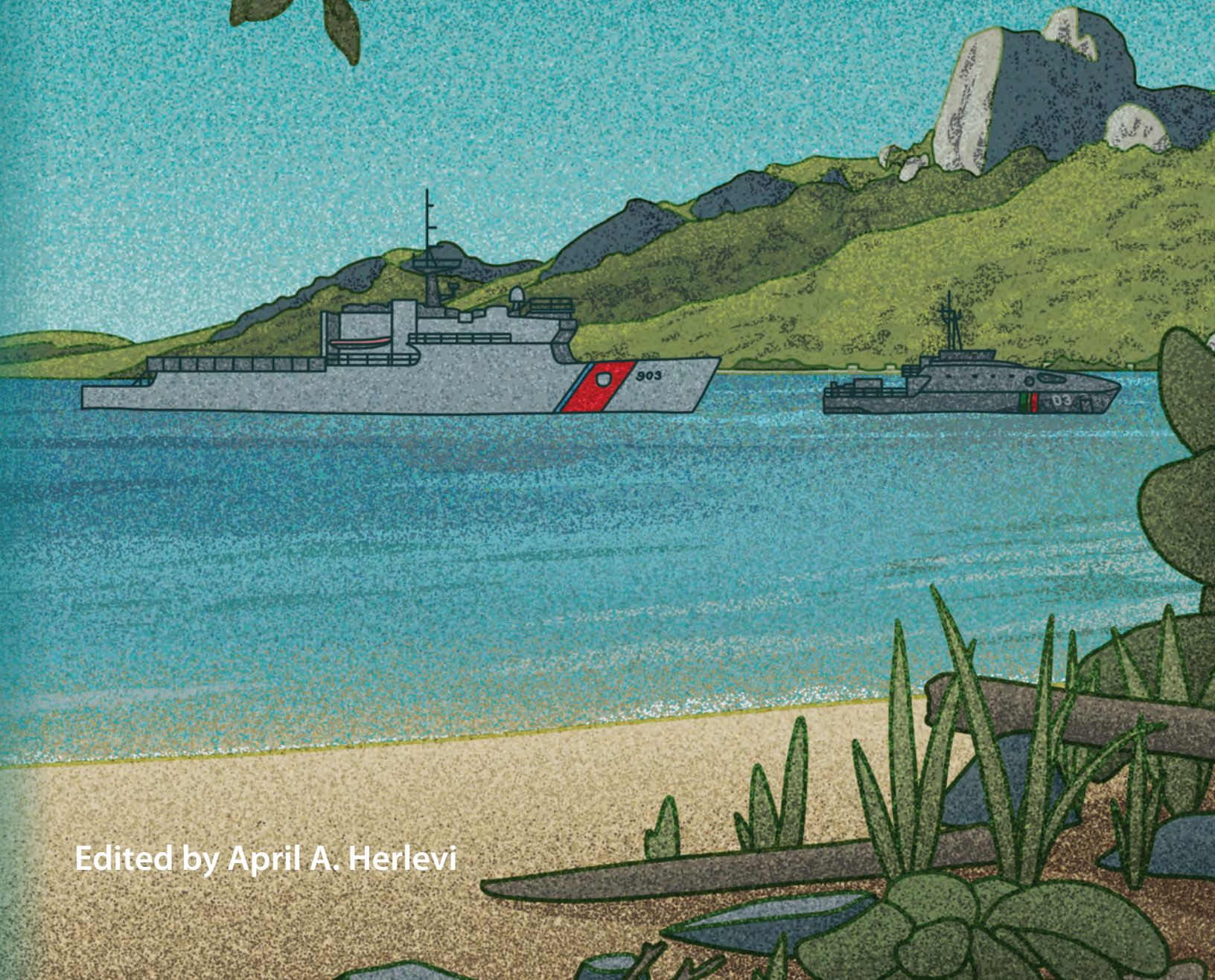


NAVIGATING STRATEGIC PATHWAYS IN MELANESIA OPTIONS FOR U.S. ENGAGEMENT

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Edited by April A. Herlevi

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Options for U.S. Engagement

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NAVIGATING STRATEGIC PATHWAYS IN MELANESIA

Options for U.S. Engagement

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NBR SPECIAL REPORT #110 | JULY 2024

Strategic Competition in Melanesia: Centering Local Perspectives for Successful U.S. Engagement

April A. Herlevi

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Over the next decade, Pacific Island nations will face many challenges. Potential solutions will rely, at least in part, on the policy decisions of countries outside the region. Climate change impacts are already occurring, and Pacific Island leaders are proposing various resilience initiatives.¹ The United States has called for “elevating broader and deeper engagement with the Pacific Islands as a priority of U.S. foreign policy” and committed to “working together with the Pacific, and to do so according to principles of Pacific regionalism, transparency, and accountability.”² External partners, such as those associated with the Commonwealth, have vowed to support resilience in a way “that transcends the pillars of humanitarian, development, human rights, peace, and security.”³ Australia, New Zealand, Japan, France, South Korea, and India have also proposed updated engagement strategies for the region.⁴

Yet, despite increased interest in the Pacific, U.S. presence and engagement remain nascent in Melanesia. For the U.S. policy initiatives to be successful, engagement will need to be consistent, and programs should be collaborative if the United States is to achieve the goals of the Pacific Partnership Strategy. Unlike Micronesia, which has long-standing relationships with the United States, Melanesia represents unique security, development, and foreign policy challenges, and coordination is more complex.⁵

Melanesia is both a geographic region and subregion of the Pacific Islands (see **Figure 1**), as well as an organizational concept. Despite commonalities across the Pacific Islands region, the countries and communities throughout Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia are not homogenous. Melanesia is particularly diverse in geography, ethnic groups, religious beliefs, customs, and communal systems of organization. Security and stability issues are complicated and often difficult to penetrate for those unfamiliar with the region’s history, culture, and politics. Like in the rest of the Pacific, critical challenges for Melanesia also include climate change, resource constraints, illegal fishing, food security, environmental sustainability, crime, and trafficking. Internal security challenges have the potential to exacerbate these region-wide concerns.

Debates in Washington, Canberra, and Beijing have centered on elements of strategic competition. This report, however, explores key security issues in Melanesia from the perspective of local scholars alongside the perspectives of several U.S. contributors. Collectively, the six essays examine Melanesia’s unique security challenges; assess the impact of strategic competition on countries, governments, and communities; and explore options for how Melanesian nations can manage increased attention from external actors.

This introductory essay serves to highlight the views of Pacific Island representatives, especially those from Melanesia, and explain how Melanesian experts and Pacific Islands-based scholars conceptualize those challenges. The findings presented in this introduction are based in large part

¹ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, “Special Forum Economic Ministers Meeting Action Plan,” July 2019. During this meeting, the economic ministers “considered and discussed the revised governance arrangements of the Pacific Resilience Facility.”

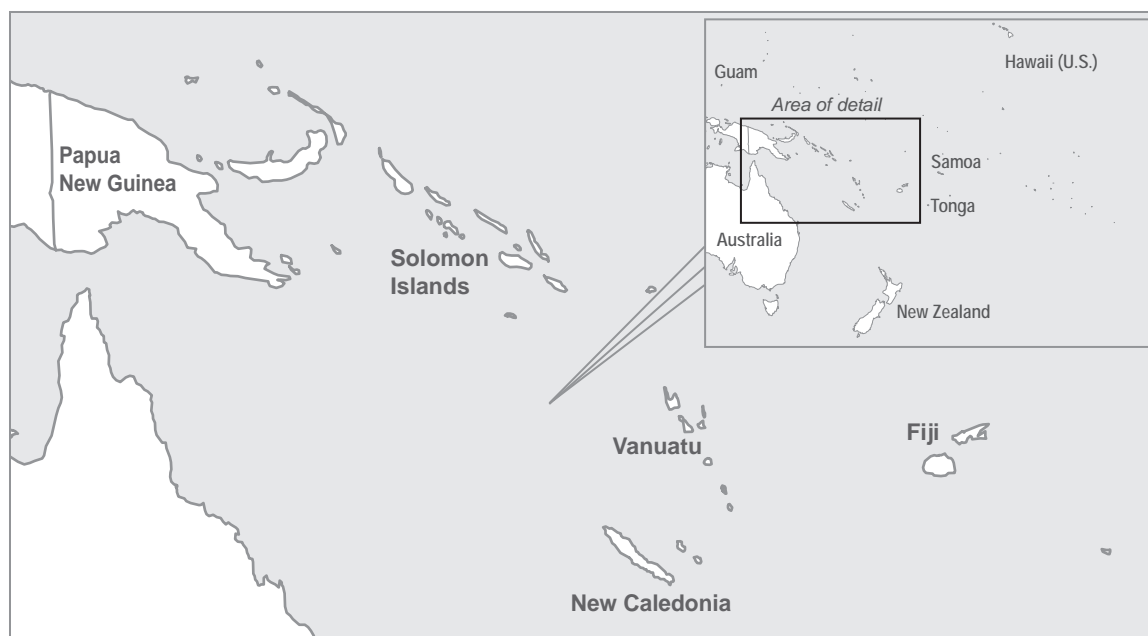
² White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C., September 2022), 4, 5, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pacific-Partnership-Strategy.pdf>.

³ “Samoa Announces Theme for the 2024 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting,” Commonwealth, Press Release, September 21, 2023, <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/samoa-announces-theme-2024-commonwealth-heads-government-meeting>.

⁴ Joanne Wallis, Maima Koro, and Corey O’Dwyer, “The ‘Blue Pacific’ Strategic Narrative: Rhetorical Action, Acceptance, Entrapment, and Appropriation?” *Pacific Review* 37, no. 4 (2024): 797–824.

⁵ For analysis of U.S. engagement with Micronesia, see April A. Herlevi, ed., “Charting a New Course for the Pacific Islands: Strategic Pathways for U.S.-Micronesia Engagement,” National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report, no. 104, March 2023, <https://www.nbr.org/publications/charting-a-new-course-for-the-pacific-islands-strategic-pathways-for-u-s-micronesia-engagement>.

FIGURE 1 Melanesia



on a Track 1.5 dialogue held in April 2023 in Nadi, Fiji.⁶ The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) convened the 2023 Pacific Islands Strategic Dialogue, with support from the Defense Threat Reduction Agency’s Strategic Trends Research Initiative and the University of the South Pacific, to explore security challenges and perspectives on strategic competition. The dialogue brought together 25 officials, regional experts, and scholars in a hybrid format. NBR asked participants to consider the following questions:

- How are military and security posture changes by the United States, Australia, China, and other countries perceived by Pacific Island countries, especially governments, leaders, and citizens in Melanesia?
- How are Melanesian governments, organizations, and citizens reacting to U.S.-China strategic competition? What are the implications for Melanesia of regional crises?
- What role should the United States and its allies’ militaries play in Melanesia over the next five to ten years? In what areas can security and defense relationships be strengthened, and how?

Before summarizing the findings from the dialogue, I offer some framing remarks that may be useful for a U.S. audience. For those in the Pacific, this background is likely common knowledge. In the United States, however, despite increased attention on the Pacific Islands region, especially from the U.S. government, there is still much to be learned about individual countries in the Pacific and the region more generally. Geographic and cultural boundaries and discussion of subregions are helpful shorthand to understand the differences within the Pacific Islands region, but those generalizations sometimes overshadow the complexity that exists. It is impossible to do

⁶ The Melanesia-focused dialogue included three keynote addresses, four substantive panels, and two interactive sessions. Discussions at the 2023 Pacific Islands Strategic Dialogue built on a Micronesia-focused dialogue held in 2022. See Herlevi, “Charting a New Course for the Pacific Islands.”

justice to the full complexity of this region here, so I concentrate on two central themes: diversity and security.

Key Concepts: Diversity and Security in Oceanic History

Neither diversity nor security are agreed-on concepts; each word means something vastly different depending on the audience. Melanesian individuals, communities, national governments, and regional organizations use these concepts to refer to many distinct ideas. In the United States, scholars often begin with the individual or the nation-state as the unit of analysis for international relations. In Melanesia, by contrast, scholars and practitioners often begin with communities, real and imagined, as the focal point for understanding the issues these nation-states face.

The Pacific Islands region is diverse, but that diversity is often underappreciated. First, regional knowledge remains limited and has historically focused on Polynesia or Micronesia. During the Cold War, the Peace Corps and other U.S. government agencies were active in the region, but over time those programs diminished in size and scope. By 2022, only four countries in the region had Peace Corps programs, down from thirteen at the height of U.S. presence in the region.⁷ Second, post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy has focused on managing conflict in Europe and the Middle East, as the current conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and Israel and Hamas illustrate. In our previous Micronesia report, we noted that throughout the 1990s and 2000s, many Pacific Islanders viewed U.S. foreign policy toward the Pacific Islands as a period of benign neglect. Third, because of the relative cultural connectivity of Polynesia, there is an implicit assumption that Pacific Islanders share the same history, languages, worldviews, religions, and social practices. This perception masks the diversity within particular countries and within the Melanesian and Micronesian subregional groupings.

Melanesia is culturally, linguistically, and geographically diverse. For example, in the 900-plus islands in the Solomon Islands archipelago, there are approximately 80 languages spoken.⁸ According to *Teaching Oceania*, an introductory series created by the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, a location such as “New Guinea became one of the most linguistically diverse places in the world, with more than 800 distinct Papuan languages.”⁹ Cultural practices also affected the history of regional organizations, such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), as discussed by Ilan Kiloë in his essay for this report. Likewise, William Waqavakatoga describes the role of religious beliefs in foreign policy in the region. There is not sufficient space here to cover all the many forms of regional diversity, so I simply want to emphasize that cultural homogeneity does not exist in Melanesia. Foreign diplomats must take the time to familiarize themselves with the different geographies, national and ethnic histories, languages, religions, and cultural practices within the region. Homogeneity should not be assumed, and steadfast study will be necessary.

⁷ “Congressional Letter to the Acting Director of the Peace Corps,” July 19, 2022, https://www.markey.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/letter_to_peace_corps_acting_director_on_the_pacific_islands.pdf.

⁸ Kabini Sanga and Martyn Reynolds, “Waka hem no finis yet: Solomon Islands Research Futures,” *Pacific Dynamics: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 6, no. 1 (2022): 30–49.

⁹ Alexander Mawyer, ed., *Introduction to Pacific Studies*, Teaching Oceania 6 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2020), 27. See Image 11 for a map of the language families in Papua New Guinea. The Teaching Oceania series, compiled jointly by the Center for Pacific Islands Studies and the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Library, provides extensive open-access materials on topics such as health, the environment, nuclear testing, gender, voyaging, and many other topics within Pacific Studies. The *Teaching Oceania* volumes are available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10125/42426>.

Diversity has brought positive benefits to the region, but it has also been a challenge for regional unity. Global challenges, such as climate change, have necessitated regional unity for Pacific Island nations to influence the global discourse,¹⁰ but solutions to Pacific problems do not occur quickly. Pacific Islanders have successfully built platforms for shaping the international discourse on climate change; illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; nuclear testing; and seabed mining. Yet, because of the diversity in the region, the Pacific Islands Forum has not been able to address all concerns, and subregional organizations, such as the MSG, Micronesian Chief Executives, and the Polynesian Leaders Group remain important. Regional leaders are not monolithic but understand the need for compromise to achieve collective action.¹¹

Conceptions of security in the Pacific Islands differ from how security is conceptualized in the United States or Europe. Human-centered security is national security. During dialogue events and consultations in 2023, I heard at least ten different definitions of security that varied based on whether the speaker was starting from the perspective of the individual, community, country, or region. Citizens and civil society organizations convey collective goals to ensure that local voices are heard by national and international leaders. Efforts to fight climate change reflect this need. Yet, there is also a danger in securitizing every issue or making everything a “national security” concern. In China, for example, many aspects of governance have become “securitized,”¹² and this model has led to a security dilemma with the United States and other advanced industrial economies.¹³

Pacific conceptions of security are neither “hard security” as typically understood in the United States,¹⁴ nor the all-encompassing security that has emerged in Xi Jinping’s China.¹⁵ Pacific security is more closely linked to human-centered security as it emerged in Southeast Asia,¹⁶ but with a uniquely Blue Pacific lens.¹⁷ The Boe Declaration on Regional Security expressly notes that Pacific leaders “affirm an expanded concept of security which addresses the wide range of security issues in the region, both traditional and non-traditional, with an increasing emphasis on human security, including humanitarian assistance, to protect the rights, health and prosperity of Pacific people.”¹⁸ Pacific leaders recognize the need to create prosperity while building resiliency. If communities and the individuals who make up those communities are not healthy and safe, then security does not exist.

¹⁰ Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte, eds., *The New Pacific Diplomacy* (Acton: ANU Press, 2015).

¹¹ Gonzaga Puaas, “The Proposed Withdrawal of Micronesia from the PIF: One Year Later,” Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, March 25, 2022, <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/a5aad122-f9f0-4438-b542-dcd040665d6b/content>

¹² Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Xi Jinping’s Quest for Order: Security at Home, Influence Abroad,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 3, 2022.

¹³ Margaret M. Pearson, Meg Rithmire, and Kellee S. Tsai, “China’s Party-State Capitalism and International Backlash: From Interdependence to Insecurity,” *International Security* 47, no. 2 (2022): 135–76.

¹⁴ Pacific scholars often refer to these types of debates as “militarism” rather than security. See Monica C. LaBriola, ed., *Militarism and Nuclear Testing in the Pacific*, Teaching Oceania 1 (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, 2019).

¹⁵ Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “National Security after China’s 20th Party Congress: Trends in Discourse and Policy,” *China Leadership Monitor*, Fall 2023, <https://www.prcleader.org/post/national-security-after-china-s-20th-party-congress-trends-in-discourse-and-policy>.

¹⁶ Amitav Acharya, “Human Security: East versus West,” *International Journal* 56, no. 3 (2001): 442–60.

¹⁷ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (Suva, July 2022), <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022-1.pdf>; Pacific Islands Forum, “Action Plan to Implement the Boe Declaration on Regional Security,” 2019, <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/BOE-document-Action-Plan.pdf>; and Pacific Islands Forum, “Boe Declaration on Regional Security,” 2018, <https://forumsec.org/publications/boe-declaration-regional-security>.

¹⁸ Pacific Islands Forum, “Action Plan to Implement the Boe Declaration on Regional Security,” Section 7.

Dialogue Findings

The security issues in Melanesia are complex and contested, presenting challenges and opportunities for U.S. foreign and defense policy. Melanesia has both political significance and a geographic status, as discussed above, but the immense diversity of the subregion means that it is difficult to generalize. This section emphasizes four main findings from the 2023 dialogue while acknowledging that those views are not necessarily representative of all Melanesian perspectives. We sought a diverse group of participants, but even within our group of academics, experts, scholars, and practitioners, there was significant disagreement on which issues were most profound or in need of solutions.

First, Melanesian countries face significant domestic development challenges and view “incomplete nation-building” as their primary security concern. Unfinished decolonization continues to hamper the creation of coherent national identities. Because domestic development and internal security challenges remain stark, participants noted that Melanesian countries must welcome all forms of aid—from all external partners. Rather than limit their choices, countries in the region want to engage all development partners. One dialogue participant put the matter quite simply: “If the Belt and Road Initiative is an option, they are going to take it” because “building roads, bridges, and airports...are tangible developments everyday people can see.” This is the lens through which many see the development realities. Thus, strategic competition that could limit choices in either foreign or domestic policy is viewed as problematic.

Second, Melanesian countries and their leaders want to maintain strategic autonomy. Some participants noted that if strategic competition does not center on local needs, priorities, and preferences—or if engagement does not include local stakeholders that appreciate on-the-ground realities—such competition could negatively affect domestic interests. In this context, participants raised several related issues, including duplicative foreign aid, lack of coordination among donors, absorptive capacity of governments, and wasted resources. Critically, there is also concern that the media focus on U.S.-China strategic competition is drowning out Melanesian and Pacific voices. While we are grateful to this volume’s contributors from locations such as Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Fiji, much more needs to be done to ensure local voices are reflected in U.S. debates about foreign policy for the Pacific. As I wrote in the report on Micronesia, in the United States we can do better.¹⁹

Third, Melanesian countries view China as a development partner. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has provided economic and development assistance, and the average citizen views new infrastructure as positive and welcomes the partnership. Dialogue participants, and several of the contributors to this report, argue that the basic needs of citizens are often secondary to foreign policy. Yet, despite welcoming Chinese aid and official development assistance, participants were realistic about both the positive and negative aspects of China’s engagement in the region. Several dialogue experts noted that Melanesian citizens and their leaders believe that the PRC needs to improve its knowledge of internal country dynamics. The criticisms of Chinese aid have raised additional questions about the overall efficacy of development assistance from all external actors

¹⁹ April A. Herlevi, “Beyond Presence: What Can the United States Do Better in the Pacific?” in Herlevi, “Charting a New Course for the Pacific Islands.”

operating in the Pacific.²⁰ Policymakers and scholars should dedicate additional attention to research on aid, development outcomes, and perceptions of aid.

Fourth, regional leaders believe that Pacific voices need to maintain solidarity. If regional organizations, such as the Pacific Islands Forum, are not cohesive, dialogue participants worried that Pacific leaders may have less capacity to shape the global agenda on critical issues like climate change or other emerging topics. Internally, colonial legacies created contested identities and subregional realities that require country or Melanesian-specific solutions. The MSG, created out of the legacy of decolonization, has been called on to address key internal security challenges, even though the organization was originally meant to become a vehicle for economic cooperation.²¹

Understanding Melanesia in the United States

This report includes essays written by scholars from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and New Zealand, as well as by contributors representing U.S. perspectives. The first essay, written by Patrick Kaiku and Vernon Gawi, describes how Melanesian states, in particular Papua New Guinea, are navigating nation-building and political modernization amid great-power rivalry. Despite serious internal security challenges, Kaiku and Gawi offer suggestions for how Melanesian countries might take advantage of strategic competition to build an informed citizenry and better institutional capacity. In the next essay, Ilan Kiloe discusses how the Melanesian Spearhead Group came into existence and how internal security challenges have affected the organization's evolution. While domestic security and development challenges remain, Kiloe notes how the MSG shapes subregionalism in the Pacific. This is critical knowledge for U.S. policymakers who may be working in these countries or alongside these organizations. Next, the report turns its attention to Solomon Islands, which is a site for competing security stakeholders to achieve their own goals. Anna Powles describes how Australia and China are attempting to provide security assistance and finds that competition could have disruptive consequences.

Moving from assessments of the situation to policy options for engagement, William Waqavakatoga of the University of Adelaide addresses how religious traditions, in particular Christianity, may offer a pathway for diplomatic engagement. He considers the use of cultural and religious traditions by Pacific leaders themselves and explains how that element of diplomacy could build trust and establish a foundation for long-term engagement. Shifting to the U.S. perspective, Yan Bennett expands the discussion for U.S. policymakers by describing the necessity of reframing U.S. perceptions of China in Melanesia while simultaneously increasing U.S. diplomatic engagement across governance, economic, and security programs. Margaret Sparling then describes how specific investments by the United States, particularly in media and information technology connectivity, could have an outsized impact on regional security in Melanesia. The report concludes with Miles Monaco and Darlene Onuorah's summary of policy options derived from the dialogue itself.

Pacific Island nations are not small, weak, isolated, or lacking in agency. The Blue Pacific concept expressly counters these “disempowering narratives” by emphasizing alternative perspectives,

²⁰ Meg Taylor and Soli Middleby, “More of the Same Is Not the Answer to Building Influence in the Pacific,” 9DASHLINE, October 3, 2022. <https://www.9dashline.com/article/more-of-the-same-is-not-the-answer-to-building-influence-in-the-pacific>; and Meg Taylor and Solstice Middleby, “Aid Is Not Development: The True Character of Pacific Aid,” *Development Policy Review* 41, no. S2 (2023).

²¹ Ilan Kiloe, “Free Trade in the South Pacific: An Overview,” *Journal of South Pacific Law* 13, no. 1 (2009): 47–55.

regionalism, and collection action.²² U.S. policy toward the Pacific should be informed by regional narratives and acknowledge them where appropriate.²³ As discussed in the report on Micronesia, “appreciating the concerns of Pacific Island country leaders is not simply agreeing with them or using their rhetoric.”²⁴ One set of scholars argues that there is a danger that “strategic narratives may be *appropriated*,”²⁵ so the United States and Partners in the Blue Pacific must be cognizant of these potential concerns. To avoid appropriation while advocating for mutual interests, the United States must actively coordinate with Pacific Island leaders in advance of major policy announcements. These options will be discussed further in the report’s conclusion. Active coordination will require strategic patience from U.S. policymakers, but remaining committed to Pacific regionalism is a central tenet of the Pacific Partnership Strategy. U.S. policy announcements should be delayed until proper consultation has occurred with the relevant Pacific partners. Coordination will take presence, patience, consultation, and a long-term pledge to engagement with Melanesia and the broader Pacific Islands region from the United States. But that commitment is one worth making.

²² Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, “Mapping the Blue Pacific in a Changing Regional Order,” in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (Acton: ANU Press, 2021), 41–70.

²³ In our analysis of U.S. engagement in Micronesia, we refer to the “three A’s: acknowledge, appreciate, and actively coordinate.” See Herlevi, “Beyond Presence.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Wallis et al., “The ‘Blue Pacific’ Strategic Narrative,” 20. Italics are my own for emphasis. For more on how the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative may have been appropriated without consultation of Pacific leaders, see Greg Fry, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, and Terence Wesley-Smith, “Partners in the Blue Pacific’ Initiative Rides Roughshod over Established Regional Processes,” Development Policy Centre, DevPolicy blog, July 5, 2022, <https://devpolicy.org/pbp-initiative-rides-roughshod-over-regional-processes-20220705>.

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NBR SPECIAL REPORT #110 | JULY 2024

Melanesian Responses to Strategic Competition in the Pacific

Patrick Kaiku and Vernon Gawi

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the approaches of Melanesian states to navigating the power dynamics of U.S.-China strategic competition and considers policy options to improve cooperation both within the region and with external development partners.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The institutional capacity and domestic agendas of Melanesian states are critical determinants in how they manage the spillover effects of U.S.-China strategic competition in the region. Although great-power rivalry presents significant challenges for these states, given their institutional weaknesses and a political culture that is not oriented toward foreign policy, their engagement with external development partners affords an opportunity to build institutional resilience and an informed citizenry. The negative effects of geostrategic competition can be mitigated if creative ways of conducting diplomacy and engaging with external actors are envisaged and implemented. Melanesian states have a responsibility to their citizens to prevent further tensions and misunderstandings. This could mean using a regional public diplomacy strategy to communicate characteristically Melanesian worldviews to external parties. Because foreign relations may not be a funding priority for Melanesian governments, the Melanesian Spearhead Group remains a useful coordinating organization for more elaborate initiatives, such as implementing a common Melanesian public diplomacy strategy.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- While Melanesian states are protective of their sovereignty and claim to pursue foreign relations as the basis to advance their national interests, collectively working through regional organizations such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group could facilitate a unified approach to managing the negative effects of great-power rivalry.
- For a “friends to all, enemies to none” foreign policy orientation that emphasizes nonalignment to be effective, Melanesian states must develop a public diplomacy strategy to communicate their foreign policy goals to the U.S. and China.
- At present, a deficit in democratic practices in Melanesian states plagues the domestic coordination and legitimacy of foreign policy decision-making. This translates into very unpopular foreign policy decisions that in all likelihood compromise these countries’ sovereignty and will be destabilizing to the internal politics of Melanesian states.

For this discussion, Melanesia is defined as the part of the Pacific comprising collectively the independent states of Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea (PNG). The states in Melanesia are characterized as having significant social and cultural diversity. This essay is informed by our vantage points as PNG citizens, with general observations about the situations in other states in Melanesia.

The critical determinants for how Melanesian states will manage the growing U.S.-China strategic competition in their region will be the absorptive capacity of their governance institutions and their individual domestic agendas. In this essay, we argue that in Melanesia, there must be domestic conversations about the effects of regional geopolitical rivalry to ensure not only that citizens are informed of the stakes but, more importantly, that states are mediating effectively between the big powers in the region.¹ Rather than exacerbating existing tensions and misunderstandings, an informed citizenry in Melanesia is capable of keeping governments in check in part by demanding some semblance of transparency in the conduct of foreign affairs through their representative institutions.

The U.S.-China geostrategic competition is especially illuminating because its effects provide useful evidence of the resilience as well as the susceptibilities of postcolonial states in Melanesia. Because this is an unprecedented situation in the region, it is both interesting and troubling. Limited knowledge and scholarly research into the diplomatic behavior of Melanesian states is understandable, as Melanesia has been a backwater in global power configurations since the period of decolonization. We hope that this discussion will initiate prospective research collaborations by Melanesian scholars and foreign policy practitioners for purposes of informing—and empowering—Melanesian citizens about the gravity of global affairs in their lives and futures.

In the first section, the essay provides context for the subsequent discussion. In essence, the larger narrative of U.S.-China rivalry is beyond the control of Melanesian states. Coupled with domestic governance challenges, these states must clearly articulate and clarify their collective foreign policy positions to external actors in order to better frame this geostrategic competition as it is manifest within a Melanesian setting. This is necessary to avoid misunderstanding. The second part of the essay will deal with the approaches that Melanesian states are using in navigating the power dynamics of the U.S.-China rivalry, notably the invocation of universalist foreign policy orientations. The spillover effects of the geostrategic competition can affect the governance and other domestic aspects of states in Melanesia. We highlight specific instances with the aim of illustrating why foreign relations matters for the ongoing nation-building efforts in the region. The concluding section assesses policy options to improve cooperation. It encourages the Melanesian Spearhead Group to be proactive in enhancing discussions about the involvement of Melanesian citizens in foreign relations. The U.S.-China geostrategic competition presents opportunities for an upgrade of diplomatic skills and approaches.

Understanding the Melanesian Context

The U.S.-China rivalry is an esoteric subject to Melanesians. The framing of the discourse about this strategic competition has been exclusively the preoccupation of external actors in academia, journalism, and foreign policy and national defense establishments. There are vested interests for

¹ See “Big Picture Vision Conversations Missing in the Pacific,” *Islands Business*, March 28, 2023, https://islandsbusiness.com/news-break/future-of-pacific/?fbclid=IwAR2yI6Mg3Oxpz9FzuC9pGANcCkCr8tGUYIXulgD3atZ89bBkcYGF_htFQLU.

research grants, military contracts, and other financial incentives that drive the rhetoric about geopolitical rivalry. Citizens of states in Melanesia may see the presence of Chinese shop retailers or read news items about the latest bilateral commitments from traditional development partners. But from their perspective, these are simply routine interactions with foreigners. Most interactions with foreigners are not necessarily assessed through the lens of “strategic competition.”

What is not helpful, moreover, is how the geopolitical confrontation between China and the United States is usually framed as a zero-sum contest and then made to fit into the Melanesian worldview, with the intention of convincing Melanesian states to take sides with one of the rival powers. Much of the misunderstanding in the last decade in Melanesia can be attributed to this confrontational narrative. Geopolitical competition is not a subject of conversation in Melanesian communities; it is within this void that the narrative of U.S.-China rivalry informs misguided approaches in dealings with Melanesian states. This further compounds the already existing situation in which government officials tasked with conducting statecraft are never held accountable to citizens.

Melanesian states are artificial postcolonial constructs. This is a useful backdrop for comprehending how the national interest in Melanesian states is defined. In the lead-up to independence, Melanesian states had to acclimate themselves to a modern and sophisticated bureaucratic machinery. This necessitated the localization of manpower in the governmental institutions and the creation of some semblance of professionalism in the civil service. In most instances, the process of institutionalizing the trappings of a modern state system was undertaken within a short time frame—what two PNG academics call the “compressed state formation process.”²

Moreover, articulating some sense of national consciousness among the diverse populations within these newly independent states was necessary for their legitimacy to be maintained. In describing the situation, Sinclair Dinnen said: “A major source of difficulty in these countries has been that state-building and nation-building have had to be pursued simultaneously and, in practice, these processes have often worked against each other, thereby contributing to crises of state legitimacy and the weakening of state institutions in the post-independence period.”³ In the experiences of PNG, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands, sporadic threats of secession were successfully negotiated and quelled. Unitary systems of government were established, and charismatic political leadership allowed for nation-building to navigate the immediate post-independence periods. These developments are directly reflected in the low prioritization that Melanesian states place on foreign policy as a specialized area of statecraft. Even electoral contests are not predicated on the marketplace of ideas in pursuit of the national interest. The electoral cycle centers on immediate domestic and parochial issues rather than on foreign policy differentiations between political parties and candidates. Foreign policy is hardly a winning ticket for political parties competing for votes in the electorate.

Without any electoral mandate to formulate a foreign policy agenda, issues of grave importance in the international arena are left to be undertaken simply as the prerogative of the executive. Some notable cases of foreign policy blunders in recent years have resulted in protests and political upheavals, as unpopular foreign policy decisions come to light. In the context of the ongoing U.S.-China strategic competition, parliamentary oversight of foreign policy decisions is usually

² Henry Okole and David Kavanamur, “Political Corruption in Papua New Guinea: Some Causes and Policy Lessons,” *South Pacific Journal of Philosophy and Culture* 7 (2003): 7–36.

³ Sinclair Dinnen, “A Comment on State-Building in Solomon Islands,” *Journal of Pacific History* 42, no. 2 (2007): 259.

found wanting. The insertion of powerful external players into the domestic politics of Melanesian states and its spillover effects is relevant for understanding the pervasive, and potentially destabilizing, nature of the U.S.-China geostrategic competition in Melanesia.

Nevertheless, regional governments are using the strategic competition to facilitate their own domestic visions.⁴ The fear, however, is that if foreign policy is left solely to politicians, it may lead to dangerous entanglements and tense standoffs. Courting powerful external actors without the appropriate scrutiny of representative institutions is not only risky, but doing so also limits the abilities of Melanesian countries to offer alternative positions of consensus on the emerging geopolitical situation.

Compared to other regions of the world, the Pacific Islands region was previously a backwater in relation to geopolitical and ideological rifts in the international system. During the Cold War, for instance, the United States was bogged down in “hot wars” elsewhere and relied on a somewhat nonchalant application of the strategic denial doctrine to limit Soviet influence in Melanesia. As noted by Terence Wesley-Smith, the emerging U.S.-China geopolitical competition is different “because China is already deeply involved in the region.”⁵ This rivalry will become more pervasive because it is “neither military nor political but economic, demonstrated through increased flows of trade, aid and investment.”⁶ Where trade and economic investments are relevant for developing Melanesian states, they could explain the process of selective engagement among a range of possible alternatives in the international system. A notable example of economic aid is seen in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI is geared toward improving infrastructure and fostering economic development. By collaborating with China through BRI, Melanesian states aim to access the financial resources, technical expertise, and technology required to address pressing domestic issues.

More broadly, the geopolitical situation gives Melanesian states the opportunity to explore strategic partnerships and competition with a range of external actors. In Fiji, for instance, domestic developments compelled the country to diversify its diplomatic partners. The military-led coup that installed Frank Bainimarama in December 2006 acted out of necessity after its expulsion from regional institutions such as the Pacific Islands Forum in May 2009 and sanctions imposed by Fiji’s traditional partners.⁷ These various diplomatic engagements illustrate how strategic competition is leveraged to address domestic imperatives.

Managing the U.S.-China Strategic Competition: How Resilient Are Melanesian Representative Institutions?

The Destabilizing Effects of Entanglement in Geopolitical Rivalry

Foreign affairs remain the exclusive domain of the executive branch of government in Melanesian countries. In PNG, for instance, Patrick Matbob observes that citizens “have little

⁴ During his visit to China in March 2023, PNG foreign affairs and trade minister Justin Tkatchenko was assured that China would “deepen the strategic alignment between the Belt and Road Initiative and Papua New Guinea (PNG)’s Connect PNG Program.” The program aims to develop infrastructure and road networks to link the country for commerce and trade purposes. See “China to Deepen Alignment between BRI and Connect PNG Program, Provide PNG Assistance without Political Condition Attached,” *Global Times*, March 30, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202303/1288285.shtml>.

⁵ Terence Wesley-Smith, “A New Cold War? Implications for the Pacific Islands,” in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (Acton: ANU Press, 2021), 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷ Sandra Tarte, “Building a Strategic Partnership: Fiji-China Relations since 2008,” in Smith and Wesley-Smith, *The China Alternative*, 375–96.

knowledge or concern about PNG's foreign relations" and "remain largely spectators to the government's international relationships and dealings."⁸ Outside of the scrutiny of representative institutions and the knowledge of citizens, powerful external actors are enlisted in the international relations of Melanesian states. When these powerful actors are mutually hostile toward each other, Melanesian states will struggle to communicate their neutrality to these competing powers. Moreover, in the binary geopolitical situation faced in the Pacific, engagement with one rival could well be treated with suspicion by the other rival power. This unfolding situation is further compounded for small states, like those in Melanesia, when foreign affairs are the exclusive prerogative of political leaders and the cabinet. Without the appropriate level of input by citizens or representative institutions, great-power rivalry raises the likelihood of conflict in the region.

Another issue is accountability to domestic stakeholders. Where representative institutions are unable to provide oversight of the executive government's foreign policy, this democratic deficit poses serious challenges for sustaining democratic ideals and the stability of Melanesian states.⁹ The case of Solomon Islands is informative. The Manasseh Sogavare government's decision to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to mainland China in September 2019 generated protests in Malaita Province under then premier Daniel Suidani.¹⁰ Even the White House Indo-Pacific affairs coordinator, Kurt Campbell, weighed in, warning Solomon Islands against allowing the building of Chinese military bases.¹¹ Such confrontational rhetoric can appear innocuous, but it came across as belittling Solomon Islands and thus proved unhelpful. Sogavare later stated, "We find it very insulting to be branded as unfit to manage our sovereign affairs, or [to] have other motives in pursuing our national interests."¹² In response, he doubled down in his engagement with China and has remained recalcitrant to diplomatic overtures to reverse the decision ever since.

In early 2023, the standoff between the national government of Solomon Islands and Suidani came to a dramatic turn when Suidani was removed from his position as premier of Malaita Province in a vote of no confidence. He of course accused the national government of working "under the influence of China" for his political demise.¹³ This episode demonstrated differences between two personalities—Sogavare and Suidani—and pitted the most populous province in Solomon Islands against a stubborn Honiara-based central government. It is a reminder of the

⁸ Patrick Matbob, "On-the-Ground Tensions with Chinese Traders in Papua New Guinea," in Smith and Wesley-Smith, *The China Alternative*, 452.

⁹ Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley have observed that foreign policy is increasingly seen as "determined by diplomatic negotiations and bureaucrats in multilateral settings rather than by electorally accountable representatives of national parliaments." See Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley, *Making Australian Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 240. However, in Melanesian states with ineffective parliaments, it is usually the prime minister or foreign affairs minister who exercises the prerogative in determining the foreign relations agenda on behalf of the state.

¹⁰ Solomon Islands' decision to switch diplomatic relations from Taiwan to mainland China (People's Republic of China) has also been criticized for its lack of domestic consultations. "Solomons' Civil Society Groups to Petition PM to Step Down," Radio New Zealand, October 1, 2019, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/400060/solomons-civil-society-groups-to-petition-pm-to-step-down>. See also "Sols Foreign Committee Chair Says China Switch 'Regrettable,'" Radio New Zealand, September 23, 2019, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/programmes/datelinepacific/audio/2018714271/sols-foreign-committee-chair-says-china-switch-regrettable>; and Grant Wyeth, "How China and Taiwan Became 'Pawns' in Solomon Islands' Internal Dispute," *Diplomat*, September 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/how-china-and-taiwan-became-pawns-in-solomon-islands-internal-dispute>.

¹¹ Kirsty Needham, David Brunnstrom, and Michael Martina, "U.S. Warns of Response to Any Permanent China Military Presence in Solomons," Reuters, April 22, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-adviser-campbell-visits-solomon-islands-after-china-pact-signed-2022-04-22>.

¹² Stephen Dziedzic and Edwina Seselja, "Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare 'Insulted' by Reaction to Security Treaty with China," ABC News (Australia), March 28, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-29/manasseh-sogavare-responds-to-leaked-security-treaty-with-china/100946614>.

¹³ Eryk Bagshaw, "Replaced Sogavare Rival Accuses Solomons Leader of Conspiring with Beijing," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 10, 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/oceania/replaced-sogavare-rival-accuses-solomons-leader-of-conspiring-with-beijing-20230210-p5cjs.html>.

possible backlash that national-level political leaders can generate in their conduct of foreign relations without consultations with the domestic stakeholders in the countries they represent.

Another useful example is the case of Vanuatu. The then prime minister, Serge Vohor, in November 2004 secretly signed a diplomatic communiqué with Taiwan pledging to establish diplomatic relations. Vohor subsequently found himself in a political crisis.¹⁴ The attempted diplomatic switch became the perfect ammunition for disgruntled members of his cabinet, and the parliamentary opposition used the controversy to initiate a successful vote of no confidence against his premiership. Tied to this scandal were allegations that Taiwan had reportedly promised to give Vanuatu a total of \$30 million in aid in exchange for diplomatic recognition.¹⁵

More recently, in August and September 2023 the same issue of “foreign engagement” was used by political rivals to initiate a vote of no confidence against then prime minister Ishmael Kalsakau,¹⁶ propelling Vanuatu into its most serious bout of political instability yet. At issue was a bilateral security agreement signed between Australia and Vanuatu in December 2022. Kalsakau was accused of signing the security agreement without the approval of the cabinet. Arguing that the agreement with Australia contravened Vanuatu’s nonaligned status, the opposition subsequently deposed Kalsakau from power. A review of the security agreement was proposed by the incoming prime minister Sato Kilman. Siobhan McDonnell observes about this episode that “security agreements that are not carefully negotiated in good faith and following proper processes can have the effect of destabilizing governments.”¹⁷

The same dynamics were also evident on the eve of the signing of the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) between the United States and PNG in May 2023. The DCA was secretly negotiated, initially bypassing parliamentary scrutiny, and ostensibly undermines PNG’s “friends to all, enemies to none” commitments. Unsurprisingly, student-led protests and subsequently the parliamentary opposition sought a constitutional decision from the PNG Supreme Court on its legality.¹⁸ After the opposition member of parliament vacated his position as opposition leader, and moved to the government side of parliament, there are no indications that the opposition will pursue this matter through the Supreme Court. The furor around the agreement attests to long-standing fears of international agreements compromising PNG’s domestic laws and sovereignty.¹⁹

The DCA, however, is not the first controversial international agreement for the country. In 2016, the PNG Supreme Court ruled that the Manus Island facility for asylum seekers, which was operated as part of Australia’s immigration policy, violated their human rights and was unconstitutional. The case demonstrates how weak domestic oversight of foreign relations

¹⁴ Melody Chen, “Vote against PM Is Legal, Court Rules,” *Taipei Times*, December 8, 2004, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2004/12/08/2003214223>.

¹⁵ “PM Who Backed Taiwan Is Ditched,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 13, 2004, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/pm-who-backed-taiwan-is-ditched-20041213-gdkaym.html>.

¹⁶ Prianka Srinivasan, “Vanuatu PM Faces No-Confidence Vote as Rivals Cite ‘Foreign Engagement’ Concerns,” *Guardian*, August 7, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/08/vanuatu-pm-faces-no-confidence-vote-as-rivals-cite-foreign-engagement-concerns>.

¹⁷ Siobhan McDonnell, “Vanuatu: No Confidence, but in Whom?” Lowy Institute, Interpreter, August 15, 2023, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/vanuatu-no-confidence-whom>. See also Catherine Wilson, “Great Power Rivalry Shakes Up Pacific Island Nation,” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, Responsible Statecraft, September 20, 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/vanuatu-australia-china>.

¹⁸ “PNG MP to Ask Court for Clarity on U.S. Agreements,” RNZ, June 26, 2023, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/492626/png-mp-to-ask-court-for-clarity-on-us-agreements>.

¹⁹ Henry Storey, “The Downsides for Australia from the U.S.-PNG Defence Agreement,” Lowy Institute, Interpreter, July 5, 2023, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/downsides-australia-us-png-defence-agreement>.

reflects persistent governance weaknesses in PNG.²⁰ This particular bilateral agreement, with PNG willingly “accommodating Australia’s wish in exchange for certain monetary and other considerations,” was relentlessly pursued by the governments of both countries, without consideration for the sovereign laws of PNG.²¹

These instances of political instability in Melanesian states demonstrate the potentially invasive aspects of international affairs, compromising their sovereignty and democratic processes. Entanglement with external parties has often been destabilizing, undermining domestic governance and prolonging the parochial political culture in Melanesia. An unstable domestic political environment is in turn not conducive to the ongoing nation-building efforts in these states. For weak and politically unstable states in Melanesia, entanglement with external powers with a vested interest in geostrategic competition can exacerbate the already precarious power dynamics in the governments of these socially and culturally diverse countries.

Maximizing Domestic Priorities amid the Geopolitical Rivalry

With the increased visibility of states in the Melanesian subregion in this time of geopolitical rivalry, in what specific areas of cooperation can Melanesian states maximize their engagement with external partners? Resourceful external partners can complement efforts at addressing domestic security challenges. Possible points of entry include domestic law enforcement, criminal justice sectors, and the capacity of national enforcement agencies.

External partners’ investment in capacity-building programs aligned with global best practices will not only demonstrate long-term cooperation with Melanesian states but, more importantly, communicate to regional governments the importance of strong and effective institutions. Lack of effective enforcement of laws and other capacity-related challenges erode the legitimacy of governments in Melanesia. The failure of a state to have any realistic and enduring impression in the consciousness of its citizens is directly tied to the inability of the institutions of the state to perform routine tasks in areas of law enforcement.

On immigration, border security, fisheries, labor rights, intellectual property rights, taxation, natural resources, and consumer protection, Melanesian domestic agencies are limited in their capacity to deliver results.²² Considered vulnerable entry points, the state agencies charged with overseeing these areas can benefit from closer cooperation with external partners on capacity building and an upgrade of technical expertise in the enforcement of their domestic laws. These are the surest routes to building the domestic strength of postcolonial states struggling with safeguarding their sovereign existence.

For the foreseeable future, Melanesian states will continue to suffer from a lack of accountability on foreign policy matters. If foreign relations in the region are plagued by a democratic deficit, how effectively will Melanesian governments be able to manage the more complex effects of

²⁰ Starting in 2001, revoked in 2008, and reintroduced in 2012, Australia’s “Pacific solution” strategy sought to deter the inflows of illegal boat people into Australia. In 2012, under the Julia Gillard–led government, Australia negotiated with PNG and Nauru for them to act as offshore processing destinations for Australia-bound illegal immigrants. In 2012, the first instrument was signed, a memorandum of understanding providing for the transfer of asylum seekers from Australia to PNG. The second instrument, called the Regional Resettlement Agreement, was signed in July 2013, which provided for the permanent resettlement of refugees in PNG after processing at the Manus Island detention center. The 2016 ruling basically reasserted the rights of these asylum seekers and pointed out the duties that state parties like Australia and PNG had in protecting them.

²¹ See *Namah v. Pato*, PGSC 13; SC1497 (2016), Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute, <http://www.pacii.org/cgi-bin/sinodisp/pg/cases/PGSC/2016/13.html?stem=&synonyms=&query=manus%20island>.

²² Patrick Kaiku, “The Internal Dimensions of Sovereignty in the Pacific Islands,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Strategist, June 13, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-internal-dimensions-of-sovereignty-in-the-pacific-islands>.

great-power politics? A predominantly parochial political culture conspires against open diplomacy for most Melanesian states. Equally problematic is the lack of investment in international relations programs in the higher educational system and diplomatic skills of officials in regional organizations and ministries of foreign affairs. These institutions are possible long-term avenues to sensitize citizens to the importance of foreign relations.

Another problem is the lack of experts and specialists informing foreign policy in Melanesian states. In PNG, for example, there is no cadre of Chinese specialists to provide informed policy positions to the government. Experts on Chinese language, philosophy, history, culture, and politics are useful resources guiding foreign policymaking. Yet governments do not consider investments in these areas useful for the art of statecraft. While the University of the South Pacific has a well-established international relations program, the same cannot be said of higher education institutions in other Melanesian countries. If universities were to offer quality programs in international relations, area studies, and diplomacy, they could create a pool of trained graduates for independent think tanks wholly dedicated to researching international and regional affairs and policy.

Such pragmatic and tangible outcomes in foreign relations would help the domestic constituencies in Melanesian states appreciate the benefits of an informed foreign policy and its connection to advancing domestic policy. As the former minister for foreign affairs and external trade of Vanuatu, Ralph Regenvanu, observed, “the best way to really make people appreciate [Vanuatu’s] foreign relations is of course all the aid projects. Being able to show that they are well chosen, have high impact on the lives of people, and that they are conducted in a manner which is transparent, and they are done efficiently.”²³ Such aid projects, he added, “are the most visible aspects of foreign affairs.”²⁴ This observation has merit when one considers the clientelist characteristics of Melanesian political systems. The primary interest of Melanesian governments is to access development assistance for their domestic constituency. This is to say that political leaders and government ministries are open to a range of development partners, both traditional and new.

One strategic position for Melanesian governments is the justification of their foreign relations in terms of their mutually beneficial engagement with external partners within the region and beyond. Vanuatu and PNG, for instance, are members of the Non-Aligned Movement. Recently, Solomon Islands prime minister Sogavare reminded bilateral partners of his country’s adherence to a foreign policy of “friends to all, enemies to none.”²⁵ These principles of universalism are residual aspects of the Indigenous Melanesian understanding of social relationships and approaches to conflict resolution such as consensus, reconciliation, and mediation.²⁶ Thus, the “adversarial” notion of pitting parties against each other or having to choose sides in any confrontation can be problematic in certain Melanesian societies.²⁷

²³ Ralph Regenvanu, “Pacific Regionalism, Climate Finance, Women in Politics: In Conversation with Hon Ralph Regenvanu,” interview by Tess Newton Cain, Development Policy Centre, podcast, July 19, 2018, <https://soundcloud.com/devpolicy/pacific-regionalism-climate-finance-and-women-in-politics-in-conversation-with-hon-ralph-regenvanu>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Nick Sas and Chrisnrita Aumanu-Leong, “Solomon Islands Receives Visits from United States, China and Japan as ‘Friends to All, Enemy to None’ Policy Proves Popular,” ABC News (Australia), March 23, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-22/solomon-islands-china-us-japan-visits/102123368>.

²⁶ When the Melanesian Spearhead Group was divided in 2010 over the issue of Fiji chairing it, member states relied on reconciliation and mediation, enhancing further the unity of the group. See Tess Newton Cain, “The Renaissance of the Melanesian Spearhead Group,” in *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ed. Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (Acton: ANU Press, 2015), 151–60.

²⁷ Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, “Westminster Meets Solomons in the Honiara Riots,” in *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands*, ed. Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth (Canberra: ANU Press, 2008), 96–118.

The founding prime minister of PNG, the late Sir Michael Somare, was adept at navigating a multilingual and multiethnic nation in the pre-independence period and eventually led the country to independence.²⁸ It was under his premiership that the universalist foreign policy orientation of PNG was established in 1975. What this demonstrates is that Melanesian governments are simply reflecting the values of the societies they represent. The imposition of a strategic competition is therefore a concept that some Melanesian states may find inconsistent with their own understanding of social relationships. As well, taking sides in geopolitical confrontations is a luxury that big states can afford to take, whereas for small states the default position is necessarily neutrality and nonalignment. Henry Ivarature, commenting on the security agreement between Solomon Islands and China, summarized it best when he said: “China is seen as a friend. It is not an enemy or a hostile country. It is viewed as a country that has something to offer to the government and people of Solomon Islands that may advance their wellbeing. But I think geopolitics is far from the minds of Solomon Islanders.”²⁹

Foreign policy postures informed by Melanesian worldviews, with universalist applications to world peace, can be strategically communicated through public diplomacy initiatives. Public diplomacy is an underappreciated toolkit in the diplomatic practices of Melanesian countries. In this capacity, the Melanesian Spearhead Group could be a useful coordinating organization and staging point for dialogue with external actors on Melanesian values and principles.

The renewed focus of external actors on the Pacific, and Melanesia specifically, is beneficial for Melanesian states in another important way. It opens avenues to directly communicating outstanding matters of import to Melanesian states. For instance, the Global Fragility Act, enacted in the United States in 2019, is a significant piece of legislation designed to tackle conflict and instability in a select group of fragile and conflict-affected countries around the globe. Moreover, the Biden administration identified PNG as a partner country in its 2020 U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, or Global Fragility Strategy.³⁰ The strategy focuses on preventing conflicts, promoting peace, and mitigating the drivers of fragility. Anastasia Strouboulis and others argue that the “strategic importance of PNG in the broader region” rendered the country an obvious candidate for this program.³¹ It should also be highlighted that PNG could be a likely test case for U.S. engagement with Melanesia, long regarded as an unstable area of the Pacific and consistent with the stated aim of assisting Pacific states in dealing with threats to their sovereignty.³²

Political leaders in PNG have also used the increased focus on their country to point out outstanding matters relevant to Melanesian stability. For instance, Powes Parkop, governor of the National Capital District, appealed for U.S. support in “addressing the conflict in West Papua by preventing its escalation and promoting stability in the region.”³³ Multiple side issues—for instance, climate change—can be brought to the fore with increased levels of engagement with external actors.

²⁸ “Sana” was the chiefly title given to the late Sir Michael Somare. Sana means “peacemaker” in the Murik language of the East Sepik Province of PNG. See Andrew Moutu, “Sana, a Noble Peace Maker,” *National* (PNG), March 5, 2021, <https://www.thenational.com.pg/sana-a-noble-peace-maker>.

²⁹ “What Do the Pacific Island Countries Think about China?” *Diplomat*, June 30, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/what-do-the-pacific-island-countries-think-about-china>.

³⁰ Anastasia Strouboulis et al., “Addressing Fragility in Papua New Guinea,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 17, 2022.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

³² The trope that the region is “unstable” is all-pervasive; it was even referred to as the “arc of instability” in the literature in the 2000s. See Ronald J. May et al., “Arc of Instability”? *Melanesia in the Early 2000s* (Christchurch: Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, 2003).

³³ “U.S. 10-Year Stability Plan for PNG,” Loop PNG, March 30, 2023, <https://www.looppng.com/png-news/us-10-year-stability-plan-png-118907>.

There is a learning curve for foreign policymaking practice, and greater engagement with external actors will help Melanesian countries build their institutional knowledge. Serious allegations of illiberal practices and the corruption of local elites have been made regarding some of these states' interactions with China. One example is the row over "media blackouts" in Solomon Islands during Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's visit in 2022. The Media Association of Solomon Islands rallied "media outlets granted accreditation to boycott the event in solidarity with colleagues who have been shut out" of the press conference.³⁴ This pushback resulted, among other things, in China failing to conclude a comprehensive security deal with Pacific states.³⁵ Through their engagements with external actors, Melanesian states will acquire more direct knowledge of dealing with these big powers in the region, putting them in a better position for future interactions.

Because China will be a permanent feature of the landscape, it is important that Melanesians extensively engage with all partners. Reflecting on the motivations of Solomon Islands in its security agreement with China, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka said: "To protect their sovereignty, island countries must build deep knowledge about the motives and modus operandi of those they have security partnership with. China is relatively new to the region and countries such as Solomon Islands must build deep knowledge about Beijing, state and non-state agencies, Chinese people and how they operate."³⁶ Recent revelations of Chinese extraterritorial activities through the deployment of its police force in the mass arrests of Chinese nationals in Fiji illustrate this point. Commenting on the influence of China, Fiji's prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka remarked: "I feel stuck only because I understand Australia and America, and I don't fully understand China's agenda."³⁷ Whereas traditional partners such as Australia and the United States have deep historical ties with the Pacific and Melanesia, the same cannot be said of China. Hence it is important that knowledge of China is enhanced, if Melanesian states are expected to navigate their sovereignty and democratic values in their dealings with China.

China's approach in Melanesia has featured aspects of both economic and public diplomacy, including substantial economic and infrastructure projects, such as roads, ports, and telecommunications, aimed at enhancing the region's connectivity and development. Cultural exchanges, art exhibitions, and performances are also employed to strengthen ties. China offers scholarships for students from Melanesian countries to study in China, fostering educational and people-to-people connections. A recent study by Denghua Zhang and Bernard Yegiora demonstrates the significance of Chinese government scholarships to PNG students, who appeared to "change their impressions of the country itself."³⁸ These kinds of immersive learning experiences can provide younger generations of Melanesians the knowledge of external actors with whom they are dealing.

³⁴ Kate Lyons, "Solomon Islands Journalists Shut Out of China Foreign Minister Visit, Raising Secrecy Concerns," *Guardian*, May 24, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/25/secrecy-surrounding-pacific-grand-tour-by-chinas-foreign-minister-sparks-alarm>.

³⁵ "China Fails to Strike Security Deal with Pacific Nations," *Deutsche Welle*, May 30, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/chinafails-to-strike-security-deal-with-pacific-nations/a-61971391>.

³⁶ Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, "Solomon Islands Asserts Its Sovereignty—with China and the West," *Lowy Institute, Interpreter*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.loyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/solomon-islands-asserts-its-sovereignty-china-west>.

³⁷ "China's Dirty Tactics to Control the Pacific," *60 Minutes Australia*, March 24, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzW1APWxBjs>.

³⁸ Denghua Zhang and Bernard Yegiora, "What Do People in the Pacific Really Think of China? It's More Nuanced Than You May Imagine," *Conversation*, November 12, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/what-do-people-in-the-pacific-really-think-of-china-its-more-nuanced-than-you-may-imagine-212781>.

Policy Options

There is a specific need for Melanesians to develop in-depth knowledge and understanding of the countries with which they are partnering. Matters of foreign policy are primary areas of competence for sovereign states. Denghua Zhang has highlighted China's growing academic interest in Pacific affairs, with the goal of building strategic knowledge and expertise of the region to inform the country's foreign policy.³⁹

The same cannot be said of Melanesian investments in area studies. To promote greater civic involvement in international relations and foreign affairs, key strategies can be employed. First, it is crucial to develop academic programs tailored to international relations and foreign affairs. In addition, scholarship opportunities and student exchange programs might be established in collaboration with foreign universities. Such initiatives provide young individuals with exposure to diverse international perspectives and experiences, further fostering their interest in global affairs. Complementing formal education, the creation of research centers and think tanks focused on international relations can offer young people the opportunity to conduct research and publish findings, contributing to a deeper understanding of global issues.

Furthermore, public diplomacy initiatives, including cultural exchanges, art exhibitions, and educational programs, could showcase the culture and heritage of Melanesian countries to the world, fostering better understanding and cultural exchange. Young people might also be encouraged to pursue careers in international journalism, as reporting on global events can contribute to international understanding and awareness. Model UN programs, for example, could be introduced in Melanesian schools, offering students opportunities to simulate diplomatic negotiations and gain practical experience with international organizations.

Finally, countries could offer internships within government departments related to foreign affairs. These internships would enable young people to work alongside diplomats and policymakers, gaining firsthand experience in international diplomacy.

By implementing these comprehensive strategies, young people in PNG and other Melanesian countries would have a multitude of opportunities to become actively involved in international relations and foreign affairs, fostering global awareness and engagement. The paucity of such opportunities could be one reason for the disconnect between citizens and foreign relations activities. Melanesian countries are not preparing globally informed citizens who see the connection between their lives and the foreign policy decisions that their governments make in their name. Public diplomacy engagement is arguably the surest way of building robust knowledge and awareness of other cultures and peoples as well as increasing engagement with other cultures and societies. If Melanesian values and worldviews are to be communicated to development partners, it will be through exchanges in public diplomacy outreach. With this in mind, Melanesian countries need to prioritize developing a regional strategy for public diplomacy activities with their development partners.

³⁹ Denghua Zhang, "Growing Academic Interest in the Pacific—Pacific Research Centres in China," Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, 2020.

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NBR SPECIAL REPORT #110 | JULY 2024

The Role of the Melanesian Spearhead Group in Security Cooperation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the evolution of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), member countries' ambitions for economic growth and development, and the re-emergence of security as the main priority for the MSG.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The MSG was formed in 1986 at the height of the decolonization movements in the Pacific Islands region. During that period, internal challenges relating to security and colonial administration led to decolonization and successful security cooperation. Following independence, there was an urgent need for economic development. Trade was considered a potential vehicle for economic growth, and by 1993 the Melanesian Spearhead Group Trade Agreement was concluded and signed by MSG members. This led to steady growth in trade until mid-2000, when the region was confronted with numerous security challenges. As a result, security cooperation re-emerged as a top priority for national and regional cooperation. In each evolution of MSG cooperation, different sets of circumstances, challenges, and opportunities called forth a need for subregional institutional development and growth, and the MSG played a part in fulfilling those needs. In view of the current and likely future trajectories of subregionalism and other broad, overarching challenges, the MSG is poised to provide opportunities for broadening security and peace in the region.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- MSG security cooperation is driven largely by internal needs, challenges, and opportunities. Thus, the MSG tends to be more responsive to partnerships that respect local uniqueness and partners that address national needs than to those that prioritize global interests in the region.
- Melanesian customs play an important role in MSG diplomacy and are a powerful unifying force of shared identity and purpose among members. The key to effective partnerships for international actors seeking to engage successfully with the MSG is a deeper understanding of Melanesian customs and diplomacy.
- The growing influence of MSG subregionalism in the Pacific is due to the group's ability to provide a platform that advocates for the needs and development agendas of its members and redefines homegrown solutions to security challenges.
- The MSG cooperation and security architecture is premised on addressing national security, alleviating poverty, encouraging economic development, and strengthening state institutions.

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) was formed in 1986 at the height of the decolonization movements in the Pacific Islands region. Its membership comprises Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS), a pro-independence political group in New Caledonia. Indonesia is an associate member, while Timor-Leste and the United Liberation Movement for West Papua hold observer status. MSG member countries account for a majority of land resources, population (more than 90%), and natural resources in the Pacific Islands region.¹ Following independence, trade was considered a potential vehicle for economic growth, and by 1993 the Melanesian Spearhead Group Trade Agreement (MSGTA) was concluded and signed by MSG members. This led to steady growth in trade until mid-2000, when the region was confronted with numerous security challenges. As a result, security cooperation re-emerged as a top priority for national and regional cooperation.

This essay provides a historical account of the establishment and evolution of the MSG, with special emphasis given to security cooperation and the broader implications of subregionalism in the Pacific. First, it describes the factors surrounding the logic and moral philosophy of the MSG's founding, particularly the challenges related to colonial administration and the decolonization of MSG countries. The key challenges identified during the colonial period continue to pose security and development problems for member states, and, therefore, a thorough understanding of the history of the MSG is necessary to understand the present security challenges in the region. The next section describes MSG trade cooperation to illustrate member countries' ambitions for economic growth and development following independence. The final section examines the re-emergence of security as the main priority for the MSG and lessons for security cooperation in the region.

The Establishment and Evolution of the Melanesian Spearhead Group

Decolonization (1970–80)

During 1970–80, decolonization movements in Melanesia resulted in numerous MSG members gaining independence: Fiji in 1970, PNG in 1975, Solomon Islands in 1978, and Vanuatu in 1980. There were various factors that led to each country's independence. Decolonization in Fiji, for instance, was primarily due to pressures put on the British government by people of diverse ethnicities. These ethnic groups were brought to work on sugarcane plantations in the country and had their rights contested in relation to land tenure, ownership, political participation, and freedoms.²

PNG, on the other hand, went through phases of administration by different colonial powers, particularly Germany, Great Britain, and Australia. With this change of hands, the proper demarcation of boundaries and border security became challenging and onerous. Given PNG's porous land borders, illegal drugs, weapons, and people smuggling were some of the key challenges that had security implications for neighboring countries.³ Solomon Islands was a

¹ Hugh Govan et al., "Community Conserved Areas: A Review of Status and Needs in Melanesia and Polynesia," Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, February 2009, 9–10, https://www.sprep.org/att/IRC/eCOPIES/Pacific_Region/422.pdf.

² Geoffrey Clark and Atholl Anderson, "Colonisation and Culture Change in the Early Prehistory of Fiji," in *The Early Prehistory of Fiji*, ed. Geoffrey Clark and Atholl Anderson (Canberra: ANU Press, 2009), 407–37.

³ Anthony Bergin and Sam Bateman, "PNG Border Security a Key Strategic Interest for Australia," Asia and the Pacific Policy Society, Policy Forum, November 16, 2018.

British protectorate administered through the British High Commission in Suva, Fiji. The colonial administration's attempt to create a local government to deal with unrest was unsuccessful, and, consequently, the British arranged to relinquish administration of the country due to rising costs.

Vanuatu was the last to gain political independence. Jointly colonized by France and Great Britain as a condominium, a series of intense discussions between the colonial powers and emerging independent leaders led by Walter Lini facilitated independence. Following the first general election in 1979, power was shared between the My Land Party (Vanua'aku), led by Lini, and the New Hebrides Federal Party, an alliance of francophone moderate parties.⁴ The ideological differences between the two parties developed into tensions that eventually led to the Nagriamel movement, a rebellion on Espiritu Santo in May 1980 affiliated with the New Hebrides Federal Party. The rebellion presented Vanuatu with a serious internal security dilemma. Lini requested British and French troops to restore law and order; however, both were reluctant to take decisive action against the rebels.⁵ As a result, Lini requested that the PNG government deploy its military to suppress the rebellion.⁶ The PNG Defence Force's intervention was extremely successful, largely due to locals welcoming the PNG troops as fellow Melanesians.⁷

Following the successful security cooperation between Vanuatu and PNG, a Melanesian bloc of newly independent states was not only possible but inevitable. The establishment of the MSG, therefore, transpired as a spontaneous process necessitated by the need to have an organization to promote the interests of Melanesian countries during the decolonization processes. Similarly, there was a need to maintain closer working relationships among these newly independent countries and render support to each other during the crucial phases of nation-building required of such a group.

Inauguration and Purpose (1980–90)

Following independence, the prime ministers of PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu and a representative of the FLNKS gathered in Goroka, PNG, on July 17, 1986, to consider the establishment of a Melanesian bloc. During the meeting, the leaders agreed to form the MSG as an avenue for considering and formulating common positions on regional issues and subjects of interest to Melanesian countries, particularly provision of support toward the struggle for independence by the FLNKS in New Caledonia. MSG members were active in leading discussions to reinstate New Caledonia on the UN list of non-self-governing territories during an August 1986 meeting of the South Pacific Forum (now the Pacific Islands Forum). Also at the forum, the group was vocal about nuclear testing in the Pacific, resulting in the Treaty of Rarotonga (or the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty), which entered into force on December 11, 1986.

To consolidate cooperation, MSG member states signed the “Agreed Principles of Cooperation among Independent States in Melanesia” on March 14, 1988. Under these principles, countries commit to cooperating to promote the following common interests:

- Melanesian heritage and its unique cultures, traditions, customs, and values

⁴ Matthew Gubb, *Vanuatu's 1980 Santo Rebellion: International Responses to a Microstate Security Crisis* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1994).

⁵ Joseph B. Treaster, “U.S. Land Developer Aids New Hebrides Dissidents,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1980, <https://www.nytimes.com/1980/06/07/archives/us-land-developer-aids-new-hebrides-dissidents.html>.

⁶ Kalkot Matas Kele-Kele, “The Emergence of Political Parties,” in *New Hebrides: The Road to Independence*, ed. Chris Plant (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1977), 17–34.

⁷ Gubb, *Vanuatu's 1980 Santo Rebellion*.

- friendly relations with each other and other international organizations
- networking and free interaction among Melanesian states
- respect for each other's sovereignty
- promotion of economic and technical cooperation
- maintenance of peace and harmony in the region

The signing of the principles provided, for the first time, formal recognition of the MSG as a subregional organization in the Pacific. Since the inaugural meeting in July 1986, PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and the FLNKS have attended summits as full members. Fiji was an observer until it became a member following the conclusion of trade negotiations in 1993.

Economic Development (1993–96)

The MSG prioritized national economic development following independence. Trade was considered a potential engine for growth, and negotiations on an MSG trade agreement began. The values enshrined in the 1988 principles to promote economic cooperation provided the basis for negotiating the agreement. Following years of negotiation, the MSGTA was signed in 1993 by PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, and in 1998 Fiji acceded to the agreement.⁸

The key objectives of the MSGTA were to foster, accelerate, and encourage the economic and social development of members in order to improve the living standards of their peoples while maintaining sovereignty, equality, independence, and noninterference in members' domestic affairs. In view of improved trade in the region, member states proposed a review of the MSGTA with a view to further accelerating trade liberalization and economic growth and to creating a free-trade zone for the MSG.⁹ The MSGTA was supplanted by the Melanesian Free Trade Agreement to create a regional market for trade in services, investment, and labor. The agreement is yet to come into force.

Institutionalization (2007–10)

Negotiations to formalize the MSG under international law commenced around 2000. A committee of prominent lawyers from member states, led by Vanuatu, was established to develop the agreement. The "Agreement Establishing the Melanesian Spearhead Group" was signed on March 23, 2007, and established the MSG as an international organization of governance and decision-making by creating constituent bodies and subcommittees on priorities that provided for the rights and obligations of member states, associate members, and observers to the MSG. The purpose of the MSG, as stipulated in Article 2 of the agreement, is to promote and strengthen intermember trade; exchange Melanesian cultures, traditions, values, and sovereign equality; foster economic and technical cooperation between the members; align member policies; and further shared goals of economic growth, sustainable development, good governance, and security. The 1988 principles were embedded in the 2007 agreement under the "guiding principles" provision.

The agreement was registered with the United Nations on March 12, 2010, and accorded the MSG legal recognition under international law. Again, security cooperation was articulated as an important pillar. Furthermore, the agreement conferred legal recognition of Melanesian

⁸ Sovaia Marawa, "Negotiating the Melanesia Free Trade Area," in *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ed. Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (Acton: ANU Press, 2015), 161–74.

⁹ *Ibid.*

customs and traditions as a fundamental tenet of MSG cooperation. This centrality of customs is replicated in the institutions and practices of Melanesian regionalism and plays an important role in maintaining relationships and social cohesion. Customs are held in such high regard that the constitutions of all newly independent Melanesian countries accord them legal recognition.¹⁰

Once the MSG attained legal recognition under international law, Vanuatu supplied what would become the MSG Secretariat building during the 17th Leaders' Summit. Originally constructed with funding support from the Chinese government, the building was officially opened in May 2008. Since its inception over twenty years ago, the MSG has operated on an interim basis from within Vanuatu's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Re-emergence of Security Cooperation

The re-emergence of a strong focus on security cooperation in the MSG has been due to significant internal security and political events in member countries. It should be noted, however, that most of these security challenges have existed since the decolonization period.

The first challenge was an ethnic conflict in Honiara, the capital of Solomon Islands. Overpopulation in the city and its outskirts led to heightened tensions between the Malaita Eagle Force and the Isatabu Freedom Movement that quickly escalated due to a lack of capacity by the local police as well as an inability to impartially resolve grievances by differing parties. The prime minister at the time, Allan Kemakeza, ultimately requested that Australia and New Zealand intervene with the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands in 2003. Aspects of the ethnic antipathy spilled over into PNG's Bougainville conflict, which by then had lasted for almost ten years. With limited police presence on the Solomon Islands–PNG border, there were incidents of arms smuggling (both manufactured and homemade arms).¹¹ For MSG countries that share borders, cross-border arms smuggling, transnational crime, and general conflicts constitute serious security threats.

The second challenge was the series of political events in Fiji in 2006. These events again brought to light some of the country's long-standing challenges in the lead-up to independence in 1970, especially related to its ethnic diversity. Fiji was eventually suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum and the Commonwealth following the government takeover—a decision that was perceived as a failure of pan-Pacific leadership to aptly deal with the situation.¹² Undeterred by its suspension from these organizations, the MSG continued to engage Fiji and assisted it with a roadmap to democracy. The decision to continue engaging Fiji was based predominantly on the MSG's establishing agreement and its principle to resolve issues intraregionally, demonstrating how Melanesian customs and traditions inform the practice of MSG diplomacy at a subregional level. A shared identity and purpose play a vital role in nurturing stronger interstate relations between members and strengthening MSG resilience. In 2011, Fiji assumed the MSG chair.

Several initiatives were considered to respond to the political and security challenges experienced by member states but at the same time to be able to complement international and

¹⁰ For example, the preamble of the constitution of Vanuatu states that the country is founded on traditional Melanesian customs and values, faith in God, and Christian principles. All land in Vanuatu is held in accordance with these rules and customs. Similarly, the constitution of Solomon Islands recognizes customs or customary law in its Preamble, Sections 75 and 76, and Schedule 3.

¹¹ Rod Alley et al., "Trouble in Paradise: Small Arms in the Pacific," in *Small Arms Survey 2004: Rights at Risk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 277–307, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Small-Arms-Survey-2004-Chapter-09-EN.pdf>.

¹² Tess Newton Cain, "The Renaissance of the Melanesian Spearhead Group," in Fry and Tarte, *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, 151–60.

regional peace efforts. First, the MSG Department for Peacekeeping Operations was created. The concept has two components: first, the Formed Police Unit was conceived as a tool for peacekeeping to address conflict in member states as well as facilitating the MSG's contribution to UN peacekeeping operations; and second, the Humanitarian Emergency Response Coordinating Center was established to assist with emergency and disaster situations in member states. The framework agreement for the Formed Police Unit was signed in 2015. The priorities recognized under the agreement include enhancing regional security and police cooperation, preventing civil unrest or law violations that threaten the maintenance of national security and public safety, and facilitating seamless law-enforcement operations in regional post-conflict situations. A memorandum of understanding establishing the Humanitarian Emergency Response Coordinating Center was also signed in 2015. The preambular section of the memorandum recognizes that MSG members are situated in one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world and are susceptible to almost all types of natural calamities.

The second initiative was the establishment of the MSG Regional Police Academy. The academy plans to strengthen police cooperation through appropriate training and exchange programs between the police forces of member states, provide a platform for appropriate capacity building for law-enforcement personnel, enhance operational interoperability, and provide training for regional and international peace support operations. The initiative was developed in recognition of the need for local police to have specialized management and operational skills during unrest and emergencies. At present, necessary operating procedures and processes, as well as training and capacity, are being developed to ensure smooth implementation of these security initiatives.

Third, in June 2023, member states penned the MSG Security Strategy. The strategy aims to provide a framework for the implementation of the various security initiatives considered above under an overarching strategy to ensure coordinated approaches to addressing security challenges. The ongoing geostrategic competition for influence in the region by global powers, though acknowledged in the strategy, is not specifically mentioned as one of its priorities. For MSG member states that have regularly experienced domestic hostilities and economic deterioration in recent years, the focus is on economic recovery and state-building rather than geopolitical rivalry. To reaffirm the MSG's position on neutrality, the Efate Declaration on Mutual Respect, Responsibility, Cooperation, and Amity was signed at the August 2023 MSG Leaders' Summit. It declares that although power tensions and potential conflict may affect peace and security in the region, the MSG remains a friend to all and enemy to none in its engagement with all partners. Instead, the main priorities under the security strategy are aimed at addressing internal security challenges and capacity building for local police, while at the same time encouraging bilateral and multilateral partnerships on security cooperation.

It is also important to note that the MSG Security Strategy complements the Boe Declaration on Regional Security adopted by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2018 by also recognizing climate change as the greatest security challenge facing the Pacific. In line with commitments on climate change, during the August 2023 summit, MSG leaders signed the Udaune Declaration on Climate Change. The declaration describes the impacts of climate change on rural communities in MSG countries, and its preamble states:

Believing in the need to change the security narrative that is being imposed on the region due to the intensification of geostrategic competition, and to focus the security conversation on Climate Change and the vulnerability and special

needs of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in particular, Melanesian Countries...call for international support to take full and concrete action to address these vulnerabilities and needs through international, subregional and bilateral cooperation;

Note with serious concern the current low global climate ambition under the Paris Agreement further accelerating the vulnerability of the Pacific in particular, the Melanesian subregion which is located in the climate hotspot [sic];

Recalling Pacific Islands Leaders identifying climate change as the single greatest existential threat facing the Blue Pacific Continent and subsequent Declaration that the Pacific is in a state of Climate emergency.¹³

In addition, Vanuatu, as MSG chair, has successfully led a resolution at the United Nations to seek an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on state responsibilities with respect to climate change. The MSG Secretariat is one of the organizations that will participate in the proceedings and make submissions to the court. Its involvement in the proceedings is important to demonstrate the MSG's strong commitment toward addressing impacts of climate change in the region. For the MSG to be given legal standing to participate in the ICJ climate change proceedings is also important for international recognition of the organization.

Apart from its commitment to combating climate change, the MSG Security Strategy also postulates strategies to address humanitarian needs by prioritizing environmental security through regional cooperation to build resilience to disasters. As a subregion of the Pacific, the MSG has subscribed to the values and strategic foresight of Pacific leaders who identified peace and security as a vital thematic area of consideration in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. The strategy directly reflects the collective vision and security aspirations of the "2038 Prosperity for All Plan," where the MSG aspires to become a "community that is strong, integrated, enlightened, happy, prosperous, secure and caring" by promoting "good governance, political stability, lasting peace and unity," and courage to shape the future.¹⁴ The MSG Security Strategy is the implementing policy framework for the plan, but it correspondingly recognizes the commitments to security made under the 2050 Strategy and the Boe Declaration.

The uniqueness of the MSG Security Strategy lies in the fact that it focuses on the peculiar security challenges that MSG members face: armed and ethnic conflicts, civil unrest, good governance, economic disparities, land disputes, and security issues relating to the extraction industry. As highlighted above, several of these challenges have been around since the independence era in the Melanesian region. The MSG Security Strategy is therefore vital to addressing them in a more focused and concerted manner.

Conclusion

The establishment of the MSG and the evolution of its role in facilitating cooperation offer crucial lessons for managing security developments in the region. First, the Melanesian approach

¹³ Melanesian Spearhead Group Secretariat, "Udaune Declaration on Climate Change by Members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG)," August 24, 2023, <https://msgsec.info/wp-content/uploads/documentsofcooperation/2023-Aug-24-UDAUNE-DECLARATION-on-Climate-Change-by-Members-of-MSG.pdf>.

¹⁴ "MSG 2038 Prosperity for All Plan," Melanesian Spearhead Group Secretariat, June 26, 2015, 5, 8, <https://www.msgsec.info/wp-content/uploads/publications/26-June-2015-MSG-2038-Prosperity-for-All-Plan-and-Implementation-Framework.pdf>.

to dispute resolution played an important role in the success of the initial security cooperation between Vanuatu and PNG. Although the security arrangement was on a bilateral basis, it provided the foundation and values on which MSG security cooperation was premised.

Second, MSG states are prioritizing the need to address internal security challenges. Some of these challenges were present in the colonial period and continue to persist even after independence. Examples include ethnic conflict and recurring unrest in Solomon Islands; ethnic tension, concerns over political representation, and land tenure issues in Fiji; border security concerns in PNG; and the divide between British and French influences in Vanuatuan politics. These issues continue to pose security challenges to member states, and the MSG Security Strategy is important to address them through regional cooperation and partnership.

Third, the renaissance of MSG security cooperation came about for two reasons: first, internal conflicts and political challenges in member states and the need for a homegrown, collective response; and second, discontent in member states toward external responses to political events in Melanesia, such as the suspension of Fiji from the Pacific Islands Forum and the Commonwealth.

A fourth lesson concerns the role of Melanesian customs in MSG diplomacy. At a symbolic level, the shared identity and purpose among members is a powerful unifying force in MSG security undertakings. But customs are also influential in more practical ways. Drawing on a dense network of associational relationships across Melanesia and a deep-seated understanding of shared values, customs play a vital role in nurturing stronger interstate relations between members and, when differences arise, resolving disputes. Considering a more complex and uncertain geopolitical and security future, international partners seeking to engage successfully with the MSG will require a deep understanding of Melanesian customs and diplomacy. These concepts and practices explain how Melanesian states interact with the global system, their behaviors toward geopolitical advances in the region, and the conduct of business in Melanesian countries.

Finally, the MSG's focus on security cooperation is driven largely by a need to address both traditional security threats, such as armed conflicts, and nontraditional challenges, such as climate change and natural disasters. Appropriate training, skills, and equipment are still required to enable police forces to effectively respond to crises, and the MSG Security Strategy is a step in the right direction. The MSG Secretariat's prominent role in promoting and facilitating cooperation not just between members but also with other regional organizations will ensure better integration into the global economy and a steadfast commitment to lasting peace and security in the region.

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NBR SPECIAL REPORT #110 | JULY 2024

How Strategic Competition Is Shaping Security Cooperation in Solomon Islands

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines how strategic competition between China and Australia is shaping security cooperation in Solomon Islands.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Strategic competition in the Pacific Islands region, including in Solomon Islands, has manifested in multiple ways as external actors engage in increased diplomatic, development, security, and defense activities with Pacific Island partners. Of these activities, security cooperation has emerged as a central mechanism among external partner countries to build relationships and influence, enable visibility and secure presence, and ultimately serve as a form of deterrence in the Pacific. For Pacific Island partners, specific types of security cooperation can directly assist in meeting their identified security needs, such as countering illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. The rise of security cooperation in the Pacific is driven by the strategic interests and actions of external actors and the ways in which Pacific states have leveraged external interest to meet their development and security priorities. However, intensified strategic competition has also resulted in the Pacific Islands Forum identifying security cooperation as an area where competing security partners could overwhelm the efforts of regional states and undermine peace and stability in the region.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Solomon Islands will continue to be seen as a pivotal actor by external partners due to geostrategic drivers. The formation of a new government on May 2, 2024, led by former foreign minister Jeremiah Manele, is an opportunity for partners such as Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S. to strengthen their bilateral relations with Solomon Islands. The U.S., in particular, will need to significantly increase efforts to demonstrate that it is a trustworthy, present, and consistent partner.
- Security cooperation activities in the Pacific Islands surged from 2022 to 2023. This trajectory will likely continue as strategic competition is projected to intensify in the region; however, caution must be heeded. In the case of Solomon Islands, security gaps continue to exist and will require addressing, but not at the expense of human security needs.
- China is seeking to advance its public security credentials across the broader Pacific Islands by drawing on the example of its security partnership with Solomon Islands during the successful conduct of the Pacific Games in 2023 and the national general election in 2024 and by making explicit the link between security and development.

Strategic competition has intensified in the Pacific Islands region following the signing of the security agreement between Solomon Islands and China in April 2022.¹ Concerns about the effects of strategic uncertainty on the region led Pacific Islands Forum leaders to highlight the impact of the “increasingly complex geopolitical environment” on member countries.² In the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, they agreed that “long-standing security threats emanating from ongoing geopolitical and geostrategic positioning by major powers in the region are impacting regional politics and security considerations.”³

In light of this dynamic, it has become increasingly valuable to examine the ways in which geopolitics and local political, economic, and security dynamics compete, intersect, and overlap. These patterns of engagement between multiple actors—both external and local—provide useful case studies by which to deepen understanding of the disruptive and potentially destabilizing nature of strategic competition in the Pacific. Security sectors in the Pacific have been identified as one example where external actors are “using security relationships to compete for influence,”⁴ raising concerns that competing and nonaligned security partners could overwhelm and “subsequently undermine some peace and security efforts.”⁵ In particular, security cooperation in Solomon Islands—specifically the subset of security sector assistance between partner governments and Solomon Islands stakeholders—has increased significantly following the signing of the security agreement with China in 2022. From 2022 to 2023, security cooperation activities surged by approximately 650% in Solomon Islands and 197% across the region as a whole.⁶ If this trajectory continues without careful management, the likelihood of the geopolitical agendas of Solomon Islands’ security partners clashing with each other, as well as intersecting with and enflaming the local peace and security dynamics, will increase.

The nexus between geopolitics and local security dynamics is thus an emerging focus of security research in the Pacific Islands. Over the past few decades, strategic competition in the Pacific Islands has given rise to a growing scholarly and policy field of inquiry concerned with how strategic competition is shaping—and being shaped by—the regional order. These works have principally focused on China as the most significant external strategic actor in the Pacific and have explored, for example, Chinese diplomatic, commercial and development strategies, behaviors, and practices in the Pacific,⁷ as well as Pacific perspectives on and responses to Chinese engagement and strategic competition more broadly.⁸ As strategic competition has intensified in the Pacific

¹ “Framework Agreement between the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the Government of Solomon Islands on Security Cooperation (Draft),” shared by Anna Powles, March 23, 2022, <https://twitter.com/AnnaPowles/status/1506845794728837120>. Danny Philip, former Solomon Islands prime minister, confirmed that the final text of the agreement was “very close” to the leaked draft. Danny Philip, “China Solomon Islands Security Agreement and Blue Pacific InSecurities” (remarks at Georgetown University and University of Hawai’i at Manoa, April 21, 2022), available at <https://youtu.be/IBJlc5hb2k>.

² Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (Suva, July 2022), 17.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴ Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Isaac Kardon, “Playing Both Sides of the U.S.–Chinese Rivalry: Why Countries Get External Security from Washington—and Internal Security from Beijing,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 15, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/playing-both-sides-us-chinese-rivalry>.

⁵ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, “The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2022–2023,” August 1, 2022, 14.

⁶ Tess Newton Cain, Anna Powles, and Teddy Winn, “Pacific Defence Diplomacy Tracker 2018–2023,” Griffith University, Massey University, and United States Institute of Peace, <https://www.griffith.edu.au/asia-institute/pacific-hub/defence-diplomacy-in-the-pacific>.

⁷ See Terence Wesley-Smith and Edgar A. Porter, eds., *China in Oceania: Reshaping the Pacific?* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); Jian Yang, *The Pacific Islands in China’s Grand Strategy: Small States, Big Games* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Denghua Zhang, *A Cautious New Approach: China’s Growing Trilateral Aid Cooperation* (Acton: ANU Press, 2020); and Peter Connolly, “China’s Quest for Strategic Space in the Pacific Islands,” National Bureau of Asian Research, January 16, 2024, <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/chinas-quest-for-strategic-space-in-the-pacific-islands>.

⁸ See Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith, eds., *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands* (Acton: ANU Press, 2021); and Michael Powles, ed., *China and the Pacific: The View from Oceania* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016).

Islands, heightened attention is being paid to the ways in which strategic competition intersects with local dynamics, including by examining whether the ambitions and actions of external actors undermine or disrupt regional and local stability. A growing consensus exists in the Pacific that strategic competition is disruptive and threatens to undermine regionalism.⁹ Accordingly, the geopolitical-local security nexus is increasingly a focus of analysis.¹⁰

Seeking to expand understanding of how strategic competition intersects with security cooperation in the Pacific, this essay explores security cooperation engagement and activities between Australia and Solomon Islands, on the one hand, and China and Solomon Islands, on the other. It examines security cooperation activities that have taken place following Solomon Islands' decision to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019, with a particular focus on China as a nascent but rapidly expanding security partner that is entering a security sector long dominated by Australia as the partner of choice. Because Australia's role as a security partner in Solomon Islands is already well documented,¹¹ this essay focuses on China's security statecraft in Solomon Islands as seen both through its bilateral policing and security cooperation agreements and, more broadly, within the context of its stated ambitions as a security stakeholder in the Pacific and as a global security actor.¹² Accordingly, this essay explores the intersection of strategic competition and security cooperation in Solomon Islands, surveying the ways in which Australia and China are seeking advantage and influence and how Solomon Islands is balancing between its two principal security stakeholders.

China as a Security Stakeholder in the Pacific

In 2022, China announced that it is a “direct stakeholder in the security of the South Pacific.”¹³ This was the first time the country publicly expressed such sentiments, as it had previously downplayed its security interests in the region while growing its military and security cooperation with Pacific militaries and police forces. This includes security arrangements with Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Tonga, as well as People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy ship visits, military medical engagements through *Peace Ark* visits, nonmilitary aid for infrastructure, uniforms, equipment and training, and defense diplomacy.¹⁴

⁹ Anna Powles and Jose Sousa-Santos, “Strengthening Collective Security Approaches in the Pacific,” in *Strategic Competition and Security Cooperation in the Blue Pacific*, ed. Deon Canyon (Honolulu: Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2022), 173–94.

¹⁰ See, for example, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, “China's ‘COVID-19 Diplomacy’ and Geopolitics in Oceania,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2021): 254–61; Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, “China–Solomon Islands Security Agreement and Competition for Influence in Oceania,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (2022); Anna Powles and Jose Sousa-Santos, “Peace Unravels in the Solomon Islands,” *East Asia Forum*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/11/30/peace-unravels-in-the-solomon-islands/>; and Anna Powles, “Geopolitical Duel in the Pacific: Solomon Islands Security at Risk as Australia and China Compete,” *Lowy Institute, Interpreter*, July 7, 2023, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/geopolitical-duel-pacific-solomon-islands-security-risk-australia-china-compete>.

¹¹ See, for example, Sinclair Dinnen and Danielle Watson, “Police Reform in a Post-Conflict Context: The Case of Solomon Islands,” *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 15, no. 1 (2021): 387–98; Casandra Harry, Danielle Watson, and Gordon Nanau, “Balancing the Scale: Police Officers' Perspectives on Plural Policing in the Solomon Islands,” in *Policing the Global South: Colonial Legacies, Pluralities, Partnerships, and Reform*, ed. Danielle Watson et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 137–50; and Sinclair Dinnen and Matthew Allen, “Paradoxes of Postcolonial Police-Building: Solomon Islands,” *Policing and Society* 23, no. 2 (2013): 222–42.

¹² Peter Connolly, “Grand Strategy: Inside China's Statecraft in Melanesia,” *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 17 (2023): 42–65.

¹³ Xu Keyue and Xu Yelu, “China-Bashing Tactics ahead of Elections ‘Hurt Aussie Parties,’” *Global Times*, May 9, 2022.

¹⁴ Denghua Zhang, “China's Military Engagement with Pacific Island Countries,” Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, 2021. Following the election of Fiji's coalition government in late 2022, Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka announced the termination of the memorandum of understanding between the Fiji Police Force and China's Ministry of Public Security that was signed in 2011, stating that “there's no need for us to continue...our system of democracy and justice systems are different so we will go back to those that have similar systems with us.” Meri Radinibaravi, “PM Terminates MOU,” *Fiji Times*, January 26, 2023. In 2024, however, Fiji announced that, following a review, the policing cooperation arrangement would be upheld, although the controversial embedding of Chinese security officials in the Fijian police would no longer be permitted. Ivamere Nataro, “Fiji to Stick with China Police Deal after Review, Home Affairs Minister Says,” *Guardian*, March 14, 2024.

China's interests and ambitions as a security stakeholder in the Pacific are reflected in its security cooperation activities with Solomon Islands—the Solomon Islands–China memorandum of understanding (MOU) on policing cooperation agreement and the Solomon Islands–China security cooperation framework agreement—and the proposed (and rejected) multilateral China–Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision. As Denghua Zhang notes, the drivers of China's growing security cooperation ambitions and activities in the Pacific are broadly outlined in the 2015 PLA white paper on China's military strategy. The white paper states that the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication, and institutions, personnel, and assets abroad have become an imminent issue and calls for “developing all-round military-to-military relations,” “pushing ahead with pragmatic military cooperation,” and “fulfilling international responsibilities and obligations.”¹⁵

These agreements, including those with Solomon Islands, reflect China's ambitions as a global security actor. In 2017, China's Ministry of Public Security called for the “internationalization of public security work” and advocated the need to “actively build a law enforcement security cooperation system with Chinese characteristics.”¹⁶ These ambitions were further solidified in 2022 when China launched its Global Security Initiative (GSI), which seeks to position President Xi Jinping's “vision of a new global security architecture as an alternative to the Western-led security order.”¹⁷ Sheena Chestnut Greitens argues that the GSI seeks to revise global security governance in order to make it more compatible with China's interests.¹⁸ Elements of the GSI can be found in the proposed China–Pacific Islands Common Development Vision, which sought to reshape the Pacific Islands regional order through a close alignment of ambitious security and economic initiatives.¹⁹ The Common Development Vision proposed substantial trade and investment initiatives, including a free trade area, alongside provisions for intermediate and high-level police training for Pacific police forces, elevating law-enforcement cooperation to ministerial levels.²⁰ It also proposed cooperative agreements on data networks, cybersecurity, and smart customs systems and invited Pacific countries to participate in the Fengyun meteorological satellite system, which collects and provides strategic weather reconnaissance data for civilian and military purposes, including maritime surveillance. The Common Development Vision reflects an alternative Chinese-led security architecture, which, if realized in the Pacific Islands, could cut across and undermine the existing Pacific security architecture from existing crisis management mechanisms, such as the Pacific Islands Forum Biketawa Declaration (2000), which provided the mandate for the Australian-led intervention in Solomon Islands in 2003, to maritime surveillance mechanisms, including the newly announced Quad-initiated Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness initiative.²¹

¹⁵ Zhang, “China's Military Engagement with Pacific Island Countries,” 1.

¹⁶ Lindsey W. Ford, “Extending the Long Arm of the Law: China's International Law Enforcement Drive,” Brookings Institution, January 15, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/15/extending-the-long-arm-of-the-law-chinas-international-law-enforcement-drive>.

¹⁷ Carla Freeman and Alex Stephenson, “Xi Kicks Off Campaign for a Chinese Vision of Global Security,” United States Institute of Peace, October 5, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/10/xi-kicks-campaign-chinese-vision-global-security>; and Wang Yi, “Acting on the Global Security Initiative to Safeguard World Peace and Tranquility,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), April 24, 2022.

¹⁸ Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Xi Jinping's Quest for Order: Security at Home, Influence Abroad,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 3, 2022.

¹⁹ “China–Pacific Island Countries Five-Year Action Plan on Common Development (2022–2026) (Draft).”

²⁰ The inaugural Ministerial Dialogue on Police Capacity Building and Cooperation was held in November 2022. Solomon Islands police minister Anthony Veke was the only Pacific minister to attend.

²¹ Anna Powles, “Five Things We Learned about China's Ambitions for the Pacific from the Leaked Deal,” *Guardian*, May 25, 2022.

David Panuelo, president of the Federated States of Micronesia, outlined his concerns in a letter to Pacific leaders, arguing that the Common Development Vision seeks to “ensure Chinese control of ‘traditional and non-traditional security’ of our islands, including through law enforcement training, supplying, and joint enforcement efforts, which can be used for the protection of Chinese assets and citizens.”²² China denied that it was seeking to undermine the existing regional security arrangements, stating that the bilateral security cooperation agreement with Solomon Islands conformed to the “common interests of Solomon Islands and the South Pacific region” and worked in parallel with, and was complementary to, regional arrangements.²³ The Chinese ambassador to Solomon Islands, Li Ming, reiterated the benefits of the bilateral policing cooperation agreement for the wider Pacific region in late 2022.²⁴ Indeed, China has pursued similar policing cooperation arrangements in Kiribati.

The Geopolitical Implications of the Honiara Riots

The riots in Solomon Islands in November 2021 exposed and heightened strategic competition in the security sector. A peaceful march in the capital of Honiara calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, led by those from the country’s most populous island of Malaita, deteriorated into riots. Fueled by “frustration with the national government, the attitude of the Prime Minister and ministers to provincial governments and provincial politicians, and the sense of alienation and disenfranchisement,”²⁵ the riots were a stark reminder that the undercurrents that led to the internal conflict known as “the Tensions” from 1998 to 2003 remained unresolved. During this period, long-standing grievances over inequitable and uneven economic development, divisions between provincial and national governments, deep frustrations over corruption, and the capturing of the state by commercial interests resulted in the Tensions and subsequent deployment of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003 to 2017. Significantly, elements of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) were complicit in the conflict, and large caches of weapons stolen from police armories fueled the violence.

In response to the riots and at the request of the Solomon Islands government, Australia deployed again to the country, activating the Australia–Solomon Islands Bilateral Security Treaty (2017) and deploying the police-led Solomon Islands International Assistance Force (SIAF) to “assist in the provision of safety and security of persons and property.”²⁶ In May 2022 the deployment was extended for a year. The SIAF remained in Honiara to help the RSIPF with security support for the 2023 Pacific Games and the national and provincial general elections held on April 17, 2024.

²² David W. Panuelo, “Letter to Pacific Island Leaders,” President (Micronesia), May 20, 2022, 3, available at <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/22039750/letter-from-h-e-david-w-panuelo-to-pacific-island-leaders-may-20-2022-signed.pdf>.

²³ “Wang Yi Expounds on Three Principles of China–Solomon Islands Security Cooperation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), May 26, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202205/t20220526_10693195.html.

²⁴ “RSIPF Receives 22 Vehicles and 30 Motor Cycle from China,” Solomon Islands Government, November 5, 2022, <https://solomons.gov.sb/rsipf-receives-22-vehicles-and-30-motor-cycle-from-china>.

²⁵ Transform Aqorau, “Solomon Islands’ Slippery Slide to Self-Impllosion,” Devpolicy, November 25, 2021, <https://devpolicy.org/solomon-islands-slippery-slide-to-self-impllosion-20211125>.

²⁶ “Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of Solomon Islands Concerning the Basis for Deployment of Police, Armed Forces, and Other Personnel to Solomon Islands,” August 14, 2017, available from *Australian Treaty Series*, no. 14 (2018), <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/ATS/2018/14.html>. The SIAF was a regional mission comprising personnel from the Australian Defence Force and Australian Federal Police, New Zealand Defence Force, and the Republic of Fiji Military Force.

At the time of the riots, which saw the targeting and burning of the Chinatown district in Honiara and the deaths of three Solomon Islanders, China asked Solomon Islands to “take all measures necessary” to protect Chinese nationals and institutions.²⁷ The following month, Solomon Islands accepted China’s offer of riot equipment and six Ministry of Public Security police liaison officers to equip and train the RSIPF.²⁸ The leader of the China police liaison team (CPLT) to Solomon Islands, Police Commissioner Zhang Guangbao, denied that China had offered assistance, stating instead that Solomon Islands had requested it.²⁹ Zhao Lijian, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, stated at the time that “China firmly supports the Solomon Islands government in safeguarding its domestic stability, bilateral ties and the rights and interests of Chinese citizens in Solomon Islands.”³⁰ The CPLT arrived on January 26, 2022.

The protection of Chinese citizens and property, particularly major projects such as the Pacific Games infrastructure, is a core tenet of Chinese security cooperation in Solomon Islands.³¹ This has included the provision of security training to the Chinese community following a request to the Chinese embassy for assistance and the creation of a contact center between the CPLT and the community.³² The Solomon Islands Chinese Association stated in the *Global Times*, “Now we Chinese here have gained more sense of security.”³³ Concerns about the safety of Chinese personnel and property are similarly a key driver of the Solomon Islands–China framework agreement on security cooperation. The agreement authorizes Solomon Islands to request “police, armed police,” and “military personnel” to assist in “maintaining social order, protecting people’s lives and property, providing humanitarian assistance, carrying out disaster response, or providing assistance on other tasks agreed upon by the Parties.” Specifically, it states that “the relevant forces of China can be used to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands.”³⁴

Fears for the security of Chinese diplomats following the November riots and the possible targeting of the Chinese embassy led embassy officials to request a ten-person security detail to protect the diplomats and compound and the importation of weapons, including a sniper rifle, two machine guns, rifles, pistols, and ammunition.³⁵ A leaked internal memo from the Solomon Islands Foreign Affairs Ministry indicated that the government was initially open to the request. Permanent Secretary Collin Beck stated that “my ministry, during the period, could not guarantee

²⁷ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on November 25, 2021,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), November 25, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202111/t20211125_10453246.html.

²⁸ “Government Thanks Solomons International Assistance Force and Welcomes China’s Offer of Assistance of Riot Equipment and Training to RSIPF,” Solomon Islands Government, December 23, 2021, <https://solomons.gov.sb/government-thanks-solomons-international-assistance-force-and-welcomes-chinas-offer-of-assistance-of-riot-equipment-and-training-to-rsopf>.

²⁹ “Zhang Guangbao, Leader of China Police Liaison Team to Solomon Islands Interviewed by the Solomon Star,” Embassy of the PRC in Solomon Islands, March 4, 2022, http://sb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sxw_3/202203/t20220304_10647941.htm.

³⁰ Kirsty Needham, “Solomon Islands Says China to Send Police Advisers after Riots,” Reuters, December 23, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/solomon-islands-says-china-send-police-advisers-after-riots-2021-12-23>.

³¹ The China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation was awarded the \$71 million contract for the 2023 Pacific Games stadium project.

³² “Zhang Guangbao, Leader of China Police Liaison Team to Solomon Islands Interviewed by the Solomon Star.”

³³ Shan Jie and Zhao Juecheng, “China, Solomon Islands See Security Cooperation Progress,” *Global Times*, July 2, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1269575.shtml>.

³⁴ “Framework Agreement between the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the Government of Solomon Islands on Security Cooperation (Draft),” 4–5.

³⁵ Evan Wasuka and Stephen Dziedzic, “China’s Solomon Islands Embassy Requested Weapons after Riots Broke Out in Honiara, Leaked Documents Reveal,” ABC News (Australia), April 12, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-12/chinas-solomon-islands-embassy-request-weapons/100985070>.

the safety of the embassy and [its] staff. As host country, we had an obligation to protect all embassies including [the] Chinese embassy...In this regard, we have no objection to the request.”³⁶

Strategic competition, though not a key driver, was certainly a factor in the November 2021 riots. Since 2019, China, Taiwan and the United States have jostled for influence in Solomon Islands, notably in the province of Malaita. Then Malaitan premier, Daniel Suidani, opposed the switch and leveraged Taiwan’s eagerness to retain a foothold in Solomon Islands, leading to accusations by the national government that Malaita was in breach of the one-China policy.³⁷ Prime Minister Sogavare even blamed “foreign powers” for exploiting Malaitan discontent,³⁸ thereby diverting attention away from the domestic drivers of the unrest. The United States’ pledge of \$25 million in 2020 bypassed national government mechanisms for donor assistance and further exacerbated divisions between Honiara and Malaita.³⁹ China’s embassy in Honiara has also run a disruptive public diplomacy campaign.⁴⁰

Furthermore, China capitalized on the riots to stoke geopolitical tensions. Between November 26 and 28, the *Global Times* ran five articles alleging that Australia, the United States, and Taiwan encouraged the unrest in Honiara.⁴¹ The Australian Strategic Policy Institute found that China conducted a coordinated but largely unsuccessful disinformation campaign during two periods: following the November 2021 riots and following the March 2022 leak of the draft framework agreement on security cooperation.⁴² The study also found that Chinese state media outlets published 67 articles on Solomon Islands over that period, with 70% of those pieces being directly aimed at undermining Solomon Islands’ relationships with the United States and Australia or supporting Chinese state narratives.⁴³ Despite this, the articles provoked little engagement on social media, with some of the responses reflecting anti-Chinese sentiment.⁴⁴

Strategic Competition in Solomon Islands’ Security Sector

Competition between China and Australia for influence in Solomon Islands’ security sector increased significantly after the riots. As noted earlier, Australia has long been Solomon Islands’ primary security partner. Its investment in Solomon Islands’ security sector was extensive during RAMSI and has remained so since the mission’s drawdown. Under its current policing capability program, Australia is supporting the RSIPF’s re-armament, infrastructure upgrades, and training

³⁶ Wasuka and Dziedzic, “China’s Solomon Islands Embassy Requested Weapons after Riots Broke Out in Honiara.”

³⁷ Evan Wasuka, “China Urges Solomon’s Province to Refrain from Contacting Taiwan,” ABC News (Australia), June 11, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/programs/pacificbeat/china-urges-solomons-province-to-refrain-from-contacting-taiwan/12347652>.

³⁸ Melissa Clarke, “Solomon Islands Prime Minister Blames Foreign Powers for Civil Unrest that Prompted Call to Australia for Help,” ABC News (Australia), November 25, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-26/solomon-islands-pm-blames-foreign-powers-for-civil-unrest/100652048>.

³⁹ Evan Wasuka and Nazli Bahmani, “The U.S. Denies Geopolitical Motives Are Behind a Massive Aid Increase to the Solomon Islands’ Malaita Province,” ABC News (Australia), October 15, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-16/us-aid-increase-solomon-islands-china-independence-malaita/12765310>.

⁴⁰ For example, in June 2020 the Chinese embassy publicly criticized Malaita’s acceptance of personal protective equipment donated by Taiwan during the Covid-19 pandemic. “Statement by PRC Embassy Spokesperson,” Sunday Isles, June 10, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/432206153524652/posts/statement-by-prc-embassy-spokesperson1-there-is-but-one-china-in-the-world-taiwa/3022522097826365>.

⁴¹ “Australia Has Fomented Riots in Solomon Islands: Global Times Editorial,” *Global Times*, November 27, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1240050.shtml>.

⁴² Blake Johnson et al., “Suppressing the Truth and Spreading Lies,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, October 5, 2022, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/suppressing-truth-and-spreading-lies>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

in areas spanning public order management, investigations, front-line policing, forensics, and leadership development.⁴⁵

In March 2022, however, Solomon Islands and China signed an MOU on policing cooperation between China's Ministry of Public Security and Solomon Islands' Ministry of Police, National Security and Correctional Services.⁴⁶ The MOU formalized the ad hoc police liaison arrangements that emerged following the riots. It covers a range of activities, including training by the CPLT in public order management, traffic management, close personal protection training, and martial arts training, as well as the donation of equipment and vehicles and the training of 32 RSIPF officers in China.⁴⁷ CPLT activities also include a "hearts and minds" dimension. Tarcisius Kabutaulaka argues that China has used policing as a mechanism for community outreach, normalizing the presence of Chinese police officers and policing methods and socially integrating aspects of Chinese culture such as kung fu to help capture institutional, elite, and community interests and empathy toward China.⁴⁸

The following month the framework agreement was signed. The scope of cooperation outlined in the agreement allowed Solomon Islands to request that China deploy police and military personnel to Solomon Islands to assist in maintaining social order, protecting lives and property, and providing humanitarian assistance and disaster response. It also stated that China may "according to its own needs and with the consent of Solomon Islands make ship visits to carry out logistical replenishment in and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands." However, as Peter Connolly argues, the agreement was about access rather than bases.⁴⁹

The undercurrents of strategic competition continued to cast a shadow over security cooperation activities throughout 2022. Controversially, the Chinese embassy imported 95 replica rifles and 95 replica pistols into Solomon Islands in February 2022.⁵⁰ The replica weapons were donated by China to the RSIPF for training purposes,⁵¹ although it was unclear why the RSIPF was receiving training on replica QBZ-95 assault rifles. The police commissioner stated that the RSIPF wanted the weapons to bolster training for UN peacekeeping deployments.⁵² This suggests that China, whose peacekeepers deploy with this model of assault rifle, could supply and arm RSIPF contingents to UN missions.

In the lead-up to the Pacific Games in 2023, China provided the RSIPF with the security plans and lessons learned from the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2016 G-20 summit in Hangzhou.⁵³ The alignment of economic cooperation with security cooperation was further emphasized in 2023 when Solomon Islands police minister Anthony Veke met with Chinese state councilor and

⁴⁵ "Development Assistance in Solomon Islands: Pillar 2—Stability in Solomon Islands," Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/solomon-islands/development-assistance/pillar-2-stability>.

⁴⁶ "Police Minister Veke Commends SI-PRC MOU on Police Cooperation," Solomon Islands Government, March 24, 2022, <https://solomons.gov.sb/police-minister-veke-commends-si-prc-mou-on-police-cooperation>.

⁴⁷ "RSIPF Officers Fly to China for Training," RSIPF, Press Release, October 11, 2022, <https://www.rsipf.gov.sb/?q=node/2391>.

⁴⁸ Kabutaulaka, "China—Solomon Islands Security Agreement and Competition for Influence in Oceania."

⁴⁹ Connolly, "Grand Strategy: Inside China's Statecraft in Melanesia."

⁵⁰ The weapons shipment was transported aboard a Malaysian logging vessel and unloaded at the privately owned Leroy Wharf, bypassing the Solomon Islands Port Authority.

⁵¹ "Replica Rifles Donated by PRC to RSIPF Purposely for Training," Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, Press Release, March 22, 2022, <https://www.rsipf.gov.sb/?q=node/2181>.

⁵² Stephen Dziedzic, "Solomon Islands Police Show Off Fake Guns Given to Them by Chinese Government after 'Secret' Delivery," ABC News (Australia), March 22, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-23/solomon-islands-police-show-off-guns-chinese-government/100927790>.

⁵³ "RSIPF Officers Completed Training in China," Solomon Islands Government, November 8, 2022, <https://solomons.gov.sb/rsipf-officers-completed-training-in-china>.

minister of public security Wang Xiaohong. During the meeting, Wang stated that “China is ready to work with Solomon Islands to promote police and law enforcement cooperation, in order to make due contributions to the development of comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries.”⁵⁴ For a country with significant development needs, this carrot-and-stick approach is difficult to negotiate.

Under the RSIPF–Australian Federal Police Policing Partnership Program (RAPPP), Australia delivered A\$1.3 million in specialist training and donated 13 vehicles and 60 Daniels Defense MK18 rifles to the RSIPF to strengthen its “operational capability in the lead up to and beyond the Pacific Games 2023.”⁵⁵ As part of the second phase of the re-armament of specialist RSIPF units, in January 2022 ten RSIPF members underwent training in Brisbane, Australia, to become qualified instructors for the Daniels Defense rifles, and in November the weapons were handed over to the RSIPF. Two days later China donated 2 water cannon trucks, 30 motorcycles, and 20 vehicles to the RSIPF at a ceremony attended by then prime minister Sogavare.⁵⁶

The donation of the assault rifles sparked similar concerns to the cache of replica weapons. Solomon Islands opposition leader Matthew Wale warned against the “militarization” of Solomon Islands and accused Australia of making the donation purely to stop China from building up its influence in the police force.⁵⁷ Wale questioned the appropriateness of the rifles, which the acting commander of the RAPPP, Clinton Smith, stated would provide the RSIPF with “enhanced capabilities to counter criminal threats and maintain peace and stability” ahead of the Pacific Games in 2023 and the general elections in 2024.⁵⁸ Wale’s claim that Australia was motivated to supply the RSIPF with weapons because if it did not, China would do so, has validity. The Solomon Islands 2020 National Security Strategy states that the government will seek partnerships with friendly foreign governments to address security gaps.⁵⁹ To that end and underpinned by concerns about instability disrupting the Pacific Games or the general elections, the Solomon Islands government has successfully leveraged strategic competition to meet its security interests.

Amid such competition, then prime minister Sogavare sought to publicly balance the two security stakeholders. He referred to Australia as Solomon Islands’ “security partner of choice,”⁶⁰ while also stating that in order for Solomon Islands to achieve its security needs, diversification of security partners was necessary: “Our traditional security partners are always important in the security space and will remain so, but in moving forward to achieve our security needs, it is clear that we may need to diversify and broaden our scope.”⁶¹ Sogavare reiterated this, stating that “in this spirit we welcome any country that is willing to support us in our security space, by diversifying our security space we do not give responsibility to one particular country to bear the

⁵⁴ “China’s Police Chief Meets Solomon Islands Counterpart,” Xinhua, July 12, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230712/81cac7fc5cf84e79819a250e48f9c5e8/c.html>.

⁵⁵ “AFP Helps Boost RSIPF Capability to Keep Communities Safe and Secure,” Federal Police (Australia), Press Release, November 2, 2022, <https://www.afp.gov.au/news-centre/media-release/afp-helps-boost-rsipf-capability-keep-communities-safe-and-secure>.

⁵⁶ “RSIPF Receives 22 Vehicles and 30 Motor Cycle from China.”

⁵⁷ Stephen Dziedzic, “Australian Federal Police Gives Solomon Islands Police Semi-automatic Rifles, Vehicles,” ABC News (Australia), November 1, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-02/australia-supplies-vehicles-guns-to-solomon-islands-police/101606466>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Police, National Security and Correctional Service (Solomon Islands), *National Security Strategy* (Honiara, October 2020), 6.

⁶⁰ Zed Seselja and Marise Payne, “Joint Statement on Solomon Islands,” Minister for International Development and the Pacific (Australia), April 19, 2022, <https://ministers.dfat.gov.au/minister/zed-seselja/media-release/joint-statement-solomon-islands>.

⁶¹ Manasseh Sogavare (speech to the National Parliament of Solomon Islands, Honiara, March 28, 2022).

burden of our security needs.” He added that “the security treaty with China gives us options.”⁶² In a press release following the signing of the security agreement with China, however, the government sought to provide Australia with reassurance: “Against the ongoing internal security threats, the Government intend to beef up and strengthen the Police capability and capacity to deal with any future instability, by properly equipping the Police to take full responsibility of the countries security responsibilities in the hope that the country will never be required to invoke any of our bilateral Security Arrangements.”⁶³

Despite Sogavare’s assurances, however, there are significant concerns about the ways in which strategic competition is intersecting with—and potentially exacerbating—local security dynamics. As Kabutaulaka notes, many Solomon Islanders distrust the RSIPF after its involvement in the Tensions. They question the suitability of the types of policing that donors are building as well as the capacity of the Solomon Islands government to sustain these changes in the long term.⁶⁴ Moreover, acknowledging the ongoing public security gap and the need to strengthen the under-resourced RSIPF, some have raised concerns that the proposed standing up of a national defense force would distract from the urgent needs of the RSIPF and potentially create a climate of competition between the two security forces.⁶⁵

Furthermore, there are critical questions about overcrowding and the absorptive capacity of security institutions due to increased attention from and activity by partners,⁶⁶ which apply to not only Solomon Islands but Pacific Island countries more broadly. Even more concerning is the possibility, however remote, of negative interactions between the multiple security actors on the ground. Australia, for example, has questioned how effectively Australian and Chinese police forces currently on the ground would be able to cooperate, particularly with respect to unity of command.⁶⁷ For example, in accordance with the bilateral treaty, following the deployment of the SIAF in 2021, an Australian Federal Police commander was sworn in as deputy commissioner of the RSIPF responsible for joint operations for a period of six months. These issues were clarified at the time of the elections in 2024 by the RSIPF Commissioner’s Directive.

Conclusion: Looking Forward

Following Solomon Islands’ peaceful transfer of power and formation of a new government in 2024, questions remain about the role of security partners going forward. Australia will retain a security presence in the country even though the SIAF is due to draw down. China will retain its policing presence under the CPLT, which has enabled it to maintain a continuous and persistent security presence in Solomon Islands akin to Australia and New Zealand for two years.

The proxy contest for influence and advantage in Solomon Islands’ security sector is part of the broader strategic competition taking place in the Pacific. In late 2022 the Pacific Islands Forum

⁶² “PM Sogavare: Not a Secret Deal but a Sovereign Issue,” Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Solomon Islands), April 1, 2022, <https://solomons.gov.sb/pm-sogavare-not-a-secret-deal-but-a-sovereign-issue>.

⁶³ “Solomon Islands–China Security Cooperation Signed,” Solomon Islands Government, April 20, 2022, <https://solomons.gov.sb/solomon-islands-china-security-cooperation-signed>.

⁶⁴ Kabutaulaka, “China–Solomon Islands Security Agreement and Competition for Influence in Oceania.”

⁶⁵ Alan C. Tidwell et al., “Solomon Islands: Invest in People and Police before Military,” Lowy Institute, Interpreter, July 28, 2023.

⁶⁶ Joanne Wallis et al., “Mapping Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands,” Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, 2021.

⁶⁷ Stephen Dziedzic, “Solomon Islands Sends Largest Police Delegation to China for First In-Country Training,” ABC News (Australia), October 11, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-10-12/china-trains-more-solomon-islands-police-officers/101526846>.

assessed that “geopolitical tension is likely to increase, and major powers are likely to continue to compete for influence in the region to protect and promote their own interests.”⁶⁸ A year later, it noted that strategic competition is projected to intensify in the region.⁶⁹

This essay has explored the ways in which strategic competition has shaped—and will continue to shape—security cooperation in Solomon Islands. The potential for strategic competition to be disruptive is considerable, and the probability that it will intensify is high. Security cooperation in Solomon Islands will remain a contested site with plausible points of friction between Australian and Chinese security personnel on the ground. The implications for the RSIPF—whose members may find themselves increasingly aligned with one or another security stakeholder—and the wider Solomon Islands society are troubling. Against this backdrop, Solomon Islands journalist Dorothy Wickham offers the following cautionary advice: “As geopolitical rivalries in the region increase, the Solomon Islands government should try to get what it can from foreign powers—but we need to choose those things with long-term benefits in mind. We should be careful what we wish for.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, “The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2022–2023,” 14.

⁶⁹ Pacific Islands Forum and Pacific Fusion Centre, “The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2023–2024,” 30.

⁷⁰ Dorothy Wickham, “The View from Solomon Islands: Our Priority Is Running Water, Not Geopolitics,” *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 17 (2023): 66–77.

THE NATIONAL BUREAU *of* ASIAN RESEARCH

NBR SPECIAL REPORT #110 | JULY 2024

Pacific Islands Narratives and Religion as a Bridge

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines how and why Pacific Island countries use narratives to assert their agency amid geopolitical rivalries in their region.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Pacific Island leaders understand that heightened interest and reinvigorated diplomacy in their region are closely related to China's rise in the 21st century and the escalation of great-power competition. The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy can be thought of as a U.S. narrative for this contest. But the success of this strategy in the Pacific Islands region may be determined by how well it intersects with the narratives of regional countries. The operative word is "intersects." Geopolitical interests have crowded the region and created new dynamics in international relations at both the bilateral and multilateral levels. In the Pacific Islands Forum, the Blue Pacific narrative is used to express the collective interests of member countries' vision for the region. One indication that Washington is paying attention to Pacific leaders is the partial alignment of the Indo-Pacific strategy with this vision. However, the substance of this alignment may not be known for at least another five years. The U.S. should not focus on reacting to China or trying to outmaneuver what Beijing is doing through its own Belt and Road Initiative narrative. Instead, the U.S. should focus on building meaningful long-term relationships with the people within the region through listening to their narratives.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- If the U.S. desires to achieve its Indo-Pacific strategy in the Pacific Islands region, then it will need to first rebuild trust in its relationships with regional countries. The offering of carrots in a transactional sense will not be effective in achieving this goal.
- If the U.S. makes a genuine effort to align its policies on climate change with the narratives of Pacific Island countries, then this could nurture the security partnerships sought after in the region.
- Religion is an underutilized bridge between Western countries and the Pacific Islands. This diplomatic tool could help develop long-term relationships if it is employed sincerely—not just at the state level but through people-to-people dialogue.

In a globalized world, the Pacific Islands are not insular in the strategic context of the great-power rivalry between China and the United States. Pacific Island countries (PICs) craft narratives at the multilateral and bilateral level to convey and frame individual or collective relationships. These Pacific Island narratives should be considered a form of soft power, but their success is debatable. Beyond the fact that studies of the South Pacific are still relatively rare, a weakness in the study of international relations is the inability thus far to effectively trace or measure the impact of soft power.¹

This essay examines how and why PICs use narratives to assert their agency in the midst of great-power geopolitical rivalries in their region. Even when these narratives are acknowledged and explained, they are often not fully appreciated. This essay is divided into two parts. The first looks at the importance of Christian principles in the establishment of the Pacific Islands' modern states and considers religion as one area to develop cultural relationships. The second part examines how PICs are diplomatically navigating external interests in the region with their own narratives as a strategy.

Religion as a Bridge

Religion (specifically Christianity) is central to Pacific Island narratives to the extent that it is intertwined into the fabric of society for the majority of Pacific Islanders. In the constitution preambles of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Vanuatu, for example, specific wording was inserted to recognize “Christian principles.” Solomon Islands’ constitution likewise recognizes “the guiding hand of God,” and Fiji mentions “Christianity” in its abrogated amended constitution of 1997. Samoa as a state is “based on Christian principles and Samoan custom and tradition.” Respect, humility, forgiveness, and trust are Pacific Island cultural values that intersect with the adopted Christian ones and are expected to be displayed by Pacific Island leaders. This display of humility was seen when Fiji’s prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka in January 2023 traveled to Kiribati on a diplomatic mission to convince its leader to return to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF).² PNG’s prime minister James Marape expressed Indian cultural respect in the act of attempting to touch Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s feet upon his arrival at Jacksons International Airport in PNG in May 2023. Although such displays of respect and humility could be natural or premeditated, the intent behind them is to establish goodwill, and therefore reciprocity is important. Reciprocity does not strictly mean the transactional return of favors but entails a mutual spirit of respect and acknowledgment. This can take the form of nods of approval and is not necessarily expressed verbally. PICs view relationships with global powers through the lens of their past, which is a mixture of colonial trauma and hope for a better future. Although Christianity is a legacy of this colonial past, its practice has been adopted favorably and become an important part of daily life for much of the region’s population.

One area where Western powers have an advantage over China, in terms of cultural identity with the Pacific Islands, is their shared religion of Christianity. Throughout the region, “Christianity has provided a lens through which to conceptualize relationships between the local, regional, or

¹ Chengxin Pan and Matthew Clarke, “Narrating the South Pacific in and Beyond Great Power Politics,” *East Asia* 39 (2022): 1–11.

² William Waqavakatoga, “How the ‘Pacific Way’ of Diplomacy Shored Up the PIF,” *East Asia Forum*, March 7, 2023, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/03/07/how-the-pacific-way-of-diplomacy-shored-up-the-pif>.

national” entities.³ This is a potential bridge that Western powers have not utilized or considered vis-à-vis Pacific leaders. Religion is often considered an obstacle to diplomacy, given historical contexts. For the Pacific Islands region, however, religion could be a pathway for meaningful engagement. Pacific Island leaders displaying their Christian faith openly in their public and political lives is not uncommon and achieves respect in their communities. A foreign leader who attends a Pacific Islands church service could build trust as a relationship foundation. In Melanesia, this approach has merits based on the text of the regional states’ constitutions and the value placed on religion in these societies. Christianity is identified with the majority populations in Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. Prime Minister Rabuka, for example, has described comfort with “traditional friends” and the “same brand of democracy, coming out of the Westminster system,”⁴ which may be interpreted as extending to the historical Christian background of the West. Other Pacific leaders very likely quietly harbor this same sentiment.

Given this shared Christian culture, Pacific leaders have often been invited to attend the annual National Prayer Breakfast in the United States. Vanuatu’s first prime minister, Walter Lini, attended twice and met Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton.⁵ Fiji’s first prime minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, also attended previously. Rabuka, as an opposition member of parliament, attended the National Prayer Breakfast in 2017. In Fiji, a similar breakfast took place in February 2023. Rabuka, as the PIF chair, held a special leaders’ retreat with a prayer breakfast as part of a program to welcome Kiribati back into the fold. Vanuatu’s first-ever National Foreign Policy document launched in July 2024 refers to “Our Christian principles” as the first of five values that shapes the country’s foreign policy.⁶ Yet even though efforts to build good relations through religion would be welcomed by regional leaders, this process should not be hurried. This is especially true for relations that are new or being reinvigorated, as in the case of U.S. relations with many PICs. The United States would be well advised to consider the advice of former U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright:

In the future, no American ambassador should be assigned to a country where religious feelings are strong unless he or she has a deep understanding of the faiths commonly practiced there. Ambassadors and their representatives, wherever they are assigned, should establish relationships with local religious leaders. The State Department should hire or train a core of specialists in religion to be deployed both in Washington and in key embassies overseas.⁷

Pacific Narratives

Faced with “unique challenges” as developing states,⁸ PICs are as a result often perceived as passive in their international relations. Pacific Island leaders’ desire to be treated and recognized

³ Alison Dundon, “Negotiating the Horizon—Living Christianity in Melanesia,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 12, no. 1 (2011): 5.

⁴ “Fijian Prime Minister ‘More Comfortable Dealing with Traditional Friends’ Like Australia Than China,” Associated Press, October 17, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/australia-fiji-rabuka-albanese-china-098d41e8112205e138555c4efcb5c85d>.

⁵ “Taurakoto Reports on Lini at Washington Prayer Breakfast,” *Vanuatu Daily Post*, September 9, 2015, https://www.dailypost.vu/news/taurakoto-reports-on-lini-at-washington-prayer-breakfast/article_d379fc59-8d7d-5ea7-89e0-f7501f7061a7.html.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and External Trade (Vanuatu), *A Foreign Policy for Vanuatu and Its People* (Port Vila July 2024), 12.

⁷ Madeleine Albright, “Faith and Diplomacy,” *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2006): 8.

⁸ “About Small Island Developing States,” United Nations, Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, <https://www.un.org/ohrlls/content/about-small-island-developing-states>.

as equals on the global stage. In 2011, this desire drove the Pacific Small Island Developing States at the United Nations to successfully lobby for an official name change to one of the five regional groupings of member states, which had never happened before.⁹ The Asia Group was renamed the Asia and the Pacific Small Island Developing States Group or Asia-Pacific Group. By contrast, broad geopolitical concepts like “Indo-Pacific” are often viewed skeptically or not understood clearly by Pacific Island leaders.¹⁰ Meg Taylor, the former PIF secretary general, raised concerns over the conceptualization of the “Indo-Pacific” by major powers with no conversation with the leadership of the Pacific Islands region, as if the PICs were irrelevant.¹¹ Any conversation about the international relations of the Pacific must take into account the interests, values, and identity of the Pacific nations.¹²

Some scholars have already recognized the importance of using PIC narratives. The “Blue Pacific” concept, for example, pushes back on the negative and disempowering narratives that have dominated extraregional representations of Oceania.¹³ Other narratives have been used strategically to facilitate assertive diplomacy by empowering PICs to be more emphatic in advocating for issues that are important to them.¹⁴ These narratives seek to influence the policies of the region’s partners.¹⁵ “Friends to all, and enemies to none” is one narrative that is being used with increased frequency by Pacific leaders and will be examined further later in this paper.

The emergence of new narratives for the Pacific Islands region has been prominent within the last fifteen years. Geopolitical contests have contributed to this trend. Drivers of competition include China’s increased bilateral engagement with and aid to PICs, improved information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure to facilitate the exchange of information, internet penetration (resulting in more transparent diplomacy), climate change, the issue of incomplete decolonization, and the establishment of new diplomatic relations and maturation of old ones. Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific, Step-up, Pacific Reset, Pacific Uplift, and Pacific Elevation are new concepts floated in speeches and communiqués to describe the strategic interests of foreign countries in developing relations with PICs.

Australia’s *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* identifies the Pacific Step-up, which is focused on engaging with the Pacific with greater intensity and ambition, as one of the country’s “highest foreign policy priorities.”¹⁶ After the United Kingdom scaled down its presence in the 2000s, the Pacific Uplift strategy is focused on re-engagement with the region by “doubling [its] diplomatic presence in the region” and “open[ing] three new High Commissions, in Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu.”¹⁷ A New Zealand cabinet paper similarly noted that the “ability to pursue our interests

⁹ This grouping comprises the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, along with non-UN members Cook Islands and Niue.

¹⁰ Fiamē Naomi Mata’afa, “2023 FDC Pacific Lecture” (speech delivered at Old Parliament House, Canberra, March 22, 2023), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2023-fdc-pacific-lecture-hon-fiamē-naomi-mataafa>.

¹¹ Johnny Blades, “Outgoing Pacific Forum Head Warns about External Influences,” Radio New Zealand, May 31, 2021, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/443728/outgoing-pacific-forum-head-warns-about-external-influences>.

¹² Rory Medcalf, “Sea of Many Flags: A Pacific Way to Dilute China’s Influence,” *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 17 (2023).

¹³ Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, “Mapping the Blue Pacific in a Changing Regional Order,” in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (Acton: ANU Press, 2021), 41–70.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Joanne Wallis, Maima Koro, and Corey O’Dwyer, “The ‘Blue Pacific’ Strategic Narrative: Rhetorical Action, Acceptance, Entrapment, and Appropriation?” *Pacific Review* (2023): 1–28.

¹⁶ Australian Government, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra, November 2017), 3, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf>.

¹⁷ Laura Clarke, “UK-Pacific Partnerships and Shared Values,” Foreign and Commonwealth Office (United Kingdom), July 3, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/oceans-apart-the-uk-the-pacific-partnerships-shared-values>.

in the Pacific is challenged by the dizzying array of problems the region faces and an increasingly contested strategic environment which is eroding our influence.”¹⁸ The Pacific Reset is seen as the country’s response to this challenge. At the inaugural Indonesian Exposition held in New Zealand in 2019, Indonesian foreign minister Retno L.P. Marsudi introduced his country’s Pacific Elevation policy, framing it as a vision for “‘a new era’ for Pacific engagement.”¹⁹

At the same time, the PICs, in an effort to gain control of their own regional narratives, have introduced concepts like Blue Pacific and “large ocean states” in speeches and diplomatic documents. The Pacific Small Island Developing States grouping defines member states in terms of their size and vulnerability, thereby portraying their small island status as disadvantageous. The Blue Pacific, by contrast, expresses a new identity and narrative for the region, which is articulated in the PIF’s *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. The member states requested UN secretary general António Guterres to share their Blue Pacific message directly with the world during his visit to the region in 2019. The “large ocean states” discourse likewise challenges conventional understandings of smallness in international politics.

Global powers are slowly acknowledging these new narratives in an effort to understand and develop trust with the Pacific Islands region. Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, for example, stated that PICs are “large ocean countries and not small island states” at the Third Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation Summit held in PNG in May 2023.²⁰ One scholar, however, has called this use of narratives to reframe the geopolitical contest as a “distraction” from the region’s real and pressing priorities, such as the impact of AUKUS, the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.²¹ The first pillar of AUKUS is Australia’s development of nuclear-powered submarines, with U.S. and British assistance. This would undermine the spirit of the 1985 South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Rarotonga) and has received mixed reactions from Pacific Island leaders. The region’s experience with nuclear testing in the past is still a source of trauma and has ongoing consequences to this day.

The first U.S.–Pacific Island Country Summit was held in Washington, D.C., in 2022. President Joe Biden remarked that world history was going to be written in the Indo-Pacific in the coming decades and that the Pacific Islands are a critical voice in shaping the future.²² Recognition of current regional declarations and treaties will be important in achieving this goal. It is therefore imperative that Washington work within existing regional frameworks and not assert new policies that may contradict or replicate this approach. The “Partners in the Blue Pacific” is a step in the right direction.²³ Its success, however, will be determined by the United States’ ability to listen and work to support frameworks like the Boe Declaration on Regional Security. The United States must also commit to addressing climate change, which is the priority security threat in the Pacific

¹⁸ “New Zealand in the Pacific,” Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (New Zealand), 2018, 1, <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/OIA/Redacted-Cabinet-Paper-for-web-publication-New-Zealand-in-the-Pacific-...pdf>.

¹⁹ “Jakarta Ushering in New Era in Pacific Engagement—Marsudi,” Radio New Zealand, July 13, 2019, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/394277/jakarta-ushering-in-new-era-in-pacific-engagement-marsudi>.

²⁰ “For Me You Are Large Ocean Countries, Not Small Island States: PM Modi at Pacific Forum in Papua New Guinea,” *Hindustan Times*, May 22, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/for-me-you-are-large-ocean-countries-not-small-island-states-pm-modi-at-pacific-forum-in-papua-new-guinea-101684723639139.html>.

²¹ Sandra Tarte, “Bringing the Blue Pacific and Indo-Pacific Narratives Together,” Lowy Institute, Interpreter, April 27, 2023.

²² Joe Biden (remarks at the U.S.–Pacific Island Country Summit, Washington, D.C., September 29, 2022).

²³ “Joint Statement on Partners in the Blue Pacific Foreign Ministers Meeting,” U.S. Department of State, September 22, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-partners-in-the-blue-pacific-foreign-ministers-meeting>.

Islands region. President Biden in September 2023 made it clear that the United States has heard the warning messages from the region's leaders and committed \$200 million in new assistance to deal specifically with this threat.²⁴ When this aid is to be received and how it is used still remains to be seen, but acknowledgment of the problem is a step in the right direction to rebuild trust and presence in the region.

The prime ministers of Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu have in media interviews expressed the “friends to all, enemy to none” stance since 2022 to respond to and justify their decision-making in international relations. This position anchors their foreign policy strategies. These four PICs, along with the independence movement Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front of New Caledonia,²⁵ make up the Melanesian Spearhead Group. This narrative is used to convey the desire for harmony and is best understood in the context of an appreciation of Melanesian diversity in language and culture. Terence Wesley-Smith and Graeme Smith suggest that “the more intense the U.S.-China competition becomes the less likely that Island leaders will be able to exercise agency, preserve their independence and avoid committing to one side or the other.”²⁶ The “friends to all, enemy to none” narrative is used to deflect scrutiny of their decision-making. Pacific leaders balance their foreign policy and diplomacy by deliberately stating this concept. In the Melanesian Spearhead Group, some of the principles of cooperation are “arms control and disarmament...efforts to reduce international tensions, to limit great-power rivalry, to secure human rights, and to ensure the peaceful resolution of disputes.”²⁷ PNG, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands were the founding members and signatory to this agreement in 1988. Therefore, the desire for regional neutrality and harmony dates back to the early years after they achieved statehood.

The post-independence foreign policy of PNG, for example, is situated in the “doctrine of universalism” given its geographic location, and this “was presented as a logical approach to establishing relations with the world and concurrently mitigating dependence on Australia.”²⁸ “Take back PNG” was a campaign expression used by Prime Minister Marape in setting a new direction for the country after his first electoral win in 2019.²⁹ This direction is motivated by the National Goals and Directive Principles in the country's constitution to avert “substantial dependence upon or influence by any country, investor, lender, or donor.”³⁰ If global powers expect PNG to favor one side over a rival through the use of carrots, this will be unlikely to happen. Underscoring his continued foreign policy of “friends to all and enemies to none,” Marape recently stated, “With no good reasons, someone else's enemy is not my enemy and our Pacific ways must

²⁴ Aamer Madhani and Will Weisert, “Biden Tells Pacific Islands Leaders That He Hears Their Warnings about Climate Change and Will Act,” Associated Press, September 25, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-pacific-islands-summit-climate-change-funding-727aa6b908ef5cf1ea28438b965ba9b5>.

²⁵ This paper will not discuss the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front because New Caledonia is a French territory.

²⁶ Terence Wesley-Smith and Graeme Smith, “Introduction: The Return of Great Power Competition,” in Smith and Wesley-Smith, *The China Alternative*, 17.

²⁷ See “Agreed Principles of Co-operation among Independent States in Melanesia,” Melanesian Spearhead Group Secretariat, March 14, 1988, <https://www.msgsec.info/wp-content/uploads/msghistoricaldocuments/1988-14-Mar-Agreed-Principles-of-Co-operation-among-Independent-States-in-Melanesia.pdf>.

²⁸ Philip Mitna, “Factors Influencing Papua New Guinea's Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century” (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2018), 42.

²⁹ Bal Kama, “‘Take Back PNG’: Prime Minister Marape and His Audacious Vision for PNG,” Devpolicy Blog, August 8, 2019, <https://devpolicy.org/take-back-png-prime-minister-marape-and-his-audacious-vision-for-png-20190808>.

³⁰ “Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea,” Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute, https://www.pacii.org/pg/legis/consol_act/cotisopng534.

pacify all forces and interests in our region.”³¹ He pointed to the need for PNG to trade outside the PIF region for economic sustainability and used the history of phosphate mining in Nauru as a case in point. In 1993, Nauru settled a landmark international legal case at the International Court of Justice, in which Australia agreed to pay reparations for its mismanagement of the phosphate mining that destroyed Nauru’s natural environment.

One especially controversial geopolitical development was the decision by Solomon Islands in 2019 to relinquish diplomatic ties with Taiwan and recognize the People’s Republic of China. The vice-chancellor of Solomon Islands National University, Transform Aqorau, argued that the country’s relationship with Taiwan was “an uneasy and unstable relationship at best.”³² It was “not one based on mutual trust and goodwill, but one Solomon Islands politicians have used to gain political mileage, often at the expense of good governance and the social and economic wellbeing of the people.”³³ This newly established diplomatic relationship led to a “security agreement” with China signed in April 2022 and has intensified the geopolitical contest in the region.³⁴ Former prime minister Sogavare, in response to traditional partners’ alarm, stated that Solomon Islands needed to “diversify the country’s relationship[s]” and found it “very insulting to be branded as unfit to manage our sovereign affairs, or [to] have other motives in pursuing our national interests.”³⁵

Vanuatu has faced a similar dilemma. In early 2023, Jotham Napat, Vanuatu’s minister for foreign affairs, international cooperation, and external trade, noted China’s earlier “strong support” for the country’s independence.³⁶ Nonetheless, he stated that Vanuatu was “conscious of competing geopolitical interests in the Pacific, and will continue to manage our relations with all nations with mutual respect and within the principle of being a friend to all and enemy to none.”³⁷ This principle of nonalignment, or of “friends to all enemies to none,” is stated as the fifth of five guiding values in Vanuatu’s 2024 National Foreign Policy document.³⁸ The United States, which reopened an embassy in Solomon Islands’ capital city of Honiara in May 2023 after a 30-year absence, has announced plans to open an embassy in Vanuatu in the future. Yet, while U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken stated that the opening of the embassy in Solomon Islands “symbolizes a renewal relationship,”³⁹ locals view this development with mixed reactions. In particular, they are wary of the geopolitical implications for great-power rivalry in the region.

³¹ Michelle Auamoromoro, “PNG’s Foreign Policy of ‘Friends to All and Enemies to None Remains’: Marape,” *PNG Bulletin*, July 22, 2022, <https://thepngbulletin.com/news/globalnews/pngs-foreign-policy-of-friends-to-all-and-enemies-to-none-remains-marape>.

³² Transform Aqorau, “Solomon Islands’ Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China,” in Smith and Wesley-Smith, *The China Alternative*, 325.

³³ Aqorau, “Solomon Islands’ Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China,” 326.

³⁴ Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, “China–Solomon Islands Security Agreement and Competition for Influence in Oceania,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, December 2, 2022, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2022/12/02/china-solomon-islands-security-agreement-and-competition-for-influence-in-oceania>.

³⁵ Stephen Dziedzic and Edwina Seselja, “Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare ‘Insulted’ by Reaction to Security Treaty with China,” ABC News (Australia), March 28, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-29/manasseh-sogavare-responds-to-leaked-security-treaty-with-china/100946614>.

³⁶ “Vanuatu, China Relations Healthy and Flourishing: Napat,” *Vanuatu Daily Post*, January 28, 2023, https://www.dailypost.vu/news/vanuatu-china-relations-healthy-and-flourishing-napat/article_7d0878bc-90e4-598e-807a-49e8c6a1e53a.html.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and External Trade (Vanuatu), *A Foreign Policy for Vanuatu and Its People*, 12.

³⁹ “U.S. Re-opens Embassy in Solomon Islands,” Radio New Zealand, February 3, 2023, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/483514/us-re-opens-embassy-in-solomon-islands>.

Conclusion

Pacific narratives are important and matter because too often regional countries' historical identities are conveniently forgotten or ignored by foreign powers. All relationships have historical starting points, and awareness of the past is important for shaping the future. A strength of the Pacific Islands region is found in its diverse languages, customs, and cultures. Trust and respect are important communal values for achieving harmony and reciprocity, and in the 21st century, narratives help convey this message.

Due to their geographic location in the Indo-Pacific, Pacific Island countries are of growing strategic importance and have garnered special attention from global powers. Their leaders have embraced the narrative of “friend to all, enemy to none” to deflect the scrutiny they receive when bilateral relationships are developed through agreements that are controversial with other countries. However, for such relationships to develop and flourish, there must be some cultural and historical understanding. For this reason, geopolitical analysis of the Pacific region should expand to consider using cultural and historical lenses to guide foreign policy. After all, it is the global powers that have come to the Pacific region, and therefore the onus to learn is on them. Pacific leaders understand the importance of maintaining balanced relationships with traditional, rekindled, or new partners.

THE NATIONAL BUREAU *of* ASIAN RESEARCH

NBR SPECIAL REPORT #110 | JULY 2024

U.S. Strategy in Melanesia: Pacific Security through Integrated Diplomatic Engagement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines U.S.-China geopolitical competition within the context of their foreign policy approaches to Melanesia and considers options for future policy actions.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The U.S. views China's presence and influence in Melanesia as a contestation of its power in the Pacific due to China's continuing rise and—as Washington sees it—belligerent and aggressive military and foreign policy. Beijing, for its part, sees the region as necessary to its foreign policy objectives, which include cultivating governments for political ends, acquiring natural resources, and maintaining trade, commercial, and shipping access. It does not, however, necessarily perceive Melanesia as a place in which to engage in strategic competition with the U.S. The U.S. needs to reframe its perceptions of Chinese activities in the region and provide diplomatic solutions for the region in order to build enduring relationships that support U.S. national security interests.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- China's engagement with Melanesia has been substantial, involving both official government assistance and unofficial development assistance. Although Washington perceives these activities through the prism of the evolving great-power competition between the two countries, a review of Chinese activities indicates that Beijing's motives are primarily economic and political. U.S. responses should address these realities rather than attributing military motives to China.
- Currently, the perception within Melanesia is that U.S. interests in the region are shallow and driven by China's growing influence. If the U.S. wants to bring Melanesia into alignment with its broader Indo-Pacific strategy, Washington must prioritize fostering enduring relationships with individual countries.
- The U.S. government can foster enduring relations by actively engaging in substantive dialogues with host governments and civil society to address the concerns and priorities of Melanesian nations. By doing so, the U.S. can show that it is a reliable partner in the region and not merely there to contest Chinese influence and power.
- By focusing on diplomatic programming to improve country capacities for governance, economic development, and security, the U.S. can not only build strong partnerships but also gain credible regional support for a rules-based order.

The United States perceives China's presence in Melanesia as a direct challenge to U.S. power in the Pacific due to China's continuing rise and—as Washington sees it—belligerent and aggressive military and foreign policy that is heavily critical of U.S. global leadership.¹ China, on the other hand, sees the region as key to its foreign policy objectives, which include cultivating governments for political ends, accessing natural resources, and maintaining trade, commercial, and shipping access, but not necessarily as a locus of strategic competition with the United States. Melanesia has thus become a potential site of great-power competition between the two countries, which could lead to the securitization of the region.

The perceptions of changing security dynamics in Melanesia are due to China's increased diplomatic, economic, and military activities, which have caused the United States to reconsider its benign neglect of the region. The United States has renewed its interest in Melanesia with a flurry of visits from high-level government officials, promises of aid, and reopening of diplomatic missions.² The Biden administration has released a Pacific Partnership Strategy outlining its regional objectives and appointed a special envoy to the Pacific Islands Forum. Since late 2023, the United States has reopened its embassy in Solomon Islands and opened a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) office in Fiji.³ The United States also intends to open embassies in the Cook Islands and Niue.⁴

At the same time, Melanesian governments have welcomed Chinese activities that may help mitigate significant security threats from climate change as well as economic and wealth inequalities. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects and development aid activities are seen as beneficial to the region's collective economic well-being and improvement. Melanesian nations, however, are also wary that their region may become an arena of competition between great powers. To assuage these concerns, Washington needs to convince them of the sincerity and longevity of U.S. commitments. The sudden introduction of new Pacific policies, followed quickly by the cancellation of President Joe Biden's visit to Papua New Guinea, continues a "pattern of behavior that causes many in the region to regard the U.S. as a less-than-reliable partner."⁵

This essay examines the drivers behind the changing security dynamics in Melanesia vis-à-vis the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China. It considers policy options for Washington to constructively engage with Melanesia and strengthen U.S.-Melanesian relations to the benefit of the overall U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Actions focusing on diplomatic means of improving partner capacities in governance, democratic resilience, and economic development would lead to the creation of enduring partnerships with Melanesian nations and better serve

¹ Melanesia includes the countries of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. It also includes portions of Indonesia, such as Western New Guinea, and the French overseas territory of New Caledonia. Due to its location during World War II, Melanesia has held historic importance as a crucial theater of war, giving this area continuing military and geostrategic importance. The region is also home to several important natural resources, including fisheries, timber, and minerals, that have geostrategic importance and play a role in global trade. The area is an important site for scientific research as well. The region's unique ecosystems, including coral reefs and rainforests, are of interest to scientists studying biodiversity and climate change. Because of the region's heavy reliance on imports, international shipping is another important aspect of this region.

² Matthew Lee, "U.S. Moves to Reopen Solomon Islands Embassy to Counter China," Associated Press, January 4, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-united-states-government-solomon-islands-china-honiara-f46d4bf43bb09c49f480b3d7b31433a0>.

³ Bruce Jones, "Temperatures Rising: The Struggle for Bases and Access in the Pacific Islands," Brookings Institution, Policy Brief, February 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/temperatures-rising-the-struggle-for-bases-and-access-in-the-pacific-islands>.

⁴ "U.S. to Open Embassies in the Cook Islands, Niue," Al Jazeera, September 25, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/25/us-to-open-embassies-in-the-cook-islands-niue>.

⁵ Anna Powles, cited in Nick Perry, "Hopes for Historic Pacific Visit Dashed After Biden Cancels Trip to Papua New Guinea," *Diplomat*, May 17, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/hopes-for-historic-pacific-visit-dashed-after-biden-cancels-trip-to-papua-new-guinea>.

long-term U.S. strategic interests. Such actions, moreover, would increase Melanesian support for the rules-based order.

China's Role in the Securitization of Melanesia

China's emergence as a great power is likely the most significant development in the post-Cold War era. Over the past few decades, China has transformed itself from a poor, technologically backward nation into a major player on the world stage, both economically and geopolitically. In some quarters, the so-called Beijing Consensus development model has garnered admiration, while in others it has drawn criticism because it presents an alternative to a rules-based order that values democratic governance and rule-of-law principles.

Since 2008, China's foreign policy has displayed a noticeable shift, adopting a more assertive and belligerent approach that seems to contest the rules-based order. While China speaks of a peaceful rise and a "vision of a community with a shared future for mankind," much of what it does belies this peace and community narrative, such as its quasi-military actions and its rejection of Philippine sovereignty in the South China Sea. BRI is China's attempt to build economic, digital, and technological alternatives to Western systems.⁶ China's rhetoric warns other nations to stay out of its domestic affairs and to respect its sovereignty while threatening those that interfere with its rise. This transformation starkly contrasts with the "hide and bide" approach of the Deng Xiaoping era.

This shift in Chinese policy has been concerning for several reasons. Amid allegations of forced technology transfers, unfair trade practices, corporate and military espionage, human rights violations in western China and Hong Kong, and saber-rattling about Taiwan, U.S. perceptions of China have become increasingly negative. Washington deems Beijing a pacing challenge in the Indo-Pacific and a hostile peer competitor in the geopolitical and economic realms. Chinese initiatives like BRI are generally viewed as exploitative and predatory. These negative perceptions are fueled by rather credible indications that China is attempting to contest U.S. leadership of the global order.

Great-power competition has both countries vying for influence and leadership worldwide. The Pacific Islands are important to Beijing in terms of gaining political influence and access to resources. In Melanesia, China has increased its engagement primarily through investment, development aid, BRI infrastructure projects, and several soft-power initiatives intended to build its influence in the region with Melanesian governments. Its agenda over the past few years has included investment in and cooperation on climate change, agricultural development, and infrastructure such as roads, ports, and airports. China documents these various activities, including exchanges and cooperation, projects and technical assistance, professional training, and concessional loans, to demonstrate its benevolence in Melanesia.⁷ Concerning BRI, China

⁶ While it does not appear that China is attempting to directly replace the Bretton Woods system, it is well-documented that China is attempting to internationalize the renminbi to integrate other countries into its financial system. Its promotion of BRI and initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank have been seen by some as part of a strategy to offer an alternative to traditional international financial institutions. If BRI nations are willing to accept the renminbi over the dollar, "China [will] have the freedom to deploy resources toward projects without having to worry about the availability of dollars, the Fed's monetary policy decisions or U.S. oversight." See Diana Choyleva and Dinny McMahon, "China's Quest for Financial Self-Reliance: How Beijing Plans to Decouple from the Dollar-Based Global Trading and Financial System," Enodo Economics, August 11, 2022, <https://thoughtleadership.enodoconomics.com/2022/08/11/chinas-quest-for-financial-self-reliance>.

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), "China's Position Paper on Mutual Respect and Common Development with Pacific Island Countries," May 30, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202205/t20220531_10694923.html.

has extended the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road to Oceania by signing cooperation agreements with Pacific Island countries with which it has diplomatic relations. While Beijing characterizes BRI projects as mutually advantageous for all parties because of potential trade growth, recipients most likely will incur even greater trade deficits with China than before.⁸ Nonetheless, BRI projects are popular. All ten Pacific Island countries that hold official diplomatic relations with China have some type of BRI memorandum of understanding (see **Table 1**).⁹ Overall, however, aid provided to Pacific Island nations is minimal as a proportion of total Chinese global investment.¹⁰

For some scholars, China's rapidly evolving Pacific strategy is seen as a "win-win situation for both the Pacific and China."¹¹ Other scholars discern that "China's long-term goal is to ultimately replace the United States as the preeminent power in the Pacific Ocean."¹² China's presence and influence, therefore, have securitized the region despite the positive benefits of Sino-Pacific alliances. The securitized response from the United States and its allies reflects the global North's sentiments on BRI, which Washington sees as a secretive, exploitative Chinese government project that is particularly alarming because of its global reach. Because Beijing does not publish official data on BRI, there is great opacity about the scope and cost of projects, the involvement of private and public actors, and funding sources, which increases suspicion of China's global ambitions. What is widely publicized is that BRI saddles recipient countries with debt that can cripple national economies.¹³ BRI projects are seen as affecting "the ability of traditional partners, such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand and especially Taiwan, to project influence in the region,"¹⁴ especially given the number of high-level visits from the Chinese president and foreign minister to Pacific Island nations.¹⁵ However, only a handful of BRI projects have been identified as genuinely predatory. For the most part, BRI has been welcomed by the recipient countries because it provides much-needed economic development to nations that believe they have no other alternatives.

Although China has been unsuccessful in building military outposts in Melanesia, the United States and its allies see the country as "apparently seeking to normalize its military presence in the region" through military aid and training, disaster relief, and humanitarian aid provision, raising concerns about China's influence over regional governments and the potential for conflict with Indo-Pacific powers.¹⁶ While some Melanesian governments view the new security pact between

⁸ David Sacks, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor—Hard Reality Greets BRI's Signature," Council on Foreign Relations, Asia Unbound, March 30, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/china-pakistan-economic-corridor-hard-reality-greets-bris-signature-initiative>. Many countries have experienced even greater trade deficits while incurring large commercial loans at high interest rates.

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), "China's Position Paper on Mutual Respect and Common Development with Pacific Island Countries"; and Carol Li, "The Belt and Road Initiative in Oceania: Understanding the People's Republic of China's Strategic Interests and Engagement in the Pacific," University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Department of Asian Studies, July 2022, <https://www.cfe-dmha.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=Fa-plgGeo2ps%3d&portalid=0>.

¹⁰ Zhou Fangyin, "A Reevaluation of China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands," in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (Acton: ANU Press, 2021), 233–57.

¹¹ Iati Iati, cited in John Ruwitch, "China Brought a Major Initiative to Pacific Island Nations. It Has the U.S. Worried," NPR, *All Things Considered*, June 8, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/08/1103785100/china-brought-a-major-initiative-to-pacific-island-nations-it-has-the-u-s-worrie>.

¹² John Henderson and Benjamin Reilly, "Dragon in Paradise: China's Rising Star in Oceania," *National Interest*, Summer 2003, 95.

¹³ Nadia Clark, "The Rise and Fall of the BRI," Council on Foreign Relations, Asia Unbound, April 6, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/rise-and-fall-bri>.

¹⁴ Li, "The Belt and Road Initiative in Oceania," 1.

¹⁵ Zhou, "A Reevaluation of China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands."

¹⁶ Xiao Liang, "What Can We Learn from China's Military Aid to the Pacific?" Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, WritePeace, June 20, 2022, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2022/chinas-military-aid-pacific>. China and Solomon Islands signed a security agreement in April 2022. China has also been providing military aid, which enables countries to prop up authoritarian governments and support corrupt politicians.

TABLE 1 BRI projects in the Pacific Islands

Country	MOU	Projects
Cook Islands	November 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student cultural exchange winter camp in Zhuhai • Delegation to Guangdong International Tourism and Cultural Festival
Federated States of Micronesia (FSM)	November 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of roads in Chuuk • Agricultural pilot farm in Madolenihmw • Construction of Pohnpei Secondary Road and Bridge • Construction of new Chuuk State office buildings complex • Construction of the National Convention Center
Fiji	November 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of Stinson Parade and Vatuwaqa bridges • Upgrade of Nabouwalu Dreketi Road • Redevelopment of Suva Civic Centre • Construction and medical equipment for Navua Hospital Medical Training and Emergency Centre • Construction of Panda Power Plant • Construction of sports facility for Marist Brothers High School
Kiribati	January 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of bridge connecting Boutu and South Tarawa
Niue	July 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student cultural exchange winter camp in Zhuhai • Upgrade of Ring Road Highway
Papua New Guinea	June 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of an industrial park in Sandaun Province • Road system upgrades on mainland, New Britain, and New Ireland • 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 project • Kamil submarine cable project • Construction of Enga Provincial Hospital

Table 1 continued

Country	MOU	Projects
Samoa	September 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of Confucius Institute, National University Samoa • Donation of Covid-19 medical supplies
Solomon Islands	October 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of seven facilities for the 2023 Pacific Games
Tonga	November 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sidewalk construction in downtown Nuku'alofa • Construction of St. George government building • Construction of solar plant • Scholarships for Tongan students
Vanuatu	November 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Malapoa College extension project for classroom, dormitory, and lab construction • Tanna and Malekula road rehabilitation project

SOURCE: Li, “The Belt and Road Initiative in Oceania.”

NOTE: BRI projects are notoriously difficult to categorize because they are not mandated through Chinese national law. Project partners often self-designate whether a project is BRI-related, and some pre-BRI projects have been renamed as such. External observers tend to over-categorize Chinese projects as BRI-related. In Li’s report, for example, the construction of a Confucius Institute in Samoa, a cultural exchange camp in Zhuhai, and a secondary school in Papua New Guinea have all been designated as BRI projects under the rubric of “people-to-people exchanges.” Since China has engaged in people-to-people exchanges and founded Confucius Institutes prior to 2012, it is hard to see how they are strictly BRI-related.

China and Solomon Islands as one that responds to domestic needs for internal security, the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies view it “as a threat to peace given China’s ambition for global influence.”¹⁷ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has also initiated information operations that are “effective in influencing public discourse and political elites in the Pacific” that further heighten suspicions about China’s global ambitions.¹⁸

China claims that its engagement is beneficial for all parties involved. Chinese engagement with Pacific Island nations is, however, driven by Beijing’s strategic interests and not purely benevolent. In general, China’s expanding influence has several objectives, such as influencing the way that

¹⁷ Ilan Kilo, “The Disproportionate Attention on the Solomons-China Security Pact,” Lowy Institute, Interpreter, May 11, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/disproportionate-attention-solomons-china-security-pact>.

¹⁸ Blake Johnson and Joshua Dunne, “Seeking to Undermine Democracy and Partnerships: How the CCP Is Influencing the Pacific Islands Information Environment,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Policy Brief, March 7, 2023, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/seeking-undermine-democracy-and-partnerships>; and Eleanor Albert, “China’s Big Bet on Soft Power,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 9, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>. Soft-power initiatives are aimed at building closer ties and increasing China’s influence in the region, including establishing well-funded Confucius Institutes and using social and traditional media to promote misinformation and disinformation to influence public opinion.

nations vote at the United Nations and reducing the number of countries that recognize Taiwan diplomatically.¹⁹ As an export-driven economy and food-insecure nation, China is also highly interested in Melanesian natural resources and raw materials. Finally, it is widely suspected to be working to reshape the rules-based order into one more amenable to the CCP's global intentions. These intentions have mainly been articulated in "Xi Jinping Thought," which states that China has "stood up" to the bullies of the world and will never again suffer the humiliations of the past. It also pronounces that China is seeking to achieve the "China dream of national rejuvenation," in which the Chinese people must "unite as one like a fortress" in order to triumphantly build a moderately prosperous society and a modern socialist country by 2049.²⁰ Speeches and other rhetoric by Xi Jinping indicate that nothing will stand in the way, including the United States and its rules-based order, while China pursues these twin goals.

Altogether, these activities have resulted in perceptions by Washington and its Pacific allies that Beijing is attempting to exert undue influence in the region. This has contributed to the securitization of Melanesia and the Pacific Islands region more broadly, as well as to a generally negative sentiment about most regional Chinese activities, even those that help Melanesian nations develop economically.

Melanesian Perspectives

Melanesian governments are concerned with domestic security issues, development priorities, and climate change. Ultimately, they seek "strategic autonomy, which they interpret as being free to engage in economic and security cooperation with all potential partners."²¹ For the most part, Melanesians do not want to be seen as favoring one side over the other.²² There is a growing perception that U.S.-China great-power competition will be played out in the Pacific Islands. Some scholars view that "geopolitical competition will serve the region well if it is geared towards the development of partnerships that aims to address the security needs of the region."²³ Others, however, are concerned about the effects of securitization. As one Melanesian scholar described the situation at the conference convened by the National Bureau of Asian Research, while the elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled. Likewise, the contest between Washington and Beijing for geopolitical primacy in the region will subsume Melanesian domestic concerns and priorities.

¹⁹ Courtney J. Fung and Shing-hon Lam, "Mixed Report Card: China's Influence at the United Nations," Lowy Institute, December 18, 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/mixed-report-card-china-s-influence-united-nations>. While the authors note that China's attempts to influence the United Nations are not always successful, these efforts are ongoing. Despite Beijing's limited transparency on spending, David Shambaugh of George Washington University estimates that China spends approximately \$10 billion annually on soft-power initiatives globally. See David Shambaugh, "China's Soft-Power Push: The Search for Respect," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2015, 99–107.

²⁰ Yan Bennett, "Xi Jinping Thought: Political Philosophy or Totalizing Paradigm?" in *China under Xi Jinping: An Interdisciplinary Assessment*, ed. Hanna Kupś, Maciej Szatkowski, and Michał Dahl (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming, 2024). In conjunction with other discourse, the future that China envisions is one in which it is an uncontested global power that is no longer bullied or dictated by Western powers. China's attempts to change multilateralism involve gaining votes at the United Nations in order to place Chinese nationals in prominent international organizations. See Jeffrey Feltman, "China's Expanding Influence at the United Nations—and How the United States Should React," Brookings Institution, September 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-expanding-influence-at-the-united-nations-and-how-the-united-states-should-react>; and Daniel Runde, "The Hard Politics of Soft Power," War on the Rocks, podcast, March 3, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/the-hard-politics-of-soft-power>.

²¹ Christopher Cairns and April Herlevi, "China and the Solomon Islands: Drivers of Security Cooperation," CNA, April 13, 2022, <https://www.cna.org/our-media/indepth/2022/04/china-and-the-solomon-islands>.

²² Patrick Kaiku, "Not the Indo-Pacific: A Melanesian View on Strategic Competition," Lowy Institute, Interpreter, April 18, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/not-indo-pacific-melanesian-view-strategic-competition>.

²³ Kilo, "The Disproportionate Attention on the Solomons-China Security Pact."

Melanesians see BRI and other Chinese assistance as beneficial. At the same time, they also recognize that such assistance comes with strings attached, usually in the form of large amounts of debt and high interest rates.²⁴ Nonetheless, given the needs of Melanesia in combating climate change and stimulating economic development, Beijing's attention is welcome, not only because of the economic aid but also because of the renewed interest that it has elicited from Washington. Undoubtedly, China's presence in the region has resulted in the U.S. government promising to reopen four embassies and provide economic and development aid.²⁵ For Melanesian countries, this is indeed a win-win situation.

At the same time, Chinese involvement in the region has sparked concerns in Melanesian civil society similar to those in Africa, where sources of tension include the perception that Chinese investment contributes to a neocolonial relationship.²⁶ African scholars have identified that the continent has undergone four waves of conquest, beginning with the transatlantic slave trade and continuing into the twentieth century with non-African nations and corporations usurping sovereignty and encroaching on worker well-being, human rights, and the environment. Some African scholars argue that China has initiated a fifth wave of colonialism.²⁷ Clashes between African civil society and Chinese merchants and companies have been well documented, showing a conflict between Chinese foreign policy and African national sovereignty and social agency.²⁸ Additionally, African governments, media, and scholars are concerned about illegal mining and transnational crime, among other activities linked to China.²⁹ Commodity-rich nations find that Chinese investments in their countries are nakedly self-serving to the Chinese government and state-owned enterprises (SOEs).³⁰ Nonetheless, many African governments hope that China's involvement will hasten infrastructure construction and economic development, and to that end they ignore the discord generated by Chinese investment.

This story of Chinese neocolonialism is being repeated in Melanesia. The current fourth wave has already been initiated by Chinese SOEs, which prefer "speaking Mandarin and employing a Chinese workforce, and [have] a reputation for segregation."³¹ Such practices crowd out local labor and prevent the development of local human capital.³² Protestors declare that Chinese businesses unfairly compete with Melanesian ones and mistreat the few Melanesian workers they do employ.³³

²⁴ Peter Connolly, "The Belt and Road Comes to Papua New Guinea: Chinese Geoeconomics with Melanesian Characteristics?" *Security Challenges* 16, no. 4 (2020): 41–64.

²⁵ Antony J. Blinken, "Opening of the U.S. Embassy in Honiara, Solomon Islands," U.S. Department of State, Press Release, February 1, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/opening-of-the-u-s-embassy-in-honiara-solomon-islands>.

²⁶ Victor Mlambo, "Exploitation Dressed in a Suit, Shining Shoes, and Carrying a Suitcase Full of Dollars: What Does China Want in Africa?" *Journal of Public Affairs* 19, no. 1 (2019): 1–9; and Francesco Iacoella et al., "Chinese Official Finance and Political Participation in Africa," *European Economic Review*, no. 136 (2021).

²⁷ Sabella Ogbobode Abidde, "China in Africa: The Fifth Wave of Conquest and Plunder?" in *China in Africa: Between Imperialism and Partnership in Humanitarian Development*, ed. Sabella O. Abidde and Tokunbo A. Ayoola (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021).

²⁸ Iacoella et al., "Chinese Official Finance and Political Participation in Africa"; and "Kenyan Traders Protest against Chinese Competitors," *Africanews*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/02/28/kenyan-traders-protest-against-chinese-competitors>.

²⁹ Mlambo, "Exploitation Dressed in a Suit, Shining Shoes, and Carrying a Suitcase Full of Dollars."

³⁰ Matt Ferchen, "How China Is Reshaping International Development," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 8, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/01/08/how-china-is-reshaping-international-development-pub-80703>.

³¹ Connolly, "The Belt and Road Comes to Papua New Guinea," 49.

³² Mlambo, "Exploitation Dressed in a Suit, Shining Shoes, and Carrying a Suitcase Full of Dollars," 5.

³³ Connolly, "The Belt and Road Comes to Papua New Guinea," 60; Henderson and Reilly, "Dragon in Paradise," 98–99; and Stewart Firth, "Instability in the Pacific Islands: A Status Report," Lowy Institute, June 4, 2018, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/instability-pacific-islands-status-report>.

Further, Chinese investment in Melanesia is seen as fueling corruption and patronage.³⁴ Many Chinese interactions with Melanesia seem blatantly transactional and disproportionately favor Chinese interests. Although Chinese aid and infrastructure-related loans do not have the same political conditions as Western aid, they nonetheless present problems to cash-strapped nations by trapping them in unsustainable debt cycles.³⁵ For example, in the Pacific Islands, Tonga holds a debt load of about \$240 million (41% of its GDP), with two-thirds owed to the Export-Import Bank of China.³⁶ The term “debt-trap diplomacy” has been exclusively used to refer to international financial relationships with China. China also imposes other forms of conditionality, such as adherence to the one-China principle, which requires countries to cut official ties to the Republic of China, located on the island of Taiwan; use of Chinese labor and companies; and funding from Chinese banks.³⁷

Ideology may serve as another source of tension. Since the 1990s, several democratic movements in the Pacific Island region have clashed, sometimes violently, with China. For example, in the 1990s a pro-democracy movement in Tonga protested Chinese immigrants and businesses for taking Tongan jobs and causing “economic, political, social, and moral problems.”³⁸ Tensions over democracy and China’s corrupting influence resulted in major riots in 2006 and 2021 directed at ethnic Chinese communities.³⁹ More recently, opposition parties in Solomon Islands fear that Chinese influence “will be the basis for the erosion of our democracy.”⁴⁰ NGOs and other civil society actors also fear that the recent security agreement between Solomon Islands and China, in which Beijing agreed to assist with domestic security issues in Solomon Islands, will be used to suppress free speech and quell opposition to China.⁴¹ Consequently, these tensions also contribute to the securitization of the region.

Policy Options for U.S. Engagement with Melanesia

U.S. perceptions of Beijing’s actions in Melanesia have been largely negative. The United States holds that BRI is predatory and part of China’s insidious global ambitions to contest U.S. leadership globally.

First, to improve its outreach to Melanesia the United States should right-size its perceptions of the threat posed by China in the region. Beijing is attempting to curry political influence in Melanesia and fuel its economic growth and development—two goals that will help China achieve its dream of national rejuvenation. Although its global intentions might be more directly

³⁴ Denghua Zhang, “Domestic Political Reforms and China’s Diplomacy in the Pacific: The Case of Foreign Aid,” in Smith and Wesley-Smith, *The China Alternative*, 276; and Connolly, “The Belt and Road Comes to Papua New Guinea,” 61–62.

³⁵ Mlambo, “Exploitation Dressed in a Suit, Shining Shoes, and Carrying a Suitcase Full of Dollars.”

³⁶ Liam Fox, “Tonga to Start Paying Back Controversial Chinese Loans Described by Some as ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy,’” ABC News (Australia), July 19, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-19/tonga-to-start-repaying-controversial-chinese-loans/10013996>; and Kirsty Needham, “Tonga Discusses Debt with China, Australia’s Wong to Visit,” Reuters, June 1, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pacific-security-china-tonga-idAFKBN2NI2FH>.

³⁷ Xuefeng Sun et al., “Conditionality in China’s Aid Model” (event hosted by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Beijing, January 10, 2012), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/01/10/conditionality-in-china-s-aid-model-event-4024>.

³⁸ Henderson and Reilly, “Dragon in Paradise,” 98.

³⁹ Cairns and Herlevi, “China and the Solomon Islands.” Another assessment is that the pro-democracy movements are instigated by non-native, pro-Western forces.

⁴⁰ Emanuel Stoakes, “Chinese Police Could Crush Solomon Islands Opposition,” *Foreign Policy*, August 9, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/09/solomon-islands-china-security-pact-beijing-policing-democracy>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

confrontational toward U.S. interests in other regions, China is not yet countering the U.S.-led rules-based order in Melanesia in ways that require direct military action by the United States. Melanesia need not be the next battleground in the great-power competition between the United States and China.

Second, the United States should lead with its demonstrated strengths in soft power, which consist of diplomatic solutions that help nations achieve political stability, develop economic capacity, build political capacity, and foster better governance. As articulated by Melanesian scholars, the region has concerns about transnational crime, drug trafficking, gender-based violence, and journalistic standards, all factors that can destabilize representative governments and disrupt civil society. There is also interest in science and technology development and education and access to educational and leadership exchanges with the United States.

While the Biden administration's Pacific Partnership Strategy promises additional funding and new programming, many departments and agencies in the executive branch already offer proven programs that could become regular and ongoing. The Office of Science and Technology Cooperation within the State Department, for example, offers education, training, and research to enhance science integration, technology, and innovation for sustainable development. The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs offers international law enforcement training to effectively confront transnational criminal threats. The Office of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs and USAID offer regional workshops to foster responsible and ethical journalism and educational and leadership exchange programs to identify young leaders. The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor offers foreign assistance programming to address gender-based violence and advance gender equality and women's empowerment. By expanding existing programming to Melanesia, the United States can avoid a steep learning curve and ramp-up phase.

With regard to infrastructure development, the United States could help regional countries achieve governance objectives and economic development through Millennium Challenge Corporation projects. This could counter the allure of BRI funding with existing U.S. programming and budgeting that offer country-led solutions. Additionally, various agencies within the federal government could assist by forming working groups about how the United States can better encourage public-private investment in Melanesia's infrastructure development.

These are all typical federal government programs implemented in other regions that, with sufficient personnel and funding, could be quickly instituted in Melanesia. Other federal executive departments could also engage with the region on exchange and training programs specific to their missions. The Department of Justice, for example, routinely trains foreign judges and lawyers on prosecutorial procedures that help promote the rule of law and human rights. These activities are relatively low-cost and high-impact and have had proven results in other regions. Such civil-society-building activities help strengthen American soft power in noncoercive ways while also supporting long-range U.S. national security goals. They also demonstrate the power of the United States' governance model over that of the Beijing Consensus.

A key to bringing these diplomatic solutions to Melanesia, however, is rebuilding and establishing a diplomatic and physical presence in the region. Melanesia has seen only a superficial U.S. presence since the 1980s. During his nomination hearing as deputy secretary of state, Kurt Campbell urged Congress to fund agreements that would help re-establish the United States' presence in the region. He described the U.S. mission in Solomon Islands as being staffed by one man who "was a one-person diplomacy in the Solomons, one of our most contested places, and was

living in a hotel with his dog.”⁴² He added that “as we drove into town, we went by the gleaming Chinese Embassy [with] dozens and dozens of staffers.”⁴³ U.S. diplomacy can only return to the region by reopening embassies and consulates and bringing relevant agencies to each of those missions. This may mean recruiting staff from other regional bureaus who may be unfamiliar with the Pacific Islands. However, the added benefit of their experience and know-how in program implementation would be invaluable.

A third policy option is to better understand Chinese activities in Melanesia. Melanesian governments should be encouraged to disclose their financial relationships and other official activities with China to the G-7 nations. Through such consultation, Melanesian governments will be better informed about what Chinese practices are predatory. Additionally, the United States and other G-7 countries should offer an alternative to BRI through the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), a G-7 initiative for sustainable, quality infrastructure projects in developing and emerging economies. PGII can provide much-needed investment that would assist Melanesian countries in achieving development goals.⁴⁴

Fourth, the United States should adopt a coalition approach to Melanesia. Scholars have noted that both security and development activities are currently uncoordinated, creating unnecessary duplication.⁴⁵ The United States should work with like-minded countries and regional organizations, such as Japan, Australia, NATO, and the European Union, to develop a coordinated strategy for Melanesia, incorporating existing plans on sustainable economic development, such as PGII, the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, and the Pacific Islands Regional Oceanscape Program (PROP).⁴⁶ In Bosnia, where this author previously worked, the international community effectively implemented a coalition approach to postwar reconstruction and counterterrorism by closely coordinating multinational military, diplomatic, and development efforts. Again, this necessitates a much greater diplomatic presence in Melanesia than is presently there.

Finally, new strategic planning, including these policy options, requires integration. In June 2022, the United States, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom established the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP), a coalition to expand economic and diplomatic cooperation with Pacific Island nations. In September 2022, the United States held its first-ever U.S.–Pacific Island Country Summit and the first PBP ministerial, at which it was announced that Canada and Germany intend to join. PGII, PROP, and PBP should be incorporated into the “Roadmap for a 21st-Century U.S.–Pacific Island Partnership.” The September 2022 roadmap provides an outline for U.S. partners and Pacific Island countries to work together on climate action, trade and investment, and addressing security and health concerns.⁴⁷ This roadmap, however, can only come to fruition through integration with existing plans, a commitment to the region, implementation of existing U.S. programming, and adequately trained staff in Melanesia. Mixed signals, such as

⁴² Kurt Campbell, cited in Nike Ching, “U.S. Official Urges Approval of New Deals with Pacific Islands,” Voice of America, December 7, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-official-urges-approval-of-new-deals-with-pacific-islands-/7388918.html>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth C. Losos and T. Robert Fetter, “Building Bridges? PGII versus BRI,” Brookings Institution, September 29, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2022/09/29/building-bridges-pgii-versus-bri>.

⁴⁵ John Blaxland and Jennifer D.P. Moroney, “The Indo-Pacific Contest: It Could Be Time for Fresh Ideas on Allied Security Cooperation,” RAND Corporation, July 8, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/07/the-indo-pacific-contest-it-could-be-time-for-fresh.html>.

⁴⁶ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (Suva, July 2022), <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022-1.pdf>; and “Toward a More Prosperous and Sustainable Pacific Ocean,” World Bank, April 13, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2022/04/13/toward-a-more-prosperous-and-sustainable-pacific-ocean>.

⁴⁷ “Roadmap for a 21st-Century U.S.–Pacific Island Partnership,” White House, Fact Sheet, September 29, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/fact-sheet-roadmap-for-a-21st-century-u-s-pacific-island-partnership>.

President Biden's cancellation of a visit to Papua New Guinea, indicate to Melanesian nations that China is the more dependable partner. The United States needs to change this narrative by firmly committing to an integrated roadmap as quickly as possible.

In sum, Washington should change its narrative in Melanesia through diplomacy, official development assistance, democratic resilience, and other country-led programming. The best policy for the United States is not to outcompete or rout China but to demonstrate a genuine and enduring commitment to Melanesia and promote development projects and other activities that bolster Melanesian capacity and autonomy. Doing so will be more cost-effective than militarizing the region. This also exploits the greatest weakness of Beijing—that its soft-power initiatives are blatantly self-serving. Sustained U.S. diplomacy will give Melanesia a stake in the rules-based order, which would provide a long-term benefit for the United States and an appropriate regional strategy to counter China.

THE NATIONAL BUREAU *of* ASIAN RESEARCH

NBR SPECIAL REPORT #110 | JULY 2024

Integrating Melanesia into the Indo-Pacific Security Architecture: Analysis for U.S. Policymakers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay analyzes past, present, and projected future security affairs in Melanesia, providing guidance for U.S. policymakers on how to better integrate the region into the broader Indo-Pacific security architecture.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Integrating Melanesia—a region that comprises the Pacific Island countries of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu—into the Indo-Pacific security framework is necessary for U.S. security interests given the region’s positioning along strategic maritime passageways and role in connecting the U.S. and its regional allies. Four pillars should serve as the basis for developing this partnership: (1) respect for the autonomy of all partners, (2) partnerships built on a common vision and shared values, (3) system compatibility, and (4) resilience to external shocks. This vision confronts two primary obstacles. The first is coercive foreign activity in the region, especially given how recent People’s Republic of China (PRC) activity in Melanesia has constrained regional autonomy and threatened democratic stability. The second is the use of “light switch diplomacy” by the United States and its regional allies, which has damaged relations with Melanesian countries. To address these concerns, the U.S. and its allies should prioritize building stronger and more comprehensive partnerships through investment in local communities, Pacific media, economic connectivity, and compatible information and communications technology systems.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- While the PRC’s activity in Melanesia is not inherently problematic and some of its involvement could bring meaningful change to Pacific communities, this activity is concerning because it constrains regional autonomy and threatens democratic stability.
- In recent years, the U.S. and its allies have treated engagement with Melanesia like a light switch, turning it on and off to fit immediate political needs. This approach and the failure to invest in long-term partnerships has damaged their relations with Melanesian countries.
- Focused, concrete, and consistent action addressing both short-term and long-term needs is necessary to heal relations and influence the direction of regional security.

Since Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi’s marathon tour of the Pacific Islands in May 2022, the United States has begun to redirect its attention to Melanesia for the first time in decades. This attention and political momentum have created a unique opportunity for the United States to reassess its relationship with the region as a whole, lay the foundation for deeper partnerships, and incorporate Melanesia into its broader Indo-Pacific security architecture.

This essay will begin by outlining four pillars that should serve as the basis for developing this deeper partnership: respect for the autonomy of all partners, relationships built on a common vision and shared values, system compatibility, and resilience to external shocks. It will then discuss two primary obstacles to the vision. The first is an analysis of coercive foreign activity in the region, with a focus on the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The second is a discussion of how the use of “light switch diplomacy” by the United States and its regional allies damages relationships with Melanesian countries. The essay concludes by considering four policy options designed to serve as a starting point for developing stronger and more comprehensive partnerships.

The Vision for a Stronger U.S.-Melanesia Security Partnership

As the United States continues to develop its Indo-Pacific security posture, build enduring partnerships and relationships, and prepare for a range of future conflict scenarios, U.S. policymakers need to include Melanesian countries—Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu—in their theater planning and invest in people-centered relationships. Some Americans wonder why the United States should direct some of its limited resources to the South Pacific. From a U.S. defense and security perspective, Melanesian countries are located along major maritime passageways, play a key role in connecting the United States and its allies across the Pacific theater, and have an abundance of natural resources. Inviting the region into the broader Indo-Pacific security framework is therefore crucial for long-term security planning.

Successful integration of Melanesian countries into the regional security architecture and U.S. security planning will be based on four pillars: (1) respect for the autonomy of all partners, (2) partnerships built on a common vision and shared values, (3) system compatibility, and (4) resilience to external shocks.

Pillar 1: Respect for the Autonomy of All Partners

Colonial legacies and histories of exploitation show that external actors have not prioritized respect for partner autonomy in their engagement with the region. U.S. policymakers need to keep this in mind when designing and implementing policies in Melanesia. These legacies shape the contemporary lived experiences of Melanesian communities and can heavily influence perceptions of the United States and its allies. Failure to take this into account not only is unethical but also can cause engagement to backfire or further entrench colonial systems and injustices.

Autonomous partners are also more willing to work with one another in the long term if they trust that they will be treated as equals and that their rights and interests will be protected. This means protecting the autonomy of partner governments and domestic populations alike; security goals cannot steamroll local needs and wishes. This also means including all relevant stakeholders in regional security discussions. For example, if the AUKUS partnerships between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States were to expand or move in new directions,

Melanesian countries should be consulted and included in planning in a way they were not during the initial discussions.¹

Countries must be free to pursue their own policies, even if those actions sometimes conflict with partner goals. Coordination mechanisms must be included in the security architecture to account for these policy divergences and prevent them from derailing broader efforts. The ultimate goal, however, is vision alignment. The United States should not force regional states to align with its vision by restricting their autonomy.

Pillar 2: Partnerships Built on a Common Vision and Shared Values

Reliable partnerships with a common vision are a vital prerequisite to tackle the next generation of threats. Many of these threats—such as climate change, maritime security issues, and transnational crime—cannot be effectively addressed by a single country but require a unified regional approach.

Security partnerships allow the group to leverage each country’s comparative advantage and build a response that is stronger and more resilient than any country could achieve on its own. For example, the United States has a comparative advantage in military capabilities, whereas Fiji has a comparative advantage in location as a hub where many of the region’s consular services and international organizations are based. By expanding and deepening bilateral relations, the United States could use its military capabilities to contribute to Fijian efforts to patrol and secure the country’s waters. For example, Fiji’s National Ocean Policy outlines the need to develop coordination mechanisms between its various maritime organizations in the government and private sector to ensure full monitoring of its waters.² Additionally, recent outreach efforts by the Fiji police indicate that it is looking for external support to prosecute maritime threats in Fijian waters.³ U.S. resources could help fill this gap. Meanwhile, Fiji’s ability to congregate regional organizations and serve as a regional hub could serve as a force multiplier for U.S. investment and programs. Without the hub’s network effects, many programs would not be able to reach as large a number of people, and many cross-organization collaborative efforts would be lost.

When these comparative advantages are aligned with a common vision and merged into a security partnership, all parties to the partnership benefit from the expanded pool of resources and new capabilities. U.S. engagement with Melanesia must therefore revolve around a common vision and shared values if it hopes to engender buy-in and long-term commitment from its regional partners.

Pillar 3: System Compatibility

Regional security must be built on compatible systems. Conflict—especially kinetic, external conflict—requires quick and decisive action. Incompatible systems constrain the ability of regional partners to act together in the face of a crisis. Vital prerequisites for a flexible and effective crisis

¹ For further discussion on AUKUS and the reaction from the Pacific Islands, see Meg Keen, “AUKUS in the Pacific: Calm with Undercurrents,” Lowy Institute, Interpreter, March 20, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aukus-pacific-calm-undercurrents>; and Declan Brennan, “Pacific Responses to AUKUS a Mix of Unease and Understanding,” *Diplomat*, April 18, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/pacific-responses-to-aukus-a-mix-of-unease-and-understanding>.

² Republic of Fiji, *National Ocean Policy, 2020–2030* (Suva, May 2021), <https://library.sprep.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Fiji-National-Ocean-policy-2020-2030.pdf>.

³ “ISG Meet Fiji Police,” Fiji Police, April 5, 2022, <https://www.police.gov.fj/view/1827>.

response are economic connectivity, compatible trade and transportation logistics, interoperability in weapons systems, and technological compatibility.

Consider, for example, a scenario involving a kinetic, external conflict in the broader Pacific theater. Logistics interoperability and system compatibility are a basic prerequisite to effective participation. Melanesian countries, however, may choose to opt out of direct participation in such a conflict, but prebuilding system compatibility enables them to affirmatively choose their course of action and level of engagement. Incompatible systems would force the hand of Melanesian countries by limiting their ability to engage quickly and decisively. During a kinetic conflict, there is neither the time nor the resources to build interoperable trade hubs or invest in advanced communications networks. In other words, system interoperability gives Melanesian countries the option to participate, engage more actively in regional defense, and therefore be positioned to play a more active role in post-conflict decision-making.

Pillar 4: Resilience to External Shocks

U.S. partnerships in Melanesia need to be developed to make the region more resilient to external shocks. External shocks could include crises in other parts of the world that redirect significant levels of resources away from the South Pacific or even electoral changes in partner countries. Resilience to these events is vital. Regional security cannot be at the whim of a ballot box thousands of miles away, nor can regional instability in another part of the world cause systemic failure. Therefore, building resilient systems and “firebreaks” to prevent the spread of external crises in Melanesia is necessary to protect greater Indo-Pacific regional security.

In practice, this means that the United States should build relationships the hard way. Instead of conducting diplomacy via executive action—an approach that at times can be implemented more quickly but leaves vital relationships at the whim of White House sentiments—the United States needs to engage in relationship building through more durable mechanisms. This could involve formal security cooperation programs, formal agreements like the Compacts of Free Association, or other efforts that cannot be easily destroyed by a single administration.

Obstacles to a Strong Security Partnership

Coercive Foreign Activity

In recent years, the PRC has been increasingly conducting influence operations in Melanesian and other Pacific Island countries.⁴ Some observers argue that the PRC’s engagement in the region highlights its offensive, expansionist streak and is part of a global effort to rewrite the rules-based international order that the United States and its allies have championed since the end of World War II. Others point out that these actions are largely defensive; Beijing is simply acting to secure its territory and interests by building a network of supporters in its backyard as any power strives to do. At its core, such engagement with the region is not inherently problematic, and in some cases, it could bring meaningful and positive change to Pacific communities. The PRC’s recent

⁴ Damien Cave, “Why China Is Miles Ahead in a Pacific Race for Influence,” *New York Times*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/world/australia/china-united-states-pacific.html>; and Blake Johnson and Joshua Dunne, “Understanding China’s Efforts to Undermine Partnerships in the Pacific,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 7, 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/understanding-chinas-efforts-to-undermine-partnerships-in-the-pacific>.

activity, however, is concerning because it constrains regional autonomy and threatens democratic stability. Three examples highlight this trend.

The first example is the PRC's engagement with the region's media and journalist community. After the Australian government's inadvertent reduction of its Pacific media content through sharp funding cuts to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 2014 and the termination of Radio Australia's shortwave broadcasts to the Pacific in 2017, the PRC stepped in to fill this void.⁵ However, its growing media presence is not benign but is negatively altering the operating environment for journalists working in the region. Sue Ahearn, an Australian journalist who spent much of her career covering the Pacific Islands and is the founder of the Pacific Newsroom project, notes that "most Pacific media organisations are struggling financially, many journalists have lost their jobs and China is offering a way for them to survive—at the cost of media freedom."⁶ Beijing has swooped in to "court the media with money, junkets and propaganda" and has offered journalists "exchange programs, opportunities to study in China, tours and financial aid for their media outlets."⁷ These types of actions draw Pacific journalists closer into the PRC's orbit and enable Beijing to exert greater influence on the type and nature of reporting in the Pacific Islands.

Journalists and media producers who do not follow Beijing's directives often face harassment. For example, an Australian TV producer faced direct pushback, threats from Chinese embassy officials, and censorship attempts over the production of a *60 Minutes Australia* report on the PRC's debt-trap diplomacy in the Pacific.⁸ Similarly, the former media director at *Vanuatu Daily Post* faced extensive pressure and was ultimately barred from returning to Vanuatu after running a story on the Vanuatuan government's willingness to enforce Chinese law on its soil.⁹

This increasingly contentious media environment and the treatment of Pacific journalists caught the attention of the international community during Foreign Minister Wang Yi's May 2022 visit to the Pacific Islands. Wang and other PRC officials refused to take journalists' questions, removed journalists who asked nonapproved questions, and physically restricted many journalists from the international community from the few press conferences, as well as other events. Lice Movono, a Fijian journalist covering the visit, described the experience as unprecedented and emphasized how this type of media environment runs counter to regional norms and values.¹⁰ Part of a growing pattern, tension between PRC officials and the local media during the visit was notable for the attention it garnered in Western media, for the failure of many Pacific governments to stand up for their journalist community, and for the subsequent mimicking of such tactics at

⁵ Denghua Zhang and Amanda H.A. Watson, "China's Media Strategy in the Pacific," Australian National University Department of Public Affairs, 2020, https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2020-11/chinas_media_strategy_in_the_pacific_denghua_zhang_amanda_watson_department_of_pacific_affairs_in_brief_2020_29.pdf; and Ethan Meick, Michelle Ker, and Han May Chan, "China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Staff Research Report, June 14, 2018, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China-Pacific%20Islands%20Staff%20Report.pdf>.

⁶ Sue Ahearn, "How China Is Winning the Information War in the Pacific," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 17, 2022, <https://www.aspi.org.au/how-china-is-winning-the-information-war-in-the-pacific>.

⁷ Sue Ahearn, "How the Chinese Foreign Minister Shut Down Pacific Media," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 30, 2022, <https://www.aspi.org.au/how-the-chinese-foreign-minister-shut-down-pacific-media>; and Ahearn, "How China Is Winning the Information War in the Pacific."

⁸ Tara Francis Chan, "How China Tried to Shut Down Australian Media Coverage of Its Debt-Trap Diplomacy in the Pacific," *Business Insider*, July 21, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-china-censors-media-it-disagrees-with-australia-2018-6>.

⁹ Jemina Garrett, "China, Media Freedom in the Pacific, and the Great Australian Silence," Lowy Institute, Interpreter, November 20, 2019, <https://www.loyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/china-media-freedom-pacific-and-great-australian-silence>.

¹⁰ Lice Movono, a Pacific journalist, discusses her experience during Wang's visit in a webinar hosted by the *Diplomat*. See "What Do the Pacific Island Countries Think about China?" *Diplomat*, June 30, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/what-do-the-pacific-island-countries-think-about-china>. For more discussion on the media climate surrounding Wang's visit, see Kate Lyons, "Outcry as China Stops Pacific Journalists Questioning Wang Yi," *Guardian*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/31/outcry-as-china-stops-pacific-journalists-questioning-wang-yi>; and Ahearn, "How the Chinese Foreign Minister Shut Down Pacific Media."

a national level in some Pacific Island countries. Each of these incidents is damaging in and of itself, but when merged together, they paint a frightening picture for the future of press freedom, government accountability, and democratic stability in the Pacific Islands.

Beijing's active efforts to coerce and force foreign policy alignment provide a second example of the PRC's interference. In 2019, PRC officials successfully pressured Solomon Islands to switch diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing.¹¹ Beijing similarly pressured Fiji to close its representative office in Taiwan in 2017 and Papua New Guinea to downgrade its official relationship with Taiwan in 2018.¹² More recently, in March 2023, Sitiveni Rabuka, the prime minister of Fiji, planned to change the name of the country's trade mission with Taiwan and reinstate diplomatic privileges as part of an effort to signal the direction of his administration's foreign policy.¹³ But allegedly under pressure from Beijing, the Rabuka administration reversed the planned name change, showing once again how the PRC tries to force foreign policy alignment.¹⁴ Pacific Island countries are and should always be free to pursue their own foreign policy. However, this type of meddling, bribery, and coercion is dangerous, threatens democratic stability, and compromises regional autonomy.

The PRC's engagement in illegal, unregulated, and underreported (IUU) fishing constitutes a third troubling example. IUU fishing is detrimental to Pacific economies, the livelihoods of fishers, and the sustainability of Pacific fisheries. While IUU fishing happens in many parts of the world, Pacific Island countries are particularly vulnerable due to their geography, the threats posed by climate change, population growth, proximity to overfished regions, and lack of governance and maritime enforcement assets.¹⁵ Left unchecked, IUU fishing undermines global maritime governance, destabilizes Pacific communities, and enables Beijing to economically pressure local communities.

These three examples collectively illustrate how the PRC's recent engagement with Melanesia constrains regional autonomy, leaves Pacific communities more vulnerable to external shocks, increases societal fragility, and threatens regional stability. Moreover, from a U.S. security perspective, PRC influence operations have the potential to undermine security goals in the broader Indo-Pacific.

Weak or Uneven Relationships

Beyond the PRC's autonomy-constraining engagement with the region, weak or uneven relationships between Melanesia and the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and other regional powers threaten long-term regional security. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has reallocated South Pacific resources to other regions of the world and failed to address the needs of Melanesian and other Pacific partner countries, which it has taken for granted. This disinterest created the opportunity for more active PRC engagement in the region. The United States and

¹¹ Derek Grossman and Michael S. Chase, "What Does Beijing Want from the Pacific Islands?" RAND Corporation, December 9, 2019, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/12/what-does-beijing-want-from-the-pacific-islands.html>.

¹² Meick et al., "China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands."

¹³ "Republic of Fiji Government Reinstates Name of Taiwan's Overseas Mission and Diplomatic Privileges," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Taiwan), March 28, 2023, https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=1328&s=99990.

¹⁴ Lawrence Chung, "Taiwan Suffers Another Diplomatic Blow as Fiji Pulls the Plug on Representative Office's Name Change," *South China Morning Post*, June 22, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3225029/taiwan-suffers-another-diplomatic-blow-fiji-pulls-representative-offices-name-change>.

¹⁵ Mark Leahey, "Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated: Fishing in Oceania," Naval Postgraduate School, March 2022, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/AD1173427>; and Steven Lee Myers et al., "How China Targets the Global Fish Supply," *New York Times*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/09/26/world/asia/china-fishing-south-america.html>.

its partners, therefore, should not be surprised when Pacific Island governments accept resources from Beijing. No degree of preference for working with democratic systems will outweigh the need to provide for the basic needs of a country's people.

While Australia and New Zealand have remained more engaged with the Pacific Islands, they, too, have neglected to engage with Pacific governments and societies to the degree necessary to preserve long-term, reliable security partnerships.¹⁶ Engagement with the region cannot be like a light switch, turned on and off at the whim of foreign countries. If the United States and its allies want to maintain long-term partnerships with Melanesia and incorporate regional countries into the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific, they cannot afford to repeat these mistakes. Relationships matter. Countries can only take so many repeated hits before the costs of repair become prohibitive.

Policy Options for U.S. Action in Melanesia

The Biden administration acknowledges the need to re-engage with the region, and its existing response relies heavily on high-level diplomatic summits and sudden funding increases for preexisting programs.¹⁷ While these efforts are necessary to move the United States toward more focused and efficacious engagement with the region, they are insufficient to more tightly integrate Melanesia into the broader Indo-Pacific regional security architecture and build lasting partnerships.¹⁸

Instead, successful security integration must be predicated on a relationship of equals in which the needs of the Melanesian people are prioritized. U.S. policy must also downplay geostrategic competition during negotiations, as Pacific Island countries have explicitly expressed their desire to stay out of U.S.-PRC competition.¹⁹ Even if PRC engagement in Melanesia is what catalyzed the redirection of U.S. attention, investing in the region's long-term security will necessitate going beyond a Beijing focus and addressing regional needs to improve resilience. This may mean that Washington must pay short-term costs and pursue efforts without an explicit benefit for the United States to develop long-term relationships. The following discussion highlights four areas where greater engagement can meaningfully influence the direction of regional security and strengthen U.S. relations with the region.

¹⁶ For examples and discussion of Australian foreign policy failures and poor engagement with Pacific governments, see "Australia: Appalling Abuse, Neglect of Refugees on Nauru," Human Rights Watch, August 2, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/02/australia-appalling-abuse-neglect-refugees-nauru>; Matthew Doran, "Australia's Climate Change Stance Damaging Relationship with Pacific Islands, Former Kiribati President Warns," ABC News (Australia), August 18, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-19/australia-climate-change-inaction-damaging-pacific-relationship/11426390>; and Margaret Simons, "Penny Wong Wants Australia to Be More Than a Supporting Player," Foreign Policy, October 1, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/01/penny-wong-australia-foreign-policy/>. For examples and discussion of New Zealand, see Katie Scotcher, "Government Accused of Neglecting Pacific Partnerships as China's Influence Grows," Radio New Zealand, May 27, 2022, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/467941/government-accused-of-neglecting-pacific-partnerships-as-chinas-influence-grows>; and Ollie Neas, "Power Shifts: New Zealand Reconsiders Pacific Role as China's Influence Grows," *Guardian*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/01/power-shifts-new-zealand-reconsiders-pacific-role-as-chinas-influence-grows>.

¹⁷ "Roadmap for a 21st-Century U.S.-Pacific Island Partnership," White House, Fact Sheet, September 29, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/fact-sheet-roadmap-for-a-21st-century-u-s-pacific-island-partnership>; and "Enhancing the U.S.-Pacific Islands Partnership," White House, Fact Sheet, September 25, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/25/fact-sheet-enhancing-the-u-s-pacific-islands-partnership>.

¹⁸ Alec Dionne and Maggie Sparling, "A New U.S. Approach to the Pacific Island Countries," New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, October 13, 2022, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/u-s-foreign-policy/a-new-u-s-approach-to-the-pacific-island-countries>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Invest in Local Communities

First, the United States should invest in people's livelihoods, health, and education. Investment in regional security necessitates investment in the people it aims to protect because these same people will operationalize U.S.-Melanesian partnerships over the next few decades. There is, however, no way to short-circuit this process, and it will take time for the benefits of this approach to be seen.

This investment involves multiple components. One is education. There is a large youth bulge in Melanesia. In Solomon Islands, for example, 75% of the population is under the age of 35, and the region's education system is poorly equipped to handle it.²⁰ As a result, the United States should fund and support existing Pacific education efforts and establish study abroad and exchange programs to build deeper ties among the world's next generation of leaders.

The U.S. Department of Defense's International Military Education and Training (IMET) program can serve as a model for how these educational ties can strengthen the rapport between the United States and Melanesian countries. IMET provides a professional military education to students and military leaders from the United States' partners and allies around the world, training the next generation of leaders.²¹ Between 2000 and 2019, over 1 million international students participated in the program, including almost 4,000 current and former heads of state and many senior defense leaders.²² The United States should develop similar programs in the diplomatic, technological, and health fields, among other areas, to foster engagement.

Investment in people also involves the protection of their livelihoods. One key way to do this in the Pacific is to help combat IUU fishing, given the region's reliance on the fishing industry for economic growth and sustainment.²³ In Vanuatu, for example, fish and fish-related products account for over 60% of exports and form the basis for many people's livelihoods.²⁴

The United States already has avenues through which to address this problem. To highlight a few, the U.S. Agency for International Development's broad portfolio of climate change programming includes efforts to combat IUU fishing, and the U.S. Coast Guard has recently expanded its shiprider program to work with Pacific countries to protect their waters and counter illicit maritime activity.²⁵ The Department of Defense and other U.S. agencies should work through these existing channels to continue and expand efforts to counter IUU fishing in the region.

²⁰ Catherine Putz, "Aidan Craney: Youth in Fiji and Solomon Islands," *Diplomat*, May 17, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/aidan-craney-youth-in-fiji-and-solomon-islands>.

²¹ "International Military Education and Training (IMET)," U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, <https://www.dscs.mil/international-military-education-training-imet>; and "Foreign Military Training and DoD Engagement Activities of Interest, 2018–2019," U.S. Department of State, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/reports/foreign-military-training-and-dod-engagement-activities-of-interest-2018-2019>.

²² Charles Hooper, "On-the-Record Statement by Lt. Gen. Charles Hooper, Director, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, to the Media," U.S. Department of Defense, December 13, 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2040347/on-the-record-statement-by-lt-gen-charles-hooper-director-defense-security-coop>. For more background on the IMET program, see Stephen Watts et al., "Building Security in Africa: An Evaluation of U.S. Security Sector Assistance in Africa from the Cold War to the Present," RAND Corporation, 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2447.html; and Thomas Dyrenforth, "Building Enduring Partnerships in Africa: How the IMET Program Helps the United States Counter China in Africa," *Small Wars Journal*, July 10, 2020, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/building-enduring-partnerships-africa-how-imet-program-helps-united-states-counter-china>.

²³ For a more detailed assessment of one Pacific community's dependence on the fishing industry, see Natalie Fiertz et al., "CORVI Risk Profile: Tarawa, Kiribati," Stimson Center, August 4, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/corvi-risk-profile-tarawa-kiribati>.

²⁴ "What Does Vanuatu Export?" OEC World, 2020, https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/vut/all/show/2020.

²⁵ For examples of this Coast Guard activity, see Sara Muir, "U.S., Federated States of Micronesia Sign Expanded Shiprider Agreement," U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, October 14, 2022, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3189490/us-federated-states-of-micronesia-sign-expanded-shiprider-agreement>; and "Coast Guard Cutter Juniper Visits Suva, Fiji, Hosts Shipriders," United States Coast Guard News, Press Release, February 16, 2023, <https://www.news.uscg.mil/Press-Releases/Article/3301373/coast-guard-cutter-juniper-visits-suva-fiji-hosts-shipriders>.

The United States, for example, could expand the use of uncrewed aerial systems and uncrewed underwater vehicles in the region. Melanesian and Pacific Island countries have very large exclusive economic zones that are difficult to monitor with limited resources and many competing priorities. Uncrewed systems can serve as a force multiplier, allowing a limited number of maritime security personnel to patrol, protect, and secure regional waters. These systems can provide real-time information and monitoring to Melanesian officials, while the U.S. Navy can gain real-world training on novel systems and acclimate its service members to regional challenges. Other agencies can then work with Melanesian officials to expand capacity to capture, store, process, and act upon the data collected by these systems.

Investment in Pacific communities is needed in a host of other areas, including by developing strategies for climate change mitigation and adaptation and improving access to healthcare systems. What all these examples emphasize is that investment in people matters for long-term security and relationships. Military and security affairs cannot be separated from other issues of human security. When the United States fails to invest in the communities that a security strategy aims to protect, it greatly weakens both their long-term viability and their support for the partnership.

Invest in Pacific Media

Second, the United States should invest in Pacific media and contribute to efforts that build a thriving local journalist community. The combination of media digitization, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the global downturn in advertising has severely hurt the Pacific journalist community. Many Pacific Island countries have been left with only a handful of poorly paid reporters. Journalists constantly face pressure to transition to higher-paying communications jobs, and those who remain in the field are increasingly pressured to follow the narrative dictated by PRC embassies.²⁶

While a number of U.S. efforts designed to provide information and programming to audiences in the region exist, the United States needs to expand its engagement in the media space by investing in local capacity.²⁷ This may involve providing basic financial support for Pacific media outlets like the Melanesian News Network founded by Solomon Islands journalist Dorothy Wickham, but there are also many opportunities to provide training resources. Shailendra Singh, the head of journalism at the University of the South Pacific, writes that training is particularly necessary “simply because good journalists are more aware of and better able to safeguard media rights” and that “media research and development is an oft-overlooked pillar of media freedom.”²⁸ The United States can contribute to journalist training by providing funding and support to reinvigorate existing Australian media-training programs, facilitating a program to build partnerships between U.S. news organizations and Pacific media outlets, and expanding engagement at the academic level with the University of the South Pacific’s journalism program. Without investment

²⁶ Author’s interview with Sue Ahearn, July 6, 2022. See also Ahearn, “How the Chinese Foreign Minister Shut Down Pacific Media.”

²⁷ For more on existing U.S. media efforts in the region, see “Asia Pacific Media Hub,” U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/bureau-of-global-public-affairs/office-of-international-media-engagement/asia-pacific-media-hub>; and “Global Engagement Center,” U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/global-engagement-center>.

²⁸ Shailendra Singh, “China’s Creeping Influence on Pacific Media Freedom,” Asia and the Pacific Policy Society, July 12, 2022, <https://www.policyforum.net/chinas-creeping-influence-on-pacific-media-freedom>.

in a robust journalist community, it is hard to detect malign foreign influence, hold government leaders accountable, and protect Pacific democracy.

Invest in Economic Connectivity

Third, the United States should focus on building increased economic connectivity by strengthening regional trade and transportation logistics and protecting regional supply chains. Such investment may involve establishing a preferential market access program, akin to what the United States has pursued in Africa with the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, in which the United States gives the Pacific Islands preferential access to U.S. markets. The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act has largely been a successful program and plays a key role in building ties between the U.S. and various African economies.²⁹ Another option is to incorporate the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative into efforts to support Melanesian development of regional trade and logistics. These agencies can provide advice and guidance for Melanesian countries looking to develop and strengthen the regulatory and legal framework that governs their trade networks.

Protecting economic connections and logistics networks is necessary to secure Melanesia in the event of a crisis. Given that such networks cannot be developed quickly, the United States and its allies must begin laying the foundations early.

Invest in Compatible Information and Communications Technology Systems

Fourth, the United States should invest in system compatibility, particularly with respect to ICT infrastructure. Part of the global competition between the United States and the PRC is a competition over internet models, data governance, and the norms and values that surround the deployment of ICT systems. While the PRC's ICT development in Melanesia is not inherently problematic, it has the potential to create security vulnerabilities, reinforce anti-democratic norms and values, and threaten the sovereignty of Pacific Island countries.³⁰ The U.S. model, in contrast, provides a path for democracy-friendly ICT infrastructure, which is often attractive to Pacific Island countries, given their almost uniform status as democracies. Ensuring that Melanesia's ICT systems are compatible with those of the United States and its allies means that the United States must make a more concerted effort to invest in bringing broadband access to the region, establishing stronger cybersecurity measures there, and training Pacific Island decision-makers and ICT experts to develop the appropriate policy, legal, and regulatory frameworks for these systems.³¹

Democratically oriented and compatible ICT systems are essential to maintain the region's autonomy and control over information—especially as technology becomes an increasingly important and dominant aspect of societal stability and national security. Such systems are also

²⁹ Witney Schneidman and Zenia Lewis, "The African Growth and Opportunity Act: Looking Back, Looking Forward," Brookings Institution, June 5, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-african-growth-and-opportunity-act-agoa-looking-back-looking-forward/>; and Daniel F. Runde and Sundar R. Ramanujam, "Beyond 2025: The Future of the African Growth and Opportunity Act," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 4, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/beyond-2025-future-african-growth-and-opportunity-act>.

³⁰ Bryce Barros, Nathan Kohlenberg, and Etienne Soula, "China and the Digital Information Stack in the Global South," German Marshall Fund, Alliance for Securing Democracy, June 15, 2022, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/china-digital-stack>.

³¹ Alec Dionne and Maggie Sparling, "Countering Chinese Influence and Strengthening U.S.-Pacific Partnerships through Information Communications Technology Policies," New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, March 3, 2023, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/technology/countering-chinese-influence-and-strengthening-u-s-pacific-partnerships-through-information-communications-technology-policies>.

essential prerequisites for integrating Melanesia more effectively with the security architecture of the broader Indo-Pacific and laying the foundation for cooperation in the event of a crisis.

Conclusion

Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu are strategically located countries in the South Pacific. Given increasing tension in the international arena, the United States would benefit from integrating Melanesia into the existing regional security architecture and investing in enduring, long-term relationships. To advance these partnership-building efforts, the United States needs to make investments in the following areas:

- *Pacific communities.* Security policies are designed to serve local populations, from which will emerge the future leaders who will operationalize U.S.-Melanesian relations in the coming decades.
- *Pacific media.* A robust local media community is a vital prerequisite to democratic stability and government accountability, including by holding foreign actors accountable for their actions and engagement in the region.
- *Economic connectivity.* Building trade, logistics, and transportation networks takes time but is necessary to lay the foundation for economic relations. These connections are a key tool to facilitate Pacific economic growth.
- *Compatible ICT systems.* Investment in ICT systems is crucial for protecting the autonomy of Pacific Island countries over their information and networks, facilitating the deployment of democratically oriented technology systems, and having prebuilt compatible systems in the event of a crisis.

The path forward is neither quick nor easy and will require carefully executed diplomacy, but the United States should not shy away from this challenge. It is a vital aspect of pursuing a vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

THE NATIONAL BUREAU *of* ASIAN RESEARCH

NBR SPECIAL REPORT #110 | JULY 2024

Conclusion: Spearheading a Pathway for U.S. Presence in Melanesia

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The United States often refers to itself as a “Pacific nation” as a means of establishing commonality with the Pacific Islands. There is accuracy to this self-characterization, given the extensive history of U.S. military and diplomatic activity in the region since World War II. However, for many Pacific Islanders observing and interpreting U.S. presence, the heavy emphasis on geopolitics overshadows the significance of forming and sustaining Pacific relationships based on cultural and ideological understanding, as well as historical awareness of the legacy of Western colonization. Concerns about geopolitics and strategic competition, particularly in the subregion of Melanesia, have been amplified as China’s rising influence generated reactionary responses by the United States to gain strategic advantage. As was continuously highlighted during the NBR-sponsored Track 1.5 Pacific Islands Strategic Dialogue in Fiji, Melanesian countries are not interested in choosing sides and are concerned with the region becoming a contentious environment for strategic competition. The “friends to all, enemies to none” principle, which guides Melanesian foreign policy and acts as a mechanism for navigating geopolitical strife, could be threatened as this competition continues to intensify.¹ It is critical that the United States and other foreign powers operating in the region acknowledge this policy as a fundamental component of Melanesia’s political identity.

The essays in this report have identified a series of issues across the Melanesian landscape for the United States to be aware of when making policy decisions. Specifically, domestic development challenges, nation-state agency, differing perspectives on China, and Pacific Islands centrality, among others, are issues of importance to Melanesian scholars and practitioners, who conveyed this message to their U.S. counterparts over the course of the Pacific Islands Strategic Dialogue organized by the National Bureau of Asian Research in April 2023. Simultaneously, diversity across the South Pacific, and even within the subregion of Melanesia, requires the United States to establish a nuanced approach toward engagement with the region and the countries within it. At the dialogue, which informed the contributions to this report, U.S.-China competition and Melanesian strategic autonomy emerged as top security concerns for countries within the subregion.

Regional Perspectives and Realities

Melanesia has evolved into a contentious theater for U.S.-China competition within the Indo-Pacific region, as China’s diplomatic, political, economic, and military presence is perceived as threatening U.S. interests.² U.S. concerns have triggered increased U.S. government attention on engagement with Pacific Island countries, including the opening of embassies in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.³ The U.S. government has also re-established the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) mission in Fiji and elevated USAID presence in Papua New Guinea

¹ For further discussion, see the first report from this project: April A. Herlevi, ed., “Charting a New Course for the Pacific Islands: Strategic Pathways for U.S.-Micronesia Engagement,” National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report, March 2023, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/charting-a-new-course-for-the-pacific-islands-strategic-pathways-for-u-s-micronesia-engagement>.

² White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C., September 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pacific-Partnership-Strategy.pdf>.

³ “Enhancing the U.S.-Pacific Islands Partnership,” White House, Fact Sheet, September 25, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/25/fact-sheet-enhancing-the-u-s-pacific-islands-partnership>.

(PNG) to a country representative office.⁴ While these signals of the United States' commitment are welcome, Pacific Island leaders have expressed concerns that U.S. behavior triggered by competition with China will distract from efforts by the Pacific Islands Forum “to address its existing security priorities.”⁵ These priorities include addressing climate security, prioritizing human security, and monitoring illegal activities. As the United States continues to increase its activities in Melanesia, a comprehensive understanding of regional perspectives and priorities is critical for effective diplomacy and policy implementation.

Each Melanesian nation faces unique and varying internal security challenges. From ethnic-based conflict in PNG and political instability in Solomon Islands to development challenges across Fiji, each country faces unique challenges.⁶ Ilan Kiloe's essay highlights how experiences of internal conflict served as the foundation for the establishment of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). The MSG still serves as a major platform for collective action to address security concerns among member nations, but it does not necessarily have the capacity to address internal issues. Kiloe argues that successful partnerships require external actors that are able to develop a deeper understanding of Melanesian customs and diplomatic practices. While multinational organizations such as the MSG provide a platform for broader Melanesian engagement, external actors must also learn about each individual nation's domestic environment when considering how to engage.

Over the course of the strategic dialogue, Melanesian scholars and practitioners stressed that while each nation faces unique internal security challenges, nation-building and the establishment of political institutions amid decolonization are shared challenges across all countries. Patrick Kaiku and Vernon Gawi address weak institutional governance in PNG and a political culture that does not prioritize international affairs discourse to explain how those factors can, at times, lead to disjointed policy priorities between decision-makers and constituents in PNG. In the face of U.S.-China competition, Kaiku and Gawi suggest addressing internal challenges through several mechanisms, including the development of international relations and foreign affairs academic programs in Melanesian educational institutions, the promotion of early-career opportunities in the field of foreign policy, and student exchange programs in collaboration with foreign universities.

Focusing on Solomon Islands, Anna Powles describes how strategic competition offers benefits to individual countries and also generates unintended consequences. For example, Melanesian countries have welcomed security cooperation to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, but intensified strategic competition could overwhelm regional peace and security efforts. In Solomon Islands, specifically, the need for security assistance has resulted primarily in policing agreements. Yet, while the government has requested and agreed to these arrangements, external involvement in policing could exacerbate local security dynamics and increase societal tensions, thereby generating future potential flashpoints. Even if policy agreements do not exacerbate domestic tension, Solomon Islands has limited absorptive capacity and needs to be clear about which agreements help the country best meet its long-term goals.

⁴ Craig Hart, “Renewed U.S. Engagement in the Pacific: Assessing the Importance of the Pacific Islands,” testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, March 23, 2023, available at <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/congressional-testimony/mar-23-2023-renewed-us-engagement-pacific-assessing-importance-pacific-islands>.

⁵ Pacific Islands Forum, “Pacific Security Outlook Report 2022–2023,” 2022, <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Pacific-Security-Outlook-Report-2022-2023.pdf>.

⁶ For background on the conflict in PNG, see Ronald May “Papua New Guinea: Issues of External and Internal Security,” *Security Challenges* 8, no. 4 (2012): 47–60.

In contrast with the focus on internal security challenges highlighted by previous authors, William Waqavakatoga explores the utilization of narratives by Pacific Island countries to assert their agency amid an influx of engagements with external actors. Highlighting the importance of these narratives, especially in light of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, he echoes the need for external actors to align with regional perspectives rather than solely react to China. Critical steps for the United States include rebuilding trust in its relationships and aligning its climate change policies with Pacific narratives. Waqavakatoga also suggests how religion could be utilized as a diplomatic bridge between the United States and Pacific Island leaders. Overall, he stresses the importance of cultural and historical understanding in shaping foreign policy in the Pacific region, urging global powers to engage meaningfully with Pacific Island narratives and identities.

The State of U.S. Presence in Melanesia

In September 2022 the United States unveiled the Pacific Partnership Strategy, which is a roadmap for addressing regional priorities identified by Pacific Island nation leaders.⁷ Regional leaders have expressed a desire to engage with the United States outside the realm of competition with China,⁸ and this sentiment was repeatedly highlighted by Melanesian participants during the dialogue. Pacific Island leaders are reluctant to involve themselves in U.S.-China competition due to the “friends to all, enemies to none” principle; instead, each country welcomes relations with both the United States and China. Acknowledging these values provides the United States the opportunity to shift its narratives and develop a deeper understanding of the South Pacific region and a more nuanced approach to Melanesian engagement.

Focusing on engagement with Melanesia, Yan Bennett’s essay argues that U.S. foreign policy rhetoric may need to “right-size” the rhetoric on China to better adjust U.S. strategic messaging. China’s intentions have historically been diplomatic and economic, and while the country’s engagement has increasingly included security cooperation, these activities do not preclude the United States from achieving its foreign policy objectives. Bennett further articulates how the reframing of U.S. perceptions of China could coincide with the prioritization of U.S. diplomatic engagement via existing public programming in areas such as sustainable development and democratic resilience. Relying on already existing U.S. programs is a means to both restore Melanesian countries’ faith in U.S. engagement and establish a foundation for sustained partnership.

While acknowledging that China’s engagement with the region is “not inherently problematic,” Margaret Sparling argues that recent Chinese engagement in areas of media relations, foreign policy, and the maritime domain could constrain regional autonomy or threaten democratic stability. To counter such activities, she suggests that U.S. engagement with Melanesian countries focus on building partnerships, investing in educational programming and local media, and expanding economic connectivity, such as through compatible information and communications technology systems. U.S. policymakers could learn from some aspects of China’s engagement in the region by shifting approaches from security-centric cooperation to economic and diplomatic

⁷ White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States*.

⁸ Gordon Peake, “Six Months In: Where Does U.S.-Pacific Islands Strategy Stand?” United States Institute of Peace, April 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/six-months-where-does-us-pacific-islands-strategy-stand>.

initiatives. The United States could differentiate itself from China through democratic-based values and the promotion of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Policy Options

In terms of narratives, Pacific Island nations are not small, weak, isolated, or lacking in agency. The Blue Pacific narrative expressly counters these “disempowering narratives” by emphasizing alternative perspectives, regionalism, and collective action. It is incumbent on U.S. policymakers to understand Melanesian narratives without appropriating them. U.S. policy toward the Pacific should certainly be informed by regional narratives and acknowledge and appreciate them where appropriate. However, as the report from NBR’s first Pacific Islands Strategic Dialogue in May 2022 noted, “appreciating the concerns of Pacific Island country leaders is not simply agreeing with them or using their rhetoric.”⁹ One recent academic analysis shows how the Blue Pacific narrative serves as a way for “less materially powerful states” to influence external actors, but warns that there is also a danger that “strategic narratives may be appropriated by their target(s).”¹⁰ To avoid appropriation, while encouraging acknowledgment, the United States must actively coordinate with Pacific Island leaders in advance of major policy announcements. Doing so may require strategic patience from U.S. policymakers. But remaining committed to Pacific regionalism, which is conveyed as a central tenet of the Pacific Partnership Strategy, means effectively coordinating with the Pacific Islands Forum and consulting with regional countries to ensure policy alignment. Policy announcements should be delayed until proper consultation has occurred with the relevant Pacific partners.

Department of Defense resources, which remain the vast majority available for carrying out U.S. foreign policy, should be used to increase the capacity of the Partners in the Blue Pacific. However, those activities also need to be more effectively coordinated with Pacific regional organizations and individual countries. On several occasions in recent years, the announcement of a major diplomatic program came as a surprise to citizens, residents, and governments that likely should have been consulted. The Partners in the Blue Pacific could become a force multiplier and a coordination tool for external countries. Yet, if activities are not coordinated with Pacific Island and Melanesian partner nations, those programs will fail. Moreover, if the Partners in the Blue Pacific becomes more about external powers talking to one another without regard for the region’s interests, allegations of appropriation will have merit. The Partners in the Blue Pacific coordination mechanism could be useful if it is systematic and builds on the experience of local partners. But that will take presence, time, effort, consultation, and a long-term commitment to engagement with Melanesia and the broader Pacific Islands region.

In conclusion, NBR’s Pacific Islands Strategic Dialogue found that the diverse and unique challenges facing Melanesian nations require engagement by the United States. The U.S. government will also need to respect each Melanesian nation’s autonomy while pursuing mutually beneficial actions. As described in the 2023 report from this dialogue series, Pacific Island countries are not monolithic, and Melanesian perspectives should not be haphazardly lumped together when considering policy decisions. U.S. policymakers will need to tailor engagement plans and consider

⁹ Herlevi, “Charting a New Course for the Pacific Islands.”

¹⁰ Joanne Wallis, Maima Koro, and Corey O’Dwyer, “The ‘Blue Pacific’ Strategic Narrative: Rhetorical Action, Acceptance, Entrapment, and Appropriation?” *Pacific Review* 37, no. 4 (2024): 797–824.

areas where bilateral agreements may be more appropriate than a broader regional approach. To better understand Melanesian perspectives, U.S. policymakers must recognize that Melanesian countries view China as a development partner and would like to avoid entanglement in U.S. strategic competition with China. If U.S. engagement is centered solely on China, the message may not resonate with Melanesian leaders and thus could compromise prospects for productive and mutually beneficial partnerships. Finally, in recognition of Pacific Island perspectives and agency, proactive inclusion of Melanesian leaders at the early stages of U.S. Indo-Pacific planning and policymaking will reassure those partners of the United States' role as a collaborative partner rather than a potential threat to Melanesian strategic autonomy.



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