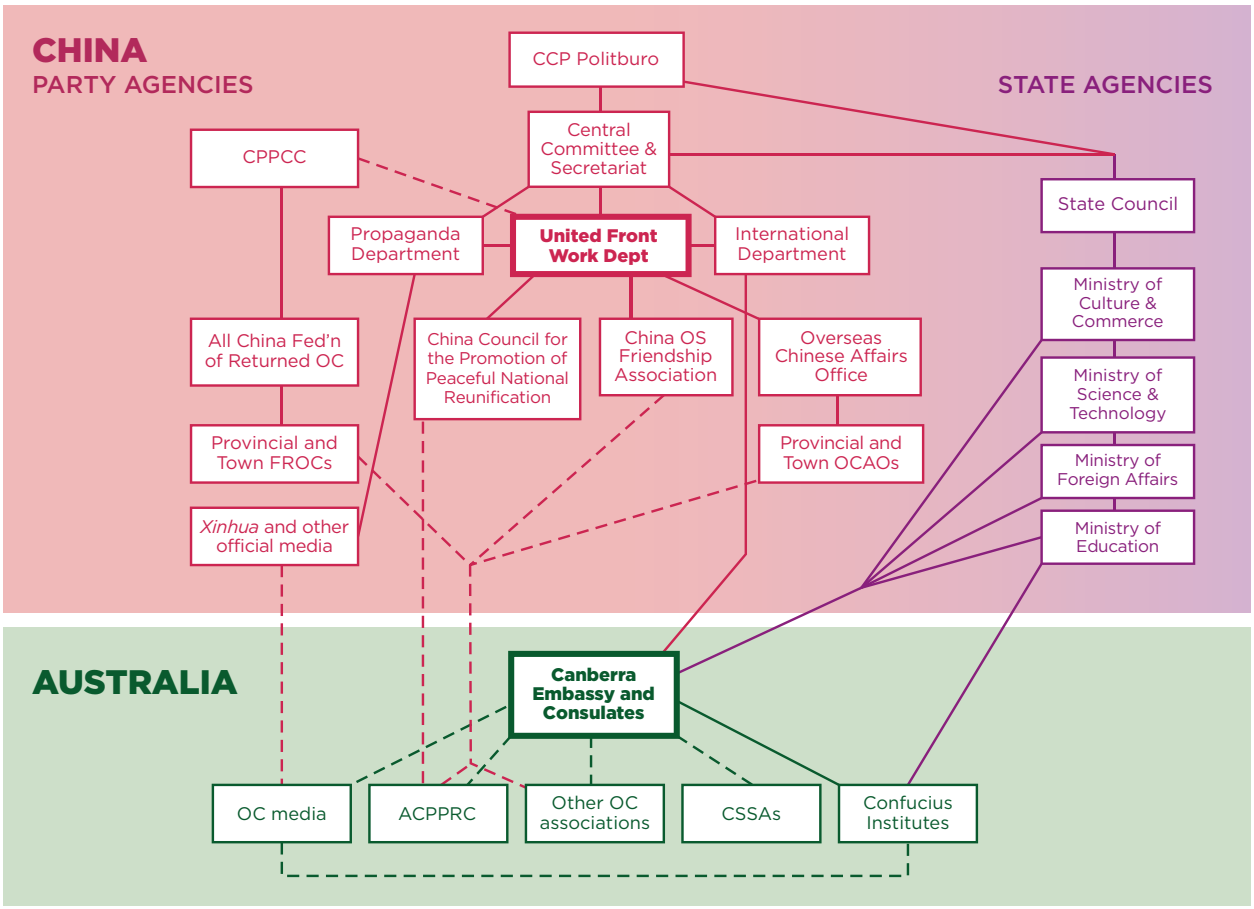
PLA Political Work Department

The PLA Political Work Department replaced the General Political Department, which was dissolved during the reorganization of the PLA in November 2015. The Liaison Bureau of the Political Work Department leads the PLA's United Front work. It operates much like an intelligence service with officers using official and non-official cover. It focuses on strategic targets relevant to military operations.[192]

Vectors and Mechanisms

In addition to Party-State entities, vectors and mechanisms for CCP United Front work may include community organizations (as mentioned earlier), wealthy individual proxies, Confucius Institutes, people-to-people exchanges/diplomacy, and consulting agreements.[193]

Figure 4 shows an example of the organizational structure of United Front operations in Australia created by Australian investigative journalist Clive Hamilton.[194] It shows the direct and guided relations between some of the key United Front entities.



OC – Overseas Chinese **OS** – Overseas **CPPCC** – Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
ACPPRC – Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China
CSSA – Chinese Students and Scholars Association

Direct relationship ——————— **Guided relationship** – – – – – – – –

Figure 4. Organizational Structure for United Front Operations in Australia. Source: Clive Hamilton, "China's Influence Activities: What Canada can learn from Australia", Mcdonald-Laurier Institute, Commentary, November 2018, *https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/201801026_Commentary_Hamilton_FWeb.pdf*

Endnotes

1 They are the U.S. embassies in Federated State of Micronesia, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and New Zealand. The U.S Embassy in Papua New Guinea also serves the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The U.S. Embassy in Fiji further serves Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga, and Tuvalu. The U.S. Embassy in New Zealand additionally serves Niue and Cook Islands.

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China's Multi-pronged Approach to Gain Influence in Oceania

APPENDIX: THE EVOLVING NATURE OF CHINA'S HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

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Image: Oregon National Guard partners with Chinese for Disaster Management Exchange. Photo by Sgt. 1st Class April Davishttps://www.army.mil/article/197416/oregon_national_guard_partners_with_chinese_for_disaster_management_exchange

Purpose

This brief initiated by the Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance explores the processes of humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR) in China as well as investigates the leadership, structures, and policies that shape and drive Chinese HADR. The first portion focuses on the general structure and policies of Chinese HADR efforts while the second half outlines the significance of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the planning and implementation of HADR, and concludes with recommendations for the HADR community moving forward.

China is becoming a large force and player in HADR and the United States must continue to collaborate, prepare, and assist partner countries alongside China. Furthermore, China's growing role presents opportunities to collaborate and foster ties; however much of Chinese HADR remains cloaked in secrecy. This piece utilizes open source materials to synthesize public information so that organizations and agencies within HADR can better understand China's growing significance in HADR.

The Executive Summary

Chinese HADR is secret and tightly regimented by the highest members of Chinese politics. The main driver of HADR decision making, other than President Xi Jinping, is the State Council which contains ranking members of the communist party as well as ranking leaders in various agencies. While the groups that respond to HADR and enact HADR measures are proliferating, the primary few are the State Council, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce which oversees international HADR. HADR policies and procedures are tightly controlled, as are responses to crises as HADR events pose key threats to political stability. Domestically, failed or poor responses to domestic crises could jeopardize political legitimacy and stability. Internationally, most Chinese do not support HADR efforts in favor of local efforts; however, President Xi understands that HADR efforts are critical to establishing China as a 'responsible' global power. Presently, Chinese HADR efforts are limited and operate under strategically vague terms. Publically released outlines of policy on assistance speak to increased infrastructure and capacity, but not specific threshold or criteria. Finalized rules and procedures with Chinese HADR do not exist, and those that do are not public.

Regarding the PLA, China does have a history of HADR and humanitarian missions but the frequency is picking up after Hu Jintao's 2004 speech outlining "Historic Missions" which included HADR missions as core to China's rise in power and influence. Organizationally, the PLA and its missions flow down from the Central Military Commission, the State Council, Politburo as well as the Ministries of Finance and Commerce. As aforementioned, formal rules and policies are not outlined in general, and this trend continues with the PLA. Examining specific responses and efforts it is clear that the 13th Transport Division plays a significant role in delivering resources to both domestic and

international events. Overall, the PLA plays the instrumental role of delivering aid as well as performing the logistical tasks associated with HADR efforts. Despite the PLA's large role and size, teams and efforts for international events are predominately small groups, such as the Chinese International Search and Rescue Team or the Peace Ark. For The Chinese HADR missions are becoming more central to its regional and global interests to establish itself as a "responsible" regional and global power. More so, HADR missions afford the opportunities to build response and logistical capacity for the PLA, while also fostering relations with host countries. Notwithstanding China's expanding military capacity and HADR efforts, Chinese HADR remains small in comparison to the likes of the U.S. Additionally, HADR efforts are slowed and hamstrung by domestic considerations, often leading to international gaffes and growing suspicions of host countries.



Figure 1. Nurse Xiao Huan Wang (center) and fellow Joint Logistics Force Soldiers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) extract a simulated casualty at Camp Rilea Armed Forces Training Center, November 17, 2017, in Warrenton, Ore. Engineers and medics from the Oregon National Guard and PLA worked alongside each other to share disaster response capabilities during the 13th annual U.S.-China Disaster Management Exchange. (Photo Credit: Sgt. 1st Class April Davis)

Ultimately, there are a few policy recommendations going forward. First, HADR organizations should try to work with the listed organizations and the PLA to clarify and establish the rules which China operates on. Second, collaboration and cooperation on crises should continue and ideally expand. Working with China on international HADR responses will help bring China into the international mold while also promoting friendship while assuaging fear. Lastly, HADR organizations can pursue other avenues to build ties and capacity with civil society organizations, or what most would refer to as NGO's. Historically, these organizations played no role in HADR domestic responses but are rapidly becoming vital components; more importantly, these organizations might shed light on the process.

Chinese Domestic and International HADR

HADR Leadership

Chinese HADR remains an enigma as the majority of details are opaque, or not searchable through open sources. However, Chinese leadership for both domestic and international HADR is similar as the structure of the Chinese government and decision making is vertical with ranking members within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) holding positions in most important committees and agencies. Of course, the standing committee and politburo, as well as the personal direction of President Xi Jinping, will set direction and policy regardless of previous policies. Internally, HADR decisions flow from a rapidly proliferating and byzantine administrative network to plan and implement responses to disasters. Central to HADR planning and response is the State Council which contains leaders and ranking members of the party such as Premier Li Keqiang as well as vice premiers and state councilors from around the country. At the moment 35 members are on the council, and all of the members also chair or are ministers of additional agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Civil Affairs, Ministry of Finance, and many others that play roles in HADR. Agencies that deal with disaster reduction and relief are the National Disaster Reduction Committee, State Flood, State Forest Fire Control, and the Disaster Control and Relief Coordination Office (Aldrich 295, Kang 40). Regarding disaster risk management: there is the State Council Emergency Management office which oversees national level events, the National Committee for Disaster Reduction for natural disasters, the National Committee for Worker Safety for labor and Industrial problems, the National Committee for Patriotic Health, and lastly the National Committee for Integrated Management for public security (Aldrich 294-295). For coordination, it would be best to try to foster ties above the individual agencies or committees such as at the State Council or at the National Commission for Disaster Reduction, which is the national committee that is staffed by people from the State Council that coordinates and guides disaster responses and relief (Luo 2014, 386).

International HADR predominately flows through the Ministry of Commerce, which is also structured under the State Council. Through Commerce and the State Council, it is often the case that the process funnels down to smaller organizations such as individual banks (China Export-Import Bank), China Africa Development Fund (also within the China Development Bank), and major state-owned enterprises such as China National Petroleum Corporation (Wolf et al., xii). In March 2018 another agency was created, called the State International Development Cooperation Agency (Cornish, 2018; Mardell, 2018). This agency will be headed by Wang Xiaotao, who previously worked as the deputy director of the National Development and Reform Commission as well as working with other important agencies such as Commerce, Foreign Affairs, and many others (ibid). The State International Development Cooperation Agency will mostly work to do planning while other agencies work with the implementation (such as Commerce, Health, Agriculture). The other vital agent in both domestic and international HADR is the People's Liberation Army (PLA) which undoubtedly contributes

logistical support as well as resources and technical support to respond to both international and domestic disasters.

Unfortunately, Chinese HADR presents several issues to find engagement opportunities. First, given the strict hierarchy of Chinese politics and the nature of the people holding positions in the most germane agencies, HADR organizations will have to rely on non-open source information to contact these representatives as even the lowest standing members are in the highest echelons of Chinese politics. Second, the nature of Chinese politics fosters an environment that will change in each scenario as well as after major disasters. One example of this is after the 2008 Sichuan Wenchuan earthquake that killed almost 70,000 people and affected tens of millions of people (Zhen, 2018). Up until the earthquake, NGOs or what the CCP calls civil society organizations (CSO) were not involved in the HADR response network. This is due to the CCP understanding that having more actors who were not part of the government taking part in HADR opens up the CCP to criticism about response efforts or policies (Luo 2014, 386; Kang 60-70). After the 2013 Lushan earthquake, CSO's were much faster and better equipped to deal with relief, and are becoming integral parts of the HADR framework in China (Zhen, 2018). While the inclusion of CSO's is to the benefit of China, the opaque nature of Chinese politics and the history of policy changes after disasters makes it difficult to pinpoint specific organizations or policies as they might change at the whim of a politburo member. Third, the nature of information flows and the press in China showcases a very regimented and directed perspective of HADR. Media or articles outlining shortcomings of responses are blocked, and those that publish the articles or journalists that ask about these questions frequently lose their positions (if they are not Chinese) and potentially face charges for creating social disorder (Kang, 63).

One example of a major Chinese CSO is the Chinese Red Cross (CRC) which is closer to the CCP than the International Red Cross Federation (Carter, 2013; Yang et. al., 759-761). Much like the PLA and the CCP, the CRC primarily responds to events by delivering emergency resources and funding to disaster areas (Liu and Peng, 2016; Markus, 2014; "Macau Red Cross Contributes…", 2018). In addition to delivering disaster resources, the CRC also carries out smaller responses such as volunteer or local capacity building as well as targeted projects like tuberculosis reduction in Shanxi province (Chandran, 2017). However, the CRC predated other CSO's as it has close ties with the CCP as salaries are paid by the CCP as well as the CRC not being independent ("Red Cross Society of China"). This is verified by checking the International Federation of Red Cross and Crescent partner countries in Asia. Having close ties with the CCP is the reason the CRC worked and predated actual independent CSO's in China. Moving forward CSO's have greater autonomy but the relationship between CSO's and the CCP stems from the original relationship with the CRC as the CRC was the only humanitarian organization other than the CCP. CSO's will have varying autonomy and decision making but ultimately all CSO's work with and at the discretion of the CCP.

Domestic HADR Policy

While most of Chinese HADR remains secretive, there is little doubt that the CCP will not continue to build HADR responses and capability. One study estimates that the yearly GDP costs of disasters are between 3-6% of annual GDP (Kang, 23-24). Domestically, there is a little bit more to work with

on how things are done, but not much. Generally speaking, policies and rules are frames of reference for how to approach situations. Many academic complications of conversations with policy makers and responders show that lower level officials believe that they must do what they think is necessary to accomplish the most critical objectives in the given disaster even if they must go against standing procedures (Ibid, 57). Comprehensive and systematic laws and regulations about disaster reduction and relief do not exist, or at least in the public space (Aldrich et al., 298; Hirono 30). While white papers exist, specific rules and regulations are difficult to find; most rules and regulations are general comments or resolutions about expanding respond abilities and infrastructure while maintaining social harmony. The most direct outlines of policy are the levels of response and the local government emergency planning. According to the 2006 "Emergency Response Plan," almost all counties and townships have local emergency plans with slightly more than half of the villages having plans (Luo 2014, 387). In terms of how the government reacts relates to the level of damage of the disaster. Level 1 being the highest, the director of the National Commission of Disaster Reduction (NCDR) goes to the area and takes on leadership (Luo 2014, 383-390). Within one day, the Ministries of Finance, Commerce, and Civil Affairs must move resources and relief to the area. Level 2 is organized by the deputy director of the NCDR who picks the person to go to the disaster area, with a 24-hour window for relief and support groups to be sent (ibid). Level 3 is organized by the secretary general of the NCDR, who is also the deputy minister of civil affairs. Again, relief and groups are sent immediately (ibid). Level 4 is decided by the NCDR after getting a report from a local office, and relief and supplies are sent immediately. Given the ability for ranking members of the standing committee and politburo to issue orders or guidance, it is often the case that formal policies are rarely followed and are used as reference points rather than strict procedure. Unfortunately, individual disaster plans and more information are not available to the public.

International HADR Policy

Internationally, Chinese HADR is expanding but continues to be introverted and opaque like domestic HADR. Starting in 2000 the Politburo adopted a 'going out' policy which China is attempting to build its reputation as a responsible power globally through acts of HADR. Unfortunately, HADR and international aid remain extremely unpopular domestically; which makes consistent and unbiased coverage of Chinese HADR difficult to find (Krebs, 2018). Most domestic articles that reference recent international HADR statements or projects come from organizations like Xinhua and the People's Daily; both are major sources of Chinese news but are also very closely monitored and run by the CCP. Similar to domestic policies, formal guidelines are vague and grant a great deal of flexibility to redefine acts as HADR. The 2014 white paper on foreign aid from the State Council outlines:

> *"When providing foreign assistance, China adheres to the principles of not imposing any political conditions, not interfering in the internal affairs of the recipient countries and fully respecting their right to independently choosing their own paths and models of development. The basic principles China upholds in providing foreign assistance are mutual respect, equality, keeping promise, mutual benefits and win-win."*

As well as:

> *"One of the important objectives of China's foreign assistance is to support other developing countries to reduce poverty and improve the livelihood of their peoples. China prioritizes supporting other developing countries to develop agriculture, enhance education level, improve medical and health services and build public welfare facilities, and provide emergency humanitarian aid when they suffer severe disasters."*

There should also be a reference to the recent publications of President Xi speaking in January 2018 on foreign aid:

> *"In 2018, we will thoroughly implement the spirit of the 19th CPC National Congress and the deployment of the Central Economic Work Conference, take Xi Jinping's thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era as guidance, and in accordance with the requirements of the report on "providing more assistance for the developing countries, especially the least developed countries, and promoting the narrowing of the gap between the South and the North" presented at the 19th CPC National Congress, adhere to the road and concept of foreign assistance with Chinese characteristics, take the guidance of the new development concept to insist on deepening the reform and innovation, comprehensively strengthen management, and enhance the quality and efficiency of foreign assistance to make new contributions to promoting the building of a community of shared future for mankind."*

Ultimately, international Chinese HADR and domestic Chinese HADR remain quite similar. Set policies and rules are not public, and those that are public are generic enough to point local cadres in the right direction for immediate responses while also leaving ample space for Party leadership to leverage HADR to advance their agenda. Beyond that, however, all of the finer details are determined within very small political circles at the very top. Everything is heavily monitored and scrutinized as the CCP recognizes the fact that while giving aid is one way to build international standing, it is also one effective tool to alienate the CCP at home.

HADR Procedures

Rapid relief efforts and supply of emergency resources for domestic crises remains the top political priority. From interviews and available sources, local cadres play larger roles in accomplishing major objectives while also incorporating CSOs to navigate local barriers (such as local mistrust or dialects). Most domestic procedures follow a two-step process in which the government floods the area with responders and relief supplies; after supplies arrive, reconstruction and infrastructure projects to mitigate future events begin. Like most aspects of Chinese HADR, the exact nature of connections between CSOs, local cadres, and larger networks as well as the exact rules and procedures are not

public. Again, this is due to the heavy censorship and scrubbing of any response effort as the CPP does not want any doubt in their ability to provide domestic HADR. For CSOs they also tread lightly as speaking to the nature of the process might result in them being cut out or sent to prison, so even with expanding networks of responding organizations, it remains difficult to get concrete information. The literature does point to a recurring theme that local cadres do whatever they think is necessary to mitigate the crisis while waiting for people at the top to give directions or create spearhead groups and committees.

Internationally, there is much more information. As noted before, Chinese HADR assumes a different set of definitions that allow for more flexible perspectives of foreign aid and humanitarian assistance that advance regional hegemony and policy interests (Mearsheimer, 2010; Hirono, iii). There are clear agendas to improve the global standing and prestige of China as a responsible power, as most of the aid that China gives is going towards strategic engagements. Between 2000 and 2012, 47% of foreign assistance went into Africa, and roughly a third of official projects are not categorized as official development assistance (Zhang, 2016). Of the aid going to Africa, roughly 60% of the aid is concessional loans for infrastructure (ibid). Furthermore, between 2000 and 2016, 95% or $45.8 billion USD of aid to East Asia and the Pacific was for infrastructural development (South China Morning Post, 27 June 2018). This is compared to $273 million USD on humanitarian aid, and $90 million on debt relief (ibid). Globally, 42% of aid and grants go towards natural resource development, 40% towards infrastructure, and 18% towards debt forgiveness and humanitarian aid (Wolf et al., xii-xvi). According to official sources, China spends about $5 billion USD per year on assistance to other countries, but it is difficult to verify that amount (Economist, 2017). While the processes of defining which projects and countries to support with grants are unclear, 93% of recipients of loans would be unable to qualify for loans on the international market (Wolf et al., 13). These loans open up strategic inroads to resources, economic zones for Chinese state-owned enterprises, territory, as well as other fixtures like naval ports (Abi-habib, 2018).

While researching Chinese HADR, several graphs and figures provided clarity to the HADR networks and process. Figures 2 and 3 show analyses done by Zhang et. al, which used publications and news to chart the relationships and the cooperation between different groups and branches from 2009 to the present (Zhang et. al., 67-70). Figure 1 shows how one ministry cooperates with other departments in the Chinese government.

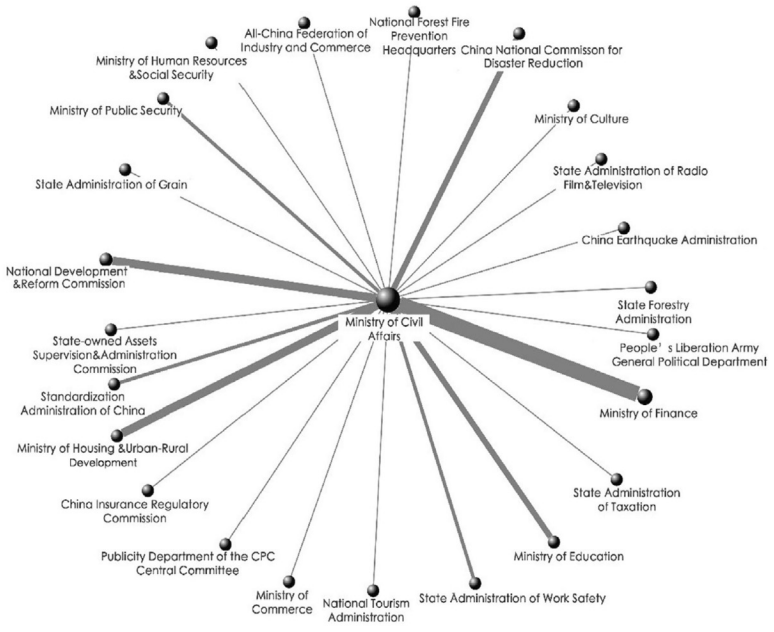


Figure 2. How one ministry cooperates with other departments in the Chinese Governement.

Figure 2 shows the domestic disaster planning using co-word analysis and cluster analysis which illuminates the complexity of Chinese HADR as well as the multiple domestic HADR hubs.

Notice that there are three key hubs around the State Council, the Ministry of Civil Affairs/ Finance, and around the National Development and Reform Commission. The sprawling network shows that HADR groups in China are becoming more interconnected, and more cooperative.

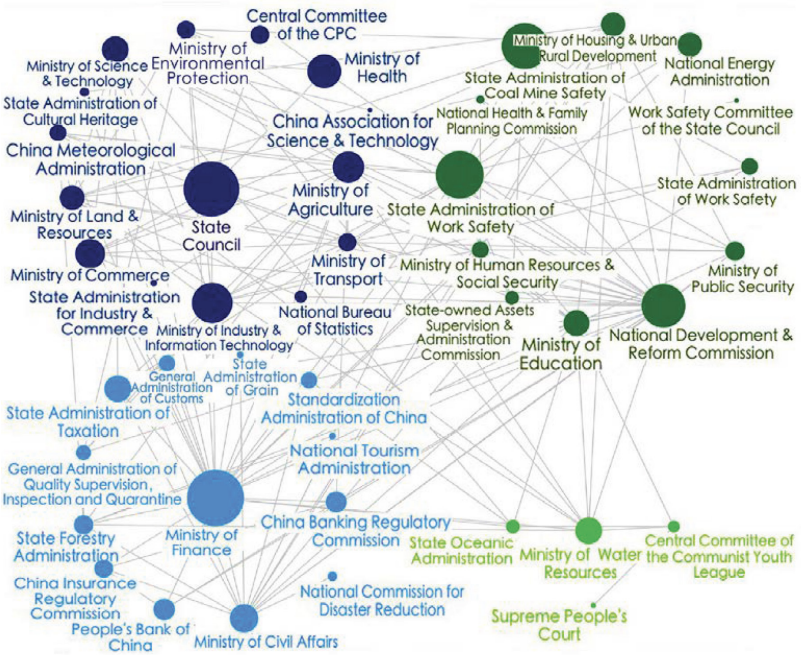


Figure 3. Domestic disaster planning using go-word analysis and cluster analysis.

One last figure (Figure 4, below) comes from a article by Miwa Hirono which outlines the general structure for how China implements aid. Again, this is a generic roadmap that outlines the process; which Hirono credits most HADR stemming from the state branch.

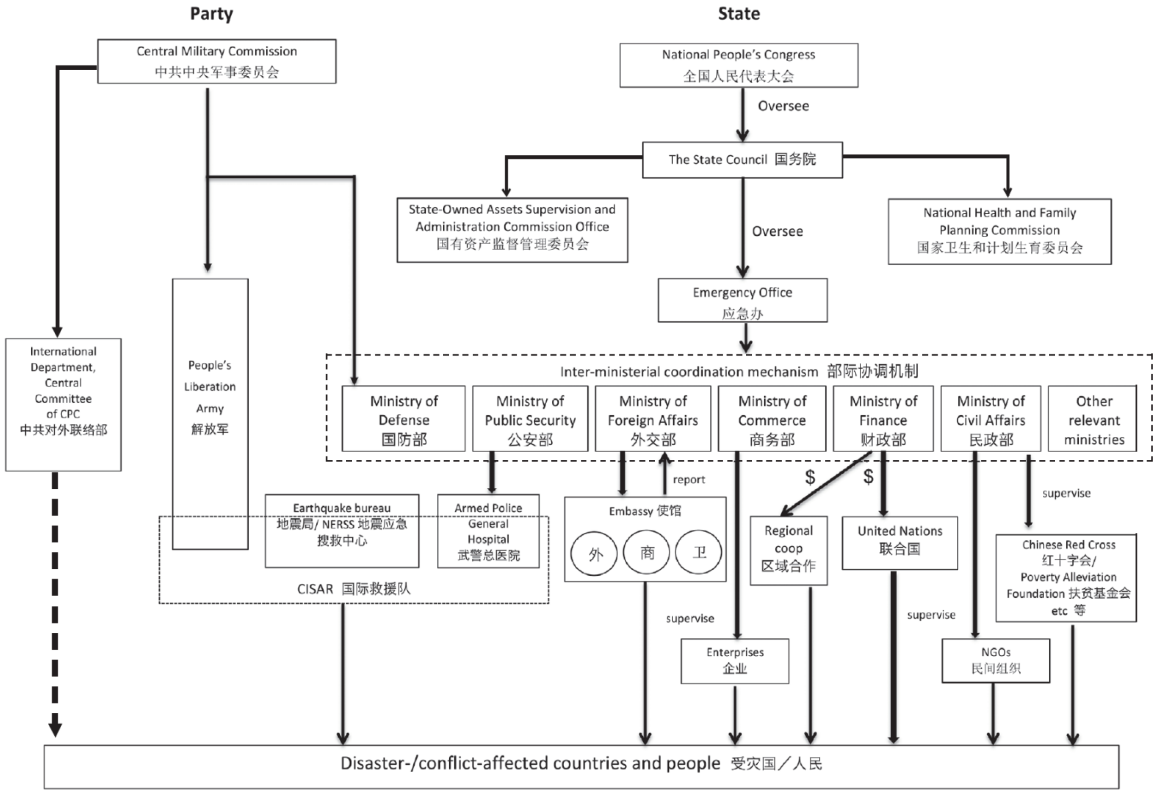


Figure 4. General structure for how China implements aid.

Focusing more on humanitarian aid, the bulk of Chinese HA is either delivery of supplies (food, water), post-event reconstruction, or financial support (2014 White Paper). From 2000 to 2012, China provided HADR assistance to more than 30 countries with roughly 1.5 billion RMB of total support. 1.2 billion of that estimate went into relief materials such as food, fuel, lights, blankets, tents, medicine, and water. There are other contributions to disasters such as deploying medical teams and other specialized groups, but there is very little open access information about these responses (Krebs, 2018). Despite domestic pressure to cut HADR and foreign aid, Chinese aid continues to expand; however China has only delivered about 10% of promised assistance; usually spending resources on one or two major crises per year (Hirono, 16; Wolf et al., 48). Additionally, the Department of Foreign Aid within Commerce has roughly 70 staff that deals with the programs around the world (Hirono, 2).

People's Liberation Army (PLA)

PLA's Changing Purpose

Historically, with international HADR China and the PLA have been missing from, or were very small players. As China grows economically and politically, the climate and desire to contribute to HADR efforts changed. In 2004, Hu Jintao proposed what he called 'New HistoricMissions' which shifted traditional national security priorities to include broader issues overseas such as counterterrorism, peacekeeping, piracy, and HADR as PLA missions. Additionally, Chinese HADR is becoming an avenue to flex soft power, build diplomatic ties, as well as providing opportunities for the PLA to improve operational capacity (Gunness 5;Yamashita and Iida 5-25). These missions were reinforced in the 2009 defense white paper which outlined the growing importance of overseas efforts (aforementioned such as counterterrorism, peacekeeping, anti-piracy, and HADR) and the logistics required to project force at a global level (Rinehart and Gitter, 27). China, like the international and academic community, is beginning to recognize HADR as one of the fasting growing avenues to establish influence and access via the exercise of power in regions of interests (ibid, 27-31; Chase et al., 21). These terms: hard, soft, and smart power speak to literature in international relations as well as the thinking of prominent thinkers like Joseph Nye, Kenneth Waltz, John Ikenberry, Robert Keohane, Francis Fukuyama, and Hans Morgenthau. Hard power is military power essentially, while soft power is the ability to influence other actors to think or do as you do. Smart power is the application of both of these, which HADR accomplishes. Deploying HADR makes the assisting country look charitable and friendly as well as allowing the assisting country to demonstrate operational competence. Furthermore, the consolidation of political power by President Xi Jinping, who aspires to build standing and clout at the international level as well as ending Pax Americana in the Pacific will certainly drive larger investments into HADR.

It is unlikely that China will abandon its burgeoning HADR efforts. Outside of political aspirations and consolidations, disasters in China are becoming more common due to the effects of global warming (Zhang et al., 1; Renwick, 27). Second, developing HADR efforts also prepare the PLA for

domestic crises that could threaten political stability within China (Du et al., 1-3). Given that these forces are very unlikely to change, HADR efforts and goals are going to expand and become more core to China and the PLA.

Definitions, Policies, Procedures

Unlike most countries, China does not have clear and defined definitions and parameters for HADR policies and procedures (Hirono, 25; Aldrich et al., 298). This ambiguity extends within the Communist Party of China, the government, and the PLA as well as PLA documents (Chase et al., 36). Compared with other countries like the United States and European countries, HADR and foreign aid follow strict guidelines. But with China, little is formally published and what writings are in the public domain are vague. Many academics argue that this ambiguity, for the PLA and the CCP, opens doors to unconventional aid to countries or regimes which can advance a foreign policy agenda. Others say that the PLA might not disclose these rules and policies because China is still a relatively new player to this field. Accordingly, what is common for countries like the U.S. with a long history of conducting HADR and assistance is not going to the case for newcomers like China. Additionally, HADR programs are very small in relation to PLA activities and spending (ibid). One additional explanation for this might be the case that for most HADR scenarios the PLA has private pre-prepared plans or waits for direction from the State Council or Politburo (Gunness, 2; Aldrich, 295; Kang, 40). The other possibility is that published information and statements regarding policies and procedures are vague, internally misleading, or change with the constantly changing political headwinds (Gunness, 2; Rinehart and Gitter, 31).

Despite this strategic dearth of information, there are a few common traits and procedures that the PLA follows. The first and the most important is that the PLA is the central hub for HADR efforts (Hirono, 24). At lower levels, the PLA deploys specialist teams like the China International Rescue Team (CISAR) and other specific teams that this piece will discuss later, but the main procedure for HADR is for the PLA to rapidly mobilize and deliver supplies (Aum, 5). One important political point for the PLA and the CCP is to be seen as the first responders, and usually, the HADR efforts only include resources and basic supplies such as tents, medication, food, water (2014 White Paper; Garafola and Heath, 23). To this point, the PLA provides the logistical support and framework to rapidly deploy forces, troops, experts, and HADR supplies to crises (ibid, 33; Rinehart and Gitter, 27).

The PLA is centralized around the Central Military Commision Joint Staff Department which is commanded by Li Zuocheng (Saunders and Chen, 46). This hub commands all theaters and forces, which extends to HADR efforts. Logistically, most of the assistance and resources are delivered by the 13th Transport Division with the PLA Air Force (PLAAF), as well as other activities like personnel recovery and participation of international exercises (Garafola and Heath, 9). Smaller groups and teams like CISAR and the Peace Ark provide some granular insights on PLA activities and procedures.

China International Search and Rescue Team (CISAR)

CISAR was founded in April 2001, and recent papers state that the organization incorporates many individuals from ranging organizations within the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as well as technical experts from bureaus that specialize on health and seismology for example (Jiong et al., 1). The primary focus of the group was for rapid response to earthquakes and similar disasters (Ibid). Presently, CISAR claims to employ 480 people ranging from administrators, technical experts as well as military, medical, and rescue teams (CISAR Website). Other sources say that there are 222 personnel on CISAR specifically from the PLA and the Earthquake Administration (Hirono, 25). And rounding on two decades of experience, CISAR is growing rapidly more proficient in the number and quality of responses. As of 2015, CISAR assisted in 12 international rescue or disaster missions which resulted in rescuing 63 survivors and medical assistance for more than 40,000 people (Jiong et al., 1). While CISAR is international, many of the efforts are directed towards regional neighbors such as Indonesia in 2004, Nepal in 2015, Japan in 2011, New Zealand 2011, Pakistan in 2005, and Thailand in 2018. However, there were countries like Haiti that are much further away, as well as domestic events which CISAR also responds to. The majority of public domain sources that cover CISAR responses are written by Xinhua or the People's Daily and the size of the team depends on the country and the magnitude of the event. The smallest team was 10 members sent to New Zealand in 2011, with 116 sent to Pakistan in 2010 (Xinhua, 27 April 2015).

Organizationally, the State Council, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the General Staff Department of the PLA are the primary actors that decide where CISAR is dispatched (Yanzhong, 191). Much like other humanitarian assistance, the Communist Party of China is wary of doing too much international aid as domestically Chinese feel that problems at home should take precedence. Nevertheless, China recognizes that CISAR is one of the ways to demonstrate itself as a responsible power.

Smaller HADR Efforts and Missions

Similar to CISAR, Peace Ark (PA) is a medical ship that conducts humanitarian assistance abroad in what is called "Harmonious Mission" (Yamashita and Iida, 4-5). The PA, or the Daishandao, is an Anwei Class hospital ship as well as being the go-to floating hospital to send abroad (Diehl and Major, 276). These missions usually entail the PA docking in disaster areas and providing medical beds as well as medical services and training; up to 2015, there were three harmonious missions and four deployments of the PA (ibid, 22; Chase et al., 36). More recently, the PA stopped in Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Tonga (Dziedzic 2018). Much like other Chinese HADR efforts, PA missions are usually short and are geared towards building naval abilities and reach (ibid, 41).

Much like the PA, when responding to the 2014 Ebola crisis, China used the PLA to deploy medical units and experts as well as building medical centers, training local medical professionals, and developing diagnostic kits and eventually treatment drugs for Ebola (Huang, 1-3). In particular, 3 teams of experts totaling 115 people were sent to countries with confirmed cases of the illness. Eventually, PLA experts and supporting teams created Ebola treatment centers as well as training local

medical and engineering that later assisted other efforts to treat the crisis and the building of treatment centers, like the U.S. Army's treatment center in Liberia for example (ibid, 3).

One other example of PLA HADR is mine removal. Between 2001 and 2002 China provided equipment and experts around the world to clear mines (Yamashita and Iida, 25). Beyond equipment and experts, China also offers international training courses hosted by the Engineering Institute of Engineering Corps which is basically a college at the PLA University of Science and Technology (ibid). While the process of removing mines does not fall into the HADR category for countries like the U.S., it is important to understand that the Chinese conception of HADR and HADR continuum are different.



Figure 5. Oregon Army National Guard Spc. Philip Costa, with the 442nd Engineer Utility Detachment, assists Joint Logistics Force Soldiers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with building a shoring structure at Camp Rilea Armed Forces Training Center, November 17, 2017, in Warrenton, Ore. Shoring prevents a damaged structure from collapsing, enabling rescuers to extract casualties. Engineers from the Oregon National Guard and PLA worked alongside each other to share disaster response capabilities during the 13th annual U.S.-China Disaster Management Exchange. (Photo Credit: Sgt. 1st Class April Davis)

PLA HADR Shortcomings and Goals

Despite the programs and efforts, it is important to understand that Chinese HADR projects and programs are still small and infrequent compared to the international community and the United States (Garafola and Heath, 23). More so, China frequently commits political blunders on HADR opportunities. Looking at the recent example of HADR efforts in response to Typhoon Yolanda, while many countries like the U.S. marshaled significant aid resources as well as about 13,000 military personnel and 12 ships; whereas China initially offered $100,000 in aid (Capie, 310-320). Once media reports found out that Ikea, the Swedish Furniture Chain offered more in assistance to the Philippines, China quickly increased the assistance (Perlez 2013). To be sure, China is still improving and expanding efforts but the fact that China doesn't understand smart power creates serious shortcomings for China both in the magnitude of response efforts as well as the credibility of China's intentions. Furthermore, the lack of available information and transparency regarding the capabilities of Chinese HADR and PLA efforts as well as the goals and intentions of the HADR efforts only reinforces fears that HADR efforts are strictly hegemonic rather than humanitarian (Rinehart and Gitter, 27-29). By extension, the small size of Chinese HADR relative to other countries and competitors creates a serious and enduring credibility gap. Chinese HADR efforts, like Chinese foreign aid, suffer from continuous suspicion from

host countries as well as the international community. Lastly, the PLA and the CCP are attempting to balance potentially opposing political forces. On one side, President Xi and the CCP continue building international clout and establishing China as a 'responsible power'; at the same time, most Chinese (although young Chinese are more open to aid than older Chinese) are very opposed to being active in HADR and foreign aid until all issues at home are resolved.

From the Chinese perspective, there are several strong incentives that drive HADR. The first being that HADR operations and events allow PLA troops and experts to build capacity to carry out rapid mobilizations as well as smoothing out operational issues (Chong, Smart Power, and Military Force, 239; Lin-Greenberg, 5). More so, with the case of the PA, CISAR, and the 13th Division, these international teams, and logistical chains allow the PLA to test drive activities and project Chinese power and agenda further from the mainland (Gunness, 5; Heath, 6; Lin-Greenberg, 6). In the same vein, HADR efforts allow China to establish and display military wherewithal as well as credibility (Chase et al., 21). Displaying the ability to rapidly dispatch teams and long range planes to disaster zones across the world speak to the logistical planning and abilities of the PLA.

Outside of the logistical benefits, HADR affords an avenue to indirectly compete with regional adversaries and potentially build diplomatic ties with smaller powers (Chong, Smart Power, and Military Force, 235). Despite the fact that domestic economic and political realities might change at any moment, building relations with other countries, especially in the Pacific is critically important to the political agenda of President Xi. Despite gaffes, HADR efforts are slowly establishing China as a "responsible power" (Patalano, 33-35). By extension, building the clout of China around the world and in the Pacific would hypothetically grant China the ability to walk back Pax-Americana (cultural, military, and political dominance of the U.S. and its rules-based order) in the Pacific and reshape or change the standing global norms. Beijing understands that soft power is incredibly important, as well as understanding that HADR efforts present the opportunity to catch up to the U.S. both in terms of hard and soft power (Chong, International Security in the Asia-Pacific, 377). While displacing American soft power in the Pacific and building ties with neighbors are the goals of HADR efforts, the reality is that these ambitions are still far from fruition.

Comparing these two overarching goals, it is likely the case that the ability of HADR to establish PLA abilities as well as troubleshooting PLA weaknesses is more valuable to China than potential political goals. This is in part due to China being quite aware that other countries still distrust Chinese aid and efforts; increases in operational capacity, logistical range, and mobilization are tangible benefits for Beijing. Domestically, improved PLA capacity decreases the risk of domestic unrest following disaster or political unrest; and by extension, that means that the regime is more assured. Certainly, political gains and increasing clout are valuable of China's foreign policy but Beijing is quite aware that the HADR project to build that clout takes time, resources, and political will that might not always be there.

Recommendations

Planning ahead, there are three primary recommendations for policymakers and practitioners. First and foremost, HADR organizations and agencies should strive to get Beijing, contacts, or even CSO's to outline formal policies and procedures. Of course, these formal rules and regulations might change with the prevailing political headwinds or a recent crisis, as well as the simple fact that getting this information might force changes in policy or regulation, for better or for worse. However, facilitating more transparent rules and policies with Chinese HADR allows for a more stable and diplomatic environment within HADR. Furthermore, more transparent practices might bring China more into the humanitarian fold. Realistically, these definitions, frameworks, and directions would have to come from senior officials who will remain within the locus of power for several years. Organizationally, local cadres might shed some meaningful light on finer details but longer and lasting procedures will come from decision-makers at the top. With the PLA, definitions and procedures might come to light if the U.S. and China work or conduct HADR drills together. Some academics and experts postulate that Chinese HADR will become more transparent over time, but this remains to be seen. In terms of utility and cost, coaxing Beijing to more transparent practices is the best immediate and ongoing course of action. Furthermore, getting Beijing to establish its definitions and codes of conduct would allow the U.S. and regional neighbors in the Pacific to glean the intentions of the Chinese. Such knowledge could reduce tensions in the Pacific while establishing a common set, or a known set of definitions that state could work with.

Second, efforts to work with Chinese HADR domestically and internationally should be increased. Similar to the first recommendation, increasing collaboration between the U.S. and China on HADR training and events removes strategic ambiguity around Chinese efforts while also allow both parties to participate in capacity building exercises. At the domestic level, groups should work with local American and Chinese embassies as those are the point-people on local disasters. Other contact points would be the National Commission for Disaster Reduction, as it has direct contacts and reporting from several dozen branches. It might also be wise to reach out to much smaller ministries and agencies, even topic specific agencies like the Seismological Bureau; however it is likely that any cooperation between agencies/ministries would require high level approval anyways. Agencies and organizations with military connections might find it difficult to build domestic collaboration and partnerships as the CCP will fear that the U.S. military is trying to collect sensitive and applicable information. Additionally, the CCP will certainly fear locals and citizens viewing increasing international assistance domestically as a sign of the CCP's inability to resolve domestic crises or instability. Such a perception of weakness or the inability to maintain 'social harmony' or stability is one of the CCP's foremost fears. If such collaboration was possible and permitted, American embassies would have to coordinate with local governments as well as establishing connections and communications with the pertinent ministries. Being that this information is not public and that the nature of a specific crisis would change which actors play a role, or even if new agencies or subgroups are created to cope with the crisis, makes specific policy proposals impossible. One dynamic that can be predicted is that smaller events would likely remain within the purview of the local government,

whereas significant events like the 2003 SARS outbreak or the 2008 Sichuan earthquake would become the purview of the State Council and senior CCP members.

Internationally, there will be greater leeway to work with the Chinese. From the Chinese perspective, working with the HADR community in the Pacific is a likely course to boost its international reputation as well as creating opportunities to build capacity and showcase its abilities. In practice, conducting drills and working with other countries in activities that allow each person to observe the capacity of the other person reduces risks of miscalculation down the line. Of course, the risk of alienating domestic support will factor in, but given the desire of President Xi and ranking CCP members to build international clout it is likely that China will work with the HADR community despite risks in doing so. Organizationally, the Ministry of Commerce is the point of contact. Given that most international Chinese aid and HADR flows from commerce under the direction of the State Council, this is the starting point. Again, creating these efforts to work with the Chinese more regularly might create the dynamic for the Chinese to open up and formally define policies and procedures. If nothing else, working frequently with the Chinese HADR teams would allow observation and speculation on procedures and policies.



Figure 6. Soldiers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) listen to a briefing in preparation for a search and extraction exchange during the 13th annual U.S.-China Disaster Management Exchange at Camp Rilea Armed Forces Training Center, November 16, 2017, in Warrenton, Ore. U.S. Army Pacific hosts the annual exchange with the PLA to foster mutual trust and understanding while sharing lessons learned to increase disaster response capabilities in the Pacific region. (Photo Credit: Sgt. 1st Class April Davis)

Realistically, the Chinese will continue to maintain ambiguity over terms and policies as once they set specific guidelines they will close off potential actions down the road. The best course of action for the HADR community is to try to promote cooperation and collaboration which can build capacity for all elements as well as allowing American HADR teams to work with and observe Chinese efforts. Again, should the HADR agencies or organizations have military connections or obligations it might make these collaborations difficult to start or maintain, or potentially impossible. Nevertheless, progressive steps to build transparency and to collaborate with Chinese HADR might drive greater Chinese efforts and transparency.

Third, given the growing importance of CSO's in HADR efforts, there might be inroads with Chinese and international CSO's that operate in China. Following the trend of the previous recommendations, this will also be tricky and difficult. Considering CSO's are a recent trend in Domestic HADR, CSO's and NGO's are likely to be worried that cooperation and collaboration with international HADR agencies or organizations would cause blacklisting or legal issues. Such fears are certainly amplified by the

fact that CSO's wield little power and can be removed from the scene as quickly as they entered. On the other hand, CSO's might be more open to discussing policies and procedures expressed to them by local or national figures. If approached cautiously and with the government fully apprised, CSO's and NGO's in China could provide a valuable inroad to foster trust on HADR efforts as well as bringing clarity to the process. Furthermore, local organizations are more likely to provide more honest and transparent information about common HADR practices and policies.

Conclusion

Looking forward, Chinese HADR capabilities are likely to increase. Domestically, CSO's will continue to integrate into HADR networks which create opportunities for the international community to build HADR ties. Furthermore, interviews with local cadres highlight the paramount importance of the CCP to maintain credibility in their ability to swiftly respond to local disasters. Internationally, China will continue to expand efforts and capacity within HADR as China attempts to assert itself as a 'responsible power'. The majority of aid and assistance will likely go to countries and areas of strategic interest. In terms of policy and procedure, it remains to be seen whether or not transparency will increase. Throughout the literature, and many sources from this year frequently refer to Chinese HADR as an "information black hole". From the perspective of the CCP, ambiguity on policies and procedures remains a strategic option which keeps domestic concerns low while allowing for more options with international HADR.

Prioritizing key members of high rank or central hubs within the decision-making process such as the State Council, Ministry of Finance or of Foreign Affairs would more likely allow HADR efforts to outlast rapid changes from recent disasters or political headwinds.

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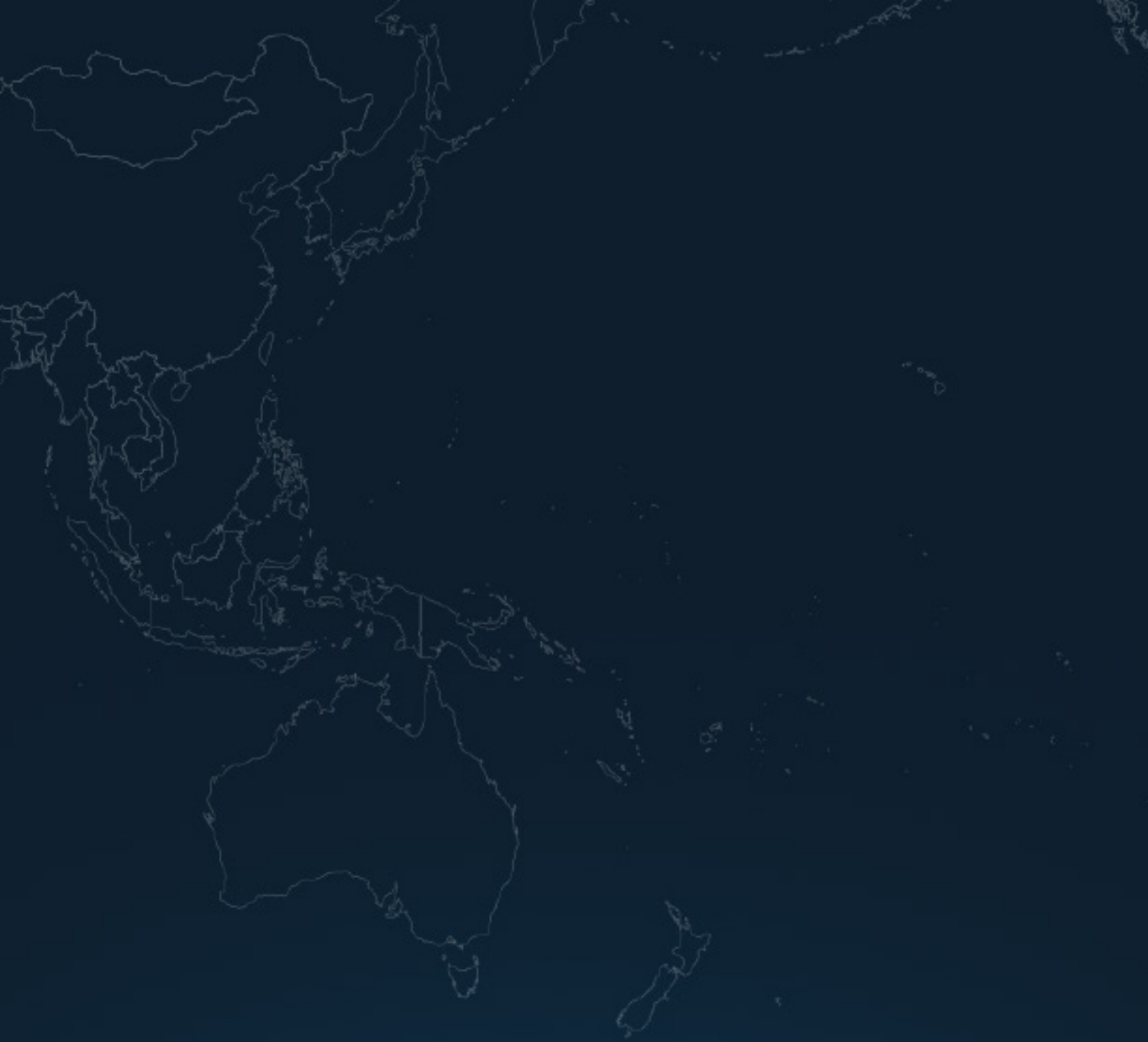
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