



CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT & HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE
UNITED STATES ARMY, SOLDIER FOR LIFE - TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SFL-TAP)

China's Foreign Humanitarian Assistance as a Tool of Strategic Influence in Oceania

January 2022

By: Emilio E. Moreno

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Client Organization:

Department of Defense, Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance (CFE-DM)

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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). Forthcoming papers in this series will explore how China's expanding HA/DR activities in the Pacific are enabling a broader Chinese military presence and armed forces operability, as well as how China's diplomatic expansion has been enabled by its Belt and Road Initiative.

Key Takeaways:

- China has expanded its diplomatic presence in Oceania. 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 its ten PIC partners. 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 the region. However, in recent years Chinese foreign aid 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.

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

- 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 Federated State of Micronesia (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).

China aid to the Pacific

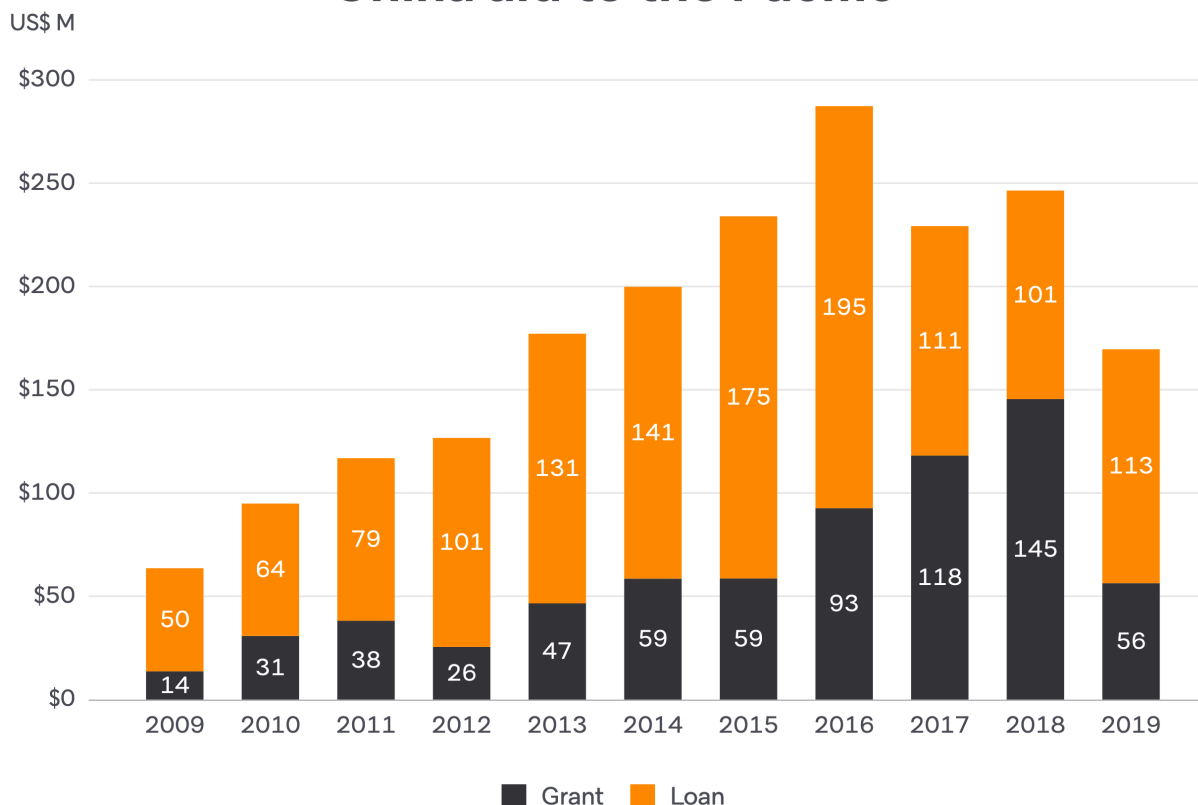


Figure 1: China's foreign aid contributions in the Pacific 2009-2019 (Source: Dayant & Pryke (2021), China's declining Pacific aid presence, Lowy Institute, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-s-declining-pacific-aid-presence>).

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 contributions received in 2019 in U.S. dollars (Lowy Institute, 2019).

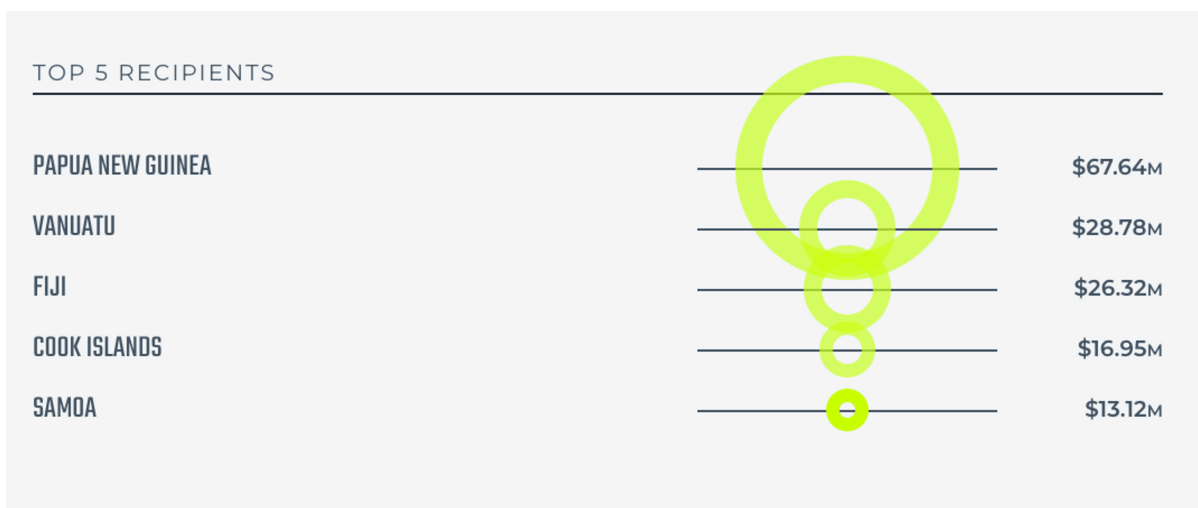


Figure 2: Top five recipients of China's foreign aid in the Pacific in 2019 (Source: Pacific Aid Map, Lowy Institute, retrieved 28 March 2022, <https://pacificaidmap.lowyinstitute.org/dashboard>.)

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 is a 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 now counts ten PIC partners 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 PIC partners. 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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Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance
456 Hornet Avenue, Building 76, Joint Base Pearl Harbor - Hickam, Hawaii 96860-3503
Telephone: 808.472.0518 | DSN: 315.472.0518
<https://www.cfe-dmha.org>

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