

All That Blue: Re-sourcing, Ports, and Geopolitics in the Pacific

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Introduction

The Pacific Ocean is set to become the next site for the industrialization of ocean resources under the wider Blue Economy framework. This ocean continent, stretching a third of the Earth's surface, is once again being prised open into a frontier for natural resource grabs and extractive industry by powerful governments, institutions, their agents and financiers. Not only are these powerful forces making the same old promises of economic salvation for the region, their gospel requires the resources of the deep as a precursor to the great green energy transition – humanity's only escape route from a global climate catastrophe.

This Working Paper provides an introductory overview of geopolitics in the Pacific and the increasing competition between the hegemonic bloc of countries led by the United States of America (USA) globally, also represented powerfully and visibly by Australia and New Zealand, versus China. Responding to the growing Chinese challenge, the USA has declared its Indo-Pacific Strategy, Australia has launched its Pacific 'Step Up' programme and New Zealand, its Pacific Reset diplomacy. Japan, India and France have joined the USA in this jostling for power and influence. (1) A new 'Quad' group has been formed comprising the USA, Australia, India and Japan to counter growing Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific. (2)

This Working Paper should be read in conjunction with the accompanying map - 'All that Blue, That is my Dream'.

In mapping the Pacific geo-politics of infrastructure, there appear to be two approaches: first, developmental and linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and second, security related with competition between powerful global and regional players vying for access to possible bases for their naval vessels and military aircrafts as well as for securing resources. Bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, aid, technical assistance and loans for major infrastructural development feature in this competition. Often missing in both these approaches is the perspective of Pacific Island Countries (PICs). A vision of this perspective is provided by the Pacific Community Secretariat's 'Pacific Ports 2030-2050: A Vision of Resilient, Green and Clean Ports in the Pacific Islands Region' presented to Pacific Islands Ministers for Energy and Transport in Apia, Samoa in September 2019. It is noted that ports are vital infrastructures and facilities "because 90% of trade commodities come by sea." (3)

PICs seek to enhance development prospects and infrastructure development is integral to social, economic and political development. The availability of donor funding and technical assistance is welcomed but becoming pawns in the geopolitics of competing power blocs is a major challenge.

Overview of Pacific Geopolitics

Geopolitics pertains to geographical areas and political power.

At the global level, the USA has been, and is the hegemonic or dominant power especially since 1990 with the collapse of the Soviet Union (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics).

For decades the colonial powers had traditionally been the dominant, and at times only, donor funders in the Pacific Islands, giving them a prioritised place in geopolitical influence. This had given them significant advantage in geopolitical affairs as their aid funds could be leveraged to pressure and influence the decisions of Pacific Island Countries. The entry of new donor governments, particularly from the emerging economies, has diluted and challenged the level of influence that the former colonial powers can exercise through their aid programmes. It is crucial to remember that the framing of the growing influence of countries like China often overlooks the existing influence of traditional powers, all of which are acting first in their own interests.

ANZUS 'Umbrella'

At the regional level, the USA as a Pacific power remains predominant. During the Cold War the security alliance of Australia, New Zealand, and USA actively engaged in the policy of 'strategic denial' to keep USSR out of the Pacific region. This was done through colonisation until the 1970s, then by economic control, diplomacy, regional organisations, and cheque book diplomacy. (4)

The latter strategies remained the modus operandi of Australia, New Zealand, the USA, France and Japan until the early 2000 period. Multilateral organisations such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, bankrolled by powerful countries assisted in their control of development in PICs generally, and especially in infrastructure and utilities. Nearly all visitors into the region had to come via airports and sea ports controlled by ANZUS. Since the 2006 military coup in Fiji, this geo-politics of the region has been disturbed by greater assertiveness by PICs, and the growing influence of China in these countries.

The Geopolitical advent of China

In 2013, China introduced a major global initiative, its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and later the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) which have provided the framework for financial and technical cooperation throughout the regions of the Global South (see Figure 1). (5)

As Peter Cai writes “[m]any foreign policy analysts view this initiative largely through a geopolitical lens, seeing it as Beijing’s attempt to gain political leverage over its neighbours. There is no doubt that is part of Beijing’s strategic calculation.” (6) The author of the Lowy Institute paper maintains that BRI also seeks to address regional economic disparities within China by spurring growth in its rural localities.

The rise of China as a major power in the Asia-Pacific has raised concerns, particularly with the USA, Australia and New Zealand. In response, the USA has returned to

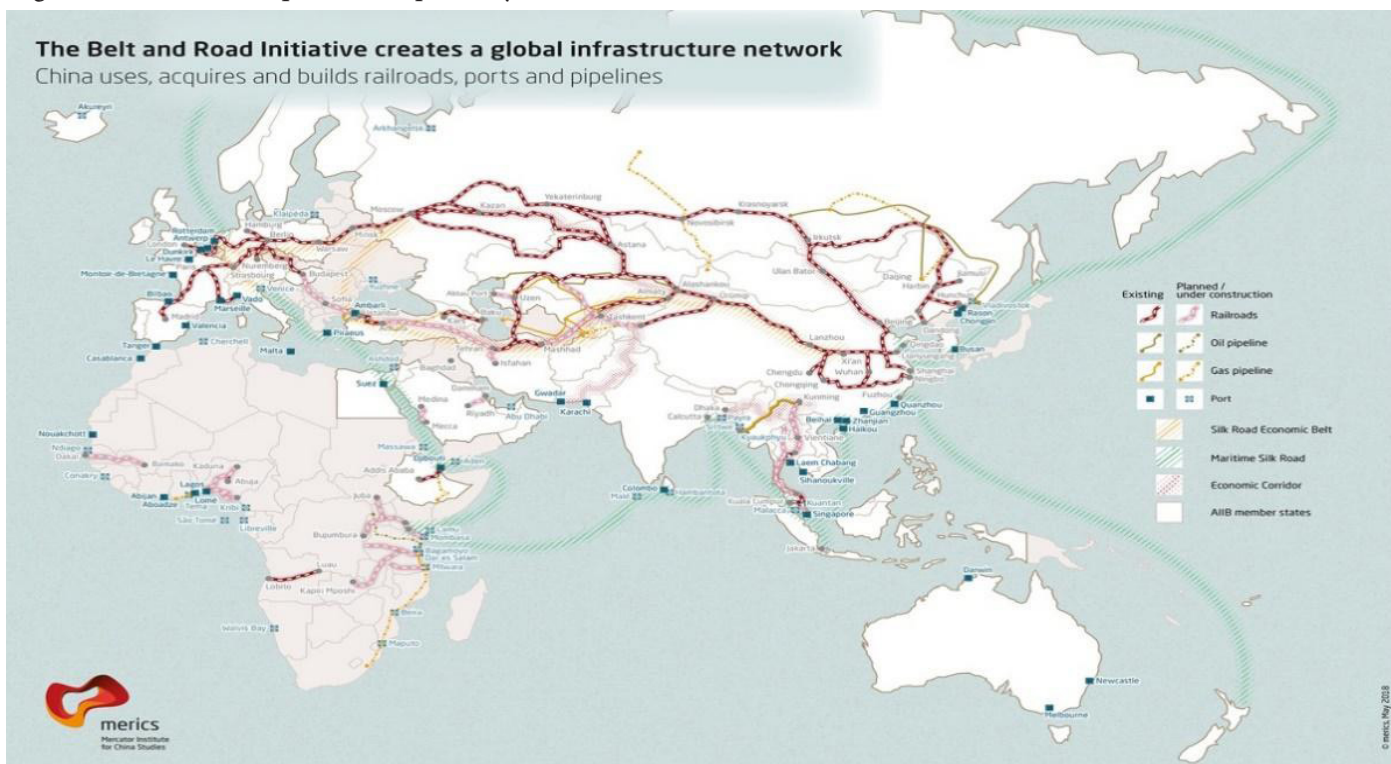


Figure1: Belt and Road Initiative and Maritime Silk Road Map Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies (2018)

the South Pacific resuming its USAID programmes, and since 2018 Australia has amped up its game through the Pacific Step-up programme by providing more scholarships, aid, finance, labour mobility schemes, diplomatic and security initiatives in the region. In July, 2019 it established the Australian Infrastructural Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP) with the stated intention to support the infrastructure needs of PICs. (7) Three deliverables of the AIFFP are; the provision of inclusive and resilient infrastructure, delivering infrastructure financing that meets the needs of partner countries and access to capital to support quality. (8) AIFFP is Australia's lending facility for infrastructure investment in the Pacific with the programmes capped at AUD\$2b of which AUD\$500m is allocated for grants. (9)

Australia and New Zealand have been the Pacific's key development partners throughout the years, however, given China's growing presence in the region, this may no longer be the case. As stated by Fletcher Melvin (President of the Cook Island's Chamber of Commerce), "China is very willing to lend money to any Pacific Island nation. As much as Australia and New Zealand have encouraged the islands to look to them first, it's been a lot easier getting money out of China". (10)

However, there are attempts to retain their primacy as seen with the initiative of the Australian government's Step-Up programme. In 2018 New Zealand reiterated similar sentiments when then Deputy PM and Minister

for Foreign Affairs, Winston Peters addressed the Lowy Institute describing how the Pacific was attracting an increasing number of external actors and that New Zealand would respond by increasing aid to the region and how "[t]here has never been a time since 1945 when Australia and New Zealand need to work together more closely in the Pacific". (11) With Australia and NZ's ongoing support, aid and technical assistance, the Pacific can address issues regarding infrastructure deficiencies, climate change risks and how best to mitigate these challenges.

What is at stake?

Securing lines of transportation and communication, and having access to resources appear to be the primary concerns that are driving geopolitical rivalry in the region. (12)

The Pacific Islands are scattered over millions of square kilometres of the largest ocean in the world. Their geographic locations and large Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) straddle sea and air routes between Australia and New Zealand and the continents of Asia, North America and South America. Having strategic access to deep water seaports and airports would ensure that transport and communication among the powerful Pacific Rim countries will be secured. Digital connectivity and intelligence gathering is also likely to be enhanced by close ties with PICs.

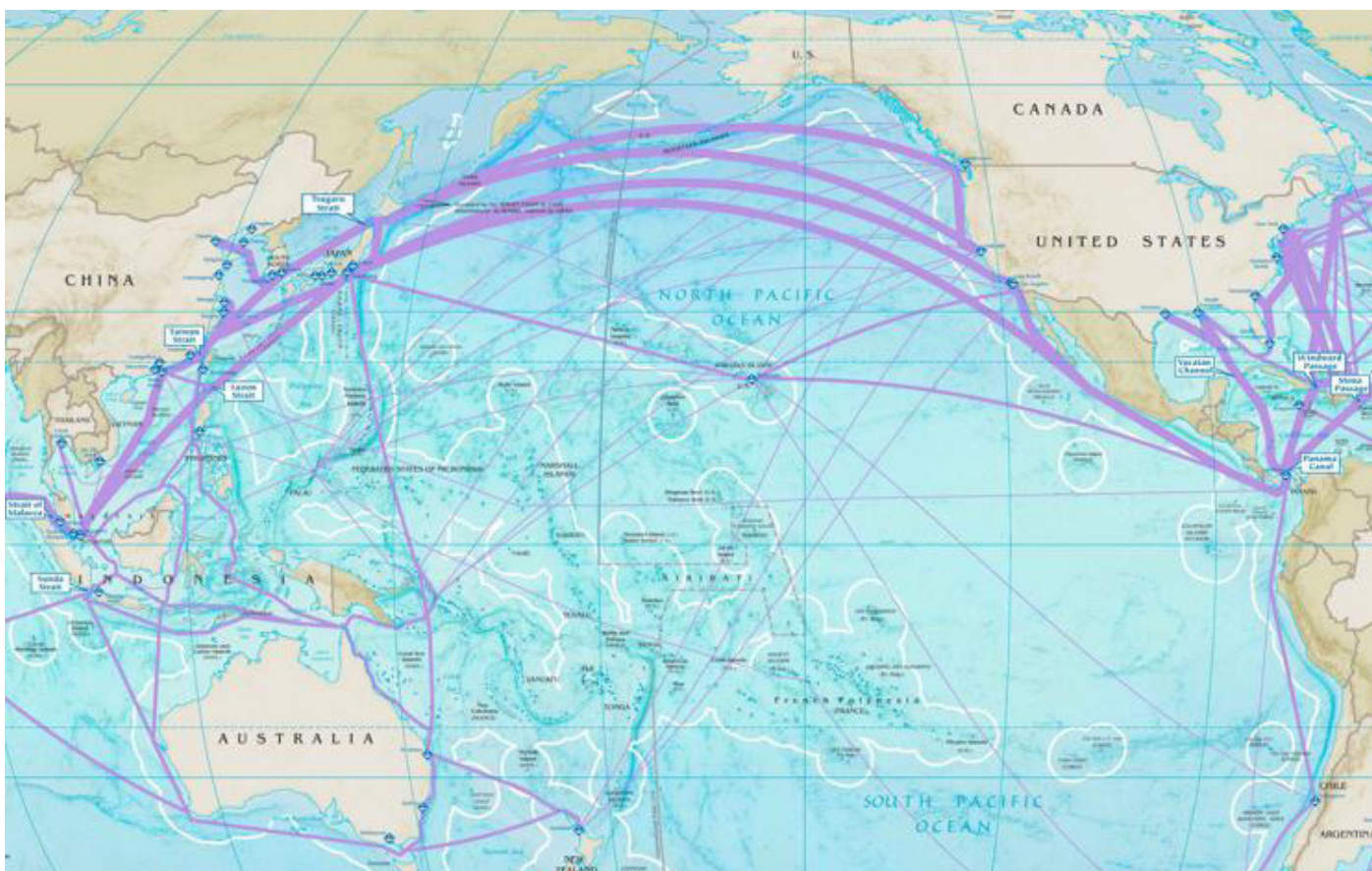


Figure 2: This map shows Pacific Ocean major chokepoints, major ports and shipping lanes (13)

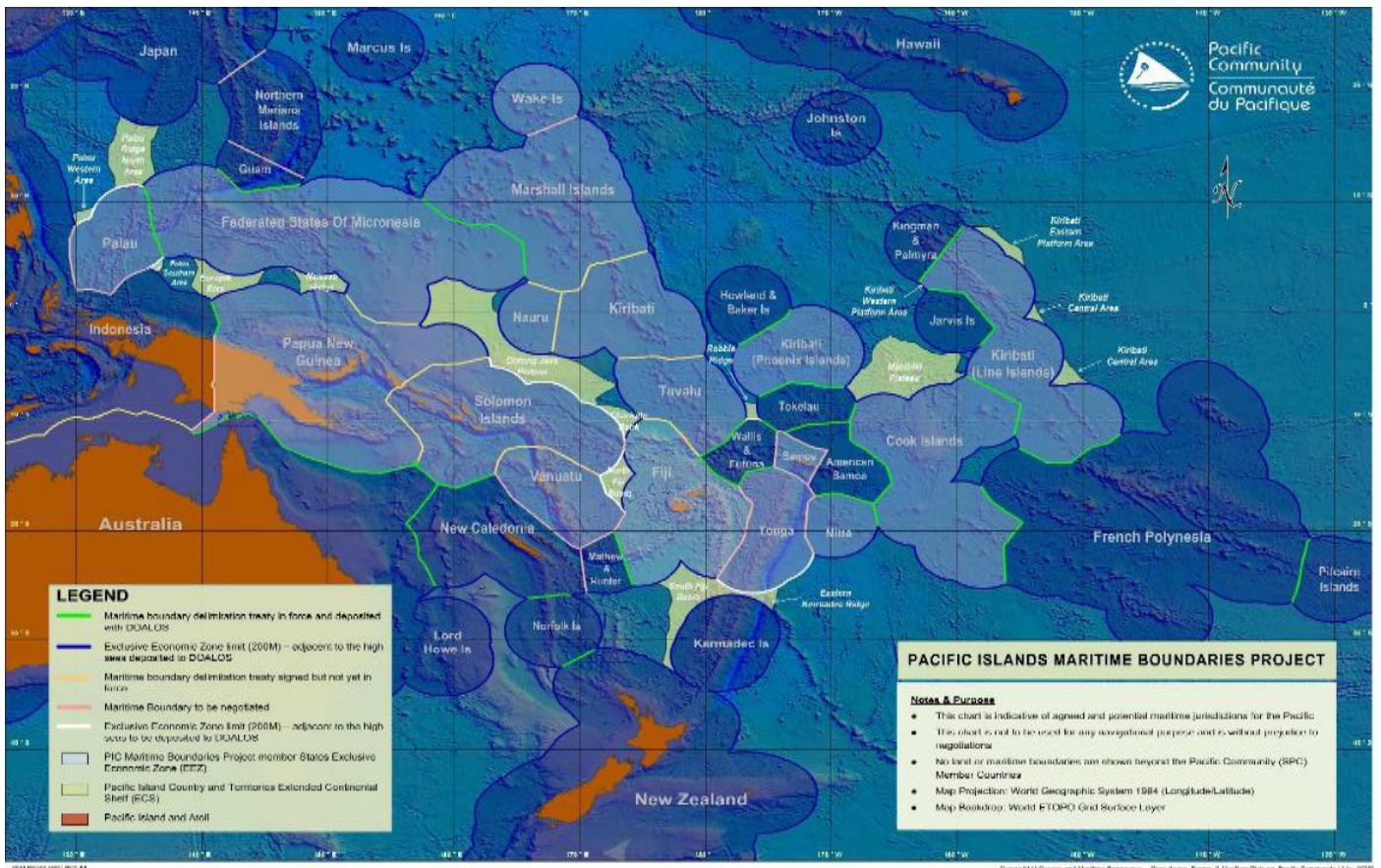


Figure 3: EEZs of Large Ocean States of the Pacific

As shown in Figure 2 below shipping lanes in the Pacific traverse the territorial sea boundaries of PICs. Deep sea ports such as Penrhyn Port in the Cook Islands; Luganville Wharf and Port Vila Lapetasi International Wharf in Vanuatu; Lombrum Wharf on Manus Island, Madang Port, and Lae Port in Papua New Guinea; and Nuku'alofa Port in Tonga (the four case study countries in the map) as well as other such ports in Oceania have considerable commercial and strategic value.

Undersea cables that provide telecommunication and digital links are also vital for commercial and security reasons. The 'Five Eyes' partnership of the USA with Australia and New Zealand (Canada and the United Kingdom are the other members) engage in gathering all forms of electronic communication (via undersea cables and satellites) for the USA National Security Agency (NSA). (14) New Zealand has been reported to be spying on its Pacific friends. (15) As part of strategic outreach, overseeing, maintaining, and protecting these lines of communication is also seen as crucial. (16)

Besides the terrestrial resources such as timber and minerals as well as agricultural produce that have long been exports of Pacific small island states, they have been designated as Large Ocean States because of their extensive Exclusive Economic Zones that have bountiful marine resources. Figure 3 provides the contiguous areas of these EEZs that belong to PICs.

In addition to the valuable straddling stocks of tuna and

other pelagic fish in these EEZs as well as other living organisms such as sea cucumber and giant clams, there are polymetallic nodules of cobalt, copper, gold, zinc, manganese, phosphorus, and rare earth minerals which have enormous commercial and strategic military value.

“Crusts that mainly contain iron and manganese can also have significant concentrations of cobalt, rare earth elements, nickel, tellurium, and platinum; they are found on seamounts (extinct submarine volcanoes that are found throughout the ocean) and other seafloor promontories. Muds that contain rare earth elements—widely used in consumer electronics such as smart phones and green technologies such as wind turbines and hybrid and electric cars—are found in the deep ocean. These muds are a relatively new discovery. Phosphorites, which occur in the ocean as crusts or nodules, are a critical source of phosphate for fertilizer and are also being evaluated as a potential source for rare earth elements.” (17)

In the last two decades both the exploration for seabed minerals and the development of technologies to extract these high demand metals have intensified. Figure 4 shows the Clarion-Clipperton Fracture Zone and the exploration areas.

There have been calls for a moratorium on deep sea mining (DSM) by scientists, the European Parliament, and civil society organisations as well as some PIC leaders. In August 2019, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu championed a ten-year moratorium. (18) However,

Exploration for minerals in the Area

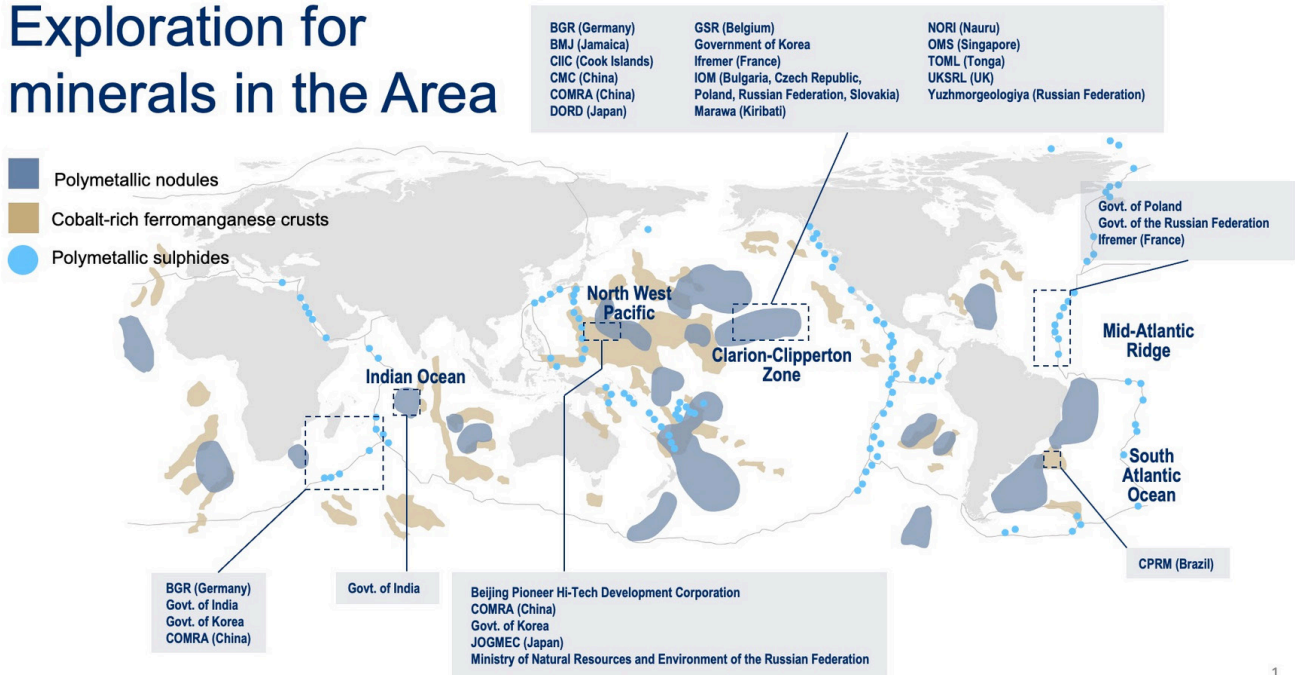


Figure 4: Clarion-Clipperton Fracture Zone and the exploration areas, IUCN/International Seabed Authority, 2021

several Pacific states including the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Nauru have either approved exploration deep sea mining concessions or are considering applications from mining consortiums. Papua New Guinea (PNG) actually approved the first DSM license for the Canada based Nautilus Minerals and bought 30% of shares in the company. This venture capital company was liquidated in 2019 and PNG lost \$120 million.

Figure 5 shows the concession areas for the defunct mining DSM either approved or being considered for approval by PICs.

The seaports of the case study countries featured on the “All that Blue” map, as well as other PICs are critical to further exploration and possible DSM activities including the import of machinery and fuel, and the export of minerals. (19)

The presence of these resources which have enormous commercial and strategic value has drawn the interests of powerful corporate interests and states including China.

China has risen as a major new player in the development world by financing projects with eye-catching loans to Pacific governments under the ambitious BRI development campaign. (20) Issues concerning debt sustainability and allegations of China pursuing ‘debt trap’ diplomacy in the region have ensued. (21) This has prompted Australia and New Zealand to step up their aid and loan programmes in the region. Moreover, China has also shifted towards grant financing in the Pacific in order to hopefully remain a major financier in the region and do away with the debt trap accusations from its critics. According to China’s White Papers (WP) published in

2011 and 2014 respectively, its total foreign aid to the Pacific increased from 4% (USD\$1.62b) from 1950-2009 to 4.2% (USD\$592.4m) in the years 2010-2012 thus depicting China’s growing attention to the region. (22, 23)

The most recent WP “China’s International Cooperation in the New Era” released in January 2021 incorporates the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development hence reiterating its commitments towards the SDGs for recipient countries. Its distribution of foreign aid to the region from 2013 to 2018 however, slightly decreased to 3.71%. This may be due to Australia, New Zealand and other donor countries like the USA and the EU’s increased aid response to the region. In addition, China’s aid to the Pacific is directed to infrastructure projects and public facilities such as roads, schools, hospitals, bridges and government buildings. They also provide fast economic benefits for their Pacific recipient countries with no questions asked, hence, it is no surprise that Pacific Island governments are attracted to China as an aid donor.

In terms of geopolitical competition, initially this was between the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) that is Beijing and Taipei. Aid and diplomacy - cheque book diplomacy - featured heavily in their tussle for recognition and influence in the smaller island countries of the Pacific. After larger countries in the Pacific rim-recognised PRC, PICs began to follow. Australia and New Zealand recognised Beijing in the early 1970s, and the USA in 1979. In the early 2000 period six of the 20 countries that recognised Taipei were in the Pacific. These were Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu. In September, 2019 Kiribati shifted its recognition as did the Solomon Islands. (24)

PRC is able to offer much greater material support than ROC including more generous aid projects, grants and loans for infrastructural development, and global trade and diplomatic relationships. However, Beijing's connections and influence in PICs have increased to a level that has been perceived as challenging and undermining of the established dominance of Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Stephen Hoadley writes "as documented by analysts at the Lowy Institute in Sydney, in the past decade China has initiated 265 projects worth US\$1.6 billion and has emerged as second only to Australia as a source of grants and loans to Pacific Island countries. This trend may see China surge to the top soon." (25)

Concerns over China's growing influence in the region from donor governments who already hold significant leverage, go beyond diplomacy to Beijing setting a debt trap for small island states, and plans to establish military bases in the form of naval bases for instance.

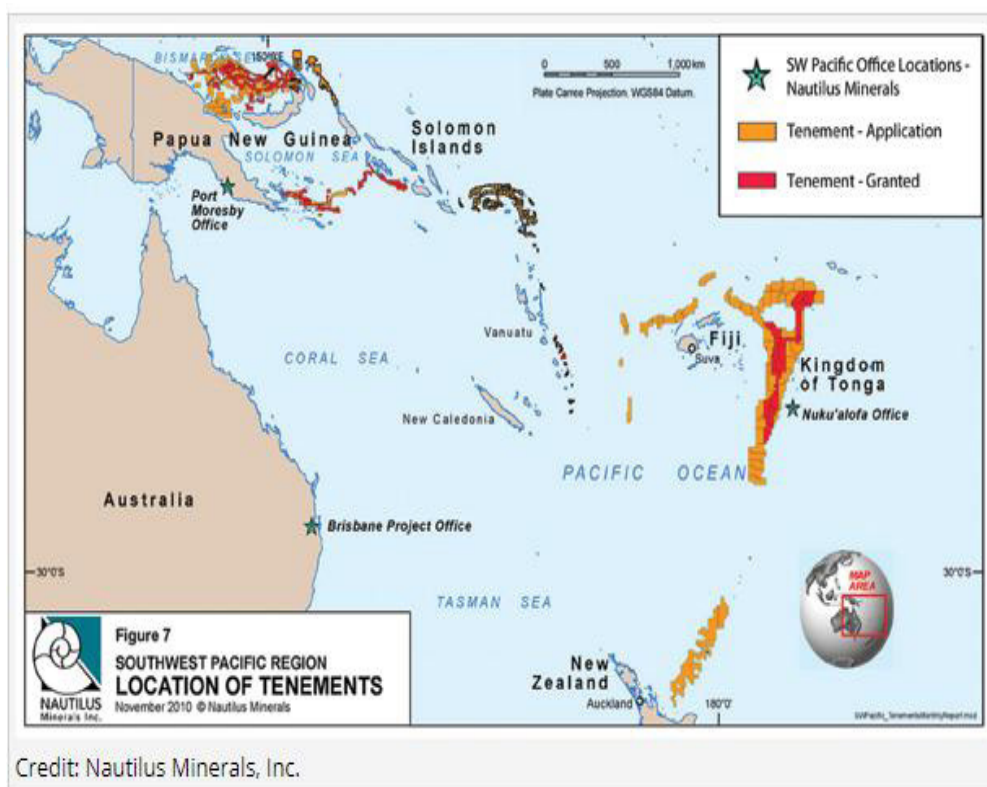
As noted earlier, geopolitics in the region has been intensifying with Australia putting forward its 'Pacific Step Up' programme, New Zealand its 'Pacific Reset' strategy, and the USA strategising more broadly on its 'Indo-Pacific' approach and recently launched Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. These three countries have also divided their focus on their respective spheres of influence in Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia through increasing bilateral aid and relationships, as well as via regional organisations such as the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Pacific Community.

Australia's aid amounted to AUD\$1.3b in 2018 to 2019 making it the main donor in the Pacific. New Zealand remains the second largest donor country and sees its aid as an investment that reduces conflicts and promotes stability with roughly 60% of New Zealand's overseas aid going toward "...shared community interest in the prosperity and stability of the [Pacific] region." The dollar amount of this contribution is around NZD\$1.33 billion and helps the collective efforts of more than 30 government agencies throughout the Pacific region." (26) The aggregate figure for USAID in the region directed mainly but not exclusively at his former Trust Territories of Micronesia is US\$5.21 billion since 2000. (27)

In addition, in May 2015, Japan hosted the Pacific Leaders Meeting in Fukushima and pledged to provide USD\$515.8m in aid to the PICs over the next three years to help deal with climate change issues and the effects of natural disasters. (28) India is not a major donor in the region however, its aid has increased over the past few years. At the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in 2006, India proposed the 'Pacific Island Country Assistance Initiative' and pledged to offer a grant of USD\$100,000 annually to each of the 14 PICs. This was increased to USD\$125,000 in 2009. (29)

Infrastructural Development is the linchpin of development in Pacific Island Countries

Infrastructural development in the PICs originated in port towns that linked hinterland regions where raw materials were produced for export. These port towns functioned as administrative centres, commercial and transportation hubs, as well as centres for social services. Wharves, jetties, and landing areas were established to facilitate shipping of cargo and people. Cargo included agricultural produce, minerals, timber and fish. In the larger islands, logging centres and mining towns emerged. These were linked to port-towns by roads. Air transport especially for passengers became important in the late 1960s with fixed wing amphibian as well as aircraft that required landing strips and runways. Patterns of infrastructural development remain tied to resource extraction and people movement.



Credit: Nautilus Minerals, Inc.

Figure 5: Nautilus Minerals DSM mining concessions

For PICs sea, land and air transportation and related infrastructure development are critical for their pursuit of social, economic and political development. They have sought donor partner support through bilateral and multilateral agreements to obtain funding and technical support for building, expanding, and maintaining ports, roads and airports. Significant loans and grants have been obtained by PICs for infrastructural development especially ports. For example the approximate overall total loans from the International Financial Institutions for four Pacific Island countries from the year 2000 are: (i) the Cook Islands - USD\$138.32m; (ii) PNG – USD\$2719.81m; (iii) Tonga – USD\$344.56m; and (iv) Vanuatu – USD\$185.8m.

With the advent of China especially since the post-2000 period as the second largest donor in the region there has been increasing geopolitical competition centred on infrastructural projects in PICs.

A number of former World War II (WWII) naval bases in PICs used by USA and its allies, especially Australia and New Zealand have come into prominence as controversy surrounded overtures relating to port development. Both Efate and Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu received a massive influx of American military personnel, equipment, and infrastructural support during WWII. Roads, wharves and landing strips were built to facilitate the war against Japanese occupation of neighbouring Pacific islands. Luganville was a strategic military post during the 1940 ‘Pacific War’ with 100,000 personnel located there, and altogether a million having passed through the port town. (30) Given its strategic location, North West of

Australia, whoever controls Vanuatu controls the sea lanes between Australia and USA. (31)

Australian government and media, and security commentators have made known their concerns regarding the building of the large wharf in the deep-water port in Luganville, Santo, Vanuatu. Figure 6 is a photo of the Luganville wharf from the Daily Post newspaper which quoted US security researchers that it posed geopolitical risks.

Vanuatu Prime Minister Charlot Salwai declared that “We are an independent country, and we can’t wait for grants to come,” citing the need for projects in hard infrastructure like roads and ports, and also telecommunications, utilities, health and education. “Whether through grants or through loans we have to have money to build our infrastructure, we want to invest this money into economic sectors.” he said, adding that funnelling money into productive projects would also help it pay back its existing debt and develop the economy. (32)

Chinese President Xi visited Fiji in 2014 triggering greater interest in the country. A number of new investments were mooted including by Guangdong Silkroad Ark Investment Company which had acquired beach side land to build a large tourist resort. This facility was to accommodate in-bound tourists. (33) A Fiji International Trade Company was established by Chinese businessmen to sell Fiji made beauty products in China, and ‘business had been good’. (34)

In April, 2019 Australia announced that it will provide funding for the upgrade of the Blackrock Camp, a Fiji military complex near the Nadi International Airport in Fiji, a project that had earlier triggered Chinese interest. (35) China had offered grant funding but was out bid by a nearly FJD\$40 million Australian offer. It is said that the upgraded camp will provide a world class training facility for peace keeping and humanitarian assistance. (36)

It is apparent that China’s economic and strategic goals are intertwined so that access to fisheries, timber and mineral resources is accompanied by the building of large port facilities that can also be used for its naval vessels. This is apparent in the overtures to the Cook Islands and Niue. “China’s signing Belt & Road MoU with the

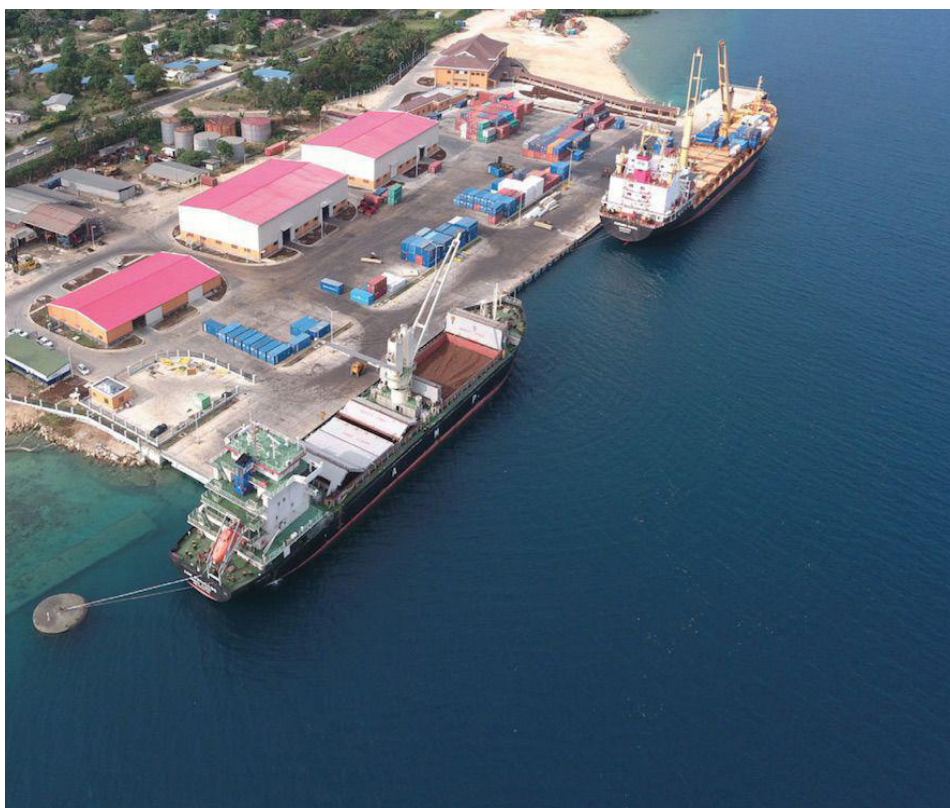


Figure 6: Luganville Port; Source: Vanuatu Daily Post, ‘Vanuatu’s Luganville Port ‘geopolitically risky’ Report, 13 April, 2019

Cook Islands and Niue caught Wellington by surprise, as did news that China would be building a deep-water port on Penrhyn Island in the Cooks, and a 64 km expressway around Niue while also upgrading wharves and ports.” (37) It was reported that several million dollars in fishing licenses for blue and yellow fin tuna was paid by China, and there was concern expressed regarding the ‘prize assets’ of Niue ‘being sold elsewhere.’ (38)

Apart from the multi-million dollar purchase of fishing licenses, no funding has been received for port development from China. From a traditional security view, Western observers worry that China’s increasing involvement in the construction of seaports, including the proposed Penrhyn deep sea port (which is a deep sea port) will ultimately allow China to take control of these ports due to heavy reliance of host countries on China. (39) Despite these reports it appears that China is not funding any re-development of the deep water port in Penrhyn.

The USA occupied Aitutaki and Penrhyn island in 1942. (40) In the latter atoll, a number of landing strips and an airport that were built by the USA military during the push against the Japanese in WWII. (41)

In October 2015 it was reported that a team of 60 military engineers and tradesmen from Britain, China, New Zealand and USA had participated in a New Zealand funded, ‘Exercise Tropical Twilight’ over 6 weeks. During this time, they worked on a number of projects on Penrhyn and Manihiki which included the upgrading of a fuel depot, repair and refurbishment of schools, a hospital, a clinic and community facilities. “The exercise aimed to develop the New Zealand Defence Force’s capability to deploy alongside other militaries to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the Pacific.” (42)

Akin to Luganville port, the Lombrum port in Papua New Guinea was a USA naval base in WWII. Strategically located on Manus Islands which interfaces the Northern Pacific, Southeast Asia, Japan and China as well as in the northwest, Hawaii and US mainland, it was used by the Australian Defence Force until the mid-1970s. It was inherited by the PNG Defence Force on the country’s independence and used as the main patrol base to monitor activities and protect its sea borders. Recognising its importance at protecting sea lanes to and from Australia and New Zealand to Asia, there were concerns expressed

by the USA and Australia at the growing Chinese interest in PNG port development. Australian company Clough has secured the contract for the multi-million-dollar upgrade of the naval base worth AUD\$175 million. The redevelopment and rehabilitation of Lombrum Naval Base will boost the capacity of the PNGDF Navy to patrol PNG’s maritime borders, thus building a stronger security sea force for PNG. (43)

Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands have licensed Chinese long liners to catch tuna (bigeye and yellow fin) for the Chinese market since early 2000. This arrangement has been renewed recently. (44)

Although hitherto Samoa has been a recipient of PRC funded projects including some major public building and is a member of the BRI network, the newly elected government has declined the previously welcomed offer of USD\$100 million for port upgrade project by China. Forty percent of Samoan external debt of USD\$160 million is owed to PRC. (45)

Tonga is the most heavily indebted PIC to China. Finance from mainland China rebuilt Nuku’alofa following the 2006 riot, and the damages caused by Cyclone Gita in 2018 amounted to USD\$65 million. Since then further borrowing and interests have increased the debt to USD\$115 million which is a third of Tonga’s GDP. Following criticism of this level of indebtedness and the recipient country’s dependence on the creditor nation, there has a significant

reclassification of the financing of the rebuild as BRI projects. (46)

The saga of geopolitical competition between China and ANZUS continues as these powerful states reinforce ties with PICs and/or seek to outmanoeuvre each other in identifying new infrastructural sites for development. It has been reported that China is upgrading the runaway on Kanton Island (also known as Canton Island) in the Phoenix group of islands owned by Kiribati. This airport was previously used for commercial aircrafts, and for the USA bombers during WWII. The Chinese engagement in the reconstruction of the airport infrastructure has caused disquiet as the geographical location of Kanton borders on sea lanes from USA to Australia and New Zealand. (47)



Photo: Phacharawi Svavudh/shutterstock.com

Kiribati has also indicated that it will delist one of the largest marine conservation reserve that encompasses the Phoenix Islands (the Phoenix Island Protected Area) as a World Heritage site for the commercial exploitation of tuna fisheries.

As reported by 1News in New Zealand, “[t]here’s deep concern that the move has been driven by China. In 2019, Kiribati ditched its 23-year allegiance to Taiwan, instead signing up to China and the promise of a NZD\$66 million grant. PIPA is attractive to China not only for its fishing wealth but its strategically significant location near US military installations.” (48)

Australia has announced that it will invest AUD\$40 million to AUD\$60 million (FJD\$61 million to FJD\$92 million) in the upgrading of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces naval base in Walu Bay, Suva as part of a major Maritime Essential Services Centre. It is to support Fiji’s “defence and security infrastructure”. (49)

Conclusion

This introductory overview has provided spot lights on PRC’s growing incursions on what ANZUS has regarded as its ‘turf’. China’s BRI and MSRI have provided the framework for its massive investments and aid to PICs. Besides access to raw materials and minerals including those from DSM, geopolitical concerns extend to port infrastructure development in the region. As geopolitical competition heats up, the protection of sea lanes that connect Australia and New Zealand to Asia and the Americas against Chinese access and control of strategic ports have emerged. The four case studies of Cook Islands, Tonga, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu provide more in-depth analysis of the social, economic and political contexts of these countries, and their changing relationships with donor countries and agencies in the confluence of PICs quest for development which includes infrastructural development, and the offers of funds, and expertise by powerful countries which have their own geopolitical agendas.

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