



**Influence of the People's
Republic of China in the
Pacific Islands**

Hugues Eudeline
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Abstract

Once again, the Pacific islands have become focal points for the major powers • The growing involvement of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the region and its ambition to gain a lasting foothold are shifting the geopolitical balance and challenging the “*Pax Americana*” that has endured in the Pacific in the wake of the Second World War and subsequent decolonisation. However, as the PRC is well aware, despite the strength of its weapons and in particular its navy, it is still not in a position to challenge the armed forces of the US and its allies and partners. Mastering the long-term approach, it has earmarked 2049 for the political objective of the “Chinese Dream” (中国梦) and 2035 for achieving the strategic target of having first-rate armed forces at its disposal. The PRC ploughs forward by exerting influence in all its forms on states and territories, gradually building a presence wherever it can, while never backing down. France and Taiwan are specifically singled out, the former because its territories are of strong geostrategic interest, the latter for both political domestic and geostrategic reasons. This report aims not only to understand the geopolitics of the Pacific islands and territories and the geostrategy of the United States and its allies for the region, but also to shed light on how China pursues its influence-building efforts, using Joseph Nye’s well-known *hard power* and *soft power* categories.

Geopolitics of the Pacific islands and territories • The Pacific is the world’s largest ocean. It encompasses many islands and atolls, mainly grouped into fourteen island states, two French “*collectivités d’outre-mer*” (overseas collectivities), Australia, New Zealand and states with ties to the United States. Some of these are micro-states that are very vulnerable to the PRC’s influence. France retains territorial possessions in the Pacific – New Caledonia, French Polynesia, the Wallis and Futuna Islands and Clipperton – making it a Pacific Rim state with more maritime space than any other state in the Pacific. As the only EU member state with an active presence in the area, France maintains a permanent military presence, albeit insufficient for the challenges it faces. Most of the islands north of the equator are under the authority of the United States of America, which has established a chain of major bases linking the North American continent to Japan via Hawaii and Guam.

The regional geostrategy of the United States and its allies • During the Second World War, the Japanese Empire and the United States carefully planned their offensives and identified the most appropriate locations to provide support to their forces as they moved forward. Their choices remain justified. Leaving aside states linked to the United States, the most likely states and territories to be targeted by China to establish bases are Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and New Caledonia and French Polynesia. In the wake of the Pacific War, the United States formed close military alliances with four Pacific Rim powers: Thailand, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Australia. The White House, which released its new Indo-Pacific strategy in February 2022, has also strengthened ties with Anglosphere countries and powers that feel threatened by the PRC. This led to Australia breaking off its confidence-building partnership with France in September 2021 and to a rethinking of the two nations’ strategic alliance. This places France in a dangerously isolated geostrategic position, given that the situation in New Caledonia is crucial for its Indo-Pacific agenda, but also for its geopolitical weight on the world stage.

China’s hard power in the Pacific • From a military perspective, China’s activities in the Pacific are limited. They focus mainly on humanitarian aid, observation and patrol work. This reflects the fact that China’s strategic priority is to break through the first chain of islands, including control of the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Beijing is not in a position to operate within, nor beyond, the second chain of islands. However, the frequent appearance of Chinese warships shows that Beijing is attaching increasing importance to high seas presence and training in the Pacific. Economically, China exerts its influence mainly by fostering asymmetrical relations, through the Belt and Road Initiative and by offering aid. The asymmetry between input costs and strategic profits means that China’s economic involvement in the region should not be underestimated.

Beijing's asymmetrical economic relations allow it to defend its "core interests". The Belt and Road Initiative and the aid granted have allowed it to gain a foothold in the Pacific.

China's soft power in the Pacific • In 2013, President Xi Jinping coined the phrase "telling China's story well" as a propaganda concept. By contributing aid and facilitating trade, China seeks to convey three main narratives in the Pacific: (1) China spearheads the community of common destiny for mankind, (2) China is a partner in the struggle against colonialism and (3) China is the protector of the Chinese diaspora. Beijing aspires to enhance its attractiveness and to pursue the "domination of minds" which it uses to shape a favourable security environment and to strengthen strategic coordination and mutual support with the Pacific islands. As a result, China currently has the support of many Pacific countries. They perceive Beijing as a partner that shares both their suffering and their joy, allowing the PRC to make significant diplomatic progress. This is illustrated by the gradual ousting of Taiwan from the diplomatic battlefield and the forging of a coalition against the interference of Western powers in the region.

Threat assessment, outlook and recommendations for action • China is interested in acquiring a strategic area east of the first line of islands demarcating the China Sea and the Sea of Japan. This would provide free access to the world's oceans, essential for the flow of the PRC's seaborne trade. However, its military power imbalance prevents China from directly confronting the US in the Pacific. The recent experience of war between Russia and Ukraine has also increased China's caution about retaking Taiwan by military means. Consequently, Beijing has been exercising a more subtle approach in terms of its activities in the Pacific. In the face of US dominance, China's record in the hard power realm is limited (although this is beginning to change), but Beijing has directed its vast resources (military and economic) to the soft power realm, and its efforts have now yielded increasing gains, thus bolstering China's future dominance in the region. Against this background, the conclusion proposes ten recommendations (three for all countries who give importance to liberty, three for France and four for Taiwan) to tackle China's strategy.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 • **Work towards building an alliance of military powers bordering the Indo-Pacific and sharing the universal values of freedom, rule of law and democracy**

Recommendation 2 • **Be prepared to wipe out China's seven illegally reclaimed shoals in the Spratly Archipelago at the outset of any potential conflict**

Recommendation 3 • **Be in a position to put a stranglehold on China's maritime approaches**

Recommendation 4 • **Counter China's influence by working to strengthen the cohesion of the people of New Caledonia in the fold of the French Republic**

Recommendation 5 • **Deploy French air and naval assets capable of delivering State action at sea and carrying out high-intensity operations in the Pacific**

Recommendation 6 • **Despite the wariness stemming from the "Australian submarine affair", a strong alliance must be forged with the major Indo-Pacific powers in the face of rising Chinese power**

Recommendation 7 • **Increase Taiwan's engagement in regional security cooperation mechanisms**

Recommendation 8 • **Establish a new high-tech supply chain between Taiwan and France**

Recommendation 9 • **Promote Taiwanese culture and values**

Recommendation 10 • **Strengthen the bond with Austronesia**

Introduction

The Pacific islands mainly located in the southern hemisphere have once again become focal points for the major powers. The growing involvement of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the region and its ambition to gain a lasting foothold are shifting the geopolitical balance and challenging the “*Pax Americana*” that has endured in the Pacific in the wake of the Second World War and subsequent decolonisation.

The region forms part of the Indo-Pacific, long regarded by the United States as vital to its security and prosperity (1). It witnessed the battles between the Japanese Empire and the United States and their allies and partners during the Pacific War from 1941 to 1945. Some of these islands were vital in supporting the huge naval, land and air forces that engaged in combat. Relatively few of these islands are suitable for this purpose, but the CPR is likely to use them as advance bases in the future. Several, like Guam, still harbour major US military facilities, in addition to the large bases located mainly in Japan. The tripartite security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS), signed to France's detriment in 2021, is expected to allow Australia to acquire nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) better suited to a possible conflict with the PRC. It will shortly open two bases to accommodate the fleets, one on the east coast for its planned acquisitions, the other on the west coast to be used by the British and American navies.

France, thanks to its overseas territories, is a major resident power in the area. It was the first European country to implement an Indo-Pacific strategy. Unlike the Anglo-Saxon countries, who are gearing up for a war in the short or medium term, it wants to be a “balancing power” despite the prevailing polarisation. France's ambition is to pursue a strategy based on defence cooperation, strengthening its bilateral partnerships and investing in regional organisations (2).

Despite objections from other bordering countries and in contradiction to the UN Law of the Sea, China is positioned to exercise absolute control over the adjacent seas (South China Sea, East China Sea and Yellow Sea). To secure its trade expansion policy, it is seeking to cross the first line of islands demarcating those seas. This is also absolutely crucial for the unlimited deployment of its oceanic deterrent force. To achieve these two imperatives, it needs an ever-expanding strategic presence in the Pacific Ocean. This would give the PRC unrestricted access to the world's oceans, especially to the Arctic sea routes to Europe, and thus enable it to harness the opportunities of global warming. However, this will require breaking the stranglehold on its maritime approaches by taking control of the key to the sea, Taiwan, by force if necessary. It must also have a logistics chain in the Pacific comprising civilian ports controlled by Chinese companies and equipped to carry out dual activities (civilian and military). Finally, in order to protect its seaways and deploy its military power, the PRC must have large and well-placed forward bases, such as Djibouti in the Indian Ocean.

This requirement would gradually appear to be put into practice. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said on 19 April 2022 that the foreign ministers of China and the Solomon Islands had recently signed a formal framework agreement on security cooperation, without providing details of the final version of the agreement which had been leaked beforehand (in March 2022). Depending on its own needs and with the consent of the Solomon Islands, China could make port calls with its vessels in the Solomon Islands and take on logistical supplies. Although the China-Solomon Islands security agreement provoked strong opposition from countries such as the United States and Australia, the pressure exerted by Australia failed to halt the agreement.

(1) White House (2022). President Joe Biden's remarks at the Quad Leaders Summit on September 24, 2021, which headline the document, leave no doubt about the significance of this theatre: “*The future of each of our nations –and indeed the world– depends on a free and open Indo-Pacific enduring and flourishing in the decades ahead*”.

(2) Cf. Amadou, Aude and Herbillon, Michel (2012).

However, as the PRC is well aware, despite the strength of its weapons and in particular its navy, it is still not in a position to challenge the armies of the US and its allies and partners. Mastering the long-term approach, it has earmarked 2049 for the political objective of the “Chinese Dream” (中国梦) and 2035 for achieving the strategic target of having first-rate armed forces at its disposal. True to its salami slicing strategy, the PRC is progressing slowly, step by step, to achieve meaningful progress cumulatively without the risk of being confronted by overwhelming forces.

The PRC ploughs forward by exerting influence in all its forms on states and territories, gradually building a presence wherever it can, while never backing down. In addition to the most vulnerable territories (see below), France and Taiwan are particularly targeted, one because it is a former colonial power whose territories are of strong geostrategic interest, the other for both domestic political and geostrategic reasons (see above).

French territories are targeted by tapping into minority pro-independence sentiments, pandering to the egos of leaders or promising economic incentives. France is primarily concerned with developments in its overseas territories. For example, Chinese influence in French Polynesia has intensified since Beijing opened its consulate in Papeete in 2007. A number of Chinese political and economic figures have been awarded French Polynesia's highest honour, the Order of Tahiti Nui (Table 1). In a report jointly submitted by French intelligence agencies in July 2020, China was accused of deliberately diverting donated medical supplies to favour “their French friends” throughout the country, including in French Polynesia (1). As for the proposed giant Chinese aquaculture farm in Hao, French Polynesia (2), French President Emmanuel Macron considered that “this project has no proven job opportunities, has dubious investors and has raised many questions about the nature of its financing” (3). In his address in Papeete on 28 July 2021, Macron explicitly declared: “This is Polynesia! But we are in France! And you will be protected” (4). This can be seen as an allusion to Beijing and France’s determination to firmly defend French Polynesia’s sovereignty.

Taiwan is regularly reminded of the threat of military intervention. At the same time, the PRC is actively engaged in isolating Taipei. Given that mutual diplomatic recognition between the Republic of China (ROC) and the Pacific islands infringes on the “one China principle”, and thus the integrity of Chinese sovereign

Table 1 • List of recipients of the Order of Tahiti Nui (French Polynesia)

Date	Recipient	Position at time of award	Grade
03.04.2001	Jiang Zemin	President of the People’s Republic of China	Grand Cross
03.04.2001	Wu Jianmin	Chinese Ambassador in Paris	Commander
10.10.2013	Li Xiaolin	Chair of the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries	Commander
27.06.2014	Wang Jian	CEO of Hainan Airlines in China	Commander
29.05.2018	Wang Cheng	President of Tahiti Nui Océan Foods	Commander
26.10.2020	Shen Zhiliang	Consul of the People’s Republic of China in Papeete	Commander

Source • Ordre de Tahiti Nui, [liste of holders](#)

(1) Mélanie Thomas, “Le traitement de faveur des ‘amis français de la Chine’ face au Covid-19”, *Le Monde*, July, 6 2020, [available here](#).

(2) Hao is the fourth largest atoll in Polynesia. With an air strip of 3,460 metres, it was, until 2000, the headquarters of the Pacific Nuclear Experimentation Centre.

(3) Christophe Marquand, “Emmanuel Macron enterre la ferme aquacole de Hao mais y implante le RSMA”, *France Info*, July, 28 2021, [available here](#).

(4) “Address by President Emmanuel Macron from Papeete”, July 28, 2021, [available here](#).

Beijing seeks to reverse these countries' diplomatic choices in a number of ways (1). Oceania is an area of fierce competition between Beijing and Taipei and many countries have repeatedly shifted their diplomatic allegiances (Table 2). Since the Tsai Ing-wen government came to power in 2016, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati have successively severed diplomatic relations with the ROC. As Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen pointed out: *"Over the past few years, China has continually used financial and political pressure to suppress Taiwan's international space"* (2); Taipei is facing a new wave of total oppression from Beijing.

As a result, many countries are concerned about China's activities in Pacific island countries. This note therefore consists of four parts. The first looks at the geopolitics of the Pacific islands and territories. The second analyses the geostrategy of the United States and its allies for the region, based on the lessons that can be drawn from the Second World War. Then, this study uses Joseph Nye's notions of *hard power* and *soft power* to analyse how China's influence is being shaped in the Pacific region (3). The third section examines China's hard power, which focuses on the command and coercion aspects of power. In the fourth part, the soft power aspect is broken down, focusing on the attractiveness of China's strength. After exploring the range of influences employed by the PRC to gain a lasting foothold in the region using the specificities of individual countries, a conclusion summarises the lessons that can be gleaned from this work and proposes actions for all democratic allies, France and Taiwan.

Table 2 • **Changes in the diplomatic recognition of Pacific island countries (4)**

Country	First change	Second change	Third change
Fiji	<i>05.11.1975</i>		
Samoa	29.05.1972	<i>06.11.1975</i>	
Papua New Guinea	<i>12.10.1976</i>	05.07.1999	<i>21.07.1999</i>
Vanuatu	<i>26.03.1982</i>	03.11.2004	<i>11.11.2004</i>
Micronesia	<i>11.09.1989</i>		
Cook Islands	<i>25.07.1989</i>		
Tonga	10.04.1972	<i>02.11.1998</i>	
Niue	<i>12.12.2007</i>		
Solomon Islands	24.03.1983	<i>21.09.2019</i>	
Kiribati	<i>25.06.1980</i>	07.11.2003	<i>27.09.2019</i>
Tuvalu	19.09.1979		
Nauru	04.05.1980	<i>21.07.2002</i>	14.05.2005
Palau	29.12.1999		
Marshall Islands	<i>16.11.1990</i>	20.11.1998	

Source • Public information compiled by the authors

(1) Given the complexities in using the term "China" in various contexts and for the sake of convenience, China refers to the People's Republic of China in this text unless otherwise specified.

(2) "President Tsai's statement on termination of diplomatic relations with Solomon Islands", Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan), September 16, 2019, [available here](#).

(3) It should be noted that countries' actions are often a combination of soft power and hard power. As Nye pointed out, the relationship between soft power and hard power is like a continuous spectrum, and there are often many indistinct grey areas in the middle of the spectrum. This means that the Chinese activities mentioned in this study may also have both hard power and soft power implications. See Nye, Joseph S. (2021).

(4) The table reads as follows: dates in blue represent the establishment of diplomatic relations with ROC, dates in red and italics represent the establishment of diplomatic relations with the PRC.

First part.

Geopolitics of the Pacific islands

The theatre covered by this study encompasses all the islands located to the east of the “first line of islands” (**Figure 1**). The Pacific Island States are scattered over a vast expanse of ocean and are organised into three sub-regions: Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. There are fourteen island states, two French “overseas collectivities”, Australia, New Zealand and states with US ties (**Table 3**).

Pacific Island States: overview

Some Pacific island states, such as Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Fiji, are relatively large and have rich natural resources; others are tiny, located on low-lying coral atolls, with limited economic prospects and high vulnerability to the effects of climate change and rising sea levels.

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) is the region’s primary political and economic organisation. It has 18 members, including 14 Pacific island states, two French “overseas collectivities”, Australia and New Zealand. It was created in 1971 against France to address political issues, including decolonisation and the issue of nuclear testing, which no other organisation in the area was tackling. In September 2018, the leaders of all Member

Figure 1 • Map of the Pacific Islands in 2022

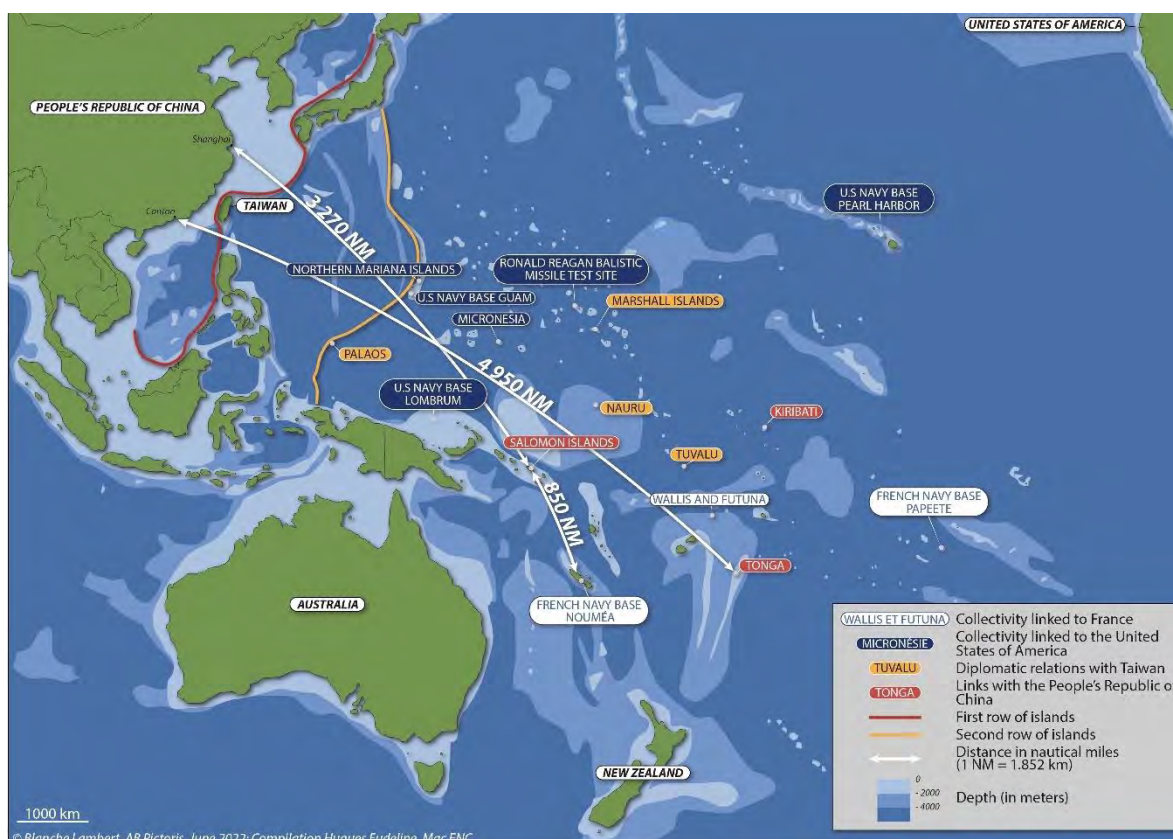


Table 3 • Presentation of the South Pacific States

Country	Archipelago	Capital	Regime	Population	Area (km ²)	Foreign policy
Fiji	Melanesia	Suva	Republic	903,000	18,272	
Kiribati	Micronesia	Bairiki	Republic	121,000	726	Recognises the PRC since 2019
Marshall (Republic of the Marshall Islands, RMI)	Micronesia	Delap-Uliga-Darrit (Majuro)	Republic	60,000	181	States freely associated with the US Recognise Taiwan
Micronesia (Federated States of Micronesia, FSM)	Micronesia	Palikir	Federal Republic	116,000	702	States freely associated with the US
Nauru	Micronesia	Yaren	Republic	11,000	21	Recognises Taiwan
Palau (Republic of Palau)	Micronesia	Melekeok	Republic (federation of 16 states)	18,000	459	States freely associated with the US Recognise Taiwan
Papua New Guinea (PNG)	Melanesia	Port Moresby	Constitutional monarchy	9,119,000	462,840	
Solomon (Islands)	Melanesia	Honiara	Parliamentary monarchy	704,000	28,896	Recognises the PRC since 2019
Samoa (Islands)	Polynesia	Apia	Parliamentary democracy	200,000	2842	
Tonga (Islands)	Polynesia	Nuku'alofa	Constitutional monarchy	107,000	747	
Tuvalu	Polynesia	Funafuti	Constitutional monarchy	12,000	26	Recognises Taiwan
Vanuatu	Melanesia	Port Vila	Republic	314,000	12,189	
Northern Mariana Islands	Micronesia	Garapan	Unincorporated organized territory of the United States	58,000	457	United States
Guam	Micronesia	Hagatna	Unincorporated organized territory of the United States	170000	541	United States
American Samoas	Polynesia	Pago Pago	Unincorporated and unorganized territory of the United States United States	55,000	199	United States
New Caledonia	Melanesia	Nouméa	<i>Sui generis</i> community	288,000	19,100	Shared sovereignty
French Polynesia	Polynesia	Papeete	French overseas collectivity	282000	3687	France
Wallis and Futuna	Polynesia	Matu-Utu	French overseas collectivity	11,000	142	France
Pitcairn Islands		Adamstown	British Overseas Territory in the Pacific Ocean	47	47	United Kingdom
Niue	Polynesia	Alafi	Free Association Agreement with New Zealand	2,000	260	Own foreign policy
Cook Islands	Polynesia	Avarua	Parliamentary monarchy State associated with New Zealand	18,000	236	Independent foreign policy
Tokelau	Polynesia		Parliamentary constitutional monarchy	1,000	12	Territory of New Zealand

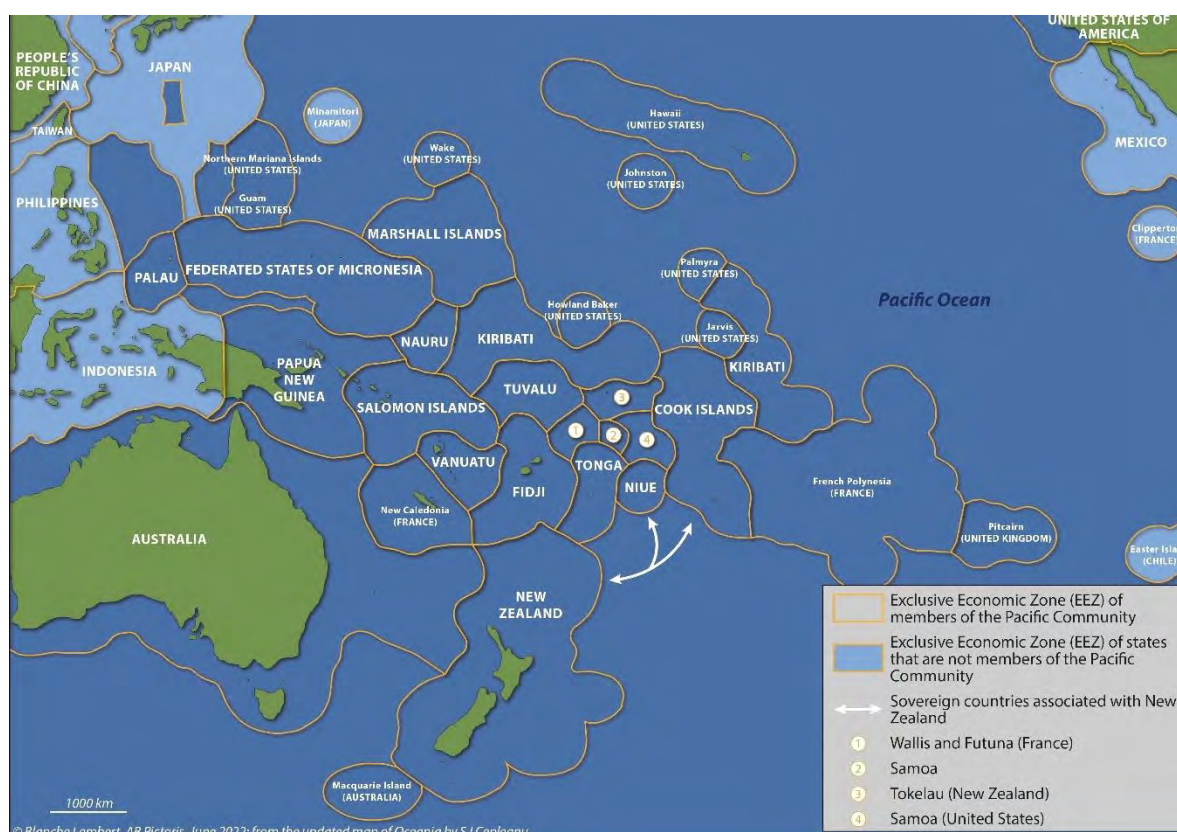
Source : *Pocketbook of World Statistics*, Series V No. 45, United Nations

States signed the Boe Declaration on Regional Security ⁽¹⁾, setting out the organisations vision and values in the preamble. The regional vision is one of “*peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy and productive lives*”. In February 2021, following a leadership clash, the five countries of the Micronesian sub-region announced their withdrawal from the organisation. Tensions within the PIF could be challenging for regional cooperation.

The Pacific Community (SPC)

The Pacific Community (SPC) is an international development organisation governed by 27 members; including 22 Pacific island countries and territories. The organisation has its headquarters in Noumea, New Caledonia ^(Figure 2). It mainly delivers technical and scientific advice and serves as a channel for funding development projects from donor countries. The SPC does not address military or security issues. The members are: American Samoa, Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, France, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Islands, Samoa, Tokelau Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, United Kingdom (returning in 2021), United States, Vanuatu, Wallis and Futuna.

Figure 2 • Map of the Pacific Community (April 2012)



⁽¹⁾ "Boe Declaration on Regional Security", Pacific Island Forum, [available here](#).

Non-self-governing territories

Under Chapter XI of the Charter of the United Nations, non-self-governing territories are defined as “*territories whose people have not yet attained a full measure of self-government*” (1). In the Pacific, these are: American Samoa (USA); Guam (USA); French Polynesia (France); New Caledonia (France); Pitcairn (UK); Tokelau (New Zealand). In addition to these territories listed by the UN, part of Papua New Guinea is seeking secession. In the 2019 non-binding referendum, 98% of the people of Bougainville Island in PNG voted for independence. The governments of Bougainville and PNG are negotiating a roadmap for accession. This roadmap must be approved by the PNG parliament.

Presence of the United States of America

For many years, the United States has played a major economic and strategic role in the Micronesian sub-region, which primarily includes:

- two US territories: Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands;
- the Freely Associated States (FAS) (Republic of the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Republic of Palau) which have special economic and security ties with the United States;
- The territory of American Samoa is located in the Polynesian sub-region.

The United States has significant military capabilities based in the Pacific. Their Indo-Pacific Command, based in Hawaii, includes Oceania in its sphere of operations. The United States has air and naval bases in Guam and an intercontinental ballistic missile test site on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands (Ronald Reagan Missile Test Site), which also conducts space surveillance missions. Radar systems are currently being installed in Palau. The US has military ties with Fiji, PNG and Tonga, the only Pacific island countries with regular military forces. The US Department of State and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) provide assistance to the Pacific Islands region focusing on disaster prevention and response, climate resilience and environmental protection, government and civil society, digital connectivity, fisheries, energy and health. In 2018, the United States announced the Papua New Guinea Electrification Partnership, a collaborative effort with Australia, Japan, and New Zealand, dedicated to expanding the country's power supply and distribution infrastructure. A new regional programme for the Pacific Islands was launched by the State Department in 2019 as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy.

The Freely Associated States (FAS)

Three sovereign Pacific island states –the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) and the Republic of Palau– have signed bilateral Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreements with the US (2). They receive economic aid and allow the US to operate military bases on their soil, with the prerogative to make decisions in the interests of mutual security. The United States and the FAS are currently negotiating the extension of economic assistance under the free association agreements. The compacts are

(1) List of “non-self-governing territories”, United Nations, [available here](#).

(2) Lum, Thomas (2020).

set to expire in 2023 for the Marshall Islands and Micronesia and in 2024 for Palau, while the provisions on defence, security and immigration are to be maintained. The main provisions of the compacts are as follows:

- the United States is obliged to defend the FAS against any attack or threat of attack. The US can block FAS government policies that it judges incompatible with its duty to defend them (the “defence veto”);
- the United States has the prerogative to deny strategic use or military access to the FAS by third countries (the “strategic right of refusal”);
- the United States is entitled to establish military facilities in the FAS;
- FAS citizens have the right to reside and work in the United States and its territories as legal non-immigrants or “habitual residents”;
- FAS citizens can volunteer to serve in the US armed forces.

The US military has access to the islands under the agreement, although it does not have any permanently stationed troops there. On 4 September 2020, Palau asked the United States to build military facilities on its territory, and to subsequently make regular use of them. Some US policymakers have expressed support for continued economic assistance to the FAS because of their ongoing economic dependence, historical US obligations and the perceived need to thwart China’s growing influence in the region. However, the PRC’s involvement in the FAS is relatively limited due to the US economic and security presence in the Compact states and the absence of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the Marshall Islands and Palau (1).

French presence

France has a presence in Melanesia and Polynesia, and has held on to territorial possessions there –New Caledonia, French Polynesia and the Wallis and Futuna Islands– consolidating its presence in the Pacific. It is the only EU Member State with an active engagement in the area, including a permanent military presence of over 7,000 men and women.

French Polynesia is an overseas collectivity with extended autonomous status, including its own institutional structure (President, Government, Legislative Assembly). It also has specific relations with the PRC, without necessarily involving the French state (2). New Caledonia is administered as a *sui generis* French collectivity. It boasts the world’s second largest nickel reserves (3). Lastly, for the past thirty years, tension and violence has split loyalists and separatists into two numerically similar factions. A document outlining France’s strategy in the Indo-Pacific succinctly explains the situation as follows: “Under the 1998 Nouméa Accord, on 12 December 2021, a third referendum was held on the question of New Caledonian independence. After the referendums of 4 November 2018 and 4 October 2020, the people of New Caledonia once again voted no to full sovereignty and independence. Pursuant to commitments made on 1 June 2021, an eighteen-month transition period began after the third round of consultations to build a common project for New Caledonia and to consolidate its place in the Indo-Pacific region” (4).

(1) *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

(2) Paco Milhet, “Géopolitique de l’outre-mer. Quelle concurrence France/Chine en Polynésie française?”, Diploweb, November 14, 2021, [available here](#).

(3) Melissa Garside, “Major countries in worldwide nickel mine production in 2021”, Statista, March 8, 2022, [available here](#).

(4) Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Europe (2022), p. 17.

France and the three French Pacific communities are members of SPC (see above) and SPREP (1). Since 2016, New Caledonia and French Polynesia are also full members of the PIF. Membership of these organisations anchors France's political legitimacy in the region, fosters the integration of its overseas territories and allows it to promote its interests on a regional scale (2). With an area of 10,911,823 km², France has the second largest maritime area in the world (3), more than 63% of which is located in the Pacific, mainly around French Polynesia. It has the largest area of maritime space in the Pacific than any other ocean state. Combining inland waters, territorial seas, exclusive economic zones and continental shelves beyond 200 miles, France's maritime area covers 6,932,677 km², which are broken down into:

- New Caledonia: 1,440,161 km²;
- Wallis and Futuna: 262,465 km²;
- French Polynesia: 4,793,620 km²;
- Clipperton Island: 262,465 km² (4).

(1) SPC's Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), which specialises in environmental matter.

(2) Amadou, Aude and Herbillon, Michel (2012), pp. 80-82.

(3) Inland waters, territorial seas, exclusive economic zones and continental shelves beyond 200 miles combined.

(4) These data are available on the French government's website "Limites maritimes", [available here](#).

Second part.

**The regional geostrategy of the
United States with its allies and partners**

Lessons from the Second World War

“Infantry wins battles, logistics wins wars.”

General John J. Pershing

Despite the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, there are relatively few locations for naval and air logistics bases capable of supporting fleets on the scale of those of China and the United States (1). There are valuable lessons to be drawn from the choices made during the Pacific War (1941-1945) by two adversaries, boasting the largest naval forces of the time and sitting on either side of this immense ocean. Whether during the Second World War or in future clashes with the PRC, the situations are comparable. The adversary of the United States is an Asian state with the second largest armed forces in the world; subject to a trade embargo, it seeks to expand its sphere of influence –limited to the Pacific in the context of this study– and must have advanced logistical bases for this. The theatre of operations is similar. The vastness of the ocean renders the distance between Japan and the Chinese coast negligible, and the main bases potentially usable by China’s navy are as far away as the distance to Japan.

However, the similarity of these situations is limited, especially in terms of alliances. The Empire of Japan had no allies in these longitudes; although it did control Formosa (Taiwan), Korea and a significant part of China. Today, the PRC does not control Japan, South Korea or Taiwan. On the other hand, it may be able to “command” the South China Sea, where it claims more than two-thirds of the area. It has forward bases in the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos and a significant contingent of naval forces (Coast Guard, Maritime Militia and Navy).

In both cases, the United States’ allies were Australia and New Zealand, as well as Western European states with a limited presence in the current Indo-Pacific theatre, with the notable exception of France. Its allies also include Japan and South Korea, two countries whose military power is far from negligible, but which are separated by historical differences that could constrain their combined effectiveness in the event of a high-intensity conflict. Last but not least, we should not overlook the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan), a thorn in the side of the colossus that is the PRC, but whose forces, far inferior in number and means, will probably be entirely devoted to defending the coasts to ward off any attempts to take control of Taiwanese territory, a threat repeatedly uttered by Beijing. The fall of the ROC, unlikely in the short term, would allow the PRC to cross the first line of islands and grant its naval forces access to the open seas. This would be of particular value for its submarine fleets, which could dive as soon as they leave the harbours, as the seas of the island’s eastern coast are especially rough.

The comparative similarity of forces and alliances, as well as the identical nature of the potential theatre of operations, makes the lessons drawn from a geostrategic analysis of Japan's choice of forward bases equally relevant today.

It is also instructive to examine how the Americans planned their operations. Dubbed “War Plan Orange”, this joint plan had been brewing since 1926 in anticipation of a seemingly inevitable conflict between the Empire of Japan (codenamed “Orange”) and the United States (“Blue”). It was kept up to date and constantly evolved until the end of the war in 1945 (2). It is particularly interesting in that it determines the choice of bases needed

(1) In the context of this note, we consider that, as happened in the Second World War, neither Australia nor New Zealand are threatened by a PRC takeover and have therefore restricted the study to the South Pacific Islands only.

(2) Miller, Edward S. (1991).

give effective support to the US attack (1). Regardless of whether they were actually implemented or simply accepted as plausible scenarios by the United States or Japan, these plans identify the best options still available to warring parties in the Pacific Ocean today.

How these sites are secured –peacefully or through combat– does not detract from their strategic importance. However, the value of a pre-existing peacetime foothold in a theatre of operations allows for the early and rapid establishment of bridgeheads capable of rapidly receiving advance elements at the outset of hostilities. As for the expansion of the fledgling base and the construction of infrastructure capable of sustaining large numbers of deployed forces, both the United States during the Second World War and the Cold War and China with the infilling of shoals in the Spratly Archipelago have shown their ability to excel in speed and sheer scale.

Before the start of hostilities, or early in the conflict, the American armies had set up a number of scattered outposts that grew rapidly and almost anarchically, with no connection to War Plan Orange. There were US Navy bases in the Aleutians (Samoa and four atolls); US Army Air Force (USAAF) runways on Christmas Island, Canton, Fiji and New Caledonia; other bases were envisaged in the 'far-flung' Gilbert, New Hebrides, Solomons and Bismark islands –each of which required the fleet's protection, thus straining its offensive power.

During the conflict, the list of naval bases with sufficient capacity to accommodate, maintain and supply large fleets was curtailed. Some were used alternately by both sides. These are:

- Oahu, Hawaii, is part of the United States of America. It is home to Pearl Harbour, the largest US naval base in the Pacific in 1941. Two major military airfields, Wheeler and Hickham Field, are also located there. The attack on the island on 7 December 1941 marked the beginning of the Pacific War, but after the Japanese defeat at Midway, it was never threatened again.
- Until the 1939 version of War Plan Orange, Wotje Atoll was supposed to be the first of a chain of island bases. The others being Kwajalein and Eniwetok. Guam was to become the "Main Western Dockyard". Ulithi and Palau were to be used as forward bases.
- Majuro: The Americans established an air and naval base there which was used for the duration of the war.
- The great atoll of Truk was regarded as Japan's most formidable stronghold in the Pacific. The Japanese Civil Engineering Department and the Naval Construction Department had built roads, trenches, bunkers and caves on the various islands. During the course of the war, five airstrips, seaplane bases, a torpedo boat base, submarine repair shops, a signal centre and a radar station were built.
- Guam became the "Main Western Dockyard" after American forces captured it in June 1944. The island was transformed into a huge naval storage facility and housed the Pacific Fleet Headquarters. Like Saipan and Tinian, it was "blanketed" with airfields from which Japan's massive bombing raids were launched.
- Saipan and Tinian: air bases. The Japanese had built three short runways for fighter planes on Tinian. After the American forces took the island, these airfields were extended to cover almost the entire northern end of the island to accommodate all the Boeing B-29 Superfortress bombers of the 313th Bombardment Wing, including those that dropped the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Tinian and Saipan are just over 4 km away. Guam is 167 km southwest of Tinian.

(1) It should be noted that it was because of General MacArthur's imperative request that President Roosevelt opened a second front, contrary to War Plan Orange (which envisage only one front), and which was finally implemented by Admiral Nimitz. MacArthur had left active duty in 1937 to assist the American colony of the Philippines on its path to independence. After the Japanese invasion, he had to leave the country announcing "I will return". Widely appreciated by the media and the American public, MacArthur asked the president –who could not refuse– to add a southern flank to the American offensive and put him in command, converting it into a "two-pronged war".

- Rabaul on the island of New Britain, Papua New Guinea. Seized by Japan in 1942, it became the main base for military and naval activity in the South Pacific.
- Port Moresby: In September 1942, a major Allied base complex. General MacArthur established his headquarters here from November 1942 to October 1944.
- Eniwetok: In November 1942, the Japanese built an airfield on Engebi Island to accommodate the aircraft used on the Carolines and the rest of the Marshall Islands (1).
- Manus: Japan established a military base there in 1942. Captured by American forces in early 1944, an Allied naval base was established here to take advantage of one of the largest and best deep-water sites in the Pacific. The United States has developed it into a major forward naval and air base, capable of supplying, maintaining and repairing naval and air forces. Its cost exceeds the aggregate investment in all previous forward bases. Equipped with three huge floating docks, Manus was functionally equivalent to the industrial arsenal long planned for Truk (2).
- Tulagi: small island on which the Japanese had installed landing strips to protect Rabaul. Port Purvis, was used by the Allied navies after it was taken.
- Ulithi: when the Caroline Islands came under US control in 1944, an important forward naval base with floating docks was established.
- New Caledonia: During the Pacific War, the US soon suffered the loss of its bases in the Philippines and the Marianas. They needed to quickly identify a main logistical base to support the southern arm of the two-pronged attack, under General MacArthur's command. New Caledonia's remarkable geographical advantages were to be widely exploited by the United States. By late 1941, it was clear to the Allies that it represented an important target for Japan due to its position in controlling the approaches to Australia. They decided to protect New Caledonia and 16,800 men of the Army Task Force 6814 made their landing on 12 January 1942, while the island's population was only 17,000. The three airfields (La Tontouta, Plaine des Gaiacs and Oua Tom) were upgraded and seven other runways were built, including the large USAAF base in Koumac. The small civilian seaplane base at Nouville was taken over by the US Navy along with the harbour which was extended. In October 1942, Noumea was chosen over Auckland as the site for the main US naval base as well as the main logistical arsenal for supporting amphibious operations in the South Pacific. Supply warehouses and fuel depots were built as well as a naval air base. The island already had good road and rail networks that could readily be adapted to the large-scale needs of the US armies at war. It was not until April 1945, after the assault on Okinawa, that activity decreased, with Okinawa becoming the new "Main Western Dockyard".

Grouped by state, the different sites that are still suitable for establishing bases today are (Figure 3):

- Hawaii, United States: Oahu.
- Marshall Islands: Wotje, Majuro, Eniwetok.
- Micronesia: Truk
- Unincorporated territory of the United States: Guam
- Mariana Islands: Saipan, Tinian.
- Papua New Guinea: Rabaul, Port Moresby, Manus.
- Federated States of Micronesia: Ulithi.

(1) During the Cold War, the atoll was equipped with a modern airfield and a long runway. The atoll was among the most used for US nuclear tests.

(2) Miller, Edward S. (1991), 342-3.

Figure 3 • Map of main bases during the Second World War (Japan and United States) and French Polynesia



- Solomon Islands: Tulagi.
- France, New Caledonia. Although French Polynesia was not involved in the Pacific War because of its remoteness from the Japanese advance, it could well have succumbed had it not been for the Battle of Midway which thwarted that threat. Having housed the Pacific Experimentation Centre (CEP) during France's nuclear test campaigns, it boasts port and air facilities immediately usable by a large navy.

US Strategy in the Indo-Pacific

In February 2022, the White House released the new US Indo-Pacific strategy. President Biden, who signed it, follows in the footsteps of his predecessors in asserting that the Indo-Pacific is the world's centre of gravity and as such faces increasing challenges, primarily from the PRC: *"The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world's most influential power. The PRC's coercion and aggression spans the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific. From the economic coercion of Australia to the conflict along the Line of Actual Control with India to the growing pressure on Taiwan and bullying of neighbors in the East and South China Seas, our allies and partners in the region bear much of the cost of the PRC's harmful behavior. In the process, the PRC is also undermining human rights and international law, including freedom of navigation, as well as other principles that have brought stability and prosperity to the Indo-Pacific"* (1).

(1) White House (2022), p. 2.

The strategic plan of action includes a paragraph dealing specifically with the Pacific Islands. It calls for a partnership to build up resilience: *“The United States will work with partners to establish a multilateral strategic grouping that supports Pacific island countries as they build their capacity and resilience as secure, independent actors. Together, we will build climate resilience through the Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility; coordinate to meet the Pacific’s infrastructure gaps, especially on information and communications technology; facilitate transportation; and cooperate to improve maritime security to safeguard fisheries, build maritime-domain awareness, and improve training and advising. We will also prioritize finalization of the Compact of Free Association agreements with the Freely Associated States”* (1).

US alliances in the Pacific

The United States has formed alliances with four Pacific Rim countries: Thailand, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Australia. The Philippines, because of its military weakness and erratic policy vis-à-vis China, is more unpredictable. However, the country is of great geostrategic importance because it makes up a significant portion of the first line of islands that delimit the South China Sea. Furthermore, the US has maintained informal relations with Taiwan since 1 January 1979, when the Carter administration established full relations with the PRC and severed its diplomatic ties with the autonomous Taiwan, over which the PRC claims sovereignty. The Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 provides a legal basis for this unofficial bilateral relationship (2). The TRA does not require the US to defend Taiwan, but states that US policy is to maintain the potential to do so, creating strategic ambiguity about what the United States would do if the PRC attacked Taiwan.

Australia is a key US ally at a time of increasing geopolitical uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific region (3). The relationship between the two countries is very close. As their relationship with China has frayed, Australia and the United States have strengthened their partnership to address geopolitical uncertainty in the region, including the announcement of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) agreement, which is expected to provide Australia with nuclear propulsion technology for its next generation of submarines. Ties between the United States, Australia, Japan and India have been further bolstered by the ongoing development of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or “Quad”. Furthermore, in January 2022 Australia signed a reciprocal access agreement with Japan –another close US ally– designed to facilitate defence cooperation between both nations. Australia has introduced a number of measures to counter China’s growing influence. In 2018, the Australian Parliament passed new laws on espionage and foreign interference. The government has blocked Huawei’s involvement in the development of the 5G mobile network. Australia’s defence budget was increased in 2021 to 2.1% of GDP. Recent Australian governments have responded to China’s efforts to influence the Pacific region through the “Pacific Step Up” (4) policy and renewed diplomatic interest in the South Pacific. Finally, both Australia and New Zealand maintain close ties with a major portion of the southwest Pacific, particularly in the Melanesian sub-region.

Other US allied nations in the Indo-Pacific play an important role, although to a lesser extent due to the remoteness of their decision making centres. These are Canada, France and Great Britain.

Canada deploys combat ships to the Pacific to ensure freedom of navigation. In this context, warships for the Canadian and US navies sailed together through the Taiwan Strait in 2021, while engaging in exercises in the region. Canada is expected to publish a new Indo-Pacific strategy in 2022.

(1) *Ibid.*, p. 17.

(2) Lawrence, Susan V. and Campbell, Caitlin (2022).

(3) Vaughn, Bruce (2022).

(4) Australia is stepping up its partnerships in the Pacific to a higher level. Together with its partners, it is striving to build a strategically secure, economically stable and politically sovereign region.

France, the most committed European country in the region, sees itself as a stabilising power, upholding the values of freedom and respect for the law: its ambition is to “provide solutions to the security, economic, health, climate and environmental challenges facing the countries in the area” (1). Its leverage in the area encompasses diplomatic, cultural, economic and military influence. The exercise of national sovereignty in the French communities of the Indo-Pacific is the primary driver that legitimises France's role in this region and forms the basis for its particular doctrine. As the United States' oldest ally, it has increased its operational activities in the region to uphold the rule of law and ensure freedom of navigation. These activities range from crossing the Taiwan Strait (2), to patrolling with a nuclear attack submarine (3), to supporting the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution sanctions against North Korea. France contributes significantly to the multilateral efforts of FVEY-Plus (Five Eyes-Plus) (4) in the areas of illegal fishing, drug and human trafficking, and humanitarian assistance to communities in the event of natural or climate change-related disasters.

France is a partner in the FRANZ arrangement with Australia and New Zealand and is a member of a quadrilateral defence coordination group with Australia, New Zealand and the US. It was in this context that the patrol boats Arago and La Glorieuse sailed from Papeete and Nouméa respectively with several dozen tonnes of humanitarian aid to help the inhabitants of the Tonga Islands after the volcanic eruption of 15 January 2022. Several other countries –notably the PRC– participated because of the scale of the emergency, with NASA estimating the eruption's power to be several hundred times that of the Hiroshima bomb. However, “Australia's decision in September 2021, made without prior consultation, to terminate the submarine procurement programme underway with France, has led to a review of the strategic partnership that linked our two countries. France will pursue its bilateral cooperation with Australia on a case-by-case basis, in line with its own interests and those of its regional partners” (5). In an information report of the National Assembly dated 16 February 2022, the rapporteurs note: “The fact remains that this discrepancy in the pace of the increase in the strength of our military resources with those of China has led a vulnerability that could be exploited by China in order to pursue a policy of *fait accompli*, particularly with regard to fishing rights, while potentially exposing our sailors to armed incidents” (6).

The Pacific-based military forces are not up to the task of dealing with the vastness of that ocean, nor of participating in a high-intensity conflict. France's role has been relegated to secondary one. An India-France-Japan tripartite partnership is being formed as a security framework in the Indo-Pacific region. Without being a true Pacific power and in the absence of strong allies, France would lose all influence in the area despite the geostrategic importance of its territories. It would be replaced by the United States, as happened in 1941, or it could be replaced by the PRC, which has signed a defence agreement with the Solomons, only 1,500 km from Nouméa. The situation in New Caledonia is therefore crucial to France's Indo-Pacific strategy, but also to its geopolitical standing in the world (7). In addition to permanently resolving New Caledonia's social turmoil,

(1) Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Europe (2021), p. 3.

(2) Maritime incident in the Taiwan Strait: the Nouméa-based surveillance frigate Vendémiaire, which was expected to participate in a naval parade for the 70th anniversary of the Chinese navy on 23 April, was intercepted on 7 April 2019 by two Chinese warships in the Taiwan Strait, which is claimed by the PRC in breach of the law of the sea. As a result, France's invitation to represent the country was withdrawn. France reasserted its commitment to freedom of navigation, in accordance with the law of the sea.

(3) As part of the Marianne mission in the Indo-Pacific theatre from 20 September 2020 to 7 April 2021, the Émeraude sailed through the South China Sea during its 199-day deployment. During its operational patrol, it carried out exercises with the US Navy, the Japanese and Indonesian navies... It made stops in Perth and Guam. A stopover initially planned in Indonesia was reportedly cancelled, probably under pressure from China.

(4) The alliance of the intelligence services of the Anglosphere countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States).

(5) Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Europe (2021), p. 42. This is a version revised in February 2022 of the one written before the decision to reject the French-Australian Attack submarine programme was announced.

(6) Michel-Brassart, Monica and Trastour-Isnart, Laurence (2022), pp. 58-59.

(7) Amelot, Laurent, Eudeline, Hugues and Mongrenier Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier (2021).

France must rapidly increase its operational resources in both New Caledonia and French Polynesia by basing first-rate frigates, one nuclear attack submarine per tour of duty and fighter squadrons. The three Rafale jets deployed in Polynesia in June 2021, considered an important achievement by the French Air and Space Force, will not be enough in the event of a conflict.

The United Kingdom. Approximately 1.7 million British citizens live in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2021, the UK government published its *Integrated Review* in which it asserts that the Indo-Pacific region is essential to the UK's economy and security. It therefore plans to establish a stronger presence in that region. Its current defence presence in the region includes the Brunei garrison of about 700 troops and two offshore patrol vessels that will remain in the Pacific for the next ten years. British forces participate in the annual drills of the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA), a regional security group established in 1971 comprising Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the UK. The United Kingdom has proved its ability to deploy a carrier battle group to the region by sending the HMS Queen Elizabeth task force, carrying British and US F-35Bs, alongside Dutch and US escort ships. Throughout its tour of the region, the group engaged in operations in the Indian Ocean, the Philippine Sea and the South and East China Seas. However, the US Marine Corps F-35s on board outnumbered those of the British forces, one of which crashed in the Mediterranean Sea during the carrier's homeward passage to Great Britain. Over the next two years, the UK intends to deploy more forces to the region in line with its "global" policy. On the diplomatic front, in 2019 the United Kingdom opened new High Commissions in Vanuatu, Tonga and Samoa.

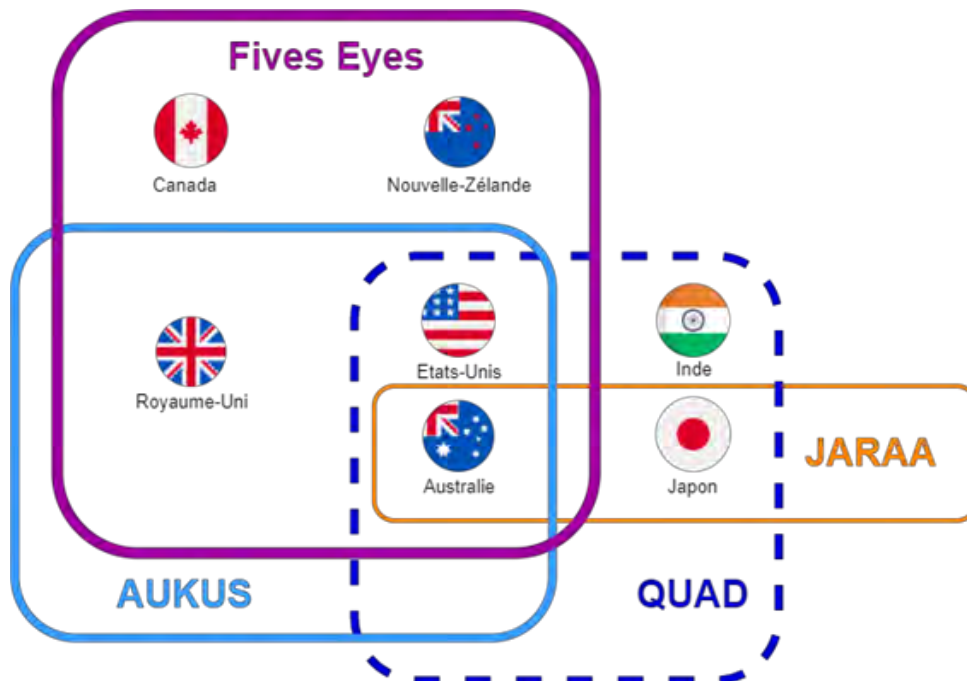
It is interesting to note that the United States' main allies in the Pacific are equipped with US weapons and hardware. All three members of the AUKUS belong to the FVEY. They have aircraft carriers with short take-off and vertical landing F-35B jets, as well as P-8A maritime patrol aircraft. Their nuclear attack submarines will be able to dock on the west coast of Australia, near the Indonesian Straits. Indeed, this is the main advantage of the agreement for the United States and the United Kingdom, which will be able to benefit from it in the short term, whereas a supply of nuclear submarines to Australia remains a long-term prospect. Japan and Korea are also equipping themselves with aircraft carriers and F-35Bs. They also have US-designed Aegis anti-missile systems and some have P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft.

By sharing the same weapon systems, war logistics can be rationalised. This suggests that the likelihood of an armed conflict with China has been identified. It should be noted that this defence system against the PRC revolves around countries in the Anglosphere, a group of states that share a common culture, i.e. a common language, history and university system, thus prompting them to share a similar strategic vision **(1)**. Through a set of cross alliances, this relatively tight-knit core group integrates other regional powers such as Japan, Taiwan, India and certain micro-states **(Figure 4)**. The AUKUS could thus transform the south-western quarter of the Pacific into an Anglo-Saxon ocean space that could be joined by New Zealand and possibly Canada, whose warships have begun to patrol the area again. The partnership of these five countries –already linked by the Five Eyes agreement of their intelligence services– represents strategically coherent front against China's military aggression, cultural expansionism and economic ambitions.

The European Union (EU). It should be noted that EU member countries are showing growing interest in the Indo-Pacific. Following France's lead, Germany, the Netherlands and the EU have also drawn up strategic guidelines for the area. As these countries have no territories in the region, their strategy does not address the risks of the PRC's influence, which they consider to be irrelevant to them. The EU *"intends to increase its engagement with the region to build partnerships that reinforce the rules-based international order, address global challenges, and lay the foundations for a rapid, just and sustainable economic recovery that creates*

(1) This informal group is composed of English-speaking countries only, mainly the United States, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, but also Singapore and other Commonwealth countries.

Figure 4 • Main alliances in the Indo-Pacific (April 2022)



Source • Compiled by Hugues Eudeline

long-term prosperity. This engagement will be based on promoting democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and universally agreed commitments such as the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals, and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change” (1).

Taiwan. Due to its complex international status, the ROC has not conducted many military operations in Oceania in the past, except for the annual stopover of the Midshipmen Cruising & Training Squadron (敦睦遠航訓練支隊). A contingent of three warships belonging to the Taiwan Navy, including an auxiliary vessel, the fuel, ammunition and equipment tanker *Pan Shi* (磐石號), a *Cheng Kung* class frigate (成功級) and a *Kang Ding* class frigate (康定級) (2) conduct a tour of Pacific island countries every year, with the Marshall Islands and Palau as the primary destinations (Table 4). Since 2016, security cooperation has started to intensify between Taiwan and Pacific island countries. In July 2018 and March 2019, successive bilateral agreements on coast guard cooperation were signed with the Marshall Islands, Palau and Nauru. Furthermore, Taipei and Washington also signed a Memorandum of Understanding in March 2021 to establish a joint coast guard working group between the two countries. By institutionalising its coast guard partnerships, Taipei can forge closer security links with its friends in the Pacific. For example, from 13-14 April 2022, Taiwan's 2,000-ton coast guard patrol ship *Tainan* (臺南號) sailed alongside a Palauan patrol flotilla at the seventh *Our Ocean Conference* in Palau (3). Taiwan is also likely to play an important role in similar US-led drills in the future.

(1) European Commission (2021), p. 1.

(2) This is the *La Fayette* class frigate that Taiwan originally bought from France in the 1990s.

(3) Launched by former US Secretary of State John Kerry, since 2014 the conference has been a key opportunity for countries, civil society and industry to engage in concrete and meaningful action to protect the Pacific Ocean.

Table 4 • **Annual port calls of the Taiwanese Midshipmen Cruising & Training Squadron, 2010-2020**

Country	Years
Marshall Islands	2011, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019
Solomon Islands	2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019
Kiribati	2014, 2017
Nauru	2015
Palau	2010, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020
Tuvalu	2010, 2013

Source · Public information compiled by the authors

Third part.

China's hard power in the Pacific

Military aspect

China has not disclosed its specific military strategy for the Pacific, but information about its intentions in the region can be found in China's military white papers published over the years. On the one hand, in the report entitled "China's Military Strategy" (中国军事战略) in 2015, the Chinese armed forces claim to be strengthening their traditional friendly military ties with their South Pacific counterparts by continuing to actively participate in international relief operations and humanitarian disaster assistance (1). On the other hand, in the white paper "China's National Defence in the New Era" (新时代的中国国防) released on 24 July 2019, China signals its readiness to strengthen military exchanges with South Pacific countries in the areas of personnel training, officer exchanges, and by providing assistance in military development and defence capabilities (2). According to this directive, China's military activities in the South Pacific basically fall into two main categories.

Humanitarian and disaster-relief assistance

In the past, humanitarian aid missions in the China Sea were mainly carried out by the Type 920 hospital ship *Daishan Dao* (岱山岛号), often referred to by the Chinese media as the *Peace Ark* (和平方舟号). The *Daishan Dao* officially joined the East China Sea Fleet in late 2008. The ship has a standard displacement of 13,000 tons. Since its first overseas deployment in 2010 (3), the *Daishan Dao* has completed one third of the PLA's humanitarian support operations in the South Pacific (4). As part of Mission Harmony (和谐使命), the Peace Ark made several stopovers in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Vanuatu between 2014 and 2018 (5). The hospital ship also conducted medical missions to French Polynesia between 2015 and 2018 (6).

More recently, however, the PLA has opted to deploy a more varied array of naval and air forces to pursue natural disaster relief missions in the South Pacific. In response to the Hunga Tonga eruption in January 2022, the PLA carried out two successive relief missions to Tonga. First, on 28 January 2022, two Y-20 (运20) transport aircraft belonging to the Chinese Air Force delivered 33 tons of relief materials to Tonga (7). Then, on February 15, Chinese Navy vessels, the Type 071 amphibious dock landing ship *Wuzhi Shan* (五指山号) and the Type 901 combat support ship *Chaganhu* (查干湖号), delivered 1,400 tons of relief supplies to Tonga's capital, Nukunono (8). These changes carry two strategic implications. On one hand, China is seeking to revamp its military logistics capabilities. In November 2021, Xi Jinping stressed the need to "further boost the construction of all combat-ready logistics" (9). Through its large-scale rapid emergency response efforts in Pacific island countries, the PLA is deploying a modern and robust military logistics system (10).

(1) State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2015).

(2) State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2019).

(3) It is also known as *Daishan Dao* (岱山岛号).

(4) Zhang, Denghua (2020).

(5) 〈和平方舟醫院船〉, 《Baidu百科》, 2021年12月18日, [available here](#).

(6) "Le bateau-hôpital Ark Peace à Papeete", *Port autonome Papeete*, December 26, 2018, [available here](#).

(7) Liu, Xuanzun and Guo, Yuandan (2022).

(8) Huaxia (2022).

(9) Liu, Xuanzun (2022).

(10) 古莉, 〈習近平建設“一切為了打仗的後勤”〉, 《法國國際廣播電台》, 2021年11月24日, [available here](#).

On the other hand, the Tonga relief mission marked a first for the Y-20, covering a distance of over 9,000 kilometres (4,950 nautical miles) (1). Representing a new breed of military transport aircraft, the Y-20 was officially deployed by the Chinese Air Force in 2016. Although the Y-20's performance is limited due to technical problems with the WS-20 (涡扇-20) turbofan engine that should be fitted on Y-20s, it has begun to fly missions overseas. Since it delivered medical supplies to Pakistan in April 2020, the Y-20 has flown nine missions to five countries (Table 5). The Tongan mission was the first time it had flown beyond its immediate neighbours. This is an indication that the APL's long-distance transport capabilities are improving.

Maritime surveillance and information gathering

China's current activities in the Pacific are mainly carried out by the *Yuanwang* (远望级) class space observation ships. At present, China has four *Yuanwang*-class observation ships in its fleet (*Yuanwang-3*, *Yuanwang-5*, *Yuanwang-6* and *Yuanwang-7*). They made frequent incursions to the South Pacific in 2019 and 2020. Like all Chinese ships, they conduct both civilian and military operations (2). In addition, the recent activities of Chinese vessels in the Pacific have also revealed a more organised and aggressive approach. In June 2019, the Type 093 supply ship *Luomahu* (骆马湖号), the Type 054A frigate *Xuchang* (许昌号) and the Type 071 amphibious dock landing ship *Kunlun Shan* (昆仑山号) called at the Garden Island Naval Base in Australia. Australian national security experts have raised concerns about the size of this contingent (three ships and 750 crew) (3). While the Australian government at the time denied there was anything unusual about this Chinese activity, disputes over China's naval involvement in the region gradually surfaced over the ensuing years. On 17 February 2022, a Royal Australian Air Force P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft was tagged by a laser from two Chinese warships it was observing in the Arafura Sea – the Type 052D frigate *Hefei* (合肥舰) and the Type 071 amphibious dock landing ship *Jinggang Shan* (井冈山舰). Both sides blame the other for dangerous and provocative behaviour (4). This incident shows that the Chinese Navy has no qualms about reacting aggressively to what it considers to be “provocative” behaviour.

Table 5 • Overseas missions of the Chinese transport aircraft Y-20 (2020-2022)

Date	Destination	Event
24.04.2020	Islamabad, Pakistan	Delivery of medical supplies
20.05.2020	Bangkok, Thailand	Delivery of medical supplies
07.12.2020	Bholari, Pakistan	Joint air combat exercise
13.06.2020	Moscow, Russia	2020 Victory Day Parade
25.09.2020	Seoul, South Korea	Delivery of soldier's remains of Chinese soldiers died in the Korean War
30.08.2021	Seoul, South Korea	Delivery of soldier's remains of Chinese soldiers died in the Korean War
13.08.2021	Ryazan Oblast, Russia	2021 International Army Games
10.09.2021	Orenburg, Russia	Peace Mission 2021
28.01.2022	Nuku'alofa, Tonga	Delivery of medical supplies

Source • Public information compiled by the authors

(1) However, the route is split into three legs: Guangzhou, Philippines, Indonesia, Tonga.

(2) Siddiqui, Huma (2021).

(3) Greene, Andrew (2019).

(4) Amber Wang, “China says Australian laser claims are ‘false and malicious’”, ABC News, February 21, 2022, [available here](#).

Economic aspect

Asymmetric economic relations

On the bilateral trade front, the trading volume between China and Pacific island countries is almost insignificant. For example, China's total value of imports and exports of goods in 2020 stood at USD 4,660 billion: with USD 2,590 billion in exports and USD 2,070 billion in imports (1). By contrast, the trade in goods between China and Pacific island countries stood at USD 9.04 billion, with Chinese exports of USD 5.20 billion and imports of USD 3.84 billion (2). The goods trade with the Pacific Islands represents less than 1% of China's total volume. China is nevertheless the Pacific Islands' main trade partner. Some countries are even showing high degrees of dependency. For example, China has been the largest trading partner of the Solomon Islands since 2011. Between 2011 and 2020, Solomon Islands' exports to China averaged 58.37% of its total foreign trade. Moreover, Beijing has also become New Caledonia's largest export market in recent years. The total value of New Caledonia's exports to China will reach EUR 844 million in 2020, i.e. 57% of the total value of exports, representing a 15-fold increase in 10 years (3). Economic dependence is pushing these Pacific stakeholders to engage more with Beijing to tackle their development problems. Solomon Islands hopes that by establishing diplomatic relations with China, it will attract a wealth of Chinese investment. New Caledonian independence campaigners want to rely on China's support to release themselves from French control once their goal has been achieved.

At the same time, such a skewed relationship places Pacific island countries in a highly vulnerable position vis-à-vis China. When trade is used as a tool for economic coercion, it is harder to resist. China has been applying economic pressure in the Marshall Islands and Palau, despite their ongoing diplomatic ties with Taiwan. On the one hand, the PRC is among the Marshall Islands' primary trading partners, largely through its exports of shipping vessels to the RMI. The Marshall Islands has one of the largest ship registries in the world, but RMI ships entering Chinese ports pay higher fees due to the absence of diplomatic relations between the Marshall Islands and the PRC (4). On the other hand, China is Palau's main source of tourist revenue. Following the visit to Palau by Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in October 2017, Beijing has restricted Palau as a destination to Chinese tourist groups, causing the number of Chinese visitors to fall from 87,000 in 2015 to 58,000 in 2017, resulting in a 3.7% slump in GDP (5). Given that tourism accounts for about 40% of Palau's GDP, Chinese pressure on tourism could be an effective tool to influence the country's domestic policies.

Belt and Road Initiative

On 28 March 2015, China's National Development and Reform Commission (国家发展和改革委员会), Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce jointly released a document entitled "Vision and Action on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (推动共建丝绸之路经济带和21世纪海上丝绸之路的愿景与行动) with the added inclusion of the South Pacific in the Maritime Silk Road (6). In June 2017, the document "Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative" ("一带一路"建设海上合作设想)

(1) 国务院新闻办公室 (2021).

(2) 商务部美洲大洋洲司 (2019).

(3) Institut d'émission d'Outre-Mer (2021a).

(4) Lum, Thomas (2020), p. 14.

(5) International Monetary Fund (2019).

(6) Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the French Republic (2015).

states that “efforts will be made to jointly build the blue economic passage of China-Oceania-South Pacific, travelling southward from the South China Sea into the Pacific Ocean (1)”. The “China-Oceania-South Pacific” route has become one of the three “blue” economic passages of the maritime silk route.

The Belt and Road Initiative has the broad backing of Pacific island nations. Nine countries have signed the initiative’s memorandum of understanding with China since 2018 (Table 6). However, in the run-up to a series of infrastructure investment plans, the Belt and Road has sparked controversy in many countries in the region. In Samoa, the new USD 100 million international port project in Vaiusu Bay is a contested issue. Former Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, a long-time Chinese ally, pledged that the Chinese project would deliver jobs, trade and tourism to Samoa. However, China is already Samoa’s largest lender, accounting for about 40%, or some USD 160 million, of the country’s foreign debt (2). The new port works will therefore deepen its debt to China. Some politicians have voice concerns about this project due to the military connection it entails with Beijing (3). Ultimately, with the appointment of the new Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata’afa, the construction was scrapped and replaced by a project co-financed by the Asian Development Bank and the Samoan government (4).

The Chinese initiative is also encountering opposition in Kiribati, where China is planning to revamp the former American airport on the island of Canton, dating back to the Second World War. The Kiribati government is adamant that the facility upgrade programme is purely for civilian purposes and aimed at boosting transport links and tourism in the archipelago, while opposition figures have questioned China’s intentions and the project’s lack of transparency (5).

On the whole, the sites selected to implement Chinese projects are reasonably significant geostrategic hubs. If Beijing succeeds in controlling them, it will greatly bolster its strategic advantage in the South Pacific. Take Kiribati, for example. Tarawa Atoll witnessed skirmishes between the United States and Japan during the Second World War. It has also been a key element in the development of China’s space power. From 1997 to 2003, China operated a space surveillance station on the atoll and a military radar on Kiritimati. Once China is able to use these facilities again for space surveillance, it could capitalise on them to fine-tune its BeiDou (北斗) satellite navigation system and, consequently, its medium- and long-range missiles and the PLA’s intelligence assets. This would pose a serious threat to US homeland security.

Table 6 • **Belt and Road Initiative memorandum signed with Pacific island countries**

Country	Date
Papua New Guinea	June 2018
Niue	July 2018
Samoa	October 2018
Fiji	November 2018
Micronesia	November 2018
Tonga	November 2018
Vanuatu	November 2018
Salomon	October 2019
Kiribati	January 2020

Source • Public information compiled by the authors

(1) Xinhua Silk Road (2017).

(2) Asia Pacific Report (2021).

(3) Samoa Observer (2021).

(4) Institut d’émission d’outre-mer (2021b).

(5) Barrett, Jonathan, (2021).

Aid

Military hardware donations

China's military donations to Pacific island countries mainly consist of light equipment and transport vehicles (Table 7). The chief beneficiaries of Chinese military donations are Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, and Vanuatu. These countries have long-standing and stable relations with China and also represent valuable strongholds for China in the Pacific.

Table 7 • China's military donations in the South Pacific

Date	Country	Content
December 2007	PNG	Renovation of the Taurama Barrack Hospital
November 2008	Tonga	8 military trucks
December 2015	PNG	40 military vehicles
February 2017	Vanuatu	Military uniforms and 14 military vehicles
November 2017	PNG	62 vehicles (including troop transports, armoured vehicles, buses and mobile catering vans)
December 2018	Fiji	1 marine survey and surveillance vessel
April 2020	Fiji	47 military vehicles

Source • Public information compiled by the authors

Economic aid

China's aid to the Pacific islands is a vehicle for addressing its international responsibilities, through engaging in South-South cooperation with developing countries (1). In the July 2014 white paper "China's Foreign Aid" (中国的对外援助), Beijing set the target: "to support the sustainable economic development of Pacific island countries" (2). Under the leadership of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (国家国际发展合作署), the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum has emerged as the main platform for financial aid initiatives. While the volume of Chinese aid peaked in 2016 and began to decline in the following years, China is still an unquestionably important Pacific donor (3). In 2020, China was the fourth largest donor in the Pacific island countries, after Australia, New Zealand and Japan (Table 8).

(1) Zhou, Fangyin (2021).

(2) State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2014).

(3) Pryke, Jonathan and Dayant Alexandre (2021).

Table 8 • Top ten donors to Pacific island countries in 2020

Country	Number of Projects	Budget spent (unit: USD million)	Rank	Budget pledged (unit: USD million)	Rank	Budget allocated to the Pacific
Australia	9689	864.60	1	865.37	2	37%
New Zealand	424	253.92	2	361.94	3	69%
Japan	882	220.74	3	160.32	7	2%
China	55	169.59	4	1030.00	1	-
Asian Development Bank	133	168.49	5	282.33	4	3%
World Bank	84	158.62	6	246.34	6	1%
United States	266	140.07	7	273.00	5	-
United Nations	289	115.71	8	44.46	10	1%
European Union	135	98.58	9	151.91	8	1%
Taiwan	217	41.10	10	44.63	9	-

Source - "Pacific Aid Map", Lowy Institute, [available here](#)

Medical diplomacy

Ever since the COVID-19 epidemic spread worldwide, China has been supplying medical provisions like vaccines, masks and respirators, in the hope of conveying the image that "China has a sense of morality and is assuming its share of responsibility in global society". The Pacific has become the hub of China's medical diplomacy. Beijing has donated supplies to Pacific island countries more than ten times since 2020, thus catalysing stronger relations between China and the Pacific island countries (**Table 9**).

Appraisal

In military terms, China's activities in the Pacific are limited. They focus mainly on humanitarian aid, observation and patrol work. This reflects the fact that China's strategic priority is to break through the first chain of islands, including control of the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Beijing is not in a position to operate within, nor beyond, the second chain of islands. However, the frequent appearance of Chinese warships shows that Beijing is attaching increasing importance to high seas presence and training in the Pacific. This represents an unparalleled show of force deployment in a theatre of operations so far from China. Chinese military activities are well planned and supervised by the Southern Theatre Command (南部战区). Due to the large number of operations it leads, the PLAN is well placed to gather intelligence and gain experience in both the escort and the anti-ship, anti-submarine warfare fields, up to and including the area between the second and third island chains. China is demonstrating its military capabilities of its modernised forces as a deterrent to potential adversaries.

In economic terms, China exerts its influence mainly by fostering asymmetrical relations, through the Belt and Road Initiative and by offering aid. The natural environmental constraints of the Pacific island countries generally mean that they are poor and underdeveloped. They need to tap into the Chinese market and investment, making it hard to refuse Beijing's offers and its reciprocal demands. Infrastructure construction projects are providing these countries with a strong incentive to cooperate with China.

Table 9 • China's main donations to Pacific island countries since the outbreak of Covid-19

Date	Countries / Entities	Content
2020		
26.03	Vanuatu	USD 100,000 (monetary grant)
06.04	French Polynesia	15 tons of medical equipment, including nearly 2 million surgical masks, overalls and protective glasses.
04.05	Fiji	N95 masks, medical protective clothing, medical overshoes
14.04	Micronesia	Hundreds of surgical masks, protective clothing, goggles and forehead thermometers
11.05	PNG	11 tons of medical equipment
21.05	Micronesia	Masks, protective suits, gloves and USD 50,000
24.05	French Polynesia	screening tests, gowns, 3 respirators
23.09	PNG	Surgical instruments, emergency medicines, Chinese medicine supplies
15.12	Vanuatu	USD 100,000 monetary grant
2021		
23.06	PNG	Sinopharm vaccines
07.11	Vanuatu	80,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine and 80,000 syringes
17.11	Vanuatu	USD 250,000 (monetary grant)
25.11	Micronesia	USD 150,000 (monetary grant)
2022		
26.01	Salomon	50,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine, 20,000 test kits and other anti-epidemic supplies
15.02	Tonga	1,400 tons of supplies, including mobile homes, tractors, electric generators, water pumps, water purifiers, food and medical supplies.
18.02	Salomon	320,000 test reagents, 20 oxygen concentrators, 20 pulse oximeters, 180,000 pairs of gloves, 20,000 protective goggles, 10,000 protective suits, 100 folding beds and 70 tents
23.02	Kiribati	Oximeters, monitors, electrocardiographs, ultrasound diagnostic systems, masks and personal protective equipment
24.02	Salomon	Oxygen generators, oximeters, protective suits and more than 300,000 test kits

Source - Public information compiled by the authors

There is no doubt that China's economic involvement in the Pacific island countries is relatively low compared to other regions. This has also been used by some Chinese scholars to defend the claim that China is not pursuing any geopolitical ambitions in the region ⁽¹⁾. However, this assessment should be viewed in perspective. Given the small economic size of the Pacific island countries, China can penetrate this strategic sea area, of great significance to Australia, the United States, France and Taiwan, with relatively modest economic resources. With the dominance of choke points, the ability of the US armed forces to assist countries in the first island chain, such as Taiwan, will be put to the test. This asymmetry between input costs and strategic profits means that China's economic involvement in the region should not be underestimated.

By leveraging asymmetric economic relations, Beijing can defend its "core interests", including national sovereignty and territorial integrity, forcing target countries to change their attitudes and conduct with regard to contentious topics like Taiwan, Hong Kong and Tibet. The Belt and Road Initiative and the aid granted have allowed it to gain a foothold in the Pacific. By establishing bases for civilian and military use, China's strategic disadvantage in the region is considerably reduced. On the one hand, they address the Chinese Navy's limited access to reliable logistical bases compared to those of the United States. On the other hand, this may allow China to protect its seaborne flows of energy and raw materials to and from the Americas. In the long term, these military bases in the Pacific are the "bridgeheads" for China to engage in regional affairs and undermine US hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.

⁽¹⁾ Zhou, Fangyin (2021).

Fourth part.

China's soft power in the Pacific

Identity aspect: exchanges

Officer exchanges and training

China attaches considerable value to the international exchange of military personnel. The PLA National Defence University has been running regular seminars for senior officers since the 2010s. China has clearly increased the level of these exchanges over the last few years. For example, in 2019, the attendance of Wei Fenghe (魏凤和), China's State Councillor and Minister of Defence, at the Fourth Caribbean and South Pacific Senior Defence Officers' Forum is a telling symbol (1). Training programmes also play an important role in China's military exchanges with foreign countries. States like Papua New Guinea and Tonga have established cooperative relationships with Chinese military academies, allowing junior officers to travel to China for training or to complete their studies (2). Beijing's focus on investing in people has yielded some tangible results. Some of these officers have become advocates of Chinese policy. For example, Siamelie Latu, the Tongan officer who trained at the National Defence University of China, was subsequently appointed Tonga's ambassador to China between 2011-2015. He has now been appointed Secretary General of the Tonga-China Friendship Association and is an outspoken supporter of China's aid to his country (3).

Confucius Institute and associations

China's non-military exchanges in the Pacific region are mainly pursued through Confucius Institutes and civil society organisations. Their mission is to promote Chinese culture, reinforce positive perceptions of China and create the basis for pro-Chinese public opinion in the Pacific. Through partnerships with Chinese universities, the Institute is expanding in Pacific island countries. The University of the South Pacific, which is jointly funded by 12 Pacific island countries, was officially opened on 6 September 2012. It was co-developed by Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications (北京邮电大学) and the University of the South Pacific. Meanwhile, on 15 May 2013, the Confucius Institute at the University of French Polynesia was officially opened with the backing of China Foreign Affairs University (中国外交学院). Hanban, the National Bureau for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (4), contributed 3,000 textbooks and annual financial support of RMB 1 million (5). On 19 February 2021, together with Chongqing Normal University (重庆师范大学), PNG's first Confucius Institute was unveiled at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology in Lae, the country's second largest city (6).

At the same time, pro-Chinese associations are also playing an active role in bilateral exchanges. In New Caledonia, the Sino-Caledonian Friendship Association (中国-新喀里多尼亚友好协会) and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (中国人民对外友好协会) signed an agreement in May 2017 in a bid to foster bilateral exchanges and cooperation. It is worth noting that key figures in the New Caledonian independence movement have close ties with this association. Namely, the last two cabinet directors of the

(1) 梅常伟 (2019).

(2) 林廷辉 (2019).

(3) Latu, Siamelie (2022).

(4) As of July 2020, Hanban has been replaced by the China Foundation for International Education (中國國際中文教育基金會) for operations of the Confucius Institute.

(5) 《中华人民共和国驻帕皮提领事馆》(2013).

(6) Xinhuanet (2021).

President of the Congress of New Caledonia, Roch Wamytan, are prominent members of the Sino-Caledonian Friendship Association (1). This indicates the harmonious relationship between the two parties.

Identity aspect: discourse

In 2013, President Xi Jinping coined the phrase “telling China’s story well” (讲好中国故事) as a propaganda concept (2). By contributing aid and facilitating trade, China seeks to convey three main narratives in the Pacific.

“China spearheads the community of common destiny for mankind”

The concept of “community of destiny for mankind” (人类命运共同体) was first propounded at the 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012. In an address at the UN headquarters in Geneva on 18 January 2017, Xi Jinping further stressed: *“Pass on the torch of peace from generation to generation, sustain development and make civilization flourish: this is what people of all countries long for; it is also the responsibility statesmen of our generation ought to shoulder And China’s proposition is: build a community of shared future for mankind and achieve shared and win-win development”* (3). The establishment of the community of destiny for mankind has become the primary focus of China’s foreign propaganda efforts. The Pacific region is no exception. On Xi Jinping’s visit to Papua New Guinea in November 2018, the Chinese Foreign Ministry stressed that *“Xi Jinping’s visit will vigorously promote the friendship and cooperation between China and developing countries, and contribute to the common advancement of mankind’s destiny with great impetus”* (4). In March 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed “the spirit of a community of destiny standing together against all odds” (风雨同舟的命运共同体精神) in his support for Tonga and the Solomon Islands. The promotion of medical diplomacy also emphasises the concept of building the human health community and highlights the use of vaccines as a global public asset without any political strings attached (5). Therefore, China’s various aid and exchange programmes in the Pacific islands attempt to build an image of China at the forefront of the community of destiny for humanity, stressing that it is not pursuing any geopolitical objectives. This is in stark contrast to the aid provided by Western countries, which is conditional on certain prerequisites. This allows Beijing to garner the support of the Pacific islands and then to secure leadership in regional affairs.

“China is a partner in the struggle against colonialism”

Building a common identity with other developing countries has been a fundamental principle of Chinese foreign policy since the PRC was founded in 1949. Despite no longer being a developing country in economic terms, China still interacts with the Pacific island countries as such. For example, when Xi Jinping met with the leaders of the eight South Pacific countries in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea in 2018, the Chinese President pointed out that *“China and Pacific island countries are all developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region, they*

(1) Jeannin, Alain (2021).

(2) 刘亚琼 (2019).

(3) Xinhuanet (2017).

(4) 新聞雲 (2018).

(5) 《中華人民共和國外交部》(2022).

are good friends... good partners and good brothers" (1). Furthermore, China places special emphasis on the shared historical experience of Pacific island countries, each of which was once colonised, accusing Western countries of continuing to pursue colonialist strategies in the Pacific. For example, China's official media outlet, Global Times (环球时报), has accused the US and Australia of trying to act as the "sheriff" and "deputy sheriff" of the Pacific. It also rebuked France for presenting China as a threat to Australia and New Zealand in order to bolster its regional presence (2). In contrast to Western countries' "bad behaviour", China maintains that it respects the independence and autonomy of South Pacific island countries.

While these efforts have not brought these territories into Beijing's hands, they have at least made them adopt a more neutral or critical attitude vis-à-vis their relations with the traditional Western powers and China. In the words of Edouard Fritch, President of French Polynesia: "Today, Pacific countries want greater security and are therefore turning to all their partners, whether it is China or the United States" (3). In New Caledonia, the Sino-Caledonian Friendship Association, an active proponent of the United Front's work, has successfully approached key pro-independence figures (4). As Roch Wamytan said: "We're not afraid of China. It's France, not China, who has colonised us" (5). Beijing's efforts have paid off.

Moreover, when anti-colonial rhetoric is coupled with the political leanings of Pacific island nations, Beijing can garner greater acceptance in those countries. For example, in 2006, faced with sanctions from Australia and New Zealand, Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama proposed the "Look North" policy in a bid to exploit trade and investment opportunities with Asian countries. Hence, China's discourse, with its emphasis on respect for independence and autonomy, is well suited to Fiji's needs. In the words of Fiji's prime minister: "he Chinese authorities are very sympathetic and understand what's happening here — the fact that we need to do things in our own way" (6). Fiji is emerging as one of China's staunchest allies among the Pacific island nations. This is reflected in Fiji's support for the Chinese stance in the 2016 South China Sea arbitration and the renaming of Taiwan's representative office to the "Taipei trade office" in Fiji in 2019 (7).

"China is the protector of the Chinese diaspora"

The influx of the Chinese diaspora into the Pacific dates back to the first half of the 19th century. Today, the total number of Chinese immigrants is about 80,000, including 20,000 in Papua New Guinea and 8,000 in Fiji (8). In proportional terms, French Polynesia has the largest presence. It ranges from 4 to 10% of the total population depending on the criteria used (9). Since the 1990s, overseas Chinese in the Pacific have started to distinguish between "old" and "new" Chinese (10). Due to historical factors, the old overseas Chinese are, as is the case in French Polynesia, relatively loyal to the ROC and hostile to the PRC (11). Over time, the old overseas Chinese gradually became integrated into the local population by identifying with the country of residence and their ties with Taiwan are waning. The new overseas Chinese are economic migrants who are seeking a better standard of living in the Pacific. They generally lack a sense of belonging to the local community and

(1) Xinhuanet (2018).

(2) 《環球網》(2021).

(3) MacLellan, Nic (2021), pp. 204-205.

(4) Charon, Paul and Jeangène Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste (2021), p. 395.

(5) Thibault, Harold (2020).

(6) Komai, Makereta (2015).

(7) The original official name of Taiwan's representative office in Fiji was "Trade Mission of the Republic of China to the Republic of Fiji". Under pressure from China, its name was changed to "Taipei Trade Office in Fiji" in July 2019.

(8) For the PNG figures, see 《中華人民共和國駐巴布亞新几內亞獨立國大使館》(2021); for Fiji's figures, see 《中華人民共和國商務部》(2021).

(9) Trémon, Anne-Christine (2009), pp. 121-122.

(10) Sheng, Fei and Smith, Graeme (2021).

(11) Trémon, Anne-Christine (2009), pp. 128-130.

identify with China as their homeland. Many of them, through their success, are the backbone of local business communities. Beijing is actively looking for support from both groups. On the one hand, the PRC plays the role of defender of overseas Chinese residents. For example, during the 2006 Solomon Islands riots, China led its own evacuation operation. During the unrest in 2021, China provided police equipment and sent a police advisory team to the Solomon Islands (1). Several Chinese media outlets commented on Beijing's response by asserting that: "If you violate China, you will be punished no matter how far away you are" (2).

On the other hand, with the sharp increase in economic power, Beijing is now focusing more sharply on the connection between "the Chinese dream" (中国梦) and overseas Chinese. The Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is now becoming the shared expectations and fundamental interest of Chinese sons and daughters at home and abroad. Overseas Chinese can leverage China's peaceful rise to reap political and economic benefits.

For Beijing, not only should the Chinese diasporas not pose a threat to the regime, but they should also promote national interests (3). Relations between Beijing and the overseas Chinese community in the Pacific are being bolstered by enticing messages and actions. In turn, the Chinese diaspora is helping Beijing win diplomatic battles in the Pacific. For example, the diplomatic shift of the Solomon Islands towards China in 2019 was backed by a small number of influential politicians and businessmen, including Tommy Chan, a Chinese-born businessman who played a pivotal rôle (4).

Appraisal

By relying on instruments of aid, exchange and discourse, China's desire is to enhance its attractiveness and pursue its "domination of minds" (制脑权). This involves using the spiritual information conveyed by the media, the national language and cultural products as a weapon to penetrate and influence the minds and consciousness of the general public and the national elites. We may ultimately witness how the behaviour of a state can be controlled (5). In other words, China's "domination of minds" is used to shape a favourable security environment and to strengthen strategic coordination and mutual support with the Pacific islands.

As a result, China currently has the support of many Pacific countries. They perceive Beijing as a partner that shares both their suffering and their joy, allowing the PRC to make significant diplomatic progress. Beijing's most conspicuous victory in the Pacific has been the progressive ousting of Taiwan from the diplomatic battlefield. The diplomatic U-turn by Solomon Islands and Kiribati in September 2019 was a blow to Taipei.

It seems that a coalition against the intervention of Western powers in the region is taking shape. On 21 October 2021, China and eight Pacific island countries held the first Foreign Ministers' meeting and issued a joint communiqué. They stressed their strong commitment to upholding the international nuclear non-proliferation system, based on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and to protecting the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (6). This statement is, of course, aimed at establishing a strategic partnership against the AUKUS, the agreement signed in September 2021 for the sale of eight nuclear submarines to Australia by the US and the UK.

(1) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2021).

(2) 《铁血观世界》(2021).

(3) Charon, Paul and Jeangène Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste (2021), p. 165.

(4) Aqorau, Transform (2021).

(5) 王建伟 (2017).

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Conclusion

Threat assessment and outlook

The People's Republic of China is militarily aggressive, culturally expansionist and economically conquering. It wants to avail itself of a strategic area east of the first line of islands demarcating the China Sea and the Sea of Japan. This would provide free access to the world's oceans, essential for the flow of the PRC's seaborne trade. Most notably, it would allow China to use the Arctic route –gradually opening up due to global warming and much shorter than any other route–, which is set to become the preferred shipping corridor between Asia and Europe. To do this, it must break the Taiwanese deadlock which is under increasing threat.

China also needs to deploy forward bases to support its naval forces in protecting its interests and citizens around the world. They would also allow its submarine deterrent force to expand beyond its bastion in the South China Sea and into the open ocean.

Despite the development of its military capabilities, especially naval, China is aware that it is not yet poised to engage in a major dispute in the Pacific, and more broadly in the Indo-Pacific, with the US and its allies. Without combat experience, it lacks trained and experienced manpower. Capturing Taiwan, which has recently shifted to an active defence against the strong by the weak, will be prerequisite for any large-scale operation in the Pacific.

However, the urge to attack the ROC is tempered by the lessons emerging from the ongoing war in Ukraine. They highlight the obstacles faced by Russian forces in launching an invasion of a country with weaker military capabilities than Taiwan. The hurdle of crossing the Taiwan Strait –65 nautical miles (120 km) wide– separating the island from the mainland is an additional challenge. Any offensive would be further complicated by the challenging geography and coastlines, many of which are unsuited to landing craft. The fickle weather in the area makes the operation even more problematic. Such an attack would have far-reaching repercussions on the global economy. The scale of the overall economic impact of the Ukrainian war came as a surprise to many, even though the countries directly implicated have modest GDPs. The impact of a high-intensity conflict in the Indo-Pacific, representing two-thirds of the world's economy, would be unparalleled.

However, an analysis of the experience of the war in Europe and the fact that the United States and NATO have opted not to intervene directly raises strategic ambiguity as to how the US would react to an attack by the PRC, and will likely prompt Chinese strategists to tread more carefully. This likely postponement of a major conflict between great powers in the Pacific has no bearing on the PRC's ultimate goal, which is a long-term one. If anything, it favours the continued and even intensified pursuit of the salami slicing Strategy, i.e. the proliferation of influencing operations and their widespread expansion throughout the Pacific in the years to come.

This is not to say that China lacks a comprehensive strategic plan for the Pacific, or that its actions are only one component of its "multifaceted diplomacy" (全方位外交). In fact, Beijing has been exercising a more subtle approach in terms of its activities in the Pacific (Table 10). In the face of US dominance, China's record in the hard power realm is limited (although this is beginning to change). However, Beijing has directed its vast resources (military and economic) to the soft power realm, and its efforts have now yielded increasing gains, thus bolstering China's future dominance in the region.

Table 10 • China's model action plan in the Pacific

Means	Category	Objective	Typical case
Humanitarian and disaster-relief assistance	Military	• Experience-building • Dissuading potential opponents	Hunga Tonga eruption (Tonga)
Maritime surveillance and information gathering	Military		The Sino-Australian incident in the Arafura Sea
Asymmetric economic relations	Economic	• Defending "essential interests"	Ban on tourist groups (Palau)
Belt and Road Initiative	Economic	• Reducing the strategic disadvantage	Upgrading of the old airport on Canton Island (Kiribati)
Aid	Economic	• Participating in regional affairs and disrupting US dominance in the Indo-Pacific	Medical diplomacy (all countries)
Exchanges	Identity	• Pursuing "the domination of minds"	The Sino-Caledonian Friendship Association (New Caledonia)
Discourse	Identity	• Shaping a conducive security environment, reinforcing strategic coordination and mutual support	Prime Minister Bainimarama's "Look North" policy (Fiji)

Source • Public information compiled by the authors

In particular, France's overseas territories are in the crosshairs, representing potentially important military bases on account of their geostrategic location and physical geography. New Caledonia was a prime example of this during the Pacific War as the main logistical base for General MacArthur's troops. French Polynesia, relatively untouched by the Second World War because of its remoteness from the theatre of operations, could also serve as a valuable forward base.

Recent events in Europe point to another, even bleaker possibility, a global conflagration. Russia and China signed a joint declaration on 4 February 2022 reaffirming that the "new inter-State relationship" between them is "superior" to the political and military alliances of the "Cold War era". In this context, the warning issued on 25 April 2022 by the head of Russian diplomacy, Sergei Lavrov, of the "real" danger of the conflict in Ukraine degenerating into a "third world war" takes on a whole new meaning. This would imply the threat of China entering the war to help an ailing Russia in the face of their common enemies, the United States and its allies on all continents.

Recommendations

On December 25, 1940, Mao Zedong outlined the Chinese Communist Party's "United Front" (统一战线) strategy during the Second Sino-Japanese War: *"In the struggle against the anti-Communist die-hards, our policy is to make use of contradictions, win over the many, oppose the few and crush our enemies one by one"*. This United Front strategy was wisely applied by Mao Zedong to defeat Imperial Japan in 1945 and to win the Chinese Civil War in 1949. Similarly, we now see a number of contradictions in the Pacific: the contradiction between the Anglo-Saxon countries and France, the contradiction between the former colonial empire and the former colony, the contradiction between nuclear state and anti-nuclear state. These contradictions have given the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party the opportunity to once again rely on the "magic weapon" (法宝) of its founder to defeat the democratic camps in the 21st century Pacific. To effectively counter China's pervasive and malevolent influence, Pacific island countries merit more consideration, and other democracies have to abandon their prejudices and cooperate more closely. Therefore, we propose the following recommendations.

For like-minded countries sharing the universal values of freedom and rule of law and democracy, given the Chinese threats to the Pacific powers and the unprecedented growth of China's military power, it is crucial, as a first step, to expand the theatre to cover the entire Indo-Pacific area, encompassing those countries directly at risk. This is particularly true of India, which has been in a state of latent war with China since 1962 and is also a major maritime power. It should be noted that Beijing's ongoing economic and political expansion to all continents raises fears of an eventual global conflict. Hence, there are three recommendations:

Recommendation 1 • Work towards building an alliance of military powers bordering the Indo-Pacific and sharing the universal values of freedom, rule of law and democracy. This alliance would bring together countries sharing the same weapons and logistics doctrines – with an emphasis on the interoperability of weapons systems and munitions. The example of NATO, which proved its worth during the Cold War, is a good illustration. However, a further expansion of the organisation is not desirable for geopolitical reasons, with many countries opposed to the idea.

Recommendation 2 • Be prepared to wipe out China's seven illegally reclaimed shoals in the Spratly Archipelago at the outset of any potential conflict, especially the three with air strips allowing Chinese fighter-bombers to operate throughout the South China Sea without in-flight refuelling.

Recommendation 3 • Be in a position to put a stranglehold on China's maritime approaches. In other words, to realise the "Malacca dilemma" and create a "Taiwan dilemma". The idea is to control and have the power to block the main straits giving access to the China Seas and to blockade China's sea. In particular the straits of Malacca, Lombok and Sunda in the south; Taiwan, Bashi and Miyako, as well as those of the Japanese archipelago in the north.

As far as France is concerned, the United States' main allies in the Pacific use US-made or interoperable high-tech weapons systems, equipment and munitions, thus streamlining their combat logistics. This suggests that the likelihood of an armed conflict with China has been identified by the US presidency. The PRC has substantial leverage in all those states likely to provide it with suitable outposts for establishing bases. A recent agreement with the Solomon Islands would allow China to provide logistical support to its forces there. The Solomon Islands were also an important Japanese base during the Pacific War. Their geographical position means that they could become a highly valuable forward base for China. This represents a major success of the Chinese policy of influence only 850 NM away from New Caledonia and a threat to the stability of the territory and the region.

Recommendation 4 • Counter China's influence by working to strengthen the cohesion of the people of New Caledonia in the fold of the French Republic. Despite three referendums in New Caledonia, neither of the two similarly sized segments of the population is prepared to settle for any outcome. The customary laws of one group are hard to reconcile with the civil laws advocated by the other. It is essential to negotiate on the ground so as to re-establish cohesion and create a true New Caledonian people in the fold of the French Republic. The more the population is fragmented, the more effective the Chinese influence operations will be. Urgent action must be taken.

Recommendation 5 • Deploy French air and naval assets capable of delivering State action at sea and carrying out high-intensity operations in the Pacific.

The situation in New Caledonia is therefore crucial to France's Indo-Pacific strategy, but also to its geopolitical standing in the world. In addition to permanently resolving New Caledonia's social turmoil, France must rapidly increase its operational resources in both New Caledonia and French Polynesia by basing first-rate frigates, commanded by a naval officer in view of the essential maritime component of the theatre of operations, and by regularly deploying a nuclear attack submarine, the naval air group and amphibious forces there.

Recommendation 6 • Despite the wariness stemming from the "Australian submarine affair", a strong alliance must be forged with the major Indo-Pacific powers in the face of rising Chinese power.

France's strategic ties with the AUKUS have been severely eroded while French military forces based in the Pacific lack the capacity to cope with the vastness of its maritime domain, let alone engage in high-intensity conflict. The discrepancy in the pace of the increase in the strength of France's military resources with those of China has led a vulnerability that could be exploited by China in order to pursue a policy of *fait accompli*. Without remaining a true Pacific power and in the absence of true allies, France would lose all influence in the area despite the geostrategic importance of its territories. It would be replaced by the US as happened in 1941 or it could be replaced by the PRC. France, the most committed European country in the Indo-Pacific region, cannot afford to be militarily isolated in the Pacific. As a NATO member in Europe, it needs to be part of a grand coalition in the Pacific and Indo-Pacific to participate in freedom of navigation and to protect itself from the PRC's attempts to intervene against its interests, territories and ocean spaces, which are more significant than the assets of any other state in the Pacific. Negotiations must be pursued to build strong bonds with the various members of the coalition that is being formed to check China's ambitions, not as an observer, but as a key stakeholder.

As far as Taiwan is concerned, given its geopolitical status and potential as a soft power, it could play an active role in the Pacific on four fronts:

Recommendation 7 • Increase Taiwan's engagement in regional security cooperation mechanisms.

In the short term, a first step could be to expand cooperation at coast guard level. Building on existing bilateral coast guard agreements, Taiwan should consolidate exchanges in the field of humanitarian aid and disaster relief in Guam, Palau and elsewhere and strengthen mutual trust in order to expand the scope of joint operations. Furthermore, by using multilateral mechanisms like the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) as stepping stones, Taiwan could cooperate with the US, Japan, Australia, France and Pacific island countries on policy, training and hardware. In the long term, Taiwan should further extend this cooperation to the defence field, which will be instrumental for averting China's aggression.

Recommendation 8 • Establish a new high-tech supply chain between Taiwan and France.

New Caledonia is one of the world's leading producers of nickel ore. Its output in 2021 stood at 190,000 tons, the third largest in the world. Taiwan is New Caledonia's fourth largest trading partner for exports (after China, South Korea and Japan). Given that nickel is an important input for many high-tech products (such as the Rafale fighter jet and electric vehicles), Taiwan and France should explore mining cooperation in New Caledonia to address high-tech supply chain issues.

Recommendation 9 • Promote Taiwanese culture and values. Taiwan has two comparative advantages in the Pacific in terms of soft power. For one thing, Taiwan has no historical baggage like the former colonial powers. The island was even a colony in the past, which can be used to counter China's anti-colonial rhetoric when promoting the mutual values of democracy and human rights in the region. Furthermore, as the most democratic and proactive political model in the Chinese world, it is quite attractive to the Chinese community who object to the CCP's autocratic rule. The case of the Chinese consulate in Tahiti shows that the Chinese community in French Polynesia still harbours strong ties with the ROC (1). Therefore, Taiwan's democratic culture and values can be seen as invaluable instruments for garnering grassroots support in the Pacific region. At a time when more and more Confucius Institutes are shutting down due to a host of complaints, including espionage activities and interference with academic freedom, Taiwan should seize this chance to establish a "Taiwan Mandarin Study Center" (臺灣華語文學習中心) in Pacific island countries to promote the Chinese language with Taiwanese traits and share Taiwanese experiences on freedom and democracy (2).

Recommendation 10 • Strengthen the bond with Austronesia. Taiwan shares cultural and ethnic links with Pacific island countries. The aboriginal peoples of Taiwan and those in Pacific island countries all belong to the Austronesian cultural circle. Since the 2000s, trade with Pacific island countries has been stimulated through mechanisms such as the Austronesian Forum (南島民族論壇). A stronger Austronesian link will help increase Taiwan's visibility and its outreach to the Pacific islands.

(1) The ROC had a local consulate in Tahiti from 1945 to 1965, which was then closed following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and France in 1964. Its property rights were returned to the local Chinese community who had helped establish the consulate. However, Beijing, asserting inheritance rights to the building under the One China principle, refused to recognise the Chinese community's ownership of the building and lodged an appeal. Beijing lost the case in both the 1978 and 2008 verdicts and was compelled to find a new location for its consulate.

(2) There are currently 45 Taiwanese Mandarin study centres worldwide, located in the United States and Europe.

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